

Brighton & Hove City Council

Cabinet

Agenda Item 95(c)

Subject: Deputations

Date of meeting: 14 November 2024

A period of not more than fifteen minutes shall be allowed at each ordinary meeting of the Council for the hearing of deputations from members of the public.

Notification of one Deputation has been received. The spokesperson is entitled to speak for 5 minutes.

1) Deputation: Concerns about school admissions proposals

We represent a group of families with children attending primary schools within a reasonable walking distance of Dorothy Stringer and Varndean secondary schools. We are deeply concerned about the Council's proposed changes to catchment areas and to cut places (PANs) in some of the city's most popular schools. The Council's proposals would increase the distance that hundreds of children across the city need to travel to school. Some of the distances would be much further than the longest within-catchment journeys to school under the current arrangements. Given the location of the city's schools and the topography of B&H, it is unavoidable that children who live a long distance from a secondary school will not be able to walk to school. The fact that this is already the case for a cohort of children, does not justify requiring large numbers of additional children who live within walking distance of two large secondary schools, to travel excessively long distances (Fig1). Long journeys to school significantly reduce sleep and exercise, with impacts on absence, lateness, readiness to learn and mental health. They reduce the scope for learning and participating in extracurricular activities. They generate child safety risks from children required to travel long distances in the dark. They will put additional strain on bus services and result in more cars on the roads, increasing traffic and worsening air quality. They would also negatively impact the journeys for children already utilising the bus network, making it harder to provide effective school bus services overall.

It is clear the Council's proposals are primarily intended to ensure the viability of Longhill High School, whose location and current size make it difficult to attract enough students (Fig 2&3). We do not think expecting children to travel excessive distances to boost numbers at a school far from where they live provides a viable solution, as it ignores the geographic and demographic reality of the city. It is questionable whether catchment areas that deliberately seek to move large numbers of children far away from their nearest schools could be considered 'reasonable' under the School Admissions Code and it is unclear whether parents would comply with such catchment areas or whether it would drive parents to look at options beyond their assigned catchment, exacerbating the Council's existing concerns.

We recognise the challenges of educational disadvantage in parts of the city, but we think the Council's portrayal of attainment data has led to misrepresentation, as B&H is performing above the national average for disadvantaged students (Fig 4). B&H is the first council in England to introduce a FSM priority in school admissions as a way of narrowing the attainment gap. In her evidence to the People Overview

& Scrutiny Committee, Dr Greaves advised the Council to assess the effects of this policy before introducing further changes and we support this.

We request that the Council takes the time to consider wider objectives, utilise available evidence and expertise, and avoid any major increases in the distances children need to travel to school. Ideas could include: building on the Council's thinking about school federations to enable schools of differing sizes to provide a comparable education; reducing the PAN at Longhill to a realistic number to enable it to focus on catering for its local community; heeding the expert advice to assess the effects of the Council's new FSM policy before introducing further changes; reviewing other admissions options; and seeking ways to influence admission numbers at faith schools pending the upcoming white paper.

Supported by:

Adam Dennett (lead spokesperson)

Tony Boland

Esme Gaussen

Tom Harrison

Matthew Boote

Anna Mouser

Paul Bunkham

Mark Kennedy

Sally Wright

Lindsay Parker

Jonathan Carr

Imogen Miles