


LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: All
REPORT TITLE Persistent Absence, Inclusion and Alternative Provision	
REPORT OF Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion and Chief Executive Officer, Camden Learning	
FOR SUBMISSION TO Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee	DATE 11 November 2024
<p>SUMMARY OF REPORT</p> <p>This report discusses the prevalence of persistent absence in Camden’s schools and an overview of our work to ensure education is inclusive for all children. Overall attendance in Camden schools in 2023/24 has improved from previous years but remains below pre-pandemic levels and the proportion of pupils considered persistently absent is higher than comparable national rates. This report details our current work to improve attendance and inclusion of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and an overview of existing alternative provision and support for children known to social care, including looked after children.</p> <p>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information</p> <p>No documents that require listing have been used in the preparation of this report</p> <p>Contact Officer: Luella Baddeley, Senior Policy and Projects Officer Supporting People Strategy, London Borough of Camden 5 Pancras Square, London, N1C 4AG luella.baddeley@camden.gov.uk</p>	
<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p> <p>That the Committee comment on and note the report.</p>	



Signed:
Vikram Hansrani - Director of Education
Commissioning and Inclusion

Date: 30 October 2024



Stephen Hall, Chief Executive Officer,
Camden Learning

1. Purpose of Report

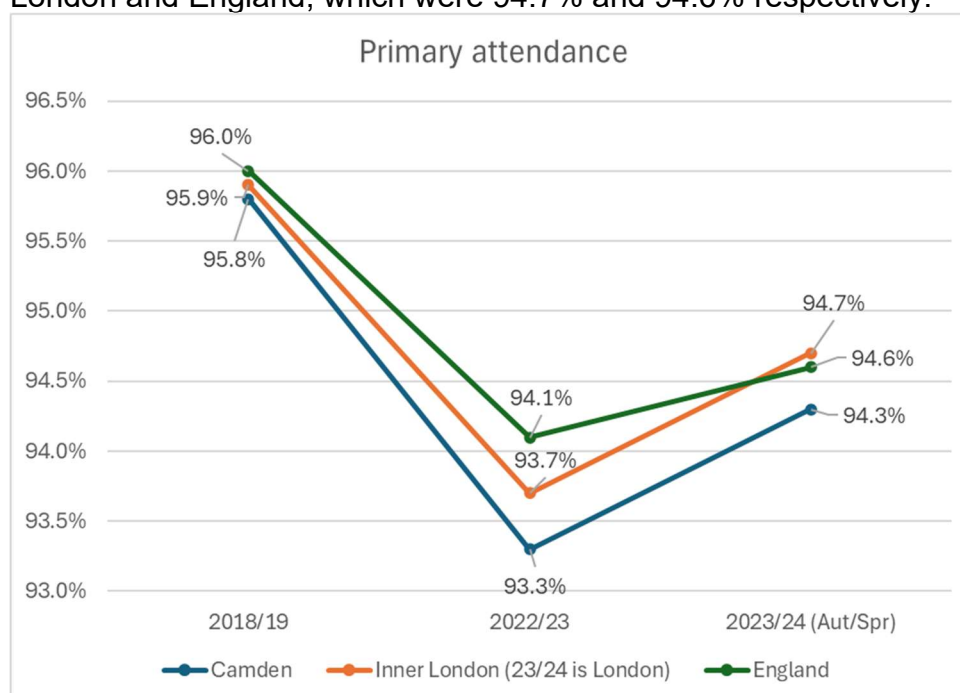
This report provides information on the prevalence of persistent absence in Camden's schools and an overview of our work to ensure education is inclusive for all children, including alternative provision where needed.

2. Introduction – Keeping Children in School and Learning

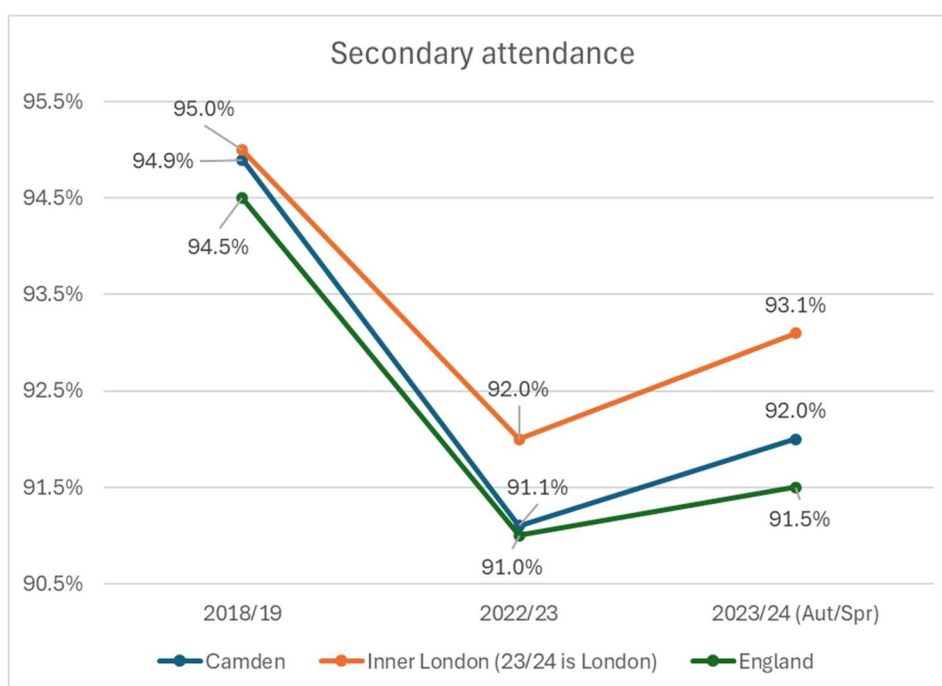
- 2.1. Camden's education strategy, [Building Back Stronger](#), emphasises the potential for education to nurture and develop individuals, and shape the values of future generations to create a fairer, more inclusive and sustainable society. Significant evidence links school attendance with positive health and educational outcomes. However, the benefits of school can only be realised if pupils attend and are engaged in education, and it meets their needs.
- 2.2. Persistent absence from schooling has been recognised as a major challenge, both in the United Kingdom and overseas since the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns. As outlined later in this report, children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are at particular risk of being persistently absent from education. Inclusion of pupils with SEND in schools and offering quality alternative provision where needed is key to ensuring that all children can remain engaged in learning.

3. Context, Attendance and Rates of Persistent Absence

- 3.1. Attendance at Camden's primary schools was higher in the 2023/24 academic year than in 2022/23 (94.3% compared to 93.3%), based on Autumn/Spring data, but remains lower than the 2018/19 pre-pandemic overall attendance rate of 95.8%. This is also lower than comparable Autumn/Spring rates for London and England, which were 94.7% and 94.6% respectively.



- 3.2. Persistent absence from school is defined as attendance below 90% of sessions. Autumn/Spring data for 2023/24 indicates that 1,505 primary school children in Camden were classified as being persistently absent. This represents 17.7% of Camden primary school children, compared to a London rate of 14.6% and a national rate of 14.7%.
- 3.3. As with primary, secondary school attendance in 2023/24 was slightly higher than 2022/23 (92% compared to 91.1%), based on Autumn/Spring data. This is lower than the comparable rate for London but higher than the national rate, which were 93.1% and 91.5% respectively. Secondary overall attendance also remains below the 2018/19 pre-pandemic rate of 94.9%.



- 3.4. In 2023/24, Autumn/Spring data indicates there were 1,894 persistently absent secondary school pupils in Camden. This represents 24% of secondary school pupils and is higher than the comparable London rate of 19.6% and national rate of 23.9%.
- 3.5. In September 2023, [Public First](#) published a report, based on national focus groups, to understand why attendance had declined since the pandemic. They found that '*parents no longer believed it is their responsibility to ensure their children are in school every day*' and that '*school closures during the pandemic had shifted this attitude in an unprecedented way*'.
- 3.6. The research found other factors affecting attendance included increased willingness for parents to take term-time holidays, a rise in mental health problems amongst young people and the cost-of-living crisis. The research did not find evidence that working from home was driving the drop in attendance. It also concluded fines for absence were counterproductive.
- 3.7. In 2022, the Department for Education issued revised non-statutory attendance guidance. Whilst recognising that there remains a place for legal

interventions in respect of school attendance, such as fixed penalty notices and prosecutions, it advocates for a 'support first' approach to pupil absence.

- 3.8. This guidance was updated and became statutory in August 2024. This coincided with new government regulations covering changes to how schools keep attendance registers and fixed penalty notices. These changes introduced revised registration codes for schools to use and a national framework for fixed penalty notice fines.
- 3.9. The national framework requires schools to consider referring for a penalty notice where a pupil has 10 sessions (five days) of unauthorised absence in a 10-week period. There is no requirement to refer, only to consider a referral.
- 3.10. The fixed penalty notice fine has increased to £160 per parent/carer per child. On the first offence this will be reduced to £80 if paid within 21 days. There is no reduction for a second offence within three years of the first offence. A fixed penalty notice cannot be issued for a third or subsequent offence within three years of the first offence. In these situations, the case can be prosecuted in the magistrates' court where a parent/carer could receive a fine of up to £2,500 per parent per child and a criminal record.
- 3.11. In 2023/24, Camden issued 546 fixed penalty notices; a reduction on the 646 issued in 2022/23. 464 of the fixed penalty notices issued in 2023/24 were for unauthorised leave in term time and 83 were for persistent absence.

Persistent Absence and School Exclusion

- 3.12. In 2022/23, 522 Camden secondary school children received one or more suspensions. This equates to 4.8% of Camden secondary school pupils, compared to 6.2% of Inner London secondary school pupils and 7.1% nationally. Provisional data for 2023/24 suggests that the percentage of secondary school pupils who received at least one suspension has increased to 6%. It is anticipated this will be below comparable rates for Inner London and England but is higher than the 2018/19 pre-pandemic rate of 5.2%. The average length of a suspension in secondary school in 2022/23 was 2.6 days.
- 3.13. In 2022/23, there was one permanent exclusion from a Camden primary school and 16 permanent exclusions from Camden secondary schools. There were no permanent exclusions from special schools.
- 3.14. Suspensions from Camden primary and secondary schools are lower than comparable rates for Inner London and England. In 2022/23, 33 primary school children received one or more suspensions, equating to 0.3% of Camden primary school pupils. This is lower than 0.5% of Inner London primary school pupils and 0.8% of primary school pupils nationally.
- 3.15. Provisional data for 2023/24 indicates the number of primary pupils who received a suspension has increased to 0.5%, however it is anticipated that this will remain below comparable Inner London and national rates and is

lower than the pre-pandemic rate in 2018/19 of 0.6%. The average length of a suspension from primary schools in 2022/23 was 2.05 days.

- 3.16. Suspension and exclusion are the cause of only a small proportion of student absences in Camden. In 2022/23, suspension or exclusion accounted for 0.1% of all missed sessions at primary school level and 1.9% of missed sessions at secondary school level.
- 3.17. They also account for only a small proportion of all sessions missed by pupils who are persistently absent. In secondary school, suspension and exclusion accounted for 3,910 missed sessions, or 2.6% of all sessions missed by persistently absent pupils, while at primary school level suspension accounted for 182 sessions or 0.2% of all sessions missed by persistently absent pupils.
- 3.18. Only two primary and seventy-nine secondary school students are classified as persistently absent due to suspension or exclusion alone. If these children had not received a suspension, Camden's persistent absence rate would be reduced by 1%. The remaining 443 secondary school children who received at least one suspension would still be considered persistently absent due to other reasons, even if they had not received a suspension from school.

Attendance of children known to social care

- 3.19. Attendance of children looked after (CLA) was a concern in 2023/24, with 18% meeting the threshold for persistent absence; an increase from 15% in 2022/23. This is lower than the national rate of 20% in 2022/23. 8% of CLA in Camden were severely absent in 2023/24, meaning they missed at least half of all sessions, compared to almost 5% across England.
- 3.20. Particularly concerning was the attendance rate in Year 11, which was 42.2% last academic year, a dramatic fall from the previous year. However, it should be noted this cohort faced the significant challenge of transitioning to Year 7 during the first COVID-19 lockdowns on top of existing vulnerabilities. Camden's Virtual School do a range of work to support these young people – initiatives and details of the support they provide is outlined further in 4.8.

4. Ongoing Work to Improve School Attendance

- 4.1. School attendance has been a strategic priority for Camden since the pandemic and a focus of work for schools. Schools have been promoting the benefits of regular attendance and working with children and families to overcome barriers to attendance. They have been supported in this endeavour with several initiatives.
- 4.2. A Camden 'back to school' campaign was run in September 2023, which involved placing posters in bus shelters around the borough, bookbag leaflets for primary schools to send to parents and posters that schools could display in their setting. The bus shelter posters were redisplayed in January 2024 and September 2024.

- 4.3. Fitzrovia Youth in Action (FYA) were jointly commissioned by Camden Council and Camden Learning to work with secondary-age children to produce a [school attendance video and carry out a series of pupil-led workshops in secondary schools](#). The video, released in September 2024, was written and produced by pupils from five Camden secondary schools and used as part of workshops with young people over the summer holidays and in schools during the autumn term. This initiative has received positive feedback from the Department for Education.
- 4.4. Using school census and other data, we recently conducted a multivariate analysis to examine the different factors influencing school attendance. We identified four main priority cohorts of children and young people (CYP) that currently have high rates of persistent absence from school:
- **CYP with Special Educational Needs** - children in the school census with an education, health and care (EHC) Plan,
 - **CYP that are known to social care** - children with a record in MOSAIC, (database used for children's social care)
 - **CYP eligible for free school meals (FSM)**
 - **Young Carers**
- 4.5. Within the cohorts above, there are three further specific cohorts at particular risk of persistent absence:
- **CYP with physical health or mental health issues** – children that have a MOSAIC coding for mental/physical health needs,
 - **CYP suffering bullying** – where bullying is listed amongst children's presenting reasons on their MOSAIC record,
 - **CYP from Asian/Bangladeshi communities** – as recorded on the school census.
- 4.6. Some cohorts were either not well covered within our data, or the cohort size was too small to make meaningful inferences. Although not specifically identified through the data analysis, professionals' judgement is that the following cohorts are also more likely to struggle with school attendance:
- CYP living in temporary accommodation
 - Refugees
 - CYP within the youth justice system
 - CYP with Care Experience.
- 4.7. Following this analysis, two test and learn projects will be piloted. A parental text messaging campaign is currently being developed with four schools and is due to begin by January 2025. A test and learn initiative is also being developed to trial providing schools with a named contact within their local Family Hub, to help them and families access the support available. This work is overseen by a steering group of senior officers, bringing together the council and Camden Learning, and will be considered by the Children's Trust Partnership Board through a focussed conversation on attendance in November.

- 4.8. In order to work with the most vulnerable pupils, and those with the highest rates of persistent absence, this year the Camden Learning school inclusion team have employed three School Inclusion Support Officers (SISO) to provide guidance and resources to Camden schools about attendance, suspensions, and pupils with medical needs. Each Camden school now has a named School Inclusion Support Officer visiting the school at least once a term, but more regularly for schools with the highest challenge. SISOs work alongside school inclusion teams to identify the best support and intervention for pupils at the highest risk of non-attendance or exclusion. Several Camden primary schools have also employed family support workers, funded by the Richard Reeve's Foundation. Family support workers assist families to work through the wider challenges that are preventing better school attendance, focussing on those with the lowest attendance. Their work includes building trust and relationships, as well as supporting families to navigate the support channels that are available to them within the Council and Early Help.
- 4.9. Six Camden secondary schools have been delivering programmes of intensive mentoring and virtual mentoring to secondary-age children in school, as part of an initiative Inspiring Inclusion led by Future First with funding from the Esme Fairbairn Foundation and New Deal. Activity in schools is delivered by the Winch or Somali Youth Development Resource Centre (SYDRC). The Inspiring Inclusion programme aims to drive wider system changes to reduce exclusion and enhance collaboration. To date, a total of 67 children have completed the mentoring programme and 193 children from a disadvantaged background have attended an event. The programmes have been welcomed in the schools. Feedback from Inclusion Leads and Heads of Year has been encouraging and they have reported that they can see a difference in the mentees. Group sessions have been particularly welcomed.
- 4.10. In addition, the University of Sussex have been working with five Camden schools on the theme of Belonging. The five schools taking part are Fleet, Brecknock, Gospel Oak and Torriano primary schools and Hampstead Secondary. The work includes detailed survey and analysis to understand students' sense of belonging, which is broken down by protected characteristics and key cohorts, allowing schools to reflect on next steps based on the data.

Support for children known to social care

- 4.11. Every CLA who is at risk of persistent absence is required to have an Attendance Plan developed by Virtual School Education Consultants. Plans are scrutinised monthly by a multi-agency Attendance Panel chaired by the Head of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Services. An external provider, Welfare Call, collects daily school attendance data. This is used to create a profile of each young person for the attendance panel, including analysis of trends and monitoring of students with less than 90% attendance.
- 4.12. Alternative education packages are created for children who struggle to attend mainstream settings. Attendance is monitored by Virtual School Education Consultants. A Specialist Reintegration and Inclusion Worker directly supports

children with significant trauma which manifests in challenging behaviour or refusal to engage in education.

- 4.13. The Virtual School responds to information from schools, social workers, foster carers and Independent Reviewing Officers when it appears a pupil's education is being disrupted, or a pattern of poor attendance is emerging. Virtual School Educational Consultants review the attendance of their CLA cohort weekly to ensure no child is slipping through the net.
- 4.14. The remit of the Virtual School Head now includes strategic oversight of all children with a social worker. This includes children assessed as being in need under the Children Act 1989 who currently, or previously, have had a social worker, and those who are subject to a Child in Need plan (CiN) or a Child Protection plan (CPP).
- 4.15. Overall attendance of children with a CPP was 82% in 2023/24, an improvement from 78% in 2022/23. Attendance of primary school pupils with a CPP was higher than those in secondary school (90% vs 70%). Similarly, children in need (CiN) in primary school attended 90% of all sessions, while those in secondary school attended 70% of sessions.
- 4.16. The Virtual School has several measures to assist those with a CiN or CPP to attend school, including a Re-integration and Inclusion Officer, who supported the improvement of 73% of the cohort last academic year. A termly Strategic Panel for Education of Children in Need oversees the work of the Virtual School and a Multi-Agency Attendance Panel for Children on a CPP is held every half-term.

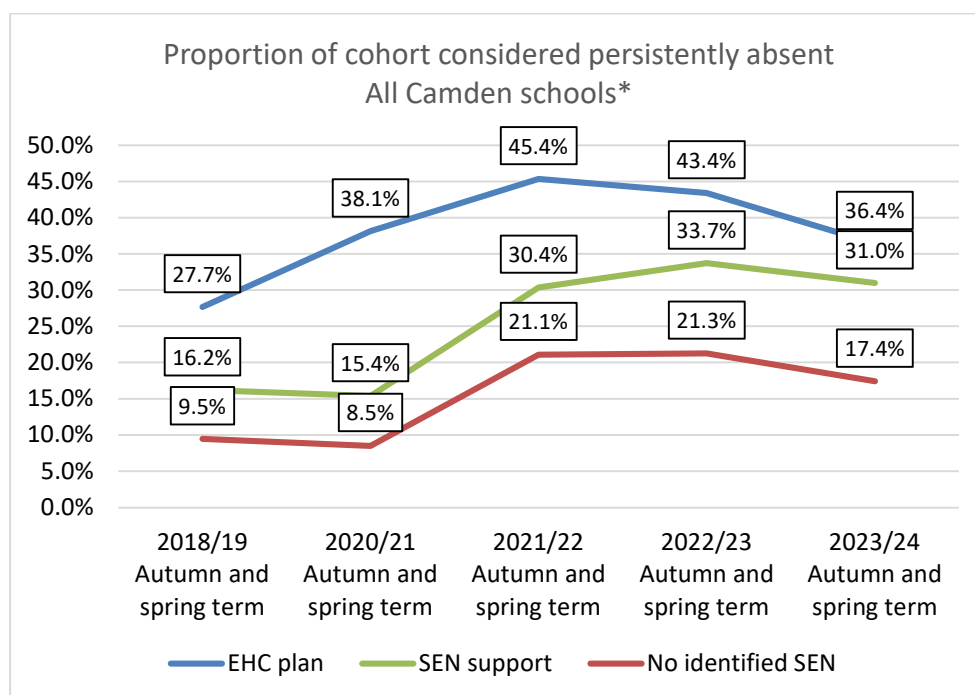
Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) Guidance

- 4.17. Illness is the largest single reason for pupil absence, accounting for 53% of all absences in 2022/23. The number of sessions lost to illness has increased significantly compared to pre-pandemic data. In 2022/23 246,563 sessions (which equates to 123,281.5 days) were lost to illness, compared to 173,804 sessions (which equates to 86,902 days) in 2018/19. This is a 41.8% increase in the number of sessions lost to illness.
- 4.18. It is not possible to accurately measure how many children in Camden are absent from school because of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), as the data does not differentiate between physical health- and mental health-related illness. Whilst definitive numbers are not available, anecdotal evidence and research suggests that, since the pandemic, the number of children absent from school due to mental ill-health and EBSA has increased.
- 4.19. Camden Council's Educational Psychology Service have produced [guidance](#) to support schools with EBSA, including advice on understanding EBSA and intervention strategies schools can use. The team work with schools to implement this guidance within their school.

- 4.20. In addition, there is external support for more complex cases that schools can refer children to. This includes the [Rebuilding Bridges programme](#), which provides parent/carer support and 1:1 and small group work for children who are: at risk of exclusion; not engaging with school; displaying behaviour of concern; experiencing social isolation; and/or have low engagement with universal services.
- 4.21. In addition to providing education for children who are inpatients at the Royal Free Hospital, the [Royal Free Children's Hospital School](#) provides education for children whose mental ill-health and anxiety means they are unable to attend school. The LinkED Up programme supports pupils to re-engage with their home school. They also provide 1:1 and small-class teaching sessions at home, in the community and at the Konstam site in Highgate. The aim is to support children to return to their home school but where this is not possible, they offer a GCSE programme to enable children to gain qualifications.

5. Improving inclusion for pupils with SEND

- 5.1. Persistent absence is higher for pupils with SEND. For some, this is related to medical conditions that impact on attendance due to the need to take time off for sickness or to attend appointments. Anxiety or poor mental health can also be a comorbidity with SEND, putting pupils at higher risk of emotionally based school avoidance.



* Includes state-funded primary, secondary and special schools.

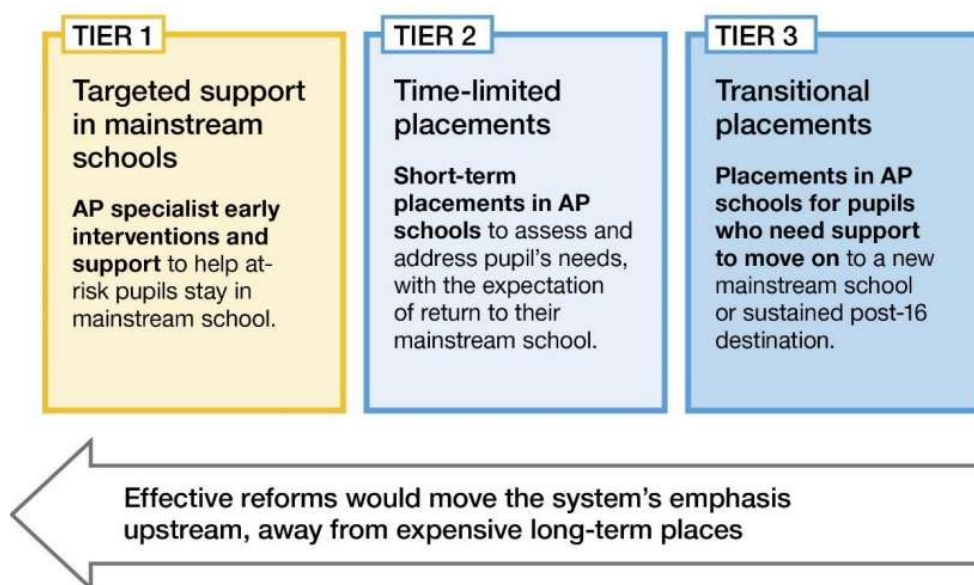
- 5.2. Work has started to better support inclusion in mainstream schools and ensure positive outcomes and experiences in education for children with SEND, which will also help to improve school attendance.

- 5.3. In the summer term 2024, the council ran a capital grant funding round for schools, awarding around £2.5 million to 28 schools in grants to enable them to make changes to their buildings and spaces to improve inclusion. The majority of these grants were for sensory rooms, with some applications for hygiene facilities, facilities for vocational learning and adaptations to reduce noise in school buildings. We hope to run future funding rounds to continue to make improvements to school buildings to be more inclusive.
- 5.4. Training from the Autism Education Trust (AET) has been rolled out widely across schools and other services in the borough to help build knowledge and skills across the workforce and make schools more autism aware. Alongside the training, there has been work to embed the learning and develop practices within education settings.
- 5.5. We are also working to make sure that schools receive the right external support from services to enable them to meet SEND needs. Schools already receive a broad offer from different services, including therapies, educational psychology and advisory and support services. Camden Learning's school improvement offer also supports peer learning between schools to spread best practice. Along with Camden Learning, we have jointly commissioned Swiss Cottage School to provide outreach support to staff at mainstream schools and in the format that is most helpful for individual schools.
- 5.6. However, we know that some local schools are facing significant pressures and are struggling to meet the increase in volume and complexity of SEND needs in their schools. We are working to improve the support offer to help schools to meet these needs. We have invested an additional £1.3 million in our SEND and Inclusion team to improve the support offer available to schools. The second phase of the redesign of the SEND and Inclusion service will focus on support and advisory services. We are working to build understanding of local needs to ensure that we are commissioning services focused on meeting these needs and improving outcomes.
- 5.7. Alongside this, we are reviewing the additionally resourced provision (ARP) that we are commissioning. These units provide education for children with complex needs within a mainstream school setting. As well as educating the children on roll, they play a role in improving inclusion more widely in mainstream schools by sharing expertise and approaches.

6. Alternative Provision (AP) in Camden

- 6.1. The Government's SEND & AP Improvement Plan was published in March 2023. This set out how alternative provision should be seen as an intervention and not a destination and provided a vision for the system based on a three-tier model.

A three-tier model for alternative provision



- 6.2. Camden schools already have access to a comprehensive offer of support for children in AP that operates across all three-tiers of the model set out in Government's SEND & AP Improvement Plan.
- 6.3. Robson House provides support for primary-age pupils with Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) needs and provides targeted outreach to primary schools, time-limited placements at the Rhyl Inclusion Satellite and transitional placements for 20 children at Robson House itself.
- 6.4. Secondary-age pupils who have been permanently excluded or are at risk of suspension are supported by The Camden Reintegration Base (CRiB) and Heath School. The CRiB, located at Haverstock School, provides time-limited placements for children in Years 7-9 who are at risk of suspension. Heath School provides education for secondary-age children who have been permanently excluded or are at risk of becoming so. They also oversee, through Camden Pathways, placements in local colleges and independent AP settings for children in Years 10 and 11, on behalf of schools. Heath School have been piloting an outreach model to advise secondary schools on children at risk of suspension and exclusion.
- 6.5. As noted earlier, the Royal Free Children's Hospital School offers AP for children who are unable to attend school through time-limited and transitional teaching in one-to-one sessions and small groups.
- 6.6. All AP in Camden was judged to be either Good or Outstanding at their last Ofsted inspection. A recent external review of Camden's AP concurred with the assessment that we have a comprehensive offer. It made recommendations regarding local authority oversight, commissioning arrangements and admissions. These are being taken forward in 2024/25 starting with a needs analysis to review whether the offer meets the needs of schools and children in a post-pandemic landscape. This will inform the development of an AP Strategy for Camden.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on attendance that pupils and schools are still recovering from. While attendance rates remain below pre-pandemic levels, they are showing signs of improvement.
- 7.2. This report has outlined the significant work being undertaken across Camden to improve attendance, support inclusion in schools and offer appropriate educational programs and settings for pupils with SEND. We continue to focus on this key focus area to ensure all children in Camden can have the best start in life.

8. Finance Comments of the Executive Director Corporate Services

The Executive Director Corporate Services has been consulted on the contents of this report and has no comments to add.

9. Legal Comments of the Borough Solicitor

- 9.1. The Government has published updated statutory guidance on “Working together to improve school attendance” effective from 19/8/2024.
- 9.2. The guidance has been updated to be clearer on the link between improving attendance and wider school culture, including the importance of Working in partnership with families to find supportive routes to improve attendance.
- 9.3. The expectations on Local Authorities are set out in Chapter 4 of the guidance which include: their role in supporting pupils to overcome barriers to attendance and support access to school. The manner in which a Local Authority fulfils this role is to be determined locally but should include tracking local attendance data, having a school attendance support team and monitor and improve attendance through the Virtual School.
- 9.4. Pupils who have long term physical or mental health conditions or who have SEND, have the same right to an education as any other pupil and therefore the attendance ambition for these pupils should be the same as it is for any other pupil, recognising that additional support may need to be provided and reasonable adjustments made.
- 9.5. If the child has an EHCP, the school should communicate with the local authority where a pupil’s attendance falls or they become aware of barriers to attendance that relate to the pupil’s needs. Where possible agree adjustments to its policies and practices that are consistent with the Special Educational provision set out in the EHCP in collaboration with parents.
- 9.6. Support first is the key message from this updated guidance; schools and partners should work in partnership with pupils and parents collaboratively to remove any barriers to attendance by building strong and trusting

relationships and working together to put the right support in place, to assist all children to access their legal entitlement to an efficient, full-time education suitable to their age, aptitude and any special educational need they may have.

10. Environmental Implications

No environmental implications

REPORT ENDS