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THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN

At a meeting of the **CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on **MONDAY, 10TH NOVEMBER, 2025** at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Judd Street, London WC1H 9JE

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE PRESENT

Councillors Sylvia McNamara (Chair), Matt Cooper, Jenny Headlam-Wells, Patricia Leman, Tom Simon and Nanouche Umeadi

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ABSENT

Councillors Lotus Bautista and Julian Fulbrook

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Marcus Boyland (Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families)

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 from Committee Members were received from Councillors Bautista and Fulbrook. Apologies were also received from Councillor Francis (Cabinet Member for Jobs, Young People and Culture).

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

Webcasting

The Chair announced that the meeting was being broadcast live to the internet and would be capable of repeated viewing and copies of the recording could be made available on request. Those participating in the meeting were deemed to be consenting to being filmed.

Camden Peer Review

The Chair stated that the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review would be taking place this week. Scrutiny committee chairs would be joining a roundtable

session with members of the Peer Review team. LGA Peer Reviews were an important opportunity for Councils to take stock - to reflect on strengths, share learning, and shape future priorities with the benefit of an external perspective. The review would be followed by a published written report which would set out the findings and any recommendations

Supplementary agenda

A supplementary agenda was published on 7 November which included additional papers for item 8 (2025 School Place Planning Report) and item 9 (Persistent Absence and Elective Home Education).

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 notification of urgent business.

6. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

THAT the minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2025 be approved and signed as a correct record.

7. APPOINTMENT OF A CO-OPTED MEMBER AND UPDATES ON CO-OPTED MEMBERSHIP FOR THE CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

The Executive Director Children and Learning introduced and summarised the report which asked the Committee to agree a co-opted member appointment and to note other co-opted member updates.

The Chair welcomed Jules Belton, Headteacher for St Mary & St Pancras Primary School, to their first Committee meeting.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee

1. agree the appointment of Jules Belton as the Church of England representative on the Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee.
2. note the three parent governor representative vacancies

8. 2025 SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING REPORT

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

The Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion, accompanied by the Interim Head of Education Transformation and the Head of Admissions, introduced and summarised the report which outlined the latest demographic trends, financial pressures and rising demand for Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision shaping Camden's education system. The report highlighted a continued decline in births and falling school rolls, resulting in surplus capacity across both primary and secondary sectors, alongside increasing pressures on schools and Council budgets. The Council had launched a School Sufficiency Programme to coordinate strategic actions across admissions, finance and SEND, including the use of a new sufficiency scorecard, targeted interventions, and development of a SEND and Alternative Provision Commissioning Plan to expand local provision and reduce reliance on external placements. The report also noted ongoing capital investment to improve access and inclusion, and set out planning area level forecasts.

The supplementary agenda was published for this item which included the following additional papers:

- Corrections to the main report and explanatory note about Appendix B
- Revised and reissued Tables 1, 2A and 2B from Appendix B

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

- A Member asked how the school place data was generated in relation to housing development figures, noting slow completion rates for developments and querying how this was reflected in projections and the timing of expected delivery. Officers explained that Appendix A contained Greater London Authority (GLA) data with headline housing figures. They added that projections were deliberately prudent because new housing did not always lead to more families, and that the methodology had not changed. The Member referred to Table 2b, highlighting the 46.7% development rate in Camden Town, and asked whether this was built into the projections and whether non-delivery would create further shortfall. Officers noted that the Schools Capital Board, which included property representatives, oversaw this work. They agreed to provide a written response confirming whether the 2027/28 pupil projections assumed that all pipeline housing developments would proceed as planned, and, if not, whether non-delivery would reduce projected pupil numbers and create an additional shortfall.

Action By: Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion

- A Member asked officers to clarify, with reference to section 4.4 and Figure 3 of the report, which of the three Year 7 entry projection scenarios (maximum, default or minimum) showed the projected increase in surplus capacity from 15% to 29% by 2033/34, equating to 16 forms of entry (FE). They also asked for comment on whether, given the scale of projected surplus capacity at secondary

level, it was considered possible to avoid school closures entirely. Officers agreed to provide a written response.

Action By: Director of Education Commissioning and Inclusion

- A Member raised concerns about Camden's strategy for SEND provision. They noted that the borough's mainstream inclusion model, alongside rising numbers of children whose needs were not being met, risked creating a cycle of ongoing challenges. They felt this approach spread SEND provision too thinly across all schools rather than building sufficient expertise within them. They also highlighted that Camden had only one, heavily oversubscribed, special school and asked about the future direction for SEND provision. Officers explained that Camden was proud of its inclusive approach and its ability to provide additional funding to schools through Exceptional Needs Grants (ENGs). The Council was developing work through school clusters and ENGs to encourage collaboration and the Council continued to work closely with Camden Learning to support schools, leaders, and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinators (SENDCos). Officers acknowledged high levels of SEND need across both primary and secondary sectors and the challenges schools faced in meeting them, while noting opportunities to strengthen the system, particularly in primary settings where more consistent approaches could be developed. Any new provision carried financial implications, so sustainability was essential. The Council was strengthening clusters and developing a SEND Commissioning Plan to identify gaps, draw on school and parent feedback, and use data to inform decisions. The plan would also capture the experiences of families struggling to access mainstream provision or managing key transitions. There was an event with school leaders scheduled for the following week which would act as a milestone to set out the principles and priorities for developing SEND provision over the coming years. Officers confirmed that a SEND report and strategy update would be presented to the Committee in February 2026.
- A Member noted that the report stated schools with the greatest needs were receiving extensive support, and queried what bespoke support involved beyond funding. Officers explained that the report referred to 32 projects, as outlined in the appendix, showing where investment had been directed. They said that those projects included a range of capital investments such as sensory spaces, outdoor education facilities, and other targeted improvements.
- A Member asked what action was being taken to support underperforming secondary schools. Officers explained that the School Support and Partnership Framework identified schools most in need, based on factors such as admissions, finance and SEND. Schools with the highest level of need received targeted intervention from the Council and Camden Learning, focusing on understanding local context and developing strategies to mitigate risk.
- A Member noted that many secondary school pupils in the south of the borough attended schools outside Camden and asked whether this was due to geography, the quality of education, or the nature of local schools. Officers explained that Camden was a net importer of pupils and that there were various reasons why children might attend schools elsewhere, including proximity to home or perceived quality of education. Another Member added that there were no secondary schools located south of the Euston Road, meaning families in the Holborn area often looked to schools in Westminster.

- A Member asked whether it would be possible to avoid any further closures at secondary level. Officers explained that the current programme focused on working individually with schools to manage risks. Officers said that any future decisions regarding school closures would be a matter for Cabinet.
- A Member observed that the data showed some girls' schools had the lowest surplus of places and asked why they were performing more strongly than boys' schools, suggesting there might be learning from their success. Officers explained that the approach was to share strong practice and that officers were keen to work with school leaders and the School Sufficiency Programme to identify and build on effective practice.
- A Member noted little recent change in the proportion of pupils in private education and questioned whether this might shift. Officers said it was too early to form a clear view of any impact from the VAT changes on private schools. They explained that only 1.5 years had passed since the changes were introduced and that the data would continue to be updated annually.
- A Member noted that one secondary school in Camden was taking around 140 additional pupils and appeared to be bucking the wider concerning trends, partly due to its selective sixth form entry. They asked whether anything in that school's approach could be applied to other sixth forms. Officers said there was a strong link between high-performing schools and pupil preference, and that the coming year would be informative given forthcoming Ofsted inspections and updated Camden school reports. They emphasised that performance was shaped by the overall depth of a school's offer rather than a single judgement, and that each school operated within its own context. Officers added that many sixth forms had some level of selectivity and that the Council was working with all schools to raise standards. They said Camden's strength lay in supporting a diverse and inclusive school system and that they wanted to maintain a mixed offer with routes for all children to progress in education.
- A Member asked whether the Council had invested in rebranding schools, noting that some still carried perceptions dating back to the 1990s despite changes over time. Officers said they had focused on large events such as the Moving On event, which gave schools an opportunity to raise their profile with families. They explained that the aim was to promote the strengths and distinct qualities of individual schools, and that there was ongoing work to improve this, supported by the Cabinet Member for Best Start for Children and Families. Another Member added that there should be greater use of social media and marketing expertise to promote schools, including increased advertising of open days in the local press.
- A Member thanked officers for the support offered to schools but raised concerns about their capacity to receive it. They explained that SENDCos, who would normally lead on sharing best practice, were overwhelmed with writing Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). They also noted that falling rolls and tighter budgets often put teaching assistant (TA) posts under scrutiny, even though TAs trained in behaviour support and speech and language work. As a result, there was limited capacity in some schools to embed support, particularly where small classes were operating with reduced staffing. Officers acknowledged the concern and said it was important to work with school leaders and governors through the School Sufficiency Programme to identify where strong practice existed and how it could be shared. They highlighted recent examples of good practice seen in the SEND Provision Panel's investigation (commissioned by this Committee) and

said the aim was to make this visible to school leaders so they could direct it appropriately within their own settings. They emphasised this was a school-led system in which leaders played a central role in ensuring support was effectively embedded.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

9. PERSISTENT ABSENCE AND ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION

Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Executive Officer, Camden Learning.

The Chief Executive Officer, Camden Learning introduced and summarised the report which outlined the current attendance trends in Camden and the work underway to improve outcomes for children with high absence levels. The report highlighted that while overall attendance in primary schools had improved since 2022/23, Camden's rates remained below inner London and national comparators, and persistent absence had increased in secondary schools. Disadvantaged pupils and those with additional vulnerabilities continued to experience disproportionately higher rates of absence. Significant growth in the number of electively home educated (EHE) children over the last decade was noted, which had required Camden Learning to adopt a risk and vulnerability-based approach to oversight. The report further set out the forthcoming changes expected through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which would introduce new duties on local authorities in relation to attendance and EHE.

The supplementary agenda included the following additional papers:

- School's attendance booklet (extract)
- Monthly Attendance Leads e-newsletter (extract)
- Examples of shared best practice (extracts from forthcoming Camden Learning Attendance Practice Guidance)
- Bus stop campaign poster
- Links to videos
- Extracts from the initial trial of the EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance) toolkit

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

- A Member referred to Appendix B which contained a sample attendance report showing Camden and national comparisons. They highlighted consistently lower attendance among Bangladeshi pupils in Camden compared with national figures and, given similar communities in places such as Tower Hamlets, asked why Camden's outcomes differed. They also queried a sharp rise in missing attendance for Year 11 in 2023/24, asking whether it reflected real data or an anomaly. Officers explained that there was significant intersectionality within

Camden's Bangladeshi community, including higher levels of disadvantage, which contributed to lower attendance. They added that they were exploring different ways to reach these communities, including through mosques. Officers noted that some of the tables used example data, so fluctuations did not necessarily reflect an actual school, though real anomalies would be followed up through inclusion and improvement processes. They further explained that attendance patterns varied throughout the year due to factors such as term time travel, particularly among Bangladeshi families, and end of year absences, which could skew figures. Officers confirmed that overall Camden trends generally aligned with national patterns.

- A Member referred to the data in Appendix A and noted that the inner London and England trends for 2022/23 and the following year moved in the same direction as Camden across all measures. They asked what national factors might explain these similar patterns and whether Camden would be expected to continue to follow the same direction once national data was updated.
- A Member referred to Appendix A and asked why secondary persistent absence had increased by 3.2% in the previous year despite the range of work underway to address it. Officers explained that one of the challenges had been that secondary attendance was proving more difficult to improve than primary. They noted that 11 more primary schools had moved to a position above the national average, but that last year the service had been trying to cover a large number of schools and had therefore been spread thinly. Officers stated that the stronger position in primary would now allow more targeted and intensive work on secondary, focusing on the five secondary schools more than 1% below the national average, including detailed analysis of their data and more focused support to address the causes of persistent absence.
- A Member raised concerns about absence linked to domestic violence and asked how far this was reflected in staff training, as well as the balance between confidentiality and ensuring good outcomes for affected children. They also highlighted the difficulties for pupils placed out of borough, including whether they should be offered a local school place. Officers explained that domestic abuse could not be clearly identified within attendance data, but schools consistently reported it as one of their main safeguarding issues. They noted that families placed in refuges or emergency accommodation were particularly vulnerable, and long distances from Camden often made regular attendance difficult. Officers added that when children were housed far from the borough, travel could become a barrier to accessing school, and uncertainty about the length of placement made decisions about offering alternative school places more complex.
- A Member asked whether there was a known percentage of children in temporary accommodation who struggled to attend school because they had been placed far from Camden, in areas such as Heathrow, Hillingdon or Enfield, noting that they were aware of such cases from their ward surgeries. Officers replied that while these cases certainly existed and schools worked with housing colleagues to support children placed in emergency accommodation, often far afield, they did not have the data to calculate what proportion of pupils were affected.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

10. LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN CHILDREN'S STATUTORY SERVICES COMPLAINTS REPORT 2024/2025

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Relational Practice.

The Director of Relational Practice introduced and summarised the report which outlined key trends in the complaints received about Camden's children's statutory services over the past year. The report noted an overall increase in the number of formal complaints, with most relating to the Child in Need service and the Children and Young People with Disabilities Service (CYPDS), reflecting the rising complexity of need across these areas. Themes emerging from complaints included concerns about staff conduct, communication, service quality, and changes to support arrangements. The service had strengthened its responsiveness to complaints and improved the timeliness of resolutions, with more complaints now addressed within expected timeframes. While a proportion of complaints escalated to the next stage, most were resolved early, supported by a continued emphasis on relational practice and direct engagement with families.

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

- A Member commented the rise in stage one complaints to 63 and, in particular, the significant increase in upheld complaints, which had been between 0 and 5 per cent in previous years but had risen to 27 per cent in the last year. Officers explained that complaints had not previously been tracked or monitored robustly, as many were being sent to the wrong place corporately. They stated that the current increase reflected better oversight of complaint handling and a more open approach to feedback and learning, with the service no longer defensive in its practice and more willing to uphold complaints where improvement was needed.
- A Member commented that an increase in complaints could indicate trust in the system and a willingness to engage. They asked how feedback from complaints, whether upheld or not, was passed on to individual social workers, how performance issues were managed where necessary, and how themes such as poor customer service were addressed through wider staff training. Officers explained that operational staff involved in a complaint received learning through supervision, while broader themes were identified, grouped and fed back through practice leader forums, practice focus sessions and wider staff engagement events. This allowed both individual and team-level responses, as well as a system-wide approach to quality assurance and learning from complaints.
- A Member noted that complaints relating to children and young people with disabilities were the second largest group. They described situations where parents seeking high-cost or out-of-borough provision sometimes approached the service with threats to use the complaints process, and asked whether residents would receive a better response by submitting a complaint directly or by trying to resolve the issue through discussion. Officers said this scenario was familiar and that many families understandably felt they were not receiving the support they needed, reflecting wider national pressures. They advised that families should first speak to the practitioner working with them and, if dissatisfied, escalate the matter to a manager. A complaint could be made at any stage, but the quickest

response would usually come from engaging directly with the team providing the support.

- It was confirmed that relational practice was being applied across other areas of the Council, not just Children and Learning. A Member noted they had seen a marked improvement in responses from Housing, which were now more open, less defensive and more focused on resolving issues. Officers welcomed this feedback and explained that the Camden Centre for Relational Practice had been supporting Housing to adopt a more relational and less transactional approach. They added that Housing had recruited a systemic psychotherapist to embed this way of working across the service, ensuring staff held a relational approach in all interactions. The Member commented that similar progress in the area of antisocial behaviour would also be welcomed.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

11. CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKER 2025/26

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

The Executive Director Children and Learning introduced and summarised the report.

RESOLVED –

THAT the Committee note the report.

12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING AND FUTURE MEETING DATES

The future meeting dates were noted.

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

There was no urgent business.

The meeting ended at 8.09 pm.

CHAIR

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MINUTES END

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