

School Future Options Report

Council Response

Camden is pleased to receive this excellent report from Natalie Parish of ISOS Partnership.

We are grateful not only to Natalie but also to the Headteachers and Governors who so ably steered the School Future Options work over 8 months; and also to the London and Westminster Dioceses and all the Headteachers and governors who contributed to the findings. The commission was originally to respond to the White Paper and the proposed journey to academisation of all schools by 2030. As we know, due to Government changes, the White Paper and the Schools Bill were withdrawn. This led to the School Future Options Steering Group refocusing the work on one of the four foundations for success of Building Back Stronger – a Collaborative and Federating system.

Camden Council is truly committed to supporting our schools form partnerships across all phases of education. Camden already has a number of structural partnerships, including formal federations, less formal collaborative groups and executive headteacher arrangements in place.

We now not only have a report which addresses the potential situation of full academisation and prepares us well for any future national policy change but we also have a report which addresses the key principles of a collaborative and federating system, with an agreed position statement on Structural Partnerships. The Toolkit attached to the School Future Options report has been designed in consultation with some Headteachers and is the first stage of an iterative process in developing the support for schools to move towards structural partnerships and, in so doing, gaining the benefits of greater opportunities for staff recruitment and retention, CPD and leadership development as well as more efficient use of limited resources. As the new academic year progresses, Camden Council, in association with Camden Learning will work closely with headteachers and governors to expedite support and guidance to enable increased partnerships and federations.

The commitment of our school leaders to Camden as a place and as a community is particularly pleasing. The determination to maintain the family of schools and work within Camden Learning as the umbrella of the family is unanimous and will be sustained, regardless of any Government policy change. This commitment and the success achieved through the partnership with Camden Learning will be the basis of our lobbying with Ministers on the best models for education communities.

We know that some schools are concerned about falling rolls and the impact for delivering education in the context of the cost of living crisis and post Brexit.

Structural partnerships are one way of abating the cost pressures, spreading the cost of some staffing posts across more than one school, whilst ensuring the breadth and quality of education remains strong.

We are already in Camden ahead of the game on addressing falling rolls, having taken out 10 forms of entry by the end of July 2023. Whilst we are not complacent about this, our action,

in taking these difficult decisions in partnership with our schools and communities at an early stage has meant that the proportion of overall empty places in schools in entry years has been kept close to the DfE 5% guidance. We are also constantly scenario planning with individual schools and reviewing pupil numbers, reviewing PANs, wherever there is scope to do so and for the benefit of the sustainability of the school. In addition, we are convening a School Place Planning Group with representatives of the Camden School Community, to work in cooperation with the Council to consider both the emergent data and any proposals for organisational change. This will be of particular relevance for Secondary Schools in the Borough as the reductions in pupil numbers are felt within that sector.

Increasing the number of children in our schools is a key priority. The cost of housing in Camden is one of the highest in the country. This drives away families who would wish to stay in Camden to find homes elsewhere. As a council, we are looking at a number of initiatives to increase our housing stock. We have the commitment in We Make Camden to increase the supply of genuinely affordable, family sized and social rented home by building as many as we can. Camden is also committed to ensuring that we address inequalities, supporting our families remain in Camden. The council's Food mission to ensure that all primary age pupils receive free school meals whilst testing how best to support children in the secondary sector is testament to this.

We will also use all our powers to compel and facilitate more organisations to deliver more affordable, high quality, family size housing. In the medium term, we aim to ensure that families are supported to stay in Camden and build a life and connections into our communities in Camden.

Nearly all our schools are good or outstanding. We are increasing our positive communications about our schools so that parents/carers are aware of how good our schools are when they choose the state or independent sector, and Camden schools or schools in other boroughs.

The School Future Options work did not address special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This is because the initial commission of the work was to address the possible impact of the White Paper and academisation, and the responsibility of SEND remains the same in an academised system. However, we are aware that schools in Camden have concerns about the provision for SEND and the increased complexity of need over recent years.

Similar to mainstream schools and pupils, we are reviewing our SEND sufficiency in parallel to continuing to support mainstream providers to best meet needs. As part of this process we are assessing whether we have sufficient provision across the borough and how best we can use the High Needs block to best meet current and future needs. This will be carried out through the Schools Forum, High Needs sub-group, and the School Place Planning Group. It will also challenge the Council to make sure it is making the best use of its education assets in the context of falling pupil numbers in mainstream provision. Many schools were engaged in work with Peter Gray who was commissioned to start this analysis and make recommendations. As with the SEND Strategy, sufficiency planning will be co-produced with parents/carers and schools to develop the best way forward.

Building Back Stronger and the SEND Strategy are fundamental to our education ambition. Our commitment to education and our schools is unflinching. As the report indicates, the council gives Camden Learning considerably more than the authority is obliged to give for school improvement. This is because we value the work of our schools and recognise schools are at the heart of the community. We also recognise that schools are the key to our children's success, now and in later life, and therefore are contributors to the well being of families in the area. Therefore, we are delighted that the School Future Options report confirms that our schools and Diocesan partners are committed to supporting Camden Learning and the education family of Camden, so together we can meet our *We Make Camden* ambition that every child should have the best start in life.