

Summary of representations received and issues raised

(responses received in the Education Transport team by 8 August 2011).

Total responses received **240**

Of which;

From individuals (mainly parents) 227

From schools and church representatives 13

Those from schools and church organisations were from;

Chair of Governors, St Augustine's RC College, Trowbridge
 Education Dept, Bath and Wells CE Diocese
 Headteacher, St Joseph's RC Secondary School, Salisbury
 Headteacher, St Georges RC Primary School, Warminster
 Director of Education, Clifton RC Diocese
 Father JP Coulon, Parish Priest, Devizes
 Cannon Liam O'Driscoll, Parish Priest, Trowbridge
 Headteacher St Augustine's RC College, Trowbridge
 Chair of Governors, Christ the king RC Primary School, Amesbury
 Father R Northey, Parish Priest, Melksham
 Headteacher, St Joseph's RC Primary School, Devizes
 School Governors, St Patricks School, Corsham

Comments made by these organisations have been included in the summary below.

134 letters were exactly the same

130 respondents live in the Devizes area

In addition, a petition of 450+ signatures was considered by Council on 12 July. A further petition of approximately 250 signatures was presented to the Prime Minister.

NB 1 Some respondents contacted more than one person in the Council (e.g. local member, leader, Cabinet members, officers). These have been recorded as a single response.

NB 2 The majority of responses (approx 56%) were the same letter received from different people. These have been recorded as separate responses.

Issues raised

Below is a summary of the issues raised, and the number of times each issue was mentioned. A brief response is given in italics below each issue.

A folder including all the responses is available for inspection in the **Members' Room**.

This proposal discriminates against / denies a faith preference. The Prime Minister holds faith schools in high regard. The law encourages local authorities to support faith schools. (mentioned in 171 responses)

The Council recognises the wish of some parents for their children to attend a faith school. However, there is no legal duty on the Council to provide transport, and it has to balance the cost of maintaining the current level of assistance against the need to respond to the significant financial pressures now facing all local authorities. The Council has stated that it will support schools to make their own transport arrangements so that as far as is possible, children are able to continue to attend faith schools where their parents express a preference to do so.

Although the Prime Minister may have expressed this view, the Government has not offered local councils any additional support to fund the costs of transport, and the overall reduction in local authority funding has meant that all areas of discretionary provision have had to come under increasing scrutiny.

The law requires local authorities to 'have regard' to parents' wishes for their children to attend a faith school. However, it does not require local authorities to provide transport (except for low income families). Local authorities are having to make difficult decisions about what services they will continue to provide given the requirement by Government to significantly reduce public spending during the course of this parliament

A proper consultation should be carried out (mentioned in 182 responses)

The Council has written to parents, schools and the Diocese making it clear how representations can be made about the proposals, both in writing and by attending the Cabinet meeting. The responses received are reported below and will inform Cabinet's decision. The decision will be made at the cabinet meeting, no decision had been made prior to the letter being sent out. A high level meeting has also been held between members of the Cabinet, the Head of St Augustine's School, and a representative of the Clifton Diocese.

The changes should be phased in, not cease at once / it is unfair to withdraw this for those already at a school or starting next term (mentioned in 143 responses)

Phased withdrawal was considered as an option at the early stages, but rejected as the Council would have to continue providing most of the existing transport until numbers travelling had reduced to the point where buses could be withdrawn, or arrangements made for the funding and operation to be transferred to another body such as the school or a parents' club. A revised proposal for phased withdrawal, with transitional funding provided to the schools to assist them with providing alternative transport, is included as Option 3 in the report. This would however defer the majority of the financial savings until 2015/16 and later.

Some children will need to move to other schools – this will be unsettling. GCSE students may have to change schools halfway through their course. The Council has not considered the wider impact of unsettling pupils and how this will affect communities. (mentioned in 167 responses)

It is recognised that, as the Council is having to make difficult decisions, some parents may also have to make difficult choices about their child's place of education and that this would be unsettling. The Council has stated that it will support schools to make their own transport arrangements so that as far as is possible, children are able to continue to attend the same school.

It is recognised that GCSE students part way through their exam course could be affected by a change of school at such an important time. To minimise the risk of this happening, the recommendation in the report is to adopt a revised proposal option 2) that would provide the schools with transitional funding to assist with providing transport for students who are already in the final years of their GCSE studies.

There will not be enough spaces at other schools if children need to transfer, and the Council will not make the savings it expects as it will have to provide transport to the next nearest available school (mentioned in 149 responses)
The risk of this occurring has been evaluated and taken into account in estimating the expected financial savings.

Faith schools contribute significantly to the educational standards achieved in Wiltshire (mentioned in 159 responses)

The Council acknowledges the significant contribution to educational standards made by faith schools. The former Wiltshire County Council's decision to provide assistance with transport to faith schools over twenty years ago has enabled such schools to develop and flourish in that time. However, this help has always been at the discretion of the local authority and is not required in law, and the financial pressures facing the Council have necessitated a review of all discretionary provision.

The RC community already contribute 10% of school costs through church collection plates (mentioned in 9 responses)

The contribution to school costs made by the Church is acknowledged, but does not diminish the need to review the affordability of discretionary transport assistance at a time of increased financial pressures.

This proposal will result in an increase in car use, impacting on the environment / health and safety (mentioned in 169 responses)

The Council has stated that it will support the schools to make their own transport arrangements, with the aim of ensuring that transport continues to be available for those who want to use it. This would help to mitigate any adverse environmental or health and safety impacts.

There is no other transport available in rural areas (mentioned in 6 responses)

It is recognised that those in more rural areas may have difficulties accessing transport, and that schools may have to investigate alternative ways of providing cost-effective transport (for example car sharing) in some places.

This subject should be scrutinised by Children's Services Select Committee (mentioned in 1 response)

The report is being considered by Children's Services Select Committee on 22 July.

It places a greater financial pressure on parents. Some households will not be able to meet the new transport costs. (mentioned in 165 responses)

Children from households with the lowest incomes will continue to be entitled to free transport. It is acknowledged that if parents have to pay a higher proportion of the transport costs, or make their own arrangements, those who are on relatively low incomes but are above the qualifying threshold for free transport, may find difficulty in meeting the cost. However, this would depend on the charging arrangements made by the school for any new arrangements that they put into place.

Unfortunately, where an educational or faith preference is being made, there is generally no responsibility placed on local authorities to assist with transport, and given the financial pressures faced by local authorities the Council has had to review its ability to continue to provide assistance in these circumstances .

The Council will still need to provide transport to local schools for many children so full savings will not be realised (mentioned in 138 responses)
In the vast majority of cases, transport already exists to the local school and in most cases children who transfer to a local school (and are entitled to free transport) could be accommodated at no additional cost to the Council.

Wiltshire has not been affected by Government cuts as much as other authorities (mentioned in 11 responses)
Following its move to unitary status, the Council has been better placed than many other local authorities in its ability to respond to the need for spending reductions. However, it has still been necessary to review all areas of discretionary spending in order to respond to these and other financial pressures such as the rising demand for services due to demographic and social changes.

This is against the Government policy allowing preference (mentioned in 168 responses)
The law regarding school admissions allows parents to express a preference for a particular school, even if that is not the nearest one. The law regarding school transport entitlement only makes local authorities responsible in cases where the nearest school is attended and when certain distance criteria are also met. The Council's policy has always been that it will not fund transport assistance for children attending a preferred school for educational or other reasons; the proposed withdrawal of assistance for children attending a preferred school for faith reasons would (if approved) bring the policy for denominational preference into line with that which already applies for families who express a preference for other reasons.

Other issues raised (each mentioned in a small number of responses)

This will lead to a reduction in funding for the school as the numbers on roll drop

**Non-faith parents will take up places at the school and change the ethos.
Religious teaching is important to us**

**This discriminates against lower incomes.
I will have to give up work to take my children to school – this contravenes my human right to work**

This will affect parents whose children can't access public transport – it will not be possible to drop and collect children by car

This will result in children from the same family attending more than one school

Parents will car-share, more cars on the road

The Council should use the money wasted in other areas before taking from this group

This should be postponed for 12 months to allow more time for alternative plans