

CABINET – 16 JULY 2013

Dear Cllr Hudspeth,

I am writing as Chairman of the Education Scrutiny Committee with the Committee's recommendations on the Home to School Transport Policy 2014. The draft proposals were discussed at our meeting on the 4th of July 2013. The Committee heard from a number of Councillors and members of the public, received a presentation from the relevant council officers followed by a lengthy question & answer session with those officers and then debated the proposals. The committee recognised the need to identify areas to save money within the Children Education & Families budget. However, during that debate, there were a number of concerns raised with the detail of the proposals and the manner in which the consultation was carried out.

The Education Scrutiny Committee resolved to send the following recommendations to Cabinet.

Recommendation 1

The Cabinet should seek legal advice to ensure that the manner of the consultation has not left the council open to challenge.

The committee queried whether the extension of the consultation period would leave the Council open to challenge. The consultation will end on the 15th of July, with the Cabinet decision due the next day on the 16th. There is a fear that the short delay between the end of the consultation period and the Cabinet decision implies that the results of the consultation may not properly factor in the Cabinet decision, which may leave the Council open to challenges including judicial review. Therefore, the committee recommends that prior to the meeting legal advice is sought to ascertain whether it is safe to take the decision on 16th July 2013.

Recommendation 2

There should be a detailed review of proposals and a lengthier, targeted consultation process. This policy decision should be deferred for a year in order for that review to take place in a thorough measured way.

The committee expressed a range of concerns:

- a. That sufficient consideration had not been given to the potential impact of proposals on rural communities. In particular, there was a concern that some villages would be significantly affected by the proposals. Due to the geography of some villages, these proposals could split communities of school children which could negatively affect their educational experience. The committee would also like reassurance that proposals on road safety take into account the material differences between walking routes in urban areas versus rural areas. For instance (as examples of some of the many potential problems) countryside issues include the lack of street lighting (which is specifically excluded as a factor for consideration in the draft policy) and the difficulty using rural paths year round: in some areas, footpaths are impassable for weeks or months at a time because of flooding or very deep mud. And in the interests of transparency, the committee would like to see the

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- criteria for assessing the 'safety' of walking routes made public on the County website.
- b. The committee also noted concern that the transport proposals may not meet the needs of a system where education providers are more independent. For instance, academies have the independence to set their own catchment areas and term-times. The proposed policy could create complex decision making scenarios for parents and the transport system which have not been scoped or understood. The committee believed that parents and schools need reassurance that transport proposals have considered these changes in the education system and their impact upon transport needs.
 - c. The committee also raised the concerns that:
 - i. the consultation process had been rushed;
 - ii. affected schools (both positively and negatively) had not been sufficiently engaged; and
 - iii. many families were unsure of their position.
 - d. These points were reflected in the number and range of responses received, so the Committee concluded that there should be additional efforts to ensure that families are clear on who will be affected and how, and that those areas and schools which are most affected are engaged with the consultation in much more detail.

In summary, the Committee felt that the implications and impact of the proposals were not clear (to officers as much as to schools, parents and the Committee) and that they needed to be understood by and communicated to all concerned much better than is currently the case.

The committee concluded that this policy proposal has been rushed, in order to have the policy in place for the 2014 school year and to secure much-needed savings as early as possible. However, the committee thinks that it is more important to be certain about the real impact of the proposals, given the number of concerns raised and the potential impact across Oxfordshire.

The Committee recommends, therefore, that the policy should be reviewed as outlined and its introduction deferred for a year, despite the fact that it would mean that any policy changes would not be able to come into force until 2015.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Lynda Atkins
Chairman of the Education Scrutiny Committee