

## **PaCC Response: Brighton & Hove's City Council's proposal to close St Bartholomew's C of E Primary School and St Peter's Community School at the end of this academic year (August 2024)**

### **Background**

PaCC is a non-voting member of the Brighton & Hove Children, Families and Schools Committee, representing parent carers of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) age 0-25 who live in Brighton & Hove.

In response to the fall in pupil numbers in the City and alongside national school funding formulas, Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) are proposing the closure of two primary schools in the City. These schools are St Bartholomew's C of E primary school and St Peter's community school.

A consultation about the proposals ran between 7<sup>th</sup> November 2023 and the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2023. During the consultation period, PaCC attended public online meetings for each school as well as SEND specific face-to-face coffee mornings for parent carers who have children who attend the schools. These coffee mornings were held on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of December. PaCC have also received email correspondence from parent carers sharing their concerns.

The face-to-face coffee mornings were well attended by parent carers. Representatives from the two schools and the Local Authority attended both coffee mornings. Representatives from community group A Seat at the Table (who support and advocate for children of colour and dual heritage and their families) attended the coffee morning at St Barts and the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service attended the event at St Peter's. Translators attended both coffee mornings.

High numbers of pupils who have SEND attend both schools, with some families living with the intersectionality of race, poverty, and additional needs. Parent carers are also carers for other family members or have health needs or are disabled themselves. People attending the coffee mornings spoke highly of the schools; how inclusive and nurturing they are and how the schools become a family to many who are part of the school community – especially to families who have moved to Brighton & Hove.

PaCC understand the need to reduce the number of primary places but believe it is essential for decision makers to consider the impacts these proposals will have on children with additional needs and disabilities, as well as their siblings and parents. The intersectionality of many of the families at the school mean they have and will continue to face layers of disadvantage and not just around SEND.

The contents and feedback of this report is to help inform discussions between decision makers about the proposals. It is to be read alongside the feedback from the consultation as well as reports or feedback provided by the schools, community groups and services.

### **Feedback from parent carers at both schools**

*‘They are more than just schools, they’re communities and for some their family.’*

*“If this school closes, where will my children go?”*

- It’s hard to build trust with professionals and schools but families have managed to do that with the staff in both schools and professionals who visit the school. It takes a long time to build up trust and it can’t happen in a couple of meetings.
- Staff created schools that are safe places for children. This isn’t something that can easily be achieved for children with SEND, especially those who haven’t had an easy educational journey and/or have faced trauma in the past.

- Children who attend the schools don't always meet the criteria for a specialist school but struggle in a mainstream setting. They feel safe at these schools because they are small and have small class sizes.
- Both schools have welcomed children with open arms, other schools haven't felt so welcoming to parent carers.

### **Concerns Raised by Parent Carers**

- Parent carers at both schools have concerns around the data provided by the Local Authority.
- Class sizes, the predictive birth rate in Brighton & Hove and the budget seem to be the driving force behind these proposals, not what is best for the children who attend the schools and their families.
- Will there be enough capacity within the SEN team to support with the EHCP review process when naming a new setting.
- Is there enough capacity within BHISS teams to provide support to children and their parent carers with transition to their new school.
- The speed of the timeframe, especially if the schools do close. It doesn't allow for a long transition and the time it may take to find a suitable setting for their children.
- Children who are mid assessment – moving from nursery to a new school instead of from a nursery within a school, having to get to know new support workers, moving from one school to another and new staff and professionals working with them.
- Parent carers chose the schools because of the importance of them being small and nurturing. They are worried about their child's move to bigger and busier schools. Their child will be lost in a bigger school. Class sizes will be bigger in other schools and their children may not cope.

- The impact of this on parent carers - travel costs if their child's new school is further away, the cost of childcare (for St Peters' parent carers as alternative nurseries are more expensive), a threat to their ability to work if their child is unable to attend school because of anxiety and/or distress, the financial impact of this and how the combination of these things will effect the wellbeing of the parent carer.
- Children have attended other schools where it has not been successful, this could be repeated if they have to transfer to another school.
- Pupils in year 5 will have to transition twice because of transitioning to secondary school at the end of year 6. This could be especially impactful for those who experienced trauma due to educational changes during COVID.
- Parents feel that their children are at real risk of being unable to attend school if they need to move to a different school, particularly if the school is unable to provide the support they are receiving currently or if the school environment isn't compatible ie too big, too many pupils. Parents are scared as they're not in the position where they would be able to home school if this happened. This could have a huge impact on siblings and parent carer employment or employment opportunities.
- There won't be time to amend EHCPs with a new setting following a review and for parents to go through the tribunal process before the schools close due to the short timeframes.
- Other schools could refuse to offer a child a place at the school.

### **Specific Feedback About St Barts**

*"Not just a school, it's part of a child's identity."*

- Children who now feel safe and are settled at St Barts have experienced trauma in the past by their experiences at other schools. St Barts has become a safe space for children, particularly for those who have been unable to attend school due to their

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school-based anxiety and trauma. Autistic pupils attending the school don't feel the need to mask due to the feelings of safety and acceptance they experience at the school.

- St Barts is a unique school and children can do things there that they wouldn't be able to at other schools, such as taking their shoes and socks off.
- Parent carers are concerned as they have contacted local schools and there are no places. They are finding it very challenging to find another suitable school that will support their child to feel as safe as they do at St Barts.
- There is a question mark around the future of the social communication resource, of which the primary resource is based. PaCC have not yet received feedback or reassurance about the primary base should the proposals to close St Barts go ahead. This is very concerning for PaCC as we know from the feedback of parent carers who have children accessing the base how valuable it has been for their child. Through our coproductive work around the development and running of the social communication resource, we know what an inclusive and nurturing school St Barts is and how passionate the senior leadership team are around SEND.
- PaCC heard concerns and queries raised by the Head and SENCO of St Barts around the decision making leading to the proposals, as well as the consultation itself. Representatives and parent carers at the coffee morning don't feel that the consultation has been trauma informed and has had a huge impact on the school community. PaCC believe these need to be taken into account by BHCC when planning future consultations.

### **Specific Feedback About St Peters**

*"St Peters is an asset and not a burden"*

- There is a lack of nursery places in the Hove area and there are no low-cost nurseries. St Peters nursery is teacher led so parent carers feel it provides a higher level of expertise. The availability of

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times and cost at other early year settings are making it difficult for parent carers to find a new placement.

- It was hard for parent carers to find a school place for their child originally and this still may be the case if their children have to leave St Peters.
- The school has a high number of children with EHCPs. Parent carers are concerned how local schools will accommodate pupils when they already have a high level of children with EHCPs themselves and schools are full.
- Distance to travel to other settings will be greater – not all parent carers drive, some will have to rely on public transport which will cause stress to their child and parent carers. Journeys to school for children with SEND are already difficult. This could risk long term school placements not working out and cause attendance difficulties due to anxiety and distress experienced. Travelling a distance may not be an option. Road safety will create for some children with SEND if they have to walk to a school further away.
- Will the Local Authority provide top up funding to assist in transitions for children with SEND moving to a new school.
- Will interpreting services be able to move to a new setting?
- As a lot of families who attend the school live in West Sussex, working across the border will make the transition to a new setting harder for children. Not all the services they are currently accessing will be available if they attend a school in West Sussex. There were no representatives from West Sussex County Council at the coffee morning, which meant conversations around cross boundary working couldn't happen. PaCC have been in contact with West Sussex Parent Carer Council and made them aware of the proposals and impact for families affected. They share PaCC's concerns about the proposals.
- Will Councillors be aware of cost implications of closing the schools when they make their decisions.

- Parent carers are sad that their children may not be able to see out their primary years with their friends.

### **Impact of the Proposals and Consultation on Families**

- The consultation is already having an impact on children.
- The mental health of pupils, parent carers and school staff; particularly the way the process has been carried out, lack of communication, and the speed of it.
- Parent carers spoke of how stressful the proposals and consultation has been for them, especially at a time of year that is already so stressful. Both coffee mornings were held on the last week of the autumn term.
- Children at both schools, who had previously been feeling safe and settled at their school have been displaying distressed behaviour since the proposals have been announced. Parent carers feel that this is directly related to the uncertainty caused by the proposals.
- Siblings who attend the schools are stressed at the thought of being split up and having to attend different schools. Having siblings attending different schools could have a huge impact for families.
- Attending multiple schools and removing children from safe places and people can cause trauma. There is a risk of causing additional trauma, on top of existing trauma caused by COVID and previous school experiences.

### **Feedback About the Consultation Process**

- Parent carers feel that the timeframe for the consultation is too rushed.
- Proposals have been made to close schools without first ensuring that there are viable alternatives for SEND pupils.

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- No real alternatives to closing the schools have been presented as part of the consultation.
- Information about the consultation happening was given to the school communities at short notice. The news was in the media before families had time to process the proposal.
- Parents don't have faith in the Local Authority finding suitable schools for their children due to short timeframes and lack of suitable school options. This is particularly the case for children who are on SEN support and don't have an EHCP. The timeframe doesn't allow enough time for them to go through the EHCP process before the school closes.

### **Initial Questions From PaCC**

- Have the schools who could potentially receive additional pupils from the schools proposed for closure, been consulted in terms of their SENCO and support capacity - will there be any transitional support financially for them?
- Will 1:1s be able to transfer with their children if appropriate?
- Will families receive funding for new uniforms?
- Will the Local Authority look back to original applications from parents, if their child started the school in reception, and aim to honour their original 1st/2nd choice if still preferred?
- Is the premise that siblings will be kept together?
- Will there be a review of transport issues for families unable to access a new school?
- Will the Local Authority fully support pupil and parent carer wellbeing and not just leave it to the schools as an additional burden?



## Other Feedback

PaCC note that these are all areas of concern on a wider scale and are aware of ongoing work by BHCC to address these wider concerns.

- Lack of specialist school places - some of the children are awaiting a specialist place. Without the current setting being available some of the children will need a specialist setting rather than the larger mainstream schools available. Parent carers have said that there are currently no specialist places available, and their children are at risk of being unable to attend school as a result.
- Parent carers don't feel that all schools feel welcoming to parent carers when they have been searching for appropriate schools – now and in the past. They have noticed a difference to how inclusive they are compared to St Barts and St Peters.
- Funding to schools doesn't cover the cost of support needed for a child and parent carers are concerned that this could create barriers to their child being able to attend another setting.

PaCC will maintain an overview of the next steps of the process and will issue further communications.

PaCC welcome any communication on any of the issues contained in this document. You can contact us by emailing [admin@paccbrighton.org.uk](mailto:admin@paccbrighton.org.uk) or by calling **01273 234862**