

Travel Assist Policy Consultation: Parent Sessions

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Contents Page

Introduction.....	Slide 3
Methodology.....	Slide 4
A Single Policy.....	Slide 5
6 th Form Contribution Increase.....	Slide 7
Over 19 Arrangements (only with EHCP plans).....	Slide 9
Contributions for CYP Below Compulsory School Age.....	Slide 10
Second Stage Appeals.....	Slide 12
Independent Travel Training.....	Slide 14
Increased Use of Personal Transport Budgets.....	Slide 15
Policy Outlining Parent Responsibilities.....	Slide 17
Other: Guides.....	Slide 18
Conclusion.....	Slide 19

Introduction

- As part of the Travel Assist Policy consultation, sessions were conducted with parents and children and young people (CYP) who currently use the Travel Assist service. This enabled the service to capture their feedback on the proposals, helping to better understand their views and use these to inform future discussions.
- This was done in conjunction with other consultation activity, which included an online survey.
- The sessions will enable the service to capture parents' and CYP's feedback on the proposals, helping to better understand their views and use these to inform future discussions about the way forward.

Methodology

- **Activity:** 8 sessions in total run by officers from the Children and Young People directorate at various SEN schools across the city
- **Sample:** Sessions were attended by parents and CYP who currently use the Travel Assist service.
- **Data collection:** notes were taken at each meeting by officers from the Children and Young People directorate
- **Analysis:** thematic analysis completed by the Performance Research and Insight (PRI) Team. While answers were given in response to questions, only the questions asked by parents and CYP will be reported here.
- **Reporting:** summary report produced by PRI team. This will feed into the Cabinet Report produced by colleagues from Children and Young People directorate.

A Single Policy (1)

- There were a number of positive comments, with parents from 3 different sessions describing the policy as a “*good idea*”, “*easier*”, “*straightforward*” and “*mak[ing] sense*” and providing parents with clarity to understand “*what is coming next*”.
- A couple of parents did, however, feel the policy could be simplified more and have better signposting.
- Some parents had some questions, and wanted clarity about:
 - What the benefits of a single document were.
 - Who would be affected by it.
 - Whether there was a new application form.
 - Where the responsibility for the paperwork lies.
 - How often parents would need to reapply.
 - Whether distance was a factor in being eligible for support.

A Single Policy (2)

- There were also specific comments relating to age, including:
 - Different ages require different types/levels of support.
 - The focus should be on mental age and not actual age.
 - 16-19 year old CYP are being disadvantaged as it does not provide them with enough support.
 - Section relating to post 19 is not taking in account exceptional circumstances sufficiently in the criteria.

Sixth Form Contribution Increase (1)

- There was one positive comment made, which stated the contributions were *“reasonable, and not a lot to get [CYP] into school safe with a guide every day”*.
- There were a number of questions relating to the process and the assessment. These included:
 - Whether there would be a new assessment.
 - What the guidelines/criteria for assessment are (e.g. income threshold levels, if CYP are on benefits and will be making the contribution (instead of parent), will there be a different in amount of contribution required).
 - Whether someone comes out to make the assessment.
 - How long the assessment takes.
- Other questions included:
 - When exactly contributions are required – e.g. at 16 years old or start of sixth form.
 - Whether they work with schools or council when applying for travel assistance.
 - Whether parents choice (e.g. not choosing the closest school) will impact on type of travel assistance received.

6th Form Contribution Increase (2)

- Some spoke about potential issues and impact on their lives:
 - Life is already difficult.
 - Concerns about affordability and difficulty paying and as a result incurring fines
 - May have little choice in allocation of school and location.
 - In exceptional cases (e.g. low income household, those in receipt of benefits, those with little control over type and location of school), is it possible to take circumstances into account in the assessment and consider waiving, reducing or means testing the contribution?

- Other comments included:
 - Issues with quality of service, with some asking whether this will improve if parents/CYP have to make contributions. One parent commented that they felt they would have no control over the service provided and were concerned about the lack of control and accountability relating to poor service.
 - One parent asked why they would be charged for 5 days when their CYP only attends for 4 days.

Over 19 Arrangements (only with EHCP plans)

- Parents had some key comments and questions concerning:
 - What the law says about post 19 provision.
 - Whether the charge is the same despite the distance.
 - Clarification on where responsibilities lie under different circumstances, i.e. when is it education and when is it adult social care?
 - Clarity on what exceptional circumstances are.
 - Vagueness of information in the policy, which requires more explanation.
 - The definition of CYP. Parents thought a definition would be helpful, with clarity around whether the age referred to is actual age or mental age.

- Some of the potential Issues and impacts identified included:
 - Concerns about being able to afford transport.
 - Policy was affecting those that were already struggling.
 - A likelihood of increased anxiety.
 - Feel like they are fighting for everything they get.
 - The perceived reduction in provision was described as potentially “*discriminatory*” as the risk is it will reduce the ability to access education.
 - How a smooth transition be ensured.

Contributions for CYP Below Compulsory School Age (1)

- All of the parents in one of the group sessions had no issues with this policy.
- In the other group sessions, questions were raised regarding the following:
 - What the criteria is.
 - What constitutes as an 'exceptional circumstance'.
 - Whether the policy is talking about council owned nurseries or private nurseries.
 - When the policy would be changed/implemented.
 - Whether it can be means tested.
 - Whether there would be additional travel assist staff available to parents to help with queries and provide support.
 - Whether parents can get money back if the service they receive is poor quality (e.g. poor/inconsistent communication).
 - What is the position if the child has an EHCP plan? Some parents felt that a delay in diagnosis (including where a diagnosis is not possible at such a young age) and production of EHCP plan could delay their access to travel assistance.

Contributions for CYP Below Compulsory School Age (2)

- Some of the potential issues and impacts identified included:
 - Contributions were seen as a potential barrier to accessing education.
 - Concerns that child's needs will not be met.
 - Increase in stress and anxiety among parents.
 - Concerns about how families are going to manage.

Second Stage Appeals (1)

- Some positive comments about changes to the appeals process included:
 - Like the idea of parents being able to attend appeals, with some perceiving parents to be the best advocates for CYP.
 - Increased frequency of meetings is welcome as it could speed up decisions and make the service more efficient.
- There was a mixed response to the proposed independent panel, with some stating that they prefer councillors, some preferring officers and professionals who know the child, some requesting “independent people from independent bodies” and others preferring a mixture of the above.
- The following, sometimes conflicting, factors were identified as important in a panel: impartiality/independence; ability to understand CYP special needs and family circumstances; and, parent struggles someone who is accountable to the public.

Second Stage Appeals (2)

- The following concerns were identified:
 - Whether council staff on the panel can remain impartial and not have a conflict of interest.
 - Whether councillors have enough understanding of CYP with SEN.
 - Whether an independent panel will sufficiently understand the needs of CYP with SEN.
 - While for some parents advocating for their children is positive, others stated that some parents would not be capable of doing this effectively (e.g. parents who themselves have SEN and those who do not speak English fluently or at all).

- Advocates were seen as very important and one suggestion was that parents could be offered the option of taking their own support (e.g. family member) or offering them a professional advocate.

- One parent stated a timeline of the appeals process would be useful.

Independent Travel Training

- There were some positive comments which acknowledged that the Independent Travel Training could be beneficial for some CYP. One parent stated, *“I love the independence for my child.”* Others, however, caveated their statements stating that it would be useful to some but inappropriate for others, and that it needed to *“be done properly”* for it to work.
- Some required clarity around the policy and process, for example:
 - What age groups is the training is appropriate for.
 - Whether the training will be voluntary or not.
 - Whether there is a cost for the training.
 - What “checks and balances” will be in place to ensure the safety of CYP.
 - Whether training was available to parents as well.
- Key concerns included:
 - Parent anxiety, particularly in relation to ensuring CYP are safe.
 - CYP may find it difficult to cope with (e.g. if they have never had experience using public transport or find it difficult to communicate with drivers etc).

Increased Use of Personal Transport Budgets (1)

- Three parents stated or suggested that personal transport budgets was a good idea, with two of these, however, caveating this by stating either that it was not suitable for their own child or that it would depend on the school location/distance of journey.

- Key questions raised included:
 - What is the budget?
 - Will the personal transport budget cover all of the transport costs?
 - Are the personal travel budgets going to increase in line with inflation?
 - What is the criteria? This needs to be clearer.
 - Will there be an assessment? If so, who will assess them?
 - When can you apply for it?
 - For those that have used it before, how easy is the process to sign up to?
 - Has the practical implications of this policy been assessed?
 - Are there other options or not, as it currently reads like it will be imposed on people?
 - Can this option be extended to 16-19 year old and post 19 CYP?

Increased Use of Personal Transport Budgets (2)

- Concerns and potential impacts identified include:
 - Perception that pushing the personal transport budgets means less travel provision, potentially resulting in more provision being taken away from those that are already struggling.
 - Whether the budget would cover the full travel costs.
 - Whether additional support will be available to provide assistance for unexpected costs arising (e.g. car breakdown, Green Air Zone charge) ?
 - Whether transport will be available to those that find personal transport budget unsuitable.
 - May impact on CYP's ability to access to education, making it more difficult.
 - Whether it will be the parents' responsibility to make travel arrangements etc (with particular concern for parents who do not have capacity to make arrangements) and how this will be assessed and dealt with.

Policy Outlining Parent Responsibilities

- Key comments included:
 - Parents driving their children to school is at odds with the city's clean air ambitions.
 - Clarity around what would be deemed an 'exceptional circumstance' was (e.g. siblings schools too far from each other, parents' inability or difficulty maintaining work).
 - Some thought the policy needs rewording for greater clarity, including clear distinction on what the responsibilities of schools, council and parents are.
 - A number of parents also sought clarity of process (e.g. how do they apply and when?)

- Concerns raised included:
 - Impact on ability to work and in turn the financial impact it could have on the household income – e.g. one parent currently relies on the afternoon transport to maintain employment.
 - Whether parents will face fines for CYP consistently being late for school, suggesting it will be harder to get their children to school on time.
 - Whether there are additional responsibilities parents need to take on e.g. buying insurance, checking drivers' licence, MOT and insurance etc).

Other: Guides

- There were a number of questions relating specifically to guides, including:
 - whether there would be changes to the guide service (e.g. reduction in the number of guides, whether guides will be provided at all, provision of “generic” guides as opposed to named guides),
 - who makes the decision about who is assigned a guide and who is not,
 - how it will be assessed,
 - whether the provision of guides can be guaranteed on travel assist buses, and,
 - whether guides have been spoken to.

- There were also a few comments regarding parents’ experience of the guide service. Key points included:
 - communication could be improved (e.g. being informed about the change in guides, how a change in circumstance affects service entitlement, reporting and resolving issues with guides),
 - guides do not fully understand the needs of the CYP,
 - guide turnover is an issue (i.e. one CYP has had 5 guides)
 - not having a guide means if there are issues there is no one there to help,

Conclusion (1)

- While there was some appreciation for simplification of policies, parents wanted further clarity on things such as:
 - The specific policies and processes.
 - Who is responsible for what (i.e. parents, schools, council etc).
 - What the definition of an 'exceptional circumstance' is.
 - Whether parents have any influence over the type of travel assistance they receive or whether the decision will be made for them (e.g. personal transport budget and independent travel training).
- Feedback relating to the second stage appeals were largely mixed, with no consensus about what a 'good' panel would look like (e.g. independent vs. knowing and understanding the needs of the CYP and family) and who should make up the panel (e.g. councillors or council officers or independent persons or a mixture of these).
- There were several comments about the benefits of parents being able to attend appeals and the importance of advocates, whether that be parents, family or friends or professional advocates.

Conclusion (2)

- While there was some feedback suggesting the proposals are reasonable, there were many concerns about the potential impact of these, for example:
 - CYP needs not being met.
 - Potentially making it more difficult for CYP to access education.
 - Causing anxiety and stress among parents Impact on parents' ability to maintain their job.
 - Impact on parents' ability to maintain their job.
 - Potential risk for families already struggling financially, with some fearful that they will not be able to pay and what the consequences of this may be.

- Some suggestions to help mitigate these concerns included:
 - Explore possibility of means testing, reducing or waiving contributions in exceptional circumstances.(low income household, parents or CYP in receipt of benefits, where families have no choice in school allocation and distance the CYP has to travel).
 - Having additional support via Travel Assist staff available to help with queries and support families through the transition.