LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: All

REPORT TITLE

New partnership arrangements with Disabled-led and Autistic-led organisations to reduce ableism and inequalities (AH/2025/08)

DATE

16th July 2025

REPORT OF

Cabinet Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Social Care

FOR SUBMISSION TO

Cabinet

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

We Make Camden is our joint vision for the borough, developed in partnership with our community. In We Make Camden the Council sets out a commitment to play a leadership role to tackle structural injustice and inequality in all its forms and to challenge ableism - discrimination or prejudice against Disabled people. This report proposes new long-term partnerships with two user-led organisations to tackle and address the systemic roots of inequality that exist for Disabled and Autistic residents and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in the community.

The Way We Work is the Council's response to We Make Camden. The proposals in this report support the ambitions within The Way we Work to share power with our communities and to develop new inclusive partnerships between staff and Disabled residents to develop deep understanding of, and solutions to, the inequalities that exist in Camden.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

This report sets out plans to award new grant funding to two user-led charities, Camden Disability Action and the Autism Hub. The grants will allow both organisations to continue to deliver a range of projects and services that empower Disabled and Autistic residents to lead changes in Camden. This will support the delivery of the commitment made by the Council in January 2025 to be a friendly and accessible Borough, as well as the new All-Age Autism Strategy that will be published in September 2025.

The report is coming to the Cabinet because under the Constitution the Cabinet must approve all grants of £100,000 or more.

Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information

No documents that require listing were used in the preparation of this report.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Having considered the equalities impact assessment (Appendix 1) and having had due regard to the obligations set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the Cabinet is asked:

- 1. To agree that grant funding of £268,660 per year is awarded to the Autism Hub and £180,00 per year to Camden Disability Action, both grants to be awarded for a period of seven-years ending on 30th September 2032.
- 2. To delegate authority to the Executive Director Adults and Health to take any decisions to grant or amend lease agreements for the Greenwood Centre, as set out at para 4.1 of the report.
- To delegate authority to the Director of Adult Social Care Strategy and Commissioning, following consultation with the Cabinet Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Social Care, to release the grant annually until 2032/2033 in line with 'What Quality Means in Camden' for our provider partners.

Signed: Chris Lehmann

Date: Monday 7 July 2025

1. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1. On 20th January 2025, the Council passed a motion committing to making Camden a friendly and accessible Borough. This commitment built on the World Health Organisation's Age Friendly Communities approach and focused on making the built environment accessible to all and one which encourages participation, fosters positive connections between people of all ages and supports health and wellbeing.
- 1.2. The Council commitment was framed within the Social Model of Disability, developed by Disabled people, which states that people have impairments, or differences, but that the oppression, exclusion and discrimination that these people experience is caused by the way society is run and organised. Such differences will include using a wheelchair, being Deaf, being Blind, having a Learning Disability or being Autistic. The way society is run therefore 'Disables' many people through attitudes, ignorance, prejudice, as well as physical barriers.
- 1.3. Language is an important part of the Social Model of Disability as this reflects people's identity and the assumptions and thinking of society around them. In this report, the term 'Disabled person' will be used to describe anyone with a difference or impairment who is 'Disabled' by society as a result of this. How people describe themselves is a personal choice and this report acknowledges that not all people who are linked with the organisations in this report will describe themselves as Disabled. Some Autistic people identify as being Disabled but not all Autistic people will. There is no single term which is preferred by everyone.
- 1.4. The commitment made by the Council in January 2025 included to address the following issues that have been consistently raised by Disabled residents over many years:
 - **Planning**: incorporating accessible and friendly design principles, such as better lighting and welcoming places to rest, should make public spaces comfortable for residents and foster positive connections between people of all ages.
 - **Communication:** ensuring communication is accessible, e.g. through British Sign Language or Easy Read, and that no one is excluded from accessing the information or services they need as a result of digital barriers.
 - **Public toilets**: anxiety around the availability of toilets is known to be a factor in deterring people from leaving home and can therefore contribute to exclusion and social isolation.
 - Streets and pavements: some people face difficulties arising from street and pavement obstacles including street furniture (e.g. A-Boards), uneven paving, bad lighting, poor parking, lack of accessible parking, unacceptable, dangerous and illegal cycle and scooter riding on pavements and floating bus-stops.
 - **Community assets**: post offices, banks, small shops and High Streets, and supermarkets with staffed tills are all valued assets by many Disabled people.

- Accessible transport: a range of accessible transport options must be available, affordable and working efficiently.
- Parking, low traffic neighbourhoods and Healthy Schools Streets schemes: efforts to reduce traffic congestion should aim to also better facilitate essential journeys by motor vehicles for residents for whom walking and cycling are not possible or practical options.
- 1.5. The 2021 Census showed that around 15% of the borough's residents defined themselves as Disabled under the Equalities Act. This was over 31,000 residents. Disabled people are part of life and society. So many of us have conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, deafness, bipolar, arthritis or are neurodivergent. Disabled people are in every café, every workplace, on every football terrace and in every park. Disabled people are us. Most people want to live in a community that includes them and be part of a society that values them. Disabled people want this too.
- 1.6. Disabled people's lives are very varied. For some Disabled people their condition itself can be tough, for some it's less so. But for all Disabled people, other people's ideas about what they can and cannot do, and how things are designed, and run can be the most disabling thing. They stop Disabled people from living their lives. The impact of this can be seen from the 2021 Census which highlights some stark equality gaps. For example, 57% of the Disabled population are economically inactive compared to 15% of the non-disabled population and 31% of our Disabled residents say they are in 'bad or very bad health' compared to just 1% of the non-disabled population.
- 1.7. These equality gaps do not only impact Disabled people themselves, but also their children. The recently published Camden Child Health Equity Data Audit (Raise Camden) found that 40% of households with dependent children in social housing, have at least one household member with a long-term health condition or disability. The audit therefore recommended that providing sufficient support to those with long-term health problems or disabilities should be a priority when working with households with dependent children in Camden.
- 1.8. Within the Council, there are also disability equality issues within our own workforce, with 22% of Disabled staff feeling that their wellbeing is not prioritised.
- 1.9. The picture nationally is very similar, and in 2023 the Resolution Foundation published an analysis of the living standards for working-age Disabled people. This highlighted a range of further inequalities, although with some progress over the last decade:
 - The disposable income gap between the Disabled (£19,319) and nondisabled population (£27,766) was 44% in 2020-21: down from 54% a decade ago, but still hugely significant¹.
 - Disabled people are far more likely to be poor than the rest of the population. One-in-three (33%) adults in the lowest household income decile are Disabled, compared to fewer than one-in-ten (9%) of adults in the highest household income decile.

¹ This excludes income from the extra-cost disability benefits, on the grounds that these are designed purely to offset additional costs associated with being Disabled.

- Almost half (48%) of Disabled adults say they have had to cut back on energy use in the winter, compared to almost one-third (32%) of people without a disability.
- Almost one-in-three (31%) Disabled people said they have had to reduce their expenditures on food, compared to 18% of the non-disabled population.
- 1.10. A Housing of Commons Committee report² published in 2024 highlighted a range of inequalities faced by Autistic adults in the UK:
 - **Healthcare Access**: Autistic individuals often report lower quality healthcare and are more likely to have chronic mental and physical health conditions. This includes higher rates of anxiety, depression, and other co-occurring conditions.
 - **Employment**: Autistic adults face substantial barriers in employment, leading to higher rates of unemployment and underemployment compared to non-autistic individuals
 - **Social Inequality**: Autistic individuals often experience social isolation and exclusion, which can impact their mental health and overall quality of life.
- 1.11. Stigma and discrimination are particularly impactful for Autistic residents. Recent research by the <u>Autism Alliance</u> found that although public awareness of autism is over 99%, 91% of autistic people feel that society does not accept or only sometimes accepts them.

2. PROPOSAL AND REASONS

- 2.1. In 'We Make Camden' the Council sets out a commitment to play a leadership role to tackle structural injustice and inequality in all its forms building equal foundations for all our citizens that provide a strong platform for everyone to participate in the social and economic life of our borough. This includes challenging ableism discrimination or prejudice against Disabled people using our collective resources to tackle and address the systemic roots of inequality and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate in the community.
- 2.2. The Council's commitment to tackle the inequalities that exist in the borough includes through diversifying leadership and continuing to invest in the capacity and innovation of Camden's voluntary and community sector. This report sets out plans to support two such partners, Camden Disability Action and the Autism Hub, to enable Disabled and Autistic residents to lead change across the borough, and society, in partnership with the Council.
- 2.3. Camden Disability Action (CDA) is a user-led organisation which aims to promote the equality of d/Deaf and Disabled adults living or working in Camden. CDA is a pan-disability organisation, and as such it is the only disability organisation in the borough that is open to all people with any impairment, health condition or difference. The majority of CDA's staff are Disabled.
- 2.4. CDA runs the Centre for Independent Living (CIL) within the Greenwood Centre in Kentish Town. The vision for the CIL, co-designed with Disabled

² "Inequalities in healthcare and employment for people with a learning disability and autistic people"

people, was for a community resource run by and for Disabled people. The vision aligns with the Council's "Supporting People, Connecting Communities" strategy by enabling the CIL to act as a 'connector' to the services and information needed to support independence.

- 2.5. The Autism Hub is an initiative by and for Autistic people (who do not have an accompanying learning disability) who live in Camden and Islington. They are a user-led organisation with a staff team formed mainly by Autistic and Neurodivergent people. Through their specialist offer, Autistic residents have access to autism-informed peer support, information and advice and autism-specific counselling. Through meaningful coproduction they are at the forefront of shaping the way that services are designed and delivered through creating equal partnerships with Autistic people and services.
- 2.6. CDA and the Autism Hub both receive grant funding from the Council's Adult Social Care (ASC) department and the current grant funding has enabled both organisations to have secure core funding to allow them to deliver and develop a range of user-led services and support for Disabled and Autistic residents. The grants were not defined by what either organisation would deliver for the Council, but what the Disabled and Autistic residents of Camden have said they want to change in the borough and to provide the support they have said they need. The awarding of these grants was in line with the Council's strategic aim to share power with our residents in partnership with our voluntary sector.
- 2.7. The positive impact of both organisations on addressing equity in Camden was noted in the recent Care Quality Commission report of Adult Social Care in Camden which rated the Council as 'Outstanding'. For example:
 - 2.7.1. "A number of autistic people had completed a leadership programme and a new role of 'Autistic peer consultant' had been developed at a local disability charity [CDA] with the local authority's support, they provided training with a focus on inclusive employment."
 - 2.7.2. "Autistic adults were involved in the re-commissioning of the advocacy service which led to a partnership with the Autism Hub and the advocacy service to develop smoother referral pathways".
- 2.8. Some of the recent achievements of each organisation are set out below:

Camden Disability Action

Building a New Partnership with disabled residents

- Leadership Model: CDA developed a leadership and coaching model that supports Disabled individuals in understanding their circumstances through the social model of disability and leading projects that challenge ableist norms. Thirteen disabled Camden residents have been through this programme, and of these, four went on to secure employment with CDA and one has been elected as a trustee. Projects include music and art projects, and equitable access to Council services.
- **Community Reporting**: CDA have trained 15 disabled reporters and collected 137 firsthand accounts of disabling barriers, establishing a valuable source of evidence for systemic change (<u>https://camdendisabledvoices.org</u>).

• **Personal Assistants Project**: Successfully tested social model approaches to co-production with ASC, focusing on training personal assistants to improve support for autistic residents.

Advice, Advocacy, and Support Services

• Advice Service: 400 residents are supported annually with complex social welfare law advice and disability concessions. Over £1.5 million in benefits awards have been secured for Disabled residents.

Building a Stronger CDA

- Income Generation: CDA have achieved year-on-year growth in room hire income, reaching £195,000 in 2024/25. They have also generated over £35,000 in income through various trade activities, including engagement work with HS2, providing Access to Work services, and street audits.
- **Organisational Strength**: CDA undertook an accessible trustee recruitment process, and in December 2024 elected seven new trustees to the Board to fill all vacancies. The CDA board is now representative of the borough's Disabled population in terms of age, gender, impairment and caring responsibilities, as well as both lived and professional experience.

The Autism Hub

- **Drop-in space has evolved.** The group have grown, they use a bigger space allowing for more to attend and have varied activities. This includes monthly board game afternoons, art and creative drop-in sessions.
- A codesigned sensory and therapy room. There are not many places that Autistic adults (who do not have a learning disability) can access a sensory room. Many Autistic people have shared that their sensory needs are often not met. The Autism Hub have collaborated with Central St. Martins (University of Arts) to coproduce a sensory/ therapeutic space in the Autism Hub. The project has empowered Autistic adults to take control of and design their own space as a community group. The sensory and therapy room includes bespoke furniture co-designed by Autism Hub members.
- The Autism Hub was involved in the recruitment and interviewing process for the Camden ASC Autism Practitioner Lead post. The Autism Lead Practitioner now attends the Autism Hub drop-in to offer advice to Autistic residents. This collaboration has led to ASC developing a Communication Passport for Autistic people who are referred into ASC. The aim is to ensure their communication needs and reasonable adjustments are acknowledged, recorded, and followed from the beginning of their interactions with Camden staff.
- The Autism Hub's relaxed spaces monthly newsletter. A monthly newsletter informs Autism Hub members of autism friendly and relaxed spaces geared towards adults all around London. This includes theatres, museums, cinemas, exhibitions and performances. Often these are either free or concessionary fees applies.
- The Autism Hub introduced a monthly walk at Kew Gardens (free to Autism Hub members). This has supported mental and physical wellbeing, which would otherwise be unaffordable to lots of Autism Hub members.

- **Growing collaborations and partnerships**. This has included partnerships with the following services:
 - The Adult Autism Diagnostic Service to help them to feel more confident in making referrals to ASC.
 - Camden Alcohol and Drug Service, CDA and the Camden Disability Job Hub to codevelop clearer referral pathways and joint working.
 - Minding the Gap to support Autistic young people.
 - Rethink Advocacy to jointly deliver self-advocacy workshops and autism training sessions to Rethink advocates.
- Autism Acceptance Training. Building education, information and knowledge-based within the community to develop autism-informed practice and awareness. This is training that is led and delivered by Autistic people.
- Infrastructure development. The Autism Hub have recruited an operational lead to support the continuation of development of quality assurance processes and policies and procedures. The Autism Hub have expanded the peer support offer and are further developing service infrastructure and processes i.e. advocacy & counselling services.
- 2.9. The current grant funding to CDA and the Autism Hub come to an end at the end of September 2025. This report recommends the award of new grants to each organisation to further develop their strategic partnerships with the Council to jointly amplify the voice of Disabled people across society and to lead the changes needed to dismantle the physical and attitudinal barriers that exist in Camden and beyond.
- 2.10. Both grants will be for a period of up to seven years, giving both organisations the secured core funding to deliver their existing services and to leverage additional funding from other sources.
- 2.11. The Autism Hub grant will be for £268,660 per year. As well as continuing to offer their core services and projects described above, the grant will enable the Autism Hub to contribute to the delivery of the Camden's All Age Autism Strategy 2025-2030 which will be presented to Camden's Cabinet in September. The strategy will take a life course approach and has been created through a range of co-production. The strategy will be accompanied by an implementation plan.
- 2.12. The CDA grant will be for £180,000 per year. In addition to building on the coproduction and leadership programmes outlined above, CDA will work with the Council to make the commitment to being a friendly and accessible Borough a reality. This will include learning from emerging best practice across the UK, such as the recent plan to make the <u>West Midlands an</u> <u>Exemplary Region for Disabled People</u>. Their plan seeks to work over the long-term towards being an exemplary region for Disabled people; a region where Disabled people thrive and achieve by having a stronger voice in decision making. Their plan focused on all aspects of people's lives, including employment, housing, transport, health and unlocking the economic benefits from the 'Purple Pound' (the spending power of Disabled residents). For

Camden to become a fully accessible borough for all will require a similarly wide focus.

3. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

- 3.1. **Do nothing** do not award grant funding to either CDA or the Autism Hub. This will risk the financial viability of both organisations and would significantly impact the Council's ability to reduce the structural inequalities faced by Disabled residents.
- 3.2. Award the recommended grants this is the recommended option as set out above. CDA and the Autism Hub are uniquely placed to take on the role to deliver citizen-led change for Disabled residents. CDA are Camden's only pan-disability user-led organisation and deliver the Centre for Independent Living. The Autism Hub are the only autism-led organisation in Camden and have championed the current work to highlight the many significant gaps in services for autistic adults.

4. WHAT ARE THE KEY IMPACTS / RISKS? HOW WILL THEY BE ADDRESSED?

- 4.1. In March 2025, the government published a Green Paper outlining a range of proposed changes to the health and disability benefits system with the overall aim of saving £5 billion and supporting people into work. The proposals will see a significant range of changes, including a freeze and then reduction in the Universal Credit health element, raising the threshold for eligibility for Personal Independence Payments (PIP), and scrapping the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) that currently decides whether people get additional disability-related support on Universal Credit (UC). These possible changes have created a huge level of anxiety amongst Disabled residents with a real fear that more people will be pushed into poverty and that it will be even harder to find sustained work. It is therefore vital that Disabled and Autistic residents have a voice and the support provided by CDA and the Autism Hub.
- 4.2. Since the Greenwood site opened in 2017 there have been a number of changes to the use of the building. The site always planned to contain Camden's first Centre for Independent Living, run by and for Disabled people, as well as a new location for Council run day services for people with a learning disability and people with mental health needs. There are also a number of other units which were originally proposed to be let commercially. While some of these are leased by voluntary sector organisations, others are vacant or are being used by the day services due to a significant increase in numbers of people requiring support. Changes therefore may be required to be made to the commercial model and the lease arrangements for some tenants. A Steering Group has been established to take forward these changes and this report recommends a delegation to the Executive Director Adults and Health to agree any property related decisions, such as the granting of new leases, or the amending of existing leases.

5. CONSULTATION/ENGAGEMENT

5.1. No formal consultation is required in relation to the proposals in this report. As user-led organisations, both CDA and the Autism Hub are made up of and

governed by a majority of D/deaf, Disabled and Autistic people. As such, the plans for future developments of both organisations are embedded in the views and needs of Camden residents and all future projects and activity will continue to be co-produced with these residents. Some recent comments from Disabled and Autistic residents working with CDA and the Autism Hub are included below:

- "I now have a newly emerging recognition that it's ok for people to adjust to my needs rather than putting up and shutting up as I have been doing until now. I am finally starting to realise it's not me being unreasonable or interrupting but just enabling the 'situation' so I can be part of things too."
- "I came here [to CDA music project] feeling low, coming with a riff [musical tune] and seeing it develop with everyone's emotions and ideas evolve to a togetherness, I feel part of a team and accepted"
- "Meeting Deaf people in the group has given us confidence and encouraged us to share our problems we face, helping us to create our own ideas of what and how solutions we want to work out. The group helps us to understand the importance of unity among Deaf people to create a real voice to be heard."
- "These connections made at Autism Hub foster mental well-being by allowing us to connect meaningfully, regularly with other autistic people on a regular or drop-in basis. This is essential for a community of people who without Autism Hub would be isolated which is a known indicator or lower life outcomes for autistic people. Autism Hub can literally be called lifesaving."
- 'As an autistic adult... I can testify both to the complete dedication and commitment of its [Autism Hub's] staff, and to the fundamental value of its services in supporting people who are often misunderstood, marginalised and who suffer discrimination. This organisation is extremely important for social inclusion and cohesion.'
- "It is thanks to [Autism Hub's] support that I have become aware of and started going to relaxed performances and events."
- "I liked the fact that it [the Autism Hub] was more 'free form' than other mental health services I have used, who all tried to put me in a box or push me down a certain avenue when a lot of the time it was not healthy for me as a neurodivergent person the expectations they put on me, or to label me as something I was not."
- 5.2. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed, which shows that the proposals will have a positive impact on our duty to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity for Disabled residents of Camden.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1. The Cabinet is being asked to agree that grant funding of £268,660 per year is awarded to the Autism Hub and £180,000 per year to Camden Disability Action, both grants to be awarded for a period of seven years ending on 30th September 2032. The report is coming to the Cabinet because the annual grant values require Cabinet decision according to the Council's constitution. This report should come to the Cabinet as it is a reserved matter for collective Cabinet decision to agree the award of grants over £100,000.

- 6.2. Councils have a legal duty to address health inequalities as part of their public health responsibilities. CDA and the Autism Hub are uniquely placed to take on the role to deliver citizen-led change for Disabled residents. CDA are Camden's only pan-disability user-led organisation and deliver the Centre for Independent Living. The Autism Hub are the only autism-led organisation in Camden and have championed the current work to highlight the many significant gaps in services for autistic adults.
- 6.3. Councils must comply with the Equality Act 2010. It is required to have due regard to the obligations set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ensuring decisions do not disproportionately disadvantage certain groups and actively promote equality. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed which shows that the proposals will have a positive impact on our duty to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity for Disabled residents of Camden.
- 6.4. Legal Services considers that the recommendations of the report as a whole are in compliance with the Council's Constitution.

7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. The report recommends that grant funding of £268,660 per year is awarded to the Autism Hub and £180,00 per year to CDA, both grants to be awarded for a period of seven-years ending on 30th September 2032.
- 7.2. CDA and the Autism Hub both receive grant funding from the Council's ASC department. It is the choice of the Autism Hub in terms of how they specifically will spend this grant.
- 7.3. The £268,660 for Autism Hub will be drawn down from the Better Care Fund (BCF) Allocation. The usage of BCF funds is subject to a detailed annual review and agreement with the ICB. If there is a reduction in BCF funding, then this will pose a contract delivery risk and potential budget pressure.
- 7.4. Government changes to NHS England should be followed closely due to significant upcoming changes in their structure and funding, coupled with the long-term nature of this seven-year commitment.
- 7.5. Helping to negate some of this pressure, the CDA have achieved year-onyear growth in room hire income, reaching £195,000 in 2024/25 and £35,000 through trade activities and this level of income is expected to be at least maintained over the life of the new agreement, and likely to increase.
- 7.6. There is no Medium-Term Financial Strategy savings attached to these budgets.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1. There are no direct environmental implications arising from this report.

9. TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

9.1. The grants awarded to both organisations will allow the continuation of their core funding to enable the delivery of the variety of projects, services and initiatives outlined in this report. The grants will also allow CDA and the

Autism Hub to develop new partnerships with the Council, and other strategic partners including Age UK Camden and Camden Carers, to deliver a range of outcomes including:

- More confidence and understanding from officers and members in disability and autism. This will include through piloting 'reverse mentoring' where officers are mentored by Disabled or Autistic residents.
- Ensuring that the voices of Disabled and Autistic residents are heard in Council decision making, building on the work of the Council's Disability Oversight Panel.
- New ways to increase employment opportunities in the Council, and across Camden for Disabled people. This will build on the work being delivered by Good Work Camden and the Disability Job Hub.
- Annual priorities agreed between Disabled residents and the Council for key co-production activities.
- 9.2. Following the decision to award the new funding, new Grant Agreements will be finalised with each organisation. These agreements will formalise the partnership arrangements, and will include annual reviews in line with the Council's approach to quality in ASC (<u>'What Quality Means in Camden'</u>). The report therefore recommends to delegate authority to the Director of Adult Social Care Strategy and Commissioning, following consultation with the Cabinet Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Social Care, to release the grant annually until 2032/2033 in line with this quality framework.

10. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Equalities Impact Assessment

REPORT ENDS