

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET COUNCIL

EARLY YEARS, CHILDREN AND YOUTH POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Monday 22nd October, 2012

Present:- Councillors: Sally Davis (Chair), Ian Gilchrist (Vice-Chair), Liz Hardman, Mathew Blankley and Anthony Clarke (In place of David Veale)

Co-opted Voting Members:- David Williams and Mrs T Daly

Co-opted Non-voting Members:- Chris Batten

Co-opted Member of the Home to School Transport Review Steering Group:- Ian Harvey

Also in attendance: Kevin Amos (Parent Support Services Manager), Mike Bowden (Divisional Director - Service Development) and Lauren Rushen (Overview and Scrutiny Support Officer)

46 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

47 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chairman drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

48 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillors Sarah Bevan and David Veale had sent their apologies to the Panel. Councillor Anthony Clarke was present for the duration of the meeting as a substitute for Councillor David Veale.

49 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

50 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

51 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE DEPUTATIONS, STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING

The Chairman announced that all public statements would be made under agenda item 7.

52 HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT REVIEW: CONTRIBUTOR SESSION BACKGROUND BRIEFING DOCUMENT

The Parent Support Services Manager gave the Panel a summary of the current policy of the Council.

He explained that the overall budget for Home to School Transport was currently around £4m and that that was broken down into the following categories.

Statutory Distances

A Local Authority has a duty to provide transport if the statutory distance to the nearest appropriate school is exceeded. Statutory walking distance” is two miles for children aged under eight, and three miles for children aged eight and over. The measurement of the “statutory walking distance” is not necessarily the shortest distance by road. It is measured by the shortest route along which a child, accompanied as necessary, may walk with reasonable safety.

Under the current statutory distance policy of the Council they currently transport 957 children at an annual cost of £850,000.

Hazardous Route

Where children live within “statutory walking distance” of their nearest appropriate school a local authority has to make travel arrangements where the nature of the route is such that a child cannot reasonably be expected to walk (accompanied as necessary) in reasonable safety.

Under the current hazardous route policy of the Council they currently transport 833 children at an annual cost of £830,000.

Denominational

Local authorities, in fulfilling their duties in relation to travel, are required to have regard to the wish of a parent to have their child educated at a particular school on the grounds of the parents’ religion or belief.

Assistance with denominational transport is currently provided to the nearest appropriate school if the statutory distances are met and the child is baptised in the relevant faith.

In September 2007 the Council introduced a charging policy for children qualifying for denominational transport. The current charge is £300 per annum [£50 per term]. For the 2nd and 3rd child a reduction of 50% is given. No further charge is made for

additional children if a family has more than 3 children travelling. If a family is in receipt of free school meals or maximum working tax credit they are exempt from the charge.

The Council currently spends £310,000 on transport to denominational schools. The total annual income collected from parents is £65,000. The annual net cost is therefore £245,000. A total of 189 children pay the full charge and 55 children pay the 50% reduction. A further 62 children travel but are exempt from the charge.

Special Educational Needs [age 0-16].

Transport assistance is given if the pupil is attending their nearest Special School and the statutory distances are met. When the distances are not met the following criteria are considered.

- The nature of the child's disability.
- Family circumstances
- The pupil's social skills.
- The nature of the journey.

The Council currently transports 271 pupils at an annual cost of £1.45m.

Children in Care

To enable continuity of education when a child is placed in care consideration is given to assisting with transport so a child can remain at their existing school. This is normally provided when a child first comes in to care, is in short term care, is in Key Stage 4 or at a time of transition in years 2-3 or 6 -7.

We currently provide transport for 25 pupils at an annual cost of £70,000. The majority of transport will require an individual taxi due to the length of the journey and the fact we have no existing transport we can use.

Medical

Local Authorities must make travel arrangements for children with a mobility or temporary medical problem which means they could not reasonably be expected to walk to school e.g. where the child has a broken leg.

We currently transport a small number of children under this policy for short periods of time at an annual cost of £15,000 per annum.

Post 16 SEN Transport

Travel arrangements for post 16 students will be considered if they are attending the nearest appropriate further education provision and:

- Have had a statement of Special Educational Needs, or medical or physical difficulties, which means they are unable to walk the distance of 3 miles (accompanied as necessary) and
- Are studying a full time course

The Council currently transports 31 pupils at an annual cost of £95,000. 14 of these students are in receipt of Disability Living allowance. If a pupil is in receipt of the Disability Living Allowance with the inclusion of the mobility allowance they are charged £50 per term in-line with the fare paying passenger scheme.

Extended rights to free travel for low income families

Children from low income groups are those who are entitled to free school meals, or those whose families are in receipt of their maximum level of Working Tax Credit.

From September 2007, children aged eight, but under age 11 from low income families must have travel arrangements made where they live more than two miles from their nearest qualifying school.

From September 2008 children who are 11 or over from low income families must have travel arrangements made to one of their three nearest schools where they live more than two miles, but not more than six miles from that school.

Where a parent has expressed a preference for a school on the parent's religion or belief, then a child aged 11 to 16 must also have travel arrangements made for them to the nearest suitable school preferred on grounds of religion or belief, where they live more than two miles, but not more than 15 miles from that school.

The Council currently transports 150 pupils at an annual cost of £90,000 under this policy.

Fare Paying Scheme

Where there are spare seats on vehicles carrying entitled passengers we can offer these seats to non-entitled children. The current charge is £300 per annum [£50 per term]. For the 2nd and 3rd child a reduction of 50% is given. No further charge is made for additional children if a family has more than 3 children travelling. If a family is in receipt of free school meals or maximum working tax credit they are exempt from the charge.

The Council currently transports 120 children collecting annual income of £30,000.

How are children transported?

The Council's Transport Services Team is responsible for contracted out Home to School Transport – This utilises 50 or so contractors and daily there are 221 school routes to 68 locations carrying over 2000 students. A lot of the work is orientated to purchasing at lowest cost and route planning as efficiently as possible. Where appropriate children can be given a public bus pass. Contracted transport involves coach, minibus and some taxi transport.

Transport Services also covers safeguarding, contractor reliability etc. There are 52 Guide Escorts who go on routes where the children have special educational needs.

Home to School transport needs are also partially met by the In House Passenger Fleet – this covers 30 vehicles and 26 Drivers. Most of the vehicles are specialist for wheel chairs and the like and most of the work done is for Special Educational Needs provision. To optimise efficiency, best use is made out of any spare capacity – for this reason the drivers also cover Dial a Rides, Treatment Centres, School Meal deliveries etc. This fills in the time between the morning and afternoon runs. The drivers in this type of work need to be of high quality. In house passenger management also has a role looking after CRB's, contractor quality assurance and dealing with 'safe pick up' disputes.

The Chairman invited the members of the public to make their statements.

Antonia Corrigan, Vice Chair of Governors at St. Gregory's Catholic College addressed the Panel. She explained that her two boys had gone to the school and that the school itself was very diverse. She added that the Christian values of the school were very important to the families of the pupils and that it would have a dramatic effect on the school if any part of the Home to School Transport measures were relinquished.

Ian Harvey asked if she knew how many pupils currently were in receipt of the service at St. Gregory's.

Antonia Corrigan replied that she thought the figure would be around 1 in 8 pupils.

Raymond Friel, Executive Headteacher of St Gregory's and St Mark's addressed the Panel. A full copy of his statement is available from the Panel's Minute Book, a summary is set out below.

"I appreciate that Home to School Transport has many dimensions, but I would like to focus on denominational transport.

First of all I would like to acknowledge again the vision of B&NES Council in supporting diversity and choice in the educational system by providing £2m in capital funding to allow St Gregory's and St Mark's to build a sixth form provision with a Christian foundation. Surveys carried out by the Council showed a great demand in the Authority for this type of education. So no-one will accuse this Council of being against faith schools, quite the reverse. However, the issue we are faced with today and the prospect of removing or reducing denominational transport subsidy could in my view dismantle the Council's strategy to promote diversity and choice. Let me explain why."

"If Catholic families who live more than 3 miles from St Gregory's have their subsidy removed, then many of those families on low or modest income will not be able to afford the cost of transport to St Gregory's and will have to send their child to the nearest school. They will thereby effectively be deprived of their first preference school and their parental choice. If subsidy is removed, there could well be a reduction in the numbers of Catholic children coming to St Gregory's, as there was between 2005 and 2007 when free transport was reduced to subsidy. At that time the numbers of Catholic children fell by 10%."

"My final point is in support of communities who are not here today. The local Polish and Filipino communities, because of their Catholic culture, are naturally drawn to St

Gregory's as the first choice of school for their children. St Gregory's has the highest number of children in the Authority who do not have English as a first language and we have developed our expertise to look after them.

These families mostly do not live in Bath and rely on denominational subsidy to get their children to St Gregory's. If that subsidy is removed, their first choice will be taken away and their children may have to go to their nearest school which may not have any resource or expertise to look after them.

I appeal on their behalf that you continue to support them and others to get their children to their preferred school and continue to support your own admirable strategy of developing diversity and choice."

Penelope Restorick addressed the Panel. A full copy of her statement is available from the Panel's Minute Book, a summary is set out below.

"I have 4 daughters; Phoebe has started this year at St. Gregory's, whilst Lilah and our twins Imogen and Evie attend St. Benedict's. All 4 attend the catchment school for area based on denominational beliefs; we live in Peasedown St John.

All 4 of our children go to school on the subsidized transport that is called Denominational transport. We pay a contribution for this service and are happy to do so to ensure our children get to school timely and safely.

Without this transport I would need to be at Odd Down in Bath to drop off at St. Gregory's whilst at the same time being at St. Benedict's in Midsomer Norton.

I'm a working mother whose husband also works.... So tell me how do I manage if there is no transport? We both need to work, but my children undoubtedly need to attend school....Somewhat of a dilemma I think you'll agree and not just one faced by my family, but by countless other families who are actually only able to get their children to school because of this most valuable service."

"Not every family has a car, and many of those that do are struggling with the rising cost of fuel. Let's also not forget that working parents are unable to just dip out of work to drop off or pick up their children without seriously impacting on their salary or even their employment.

Consider the situation if somehow we were all suddenly forced to drive our children to school instead of them going by transport, 1 coach off the road has the potential to add 50 cars to that school route every morning and afternoon. What effect does that increase of hundreds, possibly thousands of extra cars do to B&NES road infrastructure? I suggest with all these extra cars on the road the Council will need more money for their highways budget!!?!"

"I understand money is always an issue and all services require a slice of the pie, but B&NES is by no means a poor council and given that our children need to be encouraged and nurtured to become adults of the future, surely a huge priority of this Council should be ensuring our children attend and arrive at school safely and on time, a service that is currently working extremely well and offers ALL parents the ability to make the right choice for their child's education.

Whether your child is at a particular school because you thought it better than their local one, is their catchment school or is a school that offers a Faith based approach.... we as parents were given the right to make that choice knowing this service was there to support us.

We made the choice about our children's schools just like thousands of other parents. Now I trust the Council will consider that All those children still deserve this service and not discriminate against any one category or indeed consider removing this service from the majority."

Lily Webb addressed the Panel. She informed them that she had joined St. Gregory's as a pupil in September and that she thought it was an amazing school. She explained that her local school did not teach Religious Education and was therefore very happy to have gained a place at St. Gregory's.

She asked the Panel to consider the impact on transport and the environment if the subsidy was removed.

Cathy Reynolds addressed the Panel. She explained that she had two children and chose St. Gregory's for them to attend specifically because of its religious beliefs. She added that as the children are our future they need to be prepared for school in the best way possible and that even if the nearest school to her was outstanding she would still choose to send them to a Catholic school.

Tony Nicholas, Headteacher of St. Benedict's Catholic Primary School addressed the Panel. He stated that it was proud to be a Catholic school and that around 50% of the 140 pupils were Catholic. He said that the school would struggle if the transport subsidy was removed.

Councillor Liz Hardman asked how many of the pupils were from B&NES.

Tony Nicholas replied that the figure would be around 60%.

Nikolay, who has a child at St. Gregory's addressed the Panel. He explained that he lived in Radstock and was very pleased to have the opportunity to send his child to a Catholic school. He said that it was important for him to know that his child could get to and from school safely.

Tess Daly asked if the £245,000 associated with denominational transport was removed, how many of the 306 pupils would still receive some form of transport assistance.

The Parent Support Services Manager replied that 62 pupils were exempt from the charge because of low income and therefore they would still receive a service.

The Chairman then asked the Policy Development and Scrutiny Project Officer to explain the next steps of the review.

The Policy Development and Scrutiny Project Officer explained that the questionnaire deadline had been extended to November 2nd. A period of analysis would then take place with the possibility of some focus group meetings taking place

in November / December. She said that the final report, with recommendations to the Council's Cabinet would be published in January 2013 and that the Cabinet would then have six weeks to respond.

She added that if any changes are to be made to Bath & North East Somerset Council's Home to School Transport policies, these would be announced in Summer 2013 and come into force from September 2014.

Cathy Reynolds asked what power, if any does the Council have over First Bus to reduce the cost of fares.

The Chairman replied that the Council has a working dialogue with them, but as such does not have any power to influence their charges.

Raymond Friel asked for the term EIA (Equalities Impact Assessment) to be explained to the public.

The Policy Development and Scrutiny Project Officer replied that an EIA is a process that is carried out when decisions are made to show both the positives and negatives of that decision. She added that as part of the questionnaire process she had worked with officers from the Corporate Equalities team.

Antonia Corrigan commented that many pupils would not have access to a direct First Bus service to their school.

The Chairman commented that the focus groups may well take place at some of the concerned schools such as St. Gregory's and St. Benedict's.

Raymond Friel and Tony Nicholas said that the Panel would be most welcome to visit them.

The Chairman thanked everybody for their attendance and contribution.

The meeting ended at 5.35 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services