

Cabinet



PLYMOUTH
CITY COUNCIL

Date of meeting: 09 February 2026

Re-procurement and renewal of School Transport Contracts

Lead Member: Councillor Sally Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships)

Lead Strategic Director: David Haley (Director for Children's Services)

Author: Beverley Kerswell

Contact Email: Beverley.Kerswell@plymouth.gov.uk

Your Reference: BK 08/01/2026

Key Decision: Yes

Confidentiality: Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

The report sets out the procurement options we have considered and recommendations for the future commissioning and management of contracted Home to School Transport (HTST) services over the next eight years. The review has been undertaken to ensure the Council adopts a procurement route that is legally compliant, financially sustainable, operationally robust, and capable of supporting long term service resilience. Each option has been evaluated against key criteria, including operational practicality, compliance with the Procurement Act 2023 and the Authority's Contract Standing Orders, value for money, administrative impact, and overall sustainability. Following this assessment, the recommended strategic approach is to establish a formal framework agreement, through which all Home to School Transport routes including Social Care transport routes which is commissioned through the Home to School Transport team will be procured for the full eight year period, providing a consistent, transparent, and efficient mechanism for securing high-quality transport services.

Recommendations and Reasons

That Cabinet agrees to:

1. Adopt an internally managed Open Framework as the procurement route for all contracted Home to School Transport services including Social Care transport routes which is commissioned through the Home to School Transport team for the next eight years.

Reasons: This approach builds on the previous Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) model, providing the most robust balance of cost efficiency, operational efficiency, supplier flexibility, long-term resilience, and compliance with the Procurement Act 2023. It also removes the need for repeated due-diligence exercises required by Contract Standing Orders, as suppliers are vetted once at framework admission. Through scheduled reopenings, the Local Authority can maintain competitive tension and support local market development, while mini-competitions ensure competitive pricing and quality standards throughout the 8-year term.

Alternatives Options Considered

The Traditional Closed Framework was explored and ruled out. This approach means we cannot refresh suppliers mid-term, which weakens competition and risks price inflation as the framework ages. There is also a need to re-procure sooner than an Open Framework.

The Outsourced Open Framework option has been explored and ruled out. This introduces avoidable delay and additional cost through the initial procurement of the framework operator and embeds ongoing management fees without a commensurate improvement in outcomes over an internally managed model. It also reduces the Local Authority's direct control over call-off design and supplier development, which is central to tailoring solutions for local needs and ensuring continuous improvement. This model creates long-term dependency and exit risks, whereas an internally managed Open Framework maintains institutional knowledge, preserves agility, and delivers stronger overall value for money for the Council's mainly sub-£50k route portfolio.

The Single Supplier Contract option was excluded based on previous experience of this Contracting model which caused high dependency and resilience risks and the loss of competitive tension during the contract term.

The Multiple Supplier (Lotted) Contract was not considered suitable because of its substantial administrative workload and lower efficiency compared to using lots within an Open Framework.

Multiple Spot Contracts were dismissed due to the unsustainable administrative burden created by Contract Standing Orders, repeated due-diligence requirements, and the loss of economies of scale.

If there is a change in circumstances and the recommended procurement route cannot be undertaken or no longer represents best value for the Council, any subsequent procurement route will be undertaken will be in accordance with the Council's Contract Standing Orders and Procurement Law.

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

The proposal helps to meet the corporate plan through the following:

DEMOCRACY

We listen to families and make fair, transparent decisions about school transport eligibility based on clear criteria set out in Plymouth City Council's School Transport Policy. We ensure every application is assessed consistently, whether it relates to distance, low income, special educational needs, or exceptional circumstances.

RESPONSIBILITY

We understand the impact that transport decisions have on a child's education and daily life. We take our statutory duties seriously under the Education Act to provide transport for eligible children, offering the safest and most appropriate travel arrangements - whether that is a minibus, taxi, bus pass, or mileage allowance - only where no feasible alternative exists.

FAIRNESS

Every child deserves equitable access to education. We ensure that children who qualify through distance, low income, or special educational or medical needs receive the support they are entitled to. Eligibility

for transport always prioritises the nearest suitable school and is assessed individually to ensure fairness for all families.

COOPERATION

Working together leads to better outcomes. We collaborate with parents, schools, transport providers, and Passenger Assistants to deliver safe, reliable school transport. Families help by ensuring children are ready on time and by communicating changes promptly, while our School Transport Team coordinates routes, equipment, and support to meet children's needs.

Implications for the Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:

The Home to School Transport service is funded entirely from revenue, with a total budget allocation of £10.958m for 2025/26. Over recent years, significant collaborative work between the service, Finance, and the SEND team has ensured robust budget monitoring and accurate forecasting of growth pressures arising from increased Independent Special School Placements (ISP).

The forecasted annual expenditure on external transport providers for 2025/26 is £7.797m (see table below). This figure incorporates part-year costs for routes that have ceased, costs for the current 254 operating routes transporting 1,066 pupils daily, and projected growth for the final quarter of the year.

	2022/23 Actuals	2023/24 Actuals	2024/25 Actuals	2025/26 Forecast
Fixed (minibuses)	£1.505m	£1.486m	£1.765m	£1.979m
Volatile (taxis)	£2.965m	£4.451m	£4.930m	£5.817m
Total cost	£4.470m	£5.936m	£6.696m	£7.797m
Pupils (year-end)	803	903	968	1,180
Routes (year-end)	219	262	239	280

Financial Risks

The financial impact of implementing a new Open Framework for procuring transport services cannot be fully quantified until new route contracts are awarded and operational. While no savings are anticipated from the routes, the transition is essential due to the expiry of the current Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) in January 2026, which cannot continue under the Procurement Act 2023.

All routes remain operational under the current contractual arrangement which allows them to continue past the date of the DPS expiration. Further procurement is undertaken through a traditional procurement model until the new Open Framework is agreed. Savings will be made on time compared to the traditional procurement model.

Moving to an Open Framework is critical for legal compliance, service continuity, and alignment with updated procurement legislation. It will enable competitive tendering for new transport contracts, ensuring flexibility to meet rising demand. Although no adverse budgetary impact is expected, there remains a risk of cost escalation associated with market volatility and the introduction of new procurement arrangements. These increases and variables would be seen regardless of the procurement method as these relate to numbers of eligible children, their needs and the market.

By converting to an Open Framework, Plymouth gains access to a broader, dynamic provider marketplace, improving cost effectiveness and innovation. However, rigorous financial control,

procurement governance, and operational planning will be critical to manage cost escalation, compliance risk, and potential overhead increases.

Legal Implications

The proposed procurement route is compliant with the Procurement Act 2023 and the adoption of an internally managed open framework is a lawful and appropriate response to the expiry of the previous DPS and ensures that the Council can continue to meet its statutory duties under the Education Act 1996 for home to school transport.

Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

The statutory duty to provide Home-to-School Transport inevitably generates carbon emissions which will be procured through the agreed framework, as vehicle use remains integral to maintaining service delivery. Low-carbon transport technologies continue to develop, and the service has implemented measures to reduce emissions where practicable. Electric and hybrid vehicles are deployed on taxi-contracted routes in accordance with the Taxi Licensing Emissions Policy, supporting wider corporate objectives on environmental sustainability.

However, the operational requirement for larger vehicles such as minibuses, combined with the longer distances involved in certain journeys, continues to limit the feasibility of fully transitioning to low-carbon fleet options at this stage. The service will continue to monitor technological developments and assess opportunities for further emission reductions as they become viable.

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

Includes health and safety, safeguarding and equality duties within specifications and contract monitoring.

** 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.*

All children who meet the requirements under the statutory and Plymouth School Transport policies including the Post-16 policy and the Post-19 policy are in need of transport to access education will be provided with Home to School Transport and the necessary Passenger Assistant support. Additionally, the Home to School Transport team support children who live with Foster Carers outside of the city to travel to their schools. This is also arranged and tendered for through these contracts.

In order to ensure the Health and Safety of all:

- All children are assessed and issued with the relevant child car seat to ensure children travel safely.
- All wheelchair users have their wheelchairs assessed, passported and specialist equipment supplied with Drivers being trained on their application.
- Passenger Assistants are all trained and receive additional training for very complex medical needs to ensure the needs of the children are met.
- All minibuses are checked by PCC prior to undertaking a contract and on-going spot checks are undertaken on all vehicles and drivers to ensure compliance throughout the contract.

Risk Management:

- Under the contracts operators must provide replacement vehicles in the event of breakdown to ensure continuity of service.

Appendices

*Add rows as required to box below

Ref. Title of Appendix		Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable)						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A	Briefing report title							
B	Equalities Impact Assessment							
C	Climate Impact Assessment							

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)						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Sign off:

Fin	OW. 25.26. 123	Leg	LS/0 0001 312/ 2/AC /26/1 /26	Mon Off	HR	Assets	Strat Proc	PW/PS/81 4/CP/0126
-----	----------------------	-----	--	------------	----	--------	---------------	-----------------------

Originating Senior Leadership Team member: David Haley (Director for Children's Services)

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

Date agreed: 29/01/2026

Cabinet Member approval: Councillor Sally Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships)

Date approved: 19/11/2025