

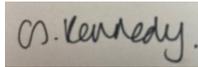
<b>LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN</b>	<b>WARDS:</b> All
<b>REPORT TITLE</b> Update on Themed Debate - We Make Camden Together: Camden's Voluntary and Community Sector's Role in Building Safer, Stronger Communities through Collaboration and Shared Purpose in Challenging Times	
<b>REPORT OF</b> Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Equalities and Cohesion	
<b>FOR SUBMISSION TO</b> Council	<b>DATE</b> 2 <sup>nd</sup> March 2026
<b>SUMMARY OF REPORT</b>  This report provides an update on the themed debate at the Council meeting in January 2026 on the Voluntary and Community Sector in Camden.  Speakers from Camden’s VCS highlighted the critical role the sector plays in mobilising community action, helping to tackle poverty and inequality and building communities’ sense of belonging and cohesion. They also highlighted the challenges facing organisations, including rising demand and complexity of need, in a context where funding is precarious and where the sector is faced with pressures on workforce and volunteering, and challenges maintaining suitable premises and community spaces.  Councillors expressed appreciation for the tireless work of the voluntary, community and faith organisations in the borough. Building on some of the strong, trusting and collaborative relationships between the council and the VCS, there was a sense of renewed commitment to work together around shared purpose and shared leadership to tackle the challenges facing communities in Camden.  The report summarises the key points made by speakers, the subsequent comments and questions from Councillors and highlights the next steps from the discussion.  <b>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information</b>  No documents have been used in the preparation of this report:  <b>Contact Officers:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John Muir, Head of Community Partnerships, <a href="mailto:john.muir@camden.gov.uk">john.muir@camden.gov.uk</a></li> <li>• Rosie Tharpe, Community Partnerships – Strategic Lead, <a href="mailto:rosie.tharpe@camden.gov.uk">rosie.tharpe@camden.gov.uk</a></li> <li>• Sassaka Amena, Community Partnerships – Strategic Lead, <a href="mailto:sassaka.amena@camden.gov.uk">sassaka.amena@camden.gov.uk</a></li> <li>• Rachel Cain, Community Partner, <a href="mailto:rachel.cain@camden.gov.uk">rachel.cain@camden.gov.uk</a></li> <li>• Hugh Smith, Head of Corporate Strategy <a href="mailto:hugh.smith@camden.gov.uk">hugh.smith@camden.gov.uk</a></li> </ul>	

London Borough of Camden, 5 Pancras Square, N1C 4AG,

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Council is asked to consider the report.

Signed:

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "C. Kennedy".

**Caroline Kennedy**

Acting Director of Participation, Partnerships and Communications

Date: 19 February 2026

## **1. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND**

- 1.1. Camden's strong, diverse, and dynamic voluntary and community sector (VCS) has a decades-long track record of mobilising community action, helping to tackle poverty and inequality and building communities' sense of belonging and cohesion. This track record reflects the anti-poverty, anti-inequality, and anti-discrimination movements that have stimulated and nurtured the growth of much the borough's VCS. Camden's VCS is central to the social fabric of the borough, and the sector plays a vital role in realising the shared vision for the future of our borough, as set out in We Make Camden.
- 1.2. The report to full Council in January highlighted the impact of the sector as well as the Council's partnership with and commitment to the sector. It also highlighted critical challenges facing organisations, operating in the context of economic pressures, rising complexity and risks to community cohesion.
- 1.3. The Council was privileged to hear from eight speakers from VCS and Faith organisations in Camden. The diverse range of leaders from organisations – representing the breadth of the sector's work – spoke insightfully and passionately about their experiences in building safer, stronger communities and of the council's work with the sector.
  1. Rev Kate Dean, Rosslyn Hill Chapel
  2. Sophie Kruger, Young Camden Foundation
  3. Suraya Miah, Participatory Grant Making Camden Giving
  4. Daniel Pitt, Old Diorama Arts Centre (ODAC) and Co-Chair of C4
  5. Ellie Rudd, Youth Leadership & Regents Park Champion's Manager, Fitzrovia Youth in Action
  6. Yusuf Deerow (Director) Somali Youth Development Resource Centre
  7. Paul Webley, Age UK Camden
  8. Rashid Iqbal, The Winchester Project

## **2. SUMMARY OF FULL COUNCIL DEBATE**

- 2.1. The debate was introduced by Councillor Nadia Shah, Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Equalities, and Cohesion. Councillor Shah set out how critical the longstanding partnership between Camden Council and the VCS is to communities across the borough; especially the most vulnerable and during times of division. She outlined Camden Council's ongoing support of the VCS, including the £4.1 million per year grant funding programme, while highlighting key challenges for the VCS facing rising demand and increasing running costs. Councillor Shah reiterated the Council's commitment to celebrating diversity and the critical role the VCS plays in building inclusive and cohesive communities, highlighting the importance of this in a world where some seek to promote and exploit division.

- 2.2. Reverend Kate Dean (Roslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel) spoke about the vital role of faith communities as inclusive “third spaces”- places for people to meet and belong. The chapel increasingly responds to social as well as spiritual needs through activities such as community lunches, toddler groups and interfaith gatherings, providing an antidote to loneliness. Kate highlighted that volunteering patterns have changed too, noting that goodwill alone can no longer be relied on and sometimes appreciation requires payment and funding. Kate actively seeks collaborators and reflected on how time with people from diverse backgrounds helps us to find common ground, strengthens the chapel’s work, and grows better leaders. Resources and tools such as Camden’s Cohesion Fund and Camden’s active Interfaith Network have supported this collaboration. Kate’s highlighted how participation in Camden’s VCS Leadership Programme is supporting her leadership practice – which effectively involves acting as a charity chief executive. Kate urged the Council to continue supporting collaborators in their work to build better third spaces to help end loneliness and strengthen community cohesion
- 2.3. Sophie Kruger (Young Camden Foundation) presented a stark, insightful and urgent overview of the pressures facing Camden’s VCS. She highlighted the immense reach of the sector, which addresses some of the sharpest inequalities. However, with high demand and more complex needs, much of the sector has spent several years firefighting to keep essential services running. This has often been at the expense of strategic planning, staff burnout and a lack of workforce development and digital infrastructure. Alongside greater public investment Sophie highlighted the opportunity to strengthen the culture of giving and accountability of business contributions to our borough. With Camden’s 38,000 businesses, a mobilised innovative VCS and political commitment and leadership, Sophie outlined in a call-to-action how Camden has the conditions to set a national example of a better future.
- 2.4. Suraya Miah (Camden Giving) offered a powerful perspective of her relationship with the VCS that is not just professional but deeply personal. She described her journey into the VCS as a resident and citizen social scientist, working alongside neighbours to turn lived experience into practical solutions, demonstrating that communities don't just have stories, they have solutions. Alongside Suraya’s experience of working within the VCS, becoming a social worker for the Council gave her a view from inside the system and an understanding of the pressure that statutory services are under. However, this also highlighted the difference the VCS makes through trusted relationships, early support and deep local knowledge. When people are trusted, supported and empowered to act, they take ownership and create change. Working at Camden Giving Suraya reflected on how participatory grant making shifts power to communities making it fairer, responsive and rooted in the community itself – a recognition that lived experience is expertise. She also highlighted the investment in the VCS Leadership Course, and the opportunity this brings. Suraya identified opportunities to deepen shared decision-making, to invest in relationships and leadership for the long term and to create conditions for the next generation of Camden's leaders. Suraya also reminded us of the need to nurture each other as neighbours, leaders and partners.

- 2.5. Daniel Pitt (Old Diorama Arts Centre / C4 Camden Community Centres Consortium) spoke on behalf of community centres as anchor organisations, strategic leaders in place with real trust and reach into communities. Daniel described C4 members as allies to Camden's Missions - community spaces and centres providing essential social and cultural infrastructure across Camden. He highlighted the breadth of work delivered by C4 members and the sector, supporting the health of residents, and the key to prevention, wellbeing and resident empowerment. Daniel made a strong case for involving community organisations early in policy development, procurement and regeneration processes, arguing that they are best placed to reach residents and deliver meaningful engagement. He described the financial fragility facing many centres, with rising costs outpacing income, and cutting back on maintenance being the only way to survive. Daniel called for public capital investment into community premises to keep the lights on and the leaks out, and more constructive use of social value commitments from the private sector. His contribution highlighted an opportunity to harness corporate social value commitments in more useful ways and urged that community centres are put at the heart of thinking.
- 2.6. Ellie Rudd (Fitzrovia Youth in Action) grounded her contribution in frontline practice, describing recent work with young people from Somers Town and Regent's Park focused on leadership, creativity and social action. She advocated strongly for a borough-wide approach to meaningful youth and resident participation, giving people power that goes beyond consultation into being part of the implementation and making change happen. Ellie highlighted successful examples where young people have shaped services and neighbourhood change, while also raising concerns about frustration and disengagement when repeated consultations do not lead to visible action. Ellie also expressed that not all areas of the Council are as responsive as others and encouraged teams across the Council to recognise that residents are our experts who can help address issues together. Ellie stressed the importance of creating paid or incentivised pathways for young people, particularly for those facing disadvantage, and called for better connections between individual support services and peer support and social action opportunities. Ellie highlighted that residents of all ages across our neighbourhoods are invested in their own community who want to see it improve and be part of that improvement and encouraged the Council to be consistent in its engagement and collaboration with residents.
- 2.7. Yusuf Deerow, Somali Youth Development Resource Centre (SYDRC) shared a compelling personal story of growing up in Camden as a Somali refugee and the role that VCS organisations played in shaping his life. Places where Yusuf could learn, belong and feel safe and supported. He explained how these experiences influenced his leadership of SYDRC, which focuses on creating pathways for young people from volunteering and paid work into long-term progression and leadership. Yusuf highlighted the organisation's long-running Education Achievement Awards as a way of celebrating success, challenging negative stereotypes about young Somali people and inspiring future generations. He indicated how much more there is to do to improve

these pathways, especially for young people from council estates who often feel that large organisations, particularly in tech, are not for them. Changing that mindset is critical. Yusuf reflected that Camden already has a strong relationship with the VCS but outlined how there's scope to deepen this by bringing organisations together more intentionally, to share learning, coordinate and collaborate. He emphasised the importance of meaningful, fair collaboration. Yusuf praised the impact of long-term funding in building organisational capacity and sustainability however he also raised structural challenges, including the affordability of community spaces and how this can act as a barrier to delivering social value.

- 2.8. Paul Webley (Age UK Camden) focused on importance of independent, community-based advice as a preventative and cost-effective service that enables residents to maintain dignity, independence and financial security. He highlighted the growing and increasingly complex needs of older residents in Camden. Last year Age UK Camden supported 4,000 people supported - 41% live alone, 69% live with disability or a lifelong condition. Paul described the impact of the Camden Advice Network, a partnership of 12 organisations supported by multi-year core funding, which allows organisations to plan, retain skilled staff and leverage additional resources including further funding of around £2m a year. Collectively the network supports 10,000 residents and since 2020 has helped write off £1.8m in debt and access more than £60m in unclaimed benefits. He gave powerful examples of outreach work and home visits that ensure isolated residents are not excluded and described how support has helped residents avoid stark choices between heating and food. His contribution reinforced the case for sustained long-term investment in advice and support to ensure that no one in Camden is left behind.
- 2.9. Rashid Iqbal (The Winch) delivered a reflective account of the voluntary sector's role in Camden, weaving together history, partnership and values. He revisited the founding story of the Winch to challenge the myth of heroic, standalone action, emphasising instead the interdependence of residents, the Council and philanthropic support. Rashid highlighted the scale of the Winch's collaborations with over 70 partners coming together to make Camden a great place to live, learn and grow up in. He described the Winch's approach as operating at the "scale of trust," rooted in long-term relationships, shared accountability and meaningful engagement - a shared endeavour where people organise voluntarily to address shared concerns. He highlighted the organisation's difficult but principled decision to withdraw from a proposed redevelopment in order to better serve its community from its existing home. Rashid described the Winch's partnership with the Council as that of interdependent allies and critical friends. His contribution framed the VCS as a vital democratic force in times of "permacrisis," powered by hope and generosity, and called on elected members to continue holding open the door to shared decision-making.
- 2.10. Summary of key themes highlighted by guest speakers:

- Speakers emphasised the importance of trust-based partnerships and shared power, particularly through participatory approaches to funding, policy design and service delivery.
- Community spaces – whether faith buildings, community centres or advice hubs – were repeatedly described as essential infrastructure for cohesion, prevention and wellbeing, yet under increasing financial strain.
- Loneliness, isolation and inequality were identified as cross-cutting challenges affecting all ages, with the VCS playing a critical role in reaching those least connected to statutory services.
- Many speakers highlighted the fragility of the sector due to rising demand, rising costs and limited reserves, alongside the need for long-term funding, leadership development and capital investment.
- Finally, there was a shared call for collaboration that is meaningful, fair and rooted in lived experience, ensuring that Camden continues to build stronger, safer communities together.

2.11. After the guest speakers had spoken, members of the Council were invited to speak and ask questions. Councillors raised the following points:

- Camden's relationship with the VCS was highlighted as a defining strength, grounded in both significant investment and an approach that treats VCS organisations as equal partners in designing and delivering services. It was highlighted how sharing power with citizens and the VCS improves outcomes because organisations are often closer to residents than the council can be. Collaboration between VCS organisations at a ward level through the Community Connectedness Fund was reported as having led to creative and innovative 'bottom up' community responses.
- Tribute was paid to the Winch's longstanding impact on children, young people, and the wider community. The significance of the Winch's decision to withdraw from the 100 Avenue Road development was highlighted as a bold and principled choice that should be respected and supported. A question was asked about how the council will work with the Winch to secure its future by investing in and improving its current building.
- There were reflections on the breadth and depth of VCS activity across the borough, recognising the contribution of SYDRC and other local organisations. The need for a long-term approach to capital investment for community facilities was raised, and a suggestion that Camden should explore lobbying for greater national investment. There was also a call for faster and more coordinated repairs in council-owned buildings, particularly those with residential flats above community premises.
- Camden's message that there is no place for hate in the borough was reiterated. It was emphasised that Councillors and officers cannot deliver cohesion alone, and that it is the commitment, compassion, and energy of community organisations and volunteers that brings communities together in challenging times.
- The Good Neighbourhood Project was referenced as a powerful model of meaningful resident engagement and the Winch's role in shaping proposals for the Dobson Close Garages Vacant Spaces pilot was

acknowledged. A question was raised about the key lessons and takeaways that could inform future community-led work across Camden.

- Reflecting on how the debate reaffirmed the incredible work of the VCS in communities and recognising the challenges faced by the VCS, a question was raised about what more the Council can do to link up services and accelerate collaboration across the sector. A question was asked about how the council can support organisations with both risks and opportunities of technology and AI and use the borough's resources to help VCS organisations to thrive.
- Expressing appreciation for the VCS, a question was asked as to how the council will ensure that significant investment does not repeatedly flow to the same larger organisations, and how funding decisions will continue to open opportunities for smaller groups and those not historically funded.
- It was stated that the debate clearly demonstrated the collaboration and shared purpose between the VCS and council, while also acknowledging the reality of challenging operating conditions. VCS speakers were asked to reflect on the main challenges they face and what could help address these pressures.
- The Winch's decision to secure its future in its original home was welcomed and there was reference to support already provided to make the building safe, with an intention to assist further with improvements where possible. It was also highlighted that there have been efforts to secure a permanent home for Mary's, a youth violence prevention charity, by leveraging support from contractors involved in the Chalcots Estate major works programme. A question was raised about how the borough can further draw on the resources of external partners to benefit the VCS.
- Reflecting on the work that the VCS does to connect people, the additional investment in community connectedness was welcomed, and a question was raised about how the council can ensure this funding reaches the most isolated residents. An example was shared about how choir participation at Roslyn Hill Chapel had provided a strong sense of belonging and mutual support for an individual, including practical help such as lifts to services after becoming frailer.
- A personal account of volunteering was shared, explaining how contributing time to a local women's centre became a two-way relationship that rebuilt confidence, supported wellbeing, and helped a transition into charity sector work. A question was raised how the Council and the sector can work together to promote the benefits of volunteering, particularly for wellbeing, loneliness and building confidence.
- An example of feedback from a resident involved in the Good Neighbourhood Assembly was shared, reflecting on how it reduced loneliness as well as bringing benefits for the community. Referencing the recent Community Connectedness Fund, a question was raised about what might be the next project for residents to get involved with, building on the Good Neighbourhood and Green Neighbourhood projects.
- Camden's broad definition of the VCS – which explicitly includes faith organisations – was welcomed. Examples of the critical role that faith organisations play as a first point of contact for residents was acknowledged. The challenges that faith organisations have with

maintaining some of the largest and most historic community buildings in the borough was highlighted and it was recommended that the Council and partners explore how these spaces could be redeveloped or adapted for wider community use. The importance of interfaith work and the role of Camden's Interfaith Network in sustaining cohesion at a time of heightened international tensions was highlighted as being of particular importance.

- Thanks were given to speakers, and an example was shared of how volunteering had provided purpose and meaning for a local resident during a period of traumatic life events. The work associated with managing and supporting volunteers was acknowledged, and the essential role that volunteers play in supporting grassroots groups to function was highlighted. The importance of collaboration between the Council and VCS to encourage volunteering in the borough was emphasised.
- Praise and appreciation for Camden's VCS was expressed, and attention was drawn to the VCS' ability to bring funding into Camden communities – with every £1 of council investment leveraging a further £10. It was acknowledged that the VCS is currently operating in really challenging conditions yet still continues to make life tangibly easier for residents.

2.12. Councillor Shah's closing statement summarised the debate by thanking speakers and reiterating Council support for the VCS. She highlighted the range of funding available through the VCS investment programme including the We Make Camden Project Fund which intentionally prioritises smaller organisations and those new to Council funding. Councillor Shah also drew attention to the recent Community Connectedness Conversations programme which encourages collaboration and has a focus on outreach to residents not engaged with services. She praised the adaptability of the sector to meet changing resident need while simultaneously facing their own challenges to meet the rising demand and complexity of needs. Councillor Shah closed by emphasising the strength of the Council's relationship with the VCS and the intentional and proactive work that is continuing to build trust and strengthen partnerships further.

2.13. Summary of key themes raised during Councillor contributions and questions.

- **Cohesion:** Recognition of the central role of the VCS and faith sector in sustaining community cohesion in difficult times.
- **Operating context:** A reminder of the scale and value of community work, particularly in the context of cost-of-living pressures, inflation and rising operating costs. Risks and opportunities for AI, issues of digital capability and opportunities to use the borough's resources and networks to help VCS organisations become more resilient and future ready.
- **Collaboration:** There was praise for examples where Camden shares power, codesigns and works with the VCS as equal partners. Opportunities to ensure a more joined up approach across all Council services to embed this work.

- **Funding and investment:** Camden's significant investment in the sector was acknowledged across a range of grants programmes, and how this is used to leverage additional resources into the borough. Ensuring investment is equitable for smaller or previously unfunded groups.
- **Premises and repairs:** The importance of a long-term approach to capital investment in Camden's Community Spaces. Creative opportunities for adaptation of faith spaces for wider community use
- **Volunteering:** Volunteering is recognised as central to community strength, wellbeing and tackling isolation, however it was also acknowledged that this requires resource. Opportunities for the Council and sector to work together to promote the benefits of volunteering for both volunteers and organisations.

### 3. NEXT STEPS

- 3.1. The debate reaffirmed the strength, depth and longstanding relationship between Camden's VCS and the council as a defining strength of the borough. Speakers consistently highlighted that the strength of this relationship lies not only in investment, but in shared purpose, shared ambitions, shared power and a shared desire for relationships of trust, collaboration and constructive challenge. The speeches from VCS representative demonstrated the kind of leadership needed to create solutions working with residents and communities, calling on the council and partners to work together to achieve this.
- 3.2. Speakers highlighted ways in which the Council can, and frequently does, play an enabling role, sharing public resources and working in ways that build community strength – unlocking the resource and resourcefulness of Camden's communities. Speakers highlighted where the council was doing this effectively and called on the Council to build on this, ensuring that the sector and the people they work with are involved early, meaningfully and as equal partners in shaping policy, strategy, funding and services.
- 3.3. Speakers highlighted approaches that involved, enabled and built agency amongst citizens, communities and the VCS. Initiatives such as participatory grant making, citizen-led research, and long-term funding through Camden's VCS Investment Programme that have enabled long-term relational work were viewed as key strengths to build upon.
- 3.4. Community centres and faith buildings were repeatedly described as essential community assets and as vital community spaces, and the depth and breadth of the work of the VCS around prevention, wellbeing, tackling isolation was recognised. Speakers highlighted the challenges of rising costs, deferred maintenance and ageing buildings and the impact this has on keeping even existing services running. This raises important considerations for how the Council understands, plans for and invests in community infrastructure over the long term, including how capital, repairs, estates management and regeneration projects can interact to ensure that community spaces are places that we can all- including the most isolated- be part of and proud of.

- 3.5. The debate celebrated the reach, adaptability, resilience and impact of Camden's VCS and faith sector. But it also exposed fragility: rising demand, limited reserves, funding and financial challenges, workforce pressures and constrained capacity for strategic planning and digital development. The sector is faced with significant structural challenges in a context of constrained public spending. VCS organisations have multiple touchpoints with Council departments and services. The range of challenges facing the sector highlighted the importance of the council developing a 'whole council' approach, building on Camden's VCS [Theory of Change](#), and of viewing the sector as critical social infrastructure vital to the borough's strength and resilience. There is a significant opportunity to invest in the long-term development and leadership of the sector.
- 3.6. Councillors and speakers alike raised the question of how collaboration can be strengthened "at scale" – not only between individual organisations, but across council services, funders, businesses and anchor institutions. The debate highlighted the Council's leadership and convening role and the potential to better align resources, social value and partnerships around shared outcomes through our ambitions for inclusive growth. It also highlighted opportunities for collaboration to be enabled in neighbourhoods as part of the Council's work with health services.
- 3.7. Volunteering and voluntary action was described as central to community strength, sustaining impact and as foundational to the VCS. The debate highlighted the personal value of volunteering to build connections, skills and confidence. It also provided insights into the resource, skills and knowledge required by the VCS to enable this work. There is significant opportunity to support, value and promote the role and contribution volunteers make to Camden communities, including the financial value of voluntary action. There is also opportunity galvanise community action, agency and power through volunteering, citizen participation and decision-making.

#### **4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1. The Borough Solicitor has been consulted on this report and encourages the continuation of strong governance and regular reporting on key projects, policies, initiatives and funding by the Council to support, empower and work in partnership with the VCS community.

#### **5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1. The Director of Finance has been consulted and his comments are contained in the body of the report.

#### **6. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 There are no environmental implications associated with the report.

**REPORT ENDS**

