

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

13 September 2011

**Public Participation
Item No. 6 - Denominational Home to School Transport**

Statement from Camilla Whipp

I am writing to you concerning the Council's recent announcement advising of its intention to withdraw the part-funding of home to school transport to denominational schools with effect from September 2012.

I will start by drawing your attention to comments made by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, when he addressed the Pope during the recent papal visit to England. Mr Cameron said a priority for the coalition government was to generate a culture of greater social responsibility and he said that the faith communities were important architects in doing this. I believe his comment clearly reflects the vital role government see faith schools have in developing and supporting young people to be ambassadors in building and supporting the government's 'Big Society'.

In the current economic climate, I fully recognise the pressure on Wiltshire Council to reduce spending and I accept that all within the community will need to bear their share of the burden. However, I would urge cognisance of the ever increasing financial pressure faced by families and the risk that if cuts are made as proposed they are likely to have a seriously detrimental effect on children's education and wellbeing. I would stress that the abrupt and finite manner in which the Council proposed to end the funding is likely to have serious and measurable impact on the education of children whose families will be forced to move them to other schools.

It is appreciated that Wiltshire Council has supported its schools for many years, and in doing so, has created many opportunities by which our children have benefitted in accessing their chosen religious based education. However our schools serve Wiltshire Council tax payers and I suggest that the contribution our schools have made to educational standards and the welfare of Wiltshire children has been, and is, outstanding.

I suggest that the realisation of the proposed savings could be problematic. In a rural community such as Wiltshire, the Council could find itself having to transport Catholic children, free of charge, to their nearest schools, whereas under the current system those families make a significant financial contribution towards the travel costs. I would ask to what extent an impact assessment has been made on whether other local schools have sufficient places to accommodate children who may no longer be able to attend their chosen faith school. Also, whether the proposal, if implemented as detailed in the letter, will merely transfer the cost to a different Council department therefore resulting in a financial loss to the Council?

Currently, significant morning rush hour traffic is attributable to the 'school run' and Government policy is to generate a modal shift from car to bus. For children entering denominational schools in the future and lacking transport support to those schools, the outcome could be an unacceptable increase in car use, presenting risks to the environment and subsequently to children's health and well being. The cost in maintain the transport infrastructure as well as transport disruption, are likely to exceed the small savings to the transport budget. Currently, St Augustine's Catholic College 'buses' in 11 coaches and any shift from bus to car would significantly impact on the environment, the through flow of traffic in Trowbridge at peak times which, we know, is already a problem and ultimately to the safety of motorists in terms of road safety and obvious increased risk of accident and consequential injury. St Patrick's school in Corsham is instigating a road safety campaign to reduce car travel to and from the school for the children's safety, and the loss of the currently supplied coach could mean more cars and more danger for the children in an already congested road.

I would like to draw the Council's attention to the DfE home to school transport and travel guidance and in particular, refer to pages 27-30 which set out the provisions relating to "religion or belief". In paragraph 119 the reference to Section 509AD of the Education Act 1996 places a duty on Local Authorities in relation to the provision of travel to have regard to the wishes of the parent for their child to be provided with education or training at a particular school or institution on grounds of the parents' religion or belief. Also of particular note is Paragraph 131 which states:

"...the Secretary of State hopes that Local Authorities will continue to think it right not to disturb well established arrangements, some of which have been associated with local agreements or understandings about the siting of such schools."

More recently the 2006 Education and Inspections Acts specifically aimed to reduce the impact of transport as a barrier to parents exercising their education preferences and also improved and extended the offer of free transport originally set out in the 1944 Education Act.

As I have said above, I very much appreciate the need for the Council to make savings but would urge that before any decisions is made by the Cabinet, that a full and open consultation should take place in order that the full implications may be assessed and considered. It was indeed this approach during the last review of denominational transport in 2006 that created much trust between the stakeholders and facilitated the development of a solution that allowed the Council to significantly reduce its financial cost and yet maintain a status quo and stability in terms of families being able to access, at a fair cost, transport to their chosen faith school. I believe that such an approach is fair and just and I would urge the council to follow such a process on this occasion also.

I ask that you acknowledge receipt of this letter and I would welcome your views on my proposal for a full and open consultation process.

Yours faithfully

Mrs Camilla Whipp.

Question

For those who live in rural areas and would require transport to their “designated school”, would they be entitled to the equivalent discount off their transport or the costs of being transported by the Council to that “designated school”?