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| LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN | WARDS: ALL |
| REPORT TITLE: An investigation of the impact of Covid-19 on the language development of early years children in Camden | |
| REPORT OF: Language Development Scrutiny Panel – Cllr Sylvia McNamara (Chair), Cllr Lotis Bautista, Cllr Matt Cooper, Cllr Julian Fulbrook, Margaret Harvey, Cllr Jenny Headlam-Wells, Cllr Andrew Parkinson, Cllr Shiva Tiwari | |
| FOR SUBMISSION TO: Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee | DATE: 20 February 2023 |
| <p>SUMMARY OF REPORT: This report contains the findings and recommendations of the Language Development Scrutiny Panel, and details of the work completed by the Panel in reaching their conclusions.</p> <p>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to information: No documents that are required to be listed were used in the preparation of this report.</p> <p>Contact Officer: Chris Douglas, Senior Policy Officer Supporting People Strategy London Borough of Camden 5 Pancras Square, NC1 4AG 020 7974 2977 / chris.douglas@camden.gov.uk</p> | |
| <p>RECOMMENDATIONS: Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consider, note, and endorse the contents of the report. 2. Agree to request the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families to prepare a response to the recommendations, to report back to the Committee. | |

Sylvia McNamara
Signed:
Councillor Sylvia McNamara, Chair, Language Development Scrutiny Panel

Date: 9 February 2023

1. Introduction

1.1 As the Institute for Government report (2021) points out, ‘the period that followed the closure of schools in March 2020 was easily the most disruptive in children’s education since the start of the Second World War’. Children born since March 2020, for example, have lived most of their life during the Covid-19 lockdown periods. They were deprived of many vital early year experiences because of disrupted family life, early education, and childcare provision. This view is underlined by the Ofsted Annual Report 2021/22 (2022), where the HMI states, ‘Every generation gets one chance to enjoy its childhood and fulfil its potential. We must do all we can to make sure this generation is not denied its opportunity’.

2. Background to the Report

2.1 On 23 March 2020, the UK government ordered all schools and Early Years settings to close to all pupils, except vulnerable children and the children of keyworkers, such as those working in public health, transport and supplying food.

2.2 Table 1: Covid and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) timeline

| When | Covid restrictions in England | How ECEC affected and supported |
|---|--|---|
| Mar-May 2020 Some easing of restrictions | <p>First national lockdown started on 23 March: allowed to leave home for limited reasons; only essential shops and services open; going out to work only if essential.</p> <p>From 10 May people can exercise outdoors more than once per day</p> | <p>Only children of critical workers and vulnerable children could attend ECEC settings (and schools). OFSTED inspections suspended.</p> <p>Covid support schemes: Early education entitlement (EEE): settings paid in full for EEE hours they had expected to deliver, regardless of take-up or whether setting was open. Local Authorities allowed to use this funding differently in exceptional circumstances to secure places for critical workers and vulnerable children. Coronavirus job retention scheme: covered 80% of staff costs (up to £2,500 a month) in proportion to the share of income lost during lockdown. The scheme could not be used for staff costs covered by EEE.</p> |
| June-Aug 2020 | Progressive easing of restrictions throughout the summer. | <p>From 1st June ECEC settings allowed and encouraged to open to all children (and phased re-opening of schools).</p> <p>Settings asked to reduce social contact as much as possible by introducing staff and children bubbles and capping numbers if necessary. Settings had to restrict entry to settings, enhanced cleaning, removed some equipment, and asked to support public health messaging around Covid safety.</p> |
| Oct-Dec 2020 | 12 Oct - Regional tier system introduced. | ECEC settings can continue to provide places to all children even in areas with stricter restrictions and during lockdown. |

| | | |
|----------------|---|---|
| | <p>4 Nov-2 Dec - second national lockdown.</p> <p>2-19 Dec - Regional tier system returns</p> <p>19 Dec – Christmas cancelled</p> <p>30 December – Most of country moved to tier four</p> | <p>Settings allowed to use the specific disapplications and modifications if any local or national Covid restrictions impact on ability to deliver the early years curriculum</p> <p>OFSTED inspections suspended.</p> <p>Early education entitlement (EEE): from September Local Authorities no longer allowed to give EEE funding to settings that were closed unless this was due to public health reasons.</p> |
| Jan-Mar 2021 | <p>On 4th of January third national lockdown.</p> | <p>ECEC settings can continue to provide places to all children (while only vulnerable children and children of key workers can go to school).</p> <p>Home testing kits for staff provided only to school-based settings in January but extended to other settings from 22 March after lobbying from the sector.</p> <p>OFSTED inspections suspended</p> <p>EYFSP assessment not mandatory in 2021, settings to use their best endeavours to complete it</p> <p>Early education entitlement (EEE): funding based on children registered on census week (in mid Jan). DfE also funded additional places over and above those reported on census week, at least up to 85% of January 2020 attendance levels.</p> <p>Education and recovery plan announced in Feb, with £18m (out of a total of £700m) allocated to ECEC settings</p> |
| March-Oct 2021 | <p>Progressive easing of restrictions under ‘Roadmap’</p> <p>8 March - schools reopen</p> | <p>From June business rates relief reduced to a two thirds discount.</p> <p>In Sept end of job-retention and self-employment income support schemes.</p> |

Table 1 Adapted from *Implications of Covid for Early Childhood Education and Care in England*. Centre for Evidence and Implementation. La Valle et al (2022)

3. Purpose of the Panel

3.1 Unprecedented in its nature and scale, the pandemic has brought two years of formidable challenge in schools. The Headteachers, teachers, staff, and governors in our schools have responded to this challenge with remarkable commitment and care. However, the impact of Covid-19 - the lockdowns, the social distancing, the face

masks, and the disrupted learning - has led to a general concern about the amount of learning lost, lower than expected pupil attendance, and the impact on the social, emotional and communication aspects of children's development.

- 3.2 In recognition of the pandemic and the disrupted learning, the government announced that all exams due to take place in schools in England in summers 2020 and 2021 were cancelled and that it would not publish any school education performance data for those years.
- 3.3 Pre-pandemic, in 2019, at the Early Years Foundation Stage, 73% of pupils achieved a 'good level of development' in Camden's Nurseries. This was an improvement on previous years, above the national average (71%) and close to London averages (74%).
- 3.4 Following the pandemic in 2022, exams returned. The numbers of pupils achieving a good level of development dropped across the country - Camden, in line with the national average at 65%, was just behind London at 67%.
- 3.5 In 2019, Key Stage 1 (KS1) results in Camden schools were broadly in line with the national averages at expected over three years, representing good progress, and this narrowed the gap to London averages.
- 3.6 In 2022, KS1 results fell in all subjects in Camden schools. However, this fall was replicated nationally, with Camden's results being slightly above national averages for reading, writing and mathematics.
- 3.7 Disadvantaged pupils, less likely to have access to technology to participate in online lessons with classmates, have most likely been pushed even further behind their more advantaged peers.
- 3.8 In Camden at KS1, there is a noticeable gap between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers although it is much narrower than the gap nationally – 9 percentage points in reading and 13 percentage points in both writing and mathematics, compared to 21-22 percentage points nationally).
- 3.9 Early Years children were the most affected with communication and language development, and children who were starting at nurseries were coming in at a lower-than-expected starting point. It was also more of a challenge if English was not their first language or spoken language was not a strength at home.
- 3.10 Evidence shows that poor speech development can have long-term effects on learning. Children's ability to understand and use speech and language at an early age is vital for their development, and if they don't develop the skills needed to interact with others, it can have a lasting and profound impact in adulthood, affecting their mental health, their educational attainment, employability, social mobility, and increase their vulnerability.

3.11 School and Nursery closures in lockdowns, less or no contact with grandparents, social distancing, no play dates, and the wearing of face coverings in public have left children less exposed to conversations and everyday experiences.

3.12 Research from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) which involved a survey of 50,000 pupils from schools across England showed an increased number of four- and five-year-olds needing help with language. Of 58 Primary Schools surveyed across England:

- 76% of schools said pupils starting school in September 2020 needed more support with communication than in previous years
- 96% of schools they were concerned about pupils' speech-and-language development.

4. Methodology

4.1 The Panel gathered evidence by using the following key lines of enquiry (KLOEs). These KLOEs were around four overarching questions in relation to language development in Camden.

- What are the most effective strategies and how do the teachers know?
- What do the schools want and need?
- What is the best practice that is currently being shared?
- What is the role of benchmarking in expected progress? This was an exploration of the extent to which any changes to children's skill level on entry to primary school would become problematic to them reaching the government's expected progress indicators at KS1, and later at the Standardised Attainment Tests (SATs) at KS2

4.2 The Panel also considered the interventions that have taken place so far, and what strategies were already in train and incorporated those into the study.

4.3 The evidence gathered from a wide range of stakeholders and practitioners came from a structured programme of interviews and included a number of site visits and to help answer the questions above. These included:

- A session of interviews with officers from Camden Learning and the Council to understand the Early Years system in Camden
- A session of interviews with Early Years Providers
- Sessions of interviews with specialist Early Years representatives from nurseries and schools
- A session of interviews with parents
- A questionnaire to school governors
- Site visits to schools and Children's Centres

4.5 This was a qualitative, triangulated study intended to gain initial understanding of the effect of Covid and the lockdown of Camden schools and Early Years providers on children's language development. We interviewed a total of forty-nine practitioners, including four Headteachers. Triangulation is defined as bringing evidence from

more than two sources. In this case we had practitioner and parent interviews, literature review and data analysis. The study also aims to uncover prevalent trends in the means of recovery and rebuilding of this disruption. The mixed methods of enquiry used included desk research, individual face-to-face interviews, in-person and online focus groups, and questionnaire returns. The recursive nature of the enquiry resulted in variations to its design during the data collection phase

5. Literature Search / Research Context of the Investigation

5.1 During 2020 - 2022 a number of research reports have appeared on the subject of the investigation:

Institute of Health Equity 2020; Marmot *et al.*, 2020; Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2020; Nelson *et al.*, NFER, July 2020; I CAN, 2020; Dimova, S., *et al.*, May 2020); Sharp *et al.*, September 2020; APPG, April 2021; Nelson, J., Lynch, S., and Sharp C., September 2021; Rose *et al.*, December 2021; Twist, L., Jones, E., and Treleaven, O., March 2022; Alta, May 2022; La Valle *et al.*, 2022; House of Commons Library, 2022; Institute for Government, 2022; Ofsted, April 2022; Ofsted, July 2022; Ofsted, December 2022, Camden Council (2022); Camden Learning (2022); Ofsted, December 2022; Voice 21, (January 2023), Dockrell and Mathers, 2023.

5.2 The National Federation for Educational Research (NFER) has taken a lead in this research, initially by tracking the effects of Covid lockdowns in July 2020 (Nelson *et al.*, July 2020), and the challenges facing teachers in September 2020 (Sharp *et al.*, September 2020). A later study put the emphasis on recovery from the pandemic (Nelson *et al.*, September 2021), discussing the impacts of Covid-19 on schools serving deprived areas. Primary pupils were reported to be struggling with social skills, confidence, and self-esteem. There were also concerns about a deterioration in learning skills such as concentration, memory, and stamina. The pandemic affected young pupils' emotional readiness for transition, with worries about children moving into Nursery, Reception and Year 1 in 2021-22 because of the large proportion of their lives spent out of a learning environment. There was concern, even in the Early Years, for children's wellbeing and mental health. Indeed, it was considered key to balance support for pupils' 'catch-up' with their wellbeing. The most urgent need was to tackle widening educational inequality. There is growing evidence that the pandemic has increased inequality and that pupils have been unevenly impacted, particularly among vulnerable children, including those with special educational needs and disabilities. This is evidenced most strongly in the NFER report (Rose *et al.*) of December 2021), which investigated the effect of school closures resulting from Covid-19 on pupils' attainment in KS1 (Years 1 and 2) in reading and maths, and on the gap between the attainment of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children. By the end of the summer term 2021, Year 1 children remained three months behind where they would be expected to be in reading and Year 2 children two months behind. In both year groups there was a substantial gap in attainment between disadvantaged children and their peers.

- 5.3 The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Written Evidence submitted to the Health Committee of the London Assembly Committee (2020) identifies the risks to children from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds of delays in their language development. These groups include families who have literacy difficulties, who speak English as an additional language, or who do not have access to technology or broadband and are thereby denied access to remote learning. It reminds us that early communication and language skills are crucial for school readiness, emotional wellbeing, educational attainment, and children's later life chances.
- 5.4 The Health Enquiry in England Report, *The Marmot Review 10 Years On* (2020), emphasises that while the mantra emerging from the pandemic is 'Build Back Better', it needs to be 'Build Back Fairer'. The focus of the report is on the ways in which the levels of social, environmental, and economic inequality in society are damaging health and wellbeing. This is highlighted by the rates of child poverty, a critical measure for early child development, which have increased since 2010 and are now back to their pre-2010 levels, with over four million children affected.
- 5.5 As we are aware in Camden, government funding for Sure Start and Children's Centres, and other children's services, has been cut significantly. The Marmot Review (2020) points out that 'Child poverty is not an inevitability, but the result of political and policy choices in areas including social protection, taxation rates, housing, and income and minimum wage policies. This has clear implications for local government provision for early years and KS1 children. The Institute of Government Report (2020) offers a critique of central government's handling of education during the pandemic.
- 5.6 The Nuffield Early Language Intervention, known as NELI, is designed to improve the language skills of Reception pupils (aged 4-5) and involves scripted individual and small-group language teaching sessions delivered by trained Teaching Assistants (TAs). The programme focusses on developing children's narrative, vocabulary and listening skills, while phonological awareness and letter sound knowledge are also developed. An Evaluation Report was carried out (Dimova, S., *et al.*, May 2020), based on a randomised control trial that took place between June 2018 and November 2019. While this report pre-dates the Covid-19 school closures, the proven success of the programme ensured that the NELI programme is currently widely used in Camden primary schools and elsewhere.
- 5.7 The Centre for Evidence & Implementation Report (La Valle *et al.*, 2022), which includes Coram Family and Childcare as a partner, covers the age group 0 - 4 years. It demonstrates that 'Covid-19 has exacerbated existing challenges in the sector - widening inequalities in access to high quality Early Childhood Education and Care services, worsening financial precarity for many providers, and contributing to a significant deterioration in staff recruitment and retention'. A key finding was that 'Speech and language delays were reported across all age groups as children had fewer opportunities to develop their communication skills at home'. Practitioners considered that this 'delay in speech and language was likely to be the development

area most affected by reduced early childhood education and care participation, as well as other Covid consequences, such as mask wearing'. They also reported an increase in speech and language referrals for specialist therapy.

- 5.8 The Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA) study (2022) reminds us that some of the factors of Covid were 'universally impactful', meaning that they were likely to affect children regardless of social determinants. These included: mask wearing, which can have negative impact on speech development and social skill development through being unable to see facial expressions during interaction; social distancing and limited gatherings which led to reduced interaction between children of their own age, resulting in 'stunted social skills' as they enter school for the first time; learning through a screen during lockdown, leading to the widening gap between children from differing socio-economic backgrounds; the disparities in home learning environments and access to speech therapy services, as well as the amount of time parents could spend with children during lockdown which led to disproportionate effects on the children of poor families compared with those of wealthy families; exposure to language was qualitatively and quantitatively differentiated between low and high income families, with the former tending to be more time-poor and under financial pressures, while the latter were able to spend more quality time with their children. This also affected access to laptops and a high-speed internet connection.
- 5.9 Ofsted published three interim reports on education recovery in Early Years providers in 2022 (Ofsted, Spring 2022, Ofsted Summer 2022, Ofsted, Autumn 2022). These are summarised in *The Ofsted Annual Report 2021/22* (December 2022), which describes 'the shadow cast by the pandemic over education and children's social care and how that was addressed over the last year'.
- 5.10 In the Ofsted Annual Report (2022) there was a focus on children's speech and language in the Early Years, with turn-taking and sharing helping to build social skills. The Spring Interim Report (Ofsted, Spring, 2022) had noted that 'children have missed out on hearing stories, singing, and having conversations'. One provider commented that, 'children appear to have spent more time on screens and have started to speak in accents and voices that resemble the material they have watched'. Other providers reported that, 'delays to children's speech have led to them not socialising with other children as they would have expected previously'. It is noted that children with the most complex needs are often the least well served in already overstretched systems.
- 5.11 The *Ofsted Annual Report 2021/22* records a number of workforce pressures in the nursery sector, with a lack of sufficient qualified and experienced staff. Similarly, at KS1 there are problems of staff recruitment and retention, caused by a shortage of government funding and the pressures of high accommodation costs in inner London. The HMI notes that 'the lasting impact of lost education will take time to reveal itself fully, in terms of achievement as well as any longer-term harm to mental or physical health'. It also records that some providers have realised that children need to be better prepared for the start of the Reception Year and are teaching them

the personal, social, and emotional development skills they need to make a successful transition. These include helping children to make friends, building their confidence, and increasing their independence.

- 5.12 On a more positive note, the Ofsted Report (2022) identifies that teachers are working towards the pandemic recovery by identifying the children who have missed opportunities in their learning and using various 'catch-up' techniques. These include: creating more opportunities for interactions between adults and children to develop speech and language, creating more opportunities for staff to read to children and talk to them about the books they read, and providing as many opportunities as they can for children to mix with others and build their confidence in social situation.
- 5.13 *Voice 21* is the UK's oracy education charity which aims to transform the learning and life chances of young people through talk, and to increase access to high-quality oracy education, particularly for those children who need it most. It was launched in 2015 and accredits qualifying schools to become *Voice 21 Centres of Excellence*. The Oracy Programme claims to boost attainment through reading, to increase students' confidence, and to enhance early language provision. (Voice 21, January 2023). An example of a Camden Primary School which achieved this status in 2021 is discussed in Appendix 6.
- 5.14 The Westminster All-Party Political Group on Oracy recognises that the pandemic has increased the imperative to act now in improving the development of pupils' spoken language skills (APPG, April 2021). The APPG launched the *Speak for Change Inquiry* in 2019. But with the impact of Covid-19, it extended the scope of the inquiry and issued a new call for evidence regarding the impact of school closures and disruption to teaching and learning on oracy. Evidence from the Report shows that oracy improves academic outcomes, underpins literacy and vocabulary acquisition, supports wellbeing and confidence, enables young people to have access to employment and thrive in life beyond school, and develops citizenship and agency. While some of these findings refer to later years of schooling, the foundations of language development are clearly laid down in the early years and at KS1. The Report also demonstrates that the Covid-19 pandemic has widened the language gap for disadvantaged children, and there is consistent concern about the negative impact of school closures on their spoken language.
- 5.15 A recent Camden Council Report (2022) on the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black, Asian, and other ethnic communities, reported that 'Schools with the highest percentage of pupils with no access to digital devices have tended to be those with high percentages of disadvantaged and/or Black, Asian, and other ethnic communities'. These families have also required the most support to access remote learning. The report also draws attention to the proportion of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). At primary level in Camden 56% of children have English as an additional language, while nationally the percentage is only 21.2%. The most widely spoken languages after English in Camden are Bengali (2,290 speakers); Somali (1,520); Arabic (1,160); Albanian/ Shqip (885); and French,

Spanish and Portuguese (320). These figures refer to the numbers of children in Camden state schools. Many of the children of French, Spanish, and Portuguese parents are in the independent sector, of which there is a sizeable proportion in Camden. In Kentish Town, for example, there is a school associated with the Lycée Française Charles de Gaulle de Londres, called the Collège Français Bilingue de Londres (CFBL), which educates 700 children, age 3-15, of professional parents of many nationalities, including English.

5.16 The Mayor of London has commissioned an investigation through the Assembly's Health Committee on *The impact of the pandemic on Early Years development* (2022). As it asks in its request for information, 'The pandemic has had a significant impact on the ability of young children to mix with children and adults outside of their immediate family, with restrictions on interaction between households and many facilities and services closed. What implications has this had for children's development and readiness for school?' The consultation period for this study closes on 1 March 2023: it should therefore be possible to submit the evidence from this current study to the Health Committee.

6. Findings

6.1 The number of people interviewed included nine officers - from the Chief Executive of Camden Learning to Early Years support officers, nineteen practitioners from fifteen Early Years settings including Camden Children's Centres and Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) settings; six parents of children with special needs from Regent's Park Children's Centre, an Early Years teacher, eighteen Early Years practitioners from twelve different schools, including two Headteachers, and the Head and Executive Head of Brecknock and Torriano Schools Federation.

6.2 **Evidence of Language delay in Early Years in Camden.** As was indicated in the data section above, in 2022 the number of children in Camden achieving a 'good level of development' has dropped to 65%, indicating that the pupils of that year did not do as well as children pre-pandemic. From our interviews there was general agreement in Camden, from teachers, Heads, parents, and governors that there is a language development issue for post-pandemic Early Years children. As can be seen from the research context that includes Ofsted reports 2020, 2021, 2022, Literacy Trust surveys with parents, and NFER studies which interviewed teachers, this concern has been highlighted nationally and Camden is no different.

6.3 **Examples of language delay in Camden identified by practitioners.** It was reported that two children in a nursery class have no words at all and are described as being 'pre-verbal'. Some children were described by the teachers as merely 'grunting' in response to questions. There are children with limited vocabulary who do not have words to describe outdoor objects, such as sweet chestnuts ('prickly'), or fir cones ('spiky'), they use only words like 'hard' or 'soft'. There were children who do not know the specific word 'anorak', only the generic word 'coat'. There were also children who cannot use or do not volunteer a sentence: they either nod or shake their heads, or use 'yes' or 'no' in answer to questions, but little more. Some children

rush in and grab the teacher to get their attention, then cut across other children, and talk very fast when they have the adult's attention, indicating the child's experience of not having enough individual adult time for them at home. All practitioners in our study emphasised the difference between the level of children's functioning in both language and other key areas of development, and the number of children with these issues, compared to pre-pandemic. One teacher said, 'children come to us at three years old. Their verbal functioning is low: we have two children who are completely non-verbal - no language at all - and these are not children from families whose first language is not English. They just haven't developed any language during the pandemic and the rest have very little language. Compared to two years ago they are at a much lower level'. 'Children's language skills are 20% lower than they should be, they have small vocabularies. We are constantly evaluating how teaching interventions are going'. 'We had lots of referrals for speech and language - stammers, speech delay, dyspraxia - we never had this before'. An additional concern identified by practitioners was speech sound production, having commented, 'We have nine children who have speech sound production difficulties - again these are issues we have never had before'.

- 6.4 **Impact of such delay on later academic attainment.** There was concern expressed by the Camden Learning Advisor, several Primary School and Nursery Headteachers, and school and Nursery practitioners that, unless addressed effectively, such language delay will have a knock-on impact with reading development in KS1, attainment measured by the SATs KS2 tests, and then later at GCSE. Research shows that below-expected development in Early Years then impacts on GCSE results by least one grade difference. The practitioners considered that the government did not understand the severity and enormity of the problem.
- 6.5 **Impact on disadvantaged children.** The school data for Camden shows a considerable variation in attainment between schools. Some schools have a much higher proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds than others. However, every single one of the practitioners interviewed, regardless of their school, said, that in their experience, disadvantaged pupils suffered most because of the pandemic. One Nursery teacher said, 'while all children suffered from lack of interaction with other children of their own age and being able to explore the outdoors, the less disadvantaged children bounced back'. As noted by Rose *et al.* 2021, the gap between the disadvantaged children and the rest is widening.
- 6.6 **Government Expectations regarding academic progress.** There is also concern about government expectations. Many practitioners said that the expectation that levels of progress would remain the same as pre-Covid was totally unrealistic when the baseline on entry for many children, especially the most disadvantaged, was lower than before. This was articulated by one Head as being the 'backwash' effect. The teachers in Secondary schools are under pressure to get children to meet certain standards and this puts pressure on KS2 teachers, who pressurise KS1 teachers, who in turn pressurise the Reception and Nursery staff. A teacher said, 'I am really worried for my four-year-olds when next year they will be expected to do phonics'. While one Headteacher said it was important to continue to have high

expectations of children, what all practitioners and Headteachers agreed on was the need to have more time to help children to catch up, and for an appropriate curriculum to do so. This appropriate curriculum was characterised by encouraging oracy and nurturing children. As one Nursery Head put it, 'We need public recognition that these children are impacted, are behind, and more intensive phonics isn't the answer'. Another said, 'the knowledge that exists in schools already is what we need to replicate and develop. What is being put in place now by central government is a barrier: the Year One curriculum is not appropriate for our children right now, and that can create a problem in Reception because we are not sending the children up ready for their curriculum. It's similar with the transition from Nursery to Reception, with the problem of mastering phonics'. Rose *et al.* (2021) noted the need to 'balance catch-up with children's well-being', and many Camden practitioners echoed this view.

- 6.7 **Implementation of the Oracy Report (February 2021).** One school had taken part in providing evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group that produced the Oracy Report *Speak for Change* in February 2021. The Executive Head wanted to know what had happened to this report, as the recommendations in it were desperately needed for curriculum implementation with this cohort of children as they go through to Year One.
- 6.8 **Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is not the problem.** Many teachers commented on the fact that they were using the techniques they had learned from CPD run by Camden Learning, from direct training, and from working closely with speech therapists. However, they lacked the time to do this effectively in Reception and were using Personal Social and Emotional Development (PSED) curriculum time, which was insufficient.
- 6.9 **Not Solely Language Development** Practitioners, Heads and Governors unanimously identified other developmental issues alongside language. These are physical, emotional, independence, and confidence issues. For each of these areas, teachers had empathy for families who did their very best for their children, but who often could not give their children the one-to-one attention they needed. These children's needs were exacerbated by their parents' work commitments, the lack of space in their homes, the needs of other siblings, the lack of access to IT devices, and their own physical and/or mental health. Practitioners with many years' experience were feeling overwhelmed by the degree of change in the children in this cohort and the volume of children who are unable to function in the way practitioners were used to. Practitioners prefaced many of their comments with, 'I have been teaching for ten years and I have never seen so many children unable to...' 'we had one or two children before, but now it is more like eight to nine in the class who cannot ...' 'we have 22-26-30 children in one class and one nursery teacher and TA across the two classes, so we cannot deal with the level of toileting needs, 'meltdowns', and the need to tie shoe laces...'. Government reports support this concern and highlight transition as an issue, because of children's deterioration in concentration, memory, stamina, and emotional readiness for the next stage.

- 6.10 **Lack of social skills.** Many of the children are unable to share and play with others - they play alone alongside other children without interacting with them (known as 'parallel play'). A teacher reported that they cannot take turns, 'they cannot do listening in a group, the older three- and four-year-olds used to be able to listen in a group - now only about one in eleven can do it. No parent can recreate a group at home'.
- 6.11 **Emotional difficulties.** The practitioners described emotional tension between parents, their children, and the school, 'with mums and dads being highly anxious about leaving their children. They stay to 'settle' them for twenty minutes and are very concerned when their child has a bump or knock. They keep phoning in to check on their child and kept their children off school before Christmas when the cold, flu, and Strep A infections were circulating. The children were also highly anxious about their mums and dads leaving, crying when they left, and needing one-to-one adult reassurance'. As another practitioner commented, 'the children are less resilient than before, they have separation anxiety from their parents, it has taken much longer this September (2022) to settle the children than last September'. Another practitioner reported, 'the children couldn't read any body-language because of the masks we had to wear in the early days'. Two practitioners said the social and emotional issues had to be dealt with before language practice because until the children were settled, they couldn't do anything. 'Transitions take so much time, such as moving from indoors to outdoors, or stopping doing one activity and moving onto another. They find it very hard to do these things, they haven't done 'make-believe' with puppets, for example, as a means of exploring their feelings'. 'Transitions are so hard, moving them from the garden to inside takes every ounce of energy, and I have been there for twenty years. The economically disadvantaged children can barely sit and listen to a story, so goodness knows what's going to happen when they have phonics activities with no play. It is too formal...the government needs to know that these children need an Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum to the end of Reception as a minimum'.
- 6.12 **Physical difficulties.** Many three- and four-year-old children are presenting in their settings unable to climb up or go downstairs, ride a balance-bike or a scooter, go down a slide, balance on equipment, or catch a ball. Instead, 'children are all floppy on the carpet'. Practitioners reported that 'children cannot sit still on the carpet' and that 'children have put weight on as they haven't been running around'.
- 6.13 **Lack of independence.** Practitioners said that many children had got used to having things done for them at home. Nursery and Reception classes have children unable to feed themselves or go to the toilet on their own. This means they are put in nappies at home, or have multiple accidents, even if they are toileted. They are unable to dress themselves, arriving with a dummy, and with some still on the bottle. Parents often lead their children into nursery with a YouTube film on their mobile phones, 'They have very little self-regulation, so if they don't win at a game, or an adult doesn't come to help when they need them, they throw themselves on the floor and sob. This happens with more than four or five in a class'. One teacher said, 'the children have no self-care skills, they cannot wash their hands, wipe their face, or

feed themselves: so both gross motor skills and fine motor skills are underdeveloped’.

- 6.14 **Lack of confidence.** Practitioners felt this particularly manifests itself in an anxiety about outdoor space, ‘the children have anxiety about outdoor space and are too timid to explore the garden’.’ ‘We have trouble with children not wanting to go outside.’ ‘Some children are afraid of going out, so they stay in, but we try to take them out to the park.’ ‘We are doing lots of emotional coaching at the moment because the children are fearful of the world and are not understanding it’. ‘They are also anxious about food’.
- 6.15 **Lack of resources from the Speech Therapy Service.** There are insufficient numbers of speech therapists to meet the increased demand. This results in long waiting times and high thresholds for children to receive support. There is clearly an issue with Health Service funding for this. Camden Local Inclusion Funding (CLIF), provided by the borough is very welcome and has been used by some schools to pay for speech and language therapy for their children.
- 6.16 **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).** Ofsted (November 2020) said that 31% of providers reported that children needed more support in areas such as SEND and safeguarding. While it is often hard to know if young child has Special Needs, or is developing more slowly than others, the practitioners interviewed were adamant that, in their experience, the incidence of Special Needs has increased, and the support has reduced. ‘We have a variety of needs and high levels of special needs as well so it’s hard to judge if the low levels of language are due to Covid-19 or complex needs.’ ‘We have been using the Camden traffic lights system to assess our children and we now have a third of our children described as needing speech and language therapy’.
- 6.17 **Examples of interventions used by the practitioners.** Camden already appears to be at the forefront in helping and supporting children and families and Early Years practitioners. The *Wellcomm Early Years* toolkit is a speech and language assessment programme that is currently used in many areas of the UK, including by Camden’s Early Years service. The toolkit uses a traffic light system to identify children with speech or language difficulties requiring immediate intervention, such as a referral to a specialist service for further advice or assessment, as well as those who show potential language difficulties. The toolkit includes a handbook, *The Little Book of Scores and Rules*, and *The Big Book of Ideas*. This is particularly useful for families as it has 150 play-based intervention activities to support identified needs which can be used at home. *WellComm* has been adopted by all Camden maintained Nurseries and is being rolled out to other Early Years providers in the borough
- 6.18 Other practitioners reported, ‘We use a speech language programme called ‘NELI’ (Nuffield Early Learning Intervention), we do interventions with some children every day, some twice a week, and interventions for Personal Social and Emotional Development (PSED) on emotional regulation and playing together.’ ‘We have

chosen core books emphasising key vocabulary, and we use a dialogic reading approach called 'Poetry Basket', along with the usual rhymes.' 'I was a Music teacher before - so I am always singing with them and repeating songs to extend their vocabulary, using material from the *Da Capo* Foundation, but now from a programme designed for younger children'.

6.19 'We also do interventions to develop their fine motor skills; we have groups such as 'Box Clever' and 'Mac Man' throughout the week. There are a larger number of children needing these groups than last year.' 'We are working with a speech and language department; we use *Talking Time* - a programme developed by the Universities of London, Oxford, and Newcastle (Dockrell & Mathers, 2023). It was funded by the Nuffield Foundation after noticing that there was a problem and developed a programme to promote children's PSED'. 'We focus on high quality conversations, stories, poetry, and rhymes, with a huge emphasis on rhymes, engagement, and enjoyment. So now children are picking up books by themselves.' 'We do a lot of rhyming and physical moves, such as *If you're happy and you know it* and *Hokey Cokey*, then Circle time. We do these as structured activities three times a day and we have one rhyming time every day. Then in free play we do lots of talking with the children, for example, staff role-model the shop keeper and sit down and see what children want to buy.' 'We use a 'Bucket Time' strategy, it's a tool to promote language. One or two children work with a single practitioner who takes items out of the bucket, names them and the children repeat back the names. Then there is the activity called 'Talking Tubs', where the tub contains items collected around themes, so with 'transport noises' there would be an ambulance, a bus, and a racing car, and the children are encouraged to build sentences from these prompts'.

6.20 **Insufficient numbers of adults to meet the needs of children.** Practitioners frequently told us, 'We need more adults in the classroom - both volunteers and trained and experienced teachers. We have three to four children having speech and language therapy, we asked for CLIF funding and were given extra cash for an additional adult for a few hours to model language and extend vocabulary, but we cannot get the adults to conduct these interventions'. 'We need more adults - 'quality' adults, to help with toileting, for example. There used to be one or two children in a class of 22 not toilet trained. Now there are four to five in a class, and they have constant accidents. We don't have the staff to help, we share one Nursery Nurse between two classes. We have very high numbers of children with SEND and we don't have the support we need. We have all been teaching for a long time, we have strategies and know what we are doing, but when half the class has SEND and two-thirds of a class do not speak at all, we just cannot do it all'. 'I recognise the need for more adults - we are in a similar situation as a two-form entry school, with 30 children in each class and huge levels of SEND. The lack of funding means we cannot support our children in the way we want to. Our children are individuals. The changes to early reading that focus on one way of doing things do not help'. 'We need volunteers to model good talking, we have 20 to 22 in a class, but our school is in King's Cross, and we have a lot of refugees in the class with many issues.' This school is located just south of St Pancras Station, which, as a Eurostar terminus, is known as a UK Port of Entry for refugees

- 6.21 **Recruitment and retention of good and experienced staff.** Practitioners repeatedly identified this issue. 'Retention of experienced staff has become a bigger problem since Covid-19, as some staff have Long Covid and have taken early retirement on grounds of ill health. Some became burnt-out with the demands of teaching through Covid and have taken early retirement. Teaching Assistants have left to get jobs in supermarkets, as the pay is better'. 'There is less money in the education system after ten years of austerity. Cuts in the public sector mean less money is available to recruit TAs at all and pay for teachers has not kept up with inflation. Pay and conditions of teachers therefore become very unattractive. We need Camden and central government to raise the status of what it is to be an Early Years Practitioner - it's a sound career choice'.
- 6.22 **Benefits of Covid: Parental involvement.** Practitioners and parents told us, 'One benefit that came from out of Covid-19 was the support Camden provided to parents to help them teach their children. They provided the resources and we worked directly with parents through Zoom. Some parents said, 'now I understand what *Word of the Day* is!'.
- 6.23 **Parental anxiety and the impact on attendance.** Practitioners said, 'The whole of the Autumn term I only ever had half to three quarters of the class attending.' 'We understand why the parents are terrified. We have had children in hospital. We've never had so many children off sick: last term we hardly had half the class in at any given time. This cohort of children has no immunity: Covid-19 has had a massive effect on all of them. The amount of time they missed Nursery means we have a huge catch-up job to do, and the sickness is still on-going'.
- 6.24 **Early Years funding of Nursery places.** Practitioners said, 'We want central government to look at Early Years funding - there is not enough. The Nursery would like it if everyone had 30 hours of funding allocated - it's such a wasted opportunity when there is so much we can do – and we can do so much more'.
- 6.25 **The role of IT in children's language development.** The role of devices such as mobile phones and tablets, may be viewed as inhibitors of children's language learning and social interaction. One practitioner said: 'Parental use of mobile phones, tablets, and iPads as pacifiers has interfered with children's language development. It was there pre-lockdown but is much worse now. Children are given a tablet and spend hours on the screen, and even babies are given a mobile phone'. The Thomas Coram Head reported her two-year-olds being led into Nursery watching a YouTube film on the phone. 'When we ask the mums to switch off their phones they say, 'No', their children are watching it. It's heart breaking'.
- 6.26 **The disproportionate impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.** This issue was raised by practitioners from all settings. It is best summed up by this teacher, 'The gap between the disadvantaged and those who are not is now much bigger and the gap is worse – recovery is slower and gaining parental trust is slower'. In addition, the Camden *State of the Borough Report (2023)* indicates that,

'in Camden almost one in three children live in poverty'. However, this varies widely from ward to ward. As the report tells us, 'Camden is a borough of diversity and contrast', and we often refer to the *Two Camdens*, because of the extremes of wealth and poverty existing there. The gap in disadvantage is very concerning to Camden, given the link between disadvantage and ethnicity and the varied ethnic composition of Camden's community.

6.27 Leadership from Camden This was praised repeatedly by practitioners across the age range, 'We just want more of what we already get. In lockdown the Camden Early Years Teams sent a lot of activities. We then we sent them out to the parents and every day we got the parents involved. We got very good feedback from the parents about this.' Many local authorities are challenged by the split in responsibility for Early Years Childcare and Early years Education. However, this is not the case in Camden and so it was not seen as a barrier for practitioners. Camden's *First Thousand Days* project was identified by some practitioners, who noted that this should begin to help identify language acquisition delays and provide some support. One or two practitioners had heard of the *Camden Kids Talk* strategy and the *WellComm Early Years Toolkit* which has already being piloted in some schools and is now being rolled out to all Camden School nurseries. However, there was serious concern about the cohort of 3–5-year-olds arriving in Nursery and Reception right now who have considerable language delay. Funding is the key issue. 'There are two issues at play: providing both emotional support for children and really good quality teaching'.

6.28 Cost of Living Crisis. Many practitioners told us, 'Children are now coming into school hungry'. This comment was made, among others, by one of the teachers at the Early Years Hub meeting. The Early Years Alliance launched a nutrition survey with the London Early Years Foundation in October 2022, and the initial findings were recently reported in the *Observer* (29.1.23). Analysis of a survey of 500 childcare providers and professionals found that rising food costs were having an impact on most families. Almost one in ten said that they had turned to food redistribution charities to help provide food for their settings. Furthermore, the *Camden State of the Borough Report (2023)* points out that, 'Camden's Free School Meals eligibility rate is the second highest in London'.

7. Conclusions: Addressing the Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE)

7.1 What are the most effective strategies and how do the teachers know? The teachers across all the settings demonstrated that they knew very clearly what worked with their children. They had strategies that included speech therapy recommended programmes, University and Nuffield Foundation programmes, a carefully researched and trialled Oracy curriculum, and language activities that were music and rhyme-based.

7.2 What do the schools want and need? The practitioners all articulated a clear need for more adults, and volunteers to help them in the classroom with toileting, transitioning in and out of doors, and exploring the external world of activities. Ideally

such volunteers would be trained in the approach being taken by that school to extend language. Also, there is a need for trained experienced Early Years teachers to run some of the one-to-one interventions. There was a clear plea for central government to provide additional funding and people for this, as well as a need for central government to publicly recognise the impact of little or no access to Early Years education on children because of Covid-19.

- 7.3 **What is the best practice that is currently being shared?** This includes the Oracy Curriculum developed in Camden schools, with Torriano Primary School taking a lead, the 'Nurture' approach to learning and developing social emotional skills, and specific language interventions. Schools were very aware of good practice in other schools and had many opportunities to share and learn from one another. This was often facilitated by the Camden Early Intervention Team and Camden Learning.
- 7.4 **What is the role of benchmarking in expected progress?** Almost every practitioner we spoke to wanted the government to acknowledge that this cohort of children were entering Early Years settings with significant delays in learning, compared with previous cohorts, and they wanted the space to be able to support these children at their own pace. They found the government proposal of focusing on only three out of seven of the Early Learning goals was the opposite of what they wanted to do with their children. The government recommendation to increase the amount of time spent on phonics in Reception and Year One was considered to be inappropriate.
- 7.5 **The CSF Special Panel raised the issue of disproportionality in relation to children from Black, Asian, and other ethnic communities.** In every interview practitioners and officers volunteered information regarding these groups of children. They were all very concerned about the disproportionate impact of Covid on Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic children, which they had witnessed in their settings.
- 7.6 Finally, the **Council's Early Years' Service initiatives *Camden Kids Talk* and the *WellComm* toolkit should be highly commended.** This is a bank of high-quality materials to support practitioners and parents of children aged 0-5 years which is being introduced to both education and health settings. Sadly, it may be too late for the cohort of children who have been impacted so much by Covid in their language development.

8. Recommendations

- 8.1 The study has shown there need to be more trained, experienced teachers to provide targeted intervention for young children. This is a national government resourcing issue. The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families, and the Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee should write to the Secretary of State for Education to request increased funding for education so that schools have sufficient resources to provide the appropriate specialist support that will enable every child, including those with

special educational needs or social, emotional, and mental health needs, to fulfil their potential.

- 8.2 There is a clear need to recruit and retain good experienced Early Years staff. The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families, and the Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee should begin a Camden campaign to raise the status of what it is to be an Early Years practitioner in Camden and to recognise that it is a sound career choice.
- 8.3 There is a need for an organised cadre of volunteers to be introduced into all Camden Primary Schools and Early Years settings to help with toileting and physical development, such as climbing and balancing. There would be a brief period of training built in so the volunteers can develop and extend the language of the Covid-19-born children, especially those born into disadvantaged backgrounds. The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families, and the Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee should begin a Camden campaign to recruit, manage and monitor such a team.
- 8.4 Similarly, there is a need for more Speech Therapists to help parents of children aged 0-5 years. There are long waiting lists for children in Camden to access speech therapy support. This is a national government resourcing issue. The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families, and the Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee should write to the Minister of Health to ask for increased funding for speech therapists so that families, Nurseries, and schools have sufficient resources to provide the appropriate specialist support to enable every child, including those with special educational needs or social, emotional, and mental health needs, to fulfil their potential.
- 8.5 There is a clear issue of language delay among those Camden children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will impact on schools' ability to show academic success with their primary-aged children, according to central government measures, even though the schools will doubtless continue to succeed in helping children make considerable progress. Despite Ofsted and the Westminster APPG on Oracy highlighting this, teachers reported that they saw little evidence of government recognition of the severity of these issues. Teachers want the government to publicly recognise that this cohort of children are badly impacted, they are behind, and they need a national catch-up period which does not consist of more of the same, i.e., phonics. It is clear that SATs tests will impact unfairly on many children in this cohort. The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families, and the Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee should write to the Secretary of State for Education to ask for the public recognition, a catch-up period, and a change in the way results of SATs at KS2 are published. Alternatively, that SATs at KS2 are suspended for this cohort of children. This catch-up period needs to protect curriculum time for the social, emotional, and physical development of our Early Years children.
- 8.6 The parents of children who seemed to be developing differently from others had a feeling of being abandoned by all the services - Health Visitors, nurses, and GPs.

While it is clear that there should be national guidance on key developmental milestones, with advice on what to do if your child is not developing at the expected rate, this report recommends that the Executive Director Supporting People should ensure that the materials for *Camden Kids Talk* are made available to all new parents.

- 8.7 The recent Camden Council Report (2022) on the disproportionate effects of Covid on Black, Asian, and other ethnic minority children commits the borough to ‘work directly, and with our partners, to rapidly increase access to digital devices and resources to support the reduction of the disadvantage gap in education’, and ‘to use the new Education Strategy to tackle disproportionality in attainment’. As *Building Back Stronger: Camden’s Education Strategy to 2030* (2022) claims, ‘Inequalities cannot be tackled without addressing racism...Education should be at the forefront of breaking down barriers established by racism’. This report recommends that this message is widely disseminated to Early Years and Key Stage 1 providers in Camden.
- 8.8 There is clearly insufficient funding to support the growing demand for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families, and the Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee should lobby the Secretary of State for Education urgently in the strongest terms for more money for SEND now. This would be for all pupils, but especially for this Covid-born cohort.
- 8.9 The practitioners were unanimous in seeing the beneficial results of children from disadvantaged backgrounds attending Nursery or Pre-School. The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families, and the Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee should lobby the Secretary of State for Education and the Treasury to ensure that the current three-years-old funding be available to all pre-schoolchildren.
- 8.10 The leadership in local government in Camden shown by the Chief Executive, the Director of Children’s Services and Deputy Chief Executive, the Leader of the Council, and the Director of Early Intervention and Prevention is outstanding and should be commended. The recommendations contained in the Literature Search addressed to local government are all in place in Camden, including having a Named Lead for Early Years intervention.
- 8.11 The sharing of best practice through Camden Learning Early Years Partnerships and the Camden Family of Schools is excellent and should continue to be supported and funded.
- 8.12 Camden Council should be commended for its Cost of Living Crisis Fund that has been ear-marked to support families in need in the financial year April 2022 - April 2023. This initiative is clearly going some way to alleviate the hardship many families are facing, which results in some of our Camden Early Years children going hungry.

It is strongly recommended that Camden Council continues the Cost-of-Living Fund into the financial year April 2023 - April 2024.

- 8.13 It is recommended that this initial research project is repeated, with a more in-depth set of interviews, in two years' time to track the 'Covid- generation children' and assess the impact of the pandemic on their progress in 2025.

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10.2 We should like to extend special thanks to Martin Pratt, Eve Stickler, Stephen Hall, Leonie Holt, Debbie Adams and her team, Budia Boakye, Perina Holness, Anoushka Clayton-Walshe, and Chris Douglas.

11. Finance comments

11.1 The Executive Director Corporate Services notes the contents of this report and comments that, given the requirements of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, any recommendations within this report will need to be contained within the existing service funding envelope.

12. Legal comments

12.1 The Borough Solicitor has been consulted and has no comments to add to this report.

13. Environmental Implications

13.1 The proposals in this report have no environmental impact.

14. Appendices

1. Scrutiny Panel timeline of interview sessions and meetings
2. Interview session meeting notes with Camden Learning and Council senior officers (19.11.22)
3. Online Focus Group notes with Early Years settings (21.11.22)
4. Interview session meeting notes with parents of children with Special Needs from Regents Park Children's Centre (23.11.22)
5. Interview meeting notes with an Early Years teacher (13.12.22)
6. Interview session meeting notes with Torriano Primary School Head and Executive Head (17.1.23)
7. In-person Focus Group notes with Early Years Hub (18.1.23)
8. Acknowledgements

REPORT ENDS