

Title of Report:	Home to School Transport Scrutiny Review Interim Report	Item 13
Report to be considered by:	Executive	
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Interim Scrutiny Report

Home to School Transport Scrutiny Review Task Group Report

**Commissioned by
Children and Young People Select Committee**

Select Committee Chairman	
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Supporting Information

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Children and Young People Select Committee at its meeting in October 2003 agreed to establish a Scrutiny Review Task Group in order to review the Council's home to school transport policy.
- 1.2 The attached report was considered by the Children and Young People Select Committee at its meeting on 30 September and the Executive are asked to note the contents of the report and to commission further work in relation to the above-mentioned issue.

2. Task Group Membership

- 2.1 The following Members of the Children and Young People Select Committee undertook this scrutiny review:

Cllr Graham Pask	Task Group Chairman
Mr Francis Connolly	Co-opted Member
Cllr John Chapman	
Cllr Geoff Findlay	
Cllr Denise Gaines	
Cllr Sandra Harding	
Cllr Caroline Suggett	
David Cook	Scrutiny Officer

3. Background

- 3.1 At its meeting on 9th October 2003 the Children and Young People Select Committee received a presentation from the Council's Head of Education Services on home to school transport. The Committee was informed of how West Berkshire Council was trying to encourage healthy and safe methods of travel to and from school.
- 3.2 Members were informed that if they were to undertake a review there were specific factors that needed to be considered:
- The rural nature of West Berkshire.
 - The popularity of individual schools and the rights of parents to express a preference.
 - The rights of parents to request denominational education.
 - A lack of competition between transport contractors.
 - The increase in car usage for the school runs.
- 3.3 The Select Committee agreed to establish a scrutiny review Task Group, as Members were concerned about the high cost of school transport provision, the implications of the Governments proposal to introduce a School Transport Bill and the need to examine alternative forms of provision.

4. Terms of Reference

- 4.1 The Task Group agreed that their aim would be to develop a policy for the Council with respect to Home to School Transport and make recommendations as to how new ways of working could be implemented in the short, medium and long term.
- 4.2 In producing its report, the Task Group would follow the general structure of asking first, what West Berkshire was currently doing, secondly what else could be done, and thirdly how existing processes could be improved.
- 4.3 The Task Group agreed to keep in mind the following issues: implications of new legislation; Pathfinder status; budget implications; reducing traffic congestion; making full use of existing Council facilities; that it is not the intention to save money, but rather to add value.

5. Why do we provide home to school transport?

- 5.1 The LEA has a legal duty to transport children to school if they live more than three miles from a school, or two miles if under eight. The basic framework was established by legislation in 1904 but has been modified by more recent Acts such as that of 1996. The Education Act 2002 extended the duty to post 16 pupils.
- 5.2 The 1980 Act introduced the concept of parental preference and absolved LEAs of the duty where the parents' preference for a school other than the child's local school had been honoured.
- 5.3 Nevertheless, regardless of the LEA's duty to provide transport, there is also the LEA's duty of care towards pupils and it is generally considered in the best interests of the pupil that he or she be conveyed safely to school.
- 5.4 A further consideration is the removal of excuses for lateness or non-attendance of the pupil at school. Persistent lateness or non-attendance can have a serious effect upon the pupil's education and any steps that the LEA can take to minimise these are to be welcomed.
- 5.5 In recent years traffic congestion due to the school run has become a major issue, especially in urban areas. Effective school transport can contribute greatly to reducing the need for parents to drive their children to school.
- 5.6 In consequence most LEAs have found it beneficial to provide transport for pupils even though they are under no legal duty so to do, either because of the exercise of a parent's preference or because the pupil does not meet the distance criteria for free transport. Under such circumstances the LEA usually provides a subsidy to encourage the use of school or public transport where capacity is available.

6. Current Policy

- 6.1 As the Local Education Authority (LEA) West Berkshire Council provides free home to school transport for a child if the distance between home and school is two miles or more if aged under 8 or three miles or more if aged 8 and over and they attend either:
- the catchment area school, or
 - a school that is closer, by a straight line, to their home address,
 - or the school has been designated on a statement for special education needs.

- 6.2 The distance measured when assessing eligibility is the shortest safe available walking route from home to school, this may not be the same as the route driven by a vehicle.
- 6.3 Free transport is not usually available if the child attends a school outside their catchment area if that place was obtained by parental preference and a place was available at the catchment or a nearer school. If a route is deemed unsafe or there are particular medical grounds or special education needs then free transport may be available.
- 6.4 The LEA also provides free transport when a school has been chosen on denominational grounds. The child must attend the nearest denominational school and live more than:
- For primary schools - two radial miles from the school if aged under 8, or three radial miles if aged 8 and over, and not more than six radial miles from the school.
 - For secondary schools – three radial miles from the school and not more than twelve radial miles from the school.
- 6.5 When a child is not entitled to free transport the LEA allows them to purchase a spare place, depending on availability. The cost of taking a place currently stands at £114 per term and this provision can be taken away if the space is required for a pupil who is entitled to free transport.
- 6.6 The LEA may also provide free transport for children that have special educational needs (SEN). Transport for pupils with statements, either to mainstream schools, resourced units or special schools, will be considered and agreed by the Special Services Section in individual cases. Transport to mainstream schools is not normally provided other than within the LEA's normal policy arrangements as already noted.
- 6.7 The LEA can also offer assistance to full time students aged between 16-18 or 19 and over if continuing on a course started prior to their 19th birthday. For a termly charge of £100 the student is provided with a bus or train season ticket or a travel pass to use on a contracted school bus. If no contracted service is available a mileage allowance is available for use of their own transport. Financial hardship schemes are available for pupils who can not afford their travel costs.
- 6.8 Students travelling on West Berkshire Council provided transport are expected to conform to an accepted code of behaviour, which normally applies in the school/college. Any breach of discipline is dealt with by the school/college and transport may be withdrawn. The Task Group will be reviewing the Council's behaviour policy as part of their ongoing review.

7. Travel Trends

- 7.1 The way children travel to school has changed over the last 10 years. The National Travel Survey shows that the proportion of primary school children walking to school has fallen from 67% to 55%. Over the same period children being taken to school by car has increased to 36% from 22%. A similar trend can also be observed with secondary school pupils.
- 7.2 These trends can partly be explained by the fact the average length of the school journey has increased ergo fewer children live within walking distance of their local school. An increase in car usage can also be attributed to parents sending their children to schools other than their designated school. In exercising parental choice the pupil may forfeit the right to free transport. Parents are also becoming increasingly concerned about their child's safety and prefer to drive their child to school.

7.3 Tables 1 and 2 show the methods of school travel over the last 4 years for Primary and Secondary schools within West Berkshire. It is clear to see that the car consistently remains the main form of school transport, especially for pupils attending primary schools. The Task Group acknowledged that introducing policies to try and reduce car usage could have a knock on effect on the Council's school travel budget. The authority's aspiration was to reduce the car as a main form of school transport whilst increasing the percentage of pupils who choose healthy options such as walking and cycling.

Table 1 Primary Schools

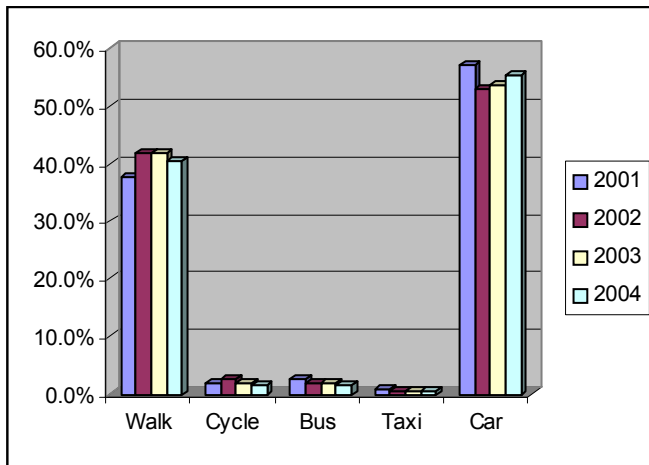
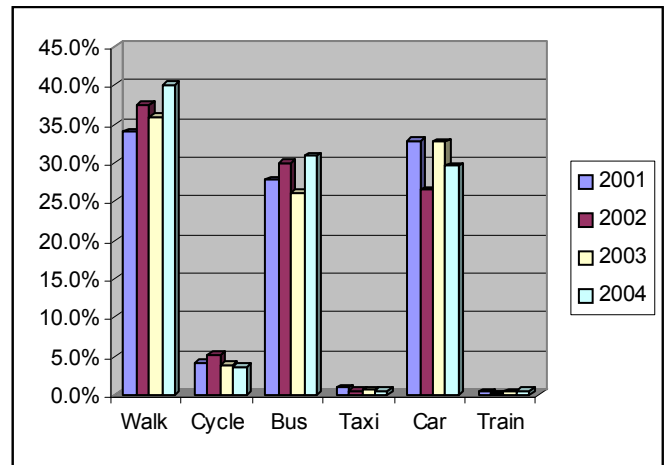


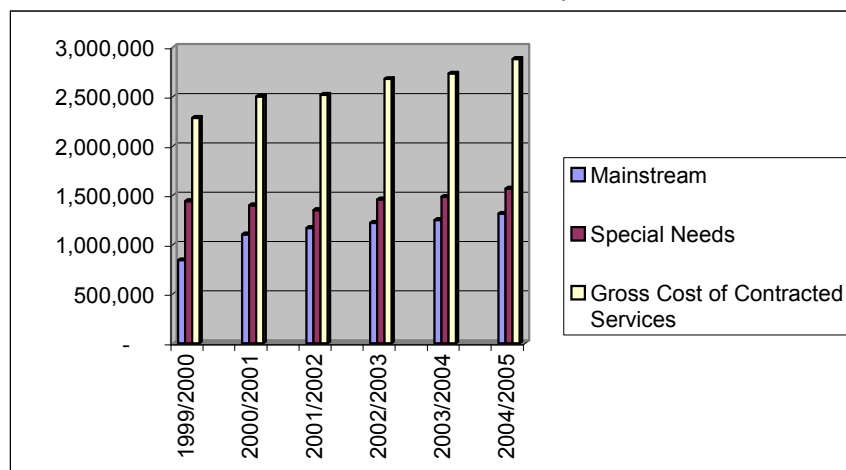
Table 2 Secondary Schools



8. Budget

- 8.1 Local authority expenditure on home to school transport provision nationally has been consistently rising above inflation. The reasons for this increase have been well documented and have placed increased pressure on education budgets.
- 8.2 Task Group Members were concerned about this trend, especially because of the lack of competition between contractors and the gradual decline of public transport provision throughout the district.
- 8.3 In 1999/2000 the cost of home to school transport for West Berkshire Council was £2,285,407. The proposed budget for 2004/05 was £2,881,400, which represented an increase of 26%. Table 3 highlights the steady increase in the cost of home to school transport provision. It is worth noting that the number of pupils entitled to free transport provision has remained constant. These figures are based on invoiced costs and exclude management and administrative charges.

Table 3 – Education Home to School Transport Cost of Service.



8.4 Whilst the cost of transport provision has steadily increased there has been an approximate 42% reduction in income (£66,000 p.a.) since 2000/0. This reduction in income is as a result of other Berkshire Unitary Authorities not sharing our services to transport their pupils. The original levels of inter Authority shared transport came from the old Berkshire County Council LEA but nevertheless has had an obvious financial impact.

9. Statistics and Benchmarked Comparison Data.

9.1 To aid Members with their deliberations the Task Group commissioned a brief report outlining comparative statistical data both operational and financial that compared West Berkshire Council's performance with other Audit Commission recommended Council groupings.

9.2 During the financial year 2000/2001 a Strategic Review of all the Council's transport activities was commissioned and the collated data was subsequently included in the Best Value Inspection carried out by the Audit Commission in late 2001. The Best Value Inspectors, whilst recognising there were no national Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) for Home to School Transport services, were critical of the Council at that time that no quantitative comparisons had historically been undertaken. The Task Group was pleased to hear that this problem was addressed following the formation of the centralised Transport Services Team. The inspectors also noted that although a unitary authority, which are mostly urban, West Berkshire Council is rural in nature. Because of this the Council's school transport costs were likely to be higher than most unitary Councils.

9.3 The information provided comes from the New Unitary Authorities Benchmarking (NUB) Group. Comparative information was provided by Bath & N E Somerset, Hereford, Isle of Wight and North Lincolnshire Council.

	WBC	BANES	HRFRD	IoW	NLINCS
Total number of pupils	24,403	24,742	24121	19,595	25,000
Total Pupils Eligible for Transport	2051	2385	5481	2867	3521
Total receiving Mainstream	1602	2139	5053	2684	3211
Total receiving Special Needs	449	246	428	183	310
Percentage receiving mainstream	6.56%	8.65%	20.95%	13.69%	12.84%
Percentage receiving SEN	1.84%	0.99%	1.77%	0.94%	1.21%

9.4 The percentage of mainstream pupils eligible for transport may be used as a measure of the rural nature of the several districts, West Berkshire being the least rural of the group as it contains 2 major centres of population.

9.5 The percentage of pupils receiving special needs transport bears little correlation with the rural nature of the area. As SEN transport has a significantly higher unit cost than for mainstream transport, the very high proportion of pupils within West Berkshire eligible must be a matter for concern.

9.6 As of January 2004 SEN transport was being provided to pupils attending 55 schools/establishments outside the West Berkshire District. Since 2000/01 the cost of providing transport in this area had increased from less than 10% to over 30% of all special needs transport expenditure.

10. Special Educational Needs Transport

- 10.1 Special education needs transport is an area of increasing concern for many local education authorities. Demands and expectations are rising and authorities are seeking to ensure cost effective delivery of the service.
- 10.2 In West Berkshire there is no automatic entitlement to free transport to school on the grounds that a pupil has a Statement of Special Educational Needs. Normally the Council provides free home to school transport for a child if the distance between home and school is two miles or more if aged under 8 or three miles or more if aged 8 and over and they attend either:
- the catchment area school, or
 - a school that is closer, by a straight line, to their home address,
 - or the school has been designated on a statement for special education needs.
- 10.3 Each request for transport, for a child with special educational needs, is considered on an individual basis. There are specific criteria that need to be met before transport is provided and these are listed in West Berkshire Council's SEN Transport Policy. If transport is provided then schools are required to review whether it is still necessary at each Annual Review. Where it is agreed that transport is necessary, it will only be provided to the nearest school suitable for the child's special educational needs.
- 10.4 Some parents whose children are entitled to transport elect to transport their child to school themselves rather than making use of LEA transport provision.
- 10.5 If the child would have qualified for transport in accordance with the SEN policy, the parent is entitled to claim a mileage allowance for the number of journeys usually allowed. The Council currently pays a basic rate of 20 pence per mile. As this is a more cost-effective form of transport for the LEA the Task Group were keen to explore this further with an eye on ways of encouraging the uptake of this arrangement.
- 10.6 Statemented pupils who qualify for transport may need to be supervised on the transport by an escort. Escort provision is costly and is only agreed in very specific circumstances.
- 10.7 As previously mentioned the costs of SEN transport is proportionately high to the number of pupils transported. Over the last 6 years SEN transport has accounted for about 56% of the total school transport budget. As of January 2004 30% of the SEN transport budget was being used to provide transport to pupils attending education establishments outside the LEA district.

11. Social Care Transport

- 11.1 Social care transport is organised around each day care centre. Members were interested in how other authorities had used social services transport to ease the burden on home to school transport.
- 11.2 The Task Group were informed that the Council already had a policy of sharing vehicles and services with Community Care Day Centres and home to school transport. Although the Council's policy on sharing vehicles is constantly reviewed, it was not an undertaking that could be widely practised.

- 11.3 The main difficulties arise because Social Care vehicles do not have dedicated drivers. The day care staff who drive the vehicles also undertake a caring role at the centres and thus it would require the employment of additional drivers if the vehicles were to be used for school transport.
- 11.4 The provision of drivers was not the only problem with sharing vehicles. The group heard how there were also difficulties with timings as vehicles for school journeys would also coincide with day car journeys.
- 11.5 The group were provided with examples of how the sharing of vehicles had been used successfully. The far higher level of utilisation of the Community Care fleet had resulted in a falling cost of taxi provision for school journeys, the falling use of taxis had resulted in a £120,000 p.a. saving over the last 3 years. The Task Group would recommend that the Council's ability to share vehicles be kept under review.

12. Examples of Best Practice

- 12.1 As part of their deliberations the Task Group also received examples of best practice from other authorities, details of some of the policies introduced are:

North Somerset

Within North Somerset, there were no schools that arranged their transport on behalf of the LEA. However, they did operate a minibus scheme where the Council supplied and maintained vehicles and contracts with some schools, through service level agreements, to undertake the home-to-school transport runs for rural areas. The scheme mainly applied to primary schools. The benefit was that they obtained a fully maintained vehicle, which they could also use for curricular and extra curricular uses as the vehicle stays with them throughout the year, in addition to generating a modest annual income. Most primary schools wouldn't be able to afford the vehicle. Schools have also reported better behaviour as the line of reporting to the Head is direct. (It is usually a member of staff, trained by the Authority, who does the driving). The LEA had seen reduced costs and increased quality, as well as a way of positively encouraging extended school type activities and increased community facilities in rural areas. In these cases, although the schools did not arrange the transport, they operated it and provided the driver.

In order to improve the quality of, and hopefully contain the rising cost of, home-to-school transport, North Somerset had recently revised their contract documentation, and altered the scoring matrix used to award contracts. The criteria/scoring matrix had been revised to allow for equal weight to be given to price and quality of contractor (in the past it has been largely price based). A number of additional measures had also been introduced to mitigate cost increases arising from a more quality-based approach, including moving from 2 year to 7 year contract periods, to allow contractors to write off capital depreciation of vehicles over a longer time period. They have also introduced the idea of discounts into the tender process, so that contractors could highlight, in their tender submission, whether they would give a discount if they were awarded more than one route. They have recently put a number of routes out to tender, using the revised documentation, and have found that a large number of contractors were willing to give discounts for multiple routes.

Hampshire

Hampshire rented minibuses on a lease at a discounted rate. The LEA then provided these vehicles for schools that arranged transport locally. The LEA provided schools with an allowance which they

believed met the cost of a driver for a year (normally around £3500), and the schools picked up any extra costs, this was mainly fuel as the lesser should pay for any repairs. The LEA then calculated the cost of a standard contract, and scheme costs, and split the savings with the school. This is mainly a scheme for special schools.

Cambridgeshire

Within Cambridgeshire the main measure that had been taken to improve the quality of transport had been the introduction of seatbelts on contract buses carrying more than 16 pupils who were of primary school age. This change was to be phased in over the next three years. The LEA provided escorts on primary age transport and was starting a pilot scheme of CCTV on buses, with a code of conduct planned. In addition they were reducing the qualifying distance for assisted post-16 transport from 5 miles to 3 miles.

Hillingdon

The LEA introduced a bus service for pupils in the Ruislip / Ickenham area in 1999 because of a severe shortage of school places in the Ruislip area. Buses were run to John Penrose School in Harefield, a small village in the north-west of Hillingdon, around 3 miles from the main suburban areas. Previously, John Penrose had had difficulties in recruiting students and they had operated their own bus as a mechanism for overcoming one of the major factors preventing pupils from enrolling at the school. The LEA now provided a daily bus service which was free to users. The service is operated by a private contractor and the costs were paid directly by the LEA.

Windsor and Maidenhead

Windsor and Maidenhead launched its yellow bus scheme in 2002. There were two main reasons for this; to help reduce traffic congestion and secondly a system was required to deal with a complex issue of overlapping school catchment areas. The scheme used American style yellow buses that were designed specifically for school transport. Officers estimated that a £1 fare per pupil per day recouped about 25% of the operating costs.

13. Green Paper

- 13.1 When establishing the Task Group Members were aware that the Government was looking to introduce new legislation in relation to school transport. The DFES document 'School Travel Schemes – Draft Bill and Prospectus' laid out the Draft School Transport Bill and the proposals to introduce pathfinder schemes. The aim was to allow authorities to use the new legislation to support arrangements that offered a range of good quality, cost effective alternatives to the family car.
- 13.2 The Task Group gave serious consideration to requesting that the authority applied for pathfinding status. It was decided that the resource cost of applying for this status outweighed the benefit of achieving such status. The Task Group did decide that they may reform in the future to discuss the implications of the new legislation once the Governments position became more clear.

14. Congestion

- 14.1 As previously mentioned the number of children travelling to school by car has increased dramatically over the years. A recent study by the AA highlighted that this increase was greater than growth of car ownership, this suggested that there has been an increased tendency for car owning families to take

their children to school by car. There were many social-economic reasons why there has been a shift that are outside the remit of this Task Group.

- 14.2 An adverse effect of the increase in car usage was congestion. The 'school run' was thought to cost industry millions of lost work hours per year as well as contributing to an increase in pollution. The Task Group were interested in exploring the potential of partnership working with local businesses in working together to provide alternative options to home to school transport than the car. If the group reformed this would be an area that they would explore.

15. Recommendations

- 15.1 The following recommendations are interim measures that the Task Group would wish to see implemented pending the introduction of the School Transport Bill. Once the implications of the Bill has become clear the Task group may reconvene to complete its review.
- 15.2 To allow them to continue with their work the Task Group felt it was important to have a clear picture of how many and the type of vehicles that were available to the authority. Members were aware that this type of audit may be time consuming and they wished to seek the Select Committee and Executive approval to instruct officers.
- 15.3 Members wish to evaluate the feasibility of having multi purpose vehicles used for a number of purposes. This might require the Council to hire a number of part time drivers from the possible savings of reduced taxi use.

Recommendation 1 - That the Executive request that Council's officers undertake an audit of the number and condition of vehicles owned by the Council and its partners. This audit to also include the suitability of these vehicles for home to school transport and the current utilisation of the vehicles.

- 15.4 The Task Group acknowledged the importance of School Travel Plans in reducing congestion and improving the health and safety of pupils. The Council currently has no powers to require that school travel plans are produced, however the Task Group felt that the authority should encourage schools to produce them.
- 15.5 The Task Group were aware that Ofsted were considering including school travel plans in inspections and it was felt that the Council should request that this is undertaken.

Recommendation 2 – That the Council encourages schools to produce and maintain School Travel Plans and that a guide is produced to aid schools in the production of these plans. It is also recommended that the Council contact Ofsted requesting that School Travel Plans form part of inspections.

- 15.6 The Task Group felt that it would be beneficial for Town and Parish Councils to identify the travel requirements of their community. Members felt that identifying need would help the Council and its partners direct resources more efficiently.

Recommendation 3 – That the Council encourages Town and Parish Councils to include community and school transport requirements in their Town and Parish Plans.

15.7 The Task Group was aware that there is still a substantial amount of work for the group to undertake prior to concluding their review. As some of this work may require additional work for officers the task group wish to request that the Executive support the following recommendation:

Recommendation 4 – That the Executive supports the Task Groups investigations into the following areas:

- 1) Investigate the feasibility of requesting schools to collaborate in setting their school day times to enable better utilisation of home to school transport vehicles.**
- 2) Investigate the feasibility of local communities entering a contract with the Local Education Authority to provide home to school transport for their community.**
- 3) Investigate better utilisation of West Berkshire vehicles in relation to co-operation between Social Services and home to school transport.**
- 4) Investigate the feasibility of co-ordinating school travel plans and school admission arrangements with home to school transport provision.**