

Agenda Item 24.

TITLE	Home to School Transport - Revised Policy
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 15 August 2023
WARD	None Specific
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson
LEAD MEMBER	Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Children's Services - Prue Bray

RECOMMENDATION

The O&S Committee are asked to consider the Executive report attached at Appendix A on **WBC Home to School Travel Assistance Policies Review** due to be considered by the Executive on 24th August 2023 and consider what recommendations and/or comments (if any) they wish to make for the Executive to consider.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Home to School Travel Assistance Policies (H2S TA) set out the way in which the Council discharges its statutory and discretionary powers and responsibilities in relation to school and college transport assistance available for pupils aged up to 25 years of age, both with and without additional needs.

The Council last undertook a policy review in 2020/2021 leading to some changes which were implemented from September 2022, but the number of children who require travel assistance and the associated costs of providing this support have risen. The Council will continue to work effectively and efficiently to secure appropriate transport where needed. However, the Council must now look to see what more can be done to sustain the support for those who need help the most. Ultimately, the Council must manage increasing costs and demand within the limited overall resources available.

The recommendations set out in this report will detail the options for children and young people who qualify for H2S TA. The Council will look to now focus support for children and young people on gaining the skills which allow them to travel more independently, as appropriate to the young person's age, abilities and needs. Our aim is to help prepare young people for adulthood and future employment. The Council is also committed to reducing emissions to improve the quality of life with cleaner air for all residents within the borough, we will therefore encourage walking, cycling, and the use of buses and trains wherever possible.

The Council's work in relation to H2S TA, is one of several areas of work which the Council is undertaking to improve educational provision and access to education within the borough for children and young people. The proposed policy changes, if approved, will come into effect from September 2024 and should be considered alongside the expansion of secondary school places, the opening of a new SEND School and the potential for two new SEND schools.

Within this document SEN support refers to the children that require additional support often provided by teachers and SENCo but the child does not have an Education, Health, and Care plan (EHCP).

EHCP within this document refers to a pupil who has an EHC plan or statement of SEN where a formal assessment has been made. For children with an EHCP, a document is in place that sets out the child's needs and the extra help they should receive.

H2S TA refers to Home to School Travel Assistance Policies

1. Rationale for the proposed changes

Home to School Transport costs have risen from £3m in 2018/19 to £5.8m in 2022/23, an increase of 93%, with the largest rise being for those children and learners with SEND. Demand for Travel Assistance for children and young people to access education has continued to rise, largely because of demographic changes, such as local population growth, a change in the educational landscape and pressure on school places, while per unit costs of school transport are also rising rapidly.

The proportion of children and young people in Wokingham Borough with Special Educational Needs and or Disabilities (SEND) has also grown significantly in the past three years and continues to grow more significantly than the overall rate of population growth.

These increases in the numbers of children and young people with SEND and in need of SEN support is reflected in the increase in demand for Travel Assistance and, as a result, expenditure on Travel Assistance. The historical lack of sufficient in-borough provision for children and young people with SEND, combined with growth in demand for SEND services and support, has driven increases in expenditure on Travel Assistance for children and young people with SEND travelling to out of borough educational placements.

Excluding the 2020/2021 financial year, and the impacts of COVID lockdowns, the H2S TA costs have increased consistently over the past few years and Wokingham Borough Council (WBC), like other transport commissioners nationally, is seeing additional financial pressures as the country moves out of a pandemic and straight into a cost-of-living crisis, as well as increasing demands for transport services.

The costs associated with mainstream travel have also been increasing, caused predominantly by pressures on school places, driven by a surge of inward migration into the Borough. The change in the Hong Kong National Visa Scheme, the war in Ukraine and the desirability of Wokingham as an excellent place to raise a family with outstanding schools, have all had a dramatic impact on the demand for school places, which has meant many families who move into the Borough are now unable to secure a place at a local school. The cost attributable to a shortage of school places in the Borough is nearly half a million pounds and is the largest contributing factor to the increased cost of mainstream travel.

Significantly increased resources have been made available to the HTST budget recognising those demand and inflationary pressures. This has been set against a programme of activities seeking to ensure value for money through such actions as smarter procurement and route optimisation. Net growth of £1.3m was provided for in the 2023/24 budget alone. Despite this, early indications are that spend will again outstrip the budgeted envelope, putting more pressure on wider Council resources. To project future demand, trends in numbers of individuals needing travel assistance have been reviewed against overall relevant population cohorts.

Mainstream

Currently 2% - 2.5% of WBC mainstream school pupils receive travel assistance. Should this level of need persist, the demand and pressure on HTST budgets will continue to grow due to the projected rise in pupil number in Wokingham through to 2027/28.

SEND

When setting those with travel assistance against overall number of pupils with an EHCP, this shows a general trend of around 27%-30%. If trend continues and set against projected number of EHCPs through to 2027/28, then demand and pressure on HTST budgets will continue to grow, with SEND numbers surpassing mainstream by 2027/28.

Post-16

In terms of Post-16 H2S TA, there is no automatic entitlement to free school or college transport once a student is over 16. Students can attend a college of choice and, if needed, apply to their college's student support for assistance. The Council currently offers, under its discretionary powers, a transport service that requires an annual parental contribution. The cost of providing this discretionary service in the 2022/2023 academic year was just under £400K, with a parental contribution of just under £40K. The Council has considered its resources and the travel to college opportunities for students.

Whilst the Council will continue to support those who need help most, we must manage increasing costs and demand, therefore we are proposing to:

- Enable more children and young people to develop the lifelong skills they need, as appropriate to their needs and abilities, to allow more children and young people to walk, cycle, use buses and trains as appropriate to for the journeys they need to make. Where needed the Council will support with Independent Travel Training (ITT) or Travel Buddies to help children and young people develop these skills.
- Continue to ensure all transport is commissioned efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of children and young people. In many cases this will mean continuing to expand the use of pick-up points which were introduced under the 2020/2021 review of the previous policy and to increase the occupancy of vehicles.
- Improve the clarity of the policy so that parents and carers are fully aware of the implications of their choices in relation to any travel assistance they may receive from the Council.

Whilst the Council acknowledges that some pupils with complex needs will require lifelong support, we also need to ensure that young people do not face a 'cliff edge' when they become adults. For young people with additional needs, for example, their eligibility for transport is linked to their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and will expire at some point in the future. If they are not supported to travel independently, this can create isolation and reduce access to employment as well.

2. Proposed changes

To support the Council's ambition of empowering and supporting children and young people, to prepare them for adulthood and to secure the best value from our limited resources, several changes to the H2S TA policies are proposed. The proposed changes set out in the consultation that took place between 14th June and 21st July 2023 can be found in Annex 3 and 4. The outcome of the consultation is set out in Annex 2. A summary of the consultation responses is provided in section 5 onwards of this report below.

There are some non-material amendments where necessary to the wording and layout to ensure that it is clear and to make sure the wording adheres to statutory guidance.

One of the main changes is for low-income families. It is proposed that the extended eligibility criteria for travel assistance will continue to apply. However, where parents / carers choose educational settings which does not meet these criteria, the Council will no longer be able to offer the discretionary 50% discount on any fare payer transport. Following feedback from the consultation, the Council does however, propose to prioritise seats for low-income families on any council arranged fare payer transport.

Another key change is for Post-16 travel. It is proposed that offers of travel assistance will focus on independent travel options, including the use of public transport and will move away from the provision of private hire vehicles such as minibuses or taxis where appropriate, and towards the use of personal budgets which facilitate families to arrange their own travel in a way that best meets their needs, or Independent Travel Training for young people with SEND. These not only provide a more cost-effective way of supporting transport in post 16 but also have wider, strengths-based benefits of social inclusion, promoting independence as part of the Preparation for Adulthood agenda.

Where the Council assesses a young person aged 16 to 19 years as eligible for travel assistance under its policy, the assistance offered in the first instance will be in the form of a post-16 transport personal travel budget to support families and young people to make their own transport arrangements, unless this is not appropriate due to severity of need or a requirement for specialist transport means. The new policy would end our current practice of providing 'fare payer' travel assistance for pupils in post-16 education.

3. Outcomes from Public Consultation

The purpose of the public consultation was to enable Wokingham residents, professionals, families, and current service users, to read the proposed changes under any new Travel Assistance policy and give their views on any or all aspects of the proposal.

The consultation document set out several questions for respondents in a survey, which focused on:

- The most significant differences between the proposed new Travel Assistance policies and the current HTST policy
- Questions and prompts designed to help the Council understand public attitudes and perspectives on various elements of Travel Assistance provision

- Questions designed to help the Council understand public opinions around opportunities to improve its Travel Assistance offer, and improve the long-term sustainability and financial viability of the service

The full consultation report showing details of responses and comments from respondents is in Annex 2.

4. About the respondents to the public consultation

260 members of the public responded to the formal public consultation on the Council's website between 14th June and 21st July 2023.

Schools and current service users were notified of the consultation, given appropriate links to the consultation page, and notice of the closing dates. Officers also raised awareness of the consultation through e-newsletters and flagged the consultation in meetings with key stakeholders in the build-up to the consultation.

The consultation was promoted through the Council's social media platforms, professional networks including schools, the Parent Carer Forum (SEND Voices Wokingham) network, and the Children with Additional Needs (CAN) Network.

The Council directly contacted service users and sent reminder communications throughout the consultation period. Issues were reported on the final day of the consultation, but the online survey was tested and found to be working for WBC staff. However, in the light of concerns raised, a PDF of the survey was provided to SEND Voices (which had reported the potential issue) with the offer that, if any resident had been unable to complete the online survey, they could complete the PDF version and return it to the Council. Although these would have been after the official close of the consultation, it was made clear that they would be considered the same as other responses.

90% of response were from Wokingham residents and 65% of respondents were service users.

Nine organisations submitted responses. The organisations represented were:

1. Robert Piggott Infant School
2. LAMBS LANE PRIMARY SCHOOL
3. St Crispin's School
4. Robert Piggott Junior School
5. Wescott Infant School
6. Dingley's Promise
7. Addington School
8. Foundry College
9. SEND Voices Wokingham

5. Feedback from Consultation on options to change discretionary Travel Assistance

A summary of the key questions and responses relating to options to change discretionary Travel Assistance is set out in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Summary of key consultation questions and responses based on those in agreement, no opinion or disagree

The survey responses were categorised as follows:

Broad agreement with proposed change greater % than disagreement
Broad disagree to proposed greater then agreement but less than 50%
Broad disagreement with proposed change greater than 50%

Summary:

Total number of responses received: 260

Total percentage broadly in support of the proposals: 46%

Total percentage neutral or without an opinion: 22%

Total percentage who broadly disagree: 32%

1. Proposed changes to definitions (Section 2.2.3b)
Broadly agree: 35%
Neutral/ no opinion: 18%
Broadly disagree 46%
2. Proposed changes to qualifying school and parental preference (Section 2.2.4)
Broadly agree: 33%
Neutral / no opinion:22%
Broadly disagree 45%
3. Proposed change to travel assistance during the school day and accompaniment (Section 2.2.6b)
Broadly agree: 38%
Neutral / no opinion:32%
Broadly disagree 30%
4. Proposed changes to timing of assessment of eligibility (Section 2.2.7)
Broadly agree: 41%
Neutral / no opinion:20%
Broadly disagree 39%
5. Changes to provision for children aged 5 to 16 with Special Educational needs and/or disabilities (Section 3.1)
Broadly agree: 35%
Neutral / no opinion:22%
Broadly disagree 43%

6. Changes to transport provided on medical grounds (Section 3.2)	
Broadly agree:	38%
Neutral / no opinion:	34%
Broadly disagree	28%

7. Changes to types of travel assistance provided (Section 4)	
Broadly agree:	37%
Neutral / no opinion:	29%
Broadly disagree	34%

8. Changes to travel assistance for those not eligible for free home to school transport under this: children below statutory school age (Section 6.1)	
Broadly agree:	36%
Neutral / no opinion:	30%
Broadly disagree	35%

9. Changes to travel assistance for those not eligible for free home to school travel assistance under this policy: fare-paying options for non-eligible children (Section 6.2)	
Broadly agree:	28%
Neutral / no opinion:	34%
Broadly disagree	38%

10. Changes to exceptional circumstances, change of circumstances and other assistance: a) change of address (Section 7)	
Broadly agree:	58%
Neutral / no opinion:	18%
Broadly disagree	24%

11. Exceptional circumstances, change of circumstances and other assistance: b) Pupils living in temporary accommodations (Section 7)	
Broadly agree:	40%
Neutral / no opinion:	29%
Broadly disagree	31%

12. Exceptional circumstances, change of circumstances and other assistance: d) changing schools (Section 7)	
Broadly agree:	42%
Neutral / no opinion:	22%
Broadly disagree	36%

13. Exceptional circumstances, change of circumstances and other assistance: h) elective home education (EHE) and Education other than at school (EOTAS) (Section 7)	
Broadly agree:	50%
Neutral / no opinion:	38%
Broadly disagree	12%

14. Exceptional circumstances, change of circumstances and other assistance *children in foster care and those in our care (Section 7)

Broadly agree: 65%

Neutral / no opinion: 24%

Broadly disagree 8%

15. New policy: to limit the number of times a parent / carer can submit an application for travel assistance, when circumstances have not changed following a refusal

Broadly agree: 60%

Neutral / no opinion: 22%

Broadly disagree 18%

16. New policy: New section to clarify circumstances that on their own will not make a child eligible for travel assistance
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Broadly agree: 46%

Neutral / no opinion: 32%

Broadly disagree 22%

17. End current practice of providing 'fare payer' travel assistance for pupils in post-16 education.
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Broadly agree: 14%

Neutral / no opinion: 16%

Broadly disagree 75%

Although it is noted that a significant percentage (70%) of responses oppose the proposal to end the current practice of providing fare payer travel assistance for post-16 students, WBC is facing significant financial pressures and must be more efficient in delivering much needed services. The proposed standard offer of transport assistance for students aged 16-19 is a Personal Transport Budget (PTB). Whilst it would replace council-organised transport (COT), which is often the most expensive travel option, the Council will continue to consider applications on a case-by-case basis, to establish if a more traditional form of travel assistance is necessary based on the assessment of needs and circumstances of the child and family.

Updates to the proposed Travel Assistance policy changes following formal consultation

Table 2 below provides an overview of the key proposed changes to the Travel Assistance Policies following the formal public consultation:

Table 2: Summary of feedback on consultation drafts of Travel Assistance Policies, and amendments made to the Policies in the light of this feedback

Feedback on proposed Policies from consultation	Amendments and updates made to the Policies as a result
Changes to provision for children aged 5 to 16 with Special Educational needs and/or disabilities (Section 3.1)	The Council will work with local bus operators to introduce a reduced fare for concessionary passholders to enable young people with SEND to get to educational settings using local bus services (Reading Buses will be working with us on this).
The proposed standard offer of transport assistance for students aged 16-19 is a Personal Transport Budget (PTB)	The Council will continue to consider applications on a case-by-case basis, to establish if a more traditional form of travel assistance is necessary based on the assessment of needs and circumstances of the child and family
Changes to travel assistance for those not eligible for free home to school travel assistance under this policy: fare-paying options for non-eligible children (Section 6.2)	Under the new policy, the Council would continue to use low income as part of the main eligibility criteria for travel assistance. If a parent is struggling through financial hardship to get a child to school, then they should contact the Council for signposting to possible sources of additional help.
Supporting low-income families	The Council will prioritise seats for low-income families on any council arranged fare payer transport

Timeline for implementation

The timeline for implementation of the proposed Travel Assistance Policies needs to reflect statutory requirements to have Home to School Transport/Travel Assistance Policies in place at least 6 weeks before the closing deadline for applications for School Places.

In light of this requirement, it is recommended that, subject to Member approval, the new Travel Assistance Policies apply to all applications for Travel Assistance taking effect from the start of the Academic Year September 2024, in order to ensure that Policies are in place to align with statutory timescales for school place applications, and to give parents and carers appropriate time to consider the terms of the new Travel Assistance Policies in the context of any applications for school places.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities. Expenditure on Home to School Transport / Travel Assistance

Table 3 shows the opening net budgets for Home to School Transport/Travel Assistance from FY20-21 to FY23/24:

Table 3: Opening net budgets FY20-21 to FY22-23 for HST/Travel Assistance

	Primary (£'000)	Secondary (£'000)	SEND (£'000)	Foundry College (£'000)	Social Care Client Transport (£'000)	Total (£'000)
Opening net budget FY20-21	397	719	2,144 including post 16 (corrected was £2,381,800)	109	91	£3,460
Opening net budget FY21-22	410	724	2,681 including post-16	109	91	4,015
Opening net budget FY22-23	438	704	3,351 including post-16 (SEN IB 1,211 SEN OOB 2,140)	90	91	4,674
Opening net budget FY23-24	484	759	4,553 including post-16 (SEN IB 1,335 SEN OOB 3,218)	90	91	5,977

Although comparisons of Opening Net Budgets for previous Financial Years show that the budget provision has continued to increase, it is important to note that most recent analysis estimates a cost pressure of approximately £1.5m in relation to Home to School Transport in FY23-24. This is on the basis of forecast increases in demand above that previously anticipated (driven mainly by forecast increases in children and young people with SEND requiring Travel Assistance) with total spend in FY23-24 forecast at approximately £7.5m. *Note that route optimisation continues through the summer and throughout September 2023 which means that there is a level of fluidity in the figures provided.

The profile of current utilisation of the service, which shows service users at Primary and Secondary stages, and children and young people with SEND, is set out in Table 5 below.

Table 4 shows that the largest customer group is SEND, followed by secondary mainstream. It is relevant to note that although children and young people with SEND account for just under 40% of HST/Travel Assistance customers, this utilisation accounts for approximately 70% of the total budget for HST/Travel Assistance. It is also relevant to note that in terms of any modelled/forecast budget pressures, the potential for increased demand relating to SEND Travel Assistance is by far the most significant driver.

Table 4: FY22-23 profile of HST/Travel Assistance service users

	Primary	Secondary	SEND	Total
Pupil Numbers	167	414	443	1,024

The new Policies for Travel Assistance make an important contribution to ensuring the Council can continue to deliver an efficient and cost-effective transport service for those pupils who need it the most. The estimated reduction of spend from implementation of the Policies in the 2024 financial year are circa £190K, with additional spend reductions being felt in the years following.

Efficiencies arising directly from the proposed new Policies will relate to:

- More effective adherence to Policy eligibility criteria, terms and conditions
- Scaling back H2S TA offers to statutory requirements only

Other Financial Information
There will be continued over spend of the existing budget

Legal Implications arising from the Recommendation(s)
The Council's Legal Services has provided expert advice and guidance throughout the development of the proposals and the consultation. Dedicated programme resource has also ensured risks are considered and mitigated where possible. Further advice in relation to the robustness of the legal position on the policy changes proposed has been provided.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
A full stakeholder consultation was carried out between 14 th June and 21 st July 2023

Public Sector Equality Duty
A full Equality Impact Assessment has been developed in parallel with the Travel Assistance Policy for children aged 5-16, and Travel Assistance Policy for young people aged 16+ with SEND. This work has been done to ensure that the Policies have been developed with appropriate regard to the public sector Equality Duty throughout the policy development process. An initial Equality Impact Assessment was carried out on the consultation draft versions of the new policies; outcomes from this Assessment also helped to inform the consultation document and questions put to the general public, in order to better understand the likely impact on equality and diversity issues that may arise if the policies were to be taken forward into implementation. The Full Equality Impact Assessment is attached as Annex 1 of this report.

Climate Emergency – 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
Please state clearly what the impact of the decision being made would be on the Council's carbon neutral objective.

Reasons for considering the report in Closed Session
N/A

List of Background Papers

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Annex 1: Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) on proposed new Travel Assistance Policies• Annex 2: Report on outcomes from formal public consultation• Annex 3: Home to School Travel Assistance Policy for children and young people 16 years old and under, including young people with SEND• Annex 4: Transport Assistance Policy for young people resident in Wokingham post-16, including young people with SEND |
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