



Report to Transport, Environment and Climate Change Select Committee

Date:	9 November 2023
Title:	Home to School Transport in Buckinghamshire
Cabinet Member(s):	Steven Broadbent, Cabinet Member for Transport
Contact officer:	Neil Beswick, Head of Client Transport Cheryl Platts, Transport Policy & Improvement Manager
Ward(s) affected:	none specific
Recommendations:	That the TECC Select Committee note the update on home to school transport in Buckinghamshire

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to provide an update on home to school transport and Personal Transport Budgets. This paper also provides a progress update on the Client Transport Improvement Programme.

2. Home to School Transport Update

Background

- 2.1 Transport Services supports and enables high quality, efficient and safe transport solutions so that children and adults can get to school, work and access public services.
- 2.2 This briefing paper covers the Client Transport Service, within Transport Services, which provides home to school transport for eligible children of statutory school age (5 to 16 years old), pupil referral unit (PRU) transport, and travel assistance for eligible Post-16 (of sixth form age) students and young people with SEND up to the age of 25.

Policy Context

2.3 Home to school transport is a statutory duty placed on local authorities to provide free-of-charge travel arrangements for eligible children of statutory school age (5 to 16 years). The Council's [Home to School Transport Policy](#) describes the policy for home to school travel assistance and the criteria applied to determine eligibility. The key areas of the statutory duty are to:

- Make transport arrangements for all eligible children of statutory school age (5 to 16 years). There are four categories of statutory school age students living in Buckinghamshire and attending their nearest suitable school who are eligible for Council funded travel assistance:
 - children who live beyond the statutory walking distance
 - children from low income families
 - children whose walking route to school is unsafe
 - children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), a disability or a mobility difficulty and who are unable to travel independently from home to school.
- Prepare and publish an annual transport policy statement specifying the arrangements for the provision of transport, or otherwise that the authority considers necessary to make, to facilitate the attendance of all persons of sixth form age receiving education or training.
- Encourage, enable and assist the participation of young people with special educational needs and disabilities up to the age of 25 in education and training.

2.4 In 2022/23 the Council provided school transport assistance for approximately 7,460 children and young people. This comprised of 7,060 students who were eligible for school transport assistance in line with the Council's [Home to School Transport Policy](#), made up of 5,060 students attending mainstream educational settings and 2,000 students attending special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) educational settings. In addition to eligible students, the Council transported approximately 400 non-eligible "spare seats" (i.e. paid-for school bus transport) students on some of our school buses.

2.5 The service also provides social care transport for about 310 adults with additional needs, and 60 children with SEND who either have social care plans (i.e. respite arrangements) or who are children in care.

2.6 The Council provides various travel arrangements for eligible children, such as bus passes or train tickets for public transport, personal transport budgets (PTBs), Council-arranged school coaches/buses, minibuses and shared or solo taxis.

Passenger assistant support may also be provided following a travel needs assessment by the Client Transport Team.

- 2.7 Decisions on eligibility for Council funded travel assistance are made by officers in the Adults and Health directorate, as well as officers in Children’s Services, who then make a referral to Transport Services. In Children’s Services decisions on eligibility for home to school travel assistance are made by the Integrated SEND (iSEND) team for students with Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs), and by the Admissions Team for all other students. Once eligible referrals are received, Transport Services make suitable transport arrangements, manage, and monitor the transport provision through contractual arrangements with external suppliers.

School Transport School Term Start Update

- 2.8 Over the last two to three years there has been a marked improvement in the September school term start arrangements. This is evidenced by:

- **An effective issuing of bus passes.** All school bus passes were issued by the stated deadlines in August 2021, 2022 and 2023. In addition, temporary bus pass booklets were sent to schools to issue to students who have lost their pass for short-term use while their replacement pass is processed.
- **A flat fee approach agreed for Spare Seats charging** from the 2023-24 academic year onwards. The flat fee is clear and easy for parents to understand and has significantly simplified Spare Seats charging administration. Where there were previously 13 different price points, there are now just two rates; one for Buckinghamshire residents and another, higher, rate for non-Buckinghamshire residents:

Buckinghamshire resident rate	Non-Buckinghamshire resident rate
£868	£1,200

- **Roll-out of better, easier ways to pay.** In addition to simplifying Spare Seats charging for 2023-24, the Council simultaneously introduced better, easier ways to pay including reoccurring card payments and payment by telephone.
- **Continued route optimisation working closely with colleagues in our Public Transport team** to utilise the commercial public bus network fully and effectively in Buckinghamshire to transport eligible children wherever possible. This approach supports the sustainability of the commercial network as well as promoting a more environmentally friendly mode of transport for these journeys. For the 2023-24 academic year we continued to work to effectively utilise the commercial public transport network for home to school transport with over 800 eligible students issued with public bus passes for the term start.

- **A reduction in complaints.** When comparing our total number of Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints from July to September 2021 (29 complaints) vs. July to September 2023 (22 complaints), there has been a 24% reduction.
- **A reduction in customer contact and improved responsiveness.** When comparing our peak customer enquiry period from July to September, there has been a significant reduction in school transport enquiries since 2021, which can be attributed to better communications to parents, including the use of text messaging for reminders/notifications.

Time period	No. of school transport enquiries received	% school transport enquiries responded to within 5 working days
1 July to 30 September 2021	5,091	70%
1 July to 30 September 2022	3,195	79%
1 July to 30 September 2023	3,241	88%

Between July to September 2023 the number of transport enquiries received were broadly comparable with the same period in 2022, however the percentage of school transport enquiries responded to within 5 working days has shown marked improvement.

- **An increase in Personal Transport Budgets.** Personal Transport Budgets (PTBs) were introduced in 2021 and give families the freedom and flexibility to make their own transport arrangements. A PTB is a direct payment to a parent/carer which can be used in many ways to make sure that their child gets to school every day in a fit state to learn.

PTBs can be a more cost-effective way for the Council to provide assistance with transport but are only offered in discussion with families and other professionals (as appropriate) where it is considered a PTB will effectively meet the needs of the child or young person. To determine the appropriate personal budget amount the following factors are taken into consideration:



- the special educational needs and disabilities of the student
- the travel distance
- how the student might travel to school
- the time the journey takes
- whether the student can travel alone or if they need to be accompanied
- the age of the student
- whether any specialist equipment might be required

The standard amount that would be offered with a PTB is 45p per mile and includes the cost of two return journeys to and from the student’s educational setting (i.e. all four legs of the journey). Any variation to the standard amount will be considered as part of the student’s travel needs assessment.

Academic Year (AY)	No. of PTBs in place
2021-22 (as at 31 July 2022 i.e. end of the AY)	378
2022-23 (as at 31 July 2023 i.e. end of the AY)	521
2023-24 (as at 11 October 2023 i.e. 5.5 weeks into the AY)	475

For 2023-24 the expectation is that the number of PTBs will follow previous growth trends and increase as the new academic school year progresses.

School Transport: seatbelt buckle guards

- 2.9 Alongside work to support the start of the 2023-24 academic school year, Client Transport have also undertaken significant work to review the use of seatbelt buckle guards on contracted transport. A seatbelt buckle guard is a device that fits on to a seatbelt and prevents the person travelling from being able to unclip the seat belt themselves.
- 2.10 Buckle guards have historically been provided for use on transport for a small number of passengers with SEND where their travel needs assessment identifies that this is required to ensure their safety in the vehicle, and/or the safety of other passengers or the driver of the vehicle, or the safety of other road users during transit.
- 2.11 Regulation 48(4)(d) of the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986¹ requires that seatbelt buckles can be readily fastened and unfastened and that they are kept free from obstruction.

¹ [The Road Vehicles \(Construction and Use\) Regulations 1986](#)

- 2.12 In February 2023 the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency issued a public statement that the use of buckle guards would be likely to be considered in breach of the regulations.
- 2.13 In July 2023 the [Good Practice Guide for Local Authorities](#) issued by the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) advised that local authorities should not issue any new seatbelt buckle guards. Where buckle guards are already in use, transport providers should find suitable alternatives.
- 2.14 Since February 2023 Client Transport have undertaken a substantial programme of work to identify and eliminate the use of buckle guards on council arranged transport. This has included engaging with transport operators and parents to fully identify use prior to reviewing needs assessments for existing passengers. The Client Transport Compliance Team have also incorporated buckle guard checks into their regular checks of transport at special schools.
- 2.15 Only 20 buckle guards have been found to be in use which equates to 1% of the 2000 SEN students transported by the Council.
- 2.16 Work is underway to update travel assessments for these children and find suitable alternatives so that we can continue to transport them safely.

Increased pressures on home to school transport budgets nationally

- 2.17 Nationally the cost of delivering Council-funded home to school travel has increased significantly in recent years. Key drivers of cost identified nationally, which are in line with the experience in Buckinghamshire, are:
- Market and inflationary pressures increasing the cost of mainstream and SEND home to school transport
 - Increasing numbers of children with Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs)
 - Increasing complexity of needs
 - Increasing distance travelled due to school occupancy and distribution of specialist provision
- 2.18 As a result of increasing costs nationally, in the first quarter of 2023-24 the County Council's Network (CCN) commissioned research to understand current demands for and expenditure on both SEND and mainstream home to school transport, differentiating between CCN councils and other local authorities. This research has not yet concluded, but their initial research is outlined below.

Local authority spend on home to school transport between 2015-16 and 2021-22

- 2.19 Published data on local authority expenditure shows that in 2021-22 just over £1.5b was spent on home to school transport by local authorities in England. 74% of this (£1.13b) was spent on SEND Transport.
- 2.20 Over the 7 year period, expenditure on mainstream transport has been relatively stable, with a modest growth of 9% nationally over that period.
- 2.21 In contrast, expenditure on SEND Transport has grown very rapidly by 79% over the 7 year period.

CCN member councils spend on home to school transport between 2015-16 and 2021-22

- 2.22 The rural nature of many county areas means that children often travel longer distances to their nearest suitable school.
- 2.23 CCN member councils spent £844m on home to school transport in 2021/22. While CCN member councils account for 41% of the population aged 5 to 25 years, they account for 56% of all school transport expenditure.
- 2.24 The 10% rate of growth in expenditure on mainstream transport over the 7 year period is similar to the 9% growth nationally over that period.
- 2.25 63% of school transport expenditure in CCN member councils was for SEND Transport. Over the 7 year period, at 84% the growth in expenditure in SEND Transport in CCN member councils is more rapid than the national rate of growth (79%).

Growth in SEND Transport demand in Buckinghamshire

- 2.26 Between January 2019 and January 2023, the total number of children and young people (0-25) living in Buckinghamshire with an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) has increased from 4,054 in January 2019 to 5,890 in January 2023, an increase of over 45%.
- 2.27 Since the Covid pandemic in 2019-20, there has been a year on year increase in the number of eligible young people with SEND. The Council have also seen an increase in the complexity of needs over that period. The percentage change of young people with SEND eligible and referred for travel assistance year on year and vs. 2018-19 are shown in the following table.

School year	Total no. of eligible young people with SEND ² (including PTBs)	% change in total number of eligible young people with SEND from previous year	% change in total number of eligible young people with SEND since 2018-19
2018-19	2,306	-	-
2019-20 ³	2,106	-9%	-9%
2020-21	2,296	9%	-0.4%
2021-22	2,541	11%	10%
2022-23	2,713	7%	18%

Buckinghamshire Home to School Transport budget position

2.28 The total approved budget for Home to School Transport in 2023/24 is £28.1m. Last financial year the outturn was a net expenditure of £26.3m⁴ which was £3.0m higher cost than budgeted. In 2022/23 the outturn net expenditure was:

- Mainstream (primary and secondary transport) at £7.5m
- Pupil Referral Unit Transport at £1.0m
- Pre-16 SEND Transport at £14.4m
- Post-16 SEND Transport at £2.5m
- Post-19 SEND Transport at £0.9m

2.29 The Client Transport service are working closely with Finance colleagues through the annual medium-term financial planning process (MTFP) to forecast future growth the Council is likely to experience in the area of home to school transport and mitigations available to reduce the impact of this growth on budgets, as far as possible, over the next 3 years. This includes a high level of scrutiny and management of the budget position month on month, and check and challenge on end of year and growth forecasts.

2.30 The Service also actively seeks to control costs in the context of a demand-led statutory service that is experiencing considerable growth year on year. The Client Transport Improvement Programme has played, and continues to play, a key role in developing and overseeing improvement activities to drive efficiencies in process and manage the demand into the Service as efficiently as possible. In the last 2 to 3 years this work has included large scale retendering of contracts, vehicle optimisation, remodelling routes, introducing PTBs and introducing a parental

² This includes students with EHCPs who attend mainstream schools

³ Decrease is attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic

⁴ A £0.1m grant was received in relation to transport for Ukrainian guest children

contribution to the cost of Post-16 SEND council arranged transport, as well as through school bus ticket sales under the Council's Spare Seats Scheme.

3. The Client Transport Improvement Programme

3.1 Since February 2020 Client Transport has been on an improvement journey, which is tracked and managed through a Client Transport Improvement Programme. The programme had three phases: stabilisation, transition, and transformation.



3.2 The programme is overseen by the Service Director for Transport Services with a board membership which includes the Corporate Director for Communities, the Cabinet Member for Transport, senior officers from across the Council and wider Board Members including [Families and Carers Together in Buckinghamshire](#) (FACT Bucks). The objectives of the programme are:

- To improve the customer experience.
- To ensure that the service has effective budgetary control.
- To ensure that the service operating model is sustainable, effective and efficient with robust contract management.
- To reduce demand and need for Council arranged transport through providing alternative transport solutions.

3.3 The key achievements of the Client Transport Improvement Programme to date include:

- **Procurement rigour.** Transport retendering completed between January 2021 and May 2022. A total of 1,300 contracts were retendered covering all school, college, pupil referral unit (PRU) and adult social care transport.
- **Increase in the number of school bus routes run commercially.** In 2021 and 2022 the service successfully encouraged the set-up of 18 new commercial school bus routes through remodelling of the Council's school bus provision. This enabled the Council to focus on providing transport for eligible children while parents /carers can quickly and easily buy their child's ticket directly from the commercial operator.

- **Personal Transport Budgets (PTBs) introduced** in 2021. As at 11 October 2023, 475 PTBs were already in place for the 2023-24 academic year.
- **Shared visibility of the single client record.** Client Transport went live with Capita ONE's transport module in February 2022. This is the same administration system used by Children's Services to manage education records.
- **Streamlining of Spare Seats fee structure and processes** which resulted in the introduction of a flat fee approach to Spare Seats charging from 2023-24 academic year. Better, easier ways to pay online and via the telephone using the Council's Pay360 platform were also introduced reducing administration activity required.

Key Current Projects

- 3.4 The Client Transport Improvement Programme has a number of current projects underway which will be key to effectively managing the growth the Service is experiencing and forecasting. These include:
- 3.5 **School Transport policy review.** On 29 June 2023 the Department for Education (DfE) published revised [Home to School Travel guidance for children of statutory school age](#) (5-16 years) and advised that the guidance comes into force with immediate effect. DfE have advised that local authorities should have regard to the revised guidance when they next review their home to school travel policies. As a result, the Council's next school transport policy consultation will take place in between December 2023 and January 2024.
- 3.6 **SEND Transport eligibility assessment review.** A detailed review has been undertaken to assess the current operating model for eligibility decision-making and identify options for improvement. As a result, a small, dedicated team have been recruited within iSEND to carry out the transport eligibility function with clear accountability for robust decision-making in accordance with the Council's school transport policies, and acting as a first point of contact for parents/carers.
- 3.7 **Streamlining Transport Operator processes** through collaboration and joint working with the Taxi Licencing team in the areas of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks, Client Transport Operator ID badge processes and training for transport crews with the aim of reducing duplication whilst maintaining our robust approach in this area.
- 3.8 **Review of our long-term procurement strategy.** Setting up a new Dynamic Purchasing System to deliver a long-term tendering strategy, which will include new contractual terms and conditions to stimulate increased market competition.

- 3.9 **Exploring the potential for cross-border transport collaboration** by joint working with neighbouring local authorities on home to school transport options.
- 3.10 **Reflecting on the outcomes of early projects.** The Client Transport Improvement Programme will also be revisiting some of its early projects to check their continued relevance. This will include a software GAP analysis to understand whether there are further opportunities to better utilise technology to drive efficiency within the Service.

4. Legal and financial implications

Legal implications

- 4.1 Section 508B and section 509AA of the Education Act 1996 set out duties on the Council to arrange travel or other arrangements as it deems necessary for pupils of compulsory school and of sixth form age (Post-16) to enable them to attend educational establishments. For compulsory school age eligible pupils, the arrangements must be free of charge, whereas for Post-16 students the arrangements can include financial assistance.
- 4.2 In addition to the statutory duties under the Education Act 1996, there are a number of overarching duties that are relevant to the Council's [Home to School Transport Policy](#) and our [Post-16 Transport Policy Statement](#). These include duties under:
- The Education and Skills Act 2008 to encourage, enable and assist participation of young people with SEND up to the age of 25.
 - The Children and Families Act 2014 in relation to the local offer

Financial implications

- 4.3 The Buckinghamshire budget position is outlined in sections 2.28 to 2.30. Current year overspend at Q2 is £1.4m adverse variance due to contractual pressures with potential risk of £2.45m linked mainly to demand growth. MTFP proposals are underway to determine the level of growth required in future MTFP cycles.
- 4.4 Owing to the statutory requirements to provide home to school transport the Council is legally obliged to ensure provision. This national cost pressure is particularly acute for rural county authorities as set out in sections 2.22 to 2.25. Nevertheless, all options to control costs whilst meeting statutory requirements are being pursued.

5. Corporate implications

5.1 The provision of home to school transport assistance to eligible young people is a statutory duty, which links to our corporate priorities in the following ways:

- Strengthening our communities – the provision of transport enables children and adults across the county to access vital services.
- Supporting the vulnerable – transport assistance is put in place to help eligible students with SEND to get to school.

6. Next steps and review

6.1 The key next steps for the Client Transport Improvement programme are:

- School Transport Policy consultation to reflect requirements of the revised DfE guidance between December 2023 and January 2024.
- Embedding new SEND transport eligibility and assessment processes.
- Streamlining Transport Operator processes through collaboration and joint working with the Taxi Licencing team in the areas of DBS checks, Buckinghamshire Council Transport Operator ID badge processes and transport crew training.
- Setting up a new Dynamic Purchasing System to deliver a long term tendering strategy, which will include new contractual terms and conditions to stimulate increased market competition.
- Exploring the potential for cross border transport provision by joint working with neighbouring local authorities, including those who run their own in-house fleet.