

Report to Cabinet

11 September 2024

Subject:	Transforming SEND Home-to-School Transport Services: Diagnostic Findings and Recommendations for Improvement
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Children and Families Councillor Jalal Uddin
Director:	Director of Children and Education Sally Giles Service Director Transformation & ICT Alice Davey
Key Decision:	Yes (a) to result in the Council incurring expenditure which exceeds that included in any approved revenue or capital budget or the limits set out within an approved borrowing or investment strategy and was not the subject of specific grant; or (b) to result in the Council incurring expenditure, the making of savings or the generation of income amounting to - £1m; (c) to be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards of the Borough.
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1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That the Cabinet receives the findings of the diagnostic undertaken by Newton Europe, as detailed in Appendix 1.

- 1.2 That the Cabinet delegates authority to the Executive Director of Finance and Transformation to identify appropriate one-off funding to specify, appoint and procure further external support to progress the identified transformation opportunities within the Council's SEND services to deliver a quantum of the identified savings within this diagnostic report, aligned to the requirement to demonstrate value for money and return on investment.
- 1.3 That the Director of Finance and Transformation works with the Senior Leadership Team and Members to align key strategic efficiency and transformation opportunities for SEND end to end services to the Council Plan, statutory provisions and the MTFP, in particular where the impact of these changes is likely to result in significant impact for children and young people, their parents or carers schools and transport operators.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 National spending on home-to-school transport is forecasted to reach £2B by the financial year 2027/28. Sandwell, like many councils, is experiencing increasing budget pressures. Local benchmarking indicates that Sandwell's home-to-school transport trend may be up to twice the expected level at current demand levels.
- 2.2 Demand for home-to-school transport in Sandwell has significantly increased from 600 to just over 1000 students annually, with this trend expected to continue. Work was initiated in 2023 within children's services teams to address these pressures, with progress reports regularly provided to the Strategic Leadership Team and other key stakeholders, this has formed the platform and basis for the appointment of external diagnostic support to underpin the transformation work in this area.
- 2.3 The Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) has identified £700k savings for 2024/25 and there is a potential budget pressure of up to £7M. A diagnostic exercise undertaken by Newton Europe has supported the Council to identify potential areas of efficiency and delivery changes which span the period from 2025/26 and 2028/29.
- 2.5 Whilst it has focussed on SEND transport, the diagnostic process and report has acknowledged the interdependencies and interrelationships with broader end to end SEND statutory processes, also currently subject to transformation.

- 2.6 Delivering the required level of change while maintaining business as usual will necessitate a range of skills, sector-specific knowledge, and additional capacity. Procuring an experienced implementation partner will provide sustained capacity, consistent experience, and proven models of change delivered at scale.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

Growing Up in Sandwell	The transformation programme ensures children and young people with SEND can access high-quality local services. The diagnostic work undertaken has identified opportunities will help to address future demand for service delivery by providing timely and appropriate interventions. This approach ensures the best possible outcomes for children and young people through both travel assistance and the development of independent travel skills while delivering value for money, and ensuring that resource is aligned to those with the highest level of need.
Living in Sandwell	<p>Enhanced travel assistance services will support the well-being of families, reducing stress and improving quality of life.</p> <p>The programme will build stronger communities by ensuring access to local services and fostering community ties. Ensuring that young people are confident and safe to travel independently is a key outcome of the travel assistance for young people with SEND in Sandwell.</p> <p>Improved transport options will enable children to attend local schools and engage in community activities, enhancing neighbourhood quality of life.</p>
Thriving Economy in Sandwell	<p>Supporting local transport operators to provide school transport contributes to the local economy's growth and sustainability.</p> <p>The programme aims to improve travel routes and vehicle utilisation, making Sandwell more connected and accessible.</p>

4 Context and Key Issues

4.1 National and Local Context

Nationally, as outlined in section 2 of this report, spending and demand on and for home-to-school transport is escalating. Sandwell is experiencing this pressure from demand and in 2024/25 has increased

the budget from in the region of £7M in 2023/24 to £19M in 2024/25, to accommodate the transport needs of young people and their parents / carers. The purpose of the diagnostic has been to identify a range of approaches to achieving efficiencies and reducing spend. Sandwell has 1085 young people accessing travel assistance:

Car Mileage	90
Personal Transport Budget	91
LA Transport/Vehicle	1004

4.2 **Diagnostic Assessment by Newton Europe**

SEND transport forms a part of the Corporate Transformation Programme, Newton Europe was appointed through the Corporate Transformation Team to support the Council for a 10-week period from 29th April 2024 to 5th July 2024, working with teams across services to deliver the key output of the diagnostic report on time in July 2024. The diagnostic assessment highlighted several key issues and opportunities for improvement within the current system.

Newton Europe worked closely with a cross-section of staff and stakeholders to undertake the following key activities:

- Held 'Best Outcome' case review workshops, reviewing over 200 children's journeys in detail with 10+ practitioners.
- Conducted data analysis of 1000+ individual children's transport journeys and details.
- Shadowed 10+ parent and carer calls.
- Undertook 30+ detailed reviews of travel assistance application forms.
- Conducted detailed 1:1s with staff and completed a culture survey with key teams to understand challenges and priorities.
- Performed detailed process mapping and developed a 'should cost' methodology.

The findings from this diagnostic assessment have been instrumental in shaping the proposed recommendations. The key findings are summarised below:

- 52% increase in children and young people receiving travel assistance in Sandwell.
- 84% of children and young people with SEND in Sandwell travel to school via local authority vehicles.
- 5% of children and young people receiving support may not meet the travel assistance eligibility criteria.
- Only 36% of children are referred to Independent Travel Training, with 6% found suitable.

- Local authority vehicles are the 'default' assistance option; only 22% of introductory phone calls by Newton explore alternative options with parents and carers.
- Cultural survey results indicate: 92% of colleagues agree that collaboration within their current team works well. 77% of colleagues disagree that leadership fosters a supportive environment. 69% of colleagues disagree that collaboration across teams is effective.

4.3 **Legislative Framework**

The Council's responsibilities regarding home-to-school transport are governed by several key pieces of legislation. Under Section 509(1) of the Education Act 1996, the Council is required to determine whether arrangements are needed for the provision of transport for each pupil with an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) who has been assessed as eligible. If the Council determines that transport is necessary, it must decide what form of travel assistance is suitable and organise it free of charge. Additionally, the Council has obligations under the Children Act 1989 (amended in 2004) and the Care Standards Act 2000 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Furthermore, the Council has a general duty under the Education and Skills Act 2008 to encourage, enable, and assist the participation of young people with SEND up to the age of 25. Statutory guidance "Travel to school for children of compulsory school age" sets out the criteria for eligibility and the council's responsibilities.

4.4 **Key Issues Identifies**

The diagnostic identified several key issues that need to be addressed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the home-to-school transport system. One major issue is the need for a standardised, consistent, and fair application of policy regarding eligibility for travel assistance. It is recognised that working with stakeholders and in particular parents / carers is essential to support best outcome decisions are being made for their young people. Additionally, there is a need to clarify the ambition for the Independent Travel Training (ITT) service and determine how to deliver on this ambition effectively. Capacity constraints must be addressed to ensure timely and thorough annual reviews, and attractive alternative transport offers need to be developed to better meet the needs of parents and carers.

Promoting planning for independence through effective travel assistance and training programmes is another key opportunity. Vehicle optimisation, contract commissioning, and procurement processes need to be improved to ensure cost-effectiveness and efficiency. Collaboration with parents, carers, and transport operators is essential to achieve

optimal routes and vehicle usage. Furthermore, enhancing data capture and visibility will enable more effective analysis and data-driven decision-making.

Finally, fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement among colleagues is crucial. The cultural survey revealed that while collaboration within teams is strong, there is a need for leadership to foster a more supportive environment and improve cross-team collaboration. Addressing these issues will help create an environment open to change, ensuring that improvements are sustainable, challenges are proactively resolved, and knowledge is shared across teams.

A procurement exercise using the CCS framework will be undertaken in accordance with the provisions of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and the Council's Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules.

5 Potential Areas of Opportunity

5.1 Policy Application Regarding Eligibility

Ensuring that policy is applied in a standardised, consistent, and fair manner across all children and young people is crucial. Building trust with parents that the best outcome decisions are being made for their children is a key priority. There is also a need to establish an ambitious Independent Travel Training (ITT) service and manage annual reviews effectively given capacity constraints. Providing attractive and alternative transport offers and engaging effectively with parents and carers are essential components of this policy application.

5.2 Travel Assistance that Promotes Planning for Independence and Effective Independent Travel Training

Effective independent travel training is vital for planning for adulthood. Early engagement with parents and carers is key alongside working with practitioners and schools to promote the benefits of a young person being able to travel independently to school.

5.3 Vehicle Optimisation, Contracting and Procurement

Optimising vehicle utilisation and contract commissioning is necessary to ensure cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

There is an opportunity to optimise vehicle utilisation by reassessing passenger composition and refining travel routes, reducing the number of vehicles required.

It is noted that the newly established SEND 3 framework offers a flexible purchasing system which will enable and support continuous improvement and will help to build a competitive market that delivers a high-quality, and cost-effective service.

The vehicle procurement framework is being reconsidered (SEND 3), aiming to regain control over rising contract costs; however, a revised approach is recommended ahead of the 2025/26 academic year, leveraging improved data integration, contract variation and should-cost analyses, and engagement of the provider market, to ensure a robust and sustainable approach to contract commissioning in the future.

5.4 Data Capture and Visibility

Ensuring that data capture and systems support effective analysis and data-led decision-making is crucial. Accurate data capture allows for better visibility and understanding of trends, which in turn enables more informed decisions. This can lead to improvements in service delivery and resource allocation.

5.5 Fostering a Culture of Collaboration and Continuous Improvement

Creating an environment open to change, proactive problem-solving, and knowledge sharing across teams is essential for fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement. Addressing survey feedback that indicates a need for better leadership support and cross-team collaboration will help in creating a more cohesive and efficient working environment. Ensuring that improvements are effective, sustainable, and challenges are resolved collaboratively will contribute to the overall success of the transformation programme.

6 Alternative Options

6.1 Do Nothing

This option is not viable as the council has a statutory duty to provide home-to-school travel for eligible children and young people. The diagnostic forecasting model indicates that costs could increase significantly under a 'do nothing' scenario.

6.2 Deliver Transformation Within Existing Teams

Delivering the transformation without an external partner would likely extend the delivery timeframe, impacting the ability to realise identified savings. An external partner's experience with tried and tested models of change is essential for timely and effective implementation.

7 Implications

Resources:	The appointment of Newton Europe cost £145,425, covered by a one-off budget allocation. Additional one-off resources are needed to procure external support for phases 3 and 4 to if Cabinet supports this recommendation.
Legal and Governance:	Procuring a transformation partner must comply with legal provisions and the council's guidelines.
Risk:	There is a risk of not achieving the projected efficiency savings, with a potential budget pressure of £7M for 2024/25, which may increase in future years as per the diagnostic report's data modelling.
Equality:	The transformation programme must ensure equitable access to transport services for all children and young people.
Health and Wellbeing:	Delivering the identified savings will ensure a financially sustainable service focused on maximising the best travel assistance offer for children, young people, and their parents and carers.
Social Value	The project offers social value by creating opportunities for young people with specific needs to achieve independent travel.
Climate Change:	Potential climate change implications include variations in journey times and vehicle utilisation, and increased use of public transport, potentially impacting air quality.
Corporate Parenting	The work to reduce accidents across the road network supports the Council in the broad role as a corporate parent.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Newton Europe Diagnostic Findings Report

8. Background Papers

None