

Subject:	School Places for Catchment Children – Items referred from the Council meeting held on 25 March 2021		
Date of Meeting:	14 June 2021		
Report of:	Executive Lead Officer for Strategy, Governance & Law		
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Wards Affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

- 1.1 To receive the following petition for consideration which was debated at and referred from the Council meeting held on the 25 March 2021.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.2 That the Committee responds to the petition either by noting it or writing to the petition organiser setting out the Council's views, or where it is considered more appropriate, calls for an officer report on the matter. It is recommended that the petition be noted.

3. CONTEXT / BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The petition is detailed below:

SCHOOL PLACES FOR CATCHMENT AREA CHILDREN

Lead Petitioner – Amy Hyland

We the undersigned petition Brighton & Hove Council to review the number of secondary school places available at Dorothy Stringer and Varndean School for the September 2021 intake.

Justification:

There are 62 children in the Dorothy Stringer/Varndean catchment area who couldn't be offered a catchment area school this year. These children have already missed many months of school and contact with their friends over the past twelve months. The impact of the pandemic and a national lockdown has been huge. Their emotional resilience is at a low. Instead of being able to look forward to the next stage in their education with , they are now having to contend with extreme disappointment and anxiety, as they have been offered places far from their homes and their local community.

In previous years, Dorothy Stringer and Varndean have taken additional students to reduce the impact of students being deprived of local school places. It seems that this year, neither school is being asked to provide any additional capacity. Indeed, capacity at Dorothy Stringer has been reduced by 30 spaces. This is despite the fact that in 2018, the Council decided not to go ahead with plans for a new secondary school on the basis of additional capacity being provided by existing schools, notably Dorothy Stringer and Varndean School, with funding being freed up to support this.

The council's data would have shown that there would be additional demand for secondary school places for September 2021. As a consequence of reducing the school spaces available, children are not able to go on to attend a secondary school in an area they have grown up and where they are part of their local community. There is a ripple effect of this reduced intake which is negatively impacting on families in other catchments areas too.

We call on the Council to review the places available at Dorothy Stringer and Varndean School.

Children have suffered enough over the past year; the Council cannot champion the importance of young people's mental health and well-being and then deprive this group of the opportunity to attend a local school for this next significant chapter of their lives.

- 3.2 An extract from the proceedings of the council meeting held on the 25 March is detailed below for information.

**COUNCIL
4.30pm 25 MARCH 2021**

VIRTUAL

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Robins (Chair), Mears (Deputy Chair), Allcock, Appich, Atkinson, Bagaeen, Barnett, Bell, Brennan, Brown, Childs, Clare, Davis, Deane, Druitt, Ebel, Evans, Fishleigh, Fowler, Gibson, Grimshaw, Hamilton, Heley, Henry, Hills, Hugh-Jones, Janio, Knight, Lewry, Littman, Lloyd, Mac Cafferty, McNair, Miller, Moonan, Nemeth, Nield, O'Quinn, Osborne, Peltzer Dunn, Phillips, Pissaridou, Platts, Powell, Rainey, Shanks, Simson, C Theobald, West, Wilkinson, Williams and Yates.

PART ONE

122 (2) PETITIONS FOR DEBATE.

- 122.1 The Mayor noted that the Council's Petitions Scheme provides that where a petition secures 1,250 or more signatures it can be debated at a meeting of the full Council and said that he had been informed of one such petition for today's meeting. The

Petition concerned school places for children in catchment areas and he called on Ms Anna Cole to present the petition.

122.2 Ms Cole thanked the Mayor and stated that she was representing a group of 62 families who all lived in the catchment area for Dorothy Stringer and Varndean schools. These parents simply wanted their children to be able to attend one of their local schools but had been allocated schools across the city which meant they would have to catch several buses and would be separated from their friends. A number had been allocated schools that were further away than other schools outside of the catchment area which also seemed unfair. However, the main concern was that it was felt Dorothy Stringer School should be able to take an additional 30 pupils above its number as it had in previous years and given that it was under capacity at present. She then read out some statement from the children affected by the decisions not to award places in the catchment area. She hoped that the matter could be reviewed, and appropriate action taken to enable the children to attend their local school.

122.3 Councillor Clare thanked Ms Cole for presenting the petition and stated that first and foremost she wanted to underline that understood that this has been a distressing episode for some families at a time of significant upheaval and uncertainty. She wanted to assure Ms Cole that councillors and offices were trying their best to alleviate the stress and fallout this has caused. There had been continued dialogue with the schools to see if a sustainable, long term solution could be found but currently it was not possible to have an additional class.

She noted that prior to national offer day the council had already reviewed whether it would be appropriate for bulge classes to be used to meet the demands within catchment. In considering whether bulge classes are appropriate and could be accommodated, the capacity of the schools to safely absorb additional pupils had to be considered, and of course this included consultation with our schools. Since 2018 both Dorothy Stringer and Varndean schools have admitted more pupils when it's been possible to do so safely, and Varndean School has become permanently bigger as a result. Stringer had also agreed to expand but only on a temporary basis. The analysis of the schools and the council this year is different. Schools have admitted up to the published admissions number for this year. Varndean is experiencing ongoing disruption of the building works needed to provide for this expansion, works that were already funded to allow for additional classes to be absorbed safely.

On top of this, Dorothy Stringer is already still managing an additional 31 pupils going through the school from previous bulge classes. They have a number of teaching spaces that are too small to take bigger classes and this causes issues around

both exam season, and some specific classes where there are health and safety requirements, like Design and Technology. They also have temporary classrooms on site.

This has meant the schools are in a good position to analyse from that real experience the impact upon existing and future pupils of growing the school still larger, and we have listened to that feedback and taken it on board. In conjunction with the schools and following cross-party discussions, the council has concluded that they should not absorb the numbers required on top of the additional numbers they have already taken.

I appreciate this is a difficult conclusion to hear for those affected. There has been some speculation that Dorothy Stringer could absorb additional pupils than is currently being managed. I'm afraid this has been followed up and is not the case. There are additional planning and practical requirements to be taken into account. These include timetabling, available staff, and very practical logistical implications such as overcrowding in the corridors, stairwells, the number of toilets and canteen facilities.

The impact on schools of taking additional pupils is more than providing temporary accommodation, and making individual class sizes bigger, challenging as that is. Dorothy Stringer school has highlighted from its experience that larger year groups have a detrimental effect on students' attitude to learning and progress. In larger classes the individual attention given to each child is reduced. This particularly affects lower attaining students who are working in significantly larger groups than the school would like.

The Council also has a responsibility to look at the situation of all schools in our city and to think about whether the bulge classes are needed for the city as a whole, and whether these additional resources are going to be needed going forward. Taking everything into account, we believe that making the schools even bigger is not going to be the right thing for all our schools or the city and in particular, for our children, especially in a year where issues of overcrowding have real implications for the health of pupils and staff.

While this is small comfort, it is very likely that some will eventually be offered places within the catchment, without requiring the schools to go above the PAN. Some pupils will be able to be taken off the waiting list when it is known what offers have been accepted across the city. There is also a mechanism for the families of the children affected to challenge the decision via the independent Appeals mechanism.

However I do appreciate that for the young people and families involved understanding why the decision has been taken offers small comfort, which is why I give my commitment that we will

support every child who has been impacted by the decision. I have discussed with council officers and requested that they invite all of those families affected for this September to meet and discuss their situation in the coming days.

Our schools' wellbeing service will also be supporting the transition, as they do for all year 6 pupils, and are putting in additional support for those affected. As I have already highlighted, I want to put steps in place to ensure we look at the long-term sooner, rather than later. Finally, I want to again thank you for your engagement on this issue and offer you both my understanding but also my assurance that we want a long-term, sustainable solution for children, young people and schools in our city.

- 122.4 Councillors Brown and Allcock acknowledged the difficulty and concerns raised by the petition and that there was a need to look at how the situation could be addressed in the future. However, it was not possible to increase class sizes and a decision had been taken this time by both the schools and the council. It was noted that the Working Group would be looking at the catchment area and it was hoped that changes to the process could be made for the future. The council took the well-being of its pupils seriously and the provision of high-quality education in the city.
- 122.5 Councillor Janio stated that he had listened to the comments and questioned why the situation could not be resolved, it was only a bulge that was going through the system and it could be addressed.
- 122.6 Councillor Clare noted the comments and stated that the situation had been looked at and unfortunately there was nothing that could be done at this stage, although the process would be reviewed and hopefully improvements made for the future.
- 122.7 The Mayor then put the recommendation to note the petition to the vote and called on each of the Group Leaders to confirm their position as well as the Groups in turn followed by each of the Independent Members:
- 122.8 Councillor Mac Cafferty stated that the Green Group were in favour of the recommendation and this was confirmed by the Members of the Green Group;

Councillor Platts stated that the Labour Group were in favour of the recommendation and this was confirmed by the Members of the Labour Group;

Councillor Bell stated that the Conservative Group were in favour of the recommendation and this was confirmed by the Members of the Conservative Group;

Councillor Brennan confirmed that she wished to abstain from voting on the matter;

Councillor Fishleigh confirmed that she was voting for the recommendation;

Councillor Janio confirmed that he was voting against for the recommendation;

Councillor Knight confirmed that she was voting for the recommendation.

122.9 The Mayor confirmed that the recommendation to note the petition had been carried.

122.10 **RESOLVED:** That the petition be noted.