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To: School Organisation <schoolorganisation@brighton-hove.gov.uk>
CC: Class Divide <curtis@classdivide.co.uk>
Subject: Class Divide response to the Secondary school admission engagement in Brighton and Hove

Dear BHCC School Organisation team,

Class Divide is a grassroots group of volunteer residents, education experts, and those with lived experience who have campaigned for the past five years to raise awareness of and take action to change the unacceptable levels of education inequality in Brighton and Hove.

Over this time, we have been very consistent in our views.

- We want the Brighton and Hove school system to be socially and economically integrated because it benefits all children to be educated alongside a wide range of peers from different backgrounds and research shows this helps improve outcomes for the poorest children.
- We support families in Whitehawk who want the same choice in the secondary school admissions process as other families in the other parts of the city take for granted.
- We want to keep all of our existing schools open because schools are an asset in a community and closing schools is deeply damaging for children, families and the wider community.

Brighton and Hove City Council have invited city residents to take part in an engagement exercise about the future of our school system.

From our perspective the background and context to this are:

- Despite the efforts of some, the city has failed children from low income and working class families for decades in education terms - to hear more about this, listen to the Class Divide podcast.
- Brighton and Hove ranks 53rd out of 144 local authorities in England for its level of school segregation.
- There was some limited redress when earlier this year, Brighton and Hove City Council approved a new policy that gives children eligible for FSM limited priority in the secondary school admissions system. This means that from September 2025 all community schools will have at least

28% of children in their Y7 cohort who are eligible for free school meals, the first time a policy of this kind has been implemented in England.

- At the time of the policy change it was our view that the significant decline in pupil numbers would inevitably result in a need to look at the system more broadly. We committed to campaigning for changes that would ensure all community schools stayed open, parents in the east of the city had more choice, and schools were more socio-economically mixed. We want to be clear, while we believe the FSM change is a step towards a more equitable education system in the city, it doesn't mean we can wait to make other important changes.

Our view on the engagement process

Our preference would have been for the city to have held a Citizen's Assembly where a representative group of citizens who are selected at random from the population to learn about, deliberate upon, and make recommendations in relation to a particular issue or set of issues.

This is because:

- Education is an issue that elicits strong emotions in people, especially in those who perceive themselves to be negatively impacted by any proposed changes and/or who feel they have a right to certain education institutions because of any financial investment they may have made to 'buy a place' at one of the city's 'popular' schools.

- Despite its image as a progressive place, Brighton and Hove has a history of making decisions about the education system that are not in the interests of its poorest children but favour residents with greater social, economic and political power.

- Arguments put forward to maintain the status quo quickly descend into accusations that those who advocate for change are unconcerned about the health, wellbeing, and lived experience of children from across the city. - when nothing could be further from the truth. And indeed, this has been a very successful tactic used repeatedly by those currently advantaged in the system to stop change in its tracks.

- The education levels in a city have consequences far beyond the individual, for example, it is strongly related to health, the economy, community safety and wider quality of life issues. These perspectives should be represented in decisions about changes to the education system.

In addition to the form of this engagement exercise, we want to state clearly that there have been mistakes made in this process. The information provided by the council required access to devices and

technology that many poorer families and communities do not have access to and there was very little in way of information about how and why the three options they put forward for consultation were chosen by them. Communities and residents in the city with high levels of education and data and analysis skills are automatically at an advantage in the process, with little investment or time given by the council in supporting residents without these privileges to take part.

Our view on the specific engagement questions

There are disparities between schools in different areas of the city. Do you think that we should maintain thriving and sustainable schools in all areas of the city? Yes.

The council believes all of our children have the right to the same education and standards. Do you agree on a system that supports all children to achieve and thrive? Yes.

Do you think that larger schools should reduce in size to create a more balanced school offer? Yes.

This is our position because:

- Some schools in the city have inflated PANs that were originally increased because there was a spike in pupil numbers in some catchment areas and our political leaders chose - we believe wrongly - to support a solution to this problem that maintained existing advantages and was actively detrimental to schools in the east of the city.
- The city now faces reductions in the number of pupils and all schools should be asked to reduce PANs in a fair and equitable way. Schools with PANs of 330 or more are in the 3% largest in the country and such high numbers are unsustainable given this new reality.
- We reject the language of 'failing schools' and have been disheartened to see this type of framing used by people so casually across this engagement exercise. We do not have failing schools in our city, we have schools that need our support and we challenge everyone to visit schools and help our teachers and school leaders by becoming governors, mentors, supporters and encouraging others to do the same.
- The education system is a public service and people should not be able to buy privileged access to this system, or institutions within this system.
- If the deeply unfair status quo remains then there is a real risk that the communities in the east of the city will be forced to endure the closure of another secondary school. We have been through this before, we made a whole podcast series about the devastation it causes, and it

would result in a situation where more of our poorest children have even longer commutes to school and the lowest income families with the burden of high travel costs. In addition to this, schools are a vital community resource for children and families and if lost would leave our most marginalised communities even worse off. This is totally unacceptable.

- Research by the Sutton Trust in 2024 found that children eligible for FSM have worse attainment outcomes in more segregated areas and that having a more integrated system would not negatively impact other pupils.

- Research from the USA where socio-economic integration policies are used in over 100 school districts, finds that “students in socioeconomically and racially diverse schools have stronger academic outcomes, on average, than students in schools with concentrated poverty. This is true even after students’ individual socioeconomic status is taken into account.” It also finds that students in integrated schools are more likely to enroll in college, less likely to drop out of school and result in other benefits such as building a more cohesive society and breaking down stereotypes.

Our view on the specific engagement options

We think that the principles in Option B best reflect Class Divide’s position as it offers choice to parents in the east of the city, creates more socio-economic integration and offers the best chance to keep all community schools open.

However, we urge the council to consider the following.

- All options require a properly planned and integrated public transport options, likely buses that keep travel times to a minimum by offering direct routes to schools from across the city.

- The needs of children with additional needs are given further consideration.

- The school place appeal panel process is tightened up considerably to ensure that the principles of reformed catchments are maintained.

- Any future consultation is easily accessible so that individuals and communities often marginalised in these processes are able to participate.

We are aware we may be accused of social engineering. We see our work as a form of reverse engineering, making schools comprehensive again.

If you have any questions, please do let us know.

Best wishes,

Carlie

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Dr Carlie Goldsmith
Co-founder and Spokesperson
Class Divide

Class Divide is a small grassroots campaign group so my response might not be immediate. For general information about Class Divide, visit www.classdivide.co.uk Explore the award nominated podcast series for a deeper dive into our history: www.classdivide.co.uk/podcast