



Audit & Governance Committee
13 September 2023

Home to School Transport - Progress Update

Purpose of the report:

The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an update on the Home to School Travel Assistance (H2STA) Improvement Programme and the current performance of the service provided to children, young people, and families of Surrey. The report sets out improvements and changes to the service and our end-to-end system since December 2022 as well as ongoing initiatives to enhance the customer experience for September 2023. An update of progress made against the specific recommendations from the original Audit report conducted in April 2022 and subsequent follow-up report in July 2023.

This report is intended to assure senior officers and leaders of the capabilities of the service to perform its function appropriately and timely for the families it supports.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Committee:

1. Monitor progress of the audit recommendations and follow-up review conducted in July 2023.

Introduction:

1. Approximately 160,000 pupils attend education settings each day in Surrey. A small proportion (around 7%) qualify for home to school travel assistance. The Home to School Travel Assistance (H2STA) service currently provide travel support to 10,407 eligible children and young people of which 4,026 (37%) have additional needs and disabilities. Provision of travel assistance is statutory in certain circumstances, as set out in the Education Act 1996.
2. During 2022 the Home to School Service received unprecedented volumes of applications which lead to family experiences of the service falling short of the standards set by the Council. This led to a focussed Learning Review, whereby 50 recommendations were put in place. A

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separate report from Family Voice was also submitted to the Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture (CFLLC) Select Committee giving 12 recommendations on how to improve the service. Also, 4 further recommendations were made from CFLLC Select Committee. Simultaneously an internal audit was commissioned for Home to School which outlined 14 findings and recommendations with an audit opinion of Partial Assurance.

3. These recommendations and improvement plans were consolidated into an improvement plan along with various external factors such as, volatility in fuel costs, inflation, as well as the scarcity of suppliers and drivers. These pressures are not unique to Surrey and are a national issue putting significant strain on the H2STA service, the end-to-end system, and budgets within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.
4. Internal Audit have conducted a follow-up review in July 2023 and have given an audit opinion of Reasonable Assurance due to the recognition that the improvement plan has only been running for 6 months and that further learning will come from the new academic year.
5. A monthly Oversight Board led by lead county councillors and senior officers has appropriate oversight for the developmental work being progressed.

H2S Programme Development

6. The programme has several key themes that they are developing that include:
 - 6.1 Children & Young People
 - a) Externally we have developed a thorough communications plan and improved external communications and working with Family Voice Surrey. This includes the co-production of a family guide with Family Voice Surrey as well as regular sessions to discuss live issues that affect families.
 - b) Through targeted work and better use of insights and data we removed the need for 850 families (pre and post 16) to reapply for transport in 2023.
 - c) A request from Family Voice and the CFLLC Select Committee was to review our Independent Travel Allowance and paying families for four journeys (round trips). In response we updated our policy in February 2023 and now pay families who receive Independent Travel Allowances (ITAs) for four journeys instead of two. This work included backdating payments to reimburse families from September 2022. These additional costs made up part of our 2023/24 budget build.
 - d) We now offer all eligible families a temporary Independent Travel Allowance (ITA), to cover the costs of transporting their child to school while contracted transport is being put in place.

- e) We are currently piloting a Personal Travel Budget offer to families whereby we will offer an enhanced rate for families that fall into parameter i.e. require a PA to accompany their child, need a specific vehicle or specific equipment. This enables families to make choices for their family circumstances in return for a travel allowance.
- f) Customer contacts, complaints and appeals processes have all been strengthened following the findings from the learning review. A stakeholder liaison role was part of the new H2STA structure, whilst the complaints and appeals service now focus on early resolution as default. Appeals training has been refreshed and panels now include the Safer Routes team where necessary. Appeals are increased when compared to the same time last year, this is due to applications being received and assessed earlier which is positive. 99.6% of appeals have been completed on time between July-August, compared to last year which was approximately 20%. Complaints remain at similar numbers when compared with last year, however, we do not expect to experience to the same peaks at the end of August going into September.
- g) Last year 25% of all applications related to Post-16 and 71% of those applications led to an appeal. This was mostly due to the 2022 policy change but in response we have stood up a dedicated team for Post-16 from April to July to undertake targeted work and early conversations with families on their travel arrangement options, including advice on bursaries.

6.2 Parent' Guardians & Carers

- a) Work to improve our communications with parents, guardians and carers as those responsible advocates for children and young people as the service users. Much of this area is in customer experience improvements, especially communications that are clear, timely and pre-empt families' queries and known needs.
- b) Process review and streamlining for specific stages of the Customer Journey, including Application, Appeals and Complaints.
- c) A full redesign of our website and webpages to enhance the customer experience and simplify our content is ongoing. We have simplified the language, removed duplicated text, created new pages, added graphics and importantly, created a service updates page where we can confirm the latest developments from the Service. This will be considered across the end-to-end system as well as the Local Offer website.

6.3 Suppliers & Partners

- a) We have engaged with fourteen suppliers, as well as building on previous work with our Community Transport providers, to help build the foundations of our future supplier strategy. This strategy will form part of our cross-cutting work across the organisation and also

support the Sustainable Modes of Travel to School Strategy (SMOTSS).

- b) We have continued to support and develop long term solutions and a pipeline of activity for travel assistance through the Freedom to Travel programme, which has included Commissioning model reviews and exploration of an in-house fleet in SCC. The Freedom to Travel programme is focussed on developing cross-cutting initiatives across CFLL, ETI, ASC, Health and Partners.
- c) Successful promotion of Independent Travel Allowances and the reductions in solo taxi arrangements have contributed to cost containment and will continue to be a priority area for future efficiencies.

6.4 Our teams

- a) The learning review assessed that there was a lack of adequate resourcing and ineffective working across the customer journey. In response a full restructure of the H2STA service was completed in December 2022. This included merging teams and processes to improve case management from application through to delivery, as well as queries through to complaints and appeals.
- b) Targeted training and upskilling across the team and end-to-end system was a significant part of embedding the new structure and will continue to be a major part of our improvement journey.
- c) The start of academic year 2022 highlighted a lack of planning and contingency plans for system peaks. We have developed a project management approach to the start of the academic year with critical paths created and resource planning across the end-to-end system. A learning framework is in place to ensure we continually iterate and improve our approach year on year. We have fully trained bank staff to support with peaks in activity throughout the year and increased resource in customer services and those trained to deal with Education related queries.
- d) Inadequate communication was a major theme in findings from the learning review and feedback from Family Voice Surrey. We have made step changes to our internal communication and working across the system. This includes weekly working groups, end-to-end resource planning, and joint working with Admissions colleagues on bulk assessments to reduce bottlenecks in eligibility and delivery. Evidence of improvements has been received from Family Voice at the July CFLLC Select Committee who rated the service 'much improved'.

6.5 Reporting, Performance, Evidence & Analytics

- a) We have strengthened our performance and financial monitoring with real-time performance management information and financial monitoring. At the same time, we have improved data integrity and

accuracy as part of our KPI development and ten-year trajectory modelling for demand and budgets.

- b) Budget management and oversight are continuing to develop. Closer scrutiny and modelling has been undertaken by Corporate Finance for this month linking to MTFP.

6.6 Systems

- a) To address several recommendations from the learning review and the Internal Audit from May 2022, we have completed a full digital discovery review of the end-to-end system focussing on pain points and opportunities to streamline processes. This fifteen week review concluded in May and generated a pipeline of further improvements across our internal and external systems and processes.
- b) At the same time, we have prioritised digital and website quick wins including an eligibility checker, new online enquiry portal for parents, a new appeal form for improved case tracking, and application form enhancements to reduce eligibility waiting times. This work will also assist in reducing the number of ineligible applications. A banner has been created on our website to provide regular service status updates to visitors of our website. We are working with our Web team on future improvements and a full redesign across all H2STA content and linkages to other services.

Audit Recommendations

- 7. Internal Audit have subsequently undertaken a follow-up review in July 2023 with further findings for the service and actions to take. The Audit gave a further opinion of 'Reasonable Assurance'.
- 8. Previous audit actions were addressed and where the need to enhance/continue to improve have been identified they are now part of the new recommendations and are deemed implemented.
- 9. Actions to take include improved Stakeholder engagement, guidance for independent travel allowances, improved systems for budget monitoring, governance within the team for directly awarded contracts and decision making. Each of these recommendations have agreed actions and timescales for work to be completed.

Finding	Risk Action
Stakeholder Engagement	SLA with SEN to be delivered within 2 months. SLA Gap Analysis to be completed within 2 months. Stakeholder Communication Plan to be developed within 2 months and activated (target completion 30/10/2023).

Independent Travel Allowance clarity		<p>Consultations on an updated version of the ITA to be undertaken which will result in a glossary of some sort to aid understanding. FAQ's to be uploaded to the web pages to aid clarity. Piloting a Personal Travel Budget process which will inform our policy after feedback from families. Allow the families a term of using PTB's to inform change in policy (target completion 5/1/2024)</p>
System Development		<p>Digital Discovery has taken place and given several recommendations (fin May 23).</p> <p>Digital Design have been undertaking a full review of the application process. SVOAC now taken the Digital Programme and working through review of systems as well as quick wins and legacy system enhancements.</p> <p>Digital development to be in place by March 2024 will deliver some immediate enhancements including automation.</p> <p>Mobisoft and Adam are longer term projects along with a CRM system which is being explored as part of a wider SCC initiative. The implementation date is December 2024 at the earliest (target completion Dec 24).</p>
Budget Monitoring		<p>Finance and the H2STA service will work collaboratively to ensure that the Business Partnering arrangements ensure accurate, robust, and clear financial monitoring and reporting. Trajectory modelling will continue to be enhanced through increased insight from performance management information and the impact of future strategies/efficiencies. Roles and responsibilities will be reviewed to ensure that accountability is in the right places in line with the partnership agreement. Any overspend or risk will be jointly agreed and reported as part of monthly monitoring meetings. (Action completed)</p>
Governance of Direct Awarded Contracts		<p>H2S management meeting checks with Team Leaders and will record if there has been any need for the requirement of direct contracts. Appropriate records will be made. (Action completed)</p>
Transport Review Process Decision Making		<p>Decisions are made in conjunction with the parameter document. All decision outside of parameters are made by a senior officer (or Team Leader or Manager).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct Awards over parameters • PTBs over parameters <p>Raised to management and recorded on management team meetings.</p> <p>Route journeys that exceed the statutory limits are agreed by Team Leaders and an audit trail made within Mobisoft. (Action completed)</p>

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Future Development

10. Our next phase of improvements, many of which have already begun, will shift our focus to more longer-term solutions. These include:
 - 10.1 Our Single View of a Child (SVOAC) Programme is currently rescoping the digital programme of work and reviewing and reengineering our legacy systems to create linkages and more streamlined processes. The full findings of our digital discovery will be planned into phases of our digital development and will be implementing solutions will be a key priority for the programme team. The team will also be looking at:
 - a) A full review and market testing for our Dynamic Purchasing and Route Planning Systems is planned for the second half of 2023. This work will support in improving the travel experience for children, young people and families, as well as assisting with cost containment in future years through robust procurement and tendering of routes.
 - b) End-to-end system improvements will continue to be our focus to ensure improvements are made in both our ways of working and culture.
 - c) Review and implement a long-term Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solution to improve the customer experience, case tracking and audit trail.
 - 10.2 Developing a full supplier engagement and strategy. We are committed to improving relations with our suppliers and increasing our supplier pool. We have completed interviews with 14 suppliers, including previous and future engagements with Community Transport providers, to understand ways we can support growth and sustainability across the travel sector in the County. This will support the development of a wider strategy across all travel in Surrey as part of the Freedom to Travel programme.
 - 10.3 Continuance of our web development.

Conclusions:

11. Key takeaways for the service include:
 - 11.1 Significant transformation undertaken and continuing.
 - 11.2 Budget risk.
 - 11.3 SEN Recovery plan and upstream risk.

Financial and value for money implications

12. The Home to School Travel Assistance budget was increased by a net £14.7m for financial year 23/24. This consisted of £17.7m of pressures and £3m of efficiencies. This significant uplift was due to pressures building in both demand and inflation over several years (excluding during the Covid-19 pandemic where school closures resulted in reduced demand). These increasing pressures were compounded in 2022/23 with

high levels of inflation and the volatility of fuel prices. Increases in unit costs have continued into 2023/24 due to shortage of vehicles, drivers and increased regulations and compliance for providers. All of which are being passed on to SCC as new routes are being tendered.

At the start of the financial year the service was not anticipating a variance to budget for 23/24, however, recent spikes in average costs in both SEND and Mainstream vehicles (average 11% increase between May and June 2023) are causing significant cost pressures. In addition, the recently agreed EHCP recovery plan will likely lead to demand entering the service earlier than anticipated. The Service are currently working through a best-case/worst-case scenario modelling with CFLL Finance with an updated monitoring position to be reported as part of Month 4 (July) monitoring.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

13. There is a full Equalities Impact Assessment available for this programme of work (see sources below).

Risk Management Implications

14. The Home to School Service remain at the top 3 high priority risks of the Council. This is likely to be reviewed after September 2023.

ST34 - There is a risk that Home to School Travel Assistance is not available for eligible children, the service level is below the standard required and/or the budget allocated is overspent.

15. Exceptional internal service risks are as follows:

Risk	I	L	Mitigation	Owner
<p>Upstream Pressures: sub-categories likely to impact H2STA service are as follows (c. 35% of SEN CYP require travel assistance):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large numbers of CYPs currently under assessment for EHCP • Phase 1 of the SEN Recovery plan is currently seeing SEND demand move into H2STA earlier than we had anticipated. • Phase 2 will result in a significant volume of applications moving through the system earlier than our trajectory modelling had profiled. This will materially impact in-year and the MTFS. • Tribunal cases and further new cases will continue to enter the system. <p>These will impact operational demand (in addition to the c.35% which is in-year rather than seasonal), and potentially our finances. Those CYP unallocated school placements may result in EOTAS packages being put together which may mean an increase in individual transport arrangements.</p>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End to end Working group across the system; weekly KST working group and data sharing between Admissions, SEND and H2STA for pre-work. • Using the data we have available to work early with families and look at expediting eligibility. • Focussing on early resolution through direct working with families and comms across the end-to-end system. • Simplified policy and website to support clarity for our customers. • Monthly monitoring and trajectory work for H2STA demand, operational impact and finances, informed by current data, figures and plans from upstream colleagues. • Ascertain any specific work or activities from Education colleagues and plan resource re-allocation 	<p>Liz Mills Eamonn Gilbert Gerry Hughes</p>
<p>Data: We have been unable to use data from EYES to do early work with families who may require transport. Information Governance recommended that we should not use contact information due to data quality concerns and the potential of breaches. This will result in more cases coming in during August and September who could have come into the system earlier and part of our full route optimisation.</p>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with schools to do early work with families known to the service. • Data improvement work with Liquid Logic continues. 	<p>SVOAC Board</p>

<p>Demand timing: A large number of applications for transport are no longer bound by the start of the academic year (35%). We also anticipate large demand throughout the Summer and September due to placement appeals, assessment timeframes, application delays etc. These applications will place significant pressure on the team, the ability to optimise routes and therefore our budget envelope. This reduces the time and ability for transport to be in place at the start of the academic year. All efforts will be made to ensure arrangements are in place within our KPI targets.</p>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased resources in eligibility and delivery. • Increased resource in customer services and Education trained staff. • Introduce re-optimisation of routes in Jan 24. • Offer upfront payments for temporary ITAs. 	<p>Gerry Hughes</p>
<p>Finance: A +/- 1% of the budgeted future demand or inflation is equal to c.£300k change in spend. Budgeted inflation for 23/24 was 5% and SEND demand growth in H2STA was forecast at 5.4%. We have a number of initiatives to manage demand and inflation but if levels are higher than these assumptions it will place pressure on the in-year position and the MTFs.</p>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live monitoring incl upstream future demand • Long term trajectory modelling and linking to anticipated trends from SEND on the recovery plan phasing of demand. • Review of our Dynamic Purchasing System. 	<p>Gerry Hughes Matt Marsden</p>
<p>Suppliers: Supplier and driver shortages are a national issue, with numbers lower than pre-pandemic levels. There is also scarcity of new vehicles (wait times of over 16 months reported). These conditions are creating a lack of competition, higher costs, and difficulty with longer term planning. This is an area of significant concern across the country with limited number of quick fixes.</p>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop long-term supplier strategy. • Promotion of Independent Travel & benefits. • Actively working with Community providers. 	<p>Gerry Hughes</p>
<p>IT & Digital Development original timeline likely to be delayed. SVOAC LiquidLogic development confirmed on hold for a year; we are consequently reassessing options, planning a refreshed programme approach. The end-to-end IT landscape may affect the H2STA service's ability to digitally develop at the necessary pace and with the original scope.</p>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with SVOAC on legacy systems and other new SCC initiatives • Explore pivoting to a new approach to achieve Single View of a Child strategic objectives without LL software involvement. 	<p>Jan Hagara Gerry Hughes</p>

Next steps:

16.

- CFL Budget Deep Dive Briefing has been commissioned for 14 September 2023.
- Risk - Informal Cabinet have requested an update of H2ST on 19 September.
- Home to School provide further report to CFLLC Select Committee on 2 October 2023.

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Annexes/Appendices:

Annex 1 - Home to School Transport Progress Update Slides

Sources/background papers:

CFLLC Select Committee Report H2STA (June 2023)

V1_Annex B Freedom to Travel Equality Impact Assessment

Corporate Risks Informal Cabinet (March 2023)

Internal Audit Report – H2ST Follow-Up and Overview (July 2023)