

Children and Families Committee

10 July 2023

Consultation on the personal travel budget offer for children and young people

Report of: Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children and Families

Report Reference No: CF/05/23-24

Ward(s) Affected: All wards.

Purpose of Report

- 1 In November 2022, the children and families committee considered a report setting out the findings and recommendations from an independent review of travel support for children and young people. The committee agreed a number of recommendations to progress the transformation of travel support over the next three years.
- 2 A subsequent report, presented in March 2023, provided more detail and the children and families committee resolved to:
 - (a) Note the progress to date on implementation of the transformation programme, including the imminent appointment of specialist professional capacity, funded from the school transport budget.
 - (b) Consider and approve the proposed arrangements in relation to the post-16 home-to-school transport policy statement for 2023-24.
 - (c) Approve the proposals to go out to consultation and the results of the consultation will be brought back to committee, including:
 - (i) the revised payments in relation to cash grants/personal budgets for the 2023-24 academic year.
 - (ii) the proposed changes to the existing school transport policies in line with the Edge review recommendations, including the review of transport charges (the post-16, spare seat and Poynton High School scheme).

- (d) Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children and Families, in consultation with the Executive Director of Place, to make decisions in relation to progressing the milestones and activity listed in the report, with any specific actions requiring a decision by committee to be subject of a further report.
- 3 This report provides a brief overview of progress to date against the plans to transform travel support for children and young people and seeks approval from committee on proposed changes to the PTB scheme.

Executive Summary

- 4 Significant progress has been made in activity in relation to the transformation of travel support for children and young people since March 2023.
- 5 Following approval at the children and families committee in March 2023, a consultation exercise proposing amendments to the PTB scheme was undertaken between 9 May 2023 and 13 June 2023. The purpose of the consultation was to understand how parents / carers may be affected by changes to the scheme and to ascertain the barriers for taking up the offer.
- 6 Following analysis of the results, this paper sets out a number of recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The children and families committee is recommended to:

1. Scrutinise the progress to date in relation to the transformation of travel support for children and young people.
2. Approve an increase of the current mileage rate for PTBs from 25p per mile to 45p per mile, effective from the start of the next academic year (September 2023).
3. Approve the proposed changes to the school transport policies and procedures in relation to the process for claiming PTBs, including removing the requirement for parents / carers to provide proof of attendance, arrange regular monthly payments and provide flexibility within the scheme for exceptional cases.

Background

- 7 In November 2022, the children and families committee considered a report setting out the findings and recommendations from an independent review by Edge Public Solutions in relation to travel support for children and young people. The committee endorsed the underlying principles and cultural change set out in the review and delegated decision making to the Executive Director of Children and Families, in consultation with the Executive Director of Place, to make a number of decisions in relation to progressing the transformation of travel support for children and young people. The report also

committed to providing interim reports around specific actions that require committee approval, along with an initial update report within six months and annually thereafter.

- 8 A detailed update report was presented to the Children and Families Committee in March 2023 and delegated authority was approved to make decisions in relation to progressing the milestones and activity within the implementation plan.
- 9 In summary, good progress has been made in the first three months of the project and the key achievements are outlined below.
 - Edge Public Solutions were appointed as the providers of specialist professional capacity to implement the transformation plan and started work in March 2023.
 - The establishment of a dynamic purchasing system (DPS) is well underway with the framework being made live on the council's procurement portal, ProContract. Supplier engagement events will be held in July. Around 950 suppliers have been contacted to join the DPS (current approved supplier list is approximately 140) to address the shortage of drivers/vehicles and stimulate competition to reduce the cost of transport.
 - The current offer for personal travel budgets (PTBs) has been reviewed in the light of comments from the Parent Carer Forum and a consultation took place during May and early June culminating in this paper to committee to seek approval for the proposed changes.
 - Site visits have taken place to some sites where transport is being provided but the route has been classed as safe to walk. A report is being produced to bring to committee in September to approve proposals in relation to these routes. We are reviewing other routes to identify what remedial work is needed to re-classify routes currently deemed as unsafe to make them safe to walk.
 - A review of independent travel training initiatives within the council, schools and neighbouring councils is underway to gather information to shape the future offer. A consultation will take place with parent/carers to gather their comments and feed into a report to committee later in the year.
 - The financial improvement plan has been established and tracking mechanisms put in place to monitor performance and sign-off improvements.
- 10 The March report sought approval to consult on proposed changes to the existing PTB scheme. A PTB is a cash amount awarded to parents / carers, as an alternative to home to school / college taxi journeys. This enables parents / carers to arrange their child's home-to-school travel in the way that suits them best, making arrangements more flexible and personalised e.g., attendance at breakfast clubs or after school activities.

- 11 A PTB is a voluntary arrangement and cannot be imposed on parents / carers as their only option for travel support. It is seen as a useful additional option available to parents / carers as an alternative to other forms of travel support.
- 12 A PTB will only usually be offered to parents if this is more cost effective than the local authority providing transport or where there are difficulties for the local authority in negotiating a suitable transport contract and there is no available public service route. As part of the decision-making process, all transport solutions are investigated to identify a cost-effective travel solution before a PTB is offered.
- 13 A PTB can be used towards costs associated with driving a child/ren to school (this could also be a member of the family or trusted friend) or arranging shared travel arrangements with other parents. It is recognised that significant savings can be achieved through converting taxi routes that transport just one child into PTBs.
- 14 It is recognised that there are many factors that will affect a family's ability to take up the offer. Through the consultation and continued engagement with parents, e.g., Parent Carer Forum, we will ensure that any barriers to taking up the scheme are addressed and, if possible, overcome to give parents / carers broad and varied options for travel support. We will build flexibility into the offer for exceptional circumstances, particularly where additional costs may occur.

Consultation on the review of payments in relation to personal travel budgets for 2023/24

- (a) The standard PTB offer is currently a mileage rate of 25p per mile for two return journeys per day. The service has occasionally offered an improved rate, but these are based on exceptional circumstances. Each claimant also must provide a confirmed record of attendance at school / college and payment cannot be made until written confirmation has been received, usually at the end of term / half term.
- (b) Evidence has shown that paying a PTB is considerably less expensive than providing home-to-school transport via taxis. However, through the recent consultation exercise, parents / carers have provided feedback that the current mileage rate of 25p per mile is not sufficient to meet the costs of transporting eligible children and young people to and from school and acts as a barrier to taking up the scheme. A number of parents who currently have a personal budget have suggested that they would need to revert to organised transport (usually a taxi) if the current mileage rate remains at 25p.
- (c) The acceptance of a PTB is a voluntary arrangement and can be refused by parent/carers. In these cases, the local authority must provide transport for eligible children/young people to attend school college.
- (d) Neighbouring local authorities are currently paying higher rates to Cheshire East, as set out below:

Local authority	Mileage rate for 2022/23
Cheshire East	25p per mile
Cheshire West & Chester	45p per mile up to 10,000 miles per academic year 25p per mile for all miles over 10,000 per academic year
Staffordshire	Pay travelling expenses at pre-agreed rate
Shropshire	40p per mile, but only for nursery or post-16 students
Liverpool	£3 per day, plus 45p per mile for up to two journeys a day within Liverpool
Warrington	45p per mile

- (e) Increasing the uptake of personal travel budgets is key to the proposed transformation programme.
- (f) To ensure the existing payments are maintained and to increase further uptake of PTBs, we have consulted on an improved payment rate for 2023/24. The estimated cost of increasing existing contracts to 45p per mile would be £139,686. However, based on the consultation results, savings of £431,400 could be achieved through converting existing taxi routes to PTBs. Significant cost avoidance would also be achieved through offering an enhanced PTB for future single occupancy taxi routes.
- (g) In addition, the consultation exercise also proposed simplifying the claim process, making regular payments, and adding flexibility to the offering for exceptional circumstances.

Consultation and Engagement

- 15 Between 9 May 23 and 13 June 23, a consultation exercise was undertaken on the proposed changes to the existing PTB scheme. The purpose of the consultation was to understand the impact these proposals may have on those who are currently eligible for free home to school travel support and the potential to incentivise parents to take up the scheme, where applicable.
- 16 The consultation was targeted at parents and carers who are eligible for free home to school travel support. Emails were sent to current eligible parents where contact details were known. The service also engaged with the Parent Carer Forum prior to consultation to promote responses and a link was published in the Schools Bulletin.
- 17 The exercise generated 273 consultation responses – 94% of these respondents had a child that is currently eligible for free home to school travel support. This represents approximately 7% of current eligible students.
- 18 The main method of travel for respondents was:
- Bus 43%
 - Taxi 37%
 - Own vehicle 19%

- 19 69% of respondents stated that their child travelled with other students, with 31% travelling alone.
- 20 33% of respondents would be more willing to take a PTB if the method of claiming payment was simplified and 33% would be more willing if regular payments could be made.
- 21 27% of respondents would be more willing to take a PTB if the mileage rate were increased from 25p to 45p per mile; although this figure reduces to 13% for respondents whose children travel in taxis, who would be targeted for conversion to PTB, where applicable.
- 22 Parents were asked to name occasions when a higher offer could be applicable – 55% stated for children with specific needs and 38% for children travelling long distances.
- 23 The main barriers that might stop respondents taking up the PTB offer were:
- The time taken to travel to school / college - 42%
 - The current payment offer does not cover costs - 36%
 - Having children at different school locations - 35%
- 24 Concerns were raised within the consultation responses that the service is looking to replace existing bus services with multiple PTBs that would be environmentally unfriendly and lead to increased traffic problems. PTBs are only considered as a viable option if it is a cheaper option or where all other options have been discounted. Therefore, the main cohort of parent/carers to be offered a PTB are those whose children have limited travel options and would likely result in being transported in an expensive single occupancy taxi.
- 25 The consultation also raised concerns about parents / carers being forced down the PTB route. As already mentioned, this option is purely voluntary, but it is essential that the offer can cover costs and encourage parents, where applicable, to accept the PTB offer.
- 26 Of the 273 responses, 270 completed the survey and 3 responded by email.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 27 As evidenced, one of the main barriers to parents / carers accepting a PTB is that the current payment offer does not cover the costs of taking their children to school. To enable the service to improve take up of the scheme, achieve savings and minimise future high-cost taxi services, it must address the low mileage rate, particularly when compared to other local authorities. Fuel and cost of living increases have exacerbated this issue over the past year.
- 28 33% of respondents stated that the claim process should be simplified and that regular payments should be made. This suggests that elements of the claim process are off-putting to some parents / carers and should be simplified. These concerns will be addressed by applying the same process to all cases, making 11 regular payments per year and by removing the

requirement of parents / carers to have the school confirm attendance every month. The service will make retrospective checks to ensure that recipients are attending school or college on a regular basis.

- 29 55% of respondents believe that higher offers could be introduced for children with specific needs and 38% of respondents believed this should be applied for children travelling long distances. Therefore, some flexibility should be built into the offer and a process defined to consider higher offers in exceptional circumstances.
- 30 Although 27% of respondents state that they would be willing to take a PTB if the mileage rate was increased, this response rate will include parents of children who currently travel by bus (43% of total responders). Bus passengers would not be offered a PTB as it is unlikely to be a cheaper option and would not support a greener environment.
- 31 By just looking at children who travel in taxis, and willing to take a PTB if the mileage rate increases to 45p per mile, the response rate reduces to 13%. However, if 13% of existing single occupancy taxi routes were converted to PTB (20 routes) at an approximate saving of £21,570 per route, this would deliver significant cost savings to offset any increase for existing PTB recipients. In addition, the higher rate means that existing recipients of a PTB are less likely to hand these back and request organised transport, which represents a cost avoidance.
- 32 If an additional 13% of future eligible families can be supported to take a PTB, cost avoidance will be equally significant.

Other Options Considered

- 33 The option of not implementing this recommendation has been considered. Maintaining the current payment rate will result in continued low take up rates for PTB and with fluctuating motoring costs could potentially lead to existing claimants moving away from the scheme and reverting to traditional more expensive transport solutions. The current level of payment does not incentivise parents / carers and makes it difficult for council officers to promote the PTB offer.
- 34 Members could choose to apply the new rate to new applicants only. However, this would create inequity in the system and would be likely to result in an increasing number of existing parents requesting organised transport, rather than a PTB, which would have the reverse effect.

Option	Impact	Risk
Do nothing	Limited opportunity to increase the current number of parents / carers taking up the PTB offer.	Existing PTB claimants move back to more expensive travel solutions, e.g., single occupancy taxi.

Apply to new applicants only	Existing PTB parents would feel this was inequitable	Existing PTB claimants move back to more expensive travel solutions, e.g., single occupancy taxi
------------------------------	--	--

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 35 The local authority is required by the Education Act 1996 as amended by the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to make suitable travel arrangements for eligible children to attend school. This includes the duty to promote sustainable modes of travel for children and young people of compulsory school age. The government has also issued statutory guidance called Home-to-school travel and transport guidance 2014.
- 36 This means that a local authority is under a duty to have regard to it when performing their duties in relation to home to school travel and transport and sustainable travel.
- 37 The local authority's transport duties apply in respect of arrangements for young people aged 16-18 years and those continuing learners up to 19 years. Under Section 509(AA) Education Act 1996 the local authority has a duty to set its own transport policy, details of transport arrangements and financial assistance in respect of reasonable travelling expenses that the local authority considers it necessary to ensure access to education or training for learners of sixth form age. The local authority must publish the statement before the 31 May and publishing by that date would demonstrate adherence with the law.
- 38 Section 509 (AB) (1) Education Act 1996 requires local authorities to set out how their transport statement facilitates the attendance of young people with SEND.
- 39 Local authorities should publish their transport policies on their "local offer" as required under s30 of the Children and Families Act 2014.
- 40 The local authority has a legal duty to ensure that any decision it makes is transparent and has been made applying the Wednesbury principles and has a rationale for the decision made. When carrying out a consultation certain guiding principles ('The Gunning principles') must be followed. The Gunning Principles are a set of rules for public consultation that were proposed in 1985 by Stephen Sedley QC and accepted by the Judge in the Gunning v LB of Brent case, which was a case that centred on a school closure consultation. Prior to this very little consideration had been given to the laws of consultation. In delivering his judgment, Sedley defined that a consultation is only legitimate when these four principles are met:
 - Consultation must take place when the proposal is still at a formative stage

- Sufficient reasons must be put forward for the proposal to allow for intelligent consideration and response
- Adequate time must be given for consideration and response
- The product of consultation must be conscientiously taken into account

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 41 The current arrangements for providing travel support for children and young people are unsustainable. The transport budget accounts for almost 20% of the budget for children's services. Any savings made against this budget will be reinvested into children's services and used to target those children and young people most in need.
- 42 Budget proposals relating to the transformation of travel support form part of the council's medium term financial strategy 2023-27 (MTFS 24). This included a funding increase for home to school transport costs of £5.4m over the next four years but changing eligibility criteria to maintain a sustainable service. These proposals around PTBs are a key part of this change and would help realise a proportion of savings that are included in the £2.1m proposed savings, included within the +£5.4m MTFS, over the next four years.
- 43 A breakdown of the school transport budget is set out below:

Budget Area	£'000
Direct Transport - Home to School Contracts	15,237
Commissioning Budget - School Crossing Patrol & Flexi link	395
Staffing	525
Spare Seat and Post 16 Income	-57
Further Mitigation - Challenge process SEND	-500
Estimated savings put forward by Edge	-545
Total Budget	15,055

- 44 As of April 2023, there are 110 recipients of a cash grant / PTB, enabling 123 children to attend school / college (i.e. some are sibling groups). 92 cash grants / PTBs are paid at the standard 25p per mile, costing £174,608 per annum. A proposed rate change to 45p per mile would see the cost rise to £314,294 per annum, an increase of £139,686. A further 18 PTBs are currently being paid on a discretionary basis at 45p per mile or above and would not be affected by these proposals.
- 45 It is proposed that existing taxi routes carrying one pupil will be targeted for conversion to a PTB. The consultation exercise suggests that 13% of parents whose children are transported by taxi, would be likely to take a PTB at 45p per mile. If this percentage were applied to single occupier routes, 20 routes could be converted to PTB at an annual saving of £431,400. In addition, if 13% of future single occupancy routes could be converted to PTB significant cost avoidance could be achieved.

- 46 The table below sets out the potential savings from these proposals:

Current single occupier routes	158
Total cost of current single occupier routes per annum	£4,172,096
Average cost per child per annum based on single occupier route (A)	£26,406
Average cost per child per annum based on a PTB at 45p per mile (B)	£4,836
Estimated saving per child of moving to a PTB from single occupier route (A-B)	£21,570
Total estimated savings if 13% of parents on current single occupier routes move to a PTB at 45p per mile	£431,400

Policy

- 47 If approved, the recommendations in this paper would require a change in policy relating to personal travel budgets. Specifically, the following changes will be made to the policy document, subject to committee approval of this paper:
- Where the existing policy refers to cash grants or direct payments, the revised policy will refer to personal travel budgets.
 - A line will be added to state that as of September 2023 the mileage rate is set at 45p per mile.
 - The policy will make clear that the value of a PTB can be set at a higher level in exceptional circumstances. The value of the PTB can be flexible to allow for the fact that more specialised vehicles or personal assistance may be required. The rate of payment will be determined by taking into account the personal circumstances of the family and any additional costs that may be incurred.
 - The policy include that each month the parent / carer will confirm that their child has been attending school, but unlike previous schemes will not ask for written confirmation from school each month.

- 48 This proposal support's the following council's priorities and aims.

An open and enabling organisation	A council which empowers and cares about people	A thriving and sustainable place
Ensure that there is transparency in all aspects of council	Ensure all children have a high quality, enjoyable education that enables	A transport network that is safe and promotes active travel

<p>decision making</p> <p>Listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation</p> <p>Support a sustainable financial future for the council, through service development, improvement and transformation</p>	<p>them to achieve their full potential</p>	
---	---	--

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 49 An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed in relation to the proposed changes to PTBs.

Human Resources

- 50 The recommendations from the consultation have no HR implications.

Risk Management

- 51 A risk management framework has been established as part of the transformation programme for travel support.
- 52 There is a risk that we do not increase the number of parents taking up the PTB option or that some existing parents wish to revert back to organised transport. Both of these would impact negatively on the school transport budget. However, through the consultation exercise and active engagement with the Parent Carer Forum, we think this is currently a low risk.

Rural Communities

- 53 Children and young people across all areas of Cheshire East access travel support. However, as the statutory provision of free home-to-school transport is based on distance to school, residents in rural areas of the borough are more likely to be eligible for travel support and therefore affected by any changes. Children living in rural communities often rely on travel support to access their learning and any proposals to improve the delivery and customer experience for these services supports these rural communities.

Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

- 54 Children, young people, and their parents are key stakeholders in the transformation programme, and this proposal looks to improve travel options for eligible students.

Public Health

- 55 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. Extending and improving the travel options available to eligible students could encourage more active and healthy methods of getting students to school.

Climate Change

- 56 These recommendations will have a positive impact on the environment and benefit climate change by targeting a reduction in single occupancy taxi journeys. This would reduce the total distance travelled within these journeys by eradicating the non-home to school element that is inherent in traditional transport options.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Gill Betton, Head of Children's Development and Partnerships Gill.betton@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Not applicable
Background Papers:	The current school transport policies can be found at: School transport policies (cheshireeast.gov.uk)