

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet
13 September 2011

Subject: Denominational Home-to-School Transport

Cabinet Member: Councillor Dick Tonge - Highways and Transport

Key Decision: Yes

Purpose of Report

1. To seek approval for a change to the Council's Education Transport Policy in respect of denominational home-to-school transport in order to achieve financial savings.

Background

2. As a result of significant budget pressures, the Council has had to review all the services it currently provides. As far as is possible, it is seeking to make savings from improvements in efficiency and procurement, but these are not enough on their own and it has also been necessary to consider whether it can continue to afford to provide services that are discretionary – i.e. not required by law.
3. Currently, the Council provides subsidised home-to-school transport for children attending a denominational school on grounds of their religion; this is over and above that provided for children not attending a denominational school. This assistance is discretionary and was reviewed in 2006/7, at which time a charge was introduced. Information about the current scheme (number of pupils benefiting, the schools attended, and the cost of the transport) is attached as **Appendix 1**. It can be seen that the current charge to parents only covers a proportion (on average around half) of the cost. The law requires local authorities to provide free home-to-school transport for children attending the nearest denominational secondary school where the child receives free school meals or the parent receives the maximum level of Working Tax Credit for their case, and where the school is at least two miles, and no more than 15 miles, from home. In all three options the Council will continue to provide free transport in these circumstances.
4. A letter was sent on 5 May to all parents receiving denominational transport assistance, to the headteachers of affected schools, and to the Clifton Diocese, explaining the Council's proposals and stating that Cabinet would be asked to approve proposals at its meeting in July. In order to make it clear what channels were available for representations to be made to the Council about the proposals, a further letter was sent to the parents and headteachers on 27 May giving details of the date and venue of the Cabinet meeting and of the rights to attend that meeting, and explaining how representations could be made. A letter was subsequently also sent to the Bath and Wells and Salisbury Church of England Dioceses in respect of the small number of Church of England children also affected.

5. At the Cabinet meeting on 24 May the Leader of the Council emphasised that no decision had been made by Cabinet, and that the decision would be made at their meeting on 26 July. It was later decided to defer consideration of the proposals until the Cabinet meeting on 13 September, so that it would not coincide with the school holidays. The deadline for written comments on the proposals was also extended to 8 August.
6. The proposals were considered by the Children's Services Select Committee at its meeting on 22 July. The Committee resolved to set up a Rapid Scrutiny Task Group, the recommendations of which will be reported to Cabinet on 13 September.
7. There have been two meetings involving, variously, the Chairman of Governors and the Headmaster of St. Augustine's School, the Chairman of Governors and other representatives of St. Patrick's School, Corsham, representatives of the Clifton Diocese and the Parish Priest of Devizes. The Leader of the Council, Cabinet Members, the Portfolio Holder and officers of the Department for Children and Education and Department of Neighbourhood and Planning attended.
8. A summary of the representations received, and the issues raised (together with the Council's response to these), is attached as **Appendix 2**.
9. Following consideration of the representations received, and of the financial, environmental, legal and equalities impacts outlined below, three options are now put forward for Cabinet to consider: