

Home to School/College Travel and Transport: Summary Consultation Document

We are consulting on the views of residents, parents, providers, schools and other stakeholders on the way we provide home to school travel assistance.

Merton Council currently provides travel assistance to around 750 pupils with special educational needs each day, over 200 on council operated buses, 475 on a mixture of private hire taxis and minibuses, and around 55 receive a personal travel allowance budget. The total spend is over £6.6 million per year.

Any change of policy that is agreed following this consultation will apply to new applicants rather than existing pupils, though the council will continue to periodically assess the travel needs of a child or young person as it can change over time e.g. as they grow older, some children may become more able to travel independently.

However, it is important for the Council to consider the effectiveness of its travel assistance practice and its 'discretionary' support for new applications for travel support from September 2022, for pre-school and post-16 children and young people.

Shifting the focus from organised transport

Firstly we are seeking views on shifting the focus from organised transport – particularly travel by taxi – to more independent forms of travel, such as encouraging independent travel training and promoting personal travel budgets for parents/ carers to enable them to get their children to school.

Independent Travel Training is practical help for some children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities to acquire the skills to travel independently. It can produce significant benefits for young people such as increased self-esteem and confidence, as well as increased opportunities to use public transport as an individual or with family and friends at weekends, evenings and over the holidays.

We are asking whether people know about travel training. If they do, what do they think are the benefits and also why they think some children and families may be reluctant to take it up; and what else would support greater independent travel?

Personal Travel Assistance Budgets (PTABs) is where the Council provide a family with a sum of money to enable them to make their own travel arrangements for pupils who qualify and where it makes economic sense for the Council to provide one. We are asking for views on why uptake is low and whether any changes would make Personal Travel Assistance budgets more attractive.

Assistance for non-statutory school age (i.e. pre-school and post-16 children and young people).

Secondly we are seeking views on providing travel assistance for children and young people of non-statutory school age (i.e. pre-school and post-16), known as our discretionary policy. The consultation sets out a set of options that would make Merton Council more in line with other local authorities. Removing discretionary travel altogether means that the Council would only provide what was required by law.

The proposals in the detailed consultation document and questionnaire consider different options for four separate categories of pre-school and post-16 children and young people:

- Pre-school children with special educational needs and disabilities
- Students from low income families and/or 'vulnerable learners', age 16-18 (without SEND)
- Young people with special educational needs (SEN) and or disabilities age 16-18 years of age
- Adult Learners (age 19+).

There are options for consultation in each of these areas, including:

- 1) The status quo – providing the service free of charge, as is current policy
- 2) Removal of discretionary travel assistance all together, other than in exceptional circumstances
- 3) Restrict the discretionary offer to only children and young people with severe learning or severe physical disabilities
- 4) Introduction of charges ('parental/student contributions') for all discretionary transport.

Current policies

Merton's current policies "SEN Transport policy Under 16" and "Post 16 travel assistance" can be downloaded accessed via the Local Offer page:

<https://directories.merton.gov.uk/kb5/merton/directory/service.page?id=byEVTQAawc4>

How to respond

If possible please also read the full consultation document before answering any questions on the survey. Both the consultation and the survey are available online.

Written submissions are welcome by email to School.Consult@merton.gov.uk

The consultation runs from 16 November 2021 **to 5 January 2022**. The Council's Cabinet will consider the outcome of the consultation on 7 February 2022 and if any changes are then made to the discretionary policies, then these would be introduced from September 2022.