

North Somerset Council

REPORT TO THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER

DATES OF MEETING: 29TH MARCH 2017

SUBJECT OF REPORT: HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY WORKING GROUP

TOWN OR PARISH: ALL

OFFICER/MEMBER PRESENTING: COUNCILLOR DONALD DAVIES

KEY DECISION: NO

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Working Group recommends that:

1. All North Somerset Council policies, documents and processes reflect that the current parameters of living beyond two or three miles from school, dependent on age, are set nationally, but are there as part of the process of ensuring attendance for school children. They do not in any way prescribe how this transport function is delivered;
2. All requests for assistance should only be considered for the closest relevant school to the child's home, be it primary, secondary or specialist. Parents should be made aware of this in any school place application system and it may not match their choice or that of the school or MAT. This may also mean that the closest school is in another council's area or is not the school previously associated as the designated feeder school;
3. If schools or MATs wish to assist in transport provision for non-qualifying children as per Recommendation 2 above, then these requests should be considered as part of our Total Transport offer;
4. In principle, all post-16 transport should be chargeable against a published standard concessionary charging structure;
5. Investment is made in the following:
 - i. training and staff awareness, both for NSC and education staff, to maximise opportunities to encourage parents and carers make their own provision prior to approaching NSC, in line with the nudge training advice provided by iMPower;
 - ii. travel training for all relevant pupils;
 - iii. a network of meeting points for pick-up points be established, checked for safety and accessibility;
 - iv. changes to road network to provide safe walking/cycling to remove the costs of transport due to dangerous road conditions for pupils living less than the statutory distance from school;
6. Personal budgets for transport of qualifying children should be properly clarified and publicised, with a clear and straightforward payment mechanism;
7. The Council's Integrated Transport Unit (ITU) seeks to negotiate on-going season ticket travel for pupils (qualifying and non-qualifying) to use public transport, both for buses and trains;

8. Any parents with mobility vehicles for their children with SEN should be expected to provide transport to school in those vehicles, with the Council funding the fuel and running costs of those journeys in accordance with a funding matrix;
9. The ITU liaise with colleagues nationwide to explore other methods of delivery, such as the Medway Council method of procurement by school rather than by route;
10. When considering matters such as new specialist placement provision or proposed school expansion, consideration should be given to the financial impact across all budget areas. Financial savings within one budget may have a consequential adverse effect on home to school transport costs. Whilst the Council may benefit from an overall financial saving, it is recommended that this is evaluated at the scoping of any such decision.

1. SUMMARY OF REPORT

This report sets out the detailed work undertaken by the Home to School Transport Policy Working Group, and contains a number of policy recommendations.

2. POLICY

The work of the Working Group meets the corporate aim of enhancing health and well-being.

3. DETAILS

- 3.1 The Working Group was originally set up by the Panel to consider North Somerset Council's (NSC) home to school transport policies and costs, both now and into the future. This encompassed mainstream, special educational needs (SEN), and post-16 education. Members were keen to emphasise that the responsibility for ensuring that children were educated remained that of the parents. The provision of home to school transport was a consequence of this parental obligation.
- 3.2 The Working Group's investigation sought to take into account the demographic, financial and institutional pressures that have the potential to increase demand and cost. These include:
 - Increasing number of school age population;
 - Increasing numbers of pupils with SEN;
 - Changes in school place provision to include bodies other than local education authorities as providing those places. Whilst there would be a hope that these were near to centres of population they would serve, increased specialisation in provision for both mainstream and SEN may mean that distances to be travelled to school necessarily increase. Academies and free schools do not have to consider the costs of pupils getting to school, exposing a potential disconnect;
 - As schools, often in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), seek to maximise pupil numbers, they will be seeking children from wider areas of the county. This pattern may be reflected also for post-16 delivery;
 - Transport costs are likely to increase for a number of reasons, including: that fuel prices are likely to rise for the foreseeable future; pressures on operators to provide lower emission vehicles will increase; potentially increasing SEN pupil transport numbers will be more complex in terms of vehicle types and personnel; and projected increases in wage costs.

- 3.3 The working group has considered evidence from relevant officers, and has also met with representatives from iMPOWER, the consultants engaged by North Somerset Council's Corporate Management Team (CMT) to review our home to school transport policies and procedures. Our overall conclusions are that:
1. Current policies, though fit for purpose now, need review to meet future challenges;
 2. Staff team are very skilled and pro-active in delivering at as low a cost as possible, but again need policy guidance to further manage the budget;
 3. Behaviours and expectations from users, providers of transport and education services and officers across the council need to be managed better.
- 3.4 Based upon the findings in 3.3 above, the working group would recommend the following changes to policy:

Recommendation 1

All North Somerset Council policies, documents and processes reflect that the current parameters of living beyond two or three miles from school, dependent on age, are set nationally, but are there as part of the process of ensuring attendance for school children. They do not in any way prescribe how this transport function is delivered.

Recommendation 2

All requests for assistance should only be considered for the closest relevant school to the child's home, be it primary, secondary or specialist. Parents should be made aware of this in any school place application system and it may not match their choice or that of the school or MAT. This may also mean that the closest school is in another council's area or is not the school previously associated as the designated feeder school.

Recommendation 3

If schools or MATs wish to assist in transport provision for non-qualifying children as per Recommendation 2 above, then these requests should be considered as part of our Total Transport offer.

Recommendation 4

In principle, all post-16 transport should be chargeable against a published standard concessionary charging structure.

Recommendation 5

That investment is made in the following:

- i. training and staff awareness, both for NSC and education staff, to maximise opportunities to encourage parents and carers make their own provision prior to approaching NSC, in line with the nudge training advice provided by iMPOWER;
- ii. travel training for all relevant pupils;
- iii. a network of meeting points for pick-up points be established, checked for safety and accessibility;
- iv. changes to road network to provide safe walking/cycling to remove the costs of transport due to dangerous road conditions for pupils living less than the statutory distance from school.

Recommendation 6

Personal budgets for transport of qualifying children should be properly clarified and publicised, with a clear and straightforward payment mechanism.

Recommendation 7

The Council's Integrated Transport Unit (ITU) seek to negotiate on-going season ticket travel for pupils (qualifying and non-qualifying) to use public transport, both buses and trains.

Recommendation 8

Any parents with mobility vehicles for their children with SEN should be expected to provide transport to school in those vehicles, with the Council funding the fuel and running costs of those journeys in accordance with a funding matrix.

Recommendation 9

The ITU liaise with colleagues nationwide to explore other methods of delivery, such as the Medway Council method of procurement by school rather than by route.

Recommendation 10

When considering matters such as new specialist placement provision or proposed school expansion, consideration should be given to the financial impact across all budget areas. Financial savings within one budget may have a consequential adverse effect on home to school transport costs. Whilst the Council may benefit from an overall financial saving, it is recommended that this is evaluated at the scoping of any such decision.

- 3.5 The ITU was created following the commencement of this Working Group investigation, resulting in responsibility for some of the issues crossing to another Executive Member's portfolio. Recommendations regarding highways and transport are being made to the Executive Member for Strategic Planning, Highways and Economic Development, whilst those issues relating to education and school placements remain with the Executive Member for Children and Young People.

4. CONSULTATION

The Working Group's findings were informed by consultation with relevant officers of North Somerset Council throughout the policy review.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The new ITU was established at the end of January 2017 as a new approach to managing the council's transport services, providing a better transport service, to better manage demand, and to achieve significant efficiency savings. The unit includes Home to School Transport, Public Transport and Fleet Services, and has an identified savings requirement of £60k from the overall budget for 2017/18.
- 5.2 The Home to School Transport budget is demand led, and we are unable to predict the number of children who will move into (or around) the area and require travel assistance. Some of these children will have additional needs and may require specialist placements around and outside North Somerset. Children who are already placed may also require more specialist placements during their time in education. North Somerset is a small local authority with three special schools and one Pupil

Referral Unit. As such, it is sometimes necessary to place children in schools in other local authorities such as Bristol, Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset, and South Gloucestershire.

- 5.3 New provisions may be set up in North Somerset to help reduce the overall cost of specialist placements, although generally the impact of travel and its costs have not been considered as part of this decision. Whilst the new provisions will be fully funded, the Home to School Transport will not be increased to reflect an additional spend. For example, a new local provision was established in September for children in out of area placements. Although this resulted in a financial saving in the placement budget, the travel costs increased by an additional £22,000 pa.
- 5.4 Weston College is a high quality provider and has developed SEN provision to meet a wide range of very complex needs. This means that some SEN students no longer have to travel outside North Somerset to find post-16 provision to meet their needs, some of which was weekly or termly boarding. The travel costs for this academic year have been set at £120k for students with the most complex needs. However, the potential increase in demand for travel to the local college was not identified, and therefore was not reflected as an increase in the Transport budget.
- 5.5 The Home to School Transport budget has not been increased even though there is a higher demand for travel assistance. This higher demand is due to a number of factors, including: the increasing birth rate raising pupil numbers by 10% in the primary phase and they are now starting to progress into secondary education; approximately 27,000 new homes are expected to be built in North Somerset by 2026. A bid for growth funding therefore needs to be considered, with 10% of the whole budget being circa £300k.

6. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 6.1 The new ITU will need to continue with the good communication links made with the SEN team, School Admissions team, schools and families. This will be particularly relevant when implementing any changes to the travel policy.
- 6.2 Parents may be reluctant to accept the offer of a local school place when a preferred school is much further away or they have to provide their own travel. This could, in turn, lead to an increase in the numbers of Transport Appeals and SEND Tribunal cases. There is also an increased possibility of more Ombudsman cases and legal challenge.
- 6.3 It will take time to fully review all Statements of SEN or Education Health Care Plans and begin to implement any potential changes in travel policy. The Annual Review paperwork includes questions about school travel and how an individual child gets to school, both now and in the longer term.
- 6.4 The opportunities that independent travel training can give to a young person should be acknowledged, as it is not just the immediate benefit of getting to school or college independently, but also the longer term independence skills and confidence it gives them.

- 6.5 It must be recognised that changes in one education area may have implications for the Transport Budget, such as a child being permanently excluded from one school then requiring travel assistance to attend an alternative school.
- 6.6 New housing and a rising birth rate could place pressure on school places, unless they are appropriately resourced. This may have implications for travel costs, particularly in rural locations where school places can also be harder to negotiate and deliver.
- 6.7 Whilst procurement savings have been generated so far, this is likely to start to plateau, eventually leading to higher tender prices.
- 6.8 This is a demand-led budget. Whilst it is possible to predict travel spend based on current student numbers, this is subject to change during the course of the financial year. Although mainstream and SEN routes are fully reviewed on an annual basis each summer, children continue to move in, out and within North Somerset throughout the year, creating a constant change in demand.
- 6.9 There is a need to fully consult with affected stakeholders, including: the schools and academies concerned, families who currently have children at these schools, and families who will be considering secondary school places in the near future. It will not, therefore, be possible to implement any agreed changes before September 2018 at the earliest.

7. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed. Further profiling may be required in the light of future stakeholder feedback on the changes recommended. Adjustments will need to be considered with guidance and support from the Equalities Scheme Implementation Group

8. CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Improving outcomes and reducing costs is a priority in the Corporate Plan. This investigation by the Working Group aligns with the values in the Corporate Plan of putting people first and working with and involving others.

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APPENDICES

Draft Home to School Transport Policy