

# Home-to-school transport proposal

Published 04.11.2013

Oxfordshire County Council is consulting on plans to change the criteria for free home-to-school transport which would bring its policy in line with neighbouring councils and reduce its annual bill. It is also consulting about the amount it charges for spare seats on the transport it provides for children who are entitled to travel to and from school for free

The following has been produced to address some frequently asked questions about our Home to School Transport Policy proposal.

## Why is the council proposing to make changes to its Home to School Transport Policy?

The council needs to make very large reductions in the amount it spends on providing services, including Home to School Transport, on which it currently spends about £15 million per year. The current policy is more generous than what the law says must be provided (the 'statutory minimum') and therefore costs the council more than it is legally obliged to spend. Current charges for spare seats ('concessionary fares') do not cover the full cost of these to the council i.e. they are subsidised.

Also, as more schools become responsible for their own admissions arrangements (academies, free schools, University Technical Colleges, Voluntary Aided School) there is a growing risk that they will introduce changes which will increase the costs to the council; the most obvious example is extending or introducing very wide catchment areas.

Oxfordshire's neighbouring authorities including Gloucestershire, Buckinghamshire, Swindon, Warwickshire, Northamptonshire, Reading and West Berkshire, and many other authorities in England, have already adopted similar school transport policies to what is now being proposed in this county.

## How much does the Council spend on Home to School Transport?

These are the budgets and actual expenditure for the past three financial years:

Year	2010-11 (£)	2011-12 (£)	2012-13 (£)
<b>Plan</b>	14,929,242.00	14,465,413.00	14,361,915.00
<b>Actuals</b>	13,112,172.94	13,350,087.23	14,703,473.11
<b>Variance</b> overspend (+)/ underspend (-)	- 1,817,069.06	- 1,115,325.77	 341,558.11

This year's budget is about £15 million and £200,000 of savings are already earmarked against it from previous financial plans. Current forecast indicate that without identifying in-year savings there may be an *overspend* of up to £<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> million.

The expenditure is split roughly 60:40 between mainstream transport and transport for pupils with Special Educational Needs attending special schools (£8.9 million and £5.8 million in 2012-13). It is not possible to divide mainstream expenditure into 'primary schools' and 'secondary schools' as some transport serves both types of school. However, the majority of mainstream transport expenditure is on behalf of secondary aged children.

## How much of this expenditure was for taxis?

2010/11		2011/12		2012/13	
Number Of children	Sum of Payments	Number Of children	Sum of Payments	Number Of children	Sum of Payments
1644	£6,554,603.63	1693	£7,011,535.29	1751	£7,922,764.01

## To which schools are children conveyed by taxi?

See the attached spread sheet.

## How many children currently use home to school transport?

Primary age

NCY 1 = 290

NCY 2 = 322

NCY 3 = 364

NCY 4 = 370

NCY 5 = 396

NCY 6 = 312

TOTAL = 2052

Secondary age

NCY 7 = 1573

NCY 8 = 1598

NCY 9 = 1672

NCY 10 = 1576

NCY 11 = 1785

TOTAL = 8204

Post-16

NCY 12 = 537

NCY 13 = 417

TOTAL = 954

GRAND TOTAL = 11,210

Of these 1,350 occupy a 'concessionary seat' so 9,860 children currently receive free transport.

## **What does the law say?**

Free transport must be provided to children who attend the 'nearest available school' if it is over the 'statutory walking distance' (2 miles for children aged under 8 years and 3 miles for children aged 8 - 16 years; there is no entitlement to free transport for children attending sixth forms or Further Education Colleges). Free transport is also provided for shorter journeys when there is no 'safe walking route'.

## **What does 'nearest available school' mean?**

This is the nearest school to a child's home address at which a place could be allocated at the time that school places are allocated. It doesn't have to be one of the three preferences on the application form but it is the only school to which there would be an entitlement to free transport. For instance, if a place couldn't be offered at any of a parent's three preferences, the Council would identify the next nearest school to the home address with a spare place; this would qualify as the 'nearest available school' and free Home to School Transport would be provided.

## **Who does the council currently provide free school transport for?**

Currently the council offers free transport for all children under eight, to either their nearest school or their catchment school if they live more than two miles from school, and all children over eight who live more than three miles from school, regardless of whether the catchment school is the closest to the child's home. This is above the national statutory level of provision. Free transport is also provided for shorter journeys where it would be unsafe for an accompanied child to walk to school.

## **So how would this change under the new proposals?**

There are two options, both of which would reduce expenditure and protect the Council against changes to schools' admission arrangements. The first would comply with the statutory minimum and limit free transport to only the 'nearest available school'. The second would establish 'travel areas', based upon which is the nearest school to each home address, but adjusted so that every child in a village would have the possibility of free transport to the same school. This second option goes beyond the statutory minimum but might actually prove cheaper if it avoids the

Council having to provide free transport from opposite ends of a village to two different schools.

## **My child already receives free transport to our catchment school, although it is not the nearest school to us. Will we lose this entitlement?**

The Council is consulting on two options. The first would withdraw the entitlement after two or three years, allowing parents to plan for the withdrawal of free transport. The second option would not affect those currently in receipt of free transport and would be phased in over 5 (for secondary schools) or 7 years for primary schools; the first children to be affected under the second option would be those starting school in September 2015. Those who currently receive free transport, despite not attending their nearest school, would continue to receive it until the end of Year Six for primary school children and Year 11 for secondary school children.

## **If I applied for a place at my nearest school to get free transport but the council could not offer me a place there because it was oversubscribed, would I still be ineligible for free transport to a school further away?**

No. In this scenario, the council would offer free transport for the next nearest available school.

## **When would the new policy come into force?**

The proposal would become active in September 2015. If the move away from free transport to other than the 'nearest available school' were phased in over 5/7 years, new starters at primary and secondary schools for September 2014, would not be affected. If it was brought in over a shorter time scale then children starting in September 2014 could be affected.

## **Which schools / catchment areas would be affected by the proposal?**

Most secondary schools could be affected but the greatest *potential* negative impact would be on Matthew Arnold School, Burford School, The Warriner School, Wheatley Park School, Icknield School and Marlborough School. Other schools, most notably Carterton Community College, could be *potential* beneficiaries.

The vast majority of children across the county would not be affected by the change in policy, as for most children qualifying for free transport, the nearest school is their catchment area school.

The Council has published maps showing secondary school catchment areas and the addresses which would be affected by the proposals. Whether schools are affected will depend upon whether parents change patterns of preferences to reflect the school to which free transport will be provided rather than the school in whose catchment area they live.

## **What about families on low incomes?**

Children from low income families – i.e. those entitled to free school meals - would continue to be offered free transport to any one of the three nearest secondary schools between two and six miles from their home.

## **How many children does the council estimate will be affected in September 2015?**

It is difficult to be precise, but currently c.3,000 children are transported to other than their nearest school. We are anticipating that in its first year, the proposal to limit the schools to which free transport is provided could affect around 500 children across the county (principally in the areas identified above), out of around 10,000 children eligible for free transport in 2014. The proposed increases to the costs of concessionary fares would affect around 1300 children.

## **How much does the council estimate it will save if ceases to provide free transport to other than the 'nearest available school'?**

It is estimated the council could make an annual saving of between £1 million and £2 million after a five-year period (i.e. once the policy had become established throughout all secondary school years) as a result of an anticipated reduction in free transport provision. The actual saving will depend upon the proportion of parents who choose to send their children to other than the 'nearest available school'

## **Does the proposal mean that I can no longer choose which school I send my child to?**

No. parents will still be able to express three preferences and the council will allocate a place at the highest ranked one that can accommodate their child. If the one that is allocated is not the nearest with an available place, the council won't provide free transport.

## **So the council is changing school catchment areas, isn't it?**

No. Changes to school catchment areas can only be made as part of the annual consultation about schools' admission rules. Most secondary schools in Oxfordshire

are already academies and so are responsible for setting their own rules, including catchment areas. Catchment areas will still determine which children will be prioritised for admission, but not who is entitled to free transport. Schools will be able to change their catchment areas without committing the council to fund additional transport.

## **How will the policy change affect new schools such as free schools?**

The policy will treat all schools equally i.e. if it is the 'nearest available school' and over the statutory walking distance from a child's home, free transport will be provided. It means that new won't be obliged to have a catchment area if they have been established to serve a wide area or to provide a particularly distinctive education. A good example is the University Technical College in Didcot which will have a catchment area covering most of the south of Oxfordshire and parts of Reading and Buckinghamshire.

## **Why is the Council proposing to increase 'concessionary fares'?**

Most Home to School Transport contracts have a built in annual inflation factor of 2% but concessionary fares haven't been increased for a number of years. The proposed 10% increase for 1014-15 fares would enable fares to catch up with the increased costs to the Council.

## **So why isn't the Council proposing to increase 'concessionary fares' by 2% in future years?**

The average cost of a seat on Home to School transport costs the Council about £700 per year so 'concessionary fares' are *subsidised* fares. The two options are intended to remove, over time, this public subsidy. An annual increase of 8% would remove the public subsidy in 3 years, one of 5% in 5 years (based on the over 3 miles rate; the subsidy on shorter journeys is greater and would take much longer to remove).

## **Can I have my say on the plans?**

Yes. The easiest way to respond is by completing the online questionnaire. If you need a hard copy of the questionnaire please contact the council by telephone on 01865 815175 or email [admissions.schools@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:admissions.schools@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

The deadline for your response is Friday 20 December 2013.