

Children and Families Committee

18 September 2023

Transformation of travel support for children and young people and review of available walking routes.

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

Report Reference No: CF/27/23-24

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 to ensure that the service can be sustained.
- 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 In July 2023, members approved changes in relation to personal travel budgets (PTBs), including the 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) and changes to the procedures in relation to the process for claiming PTBs.
 - 4 This report provides an overview of progress to date against the plans to transform travel support for children and young people and seeks approval from committee on the proposed redesignation of two routes to two schools making them 'Available walking routes' (AWR) from their current designation as 'Unavailable walking routes'.
 - 5 Additionally, this paper seeks approval to go out to consultation on changes to the school transport policies (as noted within the November 2022 report and report to committee in March 2023) to include the charging policy for post-16 transport and spare seats and to return to committee with the results from the consultation and subsequent recommendations for approval.
 - 6 As detailed within the March 2023 report the policy consultation will be based upon:
 - (a) the post-16 home-to-school transport policy statement for 2024-25.
 - (b) the proposed changes to the existing school transport policies in line with the Edge review recommendations, including the review of transport charges (post-16, spare seat and Poynton High School scheme). The existing policies being:
 - (i) Compulsory School Age Travel Policy
 - (ii) Post-16 Education Travel Policy
 - (iii) Education Travel Behaviour Code
 - (iv) Education Travel Payment Policy
 - (v) Education Travel - Appeals and Complaints Policy

Executive Summary

- 7 Significant progress has been made in relation to the transformation of travel support for children and young people since March 2023 in the areas of creation of a new dynamic purchasing system for our suppliers, new arrangements for personal travel budgets and a review of walking routes to

school currently designated as unavailable. An update on progress as of August 2023 is set out at Appendix 1.

- 8 Following approval at the children and families committee in March 2023, a review of routes deemed unavailable to walk (and thereby making effected pupils eligible for free school transport regardless of distance from school) has been started. This work develops further the work undertaken in 2017 where several 'schemes' (roads, crossings, footway improvements) were implemented in order to allow the designation of those routes to be deemed as AWR.
- 9 Whilst further work will be undertaken to identify any new schemes which can be put in place in the coming months, this paper is concerned with routes to two schools in particular:
 - (i) From Willaston to Brine Leas Academy – the area which was originally deemed as making this route unavailable to walk was an inadequate crossing point at the Cheerbrook roundabout. A traffic light controlled pedestrian crossing on the Nantwich bypass at Cheerbrook roundabout has been in place since 14 October 2008 and as such this route should have been redesignated several years ago.
 - (ii) From Prestbury to Fallibroome Academy – a scheme to put a traffic light controlled pedestrian crossing on the B5087 Prestbury Road was completed on 6 January 2020 and as such the redesignation of this route is also overdue.
- 10 This paper sets out the detail of the walking routes and the numbers of pupils at each setting who will no longer be eligible for free home to school transport.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The children and families committee are recommended to:

1. Scrutinise the progress to date in relation to the transformation of travel support for children and young people.
2. Approve the redesignation of the Willaston to Brine Leas Academy and Prestbury to Fallibroome Academy routes as 'Available Walking Routes'.
3. Approve the pupil eligibility changes that will be necessary as a result of the redesignation in line with the Councils '[Compulsory School Age Education Travel Policy](#)' to remove school transport from 75 pupils, following a 12 week notice period.
4. Approve the review of other sites across the borough which are currently designated as 'unavailable walking routes' for any financially viable improvement schemes which could make those routes 'available walking routes' to be brought back to committee for future approval.
5. Approve the proposal to go out to consultation on the current school transport policies, including the review of charging for post-16, spare seats and the Poynton

High School scheme and for the results of the consultation to be brought back to committee.

Background

- 11 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.
- 12 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.
- 13 In July 2023, members approved changes in relation to personal travel budgets (PTBs), including the 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) and changes to the procedures in relation to the process for claiming PTBs.
- 14 In summary, good progress has been made in the first quarter of the project and the key achievements are outlined below and at Appendix 1.
 - 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 were 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.
 - A consultation on the current offer for personal travel budgets (PTBs) was completed in May 2023 and changes approved by committee in July 2023.
 - Work is well progressed to redesignate routes as available and thereby allow removal of entitlement to free transport.
 - 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 will be reported to a future committee meeting.
- The financial improvement plan has been established and tracking mechanisms put in place to monitor performance and sign-off improvements.
- 15 The March 2023 report sought approval to review all routes in the borough currently badged as ‘unavailable walking routes’ (UWR). An UWR is a route which is deemed to be not available to be used when calculating a pupils potential walking route to school for the purposes of distance measurement which is a major component of whether a pupil is eligible for free school transport or not, the distance criteria are 2 miles below 8 years old and 3 miles for 8 years old and above.
- 16 The council has an adopted policy for assessing whether a route is available to walk and this is based upon the [Department for Education’s home to school travel guidance 2014](#) and [Road safety GB – assessment of walked routes to school guidance](#). Currently some 80+ contracted routes / arrangements transporting around 750 pupils receive free school transport because of unavailable walking routes across the borough.
- 17 This report covers only two initial routes, both of which have been made available to walk for some time:
- (a) The walking route from the Prestbury area to Fallibroome Academy where a traffic light controlled pedestrian crossing is now available on Prestbury Road which replaces the previous road island and makes the whole route to the school ‘available’ for walking.
 - (b) The walking route from Willaston to Brine Leas Academy where a traffic light controlled pedestrian crossing is available at the intersection of the Nantwich bypass and The Old Newcastle Road again making the whole route to the school ‘available’ for walking.
- 18 It is intended to do additional and more detailed work within the overall programme of activity to understand whether there are any other viable schemes elsewhere within the borough where there is a financial business case to undertake works which could allow other UWRs to be made in to AWRs.

Activity completed to date in respect of the two UWRs.

- 19 Both routes have been assessed by the council’s professionals in the Highways team with refreshed traffic counts where applicable and the results of this are shown in the attached technical documents, at Appendix 2 and 3, which set out why the routes are assessed as now AWRs.
- 20 Both school headteachers have been written to as a first communication to say that this process is underway.

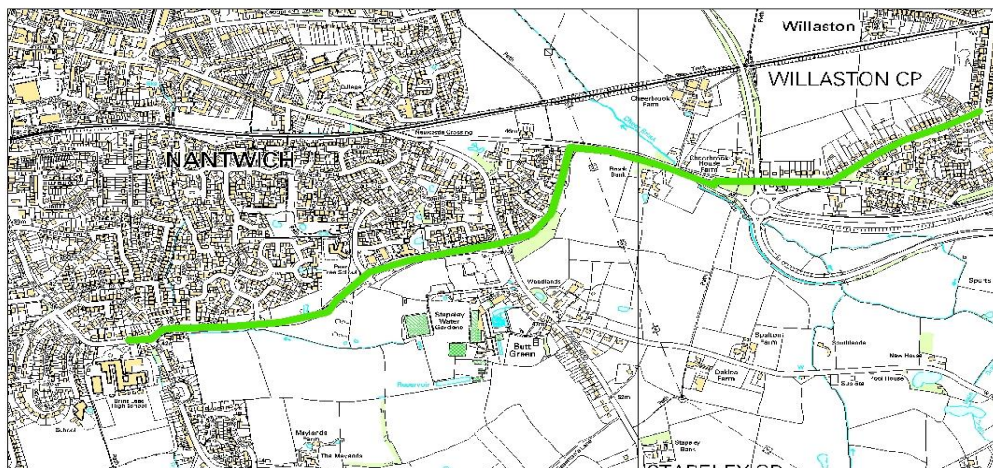
- 21 A suggested communications plan has been developed by our comms team and centres around communications when committee papers are in the public domain and when a decision is made to proceed. Communications are with schools, parents and suppliers, channels of communication are around the school transport website landing page, briefings and letters to affected parents.
- 22 An invite to ward members and to the children and families committee was extended to view and walk through the routes involved and this was taken up for both routes. The walk throughs were completed on the 11 and 12 July 2023.
- (a) Willaston to Brine Leas Academy – three committee members accepted the invite, however two members had to offer apologies on the day and only one member was able to attend.
- (b) Prestbury to Fallibroome – three committee members attended,
- 23 Feedback received from members who attended is shown below:

Route	Comments on route
Willaston to Brine Leas Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No issues with the availability of this walk route.
Prestbury to Fallibroome Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One member supports the inclusion of the route but commented that the white slow lines should be repainted and the bollard at Castle Hill should be cleaned. One member suggested that the following be considered: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The "Slow" road markings on Heybridge Lane. The paths up to Heybridge Lane were disintegrating and leaf covered. Many hedges were overgrown and needed trimming. Bollards needed cleaning. Bus stops advertised especially if the paying passengers are not being picked up on a route. One member had safety concerns in relation to Bridge End Lane: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initially the lane is very steep, and it is not gritted. There is also no clear path for the children to walk. The lane has a sign for 'no cycling'. Is the expectation that anyone on a bike should stay on the main road? Or will the path be redesignated to allow Cycles? Or is it not safe to cycle along the lane.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Other parts of the lane are not lit. ○ The lane is also very uneven. ○ The path appears to be about 420m, while walking round on the pavement is approx. 756m. Would the extra 336m take it above the 3-mile distance? ○ My preference would be to take the pavement as the safer walking option and if the child takes the shortcut along Bridge End Lane, then that would be down to parental responsibility.
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- 24 No adverse commentary regarding the route from Willaston to Brine Leas Academy was received, it should be noted that the suggested walking route to school is also a marked cycle route.
- 25 In response to the comments received Prestbury to Brine Leas Academy route it should be noted that:
- (a) A number of the highway's jobs mentioned above are accepted and already in hand where these can be completed. Others such as the overgrown hedgerows are being taken forward, however, some will be under restriction from the time of year for hedge trimming and others where the hedge is owned privately may take a little longer.
 - (b) The comments in relation to Bridge End Lane does not make the route unavailable for walking to school in line with local and national guidance. The alternative route suggested adds only around 0.15 miles to the overall route. Therefore, whilst distances will continue to be calculated based upon the shortest available distance (the Bridge End Lane route), the slightly longer walk along the main road remains an option if pupils / parents choose to use that.
 - (c) It should also be noted that the council will not be mandating how pupils get to school or whether they have to walk, the AWR rules are in place to provide a method of understanding for our adopted set of rules ['Available routes to school' policy 2018](#) whether any particular route can be used in the calculation of **distance from school** and therefore **eligibility for free school transport**.
- 26 Communication with parents has not yet been undertaken but will be completed in line with current policy (with explanation and 12 weeks written notice) once permission to proceed is agreed. Appendix 4 sets out the potential questions and answers in relation to the proposed changes.
- 27 Options to mitigate potential traffic increases at the Fallibroome Academy and to provide facility for ticketed bus travel for pupils affected have also been discussed as follows.

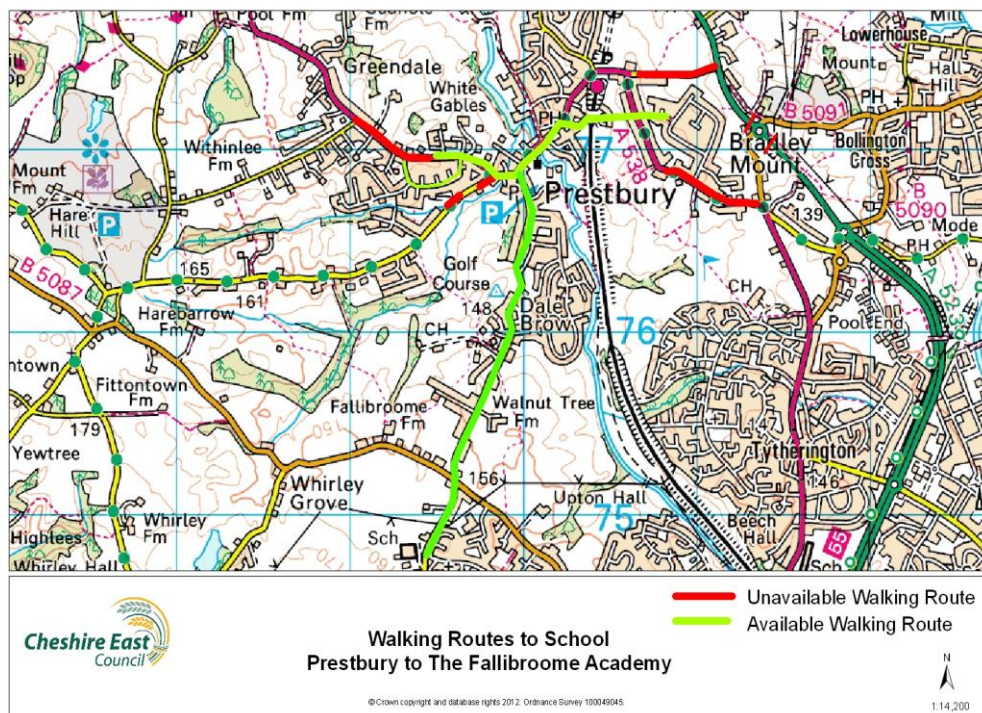
- (a) The number 19 bus serves the route between Prestbury and Fallibroome Academy with a 27-seater bus. Currently 13 pupils use this bus, alongside a larger number of students relying on contracted school buses. These include a cohort who will lose eligibility under this proposal. These pupils are accommodated on the 8am run from Lees Lane and the return 3.40pm journey in the afternoon. Pupils can purchase a child day ticket at £3.90 per day or £15.50 per week. The current contract for this service is due for renewal in March 2024, dependent upon demand there may be opportunity to increase the size of the vehicle utilised.
- (b) Discussions will take place with the current supplier to understand whether there is a commercial opportunity they would like to take up for that supplier to provide a fare paying service to those pupils who lose eligibility for free school transport, this can be easily accommodated within the 12 weeks notice period required regarding withdrawal of eligibility.
- 28 Route maps for both schemes are shown in the attached technical paperwork and reproduced below:



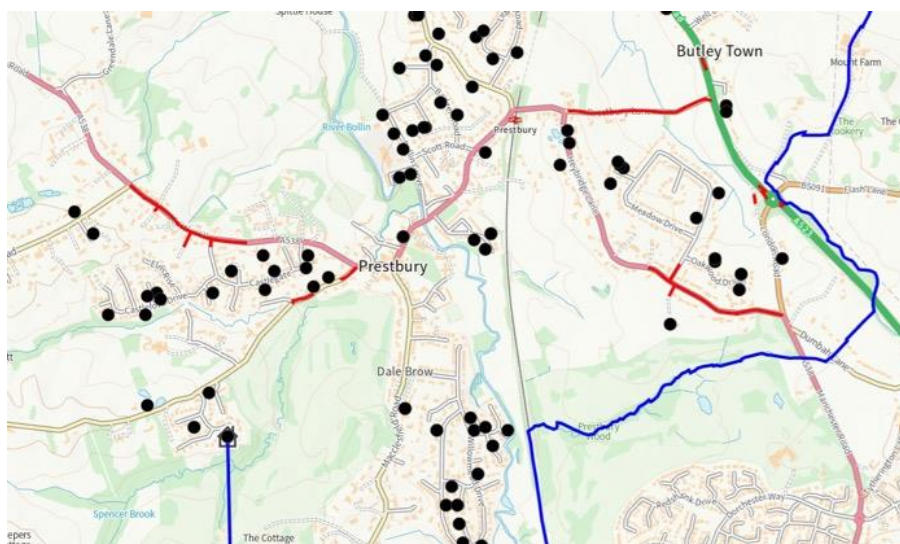
Walking route from Willaston to Brine Leas School



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- 29 A current scattered dot map of all Fallibroome Academy pupils potentially effected is attached, it should be noted that not every pupil will become ineligible for pupil transport. Each case will need to be assessed to understand the detailed reason why eligibility was given initially in order to decide whether the pupil will become ineligible or not. Additionally, some of the dots on the diagram will remain eligible because their route will remain an UWR.



- 30 We have not included a dot map for the Willaston to Brine Leas Academy as there are currently only 5 pupils effected.
- 31 Technical route paperwork for both schemes are attached.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 32 As previously stated, these routes have been available as walking routes for some considerable time and as such represent an anomaly against current School travel policy, furthermore, they represent an inequity against other pupils in the borough who either have previously had eligibility for free school transport removed in the past for this very reason or who have never received free school transport because they live on or near a route that is deemed available.
- 33 The current arrangements for providing travel support for children and young people are unsustainable as the budget is under increasing pressure. The removal of travel support to ineligible pupils is one of the ways in which members have agreed to reduce this pressure. The removal of these two routes is estimated to lead to a reduction in the annual school transport budget of £79.5k. As such these routes should be redesignated at the earliest opportunity.

Other Options Considered

- 34 There is an option to retain both or one of these routes and continue to supply free school transport for all identified children, however this would mean:
- (a) Pupils at these schools are receiving preferable treatment than other pupils across the borough.
 - (b) Savings of c.£79.5k would not be achieved.
 - (c) This would go against the current and agreed school transport policies.
- 35 It is not considered an option to apply this change only to new applicants because this would embed an inequity in the treatment of pupils across the borough and would have an impact on the medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) savings target.

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 36 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.
- 37 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.

- 38 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.
- 39 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.
- 40 Local authorities should publish their transport policies on their "local offer" as required under s30 of the Children and Families Act 2014.
- 41 The local authority has a legal duty to ensure that any decision it makes is transparent and as the details in this paper are simply about enforcing existing policies no consultation is required.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 42 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.
- 43 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.
- 44 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

- 45 These proposals form part of the 'estimated savings put forward by Edge' line of the budget.

- 46 The table below sets out the potential savings from these proposals, it should be noted that detailed work will need to be undertaken on each and every pupil to determine if eligibility needs to be removed, in addition the exact number of pupils involved is currently changing as pupils apply for the new school year, however the table below is seen as a good estimate of annual savings available from the implementation of this initiative, being £79.5k per year:

	Willaston to Brine Leas Academy route	Prestbury to Fallibroome Academy routes
How may routes	1	4
Cost of routes	£42,176.20 per annum	£87,097.90 per annum
How many pupils transported in total	9	122
How many pupils will now be on an AWR	5	70
Estimated savings	£24,000 per year	£55,558 per year

Policy

- 47 The available walking route changes do not require a change to current policy.
- 48 This paper requests approval to consult on the current school transport policies, including the review of charging for post-16, spare seats and the Poynton High School scheme and for the results of the consultation to be brought back to committee.
- 49 Consultation will be undertaken in line with 'The Gunning Principles' which will state that:
- a) Consultation must take place when the proposal is still at a formative stage.
 - b) Sufficient reasons must be put forward for the proposal to allow for intelligent consideration and response.
 - c) Adequate time must be given for consideration and response.
 - d) The product of consultation must be conscientiously considered.
- 50 These proposals support 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. decision making	Ensure all children have a high quality, enjoyable education that enables	A transport network that is safe and promotes active travel including walking

Support a sustainable financial future for the council, through service development, improvement and transformation	them to achieve their full potential	
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Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 51 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed in relation to the proposed changes to AWRs and is attached at Appendix 5.
- 52 An EIA will also be completed in relation to the proposed policy changes.

Human Resources

- 53 The current recommendations have no HR implications.

Risk Management

- 54 A risk management framework has been established as part of the transformation programme for travel support.
- 55 This change is taking place within the rules of the current school transport policy, however, there will be a number of parents / carers who will lose free school transport because of these changes, and it is likely that there will be complaints about this and scrutiny of the process.

Rural Communities

- 56 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)

- 57 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

- 58 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

- 59 These proposals will mean that more pupils will have an available walking route to school than was previously the case. There is potential for increased traffic from parental cars arriving at school, however we are reviewing the availability of route 19 to and from school and we will have active discussions with the current supplier in terms of ticketing opportunities for paying passengers in the morning and the afternoon, patronage numbers will be kept under review.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Richard Hibbert, Head of Strategic Transport & Parking Richard.Hibbert@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Update on progress Appendix 2 – AWR technical paperwork for Willaston to Brine Leas Appendix 3 – AWR technical paperwork for Prestbury to Fallibroome Appendix 4 - Frequently asked questions Appendix 5 - Equality impact assessment
Background Papers:	The current school transport policies can be found at: School transport policies (cheshireeast.gov.uk)