South Gloucestershire Council

Delivering for you

Answers to your questions

02 October 2024

Home to school transport consultation

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About the proposed changes

What changes are you proposing for home to school transport support?

In addition to our statutory home to school transport service, South Gloucestershire Council also currently offers further support to families of young people who are over the statutory school age who have additional needs, for example young people with an EHCP or learning difficulty/disability.

Families currently choose what form they would like that support to take – either the council organising and paying for taxis or minibuses to take young people to and from school, or expenses to cover the costs of organising transport themselves.

Having considered a range of options, the council has identified a preferred approach, which would make the expenses-based model the preferred option for all post-16 home to school transport.

What would this preferred option mean in practice?

The preferred option is to switch the focus to an expenses-based approach with more young people travelling independently. This would mean:

- The expenses-based model (which is already a choice for families) becomes the default option for those post 16 students eligible for additional travel support.
- Families take over responsibility for arranging how young people will get to school/college. They are supported with expenses paid at 45 pence per mile for two round trips per day. (This is the Mileage Allowance Payment rate for cars and vans as specified by HMRC).
- Families with exceptional or extenuating circumstances would be able to make a case for additional travel assistance.
- An appeals process is available for families concerned about the decision following their application.

Note: As is the case now, this discretionary support would only be available for families where the assessment in year 11 has determined that young people could not be travel trained to enable them to get around independently and where the young person attends an educational setting which meets their needs, which is nearest to their home.

When determining the discretionary offer, the council would also consider if there is spare capacity available on existing contracted school transport. If appropriate space is available, this could be offered at a concessionary rate.

The council believes this approach balances the authority's need to save money with offering support which enables young people to attend local education/training provision which best meets their needs. By promoting more young people to choose independent travel options, we will also help young people build the knowledge, skills and confidence to live more independent lives.

To keep the system fair and simple to understand and administer, expenses will be paid for the mileage travelled with one standard mileage rate aligned with the rate set by HM Revenue & Customs.

We are proposing introducing this change for students entering post 16 education/training from September 2025. There would be no impact for students already in post 16 education.

What other options are under consideration?

We conducted a comprehensive benchmarking exercise to agree the options to put forward to consultation. We looked at what support is provided in other local authority areas, focusing specifically on places like South Gloucestershire, which highlighted a range of different approaches adopted in different authority areas, including:

- Withdrawing all discretionary elements of home to school transport,
- Delivering independent travel training for young people and withdrawing or reducing ongoing support,
- Replacing home to school transport provision with an annual lump sum payment/bursary (flat rate),
- Replacing home to school transport provision with an annual lump sum payment/bursary (banded offer depending on families' financial situation),
- Replacing home to school transport provision with per mile expenses (flat rate),

- Replacing home to school transport provision with per mile expenses (banded offer depending on distance travelled),
- Replacing home to school transport provision with per mile expenses (banded offer depending on complexity of need),
- Continuing council organised provision, but charging parents a contribution towards the costs,
- Offering concessionary travel passes for individuals with complex needs,
- Switching young people with complex needs onto services provided as part of statutory provision.

Having reviewed these alternatives, our preferred option is to switch the focus to an expenses-based approach which the council believes balances the authority's need to save money with offering support which enables young people to attend local education/training provision which best meets their needs.

The financial challenges we face are significant and we have also considered what might be the impact for families if we were to follow the approach some Local Authorities have adopted in removing all non-discretionary travel support without paying expenses. Should financial pressures persist, this approach may be something which the council needs to consider in the future.

We have also kept open the option to maintain the current approach over the very short term. However, we do not believe this is an affordable long-term option; the costs of home to school transport have increased by 51% in the last four years, including a jump of over 20% in the last year alone. Going forward, we anticipate these costs will increase further due to demand pressures with more younger children entering education.

When might any changes be introduced?

Our intention is that changes would be implemented for the start of the September 2025 school year. We are proposing introducing this change only for students entering post 16 education/training from this date. There would be no impact for students already in post 16 education.

We have invited parents of young people who will be affected by these changes next year to take part in this consultation and will keep this group informed as the proposals develop.

Why do you need to review Home to School Transport provision?

Over recent years, demand for discretionary support with home to school transport has significantly increased, but funding has not kept pace. At a time when the Council's budgets are under significant pressure, we need to review the costs of providing this discretionary support to allow us to meet our statutory duties effectively.

Within the area of home to school transport provision, the financial challenges are especially acute:

- The costs of providing home to school transport have increased by 51% in the last four years, including a jump of more than 20% in the last year alone.
- We are expecting further increases in future years as the number of young people with special educational needs increases year on year.

The council is increasingly finding itself having to cut back on discretionary support to focus resources on those services which it is legally obliged to provide. Home to school transport support for young people who are over the statutory school age (16) who have additional needs is the only area of discretionary spend in the educational support the council provides.

Therefore, as part of the consultation for the council's budget for 2023/24, it was proposed to review all remaining non-statutory home to school transport provision. This proposal was

supported through a consultation and councillors agreed to investigate measures to deliver savings.

However, in selecting the best way forward, the council has balanced the need to save money with offering support which enables young people to attend local education/training provision which best meets their needs. The council first looked at opportunities to improve efficiency but must also consider what level of provision is affordable but ensures the safety and well-being of the most vulnerable young people.

Can you not save money by delivering services more efficiently?

Yes, our starting point as we tried to reduce our spending was to complete a thorough review of our operations to try to find ways to deliver services more efficiently. This work focused on three main areas.

- Firstly, we reviewed the full list of journeys to see if we could reduce our overall costs by grouping individual journeys into fewer vehicles (and drivers) where young people are travelling in similar directions.
- We also looked at all the journeys for which we are providing a guided escort to support the individual on their journeys to check these are all still required.
- Lastly, we looked at the relative costs of journeys being made within council-owned vehicles driven by council employees against what those same journeys cost in the private sector (for example using a private taxi firm).

This exercise showed that in general, the council is already providing services in the most cost-effective way, but we have found some opportunities to reduce costs without significantly impacting young people or families. These changes are due to be implemented in the coming months.

Couldn't you reduce your transport costs if you provided more local school provision?

Yes, increasing local capacity benefits everyone as it means young people can access learning opportunities with appropriate support without travelling long distances, which reduces transport costs. This is a long-term priority for the council with good progress having been made recently and the opening of the new Two Bridges Academy will further expand local schooling options for young people with learning difficulties.

How much are you likely to save through these changes?

Our modelling suggests that once we have implemented these changes, we will be able to make annual savings of approximately £366,000.

Practicalities

Who is eligible for post 16 travel support?

There is a range of support available to students to make travel to school, college or training more affordable. This includes a Concessionary Travel Scheme and discounted tickets offered by many travel operators.

On top of this, South Gloucestershire Council offers support on a discretionary basis to students aged 16 to 25 who have a current EHCP, and/or a medical condition or physical disability which results in mobility issues, where the assessment in year 11 has determined that young people could not be travel trained to enable them to get around independently. This is available to students who attend a setting which offers appropriate provision, which is closest to their home address.

How would I receive my 45 pence per mile expenses?

Final details of the scheme would be agreed following the consultation, taking into consideration feedback from respondents. However, it is likely that this would happen in a similar way to it does with the current scheme whereby parents can claim for two round trips per day attending school/college and then submit claims for mileage monthly, using a reimbursement form.

How will this work for students entering post 16 education in September 2025?

We plan to have agreed the new approach in time for parents considering school/college choices for September 2025, so they can take account of the home to school transport support available as part of their decision.

How will this work for students who are aged 16 or over, but are in earlier school years?

Any changes would only apply to students continuing education post year 11. Families of young people in earlier school years would continue to receive their current level of support until the young person has completed year 11 studies.

My child has complex needs which mean independent travel is not a viable option for us. How will we be supported?

Our approach is, and has always been, to focus support on those in greatest need. We recognise some young people face additional challenges accessing education or training and some for whom independent travel would not be an option. Families with exceptional or extenuating circumstances, for example where the young person has complex disabilities that may require a specialist support or equipment, or those who live in especially rural locations without access to public transport, would be able to make a case for additional travel assistance. An independently chaired appeals process would be available for families concerned about their personal budget award.

Additionally, we produce a travel policy statement each year which sets out the wider support available to families.

What sort of extenuating circumstances would the Council consider?

Our priority of course is to make sure that in reducing our spend in this area, we ensure young people are not excluded from education.

It is difficult to be entirely prescriptive in defining extenuating circumstances as each family's scenario will be different, but the feedback we have received in the first weeks of the consultation has been especially helpful in identifying the types of situations when individual families might need this additional support. It is clear from what we have heard already that there are a number of different family circumstances that would need to be taken into account to ensure we meet these twin priorities.

Providing feedback

How can residents provide feedback on the proposed changes?

The council is holding an 11-week public consultation to gather feedback on the proposals. People can participate by attending information sessions, webinars, and providing feedback through our survey. The consultation is open from 16 September until 1 December 2024.

How will my feedback be used?

Feedback from the consultation will be written up into a report for review by councillors and other key stakeholders who will decide if and how the proposals are taken forward. The council is particularly interested to hear about any impact of the changes.

What happens if people disagree with the preferred proposal or suggest alternatives?

We must make the savings, but the council is keen to find ways to protect services as much as possible and will actively consider alternative proposals from the consultation. We will then agree proposals which minimise disruption to services within the resources available.

Will the results of the consultation be published?

Yes, a report will be produced, which will be published on the council's consultation website.