BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL

PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

4.00pm 14 JANUARY 2025

HOVE TOWN HALL - COUNCIL CHAMBER

MINUTES

Present: Councillor O'Quinn (Chair) Sheard (Deputy Chair), Cattell, Czolak, Meadows, Shanks, Simon, Thomson, Allen and Pickett. Sara Fulford (OPC), Joanna Martindale (CVS), Adam Muirhead (CVS), Becky Robinson (Parent Carers Council), Lesley Hurst (Church of England education co-optee), Maria Cowler (Catholic Church education co-optee), Jasmine (Youth Council Rep).

PART ONE

21 PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

21 a Declarations of substitutions: Cllr Pickett for Cllr Mcleay. Cllr Allen for Cllr Helliwell.

B Declarations of interest: There are none.

C Exclusion of the press and public: There are no part two items

22 CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

22.1 The Chair gave the following communication:

Today we have two very important items on the agenda. We are again looking at School admissions arrangements and are joined again by Curtis and Lewis from Class Divide and by Dr Ellen Greaves from the University of Exeter. I have also arranged for Euan Hannington, Head of Rudyard Kipling School, and a representative of Brighton & Hove Buses to be in the audience to listen to our discussion. Secondly, we will be looking at the City of Sanctuary work carried out by the council. For this item we are joined by Prof Jo Wilding from the University of Sussex. Both of these items should be very interesting and I am grateful to our external guests for adding to the discussion.

Members may have noticed a meeting has been arranged for Friday 7th February at 15:30 at Brighton Town Hall. This is a special meeting to scrutinise the council's budget in relation to the remit of this committee. I hope that you will all be able to join us there.

23 MINUTES

23.1 Sara Fulford said that in the minutes of the joint budget meeting held on 28 November 2024 that her concerns about the imbalance of outsourcing or closing older people's services

was not included. The minutes of the joint budget meeting held on 28 November 2024 were agreed.

23.2 The minutes of the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 9 October 2024 were agreed.

24 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

24.1 There were no public questions or petitions. There was one deputation presented by Adam Dennett, the lead spokesperson.

24.2 The Chair responded to the deputation as follows:

Thank you Adam for this detailed deputation and for the time you have taken today to present here at this committee.

I understand that the Parent Support Group have been interested in the council's proposals and have invested a good deal of time in considering the implications of these. I know that you have undertaken and been involved with others in some detailed analysis pieces which have been shared widely across the city.

I have asked officers for views on some of the direct points you make in your deputation and whilst I know these points have been debated in a number of meetings, I thought it helpful to repeat some of that here.

I am aware that the Council has to be mindful that at the point of seeking the determination of a set of arrangements, a detailed analysis of its impact must be provided. The admission system currently gives parents the opportunity to use 3 preferences. All preferences for each school are considered only when more than one place can be offered so the order of preferences does have a bearing. An offer will be made to the highest preference school. There is interplay between all preferences and each school that will affect how places are allocated - this is why modelling its impact is difficult.

I'm informed that stating authoritatively that unless you have a sibling link or an eligibility for free school meals you will only have a 25% chance of getting into a catchment area school depends on certain permutations.

There are priority criteria within the admission arrangements which support local children to gain a place at a local school – priorities 1 and 2 - plus the way that local children with an EHCP who wish to attend a catchment area school are allocated. And children with older siblings in the school must live in the catchment area as well.

I do understand that the point you are making with the 25% is in reference to children who will be considered under the proposed priority 7 – children who live in catchment but don't qualify for a higher priority. I am aware that there is debate across the city about what the risk may be of not gaining a place at a local school and I know that the Administration is listening carefully to the points being raised on this within this consultation period, and analysing different permutations as part of the consultation.

The council has access to data and insights that are not able to be placed in the public domain, and our own forecasting and school place planning work has long been recognised as highly accurate

As Chair I wish to be clear that accurate forecasting is difficult to provide robust assurance on and all parties should acknowledge that.

Regarding the points you raise about absenteeism, I would like to thank you for the work you are doing to raise the profile of this most important area of work with school aged children. Absence rates, and particularly where absence is persistent, is an area that remains of great interest and concern to us all at the council and one that has had a focus placed upon it for many years now.

Our Brighton and Hove Inclusion Support Service have developed a tool to identify the push and pull factors impacting on pupil's attendance that is nationally recognised and used by other Local Authorities. There will be unique factors for each child and family impacting on attendance at school as well as important school based factors.

Whilst you raise an important point about links between absence levels and attainment, we do not believe this matter to be mutually exclusive to that of disadvantage. We also wish to continue to see a twin track of work that both focusses on absenteeism AND tackling disadvantage in the city.

I thank you again for your time and your detailed think pieces on this topic. I know that the council appreciates the engagement from you and the wider group and will continue to listen very carefully to the points you raise.

25 MEMBER INVOLVEMENT

25.1 There were no member questions.

26 SCRUTINY OF SCHOOL ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS 2026-27

26.1 Cllr Taylor presented the report to the committee.

26.2 Lewis Smith from Class Divide presented to the committee saying My name is Lewis, I work in a local semi-skilled job, and am father to twins who have just last year started secondary school, and a four year old son due to start reception year next September. We live together in a flat in North Whitehawk.

Our main worries while applying for secondary school places, especially as our eldest are both diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Condition, is how would they get along socially, and the school buses, which would be a fact of life no matter what.

My work entitles my family and I to free bus travel, so we felt like we had options, and went excitedly to visit our five local schools' open evenings, meeting teachers, visiting SEN departments, libraries and art rooms.

But there are many friends of ours where there was never any such thing as a choice, because of the costs involved. I remember thinking us very lucky, enjoying gathering information and

dreaming a little on the future If I had known quite how empty our own notion of choice had been.

The work done by the council recently to help those children eligible for free school meals is so great, and there can be no denying the opportunities it has created. But it doesn't fill the gap my own luck avoided for my own children. If choice is to be an option then it must be an option for all.

Choice is what we promoted with our own children. Wanting to make the best use of that freedom we thought my work enabled for us, we gave them the breadth of knowledge, guided them and listened to what they said, and we marked their admissions papers with their choices.

My wife, being an alumi to the school and impressed with the academic achievement there, wanted them to go to Cardinal Newman. I, being aware of the direct bus bringing children back from Longhill up to an hour earlier than children attending other schools, felt that to be the preferrable choice. Our children were both admitted to BACA and, gladly, so were many of their friends.

Knowing our children were faced with a journey including two public buses each way, and crossing of a major dual carriageway, we had more than a few worries. At least they had each other we thought, and friends, but we started practicing none the less.

I pictured an 11 year old version of myself, and there being nothing scarier to that young person than the thought of having to sit on a bus for an hour with people I didn't know. I thought of my son who just a few months previously had been hit by a car while crossing the road near a community event.

But our children have, as perhaps they always do, grown up before we were ready for them to. They plan their own alternative routes if there's disruption, recognizing destinations and numbers on buses and problem solving even when they get stuck over a mile from home in the snow. This is education beyond what can be offered by any school.

It's a continuation in many ways of my four year old's school trip to the post box, which is perhaps both the sweetest and most visionary thing I've ever heard of.
But yes, we are lucky, for our part.

I imagine if we were of a different sort of luck, and having been able to engineer our children's admission to the school of their choice by moving house to become neighbours to it, and we were now hearing about our children having no choice but to bus to school, well, I could repeat elements of what I have said, but if this is the sort of social-engineering that we want for our future, where children are pigeon-holed because of their parents economic status… where diversity is only admitted under hoop jumping, and sacrifice.

What is on the table now represents choice, at least, where right now there is none, and aside from taking down either Dorothy Stringer or Varndean and re-building it in a different part of the city, this may be the very best that can be done.

Where I come from, we don't have a voice for this sort of thing. When you live what lawyer and writer Hashi Mohammed, in his book 'People Like Us,' calls the "daily humiliations" of being

working class, it's only a matter of time before you join a kind of community depression. And if that goes on long enough, a person stands to lose something more. Belief. Belief in themselves. In change. In a system there to stand for equal opportunity, where the weakest are held high, and given wings.

What message is there in the decisions of the future, what are we making, here, and now?

It could not have a more long reaching potential. I ask please do your best. For those children whose parents have not been able to stand before you today."

26.3 Curtis from Class Divide presented to the committee saying "Thank you, and I want to especially thank Lewis for sharing his family's story today.

What strikes me about Lewis's testimony is something profound - it's about trust.

Trust in the democratic process, trust that participation matters, trust that when families engage thoughtfully and openly with consultation, their voices will be heard.

People in communities like Whitehawk have waited decades for this moment. They've watched as their children's chances of achieving basic GCSEs remained 40% lower than the rest of Brighton. That's not just numbers - it represents thousands of young lives shaped by a system we've allowed to persist.

Our group includes parents like Lewis and Beth, who you heard at the last scrutiny meeting, who have given their precious time to engage with this process - time taken away from work, from family, to be a part of Class Divide, during years that haven't exactly been easy for anyone.

They've chosen to invest their energy in this campaign because they believe change is possible.

Across Brighton, we're seeing parents wrestle honestly with these proposals.

Take Alice, a Preston Park parent who speaks about her own journey with this issue in our latest podcast episode. She acknowledges the fears many feel but reminds us of a crucial truth - She told me.

"We will be paralysed for years if we try and find a perfect solution... If you wait five years, that's five years worth of children going through secondary school for whom the situation has not improved."

We also need to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth about consultation processes. When the results come in, remember that some voices will be louder than others. Some parents have more time, more resources, more confidence in navigating these systems.

If the numbers opposing change appear higher than those supporting it, we must ask ourselves why that might be. Who feels able to respond? Who has the bandwidth to engage? Whose voices might be missing - probably the ones who have been let down with their education, generation after generation.

The proposals before us aren't perfect - change rarely is. But they represent a genuine opportunity to begin dismantling the invisible walls that have divided Brighton for far too long. As Lewis so powerfully put it:

"If choice is to be an option then it must be an option for all."

Show parents like Beth, Lewis and Alice that their participation in democracy matters. Show them that Brighton doesn't just talk about progressive values - it lives them. Their trust in this process, their hope for change, their vision of a fairer city - these deserve more than just our words. They deserve our action."

26.4 Dr Ellen Greaves, University of Exeter, presented to the committee. Dr Greaves said that most secondary schools used geographic criteria with half using catchment areas giving pupils within them priority admission. She said 90% of schools had geography as a tiebreaker and only a minority used pupil premium such as the council introduced last year, or with a percentage reserved for pupils outside of the catchment area. She said Brighton & Hove were the only local authority in England where a lottery was the main tiebreaker. She said it was worth thinking carefully about the proposed policy in combination with the lottery tiebreaker. She said that public transport would really matter on who can take up the new policy, and that the effect would be different than if everyone had a local school. On PANs Dr Greaves said that Brighton was unique in that the central schools had such high PANs, indeed some of the highest in England. Dr Greaves said that as an economist she felt that choice was valuable, that parents should have the right to make a meaningful choice and express a preference for a school they feel will best suit their child. She said that whilst she believed in evidence it was also important to recognise that having a choice will make a difference to how integrated families feel and how meaningfully they engage with the process. Dr Greaves said that there was not very much evidence in England to see what the effects are on pupils that choose alternative schools using these policies or those who are displaced. This was because of the lack of similar reforms and/or evaluation rather than evaluations that have found no/weak effects. Dr Greaves said there was evidence from the USA but the focus was on ethnic group rather than class. She said that she was applying for funding to evaluate the free school meal priority policy, which would be the first evaluation of its kind in the country.

26.5 Cllr Shanks asked a question about catchment areas and why they were needed if it wouldn't mean a child would get into the school. Cllr Taylor responded that without catchment areas they would have to work on geographical distance as a city wide catchment area was not allowed. He said that under the old system of no catchment areas they had similar problems. Dr Greaves said that the current system was catchment areas and lottery to determine ties. Living in a catchment area was no guarantee of getting a place. She said that using straight line distance was possible but you could end up with 'holes' in the city that were far aways from all schools. She said the advantages of straight line distance was that living very close to a school would almost guarantee entry. Richard Barker confirmed that there could not be just a lottery based system there would need to be elements before that such as catchment area or distance.

26.6 Cllr Shanks asked a question regarding buses for Longhill School coming earlier as they then have to go on to Cardinal Newman, so why were the council subsidising this over the council's own schools? Cllr Taylor responded that Longhill has an earlier start. He said that there were three categories for buses: directly subsidised, routes that turn into commercial routes, and those that are just commercial but follow patterns of travel to or from schools. He

said that a review of home to school transport was coming and school travel as a whole would be looked at as good travel was needed.

26.7 Adam Muirhead asked about priority 2 in the admissions criteria and if enough weighting was going to be given for SEND pupils under priority 2. Cllr Taylor responded that SEND pupils were some of the most important to think about. He said some of them would have an EHCP prescribing specific school and may set out a travel plan. Priority 2 is exceptional circumstances, which includes exceptional medical needs or young carers. Richard Barker said that the school admissions code does allow social and medical needs and that the wording of the admissions code was being looked at.

26.8 Cllr Czolak asks questions about the impact of long-distance travel on attendance, how the new policy will be assessed, and the marginal ballot being included in the consultation. Cllr Taylor responded that the Sutton trust had referred to it as marginal ballot but the council was calling it open admissions and is in the consultation. He said that the council had to address the issues of PAN and wanted to close the attainment gap. He also mentioned the work that the council is doing to address attendance. Dr Greaves said that there was a lack of good data on who goes to which school and what they go on to do, but she said it would be possible to track who gets what preference, their travel time, attainment, and GCSEs. She said that there was also more to it than just educational attainment. She felt that the proposed increase in preferences to four was good but that an increase to six would be better.

26.9 Cllr Thomson asked why we needed choice as if all schools were as good as each other it wouldn't matter. Cllr Taylor said that it was an important point and that parents were concerned about so much for their children.

26.10 Cllr Allen asked if Cllr Taylor was confident that open admission would increase choice for parents with only one school in their catchment area, if the proposals would bring back children being schooled outside of the city, and if he was happy for Rudyard Kipling School to increase its PAN in Woodingdean. Cllr Allen also asked Dr Greaves what percentage of open admissions she feels would make an impact. Cllr Taylor responded that he wanted families going to schools in the city and that he was happy for Rudyard Kipling to increase its PAN as there were enough children in Woodingdean to fill the places. Dr Greaves said that se couldn't give a concrete answer because of how recently the free school meals policy was brought in, and we don't yet know the impact of that.

26.11 Cllr Meadows raised concerns about travel arrangement for areas without buses, the cost of travel for families with multiple children, the potential for an increase in car journeys. She raised further concerns about not waiting for data from the free school meal policy, the potential for schools to close or become academies, and the level of extra support middle class parents can give to their children not helping other children. Cllr Taylor said that the cost of travel was key and he would like to see all under 19 getting free travel. He said that they were progressing at the speed set out by the government. He said that although some parents had said to do nothing and wait until next year, decisions had to be made in reasonable time. He said that the council puts in place school improvement plans where needed and need to address falling pupil numbers. He said that schools offered extra support for children in the holidays and that we need to look at extra support for disadvantaged children.

26.12 Cllr Cattell asked about how underrepresented people's voices would be heard. Cllr Taylor responded that there was a bit on the survey for personal details so the council can

monitor who is responding. He said that the council were making efforts to carry out events across the city and included the youth council.

26.13 Cllr Sheard asked what support was being given to families on free school meals, about support given to pupils being allocated a school further away from their first preference on a marginal ballot, and about the high rate of school appeals. Cllr Taylor responded that pupil premium funding is meant to be used for this, that transport costs are important and is currently offered if living more than three miles away, and said that he would come back on the appeals question.

26.14 Becky Robinson said that PaCC were planning a listening event the following week and would update their position statement then. She suggested that lived experience and case studies of children or young carers may help. She noted the concerns parents and carers had around travel and wanted to find solutions to these. Cllr Taylor thanked Becky and said he would take away the idea of case studies.

26.15 Cllr Pickett asked why the council couldn't cut the PANs this year and consider catchment areas next year. Cllr Taylor responded that this was something that could be done, that there were five proposals that could be taken forward totally, partially, with tweaks, or not at all.

26.16 Cllr Simon asked a question regarding transport to Longhill and what would be done differently to solve the problem. Cllr O'Quinn responded that Cllr Taylor was having these discussions with the bus company.

26.17 Cllr Simon asked about later buses for children doing after school activities. Deb Austin replied that there were ongoing discussions with the bus companies, and conversations were happening more in the round and included after school as well as before. She said that an additional bus had already been put on later in the day from Longhill to Whitehawk for after school activities.

26.18 Cllr Simon asked if increasing social mixing was good for children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds as it was for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Dr Greaves said that there was research that showed when children from poor areas moved to schools in wealthier areas following hurricane Katrina no body lost. Cllr O'Quinn referred to the evidence given by Prof Gorrad during the last committee meeting on the 9th October.

26.19 Sara Fulford said that she felt it was ultimately a housing issue about class and advantage that needed addressing as part of the City Plan.

26.20 RESOLVED: the report was noted.

27 CITY OF SANCTUARY UPDATE

27.1 Emma Mcdermott presented the report to the committee.

27.2 Dr Jo Wilding, Associate Professor of Law at the University of Sussex, presented to the committee. Dr wilding spoke about the report titled 'what it means to be a city of sanctuary' which covers housing, education, health and access to legal advice. She said they had looked at best practice from other cities and used this to inform what could work in Brighton & Hove.

They wanted to look at what would work without alienating other people or community cohesion. Dr Wilding said that of the 120 enquiries made to Brighton Housing Trust immigration legal service only 17 were taken on. She said that every region had a deficit in legal aid with 57% of those seeking asylum not able to get legal aid. She said that there had recently been a consultation announced on increasing legal aid funding. Dr wilding said that there were also non-asylum cases, such as people with no recourse to public funds, and she believed that these cases would increase over time. She said that in the hostile environment immigration cases covered everything including not being able moving into housing, being unable to leave hospital with a care plan, or being unable to leave abusive relationships. Dr wilding said that despite constraints on local authority finances there were lots of opportunities including things like using former school sites for modular housing. Elsewhere people are using the rent a room scheme, drawing on the lessons from the Homes For Ukraine scheme. Dr wilding said that there was a lot of good work on healthcare, particularly maternity in the hotels. She said that this sort of work is helping in areas like healthcare for the homeless community. Dr Wildings believed that everyone coming to the city should be looked at as a future citizen of the city with a contribution to make to Brighton & Hove.

27.3 Cllr Cattell asked a question about the number and makeup of the Afghan community and how they were being supported. Lucy Bryson replied that there were 37 households through the governments Afghan resettlement scheme, and that there were large families some with eight or nine children, some were single people, some were students who had been at the University of Sussex. Lucy said that this was only one part of the Afghan diaspora in the city. She said that support for women in the resettlement scheme included work with Voices in Exile and with the Network of International Women.

27.4 Jo Martindale said that it was a good example of the council working with CVS an wanted to see mor of this. Emma Mcdermott responded that they wanted to hold on to what they had learned from the multi-agency, agile working during the Home for Ukraine work.

27.5 Cllr Shanks asked about the ongoing funding for the work. Emma Mcdermott replied that the refugee and migrant team were fully funded by government grants and so did not require council revenue funding. The City of Sanctuary work was within council funding and staff.

27.6 Cllr Pickett asked how many City of Sanctuaries there were and how well Brighton & Hove compared. Lucy Bryson replied that there were lots of Cities of Sanctuaries as well as boroughs, towns, and villages of sanctuary across the country. She said that she represented Brighton & Hove on the national network for cities of sanctuary so was able to meet with others from across the country regularly. Lucy said that Brighton & Hove was doing really well but had haven't told the story yet, and that hopefully once the application had gone in this could start to happen.

27.7 Cllr Pickett asked a question about housing being an issue because of the lack of supply in the city. Lucy Bryson responded that the whole of the south had far fewer asylum seekers because of the cost of housing. Dr Jo Wilding said that dispersal of asylum seekers had started in 2000 to move people out of the southeast to places where housing was cheaper. She noted that every locally authority in the country, with the exception of the Isles of Scilly, had asylum accommodation.

27.8 Adam Muirhead reiterated points about the learning taken from the work done and asked if the report was captured this work as a case study. Emma Mcdermott said that Homes for

Ukraine had been their first time working at pace and on scale and they wanted to know if they could continue this. The team had found that with trusted relationships things could get done with bureaucracy. Dr Jo Wilding said that inter migrant analysis had carried out work to look at what has changed since 2017. A lot had been done to learn best practice from elsewhere, as well as having academic knowledge and feeding it into the council. Lucy Bryson said that she had been on fully funded learning visits to other areas including Birmingham, Coventry, Cardiff, and Northern Ireland to see what they were doing. She had also been working closely with her counterpart in Liverpool to see what they had done to be accredited.

27.9 Cllr O'Quinn was pleased to see work being done with Hong Kongers and asked how much goes on with them. Lucy Bryson said that there were around 900 Hong Kong British National Overseas passport holders in Brighton & Hove and that there was a small funding stream from MHCLG which was used for a range of things. She said that this year funding would be going into a local diaspora group. Lucy also said that the council has less connections with the pre-existing Chinese community and that there is mistrust and tensions between the two communities.

27.9 RESOLVED That Committee notes the council and its partners' work related to refugees and asylum seekers and developments in central government policy and practice over this period. That Committee notes the steps being undertaken by the city council to secure accreditation as a Local Authority of Sanctuary in 2025 in accordance with the Council Plan.

The meeting concluded at 7.08pm

Signed Chair

Dated this day of