

**Adult Social Care,
Children's Services and
Education Committee**



Reading
Borough Council

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08 July 2026

Title	Procurement of Child and School Transport and Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement 2027/2028
Purpose of the report	To make a decision
Report status	Public report
Executive Director Commissioning Report	Lara Patel, Executive Director Children's Services
Report author	Brian Grady, Director of Education
Lead Councillor	Cllr Rachel Eden, Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health Cllr Wendy Griffith, Lead Councillor for Children
Council priority	Safeguard & support the health & wellbeing of Reading's adults & children
Recommendations	<p>That Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Approve consultation on updating the Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement for 2027/28 (draft attached as Appendix A), delegating the form of consultation to the Executive Director of Children's Services, with the results of consultation to be considered at ACE Committee on 14th October. Proposed updates to the Policy Statement include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) emphasis on supporting independent travel to access education, enabling positive transitions to adulthood and promoting independence; b) revised eligibility criteria; and c) introduction of charging contributions when transport is required to be organised by Reading Borough Council, while retaining discretionary transport and assessing cases individually. 2. Grant delegated authority to the Executive Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Education & Public Health, the Lead Councillor for Children, the Director of Finance and the Director of Legal and Democratic Services to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Procure and enter into a framework contract with successful tenderers for the delivery of transport services to meet our statutory duty to provide travel assistance for eligible pupils, to provide transport for families working with Social Care and to deliver transport requirements for children in our care; b) Negotiate with the successful tenderers to mobilise the contract, vary the contract, and otherwise contract manage the contract throughout its lifecycle. c) Delegate to Director level the ability to enter call off contracts from successful tenderers to the framework contract.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. Local Authorities have duties to arrange school transport for eligible children of compulsory school age and children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). There is no corresponding legal duty that requires Local Authorities to provide free transport for children over compulsory school age.
- 1.2. School Transport has continued to be a significant budget and growth pressure in Reading. In order for the Council to maintain its statutory duties of providing essential services to children, the Council's priority for the next three years is to put in place a range of measures to deliver positive outcomes for Reading's children whilst reducing demand and cost.
- 1.3. The 2025/26 budget outturn includes an overspend of £1.25m within home to school transport, which remains a key area of financial risk due to sustained increases in demand and associated cost pressures. The financial position highlights the continued challenge within the Education Directorate, with Home to School Transport remaining a significant driver of overspend. This will require continued focus as part of forward financial planning, including the development of demand management strategies, review of policy and practice, and alignment with wider SEND and sufficiency initiatives to ensure the service is sustainable in the medium term.
- 1.4. This report covers two of those measures; establishing a new procurement approach for school transport and revising discretionary travel support for post 16 learners.
- 1.5. A new procurement approach is proposed, to replace the current Dynamic Purchasing System contract which is due to expire on 30 September 2026.
- 1.6. The new framework will be an Open Framework and has an emphasis on value for money. The new contract will support work being completed on the feasibility of moving to using larger vehicles and reducing the number of routes, with expectation this will further reduce spend and promote increased independence of children travelling to school.
- 1.7. Local Authorities have discretion to decide what transport and financial support is required, from travel allowances to the provision of a shared minibus, to assist young people over the age of 16, including those with SEND, attend school or college. When making decisions, local authorities consider the needs of their population, local transport infrastructure, and the resources they have available. They must also act reasonably and consider all relevant legislation and statutory guidance.
- 1.8. To support a smooth transition to independence and adulthood for children, and to encourage the most active and independent forms of travel, the Council proposes consulting on a revised Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement. The changes aim to simplify language and promote active travel options for learners in Reading, aligning with the Council's strategic commitment to fostering independence.
- 1.9. The proposed new Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement (Appendix A) will support the Council's aims and objectives to help children prepare for adulthood as well as achieve savings against current levels of transport spend. The proposed approach retains support for those with the greatest need while ensuring that resources are used fairly and sustainably.
- 1.10. This report invites Committee to approve the proposed consultation on the Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement 2027/2028. Specifically, the consultation will consider the following elements:
 - An enhanced emphasis on supporting independent travel to access education, enabling positive transitions to adulthood and promoting independence and improved outcomes for young people;
 - A proposed revised set of eligibility criteria for post-16 travel assistance;

- A proposed introduction of charging contributions when transport is required to be organised by Reading Borough Council, while retaining discretionary transport and assessing cases individually.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. Reading Borough Council currently provides discretionary transport support to post-16 learners with SEND, which goes beyond the statutory minimum requirements set out in the national guidance.
- 2.2. Discretionary transport refers to travel assistance provided by the Council that is not required by law. For post-16 learners with SEND, the Council is not legally obliged to provide free or subsidised transport but may choose to do so in accordance with its local transport policy. A number of Local Authorities charge for the support which they provide. Research and benchmarking with other authorities such as Slough Borough Council, Wokingham Borough Council and others outside of Berkshire demonstrate a range of Local Authorities already charge for Post-16 Transport.
- 2.3. The support provided may include free transport for eligible young learners aged 16-18 who meet the eligibility criteria. The Council currently offers fully paid travel support, mileage allowance or Council organised transport, which includes solo taxis in some cases.
- 2.4. The current post 16 transport approach fosters dependency and does not deliver value for money. We are therefore proposing a targeted revision to the Post-16 SEND transport offer that shifts the focus from reliance on Council-provided transport to promoting independence and active travel.
- 2.5. More independent and active travel is expected to lead to significant benefits for young people, with improved outcomes and readiness for adulthood. There is a strong and growing evidence base showing that the ability to travel independently is a critical enabler of post-16 outcomes. Research demonstrates that independent travel improves young people's access to education, employment and social opportunities, and builds the confidence and life skills needed for adulthood. While national datasets do not yet directly link specific transport policies to improved employment or education outcomes, the wider evidence is clear that removing transport barriers, and actively equipping young people to travel independently, supports better long-term life chances and reduces the risk of disengagement.
- 2.6. Whilst ensuring it is legally compliant, equitable, and financially sustainable, this approach continues to support those with the greatest need while encouraging young people to develop the skills and confidence for independent travel, ensuring resources are used fairly and sustainably.

3. The Proposal

- 3.1. The current Dynamic Purchasing System contract for school transport commenced on 1 November 2020 and is due to expire on 30 September 2026, with no opportunity for further extensions.
- 3.2. The new framework will be an Open Framework as the previous contract has proven resource heavy to administer and provides the Council with little control over escalating costs. The new tender has an emphasis on value for money and, by moving away from a Dynamic Purchasing System to a fixed price framework, one where we will have greater control over costs.
- 3.3. The new contract will support work being completed on the feasibility of moving to using larger vehicles and reducing the number of routes, with expectation this will further reduce spend and promote increased independence of children travelling to school.
- 3.4. It is proposed that successful tenderers will be eligible to provide the delivery of transport services to meet our statutory duty to provide travel assistance for eligible pupils, to

provide transport for families working with Social Care and to deliver transport requirements for children in our care. Following the tender process, officers would engage with the successful tenderers to mobilise the contract and by establishing individual contracts for identified routes and actively manage the contracts for routes throughout its lifecycle, promoting sustainable and efficient transport routes for eligible children.

3.5. A consultation on a new Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement for academic year 2027/2028 is proposed. The consultation would take place between 13 July and 10 September 2026. The new proposed Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement to be consulted upon is appended to this report at Appendix A.

3.6. The key changes from the current Post-16 Transport Policy (2025/26) are set out below.

3.7. **Scope and Terminology**

- A clearer definition of 'Post-16' is provided;
- The statement emphasises the requirement for annual reapplication for learners;
- Independence is actively promoted within the policy.

3.8. **Eligibility Criteria**

- It is proposed that for learners to be eligible for travel assistance they must meet the eligibility criteria set out in the appended Policy Statement, which are summarised below for ease and convenience:
 - a) Student must be a **resident of the Council area**;
 - b) Student must have an **Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)** with a named school or educational setting;
 - c) Student must attend their **nearest allocated provider**, as set out in the EHCP, or a nearer qualifying provider and not a placement chosen on the basis of parental preference;
 - d) Student is **unable to use public transport independently** due to special educational needs, disability, or mobility difficulty;
 - e) Programme of learning is **full-time** (≥ 540 guided learning hours per year, planned and funded);
 - f) Student lives **more than 3 miles walking distance** from the setting (as measured by the Council), or is unable to walk the distance due to SEN, disability, or mobility difficulty;
 - g) **Low income**: without the Council's transport assistance, the student would be unable to attend the educational placement due to financial constraints;

We will explore with applicants and their families alternative travel offers such as the [Reading Concessionary Travel Scheme - Reading Borough Council](#) as part of this process. Where these offers are able to be utilised, we will expect them to be used.

3.9. **Financial Support and Contribution Charging**

- The review of our Draft Policy Statement provides an opportunity to propose offering a bursary (personal transport budget) to families as a first option to fund transport where learners are eligible. It is proposed to develop bursary options through the consultation process.
- This consultation also gives us the opportunity to consider a contribution charging policy for eligible learners where the Council supports travel assistance through Council-organised transport. This could be a standard contribution of £330 per term or a reduced rate of £175 per term for those in a low-income household. Any charging

rate would be agreed through the consultation process and would be benchmarked against appropriate public transport options available to all young people.

- Other local authority charging policies, a summary of which are included in the table below, are provided for illustrative purposes:

Council	Charges for Post-16 SEND or Specialist Transport
Slough	If travel assistance is provided, there is usually a contribution charge of £750 per academic year per student for travel support. This applies to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students from <i>low-income families</i> qualifying for travel support; • Students with an <i>Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)</i> if travel support is provided; • Other applicants needing assistance.
West Berkshire	Contribution for Post-16 SEN Transport: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If eligible for Post-16 SEN home-to-school/college transport assistance, a contribution of £1,038 is required for the 2025/26 academic year.
Wokingham	Standard fee is £1026.00 per year: <i>Eligible P16 students starting new courses are all provided with Personal Transport Budgets, but some with special circumstances are awarded transport on appeal.</i> <i>In the case of P16's continuing into '6th form' at schools, such as Addington, they will usually be offered transport, but a financial contribution is required.</i>
Buckinghamshire Council	A Personal Transport Budget which allows them to arrange their own transport, or Council-arranged transport for an annual fee, with sliding scales based on days per week from £1,072 (5 days) to £213 (1 day) for the 2025/26 academic year. Families facing financial hardship may be eligible for reduced fees (e.g. £715 for 5 days, down to £143 for 1 day)
Plymouth City Council	Requires a contribution: £613.30 per year (or £551.97 if paid in a single instalment), with the option to use own transport at 45p per mile to avoid the fee.
Shropshire Council	Offers a contribution scheme: £1,140 per year, reduced to £330 for families on defined benefits.
Surrey County Council	Charges for travel assistance: £659.01 for low-income students; £908.85 for others, though exemptions may apply in cases of financial hardship.
Torbay Council	Specialist transport support is chargeable: £936 per year, or a fuel allowance of 40p/mile.
Cambridgeshire County Council	A contribution is required unless the household is eligible for low-income support; otherwise, it's £269.50 per term.
Peterborough City Council	Those not qualifying as low-income or without an EHCP must pay: £690 per year, or £345 for half-year, or six-monthly payments of £115.
West Northamptonshire Council	A charge of £1,000 per year for transport assistance; £500 for low-income families.
Bradford Council	Charges £370 per year for travel assistance under its Travel Assistance Service.

3.10. Impact analysis

- 3.11. Officers have undertaken a risk and impact analysis to ensure that learners are supported through the transition period in implementing proposed changes.

- 3.12. The total number of Post-16 SEND learners currently receiving transport support is 166. The table below provides a breakdown as to the types of support currently being offered:

Travel Support Offer	Breakdown of post-16 students
Council Organised Transport	Solo Taxi – 11 students Multiple occupancy Taxi – 77 students Minibus – 25 students Specialist Transport, e.g. Ambulance - 2
Personal Travel Budget	£2,000/yr – 6 students £3,000/yr – 1 student
Reimbursement/Mileage allowance	44 students approx.
Total no. of students on travel support	166 students

- 3.13. The following key risks and mitigations have been identified in implementing the new proposed Policy Statement:

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Legal challenge from families	Medium	High	Engagement and review with Reading Families Forum; ensure legal compliance; individual case consideration.
Reputational damage	Medium	Medium	Effective communications and engagement on support available for learners and reasons for change; public consultation.
Disruption to learners' access to education	Low	High	Hardship fund; travel training; case-by-case support.
Increased workload on appeals team	High	Medium	Engagement with families and learners; review process.

4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 4.1. The Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement contribute to the aims of ensuring that there are good education, leisure and cultural opportunities for people in Reading.
- 4.2. The Council Plan has established five priorities for the years 2025/28. These priorities are:
- Promote more equal communities in Reading;
 - Secure Reading's economic and cultural success;
 - Deliver a sustainable and healthy environment and reduce our carbon footprint;
 - Safeguard and support the health and wellbeing of Reading's adults and children;
 - Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future.

4.3. In delivering these priorities, we will be guided by the following set of principles:

- Putting residents first;
- Building on strong foundations;
- Recognising, respecting, and nurturing all our diverse communities;
- Involving, collaborating, and empowering residents;
- Being proudly ambitious for Reading.

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

4.5. Supporting access to education helps the Council achieve its objectives to promote more equal communities in Reading and secure Reading's economic and cultural success.

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. Although the policy is emphasising a new charging policy there is a reinvigorated promotion of independent, active and sustainable travel. The use of public transport instead of minibuses and taxis to access education is a positive contributor to addressing environmental and climate implications of school travel.

6. Community Engagement

6.1. In preparing the Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement the Council is proposing to consult with the following stakeholders:

- Reading Families Forum;
- any other local authorities it considers appropriate (for example cross border transport);
- governing bodies of schools and Further Education institutions;
- the appropriate transport administration body for the area;
- persons who will be of sixth form age at the time of the Transport Policy Statement and their parents/carers;
- other bodies including education and training providers, higher education institutions, transport companies and authorities operating in the locality, public sector bodies, community groups, voluntary organisations and groups/organisations with an interest in disability issues should also be consulted where appropriate.

6.2. Feedback will be used to finalise the revised travel assistance statement for publication by 31 May 2027.

7. Equality Implications

7.1. Under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, 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 the 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. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been undertaken. The EqIA is appended to this report. The results of the screening assessment evidence considerations which need to be taken into account to avoid risks of potential impacts for persons with a protected characteristic.

7.3. Compliance with statutory guidance will ensure that, as a public authority, Reading Borough Council will have determined travel assistance arrangements which work to prevent discrimination and advance equality of opportunity.

8. Legal Implications

8.1. School travel assistance arrangements need to be compliant with the Statutory Guidance [“Statutory guidance for local authorities on supplying transport to students and trainees aged 16 and over”](#).

8.2. Under the Education Act 1996 (Section 509AA & 509AB), local authorities are required to publish a Post-16 Transport Policy Statement each year but are not legally obliged to provide free or subsidised transport for learners aged 16 to 18 with SEND.

8.3. Local Authorities have a duty to ensure that learners can access education, not to provide transport. Support should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

8.4. The [SEND Code of Practice \(2015\)](#) and Equality Act 2010 require authorities to consider reasonable adjustments and ensure no discrimination.

8.5. In preparing this updated Policy Statement, Reading Borough Council has also considered the Education and Skills Act 2008, under which local authorities in England have broad duties to encourage, enable, and assist all young people to participate in education or training who are aged 13 to 19, as well as those aged between 20 and 25 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

9. Financial Implications

9.1. The 2025/26 budget outturn includes an overspend of £1.25m within home to school transport, which remains a key area of financial risk due to sustained increases in demand and associated cost pressures. The financial position highlights the continued challenge within the Education Directorate, with Home to School Transport remaining a significant driver of overspend. This will require continued focus as part of forward financial planning, including the development of demand management strategies, review of policy and practice, and alignment with wider SEND and sufficiency initiatives to ensure the service is sustainable in the medium term

9.2. The introduction of contributions is expected to generate a net saving of approximately per annum of £341k;

2027/28 - £199k from September 2027

2028/29 – a further £142k through a full year effect

9.3. The promotion of more independent travel is anticipated to result in reduced expenditure and generate further savings from academic year 2027/28.

9.4. The proposed changes will help to offset rising transport costs and support the long-term sustainability of the service. The main impact from this change will be seen within the Special Schools Transport spend.

10. Timetable for Implementation

- 10.1. Statutory guidance sets out the timeframes for consultations, with a requirement to consult for a period of 28 days.
- 10.2. The timetable for consultation is set out below

Action	Deadline
Launch of consultation on draft Post 16-Travel Assistance Policy Statement following consideration and approval by ACE Committee	10 th July 2026
Consultation period	10 th July 2026-1 st October 2026
Review of responses to consultation and preparation of final Post 16-Travel Assistance Policy Statement for consideration by ACE committee	1 st October 2026-7 th October 2026
Publication of ACE Committee papers including final draft of Post 16-Travel Assistance Policy Statement for consideration and review	7 th October 2026
ACE Committee date for decision on Post 16-Travel Assistance Policy Statement	14 th October 2026
Transition period to new arrangements	October 2026 – May 2027
Implementation date	31 st May 2027

- 10.3. The outcome and final documents will be presented to the October 2026 ACE Committee for final decision.
- 10.4. The final 2027/28 Post 16-Travel Assistance Policy Statement will be published as required by statutory guidance by 31 May 2027.
- 10.5. The following high level implementation plan will be followed to ensure any new charging process and policy are in place by September 2027.
- 10.5.1. Update operational guidance for SEND and Transport teams;
 - 10.5.2. Update application forms, criteria, and assessment workflows;
 - 10.5.3. Train staff on new eligibility and decision-making criteria;
 - 10.5.4. Update website, customer guidance, and parent information packs;
 - 10.5.5. Develop comms plan for families, schools, colleges;
 - 10.5.6. Scope charging arrangements;
 - 10.5.7. Confirm transitional arrangements (e.g., phased changes, legacy cases);
 - 10.5.8. Open Post-16 applications under new criteria;
 - 10.5.9. Provide helpline support for families during first month/

11. Background Papers

- 11.1. There are none.

Appendices

Appendix A: Post 16 Travel Assistance Policy Statement 2027/28

Appendix B: Equality Impact Assessment