

REVIEW OF DENOMINATIONAL TRANSPORT

This appendix contains:

- A. The consultation document.
- B. A summary of the responses received. All those responses, which were received by the closing date of 3rd June, are available in the Members' Room.
- C. The notes of a public meeting held in the Town Hall on 24th May.
- D. An appraisal of options.

Section A

Consultation Document

The following document was sent to:

- i. parents of pupils who currently benefit from the free denominational transport (750)
- ii. parents of children in 83 primary schools in the County (approximately 13,000)
- iii. all schools in the county, and to the Church of England Aided High School, Dyson Perrins in Malvern
- iv. the Hereford Diocese and Archdiocese of Cardiff
- v. the Hereford and Worcester Learning and Skills Council
- vi. surrounding LEAs
- vii. all county councillors.

PROPOSED CHANGE TO HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT FROM SCHOOL YEAR 2006/7

1. Introduction.

Herefordshire Council has a policy on home to school transport that sets out the circumstances in which it will provide free or subsidised transport to help pupils get to school.

The Council has decided that it would like to review its policy. The purpose of this consultation document is to seek your views regarding any changes.

The Council has a legal duty to provide transport free of charge to children who live beyond "walking" distance to their nearest suitable school (2 miles in the case of children under 8, 3 miles for others). There is no question of withdrawing this provision.

2. The current position.

The Council has a number of discretionary policies in relation to Home to School Transport and these were reviewed in 2002 and again by the Education Scrutiny Committee in 2004. The Council and its predecessors have been committed to the provision of transport to denominational schools since the Education Act 1944. This discretionary policy currently provides free transport to 800 pupils at an annual cost of £465,000. This figure can be compared with the £2,650,000 costs involved in transporting the 4000 mainstream pupils whose homes are beyond the "walking" distance of their schools. The overall transport budget, which also covers Special Educational Needs pupils and post 16 students amounts to over £5 million. Denominational transport provision represents approximately 15% of the total home to mainstream school transport expenditure. It is the discretionary policy on denominational transport that is the subject of this review.

3. Why review the policy?

The Council must be reasonable in its policy and must not unlawfully disadvantage any group of parents or pupils. At present the entitlement to free transport to denominational schools is determined by the admission policies of those schools. As these differ, there is potential for inequality in relation to transport entitlement. The Council wishes to act fairly in relation to all parents and pupils.

4. What are the options?

The Council's current policy needs to be reviewed in order to ensure that it is fair. There are a number of options that could be considered.

For example;

- CONSULTATION DOCUMENT, MARCH 2005**
- (1) The Council could provide free transport to all pupils who attend a Voluntary aided school on genuine denominational grounds and live beyond the "walking" distance;

Or

- (2) The Council could cease to provide all denominational transport, whilst maintaining statutory provision, from September 2006 or some later date.

The options are not limited to the above and the Council will listen to any representation and consider all suggested options.

5. Will the Council continue to support families who experience financial hardship, or pupils with Special Educational Needs, or in other exceptional circumstances?

Yes, discontinuance of assistance in these circumstances is not being considered.

1. What happens next?

This document has been circulated as follows:

- To all existing parents of children receiving denominational transport
- To all parents of children in primary schools
- To all Herefordshire schools
- To surrounding LEAs
- Diocesan Education Authorities.
- To all members of Herefordshire Council
- To both Members of Parliament

This consultation will now allow all individuals or bodies to express any alternative proposals, objection or comment, in writing to the Council by 27th May 2005. These comments/objections will be submitted to the Council's Cabinet in June 2005 for a final decision. Details will then be submitted to the Local Admissions Forum in July, 2005 when the 'Information for Parents Booklet' is considered which sets out the Council's policy on pupil admissions for the period commencing September, 2006.

Written comments should be sent to:

**School Transport Consultation
Children's Services Directorate**

**PO Box 185
Hereford HR4 9ZR**

Or

Email to: Schooltransportconsultation@herefordshire.gov.uk

Section B

Summary of Responses

By the end of the consultation period 776 responses had been received. 570 of these were in the form of a standard letter, and to all intents and purposes act as a petition favouring the maintenance of free transport. There were a further 183 responses in favour of free denominational transport.

There were 23 responses suggesting change.

The arguments put forward to maintain free transport are as follows:

1. The importance of maintaining access to a Christian based education for all pupils seeking such education wherever they live in the County, given the state/church partnership in providing schools in the County.

There is no doubt that there has been a long standing partnership between Church and State in providing schools in Herefordshire. There are 25 aided schools in the county, 23 in the primary sector and 2 in the secondary sector. In the primary sector the 20 Church of England schools act as the provided school for defined catchment areas, and this is reflected in their admission policies. Some offer an additional role of providing denominational education for those who seek it from ecclesiastical parishes, which are more extensive than the immediate catchment area. The three R.C. primary schools offer places to baptised Catholics across the County.

In the secondary sector, St. Mary's R.C. High School offers places to baptised Catholics across the county. The Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat High School is the provided high school for a defined area including part of Hereford City, and an area extending out to Mordiford and Fownhope. Approximately 150 places are offered to those in this catchment area, and as second priority approximately 80 places are offered to those seeking a denominational place and who have an allegiance to a church, which recognises The Trinity.

As a measure of this state/church partnership, the 25 aided schools have invested over £10 million in improving their buildings since 1998. Prior to 2001 the Governors found 15% of these costs. Since 2001 Governors have been responsible for 10% of the costs. It is estimated that Governors of aided schools in the county have contributed at least £1M to the maintenance and improvement of these schools. The DfES fund the other 85% and 90% of costs. It is a recurrent theme in the consultation that without the Church's involvement in the provision of schools the state would have had to find the full cost.

As part of these arrangements, the Council has used discretionary powers to transport children to these schools if they live beyond the statutory walking distance. The partnership has worked well with the aided schools in Hereford performing well and being popular, and no school applying for Grant Maintained Status in the past. Consideration needs to be given to how critical free transport is to this partnership, and on this issue the experience in other authorities and the issue on the risk to the comprehensive nature of the schools, discussed below, needs to be taken into account.

From the parent's and pupil's perspective there is no doubt that free transport does offer those parents, whose children qualify for a denominational place, more choice, and is an attractive proposition. There is also no doubt that Government is encouraging the development of opportunity for the expression of parental preference, and also more diverse education provision. Some parents are claiming both denominational education and free transport as a human right. This is not the case, and in the context of the rights of parents to express a preference, the availability of free denominational transport does favour some parents more than others. Indeed it is estimated that there are over 2000 pupils not entitled to free transport who are attending the school preferred by their parent which is not the provided school. With the approval of a feasibility study for the Steiner School at Much Birch to become a City Academy, the DfES have been asked to clarify transport responsibilities for those pupils who might attend that Academy in the future.

An analysis of the home addresses of high school pupils currently benefiting from free transport does reveal that the number of pupils attending the two aided high schools is in inverse proportion to the performance of their provided high school, i.e. where the performance of the provided high school is lower than average there is a greater likelihood of a denominational place being sought.

2. The potential of the two High Schools losing their comprehensive nature, with only those parents able to afford transport costs being able to access these two schools.

This point has been made by both high schools and parents. Although the nature of the intake of all 14 high schools does vary, reflecting the area they serve and degree to which parental preference works, it is not in the interest of education in the County for some schools to become significantly less comprehensive than at present. The intake of both St. Mary's and Bishop of Hereford High Schools, when measured in Key Stage 2 results, is above the County average. The suggestion that some parents will send their children to the provided high school in the future instead of St. Mary's or Bishop's could benefit the provided high schools. If this is a significant number, the question arises would those places in the 2 aided high schools then be filled by students from more affluent families.

Two assessments have been made on this. Firstly, a comparison has been made of the intake of pupils currently at the two high schools between those in receipt of free transport and those paying for transport. There is some evidence that the pupils currently paying for transport did have better Key Stage 2 results.

Secondly, the experience of Worcestershire has been sought, where parental contributions for denominational transport were introduced in 2000. Worcestershire report no discernible difference in the five aided high schools, comparing the schools prior to the introduction to charging and the period since.

The Council does have a duty to give consideration to the denominational preferences in its transport policy, and it would be in keeping with this duty, if in the event of free transport being abandoned, a system of support for hardship cases could be introduced. In the consultations, any future reliance on eligibility for free school meals was criticised as being too limited. However, eligibility for free school meals would be an objective criterion that could be effectively applied. Consideration could also be given to reduced rates for siblings.

In conclusion, there is a risk in the two high schools becoming less comprehensive. It is difficult to measure that risk, other than to observe it would vary according to the degree of change proposed and any policies put in place to support hardship cases.

3. Herefordshire is unique in considering change to the discretionary transport policy.

There are 150 LEA's in England. Almost 50% of these are urban authorities, where the majority of students live within walking distance of schools or the public transport system is so good that Council funded school transport is minimal. In the larger more rural authorities there has been an increasing tendency to undertake reviews, and it has been found that the position is as follows:

- Gloucestershire – free transport available to Catholics only within a 10 mile radius of two R.C. aided schools concerned (Gloucester and Cheltenham).
- Worcestershire – parents contribute £100 per term towards cost of transport.
- Shropshire – free up to 6 miles for primary denominational schools and 16 miles for secondary denominational schools – [this provision is about to be reviewed].
- Bath and North East Somerset – about to commence a review and are preparing their consultation document.
- Somerset – parents contribute £60 per term towards cost of transport.
- Northamptonshire – from September 2003 no transport provided on denominational grounds.
- Devon – parental contribution of £70 per term.
- Essex – parents contribute £100 per term towards cost of transport.
- East Riding – from September 2004 no transport provided on denominational grounds.
- Warwickshire are in the process of reviewing their denominational transport provision.
- Nottinghamshire are in the process of reviewing their denominational transport provision.
- London LEAs – free transport to all children under the age of 16 (33).
- Norfolk – undertaking review.

A point was made in the public meeting that each authority is unique and Herefordshire should have policies suited to this County. This is fully supported. The evidence of circumstances in other LEAs was produced to answer the criticism that Herefordshire was alone in considering change.

4. The impact on the means of travel to school.

Currently 710 students have free transport on denominational grounds to the 2 aided high schools. If free denominational transport was withdrawn, some of these students may be brought to school in their parents' cars, which would be contrary to the drive by the Council to reduce car usage.

However, the position is not as simple as suggested. Under half of the 710 pupils travel on dedicated school buses. 52% use public bus services, seats on buses carrying mainstream entitled riders to The Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat School, and a small number already rely on parents' vehicles. The public bus services could continue to be used if parents were willing to pay the fares, and commercial operators may respond to demand if the 9 dedicated school bus routes were curtailed.

If free transport were to be withdrawn some increased car usage should be expected. The level of increased car usage would depend on which option was chosen. In the consultation it has been suggested that free transport should be available to all children attending school. This does have many attractions, but it is estimated that the cost of running such a service would be between £15-20 million per annum, and it would be some time before there was capacity in the County in terms of vehicles and drivers to operate such a system.

5. The disruption of pupils education if free transport was abandoned, and parents were forced to place their children in their provided school is unacceptable.

The recommendation is that if any change is to be made, it should not apply to students who currently benefit from free transport. This is on the basis that when parents stated a preference for a school, they did it in light of information given by the Council in the 'Information to Parents Handbook'. Although pupils, particularly those who have not started public examination courses, can and do change schools successfully, it is not a course of action that the authority should be forcing upon children.

Linked to this argument is the question of siblings, and, if changes were to be made from September 2006, some parents have argued that they would be unable to afford to send their younger children to the same school as older brothers and sisters. In terms of the provision of an effective education for siblings, this is not felt to be sufficient reason to make special provision for siblings if policies were changed.

6. Any review of transport arrangements should be done in the context of an overall review of high school provision in light of falling numbers of pupils in the County.

The availability of free transport or not is likely to affect parents' preferences for schools. It will not affect per se the total number of students in the County, nor the total capacity of schools. There will be approximately 1900 students entering high schools in September 2005. This compares to a peak in 2001 when there were 2044 students. The number of children entering primary school in September 2005, will be approximately 1600, and by 2012 this lower number will be entering high schools.

There is no doubt that falling numbers is currently affecting primary schools, and will affect high schools in coming years. However, in 1993 only 1661 pupils entered the County High Schools in that year, and all current planning is being undertaken on the basis that all 14 high schools will remain, albeit with reduced capacity in the future.

Denominational transport and future school provision can be dealt with separately, unless there was a wish to pursue more radical rationalisation of high school places.

7. The Review is being driven by cost reasons alone and the desire to make savings.

The cost in 2004/05 financial years in providing free denominational transport was £465,000. This was not the reason why the review was instigated, but it is a factor which must be considered in the review.

It has been repeatedly stated that if free transport was abandoned, any reduction in expenditure could only be achieved over time as current beneficiaries left school, and would be offset by an increased demand for children in the future wishing to access their provided school. It is impossible to predict accurately what the latter would be, but the best estimate is that at the end of a 5 year period, i.e. 2011, a reduction in expenditure of around £250,000 could be expected (at present day prices).

The Council since its inception in 1998 has always spent at the Government figure of Education Formula Funding Share (EFFF). If this policy continues, any saving in school transport would be used elsewhere in the education service and it is a legitimate question whether the current expenditure, which supports parents seeking denominational education and the partnership between Church and State, is the best way to spend this money. £250,000 does equate to almost £11 per pupil in all schools.

The consultations held in the Autumn of 2004 over the budget revealed little support from the sample of 504 households involved for this discretionary expenditure.

Indeed 67.4% of respondents favoured a reduction in Council's expenditure by withdrawing provision for home to denominational school transport. Charging parents £130 per term was an option identified by the Household Survey as a reduction causing least displeasure.

The Household Survey was statistically robust and a representative reflection of the views of the whole adult population. The same outcome was also seen in the 156 responses in the consultation with the Citizen's Panel, the 64 responses from the Council's website, the 1695 responses to a simplified questionnaire in the Hereford Times and Herefordshire Matters.

The Views of Schools

During the consultation period meetings have been held with Governors of both St. Mary's R.C. High School and The Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat High School. Both Governing Bodies argue strongly that free denominational transport should be maintained, fearing that its loss would undermine their role in serving the Christian Community in Herefordshire, and alter the nature of their schools. Both schools favour the classification of what can be considered a true denominational place, distinguishing school places on terms of the status of the school.

Aided primary schools have offered support to the case presented by high schools.

There has been little response from other schools. In the Spring of 2004 the consultations undertaken as part of the wider review of discretionary policies revealed that of the 43 schools who responded at that time:

- 16% were in favour of the status quo
- 28% were in favour of removing all subsidy
- 42% were in favour of seeking parental contribution
- 14% were in favour of offering free transport within mileage limits.

Schools have been contacted again and their response suggests that their views remain the same.