

Parent Support Group response to Brighton and Hove City Council's consultation on changing secondary school admissions arrangements

Background about the Parent Support Group

The Parent Support Group is a group of over 500 parents who came together in response to the Council's proposals on changing school admissions arrangements. The group was formed after the launch of the Council's engagement exercise. More people have joined during the current consultation and our numbers continue to grow.¹ We have been concerned and disappointed by the nature of the Council's proposals and the way the consultation has been run. We disagree with the Council's intention to displace children by creating over-subscribed catchment areas.

Concerns about the Council's proposal to displace children

The Council's proposals would deliberately prevent large numbers of children getting a place at a school in their catchment area and require 250 randomly selected children each year to travel long distances across the city. According to the Council's own numbers, 144 children could be displaced from the Stringer/Varndean catchment area, 57 children from the Hove Park/Blatchington Mill catchment area and 44 children from the Patcham catchment area. In the Stringer/Varndean catchment area, this would mean that roughly half the children who do not have a sibling link and are not eligible for free school meals would not get a place at either school. Last year all these children would have got a place in their catchment area.

The Parent Support Group's analysis suggests the number of children displaced from the Stringer/Varndean catchment area could be even higher depending on whether the free school meals (FSM) priority is applied as it has been for 2025 admissions and as written in the proposed admission arrangements (with the quota applied on top of higher priorities), or whether it is applied in the way that was recently explained in the FAQ document for the consultation (with the quota including children eligible for FSM who are admitted through higher priorities). The uncertainty about this has contributed to significant confusion about what the Council is proposing and the likely impact of its proposals.

Children who are unable to get a place in the Dorothy Stringer/Varndean and Hove Park/Blatchington Mill catchment areas would be given the lowest priority in accessing places in other schools, meaning they would probably only be able to get a place at one of the schools furthest from where they live.

If this policy is implemented, it would create huge uncertainty for families. The negative effects would pile up rapidly. On National Offer Day in March 2026 the first cohort of

¹ See www.parentsupport.group for more information about the Parent Support Group and the analysis it has conducted of the Council's proposals.

students would find out who has been randomly selected to be displaced. By March 2027 there would already be two cohorts of displaced children. Parents of younger children would quickly become aware that Brighton & Hove's school admissions system promises longer travel distances and more uncertainty than in any other city in the country.

The Council has produced minimal evidence about the impact of its proposals. It has not provided any analysis of the likely impact on attainment, attendance, traffic, child safety, the environment, wellbeing, SEND, exercise, after school activities, sports clubs, the involvement of parents and carers in schools, homework, young carers, and many other issues. In situations where families choose longer journeys to school, they can consider the impact for themselves based on their own family circumstances. If the Council wants to impose this decision on families, it has a responsibility to provide people with its analysis of the likely impact.

Concerns about the Council's contradictory proposals

Since 2007, the Council has used a system of catchment areas to plan the number of places it needs at different schools and provide students with priority in accessing a school reasonably near where they live. The Council's current proposals seek to invert this system by giving children in dual school catchment areas low priority in accessing a school in their own catchment area and then requiring them to travel long distances to a different school.

This displacement would be caused by a contradictory set of proposals that seek to increase the number of children in the central catchment areas while simultaneously reducing the number of places that are available. This is done through a combination of the proposed open admissions priority, catchment area changes that would increase the number of children in the Dorothy Stringer/Varndean catchment area, a reduction in the number of places at Dorothy Stringer and Blatchington Mill, and an increase in the proportion of places that are prioritised for children who are eligible for free school meals. The PSG is concerned about the combined effect of these five proposals.

Concerns about creating over-subscribed catchment areas

The Council's objective of creating oversubscribed catchment areas is contrary to the basic logic of using catchment areas, which is to give children priority in accessing a school near where they live and avoid unnecessarily long journeys. For children who do not live near a school, a catchment area enables a community connection to a particular school. It also enables the Council to provide effective bus services for children who do not live within walking distance of their catchment area school.

Up until now, the Council has sought to provide enough places within each catchment area to accommodate the number of children wishing to attend a catchment area

school. The Council created the current system of dual catchments and took the unusual step of introducing a random allocation tie-break to maintain parity between oversubscribed schools within the dual catchment areas. The Council used to give a clear assurance that it would seek to provide enough places within each catchment area.² Just a year ago, when consulting on the new FSM priority, the Council provided assurance that, due to falling pupil numbers, the FSM priority was unlikely to affect children's chances of securing a place within their own catchment area.

The Council's strategy of trying to displace children from the central catchment areas is therefore new and contrary to its previous commitments. It is a strategy that would create high levels of uncertainty for large numbers of families. We believe the Council should return to its focus on ensuring it has enough places in each catchment area for the children living within that catchment area. The Council then has options about how it manages the effect of falling pupil numbers and whether it uses this opportunity to enable more children to attend schools outside their catchment area if they wish to do so.

Concerns about unreasonable travel distances

The journeys for displaced children could be very long. It is likely that many would need to travel longer distances than any children currently travel to a school within their catchment area. The Council's use of a random allocation tiebreak means there is no scope to take account of the distance, bus routes, journey times or where friends and neighbours are going unless a school is undersubscribed. Scattering displaced children from the centre of the city at random to schools on the edge of the city would make it impossible to provide dedicated school buses. Many children would have to get on 2 or 3 buses to get to school. Some would have to travel for well over an hour each way. There is a high chance they would be making these journeys on their own.

We are aware there have been ongoing issues with bus transport to schools, but the Council can provide school buses such as from Whitehawk to Longhill and to Cardinal Newman because there are large numbers of children travelling in the same direction. We understand that BACA has been seeking a dedicated school bus service and that the bus times to Longhill are earlier than the school would like because of the availability of buses. These issues have yet to be resolved, indicating that it would not be feasible to provide school bus services to transport children from the large central catchment areas in all directions across the city.

The increase in bus journeys would bring unnecessary costs and financial uncertainty for parents and the Council. The Council would need to pay for the journeys of children

² The 2010/2011 booklet on Secondary School Admissions in Brighton & Hove stated: "if a school is oversubscribed with applicants who live within the catchment area, we will negotiate with the school in question to try to secure additional places" and "if your child's home address is within a catchment area which applies to two schools (i.e. Varndean and Dorothy Stringer or Hove Park and Blatchington Mill) we will do our best to ensure that you are offered a place at one of these schools, as long as you list preferences for both of the schools in your catchment area".

who are displaced to schools that are over 3 miles from their home, while parents would need to pick up the bill for journeys that are under 3 miles unless they are eligible for free school meals. Families would not be able to anticipate this cost, and the Council would not know the travel costs until it knew the distances displaced children would have to travel

As journeys to school get longer, the proportion of children who travel by car increases. This is particularly likely when journeys to school are complex and if children will have to make those journeys on their own.

Concerns about the impact of long journeys to school

Children who currently make long or complex journeys to school mostly do so out of choice. It is a decision they and their parents have made about what they feel comfortable doing, that they believe works for them and their families. In many cases they might be making the same decision as other children from their primary school, so they would not be making the journey on their own. This is very different to individuals being selected at random.

There are many good reasons for children and their parents to want to avoid long journeys to school. If the school is close enough, there are health and environmental benefits associated with walking. If the school is not close enough to walk, most people would prefer a shorter bus journey to a longer one. Predictability also enables children to be confident that they will start secondary school with some of their friends and makes it easier for primary schools to be involved in planning the transition to secondary school. Proximity enables parents to be more actively engaged with the school community. It also makes it easier to provide additional services in a more integrated way.

Secondary school children may collect younger siblings from primary school on their way home from school. They may help care for a parent or relative. Many of these roles are not documented, they are simply part of family life.

There are also the negative effects of long bus journeys, which we highlighted in our response to the engagement exercise. Some children may have reasons why long complex journeys are particularly difficult for them. They could have SEND needs, their family could be on a low income and find it hard to afford the bus fare, or they could suffer from anxiety.

For parents who do not own a car, attending parents evenings and other school events could become more difficult, particularly if they also have younger children at primary school or for single parents or parents with health conditions.

Concerns about the impact on children with SEND

The challenges of uncertainty, long journeys and disrupted friendship groups will be particularly acute for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). These children are already being let down by a lack of resources, lack of diagnosis and lack of understanding of their needs. The Council's response has focused on the priority given to children with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) but these are difficult to secure. There are hundreds of children that either do not meet the criteria for a plan, do not know how to access one or are still waiting. Their education and wellbeing is likely to be particularly adversely impacted by the Council's proposals, which are causing parents increased concern about their welfare and education. The resulting challenges are likely to impose a further strain on SEND services that are already overstretched. These concerns were raised during the engagement exercise, but have again been ignored.

Concerns about the impact on absence and attainment

Increasing the length of journeys to school would be likely to increase absence rates and therefore have a negative impact on attainment – if a child is not in school, they cannot learn the curriculum. The Council's proposals would therefore be an active choice to negatively impact attainment.

Concerns about the Council misrepresenting the choices that are available

The Council says it wants to increase choice but is proposing to leave large numbers of children with less choice than any children have under the current arrangements – a group of children who would have a low chance of getting a place in their own catchment area and would then have the lowest priority in obtaining a place in another catchment area. Every child should be a priority somewhere, but the Council's proposals mean that a large group of children would have priority nowhere. The Council is also seeking to reduce the published admission number (PANs) at two of the city's most popular and heavily oversubscribed schools, which would further reduce choice.

The Council has claimed that one of the objectives is to increase choice in single school catchment areas, but the Council has not provided accurate information on the range of choices that are currently available. A majority of children in the BACA and Longhill catchment areas already attend schools outside their catchment area as do many children in the PACA and Patcham catchment areas, so choices already exist for many families.

Last year, BACA, Longhill and Varndean were the only schools where more than 85 percent of the children offered a place had named the school as their first preference. By contrast, Dorothy Stringer and Hove Park were the only schools where more than

35 percent of the children offered a place had not named the school as their first preference. Dual school catchment areas do not necessarily provide much higher levels of choice than in other catchment areas because choice in the dual catchment areas is bounded by the availability of places and the relative popularity of the two schools.

The purpose of catchment areas is not to restrict choice but to give children priority in accessing a school that is reasonably near to where they live. Without this priority, some children would have to travel an unacceptably long way to school. Across the country, where catchment areas are used, it is normal to have single school catchment areas. The dual school catchment areas in the city centre were introduced by the Council to manage places in densely populated areas of the city. Brighton and Hove is very unusual in using a random tie-break rather than a distance tie-break to allocate places when schools are oversubscribed. The random tie-break helps to maintain parity between the schools within a dual catchment area and avoids a situation where one of the schools becomes significantly more popular over time. It was never intended to be a mechanism for displacing students.

Concerns about misrepresentation of the Stringer/Varndean catchment area

The Council has suggested that one of its objectives is to create a more socially mixed pupil intake, but it has provided little information about the current mix of students within the dual catchment areas. The Stringer/Varndean catchment already has a diverse mix of children. The percentage of children eligible for FSM in the catchment area is already at the city average. According to the Council's analysis of data from the 2021 Census, the Stringer/Varndean catchment area includes one of the three areas in the city with the highest concentration of deprivation (Hollingdean). The Council's proposed catchment change would mean it included two of the three most deprived areas in the city (Hollingdean and Whitehawk). The Council's objective of creating an oversubscribed catchment area would put children from these areas who are not eligible for free school meals at risk of being displaced, potentially by children from more affluent families who are better able to afford the costs associated with longer journeys to school.

Concerns about contradictory objectives and the lack of evidence

The Council appears to be pursuing competing and contradictory objectives relating to choice, social mixing, attainment and school budgets. It has not been able to provide evidence for how its proposals would further these objectives. Even those experts directly consulted by the Council have distanced themselves from the specific approaches the Council is seeking to take. The Sutton Trust has made it clear that it has chosen not to comment on the specific proposals. Dr Greaves has repeatedly highlighted the need to evaluate the effects of the FSM priority admissions policy before considering making further changes. She has also highlighted that Brighton

and Hove is the only local authority in the country to use a random allocation tie-breaker and warned about the need to look at the implications of using the open admission priority in conjunction with a random allocation tie-break. During the engagement exercise, Prof Gorard highlighted the need to minimise disruption and avoid unintended consequences.

Concerns about the consultation process

The earlier engagement exercise caused great anxiety for many parents about the prospect of excessively long journeys to school. Following the engagement exercise, the Council's analysis identified parents' fears about increased distances to school under the Council's earlier options. Councillor Taylor said that these concerns had been "heard loud and clear". The analysis also highlighted anxieties about proposals that divide communities in different areas including Fiveways, Whitehawk, Prestonville, the Friars/Surrenden area and Port Hall. The end of the engagement exercise provided an opportunity for the Council to rethink its approach. Instead, the Council put out new proposals with the same effect of increasing travel distances and dividing communities.

The Council's proposals recreate the problems of its earlier options and so the consultation exercise has rerun the debates of the engagement exercise.

Introducing new proposals so soon after consulting on the three options in the engagement exercise has caused confusion with many people who responded to the engagement exercise not realising that this is a separate consultation on new proposals. Confusion has been exacerbated by a failure to correct basic errors, frequent changes in how the Council explains its proposals and the periodic release of new information.

It was pointed out before the consultation started that the Council had miscalculated the number of children who would be displaced from the Dorothy Stringer/Varndean catchment area. The Council did not correct this error until 11th January. Even then, the Council corrected the number in its powerpoint slides, while the consultation survey still links to the Cabinet papers with the incorrect number.

It was also pointed out to the Council before the consultation started that the FSM priority had been written in a way that did not take account of children admitted through higher priorities who were eligible for FSM and that this would impact on the number of children displaced from the Stringer/Varndean catchment area. The Council chose not to correct this error before launching the consultation. Instead, it issued an obscure amendment about the FSM priority, but did not change the wording of its proposed admission arrangements. This has caused a great deal of confusion. Even now, as we approach the end of the consultation, the Council has not provided a clear and plausible explanation of how this priority would be applied.

The Council has been adding new documents throughout the consultation. It started with nothing except a link to the Cabinet papers, which are unsuitable as the main source of information for a public consultation - inaccessible and with vital information either missing or buried in appendices. The Council has subsequently added a general information document, FAQ document and powerpoint slides. Each new document has added some new explanations of the proposals, often conflicting with earlier documents. The newer documents have also omitted the negative effects of the proposals, which were covered in the Cabinet papers.

Most of all, the divisive tone in which the Council has conducted the debate has again been disappointing. The Council has once more sought to set communities against each other. It has shown so little consideration for the likely impact on the children who would be displaced by the proposals that it suggests the needs of this large group of children is not important for the Council.

Concerns about the next steps

Given the level of opposition to the Council's proposals and the lack of clarity from the Council about what it is proposing or what impact its proposals would have, we believe that the Council needs to pause and step back. The current proposals would cause substantial harm to the city's school system, impact adversely on children across the city, and have particularly adverse effects for the large numbers of children who would be displaced. It has also become clear that there are many other better approaches the Council could be taking to tackle absence, improve attainment, support schools, improve bus services and much more. Any changes to admissions arrangements need to be done in a way that avoids introducing abnormally long journeys to school.

It will be immensely damaging if the Council tries to push ahead with options that are so widely opposed by parents, schools and communities. Doing so is likely to result in objections to the Adjudicator, legal challenges and increased appeals. It is also likely to undermine the systems that support students and further overburden support services for students with SEND. All of these are a distraction from the more important job of running and improving the city's schools.

The engagement exercise and consultation have revealed lots of energy and expertise across the city that could be harnessed to build on what is already working and help to tackle challenges. We urge the Council to look at the potential benefits of shifting to a more workable and less divisive approach.