

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET – 26th JULY, 2007

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

HOME TO SCHOOL TRAVEL

Executive Summary

- 1.0 This report summarises the implications of the statutory guidance 'Home to School Travel and Transport' published by the DfES in May 2007. In particular members are asked to note the changes that will be required to the Authority's Home to School Transport Policy. The rights of some groups of parents to free travel have been extended by Section 77 and Schedule 8 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Background

- 2.0 The Education and Inspections Act 2006 and subsequent guidance places new duties on local authorities in relation to home to school travel. The various aspects of these new duties are summarised below.

Sustainable School Travel

- 3.0 Section 508A of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 in force from 1 April 2007 places a general duty on Local Authorities to promote the use of sustainable travel and transport. This duty involves assessment of children's travel needs, an audit of the current sustainable travel and transport infrastructure, the development of a strategy to develop sustainable travel and transport; and the promotion of sustainable travel.
- 3.1 The Act defines sustainable modes of travel as "those that the local authority considers may improve the physical well-being of those who use them, the environmental well-being of all or part of the local authority's area".
- 3.2 The Authority is requested to publish the first stage of its plan in September 2007. Officers from Technical Services Department are working on the production of the plan. There is regular liaison with officers from the Children & Young People's Department so that the plan can be incorporated within the Admissions system. The strategy will build on previous work in developing school Travel Plans. All schools will be required to have a Travel Plan by 2010. Currently 70 primary schools and 10 secondary schools have or are developing travel plans, so there is much work to be done particularly in the secondary sector.

Eligibility for Travel Assistance

- 4.0 The Act makes provision for determining and extending the rights of families to travel assistance. Section 35B of the Education and Inspection Act 2006 defines "eligible

children” as those categories of children for whom travel arrangements will always be required. They are children of compulsory school age who fall into one of the following categories. The first 3 (a – c) have been statutory requirements since 1944 (d – e) indicate an extension of eligibility.

- (a) Children unable to walk to school by reason of their SEN, disability, or mobility problem. These children could not reasonably be expected to walk to school. (A copy of the Authority’s current SEN Transport Policy is attached).
- (b) Children who live within statutory walking distance of their nearest qualifying school where the nature of the route is such that a child can not reasonably be expected to walk (accompanied as necessary) in reasonable safety.
- (c) Children living outside the “statutory walking” distance to their nearest appropriate school. (The statutory walking distance is 2 miles for 5-8 year olds and 3 miles for 8-16 year olds).
- (d) Regardless of the level of family income, children of compulsory school age but under the age of 8 are entitled to free travel to a school more than 2 miles away. From September 2007 children between the age of 8-11 years old from low income families (defined by free school meal eligibility or receipt of maximum level of Working Tax Credit) are eligible for assistance where they live more than 2 miles from their appropriate school.
- (e) For those pupils aged 11 or over from September 2008 the Act extends the rights to free transport for those parents of low income groups (detailed as above) to a choice of one of 3 appropriate schools between 2 and 6 miles of their home. If parents in this category have a religious preference for a school then their right is extended up to a school between 2 and 15 miles from their home.

Extending the Right to Travel Assistance

- 4.1 The changes included in (d) and (e) are particularly significant for the Council’s home to school transport policy. The current policy is attached (Appendix 2) and provides the minimum legal entitlements in relation to statutory walking distance. The changes for primary age pupils which complies with new legal requirements comes into force in September 2007, for secondary age pupils in September 2008. The proposed new policies to incorporate these changes are summarised in Appendix 3. They will need to be included in the school admissions prospectus published in September 2007.
- 4.2 Parents whose nearest appropriate voluntary aided school is more than 3 miles away already receive travel assistance. This is not the case in all Authorities, some Councils have withdrawn support for travel assistance on the grounds of religious preference. Whilst there is no statutory requirement to provide travel assistance on religious grounds to all parents the Secretary of State hopes that local authorities will not change long established arrangements. There will be parents who live between 2-3 miles from their nearest Catholic school who if in one of the income groups described above will be eligible from 2008.

- 4.3 The impact of the changes in relation to applications for travel assistance for primary age pupils is likely to be negligible. For secondary age pupils from 2008 it is not possible to estimate the impact of these changes in relation to the pattern of parental preference. It is unclear whether these statutory changes will encourage parents to apply for schools further away.

Financial and Staffing Implications

- 5.0 A copy of a letter received from the Department for Children, Schools and Families outlining the grant available for the Council to implement these changes is attached. There are unlikely to be many if any applications from parents of primary age pupils. For secondary age pupils it is not possible to estimate what impact the assistance will have on the pattern of parental preference. Wirral Council has been awarded £5,505 in the first year and this will cover any additional costs. The policy is unlikely to have an impact locally until it is applied to secondary pupils from 2008. The cost of a bus pass is currently £194.00 and the grant available for any new passes for low income families with secondary age pupils has yet to be determined. Based on the initial indication for the primary sector in 2007 it is likely that the grant should cover additional costs.
- 5.1 The policy changes which are now required will be difficult to administer. The measurement of distances is not straightforward. The 2 mile limit is measured as the nearest available safe walking route, the 6 mile and 15 mile upper limits are not walking routes and therefore must be measured using road routes. The current software used to administer bus passes will be redundant. New software will need to be purchased and availability is being currently investigated. The system will need to identify the three nearest appropriate schools between 2 and 6 miles where there are places available. It is unlikely that staff at the One Stop Shop who currently administer what is a fairly straightforward policy will be able to continue to do so. This will be largely dependent on the efficiency of the software which becomes available. The Department currently uses SIA Smart mapping linked to the ARETE admission system. We are investigating a possible enhancement of this system, and will report further on any financial and staffing implications.

Equal Opportunities Implications

- 6.0 There are none.

Community Safety Implications

- 7.0 There are none.

Local Agenda 21 Statement

- 8.0 The Council's responsibility for developing a sustainable home-school travel policy is an important requirement of recent legislation. The extension of eligibility for travel assistance may encourage pupils to extend their journeys to school.

Planning Implications

9.0 There are none.

Local Member Support Implications

10.0 All Wards are affected by this report.

Background Papers

11.0 'Home to School Travel and Transport Guidance' DfES May 2007.
The Education and Inspection Act 2006.

Recommendations

That

- (1) the changes detailed in Appendix 3 be made and published in the prospectus for admissions.
- (2) further consultation on the home to school travel policy take place in the Spring Term 2008 as part of the consultation on admissions to schools.

Howard Cooper
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