



School Transport

Lessons learned and improvement plan
Public consultation on proposed changes to policy

January 2024

Overview

- Service background and context
- Summer 2023 challenges
- Summary of improvements delivered January to July 2023
- **Lessons learned summary**
- **Service Improvement Programme 2024**
 - Cross-cutting workstreams and projects
 - Admin, triage and eligibility workstream
 - Contracts and commissioning workstream
 - Passenger assistant workstream
- Activity that is not currently resourced
- High-level plan
- **School Transport Policy – Public Consultation**
- **Post 16 Transport Policy – Public Consultation**

Service Background and Context

Service statistics

- 13,550 eligible children:
 - 9,600 mainstream
 - 3,000 SEN
 - 750 post-16
 - 200 EIS and Social Care
- 250 transport operators with 1,700 contracts
- 545 passenger assistants

Service constraints

- ➔ Requirement to retender contracts. Over the summer of 2023, 1,045 contracts had to be retendered out of 1,700. This was particularly high because contracts had been extended beyond standard lifespan due to Covid.
- ➔ Deadline for all ST applications was 31st July 2023, leaving 5 weeks to get retender and arrange transport for 13,500 children (including communications to those for whom the arrangements were unchanged).
- ➔ SEN transport cannot be arranged until a child's school place has been allocated, some of which require complex arrangements.
- ➔ The Service always experiences a significant peak in customer contact at the start of the academic year (e.g. requests for changes to arrangements and general enquiries).

Market challenges

- Shortages of large and specialist vehicles, appropriately licensed drivers and passenger assistants
- Increased operator costs

Resulting in

- Significant number of retenders that did not attract any bids
- Large number of contract hand backs

Escalating costs

- £53.4m forecast spend for 23/24 (£9.5m pressure on £43.9m budget). £2.78m more than forecast at start of year.
- £61.4m forecast spend for 24/25 (£2.9m pressure on £58.5m budget)

Summer 2023 Challenges

Key issues that led to children not being on transport for start of September:

- SEN children with complex requirements that were challenging to meet (e.g., specialist vehicle required and lack of bids, requirement for PA) and were unknown until summer including 70 children attending newly established schools.
- Post-16 processing issue resulting in 250 – 300 students not on transport for the start of term.
- 24 large vehicles that did not attract bids or contracts were handed back affecting approximately 1,200 families where transport was put in place at the very last minute, but parents were not notified before start of term.

The impact of these challenges at an already peak demand period was that the Service was overwhelmed with an extremely high volume of customer contact at the end of August and throughout September (6,500 calls and 2,000 emails in the busiest week), resulting in a large backlog of emails, issues, escalations and complaints that took until October half term to return to typical service levels.

This had a significant impact on staff wellbeing and contributed to a peak in turnover.

Other Issues from Summer 2023

Application/eligibility issues

Customers who missed the deadline despite repeated reminders

Contact from parents assessed as ineligible but wanting to appeal or apply for discretionary travel

Bus pass issues

Printing of some bus passes was delayed

Late bus passes due to late commissioning

Postage/address issues

Mitigation - drivers were advised not to check bus passes for the first few weeks of term

Passenger assistant issues

Routes waiting for PA to be recruited in specific locations

High levels of PA sickness and unpaid leave in September resulting in cancelled routes

Provider issues

Hand back of 20 routes

Alleged GDPR issue (due to new provider to market)

School issues

Henry Beaufort, Henry Cort and Kings' School (and others) - no tenders for some routes leading to late commissioning

2023 Improvements

	People and Culture	Communications and Branding	Admin and Triage	Eligibility	Contracts and Commissioning	Passenger Assistants	Finance
Improvement activities January to July 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New service structure and recruitment 1:1s and VPs Team development and training (e.g., customer service and complaints) Phone first approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Website improvements Communications on application deadlines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standard Operating Procedures in place Process improvements for escalations and complaints Service demand profiling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bulk eligibility Digitalisation of appeals Policy refinement Enabling earlier eligibility assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch of new DPS and E Auction Use of Qroutes New commissioning and tendering strategy Supplier management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PA recruitment improvements Addition of PA Coordinators Review of existing systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process review and optimisation PMA first implemented PTBs defined Finance model and forecast budgets produced
What worked well?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New team structure worked well Better comms in management team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peak of applications received earlier Transport arrangement letters sent via Gov Notify reduced Admin burden 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective triage and resolution of contact to reduce burden on other internal teams. Supported commissioning with additional admin activities over the summer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bulk eligibility processing reduced overall processing time Reduced admin burden for appeals Summer workload was improved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in commissioning capacity and reduction in bottleneck Competitive bidding for smaller vehicles Contracts pricing matrix tool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong team and structure now in place to support future improvements Recruitment fayres PA engagement activities worked well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SEN calculator Increase in accuracy of reporting and contract variations Reporting and process efficiencies reduced workload
Even better if....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There were fewer/more seamless hand offs between teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There was an agreed approach for reactive service communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duplication in queries across multiple inboxes could be reduced Triage and routing of queries was automated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application methods further improved to eliminate errors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There was more time for commissioning Other teams could close more queries Data was cleansed and correct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More operators provided PAs Arranging PA cover was easier Data issues were resolved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interface was automated. Better data to enable better reporting to manage spend

Lessons Learned Summary

- Lessons learned workshops were held across the Service throughout October.
- Issues identified can be categorised into five key themes – data, process, tooling, resources and communications.
- The root cause for many of the process, tooling and data issues relate to how the Service currently uses the Capita One Transport Module.
- Severity of issues has been used to identify improvement programme workstreams to prioritise between November 2023 and June 2024.

Failure demand

Severity of issues was assessed in terms of the creation of failure demand which causes service inefficiency and prevents the service from focusing their attention on strategic change.

Service Improvement Programme

Planned activity for 2023 to 2024

Cross-Cutting Workstreams

Customer Contact Management Project

- Implementation of a solution that will remove duplication by grouping contact into tickets and provide a consolidated digital contact method.
- Enable automatic triage and routing of contact by type therefore eliminating the need to manually categorise and forward emails.

Data optimisation and reporting

- Identification and resolution of the most severe data and reporting issues.
- Review and refinement of existing Capita reports.

Service communications

- Identification and planning for scenarios that require reactive communications (triggers, approvals, templates) and website refresh.

Service resourcing

- Addressing the most significant resource issues (e.g. support in peak periods, skills bottlenecks).

Service consultation

- Identification, prioritisation and allocation of Service changes following school transport and post-16 consultations.

Service metrics

- Definition of Service metrics for BAU and peak times to facilitate earlier identification of issues and enable earlier intervention.

Admin, Triage and Eligibility Workstream

Earlier applications deadlines

- Mainstream primary and secondary 31st May 2024.
- SEN and Post-16 30th June 2024.
- Communication to ensure parents are aware of the deadlines, as any applications not submitted by deadline may not have transport in place for the early part of term

Application communications timetable

- Development of a standard applications communications plan including identification of required data and oversight of communications.

Application process project

- Root cause analysis of missing applications.
- Implementation of an improved and consistent method for applications.
- Improvement of eligibility assessment through review and improvement of application questions.
- Addition of rejection reason information for applicants.

Bulk eligibility process automation

- Options analysis for bulk eligibility tooling (Capita or QPaths) and either implementation of Capita or removal of manual steps for current process.

Contracts and Commissioning Workstream

Earlier commissioning

- Retender and contract award for mainstream vehicles before the applications deadlines so that transport can be arranged immediately after applications deadlines.
- Working with Social Care and SEN teams to enable earlier assessment and commissioning.
- Retendering of post-16 contracts for duration of placement rather than annually.

Summer process review

- Review and optimisation of end-to-end summer school transport process including root cause analysis of issues experienced throughout August and September 2023, particularly in relation to service hand-offs.

Operator PA provider project

- Working with operators to encourage provision of operator PAs and associated processes to enable and encourage use of operator PAs.

School liaison

- Fostering closer working relationships with schools.
- Proactive communications with schools regarding routes and operators.
- Implementation of a consistent communications approach to parents.

Bus pass process optimisation

- Review and optimisation of bus pass allocation and distribution process including root cause analysis of issues experienced throughout August and September 2023.

Passenger Assistant Workstream

PA recruitment process

- Targeting recruitment at high demand locations (recruitment fairs, job centres, schools, open day, targeted adverts).
- Refinement of recruitment process to reduce onboarding timescales.

PA absence cover process

- Review and optimisation of the process for arranging PA cover to maximise efficiency and effectiveness including improved communications to parents, operators and schools.

Allocation of PA process

- Development and implementation of an improved request mechanism.
- Improved PA status comms across the service to enable closure of queries at first point of contact.

Transfer of PA records to Capita

- Removal of existing Access database and associated duplicated data.
- Creation of new standard operating procedures for use of Capita for PA data.

PA communications

- Implementation of PA champions to promote more efficient and effective communication and to increase support and therefore PA engagement and retention.
- Improvement management of demand for PA support.

High-level plan

January 2024

- Customer contact management solution ready for testing
- Data optimisation and reporting workstream planned
- Applications process project scoped and planned
- Operator PA provider process confirmed and agreed
- PA data transferred to Capita
- Application communication timetable planned

April 2024

- Customer contact management solution implemented
- Summer process optimisation complete
- Applications process project complete
- Operator provider PA project implemented
- Mainstream large vehicles commissioned for September 2024
- Bulk eligibility process automated
- Capita data quality report developed
- Service metrics in place
- Service resourced for peak periods
- Website refreshed

July 2024

- High priority data and process improvements made
- Reactive comms plan in place
- School liaison activities embedded
- Targeted PA recruitment completed
- Solution for secure comms

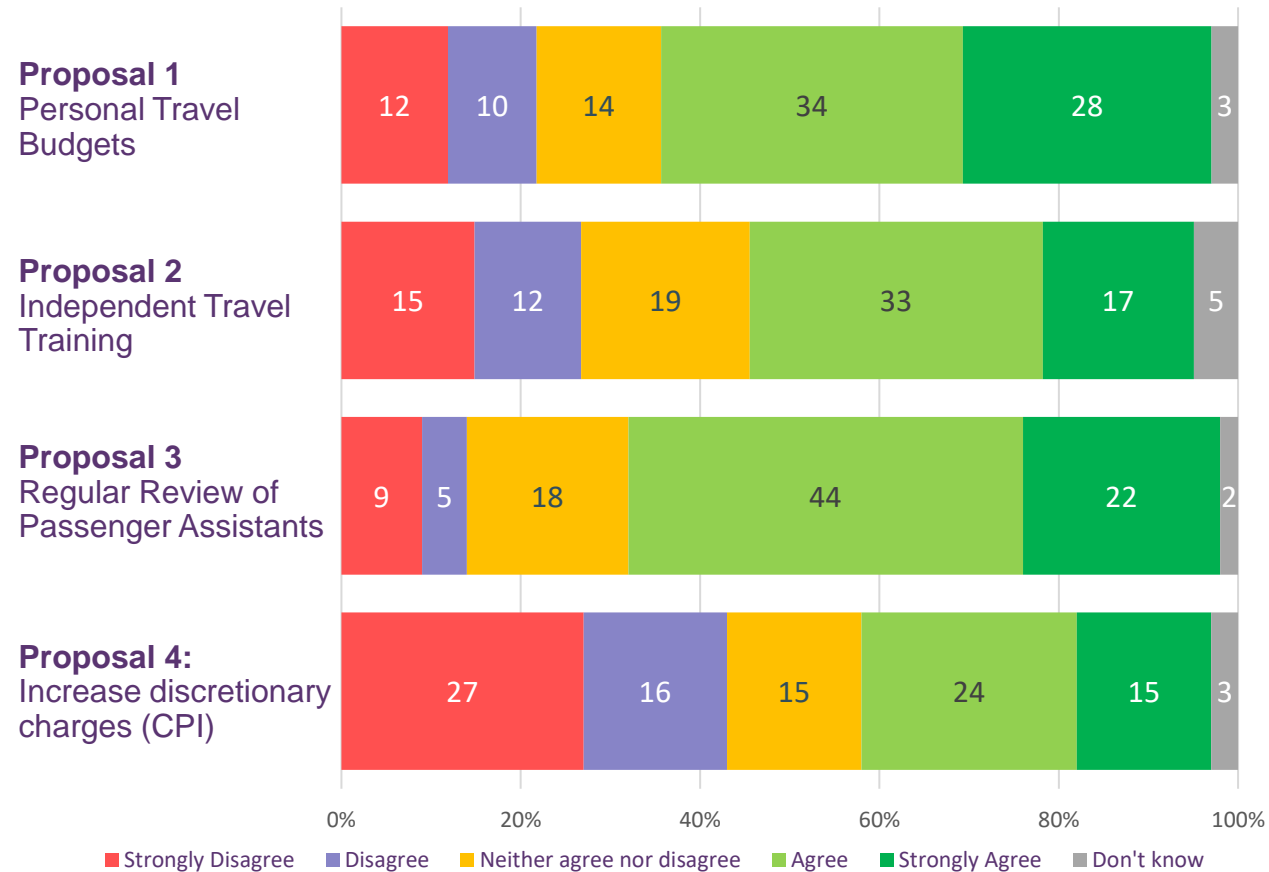
School Transport Policy Consultations

- Public Consultation 30th October to 6th December
 - Significant communications and marketing activity to engage as many respondents as possible
 - Social media, through schools and other partners, emails to parents, website, email signatures
 - 262 responses received to the main consultation
 - 78 responses to the Post 16 consultation
- School Transport Policy
 - Introduction of Personal Transport Budgets
 - Development of Independent Travel Training
 - Regular review of Passenger Assistant provision
 - Parental contribution for discretionary transport provision to rise each year by CPI
 - Wording changes to update, clarify and align with DfE Guidance
- Post 16 Transport Policy
 - Parental Contribution to rise each year by CPI
 - Wording changes to align with main Policy and DfE guidance

School Transport Consultation Results Summary

The School Transport consultation closed on 6 December 2023, and **262 responses** were received in total. A summary of results is below.

Extent that respondents agree or disagree with Proposals One to Four (%)



Respondent Themes (positive, negative and neutral)

- 1** More flexibility, better for some families & financial support. Payment won't cover cost, it's HCC's responsibility to arrange this, and payments may be misused. Stressful for families and may impact user access to education. Needs to be optional.
- 2** Independence for students, better for some families. Safety concern, not suitable for all students, and student needs are always changing. Stressful for students and users. Parents need to have a say.
- 3** Student requirements change, better for some families. Safety, not suitable for all students, attempt to remove or cut provision by HCC. Will depend on fair assessment & family involvement. Should not be at the cost of safety, must be based on child's needs.
- 4** Affordability and cost of living, transport should be free, increase is too high. Should be means-tested.
- 5** Proposal 5 refers to clearer wording aligned to DfE guidance. Comments were generally supportive of making the policy clearer provided eligibility did not change. Some respondents commented on DfE 'parental preference' guidance and drew attention to the impacts of a lack of local SEN provision.

Introduction of Personal Transport Budgets

- For Personal Transport Budgets (PTB) to be available to families where a child or young person's needs or circumstances mean that suitable transport is difficult to find, or not available at all, in the local operator market.
- 62% of consultation respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal to make Personal Transport Budgets available to families
 - Positive responses mentioned the flexibility that PTBs would offer families, and that they would also provide families with more financial support
 - Negative responses highlighted the County Council's responsibility to arrange transport, and wondered whether payments would cover the cost. The introduction of PTBs could be stressful, costly and cause difficulties for working parents
- Mitigations are that PTBs will always be with parental agreement and cannot be imposed by the LA

Development of Independent Travel Training

- The development and delivery of an Independent Travel Training service for children and young people with SEND who may be capable of travelling independently to their place of education.
- 50% of consultation respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal to develop and deliver an Independent Travel Training service
 - Supportive respondents commented on the independence that this proposal could offer some students.
 - Other respondents highlighted safety concerns, that independent travel training wouldn't be suitable for all students, and that parents would need to have a say
- Mitigations are that Independent Travel Training would be subject to parental agreement, that the design would be co-developed with parents' representatives and training would not remove the statutory duty to provide transport to eligible children. This will be re-assessed on completing the training.

Regular review of Passenger Assistant provision

- The regular review of the provision of Passenger Assistants.
- 66% of consultation respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal to regularly review the provision of passenger assistant
 - Respondents commented that they were in favour of the regular review of passenger assistant provision, as children's needs change over time
 - Other respondents felt that the proposal could be an attempt to reduce provision by the County Council, and that there were safety concerns associated with removing a passenger assistant from their own child's provision
- Mitigations include that reviews of Passenger Assistants would consider any changes in a child's needs or circumstances, whilst also ensuring that travel arrangements are safe and suitable.
- Where a Passenger Assistant is assigned based on the combined needs of children in a vehicle, this will be considered when reviewing arrangements for individual children.

Parental contribution for discretionary transport provision to rise each year by CPI

- Where parents are required to make a financial contribution towards discretionary school transport arrangements, to increase this contribution in line with inflation (Consumer Price Index (CPI)) from September 2024, with inflation-linked increases also being applied in future years.
- 39% of consultation respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal to increase the level of parental contributions to discretionary school transport arrangements in line with inflation (CPI)
- 42% disagreed or disagreed strongly.
 - Respondents were concerned about affordability and cost of living, and that the increases were too high.
 - Some respondents felt that access to education (including transport) should be free, and others felt that contributions should be means tested
- The contributions are already means tested and the contributions waived for families on low incomes

Wording changes to update, clarify and align with DfE Guidance

- Updating the County Council's School Transport Policy to reflect the current Department for Education statutory guidance and to be easier to understand.
- Respondents were asked to provide "free-form" feedback on this proposal. Feedback was generally positive.
- Respondents were positive about making the wording of the Policy clearer and simpler but on the proviso that there were no changes to the meaning of the policy within this proposal
- Many comments received were in relation to the existing elements of the Policy that were not changing

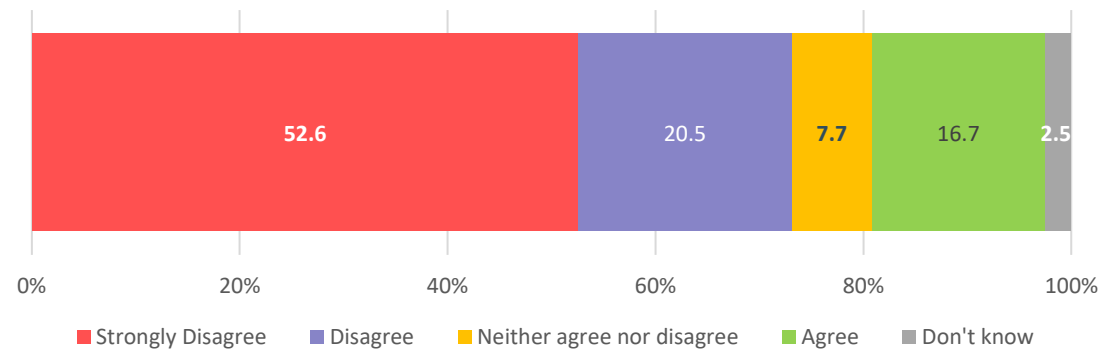
Post 16 Transport Policy

- 73% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal to increase contributions in line with CPI
 - It is worth noting that in 2022/23, for approximately 76.7% of Post 16 eligible students, the parental contribution was waived due to low income. The figures are not yet complete for 2023/24 but the interim results are very close to the same level (currently 75.9%)
 - Themes from respondent feedback included: "more SEN schools would mean less transport"; queries around why there was a charge when education is compulsory to 18 years; and comparisons to bus travel costs at the current capped prices

Post-16 Transport Consultation Results Summary

The Post-16 Transport consultation closed on 6 December 2023, and **78 responses** were received in total. Respondents were consulted on 1) an annual increase to parental contributions in line with CPI, and 2) a number of updates to the policy, including sections on Independent Travel Training, Complaints and Appeals, adding or removing links, and other minor wording changes. A summary of results is below.

Extent that respondents agree or disagree with CPI-linked annual contribution increase (%)



Alternative methods of calculation suggested by respondents:

No Parental Contribution (15.4%), Means Testing (11.5%), Based on actual travel costs (7.7%), and Based on average wage increases (5.1%)

Key Themes in Open Text Responses:

Response	Count
Affordability	57
Prevent education	22
No impact detailed/None	18
Lack of local suitable settings	17
More/clearer communications	14
Comments about Policy	14
Other comments (not categorised)	11
16-18 education compulsory	10

Other themes recorded were contribution inequality, travel training, SEN inclusion, operational transport issues, increased cars, student not independent, and driving better value.

The highest ranked **Impact Groups** were Disability, Poverty, Age and Rurality.

Other Impact Themes included: Not enough SEN schools impacting transport costs; Impact on 'working poor'; Rural locations more challenging.