

# Scrutiny Review of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training in School Transport

## Report by the Review Board:

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(Chair)

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# The report of the Scrutiny Review of School Exclusions

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## Recommendations

The recommendations below reflect the Review Board’s consideration of the Council’s use of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training as part of Home to School Transport provision. The Review focused on how these offers support eligible pupils, predominantly children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), to develop independence, while ensuring best use of public resources.

Recommendation	Page
<p>1    <b>The department should demonstrate the cost avoidance benefits of Independent Travel Training and develop a business case to expand the offer. This should take account of the wider benefits and the significance of Independent Travel Training in promoting long term independence and positive outcomes for young people, and:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• include cost/benefit models for different delivery methods; and</li> <li>• consider the costs and benefits of providing bus passes to eligible post 16 pupils after they complete training to encourage participation.</li> </ul>	15
<p>2    <b>The department should strengthen the implementation of its existing policies to ensure that frameworks supporting Independent Travel Training and Personal Travel Budgets are fully utilised to benefit families within the resources available, and, using any additional resource if secured through a successful business case, enhance the Independent Travel Training offer. This should include:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) regularly reviewing the implementation and uptake of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training, identifying and addressing barriers that prevent families from accessing these opportunities, to ensure policies are inclusive and accessible;</li> <li>b) working with schools to expand the availability of classroom based Independent Travel Training and identifying opportunities, where feasible, to increase the number of schools engaging with the offer and communicating it effectively to families; and</li> <li>c) introducing Independent Travel Training earlier and at key transition points by offering age appropriate training for younger pupils and promoting options for students to travel independently for part or all of their journey.</li> </ol>	21

3	<p>The department should develop a communication strategy to promote the benefits and opportunities of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training to parents, carers and schools; articulate how to apply and utilise these offers; and address parent/carers concerns. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) refreshed communications to parents and carers using behavioural insights to ensure families understand the offer and how it can promote independence, which is sent at appropriate times, including at transition;</li> <li>b) the use of stories and case studies to promote benefits and address parent/carers concerns;</li> <li>c) clear guidance and FAQs on applying for Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training, outlining program flexibility, long term benefits, and addressing common concerns;</li> <li>d) identifying opportunities to communicate the availability and benefits of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training to officers and elected Members to ensure they are well informed when engaging with parents, carers, and residents; and</li> <li>e) work with schools to promote independent travel early, and embed these aims in Education, Health and Care Plans.</li> </ul>	23
4	<p>The department should work with key stakeholders, including the Parent Carer Forum, SEND Strategy Governance Board and SEND Ambassador Forum, to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) co-design Personal Travel Budget and Independent Travel Training communications and policy materials, including resources aimed at parents and carers to build confidence within families on using public transport and supporting their child to travel independently; and</li> <li>b) ensure that young people’s views are shared with relevant stakeholders, including schools, transport providers and elected Members.</li> </ul>	24

## Introduction

1. The People Scrutiny Committee, in response to increasing demand in Home to School Transport, undertook two scoping exercises in 2025 to better understand the issues impacting on the service, consider work underway to address these, and explore if scrutiny could add value by undertaking a review into this area. The Board explored the growing pressures on the Home to School Transport system, driven by rising demand; policy uncertainty, particularly around SEND reforms; current system challenges, including legal constraints; and measures being taken to ensure best value for money in delivering statutory school transport.

2. The Board carefully considered the remit of the Review and acknowledged several limiting factors, including the Council's statutory responsibilities and the anticipated impact of the forthcoming School White Paper. While the details of the White Paper were still unknown at the time of the meetings, officers expected it to emphasise inclusion in mainstream education for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), alongside potential changes to the framework for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). It was also expected to address the high costs of Home to School Transport by promoting national best practices such as increased use of public transport, active travel, enhanced Personal Travel Budgets, and Independent Travel Training—all of which can provide benefits to pupils and families, as well as opportunities for cost savings.

3. The Board recognised that anticipated reforms were causing anxiety amongst parents and carers and considered that the Review should focus on areas of work that were likely to have increased prominence in national policy related to school transport, as well as considering support and guidance that could be offered to parents and carers responding to any changes.

4. Members therefore agreed that the Review should explore what the Council could do to raise awareness of, and increase the uptake of, Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training and to focus on the following lines of enquiry:

### 1. Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training policies

- How effective are current Personal Travel Budget and Independent Travel Training policies in promoting independence and delivering value for money?
- Are there best practices from other local authorities that could be adopted?

### 2. Barriers to uptake

- What are the key reasons families decline Personal Travel Budgets or Independent Travel Training and how can these be addressed?

### 3. Communication and engagement

- How does the Council currently promote the benefits of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training to parents, pupils and schools and how effective are those strategies?
- How can elected members, through engagement with their communities, raise awareness and promote the benefits of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training?

5. The Review looked at a range of evidence including information provided by the Children's Services Department (CSD), internal data, external reports and case studies, and heard from a range of internal and external witnesses. The Board was keen to include youth voice as part of the Review and would like to thank the young people who shared their views and experiences as part of a discussion at a SEND Ambassador Forum.

6. Whilst the Review focussed on what can be done to increase the uptake of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training in East Sussex, the Board recognised the wider national context of increased demand for both SEND support and Home to School Transport, significant cost pressures, and upcoming changes in national reforms. The Board also acknowledged that Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training are not appropriate for all pupils and recommendations therefore focus on the Council's role in encouraging uptake amongst eligible pupils.

7. The Board in developing its recommendations was mindful of the significant financial challenges facing the Council and agreed that consideration of recommendations and subsequent action plans should be viewed within this context.

## Background

### *Local and National Context*

#### National guidance

8. The Department for Education guidance *Travel to school for children of compulsory school age* sets out the statutory responsibilities for local authorities in England, as defined by the Education Act 1996 in assisting with transport to school where eligibility criteria relating to distance or specific needs are met. This guidance provides clarification on local authorities' duties, particularly in relation to pupils with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).

9. Recent updates to this guidance place increased emphasis on ensuring that children with EHCPs can access the nearest suitable provision and highlight the importance of sustainability and independence in travel arrangements. Local authorities are required to promote sustainable and active travel options and encourage the uptake of Independent Travel Training, especially for eligible pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

10. Local authorities do not have to provide free or subsidised post 16 travel support but do have a duty to prepare and publish an annual transport policy statement specifying the arrangements for the provision of transport, or other support that the authority considers necessary, to facilitate the attendance of all persons of sixth form age receiving education or training. Councils are expected to target this support at those who need it most.

11. Since the Review Board concluded its evidence gathering, the Government published its Schools White Paper: *Every child achieving and thriving*. The Paper places a strong emphasis on inclusion, preparation for adulthood and supporting children and young people with SEND to develop independence and life skills. The White Paper also highlights the need for greater sustainability and value for money across SEND systems and related services. The Paper does not set out detailed proposals on Home to School Transport.

#### National statistics and research

12. Increasing demand and costs for Home to School Transport have been experienced nationally; published reports and case studies have sought to explore the reasons for these increases and identify ways to reduce pressure on services and council budgets.

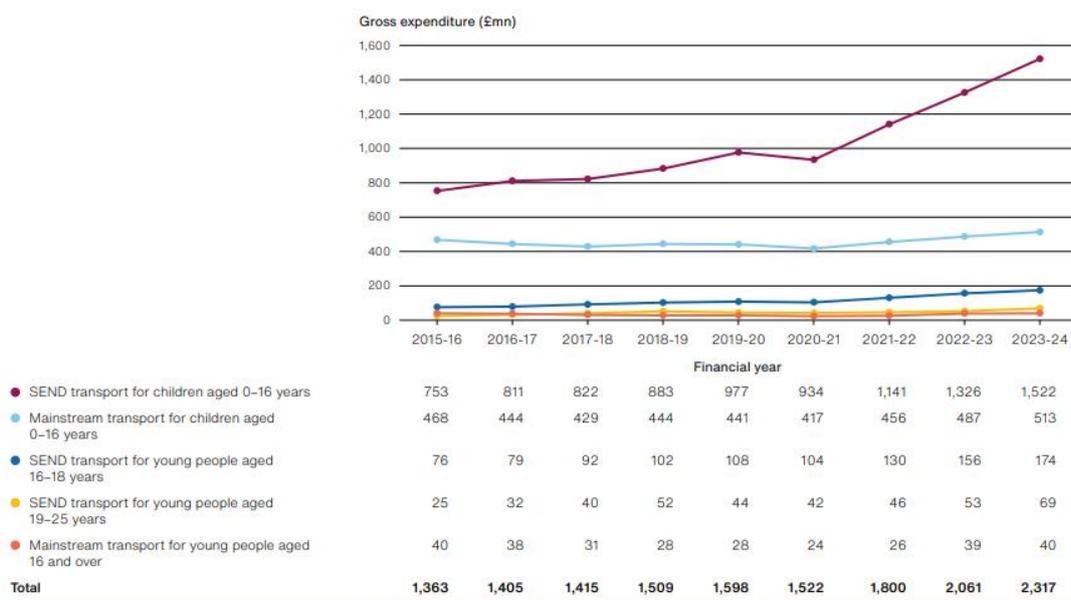
13. The National Audit Office Report *Home to School Transport* sets out that in 2023-24, local authorities spent £2.32 billion transporting an estimated 520,000 pupils to school or college. It recognises the benefits of Home to School Transport to pupils and families, however, notes that an increase in demand (a 70% increase in real terms

between 2015/16 - 2023/24) and rising costs for travel for pupils with SEND, is placing significant pressure on council budgets.

14. The graph below illustrates that spending increased most significantly after 2020-21; almost three quarters of this increase was on transporting pupils aged 0-16 with SEND.

Real terms gross expenditure on home to school transport in England, 2015-16 to 2023-24 (2023-24 prices)

Real terms expenditure on home to school transport for children aged 0-16 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) increased substantially after 2020-21



15. The report highlights a range of initiatives by local authorities to respond to rising demand and costs including the promotion of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training; managing markets; route optimisation and reducing single occupancy (solo transport); and use of alternative transport, including sourcing fleets of vehicles. The report makes several recommendations to the Department for Education, including ensuring forthcoming SEND reforms consider Home to School Transport, improving data collection, and monitoring the impact of Home to School Transport funding formulae on different types of authority.

16. The County Councils Network (CCN) report *From Home to the Classroom: Making Travel to School Services Sustainable* says that without considerable policy reforms, both costs and demand are likely to keep growing and notes that per capita expenditure is significantly higher for CCN member authorities, mainly due to their rural geographies. The report sets out that increasing the uptake of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training can be cost saving measures, as well as providing benefits for young people's independence. However, it also notes variations in provision of these offers and the challenges faced by rural authorities with limited public transport.

17. The Local Government Association (LGA) report *The Future of Home to School Transport* recognises the key role Home to School Transport plays in supporting families

and enabling children to get to school, including reducing barriers to attendance faced by some families with children with SEND. It also examines the cost drivers of Home to School Transport and sets out core principles to guide the direction of future policy, including recommendations to Government on eligibility; where transport should be provided from and to; modes of transport; and funding. Recommendations include expanding use of Independent Travel Training and Personal Travel Budgets.

18. The ADEPT *SEND Transport Toolkit* provides a practical resource for local authorities. It highlights test initiatives and case studies aimed to increase efficiencies and reduce costs in Home to School Transport through route planning and optimisation, use of Independent Travel Training and Personal Travel Budgets, commissioning, and supplier management. Impacts from initiatives include cost avoidance, better use of resources, improved outcomes for children and adults and, for some initiatives, reduced demand for school transport.

### Context in East Sussex

19. East Sussex County Council’s (ESCC) policies on Home to School Transport follow statutory duties under the Education Act 1996 and align with the updated Department for Education guidance.

20. Travel assistance is available for children of compulsory school age who meet statutory criteria, such as meeting distance thresholds, encountering unsafe walking routes, having Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND), or belonging to low income families. The policy sets out the forms of provision ESCC offers, including dedicated school transport (e.g. taxis, minibuses), public transport passes, and Personal Travel Budgets. All discretionary offers of assistance are reviewed on a case by case basis at the SEND Travel Panel.

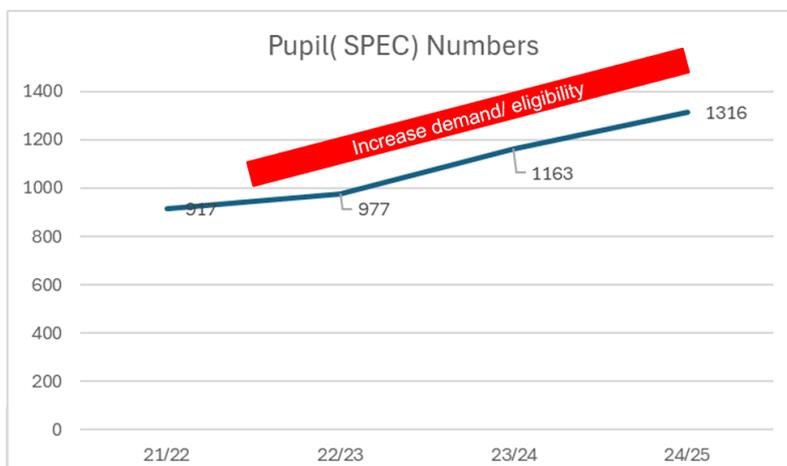
21. The May 2025 school census recorded 67,097 pupils attending primary, secondary and special schools in East Sussex. As at the end of September (quarter 2) 2025, there were 5,028 pupils in receipt of Home to School Transport support, as set out in the table below:

Category	Pupils Sep 2025
Public Transport	1792
Mileage Allowance	53
Coach	1168
Personal Travel Budget	214
Minibus & Shared Taxi	1623
Solo Taxi	178
<b>Total number of pupils</b>	<b>5028</b>

22. The ESCC Post-16 Transport Policy Statement sets out the support available for sixth form students and learners aged 19 or over with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), to enable them to access education or training. Support options may be provided by the County Council, schools, colleges, or transport operators, and the Statement details information on fares, concessions, financial assistance and travel support policies for EHCP learners. Some eligible students may benefit from council arranged transport, such as taxis or minibuses. To be eligible, learners must have an EHCP, be unable to travel independently, and attend the nearest suitable placement. The policy also outlines the requirement for parents and carers to prioritise transporting the young person where possible, and an annual contribution fee for approved travel assistance.

23. The ESCC budget for Home to School Transport in 2024/25 was £23m and the department overspent by £3.8m; transport for pupils with SEND accounted for the majority of spend. Mirroring the national trend, the department has seen a significant increase in demand and eligibility for Home to School Transport in the last three years (outlined in the graph below) due to an increase in the number of EHCPs being issued and the number of children eligible for Home to School Transport support.

24. The department has also reported rising transport costs due to inflationary factors, vehicle costs, fuel, drivers and Passenger Assistants (PAs) as well as increasing demand for alternative provision and transport requests for services including Teaching Learning Provision, Interim Provision Service and East Sussex Academy.



Percentage increase year on year	
22/23	7%
23/24	19%
24/25	13%

25. In response to this increase, the department has adopted a range of measures to manage costs whilst continuing to meet statutory duties, including route optimisation; a review of commissioning arrangements and supplier management; reducing the number of solo taxi journeys and increasing vehicle occupancy; an enhanced Personal Travel Budget strategy; promotion of Independent Travel Training; an eligibility review; and increasing the use of public transport. The department continues to collaborate with other authorities to share best practice and learning. These initiatives have slowed the rise in unit costs in recent years.

#### *Personal Travel Budgets*

26. ESCC offers Personal Travel Budgets to eligible pupils with an EHCP aged 5-25. The budget is provided to families to support costs of travel to school or college; parents/carers are responsible for organising the travel and do not have to report how the money is used. The current standard offer is 45p per mile.

27. An enhanced strategy offering 65p per mile for pupils on solo transport has launched more recently and been offered to 184 families where pupils are currently using solo transport. At quarter 2 2025, 10 families had accepted the offer. In responding to why a Personal Travel Budget was not suitable, the most common reason was that families were happy with their current arrangement.

#### *Independent Travel Training*

28. The ESCC Independent Travel Training offer supports young people with SEND in developing the skills and confidence needed to travel independently to school or college. Delivered by National Star, the programme is available to those with an EHCP and includes home visits, classroom sessions, and family support. The programme is responsive to individual needs, with suitability assessed for each participant, and ongoing work is focused on expanding access, addressing parental concerns, and benchmarking against other local authorities.

29. Whilst Independent Travel Training is available to all pupils of statutory school age, with classroom based sessions offered to younger secondary pupils, the core delivery of practical training to use public transport is focused on pupils aged over 16. A young person's independence is formally considered as part of the eligibility assessment for post 16 travel assistance.

30. Once Independent Travel Training has been successfully completed, post 16 learners who are assessed as able to travel independently no longer receive additional travel assistance. For pupils under the age of 16, eligibility for travel assistance remains unchanged. Where a younger pupil completes travel training, they continue to receive the appropriate form of support, such as a bus pass, where they meet the statutory eligibility criteria.

## **Review Board Findings**

### ***1. Value for money and wider outcomes from Independent Travel Training and Personal Travel Budgets***

31. The Board considered a range of evidence and heard from key witnesses about the cost benefits of Independent Travel Training and Personal Travel Budgets, as well as wider benefits for pupils and families.

#### **Value for money**

32. National evidence and local authority case studies highlight increasing the use of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training as key measures to reduce Home to School Transport costs, with some councils achieving significant savings through these initiatives and many councils developing their offer.

#### ***Personal Travel Budgets***

33. The National Audit Office report states that Personal Travel Budgets can offer families greater flexibility and control and are often more cost effective than other transport services. CCN cites increasing the use of Personal Travel Budgets as a key element of councils' strategies to manage Home to School Transport costs and reports one council achieving £4m of savings through reducing solo taxi usage and increasing uptake of Personal Travel Budgets.

34. The Board heard that ESCC's enhanced offer of 65p per mile for pupils currently using solo transport had generated an estimated £221,000 annual saving as reported at quarter 2 2025. Wider uptake, particularly among pupils who currently receive solo taxi provision, would offer further financial efficiencies.

#### ***Independent Travel Training***

35. On Independent Travel Training, the National Audit Office report notes that it is not only effective at promoting independence and achieving cost savings in Home to School Transport, but 'additional long-term savings may also arise across other services, such as adult social care, as individuals gain greater independence.'

36. The Board heard from the Services Manager for School Services at Sheffield City Council which had recently expanded its Independent Travel Training offer with additional investment. He commented that, although the full financial impact of Independent Travel Training was difficult to quantify, modelling suggested it offered strong value for money across a pupil's education, as well as wider social benefits. Testimonies from parents, carers and pupils in Sheffield demonstrated the positive impact it had had on their lives and the Service Manager noted that the Independent Travel Training team was working with departments across the council to realise the wider impacts of Independent Travel Training, including increased confidence in social interactions, independence and being part of a community.

37. Analysis undertaken by CSD indicated that Independent Travel Training could provide realistic opportunities for cost avoidance through more effective use of existing resources. Independent Travel Training costs an average of £2,750 per pupil. By comparison, the average annual cost of Home to School Transport for pupils attending schools that currently participate in Independent Travel Training ranges from £7,734 to £18,112 per child.

38. The table below sets out the schools that currently work with National Star to support pupils to complete Independent Travel Training; the number of pupils who have successfully completed the programme per school since 2020, and the average cost of transporting a pupil to each school. It also outlines the average annual potential savings realised when a student transitions from arranged transport to independent travel.

**Costs avoided: average unit cost per school (Jan 25)**

School	Number of pupils enrolled in 2024/25	Pupils who have completed Independent Travel Training since 2020	Average transport cost per child per £/Day	Average annual potential cost avoided per child
The Lindfield School	119	73	54.57	£10,260
Hazel Court School	77	61	80.54	£15,302
Acre Wood Academy (formerly Grove Park)	141	86	87.49	£16,623
Hazel Court FE	59	15	95.33	£18,112
Hailsham Community College	1078	14	40.71	£7734

39. In 2024-25, 22 pupils were successfully trained (the programme achieves a 96% success rate of children undertaking the course converting to independent travel). The Board considered that increasing the number of eligible learners completing Independent Travel Training could further reduce reliance on high cost transport arrangements, particularly solo taxi provision. The Board also noted that the programme had a waiting list of six pupils, demonstrating immediate scope to support additional learners. The Board was informed that Bristol City Council was expanding Independent Travel Training to better manage Home to School Transport costs. To address the financial barriers some families faced in accessing public transport, and to promote participation in training, bus passes were provided to eligible students upon completion of the programme. This

initiative aimed to increase uptake and decrease dependency on taxis with the cost of passes more than offset by the savings in direct transport provision.

40. The Board considered this in the context of recent changes to bus fares in East Sussex following the end of additional national funding, and the impact this will have on some pupils. The Parent Carer Forum Chair also highlighted concerns about ongoing costs to use public transport once training had been completed as a barrier to uptake.

### **Wider benefits**

41. National evidence indicates that Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training provide significant benefits to pupils and families, including ‘greater confidence, independence and the ability to take part more fully in their community’.

42. The LGA recommends that school travel support should ‘contribute to building the skills that children and young people need for independence in their adult lives’. In consulting with young people with SEND during the production of the LGA’s report, elected Members reflected that young people had a ‘strong appetite to travel independently and as they got older resented some of the restrictions and perceived stigma around the provision of dedicated transport’. However, the report also notes some challenges and limitations with these initiatives, including some parent/carer concerns about the adequacy and practicality of Personal Travel Budgets, challenges in councils having the resources to sustain the programmes, and the limitations of public transport in rural areas (barriers to uptake of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training are further explored in the next section).

43. The Board also considered the wider benefits of Independent Travel Training through testimonials from parents whose children had completed the training in East Sussex who noted increased confidence and independence in young people. The National Star Travel Training Team Coordinator emphasised the importance of developing independence as young people prepare for adulthood and that Independent Travel Training could support the development of essential life skills. The Deputy Head at Lindfield School also highlighted these benefits; as well as supporting pupils to travel independently, he cited increased opportunities, support with transition to college and work, independence more generally and better communication skills.

*“X absolutely loved his Travel Training... In fact now he loves planning lots of different bus journeys to places we’ve never been before”*

Mother of ESCC child who completed ITT, Dec 2024

### **Conclusions**

44. Although Members recognised that Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training could only partially offset high transport costs, the Board concluded that given the increasing pressure on the Home to School Transport budget, and the benefits Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training can offer families, the Council

should seek to increase uptake of these offers and welcomed the introduction of the enhanced Personal Travel Budget offer. With further promotion and guidance on how Personal Travel Budgets could be used (explored further in sections 3 and 4), there was an opportunity to increase the uptake of this offer and achieve further savings, as well as offering greater flexibility to families.

45. In discussions with officers about opportunities to expand Independent Travel Training, the Board heard that there was scope for this, however, any proposed increase in provision would require clear evidence demonstrating its effectiveness as a cost avoidance strategy. The Board acknowledged that providing robust evidence of cost savings or avoided expenditure would be essential in justifying additional investment and scaling up the Independent Travel Training programme.

46. The Board recognised the potential impact from changes to bus fares for young people, particularly in relation to participation in the Independent Travel Training programme. It was noted that any additional support, such as providing bus passes, would only apply to post 16 learners, as pupils of statutory school age would continue to be eligible for travel assistance even after completing Independent Travel Training. However, the Board also recognised that the majority of pupils who complete the training and successfully move to independent travel are post 16. While resources remain limited, the Board agreed that supporting and incentivising young people to transition from taxis to public transport could generate cost avoidance for the Council and provide wider benefits for young people. Therefore, options to encourage and assist post 16 learners to use public transport should be explored.

#### **Recommendation 1**

**The department should demonstrate the cost avoidance benefits of Independent Travel Training and develop a business case to expand the offer. This should take account of the wider benefits and the significance of Independent Travel Training in promoting long term independence and positive outcomes for young people, and:**

- **include cost/benefit models for different delivery methods; and**
- **consider the costs and benefits of providing bus passes to eligible post 16 pupils with an EHCP after they complete training to encourage participation.**

## ***2. Barriers to uptake and participation***

47. Although there are clear benefits for many pupils and families from the uptake of Independent Travel Training and Personal Travel Budgets, the Board heard that there were some barriers which made these options either unsuitable, or undesirable.

### **Practical barriers**

48. The Board considered insights from the East Sussex Parent Carer Forum (PCF) Chair who shared parent/carer experiences on Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel

Training. Some parents reflected that arranging transportation with a Personal Travel Budget could be challenging due to work schedules, unsuitable or unavailable wrap around care, and siblings attending different schools—making it difficult for parents and carers to transport multiple children. For families with varying weekly arrangements, such as part-time work, it was uncertain whether Personal Travel Budgets could be used flexibly to meet different travel needs on different days.

49. These practical barriers were also reported in written testimonies from parents/carers who had declined a Personal Travel Budget. Karen, a foster carer, cited transportation difficulties for families with children at both distant special schools and local mainstream schools, as well as limited wrap around care and other commitments. Karen cares for L, who has severe learning disabilities and anxiety; she declined the offer because the current taxi and Passenger Assistant (PA) arrangement ensures a calm journey that helps L prepare for school. Karen praised the taxi driver and PA for their support.

50. In another testimony Lisa, a parent of three children, one of whom L has complex needs and attends a special school 30 minutes away, had experienced a range of transport arrangements over the years. She praised her current arrangement of a taxi and PA as she said they were able to provide her daughter with the one-to-one support she needs when travelling. She noted that significant media coverage on the costs of Home to School Transport could make parents feel guilty but noted that for some families it was the only viable option.

51. Rural counties like East Sussex present additional challenges to participating in Independent Travel Training. The Independent Travel Training Lead and PCF Chair noted that route suitability and access to public transport are barriers for some journeys, which reflected findings from the National Audit Office that the availability of public transport in rural areas and the capacity to appoint and train suitable staff were ‘significant constraints’.

## Challenges for young people

52. To gain deeper insight into the challenges that young people may encounter when participating in Independent Travel Training, Board members attended a SEND Ambassador Forum and engaged in discussions with seven students ranging from Year 7 to university level.

53. Participants described a range of experiences with travel to school or college, including walking, use of public transport, taxis, and being driven by family members. They all noted barriers to accessing public transport, including accessibility barriers (including a lack of audio announcements), crowded buses and boarding/seating challenges for wheelchair users or those with visual impairment as well as other

*“Being taught how to take public transport is important for safety and independence”*

SEND Ambassador

disabilities. Young people also highlighted a lack of awareness from members of the public about accessibility needs. Despite these barriers, participants saw the value in Independent Travel Training (with many of them having undertaken this informally with family members) as a way to enable greater independence by developing confidence and practical skills.

### **Lack of awareness and the need for flexibility**

54. The Board found that awareness of both Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training remained limited among families and young people. Several young people attending the SEND Ambassador Forum were not familiar with the Independent Travel Training programme, despite valuing the idea of gaining independence.

55. The Board found that although ESCC policies allow for Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training to be adapted to individual circumstances, including flexible use, part-week arrangements and trial periods, families were often unaware of this.

56. The PCF Chair noted that families often declined Personal Travel Budgets due to unclear or outdated information about the application process and policies, especially regarding return trips and budget flexibility.

57. The PCF Chair suggested families may be more interested in taking up a Personal Travel Budget if they could be reassured that support would still be available when needed, for example due to illness or for families with limited support networks, and that it could be used flexibly to accommodate changing circumstances.

58. The Board also heard that some parents/carers were anxious about losing support they were previously entitled to if they decided a Personal Travel Budget was no longer suitable but that the offer of a trial period could mitigate this. This was reiterated by the Services Manager at Sheffield City Council who told that Board that some families felt they had had to fight for SEND support and were concerned about losing this if they explored alternative arrangements that turned out to be unsuitable.

### **Parental Concerns**

59. The Travel Training Team Coordinator told the Board that parental anxiety about safety and their child's readiness was a significant barrier to the uptake of Independent Travel Training. She explained that positive support at home is crucial for successful training, as children are more likely to engage if their parents are encouraging and described efforts to support parents, including the introduction of parent training sessions and increased engagement with schools to foster positive attitudes towards independence. The SEND Children and Young People (CYP) Participation Lead and participants at the SEND Ambassador Forum cited parental anxiety as a major barrier to young people using public transport.

60. The PCF Chair noted an existing culture of distrust towards local authorities, with some parents/carers perceiving the offer of initiatives such as Personal Travel Budgets

and Independent Travel Training as purely cost saving measures for the Council. It was therefore crucial that the benefits of these initiatives for some families were articulated.

### ***Conclusions***

61. Although a number of barriers were identified by witnesses, and some of these were outside the Council's control (rurality for example), the Board found that several could be overcome through ensuring that use of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training can be adapted in a way that suited individual circumstances. Officers informed the Board that both Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training allow for flexible use, including trial periods and the ability to use these for part of a journey and/or for part of the week, however, families often lacked this information. Further consideration is given to policies and the role of communications and engagement in increasing uptake in the following sections.

### ***3. Personal Travel Budget and Independent Travel Training policy***

62. The Board considered current ESCC policies for Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training and considered if changes to these could reduce barriers and encourage uptake.

63. The Board noted that ESCC's Home to School Transport policy incorporates Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training as part of a graduated, sustainable offer for eligible children and young people with SEND. Although the Board was assured that the Council's core policies for Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training reflected those of other local authorities and national guidance, Members did consider ways in which some councils were developing offers to make them more accessible and attractive to families.

### **Personal Travel Budgets**

64. A Personal Travel Budget is offered where it represents the most appropriate and efficient form of support and provides families with a financial allocation that they may use flexibly to meet their child's travel needs without needing to itemise expenditure. Budgets can be used to support travel costs, as well as other arrangements that enable parents to transport their child to school, for example childcare. Funding is determined by distance and attendance requirements.

65. The Board considered how ESCC's approach to Personal Travel Budgets compared to other councils. The standard offer of 45p per mile, and the enhanced offer of 65p per mile for individuals on solo transport compares positively when benchmarked against other local authorities, most of which retain only the standard 45p rate or operate banded schemes based on distance travelled and pay higher rates only for longer journeys.

66. The Board heard that the enhanced Personal Travel Budget rate of 65p per mile was introduced following national benchmarking in 2025, which showed that while 45p

remained the standard offer across most authorities, a small few provided an increased rate. The 65p level was assessed as offering a meaningful incentive for families, recognising both the additional time commitment and the adjustments many parents would need to make to their work or caring arrangements in order to take on daily transport. Although a higher rate of 75p (as offered by some other authorities) was considered, the department concluded that further work was first needed to extend uptake of the existing 65p offer. This offer will be reviewed as part of wider Home to School Transport monitoring, including any policy changes arising from the forthcoming Schools White Paper.

### **Independent Travel Training**

67. Independent Travel Training offers structured, personalised one-to-one training for eligible learners, enabling them to develop the skills and confidence needed to travel safely and independently by public transport or on foot, with delivery tailored to age, need and pace of progression. Independent Travel Training is typically offered to pupils in year 10 onwards, although some younger people had completed the training. The Council also works with local special schools to deliver classroom sessions.

68. Cornwall Council had changed the way it delivered Independent Travel Training to encourage participation. The Board heard that when the training had been delivered by the Council, there had been scepticism by some parents as this initiative was seen as a cost saving exercise. The model was changed to deliver training in partnership with the Careers Team to embed an Independent Travel Training syllabus within schools and develop the offer to include journeys to further education and potential employers. Officers reported they had received positive feedback from young people, parents and staff on this approach.

69. The Board also heard from Sheffield City Council which was working with primary schools to develop travel training classroom resources to support transition to secondary school, including a toolkit for parents which aimed to increase parent confidence in travel training.

70. The Board recognised pupil and parental anxiety about young people travelling on public transport, particularly in responding to unforeseen circumstances such as cancelled services or breakdowns and considered whether a 'buddy system' could provide reassurance. Officers emphasised that Independent Travel Training is designed to equip young people to manage such situations safely, including seeking help from staff and contacting parents or carers. However, officers highlighted significant practical and safeguarding challenges associated with any formal buddy arrangement, including the inability to monitor travel in real time, uncertainties around liability, and issues relating to suitability, insurance and DBS requirements. It was therefore considered that such arrangements would be difficult to implement within current resources, and that greater emphasis should be placed on promoting the coping and problem solving elements of Independent Travel Training to parents and pupils.

71. The Board considered whether Independent Travel Training should be offered to younger pupils in order to prepare them for travel post 16. The Services Manager at Sheffield City Council suggested that Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) should use their expertise to help families identify long term travel aspirations early on, embed these into EHCPs and continue conversations with parents and carers about how their child will travel to school; this was particularly key when planning transition to the next school. This was reiterated by the Deputy Headteacher at Lindfield School, who told the Board that conversations about Independent Travel Training should start at an early age to prepare both pupils and parents/carers.

72. The National Star Travel Training Team Coordinator told the Board that typically pupils were not ready for Independent Travel Training until they were in Year 9, often due to route suitability and pupil readiness. However, the Assistant Director, Communication, Planning and Performance suggested that earlier intervention - especially during the transition from primary to secondary school - could enable more young people to travel independently to their local schools, reducing reliance on taxis and fostering greater independence.

73. Although witnesses and evidence suggested that not all pupils would be ready for full Independent Travel Training at a young age, there was evidence to support that gradual introduction to Independent Travel Training at a younger age, including classroom training and conversations about long term aspirations, could increase the success of independent travel later on.

74. The Board heard that National Star currently provides classroom sessions to three schools, including Lindfield School. The Deputy Headteacher informed the Board that these sessions were embedded into the curriculum to gradually introduce pupils to public transport and commented that although one-to-one Independent Travel Training support was time and staff intensive, classroom sessions had the potential to introduce a greater number of pupils to independent travel and encourage pupils to share these lessons and raise awareness of the benefits of independent travel with parents.

### ***Conclusions***

75. The Board concluded that, while ESCC's existing Personal Travel Budget and Independent Travel Training policies aligned with national practice (and the enhanced Personal Travel Budget offered a greater incentive than that offered by other authorities), they were not being fully realised in practice. Families often lacked clarity about how flexibly these offers could be used, were uncertain about eligibility and the possibility of trial periods and expressed concerns about losing existing support or managing complex family arrangements, which was preventing uptake.

76. Evidence also demonstrated that early conversations in schools, clearer guidance, and gradual preparatory activities, such as classroom-based travel training, could meaningfully improve readiness and uptake. The Board therefore concluded that, rather than making any changes to policy, strengthening the implementation and communication

of current policies would enable more eligible families to benefit from these offers within existing resources. If additional resources could be secured through a successful business case, the Board agreed that this should be used to enhance the Independent Travel Training programme to offer a gradual approach to travel independence to pupils from a young age.

#### **Recommendation 2.**

The department should strengthen the implementation of its existing policies to ensure that frameworks supporting Independent Travel Training and Personal Travel Budgets are fully utilised to benefit families within the resources available, and, using any additional resource if secured through a successful business case, enhance the Independent Travel Training offer. This should include:

- a) regularly reviewing the implementation and uptake of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training, identifying and addressing barriers that prevent families from accessing these opportunities, to ensure policies are inclusive and accessible;
- b) working with schools to expand the availability of classroom based Independent Travel Training and identifying opportunities, where feasible, to increase the number of schools engaging with the offer and communicating it effectively to families; and
- c) introducing Independent Travel Training earlier and at key transition points by offering age appropriate training for younger pupils and promoting options for

#### **4. Communication and Engagement**

77. Whilst considering that use of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training should remain a choice for families, the Board heard that communication strategies could raise awareness of these offers and the potential benefits and encourage further uptake. The Board also considered the role of parents, schools and young people in shaping communications and policies.

##### **Communication strategies**

78. The Board heard that ESCC currently communicates the availability of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training through several channels. Information is included in the travel assistance application form, and letters are sent to parents following successful applications, as well as in subsequent correspondence, such as when explaining changes to entitlement for post-16 learners. Letters outlining the Independent Travel Training offer are issued directly to eligible pupils, either in Years 7-8 or Years 9-11. Information is also published on the Council website. Officers also explained that schools make referrals where appropriate. However, as noted in the section on barriers, the Board found that awareness of both the availability and scope of these offers was limited among families and young people.

79. SEND Ambassadors reviewed communications on Independent Travel Training and fed back that leaflets and newsletters appeared to be aimed at service providers rather than young people and that they did not clearly outline the benefits of developing independence or support for young people with anxiety that they would find useful. They emphasised that Independent Travel Training could really benefit young people with SEND and that improved advertising was needed to increase awareness and improve uptake.

80. The Board reviewed national evidence which underscored the need for clear and proactive communication to build trust and support informed choices. Findings from *Contact's School Transport Survey 2024 for parents with disabled children* showed that parents' biggest source of frustration was delays and inconsistencies in communication, particularly at key points such as the start of a school year or during transport assessments.

81. The Board heard from the CSD Marketing Communications Account Manager that communication strategies rooted in 'nudge' principles (approaches that steer people in certain directions while maintaining their freedom of choice) had the potential to improve clarity and uptake of Independent Travel Training and Personal Travel Budgets. She highlighted opportunities in ESCC communications to front load key messages, make benefits explicit and consistent, and create a 'choice architecture' to prompt families to consider these offers at each stage. The Board also heard that using relatable and engaging messaging, such as videos that share real life stories and experiences of parents and young people could foster trust and encourage wider uptake.

82. The Board explored how communications could allay fears that support would be withdrawn if these offers were not suitable. The Marketing Communications Account Manager suggested that communications should make clear that families would continue to have a choice about transport and that messaging should be explicit that Independent Travel Training enhances, rather than diminishes, options, and that Personal Travel Budgets can be used to support travel in different ways.

83. This approach was tested by Cornwall Council which worked with parent/carer groups to adapt the language used in communications to ensure information is clear and that expectations around travel are realistic. The Board heard that information about travel policy was communicated at key EHCP process points to reinforce the role of the Council and of parents/carers in considering how a child will travel to school. Communications on Home to School Transport focused on promoting independence and alternative solutions such as Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training. Witnesses from Cornwall Council reported that whilst demand for SEND support continued to increase, there had been a slowing of the rate of increase in demand for Home to School Transport.

84. The East Sussex PCF Chair told the Board that recent changes to policy, including the expanded definition of journey time, could make Personal Travel Budgets more attractive and should be emphasised when engaging with families. She also suggested providing comprehensive guidance on both the application and practical use of Personal

Travel Budgets, including their flexibility to meet individual family needs, and that letters to parents/carers should promote the wider benefits of these offers, as well as recognising parental concerns and anxieties. However, the PCF Chair also commented that correspondence should be targeted to eligible families who could benefit from these offers, otherwise there was a risk more general communication would be viewed as a cost saving exercise by the Council.

85. The Board considered the timing of communications. The PCF suggested that letters should be sent out multiple times to recognise changing circumstances. The Board heard that transition from primary to secondary was a key opportunity for families to consider future travel arrangements, however they also heard that conversations about Independent Travel Training should start at an early age to build in long term aspirations for children with SEND. This was emphasised by the Services Manager at Sheffield City Council who was strengthening relationships with primary schools and SENCOs to embed these aspirations into EHCPs and time offers effectively.

86. The Marketing Communications Account Manager identified collaboration with schools as an essential strategy to increase referrals to Independent Travel Training and enhance parental engagement with Council initiatives. This was endorsed by the Deputy Head of Lindfield School who observed that parents generally respond positively to schools regarding transport matters due to established trust. The Board concurred, acknowledging that schools are pivotal in communicating key messages, identifying suitable pupils for referral, and maintaining credibility with parents.

87. The Board also heard that Cornwall had developed internal relationships to increase understanding of Home to School Transport challenges across relevant teams and with elected Members. Members agreed that a greater awareness across ESCC of these offers, and a greater understanding of the wider context of Home to School Transport challenges, could support both officers and elected Members to have informed conversations with families and residents.

88. The Board concluded that strengthening communication approaches, including clearer and timely messaging, improved guidance, use of behavioural insights, and closer collaboration with schools, parents and young people, was essential to increasing uptake of these offers.

### **Recommendation 3.**

The department should develop a communication strategy to promote the benefits and opportunities of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training to parents, carers and schools; articulate how to apply and utilise these offers; and address parent/carers concerns. This should include:

- a) refreshed communications to parents and carers using behavioural insights to ensure families understand the offer and how it can promote independence, which is sent at appropriate times, including at transition;
- b) the use of stories and case studies to promote benefits and address parent/carers concerns;
- c) clear guidance and FAQs on applying for Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training, outlining program flexibility, long term benefits, and addressing common concerns;
- d) identifying opportunities to communicate the availability and benefits of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training to officers and elected Members to ensure they are well informed when engaging with parents, carers, and residents; and
- e) work with schools to promote independent travel early, and embed these aims in Education, Health, and Care Plans.

### **Engagement**

89. The Board considered insights from young people and parents, as well as evidence from other local authorities, that collaboration with key stakeholders on policies and communications was an effective way to secure engagement and achieve successful outcomes.

90. The LGA report notes that parent/carers representatives saw the benefits of building independence and developing life skills in the approach to Home to School Transport but stressed that ‘this must be taken forward in partnership with young people, parents and with schools’.

91. The PCF Chair emphasised the importance of listening to families of children with SEND and understanding challenges and previous experiences. She welcomed involvement of the PCF in developing communications and future policies on Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel.

92. In discussions with the SEND Ambassador Forum, participants had several suggestions to support young people with SEND to travel independently, including on how to prepare for journeys, as well as ways to communicate the offer more effectively and suggested that young people should be included in the development of policies and communications.

### **Conclusions**

93. The Board concluded that it was important to engage with families, young people and schools to increase awareness of the availability and benefits of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training; collaboration could build trust and address concerns but also ensure that policy and communication materials were developed in partnership with those they impact most. The Board recognised that the Council already undertakes meaningful engagement with stakeholders, including parents, carers, schools and young people, and that this work provided a strong foundation for further collaboration.

#### **Recommendation 4.**

**The department should work with key stakeholders, including the Parent Carer Forum, SEND Strategy Governance Board and SEND Ambassador Forum, to:**

- a) co-design Personal Travel Budget and Independent Travel Training communications and policy materials, including resources aimed at parents and carers to build confidence within families on using public transport and supporting their child to travel independently; and**
- b) ensure that young people's views are shared with relevant stakeholders, including schools, transport providers and elected Members.**

## **Conclusions**

94. The Review Board examined the Council's current offer of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training as part of its wider travel to school assistance provision. Members concluded that the Council is committed to providing appropriate travel assistance for eligible families and actively promoting initiatives such as Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training, which can offer greater flexibility for families and wider developmental benefits for young people. The Board welcomed this work as part of a range of measures to address rising Home to School Transport costs.

95. Given the clear benefits of Independent Travel Training and the current waiting list, Members considered that there was a strong rationale for exploring the potential expansion of the programme so that more young people can access the skills and long term benefits it provides. However, any consideration must take into account the constraints on available resources and be based on a business case approach.

96. While Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training offer significant benefits, including potential savings for the Council, the Board found that uptake was limited by a number of barriers. Although policies exist to provide flexibility, such as trial periods and part-time arrangements, these options were not widely understood. Many families remained unaware of the full range of support available or how it can be adapted to individual circumstances. The Board therefore concluded that clearer, more

proactive communication was needed to ensure families, schools and partners understand the benefits and practicalities of these offers.

97. The Review Board has considered a wide range of evidence, including hearing directly from young people and parents/carers, which has been central to informing its findings. Members also recognised that elected councillors could play a valuable role in promoting Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training within their communities and supporting informed conversations with families. The Board concluded that ongoing engagement with stakeholders in the development of policies, guidance and communications will be important to ensuring these offers remain accessible, responsive and able to support the needs of families in East Sussex.

# Appendix

## Scope and terms of reference of the review

### Terms of Reference

On the recommendation of the Scoping Board, the People Scrutiny Committee agreed that this review should explore what the Council could do to increase the uptake of Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training and that this would be explored through the following **key lines of enquiry**:

#### 1. Personal Travel Budgets and Independent Travel Training policies

- How effective are current PTB and ITT policies and do they deliver value for money?
- Are there best practices from other local authorities that could be adopted?

#### 2. Barriers to uptake

- What are the key reasons families decline PTBs or ITT and how can these be addressed?

#### 3. Communication and engagement

- How does the Council currently articulate the availability and benefits of PTBs and ITT to parents, pupils and schools and how effective are those strategies?
- How can elected members, through engagement with their communities, raise awareness of the availability and benefits of PTBs and ITT?

## **Board Membership and project support**

Review Board Members: John Hayling, Parent Governor Representative (Chair), Councillors Colin Belsey, Johannah Howell and Trevor Webb.

The Project Manager was Rachel Sweeney, Senior Policy and Scrutiny Adviser with additional support provided by Louise Carter, Assistant Director (Communication, Planning and Performance) and Megan James, SEND Home to School Transport Service & Project Manager.

## **Review Board meeting dates**

Scoping Board meetings - 8 May 2025 and 29 October 2025

First Review Board meeting - 1 December 2025

Second Review Board meeting - 15 December 2025

Third Review Board meeting - 20 January 2026

Final Review Board meeting - 25 February 2026

### Witnesses providing evidence

The Board would like to thank all the witnesses who provided evidence:

#### ESCC officers

Gillian Laughlin, Team Manager Home to School Transport and Compliance

Jo Miles, Service Manager- Admissions and Transport

Alice Tigwell, SEND CYP Participation Lead

Elaine Weddle, Marketing Communications Account Manager (Children's Services)

#### External witnesses

Daniel Baker, School, Post-16 and Social Care Transport at Cornwall County Council

Debra Baldwin, Independent Travel Training Programme Leader, National Star

Miriam Binsztok, Transport Coordination Service Manager, Cornwall Council

Ben Gubb, Deputy Head, Lindfield School

Paul Johnson, Services manager for school services, Sheffield City Council

Holly Riley-Saxby East Sussex Parent Carer Forum Chair

SEND Ambassadors

Parents: Karen and Lisa

### Evidence papers

Item	Date considered
Home to School Transport: Briefing (2025)	8 May 2025
Home to School Transport Audit Progress update (2025)	29 October 2025
LGA Isos Partnership: <i>The Future of Home to School Transport (2025)</i>	29 October 2025
The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport <i>SEND Transport Toolkit (2023)</i>	29 October 2025
CCN report <i>From Home to the Classroom: Making Travel to School Services Sustainable (2023)</i>	1 December 2025

National Audit Office Report <i>Home to School Transport</i> (2025)	1 December 2025
ESCC communications to parents/carers	15 December 2025
LIFT Independent Travel Training communications	15 December 2025
Parent/carers testimonials	15 December 2025
SEND Ambassador Forum discussion notes	20 January 2026
Cornwall Council IMPOWER presentations	20 January 2026
Cornwall Council communications to parents	20 January 2026

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