

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN

At a meeting of the **CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on **MONDAY, 23RD JUNE, 2025** at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Judd Street, London WC1H 9JE

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE PRESENT

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

Co-opted Members Margaret Harvey and Dr Rachel Wrangham

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ABSENT

Councillors Julian Fulbrook

Co-opted Members Camden Youth Council representative and Sarah Jafri

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Marcus Boyland, Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families

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

MINUTES

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from Committee Members were received from Councillor Fulbrook and for lateness from Councillor Simon. Apologies for absence were also received from Councillor Francis.

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

There were no declarations.

3. ANNOUNCEMENTS

Webcasting

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

Draft all-age Autism Strategy 2025-2030

The Chair reminded Committee Members that the deadline to submit feedback to Camden's draft all-age Autism Strategy consultation was 6 July 2025. The Strategy would be finalised and published in September 2025, subject to approval by Cabinet.

Annual Work Planning Session

Following the Committee's annual work planning session earlier that month, the Chair highlighted the themes of interest Committee Members discussed, which would be incorporated into officer briefing notes ahead of future meetings.

- Services supporting the achievement of the bottom third of children in schools, particularly at age 16
- Progress and attainment of children from underachieving groups – described by members as 'the educational strategy for disadvantaged cohorts'
- The progress of students with special educational needs
- Efforts to address persistent absence

4. DEPUTATIONS (IF ANY)

The Chair stated that there were two deputations, which were presented to the Committee by Rachel Dooley and Serenity Isaiah.

Deputation 1 – Camden Free School Meals (FSM) Scandal

This deputation, supported by the full written statement within the supplementary agenda, raised concerns about systemic issues in the provision of FSMs. The deputies described cases of families absorbing the costs of care, food, and education while being excluded from Council support and statutory entitlements. They highlighted that in their view there was an absence of a clear policy on the Camden Local Offer and they described delays and failures in delivery. These comments were supported by the written deputation which set out legal and statutory concerns, comparative practice across other London boroughs, and specific actions requested of the Council.

Deputation 2 – Camden's Functional Needs Assessment and Autism

The second deputation, supported by the written statement, addressed Camden's approach to Functional Needs Assessments (FNA) and autism support. The deputies said that in their view the assessment framework was outdated and non-compliant and excluded autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and sensory communication needs. They also described systemic conflation of autism with learning disability, failure to support neurodivergent mothers, lack of a borough-wide autism strategy, and the cost and harm of the shortfalls. These comments were supported by the written deputation which detailed four key areas of concern and actions requested of the Council.

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

Deputation 1 discussion

- A Member acknowledged the seriousness of the issue and said it raised important questions about child poverty and additional pressures on families with children who had special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). They asked whether the vouchers referenced were the supermarket-style vouchers issued during the pandemic, or were part of the Mayor of London's school meal programme. The deputies said that the vouchers in question were based on legal entitlements under the Equality Act 2010 for disabled children not attending school, and that they should be issued for both term time and holidays.
- A Co-opted Member asked how many children and families were affected by the lack of FSM provision and asked what the deputies believed was the reason behind it. The deputies replied that the absence of data was central to the issue, and while the exact numbers were unknown, their experience and national statistics pointed to a significant cohort. They added that families repeatedly had to self-fund food and care. The deputies also stated that some families who were officially listed as receiving FSM had not actually received support.
- A Member asked whether FSM entitlement might be used as an incentive to improve attendance. The deputies responded that children were not out of school by choice, and withholding food based on attendance was not appropriate. One deputy gave the example of their son being out of school for six months with no communication or support from Camden despite repeated attempts to engage with statutory services.
- A Member asked whether the Camden had considered what other boroughs were doing in this space. The deputies confirmed that boroughs such as Islington, Hackney, Southwark and Central Bedfordshire had adopted inclusive and responsive FSM policies for children not on roll. They described Camden as failing to act, and asked that the Council follow these examples.
- A Member referred to the 'plain language' request in the deputation and asked whether communications from Camden were difficult to understand. The deputies responded that the issue was not complexity, but lack of transparency and consistency. They also noted that their Communication Passports were often disregarded.
- A Member asked whether Camden was reviewing data and audit practices related to FSM. The deputies reiterated their request for published termly data on applications, approvals, and refusals, and pointed out that other boroughs had already conducted audits. They asked that Camden adopt similar practices and work towards clear and accountable delivery.

Deputation 2 discussion

- A Co-opted Member asked about the number of children affected by issues linked to Camden's FNA and what might be driving the problem. The deputies responded that the lack of disaggregated data concealed the scale of the issue. They believed that the exclusion of autistic children without intellectual disabilities stemmed from systemic design rather than oversight, and from an intention to preserve resources for only the most profoundly disabled.

- A Member asked whether the FNA tool was linked to services such as respite care and short breaks. The deputies responded that it was used more broadly across children's social care, and that under Camden's current framework, children with less visible or non-intellectual disabilities were often excluded entirely.
- A Member asked what response had been given by Camden when the Newham FNA model was raised in a meeting with senior officers a year earlier. The deputies said they had presented the model positively and hoped Camden might adopt similar practices. They were told it would be looked into but said that no formal response or follow-up was ever received, despite further correspondence and complaints.
- A Member asked what would have been a reasonable amount of progress since the deputies raised the issue with officers. The deputies responded that while they did not expect a fully revised framework, they would have expected Camden to adopt relational practice as an interim measure to support families while systemic changes were being developed.

Concluding the deputations presented to the Committee, Committee Members agreed to request written responses to both deputations from officers, addressing the points raised in both deputations, with particular focus on data transparency, policy compliance, and learning from other boroughs.

ACTION BY: Executive Director Children and Learning

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

There was no notification of urgent business.

6. MINUTES

It was noted that the running order changed at the previous meeting which had not been reflected in the minutes. Item 11 of the minutes should read before item 10 to reflect the progression and chronological order of the discussion.

RESOLVED –

THAT the minutes of the meeting held on 24 February 2025, subject to the correction, be approved and signed as a correct record.

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

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

Councillor Boyland (Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families) summarised the update paper which covered the following areas: background of Camden's Youth Mission, fifth Youth Mission Member Session exploring Camden's priority cohorts, State of the Mission update as part of the State of the Borough report, and an update on the new Mission Ambassadors. There was also an update on a basic income pilot for care experienced young people and a case study about improving attendance for pupils at risk of persistent absence.

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

- A Member referred to section 3.1 and highlighted that all six serious incident notifications to the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel in the last 12 months involved individuals of black and global majority ethnicities. They asked whether Camden had investigated the reasons for this. The Cabinet Member confirmed that the issue had been examined with the Camden Safeguarding Children's Partnership and that a report was available to share upon request. They acknowledged the serious disproportionality and offered to return to discuss it further at a future meeting. The Member then asked how mental health support and safeguarding were being improved as children moved into adulthood. Officers responded that there was dedicated support in place for care-experienced young people, including services such as The HIVE, a free mental health and wellbeing service that supports all young people aged 16 to 24 in Camden. It was noted that some incidents had occurred in custody settings, where the Council had less direct control, and work was ongoing to strengthen support in those areas, with further action planned following the recent tragic incidents.
- A Co-opted Member asked whether the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) arriving in the borough had subsided, or whether the profile of looked after children had changed. The Cabinet Member responded that both were the case: the profile had shifted, and the level of urgent arrivals had lessened, although specialist support for UASC remained in place. They added that the Council was also exploring additional ways to support children arriving in the borough.

Opportunity Centres

- A Member asked whether there was a good geographical spread of young people attending the two current Opportunity Centres, which were located in schools near each other. The Cabinet Member responded that the original intention for the centres to be placed in schools was to attract pupils from different areas and to be a neutral venue. A study was underway to compare and contrast outcomes from both centres, which would inform decisions once the current funding cycle ended. It was acknowledged that the centres were likely attracting pupils from their host schools, but the aim was to engage children from a broader area, subject to the findings of the evaluation.
- A Member asked how the Opportunity Centres linked to careers services. The Cabinet Member referred to the Connexions service for careers advice and acknowledged it was a good question, noting uncertainty about how formally the services were linked. They explained that the Opportunity Centres focused on

enriching the curriculum and broadening pupils' perspectives on their subjects. While not formally connected to their knowledge, the centres had links to the STEAM programme, which in turn had connections with careers services.

School Place Planning

- A Co-opted Member raised concerns relating to section 9 on school place planning, noting that these issues were raised annually by the Committee. They expressed frustration that a report would not be presented until 2026, which meant further delays in strategic action taken. The Cabinet Member responded that the issue was not expected to go away and confirmed that action had already been taken in Camden, including changes to Published Admission Numbers (PAN), school mergers, and closures. They emphasised the need for a strategic approach to managing the school estate, particularly in light of rising SEND needs. The Cabinet Member acknowledged that difficult decisions lay ahead and stressed the importance of bringing parents along on that journey.
- A Member noted growing Committee interest in school place planning over the past two years and called for greater awareness of, and input into, the Council's developing strategy. They raised concerns about the vague timing of the planned 2026 report, questioning whether it would be delivered in 6 or 18 months, and whether it would come before or after the next election. The Member suggested the November annual place planning report could provide a more substantial update. They welcomed the Cabinet Member's commitment and emphasised the need for proper scrutiny before the report would go to Cabinet. The Cabinet Member confirmed an opportunity would be provided and agreed to include further information in the November report.

SEND

- A Member asked about the diversity of the new SEND team and officers. The Cabinet Member agreed that diversity of the team was important but explained that they did not have the figures available and would provide the information at a later date. It was noted that the new team held regular breakfast meetings to share experiences and support networking.
- A Co-opted Member referred to section 4.5 and welcomed the inclusion of parents' views but questioned what actions had followed and wanted to see more evidence of action. The Cabinet Member responded that the team was already taking forward a range of actions, however as it was a new team still in the early stages of development, they were currently in the stages of meeting with schools and account managers. The Cabinet Member offered to provide feedback once the team was more fully embedded in the new year.
- A Co-opted Member referred to section 2.3 on strengthening inclusion in settings and requested that the Meeting Predictable Needs Toolkit be shared, which the Cabinet Member agreed to. They also asked how the toolkit approach would work for non-Camden children who did not receive additional funding, and what provision would be in place for them.

Action By: Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion

The Committee noted the update.

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

This item was not considered because Councillor Francis (Cabinet Member for Jobs, Young People & Culture) gave her apologies and invited Members to contact her directly if they had any questions about the written update.

9. ANNUAL HEALTH REPORT ON CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES - 2024/25

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Health and Wellbeing.

Manuj Sharma (Consultant in Public Health for Children and Young People) summarised the report which summarised health outcomes for children, young people and families in Camden focusing on population health metrics, inequalities and intersectionality data. The report also provided updates on work undertaken to improve health and address inequalities across 2024/25 and plans for work in 2025/26 incorporating case studies, evidence of impact and children and resident voice.

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

- A Member who had served on the immunisation scrutiny panel welcomed the update and noted the progress made.
- Members reported they found the structure of the report particularly helpful, appreciating how it outlined progress, supported with case studies, cross-referenced data, and identified areas for action along with what to expect in the coming year. They praised officers taking on last years' feedback from the Committee.
- Members raised concerns about the lack of data linking bullying and mental health, suggesting a need to identify gaps in current understanding. They emphasised the significant impact bullying in secondary schools can have on mental health and the importance of addressing this. Officers responded that surveys and questionnaires with young people included questions on both topics, offering a broader borough-wide overview in this area. They noted that mental health remained a key driver of the challenges facing young people.
- Members referred to section 3.5 and welcomed the inclusion of benchmarking data. They asked whether a more detailed breakdown was available by ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics. Officers confirmed that a comprehensive needs assessment on oral health had been completed, which included more detailed information. They noted that some of the most significant challenges were seen in South Asian and Black communities and that work was underway to address these inequalities. This included targeted school programmes, particularly in areas with a high proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, and regular engagement with community champions. Officers also highlighted the rollout of a tooth brushing programme in the most disadvantaged parts of the borough.
- A Co-opted Member raised the importance of voice and intersectionality, noting that while there was space for this, the perspectives of parents and young

people using multiple services were often missing. They highlighted that complex family circumstances could make it difficult for families to engage fully, and asked whether this was being recognised and addressed. Officers confirmed that the issue was fully recognised and that co-production was taking place across various topics and more broadly. Camden's race work was helping to bring advocacy into service delivery and provide a broader narrative. An engagement strategy with children and young people was being developed, and there was ongoing work across the Council to better connect services. Officers emphasised the importance of engaging with families consistently so they would not have to repeat their stories. This work, including a focus on intersectionality, was being explored through a group chaired by the Leader.

- A Co-opted Member noted that although intersectionality was being considered across various topics, in their view the information provided was limited. They requested more detailed reporting in the following year, particularly on which areas of the borough were facing the most and least acute challenges, and comparison with the location of services, which may not always align with expectations. Officers said the detailed annual public health report focused on place-based health which they agreed to share (Annual Public Health Report 2024/25 - Healthy Places: Evidence to support neighbourhood working in Camden).

Action By: Director of Health and Wellbeing

- Members referred to section 20 on oral health and noted that while there was still work to do, they were pleased to see action being taken and recognition of the scale of the issue. They queried an apparent discrepancy in the data: section 20.2 stated that the mean number of decayed, missing and filled teeth (d3mft) among 5-year-old children had almost doubled in Camden over the past decade, whereas appendix 1 showed that the percentage of children with visually obvious dental decay had fluctuated. Officers acknowledged the apparent discrepancy and explained that while the percentage of children with visible decay had fluctuated, the broader trend since 2016-17 showed a consistent rise in oral health issues. They noted the data was based on a small national sample and should be treated with caution, but the local needs assessment reinforced the trend, and work is continuing in light of this.
- Members raised concerns regarding breastfeeding data in section 9, noting that it was not included in the appendix or tracked over time. They stated that this had been a longstanding issue, having raised the same point on the Committee 15 years ago, and emphasised that without historic data, meaningful comparisons could not be made. Officers responded that a significant amount of work had been undertaken in this area and offered to share more detailed data upon request. They noted that breastfeeding rates had broadly maintained at a high level, above both the London and national averages, which reflected well on local services. However, they acknowledged that disproportionality remained within the data, with certain groups being overrepresented.
- A Member raised concerns that the only mention of LGBT issues in the report was in relation to substance and alcohol abuse. They noted that healthcare support for young LGBT people was currently under pressure, with state support in decline, causing significant distress. The Member felt that Camden should take action to address unmet needs and called for LGBT issues to be included in the

mental health section of the report, highlighting that this group faced considerable challenges. Officers acknowledged that the report was not as comprehensive as it could be in this area. They explained that it was difficult to obtain granular data on the needs of LGBT young people, which made it harder to always respond effectively. Officers stressed the importance of first understanding the specific needs of this group, and noted that work with the voluntary sector and building trust would be key to progressing this.

- A Member referred to section 5.2 and raised concerns about birth inequalities affecting women from Black and other global majority communities, noting these had not been fully addressed in the report. They also questioned how perinatal services were being communicated to expectant mothers, stating that while they were aware of services as a councillor, they had not received any information directly as a parent to be. Officers acknowledged these concerns and cited the MBRRACE-UK (Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries) report as a key source informing the development of a local Maternity and Neonatal Equity Action Plan across North Central London (NCL). Current work included the Family Hubs pregnancy grant for low-income households, listening events with the Bangladeshi community, a perinatal mental health needs assessment, and development of a Birthing Buddies programme supporting families from global majority backgrounds. Officers added that links between maternity and health visiting services were being strengthened, including a new targeted antenatal appointment to improve continuity of care. While services were typically promoted via midwifery and health visitors, officers acknowledged that communication could be insufficient and agreed that raising awareness would continue to be a priority going forward.
- Members noted that not only low-income mothers and families faced barriers to health services, those just above eligibility threshold or families dealing with challenging life circumstances often lacked the time or capacity to seek out information about services. Officers agreed this was an important point and explained that while universal services and Family Hubs were in place, the targeted support was currently focused on the most disadvantaged 20%. A pilot was underway to explore how to adapt universal services to better support more families. Officers acknowledged the need for the workforce to identify those who needed support most and recognised that this remained a challenge.
- Members referred to section 3.2 on child mortality and requested that figures be disaggregated to show causes. Officers explained that an annual child death report was produced for the NCL area, and that each death was subject to an agency report and a series of formal review stages to ensure every possible prevention measure was considered. While some general patterns could be observed, the process was managed collectively across the NCL partnership. Officers noted that due to the low number of cases, care must be taken in publishing data to avoid individuals being identified. It was also reported that most child deaths occurred during the natal period.
- Members referred to section 6.3 and questioned the figure of 87 smoking mothers, suggesting it seemed too low for Camden and was likely underreported due to the stigma and shame associated with smoking during pregnancy. Officers acknowledged this concern and noted that underreporting was a common challenge with many health indicators.
- A Co-opted Member welcomed the positive aspects of the report on special educational needs (SEN) but raised concerns about long assessment waiting

times, noting surprise that this data was not included and stressing the need for it to be tracked. They emphasised the importance of timely communication with families and highlighted that children should ideally be diagnosed by age three, which was not currently achievable in Camden. Officers acknowledged the national challenges and the unprecedented rise in SEN needs. They emphasised that support was needs-led and that children awaiting diagnosis could still access therapies. A support package was also available for children under five while they waited. Officers recognised that the situation could feel overwhelming for families and said more data could be included in future reports. The issue was regularly monitored and efforts were being made to improve pathways.

- The Co-opted Member also noted the absence of any reference to post-diagnostic support or therapeutic interventions, cautioning that families often believed a diagnosis would immediately resolve issues, which created false hope. They further requested specific figures on the number of families waiting for assessment and how many were receiving support, noting that many were waiting a long time without help. Officers confirmed that an item on SEN was scheduled for the next meeting and that these issues could be addressed in more detail then.
- A Co-opted Member commended the reporting on vaping but asked whether alcohol purchasing was also being addressed. Officers responded that retailers were encouraged to have clear policies in place and that an alcohol strategy, supported by trading standards, was being developed to cover these issues.
- A Member request that PINS (Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools) be included in future SEND Strategy reporting.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

10. PERSISTENT ABSENCE UPDATE

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

Stephen Hall (Chief Executive Officer, Camden Learning) summarised the report which provided an update on persistent absence levels in Camden schools, set out data trends of persistent absence over time in Camden primary and secondary schools including benchmarking data with other local authorities, and examined ongoing work to improve school attendance in Camden.

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

- A Member welcomed the efforts to engage young people but felt that parents should be more involved. They noted that parental choice had a significant impact on attendance, raising instances where parents took their children out of the country. They added that while headteachers had previously been hesitant to fine parents for non-attendance, many had now changed their view, were using fines more frequently, and had seen improvements. They asked whether this could be a useful tool. In response, Camden Learning advised caution around

framing the issue as parental choice. They explained that many parents did want their children in school, but faced challenges where children refused to attend, making it difficult to enforce. They stressed the complexity of the issue and highlighted wraparound work that involved meeting with families and supporting both parents and children to reduce barriers. They emphasised that building relationships with parents was central. Fines were described as a blunt tool, potentially harmful to vulnerable families, and not a guaranteed solution, though they continued to be appropriate in some cases.

- A Member referred to section 3.6 on bullying and raised concerns about the wider culture in schools where bullying occurred, including issues related to gender and sexual harassment. They questioned whether enough was being done to address school culture and asked if there was significant variation between schools. Camden Learning acknowledged that bullying occurred in all schools, though it was less prevalent in some. They noted it was a complex issue, particularly due to the influence of social media, with incidents often happening outside school hours or offsite. Schools provided education to children and parents about online safety, taught children about bullying and identifying a safe adult, and worked to capture and act on student voice and were actively taking steps to counter bullying. The Member asked whether efforts were sufficient to ensure consistency across schools and how differences in school cultures were being measured. Camden Learning responded that schools varied considerably and reflected their local communities, which supported parental choice. Each school received individual reports and analysis on attendance, benchmarked first against Camden and then nationally. These were presented in the form of data reports, which allowed for tailored conversations and support.
- A Co-opted Member commented that the attendance report lacked sufficient detail and did not offer much new insight. They felt the overall situation remained poor and questioned whether the actions taken so far had led to any measurable improvements, noting the absence of clear evidence. While Camden Learning appeared closely involved, they expressed concern that a sense of distance remained and questioned the transparency of schools. They suggested several contributing factors to non-attendance, including difficulty accessing GP appointments, increased illness, parental choice, and schools potentially being unable to meet some children's needs. They also noted that schools did not always ask parents about the reasons for absence and were often unaware of the underlying issues. They requested more detail on how Camden Learning was holding schools to account, and asked for evidence directly from schools, as well as input from parents and pupils. They were particularly keen to understand what effective actions schools were taking and which year groups were most affected and why. Camden Learning noted it had only been a short period since the last update and they were still assessing the impact of recent changes. Work was underway to identify strong practice in schools, particularly those actively engaging with parents and to share those examples more widely. They confirmed that attendance data was broken down by year group, with generally stable rates in Year 7 but a decline in later years. They highlighted the need to better understand this trend, especially during the spring term, and emphasised the importance of setting clear expectations with parents. A more detailed report was scheduled for November, which would also cover Education and Learning Engagement (ELE). This would include in-depth analysis of the factors driving

high absence rates, which currently appeared to relate more to demographic patterns than to individual schools.

- A Member asked whether there was a link between schools with high levels of persistent absence and other factors such as high staff turnover, wider issues, or overall underperformance. They noted that if parents did not view a school as high quality, they might be less likely to send their children in. Camden Learning confirmed that there was a known link between attendance and attainment and suggested that this relationship could be explored further to better understand cause and effect. They noted that while they did not have access to formal staff turnover data, some schools did have higher turnover than others, but there was no supporting data to demonstrate whether this impacted on attendance.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

11. OFSTED INSPECTION OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN CAMDEN

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

Tim Aldridge (Executive Director, Children and Learning) summarised the report, which outlined the background and purpose of the inspection process, key findings from the inspection in Camden, and the inspectors' recommendations for improvement. It also included initial reflections on Camden's improvement plan in response to those findings.

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

- A Member congratulated officers on the Ofsted outcome and asked whether there were areas where the inspection had not explored in depth, and how the service intended to maintain high standards going forward. Officers explained that while the inspection tested performance against the Ofsted framework, internal discovery work under the national reforms had identified areas for further improvement, including the overrepresentation of families of a Black and global majority background in child protection, and the need for more consistent responses to domestic abuse. They also noted ongoing work to prototype locally embedded social care support and to reduce the number of teenage children entering care. Officers highlighted the importance of strengthening early intervention and contextual safeguarding. It was confirmed that a strong self-assessment, performance auditing, and quality assurance processes were already in place, with continued focus on supervision, training, and learning from frontline feedback and complaints. Officers emphasised that the national reform programme provided an opportunity to test new approaches and improve outcomes further.
- A Member congratulated the positive Ofsted outcome, noting that it reflected strong attention to implementation and the detail underpinning the work. They asked what lessons could be taken from this success to improve effectiveness in

other services. They also expressed interest in the role of impact assessment. Officers responded by identifying several key factors which contributed to high performance that could be applied elsewhere, including clear strategic intent, strong investment in children's services and early intervention, and a stable core of service provision. Officers highlighted the importance of engaging with families early on, using everyday data and the voices of children to shape services, and investing in the workforce. Camden's workforce was described as stable, with low caseloads, strong training, and high levels of oversight. They emphasised that trusted relationships were a crucial factor contributing to the success.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

12. INSIGHT, LEARNING AND IMPACT REPORT - QUARTER 4/END OF YEAR 2024-25

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

Tim Aldridge (Executive Director Children and Learning) summarised the report, focussing on the service data dashboard and narrative relevant to the Children and Learning Directorate and the key areas of challenge, opportunity, and learning.

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

- A Member stated that, for at least the past three years, it appeared every negative performance measure had shown an overrepresentation of Black and Brown communities. They questioned whether this indicated a lack of a holistic approach by the directorate, a wider failure by the Council to fully address the issue, or whether the actions being taken were simply long-term and had yet to show impact. Officers acknowledged the challenge and stated that the issue extended beyond the social care system, reflecting broader societal structural disadvantages. They pointed to the Public Health report as a useful insight into inequality and its impact on families. Officers emphasised that the Council was not complacent following its positive Ofsted inspection and saw upcoming national reforms as an opportunity to push further. Discovery work had been carried out to understand the issues more fully using a variety of approaches. Officers confirmed a strong commitment to anti-racist practice, underpinned by a systemic and relational approach. They noted that while not all influencing factors were within the Council's control, there were areas where action could be taken, though change would not be quick. The issue was described as particularly visible in the child protection system. Officers explained that the national reforms provided a chance to think differently and take a bolder, more radical approach, in contrast to previous limitations where they had needed permission from the Department for Education to take risks. Officers also referred to wider public health determinants, including poverty, housing, structural disadvantage, and issues such as mental health and substance misuse, which reduced resilience among children from black and brown communities. Work was underway to

examine decision-making at every stage of the system, including supporting earlier intervention and the use of family group decision-making. A data dashboard was being developed to track decisions, data, and interventions throughout the system.

- A Co-opted Member raised concerns about the lack of short breaks and respite care provision in Camden, describing the system as overly complex. They noted that some children were considered too complex for support, while others were not considered complex enough, and asked how the Council ensured the right children received appropriate provision. Officers acknowledged the concern and explained that the issue was connected to the wider national social care reforms, which aimed to shift focus towards earlier support and clearer, simpler systems for families. Camden was investing around a third of its children and learning budget in prevention, more than most local authorities, thanks to decisions to maintain services like children's centres and early help. Officers noted that Camden had been included in a national deep dive visit as part of the reform research and further updates would be shared as the work progressed.
- The same Co-opted Member referred to section 4.4 on Children's Prevention, Family Help and Safeguarding, and commented that families often became more complex as a result of unaddressed difficulties and delayed intervention. They asked how the Council was preventing families from reaching crisis point before receiving support. Officers responded that this challenge was at the heart of the national reform agenda, which sought to front-load the system and prioritise early support. Camden's significant investment in early help services positioned it ahead of many other boroughs, but officers acknowledged the need to keep improving how existing resources were used. They highlighted the importance of simplifying the system to make it easier for families and professionals to navigate and agreed that ongoing reform work would continue to address this issue.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

13. CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKER 2025/26

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

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

14. DATE OF NEXT MEETING AND FUTURE MEETING DATES

It was noted that the next meeting had moved from 16 September 2025 to 16 October 2025. The remaining meetings dates as listed in the agenda were correct.

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

There was no urgent business.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm.

CHAIR

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MINUTES END