



HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE – 26 JANUARY 2023

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS SCHOOL TRANSPORT SERVICE –
UPDATE

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an update on progress regarding the Special Educational Needs (SEN) transport for the academic year 2022/23 since the previous report in June 2022. The service has experienced several challenges over the six-month period related to Covid-19 recovery, industry inflation and contract terminations, but there were also several benefits regarding, in particular, demand management and planned efficiencies as set out in the Positive Action section. In response, the service introduced a number of measures, listed in paragraphs 22-32 of the report which, albeit successful in the short term, are not sustainable over a longer period.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. Updated Home to School Transport policies for both Mainstream and SEN students were published by the Council in September 2018 and were introduced from the start of the 2019/20 academic year. There have been no subsequent policy changes.
3. In September 2019, the Cabinet considered a report which detailed the implementation of the Council's Home to School Transport Policies. A judicial review on the SEN policy for 16–18-year-olds delayed implementation of Personal Transport Budgets (PTBs) until the start of the 2021/22 academic year.
4. Leicestershire County Council's Strategic Plan 2022-2026 (approved by the County Council in May 2022) notes that there are two tiers of support for children with special educational needs (SEND): 'SEN Support' and 'Education, Health and Care Plan' (EHCP). It noted that demand for EHCPs for children with SEND has also increased significantly, leading to rising demand for specialist SEND provision.

Background

5. The number of pupils requiring SEN transport is projected to rise by 6% in 2023/24, followed by increases of 8% in 2024/25 and 7% in 2025/26 and 2026/27 in line with the anticipated growth of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (as projected by Children and Family Services (CFS)).
6. The daily cost of SEN transport is rising at an estimated rate of 2% annually due to the need to provide transport for those with more complex needs as identified by risk assessments. Growth figures are based on projected increases in service user numbers and complexity of needs only. Budget overspend of £1.4m currently forecast in 2022/23 is linked to other issues (primarily market conditions and inflation).
7. Since the beginning of the 2022/23 academic year, 95 SEN taxi contracts have been handed back by providers on the basis they are unable to deliver for the contracted cost. This is contributing to a substantial rise in costs when the contracts are retendered. Any impact arising from the development of additional local SEN provision is unable to be quantified at this point and will be closely monitored particularly if children move from residential provision requiring weekly transport to local provision requiring daily transport.
8. A previous report to this Committee in June 2022 listed three key elements that drive SEN transport expenditure. These are:
 - a) Demand/Growth - the number of pupils eligible for SEN transport assistance.
 - b) Pupil need - the increased complexity of the needs of pupils travelling.
 - c) Market forces and competition - fuel costs, inflation, wages etc.
9. Further updates on these three elements are provided below.
10. The publication of the County Council Network (CCN) Report in March 2022 “The Challenge in the Counties” has provided additional benchmarking information that was unavailable when the initial report was published in June 2022 and is referenced throughout for context.
11. National data from the CCN Report (March 2022) shows that:
 - a) There is a fourth growth driver to those listed in paragraph 8 above, namely the lack of suitable local placements in specialist schools. This is also being experienced locally in Leicestershire as students travel further to school.

- b) Nationally in 2016/17, there were 41,185 SEN pupils using the service, however, by 2020/21 that number had risen to 51,558 which is a 25% increase.
- c) SEN home to school transport expenditure rose from £260.5m in 2016/17 to £346.9m in 2020/21 which is a 33% increase.
- d) Nationally, the average yearly cost per SEN pupil increased from £5,893 in 2016/17 to £6,099 in 2020/21 – an increase of £206 per head.

Demand / Growth

- 12. The previous report cited a 38% increase nationally in EHCP's / SEN support; 54% locally in County and a 25% increase in local demand for SEN transport over the last two years.
- 13. Local data to November 2022 (see Annual demographic growth on SEN Transport appended to this report) indicates the growth trend is continuing.
- 14. Leicestershire's cost per SEN pupil in 2020/21 was £5,454, lower than the 2020/21 national average of £6,099.
- 15. Service spend has increased in line with demand, except for 2020/21 when the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a number of contract suspensions, which reduced contract payments.

Pupil Need

- 16. As noted in the previous report, there is an ongoing increase in pupils' needs. Service user distance travelled (to nearest suitable provision) and transport requirement complexity has been growing in terms of pupil numbers and cost year on year.
- 17. The report presented to this Committee in June 2022 states that the most cost-effective way of providing transport is to have as few contracted vehicles transporting as many pupils as possible at their maximum capacity, with reference to current types of provision. New, more efficient modes of transport are therefore being considered, for example, group pick up points for SEN students on large coach-type vehicles.
- 18. The same applies to pupils that require wheelchair accessible transport or other specialised vehicles. In June 2022 the average cost per mile for tenders received for wheelchair accessible vehicles was usually twice that of a standard taxi. On average, wheelchair accessible tenders are 95% more expensive than those for a standard vehicle, a trend that continued in November 2022.

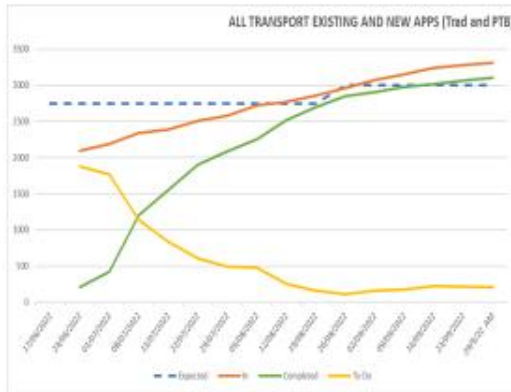
Market Forces and Competition

19. In June 2022 fuel prices had increased by 25%. The fuel element of the contract price is generally around 10% to 12%.
20. In June 2022, operators reported a shortage of drivers and escorts as well as cost of living rises resulting in wage rises of around 10%, with inflationary contract increases at 14%. This trend continued to November 2022 and is impacting the capacity of the Council fleet to provide cost effective alternative provision.
21. Between June and November 2022, 95 contracts had been rescinded at the request of the operators at an additional cost of £120,000.

Positive Action

22. The SEN transport service anticipated challenges with receiving information required to enable transport provision for the start of the September 2022 academic year due to resourcing issues in CFS, resulting in delays against the standard timeline as detailed below. In response, both departments worked collaboratively to minimise any adverse effects.
 - a) A total of 338 transport requests were delayed due to incomplete EHCP information from CFS;
 - b) There were 193 applications that took longer than 50 days to approve because of missing EHCP information;
 - c) As of December 2022 / January 2023, there are 19 applications still awaiting eligibility assessment because of missing EHCP information. This missing information is being continually requested and improved communications with SEND commissioners is helping to reduce the number of incomplete plans further.
 - d) Of those eligible, 91.33% of students had transport in place and 95% had PTB's in place ready for the start of the school year.
23. The following table shows the weekly breakdown of progress in processing transport applications.

Progress of Transport Applications @ 29/09/22



Date	Expected	In	Completed	done in week	To Do
17/06/2022	2750				
24/06/2022	2750	2090	210		1880
01/07/2022	2750	2191	424	214	1767
08/07/2022	2750	2342	1203	779	1139
15/07/2022	2750	2390	1552	349	838
22/07/2022	2750	2510	1906	354	604
29/07/2022	2750	2581	2086	180	495
05/08/2022	2750	2726	2252	166	474
12/08/2022	2750	2772	2514	262	258
19/08/2022	2750	2855	2697	183	158
26/08/2022	3000	2961	2851	154	110
02/09/2022	3000	3070	2909	58	161
09/09/2022	3000	3151	2975	66	176
16/09/2022	3000	3239	3017	42	222
23/09/2022	3000	3281	3066	49	215
29/9/22 AM	3000	3313	3104	38	209
We have completed:			38	SINCE FRIDAY PM (Not full week)	
We have received:			32		

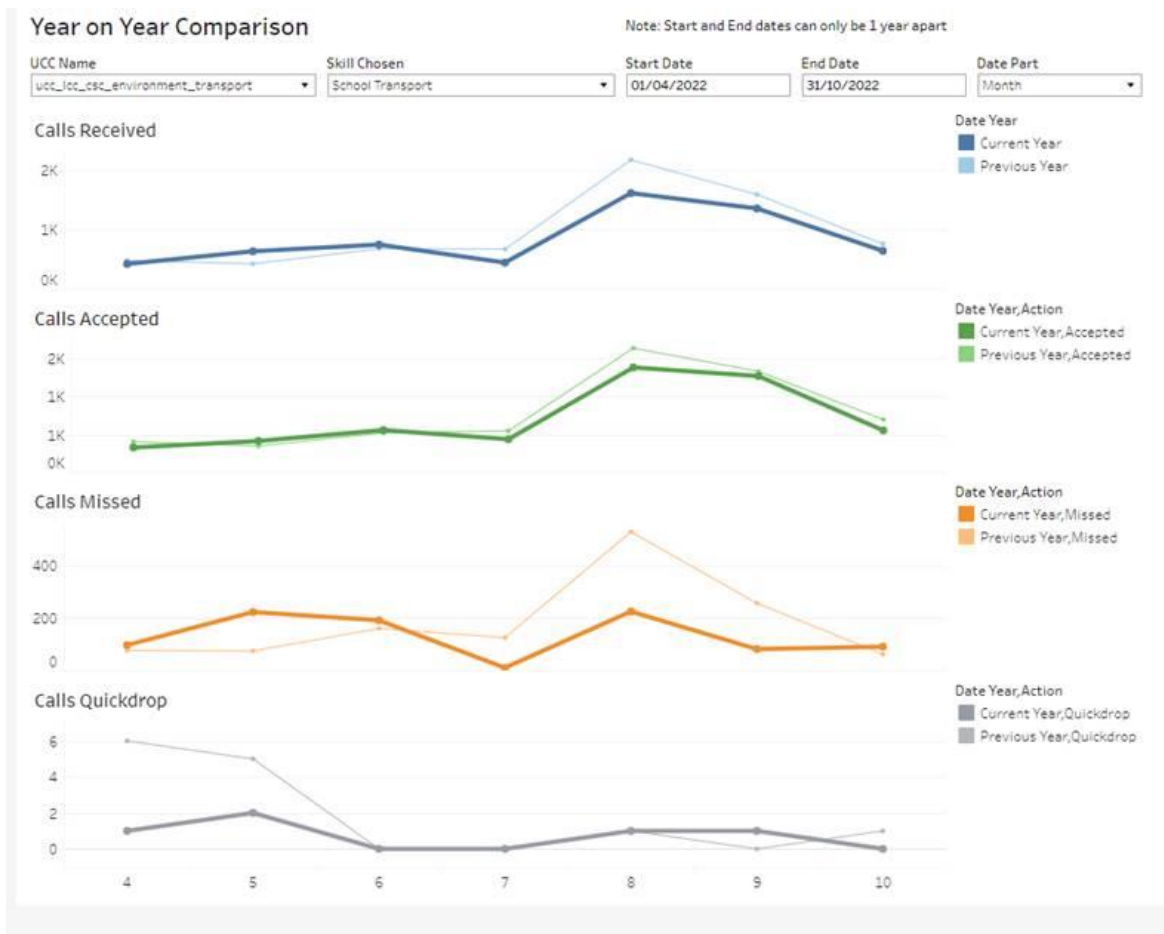
Think customer.

Think digital.

3

24. The positive actions taken included a prepayment scheme being introduced in Summer 2022 to mitigate against the late transport arrangements. This enabled parents to pay for transport until each contract could be put in place (a payment card was issued with cash preloaded). 31 families benefited from this scheme.
25. At the same time, the digital application process was reviewed with parents receiving status updates by email, so reducing the number of follow-up calls and lowering additional demand on the team, which enabled them to focus on getting transport in place. This also helped with forecasting.
26. Frequently asked questions and answers were introduced online allowing parents to refer to information and therefore also reducing call volumes.
27. Work was carried out with finance to implement a new process to speed up PTB applications which simplified the setting up of individuals as suppliers on the system.
28. A temporary control hub was established to handle a large proportion of the escalated complaints which significantly reduced the number of corporate complaints received.

29. Additional training was carried out with the Customer Service Centre (CSC) to review scripts with further information enabling queries to be dealt with at first point of contact.



30. Capacity in the CSC was reviewed. Existing resources were re-allocated and priority was given to school transport calls. The impact of this approach can be seen in the above figure showing reducing call levels.
31. The eligibility team have now access to QPATHS (a software product that automates eligibility assessments) which enables them to check eligibility of pupils quicker and more efficiently (speeding up the process of 15,000 mainstream pupils).
32. In September 2022, a transformation programme was initiated to manage demand and drive further efficiencies across the assisted transport service funded by a £500,000 one off contribution from the Transformation reserve. The programme features projects to redesign processes, procure a new IT system and improve capacity and capabilities.

Resource Implications

33. The Director of Corporate Resources and the Director of Law and Governance have been consulted on the content of this report.

Conclusions

34. SEN transport has seen significant growth over the last few years, which aligns with national trends. Despite additional resourcing challenges this year, management interventions proved a success in maintaining standards of service from June to November 2022. Those interventions, however, were resource intensive and therefore costly, and unsustainable in the long term. With growth forecast to continue, and in light of the Council's overall financial situation, work within the Environment and Transport Department and in collaboration with the CFS will continue in order to manage demand and drive efficiencies across this service area.
35. Members are asked to note the content of this report.

Background Papers

Report to the Highways and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee 9 June 2022 – Special Educational Needs Transport Service – Provision Briefing

<https://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=1293&MIId=6734&Ver=4> (item 10)

Report to the Cabinet 16 December 2022 – Provisional Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023/24-2026/27

<https://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=135&MIId=6746&Ver=4> (item 4)

County Council's Network – The Challenge in Counties

<https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/councils-face-difficult-decisions-as-spiralling-fuel-prices-impact-on-school-transport-services-report-warns/>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

None.

Equality Implications

36. There are no equality implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.
37. Equality Impact Assessments will be carried out in relation to work undertaken on individual projects when appropriate.

Human Rights Implications

38. There are no human rights implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.
39. Human Rights Impact Assessments will be carried out in relation to work undertaken on individual projects when appropriate.

Appendix

Annual demographic growth on SEN Transport

Officers to Contact

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