

## **Officer responses to comments expressed in the consultation**

### **Safety of children**

No children will be required to undertake an unsafe journey to school. If they attend their nearest (qualifying) school, and it is over the statutory walking distance, free home to school transport will be provided. If the nearest school is under the statutory walking distance, but there is no safe walking route, free home to school transport will be provided. All home to school transport has to comply with all relevant road vehicle safety requirements

If a child attends a school to which there is no entitlement to free transport it remains the parents' responsibility to ensure, insofar as they are able, that the journey to and from school is undertaken in a safe manner.

### **Ignoring links with current feeder primary schools**

The benefits of primary and secondary schools working together are acknowledged although there are already numerous examples where children attending a particular primary school transfer to a number of secondary schools. Feeder relationships are not immutable and these do change over time in response to circumstances, including changes in patterns of parental 'choice' and an assessment of the benefits to be derived from new partnership arrangements. We already have an example of an 'umbrella trust' of five primary schools which straddle two long standing existing school partnerships.

### **Ignoring Catchment areas**

Catchment areas will not be affected by any of the proposed changes to the home to school transport policy, and will continue to perform their primary purpose of determining which children will be prioritised for admission to schools when they are oversubscribed. Some schools already attract significant numbers of children from out of their catchment area e.g. Burford (28%), Didcot Girls' (29%), Bartholomew (34%), Gillotts (29%) [first allocations for 2013], not all of whom attend feeder primary schools.

The majority of secondary schools' catchment areas are no longer determined by the Council as academies (including University Technical Colleges and Free Schools) set their own admissions arrangements. Under the current home to school transport policy an academy can confer an entitlement to free transport over as wide an area as it wishes to set as its catchment area; that for the Didcot UTC will cover the whole of southern Oxfordshire stretching from Thame to Faringdon and Oxford to Sonning Common.

### **Will split families that currently have children at school**

It is possible that a minority of the families that currently have children receiving free transport, might have children going to more than one school if they choose to send their younger child(ren) to their nearest school. Of the 10,000 or so mainstream children in receipt of free transport, about 3,000 don't attend their nearest school.

Although affected families might prefer it if their children attended the same secondary school (by definition, if they are a mix of primary and secondary ages, they already attend different schools), if the schools in question are over the statutory walking distance, free transport will be provided to both.

### **All school transport should be free**

There is currently no entitlement to free home to school transport for post-16 pupils attending school sixth forms or Further Education colleges. Those aged under 16 are only entitled to free home to school transport in certain defined circumstances; the minimum that the law requires is that free transport be provided to the nearest 'available' school. To extend free transport to post-16 students and to those under 16 who are currently not entitled to receive this for free, would incur significant additional expenditure at a time when the Council is having to make significant savings.

### **More cars and congestion on roads/ environmental impact**

If, as predicted, many parents continue to 'choose' to send their children to schools to which there is no entitlement to free transport, it is possible that there will be an increase in car journeys; this was predicted when it was proposed that the Council cease to provide free transport from Bicester to Blessed George Napier Catholic School (granted on faith grounds). However, in response to the decision so to do, parents and the school worked with officers to procure alternative collective transport funded by the parents.

The Council is committed to working with parents and schools in order to identify and put in place alternative sustainable home to school transport arrangements, including assistance with procuring coaches and collaborating with public bus companies to improve services. The Council can't force parents to not use their cars for the 'school run' but if parents are interested in alternatives the Council will be an enthusiastic partner.

### **Remove all catchment areas and consider just on distance**

This is the central proposal of the home to school transport consultation. As well as anticipated savings once fully implemented, a 'nearest school' policy safeguards the Council against future cost pressures from the creation of new schools and changes to the catchment areas of existing ones.

### **More investment on improving 'safe walking routes/cycle ways'**

Although not part of the consultation on home to school transport, there is a parallel 'Supported Transport Programme' looking at all the transport in Oxfordshire to which the Council makes a financial contribution. Investment in improved walking and cycling routes could have a number of benefits for the Council and pupils/citizens.

Where there is no safe walking route for home to nearest school journeys of under the statutory walking distance, the Council has to provide free transport. Creating a

safe walking route would enable the transport to be discontinued whilst providing pupils and others with a safe, healthy lifestyle alternative.

The Council will look sympathetically at investments which produce long term savings and benefits.

### **Disadvantage to low income families**

The lowest income families, those (currently) in receipt of Free School Meals, will continue to benefit from the 'extended rights to free transport' which provides free travel to any of the three nearest schools between two and six miles from home; the savings modelling published on the Council's website assumes that FSM pupils will continue to attend more distant catchment schools, so reducing the potential savings.

The families likely to be most affected by a 'nearest school' policy are those just above the eligibility threshold for FSM, for whom the cost of transport to enable their children to attend a more distant catchment school may be unaffordable. In the same way as the Council waives concessionary fares for low income families, it would be possible for groups of parents or schools which make alternative collective transport arrangements, to implement schemes which waive part of the cost for those who would otherwise be unable to afford to pay for transport.

For post-16 pupils there are the hardship funds operated by schools and colleges (for which they receive funding) and these can be used to subsidise transport where this is a barrier to accessing education.

### **Build a new secondary school**

There are currently a significant number of spare places in Oxfordshire's secondary schools, albeit not in those experiencing the greatest demand from parents. However, the Council has secured funding to expand Bartholomew School, Eynsham, a popular and outstanding school. In anticipation of larger numbers of children leaving primary schools the Council is already in discussion with a number of headteachers about how best to ensure that total secondary school capacity keeps ahead of the growing demand for school places.

Although no new secondary schools are planned for existing communities, it is possible that proposals for new Free Schools and specialist academies (University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools) may be put forward by new or existing providers.

A number of large scale housing developments are scheduled to have new secondary schools: South West Bicester and the Bicester Eco Town, Great Western Park, Didcot (two, a UTC and an 11 - 16 school) and Grove Airfield.

### **Update or change catchment areas**

The majority of Oxfordshire secondary schools are academies and, combined with existing trust and Church Aided schools, this means that the Council will soon be

responsible for setting only 7 out of 34 secondary school catchment areas; the rest will be set by the individual schools. Although a number of contributors to the consultation have suggested changing catchment areas, there has been little sign that schools would wish to do so.

It is unclear how, other than by reducing schools' catchment areas to be more similar to 'nearest school areas', that savings on the current home to school transport policy would be made; such a change to catchment areas would, as well as reducing some entitlements to free home to school transport, also reduce some parents' chances of having their choice of school being met as most schools give a high priority to children living in their defined catchment area. A further complication arises as new schools come into existence and would need to 'carve off' parts of other schools' catchment areas to create their own.

### **Define Transport Areas**

It would be possible to define 'transport areas', but if these were coterminous with current catchment areas, current entitlements to free transport and the associated costs to the Council would, at least in the short term, be frozen i.e. they wouldn't deliver savings. Transport areas would have to be kept constantly under review and could be subject to annual changes as new schools come into existence as each would need a defined 'travel area'. It would, almost certainly, be unlawful (and therefore be vulnerable to expensive legal challenge) to treat new schools differently from those which currently exist.

### **Use just catchment not nearest**

This would be unlawful as it would not be compliant with the statutory requirement that free transport be provided to the 'nearest available school' where either it is over the statutory walking distance or there is no safe walking route. The Council currently operates a 'nearest plus catchment' home to school transport policy as it is possible to be more generous, but not less, than the statutory minimum.

### **Continue transport for up-coming siblings**

A change to a 'nearest school' policy will enable the Council to make savings on the home to school transport policy, the maximum being achieved once the policy has been fully phased in. Extending the entitlement to free transport to catchment schools to younger siblings would delay the realisation of any savings and might prolong any temporary increases in expenditure occasioned by the need to provide transport from a community to the nearest school and the catchment school when these are not the same.

There are c.3,000 children receiving free transport to a catchment school which isn't their nearest. It is not known how many have younger siblings, or how long it would be before all of them would complete compulsory schooling. For instance, children currently in Year 2 with a sibling starting secondary school in September 2014, would start secondary school in September 2018 when their sibling would be in Year 11 and so would qualify for free transport. This could mean the Council having to continue to fund transport until July 2023.

## **Transport should be determined by schools**

The statutory and financial responsibility for the provision of free home to school transport rests with the Council. If entitlement to free transport were determined by schools they would be able to make the Council liable for significant increases in expenditure which would have to be met from the Council's general revenue account i.e. council tax payers. This is the major risk associated with retaining the current policy of funding transport to catchment schools when they are not the nearest a pupil's home address.

It is open to schools to arrange additional transport to that funded by the Council and a number of Oxfordshire schools already do this. It is also open to them to use their delegated budgets (in the region of £5,000 per pupil per year) to fund, whether in whole or part, additional transport.

## **Disadvantage rural families**

Home to school transport is a predominantly rural phenomenon with relatively few children from urban areas having any entitlement to this. It is therefore inevitable that any changes to the provision of home to school transport will impact predominantly upon rural areas. It needs to be borne in mind a 'nearest school' policy would only affect those rural families where this is not also the catchment school. The current situation is that of c.10,000 children receiving free transport, for c.70% of them this is to their nearest school.

## **Should be nearest in-county**

Unlike parts of Buckinghamshire which are within the catchment areas of Lord Williams's School (the areas served by Brill and Long Crendon primary schools) or Wheatley Park (Ickford and Oakley primary schools) and the Caversham area of Reading (which sends children to Chiltern Edge School, there are no such formal arrangements covering parts of Oxfordshire. Although there is some cross border movement of children, this is on the basis of individual parental choice rather than long standing historic connections.

Given that there are only a few communities in Oxfordshire where their nearest school is not in the county (Shrivenham/Watchfield area and Chinnor, being the most obvious), it would be possible at relatively little cost (in terms of savings not made) to extend the entitlement to free transport to include the 'nearest school in Oxfordshire'.

## **Disadvantage over-16s**

Post-16 pupils are not entitled to free home to school transport; this is national policy. Where the Council operates free home to school transport for under 16s, any spare seats are offered to post-16 students, and other year groups, on a concessionary basis. At present, under-16s who are not entitled to free transport are charged a concessionary fare which is based on the distance travelled: currently £264 per annum for journeys up to 3 miles and £492 for journeys over 3 miles. On the other hand, post-16 students who are likewise not entitled to free transport are

charged a rate based upon whether they attend their catchment sixth form or not, irrespective of how long the journey is. It is proposed to implement a single tariff for concessionary fares for all pupils based upon the length of the journey. For post-16 students attending a catchment school over 3 miles from home this would result in a substantial increase in the concessionary fares they will be expected to pay.

Where paying the concessionary fare (or the much lower commercial season ticket rate where public transport exists) would cause a post-16 student financial hardship, perhaps as much as to prevent them accessing post-16 education, they can apply to their school's hardship fund; schools receive grant funding for this purpose.

### **Disadvantage rural/smaller schools, may have to close**

It is very unlikely that any rural schools will have to close as a consequence of any changes to the home to school transport policy. Many already attract a significant proportion of their pupils from out of their catchment area, their parents already meeting the costs of transport. There are currently primary schools in Oxfordshire with fewer than 50 pupils which are financially viable and in previous years there have been one or two operating with fewer than 30. The biggest threat to the viability of a number of the smallest primary schools stems from the fact that there are insufficient children living within their catchment areas, including the villages in which they are located, and they are reliant on children being transported in by their parents; a 'nearest school' home to school transport policy might have a marginal impact on some small schools.

### **Split villages**

The issue of 'split villages' was raised repeatedly during the consultation and the main concerns were:

- It could divide small communities which for many years have seen nearly all their children transfer to the same secondary school

- It would disrupt the strong links that village primary schools have built up with their feeder secondary schools

- It would cost more to transport children from one end of a village in one direction and the other end in the opposite direction

For most villages a significant number of dwellings have the existing catchment school as the nearest school. It would be possible, for these villages, to provide free transport to the catchment school for the rest of the village. To turn this into a policy it would be important that 'split village' is clearly defined, for instance by setting a minimum proportion of dwellings need to have the catchment school as their nearest one.

### **Undermining parental choice**

Despite much promotion of the 'choice agenda', the legal position is that parents cannot *choose* a school, only express *preferences*. Where a school has fewer applications than places available, all preferences can be met, in effect allowing parents to choose this school. However, where there are more applications than places available these are rationed through the application of the school's admission rules, including whether or not the child lives in the catchment area.

It is and will remain the case that whatever the Council's home to school transport policy, some parents will be constrained as to which schools they can express preferences for. This is particularly so for those whose incomes are marginally above the threshold for Free School Meals and who therefore do not benefit from the 'extended rights to free transport'. At present under 4% (c.3,000 out of over 80,000 attending Oxfordshire Schools) of children receive free transport to other than their nearest school, the majority of them qualifying under 'catchment school'. It is less well-off families in similar circumstances in the future, whose children start school in September 2015 and subsequently, who may find their preferences constrained.

### **More buses will be needed, increasing costs**

It is acknowledged that there will be circumstances during any phasing in of changes to the home to school transport policy where it will be necessary to provide additional transport. This will be where the withdrawal of free transport to the catchment school leads some parents to switch their preference to the nearest school on the grounds that this is the one to which free transport will be provided. The amount of additional transport, its capacity and the costs thereof will be determined by the extent to which patterns of parental preference change to align with the provision of free transport rather than the characteristics, including performance, of particular schools.

Prior to implementation of any policy change it is not possible to be certain of the effect on the home to school transport budget; hence a wide range of projected savings of between £1 and 2 million per annum after full implementation of any changes.

It does not need all parents to continue to prefer catchment over nearest for savings to be realised: fewer children generally results in smaller vehicles with lower contract costs and, in some cases, would allow a switch to the use of public transport, with a significantly lower per pupil cost (approximately half of dedicated home to school transport).

In addition a 'nearest school' policy would allow the almost complete phasing out of transport where the 'nearest school' is within a safe walking distance.

### **Increase mileage allowance for parents**

There are no plans to increase the mileage allowance but this will be kept under review. At present parents are able to volunteer to transport their children who are entitled to free transport in exchange for a mileage rate of 40p per mile. The Council will only agree to this where it is cheaper than the alternative, typically a taxi for a single child.

One criticism of the proposed changes to the home to school transport policy is that it will increase car use; a more generous mileage allowance for children entitled to free transport could have the same effect.

### **OCC should not pay for transport to centrally funded academies**

Academies, whether ones created by maintained schools converting or newly created ones such as University Technical Colleges and Free Schools are legally indistinguishable and all are centrally funded (through the Education Funding Agency). The law relating to the provision of free home to school transport applies to all publicly funded schools, including all types of academies.

### **Changes unfairly favour children on FSM/benefits**

The 'extended rights to free transport' provides children eligible to Free School Meals with free transport to any of the three nearest schools between 2 and 6 miles from their home. This is a national policy and the Council has no discretion as to whether or not it applies it. The Council receives a grant to help fund this; in 2013-14 this was £610,000, reducing to £378,600 in 2014-15.

### **Stop using taxis to transport children**

The Council recognises that taxis are, per pupil, the most expensive form of transport and that it is actively trying to find ways to reduce their use. Initiatives underway include: using the Council's own fleet vehicles when they are not required to transport older people to day centres; identifying opportunities for small groups of children to use public transport; combining routes so that minibuses can be used instead of taxis (albeit with some increases in journey times); and agreeing with a Further Education college that all pupils with Special Education Needs spend a full day at college so drop off and pick up doesn't have to be by a succession of taxis.

However, there will be circumstances where the use of taxis is unavoidable, such as where one or two children live in an isolated community with no public transport or where a child with SEN cannot be accommodated on a coach.

### **Tell central government - savings not possible**

The Council has accepted that the financial settlement from central government means that it needs to make substantial savings.

### **Cut children's centres instead**

The Council has withdrawn budget proposals which might have led to the closure of Children's Centres but savings in the region of £1million are still expected to be made from their management costs.

### **Stop benefit fraud**

The Council is not responsible for the payment of benefits or for ensuring that fraudulent claims are not made. Any reduction in benefit fraud would not yield financial benefits for the Council.

### **Parent would use car rather than school bus**

It is accepted that the response of some parents to the phasing out of free home to school transport may lead to some parents deciding to use their cars to transport their children to school. This was a major concern raised when the Council



proposed, and subsequently withdrew, the provision of free and subsidised transport from the Bicester area to Blessed George Napier School in Banbury. However, once the decision was taken, parents and the school worked with the Council to procure alternative transport funded by the parents and this has avoided a large increase in car journeys.

If the Council decides to phase out some home to school transport it will work with groups of willing parents and schools to try to mitigate the impact of this. Examples would include advice in relation to cost effective procurement of alternative transport (funded by parents, schools or a combination thereof) and working with public bus service providers to see whether these could make a greater contribution to home to school journeys.

### **Transport to faith schools should be paid by the church**

The Council has already implemented a policy change to remove the automatic entitlement to some transport to faith schools (the example of Bicester and Blessed George Napier catholic school). However, it cannot have an absolute ban on funding transport to faith schools as the law requires that this be made available to children, aged 11 - 16, eligible to Free School Meals whose parents want their child to be educated in accordance with their religion or belief and who attend a school between 2 and 6 miles from their home. Any other requests for transport on faith or belief grounds are only agreed where this is compatible with the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.

### **Find better value transport**

The Council is actively looking to discharge its statutory duty to provide free home to school transport in the most cost effective way it can. The Council operates a very effective transport procurement process which has resulted in year on year reductions in contract prices. The Council's own fleet vehicles are going to be used to replace a number of taxis and opportunities to use public transport instead of dedicated home to school transport are being identified.

### **Stop subsidising concessionary transport**

The Council has consulted upon doing just this, through a one off increase of 10% in 2014 and then annual increases of either 5% for each of 5 years or 8% for each of 3 years. If these proposals are agreed they would eliminate the subsidy for journeys of over 3 miles.

### **Funding for school transport should come from central government**

It is likely that if there were to be a shift in funding from local to central government this would only be at the statutory level of 'nearest school'. Otherwise central government would be in the same position as the Council is in respect of academies and new schools: they can confer increased entitlements to free transport but the costs fall elsewhere.

### **Flat fee should be introduced for sixth form transport**

It is proposed that a two tier flat fee be introduced based upon distance travelled. It would be possible to have a single fee but this would mean that those travelling under 2 miles would have to pay more than what is proposed and would still leave some concessionary fare payers (post-16 students travelling over 3 miles) paying a lower fare than pupils aged under 16.

### **Any increase of travel fees damages free choice of faith schools**

There is no evidence that the previously agreed phasing out of free transport from Bicester to Blessed George Napier Catholic School has harmed its admissions. Neither has the refusal to fund transport to faith schools, where it would incur unreasonable public expenditure, appear to have harmed admissions to other faith schools.

### **Buy and run own school coaches**

The Council's 'core business' is not to be a direct provider of coach services. Any exclusively 'school coaches' would require a significant capital investment to purchase them and would be a wasted asset for most of the day and much of the year. It is considered to be better value for money to hire transport for the journey to and from school from specialist commercial operators which are able to use their vehicles for other purposes when not being used for home to school transport.

### **Stop free transport for pensioners**

The provision of concessionary fares for older people is a national policy and the Council is obliged to comply. The grant received from central government does not fully cover the cost of this and the Council is looking at whether it can reduce its net contribution.

### **Reduce council staffing. Cuts for high earners**

The Council has already made substantial reductions in the number of staff, including middle and senior managers. It also implemented a pay freeze for other than the lowest staff grades.

### **Increase in charges should be linked to RPI**

Limiting increases in concessionary fares to the national inflation measure would, at best, freeze the current level of public subsidy.

### **School bus should cost no more than a public bus fare**

The Council seeks to get the most competitive quotations from commercial transport operators and has managed to secure reduced prices each time it has undertaken a major retendering exercise. Unfortunately, the economics of the commercial operation of public bus services and home to school transport services mean that the latter are typically in the region of twice the former e.g. a seat on a 53 seater coach costs c.£600 per annum whilst a public bus season ticket nearer £300. Wherever

possible the Council will look to use public transport instead of dedicated home to school transport.

### **Share bus journeys with neighbouring schools**

This is already done and the Council is actively seeking to identify further opportunities to do this. This may result in some increases in journey times.

### **Charge more for under 3 miles and less for over 3 miles**

This option merits further consideration and could be compatible with reducing the public subsidy for concessionary fares whilst minimising the impact on post-16 students travelling over 3 miles.

### **Collaborative Learning is effective and should remain**

Schools do collaborate in the learning of groups of pupils but the formal arrangements which the collaborative learning transport policy supported no longer exist.

### **Exclude SEN children from any changes**

There are no proposals to change the transport entitlements for pupils with Special Education Needs who, due to their SEN or disability, need assistance with transport to get to and from school. Pupils with SEN who do not need transport for these reasons but qualify under the current 'catchment school' policy will be treated the same as all other pupils should a 'nearest school' policy be introduced.

### **Stop freedom of choosing a religious based school**

Parents can still express a preference for a faith school but will not be entitled to more generous provision of free home to school transport than other children if it would incur unreasonable public expenditure. Children eligible to Free School Meals (aged 11 - 16), whose parents wish them to attend a particular school on grounds of religion or belief, are entitled to free transport if the school is between 2 and 15 miles from their home. It would be unlawful to deny parents the right to express preferences for faith schools but this does not automatically confer a right to free transport.

### **Adopted children should receive free transport**

There is no national policy to provide free transport to adopted children.

### **Should only use driving route for determining transport**

The Council uses a single commercial system for measuring home to school distances, based upon information provided by the Ordnance Survey. This is used to

determine which is the nearest school, whether there is an entitlement to free transport on the basis of the distance being over the statutory *walking* distance and, where a 'tie break' is needed' to which pupils school places should be allocated. This approach is used by many Local Authorities, produces consistent results and is legally sound.

### **Free public bus pass should be given to local teenagers**

There are just under 25,000 teenagers attending Oxfordshire schools (as of October 2013). To provide each of them with a season ticket for the major bus operators would cost in the region of £300 each, a total of about £7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> million which is comparable to the total currently spent on mainstream transport. Of the 25,000 teenagers, only a minority currently qualify for free home to school transport, so providing all teenagers with free public bus passes would substantially *increase* the Council's expenditure on transport.

### **Parents should be asked for a voluntary transport contribution towards the cost**

The Council has recently announced that it would welcome voluntary contributions although it could not require these where there is an entitlement to free home to school transport. Due to the uncertainty about how much such an initiative would yield in respect of the total home to school transport budget it is still necessary for the Council to introduce higher charges for concessionary fares and policy changes if it is to be confident that savings will be made.

### **Distance should be from bus stop not home**

This would introduce anomalies. At present the home to school distance is used to determine whether or not there is an entitlement to free home to school transport, the concessionary fare where there is no entitlement, and also which children should be prioritised for admission to schools.

### **Give transport to 1 of the 2 or 3 nearest schools**

This would be possible but any entitlement that goes beyond the statutory minimum of 'nearest school' would be likely to come with an associated cost, i.e. potential savings would be reduced. If a 'split village' policy is introduced, for many families this would, in effect, equate to 'free transport to the two nearest schools'.

### **Should be nearest co-ed school**

The statutory requirement of free transport to the 'nearest school' doesn't differentiate between coeducational and single sex schools. Any policy which discriminated in favour of families preferring coeducational provision would be likely to be open to challenge from those families preferring single sex education. An extension of free transport to additional schools on the basis of whether or not they are coeducational would be likely to result in the incurring of additional expenditure. At present, those parents who feel sufficiently strongly that they do, or do not, want

their children to attend a coeducational school that is not their nearest or catchment school, pay for the transport themselves.

### **Unable to give time to current school as governor or similar**

It is unclear how either a change in policy to 'nearest school' or increases in concessionary fares will have a direct impact on parents' and others' abilities to serve as school governors. If a family has children attending two different secondary schools this might make it more difficult for them to be a parent governor on both but this would also be a challenge if they had children at a primary and a secondary school.

### **There should be no free transport**

The law does not allow the Council to refuse to provide free transport.

### **Charge monthly for concessionary charges**

Officers are investigating whether it would be possible for parents to pay concessionary fares, monthly, by direct debit.

### **Happy to pay more for transport to school**

Noted.

### **Means tested transport costs**

The entitlement to free transport is 'absolute' in the sense that there is either an entitlement to free transport or there is no; it would not be lawful to make parents pay a contribution according to their means. There is an element of means testing within the existing policy which won't be affected by any of the proposed changes: the 'extended rights to free transport' for children entitled to free school meals; free transport on faith grounds for children entitled to free school meals; and a waiving of concessionary fares for children entitled to free school meals.

### **Pay enough in tax already**

The Council is proposing to increase the 2014-15 council tax but needs to make savings as well, including from home to school transport, in order to protect front line services. Delivering significant savings from the home to school transport budget will help to reduce the need to further increase council tax. Increasing charges for concessionary seats is not a tax as there is no entitlement to these nor obligation that parents apply for them.

### **Lack of local public transport**

The absence of local public transport is recognised as a significant issue for some communities. The council has a Supported Transport Programme which is investigating ways that access to transport can be increased, including through stimulating the voluntary sector. It is possible that commercial bus service operators may take advantage of increased numbers of children seeking alternative means of transport where home to school transport is discontinued; discussions have been held with the two main operators.

### **Small charge of £2.50 to be made for all children receiving transport**

The entitlement to free transport is 'absolute' in the sense that there is either an entitlement to free transport or there is no; it would not be lawful to make parents pay a contribution of any amount.

### **Comparing a free school to a state school**

Free Schools are state schools. Whether an academy (which includes Free Schools, University Technical Colleges) or a local authority maintained school, all are publicly funded.

### **Frozen reduced fares for catchment students**

This would not deliver the anticipated savings and would increase administrative costs as it would create additional charging rates.

### **Continue free/reduced transport for Post-16 when compulsory**

Attending schools after the age of 16 is not compulsory. What is compulsory is continuing to participate in education or employment linked with education or training. There is no national entitlement to free transport for post-16 students participating in education.

### **Disruptive/Detrimental to children's education**

It is proposed that the changes to the entitlements to free home to school transport be phased in so that no child currently in receipt of this will be affected. There is therefore no need for any child's education to be disrupted.

### **Find other ways to cut budget**

Savings are being made from a wide range of services, not just home to school transport. Contributors to the consultation were asked to suggest alternative ways of making savings (see above and below).

### **Don't completely understand what is being said/ Need more time**

The provision of free home to school transport is governed by legislation and contains an element of technical language which may not be very easy to understand. The consultation deadline was extended from before Christmas until mid-January to allow more time for people to respond.

### **Don't change anything**

This is not an option due to the severe financial risk to which the current policy exposes the Council.

### **Do not think savings are accurate**

The precise savings will depend upon how parents react to any policy changes and the extent to which the provision of free transport will influence their 'choice' of school; hence the £1 - 2 million range.

### **Unfair to religious/atheist whose nearest school does not accommodate those needs**

All publicly funded schools must offer a broad and balanced curriculum appropriate to the needs of all their pupils. Individual schools, particularly faith ones, have a distinctive ethos, and if this does not appeal to the philosophical or religious (including non-religious) beliefs of parents, they are able to express preferences for alternative schools. It is possible for parents to be exempted from religious ceremonies/assemblies but not from religious education.

### **Raise Council Tax**

The Council is proposing to do this, up to any threshold for the holding of a local referendum but it needs to make savings as well, including from home to school transport, in order to protect front line services.

### **Consider pressure put on schools to accommodate new students**

Funding for schools 'follows the child' so any school which has a rising pupil roll will attract additional funding with which it can employ additional teachers and purchase additional teaching resources. A number of schools have significant spare places so would not need additional accommodation and there are plans to expand others, including some which are very popular and over-subscribed.

### **Consider people living on county boundaries**

There is a proposal to extend the entitlement to free home to school transport to include the nearest school in Oxfordshire where a cross border school is the nearest. The law does not discriminate between schools within and without a local authority area and a number of families take advantage of free transport to out of Oxfordshire schools, albeit relatively small numbers and fewer that travel into the county.

### **Consultation meetings weren't very helpful**

The ten consultation meetings were arranged in order to provide interested parties with more information and to help clarify the implications of the proposed policy changes. About 500 people attended these.

## **Just an excuse to re-align catchment, to get more students into poorer performing schools**

The purposes of the proposed policy changes are to reduce expenditure/increase income and to safeguard the Council against the financial risks associated with increasing numbers of schools setting their own admissions arrangements, including catchment areas.

### **Phase in any changes**

It is proposed that the policy changes be phased in, with the exception of the collaborative learning transport.