

## **Wiltshire Council**

### **Cabinet**

**13 September 2011**

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

#### **Statement and Question from Father Jean-Patrice Coulon Parish Priest for Catholic Parish of Devizes**

##### **Statement**

As the Parish Priest of the Catholic Parish of Devizes, I would like to express my objection to the proposal of Wiltshire Council to remove subsidised transport for children to attend faith schools. I believe that this process of consultation has been badly handled by Wiltshire Council. This was acknowledged by the Leader of the Council when she apologised in a private August meeting held between members of the Council and members of the faith community. This apology was welcome and was accepted. However, the impression given at the meeting was that the saving needed to be found as the budget had already been set. This situation is in some ways analogous to the Salisbury Car Parking issue. As reported in the Salisbury Journal about the reintroduction of a one hour parking charge, the Salisbury Area Board "accepted that it would be hard to fund the move but said next time Wiltshire is setting a budget it should consult local people earlier in the process."

This lack of consultation has led to a process where there is an undue haste to try to remove the subsidy. This is shown in the fact the consultation has been handled by the Transport section of the Department of Neighbourhood and Planning alone, whereas in 2006 it was a joint effort between Education and Environmental Services. This had a negative impact when it was due to be debated by the Children's Services Select Committee in July, but could not be since the members had only two days to see the Report. This led to the formation of a Rapid Scrutiny Task Group.

This Task Group meeting seems to have a further role of allowing parents to have a say. It has been appreciated that this meeting has been held in the evening in a reasonably large venue. But due to the short time between the Task Group meeting and the Cabinet meeting, it would seem unlikely that members of the public will be able to see the recommendations of the Task Group until the day before the Cabinet meeting. This severely impedes the democratic rights of the public to make input to the Cabinet meeting which is the final decision-making meeting. Furthermore, the Task Group will not be able to report to the full Select Committee until after the Cabinet meeting, meaning that the Select Committee is reduced to simply retrospectively endorsing the decision of the Cabinet.

The education of children according to the religion or belief of their parents is far too important to be dealt with in such a way. It is clearly understood that the Council is facing severe financial pressures. But it should be recognised that students receiving

denominational home to school transport subsidy only represent less than 5% of the total of all students receiving this help in Wiltshire. Furthermore, they do not receive free transport but only a subsidy of 50%, despite the fact that they go to Voluntary Aided Schools which fund up to 10% of building and maintenance costs themselves, so saving the Council this money. The Department for Education is conducting a review of efficiency and practice in how all Councils deliver home to school transport. Wiltshire Council should take part in this review, and consider how it can make savings throughout the whole provision of statutory home to school transport in order that it can safeguard the discretionary portion as it is a tiny fraction of the total.

Such a move would mean a postponement of at least a year. It can be seen that Wiltshire Council can make such moves as they have made a significant U-turn in the case of Salisbury car parking. It would be appreciated if such a move could also be made here in order that an irreversible decision affecting the education of children is not taken without considering all possibilities for retention.

### **Question**

This question follows on from a question I asked to the Rapid Scrutiny Task Group about the allocation of funds from the Department for Education to Local Authorities to continue funding for extended rights to free travel and the general duty to promote sustainable travel. The funds allocated to Wiltshire Council are substantial: £603,165 for 2011-12 and £748,325 in 2012-13. In his reply, Cllr Richard Gamble stated that around 100 children would benefit from this grant as they qualify for extended rights: that is to say, they come from families of low income.

In speaking to the Head of Service Passenger Transport, I learnt that this is not an exact figure, but in any case there would be funds left over from the sum mentioned above. The Department for Education has indicated that this sum is not ring-fenced, and so can be used for "locally identified priorities." The initial Report of the Department of Neighbourhood and Planning and the subsequent information provided to the Task Group indicate that there will be a significant impact on sustainable travel if any of the three proposed options are taken forward. This is certainly the case as under the options, schools are supposed to provide transport, and there is no way that they can provide it at the same price than the Council as they do not have the expertise.

How does Wiltshire Council propose to use the remainder of the funds left after providing for extended rights? What have they identified as their local priorities? Why not consider the retention of subsidised transport as a priority, given the many detrimental impacts, not least the impact on sustainable travel?

Father Jean-Patrice Coulon MSFS  
Parish Priest  
Our Lady, the Immaculate Conception, Devizes