

# BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

## REPORT TO CABINET

31 MARCH 2015

### REPORT OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

#### LEARNER TRANSPORT POLICY

##### 1. Purpose of Report.

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to present Cabinet with the comments and recommendations of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee in response to the outcome of the consultation on proposals to change the Learner Transport Policy.

##### 2. Connection to Corporate Improvement Objectives/Other Corporate Priorities

- 2.1 The key improvement objectives identified in the Corporate Plan 2013-2017 have been embodied in the Overview & Scrutiny Forward Work Programmes. The amended Corporate Improvement Objectives adopted by Council on 3 April 2013 formally set out the improvement objectives that the Council will seek to implement between 2013 and 2017. The Overview and Scrutiny Committees engage in review and development of plans, policy or strategies that support the Corporate Themes.

##### 3. Background.

- 3.1 The Committee has considered the issues around the provision of learner transport on a number of previous occasions. The most recent of these was at its meeting on the 30 September 2013, where the Committee made a number of recommendations, which were reported to the Cabinet meeting on 12 November 2013.
- 3.2 Since this time a series of actions have been undertaken including a 12 week consultation period on the following three proposals:

**Proposal 1**

To increase the distance required for free transport between a pupil's home and their school, to match the distance required by law (including Welsh and religious schools).

**Proposal 2**

To charge the full cost of a school bus pass for pupils who do not receive free school transport.

**Proposal 3**

To stop providing free transport for learners aged 16 or over, who go to school or college.

#### **4. Current situation / proposal.**

- 4.1 At its meeting on 17 February 2015, the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report from the Children's Directorate setting out the outcomes of the consultation process.
- 4.2 Following detailed discussion with Officers and consideration of the report, the Committee agreed that whilst they did not fundamentally disagree with the proposals they did not feel confident in making firm recommendations on them based simply on the evidence provided in the consultation report.
- 4.3 For this reason, the Committee recommend that in order for Cabinet to feel confident and assured that any decisions made are based on robust information and evidence, they ensure they have taken into account the following:
  1. Whether suitable consultation has taken place with Young People given that the Children's Commissioner for Wales asked that they be a target audience for consultation. Members felt this was particularly important for pupils who would be affected by potential changes to Post-16 transport;
  2. Whether the data presented needs further clarification and explanation as some of the headline figures present a very positive view which is questionable. One example given was in relation to the 34% who stated that Proposal One would have little effect; Members questioned this as a headline figure as it omits to account for the other 66% which is a more significant figure. In addition to this, 75% of the respondents were from Archbishop McGrath, where a majority of pupils and their families would not have been affected anyway due to them being outside the 3 mile proposed limit. Furthermore, due to the fact that the data is based on a multiple choice option it is difficult to compare one percentage to another;
  3. The associated risks and mitigating actions. Members were particularly concerned over the impact of the proposed changes on YGG Llangynwyd and Archbishop McGrath Catholic High School given their large catchment areas and the impact on removing post-16 transport. Whilst acknowledging that this is recognised within the consultation report and that Officers provided reassurances that any impact would be mitigated, Members expressed concerns over the lack of evidence to support these mitigating actions. For example in relation to traffic calming measures outside schools that may need to be introduced due to increased traffic resulting from the removal of learner transport. Members noted the lack of information on whether there would be funding towards such measures;
  4. Comparative information from other Local Authorities where the Learner Transport Policy has been similarly changed, evidencing the impact on learners and schools;
  5. Associated background documents as referenced in the report to Cabinet on 16 September 2014; Workstream A paper - The analysis of the potential impact on schools, colleges and learners of withdrawing free post 16 transport, related capita reports and the individual school assessment reports detailing the potential impact of the proposals for each school;

6. The potential impact on attendance as a result of the proposed changes. Members expressed particular concern over this for Post-16 learners;
7. Impact of proposed changes on the Authority's NEET figure at a time when Bridgend has been praised for its work in this area and moved from 22<sup>nd</sup> out of all Authorities in Wales to 1<sup>st</sup> for reducing the number of young people classified as NEET.
8. Information on the potential implications of the newly proposed Welsh Government Transport Discount Scheme.

4.4 Due to their concerns over the lack of information in the report for Scrutiny, the Committee agreed that instead of providing comment on the proposals based on the consultation results, the Committee would act as consultees themselves and therefore provided the following observations and recommendations purely based on the three proposals:

- a) Members generally supported proposal one; to change the distance required for free transport to the statutory minimum.
- b) Members supported the set up of the advisory board on Safe Routes to School in order to address issues around safety to children associated with proposal one.
- c) The Committee expressed concerns over the high figure stated for the charge of a bus pass under proposal two. This, alongside the proposal to remove all post-16 transport could significantly impact upon post-16 learners. It is therefore recommended that if proposal two is approved some form of subsidy be introduced for post-16 pupils that would tie in with proposal one.
- d) Members noted the option of a 'hardship fund', but queried the figure of £30k, where this figure had been derived from and what criteria will be set against this hardship fund. Members recommend that Cabinet consider whether this figure is suitable and would meet the needs of 'alleviating the impact on learners', as stated in the report, and whether there is flexibility in this figure should the need prove to be greater.
- e) Members expressed strong concern over the rationale for removing Post-16 transport due to the fact that it is only if these places are then taken up under a charging policy that any financial savings can be realised. Given the high figure proposed for these paid places Members questioned the likelihood of their take up and thus the achievability of these savings, particularly if no subsidy was put in place.
- f) Given the uncertainty around the achievability of the financial savings resulting from options two and three, and in order to minimise the impact on Post-16 Learners the Committee recommend that no decision on Post-16 school transport is made until the full implication of the Welsh Government Transport Discount Scheme is revealed and reconsidered alongside all related evidence highlighted above in points 1-8.

## **5. Effect upon Policy Framework& Procedure Rules.**

- 5.1 The work of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee relates to the review and development of plans, policy or strategy that form part of the Policy Framework and consideration of plans, policy or strategy relating to the power to promote or improve economic, social or environmental wellbeing in the County Borough of Bridgend.

## **6. Equality Impact Assessment**

- 6.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out by the Children's Directorate for the proposed changes to the Learner Transport Policy.

## **7. Financial Implications.**

- 7.1 This report itself does not have any financial implications; however the proposals have direct financial implications for the Authority in relation to achievement of the savings requirement in the Medium Term Financial Strategy as well as financial implications for the various current and future recipients of Learner Transport.

## **8. Recommendation.**

- 8.1 Cabinet is recommended to consider the comments and recommendations of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee in relation to the options proposed for changes to the Learner Transport Policy.

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**6 November 2013**

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## **Background documents**

Cabinet:  
Report and Minutes – 12 November 2013

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny:  
Report and Minutes dated the 30 September 2013  
Report dated 17 February 2015