

Report to: **Lead Member for Learning and School Effectiveness**

Date: **8 June 2015**

By: **Director of Children's Services**

Title of report: **Review of the implementation of the Home to School Transport policy regarding children living within the shared community areas**

Purpose of report: **To inform the Lead Member of the effect of implementing the County Council's home to school transport policy as written for children living in shared community areas**

RECOMMENDATION

The Lead Member is recommended to agree the Home to School Transport (HTST) policy continues to be applied as written to ensure that children living within shared community areas are only provided with free transport to their nearest designated school, provided the eligibility criteria are met.

1 Background

1.1 In 2011, Members were given an undertaking that officers would review all areas of discretionary provision of home to school transport as part of the County Council's financial planning. These reviews are ongoing and over the next three years additional savings from the HTST will need to be modelled.

1.2 A report was submitted to the Lead Member in January 2014 following the consultation in September and October 2013, recommending that the County Council should only provide children living in shared community areas with free transport to the child's nearest designated school, providing the eligibility criteria are met. The Lead Member agreed this proposal noting the report anticipated full year savings of circa £50K. The actual number of freedom tickets issued to children living in shared community areas fell by 222 which relates to a full year's savings from September 2014 of £76,932. Savings from September 2015 are yet to be calculated but will continue over the next four years as the new implementation works through the secondary school year groups. In addition, as numbers of eligible pupils continue to fall, it could reduce the need for hired transport, as is the case with Chailey School, where fewer eligible pupils has resulted in the decommissioning of a coach for September 2015 producing an additional saving of £45K per annum. The local authority is however working with Chailey to support them to find alternative transport options for their pupils who can no longer purchase vacant seats.

2 Supporting information

2.1 The County Council's Home to School Transport policy remains unchanged and is shown as **Appendix 1**. Historically, however, free transport has been given to children in shared areas to any eligible school that serves their community area. This was a more generous implementation of the policy, and therefore discretionary. It also meant that children living in shared community areas had an unfair advantage over other children as transport could be paid to any eligible school serving their area, where other children had only one designated school. Therefore, some children in shared areas were being provided with free home to school transport, contrary to the County Council's policy.

2.2 The community areas in East Sussex are shown as **Appendix 2**. From September 2014, the policy has been applied to new applicants as written so that free home to school transport has been provided only to the nearest eligible school serving their community area (i.e. the nearest eligible designated school).

2.3 Consultation was undertaken in September and October 2013, and the vast majority of

respondents were not in favour of this change with 92.2% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This in itself was not surprising as it was anticipated that it would be unpopular with the families it would affect. It was not, however, a referendum, and unfortunately the County Council's financial situation no longer allows for the more generous provision of transport which is not in keeping with current policy and is therefore discretionary.

2.4 The change to the way the HTST policy was applied only affects new pupils so that those children currently receiving discretionary support under the old arrangements will continue to do so until their circumstances change (e.g change of school or home address).

2.5 Concerns were expressed by three headteachers, (Chailey, Heathfield and Willingdon) that the number of preferences for these schools would be affected in that parents would decide not to apply if the discretionary home to school transport for shared areas was withdrawn, but that the effects would not be seen until applications were made for transfer from primary to secondary school in September 2015.

2.6 It was therefore decided to undertake a review of preferences and report back to the Lead Member with a focus on the three schools in question. At Chailey and Heathfield, the number of stated first preferences has fallen slightly. However, the overall number of preferences for these two schools has risen slightly when comparing 2013 to 2015 (old transport arrangements versus new).

2.7 At Willingdon, the number of **first preferences** for the school (including late applications) from 2010 onwards are as follows:- 226 (2010), 158 (2011), 198 (2012), 191 (2013), 215 (2014) and 162 (2015). The 2011 cohort was smaller than other year groups. The intake for 2015 will be lower than the published number of 200 which will impact on the schools budget.

2.8 Again, comparing 2013 to 2015 (pre and post policy change) the numbers of preferences for several schools in the Eastbourne area have fallen. There has, however, been a marked increase at The Eastbourne Academy. This is likely to be due to a new well designed building, closer links with primary schools in the area and rising results. In addition, Gildredge House opened in September 2014 providing an additional 120 places in the area. The schools that felt the effect of this most were The Cavendish and Ratton. Willingdon's overall numbers rose in 2014 and fell back in 2015. It is not possible to say with any certainty whether this fluctuation is a direct result of the additional numbers of places provided by Gildredge House (and this school's rise in popularity evidenced by the increase in the number of their preferences), or the change in the implementation of the transport policy, or both. If transport was the sole reason for the fall in preferences for Willingdon, it could have been expected that the numbers at The Causeway would rise, being the nearest designated school in the area it shares with Willingdon. That has not happened which seems to suggest that parents will consider a variety of factors (not just free transport) when deciding on a school for their child. Preference levels vary from year to year too.

2.9 Preference data for Year 7 places for all secondary schools in East Sussex for entry in September 2013, 2014 and 2015 are shown as **Appendix 3**. Schools that serve shared areas are in red.

3. Equalities considerations

3.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment was carried out during the consultation in September/October 2013.

4. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

4.1 The County Council has statutory obligations to provide free home to school transport for qualifying children. However, in East Sussex the policy has been interpreted more generously to provide discretionary transport to children who are not entitled for that support under the current policy or legislative requirements. The County Council is no longer in a position to provide free transport to children who do not have a statutory entitlement.

4.2 From the information set out above it is not possible to say with any certainty the cause of the significant reduction of first preferences for Willingdon in 2015 and is likely to be a combination of factors. However given the savings that have emerged and the need to identify yet more savings from the HTST budget over the next three years it is recommended that the HTST policy is applied as written to ensure that children living within shared community areas

are only provided with free transport to their nearest designated school, provided the eligibility criteria are met.

4.3 It is further recommended that the Local Authority's efforts should be directed towards supporting schools to explore alternative transport options where there are gaps in public transport provision.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1 – East Sussex Home to school transport policy

Appendix 2 – Community areas in East Sussex

Appendix 3 – Preference data for Year 7 places in 2013, 2014 and 2015