

Children and Families Committee

Date of Meeting:	23 May 2022
Report Title:	Review of travel support for children and young people
Report of:	Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children's Services
Report Reference No:	CF/07/22-23
Ward(s) Affected:	All wards

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. This report provides the Children and Families Committee with increased oversight of the independent review that is being carried out to consider travel support for children and young people.
- 1.2. The requirement for the review was set out in the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). This recognised the emerging budget pressures as a result of the significant increase in pupil numbers, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The 2022/23 school transport budget was temporarily increased whilst a review is carried out to understand the ongoing demand-led pressures and ensure appropriate strategies are in place to achieve a financially sustainable position.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The MTFS approved by full Council in February 2022 recognised the emerging budget pressure on home to school transport. Pupil numbers, particularly those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), have significantly increased over recent years. In response £1.2m was added to the 2022/23 transport budget to help manage demand, with an additional amount of up to £1m of Covid-19 funding to be drawn down to support the service. Both allocations were one-off amounts. The MTFS stated that during 2022/23 there would be a review of travel support for children and young people to understand the ongoing demand-led pressures

and ensure appropriate strategies are in place to achieve a financially sustainable position.

- 2.2. The company, Edge Public Solutions ('Edge'), has been appointed to carry out the review. Edge will explore the current arrangements and costs of school and other transport and identify recommendations and a detailed action plan to reduce the budget pressures and improve the effectiveness and customer experience in relation to sustainable travel support for children and young people.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. The Children and Families Committee is recommended to note the actions taken to date, the timeline, scope and governance arrangements to carry out the review of travel support for children and young people, in line with the requirements of the MTFs.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1. The costs of travel support for children and young people have increased significantly over recent years and are continuing to put pressure on the council's budget. The MTFs approved by full Council in February included a temporary uplift in the travel support budget to address the financial pressures in 2022-23 whilst an independent review is carried out.

5. Other Options Considered

- 5.1. The council could do nothing. This would mean that the council would not meet the requirements of the MTFs. If the current arrangements and pressures are not reviewed, this could potentially subject the council to significant and long-term budget pressures and would not secure the best possible customer experience in this area.
- 5.2. The review could be carried out internally by officers from within the council. Whilst this may make savings on the cost of the review, it would prolong the timescale and effectiveness of the review as we don't currently have the capacity and range of expertise compared to an independent provider. An action plan to understand and to address the budget pressures is needed as soon as possible as the current budget pressures are being temporarily managed.

6. Background

- 6.1. The local authority is required by both the Education Act 1996 and the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to make travel arrangements for certain eligible pupils to attend school. This includes the duty to promote sustainable modes of travel for children and young people of compulsory school age. When a child is eligible for travel support, the local authority will provide that support using the most cost-effective option available.

- 6.2. Over recent years the council's transport arrangements were commissioned by Transport Service Solutions (TSS), an arm's-length company of Cheshire East Council. This included the procurement of statutory home to school transport for eligible children and young people. TSS also procured local supported bus services, FlexiLink and managed bus stops, bus stations and school crossing patrols. TSS also procured travel arrangements for children and families involved in statutory services such as court proceedings or for our cared for population, to facilitate contact.
- 6.3. In May 2021, Cheshire East Cabinet approved a new model, which has resulted in the strategic, planning, commissioning and procurement of services being delivered directly by the council and transfers the existing functions from TSS to be split between the council's Children and Families Directorate, Place Directorate and ANSA (Cheshire East's arm's length company) from 1 April 2022.
- 6.4. Over recent years there has been an increased demand for school transport, in particular in relation to children with SEND. The costs of providing transport have also increased significantly due to a reduction in the supply of transport providers and an increase in their running costs. The council has approved a one-year increased budget for 2022-23, whilst a full review is carried out.
- 6.5. The company to carry out the independent review was selected via the council's contract with Bloom, who act as an independent broker for the procurement of specialist professional services working with accredited suppliers. The system covers the end to end process of appointment and is a vendor neutral solution.
- 6.6. Edge Public Solutions has been appointed to carry out the review for the following reasons:
- The company is able to complete the work within the timescales needed
 - They have specific experience in relation to school transport and have worked across all areas of local government to transform services in this area.
 - They have knowledge of Cheshire East and TSS as they completed a review of our arm's length companies in 2017
 - Edge has worked successfully with neighbouring local authorities
 - Although they have significant experience of working across the country, the company is based within Cheshire East.
- 6.7. The review will look in detail at the following areas:
- Statutory requirements of the local authority

- Management and accountability around school transport
- Supply of, and demand for, travel support for children and young people in Cheshire East
- Budget and data management and information
- Efficient use of resources, including where transport may be the most cost-effective solution
- Cultural change required.

Scope of the review

6.8. The following areas are included in the scope of the review:

6.8.1. Understand the current position

- a. Work TOGETHER with key stakeholders in Cheshire East to understand the current position and expectations in relation to travel support for children and young people aged 0-25.
- b. Provide a position statement on Cheshire East's current and forecasted financial position in relation to school transport and other travel costs, including those in relation to social care.
- c. Review Cheshire East's current policies, obligations and functions, and the extent to which these are statutory, contractual or discretionary.
- d. Review the strategy for transport.
- e. Review the organisation in relation to transport and associated governance and accountability for the service.
- f. Review the current funding streams, including income generation, and the extent to which they cover the expected ongoing demand for school transport and travel costs.
- g. Determine key points where transport decisions are made and functions are delivered and whether these are appropriate and decisions and assessments meet with policy and strategy for the service.
- h. Examine the suitability of current processes and provision for children with SEND.
- i. Consider the extent to which existing budget and data reports provide accurate and timely management information.

6.8.2. Identify plans for change

- a. Work TOGETHER with key stakeholders in Cheshire East, including parents/carers, to identify options for change that minimise disruption to families and reduce the need for regular changes to travel arrangements.
- b. Clarify the current roles and responsibilities for all those involved in school transport and travel support, including those working face to face with children with SEND.
- c. Identify best practice and benchmark Cheshire East's practice and performance against other similar local authority areas.

- d. Identify key points in the identification of need, commissioning and ongoing delivery of travel support where costs are incurred, and increased income/savings could be realised.
- e. Determine approaches to improve the intelligence around the future demand for travel support earlier, in particular for children with SEND, and how these can be aligned with financial forecasts.
- f. Identify improvements that can be made to existing systems and processes to ensure that accurate and relevant financial reconciliation, approvals for variations and forecasts around supply, demand and costs for travel support are provided and readily available for management oversight.
- g. Consider the effectiveness of the current delivery, routing and contracting of travel support.
- h. Provide a range of innovative solutions to strengthen Cheshire East's financial position in relation to travel support, including the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the council for each of these.
- i. Identify functions, processes and services that could be simplified, including digital options.
- j. Evidence the rationale, costs, timescales for each option and the extent to which these are supported and informed by our stakeholders and in line with our customer experience charter.
- k. Provide a proposed savings plan for 2022-23 and beyond, including 'quick wins'.

6.8.3. Planning for change

- a. Make recommendations in relation to the key areas and findings of the review.
- b. Produce a detailed change plan to implement the agreed recommendations and cultural change needed, including governance, action leads, timescale and impact expected.
- c. Establish a plan that ensures continued engagement and communication with key stakeholders.
- d. Establish arrangements to ensure that progress against the change plan is regularly monitored and evaluated against impact measures.

Timeline for the review

6.9. The proposed timeline for the review is set out below.

Key Activity	Timeline
Draft review specification and associated documents	March 2022
Commission review via Bloom Consultancy	March 2022
Review start date	April 2022
Briefing report to Children and Families Committee	May 2022
Review end date	July 2022
Completion date for review report, including costed recommendations and change plan	July 2022

Seek approval of initial options for implementation by Children and Families Committee	September 2022
Work begins on implementing any agreed recommendations, including consultation on any policy changes and completions of equality impact assessments (EIAs)	From September 2022 onwards

Governance arrangements

- 6.10. The senior responsible officer for this review is the Director of Education and Skills. Project support will be provided by the Children’s Development and Partnerships Service.
- 6.11. Strategic oversight for the review will be through the Children and Families Transformation Board, chaired by the Executive Director of Children’s Services. Support to the review will be provided by a cross-directorate steering group.
- 6.12. A full report will be presented to the Children and Families Committee in September to approve the proposed options and recommendations.

7. Consultation and Engagement

- 7.1. TOGETHER is our shared definition of coproduction in Cheshire East and the review will be carried out together with our key stakeholders, including parent/carers, young people, our staff and providers. Other stakeholders including trade unions, transport operators, schools and settings etc will also be consulted as part of the review.
- 7.2. Depending on the outcome of the review, further consultation may be required with regard to any proposed changes to school travel arrangements with all interested parties. These will be carried out in line with national guidance and Cheshire East’s procedures.

8. Implications

8.1. Legal

- 8.1.1. The local authority is required by both the Education Act 1996 and the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to make suitable travel arrangements for eligible pupils to attend school. This includes the duty to promote sustainable modes of travel for children and young people of compulsory school age. When a child is eligible for travel support, the local authority will provide that support using the most cost-effective option available. The government has also issued statutory guidance called Home-to-school travel and transport guidance 2014.
- 8.1.2. This means that a local authority is under a duty to have regard to it when carrying out their duties in relation to home to school travel and transport and sustainable travel.

8.1.3. Legal services will be consulted within the review to ensure that statutory and local guidance is considered.

8.2. **Finance**

8.2.1. The significant pressures on the school transport budget is mainly attributable to demand pressures due to a significant increase in children with special educational needs and operators inflating contract prices to include costs of cleaning/Covid measures.

8.2.2. In addition, we are experiencing an unusually high level of contract surrenders and contract changes and have had some recent cases where operators have asked for a much higher price to deliver the same contract, or they have had very few bidders particularly for children with complex needs.

8.2.3. As the capacity of driver and vehicle availability within the local service has currently been reached, we are increasingly having to seek quotes from providers outside of the area at short notice, which increases costs further. These contracts are currently being commissioned on a short-term basis to enable a more competitive re-tender towards the end of the year. The current increase in fuel prices is exacerbating the problem.

8.2.4. The significant increase of SEND children requiring transport to school is set to continue in 2022-23 and forecasts suggest that this figure could be around 156 additional SEND pupils requiring transport over this school year, and in each subsequent year of the MTFs at an average cost of between £8,000 and £11,000 per SEND pupil. A temporary increase in the travel support budget was agreed in 2022-23 whilst the independent review takes place to explore savings options.

8.3. **Policy**

8.3.1. There are currently a number of policies in relation to travel support and school transport for children and young people. Should the review recommend any changes to these policies, we will ensure that these are done in line with any relevant consultation and approval processes.

8.4. **Equality**

8.4.1. We will ensure that any changes to policies, services and practice does not discriminate against anyone and that, where possible, we promote equality of opportunity. Equality impact assessments will be completed to support any recommendations that committee supports following this review as part of the process prior to any implementation.

8.5. **Human Resources**

8.5.1. The review is being carried out by an independent provider to ensure that it does not impact of the capacity of existing services to deliver statutory provision.

8.6. Risk Management

- 8.6.1. There is a risk that the review does not mitigate against pressures on the school transport budgets and/or that costs associated with travel support for children and young people continue to rise.
- 8.6.2. There is a risk that with the continued increased demand for education, health and care plans means that the pressure on the budget continues.
- 8.6.3. There are data risks with having an independent provider carry out the review. However, a data protection impact assessment has been carried out and advice sought from the data protection team to ensure that mitigations are in place for these risks.
- 8.6.4. There are risks to the current delivery of home to school provision due to the capacity for driver and vehicle availability locally being reached. The increased demand from children with SEND and families in financial hardship could continue to put pressure on existing budgets. These are being monitored and managed closely by teams within the council.
- 8.6.5. A risk management assessment will be carried out in relation to any proposed options that come out of the review.

8.7. Rural Communities

- 8.7.1. Home to school transport provision has a significant impact in reducing the effects of rural isolation and access to learning. Therefore, any proposals to improve the delivery and customer experience for these services supports our rural communities.
- 8.7.2. The statutory provision of free home-to-school transport is based on minimum thresholds of distance-to-school at 2 miles for primary and 3 miles for secondary pupils. These criteria mean that the pupils eligible for free home-to-school transport are disproportionately resident in rural areas of the borough.
- 8.7.3. Any options as a result of the review will take into consideration the current geography and accessibility of transport in Cheshire East.

8.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

- 8.8.1. Children and young people and their parents are key stakeholders in the review. It is expected that the review will consider how to provide a more streamlined and joined up service for these children and young people.

8.9. Public Health

- 8.9.1. Supporting children, young people and their families to engage in physical activity helps people live well and for longer. The provision of walking and cycling routes to school and promoting active travel, including safer walking routes to school is in line with our Public Health priorities.

8.10. Climate Change

8.10.1. Wherever possible children and young people are expected to go to the school and college that is closest to where they live. Where transport is required, we aim to provide this through shared transport arrangements, i.e., larger vehicles, shared taxis etc. However, this is not always possible, in particular where children with SEND need to travel to more specialist provision, sometimes outside of Cheshire East.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Gill Betton gill.betton@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	None.
Background Papers:	Current information in relation to travel support in Cheshire East can be found on the following webpages: School transport (cheshireeast.gov.uk)