

REPORT ON SCHOOL TRANSPORT CONSULTATION

Summary of main points raised during consultation.

Comments from interested parties were received by letter, through completed questionnaires and at public meetings held on 7 July. Here is a summary of the main arguments put forward and a comment from officers in response.

Arguments against changes in policy

The opportunity to attend a denominational School is important to Christian families

The current transport policy supports some expressions of parental preference (i.e. those wanting denominational or selective education), but does not support other expressions of preference which might be equally important to parents. Given that the Council has insufficient resources to support all expressions of preference, the suggested change in policy will offer greater consistency.

Changes in transport policy will affect the religious character of St Cuthbert Mayne. Some committed Christian families will no longer be able to send their children to this school and pupils with a lesser commitment will take their places.

This is acknowledged as a possibility, though this does not seem to have been the effect experienced by St Cuthbert Mayne after Devon County Council introduced charges for school transport in 1998.

The Council may not achieve the savings it hopes for if the pattern of attendance is affected. There would be too few places if pupils wanted to attend their nearest school and the Council will have to transport them to other schools where there is room.

The suggested changes in policy aims to reduce the risk of a dramatic change in the pattern of attendance through seeking a reasonable level of contribution and a scheme to remit charge from low income families. The Council has recently overseen the creation of an additional 600 secondary school places in Torbay to improve the opportunities for pupils to attend their local school.

The proposals will impact mostly on families with income just above benefit levels.

Any remission scheme will need to set a qualifying level. A dilemma for the Council is that a complex remission system will be costly to administer and these costs would need to be passed on in the form of higher contributions for other parents.

Families with several school age children will also be affected.

The majority of families who currently receive discretionary transport have either one or two children in receipt of free transport. For example, a recent analysis of those currently provided with transport to St Cuthbert Mayne indicated that there were 140 families with one child, 46 families with 2 children and 9 with 3 children.

Families will find it hard to pay a lump sum for transport at the start of the year.

A complex payment system will be costly to administer and these costs would need to be passed onto parents in the form of higher contributions. The standard regime would be to collect payments on the termly basis.

Students should not be expected to use their EMA to pay for transport. The Council should not take away money given to students by the Government.

Government guidance to LEAs states: "Students can be expected to contribute a reasonable proportion of their EMA towards transport costs. LEAs may therefore take into account the amount of EMA a student receives when deciding the level of transport support that will be offered. It is not, however, reasonable to expect that students should use all of their EMA to cover transport costs, which would destroy the incentive to young people."

One of the reasons for the introduction of EMAs is to assist students living in a number of areas where LEAs had stopped providing any post 16 transport. EMAs will help such students to meet the cost of public transport. This is not the case in Torbay which maintained a very generous post 16 transport policy.

If the Council does not spread the existing charges to a greater number of students, then the existing contribution would need to rise for other post 16 students.

The proposals will restrict parental choice, especially for low-income families.

The suggested policy offers remission for low-income families in receipt of certain benefits

More parents will choose to drive their children to school, leading to traffic congestion

The policy aims to retain the existing transport network and existing passenger numbers through seeking a reasonable level of contribution and operating a remission scheme for low-income families.

The proposals discriminate against Christian families.

It can also be argued that the current policy discriminates in favour of certain expressions of parental preference.

The Council has just helped St Cuthbert Mayne to expand, but the proposal might lead to it having empty places and give rise to financial difficulties for the school.

As has been noted above, the suggested policy has been framed in such a way to avoid a significant change in the pattern of attendance.

Selective and denominational schools are the Bay's best performing schools and parents should be supported to enrol their children at these schools.

This would require the Council to support some parental preferences, but not others

Council tax is at a level where it is reasonable for parents to expect that free transport should be provided. School Transport should be an area of priority spending for the Council. The Council should make cut backs in other areas.

All service Directorates are examining ways to make savings and in due course members will need to consider the position of other services.

The benefit of relatively small amounts of additional income is disproportionate to the detrimental effect of a change in policy.

This comment related particularly to the marginal effect of the phased introduction of contributions for transport to denominational schools. It is suggested, however, that the Council should adopt a consistent line with all discretionary transport and in full effect will yield, at today's prices, nearly £180,000 in income, which is significant. This comment is arguably an encouragement for the Council not to phase the introduction of a new policy.

Other LEAs provide transport to denominational schools.

Equally, a number of LEAs have already reviewed their discretionary transport policies (e.g. Devon and Plymouth), others are in the process of doing so (e.g. West Sussex and Essex)

Providing transport by school bus is the safest form of transport for children.

The policy aims to retain the existing transport network and existing passenger numbers through seeking a reasonable level of contribution and operating a remission scheme for low-income families.

Some students will get EMAs of only £10 per week and most of this will have to be used for transport.

Students from families where income is up to £19,630 per annum will receive £30 per week, where income is between £19,631 and £24,030 per year, students will receive £20 a week and where income is between £24,031 and £30,000 per year students will receive £10 a week. These figures exclude attendance and performance bonuses. Given these income levels, it is suggested that a charge equal to £7 per week for transport is reasonable.

The Council should provide free transport for all pupils and students.

This would require a significant diversion of resources from other service areas or increases in taxation.

Arguments In favour of changes in policy

Many post 16 students work part-time, so it seems reasonable to charge for transport

Noted

Many parents pay for extra tuition for the 11-plus tests, so they should also pay for transport to selective schools.

Noted

The current system is unfair to those who live just within the 3-mile distance limit who have to pay for transport. It would be fairer if everyone pays for transport.

Noted

Other comments

Any savings should be re-invested into Education.

Reducing net expenditure on school transport will enable the Council to protect other education services from potential cut backs

Torbay should cease to be a Unitary Authority and join with Devon.

Noted. However, Devon already charges for transport to denominational schools and does not provide any transport to Torbay selective schools.

Analysis of responses to Consultation Questionnaires

Introduction

Consultation questionnaires were distributed to parents of Year 4, 5, 10 and 11 age pupils in Torbay schools. Questionnaires were also distributed to schools, chairs of governors, Diocesan authorities and other interested parties. Some of those consulted by the Council copied their questionnaire forms and broadened the consultation. In particular one Roman Catholic Church congregation submitted nearly 200 responses alone! All responses were counted in the analysis.

Some respondents fell into more than one group. Where they were parents and governors their responses were counted as parents; where parents indicated that they were hoping that their children might attend either a grammar school or a denominational school, they were distributed evenly among the two groups.

It should be noted that not all of the respondents answered all of the questions. Where percentage figures have been given for responses, these represent a percentage of those who expressed a view on the particular question.

Summary of Responses

Total responses	735
Parents of pupils at Denominational Schools	271
Parents of pupils at Grammar Schools	140
School Governors	22
Students	77
Other	225

All Responses about changes to Grammar School Transport Policy

Total responses	440	
In favour of change	132	30%
Against change	308	70%

All Responses about changes to Denominational School Transport Policy

Total responses	709	
In favour of change	126	18%
Against change	583	82%

All Responses about changes to Post 16 Transport Policy

Total responses	473	
In favour of change	67	14%
Against change	406	86%

All Responses about the level of charges for denominational and grammar school transport

Suggested level of charge per day equivalent	Frequency of response
15 p	2
20 p	4
25 p	5
50 p	164
75 p	38
£1	62
£1.25	16
£1.50	1

Further Analysis of Responses from individual Groups Consulted

Responses from Parents of pupils at Denominational Schools

In favour of a change in grammar school transport policy	39	21%
Against a change in grammar school transport policy	146	79%

In favour of a change in denominational school transport policy	37	14%
Against a change in denominational school transport policy	232	86%

In favour of a change in post 16 transport policy	20	9%
Against a change in post 16 transport policy	196	91%

Responses from parents of pupils at Grammar schools

In favour of a change in grammar school transport policy	68	49%
Against a change in grammar school transport policy	71	51%

In favour of a change in denominational school transport policy	64	51%
Against a change in denominational school transport policy	61	49%

In favour of a change in post 16 transport policy	37	28%
Against a change in post 16 transport policy	96	72%

Responses from School Governors

In favour of a change in grammar school transport policy	5	31%
Against a change in grammar school transport policy	11	69%

In favour of a change in denominational school transport policy	5	26%
Against a change in denominational school transport policy	17	74%

In favour of a change in post 16 transport policy	1	7%
Against a change in post 16 transport policy	14	93%

Responses from Students

In favour of a change in grammar school transport policy	3	6%
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Against a change in grammar school transport policy	14	94%
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In favour of a change in denominational school transport policy	3	4%
Against a change in denominational school transport policy	72	96%

In favour of a change in post 16 transport policy	3	13%
Against a change in post 16 transport policy	20	87%

Responses from Others

In favour of a change in grammar school transport policy	17	21%
Against a change in grammar school transport policy	65	79%

In favour of a change in denominational school transport policy	17	8%
Against a change in denominational school transport policy	201	92%

In favour of a change in post 16 transport policy	6	7%
Against a change in post 16 transport policy	81	93%

RECORD OF CONSULTATION MEETINGS

Held at Paignton College and Sports College, Wednesday 7 July 2004

Chaired by Cllr Lomas

Officers in attendance: Tony Smith, Tony Jordan

Meeting One: School Transport to Selective Schools

5 persons present

Cllr Lomas opened the meeting by explaining the reason for the consultation.

JS. Governor: I am in favour of introducing a charge for transport to selective schools. I am amazed that the Council provided free transport to such schools, since this was not her experience when living elsewhere.

Councillor Mrs Turnbull I am concerned for low-income families.

Parent What will happen to children who have been given an entitlement for special reasons to attend a school at distance from home and will now be expected to pay for transport to the sixth form. This seems unfair.

Parent I have to pay for transport to Torquay Boys Grammar School already because it was my choice rather than enrol my son at Churston. I feel that if parents have to pay then they should be given a choice of schools.

Julie Cook Governor After moving from Hampshire I was quite surprised at the amount of discretionary transport provided by Torbay Council. It is very important that any savings achieved by changing policy are recycled into Education and not lost in the system.

Parent Education Maintenance Allowances are not going to be available to Year 13 age students who find themselves working a year behind in Year 12. How will the Council deal with situations like this?

Cllr Lomas closed the meeting and thanked those in attendance for expressing their views.

Consultation on Denominational School Transport

About 80 persons present.

Cllr Lomas opened the meeting by explaining the reason for the consultation.

Mr Van Kroonenburg, Head Teacher and Parent I want to thank the Council for recent investment in School Buildings at St. Cuthbert Mayne School, which has provided 250 additional places. However, it seems strange now to suggest limiting choice through a change in School Transport Policy. The Christian Education on offer at St. Cuthbert Mayne is distinctive from other schools. Parents value the special nature of this school and changes in policy would have an impact in Paignton and Brixham especially. The proposed change runs contrary to Government thinking which values parental choice and diversity. St. Cuthbert Mayne School will lose groups of pupils that will be unable to attend and this will dilute the Christian ethos at the school. St. Cuthbert Mayne School is opposed to any change in policy.

Father McGee, Chair of Governors, Sacred Heart Primary School I agree with Mr Van Kroonenburg. The impact on the intake of St. Cuthbert Mayne School will be significant. There is no similar school in Paignton or Brixham and this means that children in both of these towns will be affected. Recognised the difficulties of Torbay Council but there needs to be further serious consideration over the level of charge before any change in policy takes place. I am in favour of diversity in education. The governing body at Sacred Heart Primary School will be making some alternative proposals to put to the Council.

Councillor Mrs Turnbull I do not think that parents will be able to afford £200. It will be more expensive in Brixham, which is further away from the school. What will the Council do about those who can't afford it, including large families who may have several children at St. Cuthbert Mayne.

Reverend Macey [responding to a remark made by Cllr Lomas] Devon assists with Transport for Pupils to attend St. Cuthbert Mayne. There is a distinct ethos at St. Cuthbert Mayne School where it is a joint Roman Catholic and Anglican venture, which builds relationships between churches. I understand that £400,000 is a great deal of money, but there should have been better negotiation between the Council and the School Governors rather than rushing to consult on policy changes. Perhaps there is still time to form a sub-committee and work with the Governors over changes in Transport. Torbay is attempting to take away freedom of choice and that the Council should not accept blindly everything that Whitehall tells it.

Mrs Collier, Parent Before parents are able to comment on the Consultation they need to know precisely the level of charge, and this is not clear from the Consultation.

Rural Dean of Torbay I feel that some children would not join St. Cuthbert Mayne School and I am concerned of the effect of the change in policy on pupils and students, especially from families just above the Free School Meal qualifying level. Families with several children of school age will also suffer. This will force families to prioritise expenditure, and things such as additional educational tuition will be sacrificed, and standards will suffer.

Mr Bradley, Governor If low-income remission is based on qualifying for free school meals then this will work against those families who are just above the qualifying level. These families will have to pay for free School Meals and Transport, so will suffer disproportionately. I would like a head count and a vote taken at the end of the meeting to show the strength of felling [Cllr Lomas agreed to this request].

Mrs Palmer, Parent I agree that families who have an income just over the limit for free School Meals will suffer in particular.

Mr Eaton, Parent I consider the proposal to be erosion of parental choice. Parents do not chose St. Cuthbert Mayne on a whim, but make a conscious decision because of commitment to the Roman Catholic and Anglican ethos. There must be a safe guard for families on low income, but a large number of families fall just outside the free School Meals qualifying criteria. How will the Council deal with the situation if a number of pupils do not attend St. Cuthbert Mayne School and have to join other schools. Where will these children attend? I feel that the Public gets poor value for money from many other services offered by the Council and this is another example. How will we know what the level of charges will be in the future? What is to stop the Council making large increases in future?

Mr Rosendale, Parent This charging suggestion is flawed. Some parents might be willing to pay but others will decide to use their cars to take their children to school. If fewer people travel on the school buses then the unit cost will rise and the Council will be worse off and in a downward spiral. It will no longer be a cost-effective service. But if transport is free people will use it. The local Transport Plan for the Council aims to support Public Transport and this suggestion appears to be contrary to this plan.

Dave, Parent As grandfather of four children at denominational schools I can tell you that £800 is a lot of money for their parents to find. There is a safety and security concern over these plans because it will result in children walking or using public transport to get to school instead of school buses. I am not sure how many people have seen the Consultation document and there has not been enough Consultation. Congestion and chaos around school sites will be the result and the Local Authority does not look at these issues properly. There is no indication from the Council that it is looking at savings that it could make in house through being more efficient. It is simply looking at this one service.

Mike Bovill, Chair of Governors, St. Cuthbert Mayne School I thank the Council for the opportunity to express opinion and hoped that Councillors are made aware of views and feelings before reaching a decision. There is a need to put this in wider context. Devon and Plymouth make a charge for transport but have not done away with the transport network and most LEAs still offer denominational transport. There is a partnership between the LEA and promoters and providers of education and a change in policy may damage this partnership. This means the detriment will outweigh the potential financial savings. Some parents will be denied choice. 20% of pupils at St. Cuthbert Mayne get free transport and some of this 20% would not be able to join the school, and this would weaken the Christian character of St. Cuthbert Mayne. There would be an increase in car travel and congestion around the school gate. There could be empty places at St. Cuthbert Mayne, yet the Council is working with the School to expand it. When the school was expanded the governors at St. Cuthbert Mayne assured the Council that the extra form of entry would be drawn from Torbay and now this will be more difficult. Whilst £400,000 is spent on discretionary transport only around £100,000 is spent on providing that to St. Cuthbert Mayne. If the charges are introduced in the ways suggested the Council will earn very small amounts of extra income year on year and this change in policy seems more trouble than its worth. Please would the Council rethink its plans.

Tony Key, Governor Mr Van Kroonenburg explained that 224 pupils are transported to St. Cuthbert Mayne and the Council has made some calculations of income from a policy change but has it taken into account the number who will travel free because they qualify for free school meals? I have a daughter in Newton Abbot who pays to travel to St. Cuthbert Mayne and in effect when her children joined the school they signed a contract for 5 years. However, if parents do not know the level of charge, or what the increases will be, then they enter an unequal contract. It seems that parental choice is a red herring because for many families there is really no choice since we must commit to attending a church school. Parents in Brixham and Paignton did not ask for St. Cuthbert Mayne School to be located in Torquay. This was a decision by the Council and now parents are bound by that decision.

Peter March, Teacher Children's Education should be at the heart of everything we do. It is morally and ethically wrong to discriminate against faith and families on low incomes.

Parent If we were in another part of the country talking about taking transport away from other types of religious groups I think we would see more vociferous protests and I wonder if the Council would even consider such a move.

Tony Macey It is about time the Council withdrew this paper and decided instead to have a discussion with the Governors at St. Cuthbert Mayne to find a way forward. The Electorate know nothing about this Consultation and it is flawed like the SEN Consultation. A sub-committee including Officers should meet with Governors and plan a way forward.

Mrs Morris, Parent How many other people know about this Consultation? Would it not be better to let everyone in the Bay have sight of the Consultation Paper?

Patrick Costello, Roman Catholic Dean of Torbay and Teignbridge I recall a meeting in Totnes in 1998 held before Devon decided to change its policy. At this meeting warnings were given about the effect it would have on St. Cuthbert Mayne's intake and in the next few years the numbers of pupils joining from the outlying areas fell. Happily these numbers are starting to recover and the School still enjoys their good reputation because of the quality of the teaching but I am still worried about the effect of introducing charges. It would be a tragedy if Torbay went down the same road as Devon.

Ken Thomas, Taxpayer What will happen to the money that the Council intends to save, will it remain in Education?

Mrs Mallon, Parent Many families are on low incomes and reliant on seasonal work. This means that they are in receipt of free school meals for some of the year but other times they are not. Will they have to pay the charge for some of the time or all of the time? Does the Council's plans take this into account?

Mr Walsh, Governor Has the Council assumed that all the income will be collected? Does it not worry that there will be a drop off in the number of pupils using the transport and it will not collect the sum of money it thinks it will.

Mrs West, Parent If parents have to pay a charge then the standard of transport must improve. The buses are not very good and I have concerns over safety. Some times children travel three to a seat.

Julie Cook, Parent, Governor, Parents in Torbay are very lucky and should not take their transport service for granted. Other areas of the UK are not so generous with transport.

Mr Van Kroonenburg read the following.

*Joint Statement by Christopher Budd, Catholic Bishop of Plymouth
And Michael Langrish, Anglican Bishop of Exeter*

We are deeply concerned to learn of Torbay Council's proposal to end free denominational transport to church schools in Torbay.

Over many years we have valued our partnership with the local authorities, which has encouraged generations of students to receive the distinctive Christian education offered at a church school. We are convinced that the quality of our church schools is an indication of their special value in our society. This quality should be valued and promoted.

Any change to the discretion that enables students living more than 3 miles from the school to have free transport to a church school will have a negative impact.

This clearly runs contrary to current education policies, which are seen to embrace parental choice.

We hold our church schools in high regard and would like to make clear our opposition to this proposal.

A vote was taken at the end of this meeting: 74 votes were in favour of retaining the status quo with 1 abstention.

Cllr Lomas closed the meeting and thanked those in attendance for expressing their views.

Post 16 Transport Meeting

About 15 persons present.

Cllr Lomas opened the meeting by explaining the reason for the consultation.

Parent the Council should take into account the amount of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) that a student receives. There are three levels of payment and it is unfair to charge all students the same amount. It is also unfair to charge those students who live more than 3 miles from college when others will not need to spend any of their EMA on transport. This will mean that the cost burden will fall back on parents, as they will have to compensate their children for transport charges.

Parent This will place pressure on parents of students who do not get EMAs and will work against those in the middle income bands.

Mr Wilkinson, Parent and Teacher EMAs are designed to encourage and increase participation, so it is sad that this is being seen by the Council as an opportunity to increase its income.

Mr Van Kroonenburg, Head Teacher The proposal from the Council could create resentment. On the one hand the Government is giving students and EMA but the Council is proposing to take it away with the other hand. This will create huge resentment and will not be a good move.

Mrs Hammond, Governor I endorse these comments. Other Councils may have a different attitude to this. It is new Government money and to take some of it away from students just does not seem fair and it does not seem honest. Students will see this as a 'slap in the face'. EMAs are designed to encourage parents to back their children to stay in Education and this plan will have the opposite effect.

Mrs Wells, Parent My daughter is having to change schools in order to take the post sixteen course she needs for her future career and that she will have to pay for transport to attend her preferred school. Others are in a similar position. She will have to use some of her EMA to pay for transport and this does not seem fair.

Parent Students will not get a penny if their parents are not on low income. It is not a good idea to take new money away and it will force parents to top up the EMA.

Mr Evans, Teacher, South Devon College I think the EMA is something of a smokescreen and the Council's plans are simply to force parents to subsidise student travel. South Devon College has been successful in attracting applicants from a wide area and applications have increased on courses in skill shortage areas and it would be sad if this trend was reversed and applications decreased. The plans of the Council seem to be contrary to the desire to widen participation.

Mrs Hammond, Governor Before South Devon College decided to move to its new site there was widespread consultation and collaboration between Schools and the College and if charging arrangements are changed then this could effect some of the planning assumptions.

Parent The Council needs to be aware that students make their own decisions after they reach 16 and they might choose not to use Council Transport, and instead use a car or moped. The Council needs to be aware of this when calculating charges.

Parent This plan will increase congestion around schools and colleges. Parking is already a problem at most schools and this will increase danger of accidents and is not a responsible suggestion. Even 50 pence per day for transport soon adds up to a large sum of money.

Parent The Council needs to give careful thought to the charging regime whether it charges weekly, termly or yearly.

Parent Has the Council considered the position of part-time students? How will they be affected by all this?

Cllr Lomas closed the meeting and thanked those in attendance for expressing their views.