



Northumberland

County Council

Families and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Date: 4 April 2019

REVIEW OF IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW POST-16 TRANSPORT POLICY

Joint Report of the Executive Director of Children's Services, Cath McEvoy-Carr and Executive Director of Place, Paul Johnston

Cabinet Members: Councillor Wayne Daley, Deputy Leader & Children's Services

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide feedback on the implementation of the new Post-16 Transport Policy, the issues that have arisen and measures taken to address them. The report also provides details of the further steps being taken that will improve the management of the student travel scheme in 2019/20.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the following key themes in the Corporate Plan for 2017-2021:-

- 'Connecting - We want you to have access to the things you need'
- 'Learning - We want you to achieve and realise your potential'

Key Issues

In order to meet the Administration's Manifesto pledge of removing Post-16 transport charges, the previous policy and charging regime for Post-16 transport was reviewed and amended following a public consultation exercise.

The current policy was implemented from the start of the 2018/19 Academic Year and whilst, broadly speaking, it maintained the same eligibility criteria as the previous policy, it did result in:

- (i) free transport being reintroduced for eligible students and
- (ii) the introduction of a £50 administration fee to help offset the costs of the travel scheme.

A commitment was also made to ensure students with Education, Health & Care (EHC) Plans and students from low income backgrounds were exempt from paying the administration fee.

1. Background & Statutory Guidance

Section 509AA of the 1996 Education Act places a duty on local authorities to *'prepare and publish an annual transport policy statement specifying the arrangements for the provision of transport or otherwise that the authority considers it necessary to make to facilitate the attendance of all persons of sixth form age receiving education and training'*.

The Guidance requires that all local authorities facilitate access to education and training for learners of sixth form age and provides the discretion to determine what transport and financial support are necessary for this purpose. The extent of transport provision and support is not prescribed, but account has to be taken of the needs of the most vulnerable or socially excluded learners, as determined by the authority in accordance with its annual transport policy statement.

All local authorities have a statutory obligation to set out their arrangements for enabling the attendance of Post-16 students at schools, colleges or other training establishments by 31 May each year. This means, as a statutory minimum, ensuring that young people have access to the affordable and appropriate transport services which are necessary for them to access their further education courses. However, this duty does not include a requirement to pay the actual fares of the students. The need to publish a Post-16 Transport policy by 31 May allows students and their parents to select their preferred courses / providers whilst being fully aware of the implications this has with respect to their travel costs.

2. Impact of the change of Post 16 Transport Policy

In 2017/18 academic year, when the previous Post 16 Transport Policy was in place, 256 students were provided with seats on school bus services commissioned by Northumberland County Council. Of these students, 127 paid the £600 annual

charge which resulted in £73k annual income to the Local Authority. The remaining 129 students were provided with free transport on grounds of low income, medical need or on discretionary grounds following an appeals process. The net cost of the travel scheme was £240,850. The remaining 4700 students in Post 16 education made their own way to their education provider either by public transport or by private means.

In the current academic year, 2018/19, 877 students are benefiting from free transport which represents a sharp rise in the number of students accessing school buses and taxis procured by the County Council. The families of 698 students paid the £50 administration fee resulting in just under £35k in revenue to Northumberland County Council to help administer the increased procurement. The remainder of students were exempt from paying this charge for various reasons, mainly their low income status. Overall the net cost of the travel scheme in this financial year is £706k. Past experience, however, strongly suggests that this is likely to rise in future years as awareness of the travel scheme grows. Additional capacity will need to be procured to accommodate Post-16 students as a number of the vehicles deployed on contracts serving high schools are now running close to full capacity.

Clearly, the significant rise in students participating has led to an increase in costs. This was budgeted for as part of the change to the travel scheme.

3. Implementation of the new Post 16 Transport Policy

In anticipation for the expected increase in demand for Post-16 transport, the Council introduced a number of initiatives to help manage the travel scheme. These were: -

- (a) All parents of potential Post-16 students were written to in June 2018 to inform them of the new student travel scheme and provide them with details of how to apply online.
- (b) More effective collaborative working between Transport Officers and Education Commissioners ensured decisions regarding eligibility for free transport took full account of a student's choice of course.
- (c) The creation of a new administration system for Post-16 transport, ensuring applications were assessed speedily and parents informed of decisions.
- (d) A small temporary team of administrative assistants was deployed within the transport team throughout the summer period which ensured timely responses to telephone calls and emails.

These initiatives were extremely effective in helping ensure that applications were dealt with efficiently and quickly and that transport arrangements were in place for students for the start of the academic year. Such initiatives helped ensure that families were more informed of the eligibility criteria before applying than in previous years, resulting in a reduced number of applications for transport being declined (144 in total). The main reason for applications being turned down was on the grounds that they were undertaking a course of study that was available at a learning provider located closer to their home address.

A breakdown of establishment attended for the 849 students currently benefiting from the new Post 16 travel scheme is provided below:

Establishment	Number of Students
High Schools in South East of County	77
Ponteland Community High School	33
King Edward VI Morpeth	75
Prudhoe Community High School	30
Queen Elizabeth High School Hexham	73
Haydon Bridge High School	56
The Duchess's Community High School, Alnwick	74
Berwick Academy	12
Northumberland College, using bus services commissioned by the college	355
Out of county establishments such as Newcastle College and Tyne Met College	64
Total	849

4. Cost Implications

There are always significant uncertainties in being able to estimate the costs associated with the provision of Post-16 transport due to the wide range of factors involved, including: levels of take up; numbers of students in education; locations of students etc all of which can vary from year to year. Taking account of previous trends, it was estimated that the additional cost associated with the change of policy to re-introduce free Post 16 transport would be £2.213m per annum (£1.413 million for two terms in 2018/19 and a further £0.800 million in 2019/20). These costs have been included within the Council's proposed Medium Term Financial Plan. The budget figures were therefore the best possible estimate given the information available at this time.

It is felt that there will be a growth in the number of Post-16 students applying for and benefiting from free transport in future years as awareness of the travel scheme increases. Recent network planning has ensured that the services we procure are running as efficiently as possible, resulting in limited spare seating capacity on vehicles deployed on contracted school transport vehicles. As a result, there may be a need to procure additional and/or larger vehicles. This is likely to result in an increase in the total cost of provision.

5 Recommendations

It is recommended that the contents of this report be noted.

Implications Arising out of the Report

Policy	Post-16 Transport Policy (complying with DfE statutory guidance) annual statement must be published by 31 May each year.
Finance and value for money	The proposed changes to the Post-16 travel scheme are estimated to cost an additional £2.213m in a full financial year and provision for this has been built into the MTFP. The introduction of a £50 administration fee is helping offset some of the additional administration costs incurred in assessing the eligibility of applicants and to also help reduce the likelihood of the Council incurring unnecessary transport costs for services which may only be used occasionally.
Legal	There is a statutory duty to ensure students can access learning opportunities at post-16 level; however, there is no legal requirement to provide free transport for students in Post-16 Education.
Procurement	Additional capacity may need to be procured in future years to take account of rising numbers of Post-16 students qualifying for free transport as a result of the revised Post-16 Transport Policy.
Human Resources	Provision has been made within the MTFP to enable additional resources to be deployed to ensure the implementation and administration of the new policy can be undertaken effectively and efficiently. This had a positive effect over the course of the summer period in 2018 and in particular the period around the start of the 2018/19 Academic Year.
Property	None – no Council property is involved
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes x No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	An equalities impact assessment has been undertaken in light of this policy change.
Risk Assessment	The chosen policy minimises reputational risk for the authority.
Crime & Disorder	None
Customer Consideration	The reintroduction of free Post 16 transport will ensure that students across the County are given transport support by the Council, which enables them to access educational opportunities and realise their potential.
Carbon reduction	Greater use of bus transport for student travel may help reduce carbon use if displacing car journeys.
Wards	All

Background papers:

Cabinet Report "Consultation Exercise for Proposed Changes to Post 16 Transport Policy, 8 May 2018

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Post-16 Transport Policy 2018-19

Appendix B - Post-16 Transport Policy 2019-20

Report sign off.

	initials
Finance Officer	AM
Monitoring Officer/Legal	n/a
Human Resources	n/a
Procurement	n/a
I.T.	n/a
Director	PJ/CM
Portfolio Holder(s)	WD

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