

Children and Young People

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

BRIEFING NOTE – No. 08/23

Date: 26/10/2023

Briefing paper to: All Members of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Purpose: To provide an update to Members on the current position with regard to service delivery within SEND Transport and the challenges faced at the start of the academic year.

# SEND Transport Position briefing

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## **Background**

SEND Transport contracts ended in July 2023 and under the procurement regulations were required to be retendered. This meant a change of provider and consequently crews and arrangements for a large percentage of the eligible young people. Through the procurement process, it was agreed with providers that they would contact families by 21st August 2023 with their new pickup and drop off times, and to offer a meet and greet. Pupil data was provided by SEN Transport well in advance to facilitate this.

Canada Cabs successfully bid to be the transport provider for 36% (563/1582) of eligible pupils transported this year; they had successfully transported 22% (294/1343) of the cohort during the last academic year.

Prior to this work being awarded, Canada Cabs provided reassurances to SEN Tranpsort and Category Management that they had capacity and could deliver for all of the young people they had won contracts to transport.

Canada Cabs struggled to recruit the required number of drivers and in August 2023 the council was alerted to this shortfall.

A number of families did not hear from their provider and contacted the council. The majority of these were families allocated to Canada Cabs. Families found it difficult to contact Canada Cabs, and understandably complained to SEND Transport.

Canada Cabs continued to try and meet demand and were contacting families in the evening and at weekends, as well as during office hours.

In late August 2023 the council asked MPCF to obtain details of families who had not had their crew and pickup and drop off times confirmed.

It is worth noting that the start of term is always a busy time due to the usual settling in period at the beginning of any new academic year. The council expect to see an increase of enquiries at this time from families about their arrangements e.g., pickup times, journey length, numbers of pupils on vehicles.

College timetables are not available until after the start of term, and therefore the process of making suitable transport arrangements for young people attending college has historically always been delayed.

The smooth running of transport to schools was also being hampered by significant roadworks across Medway and beyond. Traffic delays were resulting in lengthy journey times outside of the council’s control.

## **Start of term**

Many concerns were raised by parents and carers which created a sudden backlog in outstanding enquiries. Whilst there were several duplicated concerns, individual responses were sent to all families. The small SEND Transport team lacked the capacity to deal with the volume in a timely way, causing further concern and an escalation of issues to formal complaint and member involvement.

Online meetings with parents and carers, facilitated by MPCF, were held on 14th and 25th September to discuss and work through their concerns. Concerns, in addition to the Canada Cabs issue, included the use of larger Public Service Vehicles (PSV) on a number of routes, leading to concerns re pickup, journey times and punctuality.

## **Actions taken to address issues**

From the point of notification, the council officers worked with Canada cabs to remedy individual and collective situations where issues had been identified, and officers worked to secure alternative providers through urgent procurement.

An overarching review of PSV routes has been started. This is to address concerns about early pickups, journey lengths and punctuality. A number of pupils have a journey time outside of the recommended maximum of 45 minutes (primary age) and 70 minutes (secondary age). Wherever possible these routes have been split by providing another vehicle and driver to reduce the time added to a journey by the number of pick-ups.

Fuel allowance has been offered to families who feel that shared transport is no longer suitable. This now pays for 4 journeys per day and is paid at 0.45 per mile in line with the new policy from 1st September 2023.

Post 16 pupils are being offered a rail/bus pass or fuel allowance in line with changes to the policy rather than shared transport.

## **Lessons learnt**

* Specifications for the next commissioning cycle will be much tighter and more clearly state expectations in relation to maximum vehicle size, number of passengers and maximum recommended journey times.
* Stricter KPIs and penalties for providers will be considered as part of the next round of procurement and award of future contracts.
* Improve communication to include a general update channel and liaison with the MPCF so that they can communicate out to families with information and advice.
* The application form for college students is being amended to ask for details of the timetable and set clear expectations around when transport can be put in place.

## **Current data (08/11/23)**

This data is a snapshot in time as varies daily.

***Children awaiting transport allocation*** - Two currently out to tender.

***Children awaiting transport over 20 days*** – Zero, all allocated to the relevant transport provider.

***Outstanding parental enquiries*** *-* Seven parent enquiries across the whole programme.

***Outstanding complaints*** *–* One Stage 2 complaint

***How many routes have been split*** *-* 13 routes. However, this may increase as the review of journeys is ongoing.

***How many reviews outstanding and how many over the 20 days*** – Five, of which none are over 20 days.

***Are there journey times are over the recommended time***- *Yes*.  These are being constantly reviewed and addressed as above.

## **Financial Impact**

As you are aware the cost for SEND and mainstream transport has increased year on year and adds significant pressure to the general fund.

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| **2022-23** | **Total Spend** | **Overspend** |
| SEND Transport  | £8,386,862 | £1,992,485 |
| Mainstream Transport | £1,386,428 | £121,859 |
| Total  | £9,773,290 | £2,114,344 |
| **2023-24 Forecast** |  |  |
| SEND Transport  | £10,728,661 | £1,454,227 |
| Mainstream Transport  | £1,570,014 | £314,504 |
| Total  | £12,298,675 | £1,768,731 |

Deploying an additional vehicle on planned routes cost approximately £365 a day, per vehicle. Annual costs of £454,577 have already been agreed to split routes or cover additional runs to support part-time/transitional timetables.

Vehicle and driver availability is also a concern. There is currently a shortage of 6/8 seaters and wheelchair accessible vehicles.

Additional costs to cover individual timetables and address journey times at Canterbury College equate to £65,000.

These are additional cost to the shared transport already in place, although this does free up capacity on these vehicles. Journey times may continue to be an issue when these places are filled by other eligible young people.

Work is taking place to review our Education Travel Assistance policy as the current arrangements with the escalating costs and available capacity are becoming increasingly unviable.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst the start to this academic year has been challenging, the SEND Transport team has worked with families and providers to maintain an appropriate service for all users. Lessons have been learnt and changes will be made to ensure that similar issues are not repeated.

Aside from a few remaining issues the team has managed the situation, which escalated quickly, and have resolved the majority of the various issues.