

## **THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN**

At a meeting of the **CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on **MONDAY, 24TH FEBRUARY, 2025** at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Judd Street, London WC1H 9JE

### **MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE PRESENT**

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

Co-opted Member Dr Rachel Wrangham

### **MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ABSENT**

Co-opted Members Zarin Bakhshzaad, Margaret Harvey, and Sarah Jafri.

### **ALSO PRESENT**

Councillor Marcus Boyland, Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families  
Councillor Sabrina Francis, Cabinet Member for Jobs, 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 Margaret Harvey. Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Matt Cooper.

#### **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)**

##### **Webcasting**

The Chair announced that the meeting as being broadcast live to the internet and would be capable of repeated viewing and copies of the recording could be made available on request. Those participating in the meeting were deemed to be consenting to being filmed.

## **Corporate Parenting Strategy Update**

The Council was developing Camden's Corporate Parenting Strategy to enhance support for care-experienced children and young people. The Committee was consulted at the previous meeting on the key drivers for change and the strategy's direction, which was progressing towards Cabinet approval. Officers were seeking feedback on implementation and impact measurement. A short feedback form, along with the strategy and draft implementation plan outlining key actions and success measures, would be shared with Committee Members and responses would help shape effective implementation.

### **4. DEPUTATIONS (IF ANY)**

There were no deputations.

### **5. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR DECIDES TO TAKE AS URGENT**

There was no notification of urgent business.

### **6. MINUTES**

#### **RESOLVED –**

THAT the minutes of the meeting held on 14 January 2025 be agreed as an accurate record.

### **7. UPDATE OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR BEST START FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

Consideration was given to the update of the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families.

Councillor Boyland (Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families) summarised the update paper which covered the following areas: Children's Trust Partnership Board and school attendance; Camden response to the National curriculum assessment review; Opportunity Centres and AI Campus Launch; and school estates.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for the update and invited questions and comments from the Committee. The following was discussed:

#### National Curriculum Review

- A Member welcomed the Council's contribution on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) concerns in response to the National Curriculum Review and asked for the estimated timetable for the outcome of this work. The Cabinet

Member advised that the timeline for the review was not yet known but confirmed that updates would be shared with the Committee as soon as further information became available.

- A Member asked how much consultation had taken place with SEND families before Camden's response was submitted, noting that families often felt their voices were not heard. The Cabinet Member responded that they had worked with the SEND Inclusion Board, the Parent Carer Forum, and Camden Learning. While they felt the consultation had been thorough, they acknowledged that there was always more that could be done. They also mentioned that residents and partners were aware of the challenges the Council faced.

#### School Estates

- A Member asked whether the approach outlined in section 5.3 on school estates would contribute to a broader estate strategy, incorporating strategic plans for falling rolls and place planning. The Cabinet Member acknowledged the need for a comprehensive plan covering SEND, place planning, and the school estate. Officers were working to align SEND requirements, while managing multiple moving parts and ongoing consultations with various stakeholders. The intention was to integrate the school estate report into this work, while considering maintenance needs and the diverse range of school buildings.
- A Member welcomed the school estate report and the engagement with parents and the Schools Capital Board, stating that they would like to hear more about this work and its timescales in the near future. The Cabinet Member confirmed that a report would be brought back to the Committee for input and discussion.
- A Member highlighted the event of when schools had to shut due to excessive heat two years ago. They noted the importance of climate resiliency in the school estate report and the need to assess how schools with different types of buildings could adapt to warmer summers. The Cabinet Member confirmed that this would be included in the report. They added that during heatwaves, some schools had to move children between cooler classrooms. It was noted that buildings from the 1960s were not suitable for the climate challenge. A test-and-learn approach had been applied in one school, where air conditioning was installed. The Cabinet Member also mentioned that the issue of children becoming unsettled or having difficulty regulating their behaviour due to heat would continue to be monitored.

#### Schools Art Biennale

- A Member asked whether the Schools Art Biennale was a one-off event. The Cabinet Member stated that the intention was to make it a permanent fixture in the schools cultural calendar, alongside events at the Royal Albert Hall, and that a funding request was being submitted for the next biennale in 2026.

The Committee noted the update.

## **8. UPDATE OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR JOBS, YOUNG PEOPLE & CULTURE**

Consideration was given to the update of the Cabinet Member for Jobs, Young People & Culture.

Councillor Francis (Cabinet Member for Jobs, Young People & Culture) summarised the update paper which covered the following areas: young people's participation in Youth Celebration Week; Youth Safety Steering Group and young ambassador feedback; and the successes in young people's participation and engagement.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for the update and invited questions and comments from the Committee. The following was discussed:

- A Member asked what events took place to celebrate LGBT History Month 2025, highlighting that LGBT young people were among the most targeted groups in society and had been affected by the first anti-LGBT law passed in the UK since the 1980s. The Member asked how Camden was supporting LGBT young people by fostering a sense of community and demonstrating the possibilities of adult life. The Cabinet Member stated that Camden shared LGBT History Month programming with Islington. The month started with a launch event, and an event was scheduled featuring a panel discussion on LGBT progress where a young panellist from the Camden Young Foundation would be speaking alongside older panellists. Information on events had been available on the Love Camden Culture site. The Cabinet Member noted efforts to attend as many events as possible and stated that Camden aimed to expand its programmes, though budget and time constraints remained a challenge. There were plans to make the lecture an annual event, bringing in speakers to inspire young people and older residents by showcasing positive LGBT adult experiences.
- A Member welcomed the broader and more positive framing of Youth Celebration Week while recognising that youth safety remained central. They asked whether young people at the event had shared their views on safety in Camden, particularly in light of increasing drug-related antisocial behaviour and crime over the past year. The Cabinet Member acknowledged these concerns and noted that young people often had personal connections to others involved in such activities. They stated that perceptions of safety varied significantly depending on location and individual experiences. Some young people had raised safety concerns during Youth Mission discussions, and youth workers had reported that some young people felt unable to attend certain youth clubs. Measures such as arranging group travel or support to attend clubs were being explored. The Cabinet Member emphasised that youth safety remained a key workstream, particularly in tackling the exploitation that often led young people into crime. Work with the police continued to address these issues and improve feelings of safety. Officers outlined ongoing council work on violence against women and girls, including education in schools on gender-related issues and positive masculinity. The Council had also engaged with domestic abuse survivors to improve services. A strategy was being developed in collaboration with partners, with an update expected later in the year.

- A Member expressed their ongoing support for Camden Summer University and asked about the attendance of less advantaged groups. The Cabinet Member explained that priority was given to these young people through targeted advertising. Young people in care and those with a youth worker were given a two-week head start to sign up for activities. Efforts were made to promote the initiative in spaces where these young people were most likely to engage, recognising that some had families who encouraged participation, while others did not receive the same support. The early access aimed to ensure that all young people had the opportunity to take part.

The Committee noted the update.

## **9. SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT & STANDARDS REPORT 2023-24**

Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Executive Officer, Camden Learning.

Stephen Hall (Chief Executive Officer, Camden Learning), accompanied by Dame Christine Gilbert (Chair, Camden Learning), summarised the report. Appendix 1 provided an overview of Camden schools performance including an analysis of overall published school outcomes from the academic year 2023-24 in Early Years, the Year 1 Phonics check, Key Stage 2 (KS2), Key Stage 4 (KS4) and Key Stage 5 (KS5) alongside other key performance indicators including Ofsted inspection outcomes, attendance, and suspensions data. Appendix 2 set out the 2023-24 annual review of the implementation of Camden's education strategy, Building Back Stronger.

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

- In relation to pupil suspensions, a Member acknowledged the challenging circumstances faced by schools, families, and pupils, noting that the aftermath of COVID-19 had contributed to behaviour issues. They asked whether this trend was expected to be a temporary phenomenon, given the positive emphasis on early intervention. The officer responded that while COVID-19 had had a national impact, Camden was performing positively overall regarding suspensions, with rates lower than both London and national benchmarks. They explained that more pathways were available for young people, and headteachers were keen to avoid exclusions. The officer also highlighted ongoing support and signposting for alternatives. While recognising the difficulty for school governors in making these decisions, they assured that everything possible was being done to provide alternatives before suspensions were implemented.
- A Co-opted Member pointed out the difficulty in presenting school data in a way that clearly highlighted variations across schools, noting the significant differences between them. They asked about the extent to which low-attaining disadvantaged children were represented at each school and what the variation in their chances of attainment were between the schools. They explained that schools varied in terms of student composition, with some comprehensives having a much smaller proportion of disadvantaged children. They inquired how

the data could be presented to clarify these differences. Camden Learning responded that they had this data and also noted that Camden had a mixed cohort. The girls' schools tended to perform better than mixed schools, and overall, only 63% of the Year 11 cohort had come from Camden primary schools, meaning the cohorts were different when comparing. It was also mentioned that Camden Learning had data on entry points and measures to track these variations.

- A Co-opted Member highlighted that there was little mention of vocational qualifications in the report, particularly BTECs, which were significant qualifications taken by many Camden children. They emphasised the importance of including these achievements, as failing to do so would overlook the accomplishments of a large number of Camden students. Camden Learning responded that they would include more information on vocational qualifications in the future. Camden Learning expressed pride in the work being done in the area, particularly from a post-16 perspective, including T-levels, and assured they would take the feedback into consideration.
- A Co-opted Member asked about the Sussex University project, requesting to see the plan and inquired how it had been evaluated. Camden Learning explained that the project was based on work around belonging and aimed to understand what this meant for young people, gathering insights from the children involved. Each school was building its own action plan based on their specific cohort and the findings from the project in its first year. Camden Learning noted that evaluations would be available in the summer, conducted by the university, and they would be able to report back on the outcomes.
- A Member asked about attainment in reading and writing at KS2, specifically what could be done for students not meeting expectations and what percentage of those students had SEND backgrounds. Camden Learning responded that 28% of students were not secondary school-ready and were unable to access education effectively, with some schools performing better than others. Camden Learning's focus was on sharing best practices, highlighting that some teachers were extremely skilled and experienced, supported by high ambition from leadership. They also emphasised the importance of tracking students and knowing their progress. They noted challenges such as mobility in schools and limited time to make a significant impact. Camden Learning expressed the aim to ensure all schools performed at their best and mentioned efforts to support children in Year 7, building on their progress into secondary school. They pointed to the need for improved transition guidance and the sharing of best practices for teachers, ensuring they understood the primary education children had received.
- A Co-opted Member expressed concern over poor attendance rates, noting that while Camden ranked highly on many metrics, attendance remained low. Regarding Appendix 1, next steps and activities, they queried the role of School Inclusion Support Officers in supporting schools, asking for clarity on the type of support provided. They noted that families were desperate for help, with barriers to school attendance extending beyond attendance issues alone. Camden Learning stated that attendance remained a constant challenge and a key focus. School Inclusion Support Officers worked to identify barriers to attendance, help schools recognise those at risk of persistent absence, and ensure the right support was in place. Those officers identified appropriate services, such as early help, social care, or SEND support, and facilitated meetings with parents. It was acknowledged that attendance caused significant anxiety for both parents and

schools. Family Support Workers had been effective in embedding themselves within schools, building strong relationships with families and communities. The existing Family Support Worker currently working in schools were externally funded, and there was the ability for comparisons between schools with and without them to assess their impact. There was a desire to expand this support to all schools to help families feel supported rather than judged.

- A Member raised concerns about KS4 outcomes, noting that only 19% of Black Caribbean students achieved a strong pass, meaning 81% did not. Camden Learning agreed that it was important to reframe the data and emphasised the need for schools to analyse who was not achieving and where progress was being made. Wider work was required on racial literacy and anti-racist policies, ensuring teachers understood racial and cultural differences. Sessions on anti-bias and racism were being delivered for school leaders. Camden Learning was also working to amplify pupils' voices so they could understand and advocate for their educational rights, ensuring schools listened to their experiences. A range of strategies was being implemented to address these disparities. It was also noted that Camden was a driver of the Mayor of London's Inclusion Charter.
- Camden Learning emphasised the need to focus on schools that were not achieving expected outcomes. Nationally, it was noted that students who did not meet expected standards at KS2 had only a 1 in 8 chance of achieving good results at KS4. There was a need for a more intensive focus on these schools this year.
- A Member raised concerns about SEND data on page 16, noting that progress measures were not always useful, and suggested looking at Attainment 8 data over time from 2019 to 2024. It was highlighted that Camden's data had remained around 0.5 before declining, with London data remaining steady and England's data increasing. However, SEND support data had dropped by two points in Camden, while both London and England had seen an increase. This had impacted Camden's rankings, which had shifted from 17<sup>th</sup> to 32<sup>nd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>. The Member queried the reasons for this decline, citing feedback from schools about bureaucratic barriers in completing forms, parents feeling unsupported in accessing Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), and a lack of resources to analyse the impact of negative data. Camden Learning acknowledged these concerns and noted that Fisher Family Trust (FFT) data had been used inconsistently across schools in the past, with some schools not using it at all. Last year, it was agreed that all schools would use the same system, allowing them to share data across Camden for the first time. FFT data was now being used to challenge schools and set targets. It was noted that SEND data was complex, particularly when national comparisons included mixed cohorts, and that EHCP eligibility varied across boroughs. It was also reported that two schools previously identified for improvement had since been rated as 'Good', and the impact of these changes should be seen over time. Camden Learning agreed that the London-wide trend was an important factor to consider in efforts to raise standards across all groups.
- A Member commended the report and acknowledged the challenges schools had faced in recent years, including staff losses. They noted that Camden had made progress in many areas, with significant contributions from Camden Learning and school staff. The Member raised concerns about the attainment for disadvantaged white working-class boys. They asked for Camden Learning's

perspective on this, how improvements could be made, and how political rhetoric could be more constructive, given that discussions on this topic had not led to significant change. Camden Learning highlighted the stark contrasts within this issue and noted that disadvantage encompassed a broad group affected by multiple factors, including attendance, housing, aspirations, diet, and health - some of which were beyond a school's control. A key strategy for schools was ensuring pupils remained in school so they could be monitored and supported, with a focus on high-quality teaching and tracking progress at both group and school levels. Some schools had placed a greater emphasis on this issue. Camden Learning also stressed the importance of fostering a sense of belonging, engaging with pupils to understand their perceived barriers, and adapting school approaches accordingly. The term 'white disadvantage' was described as clumsy, given its complexities and historical context. Family Support Workers were identified as playing a role in building relationships, tracking pupils, and strengthening pedagogy to support disadvantaged students effectively.

- A Member raised the issue of attendance and the barriers that may have been affecting it. They highlighted the importance of creating a nurturing and attractive school environment, noting that factors such as bullying or curriculum could impact attendance. The Member emphasised the need for schools to be places that children wanted to attend and engage with. Camden Learning spoke about the school environment being central to addressing these barriers, describing schools as places where students felt welcomed and able to engage. They referenced Appendix 1, Building Back Stronger education strategy update, which outlined activities aimed at broadening the curriculum and ensuring schools fostered communities that promoted aspirations and lived experiences. Camden schools were described as welcoming places and inclusive. There was further discussion on other barriers to learning and attendance, including behaviour, social ostracism, and issues with timetables.
- A Member raised concerns about bullying, particularly prevalent in some secondary schools, and asked about the direction of travel on bullying incidents and rates. Camden Learning responded that while they did not collect data on bullying incidents, schools did track the types and frequency of bullying, which were then reported to individual governing boards. Ofsted also reviewed this data, and the Camden Professional Partners spoke to pupils about their experiences in school. Camden Learning highlighted that there were many layers to how bullying was explored, but they could not provide the specific data. A key issue was how well schools responded to it.
- A Member discussed KS4 results, specifically Progress 8. They acknowledged that Progress 8 might not be a perfect indicator but argued that it should not be dismissed entirely. The Member expressed concern about Camden's low rankings in London on various indicators and suggested looking into and understanding the reasons behind it. They emphasised that while Progress 8 should not be the sole focus, it provided one useful perspective alongside other data. Camden Learning responded that they did not ignore Progress 8 and that school leaders shared the same view, headteachers were not all particularly keen on it, but schools had to work with the data available.
- A Member noted that the issue of underachievement among working-class boys, particularly Bangladeshi and Caribbean boys, was not new. They suggested that more sensitive analysis and an intersectional approach could be used. The Member also expressed concern that despite a wide range of initiatives, which



seemed too generic, these students might face a lifetime of low achievement, and the achievement gap was not closing. Camden Learning responded that the two highest-performing schools were all-girls schools. They explained that the advice provided was not generic consultancy but was focused on specific subjects and the unique needs and priorities of each school. Camden Learning mentioned that part of their work involved looking at schools that were bucking the trend, acknowledging that it was a stubborn issue that continued to be worked on, which they found frustrating. A Member sympathised with these comments but suggested that mixed schools might have the potential to close the achievement gap. They urged Camden Learning to look at what these schools were doing and share good practices, as well as consider research from other areas. Camden Learning explained that they were analysing subjects across schools, focusing on subjects and groups within those subjects. They also noted the introduction of a common data platform in secondary schools, allowing all schools to access and view this data. Camden Learning further highlighted the North London Research School in Camden, which served as a useful resource base. Camden Learning added that small-scale initiatives, such as using community mentors and improving the transition between primary and secondary schools, were being trialled. It was emphasised that the strong results in the girls' schools were not solely due to the gender of the students, but were also the result of excellent practices in those schools.

- A Co-opted Member raised concerns about the differences in how schools created their SEND registers, noting that one school might include a student on their register while another might not with the same needs. They asked if Camden Learning could help create a wider understanding of SEND support across Camden, particularly regarding ordinary available provisions and how SEND children who did not receive an EHCP were supported. They expressed a desire to understand why some schools appeared to be doing better than others, as the approach seemed to vary across schools. Camden Learning responded that this was a live issue regarding the identification of need and consistency. They explained that work was ongoing to create a common understanding of what ordinary available provisions would look like, as part of a change programme. It was also noted that a session had been held that day with 30-40 teachers, where barriers and strengths in the system had been discussed.
- A Co-opted Member raised concerns about suspensions and exclusions, stating that the report did not provide the necessary information to address the problem or reduce suspensions and exclusions. As a theory, the Member said if a reception teacher were asked about which children they were worried about, those children could often end up the ones struggling in the future. The Member stressed the importance of early intervention, suggesting that it needed to be very early, as reception teachers knew their classes well and could spot potential issues. They also noted the importance of understanding factors like reading age, disengagement with school, and late SEND support. For permanent exclusions, the Member asked if there was a way for schools to report near misses and what had changed in those success cases. Camden Learning responded that they took great care in identifying children early, but acknowledged that life experiences could put some children more at risk. They agreed that early intervention was crucial, although issues could also manifest at secondary school. They pointed out that while there were many small primary schools, secondary schools were much larger, with different relationships and dynamics.

Camden Learning highlighted the importance of a relational approach and strong pastoral teams in making a difference in how children were cared for and engaged in schools. Regarding near misses, Camden Learning stated that while they had evidence, they did not currently track this data. However, they assured that Camden performed better than the national average, even with challenging cohorts. They added that they had very strong pathways in place and noted the value of measuring these outcomes, but also emphasised that looking at individual stories and case studies was important.

- A Member noted that when comparing the nursery reception cohort to Year 6, struggling children could often be identified. However, doing so without labelling them, such as by using indicators like Free School Meals (FSM) status, was challenging. They asked how this could be done in a positive way. In response, Camden Learning explained that one key challenge was the curriculum's dramatic changes, particularly as children progressed through school. A major point of disengagement occurred when children struggled with reading, which hindered their ability to access the broader curriculum. They emphasised that ensuring children could read by age 7 was critical and that fostering engagement required a curriculum in which children saw themselves represented. This could be supported by diversifying the curriculum and ensuring a representative teaching workforce and school leadership. While Early Years education was crucial, Camden Learning highlighted that the entire primary curriculum journey needed to prepare children for secondary school. They pointed out that suspensions were a greater issue in secondary schools than in primary schools, often linked to students' struggles in accessing the curriculum. Identifying children at key transition points was essential, particularly in primary school, and Camden Learning was working to enhance this through improvements to the Camden school report and discussions with schools about annual surveys for pupils and parents. They also noted that secondary school students sometimes felt they lacked a trusted adult to turn to, which they aimed to address by gaining a deeper understanding of school ethos. Plans were in place to establish a reporting system for these insights by next year.
- A Member observed that while primary schools performed well, there appeared to be a shift when students transitioned to secondary school. They asked what external comparisons Camden was making, noting that other London boroughs had schools with similar demographics. In response, Camden Learning explained that they consulted with a senior secondary advisor with extensive expertise, who could direct them to schools outside Camden facing similar challenges. They acknowledged that Camden's strong internal collaboration sometimes led to a more insular approach, and engaging with external schools provided valuable insights.
- A Member emphasised the importance of school leadership for all measures and asked about the impact of coaching for headteachers, how results were tracked, and how it contributed to improving outcomes. Camden Learning responded that the impact of coaching was positive, with headteachers noting the support. They explained that coaching was set up more as a retention measure, recognising the stressful and challenging nature of the job. Camden Learning highlighted the importance of retaining headteachers, for which Camden had a good track record, and giving them time to step back and reflect.
- A Member asked what areas Camden Learning was focusing on to improve performance in schools that were consistently underperforming, and what those

schools were not doing. Camden Learning explained that they looked at specific subjects where improvement was needed. They mentioned that project boards, which included school leaders and chairs of governors, worked intensively with these schools. Camden Learning noted that correlated support and holding schools to account were key to helping improve performance. They intended to continue to challenge schools robustly and seek a positive impact in the coming year.

- A Member raised concerns about exclusions, noting that over 50% of exclusions came from two schools. They asked what Camden Learning had done with these schools and why the exclusion rates were so high. Camden Learning explained that the schools with high exclusion rates had gone through difficult leadership transitions and faced challenges with general behaviour. They also acknowledged that there could have been one-off incidents involving several pupils. Camden Learning highlighted that they were effective at showing alternatives to exclusions, aiming to reduce the number of exclusions overall.

## **RESOLVED –**

THAT the Committee note the report.

### **10. CAMDEN'S SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES (SEND) STRATEGY YEAR 2 PROGRESS REPORT**

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

Vikram Hansrani (Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion), accompanied by Di Osbourne (Head of SEND and Inclusion), Sian Thomas (Head of Children, Young People and Family Services, Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust) and Megan Jarvie (Principal Policy and Projects Officer), introduced and summarised the report.

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

- A Member asked about the role of the NHS and their contribution in the SEND space. In response, officers outlined the structure of health services, with Integrated Care Board (ICB) commissioners overseeing provision and various providers delivering services. They stated that there was strong engagement from health colleagues and a commitment from the ICB to addressing waiting times and interventions. Additional ICB funding of £625,000 had been allocated to increase capacity, with projects in place to upskill schools and provide additional support. The NHS representative confirmed that the £625,000 investment was backlog funding intended to commission private providers due to insufficient capacity. This funding would create seven extra roles, with recruitment underway. However, while the investment would maintain service levels, it would not significantly reduce the backlog due to the volume of referrals. A pilot for a shorter pathway had seen success with under-5s, and there were efforts to integrate this into standard practice. Waiting times remained high, with

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) assessment referrals in December 2024 averaging 71 weeks for under-5s and 102 weeks for over-5s. In November 2024, prior to the pilot's impact, the average wait was 91 weeks. A Member asked about the ambition for reducing wait times. The NHS representative noted that two years ago, the average wait had been six months, which would be an ideal target, but they acknowledged that this was unlikely with the current level of investment. They emphasised the need to assess the impact of the funding before determining what further improvements could be made. Members agreed they would like an update on waiting times and interventions to report to a future meeting.

- A Co-opted Member asked whether Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) services would receive additional investment. An officer confirmed that the Year 3 strategy would be published shortly, with SEMH playing a prominent role. They stated that discussions were ongoing about expansion and the outreach services needed to support schools in meeting needs. While specific details were not yet available, they would be included in the Year 3 plan.
- A Co-opted Member stated that if Priority 1 was implemented, it would bring positive change. They noted difficulty in finding service standards online and highlighted the benefit of having a named caseworker. An officer responded that service standards should be more prominent and would be reviewed. They confirmed that a range of standards existed outlining what parents and schools could expect and that work to develop these further would continue. Following recent recruitment, the SEND case officer team was now fully staffed, and officers would be allocated to schools as named contacts. While not all were in post yet, all appointments had been made.
- A Co-opted Member highlighted that Priority 3 was the area where parents expressed the most desperation, as reflected in the questionnaire. They noted that satisfaction with services declined as children got older, primarily due to concerns about what the future held. They emphasised the need for more work and a more realistic approach in addressing these concerns. An officer acknowledged that transitions needed to be managed properly at every stage. They mentioned having recently visited a setting for those with profound needs at the Alexandre Centre. The officer emphasised the importance of building on the good work done by the social care teams and teams assisting those with a disability. They recognised that individuals with EHCPs may not always require strong transitions but still needed support.
- A Member asked whether it had been difficult to bring all relevant parties together when SEND cases extended beyond schools, given the various functions within the Council, such as child safeguarding and multiple agencies. An officer responded that further work was still needed to strengthen collaboration, but noted that governance through the Inclusion Board, which included representatives from housing, leisure, and adult services, had helped broaden the conversation. This approach had allowed them to better understand what had been working and what needed improvement. The officer also mentioned that self-evaluation had taken into account both strengths and areas of challenge, citing the report's focus on making libraries and leisure centres more accessible for children with high needs.

**RESOLVED –**

THAT the Committee note the report.

**11. CABINET MEMBER FOR BEST START FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES' RESPONSE ON THE INVESTIGATION INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CHILDREN SEND PROVISION IN CAMDEN**

Consideration was given to the report of the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families.

Councillor Boyland (Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families) summarised the report which contained responses to all of the recommendations made by the SEND Provision Scrutiny Panel's investigation, which were gratefully received. The following points were made:

- The Cabinet Member highlighted the following several areas of development: Schools Forum had established a high-needs group to focus on Education Other Than At School (EOTAS), Alternate Provisions, and cluster working; the SEND Inclusion Board, chaired by the Cabinet Member, was reviewing needs assessment pathways as an key outcome of the investigation; the ICB had improved funding to increase assessments, with data expected to reflect this progress; and Camden Learning was also working more closely with the Council on SEND provision.
- At a national level, it was recognised that despite increased funding and EHCP assessments, outcomes remained stagnant or had worsened. Camden had contributed to the Government's Education Committee's inquiry into the SEND crisis and the Curriculum and Assessment Review, with indications that Camden's approach might influence national policy. The Children and Wellbeing Bill would introduce statutory registration for elective home education and unique identifiers to track children's progress.
- The Cabinet Member highlighted several key challenges and areas for improvement, including: low achievement for SEND children in Camden schools compared to London averages; underrepresentation of SEND diagnoses among certain groups; weaknesses in transitions between education settings and parent-school engagement; the need for better post-16 support and work experience opportunities; and the role of health partners in supporting SEND services, with concerns about NHS engagement in EHCPs.
- Despite these challenges, progress had been made in early SEND identification through initiatives such as Camden Kids Talk and the Welcome Kit in nurseries. A £1.3 million investment had led to a restructuring of the SEND team, including new leads for quality assurance, communications, local offer management, and commissioning. Other developments included the Centre for Relational Practice, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCo) Hub, and enhanced support for schools.
- The Cabinet Member emphasised that while improvements were ongoing, further work was needed to enhance Camden's SEND provision. The Council remained ambitious and committed to making continual progress for children and families.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for the report and firstly invited the former Chair of the SEND Provision Scrutiny Panel to speak. Councillor McNamara (Committee Member and Chair of the SEND Provision Scrutiny Panel during the investigation) responded by outlining the local focus of the Panel's work, resulting in 32 recommendations aimed at local improvements. Despite the local focus, the broader national context, including funding and educational philosophy, was acknowledged. The Children and Wellbeing Bill, currently progressing through Parliament, was welcomed, with the expectation that it would lead to increased funding for special needs. The £7 billion allocated to SEND was also expected to eventually reach Camden. Hopes were expressed that the National Curriculum Review would result in more oracy and group work, which would benefit children with special needs. They raised concerns regarding staffing, specifically the sufficiency, retention, and training of teachers, teaching assistants, and specialist staff such as speech and language therapists. They emphasised that specialist training in areas including ASD, SEMH, speech and language communication needs was a key concern. Retaining staff with this knowledge and understanding was also highlighted as a critical issue. Councillor McNamara also raised specific points in response to the recommendations:

- Recommendation(R)2: The sentence regarding the number of sessions planned between February and June was unclear, and further clarification was requested. In response, officers clarified that the sessions in question were planned between February to June 2025. These were related to developing and strengthening mainstream inclusion sessions, which had already begun. The first session had taken place that afternoon with school headteachers, with additional sessions scheduled for health and social care professionals, SENCOs, and parent carers. The aim of these workshops was to define what an inclusive system looks like in Camden. They sought to work collaboratively with schools, parents, SENCOs, and professionals to understand what resources and support are necessary for consistency across both primary and secondary education.
- R3: The notional funding for Early Years was unclear whether it referred to the April 2025 or April 2026 budget. In response, officers clarified this funding referred to the 2025 budget.
- R4: They did not agree with the statement that the Exceptional Needs Grant (ENG) application was significantly simpler and more streamlined than the EHCP, instead noting that teachers and SENCOs felt it is still a lengthy, bureaucratic process and needed further streamlining.
- R9: The requested acknowledgement of the Early Years Intervention Inclusion Team's positive impact on transitions from nursery to Year 1, with a request to explore extending similar support from Year 6 to Year 7, despite funding constraints.
- R10: They requested an update on current wait times, as the report previously identified a 96-week wait. Also, Clarification on the impact of the additional funding was sought.
- R11B: They highlighted the impact of staff retention issues, particularly in speech and language, calling for more speech and language staff who could remain in post and train Teaching Assistants (TAs) effectively.

The Chair invited questions and comments from the Committee. The following was discussed:

- A Member raised the point that SEND was a much broader issue than just schools, highlighting its complexity, which often involved housing, healthcare, and family support. They stressed that SEND support tended to focus on the children, but in reality, the entire family needed support. In relation to ARPs, while ARPs had been introduced in several schools and were seen as a promising option, some schools had found it challenging to establish them effectively, particularly in terms of creating the right cohort of pupils. The Member noted that many parents preferred their children to attend mainstream schools, yet some pupils in ARPs may not have been suited for mainstream education. The Member questioned whether Camden's current approach to ARPs was the right solution or if there were other types of provisions Camden could have explored to better meet the needs of pupils who may not have been suited for mainstream schools. They suggested that Camden consider expanding ARP provision or explore alternative settings that might have provided more appropriate support for these students. The Cabinet Member stated that a range of different offers was the right approach, advocating for more integration between mainstream and specialist classes. While they believed having more options was beneficial, they acknowledged that it came with challenges. Some schools in the borough, known for being good at supporting SEND, were becoming overwhelmed as demand increased.
- Officers stated that Camden was participating in the SEND Change Programme, which might help inform national policy and support the development of a strong, inclusive school system.
- A Co-opted Member requested further detail on R15 regarding new commission places.
- A Co-opted member noted a misunderstanding relating to the response to R18, emphasising that the discussion was not only about outlining provision but also explaining the rationale behind it. They highlighted the need for Camden to clarify its inclusive approach for parents, schools, and possibly the Council itself. The Cabinet Member agreed, acknowledging that the team was aware of the need for clarity. They noted that this issue was linked to the discussion on ordinarily available provision and stressed the importance of defining what inclusion meant in this context and the team was working to address this.
- A Member welcomed the progress on identifying autism in girls and noted that the gap in diagnosis was narrowing. They asked whether this work resulted from points raised by the Committee 18 months ago or if it was already underway. The Cabinet Member stated that it was a combination of factors, including wider recognition of the issue, conversations with schools, teachers, parents, and governors, as well as research conducted by the Committee. The gap had been acknowledged across multiple discussions.
- A Member referred to R21 and the autism journey map, stating that it had been discussed previously and was distinct from the local offer. They said that the local offer provided information on available support but did not necessarily guide individuals who had received a diagnosis and were unsure of their needs. They emphasised the importance of advising on typical pathways and helping those who did not know what questions to ask. An officer confirmed that the local offer

website, released in November 2024, aimed to provide both aspects. It would outline available provisions while also supporting individuals at the start of their journey. The website would include case studies and videos to offer further guidance.

With agreement from the Chair, the Cabinet Member proposed that the team returned in four to five months' time, once more work had been undertaken. They acknowledged that many responses referred to future sessions and training and activities, and while some actions had already been implemented, others remained as future commitments. The Cabinet Member suggested that further discussions could take place via email in the interim.

**RESOLVED –**

THAT the Committee note the report.

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

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

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

The following was discussed:

- As discussed on item 7, Members agreed they would like to receive a report on the School Estates Strategy in the 2025/26 municipal year.
- As discussed on item 10, Members agreed they would like an update on autism and ADHD assessment waiting times and interventions to be brought back to a future meeting.
- As discussed on item 11, Members agreed they would like to hear an update on the progress on implementing the recommendations of the SEND Provision Scrutiny Panel to follow up the response paper in February 2026.

**RESOLVED –**

THAT the Committee note the report.

**13. DATE OF NEXT MEETING AND FUTURE MEETING DATES**

The provisional 2025/26 municipal year meeting dates were listed in the agenda.



**14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS THE CHAIR DECIDES TO CONSIDER AS URGENT**

There was no urgent business.

The meeting ended at 9.07 pm.

**CHAIR**

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**MINUTES END**