



COMART
At the heart of regeneration
for East Brighton

The future for secondary
education on the COMART
site

Produced by the
Local Education Action
group

October 2003

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“ The expansion of popular schools is no panacea by itself.

Now pursued increasingly by councils and with deliberate support from central government, it builds on success , making access to that success more widely available.

But the consequences may make matters worse for the remaining unpopular schools . Further descent into the spiral of decline may be accelerated , as a school becomes less viable.

Yet , outright closure may not, for social as well as educational reasons , be the best option: losing its schools does not enhance a disadvantaged community.”

Ofsted and the Audit Commission: “School place planning : The influence of school place planning on school standards and social inclusion.” October 2003

1. Introduction

This document sets out a vision and urgent steps needed to establish a business case for developing secondary education provision at COMART, placing it at the heart of regeneration activity in East Brighton.

It has been prepared by the Local Education Action Group, (LEAg) a campaigning group bringing together parents of students at COMART, parents of students at other schools, young people, teachers, local residents of Whitehawk and surrounding areas, community groups and people from across the city who support the continuation and development of secondary education at COMART.

This document, a formal response from the LEAg to the LEA's 'consultation' around their recommendation that COMART should be closed:

- *Argues* that COMART must on no account be permitted to close. To do so would be to fail the young people, families and broader community of Whitehawk and East Brighton and would worsen and not improve educational achievement and social exclusion in East Brighton.
- *Sets out* the many social, educational, community development and regeneration-linked arguments against the closure of COMART.
- *Highlights* how new policy recommendations around school place planning announced just this week by Ofsted and the Audit Commission designed to enhance social inclusion present a timely opportunity for the LEA to suspend its current recommendation for the closure of COMART and together with other Council departments, community regeneration agencies and local people, take a fresh and holistic approach to the future of COMART.
- *Proposes and sets out* the case for a broad ranging partnership of statutory and community agencies to urgently come together to plan a viable future for secondary education at COMART in the context of the changes in national policy proposed by Ofsted and the Audit Commission.
- *Calls upon* all key agencies with a responsibility for and interest in secondary education, community development, neighbourhood renewal, reduction of social exclusion and improving social and community cohesion in East Brighton to unite to create a trailblazing partnership project that:
 - Secures and develops quality secondary education in East Brighton to achieve improved achievement and attainment.
 - Creates a broad range of partnership activity that effectively “extends” the school, gradually embracing a range of complementary services in the fields of health, social welfare, adult education, sport, arts IT and so on, emphasising local ownership and involvement in all activities.

- Sets out a sound financial plan for maximising the value of core statutory education funding plus a wide range of additional and complementary funding that can be levered in through the involvement of many other regeneration and community partners.

2. Background

The Local Education Authority for the City of Brighton and Hove is recommending that COMART, the secondary school sited in Whitehawk and that serves the surrounding communities, be closed.

COMART has not enjoyed the best of times in recent years, enduring many changes in staffing, leadership, name and facilities and even at one stage being placed in “special measures” instigated when a school is in danger of failing.

This is not the case now, however. As we write in October 2003, COMART approaches half term with many reports of vastly improved morale amongst staff and students and indications of improved achievement and attendance. A new leadership team, brought into the school from other education organisations in the city, we understand has been greatly impressed, even pleasantly surprised and shocked, by what they have found at the school. New partnership projects are getting under way with youth agencies, for example in the East Brighton area that promise to bring additional benefits to young people at risk of poor achievement attending COMART.

Anyone reading the local press and following the progress of COMART could be forgiven for being confused about what has been happening at the school and what the future holds. One minute we hear about new facilities being built through a PFI initiative including impressive new arts, dance and media studios as part of the move to make COMART a centre of media and arts excellence. The next we hear that these facilities are not finished, are not being used and that the school is recommended for closure by the very Local Education Authority that commissioned its development.

The Local Education Action Group understands that the recent history of COMART has been difficult. We firmly believe however that these difficulties and challenges can be overcome through a united partnership of education and skills agencies, school staff, students, parents, local families, regeneration agencies and community groups. Damaging “us” and “them” attitudes evident between local community groups and city authorities must be cast aside, mutual trust developed and a partnership effort launched to invest in the future education in Whitehawk.

There has been a long and proud tradition of secondary education based on the COMART site extending back to the days of the original Stanley Deason School. To end this tradition would be to remove one of the key organisations and institutions from the very

heart of the community of Whitehawk. The exciting opportunities that exist for the education and development of young people and the broader development of the community of Whitehawk and East Brighton would be lost.

The timetable for consultation around the closure of COMART has been very tight. Many people in Whitehawk and beyond do not fully comprehend what is proposed let alone the consequences for young people, families, the communities of Whitehawk and East Brighton and the City. We are setting these consequences out clearly now and invite everyone who supports our view that closing COMART would be a social, community and educational catastrophe to join our campaign to overturn this move by the LEA and support our positive proposal for a new partnership project to develop secondary education on the COMART site.

3. The arguments against Closure

a. Direct negative impact on young people and their families

i. Disruption and dislocation of education at any age is known to have adverse impact upon young people, their families and the broader community in terms of socialisation and other behavioural implications. Any of us who are parents of young people who have made the transition from one school to another at any stage of their schooling understand what a traumatic and dislocating experience this can be for the young person concerned and their family, for fellow students and the staff at schools involved. None of these negative consequences, which can include reduction in educational attainment and achievement need to happen if COMART is not closed.

ii. Dispersal of young people from COMART and future attendance of all secondary school age pupils at schools outside of the area where they live will bring a substantial range of additional and unnecessary costs, inconveniences and disadvantages for the young people, their families and the local community. Transport costs, the costs of new uniforms, of attending and keeping in touch with school progress far from where young people live and so on.

iii. Closure of COMART will make it more expensive and inconvenient and in practice will reduce the ability of parents and young people to play an active role in school life – especially after school activities. Residents of the community of Whitehawk – the single biggest catchment area for COMART – have lower incomes, less disposable income and it could be argued need the encouragement and support of locally available education in order to engage positively with the experience of their children. Residents of Whitehawk are more likely themselves not to have achieved well in school and need to be supported (best done locally by other support agencies that know the families) to confront the fears,

anxieties and mis-understandings or lack of knowledge they have around schools and schooling for their children. These arguments are also important when we consider the need for extended and additional services and facilities to be made available to young people and their families *at and around the school in the area where they live* and not in dispersed costly to access areas in other parts of the City.

iv. Feedback from city wide consultation on the future of COMART has indicated that parents at other schools who may take COMART students in the future are anxious about the impact this will have on their own children's education.

b. COMART is not a 'failing school as portrayed by the LEA

COMART is far from being a "failing school" as is portrayed by the LEA. The school has moved upwards out of special measures, attendance has improved and many of last year's Year 11's –in spite of the most staggering disruption and uncertainty caused by a series of wholesale staff changes, major construction work, and the mounting atmosphere of uncertainty – confounded expectations by obtaining high attendance rates at examinations and results that in the light of the circumstances can only be seen as tremendous.

A report from the Acting Principal of COMART in July 2003 sent to all parents, carers and students highlighted impressive achievements made during the last school year:

- Attendance up by 5% in the year
- Excellent motivation and behaviour from all year groups during the fortnight of school exams
- The best Key Stage 3 SATs results for Science and Maths with four students gaining level 8 in Maths (Level 5 is the national average for Year 9)
- Up to 40 students attending after-school sessions with Brighton and Hove Albion and Brighton Bears with football and basketball coaching and sport, health and literacy skills work, generously sponsored by the LEA Pathfinders Project .
- Year 10 dance project where professional dancers work from Sussex University work with students to produce a performance in September at the Gardner Arts Centre.
- COMART students participating in the Sounds of the City showcase at the Pavilion Theatre.
- The re-start of the COMART Duke of Edinburgh scheme with a group of Year 10 students.
- Year 10 GCSE drama group performing in Brighton and Eastbourne.

A recent survey of 31 COMART year 11 leavers in July 2003 established that only 2 of that group have not secured positive plans for their future education, training or employment. Earlier this year COMART was formally recognised by an award from the DFES for the substantial and rapid improvements it was making.

The new leadership team working at COMART are reported to be most pleasantly surprised at the behaviour and achievement they have found from students at COMART in the current new school year.

c. Parental choice arguments are not conclusive and are undermined by the new policy recommendations from Ofsted and the Audit Commission

It is true that many parents do choose to send their children to schools other than COMART .It has always been hus. The reasons for this are complex and multi-faceted and include high levels of transience from families moving in and out of the area , preference for schools with religious admission criteria, and most often parents who are advised by the LEA to send their children to other schools due to the children's special needs and the existence in some schools across the city of special needs units that are absent at COMART (despite COMART having the highest special needs proportions of any school – statemented and non-statemented).

This does not constitute the lack of parental respect for COMART that the LEA makes out . In any case it could be argued that any poor parental perception of COMART has more to do with a negative reaction to the chopping and changing that has happened at COMART than to the school and the education it provides . There most certainly has not been a level playing field on which to make judgements about the school in the past few years. Four name changes in twenty years have not enabled it to create a consistent reputation or history .

The LEA has not taken into account the many positive experiences and attitudes parents have of COMART nor the negative experiences and attitudes many local parents express that their children have when attending schools other than COMART. The arguments and facts around issues such as parental choice have not been represented evenly and in the round by the LEA. The simple fact is that parental and young person choice will be ***SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED*** by the closure of COMART. If COMART were to close , the likelihood of parents of young people living in Whitehawk obtaining their first choice of school for their children would be massively reduced . Dispersal would inevitably mean a higher proportion of young children being separated from their friends and peer groups which as we all know can result in long-term negative consequences for children and their families.

The real clincher with respect to parental choice arguments is the recent report from Ofsted and the Audit Commission arguing for LEA's to urgently take a completely fresh approach to their strategies for school place planning , arguing that more resources rather than less should be put into schools in disadvantaged areas to prevent increases in social exclusion.

d. Regeneration arguments

Closure of COMART would disrupt existing regeneration schemes and lead to loss of opportunities for community regeneration based around partnership work with the school involving young people, their parents, carers and families and the wider community.

i. Disruption of valuable partnership work involving locally based agencies

Loss of COMART would mean the end to vital and painstakingly established locally focused partnership working between school and many other agencies working with children and young people in the local area . Inter-agency work to support young people through their secondary education , such as liaison with social services, educational welfare officers, youth worker, connexions, locally provided community projects and so on cannot possibly be carried out as effectively and efficiently when young people are dispersed and educated out of their own local communities.

ii. Loss of impact on broader regeneration programmes

The loss of COMART from within the community of Whitehawk and East Brighton , would mean the loss of all of the positive partnership regeneration activities that could take place in the years ahead, especially those that would be possible as a result of the eb4u New Deal for Communities programme. National examples abound where partnership working around secondary schools plays a vital role in the regeneration of disadvantaged communities .

The problems experienced by the school have their roots in the state of the community , so closure of COMART would be not only premature, but damaging to the health of the community of Whitehawk ,wider East Brighton and the City as a whole.

The Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy(NRS) , 2002-2010 has just completed its first year , It needs to be allowed to continue and to develop for the benefit of the community and the school.

The NRS has a remit wider than the school itself :

“ Given the support structures already in place within schools and within the LEA it would be of little value for the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy to focus directly on work within the schools. Rather the strategy will concentrate on the relationship between the school and the local community and the support for children and young people outside the school. This also reflects the broader responsibilities of the new Council Directorate of Children, Families and Schools.”

This new Directorate is in its infancy but needs to continue the joint working emerging between education and social care to extend the range of operations in addressing issues that impact on achievement.

iii. LEA has not considered the impact of school closure on regeneration programmes

The LEA report recommending closure of COMART (par 10.6) makes it clear that officers have not considered arguments for the role of the school in the regeneration of the community (presumably because as they are the LEA this is not their role).

The LEA state : “ If the maintenance of a secondary school in the area is deemed essential to regeneration , quantified outcomes would need to be demonstrated and contributions to investment secured. No evidence has been provided to demonstrate that this is the case.

This is precisely why the Local Education Action Group is proposing (see proposal section) that additional time is taken to formally investigate these vital areas. The national policy guidance from Ofsted provides the justification and recommendation for the LEA to consult formally with other city council and regeneration bodies in the city to investigate the impact of closure of COMART on social inclusion explicitly.

iv. Summary of regeneration arguments

- One should not simply “abandon” a school in an area experiencing social exclusion , particularly where the root of the problem is likely to be in the wider social and economic difficulties faced by the community. Instead ***the aim should be to enhance well-being within that community*** and to bring it and the school up to well-being standards elsewhere.
- Contrary to the LEA’s report suggestion at para 10.10 , this would ***enhance the Council’s reputation*** (especially in the light of last week’s policy recommendations from Ofsted) as an authority that is taking innovative and holistic approaches to tackling social exclusion on a City –wide basis.
- Local children sent to schools outside the area are likely to suffer a greater sense of social exclusion and isolation as practical evidence from parents of young people from COMART attending other schools so far suggests that children are often at best ignored and at worst victimised / bullied by children in other schools. The recent publicity around the most irresponsible research commissioned to seek views of students of COMART and other schools has only contributed to exacerbate this situation and shape the likely reception young people from COMART would have in other schools. We wonder if LEA officers have demonstrable evidence that local children sent to schools somewhere other than COMART do better than their COMART counterparts?

- Extended schools type activities could bring fundamental benefits to a community that needs it most. Resources may be diverted away from this area should the school, that ought to be at its heart, serving all local people, be removed.
- The school at COMART is in a unique position to accommodate additional extended school type activities once a consolidated quality basis is secured for its core curriculum work. The site as a whole could accommodate additional services such as youth, health, family learning, adult learning, links with business and enterprise and so on in partnership with other agencies which would also help bring in the income needed to meet the PFI contract requirements.
- The school could contribute to some of the key elements of a self-sustaining healthy community. It could enhance social inclusion and reduce isolation by strengthening local links between children and amongst parents allowing support/informal services within the community beyond the family unit .eg childcare, information sharing, support for the elderly.

e. Environmental impact

The impact of dispersal of students from COMART across the city would be for increased traffic flows and journeys across town. Those families with cars would inevitably wish to use them to make the journeys to and from school for their younger children, especially young girls and in winter months on safety grounds.

f. Future of Whitehawk Primary School

Were COMART to close, this would inevitably lead to increased doubts over the future of Whitehawk Primary School as the lead “feeder” school for COMART, which could bring the sort of de-stabilising and negative impact doubts over the closure of COMART have had on the Primary School and the community it serves.

g. Impact of loss of school on community morale

Many local residents have expressed the view during this consultation period that the removal and closure of their local secondary school, which many of them attended and have good memories of, would be a further body blow to the local community and add to their sense that some in the City do not believe in or care for the residents of this area.

Conclusion: The overwhelming case against closure

We believe the case against closure of COMART is overwhelming since it embraces not just educational aspects, but broader social and community elements as well and the impact of closure, though undoubtedly falling hardest on the communities of Whitehawk and East Brighton would also have massive short-term and long-term negative impact on the entire City as a result of the increased exclusion that would result and the social and economic consequences of this.

4. Proposals for the future of COMART

The Local Education Action Group proposes a carefully phased approach to the planning of a future for COMART , prompted not least by the significant national policy changes announced this week by Ofsted and the Audit Commission just this week , and by the overwhelming local case that we have set out for opposing closure in the second part of this document.

We believe the fresh Ofsted recommendations around school place planning are enough on their own to justify a revised approach to the future of COMART.

Key elements of the work carried out by the LEA to assess the future options for COMART have not been addressed by the LEA's own admission – especially investigation of the impact of closure on social inclusion and exclusion that involves other key parts of the city council and other regeneration agencies.

The Local Education Action Group recommends working towards a small urban community school of in the region of 470 -500 pupils and with gradual adoption of extended school status.

The LEA officers report (taken from the staff and governors report) gives the example of a successful small school in Wigan with 468 children.

The school roll at COMART is nearer 400 at present, but it is argued that the school should be entitled to continued and enhanced regeneration funding , with family learning and continuing local regeneration measures , to allow for educational attainment to be increased , the image of the area improved, involvement of local people and groups in the school increased in order to deliver sustainable and long-term sense of belonging and ownership which will do much to turn around the often negative attitude and experience many within the Whitehawk community have of education and schooling.

The result will be increased confidence from the local community and broader community in the school and gradually increasing rolls , finance and achievement.

The costs of this will still be considerable , but we argue will in the end outweigh those that would be incurred long-term across many agencies in the city council in dealing with the result of the increased exclusion and its attendant consequences that would result from school closure.

The planning towards a small urban community school adopting an extended school model cannot be achieved by the LEA alone.

Central to the case for such a school – in financial terms and in increasing the delivery of educational , social, health, business and community outputs and outcomes – is the committed and formal involvement of a range of partners including :

- Eb4u representatives

- Representatives from local health, social services, the police
- Youth service, Connexions and other representatives from agencies already active in partnership work with the school
- Potential partner agencies including LSC
- Other city council service heads , such as housing,
- Local community groups , especially education related projects such as the Whitehawk Inn, the Bridge , who are working to make contributions to improved educational standards for a wide range of people
- Young people representatives of the COMART student body and community

The Local Education Action Group recommends that this range of partners would meet together to work with the core school management team consisting of

- COMART senior management team
- The LEA
- COMART governor LEA representatives
- Existing COMART partners including Varndean

to jointly plan the future of quality and viable secondary education on the COMART site.

In partnership , this group would :

- aim to raise standards of educational attainment through continuing to improve the health of the community including enabling a “culture of learning “ in the wider community , eg family learning, lifelong learning, positive parenting .
- Seek to lever in the maximum amount of external funding to support this range of extended activities , and find a solution to the issues surrounding currently under-utilised assets on the site and full use of the site and all of its assets by a range of organisations and partners.
- Collectively explore viable options for the future of secondary education on the COMART site and make revised recommendations which could be consulted upon broadly across the neighbourhood and city .

We recommend a phased approach for example, as follows :

A working group should be appointed with representatives from the key agencies with responsibility for and the potential to contribute effectively to a future secondary school at the COMART site.

We propose , in the light of exciting new national developments around school place planning and inclusion and the need to learn from innovative practice elsewhere that a special seminar is convened , with independent external facilitation , involving the key stakeholders in the future of COMART. (Though focused on COMART , the lessons learnt would be valuable and applicable across the city .)

An agenda for such a seminar which could make a significant contribution to the exploration of viable routes forward for secondary education on the COMART site could be :

Information gathering and scene setting of the national policy framework:

The **new national policy setting** – we have already approached *Ofsted and the Audit Commission* , and they have in principle agreed to attending such an event to set out the details of the new national policy framework.

Other **external inputs** to this seminar would we recommend be sought from **best practices examples of small urban community** schools such as that at Wigan and selected *extended schools with* the aim of providing information to delegates about what makes the difference in making small urban community schools work and extended schools. How have small urban community schools and extended schools in settings similar to COMART faced the challenges of financial viability, of raising aspiration, of tackling challenging behaviour, of breaking the cycle of downward spiral of schools at risk of failure through .

Best practice examples from anywhere in the UK (or beyond) in how secondary schools in areas of disadvantage best engage with the local community in partnership could be put forward. These might include innovative case study examples of secondary school partnership work with youth agencies in tackling issues of behaviour and disaffection , school attendance and achievement for young people.

Examples of how *partnership working* operates in other schools across the city would be useful to have as well.

The LEA would be able to present the challenging **financial and regulatory framework** conditions and attainment and standard targets that are set and must be met through secondary education facility at COMART.

Other inputs might be provided by key partner agencies such as *eb4u* who could set out their own targets , especially in the area around education and related issues and could begin to set out proposed partner actions that would lever in additional resource and help to achieve mutually agreed targets for the future school. Case study examples of **New Deal for Communities** partnership working involving secondary schools would be presented.

A brief case study example could be presented of successful current partnership work at the school – such as the current work with year 11's .

The financial implications of the **PFI** arrangements would need to be set out and options for dealing with this in the future explored.

These inputs would enable delegates to understand the statutory and legislative , policy and regulatory framework in which the school must operate, explore opportunities for meeting this and to look at financing and funding the future school.

The seminar could involve delegates in assimilating this information and beginning to apply the examples to the context of COMART.

Follow up action would involve the smaller working group assimilating this information and working on assembling a number of viable models that would meet the statutory demands for quality of education , the financial demands of a viable business operation and the community needs for a vibrant and healthy operating secondary school at the heart of much community activity.

Initial options would be developed by the working group , who with support from key LEA officers would work up revised proposals to be put to education committee and full council in subsequent meetings as part of a revised school place plan for the city as a whole that addresses at its centre in addition to education standards the impact of school place planning and school provision on social inclusion.

A further recommendation would be that if there was time, *independent external experts are commissioned to carry out a full impact study into the impact of school place planning on social exclusion in the city* – results of which could be shared at any seminar. (Though it is acknowledged that this would extend the timescale for production of revised proposals. In that this would continue to allow time for the current stability and consolidation at the school to develop and yield further positive results this would not be entirely inappropriate.)

We believe this would help to **put the LEA at the vanguard of local authorities in seeking to revise their school place planning in line with new policy recommendations** and would help in the **creation of one of the country's first plans that directly addresses school place planning in the context of social inclusion.**

We believe the timing would be extremely beneficial for the LEA , especially in light of the upcoming Ofsted inspection of the LEA in Brighton and Hove in early 2004.

5. Conclusion

The Local Education Action Group recommends :

- The LEA withdraws its current recommendation for the closure of COMART with immediate effect in the light of the Ofsted recommendation that LEA's take a fresh look at their school place planning policies and practices.
- The LEA creates a partnership working group comprising LEA officers, COMART school leadership team and key local community stakeholders and partners to review the options for the future of secondary education on the COMART site.
- To inform the work of this working group a seminar is held as soon as practically possible at which Ofsted sets out its recommendations for school place planning and inclusion, best practice examples are presented from small urban community and extended schools across the country together with New Deal for Communities best practice case studies around regeneration programmes linked to secondary schools and relevant locally based partnership work examples.
- The partnership working group presents revised recommendations to the CFS council committee which go out for further consultation and a final proposal put to full council.

The results of these actions will we believe be :

- Further development of improving secondary education in Whitehawk and East Brighton
- Enhanced joined up social exclusion tackling measures and actions that bring benefits to local people and all partner agencies
- Opportunity for the LEA and City Council to achieve pathfinder status in being amongst the first authorities in the country to create new joined up responses to school place planning that tackles social exclusion.

The Local Education Action group invites you to support these proposals
Please contact Kevin on 07742935254 or E-mail lea_group@yahoo.co.uk

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