

Changes to Education Travel Policy

Lead Officer: Phil Curd

Author: Phil Curd

Contact Details: Phil Curd – pjcurd@somerset.gov.uk 01823 355165

Cabinet Member: Cllr Frances Nicholson

Division and Local Member: All

1. Summary

- 1.1. Officers have undertaken a biennial review of the Education Travel in Somerset policy to ensure compliance with legislation and statutory guidance. The revision focused on reducing the size of the document, providing more clarity and flexibility in terms of service provision.

It was also an opportunity to remove the final few discretionary elements from the policy to enable the statutory elements to remain deliverable within a pressured budget.

'Legitimate Expectation' requires policy changes to only affect new pupils starting school for the first time and those children who are changing schools.

- 1.2. The recommendations link to the County Plan 2016-2020:

To provide the information, help and advice you need to make informed choices for you and your family. If you or a member of your family needs help, we want you to be able to find it quickly and easily – and for that information to really help.

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1. One key issue for the LA is the withdrawal of the few remaining discretionary elements of the Education Travel in Somerset policy. They are:

Split Families

From September 2018 we will be removing transport entitlement from split-residence families (where a child's parents live separately).

In future, travel assistance will only be assessed and awarded from the address which is registered with the school as the home address or, prior to admission, the address used on the relevant school admission application form.

Travel Assistance on Grounds of Religion or Belief

From September 2018 travel assistance will be removed for those attending faith schools unless that school is the child's nearest or catchment school and is over minimum statutory walking distance.

Temporary Medical Need

Currently as part of our discretionary policy we will consider limited travel assistance for a child suffering from a temporary medical illness or injury to any school even if this is not the nearest school to the home address or the designated transport area school. From September 2018 we propose only to consider travel assistance to a child's nearest or designated transport area school.

- 2.2. The next key issue are the changes which are designed to reduce the cost impact on the LA for delivering the service. The changes also offer the LA more flexibility in the way it can structure routes:

Waiting Time on School Premises

Currently we state that waiting time on school premises is a maximum guideline of 15 minutes for pupils. From September 2018 this will only apply to primary / middle school pupils.

This will allow Transporting Somerset to have more flexibility to manage the network fleet more effectively.

Late applications for School Admissions

The policy will be amended to raise awareness of the impact to the school transport budget due to late applicants. If a late application has resulted in the child being placed in a school which is neither their nearest or catchment school and if travel assistance was granted a notice period of ½ term will be applied. Cases will be reviewed individually.

- 2.3. The last element is the additional clarity provided in the policy, essentially addressing inconsistencies in the policy which have made certain elements hard to enforce:

Withdrawal of School Transport – Behaviour

The content relating to the suspension and removal of travel assistance due to behavioural reasons will be amended to provide clear thresholds for imposing sanctions.

This will remove any ambiguity and grounds for challenge. This means that the Transport Officers will have authority to implement sanctions within the policy.

Provision of Passenger Assistants

Currently within Transporting Somerset (The SCC team delivering school transport), Passenger Assistants are allocated following a robust Risk Assessment Process. To underline this process we will be making this clearer within the Policy.

Low Income

The content relating to Low Income will be revised to reflect new guidance and ensure policy aligns with the implementation of Universal Credit. This means that the Local Authority will be accepting the DfE's Free School Meals threshold as the measure for low income.

- 2.4. The recommendation is for all changes to be implemented.

3. Background

- 3.1. The Education Travel in Somerset Policy is the key document which defines how the LA will meet its statutory duty regarding home to school travel for children of school age (4-16).

It is reviewed biennially to ensure it complies with statutory guidance and reflects contemporary issues.

- 3.2. This revision is probably the most significant edit in many years.

Although the statutory parameters remain unchanged, the LA's financial ability to

offer support beyond what is required of it, is diminished.

Therefore, the last few remaining discretionary elements have been withdrawn from the policy, other elements have been changed to provide more flexibility and reduce cost.

As with all other revisions, there are clarifications where the current policy is unclear or inconsistent.

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1.** An 8 week public consultation took place between 16th October 2017 and 15th December 2017.

Approximately 3957 text messages were sent to parents / carers currently using school transport informing them of the consultation and how to respond. Hard copies were also available.

In addition to the text messages to parents / carers, all Headteachers in Somerset were informed of the proposals. Schools in B&NES and Wiltshire, where Somerset children attend on religious grounds, were also made aware of the proposals and the consultation.

A media release was issued by SCC's Communications Team with articles appearing in the local press and on local radio.

- 4.2.** 207 responses were received during the consultation period.

Generally, the feedback was in support of the proposed changes, although more detail is contained in Appendix A (Consultation Feedback Report) to the main decision paper.

5. Implications

- 5.1.** In terms of the removal of discretionary elements, the LA is recognising 'Legitimate Expectation' so changes will only affect children applying to use the service for the first time, those that are moving to a new school or those being reassessed due to a change of address.
- 5.2.** Although there will be some reduction in the cost of providing these discretionary elements, it will be gradual as various protections (awarded in recognition of Legitimate Expectation) will take time to expire.

6. Background papers

- 6.1.** Cabinet Member Key Decision Paper – Education Travel Policy – March 2018
Appendix A – Education Travel Policy – Consultation Feedback
DRAFT – Education Travel in Somerset – April 2018

Note: For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author.