

Agenda Item 35.

TITLE	Review of Home to School Transport Processes
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 10 January 2022
WARD	None Specific
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Clarity on the transport arrangements for September 2022 and to ensure clear, consistent, and early communication to parents.

RECOMMENDATION

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an overview of the key outcomes from the review of the home to school transport processes.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

This review was prompted by the significant problems that occurred when the newly commissioned home to school transport system was implemented in September 2021. The review focuses on the decisions leading up to the changes, the implementation of the new system and the council's response to the disruption and distress caused by the changes.

Background

Typically, over 900 children living in the borough are transported to school, daily, on council commissioned transport. In the summer term of 2021, the council reviewed and re-tendered all home to school transport (HTST) contracts to ensure they continue to meet needs and represent best value. As part of this work, some technical route optimising was also carried out to ensure all transport routes were as efficient as possible.

Analysis of Issues

Transport services are commissioned to provide dedicated school transport for those pupils who are determined by community transport to be eligible for free home to school transport and where the volume of pupils is sufficient to justify a dedicated bus service. These bus services can only be used by those students allocated to the service and not by members of the public. The eligibility requirements to receive free transport from home to school are set out in the Local Authority Home to School Transport Policy.

The re-commissioning of home to school transport had not been carried out for over 5 years prior to the 2021 programme of work. Therefore, it was imperative that the Local Authority evaluated the service it provides and identified ways to provide an excellent service, as well as being cost effective, whilst reducing the environmental impact of the service.

The recommissioning and route optimisation programme of work brought about significant changes to historic transport routes. For secondary school pupils, it meant that there was a change to most school coach routes, to better accommodate those students eligible for travel assistance, and to ensure the most efficient use of vehicles, and an overall reduction in the number of coaches was seen.

Students from different schools who previously received sole transport to an individual school, were placed on shared transport with other schools, meaning that transport, although was still available and accessible, reduced the number of vehicles on the road during peak traffic times, improving air quality and reducing carbon emissions.

For primary school pupils, many of the routes were changed from September 2021, as routes were optimised for efficiency and to make the best use of available resources. For some pupils, this meant that they were travelling with different children, a different operator, or different staff. As with secondary schools, this reduced the number of vehicles on the road.

SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disability

There are currently over 350 children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in the Wokingham Borough, with agreed transport for September. The historic data held by the council regarding children's needs, was limited, incomplete and at times inaccurate.

As a result of the introduction of the new Dynamic Procurement System and route optimisation programme, many children and young people saw new staff taking them to and from settings and began travelling with different children/young people or in different vehicles, and on different routes.

For children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, the council reviewed all transport needs and provisions and re-commissioned the transport routes. The re-commissioning of transport for children with SEND had not been carried out prior to this.

A wider review is currently being carried out within SEND, the innovation and improvement program (IIP), and transport provision forms part of that ongoing piece of work. Early findings in relation to the IIP are clear that more support is needed around communication. The expectations around sole transport are high because it has never been questioned by SEND or Community Transport (CT) in the past. Consequently, there is a limited audit trail for decisions surrounding sole transport. This is part of the review specifically for SEND and is due to be completed in January 2022.

Key Issues

The system

The new purchasing system and procurement of operators was introduced between April and June. It took longer than expected to write, as the Local Authority, Community transport and the Procurement team, had not used, or written a Dynamic Procurement System (DPS) before.

The timetable for implementation created several risks that flowed from such a tight timetable, as all recommissioning and route optimisation had to be completed before the start of the new school term in September 2021. Moving to a very different system, with so little lead in time was likely to cause significant problems which were not foreseen. A combination of the implementation of a new DPS, late installation of new route optimisation software and the vast amount of administration associated with the new tendering process produced several issues in the home to school transport process for September 2021. The SEND review also highlights numerous flaws in this system from a statutory point of view, and these issues will be detailed in the SEND review due in January 2022.

Two pre-DPS marketing events with transport operators (suppliers) took place, however, some transport operators failed to realise that they had to register to use the new system, which resulted in a significant number of applications being submitted once the DPS was up and running. There were 13 rounds of transport operator applications, some running concurrently. Statutory procurement rules only allow for 10 calendar days to assess a submission. It was found that DPS applications were time consuming to assess, with 9 policy documents, credit checks, financial checks, references, and licence checks for each application. The new system also led to some suppliers struggling to use the new procurement system, which delayed the process further.

In terms of tendering for routes, it was considered that the DPS was a quicker and more efficient way to tender contracts. Ultimately it was found to be more time consuming than the “quick quotes” function which has historically been used in Community Transport. There are 12 steps for awarding a contract, most of which require lengthy forms to be filled. These steps must be done for each and every contract awarded, bearing in mind, there were 350 contracts.

The finance step for tendering contracts requires approval by finance, within the Local Authority. This approval is needed before being able to move the process on. The structure of the DPS workflow is complex and onerous and this process needs reviewing by procurement.

One of the biggest problems was the speed of which the route optimisation software was approved through the IT processes. Market research needed to be done and attendance at numerous IT boards had to be carried out before the software was allowed to be installed.

To carry out effective route optimisation, the system also only works with a high percentage of transport requests being received. The Community Transport team then require a specific time to commission the routes.

Communication and Lateness

The late return of transport request forms by families of children and young people with SEND was the biggest contributor of the issues relating to SEND transport. Ultimately it was this that led to the number of complaints received.

Most transport request forms were returned in August and September, which caused issues for both Community Transport and SEND. All families were contacted in advance, explaining the need to return an application form by the end of June 2021, but the lack of response was not anticipated. Only 30% of forms were received on-time, by June 2021.

This meant that routes could not be tendered as there were insufficient children on the routes to enable effective route planning and route optimization.

Commissioning

Commencing work on re-commissioning and reviewing all transport needs and provisions for children with SEND in April 2021, with the new routes due to be in place for September 2021, meant that there were limited opportunities to engage with parents, carers, and schools, before the new system was implemented.

As a result, the changes were not effectively communicated to all stakeholders, and as such, systems of communication between the council and key stakeholders needs to be improved going forward.

As part of this review, it was found that further shared understanding and clarity is needed regarding the definitions and boundaries of informing, consulting, and co-production. To rebuild trust and to ensure genuine co-production of solutions with parents/carers, and schools, more time is needed to work with stakeholders collaboratively, which will be a key part of the home to school transport process for 2022.

Key recommendations

1. System to be reviewed as fit for purpose for tracking and accommodating needs. This will be discussed at the Corporate Transport Board along with available options. Community Transport to decide whether to implement recommendations from the SEND Review with support/direction from Assistant director and Director of Transport.
2. Agree clarity on communications and how that process works as business as usual and communicate to all stakeholders. Current issues are communication driven as well as systems but are not clear.
3. Development of a decision-making matrix for transport linked to SEND and removal of expectation that transport will be simply given out.
4. Panel to meet at the end of each month with Community Transport, Admissions, SEND, and Finance involved to approve and justify transport forms. At this stage SEND only.
5. All new transport requests from phased transfers, changes due to panel decisions, and movers in for example, to have new transport request forms.

Options: to be picked up at Corporate Transport Board in January 2022. Current transport agreements are rolled on through the commissioning process with no new forms needed unless a change of need is highlighted or via movers in for example. Community Transport to communicate to families that they will have different drivers or routes for example, on an annual basis because of this process.

6. Joint funded officer to link Community Transport, SEND and Admissions on transport.
7. Local Authority must manage the expectations of parents, clearly highlighting what the statutory responsibility of the LA is and manage the expectations for sole transport. Support from comms needed.
8. **Rebuild trust with schools and settings parents/carers, members and officers from other departments.** The Home to School Transport Service needs to set out clear roles, responsibilities and expectations between parents/carers and the Council. This will be done in collaboration with SEND voices.
9. **More support and oversight from senior managers when significant changes are being made to council services:** Children and young people must be at the heart of all considerations and the service should operate in a way that allows children to arrive at school stress free and ready to learn. Therefore, timings of service decisions (e.g., who will be offered transport) need to allow for a fit for-purpose service being ready by each September.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A	N/A	N/A

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
None

Cross-Council Implications
N/A

Public Sector Equality Duty
N/A

Climate Emergency – <i>This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030</i>
N/A

List of Background Papers
None

Contact Zoe Storey, Heather Tomlinson	Service Learning Achievement and Partnerships
Telephone No: 07876554688	Email zoe.storey@wokingham.gov.uk, heather.tomlinson@wokingham.gov.uk