

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN

At a meeting of the **CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on **TUESDAY, 14TH JANUARY, 2025** at 6.30 pm in Committee Room 2, Town Hall, Judd Street, London WC1H 9JE

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE PRESENT

Councillors Lotis Bautista (Chair), Julian Fulbrook, Jenny Headlam-Wells, Tom Simon and Nanouche Umeadi

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ABSENT

Councillors Matt Cooper, Patricia Leman and Sylvia McNamara

Co-opted Members Zarin Bakhshzaad, Margaret Harvey, Sarah Jafri and Dr Rachel Wrangham

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Marcus Boyland, Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families
Councillor Sabrina Francis, Cabinet Member for Jobs, Young People and Culture

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

MINUTES

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cooper, Leman and McNamara and Co-opted Members Zarin Bakhshzaad, Margaret Harvey, Sarah Jafri and Dr Rachel Wrangham.

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

There were no declarations.

3. ANNOUNCEMENTS (IF ANY)

Broadcast of the meeting

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being broadcast live by the Council and was recorded and later made available on the website. Those addressing the meeting were deemed to be consenting to having their contributions recorded and broadcast.

4. DEPUTATIONS (IF ANY)

There were no deputations.

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

There was no urgent business.

6. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

THAT the minutes of the meeting held on 10 December 2024 be agreed as an accurate record.

7. YOUNG INSPECTORS REPORT 2024 AND PROGRESS UPDATE ON RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE YOUNG INSPECTORS REPORT 2023

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion and the Director of Relational Practice.

Elzbieta Chandrasena (Senior Development Officer Participation) and Young Inspectors Mary-Lynn, Nihad and Jenny, summarised the report. The report set out the findings, key messages, and recommendations of the Young Inspectors inspection of the Virtual School for looked after children and previously looked after.

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

- A Member queried the differences between the recommendations this year and those from the previous year. Officers noted that the 2023 recommendations focused on the experiences of young people in social care meetings, with

updates provided in Appendix 2. Several changes and improvements had been made, including strengthened advocacy for parents, giving them greater agency. Additionally, the 'Mind of My Own' app, launched in September 2024, had received positive feedback from young people. Jenny said she was impressed with the app, noting how helpful it could have been during their time in care, and highlighted its ability to engage young people and reduce the pressure of one-to-one meetings. Jenny was excited about the app's development and upcoming features, such as video and sign language support for young people with hearing difficulties, as well as the ability to customise language and fonts. They also mentioned a new feature allowing young people to update their feelings, with additional emotional options to be introduced. Officers stated that the app would be reviewed, with feedback gathered to improve its role in meeting preparations, engagement, and communication alongside professional conversations.

- A Member said they were impressed by work of the Young Inspectors and their collaboration, as the Committee was each year, and encouraged them to continue and build on their achievements. They noted the app sounded impressive and looked forward to seeing progress next year. Officers highlighted the dedication of young people who often gave up their evenings and summer holidays to participate, while also benefiting from personal development and gaining insights into services. Nihad emphasised the value of teamwork, listening to different perspectives, and identifying shared areas for engagement. Mary-Lynn reflected on the experience as both enjoyable and meaningful and stressed the importance of providing a safe platform for young people to voice their concerns.
- Mary Holder (Deputy Virtual School Head/Post 16 Education, Employment and Training) thanked the Young Inspectors for their work, recognising the time they dedicated to formulating probing and important questions. They emphasised that the Personal Education Plan (PEP) was the young person's meeting and noted that the Young Inspectors' recommendations provided valuable insights to enhance the PEP process. The Virtual School would address these recommendations and report back to the Corporate Parenting Board.
- A Member noted that it was evident the Young Inspectors had found the process rewarding and had learned things they were unaware of during their time in care. A Member asked what they felt they most needed from the Virtual School during the time they used the service. In response, Mary-Lynn highlighted the importance of having support, particularly a grounding place and more people available to spend time with young people when times were hectic. Nihad emphasised the need for more support during the transition from education to employment. To address this area, officers explained that a transition panel had been implemented four years ago, working with young people each April and May to help them plan their next steps or support them in exploring options. They noted that an officer supported social workers with this process and that the panel included a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) lead. While employment was not directly recommended, apprenticeships were encouraged as part of transition work. It was added that when young people were dissatisfied, efforts were made to explore their interests rather than imposing external views.

The aim was to encourage young people to enter education, employment, or training (EET) and to remain in education until 18 wherever possible.

- A Member asked about post-18 years support for care experienced young people. Officers explained that statutory support was provided up to 18 years, but Camden continued support until 25 years. They had appointed an Education Navigator whose role started in September 2023 in the Virtual School, which was funded for a period of 7 years by an external organisation, Inner Circle Education Trust (ICET). The Personal Advisors (PA) also assisted with Further Education (FE) planning and worked closely with the Education Navigator and young people. The aim was for the PAs to broaden their understanding of their work. The Member asked how many of the young people supported by the Virtual School had gone to university. Officers responded that 10% had gone to university, which was above the national average, and the numbers were rising. With the role of the Education Navigator and a dedicated person working with young people from Year 9, they hoped to increase these numbers. The focus was on informing young people earlier about their post-18 options. They had also worked closely with the employment team on Camden internships, aiming to offer apprenticeships as an alternative if university was not the right fit.
- A Member asked what the quick wins were that could be implemented to improve the experience for young people using the Virtual School, noting that there were many ideas in the report. Mary-Lynn responded that more staff members should be available, not just those in higher positions, to interact with young people. Some young people preferred to engage with men or women, so it was important to have a diverse team to meet everyone's needs.
- A Member stated that it was great to hear about the Young Inspectors' positive experience of the project and asked what could be done to improve it for future cohorts. Mary-Lynn suggested that Young Inspectors projects should run all year round, not just in the summer. Jenny suggested increasing the number of Young Inspectors and broadening the scope. Officers mentioned wanting more touchpoints and feedback throughout the year.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

8. CORPORATE PARENTING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

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

The Chair informed the Committee that a draft of the new Corporate Parenting Strategy, alongside a proforma asking for feedback, would be circulated to Committee Members in due course, ahead of its submission to Cabinet to be formally agreed. A proforma would allow opportunity for more structured views to be provided by Members.

Brenda Amisi-Hutchinson (Head of Corporate Parenting) summarised the annual report on corporate parenting which provided an overview of the achievement, progress, challenges, and 2025 priorities for Camden's corporate parenting services in meeting the needs of Camden's children in care and care experienced young people who were placed both in and out of borough.

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

- A Member asked why the number of looked after children was higher in the summer months. Officers explained that this could be attributed to the end of the school year, with schools potentially managing challenges relating to young people, and that summer was safer for unaccompanied children to travel to the UK. Officers explained that another contributing factor was the rise in children entering care due to serious youth violence and child exploitation. The goal was to support families and help children remain in the home by offering more intensive support, such as frequent visits and dedicated workers. Parental mental health issues also played a role, and efforts were being made to offer support through safety plans and alternative family placements, including a refreshed kinship offering. Officers noted an increase in referrals, assessments, child protection investigations, and children placed on protection plans. They acknowledged that there was a higher volume of cases in the system, in line with national trends, and suggested that a post-pandemic effect might be at play. They highlighted a focus on delivering preventative interventions.
- A Member asked if the cost-of-living crisis meant parents could not afford to look after their children. Officers agreed it impacted parents and also the Council. They explained that the cost-of-living crisis impacted the cost of care purchased through commissioning, with providers inflating prices, which in turn affected the Council's budget.
- A Member stated that most carers were White British, while Black and Global Majority groups were underrepresented. They noted that White carers might not understand the trauma or culture of children from these groups and asked if there was training for them. Officers acknowledged that more work was needed to recruit more diverse foster carers. They explained that all foster carers had a schedule of training each year and that Replenish boxes containing skin and hair care products were provided for White foster carers, to support them in starting conversations and understanding the specific care needs of Black children. They also highlighted the need for more targeted recruitment of families with refugee status to support these areas within the system and mentioned commissioning specialist training. A Member stated that training should address topics directly and have a more direct approach, stressing the importance of being clear and not avoiding difficult points.
- Officers explained that Table 2 related to the period spent in care, noting that 72 children had been in care for over two years. They mentioned that there were few younger children in care for extended periods, as efforts were made to implement adoption plans. However, a small number of children remained in care for longer durations, and more children were coming into care for extended periods. The

youngest child on a care order was 4 years old and had completed care proceedings, potentially remaining with the council for up to 14 years. A Member noted that the table showed a snapshot of the length of time in care and suggested it would be useful to track changes over time. They recommended that future reports include a comparison over five years.

- The Cabinet Member for Young People, Culture and Jobs mentioned visiting the new accommodation for looked after children, Joseph House, last summer. Officers explained that it currently housed three children, with a fourth expected next month. They were awaiting Ofsted registration at the end of the month, after which the accommodation would be fully utilised. Officers noted a good mix of young children, and the Director had visited in November as part of monitoring to ensure the facility was running as expected.
- A Member asked if there were links between the Council and the regional adoption agency, Adopt London North. Officers confirmed that they worked closely with the agency, specifically highlighting the Black Adopters Project, which aimed to match children culturally. They also noted that four adoptions had taken place that year, with one child having been in care until the age of seven which demonstrated persistence and hard work to secure adoptions for children who had been in care for a long time. A Member asked if the performance of regional areas was monitored. Officers explained that inspections were conducted for the regional adoption agency, with feedback shared with the Council. They noted that the agency reported to Camden's Corporate Parenting Board, and the Director held regular meetings with the agency to stay informed.
- In response to a Member, officers agreed to provide clarification on the figures in Table 3 and Figure 3 in the report because there appeared to be inconsistencies, specifically addressing that only 70% of children were accounted for in Table 3 and that there was a different percentage of white children between the charts (section 2.3, page 47 of the agenda).

Action By - Director of Children's Prevention, Family Help and Safeguarding

- A Member asked whether the ambitions and priorities were realistic, and if they were short-term goals or ongoing areas that needed consistent work. Officers confirmed that the promises were achievable and aligned with statutory responsibilities, as well as what good corporate parenting practices entailed. They explained that an implementation plan would run alongside the Corporate Parenting Strategy and could take years to achieve, requiring consistent effort.
- A Member asked for feedback on priorities and how they would be measured, noting that while current data was useful for understanding the present situation, it was less clear how to gauge future aims. The Member inquired about any numerical targets to ensure that improvements were being achieved. Officers explained that operational targets had not been set, as striving for 100% could sometimes be unhelpful in trying to serve every child, but they could consider setting targets in the future. Officers highlighted key goals, such as ensuring as many children as possible were adopted or returned to connected family members during care proceedings. They also emphasised the importance of permanency planning, with a focus on placing children in permanent foster

homes and keeping children within Camden with in-house carers. Individual children's needs should guide decisions, acknowledging that some may require residential care. They aimed to achieve best practices while ensuring decisions were right for each child. A Member suggested it would be helpful to see how these outcomes changed year on year, with a focus on meeting targets. Officers agreed, noting that benchmarking data would also be useful. It was noted that for the implementation plan, a dataset would be created for monitoring, identifying areas for improvement.

- A Member asked for more information on how the Council could increase the diversity of foster carers. Officers explained that efforts included bus campaigns, community events, individual referrals, and staff nominations for assessments. They highlighted that schools had not been fully explored as a recruitment area but were planned to be targeted next year. The goal was to recruit 20 foster carers and officers acknowledged the need to target specific communities more effectively. A Member suggested involving community and religious leaders, as raised last year at Committee. Officers noted that while progress had been slow with this approach, the focus this year had been on recruiting 20 carers rather than specifically targeting diversity. They planned to report back on this area next year. It was added that different recruitment approaches were being explored and recruiting for specific children and integrating this into the recruitment strategy.
- A Member requested more information on the 15.1% of children who had moved placements and the reasons for instability. Officers explained that some moves were due to initial placements not being suitable. A small proportion of children experienced significant instability when first entering care, often due to underlying needs that took time to assess. There were also positive moves, such as children moving to family members, with arrangements made to support these transitions. In some cases, short-term placements were made until a more suitable match could be found, and some children returned to Joseph House. Overall, most moves were positive, though there was a small proportion where this was not the case. In response to Members, officers agreed to provide further information and reasons for instability experienced by the 15.1% children in care who had three or more moves during the 12-month period covered by the annual report.

Action By - Director of Children's Prevention, Family Help and Safeguarding

- A Member inquired about the issue of children being placed in homes outside of Camden and the potential for them going missing, referencing this as a national concern in previous years. Officers responded that Camden was fortunate to have its own provisions and were considering the establishment of smaller children's homes. They explained that there was a protocol for handling missing children, which included providing information packs, contacting families and friends, and permitting young people to stay with friends overnight, provided they informed the Council. Although the cohort of children who went missing was small, some had multiple episodes, often associated with risks of exploitation. Officers acknowledged the ongoing crisis in the national care market, which had resulted in a shortage of suitable placements, and as a result, some children were placed further away from home. They noted that the upcoming Children's

Bill would likely include regional provision arrangements. The Council was focused on managing the care market and ensuring as many placements as possible remained local. Officers additionally highlighted efforts to prevent older children from entering care, as residential placements did not always lead to improved safety or outcomes, and were exploring alternative solutions to better meet their needs. A Member said that additional data regarding children's home placements, specifically the number of children placed within the borough versus those placed further afield, as well as the frequency and types of missing incidents would be valuable in reporting.

- A Member asked if the Council had any levers to address issues in the care market. Officers explained that their powers were limited due to being one commissioner in a larger market. They gave the example of supported accommodation, where Camden had a pathway and commissioned a block of placements for a long period. Residential care, however, had small provisions. Officers noted that without working with other local authorities, it was difficult to see how they could use leverage effectively. They acknowledged that the market had not worked in some areas, resulting in profiteering and reduced quality. They hoped that the new bill might introduce measures to address these challenges.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

9. FAMILY HUBS, FAMILY HELP AND START WELL REPORT

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Children's Prevention, Family Help and Safeguarding and Director of Health and Wellbeing.

The Chair informed the Committee that another Family Hubs paper would report to Committee in the next municipal year because there was national reform and developments in this area. The Chair invited views from Members on any changes to areas the report covers or how information was presented they would like to be incorporated into the next paper.

Manuj Sharma (Public Health Consultant), Debbie Adams (Head of Early Years and Family Hubs) and Kirsten Watters (Director of Health and Wellbeing) summarised the report. The report provided updates on four interconnected programmes of work under the oversight of the recently formed Children and Learning Directorate: Family Hubs, Family Help, Start Well, and the cross-cutting Child Health Equity programme. The report provided background and context to the work, including information on Camden's population's needs and governance arrangements. The report also provided key updates from the last 12 months, challenges, and next steps for the coming year.

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

- A Member raised concerns about low vaccination rates in Camden, attributing the cause of the issue partly to misinformation spread via social media and other sources. They emphasised the critical role of schools in addressing myths about vaccines, particularly in parent governor meetings, and stressed the importance of clear communication about the serious risks of not vaccinating. The Member expressed particular concern about vaccination uptake in Somali and Bangladeshi communities. Officers reported that Camden had made sustained progress in increasing immunisation rates since 2022, including an improvement in uptake of the Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine. While the increases were modest, they were significant, given the difficulty in reaching certain groups. Officers highlighted an upward trend, with the second dose of the vaccine (MMR2) reaching 65%. They attributed this progress to cross-partnership work involving Family Hubs, the Integrated Care Board (ICB), and community participation, noting that Camden was bucking regional and national trends and making measurable progress despite external challenges.
- A Member highlighted that mental health disorders in Camden were 33% higher than the national average, with social housing and poverty cited as contributing factors. They shared concerns from their ward surgery, noting that some residents would value access to social housing. The Member also expressed particular concern at the high rates of self-harm among 17 to 24 year olds. Reflecting on a 2016-17 scrutiny panel report on mental health in secondary schools, the Member noted the worsening trends, particularly regarding self-harm, which had not been a significant focus in previous years. They also acknowledged positive feedback from interviews with providers and asked why the situation had deteriorated. Officers explained that the increase in mental health challenges reflected broader national trends, driven by factors such as the cost-of-living crisis, the pandemic, and the impact of the digital age, including social media. Although Camden's self-harm rates were better than the London average, officers emphasised ongoing monitoring and efforts to maintain young people in the 'wellbeing space.' They outlined a multi-faceted approach, including maximising mental health and wellbeing offers in schools and communities to prevent escalation to self-harm. Officers noted that services remained responsive, addressing issues within the community. Mental health support teams were enabling young people to access services, and a co-produced campaign with young people had focused on raising awareness of available mental health services.
- A Member asked for more information on the Raise Equity initiative. Officers explained that the initiative focused on addressing inequalities in child health, recognising that socioeconomic factors impacted every health condition. They noted that inequalities and disproportionality in children's health had been increasing across all age groups. The approach involved collaborating with health services and wider partners to close these gaps and ensure services were reaching children most in need. The initiative included several programme elements, and officers offered to report back to the Committee with further details

upon request. Officers highlighted that work had already begun, including audits to assess service accessibility and the prevalence of health issues. They examined paediatric care and the reasons some parents used emergency health department rather than other more suitable secondary care services, with a focus on families who felt isolated or unaware of community resources. The initiative also aimed to address inequalities caused by poverty, including through maternity grants and other supportive measures, with a planned launch in the new year.

- A Member raised concerns about the growing number of families who were homeless or living in temporary accommodation, highlighting the impact of such instability on health. They asked whether there was any specific work being done to support these families. Officers explained that the health visiting service had a specific focus on homeless families and those in temporary accommodation, with links to family support workers. They noted that the broader support model included universal offers for all families, additional help for those with greater needs, and targeted family support. This model was intended to address rising social and health issues and assist families in securing permanent accommodation. Officers also highlighted the Family Hub, which was open on weekends as part of the warm spaces programme. This initiative offered a place for families to go for support and activities. The service was continuing to develop, with a focus on ensuring that vulnerable families received ongoing assistance. In response to questions about families in hotels and those living out of borough, officers confirmed that support was being tracked, and health visiting services would continue to follow families even if they moved out of borough. However, when families settled in another borough, support would be transferred to the host borough to ensure continuity.
- In response to Members asking if professionals across different services were contributing to the work, officers stated that there had been significant effort across the system to address mental health and wellbeing, with several forums in place where they met with health partners to adapt, innovate, and explore new approaches. They highlighted the collective goodwill to make meaningful change, emphasising the importance of collaboration despite the pressures that existed. Officers noted that maintaining strong partnerships and momentum was crucial to ensuring the best outcomes for residents.
- A Member requested more information on how the role of Family Hubs could be maximised. Officers explained that family hubs had evolved from children's centres, which were well-known to families with young children. The current challenge was increasing the visibility of family hubs to families with older children. They were working on various strategies, such as engaging workers speaking directly with families and spreading the word about available services through word of mouth. They were also looking to move additional health services into the hubs, making them more accessible without requiring a referral, and replicating the successes seen in Early Years services. Officers also explained the rationale behind the child health equity work, which aimed to understand who was accessing services in proportion to their needs. They planned to conduct audits alongside qualitative work, with a focus on identifying barriers families might face in accessing services. Despite having ample data, the goal was to implement an equity approach that not only met needs but also

reduced inequalities. The officers stressed that having good services alone was not sufficient to address these issues.

- A Member stated that it appeared funding for the family hubs programme would end after three years and they would like to see quantitative data to demonstrate the programme's success. Officers confirmed that they had secured funding for an additional year and were hopeful for continued funding after the spending review, although the long-term position was still uncertain. The Member also inquired about the engagement of parents of older children, noting that this aspect seemed missing from the report. Officers acknowledged that more work was needed and they explained that engagement with families wasn't just about attending physical Hubs, but also about accessing services across the borough. While Family Hubs mainly served pre-school children, outreach services were available to older children too. Officers highlighted that they were working on tracking engagement and defining the Family Hub offer more clearly. Officers emphasised the importance of a one-stop-shop approach for addressing both emotional and physical health issues, noting that they had conducted extensive engagement with communities that had historically been underserved. They also mentioned Camden's Champions Programme, which involved invested parents who could provide valuable insights into the challenges they faced, as well as their experiences with services. These parents had been asked to share their vision for Family Hubs, contributing to a broader understanding of how they could support families in Camden—not just as physical spaces but as integral parts of the borough's health equity strategy.
- A Member raised concerns about the lack of coverage on inclusivity, particularly regarding children and parents with disabilities, different types of SEND, and varying access needs. They requested that more information on the actions being taken to enhance inclusivity, especially for individuals with SEND, be provided in a future report.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

10. CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKER

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

Tim Aldridge (Executive Director Children and Learning) summarised the work programme.

A Member raised concerns about the rise in Elective Home Education (EHE) in Camden and nationally, expressing worries about its impact and the reasons some children were not attending the good schools in Camden. They also highlighted issues with school non-attendance, particularly post-pandemic school dropouts or

those relating to gang grooming. It was agreed that an update paper, presenting the statistics on EHE, would be brought to the Committee. Additionally, a section on EHE would be included in the Alternative Provision report in November 2025.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING AND FUTURE MEETING DATES

The final meeting of the municipal year would be on Monday 24 February 2025.

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

There was no urgent business.

The meeting ended at 8.45 pm.

CHAIR

Contact Officer: Anoushka Clayton-Walshe

Telephone No: 020 7974 8543

E-Mail: anoushka.clayton-walshe@camden.gov.uk

MINUTES END