



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

Home to School Transport Consultation 2023

This document provides background and further information to the key areas and proposals that the council is consulting on.

You may wish to keep this document open when considering your responses.

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Introduction

West Northamptonshire Council is consulting on proposals that make certain changes in the way that it provides Home to School transport. These proposals relate to the discretionary provisions currently provided by the council.

The Councils statutory duty

There are a range of statutory obligations which the council must meet in relation to the provision of Home to School transport, anything above these obligations is discretionary and included within the Council's Home to School Transport Policy. The statutory guidance the

council must follow is the Department for Education's [Home to school travel and transport guidance \(2014\)](#).

Key statistics 2022/23

Based on the latest data available, for the academic year 2022/2023:

- The number of pupils in receipt of home to school transport is approximately 5,850.
- The number of transport providers available is 132.
- The number of transport contracts in place under the current policy is 490, of which 150 are for mainstream students and 340 for students with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) contracts.
- 99 of SEND related contracts are for single passenger journeys.

What is the current situation?

The home to school transport service is a statutory (legally required) service. West Northamptonshire Council currently supports nearly 6,000 children and young people by transporting them to and from school each day. The operation of this is complex as it involves nearly 500 transport routes, supported by over 100 transport providers, these range from bus companies to local taxi services.

We are legally required to provide home to school transport for pupils of compulsory school age (5 years to 16 years of age) if:

- The child is below the age of 8 and is attending their nearest suitable school which is over 2 miles from their home address
- The child or young person is aged 8 to 16 and is attending their nearest suitable school which is over 3 miles from their home address
- The child or young person is aged 8 to 11 and is attending their nearest suitable school which is over 2 miles from their home address and is from a low-income family (for example, in receipt of free school meals)
- The child or young person is aged 11 to 16 and is attending one of their three nearest schools between 2 and 6 miles from their home address, and is from a low-income family (for example, in receipt of free school meals)
- The child or young person is aged 11 to 16 and is attending a school between 2 and 15 miles from their home address where this is the nearest school preferred on the grounds of religion or belief, and is from a low-income family (for example, in receipt of free school meals)
- The child or young person is attending their nearest suitable school which is below the statutory walking distance but due to their special educational needs or disability, they cannot reasonably be expected to walk to and from school
- The route has been assessed by the Council as unsafe to walk even when accompanied by an adult

West Northamptonshire Council currently provides Home to School Transport beyond its statutory duties.

What is being proposed?

The proposals will continue to ensure any child or young person eligible for the service under the council's statutory duty will receive support to travel to school, however the consultation is proposing potential changes around how some children might access travel assistance and how they travel to school.

It is important that the views of parents, carers, and children and young people who may be affected by the proposals are carefully considered to ensure that the service continues to meet the needs of its users. Feedback is also sought from West Northamptonshire schools, colleges, and other educational establishments as well as residents and other interested stakeholders.

The changes proposed will be considered by Cabinet along with the consultation responses **The changes we are proposing will not come into effect until September 2024**, and we are consulting now so that parents are aware of their entitlement to support when deciding on their child's schooling during the school admissions process this autumn.

The consultation focuses on the following key areas of Home to School Transport:

1. Proposed Spare Seat Scheme

This proposal affects non-entitled students that currently apply for a seat on one of our existing contracted services and who are then guaranteed transport. This provision will be replaced and instead, there will be a requirement to apply for a seat under the new Spare Seat Scheme.

Currently parents of non-entitled students can apply for transport by the third Friday in May each year and are then guaranteed a seat on one of our existing contracted services. Our proposal is to withdraw this provision and parents will instead be required to apply for a seat under the Council's new Spare Seat Scheme. The new Spare Seat Scheme will prioritise applications in the following order:

- a. Post 16 Applications that are being renewed
- b. New Post 16 Applications
- c. Non entitled children with special educational needs or disability
- d. Looked After Children or former Looked After Children who have been adopted
- e. Children of Armed Forces personnel, in line with our duty as part of the West Northamptonshire Armed Forces Covenant
- f. Siblings of eligible students travelling on the same route
- g. Non entitled mainstream children
- h. All others - on a first come first served basis from date of application

2. Removal of entitlement to linked schools

The current policy makes provision for free travel assistance to a child's nearest or linked school however historically the application of the term 'linked' has different meanings in the Home to School Transport Policy and the Council's School Admissions Booklet. This has led to some confusion for both parents and schools as to whether a child is entitled to free travel assistance.

The Council's proposal is to remove the entitlement to linked schools and provide transport to a child's nearest school only, with available school places. This will help prevent any confusion and make it clearer for parents as to their child's entitlement to free travel assistance.

3. Provision of Transport for Rising 8's

Under the current policy, the entitlement to free travel assistance changes when a child turns 8 years old as the statutory walking distance increases from 2 to 3 miles. Periodically the Council will review entitlement for these children and the proposal is that this will become a scheduled task at regular intervals throughout the academic year.

This is an operational change, not a policy change and those students who qualify for enhanced support under the Governments Extended Rights provision will continue to receive support.

4. Removal of Transport for Children Under 5 for mainstream only

The current policy provides discretionary travel assistance to children in reception class. The Council propose removing this discretionary travel assistance (i.e., free transport) for mainstream pupils below the statutory age for education (those in Reception Year who have not yet turned 5 years).

Legally parents are not required to send their child to school until the term after their 5th birthday and there is no statutory duty for the council to provide transport, therefore reception is a parental choice.

5. Removal of Travel Assistance for Year 11 Pupils who Move home during the academic year

Currently where a family move home during year 11, and their current school is no longer deemed their nearest or linked, the Council will consider providing travel assistance to support the student in completing their GCSE's. The proposal is to remove this discretionary provision unless the house move is necessitated by an emergency such as a house fire or due to domestic abuse.

6. Review of Suitable Walking Route Criteria

The current walking route criteria is not clear and can be confusing for parents. We want to simplify this at the same time as ensuring that the safety of school children is maintained at all times.

7. Increase the Cost of Non-entitled Bus Pass

These proposals are to increase the contribution towards the financial costs incurred by West Northamptonshire Council in providing transport, by increasing the cost of a bus pass that parents currently pay for non-entitled children. Local authorities can charge a contribution where a passenger does not have a statutory entitlement.

The current policy provides discretionary travel assistance to non-entitled children at a cost of £600 per annum. These costs have been reviewed and one of the proposed changes is to revise the contribution required by parents who apply for a spare seat under the new scheme.

The cost of a bus pass is proposed to increase to £1000 per academic year which better reflects the actual cost to the Council for providing a seat to a mainstream learner and will therefore help meet the costs of providing the service. The original £600 cost was introduced over 10 years ago and has not been increased until now.

The increased cost will apply to both Special Educational Needs and Disabled students and Mainstream students.

Why is this being proposed?

The current Home to School Education Transport policies have recently been reviewed. The review concluded that we are not consistent based on similar local authorities for the support for travel assistance that is available. We are also aware that the way in which we provide travel assistance has changed and we are currently providing transport for a number of sole occupancy journeys, many of which require the support of a passenger assistance. We also have a lower take up of personal travel budgets which can enable families to make their own transport choices for their child which can sometimes lead to the best outcomes.

The review also identified that for some of the home to school transport services, we currently provide more than our legal requirement (statutory duty), for example, we provide a subsidised concessionary seats scheme to some pupils who do not meet statutory eligibility criteria for free transport. We are proposing to rectify this and ensure that West Northants residents only fund the legal requirements rather than subsidise the cost of travel for children that are not legally entitled to support.

The cost of this scheme has not been reviewed in over 10 years which is impacting on our budget, and we are therefore having to carefully consider what discretionary provision we can continue to offer. The council is forecast to spend over £15 million on providing home to school transport this financial year. The current overspend is £5 million more than was originally budgeted. This pressure is expected to continue into the next financial year and whilst additional funding has been made available, by acting now we can avoid making much more significant changes in the support we can offer. The changes we are seeking to make will ensure we can continue to support our vulnerable children and young people during their statutory and education.

This is a national issue, and many other local authorities are facing the same pressures. Our increase in costs is due to several reasons, such as:

- Population growth and an increased need for home to school transport, especially for children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) and other special transport requirements
- An increase in transport operation costs caused by rising fuel prices, wages, and inflation

Having reviewed the home to school transport service, it has identified opportunities to alter the service which will help to make it more flexible and efficient, whilst also ensuring the needs of children and young people are maintained in a safe, effective, and sustainable way, and make it fairer for West Northants residents.