

MTFP: STOCKPORT LOCAL TRANSPORT – FREE SCHOOL BUS PASS
CONSULTATION REPORT

1. Executive Summary

The consultation focussed on the proposal to change the eligibility criteria for free school bus passes.

This report provides an interim summary of the consultation feedback received as at 2nd January 2019. The consultation will remain open until 25th January 2019 and final results will be provided to Cabinet in February 2019. There have been 294 responses to the consultation as at 2nd January 2019.

The majority of respondents so far (252,86%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal to change eligibility for free school bus passes to only parents in receipt of the maximum level of Working Tax Credits. A small proportion of respondents either agreed or agreed strongly with the proposal (32, 11%) and 10 (3.4%) of the respondents chose neither agree nor disagree.

In relation to the proposal to change the criteria for the allocation of free school bus passes we asked respondents to indicate their preference on the following two options:

- Option 1: To remove all faith schools, including those within the borough, from the eligibility criteria. This would mean, pupils would only be eligible for a school bus pass for the nearest school to their home (with places available) based on distance or other benefits criteria.
- Option 2: Only remove faith schools located outside the borough from the qualifying criteria for free school bus passes.

The highest number of respondents (126,43%) chose neither option 1 or 2. However, a significant proportion of respondents chose Option 2 (121, 41.2%). There was a much lower level of support for Option 1 (37,12.6%) and 10 respondents didn't have a preference.

On the question of whether people agreed with the timing of the introduction of the new criteria from September 2019, the majority of respondents either disagreed or disagreed strongly (228, 77.6%). Only 28 respondents (9.5%) either agreed or agreed strongly with the proposal.

There were 207 responses to the question about what the impact the reduction in eligibility would have. The vast majority of comments received were against the proposals (95%), whereas 3.4% were neutral and only one answer was in support.

The most frequent issue that was raised was the potential negative financial impact this proposal would have, straining household budgets and increasing child

poverty. The view that the proposal would adversely impact on religious families and schools was the next most frequent issue raised.

The remaining major issues were:

- Attendance – schools would see a drop in attendance
- Danger – children would be forced to travel in an unsafe manner
- Traffic – increased congestion on the roads as a result of less taking the bus

2. Consultation Methodology

The main method of consultation was an online public survey on the Council website which was available from 5th December 2018. The survey will remain open until 25th January 2019.

The following communication activity was undertaken to communicate the consultation to stakeholders between 5th December and 2nd January 2019:

- A social media message via the Council's platforms
- Direct communication to the parents and guardians of pupils with free school bus passes and current applicants
- Direct communication to all primary and secondary Headteachers
- Direct communication to Chairs of Governors
- Direct communication to Diocesan Authorities

3. Background

3.1. Background and Context: The Council has a mandate to provide financial assistance under Section 509 Education Act 1996 to those pupils deemed eligible for free school transport according to prescribed criteria. The criteria can be defined in three distinct sections; Statutory eligible, Extended Rights, Facilitating attendance:

Statutory Eligible

- Child is under the age of 8 and lives 2 miles or more from the Nearest Suitable School*,
- Child is over the age of 8 and lives 3 miles or more from the Nearest Suitable School*.

Extended Rights

Pupils whose families are in receipt of low income benefits:

- who attend one of the three nearest Suitable Schools and they live 2 miles or more from the School (maximum 6 miles home to school distance),
- who attend a school on the basis of faith or philosophical belief and live 2 miles or more from the School (maximum 15 miles home to school distance).

Facilitating Attendance

- Pupil is in Year 10 or 11 and has taken options for GCSE**

*The Council defines a 'Suitable School' as the Catchment area school or associated Catholic School designated to the Pupil's home address.

******These will typically be children of families who have moved to the area and need a school that offers the GCSE options that they have been following.

3.2. The current Council Home to School Travel Policy goes beyond the statutory requirements in two ways:

- a) It provides discretionary assistance to pupils attending denominational schools due to the use of the associated Catholic school element of the 'Suitable School' definition. Furthermore, the current policy states that if a denominational institution is not available within the Borough, the Council will assist with transport to and from that institution. The current policy makes provision for the Council to provide discretionary financial assistance to parents of pupils attending a denominational school because of their faith, regardless of whether there is a nearer non-denominational school with places available.

In practice this means that Stockport Council supports children attending Catholic schools within the Borough; supports some children attending a Church of England secondary school outside of the Borough; and supports some children to attend a secondary Jewish school; King David High School.

- b) In the case of extended rights entitlement, statutory guidance outlines what a low income family will be defined as; one element of this definition is a family in receipt of the maximum level of Working Tax Credit.

Following a review of arrangements in 2008 review a decision was made to provide eligible families on any level of Working Tax Credit with free school travel and it was suggested that the subject be reviewed in the future.

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council continues to provide free school travel in respect to the above category beyond the minimum statutory definition and therefore incurs additional costs. Under the existing policy all families in receipt of Working Tax Credit, irrespective of level, benefit from free school travel if assessed as eligible on distance.

3.3. Current Free School Travel Pass Uptake

The table below provides information on free school travel pass uptake in Stockport since 2011. It is evident from the figures provided that there has been a decrease year on year. The decrease ties in with pupil numbers in the secondary sector whereby they've plateaued; capacity has been added to the school system in preparation for predicated increases which in the short term has eased pressures. However further capacity is needed to meet the demand our projections indicate. Pupil numbers are going to rise as these cohorts have been tracked through primary school.

Year	Total Passes Issued
2011/12	1482
2012/13	1497
2013/14	1476
2014/15	1419

2015/16	1368
2016/17	1308
2017/18	1294
2018/ to date	1226

2.3.1 Breakdown of pupils made eligible based on faith or philosophical belief:

Of the 1,226 passes issued so far this year, 374 are pupils whose eligibility has been based upon faith or a philosophical belief, equalling 30.5% of total applications in this period. They attend the following schools:

School	Total Passes Issued
Harrytown Catholic High School	146
St Annes' Catholic High School	7
St James' Catholic High School	205
The King David High School	10
Trinity Church of England High School	6

If the proposal in this document to redefine 'Suitable School' is accepted the number of pupils made eligible based on faith or philosophical belief will reduce as follows:

School	Still eligible	No longer eligible
Harrytown Catholic High School	146	0
St Annes' Catholic High School	7	0
St James' Catholic High School	184	21
The King David High School	0	10
Trinity Church of England High School	0	6

Breakdown of pupils made eligible based on Working Tax Credit additional support:

Of the 1,226 passes issued (2018 to date) 94 are for families who are not in receipt of their maximum Working Tax Credit, equalling 7.6% of total applications in this period.

Breakdown of Working Tax Credit from students eligible in 2018 to date:

	Number	Cost
Maximum working tax credit	7	£2,646
Below maximum working tax credit	94	£35,541
Total	101	£38,187

Breakdown of Working Tax Credit by area in 2018 to date:

Area	Maximum Working Tax Credit	Below maximum Working Tax Credit	Current Total
Adswood		9	9
Brinnington	5	49	54
Cale Green		6	6
Cheadle		3	3
Cheadle Heath		2	2
Edgeley	1	3	4
Hazel Grove		3	3
Heald Green		4	4
Heaton Chapel		1	1
Heaton Norris		1	1
High Lane		2	2
Marple		1	1
North Reddish		2	2
Offerton		3	3
Portwood		3	3
Romiley	1	1	2
South Reddish		1	1

3.4. The following options therefore exist:

In relation to Removal of Faith element of Free School Travel eligibility:

- a) Redefine the concept of a 'Suitable School' omitting catchment and associated Catholic school areas in favour of: *The nearest School to the pupil's home address with places available*. This proposed definition is aligned with the definition provided in statutory guidance, Home to School Transport Guidance July 2014,
- b) Omit the stipulation regarding funding / providing assistance to pupils who wish to attend a denominational institutions outside of the Borough whose offer cannot be provided for within Borough boundaries.

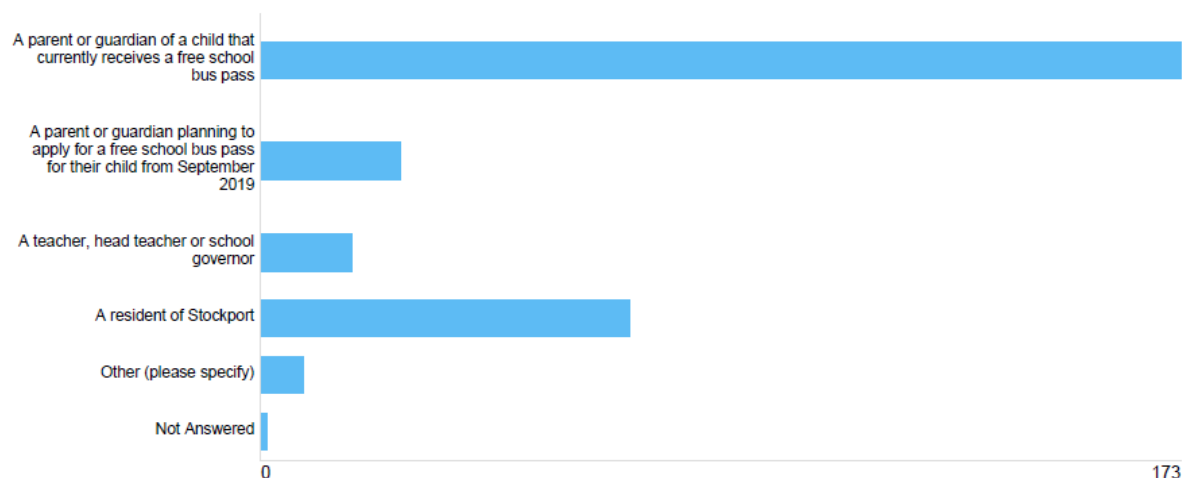
In relation to Removal of Working Tax Credit additional support:

Vary the definition used in extended entitlement back to its statutory level i.e. low income be defined as:

1. Pupils who qualify for free school meals,
2. Pupils whose parents/guardians are in receipt of their maximum level of Working Tax Credit.

4. Results

Question 1: Are you?



Option	Total	Percent
A parent or guardian of a child that currently receives a free school bus pass	173	58.84%
A parent or guardian planning to apply for a free school bus pass for their child from September 2019	26	8.84%
A teacher, head teacher or school governor	17	5.78%
A resident of Stockport	69	23.47%
Other (please specify)	8	2.72%
Not Answered	1	0.34%

Question 2: How far do you agree or disagree that the Council should reduce entitlement to its minimum statutory level so that only pupils whose parents/guardians are in receipt of the maximum level of Working Tax Credit qualify for free school bus passes?

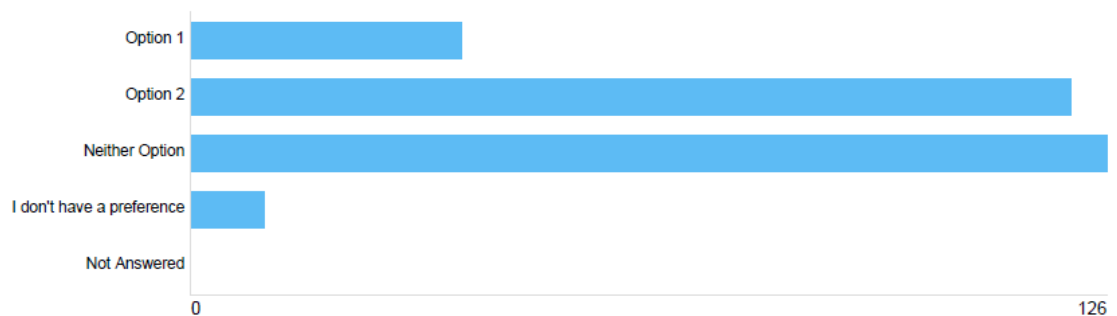


Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	18	6.12%
Tend to Agree	14	4.76%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	10	3.40%
Tend to Disagree	27	9.18%
Strongly Disagree	225	76.53%
Don't Know	0	0%
Not Answered	0	0%

Question 3: The Council is reviewing its criteria for allocation of free school bus passes for travel to faith schools. Please indicate which of the options below you prefer:

Option 1: To remove all faith schools, including those within the borough, from the eligibility criteria. This would mean, pupils would only be eligible for a school bus pass for the nearest school to their home (with places available) based on distance or other benefits criteria.

Option 2: Only remove faith schools located outside the borough from the qualifying criteria for free school bus passes.



Option	Total	Percent
Option 1	37	12.59%
Option 2	121	41.16%
Neither Option	126	42.86%
I don't have a preference	10	3.40%
Not Answered	0	0%

Question 4: Do you have any other comments on the impact the reduction in the eligibility for free school buses would have on you?

There were 207 responses to this part of the question. The vast majority of comments received were against the proposals (95%), whereas 3.4% were neutral and only one answer was in support.

The most frequent issue that was raised was the potential negative financial impact this proposal would have, straining household budgets and increasing child poverty. The perception this was tantamount to religious discrimination was the next most populous issue raised.

The remaining major issues were:

- Attendance – schools would see a drop in attendance
- Danger – children would be forced to travel in an unsafe manner
- Traffic – increased congestion on the roads as a result of less taking the bus

Question 5: If the new criteria is accepted this would take effect from September 2019. How far do you agree or disagree with this timing?



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	20	6.80%
Tend to Agree	8	2.72%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	32	10.88%
Tend to Disagree	16	5.44%
Strongly Disagree	212	72.11%
Don't Know	4	1.36%
Not Answered	2	0.68%

Question 6: Do you have any further comments

There were 142 responses to this part of the question.

The majority of the comments were on the financial impact of the proposals, particularly for parents with more than one child who would be affected. Concern was also expressed around the timing of the proposals because parents had already chosen schools for their children without knowing this information. There was also concern about potential disruption to education if children were to move schools and that the proposals were discriminatory against people with religious

beliefs. The negative impact on traffic and the risk of children having to travel to school in a dangerous manner were also raised.

A sample of some of the comments received are shown below:

Impact of the timing of the proposals

- “Parents and children opted for Schools without knowing this additional information about their travel to school.”
- “It seems unfair to bring this in after applications for places have closed as it might have affected some families' thinking. Would it also affect pupils already in receipt of bus passes? If so, that would place hardship on vulnerable families.”
- “Given that some families will have to find significant funds on an annual basis I think you need a long lead into the implementation.”
- “We were not made aware of this and have not budgeted for this change - should it happen we may have 2 children to fund to go to school and we did not factor this in when we made the preferences on our son's application form for 2019.”

Financial impact on families

- “All families in receipt of tax credits should remain eligible as that is proof they require financial assistance meeting the needs of their family!”
- “If this was to take affect do you not think most parents would need more time to start building up their savings? Most parents have 2 or 3 children at school and will need to work out how they are going to afford this extra cost.”

Impact on education

- “I think a lot of children who are in faith schools will end up having to move schools and for those who have their GCSEs coming up it's a tragic outcome.”

Impact on families with religious beliefs

- “It is discriminatory to include faith schools at all as why should pupils and families be forced to pay for previously free buses purely down to religious beliefs.”
- “This will have a major impact on Faith schools because people won't be able to afford to send their children to them. Therefore it is discriminating against children who have a faith and the parents who want their children to be in a Faith school.”

Environmental Impact

- “This goes against any "green" commitment the Council might have. A single bus full of kids removes dozens of cars from the road at the most congested times; if anything these programs should be expanded, not reduced. If you need to cut, cut subsidies to businesses.”

Risk of dangerous travel routes

- “paying for the bus is impossible on our current financial commitments. Cycling is not an option because the route would be too challenging & DANGEROUS re the lack of a designated cycle lane.”

5. Demographics

Question: What best describes your gender?

Option	Total	Percent
Male	59	20.07%
Female	216	73.47%
Prefer to self-describe	0	0%
Prefer not to answer	18	6.12%
Not Answered	1	0.34%

Question: Do you consider yourself to have an impairment, disability or long term health condition?

Option	Total	Percent
Yes	37	12.59%
No	234	79.59%
Prefer not to answer	21	7.14%
Not Answered	2	0.68%

Question: What is your age?

Option	Total	Percent
0 - 17	1	0.34%
18 - 24	4	1.36%
25 - 34	25	8.50%
35 - 44	97	32.99%
45 - 54	115	39.12%
55 - 64	22	7.48%
65 - 74	8	2.72%
75 - 84	1	0.34%
85+	0	0%
Prefer not to answer	20	6.80%
Not Answered	1	0.34%

Question: How would you define your ethnic group?

Option	Total	Percent
White- English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	238	80.95%
White- Irish	7	2.38%
White- Gypsy or Irish Traveller	1	0.34%
White- any other White background, please specify	7	2.38%
Mixed- White and Black Caribbean	1	0.34%
Mixed- White and Black African	0	0%
Mixed- White and Asian	2	0.68%
Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, please	0	0%
Asian or Asian British-Indian	0	0%
Asian or Asian British- Pakistani	0	0%
Asian or Asian British-Bangladeshi	0	0%
Asian or Asian British- Chinese	0	0%
Any other Asian background, please specify	0	0%
Black or Black British- African	1	0.34%
Black or Black British- Caribbean	0	0%
Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please specify	0	0%
Other ethnic group- Arab	0	0%
Any other ethnic group, please specify	2	0.68%
Prefer not to answer	21	7.14%
Not Answered	14	4.76%

Question: How would you define your religion or belief?

Option	Total	Percent
No religion	55	18.71%
Christian	183	62.24%
Muslim	2	0.68%
Hindu	0	0%
Buddhist	1	0.34%
Jewish	12	4.08%
Sikh	0	0%
Other	6	2.04%
Prefer not to answer	33	11.22%
Not Answered	2	0.68%

Question: Are you...?

Option	Total	Percent
Employed Full Time	140	47.62%
Employed Part Time	70	23.81%
Self-Employed	20	6.80%
Unemployed	4	1.36%
Long-Term Sick/Disabled	5	1.70%
Retired	11	3.74%
Home-maker/Care-giver	20	6.80%
Student	3	1.02%
Other	1	0.34%
Prefer not to answer	19	6.46%
Not Answered	1	0.34%

Question: What is your relationship status?

Option	Total	Percent
Single	44	14.97%
With a partner (not living together)	5	1.70%
Living with a partner	28	9.52%
Married or in a civil partnership	175	59.52%
Separated (but still legally married or in a civil partnership)	8	2.72%
Widowed	1	0.34%
Other	4	1.36%
Prefer not to answer	27	9.18%
Not Answered	2	0.68%

6. Mitigation

Based on feedback from the results of the consultation exercise, included here are details on how the issues would be mitigated against if the proposals were to be implemented.

Issue identified in the consultation	Mitigating Action
Financial Impact on families	Free travel will continue for those pupils whose nearest qualifying school is outside statutory walking distance. Free travel will continue to be provided to pupils from low income families
Impact on families who have already made choices regarding their child's school.	Consideration to be given to a phased implementation
Religious discrimination	The proposed changes to the Home to School Transport Policy are intended to ensure that all pupils are treated equitably regardless of whether they attend a denominational or non-denominational school
Faith schools may not have sufficient numbers of pupils	Alternative funding models could be considered to support the retention of the existing free travel or a reduction to part-funded free travel. This could be a combination of funding from the denominational schools or Diocesan authorities

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1. Scrutiny Members are asked to provide comments for Cabinet.