



School Transport

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Purpose

The provide members of the committee with an overview of the Council's school transport duties, the challenges this duty presents and the activities that have been undertaken, are in process or are planned to address them.



General Duties

The Council has a duty to transport or provide travel assistance to those children who live beyond statutory walking distance from their nearest suitable school. In Somerset we extend that 'nearest suitable school' entitlement to include Designated Transport Areas, which were mapped to school catchments in 2012.

Statutory walking distance is set at:

- 2 miles for children aged 7 or under and children aged 10 and under from low income families
- 3 miles for children aged 8 or over

For children aged 11 or over from low income families, there's an additional entitlement which would see the Council provide transport to one the three nearest qualifying schools where the home address is more than 2 miles but no more than 6 miles from that school.

There are also exceptions for children whose disabilities or medical condition mean they cannot reasonable be expected to walk to their nearest suitable school, even if they live under statutory walking distance.



Demand

On a typical school day, the Council transports or provides travel assistance to around 8800 children and young people.

Of those, 7700 attend mainstream schools, the majority of which will be children travelling to secondary schools.

The average cost of transporting these pupils is around £1300 a year.

The remaining 1100 will be travelling to specialist settings, with a significantly higher annual average cost of £8000.

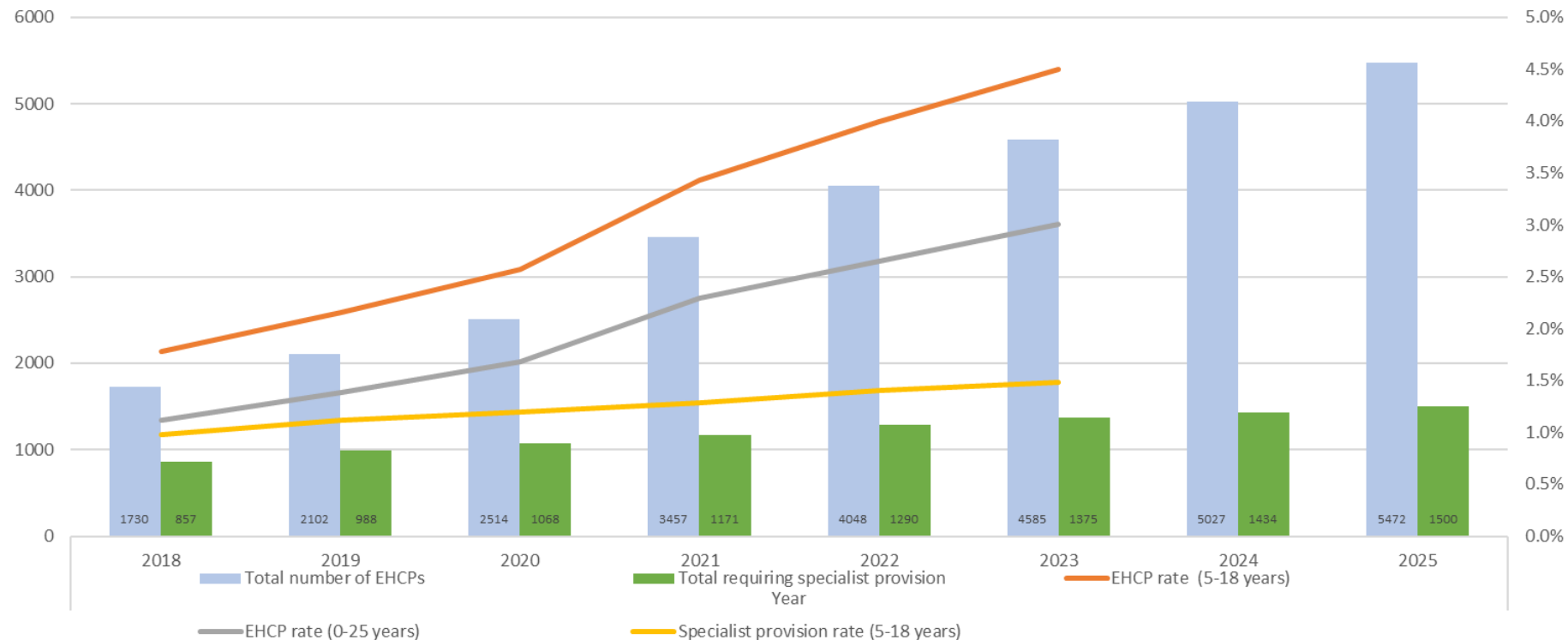
While the numbers of children attending mainstream schools is set to plateau and then gently decline over the next 5-10 years, the number of children requiring specialist placements is projected to continue increasing.



Growth of Specialist Places

Since 2017, Somerset has seen a significant rise in the number of children with EHCPs. A trend that has been mirrored across the country, but amplified in Somerset as a result of the Council's historic 'low-statementing' approach. This has stimulated demand for additional places in special schools and resources bases.

Numbers and rates of EHC plans and specialist provision



Transport Organisation

Once a child has been assessed as having an entitlement to travel assistance or transport, they are notified and their details are passed to the School Transport Team within Transporting Somerset to find the optimum solution.

This may include:

- Offering a Petrol Allowance or Personal Travel Payment
- Issuing tickets for a public transport route
- Adding the child to an existing contracted vehicle / pick-up point
- Amending an existing contracted vehicle route and adding an additional pick-up point
- Contracting a new vehicle / route

Parents are then informed of these arrangements by letter.



Transport Costs

School transport is a significant cost pressure for the Council, with mainstream and specialist transport costing around £17m annually.

The cost of specialist transport has seen the most significant growth (£4.6m in 2018/19 to £6.8m in 2021/22) as the number of children travelling to specialist settings has increased.

In parallel, the cost of providing transport has increased significantly as a result of sector specific inflation, contractual increases (20%-30%) and rising fuel prices. These pressures are set to continue.

To offset these cost increases a number of interventions have been implemented:

- Introduction of an in-house big bus fleet
- A new Dynamic Purchasing System
- Expansion of Personal Travel Payment scheme
- Statutory-only approach to policy
- The purchase of route optimising software



Transport Challenges

We are currently facing significant challenges in the provision of Home to School Transport across Somerset, including:

- Driver shortages – both taxi and PSV drivers
- Fuel costs
- General inflation
- Lack of supply – especially in the taxi market
- Lack of investment in vehicles by operators
- Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations



Cost Management Strategy

In addition to those measures described on the previous slide, a new School Travel Cost Management Strategy is being developed around 4 key priority areas:

- Reduce the cost of the school travel journeys operated by the Internal Fleet to a price point which is lower than the average rate secured through the commercial market
- Ensure budget requirements are set as accurately as possible and minimise the challenges associated with managing in-year pressures
- Identify and exploit opportunities within policy, transport organisation and market engagement to reduce the costs of delivering school transport
- Improve the inter-connectivity between various services / teams to improve communication, problem solving, cost modelling and accountability for expenditure

