

Home to School Transport Policy consultation 2013

Report

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1. Executive summary

Lancashire County Council undertook a 6-week consultation to inform its home to school transport policy. The consultation was conducted through a combination of paper-based and online questionnaires. In total, 1023 responses were received. The largest number of responses came from parents/carers of pupils at Cardinal Allen (277) and St Augustine's (162).

1.1 Key findings

- Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents disagree with the proposal to withdraw the free transport service for pupils who move home in years 6, 10 or 11 and who attend a school that is more than the statutory walking distance from their new home, even though the school that the pupil is attending may not be the nearest school to their new home.
- Over three-quarters of respondents (76%) strongly disagree with the proposal to increase the charge for transporting pupils to their nearest faith school.
- Nearly three-fifths (59%) of respondents disagree with the proposal to remove the assistance with travel costs given to pupils who attend a faith school that is not the nearest school of their faith.
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents disagree with the proposal to remove the transport assistance given to pupils who attend a GPA school that is not their nearest school.
- Just under three-quarters of respondents (71%) disagree with the proposal to withdraw, except for families on a low income, the support provided to parents with a temporary medical incapacity to ensure their child/children can get to and from school.
- Nearly two-thirds of respondents (66%) disagree with the proposal to withdraw the temporary transport assistance provided for children with short-term medical conditions, unless their family is on a low income. Over a quarter of respondents (29%) agree with this proposal.
- Over three-quarters of respondents (77%) agree with the proposal to continue providing emergency transport on a short-term basis to those families in dire need.
- Just over half of respondents (54%) agree with the proposal to withdraw travelling expenses for pupils admitted to schools by a managed move, unless the pupil comes from a low income family. Over a third of respondents (37%) disagree with this proposal.

- Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%) agree with the proposal to retain the existing policy for those pupils subject to a fair access protocol.
- Over half of respondents (52%) agree with the proposal to increase the charge for a replacement bus pass to £20 (£15 for pupils on low incomes), unless the pupil has a statement of special educational needs. Just over two-fifths of respondents (44%) disagree with this proposal.
- Opinion is split over the proposal to continue providing short-term transport assistance to get pupils under the jurisdiction of TES to school, with over two-fifths of respondents (42%) agreeing with the proposal, and just under half of respondents (49%) disagreeing with it. However, over a third of respondents strongly disagree (35%) with this proposal.
- Three-quarters of respondents (75%) disagree with the proposal to increase the fares/cost of season tickets on contracted school bus services.
- Three-fifths of respondents (60%) disagree with the proposal to undertake a review of the bus capacities provided.
- Just over two-thirds of respondents (67%) agree with the proposal to ask families in rural areas to take their own children to the bus stop on the school bus route, instead of using taxis contracted by the county council.
- Just over three-fifths (62%) of respondents agree that the county council should review all of the cases where investment in a walking route could make an unsuitable walking route suitable for pupils to walk to school.
- Opinion was split over the proposal to charge £10 for amending bus passes. Around half (49%) of respondents agree with this proposal, while just under half (45%) disagree with it.

2. Introduction

Lancashire County Council is proposing to make a number of changes to its Home to School Transport Policy. The county council currently offers support in addition to what it is legally required to. This is known as discretionary transport and it is this additional support that the county council is proposing to change.

Lancashire County Council currently spends £8.5m on providing home to school transport for pupils attending mainstream schools. Of that figure, £4.5m is spent on providing transport assistance that is not a legal requirement. Overall, the county council is faced with making savings in the region of £300m over the next four years. It therefore needs to review all of its spending, especially its spending on services that it does not have a legal requirement to provide.

A 6-week consultation was conducted to seek views in relation to these proposals.

3. Methodology

The consultation ran from 21 October 2013 to 29 November 2013. The consultation was conducted through a questionnaire which was available online. The questionnaire could be completed online or printed off and returned through the post.

In total 1,023 responses were received. The largest number of responses came from parents/carers of pupils at Cardinal Allen (277) and St Augustine's (162) and these responses account for 43% of the total number received. Nearly four-fifths (79%) of respondents clearly identified an affiliation to a faith school (parent/pupil/member of staff/governor), nearly one in every ten (9%) identified a non-denominational school and around one in every eight respondents (13%) did not identify any affiliation to a school.

As well as the questionnaire responses, four written responses were received via email or letter, these can be found in full in *appendix 2*. A response from the Student Support Appeals Committee was received as well and can also be found in *appendix 2*.

3.1 Limitations

Although the survey was available for anyone to respond to, the aim of the consultation was to gain the views of those who will be affected by the changes and so the responses should not be seen as the view of the overall Lancashire population.

In charts or tables where responses do not add up to 100%, this is due to multiple responses or computer rounding.

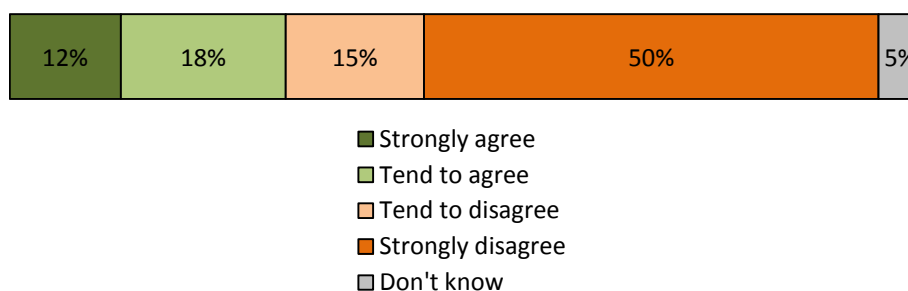
4. Main research findings

4.1 Transport assistance for pupils who move home in years 6, 10 and 11

When a family moves home while the pupil is in years 6, 10 or 11, we currently provide free transport, as long as the school they are attending is more than the statutory walking distance from their new home, even though the school the pupil is attending may not be the nearest school to their new home.

From September 2014, we are proposing to withdraw this service except for families on low incomes. Any pupil in year 11 in September 2015 who received this discretionary assistance during the school year 2014/2015 would continue to receive the concession until the end of their year 11. This is likely to affect 80 pupils annually, with annual savings once fully implemented of £132,000.

Chart 1 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 1,002

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents disagree with the proposal to withdraw the free transport service for pupils who move home in years 6, 10 or 11 and who attend a school that is more than the statutory walking distance from their new home, even though the school the pupil is attending may not be the nearest school to their new home.

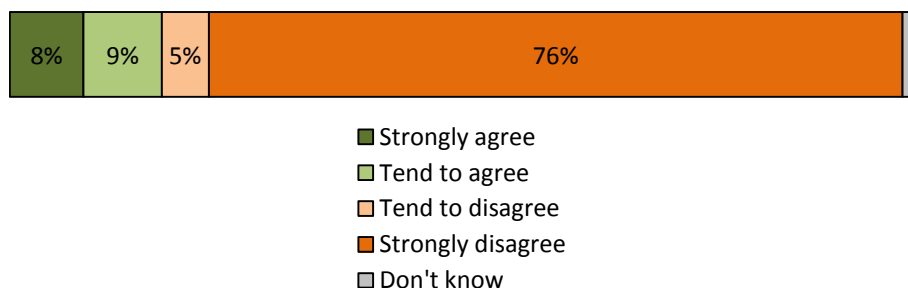
4.2 Transport assistance to faith schools

We currently offer transport assistance to pupils who attend the nearest school of their faith, even though there may be a nearer non-faith school to where the pupil lives, which is more than the statutory walking distance from that school and the pupils met the denominational criteria for admission. Since September 2011 pupils starting at faith schools, where there was a nearer school, are required to contribute an annual fee of £380 towards the travel costs. This figure has remained the same since then.

We are proposing to increase this charge to £475 from September 2014 for all those pupils whose parents would normally pay the charge. In September 2014 pupils in reception, years 1, 2, and 3 in primary schools and years 7, 8, 9 and 10 in secondary schools will pay the revised charge. This charge will increase annually by the Retail Price Index plus 5%.

Pupils on low incomes will still be exempt from these charges and parents will still be able to pay the charge by ten interest free monthly payments. This is likely to initially affect up to 2,100 pupils and will initially bring in additional revenue to the council of £199,000 per year. This additional revenue will increase as more pupils are liable for the charge and as the charges increase annually.

Chart 2 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 1,013

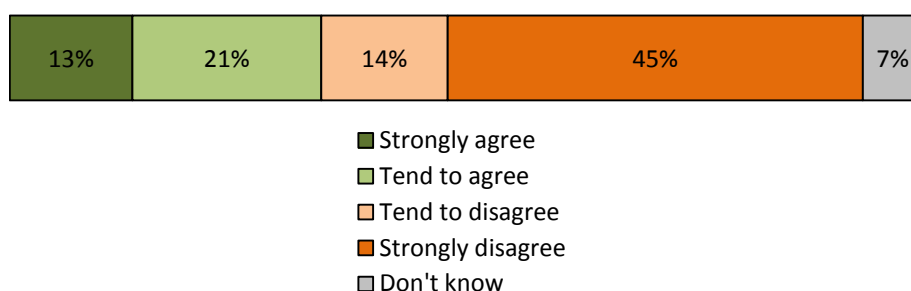
Over three-quarters of respondents (76%) strongly disagree with the proposal to increase the charge for transporting pupils to their nearest faith school.

Previously we have granted assistance with travel costs where the pupil has attended the nearest faith school which serves the parish in which the pupil lives as stated in that schools admission criteria, even though this may not have been the nearest school of their faith. Where two faith schools have named the same parish in their admission criteria we have previously granted assistance to either faith school irrespective of whether this was the nearest faith school. In all cases the distance criteria must be met.

We are proposing that from September 2015 we only provide assistance for non-low income families to the nearest school of the parental/pupil faith. This is likely to affect up to 20 pupils a year and result in a cost saving to the council of £10,000 per year. This will increase to 100 pupils after five years with annual savings of £50,000 per year.

From September 2015 any pupils currently receiving transport assistance to a faith school that is not the nearest school of their faith will continue to receive that assistance until they leave the school or until the end of year 11 in faith schools with sixth forms.

Chart 3 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 996

Nearly three-fifths (59%) of respondents disagree with the proposal to remove the assistance with travel costs for pupils who attend a faith school that is not the nearest school of their faith.

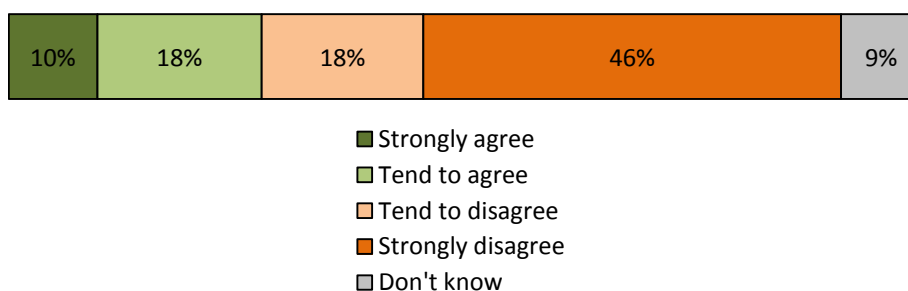
4.3 Transport assistance and geographical priority areas (GPA)

A number of schools use GPA as part of their admission criteria. In some cases pupils secure places living in these GPA and sometimes this may not physically be their nearest school. We currently allow travelling expenses in these cases provided the distance criterion is met. Where a school shares a GPA, we will only pay travel costs to the nearest GPA school.

We are proposing that from September 2015, for those pupils who start new at secondary school which is their nearest GPA school but not their nearest school, they will no longer receive transport assistance. Pupils who previously qualified for this assistance will retain it until the end of their year 11 at the school.

This is likely to affect up to 20 pupils per annum resulting in annual savings of £6,000. When fully implemented up to 100 pupils will be affected resulting in annual savings of £50,000.

Chart 4 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 999

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents disagree with the proposal to remove transport assistance for pupils who attend their nearest GPA school if it is not their nearest school.

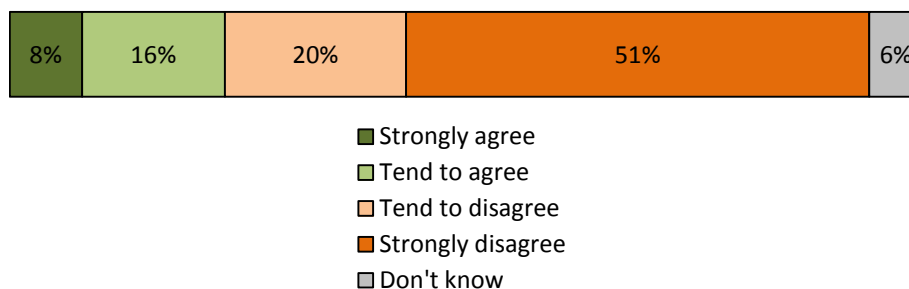
4.4 Temporary parental incapacity to accompany the child to school

When a parent is unable to accompany their child to school (mainly primary schools) due to a temporary medical incapacity and there is no other family/friend to help, we will try to help parents even if the pupil is not attending the nearest school or lives within the statutory walking distances, if satisfactory medical evidence has been provided.

From September 2014 it is proposed to withdraw this service except for families on low income.

This will affect very few pupils per year and will result in annual savings of around £8,000.

Chart 5 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 997

Just under three-quarters of respondents (71%) disagree with the proposal to withdraw, except for families on low income, the support provided to parents with a temporary medical incapacity to ensure their child/children get to and from school.

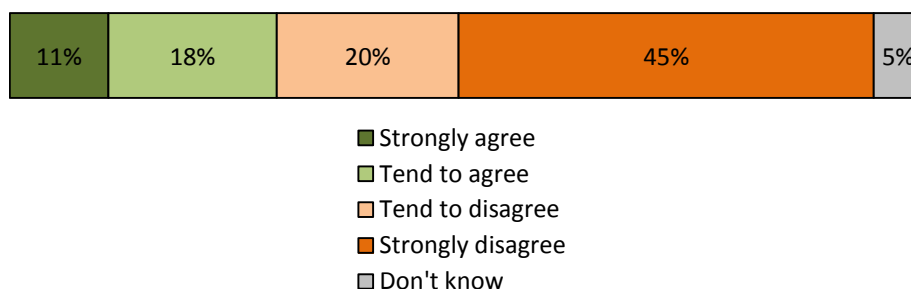
4.5 Temporary transport assistance for children with short term medical conditions

There may be occasions when a pupil, for whatever reason, is unable to walk to school due to a temporary medical reason (eg broken leg) and the pupil does not attend their nearest school. In the past we have helped pupils in this situation for up to 12 weeks, if medical evidence has been provided.

From September 2014 it is proposed to withdraw this service except for low income families.

This is likely to affect up to 30 pupils yearly and will result in annual savings in the region of £242,000.

Chart 6 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 998

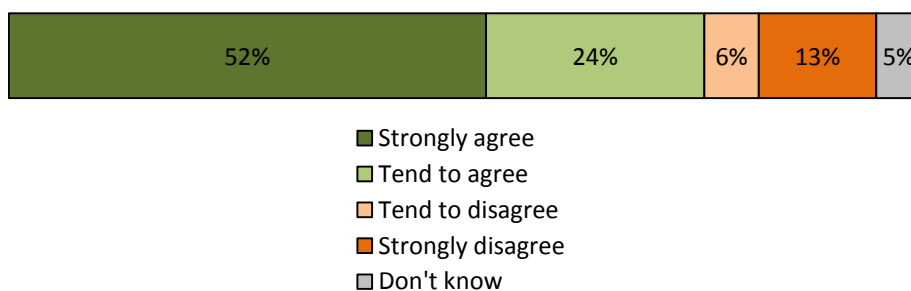
Nearly two-thirds of respondents (66%) disagree with the proposal to withdraw temporary transport assistance for children with short-term medical conditions unless the family is on a low income. Over a quarter of respondents (29%) agree with this proposal.

4.6 Emergency transport provision

There are cases where we provide emergency transport provision normally on a short-term basis to assist those families in dire need. These tend to be occasions where a family may have fled domestic abuse and the family are re-housed temporarily in refuges. More often than not these pupils are not attending their nearest school.

We are proposing to continue this service. This affects approximately 12 pupils a year and annually costs about £3,000.

Chart 7 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 997

Over three-quarters of respondents (77%) agree with the proposal to continue providing emergency transport on a short-term basis to those families in dire need.

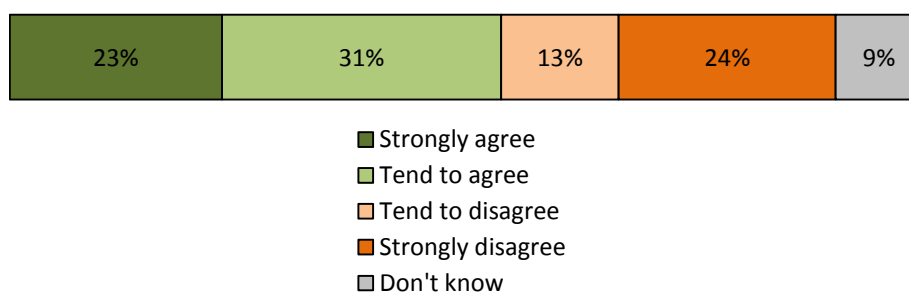
4.7 Pupils admitted to schools under the Fair Access Protocol/Managed Moves

Pupils who are admitted to schools under these circumstances are provided with travelling expenses even if they do not attend their nearest school, provided the distance criterion is met. Managed moves are for pupils who have been found alternative schools as they were at risk of permanent exclusion from their previous school.

We are proposing to withdraw this service for any pupil affected by a managed move who start at a school after September 2014, unless the pupil comes from a low income family.

This is likely to affect up to 69 pupils per year and result in savings of £54,000 per year.

Chart 8 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



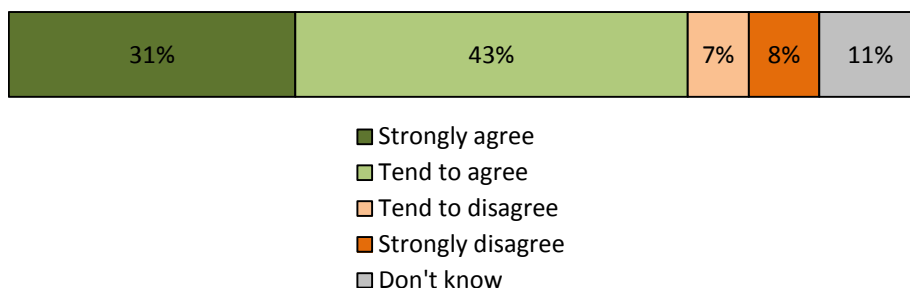
Base: All respondents 1,001

Just over half of respondents (54%) agree with the proposal to withdraw travelling expenses for pupils admitted to schools by a managed move, unless the pupil comes from a low income family. Over a third of respondents (37%) disagree with this proposal.

The fair access protocol is for pupils who move to a new area but can't be placed in their nearest school.

We are also planning to retain the existing policy for those pupils subject to a fair access protocol, as we have a legal requirement to find a school place for these pupils.

Chart 9 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 1,000

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%) agree with the proposal to retain the existing policy for those pupils subject to a fair access protocol.

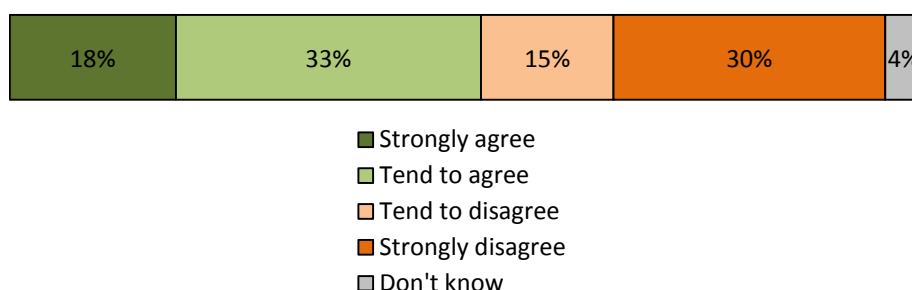
4.8 Charging for a replacement bus pass

We currently charge parents £15 (£10 for pupils on low incomes) to replace their bus pass if it is lost (it is free for those pupils who have a statement of special educational needs). These figures have remained at this level since 2000.

We are proposing to increase the charge to £20 (£15 for pupils on low incomes) from September 2014. Pupils with statements of special educational needs will continue to be exempt from these charges.

This is likely to affect 700 pupils per year and bring in additional revenue to the council of £3,500 per year.

Chart 10 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 1,005

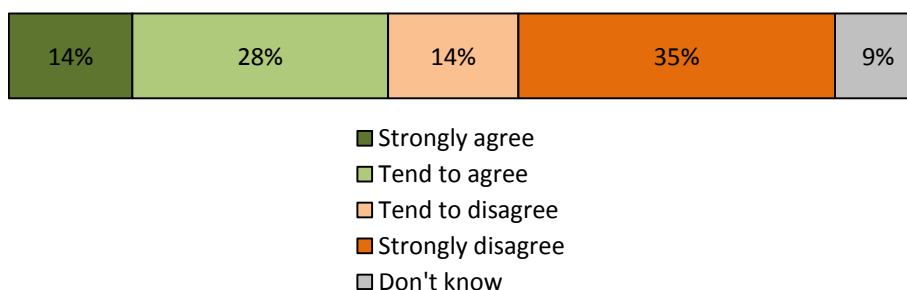
Over half of respondents (52%) agree with the proposal to increase the charge for a replacement bus pass to £20 (£15 for pupils on low incomes) unless the pupil has a statement of special educational needs. Just over two-fifths of respondents (44%) disagree with this proposal.

4.9 Pupils under the jurisdiction of the Traveller Education Service (TES)

There are a small number of cases where pupils move into an area and become the responsibility of the TES. These pupils are likely to be from the Gypsy, Roma or Traveller community. We currently provide short-term transport assistance (maximum of 4 weeks) to get these pupils to school, where they are either not attending their nearest school or live less than the statutory walking distance from school.

We are proposing to continue this service. This only affects a small number of pupils each year and the cost is only minimal.

Chart 11 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 1003

Opinion is split over the proposal to continue providing short-term transport assistance to get pupils under the jurisdiction of TES to school, with over two-fifths of respondents (42%) agreeing with the proposal, and just under half of respondents (49%) disagreeing with it. However, over a third of respondents strongly disagree (35%) with this proposal.

4.10 Increasing the fares/cost of season tickets on contracted school bus services

Pupils with no legal entitlement to transport assistance can travel on school contracted bus/taxi services by paying a daily fare to the driver or by purchasing a season ticket, subject to space being available and the service not costing us any more.

Individual fare levels and season ticket costs (which are based on the fare levels) have not been increased since 2000 and the costs are subsidised, which do not in most areas reflect commercial fare levels.

The current fare structure on our contracted school service is:

	Single fare	Return fare
Journeys up to 3 miles	£1.10	£2.00
Journeys between 3 and 8 miles	£1.60	£3.00
Journeys over 8 miles	£2.10	£4.00

Season tickets can be purchased termly or yearly and the above costs are multiplied by 190 days for a full school year. A 20% discount is then given.

We are proposing increasing the fare levels from September 2014 for all non-statutory travellers to:

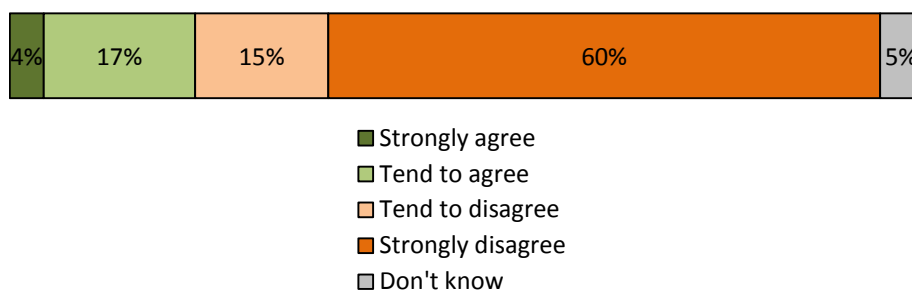
	Single fare	Return fare
Journeys up to 3 miles	£1.30	£2.50
Journeys between 3 and 8 miles	£1.90	£3.50
Journeys over 8 miles	£2.40	£4.50

This would increase annual season ticket prices as follows:

	Present price	Proposed price
Journeys up to 3 miles	£304.00	£380.00
Journeys between 3 and 8 miles	£456.00	£532.00
Journeys over 8 miles	£608.00	£684.00

This is likely to affect up to 3,900 pupils and produce additional revenue of £92,000.

Chart 12 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 994

Three-quarters of respondents (75%) disagree with the proposal to increase the fares/cost of season tickets on contracted school bus services.

4.11 Provide minimum capacities on contracted school bus services

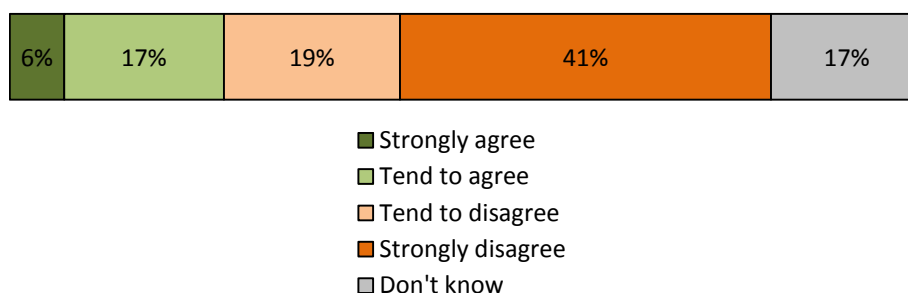
When providing school bus services we currently provide additional capacity to cater for pupils who do not have a legal entitlement to home to school travel. Providing larger capacity vehicles can often be more expensive, even when the cost of the additional revenue received from pupils who pay the fares on these services is taken into account.

We are proposing to undertake a review of the bus capacities we provide. In doing so, we will try to ensure that pupils will still be able to travel to and from school. However, there may be instances where more costly and possibly less convenient alternative services are available. In these circumstances we are likely to propose withdrawing the contracted school services.

Where a service is proposed for withdrawal a consultation will take place with those affected. We will produce an equality impact assessment for any of these proposals and all decisions to withdraw services will ultimately be made by a county council cabinet member.

More detailed work is required before potential savings can be estimated.

Chart 13 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 989

Three-fifths of respondents (60%) disagree with the proposal to undertake a review of the bus capacities provided.

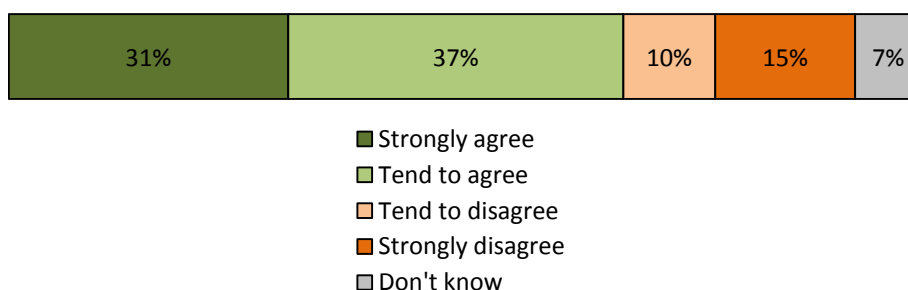
4.12 Review modes of transport

For pupils who live a considerable distance from a bus route, mainly in rural areas, we normally contract taxis to take them from home to meet up with the bus route.

We are proposing to approach these families to ask whether they would be willing to take their own children to these bus stops. We would reimburse these parents for the cost of their petrol.

This is likely to affect some 300 pupils and potentially result in savings of £320,000 per year.

Chart 14 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 992

Just over two-thirds of respondents (67%) agree with the proposal to approach families in rural areas to ask whether they could take their children to the bus stop if they were reimbursed.

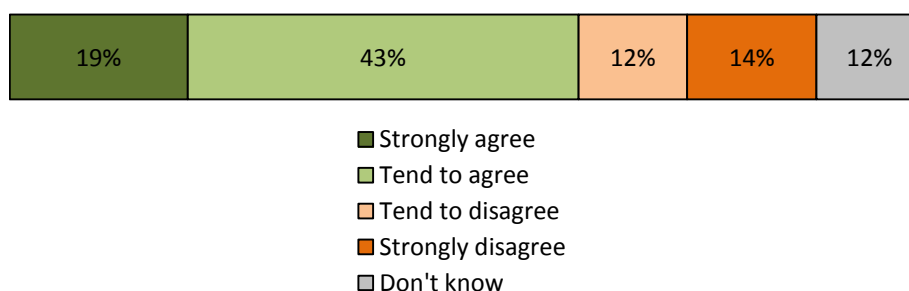
4.13 Review of unsuitable route provision

Pupils who attend their nearest school but live within the statutory walking distance from the school are provided with free transport if we feel that the route they would have to walk to school could be considered unsuitable even if they were accompanied by an adult.

We are proposing to review all of these cases. There may be instances where investment in a walking route could mean that it becomes suitable for pupils to walk, enabling free transport to be withdrawn. For example, a pedestrian crossing could be paid for from the savings made by withdrawing free transport.

More detailed work is required before savings can be estimated.

Chart 15 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 990

Just over three-fifths (62%) of respondents agree that the county council should review all of the cases where investment in a walking route could make an unsuitable walking route suitable for pupils to walk to school.

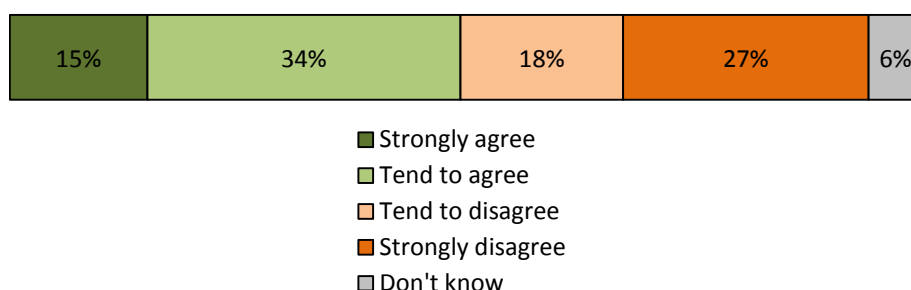
4.14 Charge for amending bus passes

Currently, if a pupil who is entitled to assisted home to school transport changes address or school then they are required to have an amended bus pass. We currently provide this service for free.

We are proposing that from September 2014 we will charge for amending passes. We are proposing a charge of £10 per pass (£5 for low income families).

This is likely to affect up to 780 pupils annually and provide additional revenue to the council of up to £7800 per annum.

Chart 16 - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this proposal?



Base: All respondents 988

Opinion was split over the proposal to charge £10 for amending bus passes. Around half (49%) of respondents agree with the proposal, while just under half (45%) disagree with it.

4.15 Additional comments

	%	Number of responses
No comment	62%	635
Unfair focus on faith schools	15%	151
Comment about how they/others won't be able to afford the proposed prices	11%	114
The size of the increase is unfair	6%	64
Concern about the impact on parents with more than one child	5%	50
Reduce costs elsewhere in the county council	4%	38
General negative comment about the proposals	3%	34
Home to school transport should be free	3%	33
Doesn't agree with protection for those classed as low income/travellers	3%	28
Other	16%	166

Appendix 1: demographic breakdown

		Count	Percentage
Are you...?	Male	273	28%
	Female	706	72%

		Count	Percentage
What was your age on your last birthday?	18 and under	25	3%
	19-24	5	1%
	25-34	85	9%
	35-54	752	83%
	55 and over	40	4%

		Count	Percentage
Are you a deaf person or do you have a disability?	Yes	39	4%
	No	921	96%

		Count	Percentage
Which best describes your ethnic background?	White	942	97%
	Asian or Asian British	12	1%
	Black or Black British	10	1%
	Mixed eg White and Asian	2	<1%
	Other	12	<1%

A parent/guardian of a pupil at...	Count
Cardinal Allen	277
St Augustine's, Billington	162
No school name given	83
St Michael's, Chorley	79
St Bede's, Ormskirk	63
Ripley St Thomas	36
St Cecillas	23
Blessed Trinity RC College	16
St Mary's, Brownedge	16
Our Lady's	12
QES Kirkby Lonsdale	8
Hutton Grammar	7
Other	90
TOTAL	872

A parent/guardian of a future pupil at...	Count
St Augustine's, Billington	50
No school name given	23
St Michael's	22
Ripley St Thomas	17
St Bede's	13
Cardinal Allen	9
Other	29
TOTAL	163

A member of staff at...	Count
Lathom High	11
Name not given	7
Cardinal Allen	6
Other	37
TOTAL	61

A pupil at...	Count
St Augustine's, Billington	8
Other	26
TOTAL	34

Other respondents	Count
Local resident	7
Other	11
TOTAL	28

Appendix 2: other comments received

"Message: I would like to draw your attention to Lancashire CC current consultation on their Home to School Transport Policy. One of their proposals is to increase the annual bus fare from £380 to £475 with effect from September 2014 and by RPI+5% per annum thereafter. This is a disgraceful assault on hard pressed families who have already committed to particular schools [in my case a faith school], and purchased expensive school uniforms, and who may now have to consider moving children to other schools. Surely the imposition of such a huge increase for children who are already in the education system and settled in a particular school is grossly unfair and likely to lead to disruptive relocation for some children. I would urge you to do what you can to influence the outcome of this consultation."

"As a parent governor and vice chair of All Saints' Catholic High School, I am emailing you both to respond to the LCC proposal to increase the travel costs of pupils attending our school. As you will be aware we objected to this proposal two years ago, when the subsidy was partially withdrawn and so to further reduce this subsidy seems very unfair to our families especially as the original agreement was a long standing one with the diocese.

Please reconsider this proposal."

"Re: HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY : LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

(CONSULTATION FOR PUPILS ATTENDING MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS)

I wish to express concern at the possibility that discretionary travel support for pupils attending mainstream schools is in danger of being withdrawn. In the present economic climate, where families are disproportionately bearing the burden, I consider any move in this direction would be grossly unjust and insensitive and a further drain on a families already stretched income. Therefore, I urge you to reconsider and oppose any proposal to delete the discretionary travel support element from the Home to School Transport Policy for pupils attending mainstream schools."

"I am emailing you both to respond vigorously to the LCC proposal to increase the travel costs of pupils attending our school.

We objected initially two years ago, when the subsidy was partially eroded and argued that this would hit a considerable number of our families hard as many are already on low incomes. So to target the reduction of this subsidy again so soon is a shameful act of the LCC targeting easy soft targets.

It was shameful too in the first place, for the council to scrap a long standing agreement with the local dioceses for the provision of free transport to catholic children to attend a catholic school.

This current proposal is a further demonstration of how low the Council will stoop.

I hope you will take my strong views into account and scrap this Proposal forthwith."

"We write to express our serious concerns regarding the proposed increases to pupil transport costs for some pupils in Lancashire this year. These proposed charges will affect a significant number of pupils who already attend Fisher More.

If the proposals go ahead, the parents of these pupils will have to find an even greater amount of money to continue to send their children to our school. In addition, these increases may also affect a number of parents who are thinking of, or intending to send their children to us in future.

Parents choose our school not because it is necessarily the closest secondary school to where they live, but because they want the high quality education that we consistently offer as well as the fact that that we are an outstanding faith school. For some parents, this is the most important attribute that we offer to enhance their children's education. This free choice should not be scuppered by what we consider to be prohibitive transport costs for some families.

Education per se should be about opening doors to young people not closing them because their parents cannot afford transport costs. Parents have a right to their first choice of school.

This planned increase needs a serious re-think. All parents in Pendle and the surrounding area should have the opportunity to send their children to Fisher More if they so wish."

Student Support Appeals Committee

Response to the consultation on proposed changes to the Home to School Transport Policy

Councillors were invited to raise any comments in response to each of the proposals which were set out at in the consultation document at Appendix 'A' to the report. In relation to questions 1 to 7 and 10 to 14, the majority of councillors tended to agree with the proposed changes. However, councillors raised the following concerns in respect of the remaining proposals accordingly:

- In response to question 8 of the consultation document, the committee strongly disagreed with the removal of such discretionary transport particularly in relation to managed moves. The committee expressed concern that removal of such provision could have a detrimental effect on pupils admitted to schools under these circumstances, especially if they were at a critical stage such as studying for their GCSEs. Concern was also expressed for those families just above the low income threshold who would miss out on such provision;
- In response to question 9, the committee strongly disagreed with the proposal to increase the cost of replacing a bus pass. It was suggested by one councillor that bus passes had become a "form of currency" in some reported bullying incidents and that some drivers were not checking passes appropriately until an inspector was present. The committee also felt that a substantial increase could lead to an increase in non-payments;
- In response to question 15, the committee strongly disagreed with the proposal to charge low income families for amending a bus pass.

Diocese of Salford response to the consultation

Set out here is the Diocesan reaction to the above consultation with specific reference to discretionary transport support for pupils/students attending Catholic schools under the Trusteeship of the Diocese of Salford. I would be grateful for its contents to be made available in full to elected members and in advance of that to Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools.

Since Lancashire County Council originally ended its long standing policy of discretionary transport support for pupils accessing denominational schools the Diocese has continued to contend that parents choosing such should have transport to the nearest denomination school in just the same way as those joining the nearest schools in other categories. This remains our determined position. At the first consultation the Diocese also suggested that there was a strong case against ending the entitlement not only legally and in principle but because the proposals ran contrary to nationally and local agreed policies, lacked clarity, were insufficiently

informed and did not comply with protocols on consultation. At that time the Diocese was dismayed that little attention was given over to the principles involved and indeed within the present proposals a key contention is that the proposed action is simply mirroring the example of other Local Authorities. The legal defence that "everyone else is doing it" is certainly often employed but is not easily represented as a statement of principle.

Returning to the present proposals to increase costs for children accessing their nearest Catholic schools then the Diocese requests that elected members consider the following objections:

- If the proposals are implemented then children accessing their nearest non denominational school will continue with their present support whilst those looking to the nearest denominational schools will be further penalised by a substantial rise in costs and so subject to discrimination. Add to this that the parents who will be most heavily hit in denominational schools are likely to be those just over the income thresholds and may well find expression of their preferences a financial impossibility especially in these difficult economic times with static salaries and an increased cost of living. This discriminates against such parents on both religious and socio-economic grounds.
- Despite the implications arising from the case of R –V- Dyfed County Council ex parte Smith 1994 ELR 20, there is a lack of financial clarity in the present costing proposals. The questionnaire sets those as RPI + 5%, the report to the relevant Cabinet members on October 10 2013 instances RPI + 2%. Whichever figure is correct it is presumably based on an analysis of future fuel and transport costs yet the report itself asserts that future costs of fuel and transport cannot be predicted; indeed current fuel prices are falling. No attempt is made to factor in the costs to the County of children transferring to non denominational schools as the increased transport charges force them out of the Catholic sector.
- Looking to the final point in 2) the report leaves elected members with a weak decision making evidence base as it suggests it is "not possible with any major certainty to predict the impact of the proposed changes". Even the impact of the present financial levy is not subject to detailed analysis subject only to the descriptors that its "overall" impact is limited and Church schools have "generally maintained their share of pupils". Members deserve far more detailed information prior to making any decision.
- What can be said with more certainty is that the erection of even higher financial barriers to those seeking places in Church schools will reduce for parents their range of preferences and hinder the promotion of education diversity. The DfE has assured parents in Cumbria County Council that the

Government remains committed to parental choice and to Faith schools and is keen to identify and share the best practices of those Local Authorities who are maintaining discretionary support to these schools. Further to those assurances MP Jim Dobbin asked the Prime Minister on Wednesday, 7 December 2011, to encourage Local Authorities to embrace the spirit of the 1944 Act re continued support for discretionary transport to denominational schools. In response the Prime Minister stressed not only support for faith schools but his intention to determine how best to enhance the prospects for those choosing such schools.

- In July of 2012 Secretary of State Michael Gove expressed his gratitude to the Roman Catholic Church for the role it has played in education and added that Catholic schools are overwhelmingly exemplar schools. Such applies within Lancashire to Church schools overall; many of which have worked with, and advocated strong support for, the education role of the County. So why take action to diminish those schools by imposition of further costs.
- As a 'key decision' under the Local Government Act 2000 and given the scale of the intended charges it was anticipated that parents would have had the opportunity to question elected members on proposals previous to any decision on their enactment. Evidence of such is not available. As proposals will impact most heavily on parents with children attending denominational schools one would have anticipated that at least "drop in" sessions would have taken place in Voluntary Aided Schools but for those parents unfortunately this appears not to be the case.

Conclusion

Much information required by members is absent from the proposals relating specifically to Church schools and that provided is often lacking in detail and clarity. Indeed the wording of the questionnaire itself is quite difficult to follow. The Diocese suggests that the proposals re denominational education should be set aside and discretionary transport maintained at their present levels for pupils accessing their nearest denominational school.

As a consequence the Diocese of Salford and indeed the whole community served by Lancashire Catholic schools within the Diocese asks that the Authority withdraws any proposal for further penalise parents with prohibitive financial burden when seeking places at schools for their children on the grounds of religion or belief. As per its remit the Diocese has advanced its arguments on behalf of those schools which fall to the responsibilities of the Bishop of Salford but equally feels that the case presented applies with the same force to all parents seeking places in denominational schools for their children. It may also be useful in any future deliberations to involve the Diocese in an earlier stage when framing proposals and determining if there is common ground for any formulaic agreement.

Further, and for reference, the Diocese would have welcomed both sight of the full Equality Analysis prior to the consultation closing date and the opportunity to comment on the drawbacks of the current appeals system re transport including its 'in-house structure'.