
To: Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1)

Date: 26th March 2025

Subject: Review Home-to-school Transport Task & Finish Group

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) of the recommendations from the Review Home-to-school Transport Task & Finish Group.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) are recommended to:
- 1) Receive a progress report on the Home to School Travel arrangements in the municipal year 2025-26 to review the changes and lessons learned ahead of the new procurement round prior to the next academic year.
 - 2) Share the Coventry transport model with the LGA and request information on what other councils are doing to manage transport costs.
- 2.2 Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) recommend that Cabinet Members for Strategic Finance and Resources, Education and Skills and City Services:
- 3) Replicate the model of working in other areas of the Council business, emphasising the value of bringing in people who don't directly work in the service to support those who do.
 - 4) Continue exploring ways to increase the number of children being moved by the Council's own transport rather than outside bodies and keep the procurement process under review.
 - 5) Investigate the possibility of creating a formula to incentivise parents to transport their children themselves, ensuring fairness and consistency.

3 Information and Background

- 3.1 At their meeting on the 11th January 2024, Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) considered a briefing note outlining the corporate controls in place to secure value for money when providing support to vulnerable residents. The briefing note provided details of the corporate controls in place to secure best value in securing support for vulnerable residents and highlighted the issues faced across different services, to include Home to school Travel Assistance.

- 3.2 In respect of the home to school travel assistance package funding, concerns were raised regarding costs and providers' contractual obligations, for instance, the costs incurred when a child is absent from school and the service not used. It was noted that a review was currently underway on this funding and the Board requested that a further report on this matter be brought back to the Board at the earliest opportunity.
- 3.3 At their meeting on the 21st March 2024, Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) The Board considered a briefing note which provided a background on the establishment and use of the home to school taxi service and an update on its review.
- 3.4 The Board questioned officers and the Cabinet Member on several points arising from the presentation including the following:
- The use of taxi service fares rather than a flat fee
 - Concerns that the current process did not provide best value for money
 - The percentage of parents who transport their child to school, in response, Officers agreed to provide that information to Members
- 3.5 Following discussion, the Board agreed that, in order to further explore the issues raised, a Task and Finish Group be established to ensure that best value was being achieved.
- 3.6 Membership of the task and finish group was:
- Cllr L Kelly (Chair)
 - Cllr J Blundell
 - Cllr R Lakha
 - Cllr J McNicholas
- 3.7 Task and finish group members were invited to be involved in co-production with officers to develop the work with a focus specifically on the procurement and value for money of the transport service.

4 Meetings of the Task and Finish Group

- 4.1 The Task and Finish Group met three times. The first meeting was to agree the scope of the Task and Finish Group, as well as to provide some background on context to the work being planned. The scoping document can be found at **Appendix A**.

5 Meeting 1

- 5.1 Officers provided a verbal presentation to members of the Task and Finish group, which gave an overview of the procurement process relating to the Home to School Transport Service and identified areas of improvement and areas to work on in future.
- 5.2 Members questioned officers and received response from officers regarding the following:
- That there is no consistency between Local Authorities nationally in awarding contracts

- The difficulty in determining whether a taxi is the most cost-effective mode of transporting children with SEN due to other factors including Safeguarding, DBS Checks and risk assessments
- That an interim review had been conducted to explore use of assets to reduce overall cost to the Council – incorporating Adult Social Care
- That route setting is part of the tendering process, and best routes are determined in terms of mileage
- That risk assessments are determined on each eligible child the outcome of which may limit safe travel options
- Taxis as a mode of transport is increasingly relied upon to manage volume demand and new routes as a consequence of children being placed in out of city schools
- That increasing the post 16 financial contribution for travel assistance had not provided an impactful incentive for families to move from a door-to-door travel assistance offer and instead make their own arrangements
- The development of a tracker is ongoing to help officers review children’s transport needs year on year
- The current mileage rate is 45p per mile (in line with HMRC rates) and that offering a variable rate to families as an incentive to increase take up was problematic because of the requirement to be fair and transparent to all. That escorts are charged as a separate hourly rate, and were in addition to the contracted mileage rate

5.3 It was agreed that the task and finish group would support the work by:

- Continuing to monitor, challenge and provide oversight.
- Provide additional support during the establishment of the new framework
- Ensuring we deliver best value and focus on the whole of our transport network. Wider review, focus on changed procurement framework and evidence that it's achieving best value over time.

6 Meeting 2

- 6.1 The second meeting discussed the progress and challenges of the home to school transport service, focusing on system improvements, cost savings, and recruitment issues.
- 6.2 Officers provided a verbal presentation on the progress from September to December 2024, highlighting the creation of an integrated tracker to improve data recording and decision-making.
- 6.3 Officers discussed the limitations and failures of the current passenger transport system, which had not been reviewed for over 10 years, and the need for a comprehensive review to improve services
- 6.4 Efforts to reduce transport costs include moving children from taxis to minibuses, which could save significant amounts annually, and working with schools to use their own transport provisions.
- 6.5 Recruitment of drivers and escorts presented challenges due to the part-time nature of the job and managing children's behavioural issues, this systemically led to high staff turnover.

6.6 Procurement and contracting issues:

- There is a need to revisit contracts to address issues with mileage rates and escort costs. Significant variances in charges were found, and the need to set upper limits for mileage rates was emphasised
- Promoting competition among providers is essential. Currently, contracts are spread across eight operators, despite the fact that the dynamic purchasing system had over 40 operators registered that could bid for work
- Lessons learned from the previous procurement round include the need for better cost transparency and setting upper limits for mileage rates to avoid inflated costs

7 Meeting 3

7.1 Meeting three enabled members of the Task and Finish Group to understand further information shared with officers in more detail as well as identify next steps and recommendations to the Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1).

7.2 Members discussed the following:

- a) Model of working: Members suggested that the working model used in the report should be replicated in other areas of the Council business. This model involves bringing in external people to support internal staff, allowing for a comprehensive review of processes.
- b) Transport Management: Members discussed the importance of using Council vehicles before outsourcing to taxis. It was recognised that some children need individual transport due to their specific needs, but efforts should be made to use Council resources first.
- c) Procurement Process: Members highlighted the need to keep the procurement process under review. Regular review has generated an increase in the number of transport providers, which helps keep costs down.
- d) Parent Incentives: Members raised the issue of the disparity between payments to parents and taxi companies for transporting children, suggesting that enhanced payments to parents could be a cost-saving measure.
- e) National Perspective: Members emphasised the importance of considering the national perspective and suggested looking into what other Councils are doing to address similar issues. Members proposed sharing findings with the LGA to gather insights from other Councils.
- f) Members of the group identified recommendations based on the discussion and requested that a progress report come back to Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) in 6 months' time ahead of the new academic year.

Appendix A: Scoping Document

Elan Jones
Scrutiny Co-ordinator
Law and Governance

elan.jones@coventry.gov.uk