

Budget Proposals 2016-17: Learning Independence for Travel (LIFT)

Summary of Feedback Received and Key Findings

Why we consulted?

Over the last four years we have had to make savings of £23m because we've received less money from central government. We have done this by becoming more efficient at what we do, by reducing some of our administrative functions and increasing our income. Throughout this period we have done our best to protect front line services.

We now have to find another £20m over the next four years, with almost £11m to be found in 2016/17. Much of this will come from further efficiencies within the council, but £4.6m will have to come from services that will impact the public.

In order to inform the budget setting process for 2016/17 we published a list of those proposals which would likely have a direct impact on service users, and sought the views from those affected and interested:

- to understand the likely impact
- to identify any measures to reduce their impact
- to explore any possible alternatives

Approach

All the proposals were published on the council's website on 3 November 2015 with feedback requested by 14 December 2015. Respondents were directed to a [central index page](#), with a video message from the Chief Executive outlining the background to the exercise.

Information relating to this proposal was linked directly from this index page. This contained more detailed information on what was specifically proposed, information on what we thought the impact might be, as well as what else we had considered in developing and arriving at this proposal. Feedback was then invited through an online form and through a dedicated email address. Current and previous service users were also contacted directly and sent the link to the consultation and a hard copy of the consultation documents.

Each individual budget proposal was placed on our [Consultation Portal](#) which automatically notified those registered that an exercise had been launched. Members of the West Berkshire community panel (around 800 people) and local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations were also emailed directly, notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions.

Heads of Service made direct contact with those organisations affected by any of the budget proposals prior to them being made publically available.

A press release was issued on the same date, as well as publicised through Facebook and Twitter.

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Background

The council provides an independent travel training service for children with special educational needs (SEN), known as the LIFT Programme. We commission this service through the National Star College, an independent further education (FE) college in Gloucestershire. The project has three staff, a Coordinator and two travel mentors, who are based at Richmond House in Newbury.

Children and young people who qualify for travel assistance through our SEN Transport Policy are eligible for support to enable them to become more independent travellers. Not all children with SEN have the capacity to learn to travel independently; however there are children who are transported to school by taxi or minibus, who could potentially walk to school or use a bus or train with the right support.

Travel training typically takes approximately one term, at the end of which the travel mentor will write a report on whether the child is safe to travel to school independently; if so the child will then be allocated with a bus or train pass. The programme works with secondary pupils and FE college students only and has a success rate of approximately 80%. Where children don't become independent travellers, it is usually because the route is too difficult given the rural nature of West Berkshire.

The budget for this service is £114,000 per annum. The proposal is to remove this budget and seek approval from the Schools Forum for the service to be funded through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) from April 2016. The DSG is grant funding allocated by the government to councils to fund schools and associated services. This funding sits outside of the council's budget.

Summary of Key Points

79 responses were received; 17 from organisations and 62 from individuals.

The organisations which responded were:

- LIFT (five responses)
- Tilehurst Parish Council
- Brookfields School (three responses)
- Reading College
- Engaging Potential
- Activate Learning
- WBC Transport Team
- Compton Parish Council
- Park House School
- John O'Gaunt School
- St. Bartholomew's School

Of the 62 individual responses, only seven identified themselves as parents. Of the remaining 55 responses, 32 were clearly from young people who had accessed the service and most of the other 23 unidentified responses appeared to be from parents. A small number appeared to be from school staff.

The main thrust of the comments was that this is a valuable service which enables children with SEN and Disabilities (SEND) to learn to travel to school independently, therefore reducing the Council's costs. The knock on effect of children learning travel skills is that they are more confident and have more opportunities to socialise and therefore their emotional wellbeing improves. In the longer term, young people with SEND are more likely to access Further Education, employment and a social life if they can travel independently, thereby giving them more fulfilling lives and reducing pressure on the benefits system, Adult Social

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Care, mental health and other services. Pressure on parents in their caring role is also reduced if young people with SEND are able to live more independent lives.

1. Are you, or anyone you care for, a user of this service?

57 respondents identified themselves as service users.

2. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how this proposal might impact people?

The range of ways in which respondents felt people would be impacted can be summarised as follows:

- Children with SEN & Disabilities (SEND) who have the potential to travel to school independently, with travel training, will remain dependent on transport provided by the Council. This will increase the Council's transport costs.
- Children will miss the chance to be more included with their peers which travelling on public transport provides and so their social development will be impeded and they will be more isolated.
- Children will not have independent travel skills to use outside of school hours and at weekends, which will also reduce their social opportunities and increase their isolation.
- Children will be more dependent on their parents if they do not learn to travel independently, which increases pressure on parents in their caring role and reduces opportunities for them to have a break from caring and spend time with siblings.
- Children will miss out on the increased confidence and self esteem which comes through learning to travel independently and which can in turn improve academic performance.
- Children will miss out on the chance to gain an Entry Level or Level 1 qualification in independent travel.
- Children will miss out on the life skills which are built through travel training such as handling money and learning about personal safety.
- When young people with SEND leave school they may not be able to access FE College if they cannot travel independently as they may not be entitled to any assistance with transport from the Council. This will significantly impact on their life chances if they require further education in order to become ready for employment.
- Young people with SEND who cannot travel independently are unlikely to be able to access employment even if they have the potential to be employed.
- Young people are therefore more likely to become NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training).
- Young people who are NEET become a burden on the benefits system and are more likely to enter the criminal justice system.
- Young people with SEND who are not in College or employment and cannot access their local community will be very socially isolated. They will also place burdens on other services such as Adult Social Care and mental health services, thus increasing long term costs to statutory services.
- Young adults with SEND who are not able to become independent adults will remain dependent on their parents who in turn will be less able to go back to work and contribute to the economy.
- Increased numbers of taxis will impact on the environment.

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- A number of respondents described the proposal as short sighted and a false economy because of the potential for increased transport costs and greater long term costs for individuals who cannot travel independently.

3. Do you feel that this proposal will affect particular individuals more than others, and if so, how do you think we might help with this?

Respondents identified the following groups as being particularly affected:

- Children with SEND who have the potential to travel independently and ultimately lead a more independent life, but can only do so with intensive travel training. This group tends to include children with moderate learning difficulties, mental health issues, anxiety, autism and some with physical / sensory difficulties
- Carers of those children as they are more likely to remain dependent on their parents in to adulthood, potentially affecting carers' employability and physical and mental health
- Children who live in more rural communities
- Children from less affluent families who are unable to transport them by car
- Children whose parents have additional needs of their own and are therefore unable to transport their children

4. Do you have any suggestions as to how this service might be delivered in a different way? If so, please provide details.

Suggestions for delivering the service in other ways included:

- Negotiate with the provider to deliver a slimmed down, more efficient service rather than losing the service altogether (e.g. by reducing overheads / admin costs)
- Bring the service in house, at a lower cost. Use staff to assess every child who is eligible for SEND transport and ensure transport is provided in the most cost effective way possible, as well as offering some independent travel training. Work with other local authorities to reduce costs
- Outsource the service to the voluntary sector, at lower cost
- Ask schools to provide the service, for example the two West Berkshire special schools
- Seek sponsorship from business, such as a bus company.
- Group children together for travel training to reduce costs.
- Expect parents to travel train their own children
- Provide some core funding for the service and raise income to meet the full costs by charging parents or schools for the service
- Parents or young people could use their Personal Budgets to buy in to the service
- Make use of volunteers
- Fund the service from the Dedicated Schools Grant
- Reverse Councillors' pay increase and reduce other expenses such as training to fund the service.

5. Is there any way that you, or your organisation, can contribute in helping to alleviate the impact of this proposal? If so, please provide details of how you can help.

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- LIFT offered to negotiate with the Council to provide a scaled down service at a lower cost.
- The WBC Transport Team offered to run the service in house at a lower cost
- One parent offered to talk to other parents to encourage them to take up independent travel training (on the basis that greater take up would generate more savings and could potentially make the service self funding).

6. Any further comments?

The service is high quality with a high success rate. Other Local Authorities are now emulating it. The Council should be proud of this service and should be maintaining and developing it rather than cutting it.

Conclusion

This service is highly valued by those who have used it, who have clearly set out the benefits in their responses. There are some potentially valid arguments about higher costs being incurred if the service is lost entirely, although this is difficult to quantify.

Both the current service provider and the Council's Transport Team have stated that they could maintain an independent travel training service, albeit at a lower level, for a reduced cost.

Consideration should therefore be given to retaining some budget for a remodelled service with the aim of reducing school transport costs.

Please note: *In order to allow everyone who wished the opportunity to contribute, feedback was not sampled. Therefore this wasn't a quantitative, statistically valid exercise. It was neither the premise, purpose, nor within the capability of the exercise, to determine the overall community's level of support, or views on the proposals, with any degree of confidence.*

The feedback captured therefore should be seen in the context of 'those who responded', rather than reflective of the wider community.

All the responses have been provided verbatim as an appendix to this report. Whilst this summary seeks to distil the key, substantive points made, it should also be read in conjunction with the more detailed verbatim comments to ensure a full, rounded perspective of the views and comments are considered.

Jane Seymour
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