

## **Update of the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families**

### **Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee – February 2026**

#### **1 Purpose of the Cabinet Member update**

- 1.1 This report provides an update on key developments across the portfolio of the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children, Schools and Families. As this is the final committee meeting of the municipal year and administration, the report takes a broader, reflective approach, summarising areas of progress, partnership work, and service developments across the system.
- 1.2 The Committee are invited to consider the information below and ask questions of clarification at the meeting, subject to the Chair's discretion. Requests for additional information can be addressed to the relevant director/s outside of the meeting. The Committee may also use the cabinet member updates to inform their scrutiny work planning for the coming year.

#### **2 Four-Year Overview: Developments and Progress**

##### Early Years and Family Hubs

- 2.1 **Family Hubs:** Family Hubs were introduced in 2023 as a single point of contact for families with children of all ages. Operating in five key locations, Kings Cross, Kentish Town, Camden Town, Kilburn, and Regent's Park, they provide integrated health, early years, and family support services under one roof, including antenatal clinics, enhanced Healthy Child Programme contacts, and targeted outreach. Co-designed with parents, hubs offer inclusive spaces with sensory rooms, quiet play sessions, and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)-friendly activities, alongside practical help such as welfare rights advice and University College London Hospital (UCLH) follow-up clinics, making them a cornerstone of Camden's early intervention and equity approach.
- 2.2 In April 2024 Camden developed an enhanced healthy child programme, delivering 8 contacts with a health visitor in a baby's first 2 years rather than the nationally mandated 5. The universal midwifery and health visiting provision to this offer is supplemented by a range of targeted services that offer support where families need extra help. Through new data sharing agreements with Central and North West London NHS Trust and Money Advice Camden families on low income have been offered a Family Hub Pregnancy Grant of £500 to help with the costs of pregnancy and birth since April 2025.
- 2.3 Camden's Family Hubs have made a significant impact on the gap in achievement between disadvantaged children and their peers. In 2022 Camden had the 36th lowest gap in England. This has now narrowed to the 6th lowest. Hubs are placed where deprivation is highest. Our data shows that children living in the 10% highest areas of deprivation are attending Family Hubs, providing access to the most vulnerable at an early stage. Benefits support and welfare advice available at the Hubs helped 511 families in the last financial

year (2024/2025). 341 eligible families were supported to make benefit claims with a total of £2.18 million in financial gains awarded.

## SEND and Inclusion

- 2.4 **Local Area SEND Strategy 2022 – 27:** Our local SEND strategy coordinates activity across the local partnership, including colleagues in social care, education, children’s services and health, as well as our voluntary and community sector partners. Our five-year strategy is supported by annual implementation plans setting out timelines for delivery of priority areas, available [here](#). Since the strategy was published, there has been considerable progress in strengthening services to improve outcomes and experiences for children and young people. In 2025, Camden published a ‘Meeting Predictable Needs Toolkit’, a practical resource for mainstream school to support consistent and high-quality approaches to meeting SEND needs across all local mainstream schools. There has been an increase in outreach activities to improve engagement and collaboration with children and young people with SEND and their families. This included a Young Inspectors investigation into co-production of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), producing strong, evidence-based recommendations that officers will take forward in delivery.
- 2.5 **SEND Change Programme Partnership (CPP):** Camden is part of the London Change Programme Partnership, funded by the Department for Education to test potential reforms to the SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) system. Camden’s work as part of the programme has included work to understand and strengthen mainstream inclusion, including work on the Meeting Predictable Needs Toolkit. It has also explored the opportunities for technology to support delivery including through using AI to strengthen EHCP delivery and AV1 robots, which act as a physical presence for children unable to attend school, supporting them to access learning. Involvement in the programme has enabled Camden to improve its readiness for expected SEND reforms.
- 2.6 **Early Years Inclusion Team (EYIT):** The EYIT plays a vital role in promoting inclusive practice across Camden’s early years settings, supporting children with SEND in nurseries and schools. During the 2025-25 academic year, the team supported 363 children, including 153 new referrals, and delivered a wide range of services such as coaching in specialist approaches, workforce development through central training and bespoke training sessions. The team also continued to strengthen partnerships with nurseries and schools to ensure early identification and timely intervention for children with emerging needs
- 2.7 **All age Autism Strategy (2025–30):** In September 2025, Cabinet approved Camden’s all-age Autism strategy and draft implementation plan. As an all-age strategy, this is a draft strategy and implementation plan between the Best Start for Children and Families and Health, Wellbeing and Social Care portfolios. The strategy outlines our support autistic residents. This Autism Strategy is our co-produced vision and strategy for how we will reduce the barriers faced by Camden’s autistic community and create a cultural change across the system. It is a strategy for those with and without a diagnosis, and those with or without a learning disability.

## Education

- 2.8 **Education Strategy:** Camden's education strategy, Building Back Stronger (BBS), published in 2022, challenged ourselves and our partners to ensure that all the young people in our borough have: a fair start, an excellent school experience and flourishing lives. Key developments throughout include: trialling Camden KidsTalk in private; voluntary and independent sector nurseries; establishing a comprehensive School Sufficiency Programme; Camden being ranked 6th out of 153 local authorities in England for phonics outcomes in 2025, with outcomes for disadvantaged pupils ranked 2nd out of 153 local authorities and the achievement gap narrowed to 9%, compared to a national gap of 17%; two school-based opportunity centres being trialled at Acland Burghley and La Sainte Union schools, along with two further 'test and learn' opportunity centres at the Euston Skills Centre and the AI Campus; every Camden school now having its own online 'Camden school report; and Camden Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) achieving its most successful year, nearly doubling school engagement from 26 to 51 and delivering 13,891 student engagements compared to 6,526 the previous year. The BBS Annual Report provides additional information regarding these achievements.
- 2.9 **Kinship:** Camden has developed a Kinship Local Offer which has been shaped through direct engagement with kinship carers and young people. Camden worked collaboratively with carers, children and young people with lived experience of kinship care, alongside internal teams and external partners, to understand what support families need and how they want information to be provided. Feedback from carers highlighted the importance of having clearer, more accessible information, a single and consistent point of contact, and support that recognises the different legal and informal kinship arrangements. In response, the Local Offer was designed to bring all kinship-related support into one place, introduce a dedicated kinship contact point, and improve online access to information. The Local Offer is reviewed and updated annually to ensure it remains responsive to the experiences and needs of children, young people and kinship families in Camden.
- 2.10 **School Attendance:** School attendance is a strategic priority for Camden and a focus of work for schools. Schools have been supported by Camden Learning and Camden Council in this work in numerous ways, both in terms of core practice and initiatives. Some of these initiatives include the 'back to school' attendance campaign which started in 2023, a text messaging pilot across three primary schools and one secondary school to improve attendance, the co-designed 2025 Camden Primary Careers Day, and a joint-commissioned school attendance video written and produced by 5 Camden secondary schools.

## School Nutrition

- 2.11 The 2024-2025 **Camden Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme** continued to offer children and young people nutritious meals and engaging positive activities during the school holidays. This year the programme provided 5,367 places, ensuring that children and young people had access to valuable

resources and support, provided across the equivalent of 6 weeks (comprising at least 1 week in spring holiday, at least 4 weeks in the summer holidays and at least 1 week during the winter holiday). One in four children and young people eligible for free school meals accessed the programme in the summer holiday, the most important time for holiday support, with a smaller proportion benefitting in the other holidays. The summer programme involved 30 providers across 48 venues, including youth clubs, schools, charities, and social enterprises, ensuring a wide range of enriching activities such as arts, sports, music, and more.

2.12 **SEND support:** Camden's HAF programme also provided support for children with SEND. In 2024, the programme funded 325 SEND spaces, demonstrating the programme's commitment to inclusivity and comprehensive support. Camden Council bolstered the programme with an additional £88,000 of funding for Summer 2024 delivery, which helped to support 116 additional SEND spaces.

2.13 The Council continues to promote healthy eating and access to nutritious meals through our **Magic Breakfast Programme** which provides free breakfast to 3089 pupils daily and **Free School Meals (FSM)** offer. 86.9% of Camden primary school pupils who are registered for FSM in Camden ate their meal on the day of the Spring 2025 census. Camden has also done research and policy design work, including interviews and focus groups with pupils, parents, school staff and other stakeholders, to look at barriers to accessing school meals and FSMs, and methods to increase uptake of FSM. This work highlighted several areas of improvement to be made across the Camden school meal contract, including an increased focus on pupil engagement to ensure that continuous improvements are being made to the meals on offer and the school canteen environment.

### Corporate Parenting

2.14 **Protected characteristic & strategy:** Camden made care-experienced a protected characteristic in January 2024. The Council has engaged with care-experienced young people through a Full Council debate. Directly following this debate, a motion to make care experience a locally protected characteristic was voted unanimously by all councillors.

2.15 **Corporate Parenting Strategy 2025-2028:** Camden has undertaken a review of the Corporate Parenting Board to ensure that the way the Board works aligns with our Corporate Parenting Promises. We have reviewed the membership of the Board and identified affiliated members to sit alongside our permanent Board members; including our youth justice and welfare rights services as well as local employers, community leaders and STEAM partners. We have also recruited two care experienced young people to Co-Chair the Children in Care Council who will sit as permanent members of the board and help us ensure that the Board continues to be an inclusive space where the voices of our children looked after and care experienced young people are heard.

## Voices of Families and Children

- 2.16 **Children's Trust Partnership Board (CTPB):** Camden's Children's Trust Partnership Board (CTPB) is the guardian of a happy childhood in the borough and brings together partners throughout the year. The board has representation from partners in health such as CNWL's Head of Children, Young People and Family Services, education with headteachers and governors from both primary and secondary schools. Senior leaders from across Children's services in the council attend meetings, alongside colleagues from Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS) organisations and the police service attend board meetings.
- 2.17 Following a refresh in 2024, meetings are themed around emerging needs, trends and projects within the children, young people and families' landscape. Meetings are hosted in community spaces in an effort to increase awareness of the breadth of provisions available for children and families in the borough.
- 2.18 **Basic Income Pilot:** As part of Camden's Youth Mission commitments to care experienced young people (CEYP), we carried out a scoping exercise to develop an evidence base examining the potential for a basic income pilot targeting CEYP in Camden. The project involved consulting key audiences and incorporating the data collected into iterative drafts of a pilot proposal. Care experienced young people were trained as peer researchers and facilitated a workshop with other CEYP.

## Children's services and safeguarding

- 2.19 We have continued to look at our children's services to ensure that we have more effective service structures and culture that is people centred. We redesigned our services in 2023, and as part of National Reform to children's social care we have been looking at our practice, and services.
- 2.20 **Continued strengthening of multi-agency partnership:** The role of the Camden safeguarding children partnership (CSCP) is to ensure good governance and strategic oversight of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements for children in Camden. The CSCP's shared vision is that all children and young people in Camden are safe, thriving and heard. In partnership with Voluntary Action Camden, the CSCP supports local organisations by listening to community voices and understanding the unique risks faced by children from minoritised cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The partnership provides safeguarding training and resources to help address these challenges.
- 2.21 **2025 Children's Services Inspection:** In April 2025, Camden Council's children's services were rated Outstanding by Ofsted. Inspectors praised the impact of experienced leadership, strong corporate and political support, and a well-trained workforce. Ofsted highlighted strong collaboration between Camden's leaders and a wide range of partners including local businesses, sports agencies, and the voluntary and community sector, to enhance support and opportunities for children. The report highlighted effective multi-agency safeguarding partnerships, strategic leadership on issues such as child exploitation and anti-racist practice, and a robust mental health and education offer for care-experienced children and young people.

**2.22 2025 Youth Justice Service Inspection:** In June 2025 Camden's Youth Justice Service was awarded an Outstanding overall rating, following our inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) in April 2025. The rating – the second consecutive time this service has been officially recognised as Outstanding by HMIP - highlights the exceptional quality of work with children and victims by the Youth Justice Service (YJS). Camden was the first local authority in the country to be rated Outstanding under the new HMIP framework, which now includes a judgement on victims.

#### Centre for Relational Practice

**2.23** Camden has strengthened the approach to Relational Practice. The Camden Centre for Relational Practice was established in November 2024 with an external launch in October 2025. Its primary objective is to operate as a research and practice hub that supports and promotes relational cultures in public services. Since 2024, the Centre has co-designed a relational practice framework and training for all children and learning staff and has delivered successful peer support for our two partner authorities - North East Lincolnshire and Wokingham borough council – through the Department for Education's Sector Led Improvement programme.