

DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR HIGHWAYS, STREETSCENE AND BROADBAND - CLLR JOHN THOMSON

HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORT SERVICE

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REFERENCE: HSB-44-14

**CHANGES TO EDUCATION TRANSPORT FOR POST-16 STUDENTS,
GRAMMAR SCHOOL PUPILS, AND THE 'CONTINUITY TRANSPORT'
POLICY**

Purpose of Report

In order to achieve the saving target approved in setting the 2014/15 budget, to decide whether to increase the student charge for post-16 education transport; introduce a charge for transport to grammar schools; and withdraw assistance for 'continuity transport'.

Consultation

A public consultation was carried out during September and October 2014 to ascertain the views of those affected, and to help assess the impact of the proposals. Letters were sent to the headteachers / principals and chair of governors of affected schools and colleges, and to the three Dioceses, and a fact sheet and questionnaire were made available through the consultation pages on the Council's website. Schools and colleges were encouraged to draw this to the attention of parents and students. The consultation was further publicised by means of a press release, which was widely reported, and a copy of the consultation documents was circulated to all Wiltshire Council Members. There was a good rate of response to the consultation with 305 replies received. A summary of the outcome is attached as **Appendix 1**, and some of the main findings are referred to in the report below.

Options Considered

The following options have been considered:

- (i) Before the current proposals were developed and as part of the review of discretionary education transport that was included in the 2014-15 Financial Plan, the option was considered of seeking to reduce the Council's expenditure on post-16 and grammar school transport by asking the schools and colleges to make a contribution. A letter was sent seeking the views of the schools and colleges on this proposal, but the response was clear that due to their own funding pressures this was an option that they were not able to agree to.
- (ii) The option of withdrawing all assistance for post-16 and grammar school transport (as has already happened in some other local authorities) was also considered. However, as this would have potentially led to the complete withdrawal of some transport services, leaving students with no transport to school or college, it was considered preferable to increase or impose charges rather than withdraw assistance altogether.

- (iii) Having considered the responses to the consultation, a change has been made to the proposals (as detailed in the main report) such that post-16 students attending the grammar schools will be subject to the normal post-16 scheme eligibility criteria and charges rather than the higher charge that will apply for grammar school transport.
- (iv) A number of other options were suggested by respondents to the consultation, and these are noted and commented on in **Appendix 1**. Many involved making the savings instead in other areas of council activity, and some others (for example the suggestion of 'spreading the burden' by imposing a smaller charge on all children who currently receive free home to school transport) would not be permitted by law. There were, however, some suggested amendments that could be considered as ways of mitigating the impacts of the proposals that are referred to in the main report. These are listed below as options for the Cabinet Member to consider when making his decision:
- (v) Post-16 transport - to introduce either a lesser increase in the full rate charge, or an intermediate charge between the full rate and lower rate. This would, however, either reduce the overall saving that would be achieved, or mean that the full rate or lower rate charges would have to be further increased to pay for a reduced 'middle rate' charge.
- (vi) Grammar school transport – either to reduce the proposed charge; or offer a reduced rate charge for pupils from low income families; or special charging arrangements for families with more than one child paying the charge. However, any of these would reduce the saving that would be achieved and would also possibly lead to challenge from those attending parental choice schools elsewhere in the county, for whom the Council does not give any assistance with transport costs even for those on low incomes (except for children who meet the criteria for statutory free transport under the 'extended provisions' of the Education Act, which continues to apply to all schools including the grammar schools).
- (vii) Continuity transport - to retain continuity assistance, but only in certain defined circumstances; for example, for low income families and in cases where their move has been due to factors beyond their control. It is not known by how much this might reduce the expected savings, as no information is currently collected from those who apply about family income or the circumstances surrounding the decision to move house. It is also not clear how many of those who might qualify under such a policy would, if the scheme was withdrawn, be able to successfully appeal on the grounds of exceptional circumstances.

Reason for Decision

To achieve financial savings in support of the Council's financial plan.

DECISION MADE

I approve that:

- (i) The full rate charge for post-16 transport will be increased from its current level of £446 to a new rate of £625 a year from September 2015. As at present, this will be payable either as a single amount in advance, or in eight instalments between August and March. It is not proposed to make any increase in the charge for low income families, which will remain at £156 a year. The proposal will also not affect students who require transport on the grounds of special educational needs or disability, to whom the current charges of £446 or £156 a year will continue to apply.
- (ii) The Council will continue to arrange transport for students in years 7 to 11 attending the Salisbury grammar schools, but the cost of doing so will be recovered by making a charge of £676 per annum per student. There will be no reduction in the charge for low income families, but the schools will be encouraged to provide bursaries for individual cases of need. Charges will be phased in starting in September 2015 and will apply only to new pupils starting at the school in September 2015 and each successive year. The charge will be payable either as a single amount in advance, or in eight instalments between August and March. The Council is required by legislation to continue to provide free transport for pupils up to age 16, either where the grammar school is their nearest available school, or where family income and distance from the school meet the 'extended provisions' criteria in the Education Act (where the child is in receipt of free school meals, or the family receive Working Tax Credit at the maximum level for their case, the Council is required to provide free transport to any one of the three nearest qualifying schools where the distance to the school is between two and six miles from their home).
- (iii) For post-16 students attending the grammar schools the countywide post-16 policy and charges will apply. Although the grammar schools will not be the designated school, all sixth form pupils at the grammar schools who currently receive transport will be eligible for assistance under the post-16 scheme because the cost to the Council of providing transport to the grammar school would be no greater than the cost of providing transport to Salisbury College (the designated FE college for the area). The charges would therefore be as in (i) above; £625 for those paying the full rate, and £156 for those entitled to a reduced rate pass. (This is a change to the original proposal which was that the £676 grammar school charge, with no reduction for low income families, would apply to all pupils at the grammar schools, including those attending the sixth form).

- (iv) The Council will cease accepting new applications for continuity transport with effect from January 2015, although in some cases assistance might still be sought on the grounds of exceptional circumstances.

This decision was published on 29th December 2014 and will come into force on the 7th January 2015.

The following supporting documents are attached:

HSB-44-14 - Report
HSB-44-14 - Report App1A
HSB-44-14 - Report App1B
HSB-44-14 - Report App1C
HSB-44-14 - Report App2

Date: 29 December 2014

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Cllr John Thomson
Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member
for Highways, Streetscene and Broadband