

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Education Skills and Wellbeing Cabinet Board

25th May 2023

Report of the Head of Support Services and Transformation

Rhiannon Crowhurst

Matter for: Decision

Wards Affected: All Wards

Subject: Introduction of a Personal Travel Budget to alleviate pressures on the Home to School Travel Assistance Budget and to offer more choice to parents/carers

Purpose of the Report

1. To outline the ongoing pressures on the Council's Home to School Travel Assistance Budget (which are becoming increasingly difficult to manage within the existing budget), and the actions being taken to address this.
2. To obtain Member approval to introduce a Personal Travel Budget (PTB) as an additional means of travel assistance under the Council's Home to School Travel Policy 2017, and that the Personal Travel Budget be available for use in the new academic year 2023/2024.

Executive Summary

3. This report sets out the ongoing pressures on the Council's Home to School Travel Assistance Budget.
4. This report introduces the concept of a Personal Travel Budget as an additional means of the Council meeting its duty to provide travel assistance to those who have an entitlement under the Council's Home to School

Travel Policy 2017. The Personal Travel Budget will continue to include the existing offer of a mileage allowance but will extend to also include:

- Purchasing a travel pass for public transport (so the child may be accompanied)
- Paying a responsible person deemed to be appropriate by the parent/carer to help the child use public transport
- Paying a responsible person deemed as appropriate by the parent/carer to walk or cycle to school with the child
- Paying a responsible person deemed as appropriate by the parent/carer to drive the child to school
- Paying for fuel
- Paying for travel by taxi
- Paying a childminder (e.g. to look after siblings)
- To organise travel to separate home addresses where there is split custody

By introducing a Personal Travel Budget to include these additional factors there is more choice for parents/carers to make arrangements according to their personal circumstances, and which meet the needs of their child. Following introduction, the initiative will be reviewed to monitor its relevance and suitability for service users, including the level of take-up.

Full details of the PTB can be found under Appendix A: Personal Travel Budget Information Sheet and Appendix B: Personal Travel Budget Contract

Background

5. The Council has a duty to provide free home to school travel assistance for all eligible children, which includes those living over the statutory walking distance, those that live on a route that has been classified as unsuitable, and those who are unable to walk any distance to school, even when accompanied because of an additional learning need or disability that affects the ability to walk a suitable route.
6. The Council's current Home to School Travel Policy 2017 reflects the duties and requirements that fall to the Council by virtue of the Education Act 1996; The Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008; The Learner Travel Statutory Provision and Operational Guidance 2014; The Learner Travel Information (Wales) Regulations 2009; The Safety on Learner Transport (Wales) Measure 2011: and the All Wales Travel Behaviour Code.
7. The Council's Home to School Travel Assistance Service is jointly managed by the Education and Environment Directorates. The Education Directorate holds the budget and is responsible for the administrative elements including creating and applying the Council's Home to School Travel Policy in line with Welsh Government legislative requirements, managing the Appeals

Procedure and the Independent Travel Training Programme. The Environment Directorate is responsible for the operational elements including procuring transport operators, tendering contracts and managing routes.

8. As at April 2023, the Home to School Travel Assistance Service transports 4346 pupils per day. This includes 3710 mainstream pupils across 124 routes to mainstream school, and 636 pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) across 192 routes to specialist educational provision.

Factors impacting the Home to School Travel Assistance Service

9. The service has been impacted as a consequence of external environmental factors including the Covid 19 pandemic and more recently the war in Ukraine, this has resulted in a number of complicating issues for the service including:

- (i) Shortage of transport operators bidding on home to school travel contracts –

Since the Covid 19 pandemic a number of transport operators have ceased trading, and those that are still operating have staff shortages in terms of available drivers and passenger assistants. The cause has been reported as employees moving to other professions e.g. couriers and haulage. During the most recent re-tendering exercise it was found that there was a lack of available transport operators, and as a result some routes were for a short period uncovered at the start of the new 2022/2023 academic year.

Number of transport operators Pre-Covid	60
Number of transport operators as at April 2023	58
Number of licenced taxi drivers in NPT Pre-Covid	340
Number of licenced taxi drivers in NPT as at April 2023	284

- (ii) Fuel cost increase –

The war in Ukraine has increased the price of fuel and consequently transport operators have increased their contract bids to cover the price rise. Additionally, some are no longer viewing home to school travel contracts as profitable so are choosing not to bid for contracts.

- (iii) Increase in contract costs –

The retendering exercise in 2022 resulted in increased contract costs:

	Pre-Tender contract price (2022)	Post-Tender contract price (2023)	% increase*
ALN Transport	£1,854,636	£2,233,659	20% (£379,023)
Mainstream Transport	£1,860,290	£2,403,880	29% (£543,590)
Totals	£3,714,926	£4,637,539	£922,613

*based on an academic year which is 190 school days and on retendered routes only

Other additional costs to the 2022/2023 budget include:

Fuel supplement	£ 189,013
Annual indexation on existing contracts	£ 257,581
Refugee transportation from accommodation centres	£95,000
Welsh immersion centre opening	£5,000

(iv) Increased cross-border competition –

It is not only NPTCBC who are experiencing the adverse impact on Home to School Travel Assistance Services, as transport operator resources have decreased across the whole of Wales. This has created a climate of competition between bordering authorities as each one seeks to ensure sufficient numbers of transport operators to cover all routes. The effect is transport operators significantly increasing their contract prices because of the current conditions of supply and demand.

(v) Additional Learning Needs (ALN) transport –

Many children with ALN require specialist educational provision outside their catchment or nearest school. It is not always possible for all children to be accommodated in specialist provision within their own community, therefore, children often need to be transported some distance from their home address. Consequently, because of the distance travelled the transport operator bids are expensive, and the more cost effective option of multiple pupils travelling in a shared vehicle is not always possible.

(vi) Late applications –

- Applications for travel assistance must be submitted by 30th June each year, however, for the academic year 2022/2023 there were 200 late applications (submitted between July and the beginning of September) for mainstream transport, and 56 applications submitted during the

same late period for ALN transport. Additionally, there were a number of application across both mainstream and ALN which were received after the first day of the new academic year. Late applications mean that some previously procured transport routes need to be re-tendered and consequently the contract price escalates.

Financial Impact

10. Financial Information 2022/2023 - Home to School Travel costs

2022-23 Financial Year	Actual Expenditure
Primary Education - In County	£1,042,274
Primary Education - Out of County	£87,939
Secondary Education - In County	£1,576,693
Secondary Education - Out of County	£274,164
Special Educational Needs - In County	£2,774,992
SEN – Maes Y Coed	£804,489
Middle Schools	£923,199
Special Educational Needs - Out of County	£169,689
Special Educational Needs Post 16 - In County	£462,825
Special Educational Needs Post 16 - Out of County	£18,336
Post 16 – In County	£1,012
Transport Delivery	£65,094
TOTAL COST	£8,200,705

11. Comparing costs over a 3 year period shows:

	Budget	Actual Spend	(Under)/Overspend	%
*2020/2021	£6,131,337	£5,697,529	(£433,808)	-8
2021/2022	£6,815,742	£6,780,050	(£35,692)	-0.5
2022/2023	£7,454,930	£8,200,705	£745,775	10

**comparison is not like for like as these costs relate to transport during the pandemic for 2020/2021 includes a 75% retainer to operators which is 25% less than usual annual budget*

12. Over the years the Home to School Travel Assistance Service across Education and Environment Directorate teams have successfully managed to minimise any overspend by means of transport route management and ensuring effective use of available resources. However, the opportunity to protect the budget from continuing pressures is becoming increasingly difficult, for the reasons set out above.
13. Ways of mitigating the impact on the Home to School Travel Assistance Service and the budget have been considered:
 - (i) an additional temporary post has been added to the Education Transport Team, this new post is Teaching Assistant Level 4 – Behaviour Support Travel Training. The post will intervene to support pupils who are required to be removed from home to school travel vehicles because of the pupil exhibiting challenging behaviour. Previously there has been an expectation that the only solution to manage the situation is for the pupil to travel in their own home to school vehicle. The cost of a single-occupancy vehicle is extremely high with a current average cost of £23,290 per annum. The new Behaviour Support Travel Trainer will work with the pupil, their family, school and other professionals to safeguard the pupil being able to continue to share transport vehicles with other pupils and thereby managing to prevent adding more financial pressure on the budget, particularly if new contracts are at inflated prices arising from supply and demand influences.
 - (ii) Promoting the Independent Travel Training Programme to provide the opportunity for pupils to gain an important life skill by becoming independent travellers and either walking a route to school/college or using a bus pass to access public transport as a means to get from home to school/college. If a pupil becomes a competent independent traveller they no longer require support from the Council's Home to School Travel Assistance Service. It is hoped that additional promotion of the Independent Travel Training Programme will assist in a move towards greater independence for some secondary aged children with eligibility for free home to school travel assistance through increased take up of the programme.
 - (iii) Introducing a Personal Travel Budget (PTB) will enable parents/carers to have more choice and flexibility around travel arrangements that meet both their personal circumstances and the needs of their child. The Council already provides mileage reimbursement, however, the PTB takes this offer further as the PTB will be available for additional arrangements the parent/carer may wish to make. Whilst offering flexibility for the parent/carer the PTB also is a cost-effective solution

for the Council. Calculations for the level of cost-effectiveness will be dependent on the level of take-up for the PTB, however, the most impact will be seen in cases of a parent/carer taking up a PTB rather than the Council needing to procure a single occupancy vehicle. PTB's also have the opportunity to benefit the freeing up of seats on shared vehicles, in place of the Council being required to procure an additional vehicle on an existing route. To ensure effective use of public resources a PTB will not be offered if it is found to be more expensive than alternative travel assistance options.

The introduction of Personal Travel Budgets is not in the first instance intended to be a mechanism for reducing the cost of Home to School Transport. The initiative is primarily a means of ensuring the Council meets its statutory duty to provide travel assistance to those who have an entitlement. The focus is to provide pupils and their families with an alternative travel assistance offer which is capable of reducing barriers which inhibit pupils travelling to their place of education or training. However, there is the potential to make savings as the introduction of Personal Travel Budgets provides for the opportunity to alleviate pressures in the marketplace, and this should inevitably lead to savings being made if the complications associated with the difficulties in procuring sufficient and cost effective transport contracts can be eased.

- (iv) Future options may include additional in-house transport fleet. Currently there are a few in-house vehicles which have been procured under Social Services that the Home to School Travel Assistance Service is able to make use of where there is opportunity to do so, however, there remains the difficulty of recruiting drivers and passenger assistants because of the shortages of this type of personnel across Wales.

Equality Impact Assessment

14. The Equality Act 2010 requires public bodies to pay 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; and
 - Foster good relations between persons who share relevant protected characteristics and persons who do not share it.”

15. An Integrated Impact Assessment is provided at Appendix C

Valleys Communities Impacts

16. The impact on Neath Port Talbot's valley communities will be the same as all other areas of the County Borough as the external environmental impacts are negatively impacting travel routes across the whole of the county borough.

Workforce Impacts

17. There are no workforce impacts associated with this report.

Legal Impacts

18. Section 3 of the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 imposes a duty on local authorities to provide transport arrangements for learners of compulsory school age who attend their nearest suitable school and meet the relevant criteria. Transport arrangements made in accordance with section 3 may include the payment of the whole, but not part, of a child's transport expenses (section 3(4)). Under section 4, a local authority may make travel arrangements for children of compulsory school age who do not fall within the section 3 criteria. Section 1(2) of the Measure defines travel arrangements as including "the payment of the whole or any part of any person's reasonable travel expenses, and the payment of allowances in respect of the use of particular modes of transport"
19. The Council's Home to School Travel Policy 2017 (the Policy) sets out how the Council will discharge its duty and the Council must comply with its Policy. The Policy sets out that travel provision may be provided by way of a parental allowance or the provision of the whole of reasonable travel expenses. The intended use of personal travel budgets, as set out in this report, concerns the provision of transport and not the issue of eligibility and is in line with the Policy. The personal travel budgets are designed to reimburse parents/carers for the costs incurred in providing the home to school transport
20. The Public Contract Regulations 2015 and the Council's Contract Procedure Rules apply to the procurement of home to school transport contracts by the Council. The Council's Home to School Travel Assistance Service is finding it increasingly difficult to procure sufficient cost effective home to school transport contracts, meaning there will be legal risk if the Council is not able to fulfil its legal duty to provide free home to school travel assistance for those pupils who are eligible. The personal travel budgets will provide an alternative means of fulfilling the Council's legal duty for transport provision

Risk Management

21. The risks to be taken into consideration are:
- The Council has a statutory duty to provide home to school travel assistance to those pupils who are eligible to receive it
 - The Home to School Travel Assistance Budget is increasingly coming under pressure and there is a current overspend as at April 2023 in the sum of £745,775
 - To manage both the financial pressures and increased demands on the service, alternative ways to discharge the Council's statutory duty must be considered, including the introduction of a Personal Travel Budget
 - Other Welsh Local Authorities, including Monmouthshire, Newport, Torfaen and Rhondda Cynon Taf have been making use of Personal Travel Budgets as part of their home to school travel assistance options for the past couple of years.

Consultation

22. There is no requirement for consultation.

Recommendation

23. That Members note the scale of the budget pressures together with the remedial actions taken through the combined efforts of the Education Transport Service and Environment Passenger Transport Section in order to contain overall budget costs.
24. Having due regard to the Integrated Impact Assessment it is recommended that Members approve the introduction of a Personal Travel Budget as an additional means of travel assistance under the Council's Home to School Travel Policy 2017, and that it be made available for use in the new academic year 2023/2024.

Reasons for Proposed Decision

25. The Education Transport Service together with Environment's Passenger Transport Section will continue to attempt to manage the budget pressures, however, in order to do so alternative options must be made available, including a Personal Travel Budget.

Implementation of Decision

26. The decision is proposed for implementation following the three day call in period.

Appendices

Appendix A - Personal Travel Budget Information Sheet

Appendix B - Personal Travel Budget Contract

Appendix C - Integrated Impact Assessment

List of Background Papers

NPTCBC Home to School Travel Policy 2017

The Education Act 1996

The Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008

The Learner Travel Statutory Provision and Operational Guidance 2014

The Learner Travel Information (Wales) Regulations 2009

Officer Contact

Rhiannon Crowhurst, Head of Support Services and Transformation

✉ r.crowhurst@npt.gov.uk

Debora Holder-Phillips, Education Transport Manager

✉ d.holder@npt.gov.uk