

Committee:	Lead Member for Learning and School Effectiveness
Date:	30 June 2014
By:	Director of Children's Services
Title of Report:	Response to Petition presented to County Council 13 May 2014 – Joint Community Areas
Purpose of Report:	Response to petition regarding Home to School Transport provision for children living in shared community areas in East Sussex

Recommendation:

The Lead Member meeting on 30 June provides an opportunity to hear the concerns of parents who signed the petition regarding the decision taken to only provide transport to pupils living in shared community areas who meet the eligibility criteria and attend their nearest designated school.

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 The Home to School Transport (HTST) budget requirement each year is determined through the use of a financial model based on the numbers and costs of pupils currently travelling plus assumptions about inflation and growth. The current shortfall between the current allocated budget and the HTST spend is £1.86m for 2014/15 which includes the savings that are required as a result of government funding cuts. The budget pressure will increase further for 2015/16 with an estimated increase of 900 pupils with SEND requiring specialist transport.

2. Supporting information

2.1 Children's Services fully understands the disappointment that parents feel about the decision to only provide transport to pupils who meet the eligibility criteria and attend their nearest school. This meeting provides an opportunity to explain again the compelling reasons as to why the County Council found it necessary to make this decision on 20th January 2014.

- Pupils living in shared community areas had an advantage over other pupils in East Sussex who are only transported to their nearest school (if eligible).
- The current HTST quite clearly states pupils would only be transported to their nearest school but this policy had not been applied according to the existing agreed policy in shared community areas. As a result we are in part addressing an historical anomaly that created inequity.
- Some parents have commented that this decision limits school choice based on affordability. Although we acknowledge this will be the case for some families, those families who qualify for free school meals or are in receipt of the maximum Working Tax Credit may still qualify for help as the statutory eligibility criteria for children are different. For secondary age pupils, children from low income families will qualify for free transport to one of their three nearest schools from where they live, provided the school attended is more than two miles but less than six miles.
- The size of the financial challenges faced by the County Council are enormous and have resulted in the need for all discretionary transport to be reviewed. The County Council views HTST as a frontline service so the requirement is to make 15% savings rather than 20% savings applied to all non frontline services. As a result HTST has been partially protected but no service has been exempt from making savings. Given that the vast majority of HTST expenditure is statutory it is inevitable that the savings have had to fall on discretionary areas. Other discretionary areas where changes have had to be made include asking for contributions to Post 16 transport costs for SEND pupils and reducing the grants available to post 16 students from low income families. In addition to these savings we have cut staffing in the Admissions and Transport team, increased income generation from academies, achieved savings through better commissioning or organization of transport provision, looked at innovative ways to increase the take up of

personal transport budgets for pupils with SEND and increase the number of students with SEND that are trained to travel independently. In reality given the size of the budget pressure on HTST and further reduction in government funding it will be likely that the County Council will need to focus entirely on discharging its statutory responsibilities as efficiently and effectively as possible. We are not alone in needing to make these changes and other Local Authorities are making similar changes to their HTST provision.

- It is our view that the County Council took all reasonable steps to make parents aware of this proposal so that they could take this into account when applying for a place at their child's preferred school. This included press releases, schools were asked to share information with parents (which they did), there were 423 comments received from the consultation and the Admissions Booklet for 2013/14 and 2014/15 stated that consultations on this issue were taking place.

3. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendations

3.1 It is recommended that the Lead Member takes this opportunity to hear directly from the parents affected by this decision. However it would not be possible to change this decision without a further public consultation. However given the compelling reasons that have been set out in section 2 of this report regarding why the decision was made, the Lead Member is not recommended to agree to a further public consultation exercise at this stage but to undertake to review the impact of this policy change in January 2015.

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Local Members: Councillors Bentley, Keeley and Simmons

Background Documents: None