

Overview of Responses and Recommendations

Budget Proposals 16/17: Home to School Transport – Available Routes		Caroline Corcoran – Service Manager (Education)	19 January 2016 Version 2 (Exec)
Proposal:	To reduce the provision of free discretionary transport on a number of routes, which have been assessed as having an available walking route (in accordance with the Road Safety GB nationally-recognised guidelines)		
Total budget 15/16:	(mainstream school transport): £1.6 M	Recommended officer saving 16/17:	Option 1 & 2: £246,400 (15%) Option 3: £234,400 - £231,400
Initial proposed saving 16/17:	£246,400 (15%)	Final recommendation to Executive 16/17:	To proceed with this savings proposal, without any modifications. Option 1.
Nos. of responses:	<p>542 responses, including responses from 7 school/Governing Bodies, 5 Parish Councils, the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust, Willink School community group (Save Our Buses) and Councillors Pask, Budgeman, Jackson-Doerge, Morrin and Locke. The responses also included the following on-line petitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willink school community group - Save Our Buses – 544 signatures • Aldermaston route – petition led by Councillor Macro – 70 signatures <p>In relation to the Mortimer to Willink route, views were also sought from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thames Valley Police local neighbourhood Inspector for Burghfield and Mortimer • Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, which manages Wokefield Common by agreement with the landowner 		
Key issues raised:	<p>Concerns that the route assessments are flawed, and that the routes should not be designated as “available”, which would result in the continuation of free transport under the statutory guidance (where there is not an available route). Respondents strongly objected to the assessment that the route was an “available route” under the national guidelines and questioned the validity of the assessment which determines whether free transport must be provided. (Appendix A & C)</p> <p>Concerns about the impact of the removal of bus provision on parents (including their work commitments), children and the school. Respondents expressed a strong desire for a school bus service to continue, and outlined the impact of the removal of a bus services on family arrangements, children and on arrival at school. (Appendix D)</p> <p>Respondents also described their views about the Council’s duty of care to children.</p> <p>Respondents for the Mortimer to Willink route stated that the route had been reviewed in 2006 and that they had a legitimate expectation that free transport would always be provided, unless material changes were made to the route. (Appendix E)</p> <p>Suggestions that free bus provision should continue or families could pay a small subsidised fee.</p>		
Equality issues:	Respondents from the Mortimer to Willink route alleged that the proposal was indirect discrimination against women, and this is assessed in the accompanying Equalities Impact Assessment (Appendix B).		

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Suggestions for reducing the impact on service users:	Suggestion	Council response
	<p>Overturn the route assessments and continue to provide free transport on school buses</p>	<p>Appendix A provides further information on how the assessments were reached, including considering relevant case law. The factors which have been raised within the consultation responses have been considered by Highways (road) and the Education Service (footpath). The test of our assessment against the Standard is whether a child could walk the route “in reasonable safety” accompanied by an adult. Assessments do not determine whether a route is “safe” or “dangerous”. All routes present some level of risk.</p> <p>By child, we mean a pupil or student of the relevant age group for the specific school. Therefore, for the Mortimer to Willink route for example, we considered a secondary age student, accompanied by an adult.</p> <p>We recognise that communities wish the Council to use a higher standard when assessing routes, but this is not what we are required to do. We are satisfied that the standards which apply to Local Authorities in terms of the assessment of entitlement to free transport have been correctly applied.</p>
	<p>Continue to offer transport on school buses, but charge a small fee</p>	<p>The Summary Report suggests mitigation in the form of:</p> <p>Where free entitlement to a seat has ceased, we could offer a seat on a Fare Payer basis. An annual decision about capacity would be carefully considered to maximise capacity in line with the level of demand for Fare Payer places up to but not exceeding a cost neutral position. We could make substantial and planned provision where this could be off-set by additional income or adjusting bus sizes, but we could not guarantee a Fare Payer place for every child that may want one.</p> <p>Fare Payer places would be charged at the new Standard Rate of £684 (£3.60 per day). This is not a subsidised rate.</p> <p>Alternatively, the Council could support the school or community to set up their own bus service. In other schools where there are large numbers of non-entitled pupils, arrangements for a replacement service have been put in place between either the parents or the school/community and the relevant operator. The operators are also more experienced in making commercial decisions on passenger choices and how to price commercial tickets to reflect this. This may address concerns about the cost of a seat on the bus.</p>

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	Improve the walking route	<p>We will explore what is required to improve the footpath to the standards that residents request (which is above the standard required for a route to be classified as available). However, any works in the future would be subject to the availability of capital or other sources of funding.</p> <p>It is noted that the route across the Common would still be classified a rural path and appropriate footwear would be required.</p>
	Storage for outdoor clothes and footwear	<p>The Summary Report suggests mitigation in the form of school lockers:</p> <p>We could work in partnership with the affected schools and offer to provide lockers for students affected by this proposal who walk to school, so that they can store their outdoor clothing and equipment. This could only be provided if the school agreed to the provision, and were able to offer the space/location for the lockers. We would not fund lockers for the whole school population, just the numbers affected by the proposal. The school may decide to offer lockers to all students and in this scenario, a proportionate contribution could be made.</p>
	Cut back the vegetation where there are grass verges or step-offs which are needed for walkers.	<p>Appendix A: Where a grass verge / step-off or a footpath is part of the designated available route to school, the Education Service will fund any additional maintenance over and above the standard level of maintenance provided by Countryside Services. This means that the relevant verge or footpath will be maintained a minimum of 3 times per year to an acceptable standard (as defined in the guidelines).</p>
Alternative options for applying the saving in this area:	Suggestion	Council response
	None	
Suggestions for how others may help contribute:	One respondent offered to provide high visibility vests for students walking the Willink to Mortimer route.	

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Officer conclusion as a result of the responses:	<p>The exercise highlighted a wide range of factors which respondents wanted us to consider. These are summarised in the Mind Map (Appendix D) and as a result, we have undertaken further research, and developed the mitigation measures proposed within the Summary Report.</p> <p>We believe the most likely outcome of the removal of free entitlement would be a combination of the following choices for getting from home to school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some families would pay for a seat on a Council-run or school/community-led Bus (if this was available)• Some families would decide to drive their children to school (and this may include car sharing arrangements with other parents)• Some families would walk together, and it is likely that those walking would be in friendship clusters or location-based clusters• Some families will decide to allow their children to walk in a group with their friends <p>The retention of a bus service would address the many concerns expressed by parents about the impact on their family lives, and especially where working parents have outlined their concerns about the impact on their ability to work.</p>
Officer recommendation as a result of responses:	<p>It is recommended that:</p> <p>The routes are confirmed as “available” routes, in terms of the assessment for entitlement to transport.</p> <p>The mitigation measures within the Summary Report are considered. The mitigation proposal to offer a Fare Payer place (with caveats regarding cost-neutral provision i.e. income offsetting increased bus capacity) and/or supporting a school/community-led bus solution would have the greatest positive impact on families.</p> <p>Mitigation Option 1: This Option would deliver the proposed level of savings. The Council budget would reduce to fund only the statutory provision, and any additional bus capacity/ seats would be cost-neutral (extra seats on bus off-set by Fare Payer income).</p> <p>Mitigation Option 2: This Option would deliver the proposed level of savings. The Council would support the setting up of a school/community-led solution.</p> <p>Mitigation Options 3: This Option would reduce the level of savings in 2016-17 <u>only</u> by £12,000-£15,000.</p>

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