

# Camden Women’s Forum: Women Into Work Inquiry Report (2025-26)

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## 1. Introduction – What is the Camden Women’s Forum?

The Camden Women’s Forum (CWF) was established in 2019 to ensure that all women and girls living, studying, working or visiting Camden have equal access to opportunities and can live safely and freely without discrimination. The Forum operates independently of Camden Council, although it is supported by officers to gather evidence and present findings. Its purpose is to understand women’s lived experiences and make recommendations that influence local and national policy.

The Forum's lead Cabinet Member is **Cllr Sabrina Francis, Cabinet Member for Young People, Culture and Jobs**. The Forum is co-chaired by **Helene Reardon-Bond CBE** and **Angela Mason CBE**, Camden's independent Gender Equality Champions.

The Forum leads inquiries on priority issues, similar to a Parliamentary Select Committee. Each inquiry gathers evidence through focus groups, oral hearings, calls for written submissions and visits to local organisations. Recommendations are shared with Camden Council, partners and national bodies to influence policy and practice.

We held our first inquiry into women's economic participation and published its report in March 2020. The recommendations of the inquiry were passed onto Council services and Camden Council's partners. Outcomes included the Council launching a scheme to support people coming to the UK with overseas qualifications to access help to translate them to the UK equivalents.

Other previous inquiries have focused on:

- **Domestic violence and abuse (2021)** – resulted in £400,000 annual investment for services, the creation of a Violence Against Women and Girls Board, and the decision to work towards DAHA (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance) Accreditation.
- **Cost of living (2023)** – examined how the cost-of-living crisis affected women in Camden, leading to council-endorsed actions such as universal Free School Meals, food and clothing support, and schemes like the School Uniform Swap and Fund. Camden also launched the Raise Camden Taskforce in 2025 to tackle child poverty and published a gender pension gap report.<sup>1</sup>

This fourth inquiry returns to the original theme of women's economic participation, recognising that persistent gender inequalities in earnings, caring responsibilities and access to work have been compounded by the pandemic, rising living costs and structural barriers. The engagement, findings and recommendations from this inquiry will feed into Camden's upcoming work focusing on and developing a strategy for inclusive economic growth in the Borough.

## 2. Chairs' Foreword

Public concern is growing about the numbers of people who are not in work or who are economically inactive. Very understandable fears have been expressed about how this is affecting growing numbers of young people, but this report looks at another group who have, so far, largely been left out of this conversation – women and particularly women with caring responsibilities. Whilst welfare benefit changes have

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<sup>1</sup> Camden Council – Gender pensions gap analysis ([opendata.camden.gov.uk/Your-Council/Camden-Council-Gender-Pensions-Gap-Analysis-2025/trb2-tuja/about\\_data](https://opendata.camden.gov.uk/Your-Council/Camden-Council-Gender-Pensions-Gap-Analysis-2025/trb2-tuja/about_data))

made requirements for mothers to find work, more stringent public policy has only just begun to address the structural barriers that prevent women taking paid employment.

We began this enquiry with some hope that the changes that are taking place would have more of an impact – rights to 30 hours child care for working parents, Day 1 rights to flexible working, but our inquiry suggests that the long-term lack of investment in childcare, and a dominant culture which fails to recognise the importance of part-time and flexible work, are still very major barriers for women.

This matters on many levels, but particularly on the way in which it impacts child poverty and household poverty. This is an issue nationally and a real issue for Camden. Fewer women in Camden are economically active - 66% compared to 72.5% of women in Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> 11.4% of households in Camden were lone parent households in 2021, up 10% from 2010.<sup>3</sup> The child poverty rate in Camden is near 40%, one of the highest in London.<sup>4</sup>

The structural barriers to women's employment affects women at all levels. The October 2025 ONS report on the 'Motherhood Penalty' showed that five years after the birth of a first child, mothers' monthly earnings are on average 42% (equivalent to around £1,051) lower than one year before birth.<sup>5</sup>

This report will also appear at a particularly difficult time with unemployment rising and the impact of AI still not fully understood, but there are strong foundations in Camden which can provide the infrastructure and cultural change that is needed. Good Work Camden, the Inclusive Business Network, the enhanced childcare offer for disadvantaged families and the work of our schools and the many exceptional community organisations, the Early Years service and Family Hubs. These can form the basis for coherent policies and priorities that create new pathways for women into work in Camden.

Across this inquiry, women shared insights into their ambitions and capabilities, and the many barriers that they are facing when trying to access work, learning or community life. We heard from mothers balancing multiple caring responsibilities, women experiencing long term health conditions, young women insecure about a competitive labour market and older women looking to retrain. Their stories were thoughtful, honest and often deeply personal.

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<sup>2</sup> Nomis – Labour Market Profile: Camden ([nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385166](https://nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385166))

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics – Census 2021, Family status of household reference person ([ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E09000007](https://ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E09000007))

<sup>4</sup> Camden Council – State of the Borough report ([camden.gov.uk/state-of-the-borough-report](https://camden.gov.uk/state-of-the-borough-report))

<sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics – Motherhood earnings impact bulletin ([ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/theimpactofmotherhoodonmonthlyemployeeearningsandemploymentstatusengland/april2014todecember2022](https://ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/theimpactofmotherhoodonmonthlyemployeeearningsandemploymentstatusengland/april2014todecember2022))

Common themes emerged:

- Childcare that is unaffordable, inflexible or difficult to navigate
- Working hours that do not reflect the realities of school and family life
- Digital exclusion that shuts women out of essential services
- Key transition points in women's lives are not recognised (children starting education or transferring to secondary school)
- Training that does not fit around caring responsibilities
- Employers who underestimate the skills women gain from unpaid care
- Confidence lost after long periods out of work
- Cultural stigma around working women or learning English
- Practical barriers affecting refugee, migrant and disabled women

Yet women's determination was striking. They shared clear, workable ideas for change, flexible jobs, trusted and local childcare, modular training, confidence building support, language learning embedded in real-life skills, peer networks and employers who understand the value of part time and flexible working.

We thank every woman and organisation who contributed evidence. Your voices shape this report and will guide what happens next.

*[Portrait photos]* Angela Mason CBE & Helene Reardon-Bond CBE, Co-Chairs of Camden Women's Forum

### 3. Why We Are Doing This Inquiry on Economic Participation

Women's economic participation matters – for households, for communities, and for Camden's future. Yet too many women in Camden remain excluded from the workforce, or trapped in low-paid, insecure jobs.

#### 3.1 The local picture

- **66% of women in Camden are reported as 'economically active'**, compared with **72.5% across Great Britain**.<sup>6</sup>
- **Nearly 2 in 5 of children under 16 live in poverty**, far above the national average and strongly linked to the challenge that mothers can face in securing suitable work.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nomis – Labour Market Profile: Camden ([nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385166](https://nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385166))

<sup>7</sup> Camden Council – State of the Borough report ([camden.gov.uk/state-of-the-borough-report](https://camden.gov.uk/state-of-the-borough-report))

- Women represent the majority of unpaid carers, those with chronic health needs, those in insecure work, and those facing housing instability. We also know that many of these women are part of the so-called ‘sandwich generation’, caring for both children and ageing relatives at the same time.
- Some women from Black, Asian and other ethnic communities, particularly Bangladeshi and Somali women, experience significantly greater barriers to both entering and progressing in work due to discrimination and cultural barriers.
- Disabled and neurodivergent women face lengthy delays in diagnosis, inaccessible workplaces and a lack of tailored employment support.

Many women told us clearly that they want to work, but they also feel that the system is not built for them. Camden’s economic inactivity rate for women (**34%**) is significantly higher than the national figure of 21.2%.<sup>8</sup> This disparity underscores the need for targeted local action alongside national reform. Employers must understand the importance of flexible work, paid parental leave, and tackling the motherhood penalty,<sup>9</sup> which remain key drivers of exclusion from the labour market.

The literature consistently shows us that childcare is a major barrier to women’s participation in work, not because of a lack of awareness of government support, but due to affordability, availability, rigidity, and upfront costs. Most parents understand the funded childcare schemes, and national take-up is high for the universal entitlements (95% of 3- and 4-year-olds receive the universal 15 hours),<sup>10</sup> yet many women are unable to use their full entitlement in ways that support paid work. A lack of available places, limited flexibility in how funded hours can be used, and the need to supplement “free” hours with paid childcare mean that work does not always leave families better off.

Cost is the most significant issue. In Camden, nursery fees reflect inner-London prices: the median cost is £8 per hour. Sending a two-year-old to nursery part-time (25 hours per week) costs on average £8,194 per year, while full-time childcare (around 50 hours per week) for 3- and 4-year-olds costs approximately £15,000 per year before funded hours are applied.<sup>11</sup> Even with the 30-hour entitlement, a parent in Camden can expect to pay around £160 per week during term time, equivalent to roughly £9,440 per year (£786 per month), assuming they take annual leave to cover school holidays. With the median full-time Camden salary at £44,529 and private renters spending around 51%

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<sup>8</sup> Nomis – Labour Market Profile: Camden ([nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385166](https://nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385166))

<sup>9</sup> Here we define the ‘motherhood penalty’ as the penalising effect that women face for taking time out of their careers to have and raise a child: “Despite women’s increasingly stronger attainment in higher education and the labor [sic] market, they continue to earn less than men and to be situated in less powerful positions. After the arrival of the first child, the gender gap increases significantly.” Social Politics Journal – Motherhood penalty research article ([doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxae027](https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxae027))

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education – Childcare and early years survey of parents ([explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents))

<sup>11</sup> Camden Council – State of the Borough report ([camden.gov.uk/state-of-the-borough-report](https://camden.gov.uk/state-of-the-borough-report))

of pre-tax income on rent,<sup>12</sup> childcare costs can be prohibitive even for working couples, and particularly for single parents.

Upfront costs present an additional barrier. Deposits and advance fees – often £600–£800 or more – make it difficult for women to take up job offers or attend interviews, especially where Universal Credit childcare support is paid in arrears.<sup>13</sup> Nationally, only 13% of eligible households claim Universal Credit childcare support, despite it covering up to 85% of costs.<sup>14</sup> These barriers contribute to women limiting their hours, delaying return to work, or leaving jobs altogether; around one in three younger mothers in England has left a job due to childcare costs, and over half say they would work more hours if affordable childcare were available.<sup>15</sup>

Research also shows the structural pressures within the childcare sector itself. Providers face chronic underfunding, rising staffing and operating costs, and increased regulatory constraints. While Camden’s hourly funding rates are higher than the national average,<sup>16</sup> providers still struggle with high rents and wages. As a result, many are reducing funded places, adding optional charges, or considering closure, further limiting access for parents.<sup>17</sup> Together, these factors reinforce a cycle in which women’s employment decisions are shaped not by preference, but by the cost, inflexibility, and fragility of childcare provision.

For the purposes of this report, we used the term ‘economic inactivity’ in line with wider, national conversations around UK employment. However, we acknowledge that we heard in our focus group discussions that many women feel this term fails to recognise the significant economic contribution that their unpaid labour makes to the economy.

### 3.2 National context

Recent national reforms — including expanded childcare entitlements, Day 1 flexible working rights, and moving the skills brief from the Department for Education to the Department for Work and Pensions — aim to improve access to employment, but the picture remains mixed.

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<sup>12</sup> Camden Council – State of the Borough report ([camden.gov.uk/state-of-the-borough-report](https://camden.gov.uk/state-of-the-borough-report))

<sup>13</sup> Camden Women’s Forum – Literature Review: Childcare as a barrier and enabler to employment (Appendix 2)

<sup>14</sup> House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee – Universal Credit and childcare costs ([publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmworpen/127/summary.html](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmworpen/127/summary.html))

<sup>15</sup> Young Women’s Trust – Childcare research: What young women want ([youngwomenstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Childcare-report-2019.pdf](https://youngwomenstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Childcare-report-2019.pdf))

<sup>16</sup> *In 2025/26, Camden’s ESFA allocation rate for 3–4s was £9.23 per hour (indicative £9.28 in 2026/27), while the Camden provider rate paid to settings was £7.42 per hour. Across England, median provider rates for 3–4s were ~£5.00–£5.16 in 2024 (regional medians).* Camden Council – Early Years Entitlements Funding 2025–26 report ([camden.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s123220](https://camden.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s123220)) (<https://camden.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s123220/Report%20-%20Early%20Years%20Entitlements%20Funding%202025-26.pdf>)

<sup>17</sup> Early Years Alliance – Survey findings on shortages of funded early years places ([eyalliance.org.uk/parents-set-face-shortages-government-funded-early-years-places-and-rising-costs-nurseries-and](https://eyalliance.org.uk/parents-set-face-shortages-government-funded-early-years-places-and-rising-costs-nurseries-and))

While Day 1 flexible working rights were introduced in 2024, the new Employment Rights Act goes further by allowing two requests per year and requiring employers to demonstrate reasonableness of refusal, with tribunals able to take this into account.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Universal Credit requirements for parents have become more onerous: claimants are generally expected to accept any job offered, with parents of children aged 3–12 often required to work up to 30 hours a week and those with older children up to 35 hours.<sup>19</sup> Central government is reviewing paid parental leave, and childcare entitlement has expanded for working parents, but costs remain high — particularly in London — and subsidies are insufficient. Inappropriate funding arrangements for childminders have led to drastic cuts in provision, reducing options for families who rely on flexible, community-based childcare.

This national context affects women across all income levels. Women with high earning potential continue to earn less than men, while disadvantaged women are often shut out of the workforce or pushed into insecure, low-paid roles. These systemic barriers have significant implications for productivity and economic growth. Tackling them is not only a matter of fairness but essential for harnessing talent and driving prosperity.

These systemic issues contribute to the national challenge of economic inactivity as women repeatedly told us that these reforms do not yet meet real-life needs.

For example:

- Childcare entitlements are still complex and often unaffordable upfront.
- Few local jobs are advertised as “flexible”; many require fixed hours or full-time availability that don’t fit around caring schedules.
- Digital-first systems disproportionately exclude women without devices or digital confidence.
- ESOL teaching is often disconnected from practical skills needed for work.
- Benefits rules discourage women from taking part-time work or volunteering.

Women described systems that “do not speak to each other”, leaving them navigating multiple bureaucracies while managing caring responsibilities, insecure housing and health needs.

### **3.3 What this inquiry set out to understand**

This inquiry explored:

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<sup>18</sup> UK Government – Employment rights factsheets ([gov.uk/government/publications/employment-rights-bill-factsheets](https://gov.uk/government/publications/employment-rights-bill-factsheets))

<sup>19</sup> Gingerbread – Work-related expectations under Universal Credit ([gingerbread.org.uk/find-information/benefits/work-related-expectations-universal-credit](https://gingerbread.org.uk/find-information/benefits/work-related-expectations-universal-credit))

- The lived experiences behind Camden’s economic participation rates
- How childcare, training, recruitment and workplace culture shape women’s access to work
- What Camden Council and partners are doing well
- What barriers women face that services do not yet address
- What women say would make the biggest difference
- Where national reform is required

### 3.4 Evidence base

Between August and November 2025, the Forum gathered evidence through:

- **Ten focus groups** (with women from a range of Black, Asian and other ethnic backgrounds, including Somali and Bangladeshi women, carers, mothers including those with children with additional needs, disabled women, ESOL learners, and women in temporary accommodation)
- **25 evidence sessions** with VCS partners, employers, health providers, schools, and council services
- Analysis of Camden employment data
- Review of national and London labour market trends

Over **60 women** directly contributed their experiences. Their voices underpin this report.

## 4. What Camden Is Already Doing to Support Women into Work

Camden has made significant progress in supporting women into work, skills and volunteering. However, women told us there are gaps in visibility, capacity, alignment between services, and accessibility at key transition points.

### Camden’s Inclusive Economy Service:

#### 4.1 Good Work Camden and Job Hubs

Good Work Camden is a local job brokerage service that runs Job Hubs across the borough, which are free and open to all residents. Advisors give one-to-one help in person, by phone, or online. They run workshops on writing CVs, preparing for interviews, and finding local job opportunities. Women repeatedly said they value the

relational, trauma-informed<sup>20</sup> and non-judgmental approach, practical help and local presence. Good Work Camden's workforce is made up of 75% women with a strong representation from Camden communities.

Good Work Camden's support offer to date has led to 2,718 women being supported, 383 women progressing into work, and hundreds more into training, volunteering or confidence-building activities.

Women described the Job Hubs as safe, trusted spaces. However, women also told us that despite good support, many jobs simply do not match the flexible working arrangements they need, so barriers remain: "They help you get ready but there's not always light at the end of the tunnel."

#### **4.2 Disability Job Hub**

The Disability Job Hub provides specialist one-to-one support for disabled and neurodivergent residents. This support is crucial where workplace norms are confusing, overwhelming, or marked by past negative experiences, and where standard recruitment processes can exclude them. The Hub also collaborates with Camden Carers and mental health services to support carers, neurodivergent women and those with long-term health challenges.

#### **4.3 Camden Future Talent**

Camden Future Talent supports young people aged 18–24 into internships and apprenticeships, creating opportunities within Council services as well as a wide range of local organisations, including schools and large and small employers such as The Crick, University of London, Lime e-bikes and the Working Men's College.

The programme prioritises potential and commitment, offering paid internships and apprenticeships that combine practical experience with structured support. Participants benefit from mentoring, interview coaching, and confidence-building activities, enabling them to gain qualifications and transferable skills while working in inclusive, supportive environments. This approach empowers young women who may have faced challenges such as disrupted education or low confidence to thrive in professional roles and build long-term career aspirations.

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<sup>20</sup> **Trauma-informed** practice is an approach to health and care interventions which is grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development. It aims to increase practitioners' awareness of how trauma can negatively impact on individuals and communities, and their ability to feel safe or develop trusting relationships with health and care services and their staff. UK Government – Working definition of trauma-informed practice ([gov.uk/government/publications/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice))

These opportunities are exclusively for Camden residents, former Camden secondary school students and care-experienced young people who were supported by Camden Council (aged 16+).

#### **4.4 Sector-Specific Pathways**

##### **Health and Social Care**

We know from our focus groups that certain sectors remain popular options for Camden women who are looking for work. One of these is the health and care sector. Good Work Camden has dedicated support for certain key sectors; for example, helping women into jobs in the NHS and social care, including roles at UCLH (University College London Hospitals), Whittington Health, and the Caversham Centre.

##### **Inclusive Business Network**

This free network brings together local employers to collaborate and develop flexible and inclusive employment policies. It offers employers access to tools, resources, recruitment support training to promote good practice.

##### **LIFT Partnership**

Through LIFT (Leading Inclusive Futures through Technology), Good Work Camden works with Islington and Hackney to open up tech, creative, and science jobs for women. Training, paid placements, and career support are provided through partnerships with local companies such as Dentsu. Since 2021, over 500 people have moved into paid jobs through LIFT — 62% of them women.

##### **Joint Work with Family Hubs and Schools**

Job Hubs run sessions in Children's Centres and primary schools, helping parents access advice and training.

Early Years services provide vital support for mums furthest from the labour market through the enhanced childcare offer that helps families access opportunities they might otherwise miss.<sup>21</sup> The service has also funded some onsite crèche provision through the Start for Life budget to enable families to engage with services more easily.

Furthermore, a diverse Early Years workforce delivers parenting courses, one-to-one support, and proactive outreach, with staff able to work in community languages including Sylheti and Arabic to ensure accessibility and break down barriers.

##### **Other Camden Council Offers**

##### **Training & Support**

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<sup>21</sup> *Up to 30 additional funded hours for disadvantaged families of children aged 3 and 4.* Camden Council – Help with childcare costs ([families.camden.gov.uk/parents-and-carers/help-with-childcare-costs](https://families.camden.gov.uk/parents-and-carers/help-with-childcare-costs))

- **Parent Champions Programme** – local parents are trained to talk to other parents about services and opportunities, creating a peer support network.
- **Adult Community Learning** – offers a range of ESOL and digital skills training, including ‘first steps’ confidence-building such as through Family Learning, arranging sessions at times that suit learners with caring responsibilities.
- **Digital Champions Programme** – volunteers providing device support and helping residents get online through the libraries scheme.

## Entrepreneurship

Through the We Make Camden Missions work, the Council offers opportunities for aspiring small business owners:

- **Future Camden Fund** – offering grants for small businesses striving to build a better future for Camden and its residents, including through activities that support free training and education for local people. For example, funding support for Well Grounded led to barista training for 114 local people.
- **Community Wealth Fund** – a £30 million social investment fund with people in Camden helping to decide how we invest the money, including a £2 million Diversity Pilot investing in businesses and other organisations that are led by people from a diverse range of backgrounds.
- **Challenge Prize** – a recurring innovation competition for residents that offers a financial prize for entrepreneurs and businesses who can solve a problem and demonstrate impact aligned with our Camden missions.

### 4.5. Camden Council as a Fair and Flexible Employer

Camden Council is proud to lead by example as a Timewise Fair Employer, showing what truly flexible and supportive working can look like. Every Camden employee has the right to ask for flexible working at any time, for any reason. This could mean working part-time, compressed hours, from home, or on different schedules that fit around family or caring responsibilities. The focus is always on balancing personal wellbeing with delivering good services for residents.

Camden wants to use its own example to encourage local employers to do the same. As of 2024, Camden’s workforce is 55.6% female,<sup>22</sup> and we recognise that Camden’s Talent Pool – advertising internal roles – is a lever to enable and promote career progression for local residents. By showing how flexible working can succeed in practice, Camden hopes more local organisations will follow its lead. Through partnerships with other local employers, the Council promotes fair employment

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<sup>22</sup> Camden Council – Annual Employment Profile 2023-24 ([https://opendata.camden.gov.uk/Your-Council/Employment-Profile-2023-2024/4ft9-z77w/about\\_data](https://opendata.camden.gov.uk/Your-Council/Employment-Profile-2023-2024/4ft9-z77w/about_data))

standards, helping businesses to see that flexibility, trust, and inclusion create stronger teams and better outcomes for all.

### **Partnership Work and Good Practice in the VCS**

Camden's borough partners and local voluntary sector organisations provide strong support for women seeking employment. Groups such as Henna Asian Women's Group, the British Somali Community Centre, Hopscotch, Home-Start Camden & Islington, Luminary Bakery and others offer culturally sensitive guidance, training, and volunteering opportunities.

Hopscotch Homecare offers flexible employment opportunities in care work, helping women gain income and experience while balancing family responsibilities. Furthermore, Hopscotch's work at Highgate New Town Community Centre includes providing crèche facilities, enabling mothers to attend classes knowing their children are nearby and safe. Euston Community Hub also hosts bi-weekly employment drop-in sessions with Hopscotch Women's Centre.

Luminary Bakery exemplifies how a structured, trauma-informed pathway can help women facing significant barriers. Their model combines hands-on training, work experience in their café, and, in some cases, paid employment within the bakery.

However, funding and capacity limitations mean it remains difficult for voluntary and community sector partners to deliver these services to all the women who need them. Partners and local women also told us that English language skills remain a barrier for women who want to work in public-facing roles.

Further education partners already strive to make advancement in this area. For example, the Capital City College Group (CCCG) supports many women who are furthest from the labour market in its Camden and Islington campuses, with 40% of learners coming from the most deprived communities and most adult provision at ESOL entry and Level 1–2. Many women returning after caring responsibilities report low confidence and uncertainty about local opportunities, with staff noting a strong sense of “you can't be what you can't see”; women know employers like Google or the Francis Crick exist locally, but do not see them as accessible.

Confidence is a major barrier, even for women who are digitally literate, and CCCG reports that young people assumed to be “digital natives” still struggle with online job applications. CCCG emphasised the importance of contextual ESOL from Entry Level 2/3 upwards, sector tasters (care, construction, hospitality), and tailored routes that move women into vocational programmes, such as their recent popular ‘Women into Construction’ programme. They warned that the Skills England shift into the Department of Work and Pensions could potentially risk meaning women are encouraged into low-paid, readily available jobs rather than sustainable careers where there are opportunities for progression. They urged local employers to commit to

recruiting more locally, including using guaranteed interview schemes to boost women's confidence.

## 5. Executive summary of recommendations

This year's Camden Women's Forum has focused on how we can continue to make Camden a place where women can thrive in work, learning, and community life. Women across the borough have shared their experiences of trying to find good, flexible jobs, balance caring responsibilities, and build confidence after time out of work.

While many praised Camden's existing support, women also told us where more can be done. Their feedback and ideas shape the following recommendations, grouped into three areas: what Camden Council can do, what partners in the borough can do, and what should change nationally.

### What Camden Council Can Do

#### 1. Strengthen joined-up support for women entering or returning to work

- Align Good Work Camden, Adult Community Learning, local FE colleges, and Early Years services to create training and employment pathways that suit parents and carers, particularly at transition points in their children's lives (e.g. starting nursery, starting primary school, and starting secondary school).
- Apply a more explicit gender lens to employment support delivery and reporting, beginning with a pilot focused on improving pathways into work for women living in temporary accommodation.
- Increase visibility of Good Work Camden's Disability Job Hub and longer-term programmes for disabled and neurodivergent women facing complex barriers to work.
- Continue offering community-language workshops focusing on employability and training (such as in Somali and Bengali) linked to real opportunities to practise English and build confidence.
- Introduce dedicated packages of training support aimed at women looking to start small businesses (such as short courses in First Aid, Food Hygiene and Budgeting).
- Introduce dedicated Good Work Camden resource for women in temporary accommodation facing multiple disadvantages.
- Increase visibility of Camden's existing Digital Inclusion offer, including the programme of library-based digital support sessions and the Digital Champions volunteer scheme.

2. Promote flexible and inclusive work across the borough
  - Use Camden Council's role as a Timewise Fair Employer to lead by example and show how flexible working benefits both employees and services. Run an employer-facing campaign to promote Camden's Inclusion Narrative, sharing case studies and good practice on flexible, inclusive employment.
  - Encourage more local employers to join the Inclusive Business Network and sign up to its standards for fair, flexible, and secure work, including through a Camden Council event on part-time and flexible working as part of the Council's developing programme of work on inclusive economic growth.
  - Encourage employers to commit to inclusive recruitment practices as an organisation-wide practice, such as offering trial shifts instead of formal interviews for practical roles, to make this more accessible to women who have low self-confidence and/or are digitally excluded
3. Amplify women's voices and visibility
  - Create a Women's Peer Support Forum through Good Work Camden to give women space to share experiences, mentor others, grow in confidence and influence change.
  - Launch an Amplifying Women's Voices project sharing success stories from women using Good Work Camden to challenge barriers that keep women out of work.
4. Encourage more women into male-dominated sectors
  - Develop pilots encouraging women into practical roles, such as in technology, construction and trades, building on existing work (such as at the Euston Skills Centre).
  - Continue to strengthen links with employers like the Francis Crick Institute and Camden Garden Centre to support entry-level pathways for women into scientific, green, and technical roles, including through peer-to-peer connections within employers' local supply chains.
5. Use communications effectively
  - Create a signposting guide for women who are unsure where to begin, improving the visibility and accessibility of existing information on employment, training, childcare and benefits.
  - Improve awareness of existing opportunities through clearer, more centralised communication – including community-based events and more in-person job fairs in venues like schools.

- Continue to recognise the importance of word of mouth in Communications planning, particularly for those who are digitally excluded, and develop new ways to strengthen non-digital communication channels.
- Increase the number of Digital Champions, recruiting more local residents to spread information through word of mouth and reach women who may not know how to access digital inclusion support.
- Through regional forums like the London Boroughs Women's Network<sup>23</sup> and national channels, encourage other councils to create Women's Forums like Camden's, sharing learning through an annual showcase.

## What our local partner organisations in Camden can do

### 1. Work together to increase access and inclusion

- Partners should collaborate on a shared communications platform to promote training, crèche provision, free courses for carers, and local volunteering opportunities.
- Colleges, health partners, and voluntary organisations should co-deliver accessible training, linking skills development to real job opportunities.
- Corporate partners should support digital inclusion by donating surplus laptops or tablets for women who do not have suitable devices for job searching, training or online services.

### 2. Support women furthest from the labour market

- Offer tailored support for women in temporary accommodation, linking to wider research on NEET prevention through the Centre for Prevention partnership between Camden Council, UCL and the Tavistock.
- Employers to contribute to the Good Work Camden Adult Work Experience programme and increase this offer to help women build confidence and practical skills.
- Ensure volunteering opportunities sit within clear progression routes so women are not left in "volunteer trap" cycles without pathways into paid work.

### 3. Improve workplace inclusion, recruitment practices and wellbeing

- Offer menopause awareness training for local employers, using Camden Council's own policy as an example of good practice.

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<sup>23</sup> London Boroughs Women's Network – LinkedIn ([linkedin.com/company/london-boroughs-women-s-network/posts](https://www.linkedin.com/company/london-boroughs-women-s-network/posts))

- Local employers to host sector-specific open days and drop-in insight sessions aimed at women, such as for those interested in hospitality, healthcare, or creative sectors, basing themselves at the heart of communities.
  - Advertise all job roles, where possible, as having potential to be flexible and/or part-time (both in terms of working hours and hybrid work arrangements) in response to candidates' caring responsibilities. Co-write job description with local women to ensure these fit their needs.
  - Local employers to trial, where possible, hands-on assessments instead of formal interviews for practical jobs.
4. Lead innovation and responsible technology use
- Work with local businesses to ensure fair use of AI in recruitment, following the national Responsible AI in Recruitment guidance,<sup>24</sup> and prevent bias in hiring.

## National recommendations

1. Build on Camden's model for inclusive employment
  - Central government to use Good Work Camden's relational approach as a model for reforming culture change at Jobcentre Plus, with a partial focus on women and carers. Increase national funding for mid-career returner programmes and scale up existing initiatives.
2. Expand childcare support and flexible training
  - Match Camden's enhanced childcare offer for 3- and 4-year-olds to make childcare more affordable across the country.
  - Increase national programmes of modular and flexible apprenticeships so women can train while working or caring.
3. Protect entry-level jobs from automation
  - Introduce national laws to safeguard entry-level, part-time, and back-office roles most at risk from AI, ensuring technology is used responsibly and fairly.
  - Strengthen protections for workers in the gig economy and improve regulation of online platforms to prevent exploitation of vulnerable women.

## Summary

Camden continues to be recognised as a borough that leads with inclusion and fairness. But women's voices remind us that progress must continue. By strengthening flexible working, improving access to training, and working in partnership

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<sup>24</sup> UK Government – Responsible AI in recruitment guidance  
([gov.uk/government/publications/responsible-ai-in-recruitment-guide](https://gov.uk/government/publications/responsible-ai-in-recruitment-guide))

across sectors, Camden can help more women move into secure, meaningful work – and inspire other councils and employers to follow its lead.

## 6. Why these recommendations: The changes that women want to see

This section sets out the detailed recommendations across 14 themes. These reflect what women repeatedly told the Forum in evidence sessions, focus groups, interviews and community conversations.

### 6.1 Flexible Working Policies

Across every focus group, women spoke about the need for work that recognises caring responsibilities, health needs, and the complexities of family life. Carers, parents, and community organisations described how rigid working arrangements continue to exclude many capable women from employment.

Women described a clear mismatch between the types of jobs available locally and the rhythms of family life. Participants in the Parent Champions focus group emphasised that “flexible work is not just about working from home – it is about hours that fit the school day.” Many said that term-time roles or those that were limited to school day hours were almost impossible to find. Camden Carers told us that women balancing caring duties require “bespoke and understanding” arrangements, including job-shares, reduced hours, or remote work options that do not compromise progression. This highlighted the need for flexible roles that recognise the uneven and often unpredictable nature of caring responsibilities.

These challenges were echoed by trade union representatives from Unison, GMB and the National Education Union, who also told us that maternity return and flexible working remain major pressure points for women across sectors. They highlighted significant variation in how women are supported to return after maternity leave: in some services, women return for only the statutory period and then leave again because flexibility is too limited; in schools, staff described difficulties negotiating phased returns or reduced days, with some women ultimately leaving their roles as a result. Representatives added that supportive, informal flexible working arrangements, such as adjusting start times after a sleepless night for those experiencing menopause-related symptoms, can dramatically reduce absence and help retain women. These practices are inconsistent and depend on individual managers, demonstrating that even when formal policies exist, inconsistent application can cause women to exit the workforce altogether.

Beyond practical constraints, women also reported that requesting flexibility can feel risky. Evidence from Back2Business and The Well Placed returner programmes

showed that women representing varied sectors and career journeys, including those identified as "highly skilled" and experienced in their respective fields, also face structural barriers, as many women described the fear of being judged or penalised for requesting personal adjustments and when taking on caring responsibilities. This shows that improving flexible working requires addressing stigma as well as system design.

Discussions with Timewise highlighted both the progress Camden has made and the challenges that remain in improving access to flexible work. Timewise noted that Camden Council has embedded flexible working practices across many services, supported by manager training and a localised framework used in adult social care and outreach roles. They also shared examples of strong practice among local partners, including University College London Hospital Trust and the Royal Free Hospital, which have introduced team-based rostering for nursing and midwifery teams, which have already shown positive impacts on retention and staff wellbeing. These examples show what is possible when flexible working is embedded consistently across teams.

Timewise also pointed to alternative rota models used by some employers in construction and other sectors that give staff more control over their working patterns. However, they explained that flexibility is still uneven across the labour market: hybrid work mainly benefits office-based staff, while 'frontline' workers often have limited options. Timewise emphasised that advertising flexible options clearly, designing team-based rostering approaches, and engaging employers in sectors such as social care, early years and construction are essential to improving women's access to good, secure part-time and flexible roles.

These challenges are intensified for the many women balancing employment with substantial unpaid care. One participant from Camden Carers told us: "We're juggling everyone's appointments and our own. By the time we sit down, the day is gone." Women are highly overrepresented in unpaid caring roles, and the evidence shows that caring responsibilities remain one of the biggest barriers to entering or returning to work. Census data indicates there are over 14,000 unpaid carers in Camden, with many providing more than 20 or even 50 hours of care each week, and more than 2,000 women are economically inactive because they are looking after family or home.<sup>25</sup> The Forum also heard concerns that the national conversation around "economic inactivity" can stigmatise women who perform unpaid care and community work. Contributors from Crossroads Women's Centre stressed that caring for family and community isn't inactivity – it's work that keeps society running. Camden Carers added that caring responsibilities can create additional pressure. One carer explained that constant caregiving and crises leave women "feeling depleted, behind everyone else and afraid to let people down", describing the emotional strain of juggling work

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<sup>25</sup> Office for National Statistics – Census 2021, Provision of unpaid care (TS039) for Camden (nomisweb.co.uk/datasets/c2021ts039)

and caring, saying that carers often feel they must "mask their stress to avoid being seen as a problem." These testimonies underline the need for trauma-informed, empathetic support within employment systems, and for flexible working approaches that recognise and value the realities of unpaid care.

Local initiatives also show, however, what flexible, carer-focused employment can achieve. Camden Carers, working as part of the Carers Trust network, provides a range of support including advice, training, health assessments and emergency planning, complemented by the Council's comprehensive new Carers Action Plan launched in 2024.<sup>26</sup> As of March 2025, Camden Carers is also developing innovative employment support in partnership with Carers Trust and the Phoenix Group through a two-year programme aimed at helping carers build confidence, develop skills and access flexible work. While these initiatives demonstrate strong progress and a borough-wide commitment to recognising carers' needs, carers in Camden continue to face significant challenges related to poverty, digital exclusion, insufficient respite provision, and insufficient flexible employment options. Similarly, through Good Work Camden's Disability Job Hub, a number of flexible working arrangements have been negotiated between candidates and individual employers, tailored to their individual needs. However, the Hub noted that while this can be negotiated on an individual basis, few employers have genuinely flexible and accessible working arrangement policies across the board, creating barriers for applicants. The ongoing work of Camden Carers, Good Work Camden and partners shows what is possible when services are designed around carers' realities, but it also highlights the continued need for specialist, gender-aware employment support for those balancing unpaid care with the desire to work. These findings point to the need for a coordinated approach to supporting carers into flexible work.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council strengthen its promotion of flexible and inclusive working policies, lead by example through Timewise Fair Employer status, and support a borough-wide campaign encouraging employers to offer flexible, secure, family-friendly work.*

## **6.2 Childcare**

Childcare emerged as the single greatest barrier to returning to work or training. Across all focus groups, women emphasised that childcare costs often exceed potential earnings and that suitable provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is limited. Research from the charity "Pregnant Then Screwed" reinforced these findings nationally: every year, tens of thousands of women

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<sup>26</sup> Camden Council – The Carers Action Plan (<https://camdencarechoices.camden.gov.uk/support-and-advice-for-carers/the-carers-action-plan/>)

lose jobs due to pregnancy discrimination, and the UK continues to have one of the most expensive childcare systems in the world.<sup>27</sup>

Recent national reforms may reshape aspects of the childcare landscape, but their impact remains uncertain. The November 2025 Autumn Budget introduced two significant reforms that will shape the national context for this inquiry.<sup>28</sup> First, the government confirmed its intention that the two-child benefit cap will be lifted from April 2026, a change expected to reduce child poverty and ease financial pressures on families, particularly single mothers. Second, the Department for Education will lead a comprehensive review of childcare provision, aiming to simplify the system for providers and families, improve accessibility, and increase the overall impact of the government's childcare offer. While these updates are encouraging, we cannot rely on national law change alone. Their success will depend on effective implementation and whether reforms translate into practical, affordable options for families. Camden and its partners will need to continue advocating for inclusive delivery and ensure local systems are ready to maximise the benefits of these changes.

Women across different communities described how childcare barriers manifest in their daily lives. Women from the Henna Asian Women's Group said, "Childcare is always the problem – it stops us before we even start." Several mothers reported that Jobcentre advisers suggested teenagers should look after younger siblings, which women felt was unsafe and unrealistic. One mother explained, "They tell you your 15-year-old can watch the little ones, but it's not right – they have their own lives too." At the British Somali Community Centre, women said that even for older children, the need to be present after school is critical: "Teenagers are easily influenced; you must be around." Others, particularly among the women we spoke to from the Somali, Bengali and Albanian communities, spoke of deep mistrust of unknown childminders: "Just because someone has a certificate doesn't mean you can trust them with your child." These testimonies demonstrate that childcare is not only a financial issue but also one of safety, trust, cultural norms, and parental responsibility.

For families with children who have complex needs, the barriers are even more acute. Participants from Hopscotch described anxiety and stress, including one mother of a child with speech delay and other additional needs who explained, "I can't risk putting her in after-school club; if something happens, I need to be there." Women consistently highlighted the importance of on-site childcare in community and training settings. For many mothers, especially those caring for children with additional needs, this is a prerequisite for participation.

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<sup>27</sup> Pregnant Then Screwed – National research on pregnancy and maternity discrimination ([pregnantthenscrewed.com/about-maternity-discrimination](https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/about-maternity-discrimination))

<sup>28</sup> HM Treasury – Budget 2025: Strong Foundations, Secure Future ([assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6929b353345e31ab14ecf735/E03444720\\_Budget\\_2025\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6929b353345e31ab14ecf735/E03444720_Budget_2025_Web_Accessible.pdf))

Women also emphasised that childcare needs change across a child's life, creating key windows where support becomes especially important. We noted that support needs to be timed around key transition points as parents might reconsider work or training when their child starts nursery, starts reception, or moves to secondary school. Participants said that these moments can create space to plan for employment, but many do not know what support is available. Clearer, targeted information is required at these points, including advice on childcare, training routes and flexible roles.

Alongside childcare pressures, women also described how training decisions are shaped by concerns about future earnings and housing costs. One mother explained that she wanted to complete a childcare qualification while caring for her three-year-old daughter, but the timetable made it difficult to attend. She described how evening courses were only possible because her partner worked mornings, and said this option "is not realistic for most mums who do not have someone [else] at home." She also did not know whether her Level 2 childcare qualification would enable her to find work that pays well enough to cover rent and childcare once she finished training, noting that she will only be able to use the Better Off Calculator<sup>29</sup> accurately once she is in a position to start active job-searching, not when completing vocational training. Other women shared similar worries, saying they feared completing training only to move into low-paid roles that affected their benefits and did not improve their financial position, or that they might be financially worse off in work because childcare costs would outweigh their earnings. This uncertainty made some women postpone training, even when they wanted to progress.

National childcare reforms remain insufficient to meet real-life needs. Costs are still high, and funding arrangements for childminders have led to cuts in provision. Camden should continue advocating for inclusive delivery and explore local solutions to bridge these gaps.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council continues to expand childcare support – including enhanced offers for three- and four-year-olds – and introduce mobile or on-site crèche facilities in training and community centres to enable women to learn and work with confidence that their children are safe. We also recommend that national government matches this offer and considers raising the free childcare support cap to children starting primary school.*

### **6.3 Health: Disability, Mental Health, and Neurodiversity**

Many women described the impact of health conditions – physical and mental – on their ability to sustain or return to employment. Some referred to late diagnoses of ADHD, autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders, which have impacted their ability to gain and sustain work. The Forum heard that the intersection of caring

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<sup>29</sup> Policy in Practice, Better Off Calculator (<https://www.betteroffcalculator.co.uk/>)

responsibilities and personal health issues compounds disadvantage, including in the labour market.

Evidence from local health organisations demonstrated how workplace practices can either support or undermine women’s health. Healthwatch’s ‘Living with Endometriosis in Camden’ report showed that access to flexible work directly affects women’s health outcomes.<sup>30</sup> Those with secure, adaptable jobs could better manage pain and medical treatment when living with gynaecological disorders. Conversely, women in inflexible or low-paid roles experienced worsened symptoms and mental distress. Healthwatch also found gaps in menopause awareness, particularly among certain communities where women were found to be unaware of what menopause entails due to cultural stigma around discussing menstruation; therefore, they were not equipped to ask for workplace adjustments. These findings are captured in Camden Public Health’s 2025 review of sexual wellbeing and reproductive health in the borough.<sup>31</sup> All this underscores how workplace culture and awareness directly shape health outcomes for women.

The wider policy and community context also illustrates the need for stronger provision around women’s health. Camden Women’s Forum is also disappointed by the news of the recent closure of Bloody Good Period,<sup>32</sup> an organisation that played a vital role in advancing menstrual equity in workplaces and beyond. Camden Council remains firmly committed to promoting menstrual equity and supporting women’s health in the workplace through its own policies and partnerships. However, the loss of such a prominent voice underlines the need for renewed efforts to ensure that menstrual health is not sidelined in conversations about equality and inclusion. The NHS’s renewed Women’s Health Strategy for England – due in 2026 – also commits to tackling longstanding inequalities in women’s healthcare, including improving access, reducing gynaecology waiting lists, and ensuring services better listen to and act on women’s experiences. These developments highlight a critical moment for strengthening women’s health support locally and nationally.

National organisations aiming to support women returners also told us about the prevalence of mental ill health. Back2Business, a community interest company supporting women returners to work after time off due to caring responsibilities, shared that many women experienced anxiety, depression, and reduced confidence following long absences from the labour market. At Henna Asian Women’s Group, we heard from women experiencing menopause-related memory loss and anxiety, one of whom described her journeys to the Jobcentre and interview interactions as “terrifying.” Social isolation, which exacerbates these experiences, was also noted as

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<sup>30</sup> Healthwatch Camden – Living with Endometriosis in Camden report ([healthwatchcamden.co.uk/reports/living-with-endometriosis-in-camden-report](https://healthwatchcamden.co.uk/reports/living-with-endometriosis-in-camden-report))

<sup>31</sup> Camden Council – Sexual wellbeing and reproductive health system review ([camden.gov.uk/documents/d/guest/sexual-and-reproductive-health-report](https://camden.gov.uk/documents/d/guest/sexual-and-reproductive-health-report))

<sup>32</sup> Bloody Good Period – Menstrual equity charity ([bloodygoodperiod.com](https://bloodygoodperiod.com))

a key driver for wanting to access suitable work: one participant told us “People don't realise that mental health is one of the biggest things. I've been out of work for six years; it's affected me because you can't talk to anyone” and that one of the primary motivations for finding a job was “to go out and meet people for my mental health”. National organisations aiming to support women returners also told us about the prevalence of mental ill health. Back2Business, a community interest company supporting women returners to work after time off due to caring responsibilities, shared that many women experienced anxiety, depression, and reduced confidence following long absences from the labour market. At Henna Asian Women's Group, we heard from women experiencing menopause-related memory loss and anxiety, one of whom described her journeys to the Jobcentre and interview interactions as “terrifying.” Social isolation, which exacerbates these experiences, was also noted as a key driver for wanting to access suitable work: one participant told us “People don't realise that mental health is one of the biggest things. I've been out of work for six years; it's affected me because you can't talk to anyone” and that one of the primary motivations for finding a job was “to go out and meet people for my mental health”. These accounts illustrate how poor mental health, isolation and lack of confidence can create significant barriers to returning to work.

The Forum noted that stigma around mental health remains high. Women from the British Somali Community Centre explained that “many are afraid to speak about mental health because they fear social services will take their children.” Others who spoke out about their challenges were quietly approached by other women in their communities advising them not to share this information out of fear. These insights demonstrate the need for trust-based, culturally sensitive support that enables women to seek help without fear.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council expand Good Work Camden's Disability Job Hub into a longer-term programme for neurodivergent women and those with complex health barriers, and promote menstruation, menopause and endometriosis awareness training for employers across the borough. We advise that job brokerage services are joined up with informal peer support and wellbeing provision that helps women to develop in confidence and find trusted confidants when they are experiencing mental ill health.*

#### **6.4 Training and Skills Support – including ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and Volunteering**

Alongside explaining barriers relating to work, care and health, women described a strong desire for learning and progression, but shared that current training opportunities are often inaccessible due to cost, timing, or lack of childcare. Home-Start told us that women who enter waged work find themselves no longer eligible for free courses, such as Beginner's English, which they cannot afford

if they are on a low salary. Parent Champions told us that many courses “run in the evenings or require full-time attendance – not possible when you have children”, and emphasised that certain offers, such as creche provision, aren’t always well advertised by education providers: “You only find out after you’ve already made other arrangements.”

Language barriers added another layer of exclusion; women from Henna Asian Women’s Group and the British Somali Community Centre said that this remains significant, particularly for older learners or those who are more socially isolated. One participant observed, “ESOL classes teach words, but we forget because we never use them.” Some partners proposed more contextualised language learning, such as ‘ESOL for Health and Social Care,’ where English is practised through practical topics. With this in mind, apprenticeships and the new Skills England Agenda<sup>33</sup> must be part of Camden’s approach. The Council should work with further education providers and careers services to ensure that women can access flexible, modular apprenticeships and sector-specific training.

Women who have undergone professional training abroad also faced systemic barriers that prevented them from using skills they already had. Staff from Good Work Camden highlighted challenges in converting overseas qualifications. Some women, particularly refugees or those who have fled their home country on schemes such as the ARAP Scheme (Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme) in 2021, lack access to certificates or translations, leaving them unable to prove their skills. The service covers costs for official recognition, but it is not always straightforward as some people need to ‘top up’ their existing qualifications from home to convert them to UK equivalents, requiring further study and exams in English. This demonstrates the importance of tailored support for women seeking to transfer international skills into the UK labour market.

Volunteering was frequently cited as a safe and supportive route back into learning and confidence. Women said it helps rebuild routine, communication skills and a sense of purpose without the pressure of formal employment. A participant from Henna Asian Women’s Group explained, “Volunteering helps you talk to people again. It is less pressure than paid work but gets you ready.” Several women told us that volunteering allows them to try new environments, practise English, and gain recent experience for their CVs.

However, women also described risks associated with volunteering when it is not linked to genuine pathways into waged work. Partners from the Uncertain Futures Project in Manchester, seeking to understand inequalities around work for women over 50, warned about the “volunteer trap” where women are encouraged to volunteer as a pathway into employment but find there is no progression and no clear route into

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<sup>33</sup> UK Government – Building the Skills System Britain needs: Skills England’s role in Post-16 Reform (<https://skillsengland.blog.gov.uk/2025/11/11/building-the-skills-system-britain-needs-skills-englands-role-in-post-16-reform-by-tessa-griffiths-and-sarah-maclean/>)

paid roles.<sup>34</sup> Some women felt they were repeatedly signposted to volunteering because it was seen as the only realistic option, rather than being offered structured support that leads to paid work. One Home-Start volunteer told us that “programmes that allow volunteers to move into paid roles after a certain period, or training schemes that lead directly to permanent positions” would “give women more confidence and motivation to get started”. Despite these concerns, women still recognised volunteering as an important first step, provided it sits within a clear pathway that builds confidence and leads to genuine opportunities.

Women also linked learning to entrepreneurship, particularly when skills have business potential. One Parent Champion told us that she had made business cards for her mother’s small catering business, as her mother’s low proficiency in English was a significant barrier to growth. Women cited needing clearer guidance on how to set up a business, including necessary licensing and finance considerations, to achieve this. This highlights the importance of practical pathways that recognise and build on women’s existing strengths.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council align Good Work Camden, Adult Community Learning, and local colleges to create flexible training pathways; expand community-language workshops linked to practical skills; and support volunteering and short modular courses that build confidence and lead to employment or self-employment.*

## **6.5 Digital Exclusion and IT Skills**

Digital exclusion emerged as a major cross-cutting issue. Many women reported that vital services, job applications, and benefits processes now rely on online access, which excludes those with limited digital literacy or equipment.

Women’s lived experiences illustrated how digital systems can feel alienating and anxiety-inducing. One woman from Henna Asian Women’s Group said that the Jobcentre “assumes your children can help you with the computer, but mine don’t.” A participant explained that she can “use a phone but not a laptop”, which means when someone sends her “links or forms, it’s frightening.” Crossroads Camden confirmed that increasing digitisation of school, health, and benefits systems has made everyday life more difficult for women who feel more comfortable with in-person support, noting that faceless digital support feels discouraging. Participants praised Camden’s Adult Community Learning digital workshops, which teach basic skills in friendly settings. However, many weren’t aware of the full offer available. “Everything is online now,” one participant said – including information about classes themselves. “If you can’t use the internet, you fall behind in everything.” These

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<sup>34</sup> Uncertain Futures Project – Research on women, ageing and work ([uncertainfuturesproject.co.uk](http://uncertainfuturesproject.co.uk))

reflections highlight the need for digital support that is human, reassuring and rooted in women's real lives.

Alongside these practical barriers, women emphasised how lack of visibility and trusted communication channels further limits access to the help that already exists. Many were unaware of Camden's existing digital support available in libraries or through Digital Champions. To reach women who rely on word-of-mouth rather than online information, Camden could recruit more Digital Champion volunteers from local communities. These community-based Champions would not only offer practical help but also act as trusted messengers, spreading awareness of digital support in the places that women already visit.

Women also noted that even when they were aware of digital support, they often lacked access to suitable devices and connectivity for job searching, training or completing online forms. Camden already works with the Good Things Foundation to provide free devices for residents who are digitally excluded, and this support was welcomed. However, staff told us that there is often a shortage of certain types of devices, meaning that supply cannot always meet demand. Women who did not have laptops or tablets at home explained that smartphones alone are not always sufficient for completing job applications, filling in forms, or attending online training. These gaps contribute to ongoing barriers in job search and learning, particularly for women trying to re-enter work after long periods of caregiving. Limited access to devices, Wi-Fi, or private space to learn particularly affects women in temporary accommodation and multi-generational households. These conditions reinforce how digital exclusion compounds other inequalities for women experiencing multiple disadvantage.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council and its partners expand digital literacy training through community-based programmes and ensure that employment and benefits support remain accessible through in-person and phone options for those without digital access. We also recommend that teams prioritise finding opportunities to share information via word of mouth, such as visiting libraries, community centres, schools and places of worship. We also recommend that partners, where possible, offer candidates the opportunity to speak to someone in person or on the phone as part of their application process to minimise the detrimental effect of digital exclusion. Lastly, we recommend that Camden works with private-sector partners to expand device provision, including encouraging local businesses to donate laptops or tablets to support women who are digitally excluded.*

## **6.6 Confidence Building**

Across all focus groups, women spoke about the loss of confidence that comes from difficult personal experiences and/or long periods outside paid work. Many said that returning to employment felt overwhelming, particularly when combined with caring responsibilities, health conditions or past negative experiences with

employment services. These experiences underline how rebuilding confidence is not a superficial task but a core part of supporting women back into meaningful activity.

Women supported by Henna Asian Women's Group shared that confidence is often the first barrier. One participant who had not worked in 30 years due to childcare and health needs explained that she had lost confidence in travelling alone and struggled with speaking and writing English after years at home speaking in her native language with her family. Another woman shared that agoraphobia and anxiety could make bus journeys to appointments feel "intimidating and exhausting." We heard from some women that they did not feel comfortable travelling outside of the comfort zone of their estate or immediate surroundings due to anxiety around unfamiliar environments. This shows how confidence-building must be sensitive to women's varied starting points, recognising the emotional labour required for some simply to leave their home.

Confidence challenges were often compounded by unfamiliarity with workplace norms. Women supported by Hopscotch highlighted that workplace expectations themselves can be unfamiliar and intimidating. Staff reported that some women lack knowledge of basic workplace etiquette, such as knowing how to request annual leave, understanding sickness protocols, or even knowing when to knock on the door before entering a meeting room. Partners also noted that reintegration into work requires more than job-searching – it also requires building confidence in how to act and speak in work environments. This highlights the importance of gentle, practical preparation that helps women reconnect with the rhythms and expectations of working life.

Women also pointed to peer support as a rare space where confidence could grow naturally and without judgement. Parent Champions told us how much they had learned from connecting with others who share similar experiences, which creates trust and motivation. Some had accessed courses and paid opportunities that their fellow Parent Champions posted in their WhatsApp group chat. Informal peer groups, shadowing opportunities in community organisations, and volunteering were all highlighted as ways that women can build confidence at a manageable pace.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council create a Women's Peer Support Forum through Good Work Camden to strengthen confidence building, provide mentorship, and support women to re-enter work in a safe and supportive environment.*

## **6.7 Cultural Expectations & Barriers**

Women from a range of communities described how cultural expectations, stigma and discrimination shape their employment experiences. For some, cultural norms emphasise that caregiving must be prioritised and discourage women from seeking paid work. One carer explained that in her community, women who take time for career or personal development fear being viewed as "neglecting" their families. She

described the emotional pressure this creates, saying it leaves “an ache in your heart because you want independence but also feel guilty.” These reflections show how cultural pressures can quietly restrict women’s choices, even when the desire to work or study is strong.

Alongside cultural expectations, women described facing discrimination that compounded these barriers and limited their sense of belonging in the labour market. Somali women told us that being “visibly Black and Muslim” created multiple barriers. Others said they believed jobs often went to applicants with connections, which made them feel that “opportunities are not for us.” These accounts make clear that structural racism continues to influence who feels able to access opportunities and who is left out.

Women emphasised the importance of support delivered in trusted environments, especially where language or confidence remains a barrier, noting that culturally appropriate ESOL classes and outreach delivered by trusted community organisations are essential. Professionals told us that older Bangladeshi and Somali women sometimes feel overlooked by mainstream services, relying heavily on local voluntary sector organisations for information delivered in community languages and in familiar settings, but funding challenges sometimes limit what these organisations can deliver. This highlights the value of culturally grounded provision that meets women where they are.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council increases visibility of community-language ESOL and workshop opportunities, and amplify the voices and experiences of women to challenge discrimination and ensure services are accessible to all.*

## **6.8 Refugees, Poverty, Benefits and Housing**

Women seeking asylum, refugees and those living in temporary accommodation described multiple, overlapping barriers to work. Their experiences showed how immigration status, poverty, trauma, and unstable housing often intersect to constrain the choices and chances they deserve.

One focus group participant, who is a refugee, shared her experience of being unable to work for years due to immigration restrictions. She said the prolonged uncertainty caused significant anxiety and affected her physical health. By the time she received status, she felt “worn down and lost.” She also reported that her daughters faced repeated rejections from employers, which she believed was due to accent bias and/or racial discrimination, despite their qualifications. Women in similar situations said they often felt “pushed into low-paid jobs below our skills.” Stories like these highlight how immigration status, discrimination and prolonged insecurity shape women’s long-term prospects long after formal restrictions are lifted.

Housing instability added a further layer of disruption, often preventing women from establishing routines needed for work, training or even basic daily life. Camden's data shows that most households in temporary accommodation are single parent-led, and most of those are led by women.<sup>35</sup> Only around one quarter of residents in temporary accommodation are in work. Women living in hostels or contingency hotels described frequent moves, overcrowding, long travel distances and a lack of space for studying or job-searching. One woman told us: "you cannot plan anything when you do not know where you will be [living] next month." This reinforces that without stable housing, meaningful participation in work or education becomes incredibly difficult.

Participants also described poverty-related stress, including rising school costs, food bills and energy prices. Crossroads Camden reported that benefit processes can feel "hostile and confusing," particularly when English is not a first language. Women said that they often do not understand what support they are entitled to or how earnings affect Universal Credit. Carers also spoke about the risk of jeopardising benefits when studying or taking on part-time work. Another carer told us that the fear of sanctions creates a "sense of being trapped." Women in temporary accommodation described being called to Jobcentre appointments during school pick-up hours or work shifts, leading to sanctions that pushed families deeper into hardship. These experiences underline how systems, when not meaningfully aligned to people's real lives, can intensify financial insecurity rather than alleviate it.

Housing insecurity, domestic abuse and trauma were consistently identified as barriers to employment readiness. Women from Henna described how one participant became homeless after leaving an abusive marriage and had to navigate housing, benefits, schooling and mental health services all at once. She said, "I did not know I had a voice until I had to fight for my life." Navigating this traumatic experience while also having to attend Jobcentre and Restart appointments felt overwhelming and exhausting, and stressed that the onus is often placed on the individual to "know [their] rights" to access suitable support and reach more stable circumstances. These insights show why trauma-informed, coordinated support is essential for women rebuilding stability following crisis.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council develop targeted employment support for women in temporary accommodation, link with borough-wide prevention work, and use the Centre for Prevention research to design holistic, trauma-informed life-course support.*

## **6.9 Recruitment, Workplace Inclusion and Wellbeing**

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<sup>35</sup> LSE London for Camden Council – Barriers to acceptance of housing offers by families in temporary accommodation (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/business/consulting/assets/documents/barriers-to-acceptance-of-housing-offers-by-families-in-temporary-accommodation.pdf>)

Women across focus groups described the workplace itself and recruitment systems as significant barriers to entering and progressing in work. Participants spoke about unwelcoming application and interview processes, inflexible managers and a lack of recognition for the pressures that women face. This highlights the need for more human approaches from the very first point of contact.

We heard how digital recruitment systems create barriers when returning to work after long periods out of the workforce, such as for caregiving, because “so much has moved on”. One participant who was looking to return to work after a period of caring for her elderly parent full-time, but explained that she had applied for many jobs without success despite having many years of relevant experience. She explained that she found it much easier “when you could hand in a CV in person so they could see your face.” Parent Champions echoed these challenges and said that long gaps in employment often made them feel judged or dismissed. One mother told us, “People think a career gap means you don’t care, but I was caring the whole time.” These reflections reveal how easily rigid systems can overlook skills gained through unpaid care and undermine women’s confidence when re-entering work.

Other Parent Champions shared that interviews can be “intimidating and very formal.” Some women struggled to express themselves in English under pressure, while others felt judged for having gaps in their CVs. Participants also said that employers could make recruitment more accessible by offering trial shifts or informal assessments, rather than relying only on online applications. Several women explained that they felt more able to demonstrate their skills in person than through digital forms, particularly if they had been out of paid work for many years. Women told us that trial shifts, friendly open days and face-to-face recruitment events would minimise anxiety, help remove barriers created by digital-only processes and give employers a clearer picture of their abilities.

Furthermore, carers described the need for more supportive managers who understand the realities of caring. One explained that during a family medical emergency she was asked how she wanted her absence recorded, which made her feel judged. She said, “There is a fear of being labelled a burden [...] It is like we have to be exceptional to deserve flexibility.” Carers also reported that a shift away from remote work, with some employers encouraging a greater mandated return to office-based work, is making it harder to balance care and employment.

Several women described feeling mistrusted by employers when trying to balance work with caring for young children. At Home-Start, one woman explained that in her first job she received repeated warnings for leaving early to collect her children or arriving late when her baby was unwell. She said that needing to respond to her children’s needs was treated “as if I was making excuses,” which left her feeling stressed and unwelcome. She later tried another role, hoping work would support her mental health after a long period at home, but felt judged whenever she needed to stay home with an ill child. She said, “They made me feel like they thought I was lying.”

Her experience reflects a wider pattern described by many mothers, who said it is difficult to find a job “where you do not feel discriminated against” for having caring responsibilities.

We also heard about barriers facing older women created by bias and automated systems that favour linear, uninterrupted careers. Back2Business and The Well Placed returner programmes raised concerns about unconscious bias and age discrimination. Women over 50 described feeling “irrelevant” in the job market despite strong experience. Returner programmes described repeated cases where women were rejected because automated systems prioritised recent experience or filtered applications based on rigid criteria.

Many women also pointed to the high number of large employers in Camden and observed that they could do more to support local women into employment and nurture their development; for example, Hopscotch staff and focus group participants pointed to the hotel chains in the south of the borough and asked if they could offer open days for those interested in entering the hospitality and tourism sector, including in housekeeping roles as many expressed interest in cleaning and facilities management roles. Women from the British Somali Community Centre said they often felt excluded from local opportunities; they acknowledged that there are large employers in the borough, but felt that they “don’t hire local people”. This reinforces the call for stronger employer engagement and clearer routes into accessible roles for local women.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council promote flexible and inclusive recruitment practices, encourage employers to host open days and trial-based interviews, and strengthen local employment pathways in key sectors including health, care, education and hospitality. As part of this, Camden Council should lead an event on part-time and flexible working as part of its Inclusive Growth priorities and using the existing Inclusive Business Network, showcasing Camden’s leadership as a Timewise Fair Employer.*

## **6.10 Women in Male-Dominated Sectors**

Women’s interest in practical and technical work showed a clear appetite for roles beyond traditionally gendered expectations. Many women expressed a desire to work in “hands-on” roles but said that some of these sectors feel inaccessible if they are traditionally male dominated. Several women from the British Somali Community Centre and Parent Champions groups said they were interested in plumbing, electrical work and carpentry, as well as in technology. Some of the focus group participants had completed recent training courses, such as tech bootcamps, but did not know how to turn this interest into real job opportunities. They said it was difficult to understand which qualifications were recognised, how to access apprenticeships, or how to find employers willing to take on women with limited recent experience. This demonstrates that motivation is not the barrier: access, guidance and visibility are.

However, without clear pathways or visible role models, male dominated sectors can feel unreachable. Focus group participants stressed that without clear guidance, these sectors can feel “closed off” even when women have the motivation and ability to succeed in them. This highlights why tailored pathways and proactive employer engagement are essential for widening access.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council continue to develop pilot pathways for women into male-dominated sectors, and that it leverages social value opportunities to encourage contracted maintenance employers to build on this by offering flexible and accessible opportunities in practical roles.*

### **6.11 Entrepreneurship and Local Business Support**

Many women described self-employment as an attractive option, particularly for those needing flexibility around caring or health needs. Many women expressed interest in using the skills that they already have, including those they use at home, to pursue community catering, arts and crafts (including henna design), handy person or gardening enterprises, as being self-employed would enable them to flex their hours around other commitments. Local interest in community-led initiatives run by organisations such as Think & Do Camden — from sustainable cooking to gardening — shows how eager many women are to build on these talents, as well as explore ways of turning them into income-generating opportunities. These reflections show how entrepreneurship can unlock talent that might otherwise remain unseen.

Women also highlighted how stronger connections with local employers could turn small enterprises into sustainable livelihoods. Participants felt that employers in the borough could do more to commission local women-led businesses for corporate catering or creative work, which would help small businesses to flourish. This demonstrates the important role of local procurement.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council increase visibility of tailored self-employment support, continuing to use the Future Camden Fund and Community Wealth Fund to help women develop their businesses, and strengthen partnerships that create markets for women-led enterprises.*

### **6.12 Responsible Use of Technology**

Women raised strong concerns about the growing use of artificial intelligence in recruitment and in the working world. Returner programmes told us that algorithmic filtering often disadvantages women with employment gaps, older applicants and those with overseas qualifications, telling us: “Capable women are getting filtered out long before anyone actually sees their CV.” These reflections underscore the need for transparency and fairness in digital recruitment tools.

Concerns about automation also reflected wider anxieties about the fragility of roles that many women rely on for stability. Participants expressed fear about automation replacing entry-level roles, particularly part-time and administrative jobs. Some women expressed fear over the growing use of AI and its potential to replace entry level roles, telling us that they “worry that computers are going to take over humans”. Women agreed that Camden should promote responsible AI use among employers, building on national guidance and encouraging practices that do not disadvantage those already furthest from the labour market. Participants told us that they need reassurance that technology will be used fairly and transparently. This highlights why conversations about technology must include those most affected by change.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council work with local employers to promote responsible use of AI in recruitment and support national action to protect entry-level roles at risk of automation.*

### **6.13 Communications and Visibility**

Women consistently said that they often do not know what support is available, highlighting a widespread gap in awareness that shapes their ability to access help. Many who had heard of the support on offer — such as Good Work Camden — explained that they only learned about it through word of mouth from a family member, friend or neighbour. Camden Carers added that online information can be difficult to navigate, especially for those who are digitally excluded, and said that clearer eligibility criteria, plain-language explanations, and more community-based information sessions would make a real difference. Women from Rhyl Primary School echoed this, suggesting more social events and job fairs in places women already attend, such as schools, to help ensure information reaches those who need it.

In addition to clearer communication, participants emphasised the importance of trusted messengers. Women repeatedly said that community connectors—people who understand their culture or speak their language—can make a significant difference to whether information feels accessible or relevant. Camden Council already works with community organisations and faith leaders to spread the word about key services and opportunities, and aims to continue finding creative ways to do this so that information is shared in more trusted, familiar spaces.

Across these discussions, women emphasised that they want information that is not only accessible but genuinely useful for making decisions about work, training and childcare. Parent Champions highlighted the need for clearer job adverts, better visibility of flexible roles, and a directory bringing together training options with information about childcare. These reflections illustrate how improving the clarity,

accessibility and reach of information — both online and in community spaces — would help women understand what is available to them and make informed choices about their next steps.

*Therefore, we recommend that Camden Council continue to strengthen communication about opportunities, including through community-based outreach and create clearer, more centralised information on training, childcare and flexible employment. This could include Good Work Camden and Adult Community Learning visiting local community centres, libraries and schools where residents are already going to tell them about the support and opportunities available. Camden Council should produce clear, accessible materials to help women navigate employment and training options, which should be distributed at key transition points such as pregnancy, nursery, and school entry stages.*

#### **6.14 Systemic Barriers – National Change**

Some barriers identified by women extend beyond the borough. Women's experiences also highlighted how many of the challenges they face are shaped by national systems, where rules and processes often fail to reflect the realities of care, poverty and instability. Participants described the impact of national childcare policy, benefit rules and the design of employment support systems.

Women spoke about the difficulties of meeting the requirements of DWP Jobcentre appointments and the Restart programme while managing childcare. Several participants described being called to appointments at short notice or during school pick-up times, which created stress and sometimes led to sanctions. Mothers said they often felt unable to explain their caring responsibilities or were afraid that doing so would be seen as non-compliance. They told us that Jobcentre coaches asked them “the same basic questions every time”, without building ongoing trusted relationships with them. Women contrasted this with Good Work Camden's relational approach, where advisers take time to understand family pressures and adapt support accordingly. Participants said they wanted national employment programmes to adopt similar principles, so women are not deterred from seeking work or training because of fear of sanctions or rigid appointment systems. These accounts show how national employment systems can unintentionally create additional strain for women already managing complex demands.

Partners, such as Crossroads Women's Centre, expressed deep frustration that national policy does not meaningfully acknowledge the value of unpaid care or the pressures facing low-income households. They emphasised the need for affordable childcare, flexible apprenticeships, and reforms to the two-child benefit cap, which they said traps families in poverty. This reveals how far national policy still has to go in responding to the gendered nature of economic exclusion.

Furthermore, returner programmes, including The Well Placed and Back2Business programme highlighted age discrimination, digital barriers and the lack of national pathways for career returners. Evidence from the Uncertain Futures Project showed that older women face cumulative disadvantage over their life course, with consequences for pensions, financial stability and wellbeing due to caring responsibilities, often compounded if women take time off work while they have a partner who continues to work full-time but the relationship ends. These experiences demonstrate that without national reform, women will continue to carry the long-term economic costs of care.

Women also spoke about the growing impact of the gig economy on their income security and wellbeing. Some participants said that both they and their partners relied on app-based work, such as takeaway delivery and carpooling apps, because it offered flexibility around childcare and irregular hours. However, women explained that this work provides little stability and no guaranteed income, which makes it difficult to budget or plan childcare and training. Through our discussions with specialist organisations such as Women at the Well, we also heard concerns about the darker side of online gig work. WATW described cases where vulnerable women were approached through social media platforms, encouraged to see themselves as content creators on OnlyFans and then drawn into exploitative arrangements, including coercive control of online accounts and pressure to engage in in-person sexual activity. These examples show how gaps in national regulation of gig-based and online work can increase risks for women who are already facing disadvantage.

*Therefore, we recommend that national government expand childcare support, roll out flexible apprenticeships, address benefit-related poverty traps, and share good practice from boroughs like Camden to create a more inclusive labour market for women.*

## 7. What Women Told Us – Lived Experience

Women's experiences were at the heart of this inquiry. The Forum held ten focus groups and a number of community conversations with women from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Somali, Bangladeshi, Eritrean, Colombian, Albanian, Polish, White British and Black Caribbean to name just a few; disabled and neurodivergent women; carers; young women; women in temporary accommodation; and ESOL learners.

This section draws on the voices and lived experiences of the women who contributed to the inquiry. It brings together themes from focus groups, one-to-one interviews and conversations with voluntary and community sector partners.

The vignettes below are **composite stories**. They do not describe any single individual but are based on repeated experiences and quotes shared by women in Camden. Names and identifying details have been changed or blended to protect anonymity.

These stories illustrate how different barriers – childcare, health, housing, immigration status, discrimination, digital exclusion and the design of employment services – come together in women’s daily lives.

### **7.1 “You cannot plan anything”: a mother in temporary accommodation**

“Layla” is a single mother in her 30s with two young children. She is living in temporary accommodation, in a hotel that was originally meant to be a short stay. Over time, she has been moved several times – each move taking her further away from her children’s school and from the community support she trusts.

Her room has no desk or quiet space. She shares basic facilities with other families, and there is nowhere safe for the children to play or do homework. She wants to work, but every part of her life feels uncertain. When she is called to Jobcentre appointments, they often fall during school pickup times or clash with ad-hoc shifts. If she cannot attend, she worries about being sanctioned.

Childcare is an ongoing problem. Although national childcare entitlements have expanded, Layla struggles to navigate the system. She is anxious about putting her youngest into childcare far from home and does not have family nearby to help. Travel costs to nursery or after-school care quickly add up, and the upfront payments feel impossible on a tight budget.

She has tried to attend ESOL and digital skills courses, but moving between hotels and emergency placements has repeatedly cut these short. Each time she starts to build confidence, she has to begin all over.

Layla’s story reflects what many women in temporary accommodation told the Forum:

- They want to work or train, but unstable housing and poverty create constant crises.
- They experience ongoing stress and anxiety, which makes long-term planning difficult.

### **5.2 “I’m always masking”: a midlife carer balancing health, care and work**

“Maria” is in her late 40s. She has spent many years juggling part-time work with caring for her mother and her teenage son, who is autistic and has a learning disability. She used to work in a skilled role but left after repeated clashes over working hours and lack of flexibility when caring crises arose.

Since then, her health has worsened. She experiences chronic pain, anxiety and symptoms she now realises were related to menopause, but which she had previously put down to “stress and tiredness”. She told us she feels like she is “always masking” how exhausted she is so that professionals don’t see her as a problem.

Maria wants to return to work, but standard recruitment processes feel out of reach. She worries about explaining gaps on her CV. She is unsure how to talk about her health without being screened out early, and is anxious about whether she could sustain a job if her caring responsibilities intensify. She also needs to find a job within walking distance of her home, as she can’t risk getting stuck in traffic if there’s an emergency and her mother or son need her to get home urgently.

By contrast, contact with Good Work Camden and Camden Carers felt more positive. Workers took time to understand her caring role and health needs, and helped her think about realistic next steps – such as short training courses, volunteering that could fit around her responsibilities, and exploring more flexible roles. However, she is yet to find a paid role in the local area that she feels confident would fit in with the rest of her responsibilities.

Maria’s story reflects what we heard from many carers and women with long-term conditions:

- Caring is constant and often unpredictable; employers can underestimate the time and emotional labour involved.
- Health and caring intersect in ways that make traditional full-time work difficult.

### **7.3 “Three biases at once”: a young woman navigating discrimination and digital barriers**

“Amina” is a young British woman of Somali heritage in her early twenties. She left school with good results, despite the impact of isolation during Covid lockdowns on her academic confidence, but has struggled to find stable work. She has done short-term retail jobs and unpaid internships, all on low or erratic hours.

She has applied for numerous jobs online but rarely hears back, which she finds demoralising. She said that when she is invited to interview, she is fighting multiple biases at once – being Black, Muslim and a woman. She worries her gaps in her work history are judged more harshly than others’.

Digital processes add another layer. Amina can use her smartphone confidently, but finds long online forms, timed tests and unfamiliar recruitment platforms difficult to navigate. She experiences eye strain and headaches from spending hours on screens and sometimes worries she has made mistakes she cannot see. She finds that people assume because she’s a “digital native”, having grown up with technology, that she doesn’t need any help with completing tasks online.

She wants to explore higher education but she and her family have concerns about interest-bearing student loans that are not Islamically compliant. She has heard of alternative student finance options but does not feel well informed or sure how to access them.

Her story reflects wider patterns:

- Young women from a number of ethnic minority communities, including Somali women, can face overlapping discrimination related to race, faith, gender and age.
- Increasingly digital recruitment systems are experienced as opaque and unforgiving.

#### **7.4 “Starting again in a new language”: a migrant woman rebuilding confidence**

“Maryam” arrived in Camden as a refugee. In her home country she worked as a teacher, but she came to the UK with limited documents and no formal recognition of her qualifications. When she first arrived, she spoke little English and relied on community organisations for support. She attended ESOL classes but struggled to practise English outside the classroom – most of her daily interactions were in her first language, and she was nervous about making mistakes in public.

Maryam’s confidence was further undermined by experiences of racism and discrimination. She applied for jobs well below her skill level but was often unsuccessful.

Over time, a local women’s organisation connected her to volunteering in a community café. There she could practise English in a real environment, meet people from different backgrounds and gradually rebuild her sense of purpose. Staff at Good Work Camden later supported her to explore how her previous teaching experience could be recognised, even though some of her paperwork was missing.

Maryam’s story shows how:

- Migration, trauma and loss of status can have long-term impacts on women’s confidence and economic participation.
- ESOL is most effective when embedded in practical activities, linked to volunteering or work experience.
- Trusted community organisations play a crucial role in bridging gaps between women and formal services.

#### **7.5 What these stories tell us**

These anonymised stories reveal women's ambition and determination to work, study, volunteer and contribute, while also exposing systemic barriers such as childcare, housing, benefits, discrimination and digital exclusion. They underscore the importance of relational, trauma-informed support that recognises the realities of caring, health, migration and poverty, and highlight the value of trusted community organisations and accessible local spaces.

Crucially, they point to the need for national reform that acknowledges unpaid care, removes poverty traps and ensures employment and skills systems work for women rather than against them. These lived experiences underpin the recommendations in this report and must guide how Camden and its partners design future support.

## 8. Conclusion and next steps

The stories shared by women across Camden this year reveal a stark truth: economic inactivity is a matter of systemic exclusion. Despite national reforms promising expanded childcare, flexible working rights, and improved employment services, these changes remain out of reach for many women, especially those with caring responsibilities, facing skills barriers, from marginalised communities, or living in poverty.

We heard from women who are eager to work but held back by unaffordable childcare, inaccessible training, and rigid workplace cultures. We heard from mothers who feel punished for prioritising care, from young women unsure how to navigate the world of work, and from older women who feel written out of the labour market altogether. We heard from women who are digitally excluded, who lack confidence, and who face language barriers that make even the first step into employment feel insurmountable.

Yet, we also heard resilience. Women spoke of their determination to build better futures, for themselves, their children, and their communities. They shared ideas for change, praised the support they've received through Camden's inclusive programmes, and called for more of what works: flexible jobs, tailored training, peer support, and employers who understand their lives.

This report reflects the barriers that women face and is also a call to action. Camden has already shown leadership through initiatives like Good Work Camden, the Inclusive Business Network, and its enhanced childcare offer. However, the scale of economic inactivity, disproportionately affecting women, demands more. It demands that we reimagine employment support, redesign services around women's real lives, and challenge the structures that keep women out of work.

These challenges span all social classes, from women with high earning potential who face persistent pay gaps to those excluded entirely from secure work. The consequences are felt not only by individuals and families but by the wider economy,

with lost productivity and wasted talent undermining growth. The welfare system, employment services, and workplace norms must evolve to meet the needs of today's women.

The recommendations in this report offer a roadmap for Camden and for councils and communities across the UK. They are rooted in women's voices, shaped by their experiences, and driven by their hope.

## With thanks to:

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- Camden Adult Social Care Service
- Camden Carers
- Camden Carers Action Plan Board
- Camden Disability Action
- Camden Council Early Years Service
- Camden Future Talent Programme
- Camden Inclusive Business Network
- Camden Parent Champions
- Camden People and Inclusion Team
- Camden Prevention and Wellbeing Team
- Camden Strength & Equalities Forum
- Camden Trade Unions (Unison, GMB, National Education Union)
- Camden Welfare Rights Team
- Centre for Prevention (UCL, Tavistock, Camden Council)
- Crossroads Women's Centre
- Earlybird AI
- Forum Plus
- Healthwatch Camden
- Henna Asian Women's Group

- Home Start Camden & Islington
- Hopscotch Women’s Centre
- Kentish Town Connects
- Lifeafterhummus
- Luminary Bakery
- NCL Maternity Voices
- Raise Camden Taskforce
- Rhyl Primary School
- Spicy Laass, Somers Town Community Centre
- Temporary Accommodation Team, Camden Council
- The Well Placed
- Think & Do Camden
- Timewise
- Uncertain Futures Project
- Women at the Well
- Working Men’s College

## Appendices

1. Evidence & Data Pack
2. [Literature Review - Childcare](#)

## Speech Bubbles (final page)

- *“When I got the job, they didn’t understand that if your baby isn’t feeling well you can’t go to work - they say ‘you can’t leave’, **they think you’re lying**. I was given three warnings: if I leave work at any time to get my kids, cancelling a shift or getting late. The manager knew I had a baby and toddler at the time.”*
- *“I want to train at [college], but I keep thinking: will the job at the end pay me enough so I’m better off? I cannot take that risk if I still need to pay childcare and rent.”*
- *“There is a fear of being labelled a burden [...] It is like **we have to be exceptional** to deserve flexibility.”*
- *“People think a career gap means you don’t care, but **I was caring the whole time**.”*
- *“[There’s] an **ache in your heart** because you want independence but also feel guilty leaving your children.”*
- *“We’re **juggling** everyone’s appointments and our own.”*
- *“Childcare is always the problem – it **stops us before we even start**.”*

- *“You cannot plan anything when you do not know where you will be living next month.”*
- *“Balance is the **easiest word to say** but the hardest thing to do as a parent.”*