

**Bath and North East Somerset Council
Home to School Transport Review 2012**

**A review by the Early Years, Children and Youth
Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel**

In-depth Review

Review Panel Members

Councillors:

Sally Davis (Chair)

Ian Gilchrist (Vice Chair)

Liz Hardman

David Veale

Co-optees:

Tess Daly

Ian Harvey

Council Officers:

Kevin Amos (Parent Support Services Manager)

Lauren Rushen (Policy Development and Scrutiny Officer)

Contents

Glossary of Terms/Abbreviations:	4
Recommendations	5
Introduction	7
Purpose and Objectives	7
Methodology.....	8
Findings.....	11
Statutory Walking Distances:	11
Low Income Families:.....	11
Hazardous Routes:.....	12
Denomination:	14
Child or Young Person who is being 'looked after':	18
Temporary Medical Grounds:.....	18
Child or Young Person has a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN):	18
Ensuring an Efficient and Effective Service:.....	20
Conclusion	21
Next Steps.....	21
Appendices	22
Additional Items that are already in the public domain:	22

Glossary of Terms/Abbreviations:

B&NES- Bath & North East Somerset Council

Contributor Session- this is a public meeting hosted by a Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel on a specific subject in order to gather views from members of the public or hear from invited speakers and Council service officers as part of a wider consultation process.

HTST- Home to School Transport

PD&S- Policy Development and Scrutiny- Policy Development and Scrutiny Panels are groups of Councillors and some co-optees who act as the Council's 'checks and balances' system to ensure that the Council operates in a clear and transparent way but 'scrutinising' the work of the main decision making body within the Council, the Cabinet.

PD&S Panels will also undertake 'policy development reviews' such as this report where they seek to undertake research and, sometimes consultation activities, in order to develop policy recommendations for the Cabinet. The Cabinet then decide whether they wish to accept, reject or defer the Panel's suggestions and will report their decision back to the Panel with reasons for their decision.

SEN- Statement of Special Educational Needs

Recommendations

Recommendation One:

- 1) The Council should continue to seek to encourage more sustainable methods of home to school transport; the Panel would particularly like to see an increase in cycling.

We understand that as part of the medium term service and resource plan for 2012/14, £500,000 has been allocated to improve cycling provision and we recommend that these, or future funds, are spent across B&NES and not just the city centre. We would particularly encourage the Cabinet to consider where routes could be used to create safer cycling routes to schools.

Recommendation Two:

- 2) Given the questionnaire evidence, we recommended that the Cabinet encourage the promotion of safe cycling routes to school as an alternative to using the car where there is a safe route to do so.

Evidence from our questionnaire also suggested that there was some level of demand for two cycle paths and we recommend that the Cabinet investigate the feasibility of establishing the following two routes:

- a) Between Bishop Sutton and Chew Valley School
- b) Compton Dando to Marksbury

Recommendation Three:

- 3) We recognise that the existing home to school transport system needs to become more efficient in the current financial climate and that 'doing nothing' is not an option.

We therefore recommend that the Cabinet considers exploring and implementing from September 2014 one of the following four options in order to reduce the overall spend on home to school transport.

- a) Raising the level of financial contribution currently paid by parents/carers using home to school transport from the Council i.e. those who do not qualify for free home to school transport. This could take the form of raising the fare currently paid for the 1st child from £50 per term to a level that would ensure that the service operated on a cost neutral basis (this amount would need to be identified by the Cabinet and Service Officers);
- b) Removing the 50% reduction for 2nd and 3rd children and/or removing the subsidised transport for families with more than three children requiring home to school transport (unless they qualified as a low income family).
- c) A combination of option A and option B.
- d) A phased withdrawal of subsidised home to school transport services for new starters attending denominational schools from September 2014 who would not qualify under

other home to school policy subsets e.g. as a low income family. This option would not affect students who currently attend the school, only new pupils joining in September 2014.

The anticipated savings from this withdrawal would be seen over a number of years as follows:

	Year 1 (2014-15)	Year 2 (2015-16)	Year 3 (2016-17)	Year 4 (2017-18)	Year 5 (2018-19)	Year 6 (2019-20)	Year 7 (2020-21)
Spend on denominational transport	£217,500	£170,500	£123,500	£76,500	£29,500	£19,500	£15,000
Anticipated saving	£27,500	£74,500	£121,500	£169,000	£215,500	£225,500	£230,000

The above savings are calculated on the basis that the money is allocated to denominational schools to arrange transport which is suitable to them. If the Council continues to arrange transport on behalf of the schools the savings in the first few years may not be as great. This is because we may have to continue to use the same size vehicle until numbers drop sufficiently to reduce the size of the transport. Based on current numbers the Council will continue to spend £15,000 per year as our statutory duty under the extended rights to free travel scheme. This will be for children from low income families who live between 2 and 15 miles from their nearest denominational school.

- e. This withdrawal could either be administered by the Council or;
- f. Following a similar example to Wiltshire Council, a set sum of money could be allocated per year to the affected schools to arrange transport that is suitable for them.

Recommendation Four:

- 4) That the budget to provide home to school transport for children in care (circa £70,000) is maintained for the foreseeable future.

Recommendation Five:

5 a) Passenger Transport Services should review home to school transport routes on a termly basis to ensure best value for money and that home to school transport bus routes are as efficient and effective as possible.

5 b) This should also include liaising with parents/carers of students who have Special Educational Needs to consider whether it is appropriate for them to receive independent travel training and a personalised transport budget to arrange their own transport which may be more suitable for their needs, similar to the system used at Coventry City Council.

Introduction

The basis for this review was a letter received by the Early Years, Children and Youth (EYCY) Panel at their public meeting on the 23rd January 2012. The letter was from the Cabinet Member for Early Years, Children and Youth at the time, Councillor Nathan Hartley, in which he asked the Panel to consider undertaking a review of Home to School Transport in order to attempt to make some financial reductions as part of the 2013/14 budget setting process. It was agreed at this meeting that further analysis of past decisions were initially required before a decision could be made on what needed to be reviewed.

After reviewing previous research and having informal discussions with the Chair of the Panel, Cabinet member and the Strategic Director it was agreed that there were many wider issues that now needed to be reviewed compared to the past reviews carried out on home to school transport, which included; *The Passenger Transport Review (March 2005)* & *The Transport to Secondary School Review (2008)* and that it is now more important than ever, particularly in today's economic climate to understand the Council's commitment to maintain transport services for young people whilst ensuring the most efficient deployment of public funds and the full range of statutory Home to School Transport (HTST) policy duties in this field are being met.

Purpose and Objectives

Purpose

To maintain transport services for young people whilst ensuring the most efficient deployment of public funds and meeting the full range of statutory duties in this field

Objectives of PDS Review

The objectives of this Policy Development & Scrutiny Review are to:

- a) Consider the impact of current HTST policy and its various sub-sets in relation to parental choices and cost of delivery. Policy sub-sets are:
 - Distance
 - Hazardous route
 - Low income family (this is defined as being in receipt of free school meals or the highest level of working tax credits)
 - Denomination
 - A child or young person being 'looked after'
 - Having a statement of SEN
 - Temporary medical grounds e.g. a broken leg
- b) Consider the effectiveness and efficiency of current policies and their operation and undertake some comparative studies of the policies and cost of other Local Authority's.
- c) Consider the deployment of HTST funding within the overall context of Council spending on public transport services. Identifying the most affordable solution to maximise the use of existing resources.

- d) Make recommendations to the Cabinet, identifying the relevant Cabinet Member(s), with any changes to policies and operations in light of the findings of the Panel.

Methodology

The research for this review was undertaken in four phases; a desk research exercise, a questionnaire, a public contributor session and meetings with students, teachers, parents/carers at local schools.

Phase One: Desk Research

In the first phase, we conducted a desk research exercise in order to identify:

- what work had been undertaken by previous two Policy Development and Scrutiny reviews in this area (the Passenger Transport Review in 2005 and the Secondary School Transport Review in 2008);
- national research and policy guidelines on home to school transport;
- best practice examples at other local authorities;
- a comparison between existing home to school transport policies between ourselves and our neighbouring local authorities of Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council and Wiltshire Council.

The Panel also received a briefing from service officers about our current home to school transport policies and the costs associated with running the service.

This background research was presented to the Panel when we held a public contributor session on 22nd October 2012, a copy of this briefing paper presented to the Panel can be found here: <http://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=461&MId=3858&Ver=4> .

The background research identified:

➤ National Research:

There was limited recent national research available on home to school transport policies. The most recent example was from 2011 with the Department for Education undertaking a review entitled '*Home to School Transport: Efficiency and Effectiveness*' with the aim being to encourage "local authorities to share best practice and ensure they have processes and systems in place that provide value for money and contribute to the reduction of bureaucracy"¹ However, at the time of writing, the details of their final report were not available.

- Good Practice Examples: The Panel looked at Coventry City Council's model for providing SEN transport in the form of independent travel training and a personalised transport budget to families to arrange their own forms of transport for children with a statement of SEN, where it was appropriate to do so, this offered greater flexibility to parents/carers whilst helping individuals to develop the skills to travel independently.

¹ Department for Education Review:
<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/community/a0077797/efficiency-and-practice-review-home-to-school-transport>

The Panel also looked at examples from Cheshire County Council and Cheshire West District Council who worked together to revise their HTST transport policies and Gloucestershire County Council.

- Neighbouring Local Authorities: The Panel compared our existing HTST policies with the policies of our neighbouring local authorities of Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council and Wiltshire Council.
- Current spending figures within Bath & North East Somerset Council (B&NES) on existing HTST policies in addition the Panel learnt that the Council operates a fare paying scheme whereby any spare seats on vehicles carrying entitled passengers are offered to those who would normally not be entitled to HTST assistance. 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.

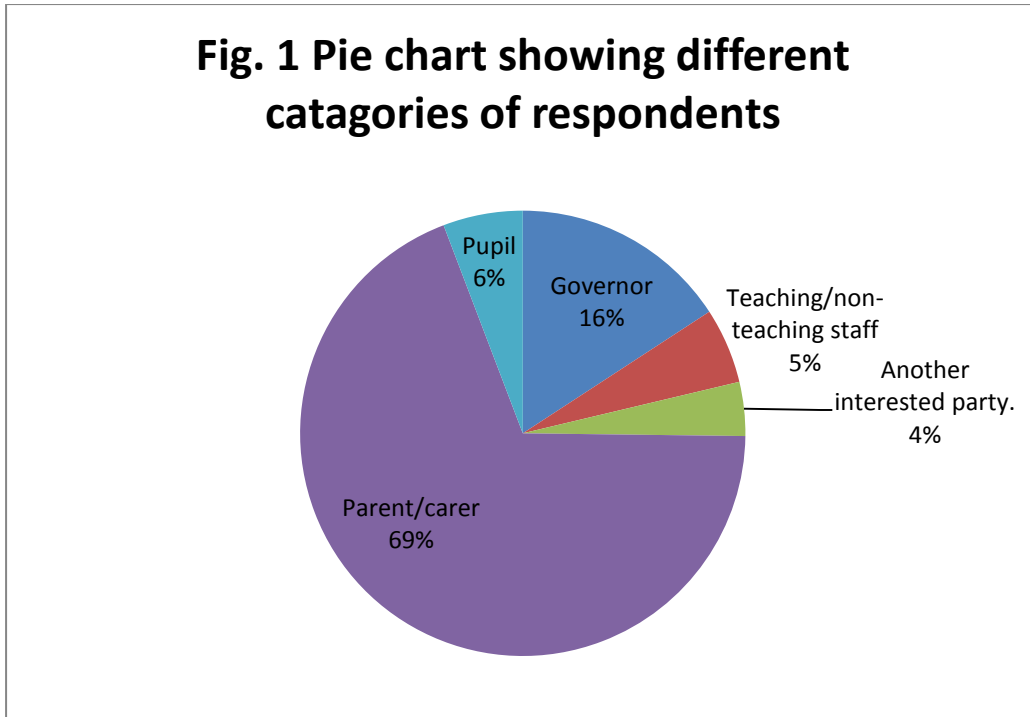
Phase Two: Questionnaire

The second phase of the research was to conduct a questionnaire, primarily aiming to contact existing home to school transport service users but also teachers, governors and home to school transport providers in order to identify whether services users thought the existing service was efficient and effective and how they would seek to prioritise future home to school transport provision.

The questionnaire was available in electronic form and in paper copy from 10th September until 2nd November 2012. This was publicised via a press release, letters to existing home to school transport users, all schools and governors within B&NES, transport companies operating within B&NES and all town/parish Councils along with promotional materials to encourage people to complete the questionnaire.

Approximately 2,500 questionnaires were distributed and we received a response rate of 574 (23% response rate). The breakdown of those that responded to the questionnaire is as follows:

Fig. 1 Pie chart showing different categories of respondents



For a full analysis of the questionnaire results please see appendix 3.

As well as receiving questionnaire responses, we also received 25 letters/emails from members of the public.

Phase Three: Public Contributor Session

The Panel held a public contributor session on 22nd October at the Guildhall in Bath. This meeting was an opportunity for members of the public to share their views about the current home to school transport system and to find out what research had been done to date by the steering group. The Panel received the briefing paper mentioned on page 9 and heard from the Head Teacher of St Gregory's Catholic College (Raymond Friel), School Governors, Parents/Carers and two students who currently attend St Gregory's Catholic College.

All of the speakers stated that they were very happy with the current denominational home to school transport policy, with most stating that they were happy to pay a contribution towards the costs of the transport. Speakers also raised concerns about the impact that removing the subsidy would have. Particular concerns were raised about students who do not speak English as a first language as speakers believed that St Gregory's Catholic College attracts a higher percentage of these students and as a result the school has the facilities to work with these students and speakers were concerned that these may not be widely available at other schools within the B&NES area.

Phase Four: Meetings with Teachers/Parents/Carers/Students:

The Chair of the Panel also met with parents/carers; students and teachers at a local schools in particular to gain the views of students who use the service and parents/carers who had concerns about any potential changes to the home to school transport service.

One meeting was held at Holy Trinity Primary School in Radstock and another meeting will be held at St Gregory's Catholic College in Bath. Originally, in the terms of reference, the steering group had hoped to undertake focus groups with parents/carers but there was a limited response to the request for focus groups so it was decided that Panel members would conduct smaller meetings at individual schools, particularly as this gave Panel members the chance to hear directly from young people and discuss the research findings with parents/carers.

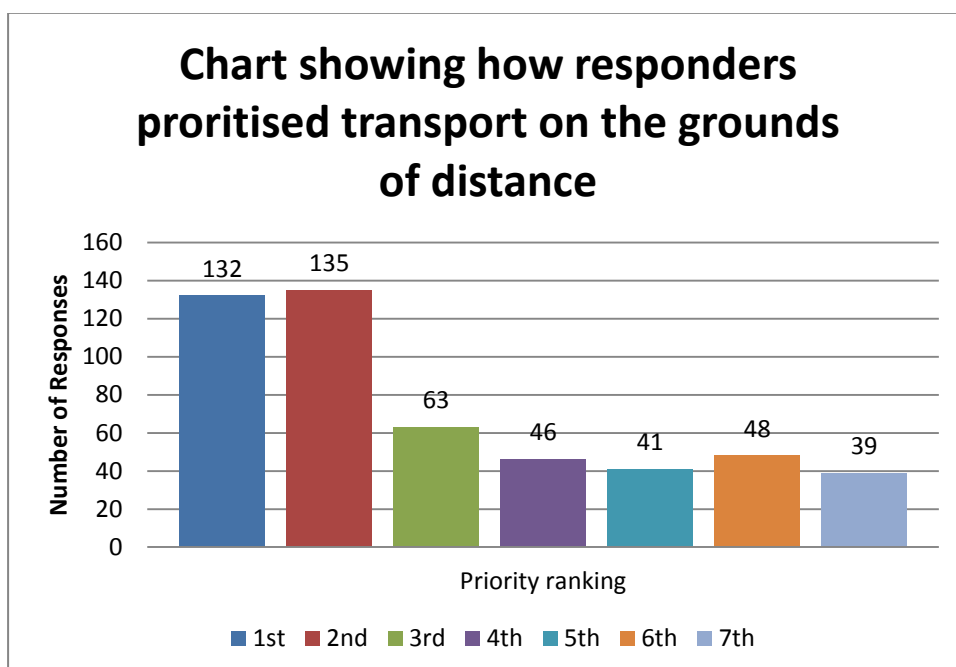
Findings

The findings will be set out under each of the existing policy subsets, highlighting any work undertaken by other Local Authorities and findings from our consultation activities along with any recommendations based on the evidence gathered.

Statutory Walking 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.

In B&NES, under the current statutory distance policy we transport 957 children at an annual cost of £850,000. The importance of this policy was also reflected in the questionnaire results, with 267 people (47%) rating this as their first or second priority for home to school transport.



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.

As this is a statutory entitlement, the Panel did not have any recommendations to make about this policy.

Hazardous Routes:

This policy applies when a child lives within "statutory walking distance" of their nearest appropriate school but the nature of the route is such that a child cannot reasonably be expected to walk (accompanied as necessary) in reasonable safety. In these circumstances, the local authority has to make travel arrangements to assist them.

In conducting the risk assessment, local authorities should take a range of factors into consideration, including:

- the age of the child;
- whether any potential risks might be mitigated if the child were accompanied by an adult.
- the width of any roads travelled along and the existence of pavements;
- the volume and speed of traffic travelling along any roads; the existence or otherwise of street lighting; and
- the condition of the route at different times of the year, at the times of day that a child would be expected to travel to and from school.

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

Whilst hazardous routes are a statutory requirement, the Panel did learn from the questionnaire that uptake of cycling as an alternative to using a car or bus was relatively low, with

respondents who did not qualify for home to school transport support stating that their main methods of getting to school were as follows:

- Walking (37%)
- Car (28%)
- Paying for an unused seat on a school bus (18%)
- Public bus service (13%)
- Cycling (1%)
- No response (3%)

The main reasons given for this were that people were concerned about their safety, particularly if using a road rather than a dedicated cycle path; this seems to be particularly relevant for rural areas of the local authority region. The Panel understands from viewing the 'Place Directorate Medium Term Service and Resource Plan'² that £500,000 has been provisionally allocated to fund cycle routes in the year 2013/14 and the same sum for 2014/15 and we would recommend that these, or future funds, are spent across B&NES and not just in the city centre, particularly if these routes could be used to create safer cycling routes to schools.

Recommendation One:

The Council should continue to seek to encourage more sustainable methods of home to school transport; the Panel would particularly like to see an increase in cycling.

We understand that as part of the medium term service and resource plan for 2012/14, £500,000 has been allocated to improve cycling provision and we recommend that these, or future funds, are spent across B&NES and not just the city centre. We would particularly encourage the Cabinet to consider where routes could be used to create safer cycling routes to schools.

Whilst we recognise that it will not be possible to create safer routes to schools in all rural areas, respondents to the questionnaire did highlight two areas for suggested cycle routes, one between Bishop Sutton and Chew Valley School and the other between Compton Dando and Marksbury and suggest that the Cabinet investigate the feasibility of establishing these routes.

Recommendation Two:

Given the questionnaire evidence, we recommended that the Cabinet encourage the promotion of safe cycling routes to school as an alternative to using the car where there is a safe route to do so.

Evidence from our questionnaire also suggested that there was some level of demand for two cycle paths and we recommend that the Cabinet investigate the feasibility of establishing the following two routes:

- a) Between Bishop Sutton and Chew Valley School
- b) Compton Dando to Marksbury

² Place Directorate Medium Term Service and Resource Plan p.11 presented at the Planning, Transport and Environment Panel: <http://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=462&MId=3704&Ver=4>

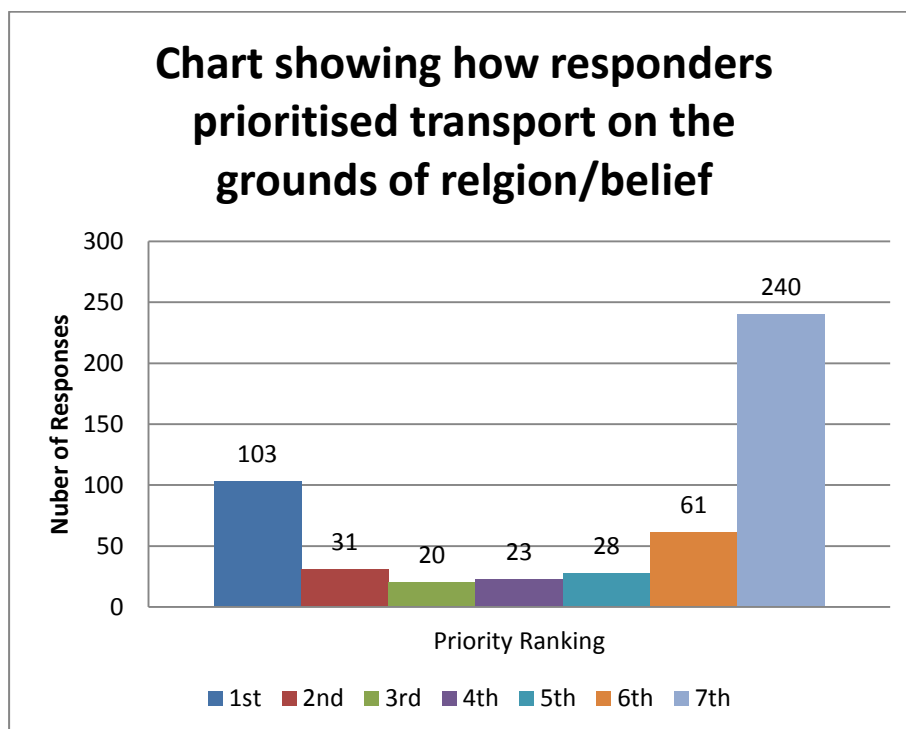
Denomination:

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, after the Passenger Transport Scrutiny Review in 2005/06, 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.

Questionnaire respondents were clearly divided on how they wished to prioritise denominational transport with 47% rating this as their 7th priority compared to 20% of responders rating it as their top priority. The table below highlights the responses received to this question:



At the Panel's contributor session, the Panel heard from parents and young people who currently received support through the discretionary denominational transport policy, along with the Head Teacher and Governors at both St Gregory's Catholic College in Bath and St Benedict's Primary School in Somerset. The speakers raised a number of concerns about the potential removal of existing subsidies which are summarised as follows:

- The removal of discretionary denominational transport policy subsidised HTST would adversely affect those on middle incomes who live more than three miles away from their nearest faith school because they would not qualify for support on low income grounds and are already financially stretched
- Linked to this, there were concerns that the removal of the discretionary denominational transport support would make it difficult for families with working parents/carers to ensure that their children arrived at school safely and on time and ensure that they arrived to work on time.
- The Christian values and ethos of the school were very important to both parents/carers and pupils who attend the school and they were concerned that this may affect the overall make of the school as parents may choose not to send their children to a faith based school if the existing policies change
- Concern that removing school buses would potentially increase the amount of congestion on the road as parents/carers may choose to drive their children to school instead
- The Head Teacher of St Gregory's Catholic College also informed the Panel that the local Polish and Filipino communities were naturally drawn to the school as the first choice for their children and that the school had the highest number of children in the Authority who do not have English as a first language and as such they had developed expertise to look after them
- Parents/carers who attended the contributor session stated that they were happy to pay a contribution towards the cost of getting their children to school safely and on time

The Panel's benchmarking research with other neighbouring authorities highlighted that none of our neighbouring local authorities (Wiltshire Council, Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council and South Gloucestershire Council) provide free discretionary denominational transport unless the family was in receipt of free school meals or the highest level of working tax credits and had specifically applied for that school on the grounds of their own beliefs.

The removal of these subsidies occurred in different ways:

- Bristol City Council opted for a phased withdrawal from September 2012 i.e. the free denominational transport would not be available to new entrants
- South Gloucestershire Council (who's policy will come into effect in September 2013) opted to remove the discretionary free transport to denominational schools to all new children starting in September 2013 (with the exception of low income families) and those families who currently receiving denominational transport would be asked to pay £360 per annum for continuing provision.
- Wiltshire Council withdrew their discretionary denominational transport policy from September 2012 but offered a transitional provision to assist pupils entering their final year of their GCSE course in 2012. This funding was provided directly to the affected schools, to assist them with cost of providing transport for pupils who were part-way through their exam course when the new policy took effect.
(More detailed information about this can be found in the briefing pack published as part of the contributor session on the 22nd October:
<http://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=461&MId=3858&Ver=4>)

We recognise through our consultation that this policy is valued by those who use it, although opinions from the questionnaire responses were clearly split on whether this should be considered a priority with 47% making it their lowest priority. Rather than developing a single

recommendation, we have developed a number of options for the Cabinet to consider which are set out as 'recommendation three' below.

Recommendation Three:

We recognise that the existing home to school transport system needs to become more efficient in the current financial climate and that 'doing nothing' is not an option.

We therefore recommend that the Cabinet considers exploring and implementing from September 2014 one of the following four options in order to reduce the overall spend on home to school transport.

- a) Raising the level of financial contribution currently paid by parents/carers using home to school transport from the Council i.e. those who do not qualify for free home to school transport. This could take the form of raising the fare currently paid for the 1st child from £50 per term to a level that would ensure that the service operated on a cost neutral basis (this amount would need to be identified by the Cabinet and Service Officers);
- b) Removing the 50% reduction for 2nd and 3rd children and/or removing the subsidised transport for families with more than three children requiring home to school transport (unless they qualified as a low income family).
- c) A combination of option A and option B.
- d) A phased withdrawal of subsidised home to school transport services for new starters attending denominational schools from September 2014 who would not qualify under other home to school policy subsets e.g. as a low income family. This option would not affect students who currently attend the school, only new pupils joining in September 2014.

The anticipated savings from this withdrawal would be seen over a number of years as follows:

	Year 1 (2014-15)	Year 2 (2015-16)	Year 3 (2016-17)	Year 4 (2017-18)	Year 5 (2018-19)	Year 6 (2019-20)	Year 7 (2020-21)
Spend on denominational transport	£217,500	£170,500	£123,500	£76,500	£29,500	£19,500	£15,000
Anticipated saving	£27,500	£74,500	£121,500	£169,000	£215,500	£225,500	£230,000

The above savings are calculated on the basis that the money is allocated to denominational schools to arrange transport which is suitable to them. If the Council continues to arrange transport on behalf of the schools the savings in the first few years may not be as great. This is because we may have to continue to use the same size vehicle until numbers drop sufficiently to reduce the size of the transport. Based on current numbers the Council will continue to spend £15,000 per year as our statutory duty under the extended rights to free travel scheme. This will be for children from low income families who live between 2 and 15 miles from their nearest denominational school.

- e. This withdrawal could either be administered by the Council or;
- f. Following a similar example to Wiltshire Council, a set sum of money could be allocated per year to the affected schools to arrange transport that is suitable for them. This should be done in consultation with the affected schools.

Child or Young Person who is being 'looked after':

Whilst this is not a statutory home to school transport policy, this policy is used to enable continuity of education when a child is placed in care and 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.

The benchmarking information suggested that not all local authorities in the local area have this policy and questionnaire responders tended to prioritise this as either their 4th (26% of responders) or 5th (28% of responders) out of the seven categories. However, the Panel did receive a letter from the Headteacher for the Virtual School for Children in Care who stated that:

“There's a real understanding that we need to try to keep [Looked After Children] LAC at the school they attend and that this sometimes means they have to fund longer travel routes. It's never been a barrier to keeping a child in a school.” (Michael Gorman, Headteacher - Bath & North East Somerset Virtual School for Children in Care)

The Panel consider that maintaining this element of funding for home to school transport is important for particularly vulnerable children and young people.

Recommendation Four:

4) The Panel recommends that the budget to provide home to school transport for children in care (circa £70,000) is maintained for the foreseeable future.

Temporary Medical Grounds:

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. The Panel did not have any recommendations to make with regard to this particular policy.

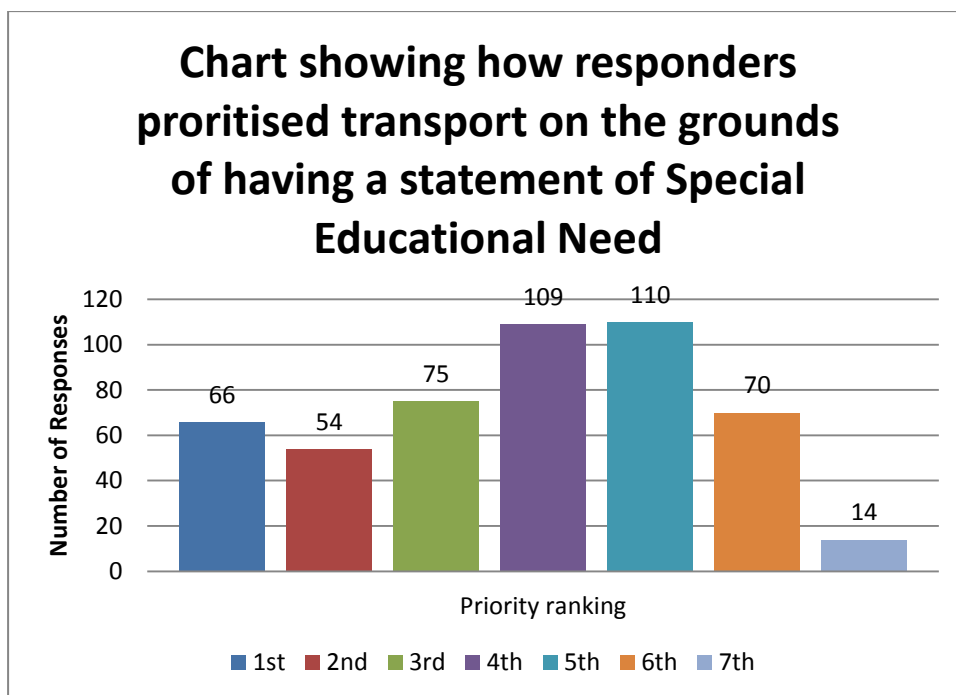
Child or Young Person has a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN):

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.

Questionnaire respondents tended to rate SEN support quite highly, only 3% of respondents rated this as their 7th priority. The most common level was either 4th or 5th.



The Panel did look at Coventry City Council’s system for delivering SEN transport who identified at their local authority, this was a historical area of overspending and conducted a review which sought to change the way the council and its partners engage with parents about transport and to introduce personal transport budgets.

This allowed parents/carers greater flexibility to transport their children and help young people to gain more independence through independent travel training for secondary age pupils who have been assessed by the school and the SEN team as being ready and able to learn to travel independently. If the young person and the family were happy with this arrangement, they would receive a personalised transport budget to be spent on the family to get their child to school. Standard council-provided transport is still available for families who do not qualify or feel it is appropriate for the individual.

We understand that a similar option is currently used in B&NES for Post-16 SEN transport and would continue to encourage this if it is appropriate for the individual and their families.

Ensuring an Efficient and Effective Service:

At their contributor session, the Panel gained more information about the Council's existing transport fleet from a service officer briefing. "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." (Take from the minutes of the meeting:

<http://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=461&MId=3858&Ver=4>)

The majority of questionnaire respondents were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the current service they receive (94%) with respondents stating that bus drivers were polite and understanding and transport being of high quality. However, some specific suggestions were made in the questionnaire to ensure a continuing good service these included:

- Some lack of continuity of drivers or children with statement of SEN
- Concerns about the safety of certain drop off/pick up points being located on busy roads
- Some issues with late arrivals of buses
- One responder noted of their taxi service that there were 8 children in the area that used this facility but only a 6-seater taxi was used. This resulted in a longer day for some children as they had to arrive at school early enough to allow for a second run to be completed.

Recommendation Five:

5 a) Passenger Transport Services should review home to school transport routes on a termly basis to ensure best value for money and that home to school transport bus routes are as efficient and effective as possible.

5 b) This should also include liaising with parents/carers of students who have Special Educational Needs to consider whether it is appropriate for them to receive independent travel training and a personalised transport budget to arrange their own transport which may be more suitable for their needs, similar to the system used at Coventry City Council.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this review set out to investigate how best to maintain transport services for young people whilst ensuring the most efficient deployment of public funds and meeting the full range of statutory duties in this field. The Panel achieved this by comparing the HTST at other neighbouring local authorities and also looking at other local authorities who were trying to initiatives to improve their HTST services.

Consultation was undertaken with service users, transport providers, local schools and other interested parties through our questionnaire and press releases asking people for their views on the current HTST service. The Panel also held a contributor session to hear from people who were concerned about the impact of any potential changes to HTST, particularly denominational transport.

We have also met with children at a local primary school and have heard how much they value their school transport.

We recognise that on the whole, the vast majority of people who currently receive HTST support are very happy with the service but also acknowledge that in the current financial climate, the service needs to be as efficient and effective as possible. We understand that making changes to any HTST policies will not be an easy decision so have come up with a range of options for the Cabinet to investigate, coupled with this we have suggested that more should be done to promote sustainable methods of travel to school such as cycling.

We hope that the Cabinet choose to accept our recommendations as they are based on a range of evidence from other local authorities and suggestions from parents/carers and service users and look forward to receiving their response to our recommendations.

Next Steps

The Panel are invited to comment on and make amendments to this report at their meeting on the 28th January 2012.

A final version of the report will be presented to the Cabinet for them to respond to the Panel's recommendations in March 2012.

If the Cabinet chooses to accept any of the recommendations regarding altering current home to school transport policies, officers in Passenger Transport Services will work with the Cabinet to produce a further report which will be presented to the Cabinet for their decision in Summer 2013.

If any changes are made to home to school transport policies, these will be published in the schools admissions booklets in Summer 2013 and will come into force for new students from September 2014.

Appendices

- Appendix Two: Equalities issues considered by the Panel in preparing their draft recommendations
- Appendix Three: Questionnaire analysis prepared by Lauren Rushen on behalf of the Panel

Additional Items that are already in the public domain:

- *Background Briefing Report- Presented to the Panel at their contributor session on 22nd October:*
<http://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=461&MId=3858&Ver=4>