

Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Date of meeting:	16 February 2022
Title of Report:	General Update on Home to School Transport
Lead Member:	Councillor David Downie (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills, Children and Young People)
Lead Strategic Director:	Alison Botham (Director for Childrens Services)
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Your Reference:	Click here to enter text.
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

To provide a general update on the delivery of the Home to School Transport service and the ongoing Covid related pressures.

Recommendations and Reasons

To continue to deliver the service in line with national requirements whilst continuing to make savings where possible.

Reason: To keep children, young people and adults safe whilst reviewing options for cost savings.

Alternative options considered and rejected

To stop delivery Home to School Transport
To contract out Home to School Transport

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

Keep children, young people and adults protected. Delivering the best outcomes for children, young people and families

Implications for the Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:

Continuing and risking financial pressures as a result of the long term impact of Covid on the transport market both within Plymouth and nationally.

Financial Risks:

Escalating costs and continuing budget pressures.

Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

This is a for information report.

Other Implications: e.g. Health and Safety, Risk Management, Child Poverty:

* When considering these proposals members have a responsibility to ensure they give due regard to the Council's duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote good relations between people who share protected characteristics under the Equalities Act and those who do not.

This is a for information report.

Appendices

*Add rows as required to box below

Ref.	Title of Appendix	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable) <i>If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.</i>						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A	Briefing report title							
B	Equalities Impact Assessment (if applicable)							

Background papers:

*Add rows as required to box below

Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are unpublished works, relied on to a material extent in preparing the report, which disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the work is based.

Title of any background paper(s)	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable) <i>If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.</i>						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Sign off:

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Originating Senior Leadership Team member: Ming Zhang/ Amanda Paddison

Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes

Date agreed: 24/01/2022

Cabinet Member approval: *[electronic signature (or typed name and statement of 'approved by email/verbally')]* Councillor David Downie Approved verbally

Date approved: 27/01/2022

OVERVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT SERVICE

The School Transport Team co-ordinates the Home to School transport provision for children and young people who have a range of special educational needs and disabilities on approximately 200 vehicles each morning and afternoon to all of the Special Schools as well as other Schools and Specialist provisions within the City and also Specialist provision outside of the City boundary. They also provide free bus passes each year for qualifying students to enable them to travel on public transport.

Transport is provided in a variety of ways, minibus, taxi, ambulances, bus passes and petrol allowance (an allowance which enables parents and carers to take their child to school in their own transport). We allocate the most cost effective form of transport based on the information that is provided to the team about the child's needs, information from the school, health and parents and a robust risk assessment.

The team only provide transport for children who qualify under the statutory criteria.

To qualify for transport the following apply:

- The child does not live within walking distance of their nearest school. For a child under 8, the walking distance is two miles from home to the school and for a child 8 and over the walking distance is three miles. However if a parent has decided to send their child to a school which is not their nearest school then they will not qualify for transport even if it is over the walking distance
- The family are on a low income and feel the following conditions
 - For primary school ages children they must attend their nearest school, receive free school meals and the distance from home to school has to be more than two miles
 - For children aged 11-16 they must attend one of their three nearest schools, receive free schools means and the distance from home to school is between 2-6 miles
- The child has an Education Health and Care Plan and is unable to walk the distance to school accompanied by an adult

For all other children, parents are responsible for ensuring that their child gets to and from school even if they attend a school which is not close to their home. In summary, the school transport service affects the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people.

Home-to-school transport is a complex area of PCC's statutory responsibility that involves high performing teams across Admissions; SEND 0-25 Statutory Assessment Team; School Transport Team; procurement and commissioning. It is also an area, which in recent years has come under significant financial and staffing pressures as the number of children who qualify for statutory provision increases. Teams have managed excellently in a constantly changing environment that has involved a number of policy, demographic, and market forces, that have led to rapid changes and growing expenditure.

PCC's existing travel assistance offer is mainly taxi and minibus transport for children and young people with SEND, resulting in an annual cost of circa £4.6m. Various teams within the Council are working together with families, young people, schools, colleges and transport providers to develop a change in culture and approach to home to school travel assistance.

PCC proactively promotes participation in education and training, including apprenticeships, for 16-18 year olds, and is working to reduce those Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). A bursary can be applied for at Post-16 institutions; this is not always used for travel, but can be. Legislation allows the Local Authority to charge all families of young people aged 16-18 a concessionary charge of £495 (2020/21 academic year) towards the cost of travel. This cost is increased by RPI on an annual basis. This contribution does not cover the full cost of providing transport for a young person.

PCC also proactively promotes participation in education and training, including apprenticeships, for Post 19 students with an Education, Health and Care Plan. No bursary is available to these students and legislation does not allow the Local Authority to apply a charge towards the cost of this transport so the full cost of providing transport is covered by the service and this is an increasing financial pressure. Providing transport to Post 19 students is a significant policy change that was introduced as part of the SEND reforms.

PCC's SEND transport has seen a significant rise in both the numbers of children in receipt of transport and the associated costs of providing that transport year-on-year. The growth in the number of children with Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCPs) is an important factor in increasing demand for SEND transport. We have contacted and benchmarked with several other local authority Home to School Transport teams and the majority are reporting an increase in demand of between 20% and 35% this is in line with the increase we are seeing within Plymouth. Plymouth has also recently seen an increase in the number of children and young people who are placed outside of Plymouth due to the complexity of their SEND needs. Although we have a range of special school provision the complexity of some children's needs means that they cannot be met within our current special school provision.

SUCCESS IN DELIVERING BUSINESS CASE TO REDUCE COSTS

A Business case was agreed in June 2020 which set out options to change the transport service in order to reduce the budget. The plan for the business case outlined actions that aimed to create a saving of £329K in 2020/21. The Business case was developed prior to the full adverse implications of Covid being realised, which have had a detrimental impact on the work of the team. The long term impacts of Covid on the provision of Home to School Transport, as outlined later in this report. However the team have managed to make the savings outlined in the 2020 business case and the full £329K has been achieved.

COVID IMPACTS ON FURTHER IMPLEMENTATION OF SAVING ACTIONS

The following actions were outlined in the June 2020 business case, which the services are reviewing and assessing their pertinence to the current challenge of full Covid advert impacts:

- Review current post 16 school transport policies, update as required to ensure legal and regularity compliance, consult on changes and implement in accordance with require timeline.

The current school transport policies were reviewed to ensure legal and regularity compliance. After consultation with other Local Authorities and working closely with finance colleagues it was agreed that any changes to the post 16 provision policy would result in an increase in financial pressure and would not result in the anticipated saving. It was therefore agreed that this action would not be pursued.

- Ensure adequate staffing of the team including staff to deliver travel training. Promote the same to ensure maximum number of children, young people and adults are diverted from taxis and minibuses, on to public or alternative transport. Increase life chances for this vulnerable group.

Although staff have been recruited to vacant positions new vacancies have been created as existing staff members have moved on and there is ongoing recruitment to these posts with the pandemic exaggerating the challenging situation. Staff vacancies within the team remain a pressure on the service.

The Travel Trainer positions are now filled and staff were recruited in December, however, these posts still need the completion of the recruitment process including DBS checks and references therefore we do not expect them to actually start work until February/March 2022. These posts had taken a considerable time to fill and once the staff members start work, travel training can commence subject to Covid restrictions.

- Review of Passenger Assistant ratios and reducing number of PAs to 1 per route

All routes have been reviewed and risk assessed to reduce the number of PAs to 1 per route where possible based on the needs of the children who are travelling

The team have also carry out comprehensive reviews of all routes every time a route needs to be changed or retendered to ensure that it is as cost effective as possible.

Despite working in very adverse conditions the team have managed to make the savings that were outlined in the 2020 Business case. Unfortunately ongoing pressures as a result of the long term impact of Covid are placing further pressures on the service in other areas.

LONG TERM ADVERSE IMPACT OF COVID ON SCHOOL TRANSPORT COSTS

The past 18 months of pandemic times have been a very difficult time for the service, like so many others services they have had to adapt to new ways of working in an ever changing environment. Home to School transport has continued to operate throughout the pandemic and continued to transport vulnerable children to school when the majority of children were not attending. Although there are no longer any social distancing requirements on school transport additional safe systems of working and PPE remain in place. The team are daily having to reschedule transport as children, PA's and drivers test positive for Covid 19.

Nationally there is a significant shortage of drivers across the transport industry which is having a detrimental impact on the supply chain for the country as a whole. In Plymouth we have seen an increasing number of taxi drivers and bus drivers leaving the profession, 180 during the past 12 month period with very few new drivers replacing them. The number of drivers leaving the industry has also been impacted by Covid. The adverse impact of this is that our transport providers are finding it hard to provide drivers to cover routes and are handing routes back. They are therefore having to incentivise drivers and offer higher salaries and guaranteed hours. At present we are seeing an increase in cost of between 10 – 20% across all routes.

The current taxi licencing consultation may also have an impact on the team if the number of private hire vehicles and hackney cabs is reduced further as a result of changes to taxi licencing.

Although we are seeing increased demand there has been a reduction of 7 transport routes since 2019/20 which demonstrates effective route planning. The total number of transport routes is currently 219, compared to 226 in 2019/20.

COVID GRANTS

The local authority was lucky enough to receive Covid grants from both the Department for Education and the Department for Transport recognising the urgent need nationally for additional financial support to support with the provision and coordination of Home to School Transport during the pandemic. This resulted in the team being able to maximise the grants and make considerable revenue savings last year in the region of £420K. However, these grants have now ceased.

INCREASE IN OUT OF CITY PLACEMENT

During the past 12 months we have seen an increase in the number of children who have been placed in educational provision outside of Plymouth. This is due to a variety of reasons including lack of capacity within our special school estate and the need for specialised provision which is unavailable within the city. We are also seeing an increase in the level of need within this cohort of children and this is increasing the need to place children out of city in very specialist provision.

The forecasted cost of out of city transport routes is £0.131m, an increase of 0.041m (45%) compared to 2019/20.

INCREASED COSTS FOR POST 19 TRANSPORT

When the SEND reforms were introduced it expanded the statutory duties placed on the Local Authority and increased the age range to 0-25 years. The major implication of this was the new duty to provide transport to Post 19 students with no additional budget so the team have provided this provision from within the existing budget arrangements. The number of Post 19 students is on the increase and this is now placing additional pressures on the budget. After consultation with other Local Authorities we have found that this area of work does not normally sit within the School Transport team but sits within Adult Social Care teams. However, in reality moving this provision would not solve the budget pressures it would just move them to another department.

The forecasted cost of Post 19 transport routes is £0.128m, an increase of £0.056m (76%) compared to 2019/20.

NEXT STEPS

Due to changing demands and new pressures on the school transport budget the team continue to explore other options to reduce costs and will review the contract tendering process to see if any further efficiencies can be made.

The Service Manager links closely with her colleagues in other local authorities to learn from each other any efficient practice. However, other LAs are also reporting considerable pressures on their Home to School Transport services and some are investing in the services and increasing the size of the transport teams to continue to address these issues. Devon is reporting a £5.5m gap in their transport budget, Wiltshire a £1.8m gap and Dorset at £3m gap, Cornwall stated that they are experiencing a crisis for both their budget and supply and West Berkshire also report a supply crisis. Plymouth is therefore not alone in experiencing these difficulties and the service will continue to work diligently to drive costs down whilst still providing a high quality service that meets the needs of children, young people and families.

Rising to the challenge, the Home to School Transport team will continue to offer a high quality service that meets the needs of the individual children and will continue to explore all options to drive down ongoing escalating costs.

OFFICIAL

The service will continue to promote and expand independent travel training, route plan, reduce PA ratios where applicable and to promote petrol allowances in order to mitigate the cost pressure of school transport.