

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN

At a meeting of the **Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee** held on **Monday, 11th November, 2024** at 6.30 pm in Committee Room 2, Town Hall, Judd Street, London WC1H 9JE

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE PRESENT

Councillors Lotis Bautista (Chair), Matt Cooper, Jenny Headlam-Wells, Patricia Leman, Sylvia McNamara, Tom Simon and Nanouche Umeadi

Co-opted Members Zarin Bakhshzaad and Dr Rachel Wrangham

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ABSENT

Councillor Julian Fulbrook and Co-opted Member Margaret Harvey

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Marcus Boyland, Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families
Councillor Sabrina Francis, Cabinet Member for Young People and Culture

The minutes should be read in conjunction with the agenda for the meeting. They are subject to approval and signature at the next meeting of the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee and any corrections approved at that meeting will be recorded in those minutes.

MINUTES

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Julian Fulbrook and Margaret Harvey.

2. DECLARATIONS BY MEMBERS OF STATUTORY DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS, COMPULSORY REGISTERABLE NON-PECUNIARY INTERESTS AND VOLUNTARY REGISTERABLE NON-PECUNIARY INTERESTS IN MATTERS ON THIS AGENDA

There were no declarations.

3. ANNOUNCEMENTS (IF ANY)

Broadcast of the meeting

The Chair announced the following: "In addition to the rights by law that the public and press have to record this meeting, I would like to remind everyone that this meeting is being broadcast live by the Council to the Internet and can be viewed on

our website for six months after the meeting. After that time, webcasts are archived and can be made available upon request.

If you have asked to address the meeting, you are deemed to be consenting to being filmed and to the use of those images and sound recordings for webcasting and/or training purposes. If you are addressing the Committee your contribution will be recorded and broadcast.”

Welcome to new Committee Member, Cllr Patirica Leman

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair welcomed Cllr Patirica Leman as a new Committee Member, replacing Cllr Shiva Tiwari.

4. DEPUTATIONS (IF ANY)

The Chair stated that two deputations would be presented to the Committee which would be considered in turn.

Deputation 1 – AI technologies and special educational needs and disability (SEND) support

Dana Klopot presented their deputation statement, on the topic of AI technologies and SEND support, included within the supplementary agenda (pages 3-4).

The Chair thanked the deputees for their presentation and invited questions and comments from the Committee. The following was discussed:

- A Member expressed interest in the potential of AI, but raised concern over a possible increasing administrative burden on staff, given reduced capacity in recent years. They noted that SEND needs in Camden were highly intersectional and questioned whether AI solutions would fairly apply, because some demographic groups already underserved were often failed in AI models due to the lack of data and recognition. In response, the deputees confirmed the aim was to create AI applications that benefitted every individual, both in Camden and globally. They emphasised that AI could support day-to-day needs by analysing patterns and providing timely resources, which could currently take years to access. The AI technology was scalable, affordable, and highly efficient.
- A Member asked for clarification on how an AI system would work, specifically integrating into current systems and its ability to identify early signs of neurodivergence. In response, the deputees explained that the technology could identify signs of neurodivergence as early as age two and could then offer solutions to providers. They highlighted the use of sensitive data, in compliance with regulations, enabling the system to detect signs of neurodivergence through prompts and mathematical analysis. The deputees described the use of a ‘neurodiversity bank’ that would continuously learn and improve its accuracy by analysing more data, allowing it to better identify needs and provide early

interventions. The system would act as a centralised platform for support and resources.

Members requested that officers prepare a written response to the deputees.

Action By - Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion

Deputation 2 – Environmental impact of school uniforms.

Hugo Keane and Alexandra Milenov presented their deputation statement, on the topic of the environmental impact of school uniforms, included within the supplementary agenda (pages 5-9).

The Chair thanked the deputees for their presentation and invited questions and comments from the Committee. The following was discussed:

- A Member expressed support for the research, but raised a concern about the cost, noting that polyester was inexpensive while cotton tended to be more expensive. They asked how the issue could be addressed while keeping uniforms affordable. The deputees highlighted that, with fellow parents, they had compared uniform costs and found that high street shops often offered cheaper, more environmental options than the prescribed uniform and it was possible to offer better, non-polyester alternatives within the typical £250 uniform budget. The deputees recommended reimagining the uniform, possibly phasing out the blazer, as a simple first step.
- A Member suggested that schools could recycle uniforms and asked what systems or incentives were in place at schools to support this. The deputees responded that a system had existed in their school, but it had not been fully implemented, as the school often did not take action with the uniforms collected. The success of such a program depended on the availability of second-hand uniform and willingness by parents and the school. The deputees said it was a statutory requirement for schools to provide second-hand uniforms, but noted their uncertainty about its effectiveness across the country. An incentive system had been discussed, but in their experience there had been limited willingness to participate and there were limitations of a recycling system.

Members requested that officers prepare a written response to the deputees.

Action By - Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion

5. MINUTES

RESOLVED -

THAT the minutes of the meeting held on 8 October 2024, subject to the correction, be agreed as an accurate record.

6. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR DECIDES TO TAKE AS URGENT

There was no urgent business.

7. LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN CHILDREN'S STATUTORY SERVICES COMPLAINTS REPORT 2023/24

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Relational Practice.

Nana Bonsu, Director of Relational Practice, introduced and summarised the statutory annual report which provided information about complaints made to the Children's statutory services in the London Borough of Camden during the twelve months between April 2023 and March 2024.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and invited questions and comments from the Committee. The following was discussed:

- A Member raised concerns about the representation of ethnicity in the complaints data, noting that it did not align with the general ethnic composition of young people in Camden. They questioned whether this discrepancy reflected satisfaction among ethnic minority groups, or discomfort in engaging with the complaints process. Members asked whether the current data provided good representation or whether certain demographics were underrepresented in complaints. In response, officers explained that Corporate Services did not currently collect ethnicity data, but planned to introduce a feedback form to gather demographic information from 2025. For the current report, ethnicity data had been manually sourced from the MOSAIC (integrated service for children and young people with disabilities and their families) database, which was incomplete but provided some insight. Officers emphasised the need for more granular data in future reports and noted that current figures did not capture complaints resolved informally before Stage 1 of the process. Officers recognised the potential barriers faced by some demographic groups, including language challenges, and highlighted the importance of ensuring equitable access to advocacy and offer clear communication about what to expect from services. They proposed exploring benchmarking to assess whether the level of complaints reflected a confident and empowered user base. Additionally, officers noted the importance of gathering feedback through alternative channels to ensure the voices of all service users were heard.
- A Member raised concerns that some residents might not be aware of their right to complain or that they could contact councillors. They noted that complaints data might not fully reflect issues, as by the time people reached the complaints stage, their situation might have significantly deteriorated. The Member also queried why there were more complaints about Children in Need services than Children Looked After services. Officers explained that the higher volume of complaints related to Children in Need services was likely due to the size of the service, which was one of the largest within the department. They noted that

Children in Need and Child Protection services involved more direct contact with families than some other areas, such as the Children Looked After or Quality Assurance services. Officers highlighted that the nature of the work in these services, particularly around support and risk, introduced complexities that could influence how families experienced the service. They acknowledged that decisions made in these areas were often challenging and emphasised the importance of communicating respectfully and effectively with families during difficult times. Officers suggested that the context and dynamics of the work were likely factors influencing the complaints data.

- In relation to the table in section 4.2, a Member noted that Camden's ability to resolve Stage 1 complaints had declined each year and asked for an explanation for this trend. In response, officers did not have explanation for why figures were higher in 2019/2020 to hand, but they acknowledged that in more recent years there had been challenges in developing a better system and that the Corporate Complaints Service required more support from Children's Services, which had now been rectified. Officers said they would investigate to better understand the variation between 2019/2020 and 2023/2024. With improvements in the system, residents making complaints should expect an improvement on timeliness to a response from the Council.
- In relation to section 6, a Member raised concerns over the lack of progress on communication and interactions with families. They also said the responses to families appeared to vary depending on the individual social worker and they asked what work was taking place to address these issues strategically. In response, officers acknowledged the concerns and agreed that communication should be a fundamental part of the service. They noted that addressing these issues was important and that work was needed to ensure more consistent practice across the service.

RESOLVED -

THAT the Committee comment on and note the report.

8. 2024 SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING REPORT

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Education and Inclusion.

Nick Smith, Head of Education Commissioning and School Organisation, introduced and summarised the report which set out the composite and live data projections for school places and demonstrated the basis for school place planning decision-making in Camden. There had been five years of unprecedented change, with fluctuations caused by Brexit, the pandemic and other external factors. The latest data did not indicate a further decline in pupil numbers, however it also did not show an upturn in demand in the near future. The reduction in pupil numbers had immediate budget implications for schools, such as challenges in delivering a full curriculum. The long-term trend raised questions for the Council about the sustainability of the system going forward. While surplus provision had already been removed, there was still a forecasted surplus of school places in the future. Primary schools, secondary

schools and different geographical planning areas of the borough faced different contexts, but Camden had been at the forefront in working to alter provisions to match demand.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and invited questions and comments from the Committee. The following was discussed:

- A Member highlighted the high proportion of pupils in independent schools in Camden, noting that Camden had 31 independent schools compared to Islington's seven. They asked if there was any scope for collaboration with London Councils or other boroughs to encourage pupils into the maintained sector. Officers responded that Camden was already working with other local authorities and London Councils, which had released papers lobbying government for funding to address falling rolls. They noted that private schools in Camden often imported pupils from both London and further afield, which was not too different from Islington. Camden would welcome a joint approach to encourage more pupils to move into the maintained sector and the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families had an interest in this topic. However, officers pointed out that while this initiative could help, it would not solve the entire issue, as the private sector could not be treated as a homogenous group. Some private school families had never engaged with the state sector, while others had tried to apply for school places but were not awarded their first choice due to the admissions criteria and then left the state sector.
- A Member asked about the differences between the secondary and primary school populations and how that impacted planning. Officers confirmed that the secondary population differed from the primary population primarily due to the locations of schools; some secondary schools were located near borough boundaries and drew a significant portion of their pupils from outside Camden, whereas primary schools tended to have more local catchment areas in pockets within the borough.
- A Member asked whether the risks associated with a continued long-term decline in pupil numbers had been considered, particularly in terms of the potential impact on schools budgets. In response, officers explained that there was ongoing engagement with schools about the financial implications of falling rolls. A school place planning group, consisting of school leaders, was involved in interrogating data which supported transparency in decision-making around provisions. The officer highlighted that support from the Council and Camden Learning was being provided to help schools manage finances and share best practices. Additionally, the use of executive headteachers and formal federation were increasing, to bolster collaboration and efficiencies efforts.
- Members expressed concern over the lack of strategic planning evident in the annual school place planning reports, highlighting that over the past five years the outlook had consistently been bleak. They noted that while last year offered a glimmer of hope for improvement, the overall picture remained dire, with an impending crisis appearing unavoidable. Members were particularly dismayed by the omission of special schools and alternative provisions from the report and criticised this exclusion as being at odds with Camden's values of inclusion and

ensuring every child mattered. There was also no reference in the report to the SEND Provision Scrutiny Panel's place planning recommendations to the Council. It was stated there was a lack of a strategic approach to address the long-term financial sustainability of schools, especially in the context of declining rolls. The Co-opted Member stated that the current trend could lead to the proliferation of one-form entry primary schools, which were less financially sustainable and often less educationally effective than larger schools. Members also pointed out the potential harm caused by half-form entries on curriculum delivery in primary schools. Members called for a strategic plan that outlined scenarios for the future of Camden schools and reflected the borough's commitment to all children.

- Officers acknowledged the concerns raised, clarifying that the report was intended to present data rather than outline a strategy. They explained that there were limits in what could be publicly shared within the report, especially regarding school futures, to avoid adverse impacts which could intensify the challenges. Officers defended the Council's strategic approach, pointing out significant changes in school place planning was made in collaboration with schools, and noted that all decision-related reports were reviewed by scrutiny and Cabinet. On the topic of SEND, officers agreed there was more work ahead to integrate SEND provision planning into school place planning. Officers said the recent Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and a recent review of high-needs provision was informing their work. Officers acknowledged the urgency for a strategic shift and assured Members that political discussions were underway, with updates expected later in the municipal year.
- A Member commended Camden for its leadership and efforts in managing challenges related to falling rolls, noting that other boroughs had fared worse. They highlighted the primary school sector needed to be more agile and competitive, particularly in comparison to private schools that could offer attractive options to parents during open days. They questioned whether Camden could adopt a more agile, system-wide approach to enhance its appeal. In response, officers acknowledged Camden's strong structural framework, particularly through its partnership with Camden Learning, which facilitated collaboration and shared good practice among schools. Camden held a unified approach, unlike the more fragmented systems in other areas, which positioned the borough well to adapt to challenges. Officers also noted that wider policy development at the national level would play a role, and Camden Learning's model could form part of that broader strategy.
- A Co-Member noted that incidents and poor Ofsted ratings could deter parents from schools and catalyse falling pupil numbers and they asked how some schools could be supported to improve their image. Officers acknowledged that individual incidents could impact pupil numbers in the short-term, particularly when surplus capacity was already a challenge. They stated that Camden Learning supported schools in recovering and rebuilding their reputation after such events, even though incidents could not always be prevented.
- A Co-Member raised the importance of ensuring that all children in Camden were represented in the place planning process. They noted that there were schools with a clear oversupply of places, compared to special schools where every place

was filled, which represented decisions being made and a category of children being excluded.

RESOLVED -

THAT the Committee comment on and note the report.

9. PERSISTENT ABSENCE, INCLUSION AND ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion and the Chief Executive Officer, Camden Learning.

Vikram Hansrani, Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion, and Chris Roberts, Senior Adviser for Safeguarding & Inclusion at Camden Learning, introduced and summarised the report which provided information on the prevalence of persistent absence in Camden's schools and provided an overview of work to ensure education was inclusive for all children, including alternative provision.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and invited questions and comments from the Committee. The following was discussed:

- In relation to section 3.2, a Member asked if the Council knew who were the 1,505 persistently absent primary school children and how they were supported. In response, it was confirmed that Camden Council with Camden Learning was working with schools to help planning and address the issue. This work was also part of the Youth Mission to tackle the issue. It was noted the secondary school level of persistent absence was higher at nearly 2,000 and it was a system wide issue. Where there were more severe cases of persistent absences, children would be referred to other support services, instead of other milder targeted approaches within schools for less severe cases such as resetting messaging.
- A Member said that there should be empathy shown to children with SEND in mainstream settings who were struggling, also raising there may be absences related to medical appointments which were marked against them. In response, officers said this report referred to current challenges and included data for special schools, where SEND had a high level of persistent absence. It was noted that often children could miss a whole day for an appointment and Camden would like to improve messaging to encourage families to attend school for a half-day on appointment days where possible, or that families try to request appointments out of school hours where possible.
- Members asked for more detailed information to be included in a future report about the background, outcomes, and destinations of children in alternative provision. In response, officers noted that there was a current focus on integrating the SEND strategy with alternative provision, aligning with the 2022 Green Paper and the associated SEND Improvement Plan from the Department for Education (DfE). Officers would ensure all alternative provision data was captured in the SEND Strategy progress report in February 2025.

- A Co-opted Member said this report was a good start, however it was lacking information in the following areas: it was hard to identify when, why and which groups of children were not at school; the variations between genders or variations between schools was unclear; the report was vague on which initiatives were successful or why certain interventions had been chosen; CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) was not referenced in the report; in relation to section 4.5, there was no mention of targeted interventions for children at higher risk; and there was little information on the impact of the interventions which had been chosen. Officers noted that further detailed analysis would be included in the SEND Strategy progress report in February 2025. They highlighted that challenges varied between cohorts and between schools, with tailored approaches needed to address disproportionate impacts. Current work included evaluating mental health support teams, family hubs, and early help system improvements, alongside strategies such as targeted text messaging for attendance and fostering welcoming school environments. Officers noted that the report was supported by more detailed analysis, which would be reviewed to determine what could be shared more widely. Officers acknowledged that persistent absence remained a nationwide challenge post-pandemic, with causes and effective solutions still being tested. Research and ongoing efforts were expected to provide clearer insights by Autumn 2025.
- Members raised concerns about a growing cohort of students who had become disengaged from education post-pandemic. They noted that while schools had always managed absences due to illness, a new dynamic had emerged where relationships between families and schools had more regularly broken down entirely. These students remained on school rolls but did not attend, presenting a worrying issue as they faced significant challenges in adulthood when entering the workforce without qualifications. Members highlighted the pressure placed on schools, who often invested significant time and resources trying to re-establish contact with families, and asked what guidance was being provided to headteachers to address these complex cases. In response, officers noted there was no clear solution at present, but there was ongoing work with the DfE and alignment with Ofsted's focus on inclusion, the curriculum, and assessment. While progress was being made, the trajectory remained positive but uncertain, but Camden was looking to utilise its strong schools ecosystem. The importance of rebuilding relationships and trust with families was emphasised as critical to addressing these challenges and there was engagement with the Parent Carer Forum for SEND in fostering trust and dialogue between families, schools, and other stakeholders. Officers acknowledged the ambiguity in some aspects of the current educational offer and greater clarity was needed.
- Members raised concerns about the long-term impact on students who struggled with basic literacy skills and about parents understanding the future consequences of these challenges. In response, officers acknowledged the concern, noting that the Free School Meal cohort was facing additional challenges that could widen the long-term disadvantage gap. They explained that while significant progress had been made over the past 15-20 years to narrow this gap, attendance issues were now contributing to a reversal of that progress.
- In response to section 5.5, a Member noted that it was hard to provide therapists due to the shortage in the profession, and in response to section 6.3, they said

targeted outreach work was not possible when Robson House was at full capacity. Officers stated that the alternative provisions challenges were regional and national. Camden aligned with external national reports, adopting a 3-tier approach to alternative provision that focused on intervention. Officers confirmed that a review of Robson House commissioning was underway to ensure there were adequate resources for effective interventions, while also defining the role of short-term provisions like Robson House. Camden had strength in retaining teaching and support staff, despite national funding challenges, which had enabled effective intervention modelling in schools.

- Members asked why persistent absence rates in Camden were higher than the London and national averages. Officers explained that prior to the pandemic Camden still had lower rates compared to similar boroughs and suggested that demographic factors, such as the proportion of children attending state schools, might have influenced the figures for mainstream schools. Further work was needed to explore whether more children had moved to the independent sector, and it was important to considering both demographic factors and variations in school practices.
- Members requested a more detailed report on persistent absence, which included information about the types of measures and case studies being used to address the issue. Members also requested the report respond to questions raised in the discussion. A Member also proposed inviting schools representatives to share their experience in tackling attendance issues, particularly for students with SEND. In response, it was confirmed that there would be a discussion outside of the meeting on how best to present the information at this time to the Committee, whether that be to the January 2025 meeting of a briefing note to members. In addition, it was confirmed that there would be more data included in the February 2025 SEND Strategy progress report. Officers stated that it would be Autumn 2025 when evidence and impacts from the intervention work could be reported to Committee.
- The Chair stated they were looking into arranging trips for the Committee to visit provisions across the borough.

RESOLVED -

THAT the Committee comment on and note the report.

10. CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKER 2024/25

Consideration was given to the report of the Executive Director Children and Learning.

Tim Aldridge, Executive Director Children and Learning, summarised the work programme.

In relation to item 8, a Co-opted Member requested a new iteration of the school place planning report, which would include details on strategic forward planning and

decision-making scenarios, based on points raised in the discussion. In response, it was confirmed that possible meeting dates to consider this report and other options for communicating the work with the Committee would be reviewed. It was noted that the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year was busy, and officers would need sufficient time to prepare this type of strategic report. Depending on the content, prior communication with schools might also be necessary before a public report. A Member suggested that, instead, a briefing session or workshop on the topic could be arranged for Committee Members.

In relation to item 9, Members requested a more detailed report on persistent absence, to include information about the types of measures being used, further SEND data, case studies, and responses to questions raised in the discussion. It was confirmed that there would be a discussion outside of the meeting on how best to present the information to the Committee.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING AND FUTURE MEETING DATES

The next meeting would be on 10 December 2024. The remaining meeting dates for the 2024/25 municipal were noted.

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS THE CHAIR DECIDES TO CONSIDER AS URGENT

There was no urgent business.

The meeting ended at 8.45 pm.

CHAIR

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MINUTES END