

Update of the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee – February 2025

1. Purpose of the Cabinet Member update

- 1.1. This paper provides a short round of updates from across the portfolio of the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children, Schools and Families. It presents an opportunity for the cabinet member to speak directly to the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee and highlight key pieces of work, both to share successes and identify challenges and opportunities in the coming months.
- 1.2. The Committee are invited to consider the information below and ask questions of clarification at the meeting, subject to the Chair's discretion. Requests for additional information can be addressed to the relevant director/s outside of the meeting. The Committee may also use the cabinet member updates to inform their scrutiny work planning for the coming year.

2. Children's Trust Partnership Board and school attendance

- 2.1. I was pleased to host Camden's last Children Trust Partnership Board for 2024 on Tuesday 19th November. The partnership discussion focused on school attendance and inclusion, one of our key priorities. The meeting heard from colleagues from across council, VCS and school groups about great initiatives underway to address school attendance concerns. Feedback from parents about school attendance was also shared at the meeting, following a focus group hosted with Camden parents.
- 2.2. Camden council showcased school attendance data discovery work, which sought to identify the priority characteristics of children and young people facing increased risk of absence amongst state-school educated students.
- 2.3. Attendees also heard from the Winch about a project called Inspiring Inclusion, an intensive mentoring and virtual mentoring for secondary-age children aiming to reduce exclusion and drive system-wide change.
- 2.4. A headteacher from Hampstead School spoke about a project they were completing with the University of Sussex on how to increase the sense of belonging in school.
- 2.5. Fitzrovia Youth in Action also showed a powerful video created with young people around school attendance as part of some work on peer mentoring.
- 2.6. Rounding off the meeting, partners discussed practical actions across the system, including health, social care, schools and VCS, to raise awareness of school attendance and work to improve it.

3. Our response to the National curriculum assessment review

- 3.1. In November, Camden responded to a call for evidence for the national Curriculum and Assessment Review. We focussed on the barriers and opportunities in the current curriculum and assessment systems for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- 3.2. Our submission argued that the current curriculum is not flexible enough to ensure that children with SEND attending mainstream schools receive a broad, balanced, and appropriate education that meets their needs. Shifts away from oracy and group work and towards testing by exams in recent years disadvantages pupils with SEND and narrow curriculums that doesn't consider pupils' individual needs and difference can result in children becoming disconnected from learning.
- 3.3. An additional Camden Learning STEAM response highlighted the importance of embedding careers education into the curriculum. The review panel is expected to publish recommendations later this year.

4. Opportunity Centres and AI Campus Launch

- 4.1. Back in November, I was proud to attend the launch of the London AI Campus located in Somers Town. Camden Learning has developed this Campus, in partnership with Google and we were honoured to have the support of the Prime Minister and our local MP, Keir Starmer at this ground-breaking space offering young people access to cutting-edge digital education and AI learning.
- 4.2. The two-year pilot programme is already underway, with a diverse cohort of post-16 students tackling real-world AI projects in areas like health, the arts, and social sciences. Meeting these students was a powerful reminder of how we can break down barriers and inspire ambition, particularly among underrepresented groups who might otherwise miss out on these opportunities.
- 4.3. From this month onwards, the AI Campus will expand as an Opportunity Centre, making technology and digital learning accessible to even more young people. Plans in the centre include enrichment sessions for primary schools and training for teachers through the Experience AI programme, ensuring that the benefits of this initiative reach across all age groups. This is happening in parallel to the launch of another additional opportunity centre in the Euston Skill Centre to deliver a programme to inform and inspire young people about vocational or non-academic routes into careers.
- 4.4. Opportunity Centres are a key part of our "Building Back Stronger" Education Strategy, and so is our commitment to provide access to high technology, digital and AI venues.
- 4.5. This work reflects Camden's determination to innovate and provide opportunities for every child to thrive. By delivering on our commitments and embedding technology and creativity into education, we are preparing Camden's young people for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

5. School Estate Report

- 5.1. Council Officers are coordinating a cross-service response to the understanding and deployment of Council Education assets. We know that effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have fundamentally altered people's lives and changed patterns of migration within central London and Camden Borough specifically. The impacts of these have reduced the anticipated level of demand for school places across the Borough.
- 5.2. Our most recent reports to schools' Forum and the Children and Learning scrutiny committee set out the latest forecast position: whilst the peak of surplus anticipated from last year is not forecasted to increase, the new data indicates that Camden will reach that peak sooner, and that the marginal increases towards the end of the planning period will not now be realised. This information does point toward a coordinated approach being required.
- 5.3. Key to this is an understanding of our education estate at the widest level. We have established a Schools Capital Board that brings together services within the council with relevance to school buildings this includes, Education, Planning and Development, Asset management, facilities and maintenance and Capital programmes. Through this group, we have initiated a full survey of our school estate including condition surveys and capacity and utilisation analysis. This information is overseen by the Capital Board that provides professional advice on the asset and capital implications of any school organisation changes. Through this, we can ensure that any consideration is based on accurate information and that decisions on capital allocations, education site development or alteration are based on best value and in the long-term interests of Camden residents.

6. Other recent meetings

Recently, I have also attended several meetings and Board meetings including:

- Camden Learning Board and Annual General Meeting
- Violence Against Women and Girls Board
- Camden STEAM Board
- Camden Safeguarding Children Partnership
- Corporate Parenting Board Meetings
- And various school Christmas and carol concerts during December!