

## **Report to the Cabinet**

Meeting to be held on Thursday, 11 July 2019

### **Report of the Head of Service - Public & Integrated Transport**

#### **Part I**

Electoral Divisions affected:  
(All Divisions);

### **School Transport - Results on Consultation Regarding Removal of Funding**

(Appendices 'A' and 'B' refer)

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#### **Executive Summary**

At its meeting on 14 February 2019, Full Council approved, as part of the county council's budget for 2019/20 a proposal to cease funding for services where no pupils statutorily entitled to free school transport had travelled on a contracted school bus for two years, and where season ticket revenue did not cover the cost of the contract to operate the service. This decision was subject to consultation, with a final decision to be made by Cabinet, taking into account the responses.

This report outlines the results from the consultation.

#### **Recommendation**

Cabinet is asked to:

- (i) Note the findings of the consultation.
- (ii) Agree to the implementation of the proposed procedure to cease funding for services that do not carry pupils statutorily entitled to transport assistance to school.
- (iii) Authorise officers to engage with representatives of schools affected to explore opportunities to maintain services in accordance with procedure.

## **Background and Advice**

The county council is statutorily required to provide transport assistance to school for some students. The eligibility criteria for transport assistance is set out in the "Mainstream Home to School Transport Policy".

Where students qualify for free home to school transport or school transport assistance, the council provides school transport services. Normally, this is by issuing a pass to travel on a school bus provided by the county council, or on a service provided on a commercial basis by a bus operator. Where there are seats available on bus services commissioned by the council, other students may use them by buying a season ticket or paying a fare. However, in some cases, school bus services are provided by the council where there are no students entitled to free home to school transport or school transport assistance.

On 14 February 2019, Full Council approved the removal of the funding for school bus services where there had been no students who were entitled to free home to school transport or school transport assistance travelling for two years, and where the revenue from fares and season tickets did not cover the cost of the service. This approval was subject to the outcome of a consultation on the proposal.

The School Transport Consultation Report is set out at Appendix 'A'. This proposal allows schools and parents a full academic year's notice before funding is removed. During this time, officers will work with schools and bus operators to determine whether arrangements can be made to provide a service at no cost to the council. This means that from September 2020, the school bus services listed within the School Transport Consultation Report may no longer be provided.

Subsequently, all school contracts will be reviewed annually to determine whether there are school bus services operating that have not been carrying students entitled to free home to school transport or school transport assistance for two years and, if so, whether revenue from the sale of passes and tickets exceed their operating costs. This annual review will take place in June each year so that schools can be made aware in September if funding is to be withdrawn for services operating the following September.

## **Consultations**

The consultation on this proposal ran for six-weeks between 25 February 2019 and 8 April 2019, during which time, parents, carers, students, schools and bus operators were asked for their views.

Head teachers of the affected schools were contacted directly, as well as all the other schools to which the council provides school transport. The schools directly affected were encouraged to publicise the consultation via their websites and social media accounts. These schools were also asked to share the information with their feeder schools and a notice was posted on the school portal system.

Bus operators on the local and school bus framework were also contacted directly and asked to submit responses.

Additionally, the consultation was promoted via social media, a press release and on relevant pages of the county council website, including the bus information and school admissions pages. The consultation was promoted internally to staff via a link to the press release on the intranet, and to county councillors via C-First (the councillors' portal). A stakeholder email was sent to Chief Executives of district and unitary councils, NHS bodies including Clinical Commissioning Groups, and MPs by the Chief Executive.

An electronic version of the consultation questionnaire was available online on the county council's website. Paper copies of the consultation questionnaire and alternative versions were also made available. In total, 195 questionnaires were completed; 179 were completed by students, parents and carers, 12 were completed by head teachers and four were completed by bus operators.

## **Key findings:**

### **1. General use of the school transport service**

When asked which school the student attended, the majority of respondents (97 out of 143) said Clitheroe Royal Grammar School.

About four-fifths of respondents (81%) said that they currently used school bus services. About one-sixth of respondents (17%) said they did not currently use school bus services, but may do so in the future.

66% said that they had a season ticket and 26% said that they paid a fare on the bus. 6% said that they had a free pass and 1% said that they had a discounted pass provided on faith grounds.

The bus services respondents most commonly said they used the 623 service (35 respondents), the 876 service (22 respondents), the 860 service (16 respondents), the 889 (9 respondents) and the 775 service (9 respondents).

The bus stops respondents most commonly said they used Hollies Road, Wilpshire (10 respondents); Berry Lane, Longridge (8 respondents) and the Traders Arms, Mellor (8 respondents).

### **2. The proposal in general for removing the funding for school transport services**

About nine tenths (88%) of the respondents said that they disagreed with the proposal to remove the funding for school transport services and about a tenth of respondents (9%) said they agreed with the proposal.

The most common responses as to why respondents agreed or disagreed with the proposal to remove funding for school transport services were that rural services already had a minimal bus service (25%), that children's safety would be at risk walking the streets (22%) and that there were no alternatives and so students would be stranded (25%).

When asked how it would affect them, if there was no bus service, respondents were most likely to say that it would have an effect on parents and carers work hours or

risk to their employment (29%); that it would be impossible to get to school (23%) and that the students would have to attend a different school or not their choice of school (18%).

When asked how they would get to school, if there was no bus service for them, respondents were most likely to say that they would use the car (42%) or use other public transport (41%).

When asked if there was anything that the council needed to consider or that could be done differently, respondents were most likely to indicate that these were essential services and should not be changed (29%) or that the bus services should be rerouted to be more cost effective or serve wider catchments (19%).

### **3. Head teachers**

Head teachers were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the proposal. Six head teachers agreed with the proposal, four disagreed and two neither agreed nor disagreed.

When asked why they agreed or disagreed with the proposal to remove the funding for school transport services, most head teachers generally focused on the fact that it may make it difficult or impossible for some students, especially current students, to get to their school.

When asked how this would affect their school, head teachers responses included the following comments; that it would not affect them, that it could mean a reduction in pupil numbers, that low income families without a car would not be able to attend school and in the long term that expressing a preference for a specific school would not be possible.

Head teachers were then asked if they would be prepared to organise school bus services themselves. Two head teachers said 'yes'; five said 'no' and five said 'don't know'.

Head teachers were then asked if they would consider paying the county council to organise these services for them. Three head teachers said 'yes'; five 'no' and four said 'don't know'.

When asked if they thought there was anything else that the council should consider or could be done differently relating to the proposal to remove funding for school transport services, head teachers responses were that young people in rural areas had already been disproportionately affected by cuts to services; that it was not the responsibility of the school to organise or pay for transport and that they would struggle to afford to pay to organise services.

### **4. Bus operators**

When asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the proposal to remove the funding for school transport services, three bus operators responded that they disagreed with the proposal and one said that it neither agreed nor disagreed with the proposal.

When asked why they agreed or disagreed with the proposal, bus operators responses included concerns about their ability to plan if contracts were to be ceased part way through and concerns about the oversight of future contracts.

When asked how the proposal to remove the funding for school transport services would affect their company, bus operators said that they would lose a bus service they currently operated; it could be an opportunity to approach the council to operate the services more cost efficiently and that reducing a contract was difficult after putting funding and contracts in place within their company.

When asked if they would be interested in providing school bus services commercially in conjunction with the schools themselves, three respondents said 'yes' and one 'no'.

When asked if they thought there was anything else that the council needed to consider or that could be done differently, bus operators responded that members of the public could buy tickets to fill seats; it was important to keep to the contract term agreed between the council and bus operators; the council could charge an administration fee to make the services profitable or appoint an outside organisation to take on the administration of the service.

## **5. Other responses to the consultation**

There was one petition asking the council to rethink the proposal and to ensure that there was provision for children who used the 623 bus service to get from Mellor and surrounding villages to Clitheroe Royal Grammar School. This petition had been signed by 388 people.

Letters were received from Nigel Evans MP and Kate Hollern MP, on behalf of parents, who were concerned that if the 623 bus service was withdrawn, their children would have to switch schools.

### **Implications:**

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

### **Risk management**

Services may have to be reintroduced if new statutory scholars start attending schools where the service has been removed. This would be mitigated by focusing on those routes where there has been no statutory scholar for at least 2 years.

### **Financial**

The saving agreed by Full Council in February 2019 totalled £100,000, with £50,000 removed from the budget in 2020/21 and £50,000 in 2021/22. If the services identified to be withdrawn within this report are agreed, then the service will fully deliver the saving agreed within the required timescales.

## **Legal**

If the proposal is agreed, funding will be removed for school bus services where there have been no students who are entitled to free home to school transport or school transport assistance travelling for two years and where the revenue from fares and season tickets does not cover the cost of the service. However, those students entitled to statutory free school transport will continue to receive it.

## **Equality and Cohesion**

It is acknowledged that this proposal will impact children and young people who currently use the identified services and their families, or those who may do so in the future, and that this may also impact some pupils and their families also on the basis of their religion or belief including having no religion or belief if their service is withdrawn. The Equality Assessment is set out at Appendix 'B'.

Although potential mitigation is proposed as an integral part of the arrangements, in terms of looking to identify alternative ways to continue making some provision for those schools affected, this may not be successful in all cases.

## **Education, Quality and Performance - Pupil Access**

One of the issues that may arise from the removal of some school bus services relates to the possibility of pupils seeking a change of school due to parental concerns relating to accessibility or safety on public transport. Parents express preferences for schools based on a number of factors, one of which is how their child might undertake the journey to school. Where schools are situated in urban centres they are often well served by public transport, as well as school bus services. Pupils attending the more rural schools tend to rely more heavily on commissioned school transport.

With the same overriding concern, there is also a possibility that the removal of school bus services may impact on the popularity of some schools. If parents are not able to make arrangements so that their child is safely dropped off and picked up, and the school is not well served by public transport, they may not express a preference for the school on their secondary school application form.

## **List of Background Papers**

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
None		
Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate		
N/A		