

Consultation on proposed changes to Somerset's transport assistance to schools preferred on grounds of religion or belief

9 September 2013 – 4 November 2013

1. What is Somerset Local Authority consulting on?

Somerset Local Authority is consulting on a proposed change to the discretionary transport policy where parents receive a subsidy for their children to go to their nearest school preferred on grounds of religion or belief. These schools are usually Voluntary Aided (VA) schools run by a church. In the main, this affects pupils of secondary age travelling to a school outside Somerset, although there are a small number of primary aged pupils currently receiving a subsidy to a Somerset school.

2. When is a pupil considered for a Somerset transport subsidy?

To be considered, a pupil must satisfy all the following:

- i) Be of statutory school age (between the ages of 4 and 16) & residing in Somerset;
- ii) Be of practising faith (evidence is required);
- iii) Have been accepted for a place at either the nearest faith school or, for Catholic families, either the faith school within the designated area or, for those living outside of a designated area, the nearest faith school;
- iv) Have been accepted at a school beyond the statutory walking distance from home;
- v) Have a journey time to school that does not exceed the standard school transport target limit of a maximum of 45 minutes for primary aged pupils or 75 minutes for children over 11 years old.

2. What level of transport subsidy do parents currently receive from the Local Authority?

The amount of subsidy varies. It depends on the particular route to school and the type of transport on which the pupil is travelling. In the 2012/13 academic year individual subsidies ranged from £215 per year to per year to £1500. The average amount of subsidy was £440 per child.

3. What do parents currently pay and how do pupils get to school?

All parents receiving a subsidy towards transport to schools on faith grounds must contribute an annual amount of £238.70* to the Local Authority for each child (or £214.83 if parents pay by the end of September). "Transporting Somerset" then arranges the pupil's transport on either:

- i) a public service vehicle, or
- ii) a school bus organised by a third party (Out of County Schools or by Volunteer/Parent run Bus Committees), or
- iii) a spare seat on an existing Somerset school transport route.

Where none of these are available, the Local Authority will pay the family a mileage allowance which is adjusted to take account of the parent paying the first £238.70 of travel (or £1.26 per day based on 190 school days).

4. What changes did Somerset propose for denomination subsidies as part of the last consultation?

In the summer term 2013, the Local Authority consulted on the phased withdrawal of denominational subsidies with effect from 1 September 2014. Under these proposals, the parents of pupils applying to start a school or transferring to a school on denominational grounds from September 2014 onwards would have to fund the full cost of transport.

5. What was the outcome of this consultation?

Whilst we did receive a number of responses in support of the phased withdrawal of denominational subsidy, the majority of responses objected to this proposal. The Transport Policy Steering Group considered all the views expressed during the consultation which highlighted particular issues unique to certain schools and communities.

6. Why is Somerset consulting again?

It became clear that the proposed changes relating to the phased removal of denominational transport subsidy would have wider implications in Somerset than had at first been anticipated. In one large Somerset community, the primary faith school caters for pupils between the ages 4-11 with pupils transferring under an established arrangement to a secondary faith school outside of the County. The other schools within this community feed the local Somerset schools with transition points at the ages of 9 and 13. The removal of transport subsidy would have had a disproportionate effect on this primary school and its pupils beyond just transport.

After carefully considering the views of those responding, the Steering Group wanted another option to be explored which would not have such a significant impact on families, pupils, and schools as that originally proposed.

Our legal advice is that a further consultation is necessary if we wish to make any amendment to our original proposal.

7. What changes to denomination subsidies are now being proposed?

For those pupils starting or transferring schools from 1 September 2014 onwards, the Local Authority proposes to align the amount that parents who prefer their children to go to a faith school pay for transport, to the charge that parents pay if they use a spare seat on an existing Somerset school transport bus. Parents purchase seats if their child is not entitled to free transport and they opt for a school which other than their nearest or designated transport school for their home address. This "paid seat" charge is currently £602.25 per year (or £542.03 if parents pay by the end of September). For those pupils travelling on buses organised by 3rd parties, it is proposed that Transporting Somerset would take over the running of the contracts and the fluctuations in cost will be managed by the Local Authority with parents paying the standard consistent rate.

7.1 Pupils Travelling on Buses Organised by 3rd Parties

Over 75% of pupils in receipt of a Somerset subsidy travel to faith schools outside Somerset on buses organised by 3rd parties.

The annual cost of a seat on a 3rd party organised bus route for the 2012/13 academic year ranged from £615 to £813. Under the original proposals, from September 2014 onwards the parents of children starting or transferring to a school preferred on grounds of religion or belief and using these routes would have been required to pay the full costs of these bus seats. Under the revised proposals, these parents would pay the paid seat charge of £602.25.

7.2 Pupils Travelling on Buses Organised by Transporting Somerset

A small number of pupils currently travel on an existing school bus run by Transporting Somerset and pay £238.70. From September 2014, parents of pupils starting or transferring school on grounds of religion or belief would be asked to pay the paid seat charge of £602.25 which is the same position as that proposed in the earlier consultation.

7.3 Pupils Travelling on Public Service Buses

Parents of children who use a public service bus on denominational grounds currently pay the Local Authority £238.70 per year. Based on the cost of a seat on a public bus route of around £630, the new proposals will mean that from September 2014, the Local Authority would still be providing a small subsidy of approximately £30 for parents of pupils starting or transferring school where a public service route is in operation.

7.4 Pupils in receipt of a Petrol Allowance

Petrol allowances will still be offered for transport to schools on grounds of religion or belief, but for those starting or transferring schools from September 2014 onwards the first £3.17 of travel per day will not be funded. Petrol allowances are paid at 18 pence per mile and two return journeys per day are covered. This means that the total daily mileage travelled from home to school will need to be over 18 miles for a petrol allowance to be paid. Currently, petrol allowances are paid for a daily mileage of over 7 miles. Under the earlier proposals, petrol allowances for children starting or transferring schools on faith grounds from September 2014 onwards would cease to be paid.

7.5 Other Implications

We accept that this is increasing the amounts which parents have to pay at times when family finances are under considerable pressure. However, we hope this proposal will:

- i. protect the existing travel routes to denominational schools;
- ii. put families on an equal footing with other Somerset families who choose a school for their child which is not the nearest but pay the same amount for a spare seat on an existing Somerset school bus route.

By retaining the existing routes we aim as far as possible:

- i. to ensure that children already attending an out of county faith school are still able to do so;
- ii. have regard to the wishes of parents for their children to be educated at a faith school;
- iii. not to adversely affect the rolls at the out of county faith schools;
- iv. maintain the strong family connections which have already been made with these schools.

The contract buses may be required to run with vacant seats and the cost of this would have to be covered by the Local Authority. However, this cost can be justified because in each community there will be children of low income families entitled by law to free transport to a faith school which would otherwise have to be provided by arranging an expensive alternative, normally a taxi.

8. When is it proposed that changes will be brought in?

The proposed decrease in Local Authority subsidy for transport to school on the grounds of religion or belief would be effective for all new first admission (Reception Year) entries and transfers to Junior, Middle, Secondary and Upper schools on 1 September 2014.

9. What will happen to pupils already receiving a denominational subsidy?

For those pupils in receipt of a subsidy at the end of the 2013/14 academic year, Local Authority assistance would continue at the current levels and therefore parental contributions would also remain at the current level of £238.70 (with annual inflationary increases applied as they are at the moment). In cases where the Local Authority proposes to run a bus contract previously organised by a 3rd party, parental contributions would also need to include any separate, additional contribution that is currently made by parents directly to the 3rd party. This protection will remain in place until the child completes his/her education at the current school. If a pupil moves schools, or if a change of address meant that current school was no longer the nearest faith school to home, the subsidy would no longer be paid.

10. What about 6th form students travelling to out of county faith schools?

We are aware that the out of county faith schools have 6th forms which Somerset pupils are attending and will in future wish to attend for reasons of continuity. At the moment 6th form pupils travelling to a 6th form at an out of county faith school can purchase a spare seat on a 3rd party run bus at full cost. In a similar way, Somerset 6th form students can travel to a Somerset 6th form on the Somerset school transport network where spare seats are available. These students are offered a Student Contract Ticket which currently costs £466.30 per year. Under the new proposals, from September 2014, any spare seats on a Somerset service running to an out of county faith school would be offered to 6th form pupils at the level of the Student Contract Ticket in place at that time.

11. The process

Consultation opens on Monday 9 September 2013 and we would like to hear your views on these proposals by 5.00 pm on Monday 4 November 2013. Once these have been received, all responses will be carefully considered and a decision taken on whether the change should be recommended to The Cabinet for a final decision on 11 December 2013.

12. Responding to the consultation

You can respond to the consultation by writing to us at this address:

Write to: Helen Reid
Policy Officer
School Commissioning Team
County Hall
Taunton
TA1 4DY

or Email: hreid@somerset.gov.uk

or via the online consultation questionnaire page found at:

<http://www.somersetconsults.org.uk/consult.ti/Home2SchTransDenomSubsidy/consultationHome>

Closing date for responses is 5.00 pm on Monday 4 November 2013

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* Amount confirmed for 2013.14 academic year