


Proposed Decision to be made by the Portfolio Holder for Education and Learning on or after 28 May 2020 – Consultation on proposed change to the Home to School Transport Policy

Portfolio Holder	Portfolio Holder for Education & Learning
Date of decision	2 June 2020
	Signed 

1.0 Decision

That the Portfolio Holder for Education and Learning approves the undertaking of a consultation process on the proposed change to the Home to School Transport policy.

2.0. Reasons for decision

2.1. Local authorities have a duty to prepare and publish Transport Policy arrangements. This policy needs to specify the arrangements for the provision of transport or otherwise that the authority considers necessary to facilitate the attendance of all eligible persons receiving education or training.

2.2. Where changes are proposed to the local policy on transport arrangements, Local Authorities are required to consult on these changes for at least 28 working days during term time.

3.0. Background information

3.1. The change proposed to the Home to School Transport Policy is to the definition of the nearest qualifying school.

3.2. A number of changes were endorsed by Cabinet in January 2018 including a revision of the definition of 'the nearest qualifying school'. From 1st September 2019 the definition of "nearest qualifying school" was altered to include only the school closest to the pupil's home by the shortest route with a pupil place available, in line with statutory requirements. However, it may not be the school in whose priority area the pupil resides

(their 'catchment school') if there is another school closer to home by the nearest available walking route. Previous criteria encompassed the priority school or the nearest school with places available.

3.3. Following a review of this change in the definition of nearest qualifying school, it is proposed to change the definition to reintroduce the priority area school. A number of factors contributed to the decision to review and propose a change to the definition of nearest qualifying school (paragraph 2.3 of current home to school transport policy):

- The implementation of the 2018 definition of 'the nearest qualifying school' has created a large number of appeals, complaints and representations from local residents. There are circa 90 appeals outstanding for September 2020, with approximately two thirds of these impacted by the recent change in definition of nearest qualifying school. The current level of appeals is difficult to manage and will result in delays to their processing and response. There is one officer responsible for coordinating both school admission and transport appeals. If the current criterion remains further officer capacity will need to be recruited in order to process and respond to the appeals in the stipulated time frame.
- There are a number of schools that have very wide rural priority areas, and therefore certain localities and villages have a divide in terms of their nearest school
- The unalignment from catchment areas has created confusion and can prove complex to understand for parents when making a school place application with one catchment school and multiple nearer schools.

4.0. Financial implications

4.1. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) proposed an additional £7.6million to the Home to Transport revenue budget by 2024/25. This includes an additional £2.037million in 2020/21 in order to address estimated growth and balance the budget.

4.2. With the current home to school transport policy still in a transition stage the transport network is predominantly operating on the previous nearest qualifying school criteria. Therefore, the operational impact of altering the nearest qualifying school criteria (for example to include the catchment area school) is expected to be minor.

4.3. The MTFS outlines proposed savings of £0.279m for 2020/21 increasing by a further £0.295m in 2021/22. It is not anticipated that the proposed change to the definition of nearest qualifying school will have an impact on these efficiency savings.

4.4. The January 2018 Cabinet report recommending a number of policy changes, including the change to the current definition of nearest qualifying school. Estimated savings were attached to these policy changes. Therefore, a reversal of the policy decision to change the definition of nearest qualifying school will result in the service being unable to achieve the estimated saving of between £31,000 and £44,000 which was based on assumptions surrounding potential additional income from paid transport (ie those that were eligible under the previous policy taking up the option of paid

transport where available). If there is a resulting overspend from this proposed policy change further areas for potential savings will be explored.

4.5. It should also be noted that the current number of appeals as a result of 2018 policy change to the definition of nearest qualifying school is difficult to manage and if the policy was to continue with the current definition of nearest qualifying school additional officer capacity within the Education Transport Team would need to be sought, together with the associated additional revenue expenditure, in order to process the transport appeals within the stipulated time frames.

5.0 Environmental implications

5.1. Including the priority area school (often the preferred school of choice), within the nearest qualifying school criteria could increase the eligibility for transport assistance in certain areas but at the same time provide the option of a more sustainable mode of transport. Retaining the current definition could lend itself to an increase in the number of individual cars used to transport learners to the school of choice where transport assistance is not available.

6.0 Timescales Associated with the Decision and Next Steps

6.1 It is proposed that a consultation exercise would take place between Monday 8th June 2020 and Friday 17th July 2020 using WCC's consultation platform and social media to connect with the various stakeholders.

6.2 Cabinet would then be asked to consider any responses to the consultation and to approve the new Transport Policy at their meeting on 10th September 2020

6.3 It is intended that the new transport policy would be implemented for new transport applications received for September 2021 entry.

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Lead Director	Strategic Director for Communities
Lead Member	Portfolio Holder for Education & Learning

Urgent matter?	No
Confidential or exempt?	No
Is the decision contrary to the budget and policy framework?	No

List of background papers

None

Members and officers consulted and informed

Portfolio Holder – Councillor Colin Hayfield

Corporate Board – Mark Ryder

Legal – Jane Pollard

Finance – Andy Felton

Equality – Keira Rounsley

Democratic Services – Paul Williams

Councillors – N/A