CABINET

Report subject	**Home to School Transport**
Meeting date	26 November 2025
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	This report presents the findings of a strategic review undertaken by an external provider into the Local Authority's home to school transport arrangements focussing on our arrangements and provision for children and young people pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The key objective of the review was to identify strategic and operational opportunities that support the development of independent travel options and make improvements to how home-to-school transport is delivered with a focus on potential efficiencies and service improvement. It identifies key opportunities to introduce travel options that meet individual needs and help prepare young people for adulthood and promote long-term independence. Key issues include the complexity of transport arrangements, market capacity challenges, and the need for improved commissioning models that deliver better outcomes and value for money. The report presents a range of options and opportunities for future delivery and contained details of the investment necessary to achieve cashable savings and cost avoidance. This report seeks approval to proceed with a formal tendering exercise to commission an external provider to implement a phased delivery of change proposals that encourage independent travel, build independence and reduce journey times for children and young people. The approach will be supportive of young people's development to help young people gain confidence and practical skills for travelling safely on their own will result in making school transport more efficient and sustainable.
Recommendations	**It is RECOMMENDED that CABINET:** **Agree to tender an external provider to deliver a transformation project over three years with a total cost of £1.5 million funded by the flexible use of capital receipts to deliver service improvements and by the end of the project on-going savings in SEND school transport projected at £3 million (net of additional resource requirement).**
Reason for recommendations	The recommended approach promotes independence by equipping children and young people with essential travel skills, while addressing rising complexity and cost pressures. A phased delivery plan ensures smooth transition, co-production with families, and ongoing evaluation. By building internal resilience and leveraging external expertise where needed, the Council retains strategic control and delivers a more sustainable, value-for-money service—reducing long-term costs and improving outcomes.
Portfolio Holder(s):	Richard Burton
Corporate Director	Cathi Hadley, Director of Children's Services
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Wards	Council-wide

Classification	For Recommendation/Decision

Background

1. Local authorities have a statutory duty under the Education Act 1996 to provide free home to school transport for eligible children and young people. This includes those who live beyond the statutory walking distance, have special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), or face other qualifying circumstances. The duty ensures that children can access suitable education without barriers related to travel.

2. The council currently provides home to school transport for 1,639 SEND passengers on a day-to-day basis. In recent years, the Council has experienced significant growth in demand for home to school transport, particularly for children and young people with SEND. This increase reflects broader demographic changes, rising levels of need, and growing parental expectations around personalised transport solutions.

3. This trend is mirrored nationally, with many local authorities reporting escalating costs and operational pressures in delivering SEND transport. The council's SEND home to school transport expenditure in 2024/25 was £13.8m with the budget for 2025/26 being £16.4m million. This budget in the current MTFP is projected to grow to £21.8m by 2028/29.

4. The key driver for the increased demand in passenger numbers has been an increase to the number of children with an EHCP which has increased by 45% since 2021/22 to 4,837. The service has largely mirrored that of other local authority operations across England and Wales. Increasing pressure has been created by a rising number of children entitled to transport which has been largely driven by growing numbers. This has combined with more costly external taxi and bus supply for inflationary and other operational reasons.

5. **The 2024/25 outturn and 2025/26 budget and forecast**

Budget Category	2024/25 Outturn £million	2025/26 Budget £million	2025/26 Forecast £million
Staff Costs - Passenger Assistants (PAs)	2.3	2.3	2.3
Staff Costs Recharge - Transport Team	0.4	0.4	0.4
Client Travel	0.5	0.6	0.5
Private Contract Hire - Taxi	6.8	9.3	9.6
Private Contract Hire - Minibus	3.9	3.9	3.8
Total expenditure	**14.0**	**16.5**	**16.6**
Income	**(0.1)**	**(0.1)**	**(0.1)**
Next Expenditure	**13.8**	**16.4**	**16.5**

6. The 19% increase in 2025/26 compared with the previous year outturn reflects that the EHCP backlog that existed until the final quarter of last year had supressed the demand for transport with a £0.3m underspend against budget recorded for 2024/25. This expenditure has caught up in 2025/26. The current year budget allowed for a further significant increase in EHCP demand throughout the year plus inflationary pressures totalling £2.1 million. The pay award initially budgeted centrally was distributed to services in quarter two and is reflected in the staff costs in the above table.

7. The current MTFP presented to October Cabinet allows for a further £1.8 million of growth each year over the next three years (39% in total) to 2028/29 for pupil travel costs, the annual pay award for staff costs continuing to be budgeted centrally.

8. The latest service estimate for EHCP growth for the relevant SEND cohort potentially eligible for school transport is under review.

9. To address these challenges, the council commissioned a headline review of its home to school transport arrangements with a focus on operational opportunities that support the development of independent travel options for children and young people with SEND. The review, undertaken by Edge Public Solutions, identifies opportunities to promote independent travel and includes measures designed to improve the delivery and sustainability of the service with associated

opportunities for cost efficiencies. The review sets out a proposed three-year transformation strategy comprising a timeline, clear recommendations and investment implications in systems and permanent resources. A full report of the review is set out at Appendix 1.

Issues

10. The home to school transport function is delivered with input and cooperation from and between the Children's Services and Environment Directorates. Duties and responsibilities are the responsibility of various Education, Social Care and Passenger Transport services. Essentially, assessment of eligibility for assistance with travel costs from home to school is undertaken by the Admissions and Transport team working across the directorate and with the SEND service where assessments and placements decisions are taken for children with additional needs. The budget and policy are the responsibility of the Education service while the day-to-day travel arrangements and commissioning functions sit within the Passenger Transport unit (see page 10 of the report for details). The overall performance of the service is summarised on pages 10-15 and headline capability and gaps are included in Appendix B of the consultant's report in Appendix 1.

11. A summary of the report's key findings is set out in an executive summary on pages 6-7. This identifies:

- BCP performs similarly to other progressive authorities and has put into place many initiatives in recent years to improve control of demand and service delivery.
- There is a commendable eligibility assessment regime which clearly contributes to only 33% of children with an EHCP receiving transport which is lower than expected when comparing to other authorities.
- Respective teams with an involvement in delivering the home to school transport function have been hampered by poor systems and are at full capacity delivering a demanding service.
- The report identifies activity to achieve service transformation over the next 3 years and deliver an annual financial impact of £2.7 million from 2028/29.
- Each key initiative will require careful phasing to allow time to properly implement in a sustainable and low risk manner over 2-3 years.
- Savings should be considered separately from cost avoidance, which is the impact of applying the efficiencies to predicted new demand and cost growth.
- Successful delivery of the changes and efficiencies will be dependent on fully implementing initiatives involving supply management and commissioning activities, policy changes, investment in independent travel training and governance.
- Implementation will present a significant challenge and be dependent on five critical building blocks necessary for sustainable delivery namely, political and officer buy-in, parent/carer understanding of the rationale and the benefits of the programme and delivering a positive message to parents and schools communicated as a period of transition (pages 6-9 of the report).
- Investment in resources will be necessary to properly support and deliver the implementation; including to ensure schools, parents and passenger needs and expectations are managed. There will also be a requirement for additional investment in systems and permanent resources as contained in the financial implications paragraph 26 and the human resource implications set out in paragraphs 35-38.

12. Opportunities to secure efficiencies in supply management and procurement are outlined in pages 17- 25 and include opportunities in the following areas:

- Supply management and procurement
- Routing
- Group/safe pick-up
- Supply of passenger assistants

13. An overview of assessment and policy is provided on pages 26 – 33 including observations, challenges and operational complexities. It highlights a limited re-assessment regime and opportunities to strengthen this. It also details proposals for assessment of single person journeys, moving away from door-to-door transport, promotion of personal travel budgets and policy change in respect of Post 16 travel, specifically, a proposal to review charges for Post 16 passengers to cover some of the cost of their journey. Details of the role of independent travel training and a

proposed model are set out on pages 34 – 36. The robustness of the policy is contained on page 37 and include some more minor changes to enforce parental responsibility and promote independence and manage parental expectations.

14. **Resources Necessary for Implementation:** Details of the resources and expertise necessary to implement a phased delivery plan of proposed changes is provided on pages 38 – 46 in the Consultant's report. The total ongoing cost implications comprise staffing costs totalling £160k and these are summarised in the financial implications and resource implications sections in this report.

15. **Implementation Timeline:** A timeline of key activity over the next 2 years to implement proposals is provided on page 44 of the report. The timelines in the report are indicative at this stage and may need some level of refinement. In particular, it will be important to manage expectations about the typical timescales involved in implementing substantive changes to the home to school transport policy. This reflects that information and guidance which help inform decisions about onward school or college placements must also be available during the autumn in each academic year. It therefore follows that the process to implement changes to policy need to be co-produced, consulted upon and formally approved well advance and typically begin almost two years prior to the point of admission. The table below helps to illustrate this in more detail. Note: regardless of whether the admission is resolved through the School Admissions Code or the SEND Code of Practice, transition planning starts in the autumn for admission in the following academic year.

Timescales involved in making changes to policy

Activity	Duration	Timeline
Initial Report to Cabinet		25 November 2025
Commission an external partner	8-12 weeks	January – March 2026
Review data	4 weeks	April 2026
Co production of policy changes	6-8 weeks	April – May 2026
Consultation/Collate responses	6-8 weeks	June – July 2026
Cabinet Approval	6 weeks	September 2026
New policy published and applicable for new starters with existing users ageing through*	September 2026 ready for families making their decision for following September 2027	New policy effective from September 2027 if consultation and decision making align. If the autumn window for a decision is not met, the new policy will be implemented from September 2028.

16. **Delivery Model:** A summary of delivery models is provided on page 43 showing the rationale for commissioning external support working in partnership with the council and pros and cons of internal/external resources including an outline cost comparison.

17. **Initiatives for Change - Recommendations:** A summary of recommendations is provided on pages 47-48.

Options Appraisal

18. **Option 1:** Do Nothing -Maintain Current Arrangements

- Advantages: No disruption to current service; avoids short-term political or operational risk.
- Disadvantages: Fails to address rising costs, inefficiencies, and increasing demand; does not include options to support children to travel independently, does not meet the council's strategic objectives for transformation or value for money.
- Conclusion: Not recommended.

19. **Option 2:** Proceed to a formal tendering process to commission an external provider to deliver the recommended changes contained in the external report which form the basis of a 3-year programme of transformation as set out in a phased delivery plan.

- Advantages: Delivers comprehensive transformation over three years; addresses demand, cost, and quality; aligns with national best practice.

- Disadvantages: Requires upfront investment; some proposals may be politically sensitive; requires formal procurement process which may impact timescales/
- Formal tendering may result in a bid award to a new supplier which could impact costs/initial investment and opportunities for savings.
- Conclusion: Recommended option, subject to robust tendering/commissioning.

Consultation

20. **Engaging with Parents/Carers:** The council has been thinking carefully about how best to engage and communicate the range of possible proposals designed to promote independence. This recognises that early and effective consultation is vital to securing the support of parents, carers and all stakeholders. Undoubtedly, effective communication involves clearly outlining the rationale for change, listening to concerns, and collaboratively exploring solutions that place children at the centre of decision making. For this purpose and as an initial step, the council has met with representatives of Parents/Carers Together who agreed to gather the views of parents/carers on proposed policy changes designed to promote independent travel. As a result, feedback on the each of the project proposals will be feedback to the council and following this, further work will be undertaken with BCP Parents/Carers to support conversations with families and stakeholders in line with the timescales of the delivery plan.

21. **Communications Plan:** In advance of a decision on the recommended option and led by our Corporate Communications Team, the council has begun shaping a communication approach to ensure parents, carers, and other stakeholders are kept informed and involved as proposals develop. It is planned that the approach will comprise:

    - A distinct focus on changes that promote independent skills for life
    - Inclusive decision-making and targeted information sessions
    - Regular communication to all stakeholders and formal periods of consultation
    - Proactive and coordinated press releases and associated handling plan

22. **Consultation Requirements for Policy Changes:** Any substantive changes to home to school transport policy particularly those affecting eligibility, service models, or parental responsibilities must be subject to public consultation. This ensures:

    - Parents and carers understand their rights and responsibilities.
    - Stakeholders can provide feedback on proposed changes.
    - The Council meets its duty to act transparently and fairly.

23. **Consultation Aligned to School Admissions and Transition:** Home to school transport policy is closely linked to school admissions. Regardless of whether the admission is resolved through the School Admissions Code or the SEND Code of Practice, transition planning starts in the autumn for admission in the following academic year. This means that information and guidance which help to determine an onward school or college placement must also be available during the autumn in each academic year. It therefore follows that any changes to policy need to be co-produced, consulted upon and agreed as part of the democratic decision-making process by the autumn in any year. The School Admissions Code 2021 requires local authorities to ensure that parents are provided with clear, accessible information about transport eligibility when expressing school preferences. This includes:

    - Definitions of "nearest suitable school" for preference, travel and transport purposes.
    - The impact of stating a preference for a school that does not meet transport eligibility criteria.
    - How transport policies may affect access to school and an emphasis to encourage parents/cares to consider how they will get their children to school when expressing their school preferences.

24. This information must be included in composite prospectuses (School Admissions Guide) and published annually to support informed parental decision-making during the admissions process. Failure to provide this information may disadvantage families and undermine fair access to education. Consultation should be timed to align with the school admissions cycle to allow families to make informed choices. Local authorities must ensure that transport arrangements are suitable, safe, and enable access to education.

Summary of Financial Implications

25. The delivery plan includes invest-to-save proposals requiring upfront investment, with projected savings over a three-year period. It shows that an investment of £1.49m is required for project management, consultation, and delivery of system changes. Budget implications span financial years 2026/27 to 2028/29. As this is a transformation programme that will lead to savings, funding for the investment can be provided through the flexible use of capital receipts, a government policy that has been extended to March 2030.

26. Details of the headline annual savings and investments required in each year are based on a late 2025/26 starting point now (page 5 in the report). The following table is an extract, and further details are contained in the detailed financial plan contained on page 49-50 of the report, section 8 items 11 and 12 in the table.

Opportunity for Cash Savings

	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	Total 26/27–28/29	2029/30 Ongoing position
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Savings and Efficiencies –Note 1	576	2,611	3,167	6,354	3,167
Total Investment Required	(558)	(497)	(439)	(1,494)	
Ongoing Resource Implications					(160)
Net Cash Saving After Investment	**18**	**2,114**	**2,728**	**4,860**	**3,007**

Note 1 - The savings figures in the above table are the reductions from the current level of budget and are the absolute values to include in the MTFP.

The cost avoidance figures in the consultant's report are indicative only based on one possible scenario for EHCP growth estimates and inflation applied to all costs, including staff costs that have not risen according to this EHCP growth trajectory and where pay awards are budgeted centrally. The final cost avoidance figures to be assumed does not impact on the savings and efficiencies in the above table or the level of investment required to achieve them. It will impact on the overall budget required each year with this budget growth requirement still under review.

Summary of Legal Implications

27. **Statutory Duty to Provide Home to School Transport:** Local authorities have a legal obligation under the Education Act 1996 to provide free home-to-school transport for eligible children. Any changes must ensure continued compliance with these duties, particularly for children with special educational needs (SEN), disabilities, or those living beyond statutory walking distances.

28. **Equality and Non-Discrimination**: Under the Equality Act 2010, the council must ensure that changes do not disproportionately disadvantage protected groups. This includes conducting a robust Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) at the appropriate stage to identify and mitigate potential adverse effects. While an initial Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) screening has been initiated, it is recognised that the process is at a very early stage. A full assessment will be more appropriately timed once proposals have been further developed and shaped through co-production and informed by the appointment of external consultancy support. Any detailed analysis will need to align with the specific proposals and be based on current data relating to children and young people travelling at that point in time.

29. **Duty to Consult**: There is a legal requirement to consult meaningfully with affected parties—especially parents, carers, and schools—before implementing significant changes. Failure to do so could expose the council to legal challenge on grounds of procedural unfairness.

30. **Human Rights Considerations**: Changes must respect the rights of children and families under the Human Rights Act 1998, particularly the right to education and the right to private and family life. Any perceived infringement must be proportionate and justified.

31. **Data Protection and Privacy**: If proposals involve collecting or using personal data (e.g., travel patterns, health information), compliance with UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 is essential, including transparency and appropriate safeguards.

32. **Contractual and Procurement Implications**: If changes affect existing transport contracts or require new services, procurement rules and contractual obligations must be carefully managed to avoid breach or legal disputes.

33. The proposed three-year delivery strategy constitutes a significant programme of work. In accordance with the public contracts' regulations, the Council must undertake a competitive tendering process to commission an external provider. Note: a direct award to the external consultant firm engaged for the purposes of producing the attached review report is not permissible unless specific exemptions apply, which is not the case here. The procurement process must ensure:
    - Transparency and equal treatment of bidders.
    - Value for money and legal compliance.
    - Alignment with commissioning timelines to avoid delays in implementation.

34. **The SEND White Paper:** The "SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time" White Paper has been delayed until 2026. Local authorities anticipated that the White Paper would address several long-standing challenges in the SEND system, including unsustainable growth in SEND transport costs. Key expectations included:

    - **Clarification of Eligibility Criteria:** Councils sought clearer guidance on statutory duties, especially around post-16 transport and independent placements, which often drive high costs.
    - **Flexibility in Delivery Models:** Proposals were expected to support travel training, personal travel budgets, and phased independence models to reduce reliance on specialist transport.
    - **Improved Commissioning and Market Shaping:** Authorities wanted support to develop local provision and reduce long-distance travel, which contributes to rising costs and carbon emissions.
    - **Data and Benchmarking Tools:** Better national data collection and benchmarking to help councils compare costs and identify efficiencies.

35. The impact of the Delay to the White Paper until early 2026 means that there is no formal national mandate to reform transport policy or indeed help manage several long-standing challenges in the SEND system which impacts on growth and sustainability. In the meantime, local authorities continue to face rising demand and rely on sector-led guidance, such as the ADCS and ADEPT joint report (Nov 2023), which calls for legislative reform and better alignment between SEND and transport policy.

Summary of Human Resources Implications

36. The report emphasises there are a range of resource intensive activities (page 36) and sets out the requirements of successful implementation in terms of leadership, governance and additional permanent temporary/fixed term support (page 41-42). Namely successful implementation will require:

    - Strong leadership to drive progress,
    - Clear governance to ensure accountability,
    - Additional permanent team resources, and
    - Temporary fixed-term support to manage and execute key initiatives beyond daily operations.

37. Adequate resources and expertise are critical to ensuring the sustainable delivery of resource-intensive initiatives. These efforts aim to achieve annual efficiencies and cost reductions. Additional support will establish the foundational elements for successful service transformation, including:

    - Building a performance-driven culture,
    - Strengthening governance frameworks,
    - Refining strategic priorities,
    - Enhancing communication,
    - Managing customer expectations, and
    - Supporting team development.

38. While precise resource requirements are challenging to predict, experience suggests the following full-time equivalent (FTE) resource levels over the three-year transformation period at a cost of £160k. Newly appointed staff will deliver travel training and team resources focussing on the development of a training contract and re assessment and compliance including the arrangements for providing personal travel budgets.

Year	Resources (FTE)
1	3–5
2	3–5
3	1–3

39. Resource demands will fluctuate, with peaks during procurement events and quieter periods thereafter. Training and change management support will be required. An Equality Impact Assessment will be completed to assess the impact on affected groups.

Summary of Sustainability Impact

40. Improved transport planning may reduce unnecessary journeys and promote more sustainable travel options. The transformation plan includes consideration of environmental impact and carbon reduction.

Summary of Public Health Implications

41. Efficient and reliable transport supports attendance and wellbeing for children with SEND. The plan aims to reduce stress for families and improve access to education.

Summary of Risk Assessment

42. Risks include political sensitivity, stakeholder resistance, and procurement delays. Mitigation includes phased implementation, clear communication, and alignment with statutory timelines.

Background Papers

Edge Public Solutions Strategic Review Report July 2025

Appendices

Appendix 1: Edge Public Solutions Strategic Review Report July 2025