Support services & Home to School Transport, January 2018

A public consultation about proposed changes to Home to School Transport and some support services for disabled children, adults and older people was carried out between 4th September and 22nd October 2017. There was a separate questionnaire for Home to School Transport, but both consultations were promoted together as some families could be affected by proposals in each consultation.

The consultation results showed that all four services are valued by the people who use them. Participants also told us about the negative impact the proposed changes would have on them and their families. In many cases these are some of the most vulnerable members of our communities. We revised some of our proposals as a result. Changes to support services and Home to School Transport have now been agreed by our Cabinet.

Access Fund

What is the Access Fund?

The Access Fund helps children who have Special Educational Needs (SEND) to take part in Early Years settings. A setting may need to pay for an extra member of staff, or a more qualified member of staff, to meet the specific needs of the child. Each setting can apply to the Access Fund for help with these additional costs. 197 children in Kirklees received support through the Access Fund in 2015 to 2016. We consulted on options for restricting the Access Fund (for example, by linking it with statutory hours for child care).

What we learned from the consultation

People who took part in the consultation were against the proposals to restrict the Access Fund. Participants said this would badly affect those who are already vulnerable. Some children might not be able to take up their place in a setting and would miss out on learning and development opportunities. It would also make it harder for parents and carers to go to work, which could affect their mental health and have a knock on effect on the whole family. Many participants said that the savings resulting from the proposals would be outweighed by the negative impact on children and families.

Changes to the Access Fund

Given the overwhelming objection to the proposed changes and the potential impact on families who are already vulnerable, we are not restricting the Access Fund. Instead, we will explore ways of building the level of SEND provision in a number of early years settings across the district, by providing specialist outreach support and monitoring. This will give us a range of settings which are already equipped to support children with SEND, which will help the funding to go further.
Home to School Transport

About Home to School Transport

Councils are required to provide free transport for all pupils of compulsory school age if their nearest suitable school is beyond two miles (for under 8s) or beyond 3 miles (for pupils aged 8 to 16). Councils also make transport arrangements for all children who cannot reasonably be expected to walk to school because of a mobility or health issues, or because there’s no safe walking route to their nearest suitable school. Kirklees Council is currently providing more support with Home to School Transport than the law requires. In recent years the budget for Home to School Transport has overspent by £1.3m a year on average. We consulted on options for making changes to the way that the service is run in Kirklees.

What we learned from the consultation

We received 543 survey responses, of which 306 (57%) were from those who receive free home to school transport, or their families. Participants told us that they value the free home to school transport arrangements highly. Concerns about potential changes included: pupil safety on rural roads, the potential that school choices would be driven by transport costs instead of the most suitable school for the child, and the potential economic impact on families who would have to pay for bus fares instead of receiving a free pass (currently an annual pass is £308).

42% (209) of participants felt that changing the service to offer only what is legally required would have a negative or very negative impact on their family. 6% (31) felt that it would have a positive or very positive impact. 52% (265) felt that it would have no impact (although this may not be the case).

Changes to Home to School Transport for mainstream schools

We will begin using a child’s nearest school geographically (rather than catchment school) as the “nearest suitable school” from September 2019. This is in keeping with Department for Education statutory guidance and the Kirklees Home to School Transport policy. This will provide an estimated saving of £114,000 per year. The changes will affect around 371 pupils and will particularly affect: Meltham (Catchment School – Honley High, nearest geographical school – Colne Valley High) and Kirkheaton (Catchment School – King James’, nearest geographical school – Netherhall High).

The law provides protection for families where pupils are entitled to free school meals, or if their parents are in receipt of maximum Working Tax Credits, but other families who are no longer eligible for free transport will need to budget for the cost of Home to School travel.
We will also investigate the possibility of moving from a system of providing bus passes upfront to a system of reimbursing the costs of travel to parents retrospectively, to avoid travel being paid for in advance and then not used.

To support children’s health and wellbeing, we may also provide an option for pupils to have a bike, helmet and safety training in lieu of a bus pass.

Changes to Home to School Transport for children with Special Educational Needs

We will split the existing joint policy into a separate mainstream Home to School Transport policy and an SEN specific Home to School Transport policy. The Independent Parental Specialist Education Advice Charity (IPSEA) has raised a number of challenges to the wording of the current policy, which we accept having taken legal advice. We are updating our current policy as a result.

Broader changes to the SEN policy will await the outcome of national statutory guidance by the Department for Education and a review of the post 16 Home to School Transport Policy. We will also consider the impact of a statutory only policy on families who may also be impacted by proposed changes to other services.

In the meantime, we want to do more to identify and train pupils with SEN or a disability who may benefit from independent travel training. Enabling children with SEND to travel independently (instead of being driven round by parents or in a taxi) helps to support the child’s development, gives them important life skills, increases their confidence and also gives more flexibility to family members. We want to encourage more of this in the future. In effect, we will be investing in children and young people’s independence.

Short Breaks

About Short Breaks

Short breaks for disabled children come in many different forms. They can last anything from an hour to several days. Short breaks give children and young people the opportunity to have a fun experience with or without their parents or carers.

Examples of short breaks include:

• Support in the home (day or night)
• Play activities outside of the home
• Services that offer help and support to carers in the evenings or during school holidays

We work with parents and partners to provide a Short Breaks Statement, which explains who can access short breaks, what’s on offer locally and what will meet a child’s specific needs. The consultation is part of Kirklees Council’s legal duty to review our statement.
What we learned from the consultation

Families use a mixture of short breaks. A sizable majority of our survey participants who use these services said they were extremely useful. 56% of people who use the service said they would rather make a contribution than lose the service. Short breaks enable families to ‘recharge their batteries’ and they are essential to enable carers to maintain employment, but some felt that the hours were restricted and transporting a family member with complex needs can also restrict their access. Families do not always know what’s available to them, and they would value more after school and holiday provision.

Changes to Short Breaks

To comply with guidance we will refresh the short breaks statement for 2017/2018, ensuring we continue to provide the services that are valued by our community. We need to continue with overnight short breaks, and further develop after school services and provision for breaks provided in the community. We also need to work with our colleagues in Community Plus to develop a sustainable range of services provided by the voluntary and community sector that will enable young people to achieve positive outcomes whilst giving families a break from their caring role.

Social Care Transport

About Social Care Transport

We consider providing transport for people who have been assessed as eligible for services or support from Social Care. Social Care is changing and Kirklees Council is developing modern, flexible approaches to adult social care that will support people and their carers to remain independent, enabling them to lead fulfilling lives. This includes seeking to ensure that as many people live and travel as independently and safely as possible within their own communities. Travel is an important aspect of everyday life which should be achievable, where possible, independently.

What we learned from the consultation

Some participants were concerned about increased stress and pressure on families to provide transport. There would also be a financial impact on some families who may currently use the mobility element of DLA/PIP to fund ‘other’ household expenditure.

Changes to Social Care Transport

We are introducing a policy of making sure that all other transport options have been fully explored with Social Care Transport users and their families before council-funded transport is offered. We will introduce this policy over the next 2 to 3 years and it will be part of the annual review process. We will also do further research into the option of a charging model for transport.