

CABINET DECISION – MINUTE FROM 15 JUNE 2011

54 PROPOSALS FOR THE PROVISION OF TRAVEL ASSISTANCE TO SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH SEN

Councillor Paul Rochford, Cabinet Member for Children & Learning, introduced the report.

This report sought Cabinet approval of proposals to change policy and practice relating to the provision of travel assistance to school or college for children and young people with special educational needs (“SEN”). This would represent a move away from the general expectation and assumption that a child with SEN will receive help in getting to school only in the form of a bespoke door-to-door service by bus or taxi.

The proposed changes would ensure that a high quality service could continue to be delivered whilst making efficiencies and would, on average, seek to reduce journey times, enhancing quality of life for children and young people which in turn could assist educational performance. The proposed changes would mean that more children would be able to travel independently and be better prepared for future learning or employment opportunities.

It was noted that the proposals had been developed and refined over the past nine months by Social Care & Learning in conjunction with the Council’s Passenger Transport Service (“PTS”). Suggestions had also been welcomed from the head teachers of the Borough’s special schools, various parents’ groups and voluntary sector organisations throughout the process. In addition, a thorough and formal consultation with parents of those potentially affected and, where appropriate, the children and young people who currently use the service had been undertaken.

It was reported that Cabinet approval of the recommendations would enable the Council to create a more streamlined and efficient service and meet savings targets by closely monitoring the needs and eligibility of those receiving assistance; using alternative travel solutions to fulfil its legal duties, and promoting schemes which encouraged long-term independence.

Reasons for the decision:

1. The adoption of the revised policy clearly sets out the Council’s aim of increasing independence and reducing the reliance on Council-organised transport solutions.
2. An annual application for travel assistance will:
 - Ensure that only those who are eligible for help will receive it year-on-year;
 - Avoid transport solutions being paid for by the Council indefinitely where the student no longer meets the eligibility requirements; and
 - Enable the Council to identify where a student’s circumstances have changed, so that the assistance offered can be tailored to suit their needs best.

3. The introduction of safe meeting points for pupils at Corbets Tey and Dycorts schools will reduce bus journey times for many children, as journeys will follow a more direct route with fewer stops.
4. Where door-to-door transport to school is provided, stipulating that for new applicants this will only be to and from the child's home address will enable the Council to carry out efficient route planning and make the best use of its resources, whilst meeting its statutory obligations.
5. Extending the travel training scheme to children with SEN who are assessed as suitable will:
 - Give increased freedom and quality of life;
 - Be an enabling process for future employment and social life; and
 - Develop social skills and increased self-confidence.
6. The introduction of mandatory assessments of suitability for travel training will enable the Council to identify as early as possible any children who would benefit from personalised travel training. By assessing children at Key Stage 3, the focus will not only be on helping them to be independent on their journey to school but also looking to their potential future journeys to college. For those in Further Education, training will improve their future employment prospects as they would be better prepared for travel to work.
7. Increased use of voluntary sector organisations will create a mixed economy and facilitate the smooth implementation of travel training and safe meeting point proposals in a cost-effective manner. This would be necessary for timely execution as the Council does not have sufficient staff resources to dedicate to this.

Other options considered:

- Do nothing: not a viable option given the financial pressures faced by the Council.
- Increase the maximum target journey time from 60 minutes to 75 minutes, in line with national guidelines: rejected due to the potential adverse impact on children.
- Outsource the entire current provision of home-to-school transport: rejected as it did not address efficiency issues and would have hindered wider ambition to increase independence wherever possible.
- Use private hire taxis for home-to-school transport as an alternative to the Council's PTS buses: rejected as (i) soft market testing indicated that this would not result in any significant savings; (ii) there would be a negative environmental impact; and (iii) concern over having a large number of vehicles entering school premises at the start and end of the school day.
- Cease provision of travel assistance to 22-25 year olds attending Further Education Colleges as no legal duty to do so: rejected. However, travel training will be promoted for these young people and

the Council will work with Colleges around the curriculum and timetabling.

- Offer of a mileage payment to parents who resume responsibility for taking their child to and from school: rejected as (i) concerns raised over fairness as many parents do already take their own children to school and do not expect payment; and (ii) deemed ethically unsound as, if parents are able to take their child to school, they should not be moved to do so only for potential financial gain.

Members suggested that the outcome of consultation be considered by the Children & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Committee before being reported to Cabinet.

Cabinet agreed:

1. **The adoption of the revised policy on travel assistance (Appendix A) which embodies the basic principles which are set out in recommendations 2 to 6.**
2. **The introduction of a requirement that parents must apply for travel assistance for their child in respect of each academic year.**
3. **The introduction of safe meeting points for children currently transported by PTS bus to Corbets Tey and Dycorts schools (subject to a full independent assessment of need).**
4. **That children who are eligible for and given travel assistance in the form of door-to-door transport, will only be taken to and from the child's home address. New requests for travel assistance to school from an address other than the child's home will not be accommodated. Existing arrangements for a small number of families will continue while the children concerned remain eligible for door-to-door travel assistance to school.**
5. **The expansion of the existing travel training scheme to all children and young people with SEN who are assessed as being suitable and likely to benefit from such training.**
6. **The introduction of a mandatory assessment of suitability for travel training for all students with SEN:**
 - on receipt of any new requests for assistance to get to school or college;
 - at the end of Key Stage 3 (approximately age 14), if already receiving Council assistance in getting to school; and
 - at age 21 for those in Further Education establishments and already receiving Council assistance in getting to college.
7. **To enter into contracts for travel training, mobility assessments and route delivery with the voluntary sector or private sector where business cases were agreed with the Lead Member.**