

WOOTTON BASSETT SCHOOL – CHANGE IN SCHOOL HOURS

Purpose of Report

1. To establish whether Wootton Bassett School should be expected to meet the full additional cost of changes to school transport following a revision in school opening hours from September 2004.

Background

2. Wootton Bassett Secondary School is served by 9 dedicated school buses which are provided by the County Council and carry a total of 474 children to and from school. The existing school start and finish times (8.45am and 3.45pm) allow some of these buses to also perform a second run to or from Lyneham or Broad Town schools. The location of these schools is shown in **Appendix A**.
3. Wootton Bassett School advised the Passenger Transport Unit on 18th December 2003 that it was considering changing its school hours to 8.40am and 3.00pm from September 2004. The changes are intended to help the school raise standards of achievement and to address staff workload issues.
4. The County Council's current policy states that any additional transport costs resulting from a change in school hours should be met by the school implementing the change (see **Appendix B**). Wootton Bassett School is appealing against enforcement of this policy and a copy of their appeal is attached at **Appendix C**.
5. Investigations by the Council's Passenger Transport Unit indicate that whilst the timing of some of the existing contracts could be altered without incurring any additional cost, it would not be possible for any of the contracts to perform a primary school run in the afternoon without delaying the departure of the bus from that primary school. In addition, as all the schools in the Wootton Bassett and Lyneham area would now be closing between 3.00 and 3.15pm, it would not be possible to transport the primary school children at their existing times, without either requiring the use of extra vehicles, (at an estimated additional cost of approximately £16,000 per annum per vehicle) or arranging for the children to be supervised until their bus arrives.
6. Wootton Bassett School was advised on 28th December 2003 that problems involving additional costs would exist with the buses that also served Lyneham Infant and Junior Schools and Broad Town schools. The minimum cost solution would be additional supervision of the primary school children between the end of the school day and the arrival of the bus (approximately 15-20 minutes), if this could be agreed with the schools. However, if the Primary Schools did not agree to this, Wootton Bassett School would be required to fund the cost of the extra buses.

7. Meetings were held in January 2004 with the Head Teachers of the affected Primary Schools at which the minimum cost solution of a delayed arrival of their afternoon bus was discussed. Although the schools reluctantly agreed to consider the provision of supervision, a subsequent letter to them on 15th April 2004 confirming the County Council's proposals provoked a number of letters from Head Teachers and Governors of Lyneham Infant and Junior Schools (see **Appendices D, E and F**).
8. A further meeting was therefore held with representatives from Lyneham Infant and Junior Schools on 21st May 2004, the outcome of which was a total rejection of the new timetable by both schools. The grounds were:-
 - Difficulty in providing supervision for such a large group of children (40-45);
 - The delayed departure and longer bus route (caused by using one bus instead of two for the afternoon journey) would mean that Lyneham School pupils would arrive home between 15-20 minutes later than at present and later than their siblings from Wootton Bassett School.
9. The meeting concluded that the minimum acceptable solution was a single dedicated afternoon bus departing at the existing time. To enable the necessary contractual arrangements to be made, the Head Teacher of Wootton Bassett School agreed to pay for this bus for the first year or such earlier time as he was able to successfully appeal against the cost. He was made aware that there was no time limit on the recovery of these additional costs and no guarantee that his appeal would be successful.
10. The Transport Bill currently before Parliament encourages local authorities and schools to rationalise existing transport arrangements in order to reduce potential long term costs. This potentially conflicts with other current developments, notably:-
 - extended schools - where schools are encouraged to open up services to the community and to encourage students to participate in a range of out-of-school hours learning and other activities
 - greater encouragement of school sports activity
 - increasing collaboration between schools and FE colleges in the provision of vocational and other courses for the 14-19 age range
 - federated schools where activities are co-ordinated across several different school sites.
11. Given these broader issues, the authority will need to consider to what extent the current policy should be varied in order to facilitate the extended school activities and cross-school collaboration. These issues are currently under consideration via the Schools Forum and will be the subject of further reports to Cabinet later this year.
12. In the meantime, as set out in paragraph 4 above, the current policy within the authority is that, where a school decided upon a change in arrangements, any additional costs are charged back to the school until such time as these costs can be recouped through a change in the contracting arrangements.

Main Considerations to Council

13. The considerations for the County Council are as follows:-
- (i) Uphold the existing policy and require Wootton Bassett School to pay the cost of any additional transport required as a result of their change in school hours; OR
 - (ii) Agree to meet the additional transport costs incurred as requested in the appeal letter; OR
 - (iii) Require Lyneham Infant and Junior Schools to implement the “minimum cost” supervision solution (i.e. to allow their pupils to remain on their premises for approximately 15-20 minutes after school finishing time, until their school bus arrives, with supervision costs paid for by Wootton Bassett School).
14. If item 13 (ii) is agreed, the Council would also need to consider whether a precedent had been set which could apply to other schools. Until now, since its inception in 1993, the ruling has been enforced and its most recent revision in 1999 is attached at **Appendix B**. Several other schools are known to be considering a change in hours and most of these are served by school buses which also perform journeys to other schools. In each case it is likely that the secondary schools will be finishing at similar times to the primary schools and so meeting these requests will only be satisfactorily resolved by contracting additional buses at substantial cost.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

15. It is possible that some parents of children attending Lyneham schools would find the use of a delayed bus service unacceptable and an increase in use of cars could result if this solution is enforced. Adopting the dedicated afternoon bus will put an extra school bus into circulation but there will be a corresponding mileage reduction for the existing afternoon buses.

Risk Assessment

16. Providing supervision at the end of a school day for 40-45 children for 15-20 minutes could impose a risk for the children. It will also impose a management burden on the Lyneham Schools and Passenger Transport Unit to make sure that the supervisors are qualified and available in sufficient numbers every day. It may also be difficult to fill the supervisory posts due to the number of children involved.

Financial Implication

17. If the Council agrees to absolve Wootton Bassett School of all additional costs associated with changing its opening hours, then the immediate impact would be approximately £11,000 in the 2004-5 financial year and around £16,000 in a full year. Exact costs will only be known when the contract for the additional bus has been tendered.
18. If by agreeing to meet these costs, a precedent is established for other schools wishing to change their hours, the costs to the County Council could be considerable.

Options Considered

19. Alterations to all existing public transport and school buses serving the Wootton Bassett School and other schools in this locality were considered when reviewing the impact of the Wootton Bassett changes. The options listed below are therefore the lowest cost solutions that can be achieved at the present time:-
- (i) Re-organise afternoon school transport from Lyneham Schools, to be operated by one vehicle and departing 15-20 mins after school finishes and providing a supervisor at the schools to look after the children until bus arrives: Additional Cost = £ 1,035 p.a.
 - (ii) Re-organise afternoon school transport from Lyneham Schools to be operated by one vehicle but retaining existing departure time (3.15pm) using a separate bus: Additional Cost = £16,000 p.a.
20. Wootton Bassett School has also been advised that these additional costs could be eliminated if it moved its new start and finish times at least 10 minutes earlier than those proposed. However, the Head Teacher was not able to agree this option.

Reason for Recommendation

21. Any decision to meet the request from Wootton Bassett School would almost certainly result in a large number of similar requests from other schools.

Recommendation

22. To confirm the officers' decision that Wootton Bassett School be required to meet the costs of providing an additional bus in the afternoon, to carry children home from Lyneham Schools, until this journey can be provided without incurring additional cost.

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The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this Report:

Contract timetables for school buses in Wootton Bassett and Lyneham area.