

# Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee

22 September 2023

## Home to School Transport Services – Consultation Outcomes



### Report of:

**John Pearce, Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services**

**Amy Harhoff, Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth**

**Paul Darby, Corporate Director of Resources**

### Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

### Purpose of the Report

- 1 To present the committee with the outcomes of the public consultation in relation to Durham County Council's Home to School Transport Service.

### Executive summary

- 2 A report was presented to the committee on 10th March 2023 which set out Cabinet's decision to undertake a consultation on its Home to School Transport Service.
- 3 The consultation was agreed in the context of significantly increased pressure on funding and growing demand for council services over recent years, especially statutory services.
- 4 It was informed by an external review of the Service in 2021, which identified a number of proposals to transform the service and to support the management of demand and pressures and support greater independence for young people.
- 5 The consultation on the proposals took place between 27 February 2023 and 12 April 2023. The proposals related to the following areas of Home to School Transport provision:

- The provision of the Durham County Council's Concessionary Schemes.
  - The effective and efficient provision of transport journeys and passenger assistants.
  - The promote of Independence skills of young people through travel training and other opportunities.
  - Simplifying personal travel budgets for parents/carers of pupils with SEN and those living in remote rural areas to provide greater flexibility for parents.
  - A review of unsafe walking routes and existing travel routes across the County, especially schools with high volumes of routes.
  - A review of potential procurement options for home to school transport services in relation to impact on value for money and associated competitive pricing.
- 6 The Consultation included a public survey, face to face and virtual meetings, media communication, information sheets and easy read materials.
- 7 There was a total of 324 responses to the online questionnaire, as well as written responses from key stakeholder group.
- 8 Based on the work undertaken and the consultation outcomes, Cabinet agreed to the recommendations as set out in the cabinet report considered on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023. These are included in the attached presentation and set out in the main body of the report at paragraph 122.

### **Recommendation(s)**

- 9 Overview and Scrutiny Committee to note the content of the report and presentation.

## Background

- 10 The Council has a statutory duty under various Acts and Statutory Guidance to provide free education transport to eligible students. The main legislation is set out in the following:
  - The Education Act 1996;
  - Education and Inspections Act (EIA) 2006;
  - The Home to School Travel and Transport Guidance 2014;
  - Post 16 Transport to Education and Training Guidance 2014.
- 11 In order to comply with statutory Home to School Transport duties local authorities must undertake the following:
  - Promote the use of sustainable travel and transport;
  - Make transport arrangements for all eligible children.
- 12 In particular, the Education Act 1996, states that a statutory duty is placed on the Council to make suitable travel arrangements to facilitate attendance at school for eligible children of compulsory school age (5-16). This is based on statutory walking distance for children to a qualifying school as follows:
  - Beyond 2 miles (below the age of 8);
  - Beyond 3 miles (age 8 – 16);
  - Between 2 – 6 miles for pupils from low income families (for example in receipt of free school meals);
  - Pupils with a disability or mobility requirement.
- 13 The Home to School Travel and Transport Guidance 2014 (Special Education Needs) requires Local Authorities to make transport arrangements for those children who cannot reasonably be expected to walk to school because of their mobility or associated health and safety issues related to their special education needs and disabilities.
- 14 Durham County Council's Home to School Transport service provides daily transport to over 9,000 passengers. This is made up of mainstream and SEND passengers along with other special provision. This requires over 1,000 transport contracts to be in place which utilise over 300 different transport suppliers.

- 15 The consultation was agreed in the context of significantly increased pressure on funding and growing demand for council services over recent years, especially statutory services.
- 16 The increasing pressures on the Home to School Transport Budget and reasons for this are set out in the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee consultation report dated 10 March 2023.
- 17 To help understand the above issues in more detail and be informed by best practice elsewhere in the country, the Council commissioned a review of the Home to School Transport service in 2021.
- 18 The outcome of the review was the development of a range of potential service improvements as follows:
  - Review the provision of the Durham County Council's Concessionary Schemes.
  - Consider how the Council can more effectively and efficiently support the provision of journeys and passenger assistants on transport.
  - Promote Independence skills of young people through travel training and other opportunities.
  - Introduce a simplified process for providing personal travel budgets for parents/carers of pupils with SEN and those living in remote rural areas where it is cost effective to do so.
  - Review unsafe walking routes and existing travel routes across the County, especially schools with high volumes of routes.
  - Review potential procurement options for home to school transport services in relation to impact on value for money and associated competitive pricing.
- 19 On 8 February 2023, Cabinet agreed to undertake a public consultation on the above proposals.

### **Consultation Approach and Timeline**

- 20 The Consultation took place between **27 February 2023 and 12 April 2023** and was implemented in accordance with the Council's Consultation Statement and Consultation Protocol (March 2019), statutory and government guidance, as well as the general requirements of public law.

- 21 The Consultation process and planned activities were set out in the Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Consultation report dated 10<sup>th</sup> March 2023. They included a public survey, face to face and virtual meetings with stakeholder groups, media communication, information sheets and easy read materials.

## Response to the Online Consultation and Questionnaire

- 22 There was a total of 324 responses to the online questionnaire. A profile of responders is detailed below (note that some responders have identified themselves against more than 1 cohort).

	Frequency	%age
A parent/carer of a child/children with additional needs	88	27.8%
A parent/carer of a child/children without additional needs	157	49.7%
A child or young person with additional needs	1	0.3%
A child or young person without additional needs	9	2.8%
A resident (not parent/carer of a child using home to school transport)	33	10.4%
An educational professional/governor	28	8.9%
A transport provider	12	3.8%
Other	8	2.5%

- 23 Of those responders who identified themselves as a parent, the following information was also provided:

	Frequency	%age
My child receives school transport which we pay for	83	35.9%
My child receives free school transport due to an unsafe walking route	51	22.1%
My child receives solo transport with a passenger assistant	6	2.6%
My child receives solo transport without a passenger assistant	7	3.0%
My child receives group transport with a passenger assistant	34	14.7%
My child receives group transport without a passenger assistant	26	11.3%
My child does not get home to school transport provided by the council	46	19.9%

- 24 A full summary of responses provided to the questionnaire and a summary of questions/points raised at consultation meetings was

included in the cabinet report dated 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023, which is included as a background paper.

- 25 The feedback from the consultation was aggregated and used to help shape the report recommendations.

## **Findings from the Survey Feedback and Consultation Meetings**

### **Priority 1 - Review the DCC Concessionary Scheme.**

- 26 The Concessionary scheme provides transport to some young people with seats being sold to pupils who are **not** statutorily entitled to free transport. There are three schemes which operate in County Durham:
- ***The DCC standard scheme.*** When the Council commissions transport for statutorily entitled pupils there may be some spare seats available which can be made available to non-entitled pupils. This practice is common across Local Authorities in England. The current charge is £1.63 per day;
  - ***The DCC maintained scheme.*** This was implemented following policy changes that took effect in September 2012, where transport capacity was maintained on some established school transport routes that did not have an alternative suitable local bus service. The Council does not operate a full cost recovery model for this scheme and incurs a financial loss each year of over £250,000. The current charge is £1.63 per day.
  - ***The Schools' Scheme.*** Concessionary transport is also provided by some partner schools which the Council arranges on their behalf. Schools set their own charges for the provision which is cost neutral to the Council. This scheme was therefore not included in the consultation.
- 27 The consultation sought views on the following:
- 28 **We currently provide subsidised concessionary transport for some children who are not statutorily entitled to free transport. The current charge is £1.63 per return journey. Do you agree or disagree that we should charge a higher fare to help meet more of the cost.**
- 29 63% (201 responses) disagreed/strongly disagreed with this proposal, with 23.2% of responses agreeing/strongly agreeing. A further 13.8% neither agreed nor disagreed.

- 30 The percentage of respondents who were parents and are currently paying for transport who disagreed/strongly disagreed was 86.6% (78 responses).
- 31 52.4% (165 responses) felt this would have a negative or extremely negative impact on them. This increased to 89% of the parents who responded who are currently paying for Home to School Transport.
- 32 There were 204 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for responses to the above question. The most prevalent themes were as follows:
- 48 responses identified that a significantly higher fare would add to the cost of living pressures currently being experienced.
  - 30 responses responded that Home to School Travel should be provided free to children.
  - 29 responses identified that the increase was unaffordable.
- 33 **A proposed increase to the daily charge for the provision of the standard and maintained Concessionary schemes which aligns to the Go North East Under 19 fare of £2.80 for a return journey from 2023/24 academic year.**
- 34 71.4% (228 responses) disagreed/strongly disagreed with this proposal, whilst 18.2% agreed/strongly agreed. A further 10.3% neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 35 The percentage of respondents who were parents and are currently paying for transport who disagreed/strongly disagreed was 94% (78 responses).
- 36 There were 190 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for responses to the above question. The most prevalent themes were as follows:
- 45 responses identified that the increase was unaffordable.
  - 34 responses identified the additional pressure this level of fare would add to the cost of living increases currently being experienced.
  - 28 responses identified that the increase was too high.
  - 25 responses responded that Home to School Travel should be provided free to children.

- 37 The consultation also highlighted the inequity of the current charging arrangements for concessionary schemes. Within the County, there are wide variations in the level of subsidy provided by individual schools for the School Schemes, which creates wide variations in the parental contributions required. Charges for the DCC Standard and Maintained Schemes are significantly below actual cost which benefits the parents of 515 young people who use these schemes. This variation in charging has created inequity within the system and has the potential to create significant dissatisfaction amongst parents in the future. For example, one response to the consultation made the point that 'If you compare rates for other schools in Durham County, the fee for School X is significantly higher.'
- 38 **Do you agree or disagree with the proposal to review and phase out concessionary transport for children who are not statutorily entitled to it?**
- 39 66.2% (208 responses) disagreed/strongly disagreed with this proposal, with 20.7% of responses agreeing/strongly agreeing. A further 13.1% neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 40 The percentage of respondents who were parents and are currently paying for transport who disagreed/strongly disagreed was 76.9% (63 responses).
- 41 50.5% of responders (165 responses) felt this would have a negative or extremely negative impact on them. This increased to 76.5% for parents who are currently paying for Home to School Transport.
- 42 There were 190 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for their responses to the above question. The most prevalent themes were as follows:
- 25 responses stated that it would impact on school attendance of pupils.
  - 21 responses stated that Home to School Travel should be provided free to children.

#### Feedback from Group Consultations

- 43 Direct consultation on the proposals took place with the stakeholder groups identified and written feedback received.
- 44 Durham County Council Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee made the following comments:



- Referring to the maintained scheme it was suggested that consideration should be given to the working poor who may have difficulty affording additional costs.
- A £2.80 fare was expensive for some parents especially when there is a cost of living crisis.

45 Durham County Youth Council made the following comments:

- They worry about it going up and people not being able to afford it. £2.80 fare was expensive for some parents especially when there is a cost of living crisis.
- They talked about some pupils taking multiple buses to get to school (service buses) which could total £5 per day.

46 Relevant questions/points raised during the Online Consultation events were as follows:

- Would there be an option to pay for the journeys used rather than a blanket charge.
- If costs increase in line with public buses, will there be other similarities introduced e.g. being able to use a different bus to go to a different location on some days.
- By raising the cost to £2.80 per child will this result in a like for like service the child would receive if they used a public bus.
- How will these proposals affect schools with special arrangements in place as some parents already pay more per seat than the amount proposed.
- In rural areas, if the bus was withdrawn there is no alternative viable way for those children to get to school other than their parents driving them. There is no appropriate public transport alternative and walking or cycling would not be appropriate / safe. If each child had to be driven to school (instead of using the bus) this would mean approx. 16 separate car journeys which would have a negative impact on the environment as well as increasing congestion around the school.

**Priority 2 - Consider how the Council can more effectively and efficiently support the provision of journeys and passenger assistants on transport.**

- 47 Single person journeys and passenger assistants are mainly provided for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and mainly to pupils in Special schools. They are usually taxis which is the most expensive form of transport. The transported pupil is often accompanied by a Passenger Assistant. There has been a significant increase in numbers over recent years.
- 48 The consultation sought views on:
- 49 **Do you agree or disagree that the council should regularly review the types of home to school travel assistance it offers to meet the needs of children and ensure the most appropriate and cost-effective mode of transport is provided?**
- 50 76.5% of responses agreed/strongly agreed with the proposal, with 8.7% of responses disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. A further 14.8% neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 51 When reviewing responses to this question from parents who have children with additional needs, 75.8% either strongly agreed/ agreed, which is broadly in line with the overall response.
- 52 There were 133 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for responses to the above question. The most prevalent themes were as follows:
- 23 Responses identified the Best Interests of the Child as a key consideration.
  - 20 responses stated that the review of provision should be undertaken as the needs of children change over time.
  - 17 Responses stated that reviews should be undertaken to ensure best use of resources.
  - 14 responses identified the safety of the child as a key factor.
- 53 **Do you agree or disagree that the council should regularly review the provision of individual passenger assistants to ensure they are used cost effectively for children in receipt of home to school travel assistance?**

- 54 71.6% of responses agreed/strongly agreed with this proposal, with 10% of responses disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. A further 18.4% neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 55 When reviewing responses to this question from parents who have children with additional needs, 70.1% strongly agreed/agreed, which is broadly in line with the overall response.
- 56 There were 100 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for responses to the above question. Responses received followed similar themes to those in the previous question relating to single person transport. The most prevalent themes were as follows:
- 18 responses identified the safety of the child as a key factor.
  - 18 responses stated that reviews should be undertaken to ensure best use of resources.
  - 16 responses identified the best interests of the Child as a key consideration.
  - 14 responses stated that review of provision should be undertaken as the needs of children change over time.

#### Feedback from Group Consultations

- 57 Consultation on the proposals took place with the stakeholder groups identified and written feedback received.
- 58 Durham County Council Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee made the following comments:
- With reference to single person transport was this at the parents request or was it due to out of area placements being required for the Young Person
- 59 Durham County Youth Council made the following comments:
- Reviewing Single Person Transport will reduce cost and encourage social engagement of young people (if some move to other types of shared transport)
  - Young People's needs would need to be carefully analysed.
  - The need to consider the safety of passengers and Young People with SEND as they may struggle to engage in bus transport. If a child needs to be transported alone, this should be maintained.

60 The Xtreme Group, which is a representative group of Young People with special educational needs made the following comments:

- The need to consider routes and length of journey. Can Young People change their mind if they tried and weren't happy?
- Group transport can be overwhelming for some children, but also some children prefer to be on transport with their friends.
- Long transport journeys take up too much of the day and can mean the Young Person can get home quite late.
- The Council should look at individual needs not costs.
- Escorts should get to know the children/young people before they support young people on transport.
- Sometimes Escorts are not needed. They should be more targeted at younger children. They gave an example where a young person had a PA but didn't need one once they got older.
- The need for PA's who can support with medical needs.

**Priority 3 - Develop independence skills of young people and introduce an updated personal travel budget scheme.**

61 Independent Travel Training (ITT) is a process that trains individuals on how to travel independently in a safe and responsible way. Travelling independently is a life skill that reduces isolation and dependency and opens opportunities for education, employment and enjoyment.

62 Many children with SEND currently receive door-to-door transport from the time they start school until the time they leave college and as such they do not gain the necessary travel and social skills that other children do. Whilst some children with SEN will not be able to travel independently, those that are able, should be given the opportunity to do so.

63 The consultation sought views on:

64 **Do you agree or disagree with the introduction of an independent travel training scheme for children with SEND when it is appropriate to their abilities and needs?**

65 56.4% of responses agreed/strongly agreed with the proposal, with 21.3% of responses disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. A further 22.3% neither agreed nor disagreed.

- 66 When reviewing responses to this question from parents who have children with additional needs, 51.1% strongly agreed/ agreed with the proposal which is broadly in line with the overall response. A further 37.5% of responses disagreed/strongly disagreed.
- 67 There were 145 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for responses to the above question. The most prevalent themes were as follows:
- 50 responses identified that any scheme would have to be appropriate to the needs of the pupil/parent.
  - 50 Responses stated that a scheme could provide long-term benefit in helping to develop independent life skills.
  - 31 Responses identified concerns about the safety of the pupil.

#### Feedback from Group Consultations

- 68 Consultation on the proposals took place with the stakeholder groups identified and written feedback received.
- 69 Durham County Council Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee made the following comments:
- With reference to independence members suggested there were varying levels of vulnerability that should be taken into consideration and this should be reviewed child by child.
- 70 The Xtreme Group, which is a representative group of Young People with special educational needs made the following comments:
- Independent Travel Training is not appropriate for all young people but could work for some.
  - Getting transport with other children can make you feel more normal.
  - A good idea, only if the young person wants to try – not forced.
  - Young People who travel on their own can encourage other young people.
  - Should do a trial and get young people used to it.
  - It should be people you know who are supporting you with travel training e.g. school staff, family, support workers etc, not someone you don't know. Ask Young People who they want to support them.

- Travel training is part of SEND Promise so in line with this.
- 71 Making Changes Together (MCT), which is a representative group of parents of young people with special educational needs made the following comments:
- Supportive of Travel Training and feel that this can help children approaching 14-16 years and also their parents.
  - Consider starting Travel Training earlier than 14-16 years, maybe at start of Secondary school.
  - Highlighted the impact of Covid on some children who may have been happy to travel on a group/public transport pre-covid, but not now.
  - Queried whether travel training opportunities will apply to children who don't have an EHCP.
- 72 The Council is also considering options in respect of the introduction of Pick up Points. Pick up Points are similar to bus stops, where the Council identifies designated pick-up and drop-off locations for the pupil to meet the bus or taxi rather than offering a door-to-door service. This reduces the time needed for the route to pick up the pupils and supports children and young people to become more independent and better prepares them for adulthood.
- 73 **When it is appropriate to their abilities and needs, do you agree or disagree that the use of agreed pickup points for children and young people with SEND can help to provide a more cost-effective service?**
- 74 46.1.% of responses agreed/strongly agreed with this proposal, whilst 24.7% of responses disagreed/strongly disagreed. A further 29.3% neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 75 When reviewing responses to this question from parents who have children with additional needs, 37.5% strongly agreed/ agreed with the proposal. However, 47.7% of responses disagreed/strongly disagreed.
- 76 There were 118 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for responses to the above question. The most prevalent themes were as follows:
- 37 Responses identified concerns about the safety of the pupil.
  - 22 responses identified the practicality of getting to the pick-up point / impact on parents.

- 17 Responses stated that it should be appropriate to the child/ young person's needs.
- 14 responses stated that where appropriate it could support the longer term independence of young people.

### Feedback from Group Consultations

77 Consultation on the proposals took place with the stakeholder groups identified and written feedback received.

78 Making Changes Together (MCT), which is a representative group of parents of young people with special educational needs made the following comments:

- There will be a number of really important considerations which include family circumstances (such as other Young People in the family), age of the young person, the distance to travel – both to the pickup point and then to school etc)
- Suggested a separate survey of parents to get their views when looking at the development of a scheme.

79 Durham Youth Council made the following comment:

- The location of the Pickup Point will be an important factor.

80 Relevant questions/points raised during the Online Consultation events were as follows:

- How would designated pick up points work for taxis. Surely the whole point is for a safe pick up and drop off from home. What if a child is a no show, how long does a driver wait.
- SEND hubs (pickup points) - where will the hubs be located? Is there a distance set from your home? Who will decide when children attend these hubs - medical professionals, parents?
- How will the hubs be policed and will parents get a travel budget to get their child to these hubs?

81 A Personal Travel Budget is a sum of money provided by the Council to parents or carers of children with SEND who are eligible for travel assistance. The budget allows families to make their own arrangements for travel, thereby increasing choice and flexibility. It also provides an opportunity for the Council to reduce expenditure and management time associated with day-to-day arrangements. Personal

Travel Budgets are typically offered to SEN passengers but in Durham there is an increased opportunity to offer them in rural areas.

82 **Do you agree or disagree that simplified personal travel budgets can provide parents of children with SEND and those in rural areas with more flexibility to arrange their own transport for their child?**

83 39.1% of responses agreed/strongly agreed with the proposal, whilst 25.3% of responses disagreed/strongly disagreed. A further 35.5% neither agreed nor disagreed.

84 When reviewing responses to this question from parents who have children with additional needs, opinion was evenly distributed with 40% strongly agreeing/ agreeing with the proposal and 37.6% of responses disagreeing/strongly disagreeing.

85 There were 118 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for responses to the above question. The most prevalent themes were as follows:

- 22 Responses identified that a Personal Budget could provide flexibility and also promote independence.
- 19 responses queried if the budget payment would be sufficient to cover parents' costs.
- 19 Responses raised concerns about the practicality of parents managing transport.
- 10 responses identified that complexity of the scheme and value for money should be considered.

#### Feedback from Group Consultations

86 Consultation on the proposals took place with the stakeholder groups identified and written feedback received.

87 Durham County Council Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee made the following comments:

- Rural areas suffer from poor transport and consideration should be given to their impact on working parents.
- Sought clarity regarding the payment of personal budgets as to whether this was only for the time the child was in the vehicle.
- Queried if parents will be subject to the same rules as other drivers who transport children and will this be looked at as an option?



- 88 Making Changes Together (MCT), which is a representative group of parents of young people with special educational needs made the following comments:
- Many parents are not aware of Personal Travel Budgets and the Councils current scheme.
  - How the scheme will be promoted to parents
  - If the Personal Travel Budget option is taken up by some parents, then this will be more efficient than the Council arranging a taxi.
- 89 The Xtreme Group, which is a representative group of young people with special educational needs made the following comments:
- Will the budget be tailored to parents' availability and circumstances.
  - Will Personal Travel budgets increase with inflation, will they cover medical needs and will distance be a factor in determining the budget e.g. if someone lives further away from a school then they get a bigger budget.
- 90 Durham County Youth Council made the following comments:
- Suggest that parents are refunded for mileage.
- 91 Relevant questions/points raised during the Online Consultation events were as follows:
- This could have an impact on some families who claim benefits example universal credit, it could mean that payments would have to be declared as income which could cause difficulties with claims.
  - A lack of awareness by some parents of the availability of the scheme.

#### ***Priority 4 - Review Unsafe Walking Routes and Re-Routing***

- 92 The Council provides free transport for pupils travelling to their nearest suitable school, who would not otherwise qualify due to being under the relevant distance threshold, where the shortest walking route(s) are assessed as unsuitable to walk. A suitable route is one on which a pupil, accompanied as necessary, can walk with reasonable safety to school.

- 93 There is an opportunity to make some unsuitable routes safe through highways works, with associated costs, enabling children to safely walk to school, as well as providing wider benefits to the community such as helping to improve fitness and potentially contributing to reduced child obesity.
- 94 The consultation sought views on:
- 95 **Some children receive free transport because a route to school has been formally assessed as unsafe. Do you agree or disagree that we should make routes safe wherever possible so that pupils can walk or cycle to school?**
- 96 70.2% of responses agreed/strongly agreed with this proposal, with 18.2% of responses disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. A further 11.7% neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 97 When reviewing responses to this question from parents who receive free home to school transport due to unsafe walking routes, 58.8% strongly agreed/ agreed with the proposal. A further 29.4% of responses disagreed/strongly disagreed.
- 98 There were 151 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for responses to the above question. The most prevalent themes were as follows:
- 57 Responses identified the child's safety on the route as a key factor in determining whether it is safe to walk.
  - 33 responses identified the benefits to the young people of walking/cycling and to the wider community of safe walking routes.
  - 25 Responses identified distance as a key factor alongside whether a route is safe to walk.

#### Feedback from Group Consultations

- 99 Consultation on the proposals took place with the stakeholder groups identified and written feedback received.
- 100 Durham County Council Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee made the following comments:
- Regarding unsafe routes members suggested that the service should be mindful of capital investment and ensure it was cost effective.

- 101 The Xtreme Group, which is a representative group of young people with special educational needs made the following comments:
- A lot of Young People travel out of area for school. How far is acceptable to walk/cycle?
- 102 Durham County Youth Council made the following comments:
- Supported walking routes to schools and to make these routes safer e.g. paths, cycle paths, lighting. This will support carbon zero agenda but there will be a large cost to do this.
  - There may be comparable cost to promoting walking routes as to putting on more transport.
  - Walking routes is a better long-term plan.
- 103 Relevant questions/points raised during the Online Consultation events were as follows:
- How often are walking assessments carried out and is there a time limit on when these routes should be assessed.
  - Need to ensure safe walking route assessments are up to date and if not, then re-assess the route.
- 104 The Review of Home to School Transport identified opportunities for effectiveness and efficiency through an annual re-routing exercise. It is common practice amongst councils to evaluate opportunities for re-routing journeys to reflect changes in demand and other changes in the lead up to the new school year.
- 105 The consultation sought views on:
- 106 **Do you agree or disagree that the council should regularly review travel routes so that it is providing the most cost effective and environmentally friendly journeys to transport children to school?**
- 107 74.1% of responses agreed/strongly agreed with this proposal, with 9.2% of responses disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. A further 16.7% neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 108 There were 100 free text comments received which expanded on the reasons for responses to the above question. The most prevalent themes were as follows:
- 22 Responses identified achieving value for money as a key factor for this proposal.

- 12 responses highlighted impact on the environment as a consideration.
- 12 Responses identified child safety as a consideration.
- 11 responses stated that reviews should be undertaken to provide the best possible service.

### Feedback from Group Consultations

109 Consultation on the proposals took place with the stakeholder groups identified and written feedback received.

110 Durham County Council Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee made the following comments:

- Volunteer drivers picking up one or two children would be more cost effective than public transport.

111 Durham County Youth Council made the following comments:

- Ensure travel routes are the most effective, that children are collected in right order and that there are more pick-ups.
- Not door to door any longer as journey time will increase.
- There are issues with transport queueing time at schools to get children into school (SEN).

112 Making Changes Together (MCT), which is a representative group of parents of young people with special educational needs made the following comments:

- Gave examples of taxis which travel through villages which are not full and could take more young people from the same village. Is this explored by council and could they not pick up extra children to reduce cost.

113 Relevant questions/points raised during the Online Consultation events were as follows:

- The lack of accessible vehicles forces the price up. Are you going to work/liase with licensing to change the policy in order to save cost.
- DCC should consult with contractors to agree the best route and number of pupils carried around that area going to the same destination. An example was given where a transport provider asked DCC to consider combining two contracts into one.

- To save congestion at the schools, could we not stagger start and finish times? I'm only suggesting this at SEN schools at which vehicles queue. The pupils will still be off loaded from their vehicles in a timely manner, but it will aid the (management of) congestion. It may also allow operators to link contracts which should save money.

***Priority 5 - Review potential procurement options for home to school transport services in relation to impact on value for money and associated competitive pricing.***

114 Due to challenges of increasing price inflation, contract costs, transport supply and market competition, it is pivotal to the delivery of the Service that the Council has a clear strategy and approach in relation to the procurement and supply of transport moving forward. This will involve assessing opportunities to develop the supply base further and increase competition and deliver better value on routes and contracts.

115 The consultation sought views on:

116 **When reviewing and improving how we purchase Home to School Transport Services, what do you think are the key considerations that we should bear in mind?**

117 There were 9 responses to this question with the most frequent theme (3 responses) identifying quality as the key consideration in procuring transport. The next most frequent theme identified was the likelihood of cheaper contract prices if longer contract durations are offered (2 responses).

Feedback from Group Consultations

118 Consultation on the proposals took place with the stakeholder groups identified and written feedback received.

119 Durham County Council Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee made the following comments:

- Referring to procurement of services members suggested engaging with community groups to come to an arrangement to share minibuses.
- Could special schools use their own buses and driver escort?
- Where possible use the same provider to attract economies of scale.

- Use/provision of school minibus with Durham County Council funding the maintenance and also paying for driver training. A non-teaching member of staff drives and would transport the children. The bus could be used for other school activities such as visits.

120 Relevant questions/points raised during the Online Consultation events were as follows:

- It is a difficult process for a new private hire or hackney carriage driver to gain their licence. This reduces the number of cars/minibuses that could be available.

### **Equalities Impact Assessment**

121 A full Equalities Impact assessment (EIA), updated with relevant consultation feedback is included in the Cabinet Report presented to the meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023 and is included as a background paper. The EIA highlights potential impacts (both positive and negative) in relation to the protected characteristics of disability, age and sex (women) although several mitigations have been identified to remove or minimise potential negative impact.

### **Programme of Work Agreed by Cabinet**

122 Following the presentation of the consultation outcomes report to Cabinet on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023, the following recommendations were agreed:

- (a) Agree a charge for the Standard and Maintained Concessionary scheme of £2.00 to align to the Bus Service Improvement Plan offer for the 2023/24 academic year;
- (b) Agree that in the event of the withdrawal of this fare in the future, that the annual charge for the concessionary schemes is aligned to commercial child travel fares;
- (c) Agree in principle to phase out the Maintained Concessionary scheme subject to further appraisals of the options available to achieve this and their associated impact on stakeholders and Transport arrangements, with a further report to Cabinet on the findings and recommendations;
- (d) Undertake a review of the needs of those individual children who are in receipt of single person transport and/or a passenger assistant to ensure that the most appropriate transport assistance relevant to their needs is provided;
- (e) Review the existing Personal Travel Budget Scheme and promote this as a travel option to parents;

- (f) Develop a Travel Training scheme in partnership with schools and parents;
- (g) Undertake a trial of Pickup Points for Children with SEND to assess the effectiveness of this option, which is developed in co-production with a small number of Special Schools and parents;
- (h) Review those routes which are currently assessed as unsafe to determine the feasibility of making them safe and also review the current configuration of school transport journeys with an initial focus on those schools which have the highest number of vehicles and/or cost associated with transporting pupils to their school;
- (i) Review the suggestions and alternative procurement options raised during the consultation, especially those which can have the most impact on efficiency, effectiveness, safety and environmental issues;
- (j) Receive reports on any future potential changes to Home to School Transport Policy arising from the recommended programme of work outlined in the report.

## **Conclusion**

- 123 Home to School Transport is a statutory service and is highly valued by parents, children and young people who use the Service. However, it also represents a challenge to the Council in terms of effective management and control of costs, value for money and the impact on Council tax payers.
- 124 The consultation has highlighted a wide range of view and opinions about the Councils proposals which are summarised in this report, with full responses available in the Cabinet report dated 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023, which is included as a background paper.

## **Background Papers**

- [Home to School Transport Services Consultation Outcomes - Cabinet 14 June 2023](#)

## **Author**

Keith Forster

Tel: 03000 267396

---

## Appendix 1: Implications

---

### Legal Implications

The Education Act 1996 and Education and Inspections Act (EIA) 2006 sets out the statutory duty on Local Authorities to make such travel arrangements as they consider necessary to facilitate attendance at school for eligible children.

The EIA 2006 defines eligible children as follows:

#### *Statutory walking distances eligibility*

The Local Authority must provide free transport for all pupils of compulsory school age (5-16) if their nearest suitable school is:

- Beyond 2 miles (if below the age of 8); or
- Beyond 3 miles (if aged between 8 and 16)

#### *Special educational needs, a disability or mobility problems eligibility*

The Local Authority must make transport arrangements for all children who cannot reasonably be expected to walk to school because of their mobility problems or because of associated health and safety issues related to their special educational needs (SEN) or disability. Eligibility for such children should be assessed on an individual basis to identify their particular transport requirements. Usual transport requirements (e.g. the statutory walking distances) should not be considered when assessing the transport needs of children eligible due to SEN and / or disability.

#### *Unsafe route eligibility*

The Local Authority must make transport arrangements for all children who cannot reasonably be expected to walk to nearest suitable school because the nature of the route is assessed as unsafe to walk.

#### *Extended rights eligibility*

The Local Authority is required to provide free transport where pupils are entitled to free school meals or their parents are in receipt of maximum level of Working Tax Credit if:

- The nearest suitable school is beyond 2 miles (for children aged 8 but under 11)
- One of their three nearest suitable schools, if that school is between 2 and 6 miles (for children aged 11 -16)
- The nearest school preferred on the grounds of religion or belief, for pupils whose parents adhere to that particular faith, where that school is between 2 and 15 miles (for children aged 11 – 16)



## **Finance**

The Consultation includes proposals to increase the charge for the concessionary scheme to a commercial rate of £2.80 per day from the current daily rate of £1.63. Increasing the charge from the current level of £1.63 to £2.00 will generate additional income of circa £40,000 and reduce the level of subsidy from the Home to School Transport budget.

## **Consultation**

The Consultation plan is included in the main report.

## **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

A full Equalities Impact Assessment is attached at Appendix 4 detailing potential impacts (both positive and negative) in relation to the protected characteristics of disability, age and sex (women). The assessment has been updated throughout and following the consultation to assess the impact of the proposed changes on the protected characteristic groups and to identify and evaluate any mitigations.

## **Climate Change**

A Sustainability Assessment has been undertaken for the Home to School Transport Review and reported to CMT previously. This includes a specific response in relation to impact on Climate Change.

A Climate Change Impact Assessment has also been developed in respect of the Review of the Concessionary Scheme and Review of Unsafe Walking routes which concluded that proposals to change existing arrangements for the provision of home to school transport have the potential to impact on climate change through reducing transport routes and therefore carbon emissions. The consultation must be careful to consider any potential increase in the use of personal vehicles.

## **Human Rights**

None.

## **Crime and Disorder**

None.

## **Staffing**

None.

## **Accommodation**

None.

**Risk**

There is a risk of challenge if the consultation and equalities impact are not undertaken in accordance with legislative requirements.

**Procurement**

The consultation will seek views on how the Council can best procure home to school transport services which have an impact on value for money and maintain quality of service.