

**Final Report of the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise:
Denominational Home-to-School Transport**

Purpose

1. To present the conclusions and recommendations of the Denominational Home-to-School Transport rapid scrutiny exercise established by the Children's Services Select Committee. The exercise relates to a report of the Corporate Director for Neighbourhood and Planning, seeking Cabinet approval for a change to the Council's Education Transport Policy in respect of denominational home-to-school transport, which is included in the Cabinet Agenda pack (pages 17-36) at Item 6.

Background

2. On 22nd July 2011, the Children's Services Select Committee received a report from the Corporate Director for Neighbourhood and Planning containing proposals to Cabinet to change the funding of Denominational Home-to-School Transport in Wiltshire. Having discussed the report, the Committee resolved to undertake a rapid scrutiny exercise at a later date in order to give members more time with the information provided. Members also asked that further analyses of the anticipated savings and potential risks of the proposals be provided prior to the rapid scrutiny meeting. It was agreed that the exercise would include an opportunity for public participation.
3. Prior to the meeting, requests for additional information were submitted by members of the Rapid Scrutiny Group. All further information provided in response was circulated to members and considered alongside the report of the Corporate Director for Neighbourhood and Planning. The information used for the meeting was published in advance on the Council website and is appended to this report.
4. The Rapid Scrutiny Exercise was held on 8th September 2011, at 6.30pm to make it easier for members of the public to attend. The following members of the Children's Services Select Committee comprised the Rapid Scrutiny Group (a full list of members and officers who attended is included at Appendix B):

Cllr Peter Davis	Councillor
Cllr Mark Griffiths	Councillor
Cllr Jon Hubbard	Councillor

Cllr Jacqui Lay	Councillor
Mr Neil Owen	Co-opted Secondary Parent Governor Representative on the Children's Services Select Committee
Mrs Rosheen Ryan	Co-opted Primary Parent Governor Representative on the Children's Services Select Committee
Cllr Carole Soden	Councillor (Lead Member for the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise and Chairman of the Children's Services Select Committee)
Dr Mike Thompson	Clifton Diocese Co-opted Member of the Children's Services Select Committee

- Members of the public were invited to submit questions and statements by 12pm two days in advance of the meeting, replicating Cabinet timescales for representations from the public.

Procedure followed for the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise

- The Chairman welcomed all present and described the procedure to be followed for the meeting. The powers and processes of rapid scrutiny exercises were summarised and reference was made to a report circulated describing these in greater detail.
- Members of the public who wished to make statements or ask questions were invited to do so. A list of those who spoke is included at Appendix C.
- Following this, Cllr Gamble responded to points raised by members of the public and introduced the report of the Corporate Director for Neighbourhood and Planning containing proposals to Cabinet to change the funding of Denominational Home-to-School Transport in Wiltshire.
- Members of the Rapid Scrutiny Group asked questions of the executive members, officers and members of the public.
- The Chairman thanked all present for attending and answering members' questions. Members of the Rapid Scrutiny Group then went into a closed meeting to agree their final conclusions and recommendations based on the evidence considered.

Summary of discussions

- The Portfolio Holder for Public Transport described the arrangements currently in place for providing financial assistance for denominational home-to-school transport, noting that the Council's average contribution is approximately £400 per pupil. He disagreed that the proposal to remove such assistance was 'discriminatory' against faith schools. He also reported that the decision on the matter had not already been taken.
- The Cabinet Member for Children's Services stated that a comparison between financial assistance for denominational home-to-school transport and

financial assistance for post-16 educational transport was not a valid one; post-16 educational transport was 'universal' in that there was no alternative educational provision, whereas those attending denominational schools had the option of attending alternative schools. The Corporate Director for Children and Education added that decreasing financial assistance for those in post-16 education would hit some of the most vulnerable in society hardest.

13. It was reported that all faiths were represented on the Council's Admissions Forum and none of them had made a request for denominational home-to-school transport to be included on a meeting agenda.
14. It was noted that the Council's responsibilities with respect to denominational home-to-school transport were the same for academies as for maintained schools.
15. It was noted that the Council has certain legal obligations with respect to providing denominational home-to-school transport to pupils entitled to free school meals. Following a member query, it was reported that the number of pupils to whom this currently applied was around 10. Others who were not entitled to free school meals would be able to share any transport provided for these pupils, but the low numbers involved meant that it would have little impact on costs.
16. It was noted that the last review of denominational home-to-school transport took place in 2006/7 and that the arrangements agreed then were subject to a further review after they had been in place for two years in preparation for the 2010-11 budget. The Rapid Scrutiny Group asked those present what had been communicated to parents by both the faith schools and the Council regarding the continuance of financial assistance once this time period elapsed. Members of the public present indicated that there had been little or no communication on this matter. Representatives from faith schools indicated that, because the review scheduled for 2010 had not transpired, it was assumed that the present arrangement would continue. The Portfolio Holder for Public Transport responded that the Cabinet did not perceive the current review as a review of the 2007 position – rather, it was a separate review that had been necessitated by the cuts in Government funding experienced in 2010.
17. Following a member query, the Portfolio Holder for Public Transport stated that although it may be reasonable to expect the current level of financial assistance for home-to-school transport to continue for pupils' time at their current school (Option 3 in the Cabinet report), the financial reality meant that this was not the recommended option.

Management of home-to-school transport

18. Following a member query, the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport reported that the Council would seek to work closely with schools to assist them in taking over the management of home-to-school transport, and this would include the passing over of funds. Members were referred to the

additional information provided detailing the kinds of support the Council would be able to provide (included in Appendix A). The Portfolio Holder for Public Transport stated that some of the faith schools, such as St Augustine's, already provide home-to-school transport to some degree.

19. Following a member query, the Portfolio Holder for Public Transport reported that calculating and implementing any necessary adjustments to existing transport timetables and routes was a technical skill that the Council's Passenger Transport Unit (PTU) had significant expertise in. In response, members questioned why it was proposed to handover such a specialised task to schools when the Council employed experts in this field.
20. Members questioned whether it was feasible for the smaller schools affected to take over the management of home-to-school transport. The Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport replied that in such cases the schools and affected parents could work together to provide alternative transport in conjunction with other parents, for example through car-sharing.
21. Members commented that traffic levels around some schools were already an issue and questioned whether the impact of the proposals on congestion and air quality had been fully considered.

Educational impact of the proposals

22. Members questioned whether the educational impact on pupils who might change schools as a result of the proposals had been fully considered. They also noted that the member request for further information on this issue had not been met. The Corporate Director for Children and Education responded that it was not possible to make precise predictions of the impact of changing schools on individual pupils and so the request for this information had not been a reasonable one. She added that Wiltshire had a high proportion of children from military families who regularly transitioned between schools and the Council had been praised by Ofsted for its work in supporting such transitions. Members commented that if children changing schools required specialised support then this suggested there would indeed be an educational impact. The Corporate Director responded that the support referred to was for children who changed schools on a very regular basis.
23. Members questioned why the cost of providing transport for pupils transferring to another school were predicted to decrease annually in the projections provided. In response, it was reported that a pupil who no longer travelled to a denominational school would have the standard legal entitlement to a local school place. Their taking up this place might prevent other pupils with less entitlement from attending that school, but there are enough places within the Wiltshire school system to meet the consequent ripple of demand. The Portfolio Holder for Public Transport clarified that the figures referred to related only to transport costs.

Conclusions

24. The Rapid Scrutiny Group have concerns that affected schools, particularly small ones, would experience significant difficulty taking over the management of home-to-school transport for its pupils given the complexity and specialised nature of the task and the limited resources and technical expertise at their disposal.
25. The Rapid Scrutiny Group have concerns at the potentially negative educational impact on pupils needing to change schools as a result of the removal of financial assistance for home-to-school transport. Members feel it is reasonable that parents already receiving financial assistance would expect it to continue for the remainder of pupils' time at their current schools. However, members did not think it reasonable for the financial assistance to 'follow' the pupil to their next school (i.e. when moving from primary to secondary education), or to continue in post-16 education.
26. The Rapid Scrutiny Group recognises the challenging financial circumstances in which the Council is working and the consequent need to make savings. However, the Group notes that the financial impact on the Council of providing transitional provisions for all those pupils already in receipt of transport (as laid out in Option 3) compared to the financial impact of providing such assistance only for pupils entering their final year of GCSE studies in September 2012 (as in Option 2) is relatively insignificant in terms of the Council's overall budget: £277K over a seven year period (see Table 1 below). The financial impact on affected parents, however, and the educational impact on pupils needing to change schools as a result of the proposals in Option 2 could be very significant indeed.

Table 1 – Projected savings from implementing options outlined in the report to Cabinet

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Totals
Option 2	£132,000	£159,000	£160,000	£161,000	£162,000	£162,000	£162,000	£1.098M
Option 3	£38,000	£69,000	£100,000	£134,000	£158,000	£160,000	£162,000	£821,000
Difference	£94,000	£90,000	£60,000	£27,000	£4,000	£2,000	£0	£277,000

27. Given the challenging financial circumstances in which the Council is operating and the need to make savings in the provision of discretionary services, the Rapid Scrutiny Group feels it appropriate that the parental contribution toward denominational home-to-school transport increase by a small percentage and the Group suggests the amount of 10%. This would further decrease the comparative financial impact on the Council of implementing Option 3 over Option 2.

Recommendations

28. Members of the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise recommend that Cabinet adopt the following option:

Withdraw discretionary denominational assistance with effect from September 2012, but:

- The current level of assistance to continue for all pupils already in receipt of transport, minus the amount saved through implementing a 10% increase to the parental contribution for each pupil;
- For this assistance to continue for the remainder of the pupils' time at their current school (but not for post-16 education);
- Transport to continue to be arranged by the Council, except where schools are willing to take over this responsibility.

**Cllr Carole Soden – Lead Member for the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise; and
Chairman of the Children's Services Select Committee**

Paul Kelly – Designated Scrutiny Officer

Report author: Henry Powell – Senior Scrutiny Officer

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Background documents

Denominational Home-to-School Transport – report of the Director of Neighbourhood & Planning, to Cabinet on 13th September

Appendices

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| Appendix A | Additional Information provided for the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise (except the relevant 2006 Cabinet report, which is available at the following link:
http://cms.wiltshire.gov.uk/CeListDocuments.aspx?Committeeld=685&MeetingId=1092&DF=05%2f09%2f2006&Ver=2) |
| Appendix B | Other members and officers attending the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise |
| Appendix C | Public participation at the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise |