

DRAFT CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

BUDGET OPTION - Schools and College Transport Policies

**For
Schools' Forum 10th April**

**Final Version will be published for consultation
Start 15th April 2013
End 24th May 2013**

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Budget Option Schools and College Transport Policies



Contents

Summary	3
<hr/>	
What is being proposed?	4
• To remove free denominational travel	4
• To change the assessment of support for free transport for children with special educational needs	4
• The removal of all post 16 transport	4
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Frequently Asked Questions	5
• What are the proposed changes?	5
• Why are the changes required?	6
• Is Wirral the only local authority making the changes?	6
• Who will be affected?	6
• When would the proposed changes be implemented?	7
• Who is being consulted with on the proposed changes?	8
• If the proposals are agreed, what would the Council continue to provide?	8
• How will this affect low income families?	9
• What steps has the Council taken to ensure the proposals are fair?	9
• What happens next?	10
• Can I appeal against the proposed changes?	10
<hr/>	
Taking part in the Consultation	10



Summary

Like many Councils, Wirral is facing unprecedented financial challenges. The Council, over the past few months, has been out to consultation on a wide range of options to try and begin to make savings of £109 million over the next three years – that’s around one third of our net budget. So, we need to make absolutely sure that the resources we have left are spent wisely, effectively and provide the best value for money for Wirral residents.

Providing transport for pupils to attend schools and colleges is very costly, particularly in Wirral as our policies are extremely generous – we provide a service over and above what is required by law.

The consultation process started with the ‘What Really Matters’ consultation that took place between November 2012 and January 2013. This consultation focused on three core principles;

- The removal of discretionary denominational transport.
- The removal of Post 16 transport (non SEN).
- A reduction in the number of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) eligible for transport. This includes the removal of all Post 16 transport for students with SEN.

This initial consultation led to Wirral Council setting the budget for the coming years on the basis of new transport policies in these areas being developed and delivered to make savings. This next stage of consultation seeks views on the proposed new policies that have been drafted to deliver the three core principles provided above.

The proposals seek to ensure that support continues to be provided to the most vulnerable young people in order for them to access education. We will continue to ensure that transport provision is provided in a transparent, supportive and cost-effective way for families.

Where it is appropriate we want to encourage progression to independent travelling in a phased supported way. This can increase young people’s confidence in using public transport, increasing participation in community life and can help to prepare a young person for life beyond school and college.

This document provides you with more detail on what exactly is being proposed, and also how you can get involved. We look forward to hearing your views.

Julia Hassall
Director of Children’s Services



What is being proposed?



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This consultation document is about proposed changes to the Council's transport policies for schools and colleges. There are three proposals:

To remove free denominational travel

The Council provides free transport, through travel passes, to both primary and secondary school children related to the religious character of the school. The cost of transport arrangements of children who have to travel more than the qualifying distances to the nearest school of the parent's religion is currently met.

The proposal is to remove this discretionary element of denominational travel. The Council will still provide transport in relation to statutory duties including beyond statutory walking distances and those on low incomes. In addition for secondary school pupils children from low income families who choose a school on the grounds of religion or belief will continue to receive free transport provision if the school is between 2 and 15 miles away from their home address.

To change the assessment of support for free transport for children with special educational needs

Currently students who have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) and attend specialist educational provision are eligible for free transport to school. A proportion of this transport can be classed as discretionary as some students live close to their school and could be assessed as safe to walk to school.

The proposal is to provide transport based on an assessed need. A new assessment through the Special Educational Needs Assessment Panel will be put in place to identify the transport support that best matches the student's needs. Where a young person is able to access and use the public transport network safely they will be expected to do so. This will mean that some pupils with a statement will not receive free transport, for others a free travel pass may be provided instead of specialised taxi based transport.



The removal of all post 16 transport

Wirral Council provides free transport for students aged over 16 who are in further education, based on low income criteria and also to those who have or had immediately prior to admission to school/ college, a statement of SEN. This transport provision is discretionary as the Council has no legal duty to provide post 16 transport.

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The proposal will be to remove this free transport and for families to make their own transport provision.

Alternative government provision is in place through a Bursary Scheme for pupils aged 16-19, which provides financial support for learners to access education or training. Schools and colleges are allocated funding and are responsible for awarding bursaries to students. The amount paid and any eligibility criteria will be decided by the school/college, except in the case of the most vulnerable learners.

Vulnerable learners, such as those in care, care leavers, those claiming income support or disabled students in receipt of both Employment Support Allowance and Disability Living Allowance, are eligible for a bursary of £1,200 for a full academic year.
accessing these sorts of services also get what they need.



Frequently asked questions



What are the proposed changes?

The table below sets out the groups affected, along with the current and proposed policy changes:

Groups Affected	Current Policy	Groups Affected
Those attending denominational schools	Free transport provision is currently provided to students who travel more than 3 miles (or two miles if the child is under 8)	To withdraw non-statutory denominational transport provision for pupils with effect from September 2014.
Children 5-16 with Special Educational Needs	Currently students who have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) and attend specialist provision are eligible for free transport to school.	To provide transport based on an assessed need. A new assessment through the Special Educational Needs Assessment Panel (SNAP) will be put in place to identify the transport support that best matches the student's needs.
Post 16 students including those with special educational needs	Currently Wirral Council provides free post 16 transport to students in further education based on low income criteria and also to those who have or had immediately prior to admission to school/ college a statement of SEN. This transport provision is discretionary as the Council has no legal duty to provide post 16 transport.	To cease to provide transport support for all post 16 students.



Current school transport policy documents are located on the Wirral Council website: www.wirral.gov.uk/my-services/childrens-services/education-and-learning/schools-and-colleges/information-parents-and-carers/school-transport

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Why are the changes required?

Like all councils, Wirral Council is under considerable pressure to make savings on its public spending. The Council has to make savings in the order of £109m over the next three years. As a result, the Council has had to look at every aspect of its work, especially where it is not compulsory for us to provide services, and consider how they can be delivered more efficiently and cost effectively.

Is Wirral the only local authority making the changes?

No. Due to the continuing increases in the cost of school transport and budgetary pressures, more and more Councils have or are in the process of revising their home to school transport policies.

Who will be affected?

Those students accessing the following services will be most affected by the proposals:

- ***Denominational transport – those who receive a travel pass to a faith or denominational school***

Children who attend, for reasons of religious belief, a denominational school more than 2 miles (children under 8) or more than 3 miles (children over 8) from their home address are currently eligible for a free bus pass if there is no denominational school nearer to their home address. Although councils in exercising their statutory powers to provide transport are obliged to have regard to the religions and beliefs of parents and pupils, there is no statutory requirement for them to provide free or assisted transport to pupils attending denominational schools for reasons of religious belief as of right. The only exception is for low income families on qualifying benefits and in these cases eligibility is dependent on the home to school distance being between 2 and 15 miles.



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- **Children 5-16 with Special Educational Needs**

Currently all students who have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) and attend specialist provision are eligible for free transport to school. A proportion of this transport can be classed as discretionary as some students live quite close to their school and could be assessed as being safe for them to walk to school.

The proposal is to provide transport based on an assessed need for transport. A new assessment through the Special Educational Needs Assessment Panel (SNAP) will identify the transport support that best matches the student's needs. Where a young person is able to access and use the public transport network safely they will be expected to do so. This will mean that some statemented pupils will not receive free transport, while for others a free travel pass may be provided instead of specialised taxi-based transport.

- **Post 16 transport**

Currently Wirral Council provides free post 16 transport to students in further education based on low income criteria and also to those who have or had immediately prior to admission to school/ college a statement of SEN. This transport provision is discretionary as the Council has no legal duty to provide post 16 transport.

The proposal is to cease to provide additional transport support for all post 16 students.

When would the proposed changes be implemented?

The decision is due to be taken in July 2013 and the implementation date for the revised policy changes would be September 2014.

Students who currently receive transport assistance at their current school or college will not be affected by the proposals. The proposals apply to students on entry into primary, secondary and Post 16 provision from September 2014.



Who is being consulted with on the proposed changes?

This is an open consultation and everybody is welcome to comment on the proposals. All of the consultation documentation is available on the Council's website. The Council has specifically contacted the following groups:

- Parents/ carers of children and young people who receive transport support
- Headteachers and chairs of governors of special schools and mainstream schools.
- All Wirral Elected members.
- The Catholic Diocese of Shrewsbury and the Anglican Diocese of Chester
- Other local authorities bordering Wirral
- Unions and professional associations
- The wider community (via the Internet)
- Wirral further education providers
- The Voluntary / Community Sector

If the proposals are agreed, what would the Council continue to provide?

Councils are required by law, to provide assistance for those pupils who are eligible. If a pupil qualifies under the following circumstances then transport is provided free. This includes pupils who:

- are between 5 and 16 and go to their nearest suitable school and live at least:
 - 2 miles from the school if they're under 8
 - 3 miles from the school if they're 8 or older
- are registered at their local school and are unable to walk to school due to a route which the Council has assessed as hazardous.
- are from a low income family (entitled to free school meals or maximum Working Tax Credit) if they are:
 - aged 8 to 11 and the school is at least 2 miles away
 - aged 11 to 16 and the school is 2 to 6 miles away - as long as there aren't 3 or more suitable schools nearer to home
 - aged 11 to 16 and the school's 2 to 15 miles away - if it's their nearest school preferred on the grounds of religion or belief





- are registered at their local school or the most appropriate school to meet their special educational needs and those needs prevent them from achieving independent travel or walking the statutory distance safely accompanied by an adult.

Transport may be provided for children in the care of the Local Authority determined on a case by case basis. The school at which a child is placed by the Council will be deemed the 'nearest suitable school' for school transport purposes irrespective of the Council's normal zoning arrangements in order to provide continuity of educational provision for such children. The allocation of school and required transport arrangements will be reviewed as part of the child's regular Care Plan review.

The Council still proposes to maintain limited discretionary elements to provision. Occasionally cases arise which are outside the policy but where the Council will take the view that transport should be provided and that it would be inappropriate or unnecessary to bring a case to appeal. For this reason, appropriate transport may be approved by the Director of Children and Young People's Services in relation to children for whom there are very exceptional personal or domestic circumstances.

I have a child at school who currently receives a pass and their younger sibling is due to start at the same school in September 2014. Will the younger child get a pass?

Not automatically, as this will be a new application and will be considered under the new policy, so they may not get a pass. However, the older child will continue to receive a pass provided that their circumstances do not change.

How will this affect low income families?

The Council has a statutory duty to provide free school travel for compulsory school age pupils from low income families as outlined below.

- Primary aged children from low income families (those in receipt of free school meals or the maximum level of working tax credit) may be supported with travel assistance where they live more than 2 miles from their nearest available school.



- For secondary aged children from low income families they may be eligible for free transport to one of the three nearest qualifying schools between 2 and 6 miles away, or the nearest suitable qualifying school chosen on the grounds of religion or belief between 2 and 15 miles away.

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This is a statutory duty and will not be affected under the proposed policy.

What steps has the Council taken to ensure the proposals are fair?

The Council is aware that these proposals would affect some families more than others and is keen to understand this impact. An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out and this has helped us to see what the impact might be.

What happens next?

Once the consultation period closes a complete analysis of the responses will be prepared by the Council for a report that will be considered by Wirral Council Cabinet at a meeting held in July 2013. At this meeting the Cabinet will decide to:

- proceed with the original proposals, or
- proceed with amendments to the proposals as a result of the consultation feedback, or
- not proceed with the original or amended proposals.

If approved, revised policies would be published in September 2013 with changes implemented on 1 September 2014.

Can I appeal against the proposed changes?

Specific appeals against a policy change may only be made where a policy is either failing to meet statutory requirements or where the policy contributes towards inequality in provision. Any revised policy would be designed to be equitable and compliant with current legislation but parents who are not happy with the way in which the policy has decided their application, may as now raise any concerns with the Director of Children’s Services.



Taking part in the Consultation

You have until May 24th 2013 to provide us with your views on these proposals. You can complete a questionnaire, online, at:

www.wirral.gov.uk/whatreallymatters

You can also request a paper questionnaire by calling us on **0151 666 4697**. All paper questionnaires should be returned to:

**The Integrated Transport Unit
Children and Young People's Department
Hamilton Building
Conway Street
Birkenhead
Wirral, CH41 4FD**

The full time table for making the final decision on these proposals is provided below:

Consultation: 15th April to 24th May 2013

Analysis of Feedback: June 2013

Final Decisions: July 2013

2014-2015 Policies Published: September 2013

Policies Implemented: September 2014

We understand that these are important proposals, so we really need to hear your views. We will not make a decision until we have carefully considered all responses to this consultation.

