

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN

At a meeting of the **CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on **MONDAY, 9TH DECEMBER, 2024** at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Judd Street, London WC1H 9JE

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE PRESENT

Councillors Awale Olad (Chair), Sharon Hardwick, Matthew Kirk, Izzy Lenga, Rishi Madlani, Stephen Stark and Shiva Tiwari

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ABSENT

Councillors Nina De Ayala Parker

ALSO PRESENT

Councillors Adam Harrison (Cabinet Member for Planning and a Sustainable Camden) Councillor Nadia Shah (Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Equalities and Cohesion), Sue Vincent.

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 Culture and Environment Scrutiny Committee and any corrections approved at that meeting will be recorded in those minutes.

MINUTES

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Lenga.

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

Councillor Madlani declared for transparency in relation to item 4 (Deputation objecting to the sale of The Central YMCA on Great Russell Street) that he was a former member of the YMCA club.

Councillor Olad also declared in relation to the same item that he and his children were also former members of the YMCA club.

3. ANNOUNCEMENTS (IF ANY)

The Chair announced that the meeting was broadcast live by the Council to the Internet and could be viewed on the website for six months after the meeting. After that time, webcasts were archived and could be made available on DVD upon request. Those who were seated in the Council Chamber or participated via Teams were deemed to have consented to their contributions being recorded and broadcast and to the use of those sound recordings and images for webcasting and/or training purposes.

Additional Information received in relation to the deputation objecting to the sale of the Central YMCA building.

The Chair announced that he received just before the start of the meeting an email from the Chief Executive of the YMCA setting out their views on the sale of the YMCA building which had been circulated to the deputies and published on the Council's website.

4. DEPUTATIONS (IF ANY)

The Chair informed members that he had received two deputation requests. The first was from The Highgate Society and LEBOC Residents Group requesting that the Dartmouth Park Healthy Neighbourhood Scheme be included on the Committee's Work Programme for 2024/25. He said he had agreed that the issue would be included on the Committee's Work Programme for consideration at a future Culture and Environment Scrutiny Committee meeting and there was no need for the deputation which had therefore been withdrawn.

The second deputation which had been accepted was from David Bieda accompanied by Joshua Von Uexkull and opposed the sale of the Central YMCA building on Great Russell Street. The deputation statement was included in the supplementary agenda. In addition, Councillor Sue Vincent had requested to speak in support of the deputation, which the chair had agreed to.

Deputation opposing the sale of the Central YMCA building.

Consideration was given to the deputation statement referred to above.

Councillor Vincent informed the Committee that the YMCA building and club was an important local facility of great importance to the community evidence of which was shown by the very large turnout of people at the meeting this evening. Members of the community were shocked that there had been no discussion or consultation with members or the community about the closure.

She was concerned that there had been no audit or needs assessment to determine what facilities the borough required and asked that the Committee support the retention of these much loved, valued and vital amenities and support the recommendations in the deputation statement.

The following response was given by the depute to members questions:

- The closure of the YMCA was a similar situation to what had occurred with the closure of the Jubilee Sports Hall. The YMCA should have called a meeting to discuss the concerns with the building and consider ideas to resolve the situation and a way forward.
- There had been a consensus in the community that the building and facilities at the YMCA had not been properly managed.
- It appeared that no information had been provided to staff or the membership on what would happen with regards to the proceeds of sale of the building.
- There was concern about governance issues, financial management and legality relating to the sale of the building.
- The lead campaigners objecting to the sale of the building had appealed to the family that owned the building to change their mind and stop the sale.
- The campaign to stop the sale of the building was not sure if the building had already been sold.
- The campaigners were not sure which other facilities in the borough, YMCA members could use should the building be sold.
- It was not for Camden officers to look for alternative facilities for YMCA members, it was up to the Committee to support the campaign to retain the YMCA.

Oliver Jones, Director of Recreation and Council Nadia Shah, Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Equalities and Cohesion made the following comments in response to the deputations and members questions:

- It was recognised that the Central YMCA had a rich history and key impact on the health and well-being of central Londoners over a very significant period of time. Particularly the impact and importance of the facilities to Londoners during the period of the pandemic.
- It formed part of the proactive Camden network which existed to develop and support physical activity in the borough and was an independent charity providing leisure facilities and activities in Camden and central London.
- Great Russell Street was not the only site in the Central YMCA. There was a further venue on Judd Street known as KX. The decisions, foreclosure and sale of the Great Russell Street site were the responsibility of and were made by Trust Charity Trustees and published on Monday 2nd December 2024.
- As with all charities, the trustees had 6 main duties including ensuring that the charity carried out its purpose for public benefit, complied with the charity's governing document and the law, acted in the charity's best interest, managed

the charity's resources responsibly with reasonable care and skill and ensured that the charity was accountable.

- In the YMCA's notification of decision on 2nd December it referenced several factors leading to the decision but ultimately stated that the cost of operations of the club were not being covered by the number of members and could therefore not be sustained.
- The Council had reviewed the Charity Commissions accounts available online up to July 2023 which showed 4 years deficits of between £2.5m to £4.4m losses per year with a reserve of £15.7m remaining as at July 2023. The accounts to July 2024 were not available.
- The available financial information on the state of finances had indicated that the Central YMCA had been operating in a difficult environment for quite some time.
- The Council had two main areas of involvement, offering its help and support to facilitate Central YMCA continue its work either at the Judd Street site or other venues in the borough. The other was as the local planning authority it could scrutinise any proposals for the site from the new owners against its planning policies that enforced protections for cultural, leisure and community facilities.
- Officers could look at the Land Registry document to determine whether there were any legal binding covenants and look back through the minutes to determine as per Councillor Vincent's request whether the Council attached any conditions to the funding it provided to the YMCA in 1975 and report findings back to the Committee.

ACTION BY: Director of Recreation

The Council had no authority over independent charities and private land ownership. It had planning and enforcement powers that were attributable to separate use classes and unlawful change of use on the site.

Officers could check if Criterion Capital owned the YMCA building and any other buildings in the borough and whether they were open to reversing their decision and report back to the Committee.

ACTION BY: Director of Recreation.

- The Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Equalities and Cohesion invited to comment on the deputation stated that it was sad that the borough was losing a great asset of significant community importance. She was sorry to just be hearing about this at a very late stage in the process when it appeared that the sale of the building had either already been completed or was about to be finalised. She would support looking into why this had happened, whether it had to happen, and if there was anything the Council could do including, whether it could engage with the YMCA or look into delivering some of the high impact activities in and around the area.

Committee Members made the following comments:

- They were frustrated, angered and outraged by what had happened and endorsed everything that had been said by the deputation. In future would like the space to remain delivering its current services, would not want the services to disappear resulting in the local communities across the southern part of Euston Road experience the loss of such a great amenity in the area.
- The same model used to protect live venues such as the Music Venue Trust should be used for this venue. Camden was a cultural borough and was part of its culture and this campaign was supported.
- The decision of the YMCA sending a scant letter and not attending the meeting this evening was condemned. As well as their decision to conduct the entire process in secret for which there appeared to be no justification. The Campaign was supported.
- The Council should explore whether the building had been sold, if it should ask Camden's GLA Assembly member to intervene on behalf of stakeholders and explore all available options.

The Chair noted that members supported the campaign not to sell the YMCA building and the Committee endorsed all the recommendations in the deputation thanking the depute for attending the meeting.

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

There was none.

6. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR VOLUNTARY SECTOR, EQUALITIES AND COHESION

Consideration was given to the annual report of the Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Equalities and Cohesion.

In response to questions, Councillor Nadia Shah (Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Equalities and Cohesion, Oliver Jones (Director of Recreation) made the following points:

- With regards to whether there was enough focus on loneliness, the Council did a lot of work with Voluntary Community Sector partners and Community Champions in bringing people together and out of isolation.
- A lot of activities and funding from the Council as well as development work in the community had gone to bringing people out of isolation.

- These activities and the work could be worded in the Annual report next year as bringing people out of loneliness or reducing loneliness.
- The warm welcome work was not included in the report this year as it had been well established and was ongoing.
- Paying a London living wage to employees was also a requirement from sub-contractors working for the Council.
- As a borough of sanctuary, the Council had achieved some key milestones including securing long term housing solutions for Afghan and Ukraine refugees ensuring that they had a safe and stable environment to rebuild their lives.
- Over the past year, the Council's resettlement schemes had provided accommodation tailored to the needs of vulnerable families alongside the practical support for those transitioning from temporary housing into permanent arrangements.
- In terms of access to education and skills the Council had focussed on the educational opportunities that could be provided to refugee children particularly those rapidly integrated into local schools.; while adults benefited from English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), which were programmes developed with community partnership organisations as well as Voluntary Community Sector partners.
- Vocational training and Curriculum Vitae (CV) writing workshops had been expanded to support people from refugee communities with the skills to enter the job market.
- The Council had also collaborated closely with employers, including business, voluntary organisations and charities to provide pathways into sustainable jobs for refugees as economic independence was important for community integration.
- In terms of community engagement and cohesion, this was facilitated by encouraging interaction between refugees and local communities at events, such as interfaith dialogues and cultural exchanges. Refugees were also welcomed to Community Sponsorship Schemes where spaces were created and refugees felt welcomed.
- With regards to Brave Cafes, this related to engagement sessions to dispel myths and stigma involving deep set issues around discrimination and equality.
- The concept of Brave Cafes was based on research and studies undertaken around concepts of discrimination and a methodology used to combat these issues in other European cities. Camden in conjunction with Leeds were leading on this in the UK.
- Camden had conducted 4 engagement sessions, on racism, domestic abuse, the LGBT+ community and the refugee community. They were conducted to promote community cohesion, by sharing experiences, fostering understanding and talking together in safe spaces.
- There had been a lot of learning and recommendations gleaned from the sessions which would be made available in a report and which the Cabinet Member was happy to share with the Committee.

- The Council was very much keeping an eye on the hate crime stats particularly around the LGBT+ community as well as worldwide issues affecting all communities. All the strands including encouraging reporting of hate crimes were being worked on in the background and creating brave safe spaces to enable safer and integration of communities in the borough.
- In terms of the long-term sustainability of VCS organisations receiving funding, Camden was one of the only boroughs providing 7-year funding for voluntary organisations.
- The whole idea behind which was to ensure that these organisations could plan ahead to sustain themselves because when funding was provided in little bits organisations were unable to survive.
- Camden's approach was regarded as innovative as it was not just financial but a community partnership focussed on creating real impact over 7 years.
- The Council invested £1.9m annually in 38 key community organisations providing unrestricted multi-year funding which allowed these organisations to adapt to emerging challenges while maintaining their core work.
- Camden's funding was long term flexible funding nationally recognised by the Institute for Voluntary Research as a leading example of open and trusting grant making. There were also tools for measuring and monitoring the impact of the funding across all communities.
- The Council had also worked with VCS organisations to create warm safe spaces. For example, the Warm Safe Spaces Campaign was a response to the ongoing cost of living crisis. The aim was to offer warm safe spaces while connecting local residents to services and community initiatives.
- As Co-Chair of the interfaith forum, with Councillor Flier, a lot of work had been done around issues caused by conflict in other parts of the world which also caused worry in individuals and local communities. Issues had caused the gap between communities to start widening again. Both co-chairs had been going out into the community meeting with community leaders. Local MPs and talking within local community settings where people were comfortable. There had also been no place for hate surgeries in communities and allowing for all voices in the community to be heard. The Council continued to ensure that cohesion was at the heart of everything it did.
- In terms of whether there were too many voluntary organisations in the borough, the Cabinet Member was proud of the number of Voluntary organisations and personally would like to see more as they did so much work and served as the backbone of the community conducting great work in every cornerstone of the community.
- In terms of involving children and schools in voluntary work, via Councillor Umeadi (Associate Cabinet Member for Educational Inequalities) the Council had been speaking to the VCS about providing space for young people and children to learn about various things that were happening in the voluntary sector. The Council also had good links with businesses and Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) programme in schools. However, the policy needed to be right before children and young people had access to the workplace because of safeguarding issues.

The Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Equalities and Cohesion and Officers were thanked for their work, time taken to attend the meeting and their responses.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted.

7. UPDATE ON THE BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Recreation.

Members made the following comments:

- The work on biodiversity in the borough was welcomed, the London Wildlife Trust were leading on biodiversity national policy net gain issues and considering how it could be made fit for purpose. Could Camden not play a role in supporting the Wildlife Trust on a national level particularly as they had some of their sites in the borough.
- It was a great report and good to receive updates every year to see the amazing work going on.

Oliver Jones Director of Recreation, Greg Hitchcock Nature Conservation Officer (remote attendance) and Councillor Adam Harrison, Cabinet Member for Planning and a Sustainable Camden gave the following key responses to questions:

- The Council worked closely with London Wildlife Trust mainly because of Camley Street Nature Reserve where the Council helped fund some of the decontamination work. Camden along with other boroughs also worked with the Trust on a review of the metropolitan sinks for the GLA.
- The Nature Conservation Team worked with Highways Team colleagues and other boroughs such as Islington in providing nature-based solutions including greening and vegetation on the highways.
- The Council's Highways Team were working hard to influence TfL to look at the whole risk area on the highways including suburban drainage, rain gardens and tree planting rather than just transport outcomes. For example, there was some recent work on Euston Road which Highways colleagues portrayed as an environment everyone could aspire to.
- With regards to highlighting the benefits of nature and biodiversity to the wider public, one of the recommendations from the Cabinet Adviser on Promoting Green Space and Biodiversity's report was the creation of a new area on the Council's website explaining the climate and ecological benefits of biodiversity. This part of the Council's website was scheduled to go live by the end of the year providing all this information.

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- The Council also hosted a lot of schools at its nature reserves, with the Nature Conservation Officer also doing a lot of work with schools encouraging them to make use of green spaces.
- With regards to hedgehogs, the Council was working hard to improve existing sites and tunnel connections.
- With regards to whether there was still a roof garden in Camden Town Hall, officers would check whether the roof garden was still in existence or what had happened to it although there was a brown garden with vegetation at the Council building at 5 St Pancras Square.
- In relation to the location of beehives in the borough, there was no longer a requirement to register beehives, although there was a lot of local interest in bees the Council did not hold any information except for those on Council sites of which there were not that many.
- There were biodiversity features on the roof of Camden Town Hall to support local bat and bird populations.
- In relation to the role of the new Nature Engagement Officer, they would be responsible leading on community engagement with schools, communication, working on projects and in partnership with local organisations to ensure the Council had direct influence on biodiversity issues in the borough.
- With regards to keeping Hampstead Cemetery open later so residents could use the green space, the cemetery was operated by Islington and Camden Cemetery Service (ICCS). The opening hours were reduced due to significant poor behaviour of dog fouling with a considerable number of complaints received about defecation on graves. Although areas of the cemetery such as the butterfly area were of great interest to residents, to ensure it was respected as a cemetery the opening hours were consistent with the East Finchley site which was also a cemetery and not a park and managed by the ICCS on behalf of the Council.
- With regards to the new Nature Engagement Officer encouraging schools in the borough to get the benefits of green space, that was something the Council was looking at doing getting to those schools with priority needs. The Council did try to encourage schools to make use of its nature areas as well as larger parks in the borough. Officers would look at prioritising how schools could get the benefit of green spaces.

Officers were thanked for their work, time taken to attend the meeting and their responses.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted

8. UPDATE ON SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY INCLUDING THE CONTRACT WITH GLL (BETTER)

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Recreation.

Committee members made the following comments:

- With the potential closure of the YMCA building, it would be good if the Council could signpost YMCA users to other available facilities in the borough.
- It would be good if Holborn and Covent Ward Councillors could be informed of this so they could help facilitate this for YMCA members and other users of those facilities.
- The Council should learn from the Knowledge Quarter the culture of thinking of these sports facilities as community assets and signposting people to make the most of them.

In response to questions, Justin Hill (Strategy and Partnerships Manager, Alex Wood, Performance Officer, Alex Harrison GLL Partnership Manager, Paul Lister (GLL Head of Service, Katy Knight, Head of Leisure (remote attendance) and Oliver Jones, Director of Recreation made the following points:

- With regards to providing up to date stats of current users of leisure facilities in the borough, there were different data sets in the report.
- There was the Camden specific data in paragraph 3.4 of the report which related to the health and behaviour question. This data was collected every two years, the information used in the report was the last cycle of data and it was hoped that updated data would be available for the next cycle.
- The other data in paragraph 3.6 of the report was from Sports England Active Lives data which had just recently been announced.
- In terms of information being Camden specific, the sample sizes were quite small so could only be used as a rough guide but it would not provide the raw data where there was far more control over data collection such as specific links to leisure centres as opposed to the broader work of the Sport and Physical Activity Service.
- The data was difficult to capture when out in the field coaching in parks or after school. However, within the Leisure Centre field, GLL operating membership system and subject to what information people disclosed, intelligence could be gathered around who was using the Leisure Centre and who was not which was a key focus area for the Council.
- Leisure Centres also conducted an annual survey to know who was using the service.
- Officers had done some work on who was and who was not using leisure centres. One of the underrepresented groups was the South Asian Community of which the Council along with GLL were encouraging members from this community to make more use of the centres.

- The Council had made this a formal performance indicator to improve access to sports facilities to disproportionately under-represented groups in the community.
- In terms of data collection, the Council was operating a number of targeted interventions the first was the Get Active Service where the Council worked with selected GPs from deprived areas to address long term medical conditions and the other was around the Active Life Campaign which was targeted at older adults to ensure residents understood the offer. The Council was able to extrapolate rich information from these two data collection methods and respond to the needs in the borough.
- In terms of facilities in the borough, there was scheduled to be a new fitness centre at Kings Cross next year with four sports courts. However, there were some things which were outside the Council's control such as swimming pools and more bespoke offers which were challenging for the Council to monitor.
- The Council relied on proactive Camden in such instances to coordinate between the Council and other providers in the borough. The Council was continually trying to learn and improve on this.
- With regards to the dramatic drop off in activity of girls transitioning from primary to secondary school, the Council was working with the Health and Wellbeing Department to deliver a pilot in Hawley Primary School specifically looking into this issue. Officers agreed to provide an update to the Committee on the findings from this pilot.

Action By: Strategy and Partnership Manager

- One of the key initiatives from proactive Camden was the production of the Children and Young People Physical Activity Plan which was currently in development and built on intelligence presented at the previous meeting where the various gaps in girls physical activity transitioning from primary to secondary school was highlighted. All this information was fed into the developing Children and Young People Physical Activity Plan
- With regards to climbing facilities, the facility at Swiss Cottage had been closed for some time and the Council was in discussion with GLL to determine whether it could be reinstated or something slightly different put in its place.
- New bouldering wall establishments had been set up in the borough so there were other places to climb.
- In terms of the affordability of the leisure facilities, GLL prices were extremely competitive in relation to the location of the facilities, products provided and sustainability of the business.
- There were no plans to reopen an Ice Rink in the borough as there was an Ice Rink facility in Lee Valley Park.
- The Council had just opened a new Soft Ball facility in Swiss Cottage which was managed by GLL and improved the borough's offer to young children.
- There were also plans to provide extra space for gymnastics in the borough next year

Officers were thanked for the report and attending the meeting.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report be noted.

9. CLEANER, SAFER CAMDEN

Officers for this item attended the meeting remotely. Due to issues with the technology members could not hear officers' responses to their question and therefore could not consider this item. Members asked that the item be carried forward to the meeting in January.

Action By: Head of Community Safety.

The Committee also asked that in future the main lead responding to questions about the report should attend the meeting in-person rather than remotely.

Action By: Head of Community Safety Director of Public Safety

10. INSIGHT, LEARNING AND IMPACT REPORT QUARTER 2

Consideration was given to the report of the Executive Directors of Adults and Health, Children and Learning, Supporting Communities and Corporate Services.

RESOLVED –

THAT the report, including the most recent data and trends and the emerging challenges identified, be noted.

11. CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2024/25 AND ACTION TRACKER

Consideration was given to the report of the Executive Director Supporting Communities.

Members discussed the work programme and suggested that the following items be moved:

- The Cleaner, Safer Camden to be carried forward to the January 2025 meeting.

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- Lime/Bike/ Scooters – members asked that this item be brought forward and considered at the January 2025 meeting subject to– Transport officers being able to meet the report submission lead in deadlines.
- The Dartmouth Park Healthy Neighbourhood Scheme be included on the Committee’s Work Programme for 2025/26 municipal year.

Subject to these changes it was

Resolved:

That the report be noted

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

There was none.

The meeting ended at 8.55 pm.

CHAIR

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MINUTES END