

Scrutiny Board:	Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board
Report Title	SEND Travel Assistance Update
Date of Meeting	10 November 2025
Report Author	Sue Moore- Assistant Director Education Support Services
Lead Officer	Sally Giles – Executive Director Children and Education
Wards Affected	All Wards
Identify exempt information and exemption category	N/A
Appendices (if any)	N/A

1. Executive Summary

To provide an update on the council's SEND travel assistance offer following the introduction of the Flexible Purchasing System in August 2024 with an emphasis on its impact financially or changes for children and young people.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Board considers and comments upon the information presented and determines whether it wishes to make any recommendations to the Executive.

3. Background and Context

- 3.1 The Local Authority is subject to statutory obligations and has powers to make travel arrangements for children with special educational needs and disabilities to facilitate their attendance at an appropriate education provision
- 3.2 Children who are eligible for travel assistance, can apply for support with travel training, parent mileage, a personal transport budget or home to school

transport. Where transport is provided the Council ensure it's appropriate to meet the needs of the child.

- 3.3 The introduction of a Flexible Purchasing System (FPS) in August 2024 has helped to reduce the cost of home to school transport without impacting on the quality of service or safeguarding of children and young people with SEND and their families.
- 3.4 The FPS offers a range of benefits including scope for new suppliers to join during the lifetime of the contract arrangement, a more flexible application process to attract small, medium and large-scale enterprises (SME) to apply. The market is far more competitive with 29 operators on the framework many of whom are local to Sandwell, that has proved economically advantageous to the Council.
- 3.5 There are also regular opportunities for new companies to apply to join the FPS which has significantly reduced the risk to the council of being unable to fulfil contracts, with many councils struggling to meet increased demand as the number of children with SEND continues to rise.
- 3.6 Work is now broken down into individual schools' contracts with varying contract lengths from 1-3 years to support and drive value for money and ensures there are regular new tender opportunities for operators. Currently the service is managing 132 contracts delivered by 14 different operators.
- 3.7 The robust contract monitoring of each contract supports regular benchmarking to ensure the average cost per passenger is still offering value for money and there is no deterioration in the level of support or the quality of service provided, either by the Council or the operator.
- 3.8 To ensure value for money the Council transport arrangements are reviewed annually as a minimum. This can lead to increased anxiety for children and their families. Where it is deemed necessary to make changes children and their parents/carers are kept informed of the changes and offered a meet and greet with the new operators to support a smooth transition.
- 3.9 As part of the contractual arrangements and to support the commitment to continuous improvement operators where required to undertake customer satisfaction questionnaire in the Summer with children and parents/carers. The responses have been shared with the Council for analysis and action where necessary, however no significant issues have been identified. This will be followed up by a customer feedback survey in the new year, once new transport arrangements have settled.
- 3.10 The use of data is critical in supporting better demand and financial forecasting to inform the Councils medium and long-term budget planning process especially given the expected continued growth in numbers of children with Education and Health Care Plans.
- 3.11 With the expected increase in the number of children with SEND the focus is very much on reducing demand/need for transport and increasing children accessing travel training or families taking up the offer of parent mileage or a personal transport budget.
- 3.12 The introduction of the locality model, Stronger Communities Brighter Futures will support more children to have their needs met in local mainstream and special schools, closer to home with a reduced reliance on specialist and out

of borough provision which is disproportionately more expensive , both in terms of the provision and transport with the average cost 25% more.

4. Consultation

- 4.1 There is no requirement for formal public consultation to take place regarding the development and implementation of a new procurement model.

5 Financial Implications

- 5.1 The cost of SEND home to school transport in 2024/25 was £18.033m a saving of £1.138m against a budget of £19.171m. This included several legacy contracts carried over from the DPS framework that were subsequently renewed during the academic year 2024-25. This was done to better manage disruption to children, their families and schools, and avoid all arrangements for over 1100 children being changed at the same time.
- 5.2 The projected cost of travel assistance for 2025-26, inclusive of travel passes parent mileage and personal travel budgets is £15,937,086 with a projected saving of £2,883,914 against a budget of £18,821,000. This is based on there being 1250 passengers on transport by March 2026, currently there are 1123.

6. Legal and Governance Implications

- 6.1 The Council has a duty to make such travel arrangements as they consider necessary to secure suitable home to school transport arrangements are made for eligible children in accordance with s.508B of the Education Act 1996. This relates to children of compulsory school age (5 - 16) and ensures transport is free. S.508C of the 1996 Act gives the Council discretionary powers to make school travel arrangements for other children not covered by s.508B.
- 6.2 In making those arrangements, regard must be had to the statutory guidance issued by the DfE. The current guidance is in the 2024 "Travel to school for children of compulsory school age". The guidance recognises that it is for the individual local authorities to decide how they apply their discretion, and that each local authority will need to balance the demands for a range of discretionary travel against their budget priorities. There are further provisions in s.509AA and s.509AB for young persons (aged 16 - 18), disabled persons and persons with learning difficulties, those continuing learners who started their programme of learning before their 19th birthday ("persons of sixth form age") and for young people with EHC Plans up to age 25 where they are continuing a course started before their 19th birthday.
- 6.3 Councils are required to prepare and publish an annual transport policy statement specifying the arrangements for the provision of transport or otherwise that the authority considers necessary for facilitating the attendance of such persons.

7. Risks

7.1 The increased demand for SEND travel assistance together with placements is currently monitored through the Council's strategic risk register. The introductions of the FPS and its impact have helped to reduce the risk to the Council from red to amber. Further actions identified to reduce the ongoing risk to the Council are:

- Increase the number of specialist places in Sandwell schools to enable children to attend their local school and reduce the use of more costly out of borough provision.
- Continue to develop the FPS to provide greater control for the Council and reduce the risk of increasing costs.
- Continue to work with the market to deliver a VFM high quality service.
- Review of the travel assistance application process to enable easy access for families, timely decision making and encourage uptake of travel training, parent mileage and personal budgets.
- Review of the Council's post 16 offer.

8. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

8.1 Children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) have protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. The Council has a duty and powers to make travel arrangements for children with special educational needs and disabilities to facilitate their attendance at an appropriate education provision.

8.2 Local authorities must publish details of school transport for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in their local offer. This is set out in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014 – schedule 2 paragraph 14.

9. Other Relevant Implications

9.1 **Climate change** Suppliers operating via the FPS are required to comply with Sandwell's Climate Change objectives and obligations, to minimise the environmental impact of the service. The ability to flexibly procure transport routes via the FPS helps to reduce the number of overall routes (mainly home to school routes) and therefore reduces the carbon impact.

The requirements within the service specification stipulate that suppliers use low emission or electric vehicles as standard. The FPS is dynamic in nature and will support the implementation of any potential changes in legislations in respect of emissions.

The FPS supports longer contract periods where value for money is provided for the council. With longer contracts Supplier business models can investment in low emission / electric vehicles

9.2 **Corporate parenting** In meeting the council's statutory duty to provide home to school transport the action supports Corporate Parenting in ensuring that

all children and young people are safely and securely transported to and from school and minimises the number of school days lost through non-attendance

9.3 **Social Value** In accordance with the council's adopted Social Value Policy, contracts awarded under the new Flexible Purchasing System will require suppliers to demonstrate how they will be responsive to Employment, Education, Local Spend and Environmental prospects. for example, employment of local traders/young people.

9.4 **Health and Wellbeing** This proposal supports the continuing provision of SEND Home to School transport to meet the council's statutory duty and ensuring that children and young people can continue to attend school and educational establishments to prepare them for adulthood through development of their health and wellbeing.

10. **Background Documents**

None

11. **How does this deliver the Outcomes in the Council Plan?**

11.1 Growing Up in Sandwell

The Council is required to make arrangements for all children who are eligible for travel assistance. Provision will meet the needs of the child supporting them to attend school.

11.2 Thriving Economy in Sandwell

The introduction of the FPS has provided increased opportunities for SME's within Sandwell with 11 of the 29 operators on the framework based in Sandwell. Of the remaining operators, only 2, both national companies are based outside of the West Midlands