

POST 16 TRANSPORT POLICY STATEMENT 2020-21

COMMENTS FROM MEMBERS OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee due to be held on 24 April 2020 was cancelled. However, members of the Committee were invited to consider and respond to this report by email.

Ten members of the Committee responded and supported the recommendations to the Executive. The following questions and comments were received. Responses to the questions were provided by officers at the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board at its meeting on 30 April 2020.

Questions to be addressed at OSMB (Responses from officers included in red)

1. What concession, if any, would the Council allow to parents who due to the Coronavirus had either lost employment or had reduced income, and were unable to help or pay for the £570 a year cost?

Post 16 education providers received funding directly from the government which they should use to help support low income families via a bursary. The bursary could be used towards transport costs. The Council signposted low income families to their post 16 education provider in the first instance. Education providers then paid the Council directly on behalf of the young person; c. 30% of income that the Council received for post 16 transport came directly from education providers. This approach worked well and it was extremely rare that families contact the Council again after first raising a concern; a good indication that they were receiving support. Officers had asked the Department for Education (DfE) to clarify if the bursary support offered to providers would be reviewed or expanded in light of Covid-19 and were awaiting a response.

2. With the uncertainty of the pandemic and with education virtually in abeyance, would families that had already paid up front for travel be able to claim a refund and if so how would the families be made aware of this?

A public announcement had been made by the Council to advise that pro-rata refunds would be issued from 23 March 2020 until the date the schools/colleges re-open. Year 13 pupils who would not return would be issued full refunds first and these refunds had already started to be paid.

3. How much would it cost to remove the surcharge for paying by instalments? Although it was only £9 it was still a deterrent for people on a low income to be able to budget for. Additionally, if there was more than one post 16 learner in a home, this was a double hit on a very large portion of annual outgoings.

The removal of the £9 admin fee would lead to a loss of income of £13,146 (figure based on the academic year 2019/20).

4. With regards to households receiving the subsidy, how many had more than one post 16 learner? This could be sizeable if twins and blended families were included. Was there any evidence from the consultation that this was an area of vulnerability for families? What assurance could be provided that families were not being deterred from applying due to the cost? Has any modelling been undertaken to explore a sibling discount?

Currently 168 post 16 travellers had a post 16 sibling residing in the same household. Two out of 88 consultation respondents raised this issue as a concern. It should be noted that if families were experiencing financial hardship they would be able to approach their education provider for support through the bursary funding. Many providers had set the threshold for support at a household income of £30k per annum or less and the support offered was per learner, not per household. Very few enquiries of this nature were made to the Council for support after exploring the option of a bursary with the education providers.

The Council already went beyond its statutory duty and heavily subsidised transport costs for post 16 learners. The cost had been demonstrated to be competitive and having a flat rate allowed equality of access for all. It was worth noting that sibling discount was not offered on other public transport. A further reduction of income would mean the Council would have to further subsidise the costs of transport by reducing funding elsewhere, which would be particularly challenging at this time. The Education Transport budget was highly volatile and already facing significant cost pressures. Further analysis would need to be carried out to fully understand the financial impact of any changes.

5. Consideration of families facing hardship was important and the policy makes reference to concessions being available, in particular the 16-19 bursary fund. The policy sets out the criteria for the bursary, such as being in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) for which there had been a vast increase in the number of people claiming in recent weeks. If these families were still in receipt of UC in September, would they all qualify for the 16-19 bursary and would schools have the necessary funds to provide this support? How much have schools in Lincolnshire awarded through this bursary last year? Even though the Council was not directly accountable/responsible for these bursaries, there might be a large increase in the number of families struggling to find the £570, which they might not have had to find last year if it was the first year in post 16 education, on top of all other financial pressures on the horizon.

Universal credit was a marker for low income used by education providers to access the bursary support and this would continue to be the case during and post Covid-19. Officers had asked the DfE if the bursary support funding available to providers would be reviewed in light of the impact of Covid-19 and were awaiting a response.

The use of the bursary funds was determined by the education providers and the Council was unable to direct providers on how these funds were used or the criteria for support. The Council was unable to report on how much funding providers received and used and also what the money had been used for. Officers had again asked the DfE if they held this information and could share it, and were awaiting a response. However, c. 30% of income that the Council received for post 16 transport came directly from education providers.

6. The introduction of T Levels in Lincolnshire, which was not planned for this academic year, could result in students incurring travel expenses. Could companies provide out of pocket travel expenses for students and could feedback be sought from other organisations before it was rolled out in Lincolnshire, depending on whether colleges and industry in Lincolnshire could offer this option?

The Executive Director of Children's Services was currently working with education providers at a strategic level to consider Lincolnshire's approach to T Levels and transport had been raised as a consideration for discussion.

7. In relation to the modelling regarding the cost of travelling between Louth and Lincoln, it was a bit misleading as the Council did not fund students from Louth to go to Lincoln under the DTA. Were there any other examples of this within the chart and could future modelling exclude this?

The future modelling could exclude this but it would not then give the most accurate representation of how post 16 transport worked in practice in Lincolnshire. The table was intended to provide an overview of the type of journeys young people may be wishing to make which may extend beyond the journeys the Council offered a subsidy for. The Council had a duty to ensure there was access to opportunities, but the Council was not and did not have to be the sole facilitator for that access. Access opportunities available to young people were available through purchasing tickets on public transport directly or through transport provided by education providers as well as the Council's support. The table was intended to give an overview of what the main journeys a student may choose to make may cost.

8. The flat rate across the county was fully supported to support the rural provision, but there might be a barrier between first choice of course and DTA. Was this being reviewed to ensure that providers were giving an equitable choice of courses?

The Council had a duty to ensure there was access available to a reasonable choice of opportunities. The Council's policy provided support to a DTA sixth form or college which met this duty. If the Council tailored transport support to individual choices beyond this there would be a significant increase in the cost of transport which ultimately may have to be passed on to all families if the Council could not increase its subsidy. Prior to the wider review of this policy in 2010/11, transport support was previously offered to the nearest institution which offered a specific course a learner wanted to pursue and the cost of transport was c. £2m higher. This was not something the Council had committed to review at this time, given it did not currently receive any funding

to support post 16 transport and any further increases in expenditure would put further significant financial pressure on the Council.

9. With regards to the Care to Learn Scheme, how was it promoted and what was the take up? Were there KPIs for take up and if so where were these recorded and reported to?

The Care to Learn initiative was administered directly by the DfE. The Council's policy signposted individuals to the support available, but the Council was not responsible for collecting any data in relation to it. This information would need to be requested from the DfE. The Council did not have any jurisdiction over how this support was offered or the criteria for support.

The Executive Councillor for Adult Care, Health and Children's Services confirmed by email to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee that parents would be reimbursed the fee they had paid for transport while schools were closed.

General Comments

- It was a legal requirement that the Policy Statement had to be reviewed annually and it was positive that the costs had not been increased for three years.
- It was likely that cost pressures due to increasing fuel prices would remain as this was the norm, despite fuel prices currently being on a downward spiral.
- It was pleasing to see that the charges would remain the same in 2020/21, especially in light of current circumstances.
- It was a plus point that the charges had been held.
- As the Covid 19 episode would have unforeseen consequences in all areas of our lives, it was suggested that the policy should be reviewed earlier than normally would be the case.

COMMENTS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD

At a virtual meeting on 30 April 2020, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board considered the report and agreed to support the recommendations to the Executive.

The following points were confirmed:

- Fees for transport would be reimbursed to parents for the time schools were closed due to Coronavirus.
- There was no evidence that education providers were not using the bursary fund to support post 16 students. This would be monitored by checking whether there was any additional contact from parents regarding payments as the Council was not made aware of how the bursary was used by education providers.
- The £9 surcharge was low and was needed to help cover the costs to have staff to process the payments.
- The school transport budget was overspent and an investigation would take place to understand the reasons why this had happened.
- The Council was focussed on ensuring students were able to go onto post 16 education and that parents could afford to support their children to do this.
- Cost pressures in the school transport budget in relation to the provider market were due to a number of factors, including rising fuel prices, the national living wage, and new vehicle regulations that transport operators had to comply with. When the Council went out to the market for school transport, there had been an increase in the price of bids as these had factored in the impact of the regulations and the cost of fuel and staff.
- No explanation could be provided for why the daily commercial fares for two of the bus routes (Ruskington to Lincoln, and Gainsborough to Lincoln) had decreased for 2020/21. It was noted that most routes demonstrated a cost increase.
- The contract for transport was with the parents/carers not the student, as usually the student was under the age of 18 years old. It was not usual practice to enter into a contract with the student directly.
- With regards to the limited transport support for some specialist courses, such as agriculture and music, it was confirmed that this had been in the policy for a number of years. It had been included in the policy to allow access to these specialist courses, in particular the agricultural courses at Riseholme College due to being a rural agricultural county.
- Sustainable modes of transport, such as walking, cycling and electric bikes, had been considered to see if there was a way to encourage the use of sustainable transport by students to places of learning, or to and from a pick up point. A Sustainable Modes of Transport to School Strategy had been developed and would be brought to scrutiny in the coming weeks.

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