

**REPORT TO:** Executive Board

**DATE:** 25<sup>th</sup> February 2025

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Executive Director, Environment and  
Regeneration  
Executive Director, Children's Services

**PORTFOLIO:** Children & Young People

**SUBJECT:** Permission to Consult- Home to School  
Transport for Pupils with Special Educational  
Needs & Disabilities – Key Decision

**WARD(S)** Borough Wide

## 1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 This report seeks the Executive Board's approval to commence a consultation with stakeholders and partners with a view to determining a new policy on sustainable travel and transport for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

## 2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the Board:

1. **Note the content of the report;**
2. **approve the commencement of a consultation with stakeholders and partners with regard to implementing a new Home to School and College Travel and Transport Policy for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities from September 2025; and**
3. **Confirm that they support the overall process.**

## 3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 In accordance with the DfE Statutory Guidance, provision of assisted home to school transport is for eligible SEND pupils of statutory school age, 5-16 years of age. Halton Borough Council currently provides a transport service to early years children and post 16 SEND students, which falls outside of their statutory duties.
- 3.2 The number of SEND pupils requiring specialist transport has significantly increased over the past number of years. This is a trend that appears to be replicated in every other local authority across the country. In Halton, as a comparison between 2012 and 2024:-

| <b>In Borough Transport</b> |  | <b>2012</b>  | <b>2024</b> | <b>Value</b> | <b>% Variation</b> |
|-----------------------------|--|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------|
| No of CYP                   |  | 262          | 461         | 199          | 76%                |
| Overall cost                |  | £ 582,000.00 | £1,783,602  | £1,201,602   | 206%               |
| Average cost per CYP        |  | £ 2,221.37   | £ 3,868.98  | £ 1,647.61   | 74%                |

| <b>Out of Borough Transport</b> |  | <b>2012</b>  | <b>2024</b> | <b>Value</b> | <b>% Variation</b> |
|---------------------------------|--|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------|
| No of CYP                       |  | 37           | 135         | 98           | 265%               |
| Overall cost                    |  | £ 281,000.00 | £ 1,236,544 | £ 955,544    | 340%               |
| Ave cost per CYP                |  | £ 7,594.59   | £ 9,159.59  | £ 1,565.00   | 21%                |

3.3 The figures above show the increasing cost to the local authority to provide travel, in particular, the number of SEND pupils placed in out of borough provision; an increase of 265%. This is reflective of the current national picture. While average cost per pupil for out of borough contracts has remained relatively stable, there has been a 74% increase in average cost per pupil for in borough routes.

#### 3.4 **Wider Context**

The Delivering Better Value<sup>1</sup> (DBV) programme is currently focused on increasing both provision and resilience in local education systems to allow a transition away from reliance on out of borough education places. Additionally, in the last 12 months 117 resource base places have been authorised in line with the directorates' commitment to increase sufficiency of SEN placements in borough. This will reduce reliance on out of borough placements and the subsequent transport costs.

3.5 There is further work ongoing reviewing current panel processes in borough ensuring robust and cost effective decision making. It is recognised that the majority of the savings in the medium to long term will be saved through having an effective inclusive educational system with the correct services to meet local needs in Halton. This is something at the core of the vision for Halton's SEND services and the primary focus of the DBV programme to be undertaken.

<sup>1</sup> The Delivering Better Value in SEND programme (DBV in SEND) is aiming to support local authorities and their local area partners to improve the delivery of SEND services for children and young people whilst working towards financial sustainability.

However it is acknowledged that this work will take time to embed, and, as such, unlikely to impact on spending in the short term.

### 3.6 **Current Policy**

A number of elements of current home to school transport provision in Halton are discretionary and could be removed or reduced resulting in significant cost savings. In addition, there are several amendments to statutory services that could achieve further cost savings and/or mitigation.

### 3.7 **Regional Developments**

Halton are part of the "Power of 9" programme. Alongside 8 of our neighbours, this seeks to provide a regional approach to a number of challenges that local authorities are currently facing of which Home to School Transport being identified as one strand. While this work is in its infancy, project proposals have been put forward. These are; a sharing of intelligence, using a collective bargaining approach to managing rates and uplifts through a regional procurement framework and developing agreed consistencies and alignment in transport policies.

3.8 It is difficult at this stage to ascertain the impact that this work will have on Halton, however work will be ongoing, which may include further cost mitigation opportunities for Halton in the future.

### 3.9 **Consultation**

It is proposed that the Local Authority consults with parents/carers, educational establishments and other interested parties on revised travel solutions. The consultation would comprise of two parts:

Part A: Flexible travel arrangements and increasing independence

Part B: Reviewing discretionary transport

#### **Part A: Flexible travel arrangements and increasing independence**

### 3.10 **Personal Travel Budgets (PTB)**

The purpose of personal budgets is to provide financial assistance to parents or carers to enable them to take responsibility for transporting their child to school. Currently the only form of PTB offered by Halton is the offer of parental mileage, where appropriate. This is with the exception of two families who receive a negotiated amount under specific exceptional circumstances.

3.11 This is offered at 45p per mile per round trip from home to school and return. Currently, parental mileage is offered to 38 families (40 children in total). This form of travel is extremely cost effective when compared with taxi contracts and other methods of transport.

3.12 There are several ways in which setting personal allowance budgets could be achieved and agreement on this would need to be confirmed should personal allowances be used more frequently in the future. Some local authorities have proposed a pricing structure of between £2,000 and £6,000 p.a. be set (which

seeks to incentivise families to take up the offer, yet maintains the maximum annual payment at less than the average cost of a hired contract per pupil) (Halton average in borough spend £3,869; out of borough £9,160).

3.13 Personal allowances can be used in several ways, with parents covering their own direct costs of transporting the child via paying a mileage allowance to parents transporting children to school. Additionally, personal/travel budgets can support parents in making their own taxi arrangements. It has been suggested that parents could secure much better rates than local authorities by dealing directly with taxi companies as individuals rather than through a corporate contract. In addition, this method would mean that only transport used would be paid for.

3.14 There are a number of identified restrictions with the current home to school offer and a move to personal budgets would allow families more flexibility around drop off and pick up schedules, including engagement in clubs and activities outside of core school hours, something the current system does not allow. Similarly, delegating authority to families can allow them to organise transport from separate address in cases of shared custody or other arrangements. Other benefits have been identified through family and friends providing transport, enabling them to have a more consistent and familiar travel experience with their parent or main carer (as opposed to being in a taxi with many different drivers). One neighbouring local authority has recently offered pay for breakfast and after school options (or other childcare options) for their non-SEND child(ren) which enables parents to take their SEND child to school. Other options could be shared travel arrangements with other parents or using the costs towards leasing a car. These options would increase choice and creativity for families to arrange travel that best suits their needs circumstances, while strongly promoting independence. This aligns with Halton Borough Council's corporate priority around supporting greater autonomy and independence.

3.15 It should be acknowledged that some local authorities had not found PTB to have made a significant difference to the reduction in cost of transport, for statutory transport as it had not enabled them to take children out of taxis or commissioned buses in sufficient numbers. A robust communication plan would therefore need to be devised for future roll out.

3.16 Promoting Personal Budgets for statutory travel aged children could realise saving of between £285k and £849k but this would be determined based on the uptake of families.

### **Escalation of Independent Travel Training**

3.17 Independent Travel Training provides a more cost effective way of supporting the SEND transport operating model (particularly in terms of post 16) but also has much wider strengths based on social inclusion/promoting independence in line with the Preparation for Adulthood agenda. Halton Borough Council offers Independent Travel Training, however service discussions have identified that this could be much improved and uptake increased.

3.18 Halton's current policy explicitly references the expectation of engagement with independent travel training from Year 8 plus for children and young people who are assessed through EHC Annual Review processes to achieve this skill, leading to positive outcomes: *"As part of the review process, young people in Year 8 onwards identified as being suitable, will be expected to be considered for Independent Travel Training"*.

3.19 S153 of DfE's statutory guidance states *'local authorities must not withdraw free home to school travel from an eligible child if a parent does not consent to them participating in independent travel training'*.

3.20 Independent Travel Training will now form part of the annual review conversation with children and families encouraged to engage where applicable, as a commitment to promoting and supporting independence, where possible. The consultation will aim to gain insight into other potential challenges or opportunities regarding uptake of Independent Travel Training.

3.21 Although at initial glance, the cost of delivering this initiative will outweigh the levels of savings that might be achieved from the provision of transport as it requires significant 1:1 contact time. The significant benefits, though hard to quantify financially, will come in later years delivering compound savings to children's and adult social care budgets as these children develop essential life skills for the future.

### **Centralised Pick ups**

3.22 As an alternative to fully independent travel, the offer of assisted travel could be to collect from a central pick up point as opposed to home addresses. This is permitted within the DfE statutory guidance and can be considered for capable pupils. This has the advantages of speeding up routes and therefore the potential for an increased number of pupils to be carried on minibus routes. Additionally, there have been several requests for uplifts from transport companies due to time taken to complete routes. Introducing pick up points for pupils will assist with speeding up routes, and reduce uplifted costs to transport companies. Reducing the externally contracted vehicle by 5% through introducing centralised pick up points could realise a potential saving of £142,000, however any actual saving would need to be reviewed following consultation.

3.23 More importantly this is a significant step for the pupil towards independent travel and may also motivate children and families to engage with the independent travel training programme on offer in Halton.

### **Motability Vehicles**

3.24 A long debated issue is the family's utilisation of their own Motability cars. There have been many conversations between LA's and the DfE around this matter. DfE have been very clear when stating the law that mobility cars can't be taken into account when assessing a young person's transport eligibility. However, where a young person has a mobility car assigned for their purpose, in law on the young person's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday the vehicle officially becomes theirs. Other LA's are now taking a tougher stance on provision of transport once the student

reaches the age of 18, in line with DfE guidance. Consultation would allow us to explore this further with children and families in Halton.

## **Part B: Reviewing discretionary transport**

### **Distance Criteria**

- 3.25 To qualify for travel assistance, a pupil's distance from home to school should be more than three miles if over eight years of age or two miles if under 8 *or if meeting the low income criteria*. There are some cases where the Local Authority provides transport for SEND pupils who do not meet the distance criteria i.e. under distance but granted based on other eligibility grounds such as medical, level of disability or exceptional circumstances as set out in the current SEND Transport Policy. We do not currently routinely review children transitioning at this stage, however one approach moving forward could be to set up a tracker to highlight 8<sup>th</sup> birthday and send a re-referral form to reapply for transport.

- 3.26 Looking at the current cohort of children, around a third of children currently receiving transport would not be eligible under additional grounds. Therefore, potential savings of £174,000 could be realised from the current cohort and/or cost mitigation for new cohorts.

### **Provision of transport for pupils under the age of 5 years**

- 3.27 Halton currently provides transport for pupils under the age of 5 years i.e. in reception classes, which we are not statutorily required to offer. Halton Borough Council do not current ask for a contribution towards transport costs.

- 3.28 The removal of this provision may have a disproportionate impact on children with complex needs and/or disabilities so it is proposed several areas are explored:

1: Halton Borough Council to continue to provide free home to school transport to an infant or primary school for a child under the age of five, where a child is likely to be deemed as eligible once they turn five years of age.

2: Halton Borough Council to continue to provide free home to school transport to an infant or primary school for a child under the age of five, where a child is likely to be deemed as eligible once they turn five years of age.

Students will be expected to travel by the most cost-effective means for which they are able which may be public transport, PTB or by way of a seat on a contract vehicle (coach, minibus or taxi) at the start and end of the normal school day. The provision of a travel allowance where the parent, carer or young person uses a contract vehicle will only be agreed where this is the least expensive option. This could realise a saving of up to £55,000, for the current cohort and/or cost mitigation for new cohorts.

3: Halton Borough Council will continue to provide free home to school transport to an infant or primary school for a child under the age of five, where a child is likely to be deemed as eligible once they turn five years of age but

request an annual/termly contribution. This would be similar to the annual charge in place for post 16 students. Using the current average charge across 25 comparative local authorities (£750 and £500 for low income), this could realise a saving of £15,800 for the current cohort and/or cost mitigation for new cohorts.

4: Halton Borough Council will cease to provide free home to school transport to an infant or primary school for a child under the age of five, where a child is likely to be deemed as eligible once they turn five years of age. This could realise a saving of £147,000 for the current cohort and/or cost mitigation for new cohorts.

### **Post 16 Transport**

3.29 There is no automatic entitlement to transport for those of sixth form age in the same way there is for 'eligible' children of compulsory school age, however local authorities have a discretion to assist with transport arrangements and are expected to target support towards students in particular circumstances (such as those with SEN or from low income families) taking into full consideration duties under the Equality Act 2010.

3.30 Halton Borough Council currently do offer transport for children with SEND over the age of 16. Currently door to door transport is provided for 64 pupils, with a yearly cost of £632K.

3.31 In 2017 a charge for Post 16 SEND transport was introduced at £370 per academic year (£250 for low income families). This currently totals £19.6K annually in contribution charges against a spend of approximately £632K per year; equating to 3.1% of the overall spend. Halton's charge is one of the lowest in the country, the average current charge of 25 LA's surveyed is £752.74 per year.

3.32 The removal of this provision may have a disproportionate impact on children with complex needs and/or disabilities, so it is proposed several possibilities are explored:

1 Increase Halton Borough Council's termly charge in line with other LA's (Average of £750/£500 low income). This could realise a saving of £44,850 for the current cohort and/or cost mitigation for new cohorts.

2: Halton Borough Council will continue to provide home to school/college travel assistance for young people ages 16-18 who meet the eligibility criteria under our existing policies.

Students will be expected to travel by the most cost-effective means for which they are able which may be public transport, PTB or by way of a seat on a contract vehicle (coach, minibus or taxi) at the start and end of the normal school day. The provision of a travel allowance where the parent, carer or young person uses a contract vehicle will only be agreed where this is the least expensive option.

3. In line with statutory responsibilities, Halton Borough Council will cease to provide ordinarily home to school/college travel assistance for young people ages 16 -18.

### 3.33 **Governance Changes**

It has been recognised that a review of governance structures as part of this project would be beneficial at this stage. This will support the day to day decision making around home to school transport and also support the scale and pace that will be necessary to implement the changes proposed within the report. The reviewed structure will provide oversight, challenge and accountability for the delivery and spend within this area. While the new structure has yet to be agreed, the new structure being proposed will ensure that the Local Authority delivers services that meet the needs of children and families in a sustainable way, adapts to social and economic changes and offers effective monitoring around future home to school transport spending.

## 4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 All of the above will require an amendment to the current “Home to School and College Travel and Transport Policy for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)”

## 5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 As detailed above, there are considerable potential budgetary savings from the identified proposals. This may be through one or a combination of the above proposals.

5.2 Failure to achieve any of the above will have a negative impact on the Council budget for provision of home to school transport for children with SEND.

## 6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL’S PRIORITIES**

### 6.1 **Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence**

Changes in this policy will encourage an increase in promoting wellbeing though encouraging a reduction in overreliance on transport and promote the use of walking and cycling to school, where applicable. For example, a personal budget could be used to buy bikes for children and carers to travel to school. Where children can use active travel options including public transport, walking and cycling key health benefits are achieved.

In addition, a key feature of the policy change will be to encourage greater independence both in childhood and into adulthood by increasing focus on independent travel training.

### 6.2 **Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy**

None.



### **6.3 Supporting Children, Young People and Families**

Provision of assisted home to school transport enables children and young people with SEND to travel to appropriate schools where they have been placed and where their specialist needs are catered for.

### **6.4 Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need**

Halton's current charging structure for post 16 contributions offers a reduction for those on a low income. A universal increase in charges would disproportionately impact on lower income families. Other mitigations against increased charges also exist such as 16-19 bursary which is accessible to students on a low income. Halton currently have a lower contribution rate for low income families.

### **6.5 Working Towards a Greener Future**

Where children can use active travel options including walking and cycling key environmental benefits are achieved. Public transport and active travel modes provide alternative sustainable options to private forms of transport which is conducive to lowering harmful emissions.

### **6.6 Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community**

None.

## **7.0 RISK ANALYSIS**

- 7.1 Depending on the exact nature and impact of the policy changes, particularly in relation non-statutory functions, changes may be contentious. While this move has been undertaken by several local authorities, the move has been viewed as unpopular when seen in isolation as it risks being seen purely as a cost cutting exercise. It is also very difficult to simply remove something that people are used to having in place, even more so when some policies have historically been relatively generous. It is likely that removal of transport is likely to be more palatable if genuine alternatives to directly provided support are offered as outlined in the consultation, reducing the risk of reputational damage to the council.

## **8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

- 8.1 Protected Characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. Given the nature of the proposed changes, there is an impact to those defined by both age and disability. A full impact assessment is currently under review and will be referenced as part of this paper.

## **9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Public transport and active travel modes provide alternative sustainable options to private forms of transport which is conducive to lowering harmful emissions.

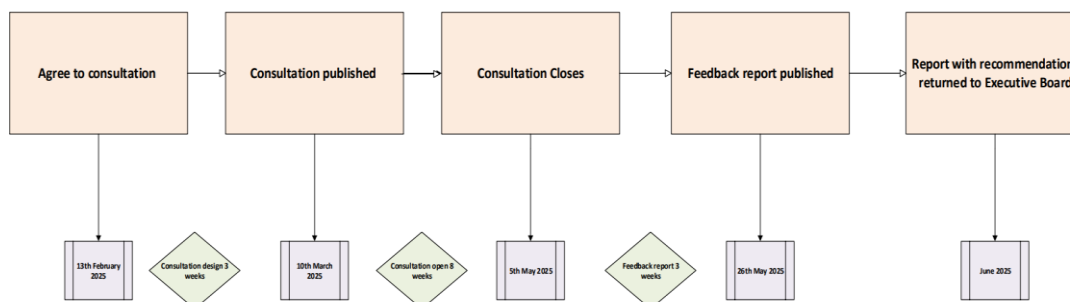
## 10.0 REASON(S) FOR DECISION

The report seeks the Executive Board’s approval to commence a consultation with stakeholders and partners with a view to determining a new policy on sustainable travel and transport for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. The outcome of changes following consultation could result in significant saving for the council and be significant in terms of its effects on children with SEN accessing Home to School Transport.

## 11.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

The alternative option would be to not consult on Home to School Transport provision and continue with the current policy.

## 12.0 IMPLEMENTATION DATE



## 13.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

‘None under the meaning of the Act.’