

## **GMCA**

Date: 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2024

Subject: GM Children & Young People programme update

Report of: Councillor Hunter, Portfolio Lead for children and young people and Caroline Simpson, Portfolio Lead Chief Executive for children and young people.

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### **Purpose of Report**

Update GMCA on the following strategically important pieces of work as part of the GM Children & Young People's programme including:

- GM Pledge
- Project Skyline
- GM Fostering Programme
- Development of the Joint Forward Plan for Children & Young People

### **Recommendations:**

The GMCA is requested to:

- Note the positive early signs in relation to compliance with the 'GM Pledge' as part of an ambition to tackle the issue of high costs and reliance on agency social workers.
- Note the positive progress towards the establishment of the GM Fostering Hub to be hosted by Rochdale Council as part of the national Fostering pathfinder, supported by the announcement of a further allocation of funding from DfE to support communications activity over the next 12 months.
- Support recommendations relating to the next phase of 'Project Skyline', to:
  - Allocate funding of up to £5m to acquire properties to be used for Project Skyline. The selection of properties will be determined by the Skyline Board and recommended to the GMCA for acquisition.
  - Delegate authority to the GM Treasurer and GM Monitoring Officer to review and agree the due diligence information and the overall detailed commercial

terms of the acquisitions, to sign off any conditions, issue final approvals and complete any documentation in respect of the property acquisitions on behalf of the GMCA as recommended by the Skyline Board.

- Delegate authority to the GM Treasurer and GM Monitoring Officer to review, agree the content, and sign the Partnership Agreement on behalf of GMCA noting that GMCA's role is one of convener, funder, owner and landlord of the properties acquired.
  - Agree that GMCA will take the lead role in procuring the contract on behalf of the 10 districts but that one of the 10 LAs is named in the contract as the lead Authority and is provided as part of the partnership arrangements with resources to manage the contract on an ongoing basis on behalf of the 10. Contract management will have resource implications which will need to be shared across Local Authorities.
- Note the current consultation process underway with Locality Boards across GM in relation to the development of the 'Giving every child and young person the best start in life' part of the GM Integrated Care Partnership Joint Forward Plan.

## **Contact Officers**

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## 1. Introduction/Background

1.1 The Greater Manchester Children & Young People's programme overseen by the Greater Manchester Children's Board covers a breadth of work areas. Whilst there are clearly overlaps between many of these work areas they can be broadly organised around the following categories:

- Giving our children the best start in life (e.g. GM School Readiness programme)
- Supporting the needs of some of our most vulnerable children & young people (e.g. Looked After Children / Care Leavers programme, Youth Justice, Violence Reduction Unit & Complex Safeguarding programmes)
- Helping young people to succeed in schools and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to find employment (Education, Work & Skills, GMACS)
- Responding to the health needs of children & young people (SEND, GM Children & Young People Mental Health Programme, Long Term Conditions programmes)
- Better Understanding the needs of our children & young people (#Beewell programme, LAC Sufficiency Observatory)
- Supporting families in our communities that need help (Supporting Families programme, family help including family hubs)
- Improving safeguarding practice in our districts (Workforce and GM Safeguarding Alliance)

Through all these programmes delivery is based on the principles of:

- Added value from working across the ten districts,
- Valuing the voice and experience of children and young people,
- Adopting a collaborative approach that recognises that improving outcomes and practice in these areas cannot be the responsibility of any individual organisation or sector.

1.2 In November 2023 GMCA received an update on a number of pieces of work of strategic importance within the Greater Manchester Children & Young People's programme and overseen by the GM Children's Board. These included:

- **The 'GM pledge'** – agreement between Local Authorities designed to help manage costs and reduce over reliance on agency social workers.
- **Project Skyline** - proposal to create supply of children's homes to increase availability of LAC placements in the GM region for some of most vulnerable young people whilst tackling the significant costs associated with these types of placements.

- **DfE Fostering Pathfinder** – Funding opportunity for GM as a city-region to test reforms around fostering identified through the independent review of children’s social care.

1.1. The report set out the significance of these pieces of work from both the perspective of the financial challenges facing children’s services budgets and the ambition to improve the experience and outcomes of some of our most vulnerable children in the city-region. Given the strategic importance of these projects it was agreed that it would be helpful for GMCA to receive more regular progress updates on these projects. This report therefore provides an update on their progress since the last report and what to expect over the next few months.

## **2. Implementing the ‘GM Pledge’**

2.1. The ‘GM Pledge’ was approved by the GM Childrens Board in September and went live on 1st November, 2023 following extensive consultation with staff, chief legal officers, legal counsel, GM trade union representatives, Reed (GM Managed Service provider) and other stakeholders.

2.2. As reported previously the GM Pledge is a commitment between GM Local Authorities around the use of agency social workers (see Appendix for more details on specific commitments). It represents a direct attempt by GM Local Authorities to tackle the significant costs and quality issues associated with agency social workers. For context there are currently 605 agency children’s social work roles being used by GM LAs (at the end of December 2023) which equates to 32.1% of the total workforce (507 on the GM Reed contract and 98 off contract agency). The latest annualised total spend on GM Reed agency roles (not including off contract) was around £38.1m.

2.3. Workforce challenges in children’s services are not unique to Greater Manchester. Research by the Department for Education found that seven in ten of the Local Authority respondents reported they were “not confident they would have enough permanent child and family social workers to meet their needs over the next 12 months”.

2.4. The process for monitoring compliance with the GM Pledge which involves bi-monthly progress reports being reviewed by GM Directors of Children’s Services and HR

Directors is working well so far in creating the shared accountability required for the Pledge to be effective.

- 2.5. Whilst it is relatively early days for the implementation of the Pledge evidence suggests that all GM Local Authorities are engaging well with requirements with 100% compliance with rates of pay for new starters across all ten Local Authorities in the first two months of implementation and evidence of a reduction in spend on off-contract agency staff by some GM Local Authorities.
- 2.6. Encouragingly some of the potential risks associated with the introduction of the Pledge do not seem to have been borne out in practice, most notably there has not been a significant number of agency staff moving to other LAs outside of GM that offer higher rates of pay and GM LAs that currently pay below the cap level have at least in the short term not been forced to increase their rates.
- 2.7. Work is underway to capture available data to track longer term trends that will indicate the effectiveness of the pledge including:
  - Expenditure by each Local Authority on agency social work agency staff
  - Proportion of workforce that is permanent vs agency staff
  - Vacancy rates for social work posts.
  - The proportion of 'Off contract' agency staff.
  - Proportion of social work staff that have minimum levels of experience vs newly qualified staff.
- 2.8. As previously reported GM continues to work closely with the North-West Association of Directors of Children's Services (NWADCS) around how the Pledge maybe extended across the north-west local authorities and it is still anticipated that Government will introduction of new rules nationally, with statutory guidance expected in autumn 2024.

### **3. Project Skyline**

- 3.1. As reported to GMCA in November 'Project Skyline' is a project of significant strategic importance in our ambition to tackle the significant challenges associated with the availability of cost effective and high quality residential placements for some of our Looked After Children in the city region.
- 3.2. Extensive analysis previously undertaken by GMCA Research team showed that around 50% of total children's social care expenditure related specifically to GM's looked after children. A recent review of the costs of independent sector placements has confirmed that these pressures continue. The median weekly cost of an

independent residential placement is now around £4,850, up 14% on the average twelve month previously.

- 3.3. Taking a longer-term view over the last six years – the span of our GM records – independent residential care placement volumes have risen by 29% while simultaneously also becoming 34% more expensive on average. This increase in placement fees is beyond the level that would be expected if attributed to inflation alone.
- 3.4. The latest Children’s Homes Association “state of the sector” report confirms this position. Residential providers cite pressures due to cost-of-living increases but also increased staffing costs, due partly to workforce recruitment and retention issues but also the complexity of need of some children.
- 3.5. This context creates challenges in terms of access to local supply. The GM Placement Sufficiency Strategy set out an ambition to increase the proportion of GM placements placed locally. While improvements are starting to happen, there is still a long way to go. As of the end of June 2023 Only one in four (24.3%) of GM independent residential placements currently get to stay in their own LA and almost one in 10 (8.8%) are placed at a significant distance from GM (outside the North-West and not bordering GM). This challenge is not unique to GM: recent research by Ofsted suggests 91% of responding local authorities “‘often’ or ‘always’ experience difficulties in finding suitable homes for children with complex needs.”
- 3.6. There is therefore strong support from Chief Executives and Directors of Children’s Services for the ambition of Project Skyline, namely to create new supply of ten Ofsted registered properties across GM with a focus on Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties and Mental Health provision (equating to twenty-four placements) and in doing so disrupt the children’s residential market, where despite the existence of some high quality and ethical children’s home providers in the region there remain concerns around excessive profits and poor-quality provision.
- 3.7. In January 2024 all 10 GM Local Authorities, GMCA and the NHS signed an MoU agreeing the key principles for Skyline, demonstrating the commitment from all parties to deliver the project. As a reminder the overriding premise of Project Skyline is as follows:
  - GMCA will provide upfront funding to purchase and refurbish properties and support mobilisation costs, as required. This funding will be recouped over time once the

properties reach full occupancy. The 10 GM Local Authorities will underwrite this upfront funding through a mechanism that has been agreed by the Treasurers.

- The 10 GM Local Authorities will jointly procure care providers to run the homes. GMCA will let the homes to the care providers and become the landlord.
- To provide overall governance to the project, a Skyline Board will be formed (as set out in the Memorandum of Understanding) and all key decisions will be taken through that Board.

3.8. To support the next phase of the work there are several key workstreams underway that will support implementation, most notably:

- i) Drafting of a Partnership Agreement - the basis for collaboration is being documented in a legally binding Partnership Agreement which will seek to formalise the way the parties will work together, the underwrite mechanism and the governance structure.
- ii) Procurement – work is underway to develop the approach to procurement and specification with the intention that the procurement will go live by May 2024. Subject to agreement the procurement will be led by GMCA with one of the 10 is named in the contract as the lead Authority.
- iii) Property purchase – given the lead in time to acquire, refurbish properties and take them through the planning process, work on identifying properties has commenced. A sub-committee has been established to progress this work and will make their recommendations to the Skyline Board.
- iv) Design of the health offer – through dedicated clinical support and engagement with NHS GM colleagues there is already a clear set of principles for the health offer (which are included in the specification). The next phase will involve more detailed design including engagement with the preferred provider(s) to ensure that the appropriate health offer is available in the Skyline homes.
- v) Staff recruitment – Recognising the staffing challenges facing the residential sector and how critical this will be for the success of Project Skyline work is underway in collaboration with Children’s Homes Association on a dedicated recruitment campaign. Supported by GMCA a skills bootcamp specifically focused on children’s residential care roles is also currently in operation to help

connect people that want to work in the children's residential sector into employment opportunities with children's home providers..

3.6 In parallel to Project Skyline Greater Manchester is one of seven regions shortlisted to become one two national Regional Care Cooperative pathfinders. The formal public announcements for this are due before the end of March 2024, and there is hope that GM may be successful with our bid, which would enable a vastly expanded and amplified Sufficiency and Market Management Programme in GM. Given there is a fairly significant capital allocation associated with the bid there would also likely be positive implications for Project Skyline for example:

- Buying better properties in better locations or buying properties that need less refurbishment works leading to faster mobilisation.
- Increasing the number of properties in the launch plan, or adding different property based service types into scope such as long-term and short break respite for children with disabilities, secure provision and / or supported accommodation

3.7 Should GM become a Regional Care Cooperative, these options will be considered alongside LAs with recommendations shared for further consideration at Project Skyline Board and GM Children's Board.

#### **4 GM Fostering Programme**

4.1 As reported in November 2023 following a successful bid for £2.7m Greater Manchester is one of the national pathfinder sites implementing some of the recommended reforms around fostering. This includes designing end-to-end improvements that aim to increase the number of foster carer numbers including:

- A Greater Manchester recruitment support hub hosted by Rochdale Council to provide information about fostering for your Local Authority to maximise the number of people who take forward a fostering application.
- Roll out of Mockingbird - an evidence-based programme across the city-region to support retention of foster carers.
- A regional marketing campaign to attract new foster carers.

4.2 The timing of this work is more important than ever. The number of GM foster placements fell to 3,017 in the most recent financial year. This is a 4.2% reduction between the end of 2017/18 and 2022/23 (4.6% reduction in in house LA fostering

placements and a 3.0% reduction in independent sector foster placements).<sup>1</sup> This insufficiency of available foster care has largely driven the increasing residential demand with substantial implications for expenditure. The average fee GM LAs spend on an independent residential placement is £4,840 per week compared to £840 on an independent fostering agency placement (June 2023).<sup>2</sup>

4.3 Since receiving confirmation of the pathfinder status a significant amount of work has been undertaken between GM Fostering leads, Rochdale Council and GMCA to put Greater Manchester in a strong position to be able to launch the GM Fostering Hub by the end of May, most notably:

- Successful recruitment of the Hub Manager and project manager posts – which will be a critical role in the set up and operation of the Hub.
- Advertisement of the Advanced Practitioner and Enquiry officer posts that will sit in the Hub with recruitment starting over the next few weeks,
- End to end design process setting out the exact functions of the Hub – which will now be tested with Fostering leads and a group of foster carers to ensure there is clarity on what will be undertaken by the Hub vs individual Local Authorities. (NB. this has been supported by guidance from DfE and Ofsted around confirmation that Initial Home Visits arranged by the Hub would not be subject to OFSTED regulation)

4.4 Alongside the development of the GM Fostering Hub work has also begun on the implementation or expansion of the Mockingbird model (for those that already have the model) across Greater Manchester. This is being supported by the fostering team in Stockport Council who have extensive experience of the model alongside the Fostering Network who already provide support to Local Authorities across the country on how to set up and get the most out of the Mockingbird model. (As reported previously the Mockingbird model involves foster carers being part of a group with other foster carers who are described as satellite foster homes. They are supported by a central 'hub' home, which provides resources and support to the satellite homes).

4.5 To support our fostering communications and marketing campaign DfE have also recently announced that Greater Manchester will receive an allocation of £323,186. This will enable GM to build on our 'Fostering Unfiltered' campaign that launched last

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<sup>1</sup> 'Children looked after in England including adoption', SSDA903 returns from GM localities provided to the GMCA Research team.

<sup>2</sup> Median weekly cost per independent sector placement, placed by GM Local Authorities in the period June 2023. Source: 'Placements North West' quarterly submissions by GM commissioners.

summer and ensure LAs are able to communicate effectively around the changes being implemented by the introduction of the GM Fostering Hub. As with the design of the Hub itself the Fostering programme team will be engaging with existing foster carers around how we might make the most of the next phase of the communication campaign to reach and attract as many prospective foster carers as possible.

4.6 Alongside this programme positively we can now report that all GM Local Authorities and GMCA have either formally signed up or are due to sign off on becoming Foster friendly employers – this scheme run by the Fostering Network sees foster carers employed by the organisation receive additional flexibility and time-off to respond to the needs of being a foster carer, for example attending meetings. Discussions are underway with other large public sector organisations in the region including Greater Manchester Police around whether this policy by also be adopted by them.

## **5 Developing a Joint Forward Plan with Health**

5.1 Fundamental to all our ambitions to improve outcomes for children & young people in Greater Manchester will be taking an integrated approach alongside health. Work is underway on the development of the 'Giving every child and young person the best start in life' part of the GM Integrated Care Partnership Joint Forward Plan as part of the NHS GM Strategic Financial Framework. The development of this plan offers us a real opportunity to achieve the following:

- Establish children and young people as a priority group for future plans.
- Ensure we have a clear set of shared priorities that respond to the needs of children and young people in our communities and demands in the system.
- Enables us to align our resources behind our shared priorities for children, young people and families.
- Follow through on our ambitions to shift the emphasis towards investment in preventative approaches/models and away from reactive spend.

5.2 To support this work the Joint Forward Plan is being discussed with each Locality Board over the next few weeks. This recognises that locality leads and practitioners within localities need the opportunity to shape and influence the programme to ensure that the Children & Young People programme can be aligned to the delivery of the 3

population health opportunities outlined within the Strategic Financial Framework and ensure delivery reflects local area identification of need.

5.3 Following this period of consultation a revised version of the Joint Forward Plan will be submitted to the GM Integrated Care Partnership Board for sign off. This will also be shared with GMCA.

## **6 Conclusions**

6.1 The areas of work described in this report are mostly born out of a recognition that more radical solutions are needed in response to the challenges facing children's services departments across GM, both in terms of financial pressures and the outcomes we want for our children & young people. Whilst the projects are making good progress on implementation it will take some time to understand whether they are having the desired effect on key indicators such as spend on agency staff (GM Pledge), an increase in the number of foster carers (GM Fostering Programme) and availability of high quality and cost effective placements for Looked After Children (Project Skyline). Either way through commitment across GM Local Authorities (supported by strong leadership from GM Directors of Children's Services and lead members) and working collaboratively with partners good progress is being made.

## Appendix – Commitments within the ‘GM Pledge’

Each local authority agrees to:

- Commit to working within the pay rates and protocols of the GM Pledge from **November 2023**. This will apply to **new** engagements active from this date. Each DCS will agree a timeline for the transition of existing workers which reflects local circumstances.
- **Bring any existing agency workers** who exceed the new GM Pledge pay rates **in line with the pay rates** and timelines as agreed with each LA.
- **Bring any existing project or Managed Teams to an end within 6 months** of the go live date of October 2023
- **Introduce a standard reference template** for all candidates that relates to standard of practice for any agency worker
- **Not to engage candidates leaving a permanent contract in GM** to take up an agency role in GM for a minimum of 6 months
- **Refrain from headhunting staff from GM** boroughs, unless for a promotional role
- **Work closely with the agency supply chain** to better enable their support of permanent recruitment activities across GM
- **Hold one another to account and provide mutual support** and assistance to other GM LAs e.g. short term provision of staff or leadership advice and support in specific areas
- **Provide accurate and complete data** to the GMCA’s HR metrics service on a quarterly basis