

<b>Bath &amp; North East Somerset Council</b>	
MEETING	<b>Corporate Policy Development &amp; Scrutiny Panel</b>
MEETING	<b>25<sup>th</sup> November 2025</b>
TITLE:	<b>Home to School Transport – Financial Update</b>
WARD:	All
<b>AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM</b>	
<b>List of attachments to this report:</b> None	

## **1 THE ISSUE**

- 1.1 The Panel has requested an update on the operation and financial position of the council's Home to School Transport Service.

## **2 RECOMMENDATION**

The Panel is asked to;

- 2.1 Note and discuss the financial update.

## **3 THE REPORT**

### **3.1 Introduction**

3.1.1 The provision of home to school transport is a vital service that enables children to access education. For many families, particularly those with children who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), this service is not just a logistical necessity, it is a lifeline that ensures their children can attend school safely and consistently.

3.1.2 As a local authority, we have a statutory responsibility to support eligible children in accessing education. In fulfilling this duty, we play a crucial role in protecting some of our most vulnerable residents — children with complex and challenging needs who often require tailored transport arrangements. These services are not only essential for their educational development but also for their social inclusion and overall wellbeing.

However, the cost of delivering home to school transport has been rising significantly in recent years across England, with the most acute pressures seen in the SEND sector. Increasing demand, more complex individual needs, and a constrained provider market are contributing to escalating costs that are placing considerable strain on council budgets. This report outlines the current financial pressures, explores the underlying drivers, and sets out how we are managing

these challenges while continuing to uphold our commitment to supporting vulnerable children.

### **3.2 Services provided**

A school pupil is considered to be an 'eligible child' if they meet one or more criteria based on the distance they live from the school or if that route is unsafe, if they cannot reasonably be expected to walk to school due to SEND, or mobility issues, or low-income families. The council uses the criteria as set out in statutory guidance under the Education Act 1996.

#### **Distance Criteria:**

- Under 8 years old: Lives more than 2 miles from their nearest suitable school.
- Aged 8 or over: Lives more than 3 miles from their nearest suitable school.

#### **Special Educational Needs, Disability, or Mobility issues:**

- If a child cannot reasonably be expected to walk to school due to special educational needs, disability, or mobility problems, even if accompanied, they are entitled to free transport.

#### **Unsafe Walking Route:**

- If the route to school is deemed unsafe, even if within the statutory walking distance, the child is eligible.

#### **Low-Income Families:**

- Children from families entitled to free school meals may qualify under extended criteria, such as:
  - Aged between 8 and 11 and who live more than two miles from the nearest school
  - Aged 11-16 and attending one of the three nearest suitable schools between 2–6 miles away.
  - Attending a school up to 15 miles away if it's the nearest school preferred on grounds of religion or belief.

The Passenger Transport team provides the council's Home to School Transport service. In 2024/25 academic year, it transported approximately 2,700 children each school day. This consisted of the following (please note, the numbers of children transported to school fluctuates on a daily basis):

Table 1: number of children transported during 2024/25 academic year

1,859 mainstream children	Children attending mainstream schools, eligible through meeting distance, unsafe route or low-income criteria.
703 Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) children	Children attending mainstream or SEND through meeting distance, unsafe route or low income and SEND criteria.
55 Alternative Provision children	Mainstream children attending primary and secondary aged alternative provision schools due to permanent exclusion or preventative measures where the child is at risk of exclusion. Distance, unsafe route and low income criteria eligibility have to be met.
55 Hospital Education Reintegration Service (HERS) children	Children attending the HERS school due to being medically unable to attend their registered school.

The Education Eligibility team receives a transport application from a child's family, which is assessed according to eligibility criteria. If the child is deemed eligible, the Passenger Transport team is notified that transport is required. The council's eligibility policy was recently revised and adopted via a Single Member Decision in June 2024, after consideration at the Children, Adults, Health & Wellbeing Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel in May 2024.

Mainstream transport is arranged after considering:

- available public transport routes
- seat availability on existing contracted routes
- the safety of walking routes to any existing pick-up points.

SEND transport is arranged by considering:

- seat availability on existing routes,
- the needs of the new child
- the needs of the other children already using the route.

If there are no available seats on existing contracted routes, no existing routes to the school, or no suitable transport options, a new route is tendered.

## **Transport Options**

Transport is arranged following a clear transport hierarchy to mitigate costs - starting with the use of scheduled public transport, through large contracted vehicles, Personal Transport Budgets paid to parents and carers to transport their own child/children, specialist internal fleet provision, small contracted vehicles and only in very specific cases single occupancy taxis.

The council owns thirteen 16-seat low floor coachbuilt wheelchair accessible mini-buses, which have been specifically built and equipped to transport passengers with differing mobility needs. It now also owns seven cars and twenty drivers are employed as well as 40 guide escorts to help those SEND children who require assistance on their journeys. The drivers and guide escorts are specifically recruited and trained to be able to work with children with a wide range of needs. We have a duty to safeguard children using the transport we provide to ensure they are emotionally supported and protected from risks, as well as ensuring they are physically safe.

Outside of times when not in use for school transport, the council's minibuses provide the Bath Dial-a-Ride service. The cars are also used outside of 'typical' school start and end times to transport some Alternative Provision and Hospital Education Reintegration Service (HERS) pupils who have different school times.

### **Personal Travel Budgets (PTBs)**

These are payments offered to families of eligible children, particularly those with SEND, to arrange their own transport to school. This allows parents to tailor travel to their child's needs and can be more cost-effective for the council compared to contracted transport services. PTBs are only provided when safe, appropriate, and financially viable.

### **Independent Travel Training**

This training helps young people, especially those with SEND, learn how to travel to school safely on their own. It promotes confidence and independence, and can reduce long-term reliance on council-funded transport, where appropriate.

## **3.3 Independent review of Home to School Transport in B&NES**

The council benefits from an experienced and well-performing team that delivers home to school transport efficiently and with a clear focus on value for money. This has been independently validated through a recent external review by consultants PeopleToo in autumn 2024, who confirmed the team's effectiveness in managing complex transport arrangements and delivering positive outcomes for children and families.

The consultants commented "Compared to other local authorities supported by Peopletoo, B&NES demonstrates better performance across many analysed metrics." They identified the following strengths in B&NES:

- We are receiving good rates on prices for external 6-8 seater, 16-seater minibus and coach routes when compared to benchmark rates.

- Generally, the most frequently used external transport providers offer good value, across all vehicle types [ie taxis, minibuses, coaches]
- Internally delivered routes have a lower average cost than comparable routes delivered by external providers.
- Lower than average use of guide escorts suggests the appraisal of whether to deploy their use on a route is robust in B&NES.
- The proportion of children with an Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP) supported by transport is lower than comparable authorities.
- Personal Travel Budget uptake amongst SEND pupils is 12%, which is higher than the average rate in comparable councils of 9%, but best practice uptake is 15%, suggesting room for improvement.

They also noted the following potential opportunities:

- The level of out-of-area routes is high; increasing the volume of placements in-district would reduce costs.
- The cost of taxis is significantly higher than the benchmark. A commissioning strategy and consideration of in-house models is key.
- B&NES has a lower than average uptake of Independent Travel Training (ITT) (1% vs 3%). There's potential to grow the cohort of children completing ITT.

Commentary on these opportunities is given in section 3.8.

Separate to this review, B&NES was an active participant in the development of the recent Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (ADEPT) toolkit for local authorities on SEND Home to School Transport. B&NES' service is cited in the guidance document as an example of good practice for our review and analysis of single occupancy taxi routes and for having established a cross-service project team to enable best use of resources.

B&NES is also a member of the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ACTO), which brings together council officers who are responsible for passenger transport services such as Home to School Transport. Our team manager is on the ACTO School Transport Committee, which enables the council to keep up to date on different ways of working across the country.

### **3.4 Improvements & efficiencies already undertaken**

To address the overspend in Home to School Transport and to improve the service delivery, a cross-service project team was set up 2023 that included officers from Passenger Transport, Education, Finance, IT and Business Intelligence, and overseen by directors from Education and Place Management. The project team has driven through the changes and improvements described here.

Prior to 2024, there were separate transport teams in Education and Passenger Transport, which were in different directorates covered by two different finance

managers. These were brought together into a combined team under a new manager in order to provide a clear focus to drive operational and financial improvements. The new team is responsible for personal travel budgets, independent travel training, mainstream and SEND transport, as well as community transport, Bath Dial-a-Ride, private hire and contract bus routes. They have retained close contact with the SEND team in Education.

The budget for Home to School Transport moved from Education to Highways Delivery in 2024/25 in order that the team delivering the service also managed its financial performance.

During 2024/25, various improvements were made to IT systems and processes within the Home to School Transport team to reduce time spent on administrative tasks. A Business Lead post was also created, the purpose of which is to undertake more thorough analysis of transport options and routes in order to achieve better value for money. Previously, there was not sufficient capacity within the team to do this.

### **Introduction of council-owned cars**

Historically, councils could operate minibuses (9-16 seats) under a Section 19 Permit (from the 1985 Transport Act). This section was later amended to include cars with 8 seats or fewer. However, B&NES could not operate cars because legally it was not possible to hold both a Section 19 Permit as well as a commercial PSV Operator's Licence, which is needed to run our minibuses. The withdrawal of Section 19 in relation to cars in around 2022 left a gap in the licensing regime for 'not-for-profit' operation of vehicles in the 'less than 9 – 16 passenger seat' class. Some local authorities started to explore methods of self-operation. Legal opinion was sought that found the self-operation as we proposed in B&NES would be 'not-for-profit' and therefore fell outside of any licensing regime. A decision was taken to invest in a small fleet of cars (8 passenger seats or less) to self-operate in place of contracted taxis, driven by drivers directly employed by B&NES.

Introduction of council-owned cars has proved very effective. Since early 2025, seven cars have been bought and seven car drivers employed which operate on routes that would have been fulfilled by taxis. The cars have been purchased second hand in order to keep the operation cost effective. Additional work is found for these cars and drivers during the normal school day which further adds to overall savings.

### **Dynamic Purchasing System**

Routes that cannot be provided by our in-house fleet of vehicles are tended through a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) and are awarded to the lowest bidder to ensure we get the best value for every journey. A DPS is a procurement system which allows approved contractors to join at any time, providing they meet the required criteria. All contractors on the DPS have the opportunity to bid on every route that is tendered which creates competition and helps to secure the lowest possible price. However, there are a limited number of transport and taxi operators in the local area. On some routes we may not receive more than a single bidder to an invitation to tender.

### 3.5 Service costs

The costs to the council of providing Home to School Transport, together with the annual budget, is summarised in the table below.

Table 2: Cost of home to school transport

Year	Cost	Budget
2018/19	£5,440,224	£4,633,370
2019/20	£5,182,502	£5,227,610
Post-Covid		
2022/23	£7,382,881	£6,454,842
2023/24	£8,893,886	£7,778,271
2024/25	£10,806,896	£9,402,709
2025/26		£11,435,130

The increased budget for 2025/26 budget includes a £1.7m uplift (on top of contract inflation, National Insurance increase, staff pay award) in recognition of the previous year's overspend and to take account of the expected growth in numbers of children being eligible for the service, together with increases in transport costs.

A sum of £350,000 has been allocated within the budget in 2025/26 to allow for the purchase of additional car transport and to employ more drivers to help reduce the use of taxis. A savings target of £600,000 has also been factored into this year's budget, to be achieved through use of council-owned cars instead of contracted taxis.

At Quarter 2 of 2025/26 we are reporting the achievement of this savings target. We will continue to look at options to use our own cars, meaning there may be further savings this financial year.

### 3.6 Service pressures – national context

In June 2025, the Local Government Association (LGA) published a report into the future of Home to School Transport based upon research involving local authorities across the country. It found that between 2021/21 and 2023/24 expenditure grew on average by more than 20% a year. Over the past decade, they estimate that the amount spent has increased by £1.23 billion.

The LGA's research found that single occupancy taxis were a key factor in increased costs. This is due to increasingly complex behavioural and medical needs, more bespoke education arrangements that prevent group transport and evolving parental expectations around transport provision. It also noted local authorities have reported that new housing developments have contributed to

the growing costs of mainstream home to school transport due to developers often being reluctant to create new school provision.

There is national interest in the impact this statutory service is having on local government finances. In July 2025, the parliamentary Public Accounts Committee announced that Home to School Transport would be included in its next programme of inquiries.

In October 2025, the National Audit Office published its report into Home to School Transport. It noted that this is one of the fastest-growing areas of spend for councils and that expenditure on the service consistently exceeds the budgeted amount. Other findings included:

- Between 2015/16 and 2023/24, local authority spend on school transport rose 106% for children with SEND compared to 9% for mainstream school transport.
- EHCPs or statements of special educational need increased by 166% between January 2015 and January 2025.
- On average, it costs local authorities five times more to provide transport per child with SEND than on other children.
- Local authorities are struggling to balance the statutory duty to provide transport for eligible children with their duty to balance their budget.

### **3.7 Service pressures in B&NES**

The number of school children transported by the council's Home to School Transport Service has been continually increasing in recent years. Whilst there has been a modest increase in mainstream children making up these numbers, there has been significant growth in transport for SEND children.

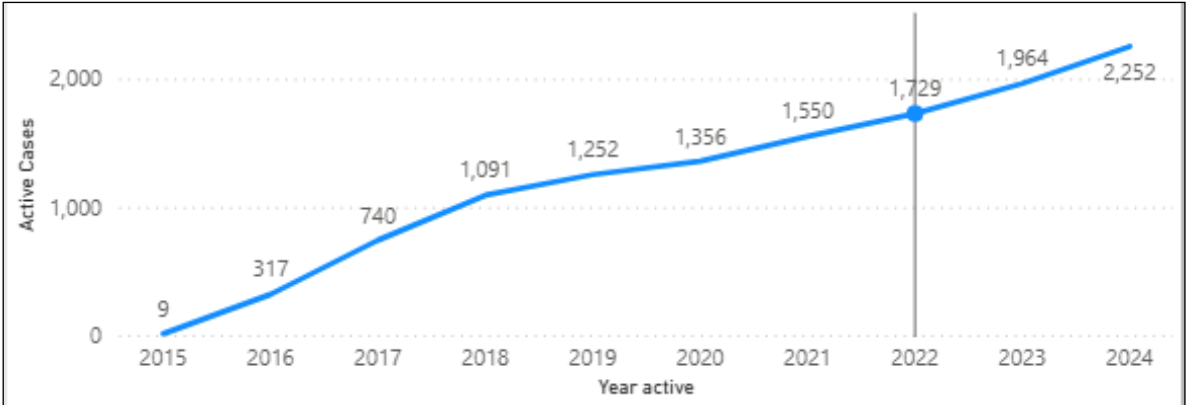
The number of B&NES children and young people needing support with special educational needs and disabilities has been steadily rising. In the academic year of September 2024 - July 2025, there were 31,881 children and young people going to school in B&NES. Around 18.8% of those children and young people needed support with SEND. This is 0.7% higher than the national average.

From early years to further education, we want learning to be a positive experience for our children and young people. We want all our children and young people to feel like they belong and that there is a consistent, inclusive experience for every child and young person in education, no matter where they go.

The number of children with EHCPs has increased significantly, as shown in Figure 1. As of 7 October 2025, the number of active EHCPs (where a child is in education) was 2,629. An EHCP does not provide automatic entitlement to free school transport, but their increase in number has led to a rise in Home to School Transport costs. This is due to the greater need for specialist provision, which often involves travel to schools further from home and the use of tailored transport arrangements such as individual taxis or guide escorts to meet specific needs.



Figure 1: Growth in active Education, Health & Care Plans



A large proportion of SEND children are being educated at special schools outside of the district because of a shortage of places within the local area. The impact of this is the journeys to school are longer and therefore cost more. This means there are fewer opportunities to coordinate children’s journeys, resulting in more individual vehicle trips to transport them. At the same time, as the demand for transport for SEND children has grown, costs of transport have also increased.

The wide geographical spread of schools that children living in B&NES are transported to by the council is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: locations of schools served by B&NES Home to School Transport (dark circles = SEND, light circles = mainstream)

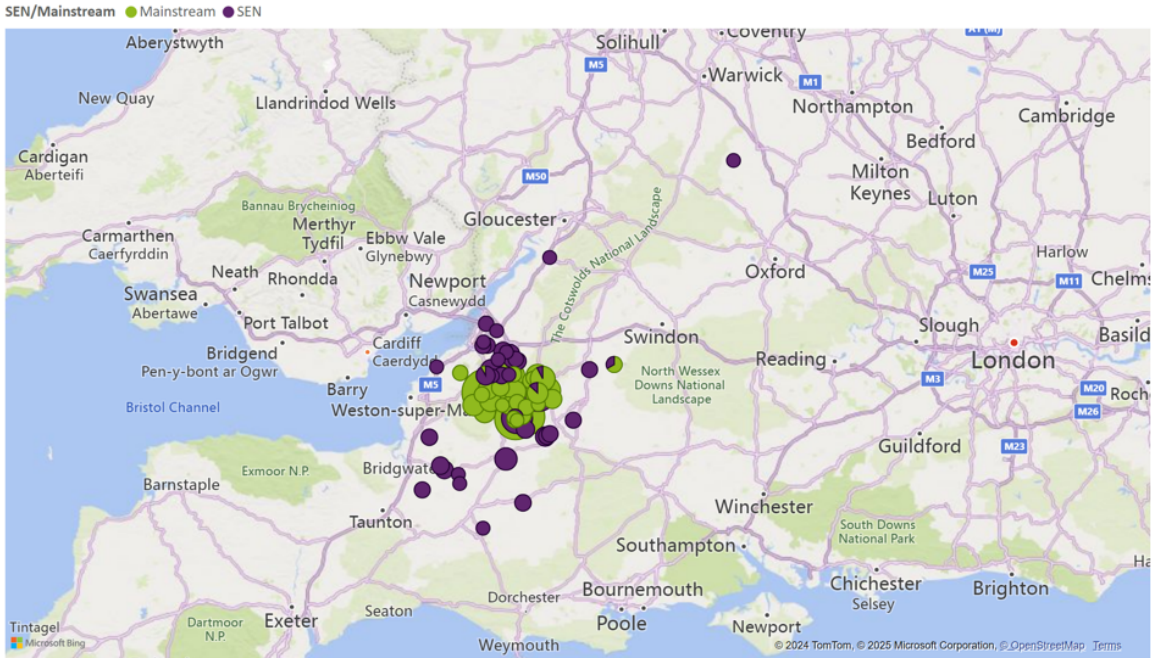


Table 2 below shows the number of children provided with Home to School Transport broken down by pupil type. Please note, the numbers are indicative since there are frequent changes throughout the year.

Table 2: Types of school pupils provided with home to school transport

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Mainstream	1,751	1,681	1,794	1,817	1,764	1,859
SEND	438	483	515	560	592	703
AP	7	14	11	24	39	55
HERS	2	9	16	27	35	55

Whilst the number of mainstream children has seen a modest increase, there have been significant increases in the number of children transported in the SEND, Alternative Provision and Hospital Education Reintegration Service eligibility categories.

The largest impact on the cost of providing Home to School Transport has been the need to use taxis, particularly for SEND children. Tables 3 and 4 below shows this increased demand.

Table 3: Number of single occupancy taxis for SEND children

2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
27	27	35	60

Table 4: Total number of SEND schools to which transport has been provided

2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
33	37	37	41	40	48

In 2024/25, the cost of taxis with a single SEND child passenger without a guide escort ranged from a daily cost of £87.50 per return journey to £283.25.

The reasons why SEND single occupancy taxis are being used has been analysed in more detail:

- 14 single occupancy taxis provided due to it being the only route to a school
- 16 single occupancy taxi routes where the child cannot share with other children to maintain a safe and positive journey.
- Other single occupancy taxi routes are being provided for logistical reasons where there is no other available route from the nearby area.

There is a need to provide guide escorts on some routes to maintain the safety of children and/or the driver.

Table 5: Total number of routes requiring a guide escort

2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
51	53	55	57	67	79

When council-employed driver and guide escort posts are vacant or if an employee is unable to work due to illness, we have to use agency staff to maintain the statutory service. In 2024/25, £670,155 was spent on agency staff. For those routes that are contracted, the contractor is required to provide an alternative driver if a driver “calls in sick”.

As the volume of children provided with transport has increased together with the number of routes, the capacity within the team has come under pressure due to a large increase in workload being undertaken by the same number of staff. This has limited the resource within the team to seek efficiencies in the options considered for the provision of transport, since the priority has to be to fulfil the statutory function of delivering eligible children safely to school every day.

### **3.8 Further improvements being explored**

We are seeking to employ further drivers and purchase more cars in order to reduce reliance on the use of taxis. We aim to make full use of all our vehicles and drivers throughout the day where possible. The team operates the Bath Dial-a-Ride service using its minibuses. There are fewer opportunities for car driver work in between school start and finish times which means additional car drivers will need to be employed on a part-time basis.

However, there are a limited number of people who will accept a role that only pays them to work at the start and end of the school day and in term time only. This means it is challenging recruiting to these specialist driver roles. We are currently exploring the possibility of combining roles in different council teams to provide full time employment that would enable us to operate more in-house cars. We expect to be able to operate two more cars by the end of 2025/26.

We have reached a point at which there is little benefit in increasing the number of minibuses operated by the council as we have already fully exploited all the available ‘additional’ work during the school day. The current fleet is fully deployed during the day on a mixture of Community Transport, NHS Patient Transport / Bath Dial-a-Ride and private hires. This ‘additional’ work helps keep the operating costs of our in-house fleet low. Purchasing our own coaches (rather than use of contractors) has also been ruled out because of the high purchase cost and the lack of opportunities to make an income from such vehicles outside of the start and end of the school day to contribute to their running costs.

We are in the process of replacing seven of our minibuses which have reached the end of their serviceable life. Three of these will be larger than the vehicles they replace and will provide us with an extra 20 seats overall.

The combining of the two former teams and creation of the Business Lead post has not yet realised its potential due to recent absences within the team. The new structure only became fully operational in October 2025 because of the need to focus on keeping the service running as demand has grown. Capacity within the team is under review to ensure the provision of this essential statutory service is sustainable as demand continues to increase. With the recent improvements and efficiency measures implemented within the Passenger Transport team, any opportunities of reducing single occupancy taxis will be explored further, following full consideration of the reasons behind each single occupancy taxi and the individual child's needs.

The Education team is currently investigating whether a mentor service could be trialled to include some element of transport provision for some SEND children as an alternative to taxis. The cost of doing this could be favourable and it would also provide a more supportive and tailored service to each child's needs, improving their overall educational outcomes.

Some education providers already arrange their own transport, and we are also looking at whether this could be extended to Alternative Provision providers.

The opportunities identified in the independent review that could generate the greatest potential efficiencies have been investigated and are being actioned as described. The review also recommended increasing the level of Independent Travel Training (ITT) and use of Personal Travel Budgets.

There are limited opportunities to exploit ITT because there are few children currently travelling on contracted routes who could move to public transport. Contracted routes tend to operate where there is no public transport. The B&NES Travel Support Service is currently performing almost 50% above capacity and we are supporting the service to expand in the near future. The current service focuses on transitions to post-16 further education placements. Potential expansion to younger age groups from year 9 are being considered, but barriers exist, including levels of public transport available in rural areas.

Similarly, Personal Travel Budgets should only be used when they can take the place of a contracted route and are therefore reliant on there being suitable public transport routes.

### **3.9 Creation of more SEND places in schools**

Ultimately, the biggest impact on the cost of providing home to school transport would be more school places within the local area to cater for SEND children. We need to use the funding that is available to us as wisely as possible. We have a plan for SEND in B&NES, our SEND Capital & Sufficiency workstream, and a crucial part of this is the creation of more SEND places in schools. so that more children and young people can stay in their local area, now and in the future.

The aims for the SEND Capital and Sufficiency workstream are as follows:

- Ensure there is sufficiency of school places and provision for children with SEND.
- Reduce lengthy journeys to the appropriate provision.

- Ensure children are educated at their most local special school. Reduce our reliance on independent placements so that we only place those whose needs cannot be met by the increased provision within B&NES.
- Develop a joined up, agile approach to SEND place planning, with dedicated capacity and systems to regularly review and respond to sufficiency (including costs) in our local area.

Current SEND capital projects include:

- Two Free Schools on the Culverhay site; a generic 120-place special school and a 55-place Alternative Provision (AP) school. Whilst both were approved by the Department of Education, the Free School programme has been paused, and we await a decision from Government. In the meantime, we continue to progress the programme from our end, such as the clearance of the site.
- A 30-place Free Special School, via the presumption process, for pupils aged 11-18 with autism and complex needs by repurposing the council owned Charlton House in Keynsham.
- Expansion of our specialist resource base/unit places in B&NES, such as the two new secondary resource bases for children with autism that opened in September 2025, each with the capacity to welcome 20 children.

## **4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS**

- 4.1 The council has statutory duties under the Education Act 1996 to provide free home-to-school transport for certain children of school age (5–16).

## **5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)**

- 5.1 The impacts of the continuing increase in demand for Home to School Transport are outlined above.

## **6 RISK MANAGEMENT**

- 6.1 A risk assessment related to the issue has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance. The service inputs into the Highways Risk Register to ensure that all service risks are considered and monitored in line with council best practice. Any significant risks are escalated through the Place Management Directorate Risk Register and into the Corporate Risk Register
- 6.2 It is important to note that the number of children eligible for Home to School Transport is expected to continue growing, especially children who need support with SEND. The transport efficiency measures outlined in this report will help control costs, but it is anticipated that the overall cost to the council of providing transport for eligible children will continue to increase for the foreseeable future.

## **7 EQUALITIES**

- 7.1 No adverse impacts have been identified as a direct result of this report. An Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed in relation to this update

because it has been provided for information and does not propose any changes to the service that could have an impact upon equalities.

## 8 CLIMATE CHANGE

8.1 No adverse impacts have been identified as a direct result of this report.

## 9 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

9.1 None.

## 10 CONSULTATION

10.1 This report was undertaken in consultation with the Director of Place Management, the Director of Education & Safeguarding, Monitoring Officer, S151 Officer and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services.

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<b>Background papers</b>	Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (2023), <i>SEND Transport Toolkit</i> <a href="https://adeptnet.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/2023-11/ADEPT%20SEND%20Transport%20Toolkit_Nov%202023_0.pdf">https://adeptnet.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/2023-11/ADEPT%20SEND%20Transport%20Toolkit_Nov%202023_0.pdf</a>  Local Government Association & Isos Partnership (2025), <i>The Future of Home to School Transport</i> <a href="https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Home%20to%20school%20transport%20report%20final%202025.pdf">https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Home%20to%20school%20transport%20report%20final%202025.pdf</a>  National Audit Office (2025), <i>Home to school transport</i> <a href="https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Home-to-School-transport.pdf">https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Home-to-School-transport.pdf</a>
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