

Consultation Document



Staffordshire
County Council

Introduction

Staffordshire County Council is proposing to make changes to its discretionary, denominational home to school transport policy from September 2011.

This discretionary policy gives free school transport on denominational grounds to some pupils from Reception to Year 11 who attend Catholic schools, within and outside Staffordshire, or St Peter's Collegiate School (a Church of England secondary school in Wolverhampton), where they live over walking distance from school.

This document gives you information on the proposed changes and explains how you can have your say.

Why change the policy?

In the current financial climate, Staffordshire County Council needs to identify savings. To deliver these savings, we are reviewing all of our services, including the transport benefits currently available to pupils and their families in Staffordshire.

The County Council currently makes special arrangements, agreed with Diocesan Bodies, to give free transport for some children travelling to Catholic schools and St Peter's CE Collegiate School. It also provides some subsidised transport where parents pay towards the cost by purchasing a vacant seat pass. The estimated net cost to transport these pupils is just over £1.1m a year.

The County Council strongly believes in equity and fairness. This discretionary policy benefits one group of children. We believe this is neither fair nor equitable.

Staffordshire County Council continues to recognise and support faith schools as providers of high educational standards and pastoral care for the pupils in their charge. However, the financial costs to council taxpayers of providing transport have to be taken into account.

The County Council wants to introduce a fairer, more equitable policy that delivers budgetary savings for the council tax payer. An increasing number of Councils have already reviewed their transport policies to denominational schools and a number have introduced a charge to parents, or have completely withdrawn transport support.

What are the proposals?

September 2010 to July 2011

No changes are proposed between September 2010 and July 2011.

September 2011 to July 2012

If your child is receiving free transport in July 2011 under the denominational transport policy, they would continue to receive free transport during the school year 2011-12.

Any new applications received for transport from September 2011 (house moves, school moves or new applications) would not receive free transport, unless the pupil qualified on the grounds of either low income or because it is the nearest school to their home address and they also met the walking distance criteria (see tables on pages 5-6). However, they may be able to purchase a seat on the existing routes, where available.

The proposed charge has not been set for 2011-12 but is likely to be in the region of £410 per pupil per year. We are not proposing to offer reductions for families who want to purchase a seat for more than one child. Each year the charge would be increased to reduce the amount that the County Council subsidises the cost, working towards a full cost recovery.

From September 2012

No free transport would be given on denominational grounds to any school, including Catholic schools or St Peter's CE Collegiate school, unless the pupil qualified on the grounds of low income and they also met the distance criteria.

For pupils still in receipt of free transport at the end of the summer term in July 2012, existing contracted routes would be maintained until the child left the school, or moved address, unless there was a suitable public bus service alternative.

However, all parents would need to pay towards these transport costs and purchase a seat, where available, when travelling on maintained contracted routes. Priority for purchasing a seat would be given to those pupils who had been in receipt of free transport in July 2012. Pupils travelling by public bus would need to purchase their own pass directly from the bus company or pay daily fares.

As with all Staffordshire's contracted home-to-school transport, where possible, we would work with public service operators to enhance public bus services, and increase sustainable transport, so that secondary aged pupils could pay fares to get to and from school.

Contracted routes to Catholic schools and St Peter's CE Collegiate school, would no longer be maintained from September 2015 for secondary schools and 2017 for primary schools. However, the County Council would provide advice and assistance to schools and other organisations or groups who might be interested in organising their own home to school transport.

Who would be affected by these proposals?

The proposed changes would affect pupils who receive free or subsidised transport to Catholic schools or St Peter's CE Collegiate School, Wolverhampton, under Staffordshire's discretionary denominational transport policy.

As of October 2009, 1,499 pupils received free transport under the denominational transport policy. A further 221 pupils purchased a seat under the Vacant Seat Scheme.

The estimated total net cost to the council to transport these pupils is around £1.1m.

Who would not be affected by these proposals?

Some pupils attending Catholic schools or St Peter's CE Collegiate School, would not be affected by the proposed changes. Transport would continue to be provided to some secondary-aged pupils from low income families, post-16 students and pupils where the denominational school is the closest school to their home address.

As of October 2009, 25 pupils received free transport under low income grounds. A further 122 post-16 students received free or subsidised transport and 5 pupils received free transport to their nearest school.

The estimated total net cost to maintain free or subsidised transport for these pupils is £210k (including an estimated cost for pupils from low income families who qualify for free transport but do not currently claim for it).

The policy providing free transport to children in care (1 pupil, as of October 2009) would not be changed.

At present, there are no further changes proposed to the council's other discretionary school transport policies (see page 6).

Legislative Background

Entitlement to school transport is defined in the Education Act 1996 (as amended by the Education Act 2002 and the Education and Inspections Act 2006). Local authorities have a statutory duty to make school travel arrangements for certain categories of children (which includes those whose families are on low incomes), as well as a discretion to provide school transport to other children if they consider such arrangements to be necessary in order to facilitate that child's attendance at school.

Whilst exercising travel duties, Local Authorities remain under a general duty to 'have regard to' the wish of a parent for their child to be provided with education or training at a particular establishment on the grounds of the parents religion or belief. However, other than the statutory duty towards particular children, there is no duty to provide free transport to denominational schools for children generally.

What is the statutory entitlement to free transport?

The statutory entitlement to free transport for all pupils is shown below.

Age	Statutory Entitlement
Pupils up to the age of 8 (year 3)	Free transport to the closest suitable school if it is beyond a 2 mile walking distance from home using the shortest available walking route.
Pupils between the ages of 8 and 16 (years 4 - 11)	Free transport to the closest suitable school if it is beyond a 3 mile walking distance from home using the shortest available walking route.
Pupils from low income families* aged between 8 and 11 (years 4 - 6)	Free transport to the closest suitable school if it is beyond a 2 mile walking distance from home using the shortest available walking route.
Pupils from low income families* aged between 11 and 16 (years 7 - 11)	Free transport to one of the three closest suitable schools if it is between 2 and 6 miles away, or the closest school chosen on the grounds of faith or philosophical belief, if it is between 2 and 15 miles away. Proof of adherence to the faith of the school is required.
Medical grounds for pupils up to the age of 16 (year 11)	Free transport to the closest suitable school, where the pupil lives within walking distance from school and where a medical condition prevents them from walking in reasonable safety even when accompanied.
Pupils with Special Educational Needs or a disability	Free transport to the closest suitable school, where the pupil lives within walking distance from school and where due to their special needs or disability they are unable to walk in reasonable safety even when accompanied.

* A low income family is defined as one where the child is registered as entitled to free school meals or the parent(s) receives the maximum level of working tax credit.

What are Staffordshire’s current discretionary transport policies?

Additionally, Staffordshire County Council’s discretionary transport policies provide free and subsidised transport in the following circumstances.

Age	Discretionary Policy
Pupils below the age of 11 (up to and including year 6)	Free transport to the catchment school, if it differs from the closest school, if it is beyond a 2 mile walking distance from home using the shortest available walking route.
Pupils between the age of 8 - 11 (years 4 – 6)	Free transport to the closest suitable school if it is beyond a 2 mile walking distance from home using the shortest available walking route.
Pupils between the ages of 11 - 16 (year 7 to year 11)	Free transport to the catchment school, if it differs from the closest school, if it is beyond a 3 mile walking distance from home using the shortest available walking route.
Denominational transport - students up to age 16 (year 11)	Free transport for Catholic pupils to the Catholic school determined for their address by the Diocese (where it has an agreed transport area) when it is beyond 2 miles away for those up to age 11, and beyond 3 miles away for those above age 11 to age 16, using the shortest available walking route. Free transport to St Peter’s CE Collegiate School for pupils living in Codsall, Wombourne and Pattingham where they live beyond 3 miles from the school using the shortest available walking route.
Post 16 students - students between the ages of 16 to 19 (year 12 and above)	Subsidised transport support to the closest school or college offering the course, the catchment school or denominational school attended in year 11. A charge is payable towards transport costs but this charge is waived if in receipt of certain benefits.
Medical grounds for pupils up to the age of 16 (year 11)	Free transport to the catchment school, or school to which they would be entitled under the denominational policy where the pupil lives within walking distance from school and where a medical condition prevents them from walking safely, even when accompanied.

Facts and figures

There are 363 schools within Staffordshire (295 primary and 68 middle and secondary), plus 23 special schools. As of October 2009 there were 118,632 pupils on roll at Staffordshire mainstream schools, and 1,932 at special schools.

Of the 363 schools, there are 31 Catholic primary schools and 5 Catholic high schools in Staffordshire, with a total number of pupils on roll of 10,609.

Under the statutory and discretionary policies, Staffordshire County Council transports over 14,000 pupils to schools and colleges, at a net cost of over £15m (2008/09 costs).

We provide transport to 29 Catholic schools (20 in Staffordshire and a further 9 out of County) plus St Peter's CE Collegiate School, Wolverhampton, on denominational grounds. Over 1,800 students receive transport to these 30 schools, at a net cost of just over £1.3m.

Your Feedback

We would welcome your views on the proposed policy change. To do this, please use one of the following ways to ensure your feedback is taken into account.

Online – please send us your comments by completing a feedback form on line at www.staffordshire.gov.uk/transportconsultation

By Post – please send us your comments by completing the feedback form enclosed and return to:

Transport Consultation
Staffordshire County Council
Tipping Street
Stafford
ST16 2DH

Please note that we will not acknowledge receipt of your feedback form.

By Email – Email your views to transportconsultation@staffordshire.gov.uk

All comments must be received by us by 4.30pm on Friday 25 June to be taken into consideration by Staffordshire County Council's Cabinet on Wednesday 18 August 2010.

For further information such as details of how the costs and figures within this document have been calculated, how to obtain public transport information, and answers to some frequently asked questions please visit www.staffordshire.gov.uk/transportconsultation

The best way to ensure that all members of Staffordshire's Cabinet see your views is to put them in writing using the feedback form. We will hold a number of public meetings during the consultation period (although attendance will be restricted to the capacity of the venues). For details visit www.staffordshire.gov.uk/transportconsultation

If you would like this document or a feedback form in another language or format (e.g., large text), please email or write to the addresses given above.