



## Brighton & Hove City Council disadvantaged strategy consultation

March 2022

### PaCC Focus Group

This report is a summary of a focus group on 'disadvantage' that PaCC organized in response to Brighton & Hove City Council 'Better Outcomes, Better Lives Brighton & Hove's Draft Strategy for Tackling Educational Disadvantage September 2022 – September 2026' ([Education Disadvantaged Strategy APX. n 1.pdf \(brighton-hove.gov.uk\)](#)). The consultation looks at ways to 'improve educational attainment for those pupils who are considered 'disadvantaged' so that they are encouraged and supported to achieve their academic potential and will leave school or college with a positive relationship with education'. Findings and recommendations will feed into the Council's consultation.

The focus group took place on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2022 in Moulsecomb Leisure Centre, East Brighton. The focus group was facilitated by Diana Boyd, PaCC Chair, and by Paolo Boldrini, PaCC Engagement Coordinator. The focus group was promoted to parent carers who attend a monthly coffee morning – the Sunflower Support Group – hosted by PaCC and supported by Amaze. 10 parent carers took part.

**A) The first part of the focus group looked at what parent carers understand by 'disadvantage'. To start the discussion, we wrote the definitions below on a flipchart:**

- 1) Educational disadvantage definition:  
*'Disadvantaged pupils are defined as: Pupils who have been eligible for Free Schools Meals (FSM) at any point over the last 6 years, Pupils who have been looked after continuously for at least one day in the last year, and pupils who have left care through a formal route such as adoption'*

Parents saw disadvantage as:

- Children who get free meals or some other kind of 'free stuff'
- Many parents have to give up employment to look after a SEND child; which can create further disadvantage
- Families who are on low income
- A parent commented that her child has not be able to attend school trips because they were unaffordable and he doesn't receive free meals so can't get reduced rates
- Some parents thought that the definitions are too 'strict' and it would be good to broaden the definition/spectrum. By defining categories of 'disadvantage' the risk is that you will eventually exclude someone who doesn't fit into a category. Disadvantage is anyone who doesn't fit into the majority category, rather than specific categories being 'disadvantaged'.

Therefore, if it non-disadvantaged was a circle, the disadvantaged are those who are outside the circle because the 'mainstream' offer doesn't cater for them. Those on the 'margins'.

2) Brighton & Hove Early Years Strategy (currently being reviewed) definition:

*'The agreed definition of those at risk of disadvantage for Brighton & Hove is children who:*

- *live in workless families (eligible for free childcare at age two and the early years pupil premium at age three)*
- *live in low-income working families (eligible for free childcare at age two)*
- *have SEND including those in receipt of disability living allowance (DLA) (eligible for free childcare at age two and the disability access fund (DAF) at age three)*
- *are looked after or adopted (eligible for free childcare at age two and the early years pupil premium at age three)*
- *have English as an additional language*
- *are from black and minority ethnic groups*
- *live in vulnerable families, including children: with teenage parents; who suffer neglect; with parents who have poor mental health, learning disabilities, substance misuse, subject to domestic violence ; live in emergency housing and/or with a child in need or child protection plan'*

#### Parents commented:

- A minoritised ethnic parent didn't think BAME should be included as a disadvantage because not all families are disadvantaged because of their ethnicity. It was suggested that this could be reworded to something like 'disadvantage because of racism' to focus on racism rather than being in a specific group.
- Another parent added that she objected to being called disadvantaged because her child is on FSM "that's offensive"
- Disadvantage shouldn't be seen as only negative like a failure; it could be because of circumstances you can't control. We shouldn't make assumptions
- Use neurodiverse instead of SEND - though another parent pointed out that not all children with SEND are neurodivergent
- Disadvantage should include mental health and anxiety - on the list but could be more explicit
- To add parents with physical disabilities and long-term conditions and parents with non-visible disabilities and mental health issues
- Disadvantaged people shouldn't be seen as "outsiders" or 'on the margins'; if non-disadvantage was a 'circle', the disadvantaged are those who are left outside of the circle. The focus group participants pointed out that what is needed is for everyone to be inside the circle.
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#### What does contribute to disadvantage:

- Lack of opportunities
- Financial barriers
- No social housing available, or housing department not understanding the needs of your child or listening to you
- High rent
- Unaffordable child minding - we can't go out and meet other people because of lack of respite
- Not being listened to

#### How the current system works:

- Assumptions made by people about others, e.g. not working/on benefits/scroungers.
- Describing people as disadvantage feels very patronising

- The whole system is set up to work with children who fit the idea of 'normal'. SEND kids experience exclusion and disadvantage all the time because they don't 'fit in'. We need more awareness at every level and the system needs to work for everyone
- Some parents are asked to attend courses which sometimes feels like 'be better, adapt to the system' / 'change and adapt to other people'
- Some people see "disadvantage" like a stigma

#### Suggestions:

- Having SEND can also be an advantage, e.g. because they spend more time with their parents
- Carers and parents should be valued more; some carers end on low income because the job they do that is not valued
- Planning for the future: there is no vision of the future for our children with SEND, so schools and services are not working towards that. Other children have a vision for what their future will look like, a job or higher education, etc.
- Education needs to reflect children's different needs – life skills as well as curriculum – and the child needs to be happy
- Better adaptation of services: some services are not geared towards children with additional need, and this can have long-term impacts, e.g. if a child has a bad experience with health services, he/she doesn't want go back



**B) For the second part of the focus group a short multiple choices questionnaire was handed out to parents attending the focus group who were able to 'tick' more than one 'area'. To the question - 'In which areas do you think your child with SEND faces more disadvantage than other CYP?' - parent carers responded:**

78% Physical health

89% Mental health

89% Education

100% Making friendships/building peer network

100% Accessing leisure opportunities

78% Accessing therapies – Physiotherapy, OT, SALT

Other – tell us more:

- Mental health: all the factors which have a negative impact on MH – educational system/lack of leisure opportunities/lack of friendships/access to therapies
- Communication: being understood
- Accommodation: lack of it and not been fully accessible for SEND families
- Stigma: because of SEND/barriers
- Childcare: especially for single parents so they can create new families/relationship structure, get out of isolation and take part in life. Trained childminders aren't affordable; untrained babysitters find it hard to deal with the child behaviour at bedtime
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**C) The third part of the focus group looked at what parent carers would like to be able to access/what does need to change/ improve for SEND families at risk of disadvantage.**

**Parents suggested:**

Services:

- To be creative, they haven't tried everything yet. Services reflect what the Council can offer, rather than being creative
- More eligibility for services, e.g. respite
- Pandemic made the child more dependent on parents which increased disadvantages, e.g. child not trusting anyone anymore
- parents who look like they are managing don't get any support

General:

- Cheaper IT equipment (during the pandemic some families struggled to buy everything that the kids needed)
- Better understanding of SEND children and how they appear to cope and the barriers they are facing
- A benefits system that takes into consideration how challenging and costly it is to look after SEND children
- Pool of people parents can contact for help
- More support and friends

Schools:

- Provide school uniforms/agree dress code without targeting children who don't follow it, and avoiding stigma
- Make schools more friendly towards kids with additional needs
- Small groups/separate groups/short sessions/nurturing session in the class for everyone - to avoid stigma. This can be done even without equipment
- Support and opportunities for child during school holidays

Social Care:

- More respite and for those who can't get it at the moment

Housing:

- Better housing that is SEND child friendly: currently often not suitable for SEND families. A parent described how she has to supervise her child all the time because the housing department is not linked to SEND – their needs aren't understood, so the front garden isn't safe.

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**D) For the final part of the focus group, we asked parent carers what works well for SEND families at risk of disadvantage at the moment. Parents feedback:**

- Accessing groups, meeting other parents and getting some emotional help (like this coffee morning); be able to express and communicate, it helps to calm down and relax
- Practical help; clear information and people to help you

- Services that are more creative, different version of services so can welcome and accommodate all SEND children
- Empathic school staff who show how to support the child and the parent
- Services and schools that offer a flexible approach
- Councillors can be contacted by families and can help with issues, but many parent carers don't know this – needs to be communicated to families



## Recommendations:

### I. Stigma and language

A strong message that came through is that people described as 'disadvantaged' can feel stigmatised and 'done to' by this definition, and it can also exclude those who don't fit into the categories. It can make you feel you are an 'outsider' or 'on the margins' of society. Attendees would prefer an approach which aims for systems that don't disadvantage anyone, and the language should match this approach.

**Recommendation:** Ensure language does not alienate the people you are trying to support by making them feel categorised, stigmatised or judged. The language used at the moment does not empower people and doesn't feel owned by some of those it is trying to support. Include a range of people who feel this stigma in decision making to help avoid.

### II. Inclusion not exclusion

Tackling disadvantage should be more positive – making sure services and society includes everyone. People are disadvantaged by the system, rather being disadvantaged by their characteristics. There was however, recognition that there are specific disadvantages associated with certain categories, such as SEND, single parents, low income etc. An example of this was one parent who felt that racism could disadvantage you, but being from a BAME background did not necessarily mean you wanted to be considered as 'disadvantaged'.

**Recommendation:** Systems need to include and work for everyone, rather than viewing those at risk of disadvantage as outsiders, or as failing, who need to be helped to fit in to the current system.

### III. Finance and support services

Another theme that came through strongly was that financial hardship combined with their child's SEND had huge impacts on mental health, or ability to work which leads to a spiral of 'disadvantage'

**Recommendation:** Multiple impacts need to be included in the strategy, particularly around financial hardship, to avoid a spiral of disadvantage

### IV. Services working together

Different departments need to work together so that the needs of, for example, families of children with SEND, are understood and addressed across services, e.g. Housing, universal health, etc.