

Children and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

6 November 2012

Removal of Passenger Assistants from Home to School Transport – Update Report

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The proposal to no longer automatically provide passenger assistants on vehicles serving primary schools was first raised in 2011 as a result of the need to make savings of around £1.4m from home to school transport budgets. Many other Local Authorities do not provide passenger assistants on such vehicles, nor have they ever done so.
- 1.2 At the time the proposal was first raised, around 90 vehicles (buses and taxis) were transporting children to primary schools under the Council's mainstream Home to School Transport policy. A condition of all of these contracts was that a passenger assistant had to be provided.
- 1.3 Contracts requiring a passenger assistant to be provided are notoriously unpopular with operators, with tenders for such contracts only normally submitted by around 20% of approved operators. Savings would therefore be achieved in two ways: by operators no longer having to fund the salaries of passenger assistants and greater competition for contracts which would in-turn drive prices down. It was anticipated that increased competition would realise the greatest savings.
- 1.4 Based on a projected savings figure of £35 per day across all 90 contracts, and no longer automatically providing passenger assistants on taxis transporting Looked After Children, it was estimated that a maximum saving of c£700k could be achieved. However, as contracts were never tendered with the cost of a passenger assistant as a separate element, the true level of savings would only be known once assistants were actually removed and contracts retendered.
- 1.5 Following a full consultation exercise, Cabinet approved the proposal to no longer automatically provide passenger assistants on vehicles conveying children to primary schools.
- 1.6 Throughout the consultation process, it was made clear that rather than simply removing all passenger assistants, each service would be individually assessed. A passenger assistant would therefore still be provided where it was considered appropriate. In order to help reach a decision on whether or not to provide an assistant, a number of criteria were developed. If any of

these criteria applied, a passenger assistant would continue to be provided. These have been amended slightly from those included in the original consultation document to add greater clarity and strength. These changes are likely to increase the instances where an assistant would continue to be provided. The relevant criteria are set out below:

- a) A passenger assistant is considered necessary because of the age of the children being transported (normally when primary and secondary school children are travelling together)
- b) The transport is provided on a double-deck vehicle
- c) The pick-up / drop-off point at the school requires children to be escorted between the vehicle and the school premises (or vice-versa) where the driver is unable to perform this task
- d) There is a risk of behavioural problems occurring on a vehicle if a passenger assistant is not provided (normally when there have been previous issues)
- e) There are vulnerable travellers or students with special needs

2.0 Implementation to date

2.1 Following the decision to no longer automatically provide passenger assistants, a number of services have been assessed and a decision taken as to whether or not to continue to provide a passenger assistant.

2.2 Bus services where the passenger assistant has been removed are as follows:

- Cubbington C of E Primary
- Long Lawford Primary
- Wolvey C of E Primary
- Newton Regis C of E Primary
- The Dasset C of E Primary
- Kineton C of E Primary
- The Ferncumbe C of E Primary
- Bishops Tachbrook C of E Primary
- Wootton Wawen C of E Primary

- 2.3 Services where the passenger assistant has been retained, and the reasons for doing so, are as follows:

School	Reason for retaining assistant
Our Lady's Princethorpe, shared with Knightlow C of E Primary	Dangerous walk from pick-up / drop-off point at Our Lady's
Southam Primary	Transport shared with secondary school
St Mary's Catholic Primary, Southam	SEN travellers
St Lawrence C of E Primary, Napton	SEN travellers
Southam St James C of E Primary	SEN travellers
St Gregory's Catholic Primary	Transport shared with secondary school
St Mary's Catholic Primary, Henley	Transport shared with secondary school
Henley in Arden C of E Primary	Transport shared with secondary school
Kenilworth Primary Schools	Transport shared with secondary school
St Joseph's Catholic Junior	Transport shared with secondary school

- 2.4 As more assistants have been considered for removal, the assessment process has been developed, taking into account comments from members of the public, schools, operators and Elected Members. Changes include an Inspector travelling on the vehicle in question, as well as observing the pick-up and drop-off points, operators given the formal opportunity to comment on the removal of the assistant, a comprehensive checklist to ensure that every stage of the assessment process has been followed, and a formal panel of three officers meeting to decide whether or not to remove an assistant. A unanimous decision is required for an assistant to be removed.
- 2.5 Taxi services to the following schools have now also been identified as suitable for removal: Stockingford Primary, St Michael's C of E Primary, St Andrew's Benn C of E Primary, Bishopton Primary, Bridgetown Primary, Acorns Primary, Wolston St Margaret's C of E Primary, Newbold Riverside Primary (x2), Shipston Primary, Alveston C of E Primary and St Lawrence C of E Primary, Napton.
- 2.6 There are currently a further 28 bus services and 15 taxi services under review. In many cases, the services have already been observed and comments invited from parents. Once all relevant information is available, a decision will be taken on whether or not to remove the assistant. It is hoped that this exercise will be largely complete by the end of the calendar year. Services will be retendered as quickly as possible in order to maximise the total savings.

3.0 Incidents reported

- 3.1 No incidents have been reported on the following routes: Cubbington C of E Primary, Long Lawford Primary, Bishops Tachbrook C of E Primary, Wootton Wawen Primary, Kineton Primary or Budbrooke Primary.
- 3.2 Three incidents have been reported on the service to Wolvey C of E Primary School and two incidents on the service to Newton Regis C of E Primary School. Eight complaints / incidents relating to the service to The Dasset School have been reported. Five complaints / incidents relating to the services to The Ferncumbe School have been reported.
- 3.3 Full details of the incidents reported to date and the actions taken are set out at **Appendix A**.

4.0 Conclusion

- 4.1 The decision to remove passenger assistants was a difficult one taken as a result of the need to make significant savings and in light of the fact that many other authorities make no such provision.
- 4.2 As expected, the implementation of the policy has proven difficult, with Elected Members, parents and schools understandably concerned. However, the number of incidents reported is relatively low. In many cases, it is not possible to say that if a passenger assistant had been provided that the incident would have been avoided.
- 4.3 While the progress in removing assistants has been slow, this is due to the need to assess each service individually and to consult with all relevant parties. The decision-making process is now more robust, but as a consequence, extends the time taken properly to assess a service.
- 4.4 Savings achieved to date have been lower than expected. However, once all services have been assessed and contracts retendered, the true long-term savings are still expected to be significant.

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Removal of Passenger Assistants from Home to School Transport

Incidents Reported to Date

Listed below are details of all specific incidents reported to either Transport Operations or Education Transport following the removal of a passenger assistant from home to school transport. Further comments received about the policy in general have not been included.

Wolvey C of E Primary School.

- 1) Complaint in September 2011 that the service was running late since the removal of the passenger assistant.

Action Taken - Operator contacted by Transport Operations – no further complaints received regarding the timing of the service.

- 2) Incident in November 2011 when a student left the vehicle at the wrong stop.

Action Taken - Investigation carried out by Transport Operations. The student concerned had not travelled on the service before and left the vehicle with a friend. As all students were accounted for the driver's actions were considered appropriate and it was determined that a passenger assistant would not have prevented the incident.

- 3) Incident in January 2012 when a child left the vehicle at the correct stop but was not met by their parent as they had been unexpectedly delayed.

Action Taken – Investigation carried out by Transport Operations. The student concerned normally left the vehicle alone and was then met by his father at a nearby location. This was out of the driver's sight and it was therefore determined that the driver had acted appropriately and that a passenger assistant would not have prevented the incident.

Newton Regis C of E Primary School.

- 1) Incident in February or March 2012 (the school are unable to confirm the exact date although the incident was only reported in May 2012) involving a child leaving the vehicle before it reached school. The child then refused to get back on to the vehicle. Incident reported to Adrian Over, Education Safeguarding Manager, by the School's Chair of Governors.

Action Taken - Investigation carried out by Adrian Over. The child concerned had left the vehicle before it reached the school and was subsequently found by his mother. Investigation concluded that drivers and assistants are unable to force a child to remain on a vehicle. A passenger assistant would not therefore have prevented the incident.

- 2) Incident in October 2012 when a child left the vehicle at the correct stop despite no parent being present to meet them.

Action Taken – Investigation carried out by Transport Operations. While the parent believes the bus arrived at the stop early the operator could not confirm this. After the bus had arrived at the stop the child in question began to get upset and was able to point to their home address. The driver allowed the child to leave the vehicle and ensured they reached their home address safely. While it is believed that the driver acted in good faith the operator has been reminded of the need to wait for parents if they are expected at the pick-up point. An Inspector will observe the service in order to establish if there are any issues with the timing of the service.

The Dassett C of E Primary School.

- 1) Complaint in January 2012 that children on the service had witnessed the aftermath of an accident on the B4100.

Action Taken – Operator contacted by Transport Operations. While it was very unfortunate that children on board the vehicle witnessed the aftermath of the accident this was unavoidable and could not have been prevented by the presence of a passenger assistant. Operator determined to have acted appropriately.

- 2) Complaint received in February 2012 that a double deck vehicle was being used.

Action Taken – Operator contacted by Transport Operations and reminded of the fact that such vehicles should not be used under any circumstances.

- 3) Complaint received in April 2012 that the driver of the 335 service was not ensuring seatbelts were fastened.

Action Taken – Operator contacted by Transport Operations and instructed to remind students using all means necessary of the need to fasten safety belts. Driver should ensure belts are fastened before driving away.

- 4) Two complaints in May 2012 regarding bullying, the behaviour of children on the service and children travelling without seatbelts.

Action Taken – Operator reminded by Transport Operations of their responsibilities and service observed by Quality Standards Inspector.

- 5) Complaint in May 2012 regarding late running of the 346 service and occasional use of a double deck vehicle.

Action Taken – Operator contacted by Transport Operations and formally notified that a double-deck vehicle must not be used.

- 6) Correspondence from school and parent received in September 2012 regarding unreliability of service.

Action Taken – Operator contacted by Transport Operations.

The Ferncumbe C of E Primary School.

- 1) Complaint in December 2011 regarding the 523 service and methods of communication available to the driver. The vehicle in question had been hired by the school under a private arrangement. The vehicle then broke down and the driver of the vehicle did not have a mobile phone. The vehicle in question was then scheduled to transport children home from school.

Action Taken – Response offered by Education Transport with complaint then considered under the Corporate Complaints Process including an independent report commissioned by the Customer Relations Team. Recommendation that the complainant be offered an apology for the delays in responding to his complaints, that the role of the Council's O&S Committee be explained, and that the Council consider providing more information in future documents about how savings targets will be achieved. While this complaint was linked to the removal of passenger assistants it should be noted that the service in question was not a home to school contract.

- 2) Complaint in May 2012 regarding behaviour of certain children.

Action Taken – Concerns noted but parent unable to identify those responsible.

- 3) Two complaints received in September 2012 regarding the driver of the service not ensuring children had fastened their seatbelts, children moving around after the vehicle had started moving, and the driver having to stop the vehicle due to the behaviour of children.

Action Taken – Investigation carried out by Transport Operations. Comments were invited from the operator who refuted the suggestion that the driver had not been checking belts were fastened and that it was necessary to stop the vehicle due to poor behaviour. The operator did, however, concede that a student may have released their seatbelt once the vehicle was moving, and confirmed it was necessary for the driver to speak to a child about his behaviour while the vehicle was stationary. Transport Operations to contact the school and to offer training to students on how to travel in safety.

- 4) Complaint received in October 2012 concerning the conduct of the driver who did not seem to know the route, performed a potentially unsafe reversing manoeuvre, did not check children had fastened their seatbelt, and failed to display the destination of the vehicle.

Action Taken – Investigation carried out by Transport Operations. The service in question had been subcontracted for the AM journey – this is permitted to cover incidents such as vehicle failure. While the driver had driven the route

before he confirmed that he had asked parents for confirmation of the route. The driver also admitted that while he did check that all children were seated he did not leave his seat to check that belts were fastened. After missing a turning it was necessary for him to turn the vehicle around. The driver stated that the destination of the service was displayed and the vehicle reached the destination in good time and without any further incidents. Apology issued to complainant along with acknowledgement that the service in question had fallen below the expected standard. Operator notified of this by Transport Operations.