

<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>Proposed Home to School Transport Policy 25-26</b>
<b>MEETING:</b>	<b>Cabinet</b>
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>11<sup>th</sup> September 2024</b>
<b>DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:</b>	<b>ALL</b>

## 1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 The Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 sets out the legal responsibilities for the provision of school transport which places a duty on local authorities to review their transport policy on an annual basis.
- 1.2 To provide Cabinet with the results of the recent public consultation exercise to assist them in determining whether to implement any of the options in the 25-26 Home to School Transport Policy.

## 2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Considers the consultation responses, together with the content of this report and supporting documentation.
- 2.2 Agrees to implement the following in the 25-26 Home to School Transport Policy
  - That the Council adopts the statutory distance eligibility criteria of two miles for primary aged learners who are attending their nearest suitable or catchment school.
  - That the Council adopts the statutory distance eligibility criteria of three miles for secondary aged learners who are attending their nearest suitable or catchment school.
  - Expanding the application of personal transport budgets where this is the most economically advantageous option for the Council. This option would only be implemented if the parents /guardians agree with the proposal, and they have the means to transport their child(ren) on a daily basis.
- 2.3 Delegates authority to the Chief Officer Communities & Place to develop and or amend the Home to School Transport Policy and any supporting guidance to reflect Cabinets decision.

### **3. KEY ISSUES:**

- 3.1 The Council is currently developing its medium term financial plan which needs to manage projected funding shortfalls over the coming years. This has necessitated a review of services, their operating models and the provision of discretionary services. The Council's current home to school transport policy provides transport in excess of our statutory responsibilities and the costs of providing the transport have continued to increase, exceeding budget provision.
- 3.2 During the academic year 23-24, the Council provided transport for 2,828 learners, equivalent to 28% of pupils aged 5-18, or 29%<sup>1</sup> of pupils aged 5-16 year living in Monmouthshire. Transport was provided to 54 educational sites at an average annual cost of £2,894 per learner receiving home to school transport.
- 3.3 In March of this year, Welsh Government published their findings and recommendations following a review of the Learner Travel Measure. They concluded that due to the planned changes to the bus industry and significant challenges around budget pressures they would not be making any amendments to the existing legislation.
- 3.4 The majority of Welsh Local Authorities have now adopted the statutory distances within their Home to School Transport Policies. The exceptions are Rhondda Cynon Taff and Caerphilly who provide free transport for primary aged learners from 1.5 miles and Caerphilly also offers free transport from 2 miles for secondary learners, Blaenau Gwent's policy is to provide free transport for those who live more than 1.5 miles from their school for learners up to the age of 8 and then 2 miles for all learners thereafter.
- 3.5 The costs of home to school transport have continued to escalate due to increased operating costs for transport providers. Where it is the cheapest option, or we are unable to secure an external operator contracts are undertaken by the Councils Passenger Transport Unit. The majority of the contracts, however, are externally commissioned by means of an electronic tender process. All contracts are reviewed on an annual basis to reflect changes in passengers and route reviews. The forecast costs for mainstream home to school transport for 24/25 are £5,726,603 with a projected budget shortfall of £622,930. Additional Needs Transport has an allocated budget of £2,451,243. The continually increasing costs have necessitated the review of the policy and the long term viability of providing the existing generous provision.

#### **Legislative Duties**

- 3.6 The Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 imposes the statutory duties on Local Authorities for the provision of home to school transport. Further guidance was provided by the Learner Travel Statutory Provision and Operational Guidance 2014. The legislation places the following legal duties on Local Authorities to:

- Assess the travel needs of learners in their authority area.

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<sup>1</sup> [Pupils by local authority and age group \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/pupils-by-local-authority-and-age-group)

- Provide free home to school transport for learners of compulsory school age attending primary school who live 2 miles or more from their nearest suitable school.
  - Provide free home to school transport for learners of compulsory school age attending secondary school who live 3 miles or further from their nearest suitable school.
  - Assess and meet the needs of 'looked after' children in their authority area.
  - Promote access to Welsh medium education.
  - Promote sustainable modes of transport.
  - Where learners are not entitled to free transport, local authorities have the power to provide transport on a discretionary basis.
- 3.7 The Learner Travel Measure defines suitable school as a setting where the “education or training provided is suitable having regard for the age, ability and aptitudes of the learner and any learning difficulties he or she may have”. Nearest suitable assessments will vary dependent on their chosen language medium, faith preferences and any assessed additional learning needs. Transport will be provided to either the learners nearest suitable or catchment school if they are different. When assessing nearest suitable, as required by legislation, we will consider all schools including those within other Welsh Local Authority boundaries.
- 3.8 When assessing transport entitlement, the Council also needs to consider whether there is an available walking route for learners to access to travel to and from home to their nearest suitable school. Where learners do not have an available walking route, the Council is legally required to provide home to school transport. Available walking route assessments are undertaken by the Councils Highways officers and is undertaken using the guidance within the Learner Travel Measure and the Road Safety GB Assessment of Walked Routes to School Guidelines.
- 3.9 Cabinet should also have regard to the Councils Welsh in Education Strategic Plan 2022- 2032 when considering which if any options to implement. The Plan has adopted seven outcomes, which are provided below:
- Outcome 1: More nursery children/three-year-olds receive their education through the medium of Welsh
- Outcome 2: More reception class children / five-year-olds receive their education through the medium of Welsh.
- Outcome 3: More children continue to improve their Welsh Language skills when transferring from one stage of their statutory education to another.
- Outcome 4: More learners study for assessed qualifications in Welsh (as a subject) and subjects through the medium of Welsh.
- Outcome 5: More opportunities for learners to use Welsh in different contexts in school.
- Outcome 6: An increase in the provision of Welsh medium education for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) in accordance with the duties imposed by the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018.
- Outcome 7: Increase the number of teaching staff able to teach Welsh (as a subject) and teach through the medium of Welsh.

3.11 Whilst free transport to Welsh medium education is not a statutory requirement, the Council provides free transport to the learners nearest suitable Welsh medium school subject to meeting the eligibility criteria. As there is no secondary Welsh medium provision in Monmouthshire, the Council also guarantees that those learners wishing to attend Welsh medium Post 16 education will be able to purchase a concessionary seat at a cost of £488 for the 24- 25 academic year.

### **Current Policy**

3.12 The Learner Travel Measure confers the powers to Local Authorities to provide discretionary transport. The Council's 24-25 Home to School Transport policy provides the following discretionary transport arrangements:

- Learners of compulsory school age attending a maintained primary school who live 1.5 miles or more from their nearest suitable or catchment school.
- Learners of compulsory school age attending a maintained secondary school who live 2 miles or more from their nearest suitable or catchment school.
- Learners aged 4 attending a maintained primary school who live 1.5 miles or more from their nearest suitable or catchment school.
- Learners attending their nearest or catchment Welsh medium school who meet the distance criteria of 1.5 miles for primary and 2 miles for secondary.
- Learners attending their nearest or catchment faith school who meet the meet the distance criteria of 1.5 miles for primary and 2 miles for secondary.

3.13 Transport is predominantly provided via dedicated home to school transport, however in line with Llwybr Newydd, we have adopted Welsh Governments transport strategy and are continuing to increase the number of secondary learners travelling by public transport. Monmouthshire's public bus routes were subject to a re-tender earlier this year which gave us the opportunity to change timetables to make them more attractive for learners by ensuring that they arrived at or departed schools at convenient times for school users.

3.14 In the academic year 2023-24 we commissioned 235 dedicated home to school contracts and provided 140 public transport season tickets transporting 2,828 learners.

### **Consultation Proposals**

3.15 Public consultation was undertaken between the 12<sup>th</sup> July and 23<sup>rd</sup> August inviting feedback on three options. Emails were sent to key stakeholders notifying them of the consultation alongside a social media campaign and press release. In addition officers attended five of the Community Hubs for those who wished to discuss the proposals in more detail. Feedback was invited through an on line survey, through hard copy responses or via email. The Council received 408 survey responses and 11 emails.

3.16 The survey asked the respondents to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with three options and also provided them with the opportunity to provide comments on the proposals and any suggestions they may have as to how savings could be achieved by

home to school transport. Of the 408 survey respondents 155 had children attending primary education and 228 were attending or have children in secondary education.

- 3.17 Option one proposed the reversion to the statutory distance of 2 miles for primary learners attending their nearest suitable or catchment primary school. The outcome of the survey was that 41% (168) agreed with this proposal and 59% (240) disagreed.
- 3.18 Option two proposed the reversion to the statutory distance of 3 miles for statutory aged 11-16 secondary learners attending their nearest suitable or catchment school. The final response indicated that 36% (147) supported this option whereas 64% (261) disagreed.
- 3.19 The final option asked respondents if they supported the provision of personal transport budgets where it would be the best financial option for the Council, or they were unable to secure an operator. The survey results indicated that 36% (147) were in favour of this proposal whereas 64% (261) were opposed.
- 3,20 Respondents were asked to explain why they had answered the way that they had and to provide any comments that they wished to make. The responses can be summarised as follows:

- **Safety Concerns:** Parents are worried about the safety of walking routes, particularly in rural areas with busy roads, inadequate lighting, and lack of pavements.
- **Impact on Working Parents:** Working parents find it challenging to transport children to school due to work commitments, making school transport essential for maintaining their schedules.
- **Unfairness in Current System:** There is a perception that the current system is unfair, with wealthier families outside towns receiving free transport, while others closer to schools have to pay.
- **Traffic and Pollution:** Many parents believe that reducing school transport will lead to increased traffic congestion and pollution around schools as more parents will drive their children.
- **Environmental Impact:** There are concerns about the environmental impact of more cars on the road, contradicting efforts to reduce carbon emissions.
- **Logistical Challenges:** Parents highlight the logistical difficulties of coordinating school runs with work schedules and other commitments.
- **Impact on Welsh Medium Education:** Changes to transport policies may disproportionately affect Welsh medium education, making it harder for students to attend these schools.
- **Retrospective Changes:** Parents are concerned about the retrospective nature of the options, which could disrupt decisions made based on existing policies.
- **Impact on Rural Areas:** Respondents highlight that Monmouthshire's rural nature makes the options impractical, as many areas lack safe walking routes and public transportation options.
- **Financial Burden on Families:** Some parents express concerns about the financial burden of having to transport their children to school, especially those without cars or on low incomes.
- **Potential for Increased Absenteeism:** There are fears that the increased difficulty in getting to school could lead to higher absenteeism rates, particularly among students who live farther away from their schools.
- **Disproportionate Impact on ALN Students:** Parents of children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) argue that these students require reliable transport due to

their specific needs, and the changes could cause significant stress and logistical challenges.

- **Concerns Over Policy Fairness:** Some respondents feel that the options are unfair, particularly for those who have chosen schools based on faith or language preferences, which may not be the nearest schools.
- **Impact on Working Parents:** Working parents worry that the changes would make it difficult to balance work commitments with transporting their children to and from school, potentially affecting their employment.

3.21 The following seeks to address the points raised by the respondents:

**Safety concerns and the lack of available walking routes** – The Learner Travel Measure imposes a duty on Local Authorities to provide transport where a learner cannot access an available route. The Council continues to develop its active travel network which should enable more learners to walk or cycle to school. Parents and guardians are able to request a walking route assessment if they have concerns over the safety of a walking route and this will be assessed by the Council’s road safety officers.

**The environmental impact of the proposals** – It is acknowledged that if any of the options are adopted this may result in an increase in car journeys and congestion at school locations. An analysis of the potential impact of adopting options one or two is provided below.

Option	Number of Current Users	Number of existing users affected by the options	Increased emissions if all learners losing transport travelled by private car	Increased emissions for journeys between 1.75 and 2 miles for primary and 2.5 and 3 miles for secondary
Reversion to the statutory distance of 2 miles for compulsory aged primary learners	468 Mainstream 294 Faith 116 Welsh Medium	70 Mainstream 53 Faith 10 Welsh	33.06 tonnes	11.11 tonnes
Reversion to the statutory distance of 3 miles for compulsory secondary aged learners	1,487 Mainstream 112 Faith 161 Welsh Medium	167 Mainstream 0 Faith 0 Welsh Medium	60.75 tonnes	16.16 tonnes

Column four in the above table assumes that all learners who would lose transport would be taken to school in private car, whereas column five adopts a medium approach assuming that learners would walk up to 1.75 miles to primary settings and 2.5 miles to secondary settings. This table does not consider any reduction in carbon emissions due to the reduced number of dedicated home to school transport contracts, which are often the most polluting vehicles.

**Financial and logistical impact on families:** It is accepted that where parents choose to transport their children to school rather than walk or cycle, this will result in additional expense to families. The statutory distances of two and three miles have recently been reviewed by Welsh Government and they have confirmed that no changes will be made to

the statutory distance criteria. The recent retendering of public buses has enabled the Council to improve the accessibility of public transport to secondary aged learners which can also provide a more affordable alternative to private car use.

We acknowledge however that the loss of home to school transport may place additional burdens on working parents, particularly those with primary aged children.

**Impact on rural versus urban areas** – Town residents will be able to access improved public bus services and will have access to active travel networks. Residents in rural areas have to travel greater distances to access schools and are unlikely to be able to access an available walking route which may mean that a higher proportion of learners living in rural areas will continue to be entitled to free home to school transport.

**Impact on ALN learners** – The Council has a duty via S17 of the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote the upbringing of “children in need”, which is defined as those children with health or development impairments. The three proposals do not seek to undermine this duty and learners with ALN will continue to be assessed by the Councils Children and Young People Directorate as regards their educational and transport needs. In addition the Home to School Transport policy already contains a provision to provide discretionary transport for learners with evidenced medical needs or for parents of primary learners who have independent medical evidence that confirms that they are unable to walk their children to school.

**Increased level of absenteeism** – Respondents indicated that school attendance would be directly impacted by the proposals as the proposed distances were too far for learners to walk, transporting their children was financially unviable or they would be unable to do so due to work commitments. We acknowledge that additional walking distances would impact on families with primary aged learners, where an appropriate adult will need to accompany children to and from school. Secondary aged learners however should be able to travel independently to and from school either walking, cycling or by public transport. Parents and guardians have a legal duty to ensure that their children attend school and will need to implement their own travel arrangements which could include car sharing or liaising with schools / MonLife to implement interventions such as walking buses, school streets and cycling proficiency courses. Should the options to revert to statutory distances be agreed by Cabinet, it is proposed that the Commissioning Team work with CYP colleagues to monitor absenteeism levels and if any negative impact is identified, arrangements are put in place to improve attendance levels.

**Not maintaining transport for those who have already been awarded it** – The options proposed, if adopted would be applied to all learners with no protection for learners who already in receipt of transport. Respondents have indicated that they choose schools based on their ability to access transport and if this is subsequently withdrawn this will have a detrimental impact on their families. It is acknowledged that there are potentially 133 primary aged learners and 167 secondary aged learners (23-24 data) that may be affected by any changes to the distance criteria. These figures will change as if the policies are adopted they will not be implemented until September 2025. To mitigate potential impacts if either option 1 or 2 is adopted, it is proposed that walking route assessments are undertaken in the areas where transport will be lost to identify

opportunities to improve existing routes or confirm where transport will need to continue due to the lack of an available walking route. We will also continue to work with public transport providers to ensure that public transport is reliable and operates at appropriate times to enable secondary learners to travel to school. Alternatively, Cabinet may wish to consider a phased implementation of the options to provide parents with more time to plan and prepare. If this approach was adopted, it would reduce the financial savings associated with the proposals.

### Impact on the Welsh Language

3.22 We asked respondents to consider how the proposals would impact on the Welsh language and access to Welsh medium education. A summary of the responses is provided below:

- **Concerns About Accessibility:** Several respondents mentioned that the options changes could make it harder for families to access Welsh medium schools, potentially reducing the number of children attending these schools.
- **Impact on Parental Choice:** There is a concern that the options might limit parental choice as families might opt for more conveniently located English medium schools instead.
- **Negative Effect on Welsh Language:** Some respondents believe that the options could negatively affect the Welsh language by reducing the number of children receiving Welsh medium education, which is crucial in areas where the language is already declining.
- **Financial and Logistical Burdens:** Concerns were raised about the financial and logistical burdens on families who might have to arrange their own transport if the options are implemented.
- **Potential for Increased Complexity:** Some respondents noted that the options could create more complexity in school choice decisions for parents, particularly those considering Welsh medium education.
- **Support for Current Transport Provisions:** Many respondents support maintaining the current transport provisions to ensure that Welsh medium education remains accessible and to promote the Welsh language.
- **Mixed Opinions on Welsh Language Education:** While some respondents see the value in Welsh medium education and support transport provisions, others believe it is a waste of resources and should not be prioritised.

In response to the points raised, the 23-24 data indicates that of the potential 300 learners that could be impacted by the proposals, 0.34% (10 learners) are those attending Welsh medium education. The proposals would not impact on any learners attending secondary provision due to the distances that learners need to travel to access provision. An analysis of the 10 primary learners has indicated that 1 will be leaving primary school at the end of the 24-25 academic year and will not be impacted by the proposals. Of the remaining learners they are aged between 6 and 9 and live between 1.5 and 1.8 miles from their respective primary schools.

Respondents have expressed concern that reverting to statutory distance eligibility criteria will act as a deterrent for families who may have an English medium school in closer proximity meaning shorter walking distances or alternatively their English medium catchment / nearest suitable primary school might be further than 2 miles which would entitle learners to free transport which would make it more appealing for parents with working commitments. Any reduction in learners applying for and accessing Welsh



medium education has the potential to impact on the targets set out in the Councils Welsh in Education Strategic Plan. Accessibility to Welsh medium primary education will improve from the academic year 24-25 as the seedling school in Monmouth opens providing an additional education setting.

3.23 Respondents were also asked to provide their thoughts on how the potential negative or positive effects of the proposals on the Welsh Language can be mitigated and how the proposals could be changed to have positive impacts on the Welsh language, ensuring that Welsh medium education is treated no less favourably than English medium and remove the adverse effects on opportunities for people to access Welsh medium education. A summary of the responses is as follows:

- **Maintaining Current Transport Services:** Many respondents advocate for keeping the existing school transport services unchanged to avoid negative impacts such as increased traffic, emissions, and safety concerns for children walking long distances.
- **Providing Active Travel Options:** Introducing bike-to-school schemes and improving pedestrian infrastructure like footpaths and cycle lanes are suggested to encourage active travel and reduce congestion.
- **Financial Contributions and Means Testing:** Some propose means-tested payments or parental contributions to support the continuation of school transport services, especially in rural areas.
- **Alternative Transport Solutions:** Suggestions include using smaller coaches, arranging lift shares, and coordinating with existing bus services to make transport more efficient and cost-effective.
- **Support for Working Families:** Providing affordable or free breakfast and after-school clubs is recommended to help reduce congestion and support working families.
- **Consideration for Welsh Medium and Faith Schools:** Ensuring transport services for Welsh medium and faith schools is emphasised, with suggestions to maintain current distance criteria and provide additional funding.
- **Ensuring Safe Walking Routes:** Improving street lighting, creating paved walking routes, and ensuring safe crossings are suggested to make walking to school safer for children.
- **Positive Effects on Opportunities:** Some respondents believe that offering travel for Welsh schools can increase their popularity. Providing more Welsh-speaking schools in localities where children have to travel long distances is suggested.
- **Negative Effects on Opportunities:** Increasing the mileage for attending a Welsh-medium school could make it harder for students to attend and may negatively impact the progress made in Welsh education. Some respondents feel that Welsh-medium education should not be publicly funded and that it is a choice for people.
- **Suggestions for Improvement:** Proposals include building a Welsh-medium comprehensive school in North Monmouthshire. Alternatives such as using bigger buses to collect more children and reduce the number of drivers are suggested.
- **General Opinions:** Some respondents express indifference towards Welsh-medium education. There are concerns about prioritising budgets for Welsh-medium education over English-medium education.

3.24 All respondents were asked to consider how the home to school transport service could make savings and a summary of those responses are below:

- **Alternative Budget Reductions:** Several respondents suggested that the council should look for savings in other areas of its budget rather than cutting the home to school transport service, as children's education and safety are too important to compromise.

- **Negotiating Better Contracts:** Suggestions included negotiating better prices with public transport providers and ensuring that procurement processes are in place to achieve the best value for money on transport contracts.
- **Means Testing and Parental Contributions:** Some respondents recommended introducing means testing for transport services and asking parents who can afford it to contribute towards the cost of transport.
- **Improving Transport Efficiency:** Improving the planning and scheduling of transport routes, using larger buses instead of multiple smaller vehicles, and optimising pick-up points were suggested to make the transport service more efficient.
- **Encouraging Alternative Modes of Transport:** Encouraging walking, cycling, or using public transport for students who live within a safe distance from school was proposed as a way to reduce reliance on school transport services.
- **Environmental and Safety Considerations:** Respondents emphasised the need to consider the environmental impact of increased car usage and the safety of children if transport services are reduced or withdrawn.
- **Utilising Existing Public Transport:** Some suggested utilising existing public transport services more effectively, such as offering reduced-cost bus passes for children to use public buses that are already in operation.
- **Future Planning and Policy Changes:** Introducing changes gradually and ensuring that any policy changes do not have a retrospective impact on current users were recommended to allow parents to make informed decisions.

3.25 The following seeks to address the points raised in 3.23 and 3.24.

**Procurement and vehicle sizes:** All externally awarded contracts are subject to a competitive bidding process to ensure that we achieve the best financial price. Internal services are regularly reviewed to compare costs with external operators and where appropriate these contracts will be offered to external operators if they are able to undertake the service at a lower cost. Vehicles sizes are allocated based on the locality as rural lanes will reduce the size of the vehicle that we are able to operate. Where financially appropriate we run smaller vehicles as feeder routes that will collect learners from their rural locations and take them to a pick up point to meet a coach.

**Transport efficiency and public transport:** We continually review routes and use route optimisation software to identify opportunities to operate services more efficiently. We do however follow the Learner Travel Measure guidance and limit primary school journeys to 45 minutes and secondary journeys to 60 minutes. We have also adopted Welsh Governments transport hierarchy and are increasing the use of public transport. In 23-24 we issued 140 season tickets this has increased to 255 in 24-25. Learners who are awarded a season ticket can use this at any time to access public transport in Monmouthshire.

Where dedicated transport has vacant seats these are made available to learners who are not eligible to transport at a cost of £488. This can be paid in instalments throughout the academic year to mitigate the financial impact on families. We note the suggestion that subsidised public bus passes could be made available; any subsidy will increase costs to the Home to School Transport service and would therefore not be affordable at this time. Welsh Government offers a discounted bus fare scheme for young people aged 16 – 21 called 'mytravelpass' which can support Post 16 learners. In addition 16 -18 year olds can also apply for an Education Maintenance Allowance which supports learners to continue with their education. Newport Transport offer 4 weekly child bus passes ( 5 – 15) at a cost of £20.40 and Stagecoach offer 28 day student tickets.

**Maintaining transport for Welsh Medium learners** – The Council has a legal duty to ensure that the Welsh language is not treated less favourably than the English language and to promote access to education and training through the medium of Welsh. The options if adopted would equally apply to both Welsh medium and English language learners. Whilst the Council does not have a statutory duty to provide free transport to Welsh medium education, it provides discretionary transport to these educational settings and there are no proposals to change this. The Council also guarantees that concessionary seats will be available for Welsh medium Post 16 learners due to the distances that they need to travel to access their school setting. This guarantee is not available to English medium Post 16 learners whose access is dependent on the availability of vacant seats. It should also be noted that based on the 23-24 data the impact of any changes will be disproportionately felt by English medium learners.

**Imposing means testing:** The Learner Travel Measure places a statutory duty on Local Authorities to provide free home to school transport for those learners that meet the statutory distance eligibility of 2 miles for primary learners and 3 miles for secondary.

### **Personal Transport Budgets**

3.26 Much of the commentary was focussed on options 1 and 2 and the comments that were received appear to misunderstand the proposals surrounding the application of personal transport budgets (PTBs). The Council already awards PTBs in specific circumstances, for instance where learner behaviour results in it being unsafe for them to continue to access dedicated transport. The proposal is that PTBs are offered more widely where it is the most advantageous financial option for the Council or where we have failed to secure a bidder to undertake a contract. The proposal did not intend PTBs to be mandatory but instead would require parents or guardians to accept the Council's offer of the PTB. We fully accept that not all families will have access to a vehicle to transport their children, may not be physically able to undertake the journey or have work commitments. If a family choose to decline the PTB the Council will continue to provide home to school transport using public transport or dedicated transport. Adopting this proposal, will however provide the opportunity for families who do wish to transport their children to be reimbursed for their time and costs.

3.27 In addition to the survey respondents, email responses were received from stakeholders. The points raised by these respondents which have not already been considered were as follows:

- Concerns over the timing of the consultation.
- Concerns that the EQIA was not immediately published alongside the consultation and the impact that may have on early responders.
- Lack of granular detail on the localities in the areas of Welsh medium schools that will be impacted by the proposals to revert to statutory distances.
- Need to assess the ability of parents to transport their children if option 3 is implemented.
- The collective experience of transport and being able to use the Welsh language on transport could be impacted by option 3.
- Insufficient regard to Welsh Governments Transport Strategy as the proposals will result in increased traffic movements.

- The proposals will have a detrimental impact on the growth of the Welsh Language in Monmouthshire.
- School access issues need to be addressed as the proposals will result in increased car journeys
- The proposals do not consider the differing walking abilities of learner's dependent on their age or the impacts of inclement weather.
- Minor health complaints / injuries that may impact on learners' ability to walk to school
- Impact on learners' ability to undertake extra-curricular activities, leisure, walking etc.
- Proposals to graduate transport distance eligibility criteria based on age and to continue to provide transport in poor weather conditions.
- Retain legacy entitlements
- Potential impact of the proposals on those attending faith schools.
- The proposals disproportionately affect primary school pupils with limited financial means
- The consultation did not include a proposed draft of the policy document.

**Timing of the consultation:** It was intended that this consultation would have taken place during the 23-24 summer term, unfortunately as a result of the General election being called we had to put this in abeyance due to the restrictions imposed during government elections. We accept that this has meant that the consultation has taken place during the summer holiday period, to mitigate this we have emailed all parents who currently have home to school transport making them aware of the consultation and reminding them half way through the process. We also contacted all schools, ran a social media campaign and issued a press release to communicate as widely as possible. It is acknowledged that the EQIA was not published at the same time as the launch of the consultation, however it was made available on the 25<sup>th</sup> July on the consultation page and prior to that it was published on the People Scrutiny Agenda for its meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> July. Early respondents had the opportunities to address any additional points they wished to make via the online survey or via email.

**Lack of granular detail on individuals impacted and their local communities –** Passenger data changes on an annual basis as learners move into or through their education journey. Information was broken down to an individual school level which enabled respondents and Members to consider the potential impact at a local level , based on 23-24 academic data. The school data has also enabled us to identify the impact for learner's dependent on the education setting they are attending.

**Learners' ability to walk to school:** The proposals are to revert to the statutory walking distances that have been imposed by Welsh Government through the Learner Travel Measure and have been implemented by the vast majority of Local Authorities.

**Providing transport in inclement weather and impact on learner's extra curriculum activities.** Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide transport to enable learners to travel to and from school for the scheduled school day. Transport is not provided or varied to accommodate breakfast clubs or after school activities. It would not be possible to

provide discretionary transport for learners when there is inclement weather as there would be insufficient vehicles and or resources to facilitate and fund this.

**Potential impact on faith schools:** The 23-24 data indicates that the proposals could impact 53 primary learners attending faith schools. In a number of settings the faith school is also the nearest suitable and or catchment school e.g. Usk primary, Raglan primary and Archbishop Rowan Williams which account for 50 of those potentially impacted. There is no impact to secondary learners due to the distances travelled to access faith secondary education. One respondent has noted that their faith primary school needs to compete with a local mainstream school, and they are concerned that they need to maintain the widest possible catchment. The proposal will not impact on catchment areas or nearest suitable requirements and primary aged learners will continue to be eligible for transport if they live 2 or more miles from their nearest suitable faith school.

**Draft Policy document:** The Council is not proposing to amend the document save for the three options should Cabinet choose to adopt them. Consultees were directed to the existing policy so that they could view the content of the existing policy.

## **EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):**

The evaluation has highlighted the complexities of the provision of home to school transport including its substantial impact on resources, its impact on climate change and the need to continually evaluate provision to respond to changing social, economic, legislative and environmental needs. It is apparent that any reduction in the current provision will negatively impact on both existing and future users of the service as there is an expectation that the Council will continue to provide a service which exceeds its statutory functions. There is particular concern that the proposed reversion to statutory distance eligibility criteria will disproportionately impact Welsh medium education. The current data and evidence does not support this supposition as of the 300 23-24 home to school transport users that would be impacted by this proposal only 10 of them are attending Welsh medium education. It is acknowledged however that the distance criteria may impact future decisions if parents can choose a closer English medium school. The proposals may also result in increased hardship or logistic difficulties for working families or those who are unable to access transport. If parents have evidenced medical needs that prevent them from accompanying primary aged learners to walk to school they are able to apply for discretionary transport. Similarly, learners who have evidenced medical conditions that prevents them from walking to school can also apply for discretionary transport. There is the potential that carbon emissions will increase if all parents choose to drive their children to school, however this will be offset by a reduction in home to school vehicle movements which are predominantly diesel and highest emitters of carbon emissions.

### **4. OPTIONS APPRAISAL**

- 4.1 **Do Nothing:** As previously highlighted the Council has identified that it needs to make financial savings to manage the funding shortfall over the Medium Term Financial Plan. Whilst the do nothing option is available to Cabinet; this would not result in any

revenue savings. As the costs of the service continue to increase it is probable that additional revenue funding will be required to meet growing demand and service costs.

- 4.2 Implement Option 1** – Based on the 23-24 academic year, if the Council were to implement this proposal it would result in revenue savings of £299,000 and result in the loss of transport for 70 mainstream, 53 faith and 10 Welsh primary aged learners. If all families chose to drive their children to school this could result in 33 tonnes of increased carbon emissions, however this would be partially offset by a reduction in home to school transport vehicle movements. There is a concern that the proposal will detrimentally impact future Welsh medium and faith settings as parents may instead choose English medium settings which are closer to their home or where they can continue to access free transport. This would align Monmouthshire with its statutory obligations and remove the enhanced provision currently enjoyed by Monmouthshire residents. The number of learners impacted, and savings will vary as the proposal if adopted will not be implemented until September 2025 when operator costs and learner data will have changed.
- 4.3 Implement Option 2** – Based on the 23-24 academic year data, if the Council were to implement this proposal it would generate savings of £365,000 and impact 167 mainstream learners. There will be no impacts to Welsh medium or faith learners as they have to travel out of County to access their preferred medium. The biggest impact will be in the Severnside area where 95 learners attending Caldicot, and 38 attending Chepstow will no longer be eligible for transport. The potential carbon impact is 60.75 tonnes if all families choose to drive their children to school. However this will be offset by a reduction in home to school transport vehicular movements. These figures will be subject to variation as any changes would not be implemented until September 2025, by which time the base data will have changed. The Council is developing active travel routes in the area which will result in improved walking and cycling routes for learners to travel to and from school.
- 4.4 Implement Option 3** – This proposal if adopted would enable the Council to deploy cost avoidance approaches where parents agree to transport their own children. A recent example is of a young learner attending their nearest suitable Welsh Medium school. As there is no transport going to this school within the locality a tender exercise was undertaken, the costs of which are circa £21,000 per annum. The costs of a PTB equated to £10,000 per annum which would have reduced the cost to the Council by £11,000. This option will not generate any savings as the Council will remain obligated to provide transport, it will however enable us to mitigate costs.
- 4.5 Implement options 1 and 2 but retain legacy benefits** – Cabinet may wish to consider a phased approach whereby those that are already in receipt of transport continue to receive it until they leave their current school, or their personal circumstances change for instance moving house. This will result in a loss of potential revenue savings of circa £665,000, however it would create generate cost avoidance savings for all new learners commencing school in September 2025. It is not proposed that this option is adopted due to the costs pressures facing the Service and the Council.

## **5. REASONS:**

- 5.1 The Council currently offers an enhanced home to school transport policy that is considerably more than its statutory obligations which continues to generate financial pressures due to increasing demand and contractor costs. The service continually reviews contracts and routes to identify opportunities to make savings, however large-scale savings can only be realised if the statutory distance eligibility criteria is adopted.
- 5.2 The Council needs to make significant financial savings over the next few years which has necessitated a review of its non-statutory and discretionary provision. Despite the associated costs involved in the discretionary transport for learners attending Welsh medium or faith settings, the Council is not proposing to withdraw this transport, but is proposing that the statutory distance eligibility criteria are adopted for all learners.
- 5.3 Whilst it would have been preferable to undertake the consultation during the school term as planned, the General election prevented this from being undertaken. The Council is legally required to publish its Home to School Transport Policy by the 1<sup>st</sup> of October to take effect in the following September which has dictated the consultation and reporting timescales.

## **6. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:**

- 6.1 The forecast cost for the provision of mainstream home to school transport for the financial year 24-25 is £5,726,603 against a budget allocation of £5,125,025. The budget allocation for ALN transport is £2,451,243 and the annual expenditure forecast is currently being prepared.
- 6.2 If option 1 and 2 are implemented with no legacy protections, revenue savings of circa £665,000 could be realised. If option 3 is adopted this would enable the Council to work with willing parents to reduce the potential cost burden where personal transport budgets are adopted.

## **7. CONSULTEES:**

- 7.1 People Scrutiny Committee considered the proposals on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July. The Chairs summary of the discussion is as follows:  
“The chair sought the committee’s views on whether the policy could be supported and there were no stated views expressed to the contrary, however a member expressed their concern about how the data arising from the consultation would be interpreted.”
- 7.2 Public consultation between 12<sup>th</sup> July and 23<sup>rd</sup> August. The Council received 408 survey responses and 11 emails commenting on the proposals.
- 7.3 Cabinet and Senior Leadership Team.

**8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

[Learner Travel \(Wales\) Measure 2008 and Operational Guidance](#)

[Home to School Transport Policy 24 - 25](#)

[People Scrutiny Committee 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2024](#)

[Learner Travel in Wales analysis and evaluation: recommendations report December 2023](#)

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