

Divisions Affected -

EDUCATION & YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 22 July 2024

Overview of Home to School Transport in Oxfordshire

Report by Executive Director of People and Transformation

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Committee is **RECOMMENDED** to note the report.

Executive Summary

2. This report provides an update in relation to Home to School Transport provision at Oxfordshire County Council. This includes:
 - Current service delivery performance (spend and demand)
 - Progress update of Home to School Transport policy working group recommendations
 - Overview of the Home to School Transport Transformation Programme activity and progress to date

Home to School Transport

Home to School Transport Overview

3. Oxfordshire County Council as a local authority, has a statutory duty to provide free travel for children and young people of compulsory school age (5-16 years of age) who meet those thresholds detailed in legislation. These thresholds are set out in sections 508A, 508B, 508C, 508C and 509AD and Schedule 35B of the Education Act 1996 (as amended by Part 6 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006).
4. In accordance with the SEND Code of Practice 2014, the Travel to school for children of compulsory school age issued by the Department for Education (DfE) in January 2024, the Post 16 transport and travel support to education and training (issued by the DfE in January 2019, and aligned to the Council's Local Area Special Educational Needs and Disability Strategy, the local authority has a commitment to support children and young people to become independent. Therefore, where it is a reasonable expectation, children and young people are supported and encouraged to develop travel skills to travel to school or college independently.

5. The Council continues to support young people in Post 16 Education where travel is necessary to access their education, subject to meeting the stated eligibility thresholds detailed within the policy. Young people without an EHCP are expected to make their own travel arrangements. Currently pupils with an EHCP are not required to pay a contribution towards costs.
6. The Council does not provide free or subsidised transport to children of pre-school age (under 5 years of age) who attend nurseries or other Early Years settings, irrespective of whether they have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Travel to these settings is wholly the responsibility of a child's parent or carer.

Service Delivery & Spend

7. In Oxfordshire the total number of statutory school aged pupils is circa 100,000. The number of pupils conveyed to school every day are set out in the tables below:

Table 1. Numbers of pupils using Home to School Transport

Category of Passenger	2022/23	2023/24
Mainstream	6605	6871 (+4%)
SEND	1,162	1,428 (+19%)
Spare Seat	1105	1314
Total	8,872	9,613

(Figures for 24/25 are not yet available)

8. As demand for travel support and provision has grown spend in this area continues to grow annually.

Table 2. Annual Spend of Home to School Transport as per Supported Transport IBC

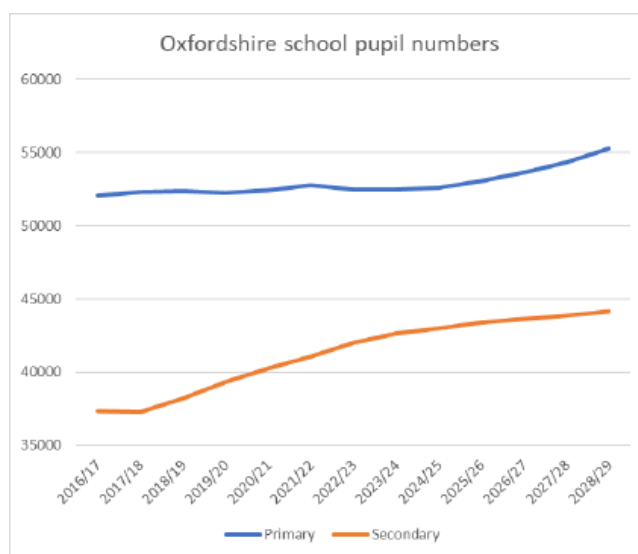
Category of Spend	2022/23 Actual £'000	2023/24 Actual £'000	2024/25 Forecast £'000
Mainstream	£8,362	£8,932	10,188*
SEND	£20,793	£25,988	28,784*
Total Spend	£29,155	£34,910	Not Available
Total Budget	£26,869	£31,797	38,971

*Budget figures as outturn figures for 24/25 are not yet available

9. SEND and Mainstream transport spend reflects the growth in passenger numbers for each category of spend.

Growth in Pupil Numbers (Demand Pressure)

10. Demand for secondary school places been growing strongly in recent years, as the earlier births boom matured.
11. Our current pupil projections show a 1.2% increase in primary pupil numbers and for secondary school pupils a 7.8% predicted rise between 2020/21 and 2025/26. Longer term, there is expected to be significant further growth due to the high levels of housing growth planned for the county.
12. Graph 1. Recent and forecast primary and secondary pupil numbers in Oxfordshire's schools.



13. Approximately 1% of the total primary school population and 2% of the total secondary school population attends special schools. Forecasting for special educational provision is more complicated than for mainstream schools. The number of pupils with Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs) has grown significantly faster than the overall population at both the Oxfordshire and national level. Nationally and locally there has been an increased dependence on independent and non-maintained schools due to a shortage of suitable maintained school places.

Home to School Transport Policy Working Group

14. The Home to School Transport Policy Working Group identified 10 recommendations with the aim of improving Home to School Transport in Oxfordshire in March 2023. In May 2023, the recommendations were presented to Cabinet. Cabinet approved 7 of the recommendations for further development and implementation.
15. The 7 approved recommendations and a summary of progress is given below:
 - Recommendation 1: The Council engage with schools regarding whether there are circumstances in which they would consider providing home to school transport for pupils entitled under the Home to School Transport

policy. **Update – Developed into business as usual process, the service works closely with Schools to facilitate transitional arrangements as well as ensuring a robust and auditable decision making process supports this.**

- Recommendation 3: The Council pilot adjusting a small number of Home to School Transport routes to fill as many unfilled spare seats as practicable. **Update – Pilot undertaken and completed December 2023. Limited success but is considered as part of business as usual operation, no savings identified (cost neutral).**
- Recommendation 4: The Council's Home to School Transport Policy be amended so that spare seat prices are commensurate with the cost of providing them, including through the introduction of further price bands which better align with the costs of different routes Amendment 4B: That a moratorium on changes to the Spare Seats Scheme is set up swiftly to allow time for the Council to address outstanding issues **Update – To implement, a policy decision is required. This initiative is being considered as part of the Home to School Transport Transformation Programme Policy Review & Update Workstream**
- Recommendation 5: The Council reassess Home to School Transport entitlement when a child begins to receive the majority of their tuition at a different site of a split-site school to that in relation to which their transport entitlement was originally assessed. The entitlement to be reevaluated when they move to the second site or at the start of their tuition, taking both sites into consideration and planning accordingly **Update - This initiative is being considered as part of the Home to School Transport Transformation Programme Policy Review & Update Workstream**
- Recommendation 6: The Council look at possible exceptions and transitional arrangements to provide spare seats to children if a new school has become the nearest available, but one or more siblings attend the previously nearest school. **Update – Agreed to continue considering cases on a case by case basis as part of business as usual.**
- Recommendation 7: That walking route safety assessments are regularly and consistently reassessed where circumstances may have changed, ensuring councillors are consulted (i.e. at localities meetings) and that data on assessments is made publicly available. Route safety assessments should also consider both short- and long-term weather conditions. **Update – Identification of routes has been completed and reassessments scheduled as part of the Home to School Transport Transformation Programme Safer Routes to School Workstream**
- Recommendation 9: Feedback from transport eligibility appeals to be used to improve digital capabilities (communications, guidance and data collection) and to improve outcomes – **This has been reviewed and incorporated into business as usual and has included a review of the existing process and information that is published.**

Home to School Transport Transformation Programme

16. To tackle the ongoing demand, financial pressures, and evolving requirements of Home to School Transport the Council has established a Transformation programme.
17. The vision of the Home to School Transport Transformation programme is to *“support children and young people to access the highest quality education provision in Oxfordshire. We will meet their needs and enable them to thrive by providing a modernised, safe, reliable, and sustainable home to school transport service.
The use of technology, joined up management information and consultation with parents will help to identify the most effective active travel infrastructure and solutions.”*
18. The objective of the programme is:
 - To manage in-year spend on home to school transport, specifically (but not exclusively) reducing the overspend.
 - To maintain good quality access to education for children in Oxfordshire
 - To promote greater independence of children & young people including those with SEND and to support preparing them for adult life.
 - Improved health and wellbeing of children through increased active travel.
19. The programme has 6 assigned workstreams. Within each workstreams are several projects that are naturally linked or dependent on one another, contributing towards to overall workstream aims and objectives, and the wider programme. The workstreams are as follows:
 - Policy Review & Update
 - Independent Travel Training
 - Safer Walking Routes to School
 - Budget and Information Management Development
 - ICT/Technology Review
 - Market Management/Development
20. Individual projects are all at different stages of delivery, where financial benefit has been identified and delivery/forecast evidenced then these spend reductions opportunities are records and tracked through to delivery. The latest position is that a £1.6m cost/spend avoidance or reduction is achievable between the period between 2024 and 2027.
21. Workstreams continue to be developed and benefits identified and confirmed. Once identified and confirmed as realistic and viable benefits they will be added to the existing benefits forecast.
22. Current benefits forecasts do not consider future demand/service growth, reflecting the opportunity and benefit if applied to existing demand and service provision. Therefore, service and demand growth will continue to apply pressure to both the service and associated budgets.

Programme Workstream Update – Policy Review & Update

Policy Review

23. Current Home to School Transport Policies have not seen significant changes for approximately 8 years and they may not reflect the current policy framework and the legislative/statutory position.
24. DfE Guidance for Home to School Transport was updated in January 2024. The programme continues to review its existing policies to ensure they continue to meet all the Council's statutory obligations, as well as reflecting the updated guidance and instruction from the DfE.
25. The policies have not been subject to public consultation for several years. Best practice suggests that policies should be consulted upon on a regular basis to ensure they remain fit for purpose and reflects the needs of the local community. It is therefore planned that following a review and refresh of the policies that these are subject to public consultation during the 2024/25 Autumn Term.
26. No decisions have been made about changes that will be proposed as part of the consultation.

Spare Seats Provision Review

27. Councils have a statutory obligation to provide travel to those children and young people who meet the agreed eligibility threshold. For those that do not meet these thresholds, the Council is under no obligation to provide any support with travel.
28. With parental choice of School encouraged by the government there is continued pressure to facilitate transport to schools that are not the nearest to a child or young persons home address, at a reasonable cost or on a cost neutral basis.
29. Conflicting priorities create a challenging environment to ensure continued support for spare seat provision remains. The programme is supporting the Council to review how existing numbers of school bus places can be maintained and, where possible, increased. Whilst continuing to work with parents, schools and bus companies to ensure continuing provision of affordable school bus places. The outcome of the review will be reported back to cabinet for discussion and guidance.
30. Currently 600 children and young people are provided use of a spare seat on a Home to School Transport service organised by Oxfordshire County Council with circa 800 expected in September 2024.
31. As the cost of transport has increased post covid due to rising inflation and cost of living pressures, the cost to the Council of providing a spare seat rise to over £1k per annum, whilst the contributions received per spare seat are:
 - Home to school journey under 3 miles - £433.40 a year (£144.47 per term)

- Home to school journey 3 miles or over - £806.30 a year (£268.77 per term)
32. In previous years the Council has been able to offer these seats without incurring additional cost. The cost-of-living crisis along with other factors have contributed to an increase in operating costs for transport providers which now means **that the existing spare seat contribution is no longer able to operate on a cost neutral basis.**
 33. Aligned to Council policy the service have been working towards mitigating the financial pressure created by the issue of spare seats by ensuring transport services arranged by the Council reflect the demand of eligible children and young people only, enabling smaller capacity vehicles and overall fewer vehicles used in the provision of home to school transport.
 34. Spare seats continue to be available where capacity exists, being offered to children and young people who do not meet that agreed Council criteria for free travel.
 35. Where the service has previously reduced the availability of Spare Seat, the Council has worked closely with these settings to establish alternative private arrangements, facilitating the set up and initial management.
 36. The reduction of capacity on Council arranged Home to School Transport services for the 2023/24 academic year affected approximately 222 children and young people at 6 different schools. Collaborative working with Schools and communities enabled 6 new private arrangements established to ensure travel options still existed for pupils at these settings.
 37. A review of these 6 services during the 2023/24 academic year identified that arrangements continued to be in operation privately for 5 of these services for the 2024/25 academic year. They continue to be commercially viable with families paying between £550 and £1,478 per annum to travel on these services.

Spare Seats – Contribution Charge Review

38. Children and young people who do not meet the agreed eligibility thresholds identified in the 5-16 Home to School Transport Policy or the Post 16 Transport Policy Statement are able to apply to use a Spare Seat on an existing service contracted by the Council, where the capacity of a transport route is not utilising the contracted full capacity for eligible children and young people.
39. The cost of using a spare seat for the 2023/2024 academic year was:
 - Home to school journey under 3 miles - £433.40 a year (£144.47 per term)
 - Home to school journey 3 miles or over - £806.30 a year (£268.77 per term)

40. As part of the review of spare seats it was agreed by Cabinet in November 2023 to apply a 5% uplift in spare seat fares for the 2024/2025 academic year. Rates for 2024/25 are:
- Home to school journey under 3 miles - £455.00 a year (£151.66 per term)
 - Home to school journey 3 miles or over - £846.60 a year (£282.20 per term)
41. This is expected to increase income and contribution towards travel costs by £35k in 2024/25. This is based on existing Spare Seat passenger numbers. However, despite increasing income this does not cover the full cost of a seat, based on existing transport costs.
42. The programme has continued to explore options to neutralise the cost implications of providing Spare Seats on Home to School Transport services, which includes increasing the contribution charge to reflect actual seat costs and remove any subsidy from the Council.
43. To enable the Spare Seat offer to operate on a cost neutral basis it has been calculated that an increase of 38.84% is necessary to the existing Spare Seat fare. This would increase the 2024/25 fares to:
- Home to school journey under 3 miles - £631.72 a year
 - Home to school journey 3 miles or over - £1,175.42 a year
 - Taking a 50/50 split of users and using the 2023/24 actual income (potential additional income could be circa £230,000)
44. Acknowledging the financial pressure on families' and the desire to continue to support parental preference work is continuing to explore other options are and will be included in the scheduled cabinet report, as previously mentioned in paragraph 29.

Programme Workstream Update - Independent Travel Training

Independent Travel Training

45. In 2023 it was agreed that the Council's existing Independent Travel Training offer should be altered with the support of an additional £300k added to the operating budget of Support Transport.
46. The purpose of the additional funding is to invest in 3 additional Travel Trainers and a Lead Travel Trainer who would manage the service as part of the support transport structure.
47. A key change to the delivery model is that the 3 Travel Trainers and the Lead Travel Trainer would take direct responsibility for the management and delivery of travel training, moving away from a School led delivery model.
48. The updated delivery model reflects suggested best practice from other local authorities. This has included close working and engagement with Gloucestershire County Council who have an established and successful Independent Travel Training programme.

49. The new Independent Travel Training model began operating under its new structure and processes in May 2024, working closely with a few select establishments.
50. Confidence is high that the approved delivery targets are achievable and a return on investment will be achieved. Table X captures the forecast delivery and targets assigned to Independent Travel Training and return on investment over a 3-year period.

	Number of Pupils Successfully Trained & Travelling Independently	Forecast Transport Cost Spend Reduction – New (Per Annum) £'000	Forecast Cumulative Transport Cost Spend Reduction (Per Annum) £'000 *	Cumulative Independent Travel Training Investment (Service / Operational Costs) £'000
2024/25	16	£184	£184	£300
2025/26	20	£230	£598	£600
2026/27	25	£288	£1,300	£900

*Table 3: *Cumulative totals include benefits over a maximum 3-year period. Individuals may benefit and travel to School/College over a longer period creating a larger benefit to the Council.*

51. It is expected that the first cohort of 6 successfully trained young people will be achieved early in the 2024/25 academic year. If successful and the programme is successfully embedded, then delivery numbers will be reviewed to explore if more young people could be successfully trained utilising the same resources.

Programme Workstream Update – Safer Routes to School

Safer Routes to School

52. As part of the Council's statutory obligations a child may be awarded travel where the walking route between home and their school is unavailable to walk, even if accompanied by an adult. Currently Oxfordshire Where a child attends their nearest School,
53. Historically routes have been assessed to determine availability to walk, accompanied by an adult if necessary. Since the initial assessments many communities have experienced significant developments which were not previously considered as the future footpath and highways network was unknown and if assessed based on the current infrastructure may indicate walking to school from a home address is a reasonable expectation and travel provision is not necessary to access their education setting.
54. In some cases, the footpath and highways network may remain unchanged, however with some investment the route may be able to be made available for walking from home to school, such as the clearing of overgrown vegetation. Because historic assessments either determined the route was available or unavailable, the option of investment to improve the footpath/highway was never considered.

55. Home to School Transport currently has 24 transport routes in place where walking routes to school are deemed unavailable. The cost of providing this transport is approximately £1.5m per annum, supporting 611 children and young people. Investing in improvements to just 7 routes to make walking routes available could reduce transport spend by approximately £400k per annum.
56. Currently reviews of unavailable walking routes are scheduled over the next 6 months, the purpose is to conduct a new review of the route to reflect the current characteristics of the route. The review will indicate which routes should have their status changed to available to walk, where they are unavailable still it will also indicate what investment is necessary to make the route available.
57. Each route that has potential to be re-classified as “available” will be discussed with the affected school to explore the impact of this status change and develop a plan to encourage behaviour change that will encourage a change of travel mode for families and pupils. Engagement will then follow with families enabled sufficient time to become accustomed to changing travel arrangements from an arranged vehicle to an alternative travel option.

Programme Workstream Update – Budget and Information Management Development

Management Dashboard & Systems Audit/Review

58. Effective use of information is key to understanding the performance levels of the service. Cross directorate working and use of multiple systems, databases and information sources make this a challenging aspect of the operation.
59. The programme has identified a need for improved use and management of information across the service and directorates in relation to Home to School Transport and is working with finance and ICT to improve this aspect of the service.
60. The aim is to have accurate analysis available to effectively manage the service and understand potential variations in demand and spend.
61. Work is currently underway to identify and rationalise the number of information sources, and to develop processes and controls to ensure high data quality and accuracy.
62. The objective is to create a series of dashboards which enable both high level management/oversight and the ability to examine and scrutinise the detail behind the service to explain service forecast changes and early identification of trend/pattern changes.
63. No financial benefits have been identified and it is as yet unconfirmed what investment is required to deliver this workstream. Successful delivery will enable more effective management of the service, improved forecasting, and better understanding (council wide) of Home to School Transport.

Programme Workstream Update – ICT/Technology Review

Route Optimisation

64. Officers responsible for planning travel arrangements have been reliant on their excellent knowledge and understanding of the local road network and of individual passenger needs. Although excellent route planners, existing technology, and access to information results in a prolonged planning period.
65. The Home to School Transport Programme is exploring and piloting the use of Route Planning tools to complement the existing Officers skills and knowledge to speed up the planning process, improve route planning outcomes (consistency), and have the ability to explore and test alternative solutions before deciding on the optimal travel options that uses Council's resources effectively and takes into account the varying needs and circumstances of individual passengers.
66. An initial pilot using a route planning tool on an existing transport arrangement that currently uses 8 vehicles was reviewed and numerous solutions were generated, reviewed, and adjusted. The tool enables to complete these tasks quickly to create a final viable solution which required 1 less route. The average cost of transport from this network was £80k per annum.
67. The pilot is being extended to explore the benefit of using a route planning tool on SEND transport routes to determine if time and cost efficiency benefits can be achieved on routes which often have more travel requirements that require consideration and accommodating.
68. So far, the service has invested £14k to pilot the concept and use of a route planning tool, it has already identified route planning efficiency of approximately £80k following a successful tender of the agreed solution. Therefore, a return on investment has already been achieved.
69. Ongoing access to a Route Planning Tool will be considered by the programme, if agreed then approval will be sought via the appropriate governance route. It is anticipated that approximately £25k investment will be necessary annually to ensure officers have access to a suitable route planning tool. Reducing (or avoiding) transport provision of just 1 route annually would generate sufficient income to cover any additional cost to the Council.
70. Service wide benefits are currently unconfirmed at this stage but are being explored and evidenced. Analysis will inform the programmes benefit forecast and tracking and contribute to ongoing delivery of reduced/avoided transport spend.

Programme Workstream Update – Market Management/Development

Route Efficiency Programme

71. The service reviews a number of high cost and single occupancy routes on a monthly basis. The purpose is to determine whether the cost of the route reflects typical market rates, and/or whether the level of support (the route) continues to be required.

72. The focus and highlighting of high support/cost routes has enabled officers to examine the history and detail of each route to determine if it is currently an effective use of resources and whether alternative arrangements/travel options could be considered.
73. Over a 3 month period officers have reduced the daily cost of 12 routes. This has reduced the combined forecast spend of these 12 routes by £98k annually.
74. Monthly reviews of routes will continue, challenging historic arrangements and pricing to ensure there is an efficient use of resources and constructive challenge back to the market place.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

75. The programme continues to support the delivery of key principles identified in the County Council's Corporate Plan, providing benefit to both service users and the wider community.
76. Multiple links to the Corporate Plan are associated with most of the workstreams and include:
 - **Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work** – efficient use of travel resources, exploration and use of greener travel, and promotion and encouragement of active travel.
 - **Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents** – through the development and encouragement of independent travel and promotion of active travel.
 - **Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network** – review and development of transport network solutions through robust planning to create inclusive and sustainable travel in and around Schools and their communities within the available resources and infrastructure available.
 - **Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential** – central to the programme by supporting the service to effectively enable access to education in a safe environment so young people are ready to learn and maximise their development opportunities.

Financial Implications

77. The financial implications of the programme are set out in the report above, and include a forecast of £1.6m of cost avoidance or reductions over the period 2024/25 to 2026/27, but it must be noted that these haven't at this stage most of these haven't been realised as they relate to future activities.
78. At this stage however this not expected to have an impact on future budget allocations agreed as part of previous budgets as the Home to School Transport

Programme has the aim of managing increases in spend of Home to School Transport services.

79. It is also acknowledged that for the foreseeable future service demand growth will continue, therefore the benefits identified and delivered through the programme will work towards mitigating and reducing the impact of this growth.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

80. No legal implications have been identified at this stage of delivery for each workstream.
81. Legal Services are engaged from time to time for advice where required, or at the point where the Council seeks to contract with service providers for delivery of home to school transport. This is to ensure compliance with applicable legislation including Procurement and Subsidy law, and to ensure that legal obligations are met and the risk of challenge is minimised.

Comments checked by:

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Staff Implications

82. There are no planned staffing implications as part of the programme's activities at this stage.
83. Where workstreams and individual projects identify a potential staff implication, then this will be included in the design phase of each project and will be included in any business case that is produced.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

84. No new Equality and Inclusion implications have been identified with statutory duties continuing to be met through the existing Home to School Transport policies and service delivery. The policy continues to meet the requirements of the 2014 SEND code of practice and other legislative frameworks.

Sustainability Implications

85. No sustainability implications to report at this stage.

Risk Management

86. The Home to School Transport Transformation Programme continually identifies and reviews risks that may impact both the deliver programmes vision and objectives and the successful delivery of the service.
87. The Home to School Transport Transformation Programme Board meet monthly and consider risks associated to the programme, updating risk ratings and agreeing necessary mitigation.
88. The Board also considers whether it is necessary to escalate specific risks as part of its monitoring role. This will include the identification of where specific risks should be escalated, and support in identifying (and securing) required specialist resource.

Consultations

89. No consultations have taken place as part of the programmes work to date, with no significant changes to either service delivery or policy being made.
90. Where programme identified potential changes in terms of service delivery and/or alterations to policy then consideration will be given in relation to the undertaking of a consultation. The programme will seek advice and guidance on the need to consult on specific developments within the Home to School Transport Transformation programme from legal service and democratic services.
91. As previously mentioned in paragraph 24, the existing home to school transport policies are being reviewed to ensure of ongoing compliance and consistency with recently updated DfE guidance. Options are also being developed which may present a change to existing provision, which may require consultation.
92. Due to the existing policies last being consulted several years ago and the potential identification of possible alterations to the service, it is expected that Home to School Transport policies will be consulted upon, during the early part of the 2024/25 academic year (autumn term). Consultation feedback will be with Cabinet.

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Annex:	Nil
Background papers:	Nil
[Other Documents:]	Nil

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July 2024