

REVIEW OF DISCRETIONARY POLICIES APPLICABLE TO HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Report By: HEAD OF POLICY AND RESOURCES

Wards Affected

Countywide.

Purpose

1. To seek comments on the conclusions of the review of the discretionary policies for provision of home to school transport.

Financial Implications

2. As indicated in the report.

Report

3. The cross-service Best Value review of transport recommended that the discretionary policies for provision of school transport should be reviewed. The discretionary policies are listed in Appendix 1.
4. In October 2003, this Committee established a working party, the membership of which is listed as follows: Councillor Ashton, Councillor Manning, Councillor Taylor and Councillor J Thomas, C. Lewandoski from Aylestone High School, Reverend I. Terry, Mrs S.Wright as a parent governor representative. The working party was supported by the following officers Mark Chamberlain, Andrew Blackman, and Richard Ball and George Salmon. The working party has met on 5 occasions and undertaken 2 consultation exercises with those listed in Appendix 2.
5. At the end of the first consultation period, the working party felt that no change should be made to the policies covering:

Boarding points
Year 10/11 whose home address changes
Travelling times
Vacant seats for all age groups
Public Service route subsidy
6. However, further consultation has been undertaken and consideration given to possible changes in the following areas:
 - (i) Denominational transport
 - (ii) Post-16 transport
 - (iii) Transport for under 5s
 - (iv) Transport for children with SEN
7. The Working Party met on Thursday, 27th May to consider the issues in light of the responses received. In view of the relatively low response from schools there was a

reluctance to draw firm conclusions unless issues appeared clear cut. The Working Party were also aware that transport is a crucial issue in Herefordshire and asked that the Countryside Agency's rural proofing criteria should be applied to each of the options. The results of that exercise are included in Appendix 3.

8. The options for change are now considered:

(i) Denominational transport

Current policy:

The current policy offers free transport for children, over the age of 8 who live more than 3 miles from school and under the age of 8, 2 miles from school, who have been admitted to a school on **denominational grounds**.

At present 686 (65 primary and 621 secondary) pupils benefit from this policy at the total cost to the LEA of £435,000.

By comparison equivalent policies currently in place in other LEAs include the following:

- Free provision for pupils living more than 3 miles from Home to School.
- Free provision for pupils living more than 3 miles but under 6 miles for primary pupils and 3 to 10 miles for secondary pupils.
- All relevant parents make a contribution of between £200 and £300 per school year for denominational transport.

Options:

- a. **Maintain Status Quo:** The current policy reflects the voluntary understanding reached between the Church and State School in the 1944 Education Act and the expressed desire to enable all pupils to have access to denominational education, without the constraint of transport cost. It is anticipated that the current number of beneficiaries would remain approximately the same as at present, with costs increasing in line with inflation within the transport industry.
- b. **Remove any form of subsidy.** Such a change would reflect a significant shift in the current arrangements relating to state/church provision of school places. It would mean that the admission to a church school beyond the boundaries of the catchment area of the provided school would be treated on the same basis as any other admission by parental preference. The parents would then be responsible for transport to the school. In the discussion of this option the question of equality of opportunity has been raised bearing in mind that it could be perceived as making denominational places available only to the pupils whose parents could afford the transport costs.

If such a change were to be made it could be introduced in annual steps as each new cohort joined the school. Full implementation in 5 years for high schools and 7 years for primary schools. On full implementation it has been estimated that savings of the order of £235,000 could be achieved. This is less than the gross cost of the existing policy as some students would be entitled to transport to their provided school.

- c. **Seek Parental Contributions** in line with the charges for vacant seats. This option was considered as a compromise acknowledging the role of the church and state in education provision and ensuring a reasonable level of transport

costs without the full cost falling on the Council Tax payer. It has been estimated that a saving of £110,000 could be produced in the full year of operation.

- d. Offer free transport for pupils living beyond 3 miles but within 6 miles of their chosen primary school and 12 miles of their high school. Pupils living beyond the defined distance would be able to claim free transport if they take full responsibility for transport to a pick up point or along an approved route. Some English LEAs do operate similar policies. It is a compromise, which avoids the high cost to the LEAs of long journeys, but at the cost to parents who happen to live at longer distances from the denominational schools. This would produce a saving, which is difficult to predict accurately but it is thought it could be in the order of £115,000.

Response:

The response from consultees to these options was as follows:

Option	In Favour	
1. Maintain Status Quo	7	16%
2. Remove any form of subsidy	12	28%
3. Seek Parental Contributions	18	42%
4. Free transport with mileage limits	6	14%
5. Other option		
Total	43	100%

The working party has noted that the majority of consultees who responded favoured change. They also considered the form and degree of change against the following factors:

- extent to which any charging would increase the use of cars;
- degree to which pupils would be denied access due to cost;
- parity between schools;
- ease of administration;
- legal issues.

The working party has concluded that the options for the future should be between 1, 2 and 3 but given the limited number of responses and no clear pattern there was a reluctance to make a particular recommendation it was therefore proposed to and invite the broader membership of the Scrutiny Committee to consider options 1, 2 or 3.

(ii) Post-16 transport

Current policy:

At present, Post-16 students living further than 3 miles from college or Sixth Form are offered transport on payment of a termly contribution of £80. Similarly those students under the age of 16 who are not entitled to free transport have the opportunity to buy into the transport provided for entitled riders where there are vacant seats. Currently the cost of a 'vacant seat' is £80 per term.

These policies produce an income of £150,000 (£105,000 Post-16 plus £45,000 Vacant Seats Payment Scheme). However, the total cost of post-16 transport is £480,000, i.e. a shortfall of £375,000.

There are administration costs associated with the collection of both the contributions to post-16 transport and for vacant seats. This is done on a termly basis and it has been estimated that 1/3 of the income is required to cover administration costs.

It is also noted that Education Maintenance Allowances (EMA) will be available to students from poorer families from September 2004, with the student being able to contribute from their allowances.

Options:

- a. **Maintain Status Quo.** Termly charge of £80, with an annual review. Large cohorts and a higher staying on rate are likely to require a larger budget for the coming 4-5 years
- b. **Vary Charging Policy.** Each change of 1% would produce a saving or additional cost of approximately £1,000.

A decision to increase the current charge would mean raising the current charge of £80 per term to £100 per term. A 50% increase on current charge would provide a charge of £120 per term.

To simplify administration costs, it would be advantageous to have a single charge rate, but there could be a different rate between post-16 and vacant seats, and possibly a reduced rate for the second or subsequent child from the same family.

Response:

The response from consultees to these options was as follows:

Option	In favour	
1. Maintain Status Quo	22	51%
2. Vary Charging Policy	21	49%
Total	43	

1. Single rate	31	72%
2. A more complex set of charges	12	28%
Total	43	

The working party noted that a similar number of respondents wished to retain the status quo as the number who favoured change. The working party have, therefore on balance, concluded that the current charges should be maintained and be subject to annual review. No additional support should be offered to students through discounted fees on the basis that EMAs are available to cover such costs. That is the view recommended nationally.

(iii) Transport for under 5s

Current policy:

At present no child under statutory school age is supported on transport to schools unless that child has special educational needs.

A number of parents (fewer than 50) have chosen to buy tickets under the vacant seats policy, and the authority stresses the health and safety issues which parents must accept in choosing to use vacant seats.

A large number of primary schools admit children at a single point during the academic year, and it has been suggested that any child whatever age should be entitled to free transport if they live further than two miles from the school and are on the school register.

Options:

The response to these options was as follows:

- a. Maintain the existing policy or
- b. Grant entitlement to those four year olds registered at school who live further than two miles from the school.

It is thought that a change of policy would produce an additional cost of between £25,000 and £50,000. However, the more serious concerns relate to responsibility and the sense in encouraging very young children to travel independently of their parents in vehicles largely designed for older children and adults. There is also particular concern not to weaken the message to parents that children starting school need to be accompanied to and from school each day by a parent/guardian for an extended period to ensure that their children feel settled and secure.

Response:

Option	In favour	
1. Maintain Status Quo	28	65%
2. Entitlement to all on school	15	35%
Total	43	

The greater number of respondents support the maintenance of the status quo.

There is serious concern over the practical issues in carrying very young children on school buses, and the transfer of responsibility from parents to the Council for journeys to and from school. Although no formal consultation has been undertaken with early years settings that also make provision for 3 and 4 year olds, the Director of Education is aware that private and voluntary settings are already fearful of schools taking a larger percentage of pre-statutory age children attending school. The provision of free transport to schools would be seen as favouring schools, and the Council would be likely to face a call to offer similar arrangements to all 3 and 4 year olds attending private and voluntary settings, eligible to receive Nursery Education Grants.

The working party have concluded that there should be no change in this policy.

(iv) Transport for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Current policy:

At present, children with special educational needs are offered transport to the appropriate designated provision, if it is considered that it is needed to ensure attendance at school. The cost of such transport is currently £1.4m for 460 students up to the age of 25. There is close liaison with Social Services Transport as some

students have provision from both services and similar vehicles may also be required.

Options:

The working party considered that either the status quo should remain or that the essential elements of the status quo should remain but with –

- a. a more rigorous annual review of need to ensure that pupils, as they grow older and more capable, are encouraged to become independent in their travel; or
- b. consideration of contributions for students who benefit from a mobility allowance; or
- c. the possibility of making 21 instead of 25 the upper age limit for free transport.

Response:

	In favour	
1. Maintain Status Quo	7	10%
2. Amended arrangements		
	(a) 25	34%
	(b) 25	34%
	(c) 16	22%
Total	73	

The largest number of responses were received on this discretionary policy, and were broadly in support of some change. The more rigorous annual review of need is an operational matter and will continue to be developed in the interest of the students themselves. The working party have concluded that a formal proposal should be made to reduce the age range to 18, and to remove subsidy to those students entitled to mobility allowances should be further consideration to be given to remaining subsidy.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Committee considers the recommendation of the Working Party as set out below then considers what recommendations it wishes to submit to the Cabinet Member (Education) for his consideration.

1. Denominational Transport

It was agreed that any further responses should be reported to this committee and this committee should consider the following recommendations –

- i. that any form of subsidy should be removed and transport if required should be provided at cost.**
If this is not accepted –
- ii. that parental contribution be sought in line with charges for vacant seats and with further discounts for these students entitled to free school meals.**
If this is not accepted.
- iii. that the status quo be maintained.**

2. **Post 16 Transport**

The Current charging levels be maintained (subject to annual review) but no additional subsidy be offered on the basis that EMAs are available to cover costs.

3. **Transport for Under 5s**

No change to existing policy

4. **Transport for Children with Special Educational Needs**

The existing policy to be amended to benefit only those students who have not reached their nineteenth birthday, and those students not in receipt of a mobility allowance.

BACKGROUND PABAPERS

- None identified.