



17 January 2024

Title	Proposals to change Chiltern Edge School Transport arrangements
Purpose of the report	To make a decision
Report status	Public report
Report author	Brian Grady, Director of Education
Lead Councillor	Cllr Ruth McEwan
Corporate priority	Thriving Communities
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That ACE Committee agree to consult on School Transport policy changes to remove free transport entitlement for pupils attending Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge School and to change current transport arrangements. 2. That ACE Committee delegate the format and process of consultation to the Executive Director, Children's Services, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Children's Services and the Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. Parents are responsible for ensuring their child attends school. This means they must take all the action necessary to enable their child to attend school. For most parents, this includes making arrangements for their child to travel to and from school. The Statutory Guidance makes clear that Local Authorities must make arrangements, free-of-charge, for eligible children to travel to school.
- 1.2. School Transport has been a significant budget and growth pressure in Reading for the past two years. Local Authorities across England are experiencing continued demand and cost pressures regarding school transport and local pressures are in line with these national increases in demand and cost increases. These include continued increases in numbers of children with SEND, leading to an increase in the number of children needing transport assistance to school, including children needing to go further afield to be provided with an appropriate education placement. These demand and growth pressures mean action needs to be taken to make savings across the School Transport budget.
- 1.3. Chiltern Edge secondary school is a 6 form of entry school in Sonning Common, Oxfordshire, which has been providing school places for Reading pupils aged 11-16 unable to secure a local Reading school place for many years. In recognition of the need to support Reading pupils access a school place, school transport arrangements have been provided for Chiltern Edge pupils since before Local Government reorganisation, with Oxfordshire establishing arrangements before 1998.
- 1.4. With the opening of the new River Academy secondary school in Reading from September 2024 securing sufficient local secondary places for all Reading children, it is appropriate for us to review the free transport provision for Maiden Erlegh Chiltern

Edge. This paper recommends that we consult on revising the School Transport Policy to remove free transport entitlement for pupils attending Chiltern Edge school.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. As set out in HM Government's Department for Education (DfE) Statutory Guidance: *Travel to school for children of compulsory school age* (updated June 2023), parents are responsible for ensuring their child attends school. This means they must take all the action necessary to enable their child to attend school. For most parents, this includes making arrangements for their child to travel to and from school. The Statutory Guidance makes clear that Local Authorities must make arrangements, free-of-charge, for eligible children to travel to school.
- 2.2. A child is deemed eligible if they are of compulsory school age, attend their nearest suitable school and: live more than the statutory walking distance from that school; or could not reasonably be expected to walk to that school because of their special educational needs, disability or mobility problem, or would not be able to walk to that school in reasonable safety, even if they were accompanied by their parent.
- 2.3. As well as these legal obligations, the Statutory Guidance confirms that Local Authorities are able to make discretionary arrangements to fund wider school transport. Such arrangements were agreed by Reading Borough Council and last ratified at Reading Borough Council Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee in October 2020, including the following arrangements:
 - 2.3.1. Provision for children beyond statutory school age (post 16)
 - 2.3.2. Supporting the most vulnerable children access schools through taxi transportation rather than a personal budget or bus routes.
 - 2.3.3. Chiltern Edge School transport.

3. Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge

- 3.1. There has been a long-standing historical need for Reading families to access Chiltern Edge School, due to the lack of local secondary school places in the north of the borough and oversubscription of Highdown School in Caversham. Following school admissions boundary changes, Oxfordshire agreed to pay transport costs for Reading pupils attending Chiltern Edge School from two areas of Caversham – Caversham Park Village on the east side of Caversham and a number of roads on the far west side of Caversham.
- 3.2. Reading Borough Council altered the designated catchment areas for the Caversham area, and made all of the Borough north of the river (RG4 postcodes) into one dual catchment area shared between Highdown School and Chiltern Edge. It was agreed at the time of this boundary change that Reading would assume responsibility for the pupils Oxfordshire had been paying for and that this would be phased in over 5 years as each new Year 7 started. This historical context is important, as when Chiltern Edge and Highdown schools academised, they will have taken ownership of their own catchment areas and admissions arrangements and Reading Borough Council ceased to be the admission authority at this time.
- 3.3. Originally, the routes were covered by buses procured by Oxfordshire. Reading took over the transport provision for the Reading pupils and Reading Buses were able to provide double decker buses out of their network provision. The buses became part of the Reading Buses timetabled services and pupils were issued with Reading bus passes and could use not only any of the three public bus services but also the public bus service to Sonning Common, giving them the option of travelling out of normal school hours e.g. to attend after school clubs.
- 3.4. In 2022, the most recent contract was awarded to Reading Buses to operate three double decker buses from the RG4 Caversham area to Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge. The original specification was to convey 245 pupils but the total number of passes

issued was 290. Further to the contract award, the admissions round for September 2023 saw 100 places offered for Reading pupils, which required additional bus capacity. For 2023-24 a contract variation has been put in place for Reading Buses to provide a 4th bus.

- 3.5. As Highdown has been oversubscribed for several years, the school transport policy has allowed free transport to Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge for any pupil living within the RG4 postcode area. However, with the opening of the River Academy in September 2024, there is an opportunity to revise this policy and reduce or remove the cost of transporting pupils to an out of borough school.
- 3.6. The Statutory Guidance requirements regarding consultation are set out in the Community Engagement section of this paper below. The key test in the Statutory Guidance regarding any proposed change is a test of reasonableness. To ensure that all options for change of policy can be considered for implementation from September 2024, our published Secondary Admissions Guide, made available from the beginning of September 2023, has highlighted there may be a potential change to our Transport policy regarding what is now Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge.
- 3.7. Statutory Guidance requires a 28-day consultation period in term time. The proposed timeline would therefore be undertaken across January – March 2024, with any implementation of policy changes from September 2024:
 - ACE Committee agreement to consult on proposed changes January 2024
 - Consultation undertaken mid-January to Mid-February
 - ACE Committee consideration of preferred proposal early March
 - March-September implementation period.
- 3.8. It is proposed that the policy change would remove eligibility for children not yet currently in receipt or eligible for transport. It is then proposed to consult on the following options:
 - Fully removing eligibility from September 2024. This would achieve a full saving of £264,000 per year. This is currently the recommended option, due to the current savings required on School Transport budgets.
 - A planned reduction of between one and two buses a year, to cancel all four buses within a three-year period. A three year reduction would lead to projected savings of £90,000 per year from September 2024. The planned reduction proposals could be based on year group eligibility or on reducing geographical area eligibility.
- 3.9. The consultation will include impact monitoring proposals, so that Councillors could be assured that at any point the policy could be amended if there was deemed to be an adverse impact on disadvantaged families.
- 3.10. Year group – led reductions would be based on the impact of the River Academy opening year group by year group from September 2024 (new secondary schools open on a phased basis, initially opening usually Years 7 and 10 before growing to have all year groups open across a number of years). As River Academy opens more year groups, we would align eligibility changes to year groups opening, which would support the options for parents if they wished to move their child from Chiltern Edge. For the 24-25 academic year, eligibility being removed for Year 7 is expected to have a low detrimental impact for families, as parents are expected to prefer River Academy. River Academy opening is projected to reduce demand by at least one bus. A reduction of a further bus would be proposed for September 2024 for the older year groups in this option, but this would have more impact.
- 3.11. Geography-focused changes could reduce the eligible area based on nearest schools for pupils with an aim that pupils under the three-mile walking limit for school transport

would have eligibility removed, with protection remaining for children living over 2 miles who might qualify for a bus pass under the current Low Income criteria of our policy .

- 3.12. Reading Buses have been engaged in discussions regarding proposed options for change and advise that tranches of 80 pupils per bus would be the planning approach taken by Reading Buses to test viability of any parent-funded route. Options being considered include season tickets versus direct pay, and open public buses versus coach travel, with volumes and phase options to be informed by feedback.

4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 4.1. The Council's new Corporate Plan has established three themes for the years 2022/25. These themes are:

- Healthy Environment
- Thriving Communities
- Inclusive Economy

- 4.2. These themes are underpinned by "Our Foundations" explaining the ways we work at the Council:

- People first
- Digital transformation
- Building self-reliance
- Getting the best value
- Collaborating with others

- 4.3. Full details of the Council's Corporate Plan and the projects which will deliver these priorities are published on the [Council's website](#). These priorities and the Corporate Plan demonstrate how the Council meets its legal obligation to be efficient, effective and economical.

- 4.4. The opening of River Academy supports the Council's ambitions for local, high quality school places for Reading children, and actively supports the Corporate Plan theme of Thriving Communities. In addition, any reduction in road traffic will support the Council's actions in response to the Climate Emergency and the ambitions set out in our Corporate Plan under Healthy Environment.

5. Environmental and Climate Implications

- 5.1. The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 5.2. The model of prioritising active travel and school transport through buses will encourage reduced emissions. The proposed policy changes will promote Reading children to attend local schools within walking distance, which will have a further positive impact on the Climate Emergency, reducing transport emissions in and around Reading.

6. Community Engagement

- 6.1. Statutory Guidance sets out what Local Authorities should do when consulting on school transport arrangements. This guidance is quoted below.
- 6.2. *"Local Authorities should consult locally with: schools whose pupils will be affected by the proposed changes, parents whose children will (or may) be affected by the proposed changes, and those whose children may be affected in the future – for example, because they live in the catchment area of, or attend the feeder school of, a school affected by the proposed changes; and the local Parent Carer Forum.*
- 6.3. *Consultation should last for at least 28 working days during term time.*
- 6.4. *Local Authorities should give careful consideration to the impact proposed changes to their policy will have on parents' choice of school, the financial impact the changes will have on affected families, paying particular attention to the potential impact of any*

changes on children from low-income families and the impact the changes will have on people with protected characteristics.

- 6.5. *Wherever possible, local authorities should phase in changes so that children who begin attending a school under one set of travel arrangements continue to benefit from those arrangements until they leave that school”.*
- 6.6. Engagement with Reading Buses has been undertaken ahead of the formal consultation, to establish whether a publicly available bus service could be provided to mitigate the risk of the removal of dedicated school buses to Chiltern Edge. The proposed consultation on policy changes is being planned with Reading Buses advising on potential routes, to inform Councillor decisions.
- 6.7. Statutory Guidance requires a 28-day consultation period in term time. The proposed timeline would therefore be undertaken across January – March 2024, with any implementation of policy changes from September 2024. If agreed by Committee, the proposed timeline for consultation and implementation of the revised policy is as follows:

Milestone	Timescale
Decision by ACE Committee to proceed with statutory consultation	16 January 2024
Commencement of statutory consultation period	17 January 2024
Closing date of statutory consultation period	16 February 2024 (to account for half term and comply with the requirement for a 28 day consultation)
Review of feedback from consultation period	19 February-1 March 2024
Confirmation of final proposals published for Committee decision	13 March 2024
ACE Committee consideration of final proposals	20 March 2024

- 6.8. Dedicated engagement sessions on the consultation will be held with parents of children attending Chiltern Edge secondary school.
- 6.9. The consultation will include impact monitoring proposals, so that Councillors could be assured that at any point any newly adopted Policy could be amended if there was deemed to be an adverse impact on disadvantaged families, pupils with protected characteristics or any other at risk group.

7. Equality Implications

- 7.1. Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 7.2. It is anticipated that an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is relevant to the decision, and will be completed, so that we can evidence any differential impact in particular for

children with a disability, but also parents with any of the protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex (gender) or sexual orientation.

- 7.3. The consultation will identify families where a pupil is eligible for Free School Meals and pay particular attention to the need to mitigate pressure on families currently exacerbated by the cost of living crisis – through mitigations such as a means tested approach for some families to received support, and negotiate ongoing public transport access through Reading Buses and other public transport providers in Oxfordshire. In terms of the Reading Borough Council reducing inequality priority, Chiltern Edge is the only school where families benefit from this extended entitlement, and analysis of catchment areas suggest that it is predominantly not disadvantaged families who currently benefit from this entitlement. The percentage of children eligible for free school meals in local schools compared to the national average of 22/5% is: Highdown 9.4% JMA 37.8% Wren 24.5%; Chiltern Edge Reading pupils 13% (estimated – updated data held by the Trust requested).

8. Other Relevant Considerations

- 8.1. Impact on Public Health outcomes will be modelled as a result of more children being supported to travel actively and more children being able to walk and cycle to an appropriate local school place.

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1. Statutory guidance refers to the legislation governing travel to school for children of compulsory school age, in particular:
- Section 508A of the Education Act 1996: sustainable travel to school;
 - Section 508B of and Schedule 35B to the Education Act 1996: travel arrangements for eligible children;
 - Section 508C of the Education Act 1996: travel arrangements for other children;
 - The School Information (England) Regulations 2008: publication of information about travel arrangements.

10. Financial Implications

- 10.1. The proposals being considered are anticipated to make budget savings. The savings analysis undertaken so far will be further informed by the consultation process. In addition to Policy changes supporting current resource management plans, the following areas of Policy are anticipated to make savings.
- 10.2. The agreed 2022/2023 contracts costs for 3 buses to Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge was £925 per day (£308 each per day). The 2023/2024 costs for 4 buses is £1,356 per day (£339 each per day). The difference in prices equates to around 10%, which is currently around the standard inflation pressures being seen across transport contracts.
- 10.3. The current annual contract cost therefore equates to a total of £257,640 a year (based on 190 school days).

11. Timetable for Implementation

- 11.1. Statutory Guidance requires a 28-day consultation period in term time. The proposed timeline would therefore be undertaken across January – March 2024, with any implementation of policy changes from September 2024.
- 11.2. Implementation is proposed from September 2024. A more detailed implementation timetable will informed by dialogue with Reading Buses. The contract terms for the current bus contract, which is in place until 2025, include a three-month termination clause.

12. Background Papers

- 12.1. There are none.

Appendices

1. School Transport Policy 2024-25 DRAFT: subject to consultation.
(See Appendix 1 to Item 11 in the Agenda Pack)