

Report to the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools
Report submitted by: Interim Executive Director for Children and Young People
Date 6 February 2014

Part I

Electoral Division affected:
All

Review of Home to Mainstream School Transport Policy
(Appendices 'A' and 'B' refer)

Contact for further information:
Lynn Mappin, (01772) 531951, Directorate for Children and Young People,
lynn.mappin@lancashire.gov.uk

Executive Summary

On 10 October 2013, the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools gave permission for a public consultation exercise to be completed on proposed changes to the discretionary (non-statutory) home to mainstream school transport policy. This report presents the results of the consultation exercise and makes recommendations for determination.

This is deemed to be a Key Decision and Standing Order 25 has been complied with.

Recommendation

The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools is recommended to:

- (i) Consider the information in this report;
- (ii) Determine the following changes in respect of the discretionary home to mainstream schools transport policy, effective from 1 September 2014:
 - withdrawal of transport assistance for pupils who move home whilst in Years 6, 10 or 11;
 - increase the charge to £475 per annum for parents who pay the contributory charge to faith schools, and, thereafter, by Retail Price Index plus 5%;
 - withdrawal of transport assistance where a parent is temporarily unable to accompany their child to school due to a temporary medical incapacity;
 - withdrawal of transport assistance where a child is temporarily unable to walk to school due to a temporary medical incapacity;
 - withdrawal of transport assistance for pupils affected by a managed move;
 - increase the charge for replacement bus passes to £20 (a £15 charge will apply to pupils from low income families and pupils with statements of special educational needs will continue to be exempt from charges);
 - introduce a charge of £10 for amending bus passes (a £5 charge will apply to pupils from low income families);
 - increase the fares and costs of season tickets on contracted school bus services to prices outlined in the attached report on the results of the home to school transport consultation document at Appendix A;
 - review modes of transport for families living in remote areas by reimbursing parents the cost of petrol to the nearest bus stop rather than providing a taxi (this will be subject to the agreement of individual parents)
- (iii) Determine the following changes in respect of the discretionary home to mainstream schools transport policy, effective from 1 September 2015, and applicable to newly admitted children only:
 - to no longer provide transport assistance for pupils attending a faith school which serves the parish in which they live, when there is

- another nearer faith school; and
- to no longer provide transport assistance to schools within the geographical priority area of the pupil's home, when there is another nearer school.

Families on low incomes are exempt from the changes, apart from those relating to replacement or amended bus passes; and

- (iv) Continue with the review of vehicle capacities and unsuitable routes and present a further report on findings, for implementation with effect from September 2014 onwards.

Background and Advice

The cost of providing home to mainstream school transport in the financial year 2012/13 was £8.5 million. In the same year, the cost of compliance with the statutory requirements of home to mainstream school transport was £4.02 million, which made up just 48% of the overall costs. The remainder, £4.48 million, was spent on non-statutory (discretionary) transport provision.

Due to the considerable financial pressures being faced by the County Council it was considered necessary to review the home to mainstream school transport policy with a view to identifying possible savings and/or generating additional revenues.

The proposals will impact on families with school age children who are not entitled to statutory transport provision to school but would receive discretionary transport assistance under current policy. It is estimated that this will impact on around 8,750 children out of 153,300 school age children when fully implemented i.e. 5.7% of the school age population. One of the largest groups of children impacted is those that attend a faith school where there is no statutory entitlement to school transport assistance. It is estimated that around 2,700 secondary age children will be impacted and a small number of primary age children, once the proposal is fully implemented. Not all children that attend faith schools do so because of their parents' religion or belief.

Consultations

Following the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools' approval, a public consultation exercise was conducted on changes to the discretionary elements of the home to mainstream school transport policy.

Consultation was held for 6 weeks from 21 October to 29 November 2013. The consultation document was placed on the Lancashire County Council website together with an online questionnaire. There was also a facility to make a paper based response. In addition, head teachers were sent a letter via the schools portal advising them of the consultation and asking them to refer to the consultation in any planned newsletters to parents. Lancashire District Councils, County Councillors, Diocesan Authorities and Lancashire Member of Parliament's were all sent copies of the consultation document.

The full report on the consultation is set out at Appendix 'A'.

A total of 1,023 responses were received. Given that around 8,750 children may be impacted and there are 153,300 statutory age school children in mainstream schools, the response rate was relatively low.

The responses were from the following groups:

872 from parents/carers of a current pupil
163 from parents/carers of a future pupil
34 from pupils
62 from members of staff
48 from school governors
18 from others

The Student Support Appeals Committee and the Roman Catholic Dioceses of Salford and Lancaster made representations about the proposals and these are presented within the full report on the consultation at Appendix 'A'.

174 respondents fitted into more than one of the above categories. Not all of the respondents answered all of the questions.

It is clear that the majority of the respondents (around 79%) were connected to faith schools. 59% of responses came from individuals connected to four schools: Cardinal Allen, Fleetwood (298), St Augustine's, Billington (223); St Michael's, Chorley (103) and St Bede's, Ormskirk (81).

As could be expected, the response to the consultation was largely negative. Depending on the question, around two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with most of the proposals. The exceptions to this were the proposals to:

- continue to provide emergency transport on a short term basis to families in dire need;
- withdraw transport assistance to pupils on managed moves;
- continue to provide transport for those pupils admitted under the fair access protocol;
- increase the charge for a replacement bus pass;
- ask families in rural areas to take their children to the nearest bus stop, instead of using LCC taxi provision; and
- undertake a review of unsuitable walking routes

where more people agreed with the proposals than disagreed.

The most unpopular proposals were those to:

- Increase the cost of fares and season tickets, with 60% strongly disagreeing and a further 15% disagreeing with the proposal; and
- Increase the charge for transport to faith schools, with 76% strongly disagreeing and a further 5% disagreeing with the proposal.

As both proposals represent an additional annual cost to those affected, it is not surprising that they attracted the most negative responses, particularly given the make-up of the respondents.

Most people (62%) made no comment on the proposals; 15% said that there was an unfair focus on faith schools; and 11% said that they, or others, would not be able to afford the proposed prices. An analysis of the comments is provided at Appendix 'A'.

Conclusion

Whilst the response to the consultation was largely negative, this was to be expected, particularly on those items that have the widest impact such as the increase in travel charges to faith schools and the increase in fares and season tickets. The overall response rate was not high and it was heavily influenced by individuals with an interest in faith schools.

The proposed changes to home to mainstream school transport must be set in context: they only affect children who have no statutory entitlement to travel assistance; and low income families are protected from the impacts. In addition the County Council will still be heavily subsidising the costs of discretionary transport and, therefore, shielding parents from the full costs (many other local authorities have removed discretionary transport assistance altogether); and the right to appeal to the Student Support Appeals Committee remains in place.

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Risk management

The risk management implications are as follows:

Finance

It is estimated that the sum total of all of the quantifiable measures above could save the County Council in the range of £0.6 million in the financial year 2014/15, rising to £1.2 million in the financial year 2020/21 and beyond. Further savings may be generated by the review of non-statutory travel capacities and unsuitable routes and a further report will be presented on these issues for introduction in September 2014.

If the proposal is not implemented, the County Council will need to make savings of £0.6 million in 2014/15 rising to £1.2 million in other policy areas as these overall levels of savings have been agreed by Cabinet and the subsequent negative impacts on groups or individuals may be far greater than those identified in this area.

Legal

The Local Authority's statutory obligations to provide free home to schools transport

were outlined in section 1 of the report dated 10 October 2013. These elements of the home to mainstream school transport policy will remain intact and the Local Authority is consulting on changes to the discretionary elements of the policy only.

Equality and Diversity

A full Equality Analysis has been included at Appendix 'B' to this report

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Directorate/Tel
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None

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A