

# Home to School Transport Consultation FAQs

Version 2 – Updated 28 April 2023

## What is Home to School transport?

The Home to School Transport service is a statutory (legally required) service. West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) 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

WNC currently provides Home to School Transport beyond its statutory duties.

## What changes are the Council proposing?

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 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:

1. Post 16 Applications that are being renewed
2. New Post 16 Applications
3. Non entitled children with special educational needs or disability
4. Looked After Children or former Looked After Children who have been adopted
5. Children of Armed Forces personnel, in line with our duty as part of the West Northamptonshire Armed Forces Covenant
6. Siblings of eligible students travelling on the same route
7. Non entitled mainstream children
8. 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 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 8s

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

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 the 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 are under review 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 & Disabled and Mainstream students.

[Full details of the proposed changes can be accessed here.](#)

### **Why is the Council proposing these changes?**

These changes are being proposed in order to meet increased demand and operating costs whilst attempting to create a fairer system and exploring opportunities to give greater flexibility for parents, support our young people's independence and help to promote sustainable travel.

A review of the current Home to School Transport policy concluded that we are not consistent based on similar local authorities for the support for travel assistance that is available, and that we currently provide more than our legal requirement (statutory duty) for some of the Home to School Transport services. Therefore 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.

## **Does the Council have a statutory duty to provide school transport?**

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 are discretionary and included within the Council's [Home to School Transport Policy and Post 16 Education Transport Policy](#).

## **What alternative options are available to get my child to school?**

The Council looks to parents and carers to make arrangements for their children to travel safely to their chosen or allocated school where possible and will provide funded travel assistance only where we have a statutory duty to do so. However, families may be eligible for alternative support, including:

- Independent Travel Training: this is available alongside a training programme to enable children and young people to travel independently over a period of time.
- A Personal Travel Budget (PTB): a payment given to families directly which they then use to ensure their children get to and from school every day.
- A funded travel pass: to occupy a seat on a minibus, coach or taxi.

## **Will there be any changes to Post-16 travel?**

Changes to the Post-16 Education Transport Policy which sets out transport arrangements for students aged 16 and over will be considered and consulted on later in 2023 following a full review of bus services.

## **How can I have my say?**

You can tell us your views in one of the following ways:

- Complete the online survey [here](#)
- Email us at: [schooltransportpolicy@westnorthants.gov.uk](mailto:schooltransportpolicy@westnorthants.gov.uk)
- Write to us at: *Home to School Transport Consultation 2023, West Northamptonshire Council, The Guildhall, St Giles' Square, Northampton NN1 1DE*

Children and young people, their parents and carers, and other stakeholders will also have an opportunity to attend a drop in consultation event to get more information on their proposals and to have their say. We are running 3 public events, If you are interested in attending one of these, the details are as follows:

- 4 May, from 4pm to 7pm, in the Council Chamber, The Forum, West Northamptonshire Council, Towcester Office
- 2 May, from 4pm to 7pm, in the Jeffrey Room, Guildhall, Northampton
- Daventry, time and location TBC

The deadline for completing this questionnaire is midnight Tuesday 30 May 2023.

## **What happens following the consultation?**

Your feedback will form part of a report with other people's feedback, you will not be personally identified. All responses will be considered and will help to shape decisions by the Council on the proposed changes to Home to School Transport and how transport is delivered. The findings of the consultation will be published and presented to Cabinet later in 2023.

## **When will any changes come into effect?**

Depending on the responses to the consultation, any proposed changes will not come into effect until September 2024. 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.

## **How many spare seats are there for the spare seat scheme?**

The number of available seats is dependent on the number of late applications we receive for statutory entitled students, which we continue to receive during September and October. Only after these have been processed will we know the number of spare seats that can be offered which is normally around the October half term.

## **Why are we not running our own bus service?**

Given the number of children and adults we transport each day (nearly 6,000), we would not be able to provide the necessary resource (vehicles, drivers, and passenger assistants) that would be required. Utilising the existing bus, coach and private hire market through a competitive procurement process currently provides best value for the Council.

## **Why are year 11 being singled out on the removal of travel assistance for year 11 pupils?**

The purpose of the proposed changes is to ensure that the Council continues to meet its statutory duty and to reduce the financial pressures faced by the Council in subsidising the cost of travel for children who are not legally entitled to support. Year 11 students who move home during the academic year and who are no longer attending their nearest suitable school are not legally entitled to free transport and this is why the Council is considering removing this discretionary provision. The proposals also include removing discretionary transport for children under 5 years old and therefore we are not singling out Year 11 students.

## **Does this mean that children will need to review which school they attend if they have no transport and no alternative?**

Parents and carers will still be able to make a preference on which school they wish their child to attend, however if this is not their nearest suitable school with places available, then they will lose any entitlement to transport and be responsible for transporting their child themselves. The proposed changes will simplify the policy and will help parents be more aware of their entitlement to transport when choosing a school for their child.

Where a student has already started at a school which is a parental preference and is relying on the Council's non-entitled scheme to ensure they can continue to attend that school, then there are alternative options they can consider. This could include sharing transport with other families or grouping together to procure transport themselves. They could also consider moving their child to their nearest school. We would encourage any

parent who is in this position to complete the online consultation survey as the findings will be published and presented to the council's Cabinet later this year for consideration.

### **What are the positive impacts?**

The proposals seek to simplify the policy and will help parents understand their child's entitlement to free home to school transport when choosing a school. The proposals will also reduce the financial pressure faced by the council in subsidising the cost of travel for children who are not legally entitled to support.

### **Why should the provision be to the nearest school, and what if that is not suitable e.g., oversubscribed, or failing?**

The Council has a legal duty to transport a child to their nearest suitable school which has places available and is in excess of the statutory walking distance. If the nearest school is oversubscribed, parents would still be expected to apply for this school as they may secure a place under the schools over subscription admission criteria.

All mainstream schools are deemed suitable, regardless of their Ofsted status, and therefore will remain a qualifying school for the purposes of assessing transport entitlement.

### **What does linked schools mean?**

Within the current transport policy, 'Linked school' refers to schools which are linked to a particular town or village. Students who reside in these towns and villages currently receive free transport to either their linked or nearest school. This was introduced prior to schools converting to academies and were local authority maintained and was used as a means of distributing students and relieving pressure on oversubscribed schools. The proposals seek to provide transport to a student's nearest school only.

### **What is Rising 8's?**

This is children who are approaching or have recently turned 8 years old.

### **Why is the focus on rising 8's?**

The Council is not focussing on rising 8's and this is not a policy change. The purpose of including this within the consultation is to make parents aware that the statutory walking distance (the maximum distance under current legislation that children are expected to walk to school) increases from 2 miles to 3 miles when a child reaches the age of 8. The Council will be undertaking regular reviews of those children turning 8 to ensure that they are still entitled to receive free home to school transport.

### **Will the changes really save money?**

The majority of the proposed changes seek to simplify the policy to make it easier for parents and carers to understand their child's entitlement to free home to school transport when choosing a school place. The increase in the cost of a bus pass for non-entitled children will mean that the level of subsidy currently provided by the Council will be reduced, and therefore offer a saving.

### **For the proposal to increase fees for non-entitled; How are the costs worked out?**

The cost is based on the actual cost to the council of providing a seat on one of our existing contracted vehicles, for a mainstream student.

### **Why can't this be done in phases?**

By doing this in phases would mean that the Council will continue to subsidise the costs of transport for students who are not legally entitled to transport.

### **Are there any alternative options?**

Increasing the cost of non-entitled transport is considered the most effective option to reduce the level of subsidy provided to non-entitled students.

Parents and carers could choose to send their child to the nearest suitable school which would then overcome the need to purchase a seat on one of our existing contracted services. There are other options parents could consider such as grouping together to source their own transport or take turns to transport their own and other children attending the same school. In some cases, the schools themselves procure their own transport for non-entitled students.

### **Why is there no bus service offered from Brixworth to NSB but a service goes from Brixworth to NSG?**

The Council does not provide any contracted services from Brixworth to either NSB or NSG. The service to NSG is provided by the school themselves and not by the Council.

### **How are walking routes decided?**

The walking route is measured using the shortest available route. However, where that route is judged to be unacceptable, longer alternatives may be considered provided that the distance remains within the statutory walking criteria of 2 miles for children up to 8 years old, and 3 miles for children aged 8 and above.

### **Do the proposals impact Post 16 students?**

The proposals outlined in this consultation relate to children up to the age of 16. A separate consultation on the Post-16 policy will take place later this year, following the completion of a public transport review which is currently being undertaken.