



Report to North West Chilterns Community Board

Date:	23 November 2023
Title:	Response to ePetition - School Bus for Lord Williams
Cabinet Member(s):	Councillor Stephen Broadbent, Cabinet Member for Transport
Contact officer:	Neil Beswick, Head of Client Transport
Recommendations:	That the North West Chilterns Community Board notes the Council's statutory duty to provide school transport only for eligible students as defined by the council's Home to School Transport Policy
Reason for recommendation:	The Council only provides home to school transport for students who are eligible to receive it under statutory legislation.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 A petition was submitted by the parents of students from the Princes Risborough area attending Lord Williams School in Thame.
- 1.2 The petition requested that the council arrange transport for students to school after the withdrawal of a commercially operated local bus service that students previously travelled on.
- 1.3 The students concerned are not eligible for council funded transport as described under Buckinghamshire Council's [Home to School Transport Policy](#) as they are not attending their nearest suitable school.

2. Report

- 2.1 School transport between the Princes Risborough area and Lord Williams School in Thame was previously provided on a commercial basis by public bus operator Redline of Aylesbury.

The main purpose of the service was to convey Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) students who were eligible for school transport to Lord Williams School. OCC funded the cost of transport for these students.

Buckinghamshire Council did not and has never provided any financial support for this service, from either the local public transport budget or the home to school transport budget.

- 2.2 The vehicle being used by operator who was taking on the OCC contract, Redline, has to pass close to the Princes Risborough area on the way to the first pick up point for OCC's students.

Redline were aware that there was interest from parents in the Princes Risborough area for transport to Lord Williams School, so took the commercial decision to commence the bus service from Princes Risborough on a commercial basis at their own financial risk.

- 2.3 OCC retendered the section of the route that provided transport for their eligible students, and the operator of the winning tender stated that they couldn't replicate the commercial section of the route, meaning Buckinghamshire students who weren't eligible for council funded school transport were left without a bus service.

One of the parents affected by the withdrawal of the commercial service contacted the Council on 26 July 2023 providing details of the number of students affected, 13, and to ask that the council engage with OCC to get the commercial section of the route reinstated.

- 2.4 In response officers from Transport Services requested that OCC ask the new operator to reinstate the commercial section of the route, but unfortunately OCC advised that they were not in a position to be able to support this request as they were focused on the statutory requirement to provide transport for their eligible students.

- 2.5 Transport Services also provided the parents with a list of contact details for operators who currently carry out work for the Council, in case the parents wished to arrange their own transport.

- 2.6 There were no feasible options to offer the students a '[spare seat](#)' for purchase on a Buckinghamshire Council contracted service as there were no services to Lord Williams from the affected areas. The only option would have been to contract a new service, primarily for non-eligible students, which would not be in accordance with the Home to School Transport Policy. Transport Officers held regular discussions

with their counterparts from OCC during August and September to try and find a solution, but by the start of the new academic year there was no transport in place.

- 2.7 In March 2019 Buckinghamshire County Council (BCC) Cabinet agreed the Policy that now forms the basis of the current Home to School Transport Policy. This included an associated decision to implement the Policy through the rationalisation of the Council's directly provided school bus routes, so that the Council now only pays for bus contracts to provide transport for eligible children. Non eligible children are able to purchase tickets directly from commercial bus operators on routes which provide transport to schools, where they are in place.
- 2.8 In early October, OCC informed the council that the transport operator who had originally won their tender had decided that they didn't wish to continue after the half term break, and the contract would now be awarded to Redline, the previous operator who had provided the commercial extension of the route from Princes Risborough.
- 2.9 The representatives of the parent group were made aware of the this positive news on 10 October by Transport Services, with the offer that Officers would provide an 'introduction' between the parents and the operator.
- 2.10 The operator and parents have subsequently communicated, and the new service is due to commence from Monday 06 November and will provide a transport option for students travelling from Princes Risborough to Lord Williams School.

3. Other options considered.

- 3.1 The council could have contracted a service to provide transport for the students, but as they are not eligible for transport under the Council's Home to School Transport Policy, and following the decision taken by BCC Cabinet in March 2019, this would have been against the approved Council policy.

4. Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 The council's Home to School Transport Policy has been developed in accordance with the legislative framework set out under the Education Act 1996 and current Government guidance.
- 4.2 The Education Act 1996 provides the following duties and powers on local authorities:
 - duty to promote sustainable modes of travel to meet school travel needs - s.508A

- duty to make necessary travel arrangements free of charge to secure suitable home to school travel arrangements for eligible children. Eligibility includes age, distance to school, disability and safe walking routes - S.508B
- power to make necessary school travel arrangements for other children on payment of a charge as appropriate - s.508C
- power to provide travel assistance or travel expenses for children attending early years education, subject to eligibility criteria - s.509A
- duty to prepare a Post-16 transport policy statement setting out transport provision and financial assistance (where applicable) to facilitate attendance of sixth form students at educational institutions - s.509AA and s.509AB

5. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

5.1 The North West Chilterns Community Board's Transport and Road Issues Action Group submitted the following comment:

“The North West Chilterns Community Board's Transport and Road Issues Action Group (TRIAG) empathises with the Petitioner concerns with the cessation of Oxfordshire County Council's Redline Bus school transport contract and the serious impact this will have on those families in Buckinghamshire that use this bus service. TRIAG also acknowledges the importance of Buckinghamshire Council's Home to School Transport policy in determining the provision of, and access to, home to school transport. TRIAG encourages Buckinghamshire Council Officers to actively and urgently work with Oxfordshire County Council officers to find an acceptable way forward on this matter.”