Presentation to Scrutiny Commission – Wednesday 26th February 2014

Thank you for giving me the opportunity of talking to you today. I speak to you on behalf of the Governors of South Charnwood High School.

We believe this proposed change to the home school Transport Policy is unjust and unfair. It is a "one size fits all" policy which, obviously, takes no account of historical transport links or catchment areas. Therefore, it cannot "fit all" and favours some schools over others. In short, it is "discrimination by location" and, could be seen to, favour urban schools and discriminate against rural schools.

South Charnwood High School, set in open countryside in North West Leicestershire, would be severely affected by this policy which would sever free transport links with its largest feeder primary school in Leicester Forest East. In fact, such is the distance, there are several schools nearer to our catchment area in Leicester Forest East and so the argument that once the nearest school is full, pupils could come to South Charnwood, cannot be applied.

To cut off South Charnwood's major lifeline as far as pupil numbers is concerned could have a seriously negative impact on this outstanding high school. To argue that, in return, South Charnwood would gain pupils from Bagworth (who normally go to Ibstock High School) is not relevant as the numbers involved are so few and South Charnwood already draws many pupils from Bagworth.

This new proposal, therefore, replaces the suburb of Leicester Forest East, and the highly populated David Wilson estate, with Bagworth and green fields as far as South Charnwood's transport eligibility area is concerned. This is clearly unfair and needs rethinking.

Schools are being forced into a position whereby they have to consider committing some of their school budget to providing transport for pupils in order to "level the playing fields." In South Charnwood's case this could be as much as £25,000 per annum, on top of the £50,000 the school is already committed to paying out because the old policy takes no account of age range change.

I appreciate that we find ourselves now in a highly competitive marketplace and South Charnwood has no issue about competing in that marketplace, based on the quality of its educational provision and standards. However, the school should not be penalised in this way by external forces outside of its control.

In short, such a financial commitment would be incredibly difficult to sustain and adds further strength to the argument that the proposed policy discriminates against rural schools or schools whose catchment area is diverse such as South Charnwood.

Therefore, the new proposal must be reviewed and amended and exceptions made for schools in the same or similar position to South Charnwood High school. The anomalies in catchment areas in Leicestershire are well known and well documented and the problems highlighted above could be overcome and resolved with a more creative and more flexible approach. Further thought and consideration must be given to those schools, like South Charnwood, who find themselves, through no fault of their own, in this obviously unfair predicament. I am fully aware that this must happen quickly as the old policy is unfit for purpose as more and more schools change their age range.

Whilst the Local Authority may want to apply the policy across the board, it should then look at those schools in exceptional circumstances and amend the policy accordingly for them. Remember, the new "holidays during term time" guidelines introduced by the Government (in the news at the moment) is a blanket policy covering all schools, but does give leeway to headteachers "in exceptional circumstances". The same procedure could, and should, be adopted by the Local Authority in the case of home-school transport.

It is heartening that all my comments are not negative! It is pleasing to note, for schools in the process of changing their age range to 11-16, that the transition arrangements include a commitment by the Local Authority to continue to provide free transport for eligible pupils at present in Years 6, 7 and 8 (South Charnwood is a 10-14 High School), up until the end of Year 11. This is to be welcomed.

But there are also other ways the Local Authority could sweeten this bitter pill for schools such as South Charnwood. If my understanding is correct, my present Year 9 pupils (2013-2014) still come under the old transport policy and, therefore, even though they are staying on at South Charnwood into Year 10, they will not receive free transport, the right to which is retained by the traditional upper schools. To ensure that parental choice is based solely on educational reasons, South Charnwood is subsidising free transport for these eligible pupils (which will save the Local Authority approximately £50,000). However, when these pupils move into Year 11 they will then become part of the new Transport policy (transition arrangements) and, therefore, we believe that their right to free transport should be reinstated.

Even better, for the small number of schools who find themselves changing their age range starting in September 2014, the Authority should agree to provide free transport for those pupils who are remaining at their former high school in Year 10 as well. In South Charnwood's case, this would save the school approximately £50,000 per annum which could then be spent on educational provision as it should be. I am sure this could be afforded by the LA for this interim period of two years. This would make the transition arrangements even more attractive.

In fact, the transition arrangements should go even further. For schools which are seen to lose heavily due to this policy there should be criteria set up to ensure any losses are gradual. There is a precedent for this, if my information is correct, in that those upper schools adversely affected by the change to 11-16 of some, or all, of their former feeder high schools have been assured that their maximum loss in the first year is 20% of its pupil income from the previous year. These schools, therefore, retain 80% of their former funding, even though they do not have the pupils. The same should be applied to schools in this instance and the real losers, like South Charnwood High School, must receive similar compensation in the form of these "parachute payments."

There is no doubt that the present policy is not fit for purpose and certainly does need to be replaced. As a school changing its age range from 10-14 to 11-16 in 2014 South Charnwood has already lost pupils from out of catchment to other schools simply because they cannot afford to stay at South Charnwood as they get free transport to another upper school. This obliges South Charnwood to commit to providing free transport to its catchment area pupils who would receive free transport to other upper schools. This is a commitment of approximately £50,000 per annum in order to level a very uneven playing field as far as transport is concerned under the present policy.

Because of this existing unfairness, the new proposed policy which would hopefully rectify these unjust imbalances, was eagerly anticipated by all at South Charnwood High School. In truth now we feel we have been thrown out of the frying pan and into the fire!

In this newly created competitive world, a school's survival and success should be based on the quality of the education it provides and parents should have the right to make a choice of school based on this and not on whether free transport is available to any particular school.

Therefore, the fairest method for a new Transport Policy would be for each pupil to receive a fixed sum of money from the Local Authority which, once pupils have made their choice of school solely on educational grounds, is delegated to the school to organise transport for its pupils in whichever way they deem to be best. Inevitably, pupils' eligibility for this money would have to be based on existing catchment areas. For example, pupils in Leicester Forest East who are presently in the catchment area for South Charnwood High School (and who now can attend Bosworth Academy as an 11-18 school) , should have the choice of either school and receive free transport in the form of a fixed sum delegated to the chosen school.

Another idea is that the authority delegates the present transport budget per school, to the school itself and allows the school the freedom to arrange transport for its pupils, (again in whichever way they deem to be best) whether that be in conjunction with other local schools or not. This ties in perfectly with the academy agenda and giving schools more freedom. It also takes the burden off of the Local Authority. Also it would be cost neutral, which is the same as a new proposed policy would be.

The argument against these two proposals may be that, if schools were to exhaust their transport allocated budget, then the Local Authority, because of its statutory obligation, would have to pay for pupil transport. However, surely this could be avoided if the authority delegated the money on a quarterly or, even, monthly basis into school funds. Also, in the case of pupils moving into a transport eligibility area, schools should agree to fund the first 5-10? such pupils out of its own budget. Any more than that then the Local Authority should take on responsibility. The Authority could create a pocket of money for such cases by top slicing the budgets delegated to schools. As is evident, the problem is not insurmountable.

So:

- The present policy is not fit for purpose and needs changing
- Proposed policy is unfair and unjust and discriminates against certain schools according to their location or diverse catchment area.
- Will cost some schools money as they attempt to 'level the playing field.'
- One size does not fit all.
- Exceptions must be made for those schools 'in exceptional circumstances.'
- Pleased with the transition arrangements for pupils presently in the high school of schools which are changing their age range to 11-16.
- Reinstate entitlement to free transport to school for Year 11 pupils (presently in Year 9) in schools changing their age range to 11-16.
- With regards to the point above, rather than remove transport for Year 10 pupils for one year and then reinstate it in Year 11, continue to provide free transport to Year 10 pupils staying at 11-16 schools.
- "Parachute payments" for schools hit harshest by the policy.
- Delegate money to schools termly based on number of pupils choosing the school (within designated/catchment areas).
- Delegate money to schools termly based on present home school transport costs.
- Amend proposed policy to allow exceptions in exceptional circumstances.