



Northumberland

County Council

PETITIONS COMMITTEE

28 OCTOBER 2021

PETITION REQUESTING A REVIEW OF ARRANGEMENTS FOR NON-STATUTORY TRANSPORT TO SCHOOLS

Report of: Rick O'Farrell, Interim Executive Director of Regeneration and Cath McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services

Cabinet Member: Councillor Wojciech Ploszaj, Cabinet Member for Business & Guy Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Purpose of report

To acknowledge the petition received requesting a review of arrangements for non-statutory transport to schools for rural communities and to agree the Council's response.

Recommendations

The Petitions Committee is recommended to note:

- **the issues raised in the petition;**
- **the changes to the 688 Service timetable made in conjunction with Go North East addressing the concerns highlighted in the petition; and**
- **the ongoing regional work on the establishment of an enhanced bus partnership and the associate funding and network improvement opportunities arising from this initiative.**

Key issues

A petition of 109 signatures has been received requesting a review of arrangements for non-statutory transport to schools for rural communities.

The petition has been submitted to highlight the difficulties in using public transport to access non catchment educational establishments when living in remote communities

such as Allenheads.

The petition states. *“Whilst the Council have made it clear that no changes will be made in the provision of transport outside of a school catchment area, they surely have a responsibility to work with public transport companies to ensure that school children have services running at the right times and to and from the correct locations (where feasible).”*

BACKGROUND

1. Other than supporting travel arrangements for pupils with disabilities and mobility problems, the Council's statutory duty in relation to travelling to and from educational establishments is limited to supporting a child's attendance at school by providing transport arrangement for those families that live beyond the statutory walking distance from the nearest appropriate school (section 508B, Education Act 1996, inserted by the Education and inspections Act 2006)
2. The Council only provides free travel support to children who are:
 - Of compulsory school age;
 - Resident in Northumberland;
 - Attending their nearest and appropriate qualifying school, or
 - Attending their nearest school chosen on grounds of religion or belief;
 - Living beyond the statutory walking distance for their age, or
 - Living within the statutory walking distance for their age but the walking route is deemed "unavailable" for safety reasons by the County Council, or
 - Qualifying for "extended rights" on the grounds of low income, or
 - Unable to walk to school as a result of their disability, mobility problems or special educational needs.
3. As a rule, the County Council does not provide travel support to enable pupils to attend other schools outside of their catchment area. However, there is sometimes spare seating capacity on contracted school transport vehicles arranged for pupils who meet the eligibility criteria, and the Council may be able to make these spare seats available to children not qualifying for free school transport for this reason. There is a charge for transport provided on this basis. The Council cannot guarantee that this will continue throughout a child's attendance at an establishment, so families should not make school choices which rely on this.
4. On the 29th June 2021, the council received a request to create an e-petition calling for a Review of School Transport Arrangements for Rural Communities the petition went live on the 7th July 2021 and closed on the 1st September 2021, having amassed 109 signatories (Appendix 1). The petition states, 'people should have a choice as to where their child goes to school and in rural areas especially, appropriate transport and subsidised tickets are the only means to give those children a choice' and 'they [NCC] surely have a responsibility to work with public transport companies to ensure that school children have services running as the right times and to and from the correct locations'.
5. The specific example highlighted in this petition concerns students travelling to non-catchment schools and being reliant on parents making independent travel

arrangements as the current public bus network in the area did not support travel to and from the chosen educational establishment.

6. The area in question was served by the Northumberland County Council supported 688 Service and operated by Go North East. The service offered 9 return trips a day between Hexham and Allendale with 6 of those journeys extending to Allenheads. An abridged version of the 688 Service timetables is set out below:

Monday to Friday from 7 September 2020

Hexham >> Allendale >> Allenheads

Hexham	0549	0724	0855	1045	1200	1350	1545	1730	1835
Allendale	0613	0750	0922	1112	1227	1417	1612	1757	1901
Allenheads	0631	-	0940	-	1245	1435	1630	-	1919

Allenheads >> Allendale >> Hexham

Allenheads	0631	-	0941	-	1246	1436	1636	-	1921
Allendale	0650	0750	1000	1115	1305	1455	1655	1800	1940
Hexham	0717	0817	1027	1142	1332	1522	1722	1827	2007

7. The timings allowed students travelling between Allendale and Hexham to use this public bus service to travel to and from Hexham based educational establishments and the later journeys allowed for return journeys for those students accessing after school activities.
8. However, the absence of key journeys extending to Allenheads meant this service was unsuitable for travel to and from Hexham based educational establishments for any students living south of Allendale and extending down to Allenheads.
9. It should be noted the Council was aware of the issue, having received a number of queries regarding the service and had embarked on a review of the 688 Service timetables in advance of receiving the petition.
10. In May 2021 Northumberland County Council met with Go North East to review all Hexham based services, with a number of changes identified for implementation. Included in these changes was the development of a new timetable for the 688 Service. An abridged version of *NEW* 688 Service timetable is set out below:

Monday to Friday from 24 July 2021

Hexham >> Allendale >> Allenheads

Hexham	0550	0650	0910	1110	1310	1530	1730	1830
Allendale	0617	0717	0937	1137	1337	1557	1757	1857

Allenheads	0635	0735	0955	1155	1355	1615	1815	1915
<i>Allenheads >> Allendale >> Hexham</i>								
Allenheads	0635	0735	0955	1155	1355	1615	1815	1915
Allendale	0654	0754	1014	1214	1414	1634	1834	1934
Hexham	0721	0821	1041	1241	1441	1701	1901	2001

11. The new timetable came into effect on the 24 July 2021, in time for the start of the 2021/22 academic year. Whilst the total number of return trips per day dropped from 9 to 8, the hours of operation remained unaltered, with all journeys now extending to Allenheads.
12. The newly added 0735 departure from Allenheads, provides a new direct link for students south of Allendale who attend Hexham’s educational establishments.
13. Other improvements include the 1730 departure from Hexham, again extending to Allenheads, which allows return travel for those students participating in extra circular activities.
14. Northumberland County Council is committed to working closely with bus operators to provide services that meet the needs of users, both in terms of frequency of service and value for money. Local Authority funding constraints coupled with operators need for services to be commercially viable, means that communities, particularly rural communities, don’t have the level of service we aspire to. To that end, Northumberland County Council funds a range of mostly rural supported services to ensure, where possible, residents have access to public transport for essential journeys such as those to educational establishments.
15. The future of the bus network in the region is in a precarious position with the Covid-19 pandemic having decimated ridership, with a return to pre-Covid patronage essential to maintaining the existing network and avoiding a significant reduction in service levels. To further this aim Northumberland County Council, in collaboration with Transport North East, has committed to the establishment of an enhanced bus partnership. With a 3-year package of central government funding linked to this partnership, it will be possible to look at developing further improvements to the network coupled with ticketing incentives that will make travelling on bus services more affordable and help rebuild patronage.

IMPLICATIONS

Policy	The response to the issues raised in this petition is consistent with the Council’s current home to school transport policy and supported services policy.
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Finance and value for money	Any changes to the Council's Home to School transport policy would increase costs.
Legal	None
Procurement	None
Human Resources	None
Property	None
Equalities	Impact Assessment attached Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Risk Assessment	None
Crime & Disorder	None
Customer Consideration	None
Carbon reduction	None
Health and Wellbeing	None
Wards	Hexham and South Tynedale

Background papers:

[Home to School Travel and Transport Policy](#)

Report sign off

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Helen Lancaster
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Directors	Rick O'Farrell
	Cath McEvoy-Carr
Chief Executive	Daljit Lally
Portfolio Holder(s)	Wojciech Ploszaj
	Guy Renner-Thompson

Author and Contact Details

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Appendix 1: Petition Information

Review of School Transport Arrangements for Rural Communities

This petition requests that the Council review current transport services and works with public service transport companies to ensure school transportation in the area meets the needs of the community and gives more choice to our children and their education.

If your child attends a school not within the catchment area for your postcode, the current policy of the Council is not to provide transport unless certain criteria are met. You are therefore reliant on either Public Transport or making alternative arrangements to take your child to school.

Currently, the 688 Hexham to Allendale/Allenheads provides a bus service from Allenheads at 06:31 and 09:41. The service which runs in-between terminates at Allendale, returning to Hexham at 07:50. Any parents who live further up the valley, have to transport their children by car to Allendale to catch the service bus.

A number of other parents have also stated that services to schools do not take into account children who may do extra-curricular activities after school. Whilst the Council have made it clear that no changes will be made in the provision of transport outside of a school catchment area, they surely have a responsibility to work with public transport companies to ensure that school children have services running at the right times and to and from the correct locations (where feasible).

People should have a choice as to where their child goes to school and in rural areas especially, appropriate transport and subsidised tickets are the only means to giving those children a choice. The Council try to encourage environmentally friendly ways of travelling to school with their 'Go Smarter Northumberland' initiative and yet there appears to be a disconnect between this and the current working arrangements with Public Services.

Opened for signatures on 07.07.21

Closed for signatures on 01.09.21

Number of signatures as at 01.09.21 - 109