

CHILDREN, FAMILIES, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE SELECT COMMITTEE

Item under consideration: HOME TO SCHOOL TRAVEL ASSISTANCE (H2STA)

Date Considered: 30 July 2024

- 1) Home to School Travel Assistance has received a high level of scrutiny throughout and following a 2022 Learning Review. The Committee was brought an update in July 2024 and draft minutes can be found [here](#). In addition to the budget deficit, the Committee remains concerned in the area of communication, both with parents and between Council teams.
- 2) The H2STA budget was overspent by 19% in 2023/24, that is £10.35m over. This is mainly due to an increase in both price, due to driver shortages and increasing complexity of need, and volume due to the Recovery Plan work on EHCPs. This shows the importance of the travel assistance and school place planning teams being joined up with the inclusion and additional needs teams. An overspend is also forecast for 2024/25, of £7.4m with a further £2.5m risk. This reflects a multitude of factors, including growth in pupil numbers exceeding the assumptions applied at the time of budget setting. This year saw a significant increase in the number of in-year SEND applications compared with 2023. The average annual cost of a travel arrangement for a child or young person with additional needs and disabilities is almost £7,000 more than that of mainstream – and nearly half (49.5%) of pupils qualifying for assistance have additional needs and disabilities – so the forecast demand for SEND school placements does need to be considered when budgeting for Home to School Transport.
- 3) It is discretionary to pay for travel assistance for children below compulsory school age. Despite Surrey County Council's policy being that, in the absence of exceptional circumstances, it does not, this had not been robustly implemented and last year SCC transported about 165 four-year-old children in reception year. Looking for cost efficiencies, the Council decided to apply its under 5s policy more stringently, but despite this some parents were advised by SEND and Commissioning Officers that they may get transport. The Assistant Director for H2STA told the Committee lessons had been learned and the policy has now been communicated directly to parents and through schools and Family Voice. Members believe confusion may still exist amongst parents about what is classed as extenuating circumstances.

Recommendations

The Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee recommends that:

- 1) The Surrey School Travel and Assessment Team (SSTAT) prioritises communications to parents and carers when changes to policy and practice

are finalised and ensures that these communications are widely shared in advance of the change being implemented.

- 2) In order to further improve communication,
 - (a) the SEND and Admissions team take the transport implications of a placement into account, and pro-actively discuss it with families prior to a placement being discussed, agreed and named in a plan, including for those Children and Young People outside of statutory school age.
 - (b) The updated parent guide to travel assistance – developed in collaboration with Family Voice Surrey – is given to parents when an EHCP application is made and is included in the Key Stage Transfer paperwork.
 - (c) SSTAT makes it clear to families, before the next academic year's applications, what extenuating circumstances will be considered for Children and Young People under-5 and post-16.
 - (d) As Family Voice suggests, SSTAT provides regular engagement sessions/surgeries throughout the summer that parents and carers can book onto.
- 3) The forecasting of demand and the budget for Home to School Transport takes account of the forecast demand for SEND school placements.
- 4) SSTAT undertakes a cost benefit analysis to identify whether a higher standard Independent Travel Allowance would incentivise uptake, what the implications for parents and carers would be, and what Surrey can learn from other local authorities who have implemented this strategy.
- 5) In order to come up with potentially innovative solutions, SSTAT looks further at what other local authorities are doing to manage home to school transport costs.

Fiona Davidson, Chairman - Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee

Background papers

Report to Children, Families, Lifelong Learning Select Committee 30 July 2024, Item 7:

<https://mycouncil.surreycc.gov.uk/documents/g9216/Public%20reports%20pack%20Tuesday%2030-Jul-2024%2010.00%20Children%20Families%20Lifelong%20Learning%20and%20Culture%20S.pdf?T=10>