

# **Analysis of the responses to the consultation on the proposed changes to the Home to School Transport Policy (2015)**

## **1. Introduction**

### **Background**

- 1.1 In 2012-13 Oxfordshire County Council spent over £15 million on home to school transport, part of which was met from grants resulting in a net cost of £14.7 million. The decision to review the discretionary elements within the policy was made in the light of the current difficult financial situation in the UK; the continuing impact this will have on local government finances, and the need to ensure that Oxfordshire County Council's Home to School Transport Policy is equitable.
- 1.2 Between 5 June 2013 and 15 July 2013 the Council conducted a consultation on changes to the policy on home to school transport. However, following the withdrawal of the Department for Education's Guidance on Travel and Transport in June 2013, and the response to the consultation, at its meeting on 16 July 2013 the Cabinet decided that it was not appropriate to make a decision on policy changes at that time. The Cabinet further decided that a new consultation on possible changes to the policy on home to school transport would be required in the autumn. The scope of the new consultation was decided at a Cabinet meeting on 16 September 2013.
- 1.3 This report on the analysis of the responses to the consultation on the proposed changes to the Home to School Transport Policy (2015) is split into two parts:  
  
Part 1: Analysis of the consultation forms  
Part 2: Analysis of all qualitative comments submitted
- 1.4 When considering this analysis, it should be noted that those who responded were self-selecting and therefore the responses received cannot be considered representative of the views of the public, parents or other stakeholders in general. The consultation has a large response and around 600 people took the time to attend one of more of the public meetings. This provides a good indication of the strength and nature of the concerns of interested parties.
- 1.5 Oxfordshire County Council is grateful to all those who participated in the consultation.

## **2. Methodology**

### **Approach**

- 2.1 The consultation on the Council's proposals to change its Home to School Transport Policy took place between 4 November 2013 and 14 January 2014. The consultation process was launched in the media, on the county Council website, via digital channels and direct communications to stakeholders. The consultation consisted of documents were placed on the County Council's public website and

were accessible through the online Consultation Portal. Links to the documents were sent to all state funded schools in Oxfordshire as well as to neighbouring local authorities, the Oxford Diocese, the Archdiocese of Birmingham, district Councils in Oxfordshire, and parish Councils within Oxfordshire.

- 2.2 The consultation was publicised online, via press releases, through adverts placed in local newspapers and posters sent to libraries and town and parish Councils. In addition two letters were posted to 8,400 families that had one or more children either in receipt of free or concessionary transport to inform them of the consultation.
- 2.3 Background materials to support the consultation were published on the Consultation Portal. This included a series of maps and a set of frequently asked questions, which were periodically updated throughout the consultation period. The Council provided channels through which people could ask questions or request hard copy documents. In addition, the Council hosted ten public meetings between 11 November and 11 December 2013 (the schedule is posted on the consultation portal). These meetings provided interested parties with an opportunity to hear a presentation from the Council and to ask questions of Council representatives to help inform their response to the consultation itself.

## Response

- 2.4 While the consultation was open to anyone to respond on the Council’s website, as set out above, the Council specifically sought to raise the profile of the exercise amongst those people who might be most affected by the proposals.

Overall the Council received 2,543 responses to the consultation.

The breakdown of consultation responses is as follows:

<b>Format</b>	<b>Number</b>
Oxfordshire County Council online questionnaires	1,916
Postal responses (including letters and hard copy questionnaires)	402
‘Kennington’ hard copy forms (345) ‘Kennington Chronicle’ hard copy forms (21) ‘Garsington Primary School’ hard copy forms (23)	
Email responses sent to Oxfordshire County Council <a href="mailto:transport.consultation@oxfordshire.gov.uk">transport.consultation@oxfordshire.gov.uk</a>	225

- 2.5 On 28 January 2014, Oxfordshire County Council’s Cabinet received a petition organised by the Oxon School Bus Action Group. The petition has 4,087 signatures and asks for the withdrawal of the Proposed Home to School Transport Consultation.

*‘Dear Oxfordshire County Council, we demand the immediate withdrawal of the Proposed Home to School Transport Consultation (2015) on the grounds that it will not deliver any guaranteed savings, it is unfair and inequitable.’*

- 2.6 Copies of the full consultation responses (with personal information redacted as appropriate) and the petition have been placed in the Members' Resource Centre for all councillors to review.

### **Analysis**

- 2.7 All consultation responses have been read, analysed and written up by Council officers in the Chief Executive's Office and in the School Admissions and Transport Team. All qualitative comments (those responses to open ended questions on the consultation form) and the content of letters and emails have been logged. This was done by reading the comments then coding these to identify frequently occurring themes. Where respondents commented on different aspects of the proposals in a letter or email, or made comments covering several different themes on their consultation response form, this has been taken into account.
- 2.8 The numbers presented in this report are actual numbers or percentages and have not been weighted. Not all respondents chose to answer each question on the consultation form so care must be taken to note the response base should any of the analysis figures be quoted.

## Part 1: Analysis of the consultation forms

Part 1 of this report sets out an analysis of the responses to the consultation forms. This includes the online and hard copy forms provided by Oxfordshire County Council and also the hard copy forms from Kennington village (including the form published in the Kennington Chronicle) and the forms distributed by Garsington Primary School. Although these forms may have been prefaced by a 'local perspective' on the proposals presented, the questions on the form were similar in format. Copies of all the consultation forms are included as an annex to this report.

The Council put forward options under four headings for changing its policy on home to school transport: which school; when should changes be introduced, concessionary fares, and collaborative transport arrangements. In the case of the first three headings the vast majority of respondents opted for 'none' or 'neither'. A majority supported the proposal to remove references to this.

### Respondent profile

Nearly all respondents (92%) to the consultation forms identified themselves as members of the public and nearly 966 respondents said that a child or children in their household currently receives free or subsidised Home to School Transport from Oxfordshire County Council.

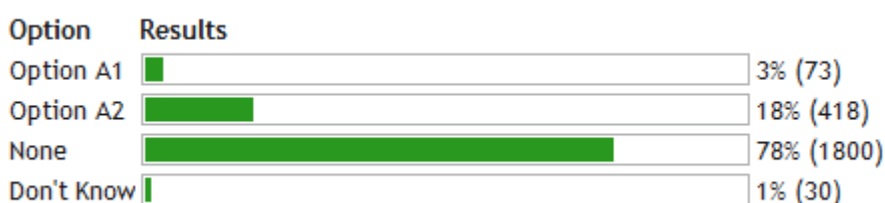
Some stakeholders chose to submit their response using the consultation form, of these 42 respondents said they were a local councillor – either town/parish, district or county councillor, 50 said they were a representative of an early years setting or school, 12 said they were a representative of a group of organisation and 121 replied 'other'.

### Section A: To which school(s) should free travel be provided?

There were two proposed options for changing to which school(s) free travel should be provided.

#### Q1. Which of these options do you prefer?

(Base: 2,321 responses)



A significant majority of respondents (78%) opposed the two options set-out in the consultation. A minority (1 in five) specified a preferred option; 3% chose option A1 and 18% chose option A2.

## **Option A1:**

### **Provide free transport to the nearest available school only**

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 may not necessarily be one of the three preferred schools chosen by families on the application form, but it is the only school to which they would be entitled to free transport.

This option:

- Is the 'statutory minimum' that the Council can provide
- Is estimated over time to save the Council between £1 million and £2 million per year
- Reduces the financial risk to the Council from additional transport costs caused by schools changing their admission arrangements.

## **Option A2:**

### **Provide free transport to the nearest available school but introduce adjustments to the policy to avoid splitting villages**

This is the nearest school to a child's home address at which a place could be given when school places were allocated. However, children living in a particular 'travel area' would have a defined school to which free transport could be provided. For most children this would be the nearest school but for a minority, this could also be to the second nearest school – for instance, where opposite ends of a village are nearest to different schools. We would be particularly interested in local views - please use the comments box to refer to named villages.

The school may not necessarily be one of the three preferred schools chosen by families on the application form, but it is the only school where they would be entitled to free transport.

This option:

- Is slightly more generous than the 'statutory minimum' that the Council can provide
- Is estimated over time to save the Council between £1 million and £2 million per year
- Reduces the financial risk to the Council having to meet additional transport costs caused by schools changing their admission arrangements.

## **Comments**

968 respondents put forward comments to support their response, with 747 of these being put forward by those respondents who opposed both options. Several people gave comments on more than one theme and the analysis takes this into account of this – this is the case for all open-ended comments sections on the feedback form.

By far the most frequently occurring theme was for the Council to 'use just catchment areas not nearest school' as the grounds for the provision of free home to school transport (392 mentions). This was followed by concerns about the proposals splitting villages/communities, ignoring links with current feeder primary schools and/or undermining choice.

<b>Themes (50+ mentions)</b> <i>(Base: 968 responses)</i>	<b>Total number of mentions</b>
Use just catchment not nearest for free transport	392
Split villages/communities	198
Ignoring links with current feeder primary schools	155
Undermining parental/ child choice	116
Safety concerns	98
Do not think savings are accurate	92
More traffic and congestion on roads/ environmental impact	86
Will split families that currently have children at school	84
Disadvantage low income families	79
Disadvantage rural families	69
Don't change anything	56

### **Alternative suggestions**

#### **Q2. If you have an alternative suggestion, please put it in the box below.**

In total, 1,044 people put forward an alternative suggestion to the two options..

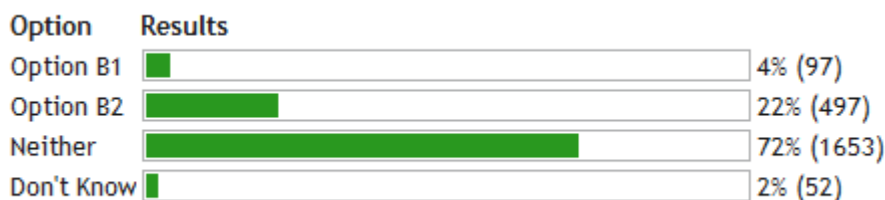
Around three-quarters of respondents to this question (706 respondents) put forward the suggestion for free Home to School Transport to be provided to catchment schools not just nearest school' this was followed by a request for the Council to define 'Transport Area' mentioned by 149 respondents and 92 people asking for the Council to maintain the status quo. All other themes received fewer than 50 mentions and no further suggestions for an alternative countywide policy to the 'catchment school proposition' was put forward.

#### **Section B: When should the policy change be implemented?**

There were two proposed options for when the proposed policy change for the provision of free transport within the Home to School Transport Policy should be implemented.

### Q3. Which of these options do you prefer?

(Base: 2,297 responses)



Again a significant majority of respondents (72%) opposed the two options set-out in the consultation. A minority (just over a quarter) specified a preferred option with 4% choosing option B1 and 22% choosing option B2.

#### Option B1:

**Introduce the new policy from September 2015 for all children starting primary school or transferring to secondary school and change the entitlement for all other children in September 2017, including those currently in receipt of free travel.**

- Parents expressing preferences for school places in September 2015 would be able to take account of whether free transport would be provided when making their choice.
- Parents of children currently in receipt of free travel would have time to prepare for having to pay for this if their children are not attending their nearest school.
- This option would enable the maximum saving to be made from September 2017.

#### Option B2:

**Introduce the new policy from September 2015 for children starting primary school or transferring to secondary school and phase the policy change in year by year as children start schools. Children in receipt of free travel to the school they currently attend would not be affected by the policy change.**

- Parents expressing preferences for school places in September 2015 would be able to take account of whether free transport would be provided when making their choice.
- Parents of children currently entitled to free transport would be unaffected.
- This option would enable the maximum saving to be made from September 2019 for secondary aged children and September 2021 for primary aged children.

#### Comments

1,190 respondents put forward comments to support their response.

Of those responding a large number requested the Council maintain its the current position (368 mentions) and/or placed doubt over the proposed savings put forward 'do not think savings are accurate' (304 mentions). The next most frequently occurring theme focussed on concern that the introduction of the proposals would be disruptive/detrimental to

children's education. All comments with 50 or more mentions are set out in the table below.

<b>Themes (50+ mentions)</b> <i>(Base: 1,190 responses)</i>	<b>Number of mentions</b>
Don't change anything	368
Do not think savings are accurate	304
Disruptive/Detrimental to children's education	178
Will split families that currently have children at school	138
Undermining parental/ child choice	134
Ignoring Catchment areas	114
Disadvantage low income families	104
Phase in any changes	104
Ignoring links with current feeder primary schools	66
Disadvantage rural families	52

### **Alternative suggestions**

#### **Q4. If you have an alternative suggestion, please put it in the box below.**

In total, 723 respondents put forward comments in the box asking for an alternative suggestion to the three options proposed.

No alternative suggestions were put forward. 98 people requested that the Council phase in any agreed changes and 62 people requested the Council not to make any changes. A majority people responding to this question used it as another opportunity to share their view that proposals should focus on catchment areas not nearest school (536 mentions).

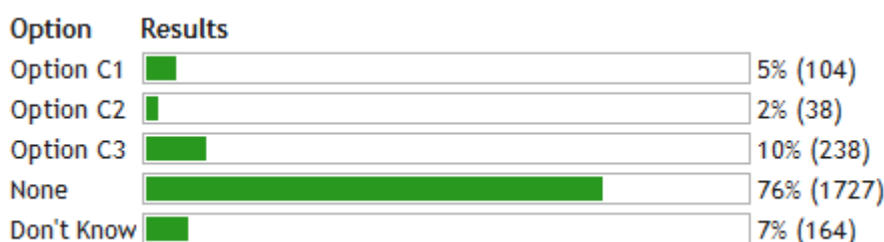


## Section C: Concessionary Fares Scheme

There were three proposed options for changing the Concessionary Fares Scheme within the Home to School Transport Policy.

### Q5. Which of these options do you prefer?

(Base: 2,271 responses)



#### Option C1:

**From September 2014, to introduce a 10% increase in the price of concessionary fares and post-16 fares to £290.40 for those who live under three miles from the school attended and to £541.20 for those who live over three miles from the school attended.**

- This increase in fares would reduce the overall amount Oxfordshire County Council subsidises the concessionary fares scheme by at least £18,000 in 2014/15 only. This option would not reduce year on year the amount of subsidy from the Council.
- This would involve ending the current practice of charging the lower fare to post16 travellers who live in a school's catchment area. Post16 and those in younger year groups would all be charged according to the distance travelled.

#### Option C2:

**From September 2015 to increase concessionary and post-16 fares by 8% per year for the next three years**

- This on-going increase would reduce the amount Oxfordshire County Council has to subsidise the concessionary fares scheme year on year by £14,000 per year from September 2015.
- Assuming an increase to £290.40 in 2014, fares for those living less than 3 miles from the school/college attended would increase to £313.63 in 2015, £338.72 in 2016 and £365.82 in 2017.
- Assuming an increase to £541.20 in 2014, fares for those living over 3 miles from the school/college attended would increase to £584.50 in 2015, £631.26 in 2016 and £681.76 in 2017.

### **Option C3:**

#### **From September 2015, to increase concessionary and post-16 fares by 5% each year for the next five years**

- This on-going increase would reduce the amount Oxfordshire County Council has to subsidise the concessionary fares scheme year on year by £9,000 per year from September 2015.
- Assuming an increase to £290.40 in 2014, fares for those living under 3 miles from the school/college attended would increase to £304.92 in 2015, £320.17 in 2016, £336.18 in 2017, £352.99 in 2018 and £370.64 in 2019.
- Assuming an increase to £541.20 in 2014, fares for those living over 3 miles from the school/college attended would increase to £568.26 in 2015, £596.67 in 2016, £626.51 in 2017, £657.83 in 2018 and £690.72 in 2019.

### **Comments**

601 respondents put forward comments to support their response. The largest number of comments focussed on the potential for the proposals put forward to disadvantage specific groups:

- Disadvantage over-16s (188 mentions)
- Disadvantage rural families (132 mentions)
- Disadvantage based on income (78 mentions) - low income families (44 mentions) / working / middle earning families (34 mentions)

89 respondents requested that the Council continue free/reduced transport for Post-16 when education is compulsory. All other comments received 34 or fewer mentions.

#### **Q6. If you have an alternative suggestion, please put it in the box below**




In total, 606 respondents put forward comments in the box asking for an alternative suggestion to the three options proposed.

A majority of these comments called for 'frozen or reduced fares for catchment students (359 mentions) or for 'continued free/reduced transport for Post-16 children when education is compulsory' (294 mentions). All other themes identified received 26 or fewer mentions. Forty respondents called for the Council to main the status quo 'do not change anything.'

**Section D: Collaborative Learning Transport**

**Q7. What are your views on the proposal to remove references to Collaborative Learning Transport from Oxfordshire County Council’s Home to School Transport Policy?**

*(Base: 2,179 responses)*

Option	Results
Agree	 58% (1254)
Disagree	 15% (330)
Don't Know	 27% (595)

Around 3 in 5 respondents to this question (58%) agreed that references to Collaborative Learning Transport should be removed from Oxfordshire County Council Home to School Transport Policy. 179 respondents provided comments to support their response, many of these focussed on collaborative learning itself and other aspects of learning rather than whether or not this reference should remain in the policy. A number of people commented on its relevance or required more information/clarification on collaborative learning and/or collaborative learning transport.

**Section E: General Comments**

The consultation form provided an opportunity for respondents to make general comments about the proposed changes to the Home to School Transport Policy. In this section, the Council prompted people to consider if they wished to comment on the impact of the proposed changes on different groups of people and in particular the nine ‘protected characteristics’ specifically referenced in the Equality Act 2010:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Maternity and pregnancy
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

**Q8. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about the proposed changes to the Home to School Transport policy?**

In total, 758 respondents choose to make comments in this section. Comments submitted clustered by themes are shown in the table below. As before, several people gave comments on more than one theme and the analysis takes account of this.

Some respondents used this section to reiterate their concerns expressed elsewhere on the consultation form. The key themes emerging (with more than 100 mentions) were the potential of the proposals to disadvantage different groups of people and in particular 'rural families', under 16's, and low income families – only one of these directly correlates to a protected characteristic (age) under the Equalities Act 2010.

There was a sizeable call to continue free/reduced transport for post-16 children when this is compulsory, and concerns that 'choice' would be under minded. For many a view was expressed that the savings presented by the Council were not accurate. Finally there was a perception amongst some that there would be a negative impact on traffic and travel and the environment, including an increase in parents using their own car (16 mentions).

<b>Theme</b> (Base: 758 responses)	<b>Number of mentions</b>
Disadvantage rural families	335
Safety concerns	257
Disadvantage over-16s	229
Continue free/reduced transport for Post-16 when compulsory	231
Disadvantage low income families	128
Undermining parental/ child choice	111
Do not think savings are accurate	107
More traffic and congestion on roads/ environmental impact	90
Split villages/communities	61
Find other ways to cut budget/make savings	57
Will split families that currently have children at school	54
Disruptive/Detrimental to children's education	48
Exclude SEN children from any changes	22

Table continued /

Consider pressure put on schools to accommodate new students	21
Parent would use car rather than school bus	16
Consultation meetings weren't very helpful	12
Unfair to religious/atheist whose nearest school does not accommodate those needs	4
Stop subsidising concessionary transport	4
Tell central government - savings not possible	3
Stop using taxis to transport children	3
Adopted children should receive free transport	3
Reduce Council staffing. Cuts for high earners	2
Means tested transport costs	2
Completely agree with proposals	2
Any increase of travel fees damage free choice to faith schools	2
City dwellers disadvantaged	2
Disadvantage military families	2
Parents should be asked for a voluntary transport contribution towards the cost	1
Just an excuse to re-align catchment, to get more students into poorer performing schools	1
Share bus journeys with neighbouring schools	1
Stop benefit fraud	1
Transport to faith schools should be paid by the church	1
Find better value transport	1
Funding for school transport should come from central government	1
Lack of local public transport	1
Cut children's centres instead	1

## Part 2: Analysis of all qualitative comments submitted

An analysis of all the qualitative comments submitted as part of the consultation has been undertaken. This includes all comments provided in written format, including emails, letters and consultation forms.

In total, 8,627 comments have been recorded. The table below presents the number of mentions by theme. Each of the themes identified in the table below has an accompanying officer response. This is set out in a separate document also published on the consultation portal.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Mention</b>
Use just catchment not nearest for free transport	1537
Disadvantage rural families	811
Ignoring links with current feeder primary schools	464
Safety concerns	449
Continue free/reduced transport for Post-16 when compulsory	440
More traffic and congestion on roads/ environmental impact	388
Ignoring Catchment areas	382
Disadvantage low income families	382
Undermining parental/ child choice	345
Do not think savings are accurate	311
Frozen or reduced fares for catchment students	283
Will split families that currently have children at school	264
Split villages/communities	249
Define Transport Areas	240
Disruptive/Detrimental to children's education	207
Disadvantage over-16s	166
Continue transport for up-coming siblings	142
OCC should not pay for transport to centrally funded schools/academies	107

Table continued /

All school transport should be free	103
More buses will be needed, increasing costs	98
Find other ways to cut budget/make savings	89
Don't change anything	85
Consider pressure put on schools to accommodate new students	71
Update or change catchment areas	68
Transport should be determined by schools	63
More investment on improving 'safe walking routes/cycle ways'	61
Exclude SEN children from any changes	42
Consider people living on county boundaries	42
Phase in any changes	41
Increase in charges should be linked to RPI	40
Free public bus pass should be given to local teenagers	38
Flat fee should be introduced for sixth form transport	35
Parent would use car rather than school bus	34
Don't completely understand what is being said/ Need more time	32
Disadvantage rural/smaller schools, may have to close	30
Build a new School	29
Changes unfairly favour children on FSM/benefits	28
Should include nearest co-ed school	26
Find better value transport	25
Should only use driving route for determining transport	25
Should be nearest in-county	24
Raise Council Tax	23

Table continued /

Reduce Council staffing. Cuts for high earners	21
Consultation meetings weren't very helpful	20
Parents should be asked for a voluntary transport contribution towards the cost	18
Comparing a free school to a state school	18
Just an excuse to re-align catchment, to get more students into poorer performing schools	18
Pay enough in tax already	17
Stop using taxis to transport children	13
Collaborative Learning is effective and should remain	13
Unfair to religious/atheist whose nearest school does not accommodate those needs	13
Means tested transport costs	12
Remove all catchment areas and consider just on distance	11
Lack of local public transport	11
Tell central government - savings not possible	10
Stop free transport for pensioners	10
Completely agree with proposals	10
Share bus journeys with neighbouring schools	9
Give transport to 1 of the 2 or 3 nearest schools	9
School bus should cost no more than a public bus fare	7
Increase millage allowance for parents	5
Any increase of travel fees damage free choice to faith schools	5
Stop benefit fraud	4
Transport to faith schools should be paid by the church	4
Charge monthly for concessionary charges	4
Stop subsidising concessionary transport	3



Table continued /

Funding for school transport should come from central gov	3
Buy and run own school coaches	3
Charge more for under 3 miles and less for over 3 miles	3
Stop freedom of choosing a religious based school	3
Distance should be from bus stop not home	3
Build a new secondary School	3
Unable to give time to current school as governor or similar	3
Happy to pay more for transport to school	3
Seek sponsorship from private sector for transport	3
Adopted children should receive free transport	2
City dwellers disadvantaged	2
Any change would need to be reviewed, ongoing	2
Just a money making scheme	2
Cut children's centres instead	1
There should be no free transport	1
Small charge of £2.50 to be made for all children receiving transport	1
Only introduce changes to West Oxon	1
Disadvantage military families	1
Minority groups should not be offered specialised transport	1
Use post 16 costs to fund rural routes	1

Annex 1: Oxfordshire County Council Consultation document

Annex 2: 'Kennington' hard copy forms

Annex 3 'Kennington Chronicle' hard copy forms

Annex 4 'Garsington Primary School' hard copy forms