

Briefing: The impact of transport capacity on the attendance of pupils with EHCPs during term 4 2022

To properly identify the potential impact of lost learning for pupils affected by the well-publicised failings for SEN school transport in February 2022, it is important to first establish the number of pupils for whom transport was not made available by the start of the term. The retendering process included 5284 pupils out of a total eligible cohort of 5672, who were advised that details of alternative transport would be provided to them by 11 February, which coincided with the last day of term.

During emergency discussions organised by then Cabinet Member for Education and Skills – Shellina Prendergast on the morning of 14 February 2022 (the first day of the half term break), Public Transport were tasked with identifying the total number of pupils for whom this deadline was missed. By that afternoon, spreadsheets detailing 1390 pupils (24.5% of the total cohort) were shared with all key parties. Schools with impacted children were contacted and advised to consider the provision of distance learning options. Following intensive efforts by transport staff, this number was reduced to 591 (10.4%) by 18 February, the last working day before the start of the new term. Work continued over the weekend and by the close of the first day of term Monday 21st, 300 (5.3%) remained unallocated to alternative transport.

By the end of the first week of term 150 pupils (2.6%) remained without transport. As a result of the need for repeated tendering exercises to identify providers, the last pupil to be provided transport was finalised at the end of the third week of term.

While this remained a wholly unacceptable situation, it should be noted that the number of pupils who had the potential to miss schooling is therefore much lower than may have been expected following the significant number of pupils that whose transport had not been resolved by the earlier public deadline. While it is likely that the 1090 pupils who secured transport during the half term break were affected by the short timescales that were made available to them to acclimatise to new providers, it is not possible to analyse any impact on attendance using the available data. While Public Transport and Transport Eligibility received a significant number of complaints related to delayed transport, between 50-60 (0.88-1.05%) requests concerned what parents considered to be inappropriate transport arrangements following the retender. Each case was manually reviewed and adjustments were made where necessary to bring transport offers in line with statutory expectations. Members can therefore be assured that mitigating actions kept this overall impact to a minimum.

In order to reduce the number of pupils who missed out on education, affected parents were contacted at the start of half term and advised that if they were in a position to make their own transport arrangements, KCC would provide them a full refund of costs incurred. Transport staff rang every Kent special school at the start of term to collect information on which pupils were unable to attend school as a direct result of missing transport arrangements. A webform was circulated to all mainstream schools to collect the same information. This exercise identified 30 children from special schools and 8 from mainstream who were unable to get to school via alternative means. While this number is not definitive, it provides further

evidence to suggest that the overall number of pupils who missed out on direct education was much lower than expected.

Of those pupil for whom alternative arrangements were not possible, it has been identified that they had the potential to lose between 1 and 15 school days. Working on the principle of an average 190 day academic year, this means affected pupils could have lost between 0.53% to 7.89% potential learning time, not accounting for distance learning opportunities that were provided by their educational establishment.

KCC provided all schools with advice to ensure that pupils who could not get to school were recorded as authorised absences under the appropriate attendance code. This allows Officers to consider the impact on attendance over the period. Whilst there was impact on an individual basis for pupils, there has been no disproportionate effect on overall attendance levels for this group of students. In fact, in comparison to the previous years' figures, where absence rates had increased due to the effects of the pandemic, overall attendance levels of students with an Education Health Care Plan have been relatively unaffected. For example, in comparison to 2020/21 figures, there was only a slight increase in total absence (1.5%) and persistent absence (1.6%) for students with an EHCP in 2021/22. Whereas, there was a greater increase in these figures for students without a SEN diagnosis with a 3.3% increase in total absence and 11% increase in persistent absence. For students with an SEN diagnosis, but without an EHCP, there was an increase of 4% in total absence and 14% in persistent absence.

While it is highly likely that a limited number of pupils experienced an unacceptable level of disruption to their education for up to three weeks at the start of the February 2022 term, there is no evidence to suggest a widespread negative impact on the SEN cohort. No pupil should have experienced significant lost learning as a result of the challenges in securing sufficient transport capacity. It should be highlighted that before the retendering exercise, a rolling cohort of between 200 to 350 pupils who were identified as eligible could not be provided the transport they were entitled to within expected timescales as a result of insufficient capacity in the transport network. The retendering exercise ensured these pupils were provided transport and unlocked capacity for an additional 700-800 pupils for the remainder of that academic year. As EHCP numbers continue to increase, it is imperative that KCC invest in initiatives to identify sufficient capacity to meet demand and make best use of available resources, to ensure future potential for lost learning is minimised.