

11 HOME TO SCHOOL/COLLEGE TRANSPORT – REVIEW OF DISCRETIONARY AREAS OF POLICY

Report By: Director of Education

Wards Affected

Countywide.

Purpose

1. To consider the scope of a possible review of the Council's discretionary policies on home to school/college transport.

Financial Implications

2. The financial implications are stated as shown in this report.

The Council's Cross Service Best Value Review of Transport

3. During 2002, the Council carried out a best value review of all transport services provided in Herefordshire. The review covered transport in support of people benefiting from services provided by the Social Care Directorate, public transport services provided or arranged by the Environment Directorate, and home to school/college transport. A summary of the main recommendations is set out at Appendix 1.
4. Since the review, a Transport Co-ordination Board has been formed under the Chairmanship of the Director of Environment and involving the Directors of Education and Social Care, and the relevant Transport Officers.

Joint planning of routes and services

5. A major part of the work of the cross-service Board is focused on joint planning and commissioning of routes, to ensure that existing transport requirements can be met in the most cost-effective manner. Route scheduling software has been assessed, and a decision to purchase is imminent. Any identified changes in school/college transport would be brought into force at the appropriate time, generally at the beginning of a new term or half term.

Co-ordinated opening times

6. Work has also begun, to develop ideas around the recommendation that changes in the daily opening and closing times of schools and other relevant Council services might be considered in order to improve cost efficiency. Assessments are currently being made of the potential savings from co-ordination of transport for special education and social day care. The possibility of achieving savings, through co-ordinated opening and closing times at primary and secondary schools, will also be considered, though the requirement to consult parents and date any changes from the beginning of a school year means that such changes need to be developed over an extended period.

Discretionary areas of home to school/college transport

7. Consideration needs to be given to the scope of a possible review of discretionary areas of home to school/college transport. The immediate aim is to identify options that might be considered sufficiently practical to justify the period of public consultation that would have to precede any significant change. It should be noted that the consultation requirement means that any changes envisaged could not realistically come into effect until the school/college year beginning September 2005 (i.e. in two years time). Decisions would need to be made before the end of June 2004, so that details could be included in the information that has to be given to parents of children due to start school or transfer to high school in or after September the following year.

Current Discretionary Policy on Home to School/College Transport

8. It is important to emphasise, first, that the great bulk of the cost (currently almost £6m) of home to school transport in the County arises from the Council's legal obligations to provide or arrange free transport for entitled pupils/students of statutory school age (i.e. between the ages of 5 and 16). The main areas of current entitlement allowed in Herefordshire are –
- i. children between the ages of 5 and 8 living more than 2 miles from the school provided for the locality (statutory requirement);
 - ii. pupils between the ages of 8 and 15 who live more than 3 miles away from the provided school (statutory requirement);
 - iii. pupils living closer than those distances, along walking routes deemed to be dangerous even when children are accompanied by their parents (statutory requirement);
 - iv. children with special educational needs whose disabilities are such as to necessitate, in the Council's judgement, provision of transport (statutory requirement);
 - v. any other pupils whose individual circumstances are judged, by the Council, to require provision of transport (the Council must consider any application received);
 - vi. pupils who qualify for free transport on the grounds of obtaining a denominational place (this is a local policy at Council discretion).

The costs of these requirements are outlined in **Appendix 2**.

9. In addition to these basic requirements, LEAs now have a duty to co-ordinate transport, and ensure that reasonable transport is available, for students between the ages of 16 and 19 attending Sixth Forms or Colleges. Reasonable payment can be required of parents for the transport service(s) provided, but the Council no longer has discretion to end such provision.

Discretionary areas of current Council Policy

10. There are several areas in which the Council currently exercises discretionary arrangements. The main areas are –
- **Walking distance to pick up points** There is a degree of discretion (technically up to the 2 and 3 mile walking limits) concerning the distance an entitled pupil/student may be expected to travel to and from the pick up points for provided transport. Currently, the Council aims to limit such distances to 1 mile in the case of primary and secondary aged pupils, and 3 miles in the case of Post-16 students
 - **Travelling time on School Transport** Similarly, there is an element of discretion concerning the time spent travelling on the relevant vehicle(s). The Council currently aims to limit journey times to 45 minutes each way in the case of primary school pupils, to an hour in the case of secondary and Post-16 students, and one hour in the case of pupils with special educational needs for whom the relevant provision might be at a considerable distance from home. Costs increase if the journey times are reduced by providing extra, more lightly used, routes.
 - **Denominational Transport** Free transport is currently provided to any pupil with the relevant denominational qualification for a **church place at a voluntary aided school**, provided they live beyond the statutory distances of 2 and 3 miles to the nearest provided denominational school. That is a discretionary policy, which Councils do not have to provide and which a number of LEAs have now brought to an end.
 - **Charges for Post-16 Transport and Vacant Seats for all age groups** The remaining area of discretion, in the case of Post-16 students and the use of vacant seats, concerns the level of charging to parents. Currently, the charges in Herefordshire stand at £75 per term (full price) with a discretionary level of £20 per term in the case of students whose families are on income support. The charging levels in Herefordshire are below those of neighbouring LEAs, so there is a potential to raise the levels in future years.

Options for possible review

Travelling distances, travelling times and charging levels

11. It can be seen, from the above outline of current areas of discretionary policy, that there is only limited scope for changes in policy. The potential for lengthening walking distances to pick up points would be constrained by concerns about the safety of walking routes. Similarly, longer journey times would be controversial, and would also raise concerns about the tiring effects on pupils before they arrive at school and on the journey home. Charges could be raised each year, but only by modest amounts if they are to remain at reasonable levels or at levels that will maximise income on necessary routes
12. Bearing in mind these constraints, it might be more sensible to add to the possible ways of improving in efficiency, by widening the scope of the *Safer Routes to Schools Initiatives* to include consideration of better access to appropriate pick up points.

Denominational Transport

13. The most significant area of possible change is the discretionary policy on denominational transport. The current gross cost of denominational transport in Herefordshire is estimated at £435,000. However, the **net** saving could reduce down towards £300,000, depending on how many parents would instead send their children to a catchment area school to which they would have transport entitlement. It should also be noted that any savings achieved would have to be built up over 5 years (e.g. long term saving of say £250,000 would produce a saving of £50,000 in the first year, £100,000 in the second, etc), because pupils already granted denominational transport entitlement **before** the policy change would remain entitled until they leave the school.

Rationale for denominational transport

14. Apart from the question of cost, close consideration would need to be given to the inclusive character of denominational schools in Herefordshire.
15. In the case of the Anglican sector, the 20 primary schools all give first priority to children living in the local catchment area, and almost all of the transport to them is on the same basis as for other schools. In practice, therefore, their intakes are very similar to those of voluntary controlled and community schools, with variations emanating from their location rather than from their denominational character.
16. The one voluntary aided Anglican high school (Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat School, Hereford) also gives first priority on admissions to its local area, in the Hampton Dene area of the city and the rural hinterland to Mordiford – about 150 of the 232 places are allocated annually in that way. The school is also notable for its unique, special provision for 40 students with severe physical disabilities at the Kielder Centre within the school. The governors, and the Diocesan Authority, attach high importance to those inclusive aspects of the school's work, and ask for that to be taken into account when reviews are considered of the transport assistance for the 80 or so *church places* that are allocated according to denominational preferences.
17. In the case of the Roman Catholic Sector, the relevant parish catchment areas overlay the catchment areas of other schools, with a focus on the wider areas covered by relevant parish churches. Two of the 3 primary schools are based in the South Wye and Aylestone wards, which are the two wards in the County with the highest levels of social disadvantage. The two Hereford schools, and the other primary school in Ross-on-Wye, together contribute a large proportion of the total pupils at St Mary's RC High in Lugwardine, which therefore educates children of widely varying ability and social background. All 4 Roman Catholic School actively welcome applications from parents of other denominations and religions and, like their Anglican colleagues, attach importance to their joint contribution to the education of Herefordshire children.
18. Finally, the Council's School Organisation Plan depends heavily on the places provided by the 25 voluntary aided schools (Anglican and RC together), and the Council could not meet its statutory obligations without those places. There is particularly heavy dependence on the high school places at Bishop's and St Mary's to meet the needs of Hereford City and its immediate hinterland. Any changes in denominational transport would therefore need to be considered carefully to avoid creating unacceptable shifts in the balance of school provision, though the quality

and strength of the two schools is such that they would continue to operate at full capacity.

The range of review possibilities

19. The review possibilities for changes in denominational transport include (a) limited changes to do with pick up points and travelling times; (b) possible new charging arrangements (depending on legal constraints); and (c) phased withdrawal.
20. If a decision were taken in the direction of phased withdrawal, transport provision to denominational schools would be limited to pupils living in a defined area **and** living more than the statutory distance from the school catchment area (i.e. as for all schools). Any vacant seats would also be available on relevant routes.

Environmental Impact

21. All options for policy change would need to be considered alongside an analysis of the potential environmental impact. In particular, it would be necessary to consider (a) the extent to which any change would increase the number of parents using private cars to take their children to and from school (or to alternative pick up points), and (b) the pressure any such increase might create on traffic movement and street parking close to schools. Each of the 2 Aided High schools has difficult locations for traffic, and that is also the case at a high proportion of VA primary schools that attract pupils from some distance from the school.

Consultations

22. Any significant proposals for altering current transport policy would require public consultations. The consultees would need to include all schools in the County (community schools as well as church schools), parents and the wider public, and possibly representative bodies such as the Local Admissions Forum. Among the issues to be considered would be –
 - a. the likely impact on enrolments at all schools in the County;
 - b. the likely impact on the provision of school places as set out in the School Organisation Plan;
 - c. the consequences for school budgets;
 - d. the effects on parents and families;
 - e. the consequences for the environmental, especially through different transport flows around the start and end of the school day.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked to identify any areas of possible change that they would recommend for further consideration.

Background Papers

- Best Value Report on Transport