

# Working Group Summary - Children's Transport Policy: Proposed changes to transport assistance for post-16 learners with SEND

Date: 9 October 2024

Report of: Head of Democratic Services

Report to: Scrutiny Board (Children and Families)

Will the decision be open for call in?  Yes  No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?  Yes  No

## Brief summary

On the 19 June 2024, the Council's Executive Board approved a 4 week public consultation on a range of proposals for post-16 SEND transport assistance. This took place from 24th June – 21st July 2024 and set out four options for possible change.

In order to give the Scrutiny Board the opportunity to comment on and consider the proposed changes it was agreed that a working group would be formed on 24 September 2024 to consider the proposals for change and to take account of feedback from the consultation process to inform the views of the Board and assist in developing any recommendations the Board may wish to make to decision makers. The final proposals are due to be considered at Executive Board at its meeting on 16 October 2024.

Whilst it is recognised that providing transport assistance to Post 16 learners with SEND is an important and valued service, the assistance that is provided by the Council is discretionary with the responsibility for home to school transport falling on parents for this cohort of young people. In the context of rising demand, with recent analysis showing the number of post-16 SEND students in receipt of such support having doubled since 2015, the current arrangements are considered to be financially unsustainable as well as being restrictive and limiting for families who have transport arrangements decided for them.

Appendix 1 to this report provides a summary of the Working Group and the key issues raised during the meeting for approval at today's board meeting. Members should note that due to publication deadlines and the confidential nature of information considered at the working group, Appendix 1 will be provided as supplementary information on Tuesday 8 October following publication of the Executive Board agenda pack.

## Recommendations

Children and Families Scrutiny Board is asked to:

- a) Note and approve the summary note of the Working Group into the proposed changes to transport assistance for post-16 learners with SEND held on 24 September 2024.

## What is this report about?

- 1 Local authorities are currently facing significant financial pressures and an increasing number of councils are reporting ongoing pressures in the current financial year and considerable estimated budget gaps in future financial years which provide a challenge to financial sustainability.
- 2 In the last financial year (2023/24), the Council's outturn position for the General Fund was a balanced budget. However, this was achieved through the use of reserves to meet the legal obligation to have a balanced budget at the end of the financial year. The Children and Families directorate budget had an overspend of £38.129m at the end of the 2023/24 financial year which was principally driven by pressures within external residential placement costs in Children Looked After Budgets but was also impacted by an overspend of £5.147m in transport costs.
- 3 The pressure within transport budgets is driven by demand with unit costs per young person now at their lowest level in recent years at £5,937. There are currently 3506 (March 2024) children and young people accessing transport support which has surpassed the forecasted end of year figure of 3380 (a forecasted increase of 6%). In school-year applications have increased by 18% year on year, and an overall 15% year on year forecast is now anticipated. There has also been a 25% increase in transport awards with a passenger assistant due to a significant increase in complex behavioural and/or medical issues.
- 4 These pressures from the last financial year have continued into 2024/25 with the latest financial health monitoring report considered at Executive Board on 18 September showing a Children and Families directorate projected overspend at £18.847m with transport accounting for £3.749m of that pressure.
- 5 In addition to the financial context the policy proposals also reflect a desire from the authority to encourage and empower more families and young people to find their own lasting transport solutions as an alternative to the council doing it for them. This approach is highlighted by recent expansion of the Independent Travel Training (ITT) programme.
- 6 Any changes would be implemented for young people newly entering post-16 education in September 2025 and onwards with the final decision on any changes expected to be taken at Executive Board on 16 October 2024.
- 7 This report provides an update to the full Board meeting on the Working Group meeting, in line with scrutiny board procedure rules which state that '*A summary of issues considered by a Working group must be considered by a Scrutiny Board prior to recommendations being made.*' In this case this is being done at the earliest opportunity.

## What impact will this proposal have?

- 8 The Council's Vision for Scrutiny contained in Article 6 of the Constitution sets out the nationally agreed four principles of good scrutiny. Within these are a commitment to promote scrutiny as a means to ensure the voice and concerns of the public can be heard and to improve public services by ensuring that reviews of policy and service performance are focused. Consideration of this issue in a focussed working group considering views from Leeds residents addresses both of those points.
- 9 It is hoped that this working group will facilitate scrutiny board input into the Post 16 SEND Transport proposals.

## How does this proposal impact the three pillars of the Best City Ambition?

Health and Wellbeing

Inclusive Growth

Zero Carbon

10 The terms of reference of Scrutiny Boards in Leeds promote a strategic and outward looking Scrutiny function that focuses on the priorities of the Best City Ambition.

### **What consultation and engagement has taken place?**

Wards affected:

Have ward members been consulted?       Yes                       No

11 The Working Group specifically considered feedback from Leeds residents on the proposed changes to transport assistance for post-16 learners with SEND. This feedback was provided with the intention of informing the views of the Board.

12 The Working Group proposal was developed in consultation with the Chair, Board and senior officers in the Children and Families directorate.

### **What are the resource implications?**

13 The Vision for Scrutiny, agreed by full Council, recognises that like all other Council services, resources to support the Scrutiny function are under considerable pressure and that requests from Scrutiny Boards cannot always be met. Consequently, when establishing their work programmes Scrutiny Boards should:

- a) Seek the advice of the Scrutiny officer, the relevant Director and Executive Member about available resources;
- b) Avoid duplication by having a full appreciation of any existing forums already having oversight of, or monitoring a particular issue;
- c) Ensure any Scrutiny undertaken has clarity and focus of purpose and will add value and can be delivered within an agreed time frame.

### **What are the key risks and how are they being managed?**

14 There are no specific risk implications associated with this report.

### **What are the legal implications?**

15 There are no specific legal implications associated with this report.

### **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – Working Group Summary - Children’s Transport Policy: Proposed changes to transport assistance for post-16 learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) – To follow as supplementary information on 8 October 2024.

### **Background papers**

- None