

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
GMCA OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY HELD WEDNESDAY 25 FEBRUARY 2026 AT
THE TOOTAL BUILDINGS - BROADHURST HOUSE, 1ST FLOOR, 56 OXFORD
STREET, MANCHESTER, M1 6EU**

PRESENT:

Councillor John Walsh	Bolton Council (Chair)
Councillor Peter Wright	Bolton Council
Councillor Imran Rizvi	Bury Council
Councillor Basil Curley	Manchester City Council
Councillor Mandie Shilton Godwin	Manchester City Council
Councillor Colin McLaren	Oldham Council
Councillor Ken Rustidge	Oldham Council
Councillor Lewis Nelson	Salford City Council
Councillor Helen Hibbert	Stockport Council
Councillor Sangita Patel	Tameside Council
Councillor David Sweeton	Tameside Council
Councillor Jill Axford	Trafford Council
Councillor Nathan Evans	Trafford Council
Councillor Will Jones	Trafford Council
Councillor Mary Callaghan	Wigan Council

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Karen Chambers	Senior Governance and Scrutiny Officer, GMCA
Miriam Loxham	Senior Principal, Early Years and Family Help, Public Service Reform, GMCA

O&SC 09/26

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor John Leech (Manchester), Councillor Dylan Williams (Rochdale), Councillor Terry Smith (Rochdale) Councillor Tony Davies (Salford), Councillor Sean Ennis (Trafford), and Councillor Garry Lloyd (Wigan).

Apologies were also received from Caroline Simpson, Group Chief Executive and Gillian Duckworth, Group Solicitor and Monitoring Officer.

O&SC 10/26

CHAIRS ANNOUNCEMENTS AND URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that as there was only one substantive item on the agenda he would aim to end the meeting at 2.30pm.

The Chair reported that he had raised the Committee's concerns about the growing prominence of fly-tipping at the Combined Authority meeting on Friday 13 February. He drew attention to the Mayor's comments on the links between fly-tipping and criminal activity, as well as recent discussions held by the Mayor and Deputy Mayor with Greater Manchester Police and the Environment Agency regarding potential actions to address the issue. Members reiterated their concerns and stressed the importance of ensuring that the full scale of the problem was properly understood.

The Chair informed the Committee that the quarterly report for October to December 2025 would be circulated to Members following the meeting.

RESOLVED /-

1. That the Chair's announcements be noted.
2. That the Quarterly Round Up Report be circulated to members after the meeting.

O&SC 11/26 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Lewis Nelson declared an interest in relation to Item 5 on the agenda due to his partner being a consultant at the Innovation Unit.

RESOLVED /-

That the above declaration be noted.

**O&SC 12/26 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 11
FEBRUARY 2026**

RESOLVED /-

That the minutes of the GMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 February 2026 be approved as a correct and accurate record.

**O&SC 13/26 DRAFT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH
REVIEW - WORKFORCE RETENTION & QUALITY IN
EARLY YEARS**

Councillor Mary Callaghan, Chair of the Task and Finish Review, presented the Review to the Committee which was undertaken by members of the GM Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Building a Stronger Early Education and Childcare Workforce.

Councillor Callaghan advised the Committee that the Review had been the product of extensive engagement over recent months with practitioners, leaders, and partners from across Greater Manchester (GM). Their honesty and insights had shaped the findings and expressed thanks for the time and thought they had contributed. Contributors had demonstrated strong commitment to early education and childcare, emphasising the importance of relationships in supporting children

and families. However, many also described the challenges of working within a stretched system and the feeling that their work was often undervalued.

It was stressed that the Review had not sought to criticise but to understand practitioners' experiences, recognising both the emotional and practical pressures faced. The Review had highlighted examples of effective leadership, innovation and supportive cultures that prioritised young children and their families. The recommendations stemmed from these shared insights and had been based on the principle that every child deserves the best possible start. Achieving this required a workforce that felt respected, valued, and able to thrive. It was noted that GM already had strong foundations on which to build collaboratively, with a continued focus on children, families, and the workforce.

Members of the Task and Finish Review briefed the Committee on some of the recommendations contained within the Review.

Recommendation 2 - Make early education and childcare a desired career choice

Councillor Mandie Shilton Godwin advised the Committee that it was very important for early education and childcare staff to feel valued, respected, and properly supported. It was noted that the sector continued to be widely perceived as "women's work," which contributed to the sector being underpaid, undervalued, and insufficiently recognised, despite the highly skilled, demanding and emotionally intensive nature of the work. This gendered perception aligned with the findings of the Task and Finish Review, which evidenced long-standing structural issues around low pay, poor progression opportunities and the significant pressures placed on a predominantly female workforce. These factors were major contributors to ongoing challenges with recruitment, retention, and career sustainability across GM.

Councillor Shilton Godwin also referred to the recent publication of the Government's paper Solving the SEND Crisis, noting its relevance to the Review. Investment in the early education and childcare workforce had the potential to

transform long-term outcomes for children, particularly through early support for speech, language, and emotional development. High-quality early education and childcare formed essential social and economic infrastructure, enabling parents, especially women, to participate in the workforce with confidence that their children were well supported. The Review presented a significant opportunity to drive change, recognising early education and childcare as a fundamental infrastructure that underpinned child development, family wellbeing, and GM's wider economic resilience.

Recommendation 3 - Increase data insight without additional burden

Councillor Helen Hibbert advised the Committee that it was important to ensure that the impact of any proposed changes could be properly measured. Improvements could only be understood through accurate and sufficiently granular data and highlighted that the Review had found that early education and childcare providers often received piecemeal or duplicative data requests, creating unnecessary administrative burdens. Early education and childcare formed essential social and economic infrastructure, as highlighted by the Review, with almost 190,000 children in GM affected by poverty in 2024 and strong evidence that maternal employment was one of the most significant safeguards against child poverty. Improving affordability and accessibility of childcare supported wider economic participation, including reducing gender employment gaps, and contributed to a shift towards prevention rather than crisis response. One of the Review's key recommendations related to strengthening and streamlining workforce and system data, ensuring a single, coordinated mechanism for data collection. This would enable the Combined Authority to measure progress effectively, identify what was working, and avoid repeated or overlapping data requests to providers, allowing them to focus on supporting children and families.

Recommendation 5 - Invest in career progression, continued professional development and training

Councillor Colin McLaren advised the Committee that this was the third Task and Finish Review on early years provision he had contributed to in recent years and welcomed the opportunity to continue this work. Unlike most professions, the early

education and childcare sector still lacked a clear and coherent structure for qualifications, professional progression, and ongoing training. The Review had found that in some instances there was limited opportunities for staff to advance, share best practice or develop leadership skills, alongside continued shortages of Level 2 and Level 3 practitioners. These gaps placed significant pressure on a young and often inexperienced workforce and contributed to persistent difficulties in recruitment and retention. Without a stronger professional framework, early education and childcare settings would continue to struggle to support children to achieve good levels of school readiness.

Councillor McLaren advised that Review provided an important opportunity for GM to develop a more robust and supportive structure for the benefit of children, families and the early education and childcare workforce.

Recommendation 6 – Promote integrated models and social purpose businesses

Councillor Jill Axford advised the Committee that Recommendation 6 highlighted the need for more integrated models and joined-up services across early education and childcare. Primary school sites appeared to be a natural home for childcare provision and suggested that parity of status and funding with schools would significantly strengthen the sector. Linking provision with Family Hubs and the Live Well programme would be essential to delivering seamless and holistic support for parents and children.

Councillor Axford further commented on the recommendation to explore alternative business models, expressing concern that such an important area of work remained heavily shaped by market forces. The Review's call for the promotion and support of community-interest companies, social enterprises and cooperatives as models that better reflected the social purpose and public value of early education and childcare was welcomed.

Miriam Loxham, Senior Principal for Early Years and Family Help advised the Committee that, as Lead Officer for the Review, she believed the work had provided

a valuable opportunity to pause, reflect and consider both the progress made to date and the need for GM to go further in addressing long-standing challenges within the early education and childcare system. The Review offered a clear blueprint for future action, setting out the issues succinctly while also challenging partners to work more collaboratively across the breadth of GMCA policy levers. Participation in the Review had been an insightful experience, providing an opportunity to experience members' questioning and challenges, which had informed the development of potential next steps. The timing of the Review aligned closely with the current policy environment, with all ten local authorities preparing their Best Start to Life Plans, required by DfE, to provide oversight of delivery of statutory school readiness targets by 2028. These targets were highly ambitious and high-quality, accessible and inclusive early education and childcare would play a central role in delivering improved outcomes for children across GM.

Councillor Callaghan extended sincere thanks to all members of the Task and Finish Group for their time, thoughtful discussions, and invaluable contributions throughout the Review. The draft report was commended to the Committee, with the hope that it would encourage continued partnership, compassion, and determination in strengthening early education and childcare across the city region.

Members suggested that, in light of the Government's announcement on SEND reforms published earlier in the week, a codicil to the report should be considered. They noted that subsequent policy developments had the potential to affect elements of the draft recommendations, particularly Recommendation 1, which emphasised the importance of SEND proposals, and that it would therefore be appropriate to monitor the impact of any new Government measures. Members felt that including such a note would ensure that the GMCA and partners remained alert to ongoing changes and continued to track progress and emerging opportunities.

Members commented that achieving improvements required sustained attention over time and highlighted the importance of workforce stability, noting that high staff turnover made progress difficult. It was suggested that the Committee receive regular updates, to ensure continued oversight, recognising that effective early

education and childcare support could fundamentally change outcomes for children across GM.

The Review was well-evidenced and clearly set out the key challenges facing the early education and childcare sector. The Committee noted the significant increase in the number of children living in low-income households across GM and emphasised the importance of taking action to re-address this position.

Early education and childcare roles should be recognised as highly skilled and were of equal importance to teaching and welcomed the Review's recommendations on improving qualifications and pay to stabilise the workforce and reduce staff turnover. The wider socioeconomic benefits of strengthening the early education and childcare workforce, particularly for women's employment and economic participation, were highlighted in the Review. Members supported the need to translate the findings into tangible delivery and stressed the importance of maintaining momentum to ensure the work resulted in meaningful and sustained improvement.

Members enquired about mental health support structures for early education and childcare staff and were advised that the Review had highlighted an opportunity to identify and scale up effective practice from strong providers across GM, using case studies and local authority provider networks to define and disseminate what good support for the workforce looked like. A more structured approach to workforce wellbeing and mental health, including peer support and supervision for new entrants and access to appropriate training was emphasised, including drawing on clinical expertise, both to reduce staff turnover and absence and to support staff managing complex family circumstances. It was important to systematically capture and spread good working practice and address gaps through GM workforce training and development offers.

Councillor Callaghan noted the importance of the point raised, explaining that as a Governor of a school with early education and childcare provision, staff wellbeing and support were monitored regularly. Very young practitioners, often aged 18 or

19, were frequently required to deal with complex family situations and interactions with social workers and relatives and therefore needed appropriate mental health support and supervision. The assurance that protective measures were being developed were welcomed and expressed hope that this support would be implemented consistently across GM.

Members noted the variation in the quality of early education and childcare provision across GM, highlighting both excellent practice and settings where families received poor support despite high costs. Members welcomed the Review's clear contextual analysis, including the growth of large private chains, and raised concerns about the influence of private equity within the sector. The shift towards integrated, purpose-driven, community led provision was supported and emphasised the central role of the workforce. Members also highlighted the need for action to drive this work forward, rather than relying on encouragement alone, to ensure meaningful change. Officers acknowledged members' concerns regarding the growth of large, profit-extracting models within the early education and childcare sector. They confirmed that work was already underway to analyse the GM childcare market, including understanding the balance between for-profit and not-for-profit provision and how funding was being utilised. As part of this work, GMCA was engaging with the Innovation Unit to develop a case study of the GM market, recognising that there was currently no comprehensive picture of provider types, market size or the flow of public funding. This insight work would support future consideration of proportionate and evidence-informed market reform, similar to the analytical approach previously taken in relation to children's residential care and would help to clarify the potential role the Combined Authority could play in supporting a more sustainable and socially purposed model of provision across the city region. Members cautioned against poorly designed intervention, drawing on examples such as the rental market, could lead to providers withdrawing and reducing provision. While supportive of cooperative and CIC models, Members stressed the need for careful consideration before pursuing wider intervention. Officers clarified that no proposals would be made to introduce reforms that would force large numbers of providers out of the market. However, with more than 80% of sector funding now coming from Government, greater oversight was needed to

ensure that funding supported quality and outcomes. Officers identified some of the concerns about large extractive provider models and the importance of proportionate challenge. It was noted that mapping work was planned to understand the composition of the GM childcare market, which would support future thinking on evidence informed and targeted market management, particularly in areas with childcare shortages.

Members noted the predominance of women in the early education and childcare workforce and highlighted low pay as a key contributing factor, with consideration to be given to how more men and individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds could be encouraged into the sector, given the importance of a representative workforce for GM's communities. Members also referred to forthcoming Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) reforms and the potential removal of the independent right of appeal, noting that these developments could have significant implications for families. The Committee requested further updates on these matters as the reforms progressed. The importance of workforce diversity was recognised, and GM continued to see a significant gender attainment gap at age five, and that increasing the number of male and racially minoritised practitioners could provide positive role models and better reflect local communities. Recent recruitment campaigns had been designed to showcase male and diverse practitioners and that further work was underway to understand how best to attract a wider range of candidates into the sector. Low pay remained a barrier, particularly for men who were more likely to be primary earners. In light of the recent SEND reform proposals, rising levels of EHCP requests among under-fives, and the continuing need for a stable and skilled workforce to meet new expectations, there was concern about the potential emergence of a two-tier system between school-based nurseries and Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) settings. Members emphasised the importance of ensuring consistent support and provision across GM. Members also highlighted the need to prioritise fair pay within the sector, noting that higher wages were essential to reflect early education and childcare roles were highly skilled and demanding, rather than simply as a means to attract more men into the workforce. Members stressed that all practitioners deserved appropriate recognition and remuneration for the complexity of their work

and agreed that any improvements in pay should reflect the value of the profession as a whole.

Members noted the Review's findings on the decline in early intervention spending since 2010/11 and the corresponding rise in late-stage crisis costs. The long-term impact of the closure of Sure Start, despite evidence that every £1 invested had generated significant social and economic returns was highlighted. Falling birth rates and the wider implications for future services, further evidenced the importance of supporting families and improving early education and childcare provision across GM. Officers confirmed that national evidence indicated rising living costs and childcare affordability were contributing to declining birth rates. The recent expansion of funded hours for working parents offered some support, but falling birth numbers also created opportunities to expand school-based nursery provision, with some schools already extending places to younger children. Members noted that falling birth rates were influenced not only by affordability pressures but also by younger adults choosing to delay starting families. Many parents were now older when having their first child and were often limiting family size because of the high costs associated with pregnancy, infant care, and childcare. Members highlighted that this trend risked long-term demographic challenges and underlined the importance of supporting families more effectively.

Members expressed concern about the high rates of infant mortality in some areas and reflected on the importance of early support for families, including factors such as breastfeeding and parental care in the earliest months of a child's life. There were historical examples illustrating how strengthened family support could improve outcomes and suggested that lessons from the past should inform ongoing work to support young children and families.

Members discussed the importance of supporting and retaining early education and childcare staff and highlighted an example from Bolton, where a CIC provided support for carers of older people. It was suggested that similar approaches could be valuable in the childcare sector to strengthen staff wellbeing and retention.

Members asked whether there were further opportunities to expand apprenticeship schemes. It was also noted that structured apprenticeships could support skills development, strengthen the quality of provision, and provide clearer career pathways for early education and childcare staff. Officers noted that apprenticeships played a critical role in growing and developing the early education and childcare workforce and reported that the Government had recently announced grants to support early education and childcare degree apprenticeships, offering an opportunity to increase the number of Level 6-qualified practitioners. However, retaining graduate-level staff remained challenging, as higher salaries were available in the school-based education sector and pay levels were constrained by the national funding formula, which could not be significantly altered locally.

Members reiterated the importance of supporting workforce development and noted that career progression required both on-the-job support and access to education and training. The existing initiatives outlined in the Review, including apprenticeship pathways, were welcomed, although stressed that without competitive pay the sector risked losing newly trained staff to better-paid roles elsewhere. Members also highlighted the need to ensure sufficient local nursery provision, noting the pressures caused by recent closures. It was suggested that expanding school-based settings, potentially delivered in partnership with CICs, co-operatives or social enterprises, could help improve access for families and strengthen provision across communities.

Members involved in the Review thanked the Chair and officers for their commitment to the Task and Finish Review.

The Chair summarised the additional actions requested, noting the need to monitor closely any post-report Government proposals arising from the SEND White Paper and to assess their impact on the Review's recommendations. The Chair also highlighted the earlier point regarding the importance of regular oversight and suggested that this be incorporated into the Committee's work programme to ensure progress continued to be tracked and maintained.

RESOLVED /-

1. That the comments of the GM Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Task and Finish Review be noted, and amendments made prior to the final Review being presented at the GM Overview & Scrutiny Committee taking place on 25 March 2026.

O&SC 14/26

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME & FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The Chair advised that the Greater Manchester Strategy would be brought to the next Committee meeting and clarified that it would outline the proposed structure rather than provide detailed data at this stage. It was further noted that the Good Growth Fund Governance report would be deferred. The Chair also advised that feedback from the recent joint audit discussions was still awaited and would be reported to the Committee in due course.

It was noted that dates for the next municipal year could not yet be confirmed, as the future composition of the Committee was still to be determined and the Committee would be reappointed at the GMCA's Annual meeting taking place at the end of June. The Chair highlighted the need to avoid clashes with council meetings and advised that it might be necessary to consider moving the Committee's meeting day to minimise conflicts.

RESOLVED /-

1. That the update on the proposed Overview & Scrutiny Work Programme and meeting dates for the next municipal year be noted.
2. That Members use the Forward Plan of Key Decisions to identify any potential areas for further scrutiny.

O&SC 15/26

FUTURE MEETING DATES

RESOLVED /-

That the following dates for the rest of the municipal year be noted:

- Wednesday 25 March 2026