

Home to School/College Travel and Transport:

Consultation Document

November 2021

Merton Council

Consultation: Home to school or college travel and transport

1. Introduction

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

The vast majority of the Council's expenditure on home to school travel and transport is on providing assistance for pupils and students who have special educational needs and disabilities.

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.

The Council must provide home to school travel for pupils of statutory school age (5-16) who qualify free of charge. The Council also has the discretion or choice to provide travel assistance to those who are not of statutory school age – those under 5 and those over the age of 16 years.

The Council is seeking views on:

- **Statutory school age** – 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.
- **Non statutory school age** – Secondly, a set of options, one of which is to understand views of the impact of the Council ceasing its 'discretionary' transport support, other than in 'exceptional circumstances'. Other options are to introduce charges (parental contributions) to offset some of the costs of transport or to restrict the provision of minibuses and taxis to only those young people with the most severe or complex special educational needs and disabilities. This would make Merton Council more in line with other local authorities.

The Council currently provides free travel assistance for 'vulnerable students' or low income students aged 16 or over. It provides travel assistance for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who are aged 16 or over; and it provides some travel support to very young children (under 5) with SEND.

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>

1.2 Policy context

Councils are under a duty to provide school transport, free of charge, to 'eligible children'. These are children of statutory school age (5-16) who attend the nearest suitable school and who live outside the statutory walking distance (for children aged over 5 but under 8, this is 2 miles; for children aged over 8 and under 16, this is 3 miles). Outside London, pupils who qualify may receive a bus pass. In London, their travel needs are largely taken care of by Transport for London who provide free travel.

But some children with special educational needs, disabilities or mobility problems may get free travel regardless of the distance between their home and school; this is based on an assessment of their needs. If they qualify for travel assistance, they may get a place on a bus or minibus travelling to a special school, a place in a taxi or a payment to their parents or carers to make their own arrangements.

You don't need an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP) to qualify for assisted transport when you are of statutory school age, but most pupils on assisted travel will have one. Around a third of pupils with EHCPs in Merton currently receive assisted transport.

Councils also have discretionary powers to make travel arrangements for children who are not aged 5-16. Merton's discretionary travel covers pre-school age children with special educational needs and students aged 16 years or over, with or without special educational needs. Transport is usually by taxi or minibus.

Many local authorities inside and outside London have already reduced their travel assistance for post 16 students and so Merton's policy offers more assistance than other council areas. Often, travel support is maintained for post 16s although charges ('parental contributions') are introduced.

1.3 Financial context

The council estimates that it will spend over £6.6 million this year on home to school travel assistance.

Almost all of the expenditure is on providing transport for children with special educational needs to special schools and other settings, inside and outside the borough's boundaries.

Expenditure has increased to meet rising demand – there are more children, more with special needs and more places being commissioned in special schools in Merton and beyond.

Within that £6.6 million, around £1.1 million a year is spent on discretionary transport, fewer than 10 of pre-school age, but more than 80 for students aged 16-18 with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND):

In comparison with other local authorities (2019/20 figures):

- Merton budgeted to spend £166 per head of relevant population (5-16 year olds) on SEND transport for pre-16 year olds.
- At £166 per head, Merton ranks second highest of all 32 London boroughs and the third highest in the country. Merton is 78% above the London average of £93 per head.

2. Consultation: Towards more independent travel

In Merton, around 750 pupils with special educational needs are transported 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. A large numbers of journeys are in 'solo taxis' – one taxi for one individual pupil. There are a large number of 'passenger assistants' – adults who accompany the young person - too.

Merton's high costs are partly explained by the fact that there are placements to a large number of different schools, currently 135, many of which are in schools or settings outside the borough. We are seeking to address this by creating a further expansion of in-borough local special school places over the next 5 years.

However, as part of this consultation we would like to explore whether there is any over dependence including unnecessary expectations of being picked up from the front door and driven to school. Although for those pupils with the most severe special educational needs and disabilities, that is the most appropriate arrangement, it is not for all children and young people and we want to work together to ensure opportunities are provided for these children to develop their independence. The successful introduction of pick up points for the buses for one large special school is a good example of this and that could be expanded further.

2.1 Independent Travel Training (ITT)

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 and without fear so they can get to school or college, work and for social and leisure activities. In Merton, training that is tailored to people's needs is provided by Merton Mencap to help people from secondary school age upwards, to travel on public transport. Around 20 young people a year have benefitted from the scheme. As they

grow older, some children may become more able to travel independently. ITT reduces the reliance on Council provided transport such as minibuses or taxis. It also produces significant benefits for young people themselves, 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?

2.2 Personal Travel Assistance Budgets (PTABs)

This is where the Council provides 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. The amount of money is based on the distance between home and school. In Merton, the mileage rate is currently 52 pence per mile for two return journeys a day. But Merton also pays for taxis that are hired by the parent at a given rate and may also pay for a passenger assistant to be on board. The money is paid in advance via a card. PTABs can be 40-50% cheaper than organised transport for single taxis.

Take up has fallen in the past two years. Merton's mileage rate is better than many authorities who pay only 45 pence per mile, but not as good as some nearby councils who pay between 60 pence, possibly up to 90 pence in some circumstances. There is some feedback that suggests that parents find the Merton scheme too complicated and difficult to understand. Some authorities offer a simple mileage claim at the end of each month as well as the more formal Personal Travel Budget scheme.

3. Consultation: Discretionary provision (pre-school and post 16)

These are areas where the Council has a choice whether to provide support or not. That is in contrast to travel assistance for children of statutory school age (5-16) where the eligibility criteria to provide travel assistance is set by government. Removing discretionary travel assistance would make the Council more closely aligned with Statutory Guidance and what we *must* provide rather than what we *can* provide.

The Council spends £1.1 million a year on 'Discretionary provision' of travel and transport.

The proposals below 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+).

3.1 Pre-school children with special educational needs and disabilities.

These are children who are under 5 (and therefore not of statutory school age). The Council is spending £115,000 on transporting fewer than 10 children a year to special schools or specialist provision, mainly in taxis. This is regardless of the distance between home and school and reflects an assessment of their special educational needs and family circumstances.

There are three options:

- 1) Continue to provide travel assistance for pre-school age children with special educational need and disabilities to its current policy.
- 2) Cease to provide travel assistance for pre-school age children with special educational needs and disabilities, other than in exceptional circumstances.
- 3) Continue to provide travel assistance for pre-school age children with special educational need and disabilities, though seek a financial contribution from parents towards the costs of transport.

3.2 Students from low income families and/or 'vulnerable learners', age 16-18 (without SEND)

Merton's current policy for vulnerable learners/ students from low income families is that assistance with travel can be granted if the student is attending a school or college or approved course of study that is more than 75 minutes' travel time by bus or tram from home and where TfL's (Transport for London) concession scheme for free bus travel does not cover the cost. The student is either from a low income family or is a 'vulnerable learner' – these are students who have been in care; students who are on probation or are otherwise considered to be at risk; students who are parents who retain responsibility for their child. These students do not have special educational needs and disabilities.

We would like to know why the take up of support for low income and/or vulnerable students under the Council's policy is so low. No students are being supported in the current academic year and none were supported last year.

There are two options:

- 1) Continue to provide travel assistance for students from low income families and /or students who are vulnerable learners and age 16-18 years.
- 2) Cease to provide travel assistance for students from low income families and /or students who are vulnerable learners and age 16-18 years.

3.3 Young people with special educational needs (SEN) and or disabilities age 16-18 years of age

The current policy says that Merton Council may provide travel assistance for students who currently have an Education, Health and Care Plan or are disabled and aged 16 and over, but below the age of 19 years prior to the start of the course of study; **and** there is clear evidence that the young person's disability is such that they are unable to travel independently or to do so would result in undue stress for the young person; **and** the establishment of education or training is more than 3 miles away from the young person's home and there is no suitable provision available nearer to home; **or** the nature of the young person's disability means that they must have travel assistance in order to access education and training, even if less than 3 miles from home.

Support can be extended beyond the age of 18 for those who are continuing a course of study, potentially up to the age of 25, so long as an EHCP is in place.

The policy says that a Personal Travel Assistance Budget is normally the preferred option of travel assistance provided by the authority for young people attending college. The Council is spending just under £1 million a year on travel assistance for around 80 students a year, only 6 of which were through Personal Travel Assistance Budgets.

There are four options:

- 1) Continue to provide travel assistance for students who have special educational needs and disabilities and are age 16-18 years.
- 2) Cease to provide travel assistance for students who have special educational needs and disabilities and are age 16-18 years, other than in exceptional circumstances.
- 3) Continue to provide travel assistance for students who have special educational needs and disabilities and are age 16-18 years, though seek a financial contribution from parents or students themselves towards the costs of transport.
- 4) Continue to provide travel assistance for students who have special educational needs and disabilities and are age 16-18 years, but only for those students who have the most severe or complex special educational needs or disabilities.

3.4 Adult Learners (age 19+)

These are students with an EHCP who start an approved course of study following their 19th birthday. Local authorities have a duty to make such transport arrangements *that they think are necessary* for students aged 19 to 25 with EHCPs in residential education or attending further education colleges.

In Merton's case, for those who will be 19 years of age prior to the start of their course of study, a request for travel assistance may be made to Adult Social

Services. They may provide travel assistance for these students as part of their support with travel for adults with Learning Difficulties and/or EHCPs.

Adult Services will also be reviewing their travel policies in 2022.

There are two options:

- 1) Continue to provide free home to college transport for adult learners who have an Education, Health and Care plan.
- 2) Cease to provide free home to college transport for adult learners who have an Education, Health and Care plan.

3.5 Background on Parental contributions

Many authorities outside London charge for post 16 travel. Nearby Surrey County Council seek a contribution £551 from low income families/students and £760 a year for all other students. In East Sussex parents/carers are required to pay a contribution towards the costs. The charge for this school year is £684. If the family is low income, the contribution is halved to £342 per year. Low income is assessed as being eligible for free school meals. In London, the Borough of Bexley ask for £400 a year, regardless of family income.

If parental contributions were introduced in Merton, the estimate is that it would save around £55,000 a year or more. That compares with the total cost of discretionary travel of £1.1 million.

4. How to respond

Please read all of this 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 met on 8 November to approve the start of the consultation. There will be a report back to Cabinet on the outcome of the consultation on 7 February 2022.

If any changes are then made to the discretionary policies, then these would be introduced from September 2022.