



Report of the Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning and Skills

Overview Briefing for Education Scrutiny Performance Panel
13 February 2020

Briefing on School Transport

Purpose:	To provide an overview of the current home to school transport arrangements, challenges and opportunities.
Content:	Information on the current demands, cost pressures and other challenges in relation to home to school transport and continuing robust management action.
Councillors are being asked to:	Consider the information provided and make their views known to the Cabinet Member via a Conveners Letter.
Lead Councillor:	Councillor Jennifer Raynor, Education Improvement, Learning and Skills
Lead Officer & Report Author:	Brian Roles, Head of Education Planning and Resources Tel: 01792 636357 E-mail: brian.roles@swansea.gov.uk
Legal Officer:	Debbie Smith
Finance Officer:	Paul Cridland

1. Background

- 1.1 The Council provides home to school transport on the basis of its published Home to School Transport Policy (see link in appendices). This is in accordance with the requirements of the Welsh Government's (WG's) Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008. Free transport is provided for pupils who live two miles or more from their catchment area primary school or three miles or more from their catchment area secondary school. The distance is measured by the shortest available walking route in accordance with the Council's Home to School Transport Policy, the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 and the WG's Learner Travel - Statutory Provision and Operational Guidance (June 2014). Free transport is provided from the beginning of the school year in which pupils reach the age of five but is not provided for younger / nursery aged children.

- 1.2 For children with statements of additional learning needs, the general transport policy described above applies. The Council will provide free transport for children with additional learning needs where they are placed by the Education Directorate at a mainstream school other than their local catchment school, at a specialist teaching facility other than at their local school, or in a special school, as long as they live 2 miles or more away in the case of primary pupils and 3 miles or more in the case of secondary school pupils.

The local authority does have discretion to provide free home to school transport according to the nature of the additional learning needs of the child. If the Education Directorate feels that a child's needs can be met at their local mainstream school, but the parents choose an alternative mainstream school, the parent is then responsible for any transport arrangements and costs.

- 1.3 Details of pupils in receipt of free home to school transport are as follows:

	2018/2019	2017/2018	2016/2017	2015/2016
Number of mainstream pupils	4,366	4,410	4,552	4,300
Cost of transport for mainstream pupils	£3.627m	£3.387m	£3.629m	£3.764m
Number of ALN pupils	678	692	676	694
Cost of transport for ALN pupils	£4.071m	£3.564m	£3.256m	£3.736m
Number of mainstream contracts	151	139	140	161
Number of ALN contracts	409	422	359	400

- 1.4 Whilst expectations continue to be raised nationally, the number of pupils in receipt of free transport has remained fairly stable. However, the overall cost of transport provision has increased significantly against a base budget that has generally not reflected even contract indexation rates. The medium term financial plan and operational plans reflect the need to identify further significant actions to mitigate the cost pressures and seek to ensure longer term sustainability.

2. Statutory Requirements

- 2.1 The Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 requires local authorities to provide home to school transport for eligible children. In deciding whether or not free transport should be provided, the council is required to take into account the age of the child, the nature of the route, any wish the parent may have for the child to be educated at a school

which provides religious education, any wish of the parent for the child to be provided with education in Welsh, the needs of disabled learners or learners with learning difficulties, and any particular needs of learners who are children 'looked after' by a local authority.

2.2 This area of provision supports a number of corporate priorities, organisational aims and objectives including:

- Improving Education and Skills
- Tackling Poverty
- Transformation and Sustainability

2.3 Most of the cost of home to school transport relates to areas of statutory provision, as set out in the approved local policy. Any changes in the limited remaining areas of discretionary policy require a full statutory consultation process and inevitably the risk of legal challenge, including potential Judicial Review.

3. How is Home to School transport delivered?

3.1 The home to school transport policy (see link in appendix) is overseen by the Education Directorate, whilst the Integrated Transport Unit within Place are responsible for the operational delivery of the transport needs in accordance with the approved policy.

4. Key Stakeholders

4.1 WG determines national policy and the expectations of local authority provision through the Learner Travel measure. Parents and pupils are most directly impacted by the policy and local arrangements and will understandably focus on the perceived safety of walking routes, rather than the objectively assessed availability of such routes. Community police and local councillors will also have a view on such matters. Availability is assessed in accordance with specific guidelines that may not reflect an individual's view of the safety of a particular walking route.

5. Finance

5.1 Significant savings have been delivered over recent years, in addition to the mitigation of other inflationary cost drivers), through consistently robust management of the service and regular re-tendering of bus and taxi operator contracts and routes, to as far as possible optimise efficiency of delivery. This has been achieved without any reliance on costly external consultancy support. These savings particularly relate to special needs transport but also reflect the impact of the improved 'spread' of Welsh medium primary and secondary provision over recent years through the Quality in Education (QEd) strategic programme. Significant savings have also been achieved by regular retendering of

mainstream school contracts, approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of routes are retendered each year.

- 5.2 Wherever possible the fullest possible use of the Council's in-house fleet is ensured before contracting with other operators. Constructive discussion has taken place with the relevant officers in the Education Directorate and the Integrated Transport Unit which indicates little scope for further savings to be delivered in this area at the moment due to the age and make up of the current fleet. However, further detailed work on this area forms part of the wider corporate transport review.
- 5.3 National changes to criteria regarding 'safe' routes, outside the Council's control, are likely to significantly increase costs of provision in the future as well as undermining some of the work that has been undertaken to deliver 'invest to save' options through investment in 'available walking routes'.
- 5.4 Home to School transport currently (2019-20 projections) includes the following key areas of spending:
- Transport for special educational needs (SEN) pupils (£2.8m) – by its very nature this represents the most significant single element of cost as well as the area of greatest demand and cost pressure, reflecting the legal requirement to provide appropriate (often specialist / adapted) transport to meet stated needs, generally requiring passenger assistants.
 - Transport to English medium secondary schools (£1.3m), generally reflecting a lack of available walking routes to specific schools. There are a small number of particularly large sums in relation to specific schools, for example Bishopston.
 - Transport to Welsh medium secondary schools (£0.9m), where the far larger catchment areas mean that there is inevitably a greater proportion of pupils who will be more than 3 miles away and therefore eligible for free transport.
 - Transport to Special Schools (£1.3m) – again reflecting the legal requirement to provide appropriate (often specialist / adapted) transport to meet stated needs, requiring passenger assistants, and reflecting the increased number of school places.
 - Transport to Voluntary Aided Schools (£0.4m primary & £0.3m secondary)
 - Transport to Welsh medium primary schools (£0.5m) – again reflecting the larger catchment areas but reducing relatively over time as the County wide coverage of provision has been improved. Passenger assistants are provided
 - Transport to English medium primary schools (0.2m) – whilst there is generally appropriate provision within 2 miles of pupils homes, costs are incurred in respect of more rural locations of pupils, particularly the North Gower and the lack of available walking routes. Passenger assistants are provided

- The largely discretionary financial assistance that is currently provided to post 16 learners (£0.6m in total), although the element which supports the stated needs of pupils is statutory and amounts to almost £0.3m of this total cost.

6. Current Performance Trends

6.1 The latest total projected spend in 2019-20 amounts to £8.3m against an approved budget of £7.6m, a reported gross overspend of around £0.7m offset in part by an underspend of £0.2m against transport for SEN pupils in out of county placements.

6.2 Continuing robust management action has continued to identify and realise savings to mitigate the scale of cost and demand pressures facing the services.

- significant work has already been undertaken and is continuing to identify efficiency savings in the provision of transport for learners under existing policy constraints. These delivered savings amounted to £96,614 in 2018/2019 and £204,273 in a full year (2019/2020) through a detailed review of current delivery arrangements
- of these most recent measures the largest single saving relates directly to a review of post 16 transport payments and has generated savings of £41,600 in 2018/2019 and £62,400 in a full year (2019/2020). This represents an earlier delivery against a specific Medium Term Financial Plan savings target and consequently reduces the further potential savings from any policy change
- whilst significant, the above savings are more than offset by the growing cost pressures and demands across home to school transport budgets as a whole. Moreover, whilst the scale of cost and demand pressures have not previously been reflected in approved base budgets, any general 'efficiency' savings realised (£141,873) have been captured corporately towards wider Council savings targets, and the base budgets adjusted accordingly, leaving the cost and demand pressures as a reported overspend against the Education Directorate budget

7. Future Challenges and Opportunities

7.1 As can be seen from the analysis above, the most significant areas of transport costs, as well as most of the areas of continuing pressure, relate to areas of statutory SEN provision. There are also significant areas of mainstream transport provision which would remain no matter what policy changes were to be considered for the relatively smaller areas of remaining discretionary provision. Consequently, it is proposed that work continues to focus on the areas outlined in the following paragraphs.

7.2 Further tightening of ALN (Special Education Needs, Special Teaching Facilities and Special Schools) and Post 16 demands as well as continuing to build capacity within Swansea Council to meet the needs of all learners. This could further mitigate areas of particular pressure within the home to school transport budget as a whole. Transport provision here will still need to be considered in line with the review of the mainstream education travel policy, but there is scope for the consideration of additional aspects, such as:

- expectations around the use of motability cars
- review of petrol allowances to parents
- independent travel training provision
- time limiting and regular reviews of transport provision

7.3 There will be a considerable degree of overlap and interdependencies with other reviews where similar provisions will be considered (e.g. the use of motability cars may apply equally to Social Care clients) and the role of the ITU in provision of more efficient corporate transport will also need to be considered.

7.4 The Education Other Than At Schools (EOTAS) service includes Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Home Tuition. Work will include reviews of policy and process with a view to identifying opportunities for a more corporate provision of transport services should this prove financially beneficial and a refinement of current transport provision.

7.5 The Highways and Transportation Commissioning Review identified the creation of new/improved walking routes between schools (and communities) as a potential revenue saving in the medium term. This saving would be realised by a reduced burden on the authority to provide statutory transport for education where a 'safe' walking route within a statutory radius (2 miles and 3 miles) exists.

Three routes were proposed, offering potential savings of £280k per annum:

Birchgrove (£80k)
Kingsbridge (£80k)
Clyne (£120k)

Work has already commenced on constructing the route between Gowerton and Kingsbridge with completion due in March 2020. Feasibility studies are under way on the other 2 routes. Subject to feasibility and acquisition of land etc., the creation of these routes will require capital investment through Local Transport Grant.

Whilst the creation of such routes is clearly a positive action there is likely to be a degree of opposition from parents who will challenge

these routes as being unsuitable for their children to walk to school. Should such objections succeed and a route ultimately be found to be 'not available' then any saving associated with that route would disappear.

- 7.6 The Welsh Government Mytravel pass for those aged 16-21 that provides a 30% saving on journeys could provide further opportunities but there needs to be a viable public bus service for a travel card to be any help.

8. Risks

- 8.1 There will always be a risk of challenge where the demands and expectations of parents are not met and when changes in provision are proposed.
- 8.2 There is also a continuing risk of further national policy changes which could further raise expectations of home to school transport as well as in future potentially limiting the income that can be generated from the sale of surplus seats.

9. Key Issues in Summary

- 9.1 These include:
- the statutory and emotive nature of home to school transport provision, particularly with other national policy drivers, for example in relation to the Welsh language, poverty, and post 16
 - the likely legal and other challenges to any further review of the limited areas of remaining discretionary transport provision
 - the scale of demand and cost pressures, exacerbated by the raising of expectations nationally
 - the significant impact of continuing robust management action against a base budget that has generally not reflected any contract indexation
 - the challenging savings targets (including those captured corporately) to further mitigate the scale of cost pressures, requiring a particular focus on ALN as part of wider strategic review of delivery models
- 9.2 Budget overspends in previous years, as well as the current financial year, reflect both the continuing raising of parental expectations, as well as the scale of demand and cost pressures whilst budgets have largely remained unchanged in cash terms, even without specific savings targets.
- 9.3 The service aims to achieve a sustainable level of provision in the longer term, continuing to improve the consistency and rigour with which transport needs are assessed and reviewed, coherent with wider educational outcomes such as the encouragement of

independent travel. Future budget proposals reflect the anticipated continuing demand and cost pressures, as well as further challenging savings targets from further action to mitigate the scale of these pressures. Whilst challenging, the proposed medium term financial plan should provide a realistic basis on which to deliver services over the next few years.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Home to School Transport Policy / [link](#)