

Cabinet

SEND (Special Education Needs and Disability) – Improving the transport application experience

15 June 2023

Recommendations

That Cabinet

- 1) endorses the proposed change to the Home to School Transport application process as set out at paragraph 1.7; and
- 2) approves the proposed changes to the wording in the Home to School and College Transport Policy as set out at 1.12 .

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 An internal review of the delivery of SEND Home to School Transport has looked at ways to improve the experience for parents and carers of applying for Home to School Transport provision. The review looked at ways of improving processes, ensuring consistency in approach, and clarifying information in the policy.
- 1.2 The review has led to changes and clarifications being proposed in the application process and to proposed changes to the wording of the transport policy.
- 1.3 A public consultation was undertaken between November 2022 and March 2023 to consider the proposals. There were 147 responses to the consultation with general support expressed for the proposals with 82.6% expressing agreement or strong agreement to the proposed process changes, and 56.8% of respondents indicating that they found the policy changes very easy or easy to understand.

The Need for Change

- 1.4 Warwickshire County Council currently support approximately 2,000 children with special needs and disabilities to be transported to school. The service has an annual spend of circa £18m.
- 1.5 In recent years there has been an increase in demand for the service which when combined with the significant inflationary pressures being experienced has led to substantial cost pressures on transport budgets.

- 1.6 In order to consider how best to meet those pressures and to plan for a sustainable service moving forward, a review of the service was commissioned in 2022 following which a number of improvement workstreams have been progressed. One of those workstreams looked at how to improve the processes around applying for and allocating transport to make them more efficient and easier to follow, as well as ensuring the policy that governs decision making is clear and transparent. .

Proposed Process Change – Application for SEND transport

- 1.7 At present parents and carers have to make an application for home to school transport assistance following the confirmation of a school placement. It is proposed to simplify the process and make it easier for parents and carers by removing the need for a separate application. The proposed change will mean that parents and carers submit an expression of interest in school transport at the same time as applying for the child's school place.
- 1.8 Once school places are confirmed (in February each year for school admission in September) this information is immediately available to the school transport team, who can start risk assessments and consideration of transport options well in advance of the start of the school year, helping to remove uncertainty for service users.
- 1.9 Having more time to plan and arrange transport ensures transport providers can carry out pre-transport visits in advance of the new school year and services can be confirmed earlier to parents and carers. This will not only give reassurance to parents ahead of the start of the school term but allows the Council to operate more efficiently, allowing more time to tender for services and negotiate changes to services with operators. This supports greater efficiency and improved outcomes for service users and also for the Council.
- 1.10 Processes will remain in place to deal with late transport requests but the proposed changes if adopted will allow the bulk of transport needs to be known months in advance enabling parents to be better prepared and informed.
- 1.11 Consultation responses to the proposed clarifications were mostly positive with 82.6% expressing agreement or strong agreement to the proposed process changes.
8.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The reasons given were largely related to their personal experiences of Home to School transport, criticisms of the eligibility criteria or suggestions of additional services and were not directly related to the process.
Details of these are summarised in Appendix 3 part 1 "Key Messages".

Changes to Policy - Home to School and College Transport policy

- 1.12 The proposed changes to the wording of the Home to School and College Transport Policy are intended to clarify for parents and carers what provision is available. The changes are also designed to help clarify the provision of

transport assistance for young people in supported internships, apprenticeship schemes and specialist placements.

- 1.13 We have also taken the opportunity to clarify the position if there is a need for a passenger assistant for pupils with SEND. At present every transport route carrying student(s) with SEND is automatically provided with a passenger assistant. In the proposed changes, this provision will be considered as part of the Transport Risk Assessment, so that those pupils who need a passenger assistant to support their needs will be provided with one but for a smaller number of students who have less severe needs this will not be required. This change will ensure resources are targeted to support those who need the support and provide a more sustainable provision. It is proposed that the changes will only apply to new transport applicants and not to existing passengers.
- 1.14 The proposed changes also introduce the opportunity for parents and carers to transport their child or young person themselves and to receive a Direct Travel Payment contribution towards the costs incurred, alongside clarification of the Council's protocols in relation to damage that occurs to a transport operator's vehicle as a result of actions of a child or young person. Feedback from the consultation has led to the specific proposal to modify the wording in respect of damage to transport vehicles to provide greater clarity where responsibility lies in such circumstances.
- 1.15 Consultation responses to the proposed clarifications were mostly positive. In response to "Is the clarification of the policy easy to follow and understand" 56.8% of respondents indicated that they found it very easy or easy. 11.9% found it very difficult or difficult. The reasons given were related to the proposed wording on damage to an operator's vehicle (which has been revised as set out at 1.13), or concern about how the allocation of passenger assistants will be assessed (as set out in 1.12). Details of these are summarised in Appendix 3 part 1 "Key Messages".
- 1.16 Feedback about the specific wording used in elements of the policy has resulted in minor changes to the proposed wording giving greater clarification on the protocol following damage to transport vehicles.
- 1.17 A summary of the amendments to the Home to School Transport policy is in Appendix 4.

2. Financial Implications

- 2.1 SEND Home to School Transport is an area of significant financial pressure for the Council due to increasing need for the service and costs of procuring transport operators. These changes are not financially driven but should help us better control costs.
- 2.2 The proposal to change the application process allows officers to begin planning transport sooner leading to a more efficient and effective use of

school transport resources. As a result, there is an extended time frame for tenders for services and negotiations on adjusting existing routes. Another benefit of the change will be more time to explore alternative options if a service does not represent good value for money.

- 2.2 The majority of the proposed changes to the SEND Transport policy are minor changes to the wording of sections of the policy and have no financial implications.
- 2.3 The changes to the wording around the mechanism used by the Council to understand if there is a need for a passenger assistant may result in a reduced need for passenger assistants resulting in a cost saving over time. Such changes would be subject to risk assessment, and the proposals do not remove these for existing pupils. Any savings made will be incremental over several years.
- 2.4 The opportunity for parents and carers to transport their child or young person and receive a Direct Travel Payment contribution for costs incurred could also result in efficiencies.

3. Environmental Implications

- 3.1 None.

4. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

- 4.1 Subject to approval by Cabinet, changes to the application process to be introduced in time for parents/carers to apply for school places for September 2024. The other changes and updates to be introduced for those starting school in September 2023.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 Home to School Transport Policy
- Appendix 2 Public Consultation on the Warwickshire County Council Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Home to School Transport Service 2022
- Appendix 3 SEND Home to School Transport Consultation Analysis
- Appendix 4 Home to School Transport Policy – Summary of Amendments

Background Papers

None

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Local Member(s): not required – County wide matter

Other members: Councillors Clarke, Chilvers, Fradgley and Feeney