

Officers' response to public questions

86 submissions were received and these are reproduced, in redacted form, in this supplement to the Committee's agenda. A number of these submissions either simply wished to make the Committee aware of the views of the correspondent or raised questions which do not relate to the reasons for call in. Of those questions which do relate to the reasons for call in, given the number of questions raised and the time available, responses have been provided to identified themes within the questions raised. Where questions require detailed individual responses relating to the circumstances of that individual or school, responses will be provided direct to the correspondent in due course.

Theme	Response
<p><i>Reason for call-in: It is not clear that the cost modelling has taken the full cost impact of the decision into account across all areas of the council's operation, and therefore assurance is sought that the total anticipated net financial effect is achievable, realistic and proportionate.</i></p>	
<p>On what basis has the cost modelling been carried out? Does it take account of: potential loss of pupil grants; impact on costs of providing additional buses or if nearest school does not have capacity; additional resources required to support SEN pupils at nearest school?</p>	<p>The implications for the change to the home school transport policy were considered across a range of aspects and in detail. In particular the impact on families, schools and the wider transport network was examined, including the potential negative impact if numbers of children were not educated in Herefordshire schools. The potential savings to the Councils home to school transport budget and the contribution to the wider Council budget were also considered.</p> <p>The cost modelling for savings that might be realised through introducing the nearest school only policy was set out in paragraphs 10.8 and 10.9 of the report. It is very difficult to predict what parents might choose to do on the introduction of the policy change as transport is not the sole determinant of where parents choose to send their children. Analysis of the data about riders can show the number affected i.e. how many pupils would not necessarily be entitled under the new policy. At the outset it was identified that there were 850 riders.</p> <p>A number of possible scenarios in the cost modelling were considered, dependent on parental decisions and options introduced by community groups and schools. If all parents/carers of the children who are currently being transported, but were not entitled under the new policy, decided to pay the increased cost of transport the council would receive an increase in revenue, and therefore make a saving in the Council's home to school transport budget, of £680,000 (850 riders X £800 contribution). £800 is the average cost of transport for a pupil</p>

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	<p data-bbox="801 252 2022 480">for a year without on costs. Alternatively, if every parent/carer, affected by the policy change, decided to send their child to the nearest school, some would not be entitled as the nearer school would be closer than the statutory distance (2 or 3 miles depending on age) along a safe walking route, others would be transported on contracts that would be cheaper, as the overall mileage would be less. It was considered that the full effect of either scenario would be unlikely.</p> <p data-bbox="801 512 2022 815">The assumptions underpinning the potential savings to the Councils home to school transport budget of £250,000 were that 60% (500) of those affected transfer to their nearest school at no extra cost (still entitled but on a different route and at no extra cost over and above that when they were being transported to their catchment school), 20% (175) pay for a seat on their existing route and 175 make their own arrangements (car share or public bus) or use other transport arrangements provided by their catchment school. The 60% assumption reflects the pattern of parental choice of schools as 43% of parents don't send their child the catchment school.</p> <p data-bbox="801 847 2022 999">If there is not sufficient space at the nearest school for the 60% seeking a transfer then it has been assumed that free transport would then be provided to the next nearest school with space (at no extra cost over and above the cost when they were being transported to their catchment school).</p> <p data-bbox="801 1031 2022 1334">As a result of the consultation changes to the original proposal were made which also altered the savings projections. The consultation identified some aspects where some children from Herefordshire might be disadvantaged by their parents/carers feeling they would have to attend a Welsh school or have the GCSE courses they have started disrupted. The estimated ongoing cost of not applying a nearest school in Wales policy is estimated to be circa £60,000 a year. The full year cost of delaying implementation for those who will be in in Y10 11 in September 2014 will be £188,000. The approach to Y10 and Y11 and nearest school in Wales is reflective of due consideration being given to the views of schools and families as</p>

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	<p data-bbox="801 252 1272 284">expressed through the consultation.</p> <p data-bbox="801 316 2022 579">The model also considered potential impact of a change in the pattern of schools parents choose compared to the current catchment arrangements. While the reasons for parents/carers sending their children to different schools are many and varied, schools and the Local Authority are mindful of the numbers on roll as they play a large part in determining their overall budget. Already, some 43% of Herefordshire parents do not send their children to their catchment school. Some schools already co-ordinate and organise transport for children who are not in their catchment area.</p> <p data-bbox="801 619 2022 994">A further factor is that there are a significant number of surplus places across schools in Herefordshire; schools therefore are already in competition with each other for pupils. Herefordshire schools attract children not only from other schools within Herefordshire but from neighbouring Local Authority areas Circa 300 out of county pupils currently attend Herefordshire secondary school and 180 Herefordshire pupils live nearer to another English Local Authority school too. The picture is already mixed and varied which suggests it is factors outside of a change to transport policy which will determine the viability or otherwise of schools. Schools may want to extend and develop the incentive for parents to attend by offering transport as some already do. The annual cost of a particular contract can be less than the overall average the LA uses.</p> <p data-bbox="801 1034 2022 1257">Schools close to other Local Authority borders attract significant numbers of children from neighbouring local authority areas. While the neighbouring Local Authority transport policies vary parents are choosing to send their children to Herefordshire schools, highlighting the choice and competition policy preferred by the Government. It is both realistic and proportionate to believe the changes to the transport policy will not be the determining factors in the success or failure of schools to attract pupils and therefore remain sustainable.</p> <p data-bbox="801 1297 2022 1361">The council's wider responsibilities and aspirations to provide a cost effective and efficient transport service for the residents is also linked to the development of an integrated transport</p>

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	<p>service. Children do use service buses and the integration of contracts should bring about not only cost savings but also efficiencies for contractors.</p> <p>The changes to the policy will result in the Council having to undertake fewer journeys and those that we do will be shorter. This will reduce the environmental impact.</p> <p>Modelling also considered where a school could not accommodate all children whose parents wanted them to go to their nearest school.. In line with the existing policy in these circumstances pupils would be transported to their next nearest school. This may not be the school that is currently described as the catchment</p> <p>If a child with Special Educational Needs transfers school as a consequence of a parent/carer feeling they should move schools as a result of the home to school transport policy changes then the detail and focus of their support will transfer with them.</p> <p>As with any modelling, the assumptions made could be different in reality. One of the expressed wishes of the Council is to work with schools, local communities and transport providers to retain stability in the school system. .</p>
<p><i>Reason for call-in: It is not clear that the significant and negative effects of the changes highlighted in the consultations have been given proper weight and due consideration in the decision-making process.</i></p>	
<p>Concern that Cabinet based its decision on inaccurate information regarding schemes in place in Worcestershire.</p>	<p>During the consultation Herefordshire asked neighbouring local authorities for their views. Worcestershire's response advised that they had introduced similar policies in 2011. Further discussion with officers in Worcestershire confirms they have implemented the post 16 SEN contributions. A number of Local Authorities, including NE Somerset, Powys and Birmingham Y and Z have changed their school transport policy to nearest school only and some others including Oxfordshire and East Sussex are considering or consulting on similar changes.</p>

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	<p>The decision was taken in light of a range of factors, including information regarding a number of other Local Authorities.</p>
<p>Concern to understand what weight was given to consultation responses in terms of decision-making and with reference to informing the equalities impact assessment.</p>	<p>There was a very good response to the proposals and the Council does consider all responses very carefully as part of the decision making process. Some changes have been made as a result of the consultation, and some other issues raised are very much at the heart of the implementation of the policy. For example, working with local contractors and communities to see what can be done regarding prices, another is the exploration of how to spread costs for families.</p> <p>A two stage consultation was undertaken and following a testing of initial ideas a detailed consultation was embarked upon. The consultation and feedback is set out in the report paragraphs 16.1 and the response summary in appendix 3. Proposals were amended in light of consultation responses for example nearest English school, phased introduction for KS4 pupils, full cost recovery by way of parental contributions over 3 years and not 2 and Post 16 SEN contributions to start from September 2014 rather than April 2014.</p> <p>The equalities impact assessment attached to the report recognised that the introduction of a contribution to transport costs for post 16 SEN students may have a detrimental impact on a group with protected characteristics under the 2010 Equalities Act. Careful consideration was given to what mitigation would be in place if it was introduced. The cabinet members were satisfied there was mitigation including in the form of bursary grants available to families directly or via further education establishments. The impact on a parent of a child being in receipt of different grants is highly individual. The consultation very helpfully raised specific risks which the cabinet considered and which we will monitor and review to ensure there are no unintended impacts.</p>
<p>Did the consultation undertaken meet required standards of consultation; were all relevant bodies including bus operators and</p>	<p>. Following initial discussion there was a well-publicised formal consultation period of 6 weeks where respondents were able to present views that could affect the decision. Groups affected were engaged with through public meetings or meetings with officers and the lead member.</p>

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neighbouring authorities consulted?	The proposed changes were discussed with bus operators and neighbouring authorities
<i>Reason for call-in: No reasons have been given for dismissing the approaches taken in other authorities, e.g. Durham provision of 'nearest school in-county' option to parents.</i>	
What account has been taken of 'best practice' elsewhere?	The Local Authority looked at what other councils have done. Many councils are experiencing financial challenges and some are committing to reducing their costs to the minimum statutory level based on financial necessity or policy priorities. Durham provides assistance with transport, once distance criteria have been met, to the nearest school within Durham and the nearest school in a neighbouring authority. Other authorities have made changes to both the nearest school and post 16 SEN charging. E.g. Bath and NE Somerset. Alternative options were set out in the report and considered by Cabinet.
<i>Reason for call-in: Post-16 SEN proposals go against the Council's first principle of protecting the vulnerable</i>	
Have the impacts on families with a disabled child been fully explored?	The impact on families with children with a disability was explored fully through the equalities impact assessment attached to the report and which informed the decision taken by Cabinet. Central government have made available the 16-19 Bursary Fund for disabled and low income families seeking assistance with the costs associated with participation e.g. transport
<i>Reason for call-in: The decision has a disproportionate effect on families with more than one child if a sibling is forced to attend school out of county where holidays may not be taken at similar times</i>	
Have the impacts on families with children having different school holiday's been taken into account?	Every attempt is made by adjoining local authorities and schools to operate common school term dates because the problem highlighted already exists when primary aged children from families attend in one county and older siblings attend secondary schools in another. Academies already set their own term dates and in Herefordshire work constructively together with the Local Authority and other schools to minimise impact on families. From 2015 all schools will have the responsibility for setting term dates and the local authority is encouraging ongoing cooperation within and across borders.

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<i>Reason for call in: Families unable to afford this additional cost have not been given the notice they need to amend their school choices for Sept 2014 intake in the light of this decision.</i>	
Why weren't parents of year 6 pupils advised, when making their school choices, that this policy may change?	The 2014 Herefordshire secondary school admission booklet made reference to the fact that the Local Authority was consulting on changes to the home to school transport policy and advised that changes could be approved after the deadline for applications. The issue of year 6 transfer also featured in the consultation information on the proposed policy changes. The process by which parents make changes to their preferred secondary school is set out on our website and in the information to parents, who also have access to appeal mechanisms should they feel it necessary.
<i>Reason for call-in: The total effects of the decision in exporting the county's young people to schools in other counties, in not demonstrating adherence to the principles of our transport plan, in not evidencing alignment with our Sustainable Modes of Transport Strategy for schools*, and in not demonstrating that net savings at council level exist when loss of pupil grants are taken into account, raise concerns that aspects of this decision fall outside of the council's current Budget Monitoring and Policy Framework</i>	
What account has been taken of environmental and congestion impacts of this change in transport policy?	<p>Current school transport patterns are made up of parent activity, the Council's school transport provision, the public transport network, and transport provided by individual schools. Cabinet was aware of these factors in making its decision, and that any decision could alter the balance. For this reason the expectation as laid out in the report is that the integrated transport unit will work closely with parents, communities, schools and transport providers to maintain the most sustainable response.</p> <p>The move to defining eligibility for free school transport in terms of the nearest school rather than catchment should reduce some transport impacts and enable economies of scale in provided transport thus reducing costs and assisting with the Council's overall need to make significant savings.</p> <p>This is consistent with the Council's Local Transport Plan which seeks to reduce travel demand where possible. The Local Transport Plan, which forms part of the Council's Policy</p>

Theme	Response
	Framework, also identifies the coordinated review of all passenger transport services. This review is progressing and is identifying opportunities to integrate school transport services with the public bus network. This work is being informed by the proposed changes to the schools transport policy and meetings with schools to identify the best options for integration.