SCHOOL ADMISSIONS AND HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT SERVICES OUTCOME FOCUSED REVIEW

To:	**Children and Young People's Committee**
Meeting Date:	**9 October 2018**
From:	**Service Director, Education: Jonathan Lewis**
Electoral division(s):	**All**
Forward Plan ref:	**n/a** *Key decision:* **No**
Purpose	**Committee is asked to consider the recommendations for changes to the Council's school admissions and home to school transport services developed through the Outcome Focused Review process.**
Recommendation:	**Committee is asked to comment on and approve the following recommendations:**

a) **The Local Authority establishes a Transport board to evaluate the council's position on its future role in facilitating access to education within the area of Post-16 Education Transport, informed by additional engagement with schools and customers.**
b) **Make website content more accessible and provide well-timed guidance to residents in order to reduce demand on customer services.**
c) **Resource needs to be dedicated to implement improvements to the systems that the services use in order to streamline processes for the customer, adapt to customer needs, and enable more efficient back-office processes for the team.**
d) **Re-introduce an opt-in system for secondary transport in order to reduce additional unused capacity.**
e) **Services working more closely together by co-locating the School Admissions and Education Transport team.**
f) **Development of more robust reflective practices.**

Officer contact:		Member contacts:	
Name:	**Jonathan Lewis**	Names:	**Councillor Simon Bywater and Councillor Samantha Hoy**
Post:	Executive Director of Education	Post:	Chairman and Vice Chairwoman of the Children and Young People Committee
Email:	Jonathan.Lewis@cambridgheshire.gov.uk	Email:	samphoy@googlemail.com
Tel:		Tel:	01223 706398

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 In autumn 2017, Members and the Senior Management Team at the Council asked services, supported by the Transformation Team, to deliver a series of Outcome Focused Reviews (OFRs). These reviews are an opportunity for Council services to have an in-depth evaluation of the activities services undertake, why the service delivers those activities, and how those activities are delivered. This OFR of the School Admissions and Education Transport services was launched in November 2017.

1.2 The School Admissions team delivers the Local Authority's school place planning responsibilities for mainstream pupils, while the Social and Educational Transport Team (SETT) manages the provision of home-to-school transport for mainstream and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) pupils. A summary of the statutory responsibilities for each service is featured in Appendix A. For the most part, the Council currently offers the minimum services required by statute. Exceptions to this are:
- Extending free transport provision to children aged 8-11 who live more than two miles from their designated primary school (rather than the statutory minimum of three miles).
- Consideration of requests for transport on medical grounds on a case-by-case basis.
- Subsidising transport for low-income students over the age of 16.

1.3 The review recognises that these two services are closely linked and it is many of the same children and their parents that each of these services is working to support. The ability for these two teams to effectively collaborate has significant implications for how Cambridgeshire parents experience the service.

2. MAIN ISSUES

2.0 There are a number of recent changes to the services that have a direct relevance to this OFR.

1) **Citizen Portal:** The introduction of the Citizen Portal for school admissions which enabled residents to apply for a school place online and alongside this the team are working towards eliminating paper applications.
2) **Total Transport Pilot:** The Total Transport pilot, funded by the Department for Transport, removed significant additional capacity from home-to-school transport services as well as introducing a new flexible, demand-responsive bus service in East Cambridgeshire.
3) **Post-16 Education Transport:** As of last year, the Council now only offers post-16 education transport support to students living in low income households who meet certain criteria.
4) **Shared Services Programme:** The Shared Services Programme between the Council and Peterborough City Council has grown significantly in both scope and pace in the last six months. For School Admissions there is already a Strategic Admissions Manager working across both Councils and this will facilitate the process of integrating the School Admissions services of Peterborough and Cambridgeshire. Education Transport across the two authorities is a relatively new area being explored for shared services.
5) **Community Transport Contracts Audit –**some of which cover school transport. In 2016, the Council commissioned an enquiry into complaints by the Cambridgeshire Bus Coach and Taxi Drivers Association about errors and discrepancies in the way services

were commissioned, grants administered, service delivery checked, funding awarded and contracts managed. The enquiry has now been completed with the investigating body PFK reporting its findings to the Council's Audit and Accounts Committee on July 31. An improvement plan has been agreed to address areas where arrangements were not delivered in a fit for purpose manner.

2.1 There are key societal and fiscal trends that have informed our recommendations.

1) A changing educational landscape
Schools have much greater independence and control over their own affairs than was previously the case. In interview, one school commented "A lot of the services that the school receives from the Council were designed when schools were part of the Local Authority family. There is now a completely different educational landscape and the services the Council offers needs to reflect that". Whilst all schools, including academies, are required to be part of the Council's co-ordinated schemes at the point of transfer (into reception and from year 7 into Secondary Schools), own admission authority schools (foundation, voluntary aided, academies and free schools) are not required to be part of the Council's co-ordinated scheme for in-year admissions, but the majority choose to do so. In this landscape, it is critical that the service the Council offers is flexible and can adapt to the needs of schools.

2) Technology and changes to customer expectations
The ability for individuals to track the progress of enquiries and gain regular updates has become commonplace for many services delivered by private sector organisations. This could be raising the expectations of parents who wish to contact the Council regarding school admissions or transport services. The Customer Service Centre reports that they receive regular contacts from parents to process chase – despite the fact that timescales for responses are communicated from the outset, and this costs the service money per call. Residents now have expectations for joined-up systems, efficient processes and the ability to pay online.

2.2 The recommendations presented in the following section have been developed following extensive engagement: an online survey with over 800 responses; a number of focus groups and telephone interviews with schools. Based on this data and with current processes mapped out, workshops have been held to identify how the service could change to better meet customer needs while also becoming more efficient. In addition, the Transformation Team has undertaken benchmarking activities with Buckinghamshire County Council, Hampshire County Council, Hertfordshire County Council Norfolk County Council and Peterborough City Council.

2.3 The services involved in this OFR would like to thank all of the parents and schools that provided feedback on the current service; the Local Authorities who shared their own practices and data with us and all of the Council services who provided input for this review.

Recommendations

3.0 Recommendation 1: The Local Authority establishes a Transport board to evaluate the council's position on its future role in facilitating access to education within the area of Post-16 Education Transport, informed by additional engagement with schools and customers.

3.1   **Current practice**

There is no statutory requirement for the authority to provide post-16 transport, although Councils do have a responsibility to facilitate access to participation in education and the Government requires that young people stay in education or training or are in work with training until their 18th birthday. This has not changed the statutory school leaving age; this remains 16.

The Council has decided to continue to provide automatic transport for post-16 children on low incomes. The Council also provides opportunities for parents to purchase spare seats that are not being utilised by entitled pupils on a first-come-first-served basis at the current cost of £230.

At the same time, recent Total Transport project has included work to proactively plan transport routes to the maximum efficiency, reducing the capacity of existing transport with a knock-on impact of limiting the number of spare seats available to offer to parents to purchase. In some instances, where public transport options are not available, the Council has utilised its spare seat capacity to help students to access post-16 education. There is a mixed picture around provision as currently some schools and Further Education (FE) colleges provide and manage their own transport.

As a Council we are limited in our ability to offer spare seats, as the number of seats on contracted services has to be within acceptable margins. We limit the risk of ending up with wasted seats by contracting services with seat volumes as close as possible to the number of eligible pupils that require transport. As stated above, currently parents can apply on a first-come-first served basis for spare seats and this means that certain pupils miss out on using contracted services. In the area of expanding the offer for spare seats, the risk to the Local Authority is significant because there is currently no way to predict the volume of non-eligible pupils that would request transport any given year and a large volume of pupils drop off during the year as they start to drive. This could result in the Council continuing to pay for services with more empty seats for the remaining months.

3.2   **Recommendation**

The Local Authority engages a Transport board to evaluate the council's position on its future role in facilitating access to education for pupils aged 16 and over.

It is believed that there may be scope for provision and management of home to school transport by local schools to be expanded, but more local research needs to be done to investigate the potential for expanding this model. Engaging schools and colleges including the Cambridgeshire Secondary Heads Association, Sixth Form Colleges and FE providers would be an important first step to taking this work forward.

Post-16 Transport board
Establishing a Transport board will create the opportunity for focused consideration of who the Council will provide transport to in the future and how it will support them, as well as considering feedback from FE schools and colleges. The board will be chaired by the Service Director – Education and would also consider the pressures across home to school

transport. Following the discussion of these issues, the board would report its conclusions back to the Committee.

New arrangements with FE schools and colleges
Depending on the results of further enquiry, there might be potential for schools that do not currently provide a service, to start providing one. While the Council would continue to have oversight of transport provision and subsidise transport for eligible pupils, participating schools would take on elements of the transport arrangements.

This could include:
- Carrying out the tender process for a provider to deliver transport for their school (supported by SETT)
- Managing provision for non-eligible pupils, including setting their own fees (spare seats)
- New payment methods (online banking, direct debits etc.)
- Communication with parents. This could be bespoke to individual schools and schools could choose to implement some of the suggestions from customers, such as: progress tracking of their transport applications, real-time journey tracking, and text updates to notify parents that students have arrived.

Aside from further investment into the transport budget, this may be one of the best options for facilitating access to education for pupils that don't meet the Council's eligibility criteria – particularly those pupils living in rural areas with poor transport provision. As schools could set their own rates for spare seats, while we subsidise transport for eligible pupils, they may be able to run viable services that support that cohort of pupils. The autonomy for schools on the rates that they charge would provide an incentive to FE schools and colleges and could offset any associated administration costs.

Areas on which the Council would need have a defined position would be:
- Communication with parents: whether we would want to standardise this across schools
- Setting standards for the providers that are selected by schools (DBS checked etc.)
- Governance, monitoring of each school's performance and taking action to remedy instances of poor management

If this measure was approved and adopted by post-16 schools/ colleges, the key financial benefits for the Council would be efficiencies from the reductions to the services' administrative workload, as the Council would continue to subsidise transport for the eligible groups.

Proposed actions and resource required
1) **Engage with the Cambridgeshire Secondary Heads Association, Sixth Form Colleges and FE providers** to establish a sense of the appetite for post-16 schools/ colleges playing a bigger role in transport provision and gather feedback on the post-16 policy
   - Project owner = SETT
   - Project support = Transformation team

- Cost = N/A

2) **Present findings back to CYP Committee** to get approval
   - Project owner = SETT
   - Project support = Transformation team
   - Cost = N/A

3.3   Benefits

We believe the benefits of this would be:
- The board would support the Council to set out an agreed clear and transparent position on the future of post-16 school transport which can be communicated to parents and their families./
- Relevant schools would have had the opportunity to be engaged to understand their perspectives on the future direction of post-16 school transport and their appetite for getting involved in provision in the future.

3.4   Risks/mitigation

The risks associated with this approach are as follows:
- There may not be a willingness from schools and colleges and other stakeholders to engage in further discussion on this issue so they will need to be proactively communicated with to ensure this can happen.
- There may not be the appetite from post-16 schools and colleges to set up different arrangements for home to school transport for their pupils and this would need to be tested out further with Cambridgeshire Secondary Heads Association, Sixth Form Colleges and FE providers.
- Any changes to the Council's position that result from this process could encounter opposition from pupils and families who currently access Council-funded transport, the reasons for any change would need to be communicated effectively.

3.5   Evidence

The evidence for this is as follows:
- In 17/18 there was a total of 411 students using the Council's spare seats provision to access post-16 education, generating an income of £86,310. It is too early to conclude with any certainty but it does appear that these numbers are in decline. This is in the context of an expenditure of £377,000 on post-16 education transport (not taking into account income).
- In our survey of parents, a number were concerned about this issue, with comments about the school leaving age [as stated above, this remains 16] ("It's shocking that although I have to send my child to sixth form education transport is not provided"), the criteria around allocation of spare seats ("I think it is unfair that those living in villages, that does not have public transport running early enough for going to school, has no priority for a spare seat"), cost ("I don't mind paying towards the cost of transport to school for my children, but it is currently too high") and the Proposed actions and resource required of the current approach ("Was not impressed last year that paid for a college bus pass and then not enough seats for 1 week").

- The Team find the Spare Seats policy opaque and difficult to explain and the process difficult to implement e.g. payments are made but refunded if seats are not available, pupils may only require spare seats for short periods of time but buses are contracted for much longer, and parents have been unhappy about the criteria used to determine the allocation of spare seats and have successfully campaigned for extra provision where this has been withdrawn.
- A number of schools and colleges already provide transport for their post-16 pupils and we believe there is interest from others in doing more of this. This has been set up on a case-specific basis with two local secondary schools.
- Although not yet concluded, Cambridge University students are currently researching the impact of rurality upon the life-chances of young people, which may well make recommendations around post-16 transport.
- Some other Councils, such as Hampshire County Council, have a policy statement which pupils and parents have to demonstrate their inability to meet to access transport before any support is provided.

4.0 *Recommendation 2:* **Make website content more accessible and provide well-timed guidance to residents in order to reduce demand on customer services**

4.1 **Current practice**

The Council's website is the primary source of information provided around School Admissions and Education Transport for customers. The website contains downloadable policy documents and content is amended when the teams believe further information is required rather than at certain times of the year. In the OFR survey, 55.9% of respondents cited their School or College as their primary source of information for school admissions, with the Council's website the second highest response at 21.2%. When finding answers to queries, or resolving issues related to the application process, while just under half of respondents use information on the Council website, a quarter of respondents stated that they called the School Admissions team.

School Admissions Team and SETT also provide information to customers through the following channels:
- Letters (e.g. offer letters)
- Email correspondence: some offers, responding to queries
- Updates on the Customer Portal (*School Admissions only)*
- Inbound phone calls to the Customer Service Centre, escalated by calls/ emails to School Admissions and SETT.
- Social media communication through the Communications team
- Paper booklets distributed at local schools/ nurseries.

4.2 **Recommendation**

It is proposed that we implement a one year action plan to improve web content and prototype a digital solution which would aim for a single point of contact for customer inquiries. This would take the form of an initial phase in 2018 of website, e-form and correspondence changes, supplemented by a chatbot to filter calls further, followed by a process of review and ultimate absorption of customer service functions within the existing

teams from May 2019. We would also seek to trial some behavioural insights work into this approach.

Proposed actions and resource required:
1) **Design work to transform the website content for School Admissions and Transport**
   - Project owner = Information team, SETT and SAT
   - Project support = Transformation team (one-off)
   - Cost = N/A
2) **Design work to improve the e-forms so that they contain timely guidance (that we would remove from the website)**
   - **Project owner = IT and Digital team, SETT and SAT. Possible LGSS Digital support**
   - **Project support = Transformation team (one-off)**
   - **Cost = £8 – 10k**

3) **Work with the Customer Service Centre to review improvement on overall call volumes and volume of avoidable calls**
   - Project owner = Customer Service team, SETT and SAT.
   - Project support = Transformation team (one-off)
   - Cost = N/A

4) **Design and integration of a Chatbot for the SETT and SAT call tree**
   - Project owner = LGSS Digital, SETT and SAT.
   - Project support = Transformation team (one-off)
   - Cost = Not known

4.3 **Benefits**

We believe the benefits of this would be:
- Savings on the cost of over £8,500 for currently classified avoidable calls (where customers cite a reason for their call that could reasonably have been pre-empted) as well as other calls to both the Contact Centre and the services.
- Savings on the cost of e-mail based customer service
- The current SLAs between the Contact Centre and School Admissions and Education Transport, costing £58,272, would no longer be required upon successful reduction of call volumes.
- The current stream of e-mails from the Contact Centre to School Admissions and SETT teams chasing on progress around customer queries would cease.
- There would be a reduced workload for service staff, freeing up their time for more proactive, high priority work e.g. route reviews or focused SEND, alternatively it could reduce the need for current staffing levels.

4.4 **Risks/mitigation**

The risks associated with this approach include:
- Making insufficient information available for parents on revised web pages. This would need to be addressed by School Admissions and SETT working closely with the Information Team to review and update content effectively.

- The language used on the revised web pages could remain difficult for customers to understand, this could be avoided by engagement with service users to gather feedback on proposed new content.
- Premature cancelling of the SLA could result in calls being rerouted to the service, overwhelming the capacity of staff. This could be addressed by phasing in the introduction of these changes, with regular evaluation of the impact upon call volumes, and seconding in Customer Service Advisors into the service to manage enquiries as required.

4.5 **Evidence**

- The OFR survey showed that for resolving issues in relation to admissions and transport, residents used the following routes:
  School Admissions
    - 43.5% of respondents said they used the Council's website but 24.7% called the School Admissions Team
    - 28.6% said they relied on advice from friends and family and for resolving education transport queries
  Home-to-School Transport
    - 45.7% of respondents cited the Council's website
    - 44.6% called SETT
    - 27.2% said that they relied on advice from families and friends.
  Full survey headlines can be found in **Appendix B**.
- The OFR survey also highlighted a number of very dissatisfied customers, particularly around how confusing the website is and the inaccessibility of the language used. These included the following comments:
    - "I found it difficult to understand what to do and wasn't clear on some of the technology"
    - "Trying to find information about transport help on the website is difficult"
    - "My obstacle was difficulty finding the form on the website".
  The information team also report many of the current webpages receive very few hits.
- The Council receives a number of classified avoidable queries by phone and email. There are currently 4,243 calls around Education Transport and School Admissions classified as avoidable at a cost of approximately £8,642. These are only a fraction of the overall 24, 379 calls to the Contact Centre which could be reduced by even better online information as well as the large number of calls dealt with by the services which staff report take up much of their time.
- In addition to direct customer inquiries, the SETT and School Admissions teams state that they receive approximately 3,445 e-mails a year from the Contact Centre either chasing or escalating inquiries, which we have estimated take up 20.1 hours a month of staff time, at a cost of approximately £3,600 per year. Feedback from the service has been that the volume of enquiries coming through has a significant impact on their workload and they feel many of these inquiries could be resolved by the Customer Service Advisors.
- Other Local Authorities have successfully achieved significant savings and improved customer satisfaction by transforming their customer service offer through digital innovation and increasing the clarity of their online content e.g. Buckinghamshire County Council have reduced their 36,000+ School Admissions related calls a year down to zero through implementing a programme of better online information, webchat functions, and managing customer demand, switching off their call line for this area of inquiry.

5.0   Recommendation 3: Resource needs to be dedicated to implement improvements to the systems that the services use in order to streamline processes for the customer, adapt to customer needs, and enable more efficient back-office processes for the team.

5.1   <u>**Current practice**</u>

Since 2017, School Admissions have had a Citizen Portal provided through Capita One which customers can log into, apply for a school place online and receive updates on their application. SETT do not currently have a similar portal for school transport. E-forms are available on the website for current processes, and are provided through the Jadu system. Current systems are being looked at in the context of the Shared Services programme.

5.2   <u>**Recommendation**</u>

We believe that resource needs to be dedicated to ensure significant improvements to our systems are made to streamline our existing processes for the customer, adapt to their needs and enable more efficient processes for the teams to use.

These specifically include staff time (and potentially investment) to ensure systems that are:
- Giving customers additional permissions on the customer portal and e-forms to enable them to more easily log-in and log back in.
- Giving customers the ability to upload all relevant evidence (e.g. proof of address) on the customer portal and e-forms.
- Giving customers the ability to make online payments for transport over a school term – with no need for cheques.
- Removing the practice of SETT receiving payment and then refunding where seats are not available (specifically relevant to spare seats).
- Enabling School Admissions and SETT to share more data between their teams. The IT and Digital team have reported that there is some scope for maximising use of existing functionalities on the system that would facilitate data sharing between the two teams. This would require further staff training.
- Enabling School Admissions and SETT to share more information with schools and transport providers where necessary.
- Developing a suitable portal or other application management option for SETT.

Proposed actions and resource required
1. **Finalise scope of the customer service portal/ e-forms changes sought by the SETT and SAT**
   - Project owner = IT and Digital team, SETT and SAT.
   - Project support = Transformation team (one off)
   - Cost = N/A

2. **Implement changes**
   - Project owner = IT and Digital team (possible LGSS Digital support)
   - Project support = Transformation team (one off)
   - Cost = N/A

3. Test changes with users
- Project owner = IT and Digital team, SETT and SAT.
- Project support = Transformation team (one off)
- Cost = N/A

5.3 <u>Benefits</u>

We believe the benefits of this would be:
- An improved customer experience in relation to our School Admissions and Education Transport processes and services.
- A reduction in customer enquiries (both by phone and e-mail) in relation to issues with their interaction with our systems.
- A more joined-up service between School Admissions and SETT without the need for unnecessary contact to check information.
- A more cohesive and joined-up relationship between our services, schools and providers.
- There would be a reduced workload for service staff, freeing up their time for more proactive, high priority work or reduce the need for current staffing levels.
- Better datasets, more able to produce automatic reports, which would allow stronger analysis of how well our current systems work and where there is scope for improvement.

5.4 <u>Risks/mitigation</u>

- Resources required for these changes might escalate. Initial conversations with technology teams indicate most of these issues should be able to be resolved at little or no cost, or met through existing budgets, but close monitoring of this issue would be required and where investment is required, a specific business case developed.
- It could be that these changes are not delivered. Up until now suitable changes to systems have not been implemented and current providers have not been willing to adapt their systems to our needs. We would therefore want to use all mechanisms, such as the Regional Local Authority Forum[1] with our current provider, to ensure we have the systems we need in place and have Proposed actions and resource required closely monitored to track progress.
- There is the possibility that greater sharing of sensitive information could mean that this is not sufficiently secure. The necessary systems, training and protocols around information security that the Council has in place would need to be adhered to.

5.5 <u>Evidence</u>

- Our survey highlights that some customers are highly frustrated with their functions for logging in to our systems, using our e-forms, uploading relevant evidence and making online payments. Specific quotes include:

---

[1] The regional forum attended by School Admissions representatives from Local Authorities in East Anglia.

"After clicking on 'citizen portal' and going through a few clicks here and there, it would then go back to citizen portal round and round. I missed the deadline. In March, I tried again, this time, after clicking on 'forgotten password', I'd wait for the email with a link to reset my password and nothing happened."

"Please, please make it easier to pay and for the whole year if possible and NOT by cheque. Only my grandparents use cheques. Also we have to wait for a letter to come to us before we can send a cheque."

- In our discussions with Schools, some reported difficulty extracting the data they require around pupils and their admissions and the reliability and detail of that information.
- School admissions and Education Transport report difficulties in sharing information across their systems, with simple confirmation of data issues having to be resolved by e-mail, phone or face-to-face contact.
- There is frustration with the inadequacy of the systems the teams are currently using, particular for Education Transport, and the lack of suitable technology systems to enable them to conduct their work effectively.
- Capita does offer a Transport Portal option that costs approximately £15k for the license and £3k annual maintenance. What this will mean is that when a parent logs into the Citizen Portal to complete an admissions application, they can also make an application for transport. The service did look at this option in October 2017 and discounted this based on cost and lack of functionality in particular this applied to applications for SEND pupils and post-16.
- To integrate information from the e-form into back office systems this could cost approx. £8-10k per integration with 20% maintenance costs to keep the development in sync with the back office.
- The IT and Digital service have confirmed that the team could support the design of a basic new forms package in house

6.0   Recommendation 4*: Re-introduce an opt-in system for secondary transport in order to reduce additional unused capacity on transport to Secondary Schools.

6.1   **Current practice**

Currently Secondary pupils who are allocated a school place and are eligible for transport under the criteria are automatically allocated provision for that transport for school whether they require it or not. Likewise there is no requirement for eligible Primary Schools pupils to opt-in; for both primary and secondary schools the service offer transport provision on an opt-out basis. This follows a previous review of the Council's practices which recommended this change as a simplification for customers.

6.2   **Recommendation**

It is our recommendation that we reintroduce an opt-in system for eligible pupils who wish to have secondary school transport provided for them, rather than providing them with transport automatically without asking them first. We understand that this could easily be incorporated within the current systems and forms through the introduction of a simple tick-box question for customers.

Proposed actions and resource required

4. Communications to advertise the change of policy
- Project owner = Comms team, SETT and SAT.
- Cost = N/A

5. Adding information into the School Admissions Policy
- Project owner = SETT.
- Cost = N/A

6. Implementing the change to the customer service portal/ e-forms (in order that customers can indicate their preference earlier in the process)
- Project owner = IT and Digital team, SETT and SAT. Possible LGSS Digital support
- Project support = Transformation team (one off)
- Cost = N/A

6.3 **Benefits**

We believe that the benefits of this would be:
- A more efficient process of matching school transport provision with the number of pupils both eligible and requiring transport.
- The ability to make savings on school transport provision by removing current unused capacity.

6.4 **Risks/mitigation**

- Work on Total Transport has already taken out significant capacity and so any savings may not be as extensive as they might have been if this work to improve the efficiency of the existing routes had not been carried out. This will need to be tested through monitoring of Proposed actions and resource required.
- Large numbers of parents may continue to opt-in to the School Transport they are entitled to and should they do so then this will still need to be provided, limiting the extent of any savings. The extent of this activity could be mitigated by the effectiveness of our pro-active communications activity.
- Parents may not choose to opt-in to School Transport but then still require it at the last minute, and the service will still need to make provision for them. The service will have to manage any situation like this, and may wish to leave a few additional seats on existing provision in order to anticipate this possibility.

6.5 **Evidence**

- The work conducted by the Council around Total Transport was able to reduce existing capacity by as much as 10% by a more efficient proactive planning of routes, even with the assumption of automatic provision of transport.
- It is the strong belief of the SETT team that by asking customers to confirm whether they wish to take up the offer of school transport it will be possible to identify parents and families that will not require provision.

- This process was in place in the past at the Council and other Local Authorities do request confirmation of the desire for school transport e.g. Peterborough are switching from an opt-out system to an opt-in system from September 2018.
- If this was to reduce existing capacity by between 3-5% this would represent a saving of £270k-£450k over a three year period due to contract lifecycles.

7.0   Recommendation 5: Services working more closely together by co-locating the School Admissions and Education Transport team

7.1   **Current practice**

The current School Admissions and Education Transport teams are primarily based on the same floor at the Council's Shire Hall site but do not sit together. They are also based in different directorates. The two teams do correspond and meet with each other but equally have similar relationships with other teams.

7.2   **Recommendation**

We believe that the services could work more closely together by co-locating the School Admissions and Education Transport team.

Proposed actions and resource required
1. **Arrange the changes with Facilities Management**
    - Project owner = SETT and SAT
    - Cost = N/A

7.3   **Benefits**

We believe that the benefits of this would be:
- Greater collaboration between the two teams on specific cases, enabling more effective resolution of issues that arise.
- Greater sharing of data and intelligence across the two teams, improving the efficiency of how issues are currently dealt with.
- A more joined-up customer journey for pupils and their families as they progress through the School Admissions and Education Transport process.

7.4   **Risks/mitigation**

- There is a risk that co-location might not necessarily lead to collaboration in and of itself. It would therefore be important that this was accompanied by support from managers of both teams to encourage collaborative behaviours and a shared approach to issues.
- There may be practical difficulties in co-locating the current teams in one place and this may well be even more difficult once the Council has moved out of Shire Hall and has a hub-and-spoke system across the County. This would need to be conducted sensitively within this context as to what would be practical, with other mechanisms (such as technology and encouraging collaborative behaviours) also deployed where full co-location is not possible.

7.5   **Evidence**

- The School Admissions Team and SETT have reported difficulties in sharing information with each other effectively.
- Other Local Authorities have co-located their School Admissions and Education Transport teams and report that this has assisted their ability to deliver a cohesive service for customers e.g. Hertfordshire County Council have all their teams in this area sitting together having previously had them spread around different buildings.

8.0   Recommendation 6: Development of more robust reflective practices

8.1   **Current practice**

Currently the School Admissions team have an annual consultation process, which is used to inform current practice and is included in the team's appraisal objectives. SETT do not currently have a similar system in place but do work with organisations such as Pinpoint, with whom they have co-produced a Code of Conduct and individual pupil passports for children with SEN. Information on customer contacts is gathered by the Contact Centre and relayed to the teams, but this is more often about the need for inquiries to be responded to rather than assessing the content of these inquiries.

8.2   **Recommendation**

We recommend that School Admissions and Education Transport put in place mechanisms for their teams to get regular feedback from customers and stakeholders themselves and encourage staff to make changes to their practices to improve customer experiences based on that feedback. This could include customer surveys, collating and assessing information from customer queries, running consultation events with schools, testing web content with customers, seeking views on social media.

Proposed actions and resource required
1. **Improving the annual consultation process so that further feedback is gathered from customers**
   - Project owner = SETT and SAT
   - Project support = Transformation team (ad hoc)
   - Cost = N/A

8.3   **Benefits**

- School Admissions and Education Transport will be better informed as to the views, wants and needs of their customers and stakeholders.
- School Admissions and Education Transport will be more able to identify and make changes to their current processes which would improve the experience of customers.
- Pupils, their families, schools and other stakeholders e.g. Pinpoint, would be better able to input into the development of these two services in future.
- There would be less of a need for internal or external reviews, such as this OFR in future.

8.4 **Risks/mitigation**

- There is a risk that customers and stakeholders might not be willing to provide feedback. This was not the case with responses to the OFR survey and other activity, however suitable communication to encourage participation would be required.
- There is a risk that the engagement work might not yield useful insight or actionable recommendations. This would seem to be a risk worth taking to find out what further ideas might be generated but even if this were not to happen, the regular involvement of customers, schools and other stakeholders would at a bare minimum generate goodwill from other important parts of the overall system.
- There is a risk that instituting regular feedback processes might take up considerable time of busy officers. By setting up regular processes this should not be a resource intensive requirement, and could well save time by informing where services to prioritise their work most effectively to meet customer needs and which things they could scale back or stop doing.

8.5 **Evidence**

- The OFR process of surveys and engagement has demonstrated a strong desire from customers to express their views on their experience of the current School Admissions and Education Transport process and a desire to discuss potential solutions (both simple and more complex).
- The OFR process has demonstrated a strong desire from Schools and other stakeholders e.g. Pinpoint, to discuss their experience of the current School Admissions and Education Transport system and a desire to work with the Council on solutions together e.g. some schools spoken to were keen to jointly run School Admissions annual consultation with the Council.

9. ALIGNMENT WITH CORPORATE PRIORITIES

9.1 Developing the local economy for the benefit of all
There are no significant implications for this priority.

9.2 Helping people live healthy and independent lives
There are no significant implications for this priority.

9.3 Supporting and protecting vulnerable people
There are no significant implications for this priority.

10. SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Resource Implications

The following bullet points set out details of resource implications identified by officers:
- Integrating information from the e-form into back office systems would cost c£8-10k per integration with 20% maintenance costs to keep the development in sync with the back office.

10.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.

10.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications
The following bullet points set out details of resource implications identified by officers:
- Possible reputational risk from reversing the decision to remove the opt-in school admissions process *(Minor)*

10.4 Equality and Diversity Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.

10.5 Engagement and Communications Implications
The report sets out the results of community engagement in **Appendix B.**

10.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement
There are no significant implications within this category.

10.7 Public Health Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.

SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Source Documents	Location
None.	

Appendix A: The Legal Framework

School Admissions
The School Admissions team delivers the Local Authority's school place planning responsibilities for mainstream pupils. Under section 86 School Standards and Framework Act 1998, for applications in the normal admissions round, Local Authorities must provide a Common Application Form (CAF) that enables parents to express their preference for a place at any state-funded school. Furthermore Local Authorities are under an obligation to comply with the wishes of a parent in expressing a preference for a particular school, unless it would prejudice the provision of education or the efficient use of resources.

The local authority has a duty to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people and to eliminate discrimination and therefore the admissions process must not affect children with disabilities less favourably than others in the admissions process (section 149 Equality Act 2010).

Children with Education Health and Care plans fall outside the standard admissions process, they are not admitted through the admissions arrangements and are placed in schools through the EHCP process. Under section 37 Children and Families Act 2014, the school named in an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) must admit the child.

Whilst all schools, including academies are required to be part of the Council's co-ordinated schemes at the point of transfer (into reception and from year 7 into Secondary Schools), own admission authority schools (foundation, voluntary aided, academies and free schools) are not required to be part of the Council's co-ordinated scheme for in-year admissions, but the majority choose to do so. Section 94 School Standards and Framework Act 1998 requires admission authorities of schools to make arrangements to allow parents to appeal against any decision to refuse entry, following an application. All appeals are held in accordance with legislation and the national School Admissions Code.

Moreover, Local Authorities should have in place both complaints and appeals procedures for parents to follow, and the procedure should be published and accessible. Whilst the exact form of the process has no associated obligations, recommendations are set out in the Statutory Guidance[2].

Home to School/College Transport (Mainstream)

The legal parameters relating to home to school/college transport for children and young people of statutory school age are set out in Sections 508, 509 and schedule 35B of the 1996 Education Act as amended by the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Sections 509(1) and (2) place a duty upon local authorities to provide free transport where necessary to facilitate the attendance of children and students at schools and institutions both within and outside of the further and higher education sectors.

Section 509(3) allows local authorities to pay the whole or any part of reasonable travelling expenses when not making provision under 509(2) above.

Section 509(4) requires local authorities to take certain factors into account including the child's

---

[2] As above

age, the nature of possible routes and parental wishes for the provision of education at a school or institution in which the religious education is that of the religion or denomination to which his/her parent adheres.

Section 509AD defines the duty placed on local authorities to have regard to religion and belief in exercising their school travel functions. They are required to provide free transport to the nearest secondary school preferred by reason of a parent's religion or belief between 2 and 15 miles from the child's home where the family meets the national low-income criteria.

In line with the requirements of the Act, the Council provides free transport for all young people of secondary school age (11-16) living in low income families **if** they are eligible for free school meals, or their parents are in receipt of their maximum level of Working Tax Credit[3], to:

- one of their three nearest qualifying schools where they live more than two miles, but not more than six miles from that school and
- the nearest suitable school preferred on grounds of religion or belief, where they live more than two miles, but not more than 15 miles from that school.

The Act requires authorities to make arrangements to assist students with transport costs, as appropriate, who are enrolled on a full-time post-16/FE course of study, which started before they reached the age of 19. For students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, assistance must be provided up to the age of 21, as a minimum. It does not prescribe what those arrangements might involve. It is therefore, for the Council to decide whether transport needs to be provided and under which circumstances assistance with travel should be available.

The law states that in providing transport, local authorities must make no less favourable arrangements for students attending a further education sector institution or a higher education institution maintained or assisted by the Council than at a maintained or state-funded school (be it a community, voluntary aided, foundation school or academy, including free schools and University Technical Colleges).

The law also stipulates that if the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) has secured for a student a placement for education or training at an institution outside the further and higher education sectors together with accommodation, the Council is under a duty to provide transport if it deems it necessary for facilitating the student's attendance at that institution.

Section 508A of the Act covers the duty upon local authorities to promote sustainable travel.

Section 508B of the Act deals with the duty on local authorities to make such travel arrangements as they consider necessary to facilitate attendance at school for 'eligible children'. Section 35B of the Act defines 'eligible children' – those categories of children in a Council's area for whom travel arrangements will always be required. A condition of each category is that they are of statutory school age. Under Section 508B, every feature of these arrangements must be provided free of charge.

Section 508C of the Act provides local authorities with the discretionary powers to make arrangements for those children not covered by Section 508B.

---

[3] These are statutory eligibility criteria.

Statutory walking distance is defined in Section 444(5) of the Act as either two miles (if the child is under 8 years of age) or three miles (if the child is aged 8 to 16 years old).

The Council has used its discretionary powers under Section 508C of the Act to apply a two mile 'walking distance' for children up to the point at which they transfer to secondary school at age 11.

The Equality Act 2010

S149 Equality Act 2010 ('The Act') places a duty on local authorities to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people and to eliminate discrimination. As such the Council has a duty to ensure that its policies, practices, procedures and services do not discriminate against disabled people.

Section 6 of The Act defines disability and section 20 defines the duty to make reasonable adjustments so that disabled people are not discriminated against.

The Council is under a legal duty to publish a policy that reflects these provisions and to comply with the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Appendix B: Summarised survey findings

School Admissions, May 2018

Primary source of information about this process:
- School / College = 55.9%
- Council Website = 21.2%
- Internet Search = 6.6%
- Word of mouth = 3.1%
- Media/ Social media (Facebook, Mumsnet etc.) = 0.2%
- School Admissions Booklet = 8.0%
- Nursery / preschool = 2.3%
- Primary school SENCO = 0.5%
- Previous family members attended the school = 0.7%

Ease of finding information about the application process:
- 13.5% found it difficult
- 62.3% found it simple

Length of time to complete the application:
- Under 30 minutes = 85.4%
- Over 30 minutes = 14.5%

Did you encounter any obstacles during the application process?
- Yes = 17.8%
- No = 82.2%

Route used to find answers to queries, or resolve issues related to the application process:
- 43.5% used information on the Council website
- 28.6% used advice from friends / family
- 5.1% used Media/ Social media advice
- 24.7% called the Council Admissions team
- 7.3% used the Admissions appeal process
- 3.7% sought advice from a support group
- 0.2% raised the issue with the Ombudsman
- 0.2% raised the issue with a Councillor

Rate the level of effectiveness of each of the following routes, for finding answers to queries, or resolving issues during the application process?
- 8.9% found Council website information ineffective
- 60.9% found Council website information effective

- 5.7% found Advice from friends and family ineffective
- 51.8% found Advice from friends and family effective

- 7.3% found Media/ Social media advice ineffective
- 17.7% found Media/ Social media advice effective

- 9.3% found a phone call to the Council Admissions team ineffective
- 27% found a phone call to the Council Admissions team effective

- 7.4% found the Admissions appeal process ineffective
- 9% found the Admissions appeal process effective

- 2.2% found advice from a support group ineffective
- 8% found advice from a support group effective

- 1.1% found the process of raising the issue with an Ombudsman ineffective
- 2% found the process of raising the issue with an Ombudsman effective

- 1.1% found the process of raising the issue with a Councillor ineffective
- 2% found the process of raising the issue with a Councillor effective

How would you prefer to receive information about the application process for admission in Sept 2019?
- 78.4% prefer to receive information from the Council website page
- 16.9% prefer to receive information from a Social network (Council Twitter, Council Facebook page, Local Facebook group etc.)
- 10.1% prefer to receive information from family / friends who have completed the process

- 3.7% prefer to receive information admissions information via word of mouth
- 24.0% prefer to receive information in a phone conversation with the School Admissions team
- 3.4% prefer to receive information from a local library

Overall, how would you rate the process of applying for a school place for your child?
- 15.6% found the application process difficult
- 65.2% found the application process simple

Home to School Transport, May 2018

Primary source of information about this service:
- School / College = 46.3%
- Council website = 26.3%
- Internet search = 5.3%
- Word of mouth = 16.8%
- Primary school SEN co-ordinator = 1.06%
- County Council letter = 1.06%
- Hospital = 1.06%
- START caseworker = 1.06%

Ease of accessing information about applying to this service:
- 29.5% found it difficult to access information
- 33.7% found it simple to access information

Length of time to complete the first application?
- It took 90% of people under 30 minutes to complete their transport application
- It took 10% of people more than 30 minutes

When you made your first application, did you encounter any obstacles?
- 71.6% of people encountered no obstacles

How often do you make this application?
- Half termly = 1.3%
- Termly = 14.1%
- Yearly = 84.6%

Did you encounter any obstacles when you reapplied to use this service?
- 22.4% encountered obstacles when they reapplied
- 77.6% did not encounter obstacles when they reapplied

Routes used to find answers to queries, or resolve issues related to the application process:
- 45.7%used information on the Council website
- 27.2% used advice from friends / family
- 6.5% used Media/ Social media advice
- 44.6% called the Council Admissions team
- 4.3%used the Admissions appeal process
- 4.3% sought advice from a support group
- 0.0% raised the issue with the Ombudsman
- 3.3% raised the issue with a Councillor

Rate the level of effectiveness of each of the following routes, for finding answers to queries, or resolving issues during the application process?

- 29.70% found the Council website information ineffective
- 53.60% found the Council website information effective

- 5.90% found advice from friends and family ineffective
- 41.70% found advice from friends and family effective

- 6.70% found media/ Social media advice ineffective
- 18.70% found media/ Social media advice effective

- 19% found a phone conversation with the Council Transport team ineffective
- 44.70% found a phone conversation with the Council Transport team effective

- 12% found the transport appeal process ineffective
- 5.30% found the transport appeal process effective

- 6.80% found using a support group ineffective
- 5.50% found using a support group effective

- 1.40% found raising their issue with an Ombudsman ineffective
- 2.70% found raising their issue with an Ombudsman effective

- 2.70% found raising their issue with a Councillor ineffective
- 8.10% found raising their issue with a Councillor effective

Preferred method of payment?
- Online card payment = 41.5%
- Card payment at school / college office = 4.9%
- Bank transfer = 7.3%
- Cheque = 1.2%
- Phone payment = 1.2%

Overall how would you rate the process of applying for this service?
- 27.6% found the process difficult
- 41.5% found the process simple