

Potential impact on bus services and the Passenger Transport Budget

This response is from the perspective of the CET Passenger Transport Team's role of managing the Council's Public Transport Strategic Commissioning Strategy and understanding of the commercial and supported bus service provision in the county.

From the consultation commentary it is noted that Children's Services currently give travel assistance to around 470 young people from low income families at a cost of approximately £240,000 per year. These young people would have been provided with either a travel grant, free place on a school coach, or travel pass.

The Passenger Transport Team has identified two key risks if the changes were made:

1. Risk to viability of bus services

There is a risk to the viability of some bus services in East Sussex if fewer young people travel by bus as a result of a change to travel support to students. If use of services were to reduce, there would be a consequential reduction in income for commercial bus operators. The level of reduction would only be known once the new post-16 travel support arrangements are implemented, as a proportion of students are likely to continue to travel. Other students may instead travel by car or bike, or choose a more local educational establishment due to the burden of travel costs.

The ESCC Freedom pass is provided to young people from low income families to travel on ESCC supported bus routes (funded through the CET revenue budget) and routes run on a commercial basis by bus operators. Use of these Freedom passes is distributed across a large number of bus routes serving 15 post-16 education establishments. ESCC pays the commercial operator on a per pass basis for accepting Freedom passes. A further approximately 50 young people receive a Saver bus pass for use on Brighton & Hove Bus Company routes.

The risk to individual bus routes is likely to be greater for those where there are more students with low income travel support. The table overleaf illustrates those bus routes on which more than three post-16 low income students received an East Sussex Freedom pass in November 2014 (an average month in the academic year).

2. Risk to CET's Passenger Transport Budget

Unlike commercial operators, ESCC does not pay the operators of the supported bus routes it contracts for accepting Freedom passes issued by ESCC. In 2014/15 CET's passenger transport budget was credited with £37,200 for the full cost of Freedom passes issued to 45 post-16 students from low income families travelling on ESCC supported routes, thereby reducing the net cost to ESCC of providing the service. Due to a number of contracted bus routes being taken on by bus operators on a commercial basis from April 2015, the amount credited to the CET budget is anticipated to be less, at £27,400 in 2015/16.

The direct effect to the CET budget of implementing this post-16 travel support proposal would be a loss of income. Whilst CET will try to recover as much of this income as possible by negotiating lower contract prices with the contracted operators, the difficulty will be in establishing how many of the post-16 students affected have reverted to paying bus fares. Therefore the total saving to ESCC in removing travel support for low income post 16 students would be less than £240,000, to a maximum reduction of £27,400.

However, as 24 of these were Bexhill College students on 3 routes, it appears that these students (or similar ones) will continue to buy Freedom Passes, as the large FE colleges have indicated that they will assist their most needy students with the EFA bursary scheme

or the new Hardship Fund. This should allow CET to negotiate revised contract prices with those routes and reduce the forecast loss of income.

Bus routes with a higher number of Freedom passes issued to young people from low income families as at November 2014

Education Establishment	Route No	Operator as at September 2015	Freedom Passes
Bexhill College	70	ESCC CET funded service	6
	95	Renown commercial service	15
	98	Stagecoach commercial service	4
	99	Stagecoach commercial service	10
	360	ESCC CET funded service	9
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Sussex Coast Col@Station Plaza	99	Stagecoach commercial service	4
	100	Stagecoach commercial service	9
	101	Stagecoach commercial service	6
Sussex Downs Col@Eastbourne	51	Stagecoach commercial service	32
	54	Stagecoach commercial service	5
	98	Stagecoach commercial service	6
	12A	Brighton & Hove commercial service	7
	LOOP	Stagecoach commercial service	6
Sussex Downs Col@Lewes	28/29	Brighton & Hove commercial service	7

Note regarding fare levels

ESCC is in the relatively fortunate position of having the agreement of nearly all bus operators to participate in the East Sussex Freedom ticket scheme. This long-standing scheme, coordinated by CET's passenger transport team, provides unlimited travel in the county on nearly any bus for a weekly rate of £16. Unlike other authorities, this scheme is not subsidized by ESCC. With a significant reduction in post-16 travel assistance, increasing concerns are likely to be expressed about the level of bus fares charged to young people as being a barrier to education access. Discounted fares are generally only available to under 16s in East Sussex. By withdrawing travel support for post-16 students, ESCC should expect to receive more public demands for a discounted bus fares scheme for young people aged under 19 in education, similar to the local authority subsidized arrangements in West Sussex, Surrey and Kent.

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