

CABINET- 24 SEPTEMBER 2024

CABINET RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE CHILDREN, FAMILIES, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE SELECT COMMITTEE

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Item under consideration: HOME TO SCHOOL TRAVEL ASSISTANCE UPDATE

Recommendations:

The Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee asks Family Voice Surrey to share the findings of its autumn survey with the transport team and Select Committee members by the end of the year, and 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

Cabinet Response:

- 1) During our annual October lessons learned review, we will review and revise all aspects of our communications strategy.

Furthermore, we will continue to engage with key stakeholders as part of our ongoing stakeholder analysis work to ensure that we reach our main audiences.

We have created a summer bulletin for Family Voice Surrey to distribute to their families which covers our current programme of works. We will follow up with a bulletin in October and this will outline our plans for 2025.

- 2) (a) The SEND team have amended the SEND processes and the database system to ensure the following steps are taken when a change of placement is required for a child or young person (whether this is part of a key stage transfer process or not)
- Home to School transport are contacted at the start of a consultation process to ensure correct information is gathered
 - Costings from the home to school transport team are included in the consultation process form as a mandatory field, meaning a place cannot be progressed unless the transport costs have been added and considered
 - The panel process has a mandatory field requiring the case officer to confirm they have discussed transport implication of possible placements with the family. For children who are school age this discussion will be held by case officers, for children in the early years the discussion will be held by the early years team.
 - The panel process has a mandatory field requiring confirmation transport costs have been taken into account when placement decisions are made
- 2) (b) We have met with colleagues in SEND Systems and Planning Data this August to discuss further integration of communications at specific points throughout the EHCP process. This can be broken down into the following:

Key Stage Transfer

For families of children who are aged Under 5, Year 2, Year 6 and Year 11, we will work with Systems and Data to ensure that travel assistance communications are assigned for Case Officers to issue to families. While the Parent Guide is our main guidance work for families, we are also producing

guidance for specific families, including children aged Under 5 so that the Council can manage expectations around eligibility and remain mindful of national guidance regarding how we consider discretionary travel requests.

EHCP process

We will work with colleagues in SEND and Commissioning to review all communications that are issued for children and young people where an EHC assessment and subsequent Plan is issued. This may include the draft EHCP letter along with updating the existing messaging in the final EHCP letter. To ensure that we can monitor progress, regular catch-up meetings have been scheduled with colleagues in SEND, and we will maintain attendance at the fortnightly Key Stage Transfer meetings which brings together SEND, Commissioning and Early Years.

2) (c) Children under statutory school age:

From the next academic year, travel assistance will not be provided for children who are not yet of statutory school age. However, the authority is able to apply discretion to provide assistance as an exception to policy in cases where it has been sufficiently demonstrated that:

- the child would be prevented from accessing their education AND there are clear medical/social/economic/physical/mental health reasons why the parent/s is unable to facilitate the child's journeys to and from school
- that not accessing education would have a negative impact on the child's development, for example the child has educational/medical/physical needs that necessitate a school placement prior to the time they are of statutory school age and it was not deemed suitable for them to remain in Early Years education until such a time they would be considered of statutory school age
- that all reasonable options have been considered to facilitate the journeys; parents have demonstrated why they are unable to facilitate but have reached out within the local community, school, other family members for example
- the placement will also be considered, i.e were considerations made regarding how the parent would facilitate their child's journeys to and from school at the time school consultations were taking place, decisions should not be based on the assumption that travel assistance will be provided

We have already informed SEN teams that our approach to providing travel assistance for children not yet of statutory school age is changing to become more robust, and while parameters were loosened for the academic year 2024/25 this will not be the case for 2025/26. This information will also be clear on our website so that families can review before making an application for travel assistance.

Post 16:

For this academic year and going forward travel assistance will not be provided for young people in Post-16 education as the Local Authority has no legal obligation to provide assistance for this cohort. However, the authority is able to apply discretion to provide assistance as an exception to policy in cases where it has been sufficiently demonstrated that:

- the young person would be prevented from accessing their education/training without support from the local authority AND there are clear medical/social/economic/physical/mental health reasons why the parent/s is unable to facilitate the young person's journey to and from school by any means available (driving, public transport, walking etc), that it has also been demonstrated that it would not be reasonable to expect the young person to travel independently (either by foot, bike or public transport) or when accompanied due to their needs
- that all reasonable options have been considered to facilitate the journey, and parent/s have demonstrated why they are unable to facilitate but have reached out within the local community, school, other family members for example
- the placement will also be considered, i.e. could a nearer provision offering the same/similar course have met the young person's holistic needs, evidence that nearer provisions were full/could not meet need is encouraged if that is the case
- considerations were made regarding how the parent/s would facilitate their young person's journeys to and from school at the time Post-16 placement consultations were taking place, decisions should not be made based on the assumption that travel assistance will be provided
- If Travel Assistance is deemed necessary, the young people/their family will be offered the Post-16 Independent Travel Allowance (P16 ITA) in the first instance
- Contracted transport will only be considered in certain scenarios

This information will also be clear on our website so that families can review before making an application for travel assistance.

We have already informed SEN teams and schools (via Phase Council) that our approach to providing travel assistance for young people 16+ will be more robust. We are expecting this will be taken into consideration when deciding placements. A Post-16 Guide to Exceptional Circumstances is awaiting sign-off from Family Voice, this can then be circulated to families. This will also be circulated to colleagues in the SEN area teams to share with families as it is important to get this messaging out before placements are decided and before an application for travel assistance is required.

We have been delivering mandatory training for colleagues in the SEN area Teams, to make our messaging and policy clear and help to inform decisions in a positive way moving forward.

- 2) (d) We met with Family Voice in July and August to discuss the option of drop-in sessions where families of eligible children and young people who wished to find out further information regarding their travel assistance, or who wished to raise a concern about arrangements that have been communicated, could speak with a member of the SSTAT.

A communication was issued to all families that FVS work with confirming that they could request a call back from the team by submitting an online enquiry form available on our website. Families can select the 'Request a call back from the team' option and any request will be triaged to ensure that families are spoken to:

Request a call back from the team

Looking forward, we are looking at wider engagement sessions with families during the autumn, both in-person and virtual having held a post-16 forum for families, where around 40 families attended a virtual Zoom session.

- 3) The forecasting tool has been reviewed and will ensure regular updates of SEND demand be fed into the forecast projections monthly.
- 4) The DfE clarified payment should be to reimburse parent's costs:

Q31	The guidance doesn't say what mileage rate we should pay to parents in order to avoid Universal Credit and tax implications. Would any payment above the standard 45p per mile have an impact on a parent's Universal Credit and tax?
A31	The principle is that the payment should reimburse the parent's costs. If the parent makes a 'profit', that may be taken into account in their Universal Credit assessment or affect their tax liability. Some authorities use the 45p rate set by HMRC: www.gov.uk/government/publications/rates-and-allowances-travel-mileage-and-fuel-allowances/travel-mileage-and-fuel-rates-and-allowances . We understand that this is the rate at which employees may claim expenses from their employer without it affecting their tax liability, so it does seem logical to use it for reimbursing parents too – but DfE cannot provide tax advice. You may wish to seek your own advice.

Benchmarking against several other authorities shows that Surrey is comparable to other authority offers. The current Personal Travel Budget (PTB) was piloted

in June 2023, following the successful uptake and efficiencies identified it was added into the Main Home to School Travel Policy in July 2024.

The main objective for a PTB is to reduce solo routes, identifying efficiencies against financial pressures and give families a more flexible offering for Travel Assistance.

The level and value is identified against the Child's/Young persons need, a contract is sent to the families to sign and confirm the PTB.

Level 1 – ITA	Level 2 – PTB	Level 3 – PTB
Solo by default owing to no other pupils sharing	High-cost solo vehicle - no other child travelling	May need a medical PA
Requested ITA as appropriate support and it is cost effective	Need a PA	Child with complex behaviours
Our established process	Need to purchase additional equipment	Only to be agreed at a management Panel
<i>Over time we may offer contracts to all ITA families but not during the pilot.</i>	Maybe able to travel on public transport or private taxi or family member support	May agree a banding rate or £25 per hour for medical PA
No PTB contract needed	PTB contract needed	Need to fill out the Level 3 Panel Authorisation Form to be sent to Management and agreed at weekly panel.
		PTB contract needed

- 5) ADEPT (The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport) put together a national Toolkit for home to school transport colleagues with idea and innovation that may require change. SST&AT have reviewed this and provided narrative on all aspects and give assurances that all ideas have either been worked through or in progress. The service also has regular dialogue with other authorities to share best practice on specific issues.

However, the most significant impact on this budget will be to place children closer to home which is outside of the service's remit.

Clare Curran
Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning
24 September 2024