

CHILDREN, FAMILIES, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE SELECT COMMITTEE

Item under consideration: HOME TO SCHOOL TRAVEL ASSISTANCE LEARNING REVIEW

Date Considered: 15 December 2022

1. The Committee took evidence from the Chief Executive's Chief of Staff on what issues the Council planned to address following a [Learning Review](#), carried out between September-November 2022, into a number of coalescing pressures on providing home to school travel assistance.
2. The Committee heard that a combination of a shortage of drivers and growth in applications, reduced control over admissions decisions, late applications and a new policy introduced without delay or the requisite staff levels, meant the Council struggled to process applications at the rate required. This led to a growing number of complaints and appeals that further overwhelmed staff. The end result was 150 children with special educational needs and disabilities missed education at the start of term.
3. Surrey's parent carer forum Family Voice Surrey presented [findings from an online survey](#) they conducted between October-November on what families experienced when applying for travel assistance earlier in the year. This, they said, was put in place after an unprecedented number of parents made contact with them in August and September. They told of parents misinformed of the deadline, delays in communication resulting in financial hardship and anxiety, and inconsistencies in what the Council offered.
4. In advance of the meeting, the Committee asked multiple questions on the Council's handling of the situation and the impact on children, and requested comparative data for the years preceding the policy change. In the meeting, lines of enquiry focused on understanding the causes of issues, whether certain policies could be justified and how the success of the Council's action plan would be measured. These can be found in the minutes and are not reproduced here.

Recommendations

The Select Committee agreed the following recommendations:

1. That the Cabinet amends the Home to School Travel Assistance Policy and updates the Local Offer with immediate effect to ensure:
 - a) A parent carer is, from the first instance, only given the alternative of a mileage allowance if their consent has been obtained. This accords with [DfE Statutory Home to School Guidance 2014](#) and should avoid the ensuing appeals with associated delays.
 - b) Parent carers who receive an Independent Travel Allowance are paid mileage for a return journey to the child or young person's setting in accordance with the [Local Government Ombudsman decision](#). This should be the general rule

for all recipients, both to ease the Council's administrative burden and for parity. This policy should be backdated to September 2022 and recipients reimbursed accordingly.

- c) Parent carers eligible to receive an Independent Travel Allowance are paid it at the start of term rather than being reimbursed later.
- d) Systems are coordinated so that an application for travel assistance is automatically made at the point at which a school of qualifying distance is named on the EHCP. An application is not classed as late in the circumstance that a school is named in the plan after deadline.
- e) The inclusion of additional children on a route is not used as a reason to exceed maximum journey times considered best practice i.e. 45 minutes for primary and 75 minutes for secondary.
- f) Where young people have the potential to travel independently, the independent travel training offer is promoted and additional public transport routes commissioned wherever possible.
- g) When opening a new specialist school, consideration is given to whether it is on a bus or other public transport route.

2. That the Select Committee endorses the recommendations in the Learning Review subject to Cabinet agreement of the changes recommended in 1 and on the proviso that:

- a) Children, Families and Lifelong Learning (CFL) assigns a RAG rating to progress in the five workstreams and reports these to each formal Select Committee meeting, and
- b) CFL shares with the Select Committee for scrutiny as soon as possible, its proposals for the performance indicators referred to in its recommendation #39, which measure a young person's home to school transport journey from application to delivery. These should include the number of occasions the transport team misses a target to (i) respond in a timely manner to general queries (5 working days) and with an application outcome (20 working days), and
- c) CFL shares the above data at each formal Select Committee meeting as part of its regular monitoring of Inclusion and Additional Needs.
- d) In order to provide clarity on the different policy post-16, CFL works with Family Voice Surrey to produce a separate guide for parent carers and young people specifically for post-16 transport.
- e) CFL carries out an annual survey of home to school transport satisfaction in conjunction with Family Voice Surrey.

3. That the Select Committee receives an updated report from CFL on the new round of Home to School Travel Assistance applications, at its meeting in May 2023.

4. That Family Voice Surrey report on parent carer experiences to Select Committee at its May 2023 meeting and prior to that discuss developments with CFL officers.

Reasons for recommendations

1. (a) According to Family Voice, parents reported to them that when they objected to an offer of a travel allowance they were told they could appeal. The Department for Education's guidance states that a mileage allowance can be paid in lieu of making travel arrangements "on condition that the relevant parental consent has been obtained".

(b) The Committee welcomes the acknowledgement that a consistent policy on this needs to be agreed. The Ombudsman ruled in 2020 that mileage costs of all four legs of the journey should be paid when the Council is unable to provide transport. The Committee recommends that for fairness and consistency this should also apply when parents volunteer to drive their child, as the costs to them are the same.

(c) Family Voice heard from parents struggling financially due to being paid in arrears at the end of October, which for some resulted in reliance on a food bank. Almost 40 per cent of their survey's 290 respondents reported financial difficulty resulting from the transport issues.

(d) The Committee wholeheartedly welcomes the plan to join up processes and make placement and transport decisions together. Such streamlining should help to avoid families falling through gaps. With regard to 'late' applications, a child or parent should not be penalised when the deadline is missed through no fault of their own.

(e) In response to a recommendation by the Committee in April 2022, Cabinet agreed that if in certain circumstances the Council were to depart from the statutory guidelines on journey times, it must ensure the planned route is not of such duration that the pupil is unable, because of stress and strain, to learn properly. Yet almost 12 per cent of Family Voice's respondents reported an excessively long route going over the recommended maximum journey times due to multiple pickups. Parents on occasion reported up to a three-hour journey for a route that should take no longer than 30 minutes.

(f) This could help prepare young people for adulthood, save taxpayers' money on taxis and aid Surrey's Climate Change Strategy.

(g) This forward planning could help mitigate future growth in applications as well as encourage use of public transport where appropriate in line with the Council's greener future ambition.

2 (d) This could reduce confusion around eligibility identified by Family Voice, given the difference between pre and post 16 duties of the Council. It would be an opportunity to promote support for independent living skills such as independent

travel training, Bikeability cycle training and driving lessons. The latter two are identified as missed opportunities in the Learning Review's recommendation #8.

All remaining: It is vital to monitor progress in terms of outcomes, particularly the timeliness of communication with children for whom preparedness is of particular importance. Family Voice are best placed to help gather the lived experiences of families, which will illuminate the impact of changes on the ground.

Liz Bowes, Chairman - Children, Families, Lifelong Learning Select Committee

5

Background papers

[Item 5, Children, Families and Lifelong Learning Select Committee, 15 December 2022](#)

[Learning Review presentation to Select Committee](#)

[Supplement on Family Voice's findings from home to school transport survey](#)

[DfE Statutory Home to School Guidance 2014](#)

[Local Government Ombudsman decision 2020](#)