

School transport plans go out to consultation

Oxfordshire County Council is today launching a new consultation on proposals to reduce the amount it spends on home-to-school transport – following a decision in July to look again at the plans.

Under the current policy, some children receive free transport despite attending schools which are not the nearest available to them. In some cases, children receive free transport to their catchment school even though an alternative school exists within walking distance.

This level of provision is more generous than the national statutory level and is not considered sustainable given the on-going pressure on public finances and the need for the council to identify potential savings across all service areas.

Feedback

Following extensive feedback during the summer, when the Cabinet opted to defer its decision on any changes to the home-to-school transport policy, the council has revised its proposals and is re-consulting on two options which would reduce the range of schools to which children would qualify for free transport.

Either of these options would bring the council's policy into line with the national statutory level, as well as with similar policies adopted by neighbouring authorities and elsewhere in the country. The vast majority of children qualifying for free transport would not be affected.

Reducing provision to the statutory level would achieve estimated annual savings of between £1m and £2m (after the changes had been fully 'phased in' – see below), while other proposals to raise concessionary fares on school buses would reduce the level of public subsidy required to run these services.

Inviting public comment

Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Families Melinda Tilley said: "As many people are aware, we deferred a decision on changes to the home-to-school transport policy, and have used the time since to consider the feedback received and put new options on the table for public comment.

"We will listen carefully to what people have to say, but we also hope people understand that the county council as a whole is having to find huge savings right across its service areas – and that we are now expecting to have to find an additional £61m of savings up to 2018, on top of the £74m we had already planned for."

She added: "Our home-to-school transport provision is more generous than our neighbouring counties and national requirements, and we have to ask whether that can continue to remain the case in the context of ever-tightening financial constraints."

For full details of the consultation options, and to submit a response, visit www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/htspconsultation (a summary is provided below)

A list of questions and answers relating to the consultation can also be viewed online.

The consultation will run until 20 December. Following this, a report will be written and submitted to the Cabinet in January 2014. No decisions have yet been taken about the proposals.

Public meetings

Families are encouraged to attend a series of public meetings due to take place at schools which could be most affected by the proposals. All meetings will start at 7pm and are scheduled to finish by 8.30pm.

These are as follows:

- 11th November Carterton Community College
- 14th November Matthew Arnold, Cumnor
- 22nd November Bartholomew, Eynsham
- 29th November The Marlborough, Woodstock
- 2nd December Icknield, Watlington
- 4th December Wheatley Park
- 10th December Larkmead, Abingdon
- 12th December The Warriner, Bloxham
- (Date to be confirmed) Burford School

A summary of the main options

- 'Nearest School only'

The first option is to limit the offer of free transport to children who live beyond the statutory walking distance (or within it, but not on a safe walking route) and attend their nearest available school.

This is the same proposal consulted on during the summer, and if approved, it would mean ending free transport to catchment schools when available alternative schools exist closer by or within walking distance.

- Travel areas option – avoids 'splitting' villages

The council is also inviting views on an alternative option based on the nearest school principle, but with adjusted 'travel areas' to avoid 'splitting' villages between two different schools.

This would continue to promote links between specific communities and specific schools. However, it would mean some children receiving different treatment through having the option of free transport to two schools.

- 'Phasing-in' of changes

Options for the phasing-in of any changes outlined above are also included in the consultation.

These include applying the new policy to all children starting school in September 2015 and extending it to all other children after two years, or phasing it in more gradually to

ensure all children currently in receipt of free transport continue to receive it until they leave primary or secondary school.

- Concessionary fares

The council is also consulting on various options to raise the cost of concessionary fares for school pupils and post-16 students who are not entitled to free travel on school buses. Raising these fares would help make further savings by reducing public subsidies required to operate these services.