

Surrey County Council

Consultation on the provision of transport to denominational schools

1. Background

Surrey County Council currently provides free transport to approximately 8700 compulsory aged mainstream pupils each year at a cost of approximately £10m per annum.

By law, the following pupils qualify for free transport to a school:

- Children who are under the age of 8 who attend a school which is their nearest suitable school which is more than 2 miles from their home
- Children who are aged 8 years and over who attend a school which is their nearest suitable school which is more than 3 miles from their home
- Children who are aged 8 years and over but under the age of 11 who are in receipt of free school meals or whose parents receive the maximum amount of Working Tax Credit and who attend a school which is their nearest suitable school which is more than 2 miles from their home
- Children who are of compulsory school age who are aged 11 years and over who are in receipt of free school meals or whose parents receive the maximum amount of Working Tax Credit and who attend one of their three nearest schools between 2 and 6 miles from their home
- Children who are aged 11 to 16 who are in receipt of free school meals or whose parents receive the maximum amount of Working Tax Credit and who attend a school on the grounds of their religion or belief which is between 2 and 15 miles from their home

As well as providing transport to these categories of pupils, Surrey County Council also provides assistance on a discretionary basis to pupils who do not attend their nearest school but who attend their nearest denominational (church) school on religious grounds if it is up to 6 miles away for a primary school or 10 miles away for a secondary school.

Surrey County Council currently provides discretionary transport on denominational grounds for approximately 2,200 pupils at a cost of £1.9m per annum.

2. What change is being considered?

Surrey County Council is considering changing its Home to School Transport Policy so that from September 2012 transport to denominational schools would no longer be offered to new applicants, other than those who remain eligible by law.

3. Why is the change being considered?

With the cost of transport increasing Surrey County Council is not able to sustain the current level of transport support that it offers to pupils. In the current economic climate, the County Council needs to identify significant savings and to this end it is reviewing areas of discretionary spending. In doing so the County Council is committed to ensuring that its services and its use of resources are fair and equitable to all its residents and this includes fair access to education.

Surrey has 359 maintained mainstream schools. Generally, when families choose a school for their child which is over the statutory transport distance and not their closest school they have to pay for their own transport costs. However pupils who attend a denominational school on religious grounds currently qualify for free transport if it is their nearest denominational school. In practice, this is discretionary support that is not available to pupils attending non-denominational schools. Currently the County Council is providing free denominational transport to 33 faith schools, of which 11 are out of the County Council area. The withdrawal of free denominational transport would mean that all pupils would be treated equally, regardless of their religion or belief. This would arguably be a fairer and more equitable policy, and it would release significant savings in transport over a period of time.

4. How would pupils already receiving free transport to attend a denominational school be affected?

In fairness to families who made their decisions about schools under the old policy, Surrey County Council is considering phasing in this change so that it would not affect existing pupils who currently receive free transport. The change would only be introduced for any new pupils whose parents are seeking free transport from September 2012, including the new intakes to Reception, Year 3 and Year 7.

5. Do other Local Authorities provide free denominational transport

In recent years a number of Local Authorities have reviewed their policies on denominational transport. Some, such as East Sussex and Essex have decided to introduce a charge for transport provision whilst others such as Bracknell Forest and Hertfordshire have decided to withdraw the provision of transport to denominational schools. Others Local Authorities are currently proposing to change their arrangements for 2012.

6. Why is Surrey County Council not proposing to introduce a charge for denominational transport?

Any proposal other than a complete withdrawal of denominational transport would mean that some pupils would still be treated more favourably than others i.e. if a charge was introduced for denominational transport, any pupils attending a denominational school

would receive a subsidy on their transport costs whilst pupils attending non-denominational schools would not.

Given the current economic climate, Surrey County Council also wishes to maximise the savings that it can make by effecting a full withdrawal of denominational transport for new students from September 2012. Given that the change would be phased in it would take some years before the full saving is realised.

It is possible that if this change was made, some denominational schools would consider running their own school busses and making charges for transport. This would be a matter for individual schools to decide.

7. Would parents still be able to apply for a place in a denominational school?

Yes. Any change to the Home to School Transport Policy would not remove a parent's right to name a preference for a school that they want their child to go to. However, parents need to consider how their child will travel to the school should they be offered a place.

8. Who is being consulted on this proposal?

Surrey County Council is consulting with parents, Chairs of Governors and Headteachers at all Surrey schools, neighbouring Local Authorities and the Diocesan Bodies that represent the church schools in Surrey.

9. How can I respond to the consultation?

Respondents should complete the online response form which is available at www.surreycc.gov.uk or send the paper response form to: Admissions and Transport Team, South West Area Office, Grosvenor House, Cross Lanes, London Road, Guildford, Surrey, GU1 1FA.

10. What is the timetable for the consultation?

The closing date for responses is Friday 8 April 2011. An analysis of the responses will then be prepared and this will be considered by Surrey County Council's Cabinet for a decision on 24 May 2011. The transport policy for 2012 will then be published and if the proposal is agreed, this would ensure that parents seeking places at denominational schools from September 2012 would be aware of the change before indicating their school preferences.