

Section C

HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

Notes of Home to School Transport Consultation Public Meeting Held on 24th May, 2005 at 7pm

Meeting started at 7.40pm

Chair: Colin Riches

Speakers: George Salmon, Head of Policy and Resources
Councillor D.W.Rule, Cabinet Member for Children's Services
Andrew Blackman, Admissions and Transport Manager
Rev. I. Terry, Hereford Diocese
Mr C. Lambert, Headteacher of St. Mary's R.C. High School
Mr A. Marson, Headteacher of The Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat School

Apologies: Bill Wiggin, MP

Colin Riches introduced himself as the Chair of this meeting and all six speakers. He reminded people that this meeting was concerning two issues.

1. Denominational Transport and not about any other transport issue other than those of faith.
2. The issues raised will be very emotive but this is a measured consultation.

CR explained the format of the meeting. The six speakers will take their turn to speak and then there will be a break where the public will be invited to comment on slips provided and enter them in the boxes around the room. These will then be considered in the second half of the meeting. They will be separated into categories of legal consideration, cost implications, traffic issues and the future of schools.

These will then be answered in turn, CR reminded them of the factual basis of this meeting it was not a debate.

Councillor Rule gave an introduction to the review and procedure and offered his thanks for being invited to the meeting. He addressed the meeting by stating they were here to listen and answer questions and points of fact, if these could not be answered the questions will be noted down along with the details of the person asking the question and answered by the end of the week. He finished up by saying the final decision of this consultation would be decided by Council.

George Salmon started by stating some people would be aware that there was a review of transport policy taken last summer report to Cabinet and Education Scrutiny and at that point Scrutiny and Cabinet decided no future action should be taken and it was felt that it was settled. There was a debate in the Autumn term over Vacant Seats from Ross on Wye area. In light of the challenge by parents, the Council consulted Queen's Counsel to check whether it was correct. They said yes they had followed right procedures for Vacant Seats but needed to check denominational transport policy and that the Council's policy may not be consistent and fair. It was felt it was mostly a high school problem. The Queen's Counsel advised that a non-discriminatory transport policy could be linked to a genuine denominational place, but a clear definition of genuine denominational policy in 25 aided schools is needed. Because the existing policy means Council is at risk of treating parents unfairly, a review is required. Therefore there was Cabinet approval to the review in March and letters were issued via schools to primary age children who were most likely to be

affected and the two high schools where letters were sent to all who currently benefit. Following complaints of how these were issued, there were checks made with the schools and GS was satisfied that the majority of parents were made aware of the consultation. However it had been decided that the consultation period should be extended by a further week. Cabinet will then feed the result into the Local LAF (11th July) to determine the admissions policy for September, 2006. All comments and views would be taken as part of this consultation period. GS will be writing the report that will go to Cabinet on 23rd June and a council decision will be made as to the outcome. The report will identify options, including abolishing the existing free transport or continuing much as present albeit with some alteration to meet legal point. GS invited any suggestions or proposals if there was felt to be one but at this moment in time no alternative had arisen.

Andrew Blackman relayed some key statistics on the current situation on denominational transport as follows:

Current Denominational riders:

75 Primary and 710 High School pupils at an annual cost of £50K (average of £666 per primary pupil per annum) & £415K (average of £585 per high school pupil per annum) respectively

High Schools

St Mary's – 689 pupils on roll and 395 pupils in receipt of denominational transport (57%)

Bishop's – 1192 pupils on roll and 315 pupils in receipt of denominational transport (26%) and 165 pupils in receipt of mainstream transport (14%)

Remaining 12 High schools have 8189 pupils on roll and 2891 in receipt of mainstream transport (35%) at a cost of circa £1600K (£553 per pupil per annum)

NB Primary schools entitled mainstream riders total 1195 out of a school population of circa 13,000 (9%) and cost £1050K per annum (£878 per pupil per annum)

Current Year Transfers

This year 1987 pupils are transferring to high schools of which 102 (5%) pupils are eligible for denominational transport and 324 (16%) pupils living more than 3 miles from their preferred school are not eligible for transport as they will be attending a non-catchment high school. Therefore there are more than three times as many parents who are exercising their parental preference to attend a non-catchment school and thus make their own transport arrangements than there are pupils currently eligible for denomination transport.

Of the 1987 pupils transferring this year 1372 (69%) are taking up their catchment places. All pupils transferring under denominational criteria would have been offered a place at their catchment school if they have put their catchment school as a higher preference above Bishop's/St Mary's.

Birth rate decline – over next 5 to 7 seven years the number of pupils transferring from Primary School to High School each year will decrease from approx 2000 to approx 1850 and thus pressure on High School places will decrease. The current total PAN for High Schools in Herefordshire is 2100.

Current Denominational Transport arrangements:

Broken down as follows:

Dedicated vehicles	48% - comprising 9 dedicated buses, 5 serving Hereford City, 2 from Ross and 2 from Leominster
Own Transport	4%
Public Bus Service	40% - of which 60% change at either the Hereford County or City Bus Stations
Shared Mainstream vehicles	8% - made up of 14 vehicles carrying mainstream entitled pupils

Other Local LEA's Policies:

- Gloucester – free to Catholics only within a 10-mile radius of two schools concerned (Gloucester and Cheltenham).
- Worcestershire – parents contribute £100 per term towards cost of transport
- Monmouthshire – no denominational transport provided
- Shropshire – free up to 6 miles for primary denominational schools and 16 miles for secondary denominational schools – this provision is about to be reviewed.
- Powys – free transport to 2 x primary Roman Catholic schools only.

Other LEA Policies:

- Bath & North East Somerset – just about to commence a review and are preparing their consultation document.
- Somerset – parents contribute £60 per term towards cost of transport.
- Northamptonshire – From Sept 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

- London LEA's – free transport to all children under the age of 16.

CR asked how many Council's do provide free denominational transport?

AB said this was difficult to answer as London doesn't have the same issues and there is different criteria at other LEA's.

Revered Ian Terry began by thanking Lynn Johnson for organising the meeting and felt it was a testament of the importance of the issue by the turnout. He addressed two general points of principle. The first was provision, the Church values the partnership with the state which began in 1870. The provision of both the Roman Catholic and Church of England [which was a quarter of primary school places (this was considering the buildings that they own) and over a seventh of all high schools] needed to be recognised. This was no small contribution and needs to be taken seriously. Secondly the principle where Church Schools have provided education to the less well off. The churches together have delivered high quality education service to all. Withdrawing the denominational transport will hit the poorer Christian people the most.

Mr C Lambert wanted to thank Father Martin for all his work. CL put it was an issue of choice. Should parents of Catholic and Anglican faith be denied choice because they cannot afford the transport. 22nd September, Stephen Twigg stated that there was no

agenda to remove free transport in the transport bill. The Queen's speech said it was important to offer choice and that faith schools were valued. AB had named 7 local authorities. 106 in the county. Herefordshire is different given its rurality. Transport is difficult with no infrastructure. It was not fair to compare Powys and Monmouth as they do not have Catholic schools. What is this about and why now? Parents have the right to have their children go to a school of their choice, the system works. When the Vacant Seats policy was taken away 22 children who attended St. Mary's were effected and some have now gone to alternative schools. CL felt they would lose between 75 and 100 children because of this throughout all year groups, this would alter the character of the school. If the location was different and St. Mary's was in the city this may be different, but it is not, originally it had been Herefordshire Council who had determined that the RC High School should be located in Lugwardine. Both schools already pay for this by a capital building programme the school and Governing Body have to fund 10% of that cost.

Andrew Marson wanted to raise two points in addition to him lending support to the two previous speakers.

1. First point. Why was this not taken to Scrutiny Committee? It is a legal concern. On May 11th when Council came to see Governing body it was clear that there was misunderstanding in the way in which our Governors interpreted entitlement and the way in which the authority did. Under the admission arrangements for Bishop's only the Church of England pupils with Category 3 (Church Places) are eligible for denominational transport. Our Category 3 is different from St. Mary's we have an Ecumenical policy for church places. On the SA1 form, when parents apply for transport it states that the pupil must provide information if your request is based on genuine denominational grounds.
2. Second point was the speed of the review. It was viewed by Council as quite a simple issue. It is not. Bishop's is different from St. Mary's. It effects the whole school provision and broader transport issues. If denominational transport was taken away and buses disappear there will be a lot more cars and more traffic.

In the second half of the meeting, questions relating to the legal, financial and impact on the schools from members of the audience were put to the panel.

The Chairman closed the meeting at 9.15pm.

Section D

Appraisal of Options

Option 1

The continuation of free transport for those children occupying a denominational place in aided schools as a result of parental preference based on genuine denominational belief.

This option would provide free transport to those students living beyond statutory walking distance for Roman Catholic students attending Roman Catholic aided schools, and Church of England students attending Church of England aided schools. Staunton-on-Wye Primary School although outside the Hereford Diocese family of schools, does have links through its trustees with the Church of England, and would therefore be considered as a Church of England school.

Free transport would not be available to pupils who attended Church Schools from other denominations.

This policy would enable the Council to have a clear and consistent transport policy that took into account the main denominational preferences of parents.

In the main, it would maintain the benefit currently enjoyed by the 750 pupils, with only a limited number of children from Methodist, URC, Baptist and other Church backgrounds being denied such benefit.

There would be no additional cost, and no savings, and the impact on roads/environment would be the same as at present.

However, in maintaining benefit for one set of parents on denominational grounds, other parents expressing preferences for schools other than their provided school may still feel unfairly treated.

Option 2

The extension of free transport to all who have a place at an aided school and who qualify on distance criteria.

Although this may avoid having to make a distinction between pupils attending each aided school on who should and should not have transport, it creates a wider anomaly between those attending aided schools and those attending Voluntary Controlled and Community Schools. This is less defensible than the current arrangements.

Costs would increase, but more school journeys would likely to be by bus.

Option 3

As Option 1 except that most parents will make a contribution to cost.

A prerequisite in this option (as in Option 1) is the need to define a denominational place in terms of the denominational character of the school. If this is achieved for all 25 aided schools, subsidised transport could be offered. This would continue support for denominational places and denominational schools, and answer the fears concerning increased traffic congestion. If this model were to be adopted, places on buses would be offered at the same rates as under the vacant seats policy which currently stand at £100 per term (£35 per term for those in receipt of FSM). There would be increased administration costs in implementing this. It is difficult to estimate the number of parents who would take up this option, but if the majority entitled took up this option, this would lead to a net saving of approximately £150K at the end of 5 years. The risk in increased traffic congestion would be minimised. Contributions would be waived for parents who qualify for free school meals or for third and subsequent children in a family.

Note:

In the event that Options 1, 2 or 3 are adopted it would be necessary to provide similar arrangements for genuinely secular parents who do not wish their child to attend a church school if that is the nearest school and there is no other suitable school within the statutory walking distance.

Option 4

Ceasing to provide free denominational transport for pupils admitted to Year R and Year 8 in schools in September 2006 onwards.

This does answer the criticism of potential discrimination in the transport policy in that benefit would be withheld from all new applicants. It would treat the application to an aided school which was not the provided school, as a form of parental preference, where parents are responsible for transport.

The authority could meet its legal obligations by considering hardship cases in which various factors prevented pupils attending denominational schools.

The authority could offer an agency arrangement in which buses are provided under contract to the school or parents at cost, but is unlikely, because of the high costs involved, that this would be seen to be attractive to school or parents.

The withdrawal of free transport is unlikely to have a significant impact on overall numbers in the primary or high schools involved. In primary schools the numbers currently benefiting from school transport are low and distances travelled limited. In the secondary sector, both high schools have high reputations, and in recent years have been oversubscribed. It is predicted that this will continue, but there may be fewer children from families on low incomes, and those that live further from Hereford City. Both Governing Bodies believe that this will happen, and that it will be to the detriment of the comprehensive nature of the schools.

Some growth in the use of private cars may occur, but not to the extent which was argued in the consultation. Given that less than 50% of those benefiting from free transport travel by dedicated buses, (which if withdrawn could be replaced by commercial services), it could be expected that in future the majority of pupils would travel by public transport.

On cost, although it is impossible to be precise in this, it has always been envisaged that a net saving of around £250,000 could be expected in five years time under this option. This is on the basis that some pupils in the future will choose to go to their provided high school and be entitled to free transport.