



**GROWTH, HIGHWAYS, TRANSPORT AND WASTE OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 4 JUNE 2026**

**HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT ANNUAL REPORT 2025/2026 AND
KEY PRIORITIES FOR 2026/2027**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF GROWTH, ENVIRONMENT AND
TRANSPORT**

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to advise Members regarding the performance and delivery of the school transport service for the 2025/26 academic year, and present the challenges faced by the service in terms of managing growth and driving efficiency.
2. The report also outlines key successes achieved in the past 12 months and provides a summary of the next steps to be taken by the service over the next year.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

3. The primary legislation and guidance relevant to home to school, post-16 and adult learner transport includes the Education Act 1996 the Department for Education (DfE) statutory guidance Travel to school for children of compulsory school age; the DfE statutory guidance Post-16 transport and travel support to education and training; the SEND Code of Practice; and the Council published transport policies. In broad terms, the Council must promote sustainable travel, make free travel arrangements for eligible children of compulsory school age, consider discretionary arrangements for other children where appropriate, and publish/consider appropriate post-16 and adult learner transport arrangements in accordance with the relevant statutory duties. In March 2018, the Cabinet approved changes to the 'Mainstream and Special Educational Needs Home to School Transport Policy' which were introduced from the start of the 2019/20 academic year. The Policy, which is published each academic year, applies to children living in Leicestershire. It describes free and assisted transport entitlement to mainstream schools, academies, and colleges, including entitlement for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) who have no special transport requirements and who attend such establishments. Some children with special educational needs require specific transport, for which there is a supplementary SEND policy.
4. In September 2019, the Cabinet considered a report on the implementation of the Council's 'Home to School Transport Policies', which included Personal

Transport Budgets (PTBs). A judicial review on the Council's SEND Policy for 16–18-year-olds delayed the implementation of PTBs until the start of the 2021/22 academic year.

5. In June 2023, and as further clarified in January 2024, the DfE revised its statutory guidance on 'Travel to school for children of compulsory school age'. The updated guidance clarified the law, recognised the increasing cost of delivering free home to school travel and the importance of taking travel costs into account when local authorities plan the supply of school places. It stressed the importance of school travel and SEND teams working together to ensure travel arrangements were considered when deciding what school to name in a child's Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Officers are monitoring the legal and funding position in relation to transport costs for looked after children placed outside their home authority area. The latest indications from the DfE are that the costs of transport for looked after children should be met by the placing authority rather than the authority in which the child resides, as has been recent practice. Any change to the Council approach will need to be considered in light of published statutory guidance, any relevant legal advice and any formal clarification issued by the DfE.

Background

Current School Transport Operation

6. The Council has continued to meet all eligible transport requests, despite ongoing increases in SEND pupil numbers and challenging market conditions.
 - a) Over 3.1m pupil journeys were provided over the 2025/26 financial year.
 - b) A total of 2,561 applications for SEND transport assistance were received in the 2025/26 school year.
 - c) A total of 720 applications were received by the closing deadline of 18 May 2025; 100% of those eligible with a complete application and confirmed placement had transport assistance arranged for the start of the new school year.
 - d) Between 18 May and 31 July 2025, a total of 758 applications were received; 98% of those eligible with a complete application and confirmed placement had transport assistance arranged for the start of the new school year.
 - e) A further 1,083 applications were received after 31 July 2025 and throughout the school year and these are arranged within normal service timelines.
 - f) Students staying within their phase of education do not need to apply and 100% of these had transport assistance arranged for the start of the new school year.
 - g) All groups combined make a total of 3,377 SEND students in receipt of transport assistance.
7. Mainstream school transport is provided primarily by commissioned contracted bus services and season tickets, and SEND transport is provided in the main, by minibuses, taxis, Council in-house fleet, or PTB.

8. To achieve this, a wide range of tasks need to be performed, including undertaking eligibility assessments; undertaking pupil risk assessments; reviewing each school and contract; procuring new contracts or changes to existing contracts; generating route sheets; facilitating meet and greets; arranging equipment; setting up and monitoring payments; and supporting day-to-day correspondence with schools, operators, and families.
9. Data from January 2025 to December 2025 shows that the service received:
- 4,293 e-forms.
 - 72,653 emails,
 - 8,397 phone calls.
10. In addition, the service is responsible for the ongoing monitoring of contracts with transport providers. During 2025/26 activities included:
- 840 on-site inspections of taxi/bus operations,
 - 1,797 checks of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) applications,
 - 459 verbal competency and identity document checks of new Passenger Assistants.

Mainstream School Transport

11. The majority of students travel to primary and secondary schools within Leicestershire. In line with the current transport policy, 4,909 Mainstream students were eligible for free school transport as of September 2025.

Figure 1: Breakdown of cost per pupil and budget for Mainstream school transport

Mainstream Position	2025/2026	2026/2027
Pupils	4,909	
Average Cost Per Pupil	£1,405	
Expenditure	£6.9m	
Budget	£7.0m	£6.5m
Underspend	£0.1m	

* Note, the budget is reducing in 2026/27 by £0.5m, because of budgeted contract savings (£0.5m), and a lower number of school days budgeted in the next financial year (£0.1m), partly offset by growth for increase in users (£0.1m).

12. Last year transport was provided over 189 school days, twice a day a total of 1,855,602 journeys.

Figure 2: Travel options - Data Snapshot - September 2025

2025/2026 Mainstream	Total number of pupils
Season Tickets	2,052
School Buses	1,968
External Provider (Taxi)	547
Personal Transport Budget	48

2025/2026 Mainstream	Total number of pupils
Other Local Authority Provision	2
Service Shared by School	56
Local Bus Services	232
SEND Students on Mainstream	4
Total	4,909

13. There has been a significant increase in costs affecting Mainstream school travel in recent years. In 2021/22, the cost per school day was £25,190 and, based on a total number of pupils in July 2022 of 4,803, this equates to £5.24 per pupil per day. In 2024/25, the cost per school day had risen to £37,663 and, based on a total number of pupils in September 2024 of 5,124, this equates to £7.35 per pupil per day. In 2025/26 the cost per school day in September 2025 was £34,639 and based upon a total number of pupils of 4,909 this equates to £7.06 per pupil per day. This reduction is as a direct result of efficiency work undertaken by the Assisted Transport Service, reviewing the Mainstream network and retendering contracts, which has mitigated rising industry costs. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) growth bid for 2026/27 was based on an estimated total of 5,024 Mainstream students requiring transport. Cost increases have occurred in recent years due to a number of factors, including rising fuel costs (this pressure has intensified since the start of the geopolitical instability arising from the Iran conflict in March 2026), inflation, and difficulties in recruiting drivers.

SEND Transport

14. Eligibility and assistance for children and young people with SEND is considered under the relevant statutory and policy framework for the following cohorts: (a) nursery age children; (b) compulsory school-age children; (c) young people of sixth form age/post-16 learners; and (d) adult learners aged 19+.
15. If a child/young person is eligible for transport assistance, they may receive either:
- Council-organised transport, which may be a fleet minibus, taxi or a bus pass for use on public transport.
 - A PTB, which enables the family/young person to make their own transport arrangements and receive a personal payment, with the value based on the distance being travelled.
16. A total of 2561 applications for SEND transport assistance were received in the 2025/26 academic year. Applications are required for all new provisions and for all post-16-year-old students. For post-16 and 19+ learners, assistance is assessed under the applicable post-16/adult learner statutory duties and Council policy and is not an automatic continuation of compulsory school-age entitlement. On average, 92% of applications are assessed as eligible for transport assistance. Of those who apply for Council organised transport, an individual risk assessment is completed. This number does not account for statutory school age students staying within their provision or phase of education (primary / secondary) who do not need to apply every year.

Figure 3: Breakdown of costs per pupil and budget for SEND transport

SEND Position	2025/2026	2026/2027
Pupils	3,377	
Average Cost Per Pupil	£7,870	
Expenditure	£26.6m	
Budget	£27.8m	£29.1m
Underspend	£1.2m	

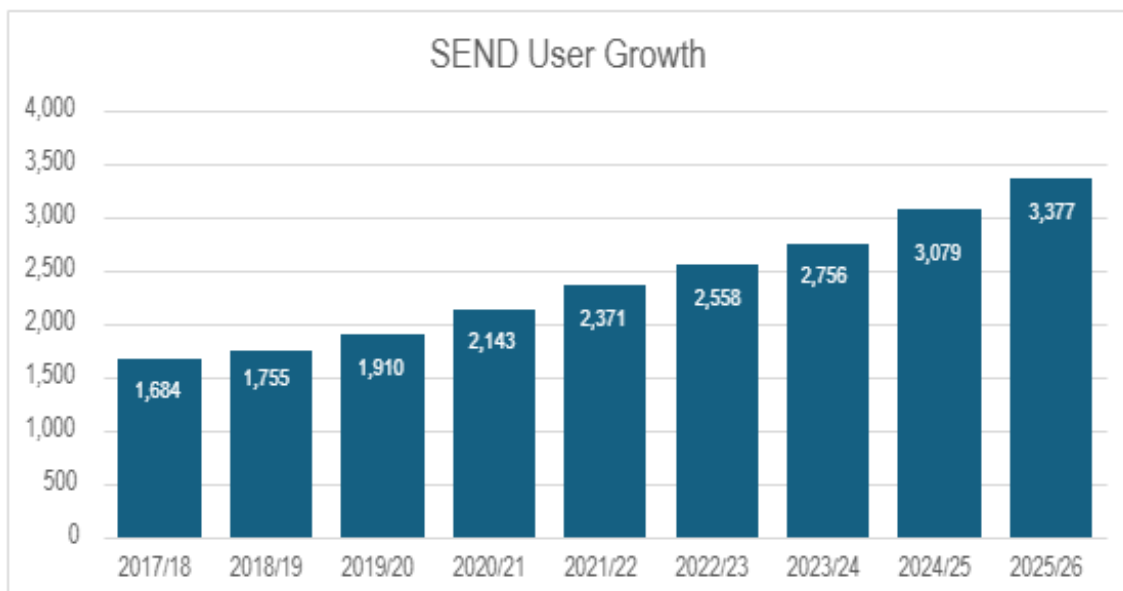
* Note, the underspend in 2025/26 arose mainly due to contract savings delivered over the summer period which have now been built into the 2026-2030 MTFs.

17. The 3,377 SEND pupils were taken on two trips per day for a total of 189 days, equivalent to 1,276,506 pupil journeys.

Costs and Growth Challenges

18. The local school transport market remains challenging both nationally and in Leicestershire, with increasing demand for the service and costs. Some of the challenges nationally and locally are as follows:
- Since the introduction of EHCPs in 2014, there has been national growth of 140%. In Leicestershire, the number of children with an EHCP has more than doubled since 2018 with 2025 seeing the highest year on year increase of 20%. Year to date figures for 2026 suggest this growth could be slowing slightly.
 - The increase in EHCPs has affected SEND transport, with approximately 45% of pupils with an EHCP requiring transport provision.
 - In November 2015, there were 1,551 SEND pupils receiving transport. This rose to 3,377 by November 2025.

Figure 4: Growth in SEND students entitled to Transport in Leicestershire since 2017/2018 as recorded in November 2025



19. The MTFs growth bid for 2026/27 was based on an estimated total of 3,638 SEND students requiring transport. As of April 2026, there were 686 children awaiting placement (source: SENA Assessment Performance Management Dashboard). As a result, there is an increase in children attending alternate or bespoke placements, which reduces opportunities for efficiencies in the transport network. This is likely to have a significant impact on Assisted Transport budgets and service delivery.
20. The local market continues to show a significant volatility, which is reflected by the number of contracts handed back (terminated) by operators: this occurs when operators no longer feel that they can continue to provide the service.
 - a) 2025/26 –191 terminations,
 - b) 2024/25 - 188 terminations,
 - c) 2023/24 - 203 terminations.
21. Against this backdrop, expenditure on SEND transport continues to rise. At the end of the 2018/19 year, the final expenditure on the SEND transport was £11.3m, whereas the 2024/25 SEND transport expenditure was £25.9m. In 2025/26 financial year this was £26.6m.
22. Other factors that affect this growth, which have added to the pressure, include:
 - a) Late applications for the SEND transport in 2025/26 - the Council received a significant volume of applications for SEND transport after the closing date, which is in late May each year. Late applications mean that the ability to build an efficient network is severely compromised as there is little time if any to plan. Late applications remain a contributory factor in the increase of solo taxi contracts. This situation often occurs because an EHCP is not yet in place, so the school where transport is required is not known, and transport cannot therefore be planned within the usual planning timeframes.
 - b) Since the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the pressure and volatility of SEND transport has been relentless. Before the pandemic, there was a quieter period between the end of October and the beginning of February each year, where transport teams could take stock and develop the service. This has been eroded as the growth has led to an ongoing demand; in 2023/24, the Council continued to receive on average 80-90 applications per month. In 2024/25, this has increased to 148 applications per month in total for the SEND and Mainstream transport which has a significant impact on the service's resource.

Assisted Transport Programme Work

23. In September 2022, the Council's Transformation Programme initiated work to manage demand and deliver efficiencies across the Assisted Transport Service.
24. The aim was to ensure that systems were in place to effectively deliver home to school transport and to ensure that service delivery is underpinned by compliance with statutory transport duties, the Council published policies, public law decision-making requirements, safeguarding requirements and applicable procurement law.

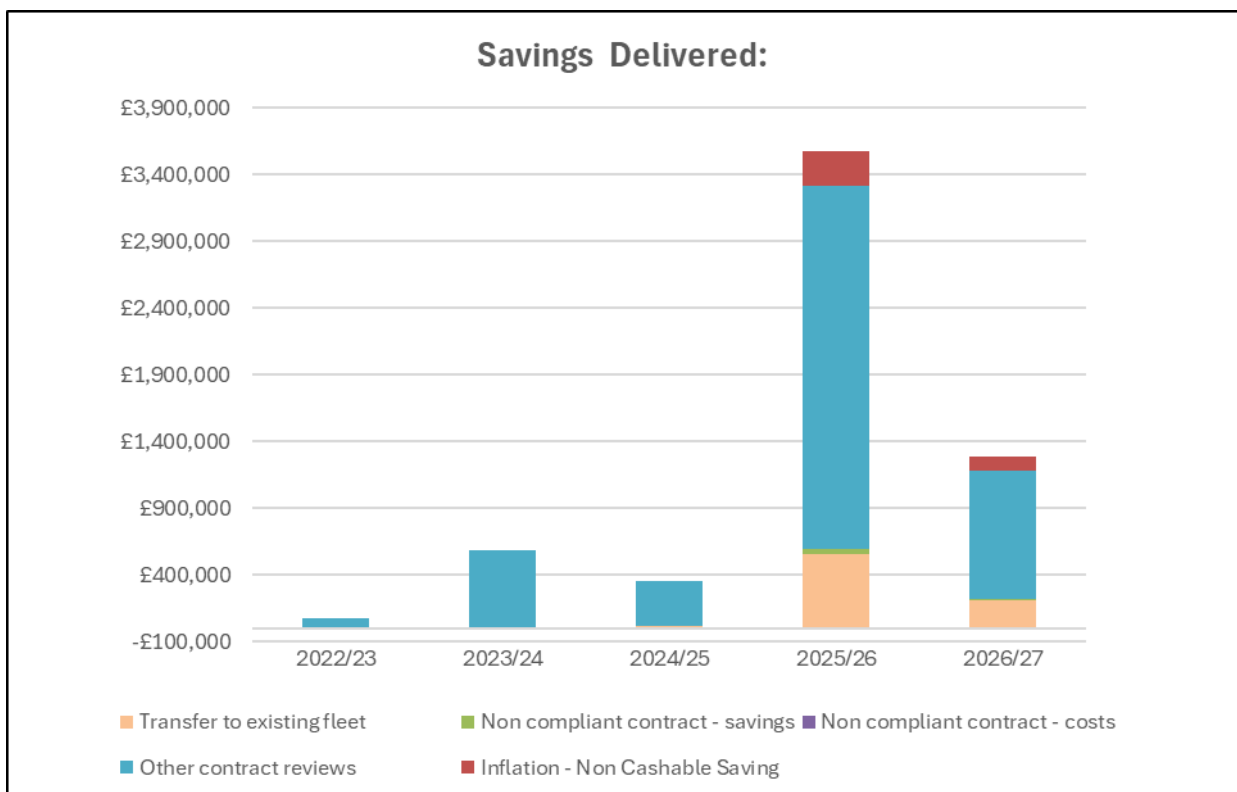
25. Over the past year, the programme has implemented a number of key changes that have resulted in both improved outcomes and the achievement of MTFS efficiencies ahead of schedule. These include:
- a) Implementation of new operational management systems including automated allocations; customer communication; financial management; improved data intelligence; and more efficient integrated processes for the service. Over the last four months, all operational processes have been mapped and will be published on the Council's Quality Management System, to ensure consistency in approach – these can also be used for training of new staff and performance management.
 - b) Transport Hub - After the successful trial last year, this remains in place and continues to improve customer experience, with benefits including fast-tracked responses to enquiries, online contact form providing answers to common queries, automated proactive communication to parents, Interactive Voice Response telephone messaging, improved website content, and a review of all letters to customers. A duty cover will also continue to be in place during the summer peak period for parent communications, including the virtual hub. The virtual hub is a chat room where calls or messages that are more complex, than those typically received by the customer service centre, can receive a response.
 - c) Enhancements to Safeguarding Practice - A workstream has been established to bring about a number of enhancements including a revised DBS tariff, verbal competency and identity document checks, bespoke safeguarding training for Assisted Transport Service staff, a targeted inspection programme, DBS alerts ahead of expiry dates, enhanced DBS checks with barred list checks where required, appropriate referral/escalation routes to the DBS or licensing authority where concerns arise, and new procedure for pre-contract checks of crews delivering transport for high needs service users.
 - d) New Data Capability - The data capability of the new Home to School Transport Management comprehensive software system has improved budget forecasting, contracts and year-end reporting and new school year and 'exceptions' dashboards, to improve service performance management information.
 - e) Efficiencies – Continued use of QPaths/Qroutes (software) enables teams to better undertake targeted route reviews and a summer refresh to ensure the school transport network is as efficient as possible, providing better value for money, for example, merging routes and ensuring that single person journeys are identified through risk assessments. The systems supported the service to successfully achieve summer refresh full year contract savings of £2.9m for SEND transport by September 2025, and £0.5m for Mainstream transport by October 2025. Other efficiencies have also been achieved for SEND, Mainstream and Social Care transport and work is underway to do a full review of Social Care over the next few months.

- f) Commissioning and Procurement - The Corporate Early Payment scheme was introduced in September 2025, and all operators now submit electronic invoices.
- g) Replacement of outdated system - During 2024 an outline business case was approved, defining a broad programme of delivery in the coming years, including a replacement of the previous outdated STADS system. The STADS system is now fully decommissioned, data archived and dashboards have been built to provide the team read-only access to historical data. It was replaced by MTC, a specialist school transport database, which is now fully implemented and integrated into service delivery.
- h) Enhancements to PTB processes - The service has continued to prioritise the development of PTBs, which are the most cost-effective solution. Around a third of SEND students entitled to transport are awarded PTBs.
- i) Partnership Working - During the last year, the Assisted Transport Service has continued to be actively involved in regional and local partnership working with other local authorities to develop best practice in school transport.

Summary of Benefits to Date

26. Figure 5 below shows the Assisted Transport Programme’s performance in recent years in terms of efficiency savings. The savings position is reviewed monthly on an ongoing basis.

Figure 5: MTFs Savings Achieved by the Assisted Transport Programme since 2022/2023 (includes SEND, Mainstream and Social Care Savings)



27. Figure 6 below shows the Assisted Transport Programme's cumulative MTFS savings achieved against target.

Figure 6: Cumulative MTFS savings achieved against target

Cumulative Savings	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Ongoing MTFS cashable	Inflation non-cashable	Ongoing Total
MTFS targets (as per original ATP business case)	-£1.2m	-£2.5m	-£2.5m	-£2.5m	£0	-£2.5m
Cumulative Savings Delivered	-£3.3m	-£4.5m	-£4.5m	-£4.5m	-£0.3m	-£4.8m
Planned Savings / Savings in Progress	£0	-£0.8m	-£1.4m	-£1.4m	£0	-£1.4m
Forecast Cumulative Savings Delivery	-£3.3m	-£5.3m	-£5.9m	-£5.9m	-£0.3m	-£6.2m
- Over Achievement / + Under Achievement	-£2.1m	-£2.8m	-£3.4m	-£3.4m	-£0.3m	-£3.7m

28. Key headlines are as follows:

- a) £0.3m savings delivered in 2024/25, reducing the overall overspend.
- b) £3.3m savings delivered in 2025/26.
- c) £2.0m savings forecast for 2026/27.
- d) £0.6m savings forecast for 2027/28.
- e) Including savings identified in 2022/23 (£0.1m) and 2023/24 (£0.6m) and inflation not claimed (£0.3m), total savings forecast amount to £7.2m.
- f) It is expected that the original 2025-2029 MTFS contract savings will be over-achieved by £3.4m by 2027/28.

Next Steps and the Transformation Agenda

29. A stocktake of the Assisted Transport Programme was undertaken in November 2025 to identify key deliverables for the next 12 months, and these are listed in paragraphs 32 to 42.

Tendering and Efficiencies

30. During the new school year (2026/27), staff will continue to maximise efficiencies as part of designing the new school transport network. This will include reviews of the routes used to the six largest special needs schools, to

ensure that the Council's fleet is used as much as possible. The schools include Dorothy Goodman (all sites), Ashmount, Birchwood (all sites), Birkett House (all sites), Forest Way, and Maplewell (all sites).

31. Efficiencies will be tracked and logged to monitor MTFS savings.
32. Route reviews and network efficiencies will continue to ensure that travel arrangements remain suitable for the individual child or young person, taking account of safety, journey length, stress, the child's SEND/medical needs, and any passenger assistant or equipment requirements.

Commissioning and Procurement

33. Design and implementation of a Short-Notice Procurement Framework (due to launch in December 2026) will ensure that, where there is a need for short-notice transport, mainly in the social care cohort, transport providers offer value for money for the Council and comply with required standards legislation.
34. Preparations are currently underway to vary the terms and conditions of contracts to enable the Council to implement enhanced safeguarding measures.
35. Upcoming changes to procurement law require a significant review of the current Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) Framework Agreements with transport providers; planning is underway for the retendering of SV5 (taxi) and BB4 (buses), as these two new frameworks must go live in 2028/2029.
36. Ongoing engagement with providers during this period will be needed to understand the impact of proposed changes on contract prices and future changes to procurement agreements.

Finance, Performance, Systems and Process

37. Finance reporting will continue to be enhanced to improve forecasting and budget management. In addition, the financial transactions will be streamlined to allow more efficiency.
38. End-to-end process mapping of all processes across the service will allow areas for improvement to be identified, designed and implemented.
39. The contract for the business system MTC has been extended for one year, as per the original contract period, with an end date of August 2027. Although not in scope of the Assisted Transport Programme, the retendering of this contract is a key dependency on associated Assisted Transport Programme deliverables.

Legal Implications

40. In delivering efficiencies and route reviews, the Council must ensure that savings targets do not override or predetermine individual eligibility decisions, the suitability of transport arrangements, safeguarding requirements, or the Council's statutory transport duties.

41. The Council must also have regard to its Best Value Duty when delivering the Assisted Transport Programme, including the need to secure continuous improvement having regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness, while continuing to comply with statutory duties.

Safeguarding

42. The safeguarding workstream will continue to build on the last year's improvements and extend roll-out of new initiatives, such as verbal competency testing, and extend the roll-out of internal training for staff, including safeguarding, equality, emergency procedures and training required to meet specific needs of children travelling, where relevant within the Assisted Transport Service. Additional priorities include:
- a) A review and development of safeguarding training for operators;
 - b) A review of the process for checking DBS certificates for operators;
 - c) The introduction of safer recruitment standards for operators;
 - d) Ongoing face-to-face ID and English language checks for operators;
 - e) Development of a safeguarding operational standard;
 - f) Design and development of safeguarding key performance indicators and associated dashboards.
43. The safeguarding workstream should also be expressly linked to the Council's duty under section 11 Children Act 2004 to make arrangements to ensure its functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Resource Implications

44. For 2026/27, the SEND transport budget amounts to £29.1m. This includes net growth of £5.0m, which is projected to rise to £13.3m by 2029/30 (based on the current projected increase in SEND pupil numbers requiring transport).
45. For 2026/27, the Mainstream transport budget amounts to £6.5m. This includes net growth of £0.1m, which is projected to rise to £0.6m by 2029/30 (based on the current projected increase in Mainstream pupil numbers requiring transport).
46. The 2026-30 MTFS includes a net savings requirement from the overall Assisted Transport Programme (which incorporates SEN, Mainstream, and Social Care transport) of £4.0m in 2026/27, rising to £4.8m by 2029/30.
47. The Director of Corporate Resources and the Chief Legal Officer and Monitoring Officer have been consulted on the content of this report.

Conclusion

48. Despite continued pressures the school transport service, especially within the SEND transport area, the service was able to successfully deliver transport to students across the County, facilitating approximately 3.1m pupil journeys.

49. In addition, the service has adopted an ongoing review of its transport arrangements, maximising efficiencies wherever possible, and as a consequence delivered efficiencies of £3.3m in 2025/26 and total savings of £2.0m for 2026/27. The new Home to School Transport Management software system has continued to provide improved management data, which has contributed significantly to these successes and improved understanding of service demands and trends.
50. 2026/27 will undoubtedly continue to see the service challenged by further growth and industry pressures. There are already significant pressures created by the Iran conflict, which has caused an increase in fuel prices and may impact upon decisions made about the ongoing management of the network. To mitigate this, there will be a continued roll-out of the transformation of the Assisted Transport Service, supporting delivery of the Council's statutory requirements and helping to deliver efficiencies.

Background Papers

Highways and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 June 2025:
Home to School Transport Annual Report 2024/2025 and Key Priorities for 2025/2026

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1293&MID=7842#A185370>

Cabinet, 13 September 2019: Mainstream and Special Educational Needs Home to School Transport Policies – Outcome of Judicial Review

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=5605&Ver=4>

Cabinet, 9 March 2018: Mainstream and Special Educational Needs Home to School Transport Policy

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=5178&Ver=4>

Cabinet Office: Procurement Act 2023 guidance on transitional and saving arrangements.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-act-2023-guidance-documents-plan-phase/guidance-transitional-and-saving-arrangements-html>

Department for Education: Travel to school for children of compulsory school age: statutory guidance for local authorities (January 2024).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-to-school-travel>

Department for Education: Post-16 transport and travel support to education and training: statutory guidance for local authorities (January 2019).

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c48534c40f0b616fba5cb6a/Post16_transport_guidance.pdf

Department for Education/Department of Health and Social Care: SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>

Department of Health and Social Care: Care and support statutory guidance issued under the Care Act 2014.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-act-statutory-guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance>

Leicestershire County Council's 'School Transport – Special educational needs and disabilities' (SEND) webpage

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/school-transport/school-transport-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-send>

Leicestershire County Council's Mainstream Home to School/College Transport Policy for the 2025-26 academic year

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/Mainstream-home-to-school-transport-policy-2025-26.pdf>

Leicestershire County Council's Special Educational Needs Home to School/College Transport Policy for the 2025-26 academic year

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/SEN-home-to-school-college-transport-policy-2025-26.pdf>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

None.

Equality Implications

51. This report is for information and does not itself recommend a change to policy or entitlement. However, the subject matter is directly relevant to children and young people with SEND and therefore engages protected characteristics, in particular age and disability. The Council must continue to have due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty when designing and implementing operational changes, route reviews, PTBs, procurement arrangements and safeguarding measures arising from the Assisted Transport Programme. Equality Impact Assessments will be completed or updated for individual projects where required

Human Rights Implications

52. There are no human rights implications arising directly from the content of this report.
53. Human Rights Impact Assessments will be conducted in relation to work undertaken on individual projects when appropriate.

Officers to Contact

Ann Carruthers
Director, Growth, Environment and Transport
Tel: (0116) 305 7000
Email: Ann.Carruthers@leics.gov.uk

Pat Clarke
Assistant Director, Highways and Transport Operations
Tel: (0116) 305 4244
Email: Pat.Clarke@leics.gov.uk

This page is intentionally left blank