



CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 27 November 2024

REPORT TITLE:	WIRRAL HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES & EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee with an overview of the current delivery model for home to school travel for Wirral children.

At the present time Wirral Council provides transport for 1853 children with a door to school service, this mainly support young people who have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). In addition, we provide schools bus passes for 666 pupils, with an annual cost of approximately £145K. This is to support pupils whose mainstream school is beyond a certain distance and the local authority has the statutory responsibility to provide travel.

The cost currently to the council is £11.1 million for the financial year 2024-2025, this includes a pressure for this year of £3.1 million. Based on current projections in relation to increased EHCP's, it is expected the cost of this service will continue to grow into the next financial year and a pressure of £3.3 million is already built in. The challenge is not a purely financial one, the resources required are significant and the current commissioned provision is under pressure due to the transport providers available.

The pressure currently faced by Wirral is in line with the national picture with the increased number of children with an EHCP, the dwindling number of providers and the increased costs due to inflation.

The current model is fully reliant on commissioned transport, of which the majority uses combustion engine vehicles, this leads to significant carbon emissions as part of the delivery model. As part of the activity to develop a delivery model for the future, development of a greener approach will be explored.

Fundamental to the work has been adherence to the principles outlined. These are the drivers for change and are intrinsically aligned to the 'Early Help for Children and Families', 'promoting independence and healthier lives' and 'protect our environment' themes of the Council Plan: Wirral Working Together 2023 - 27.

This matter affects all wards within the borough.

This is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is requested to:

1. Approval for the development of a new Assisted Travel for Young People Policy and for this to be approved at a future Children, Young People and Education Committee.
2. Approval to develop the strategies as outlined in the report to embed a more effective service delivery model.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 To enable members of the Children, Young People & Education Committee to support the council's statutory responsibilities in relation to transport to access education establishments.
- 1.2 To enable members of the Children, Young People & Education Committee to explore options that allow cost savings alongside their statutory responsibilities

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 We could change nothing in relation the current delivery model of home to school transport, this would lead to a cost of £17million by the financial year 2028-2029, this would continue to challenge the council's current financial position.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Current service delivery model

- 3.1 Over the three-year period 2020/21 – 2023/24 the expenditure in this area has risen by 82% in relation to contract commissioning from £3.6million to £6.7million, which is only part driven by young people demand, which has increased by 38% in the same period. The cost per passenger has risen from £4,684 to £5,369 per annum, representing an increase of 15%.
- 3.2 A recent Association of the Director of Children's Services (ADCS) report in November 2023 outlined growing expenditure on home to school transport across the country. It stated local authorities will have to explore all options in making services more efficient.
- 3.3 The costs outlined in the summary above cover costs for children and young people to primary, secondary and special schools; the cost of escorts that support the transport of young people; bus passes for young people who reside a certain distance from their nearest mainstream school and the officer costs to deliver the service.
- 3.4 Some young people are eligible to support with public travel costs that are not linked to a special educational need or disability (SEND). The two most common reasons for this are the travel distance from the home address to the school or they young person is unable to walk to school, even if they were accompanied by their parent, due to a route which the council has assessed as hazardous. As outlined earlier in the report, the council 666 travel passes to support young people with school travel under these criteria.
- 3.5 Until June 2024, while the budget pressures for the commissioned home to school transport sat within the Children's Directorate, the remaining costs and service delivery sat within the Neighbourhood's Directorate. This arrangement was not conducive in support clear oversight in relation to the changes in requirements to deliver the service and the expected change in demand. The transport service is also

a key aspect of the current SEND sufficiency strategy for the next 5 years that is currently being developed, following the publication of a 2-year sufficiency plan that was approved by the LA SEND Partnership Board in June 2024.

- 3.6 The home to school travel service, since June 2024 is part of the Children's Directorate. Part of the transfer includes all officers that delivered the service, the senior transport manager now reports to Assistant Director – Education. Moving forward this will allow much closer working between transport, Education and SEND officers. In addition, it is expected this will allow closer control in relation to cost pressures.
- 3.7 One of the responsibilities of the team is also to oversee and deliver the transport for Adult Day Care Services. The costs associated with the delivery of this service are the responsibility of the Adult's Directorate. This is a much smaller provision and currently supports 400 adults with learning needs. Any options to review this service will be overseen by the Adult's Committee. The team of officers that oversee both services is an appropriate model given the knowledge oversight in relation to the area.

New policy, application and assessment process

- 3.8 The current policy for school aged and post-16 young people has not been reviewed for several years. The policy needs to clearly offer the range of travel options offered in a hierarchy. The policy should outline a clear process for re-assessment which doesn't currently exist, this would need to be underpinned with the need for travel training to support independence.
- 3.9 The development of a new policy will need to be undertaken through significant stakeholder engagement to make sure it fulfils the council's statutory responsibility in making sure can access their statutory education entitlement.
- 3.10 If approved by committee, the development of the new policy will commence in December, with the expectation of the consultation and development of the new policy to be concluded by the end of the financial year. This would allow the new policy to be approved at committee at the beginning of the next municipal year.
- 3.11 It is vital that through the development of the new policy, the views of young people, parents/carers, education settings and transport providers are captured to make sure the new policy takes into account views across the partnership.
- 3.12 As part of the review the policy a new application form should be developed and provided by an on-line system. The form should also be redesigned to capture the evidence in relation to needing transport. It is vital that the information shared with transport officers allows the most informative decision regarding the most appropriate transport approach.
- 3.13 Currently the assessment for requiring transport is undertaken by the transport officers, with little interaction with the SEND team. The increased capacity within the new SENDSTART team will allow closer collaboration in between both teams in relation to decision making. The combination of considering both transport and

provision as the part of any decision-making process will allow a more holistic outcome to be made.

Travel training offer as part of the new policy and application process

- 3.14 Wirral LA needs to re-establish the offer in relation to travel training, to allow dedicated support to work with schools and the promotion of travel training opportunities to young people. The opportunities for travel training need to be linked to the transport policy for post-16 given this cohort of young people would be the most appropriate to support with this training. It is important this offer linked to curriculum delivery in relation to preparation for adulthood.
- 3.15 The development of travel training is linked to a wider piece of work across the 9 local authorities cover in the Cheshire and Merseyside ICB area. Wirral LA will work with colleagues to develop travel training where best practice has been shared.

Operational delivery opportunities, commissioning and procurement

- 3.16 Greater collaboration between colleagues within children's services and transport officers should lead to more integrated working practices.
- Improving the quality of data and utilising professional expertise in eligibility assessment decision making, including the need for the application of escorts to a route
 - Improving the visibility of individual transport needs and the range of solutions available when developing and reviewing an EHCP
 - Better considering the costs of transport when making placement decisions
 - Better providing supporting evidence for making decisions and responding to appeals
- 3.17 The current systems and databases used by officers are historic and oversight could be better. The council has procured new routing software – Q routes, this will allow much better planning for young people attending the same school.
- 3.18 As part of phase 2 of the Liquid Logic Early Years & Education System, Children's transport will transfer all data to this system. This should work alongside the database and routing software to allow better oversight and governance of the service.
- 3.19 The combination of a new database and routing software should allow a full overhaul of the routes currently used for the next academic year, it is expected this could lead to efficiencies and reduction in the number of routes for the same number of young people.
- 3.20 A reduction in routes based on the current operation would also create capacity in the system and reduce the council's carbon footprint.
- 3.21 Another option alongside a review of routing is the development of group pick-up, where this is safe to do so. This has been developed in other local authorities, where passengers are accompanied as necessary to safe pick up-points in appropriate locations. This initiative also supports the independence and transition to adulthood

of passengers. A review of one special school showed 140 children lived within half a mile of safe walking to a sheltered bus stop. This could reduce the number of pick ups from 140 to 28 saving 30% of the mileage. This option would have to be carefully considered based on discussions with parents/carers, young people and schools.

- 3.22 A significant proportion of the budget used is relation to commissioning of private providers to deliver home to school transport. The next opportunity to commission a significant number of contracts is for September 2025. It is imperative that transport officers work collaboratively with commissioning and procurement officers to seek the best value in relation to future contracts. This work will be supported using Q-routes to allow more efficient routes to go out to tender.
- 3.23 When considering how the use of escorts are deployed in Wirral, currently 82% of all routes are assigned an escort, which is higher than an expected benchmark of 60%. Through the process of re-assessment that will be developed as part of the new policy, the possibility exists to reduce the number of escorts required. A reduction to 75%, would equate to a reduction of 20 escorts on the routes that currently exist, this would allow deployment to other routes as they are required.
- 3.24 Currently escorts are picked up and dropped off at their home address, the LA should explore the use of designated pick up and drop off points which are convenient for each route. This is common in other councils and would support better pricing with transport providers.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The current home to school transport budget is under significant pressure, as outlined earlier in the report, with £3.1 million pressure this year, with a similar amount expected next year. The pressure is driven by growth and inflation pressures. That said, the outlined areas within the report indicate the significant efficiencies, that could be made.
- 4.2 The development of a new policy and implementing the areas outlined could lead to reduction in the pressure outlined for the financial year 2025/26. Within the report that is brought back to committee with the new policy recommendation, it is expected the savings linked to operational delivery change will also be outlined.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The local authority has a statutory responsibility to provide transport for young people to attend school where it is appropriate within the policy. The requirements of the local authority are outlined in the Education Act 1996, "*LA must make such travel arrangements as it considers necessary in order to secure that suitable home to school travel arrangements, for the purpose of facilitating an "eligible child's" attendance at the relevant educational establishment*".
- 5.2 As part of the development of the new policy for home to school travel, it is imperative the policy adheres to the requirements as set out in the act.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 The current transport team has not changed in size for a number of years with a significant increase in demand. The development of closer working with SEND and education officers within Children's Services should lead to an improvement in this area.
- 6.2 To facilitate the areas outlined in this report, additional investment within the team may be required. As part of the transformation work within this area, any investment would be linked to savings that reduce the cost pressures for future years.
- 6.3 The LA has already procured a new routing software system – Q Routes, this should lead more efficient planning and procurement in future years.
- 6.4 The oversight of the transport system is scheduled to transfer across to Liquid Logic EYES this academic year, this will enable further collaboration between different areas of Children's Services.
- 6.5 The deployment of escorts is currently overseen by Wirral LA, with many escorts employed directly by the LA. As part of the development of the new policy and re-assessment process it will be to capture feedback from this area of the workforce.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 The service area is expected to place significant financial pressure on the LA in future years, given the councils current financial position, it is imperative steps are taken to implement efficiencies where possible.
- 7.2 Some of the areas outlined within the report would be a change of approach in relation to how services are delivered. It is imperative that through the development of the new policy and development of efficiencies all relevant stakeholders work together in relation to this area.
- 7.3 The current delivery model is placing a significant strain in relation to the providers available in this market, the activity outlined in the report will hopefully allow efficiencies to be found to support providers and ultimately make sure young people can attend their education setting.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 If approved by committee today, this report commences the development of a new policy for home to school travel. It is essential that through this development all stakeholders are part of the process, including parents/carers, young people, settings, officers and wider partners of the LA.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.

9.2 As part of the development of the new policy if approved by committee, a full equality impact assessment will be completed for when the policy returns for approval.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The current home to school transport model places a significant reliance of transport that adds to current carbon emissions of the LA. As part of this work, any reduction in the use carbon emissions or the use of greener transport will be explored and share at the future committee meeting for the new policy approval.

10.2 As part of the new policy and re -assessment process the development of a process that takes into account the carbon footprint of the journeys being made will also be part of the review and development of any future approaches.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The development of a new travel training offer to allow greater independence will young people to be better prepared as they enter adulthood and leave education, this will support young people with training and employment opportunities.

REPORT AUTHOR: James Backhouse
Assistant Director
telephone: 0151 666 4964
email: jamesbackhouse@wirral.gov.uk

APPENDICES

None

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Children, Young People and Education Committee in accordance with section 3.2(a) of its Terms of Reference, to exercise management, oversight and delivery of services to children and young people in relation to their care, wellbeing, education or health, with the exception of any powers reserved to full Council;

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Council Plan: Wirral Working Together 2023 – 27
- Association of the Director of Children’s Services (ADCS) report, November 2023
- The Education Act 1996

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date