

**Scrutiny Call-in - 23/00069 - Post 16 Transport Policy Statement including Post 19 for
2024/25**

Submitted by Mr Brady & Mr Lehmann.

This call-in request is principally related to the proposal to remove wholly free post-16 transport for learners with SEND and/or mobility problems. While I do not agree with this particular proposal, I am broadly in favour of the other changes that are set out in the Transport Policy Statement.

Reasons for call-in:

(a) Action proportionate to the desired outcome

It is stated in the decision report that 'Local authorities have a duty to encourage, enable and assist young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) to participate in education and training, up to the age of 25'. While I acknowledge that KCC offers a particularly generous post-16 transport offer compared to other Local Authorities, I am concerned that this particular proposal will actually *discourage* children and young people with SEND from participating in further education. Indeed, having read the paperwork, it does not appear as though any level of risk analysis has been undertaken to establish the estimated reduction in the number of post-16 children and young people with SEND who will decide to not proceed with further education as a result of this decision. I worry that this decision will prevent some children and young people with SEND from accessing the education that they deserve, and that consequently we will see increasing numbers of young people with SEND not in education or training (NEET). I questioned the Cabinet Member for Education Skills on this very issue during the July CYPE Cabinet Committee meeting and he was unable to provide an adequate response. Fundamentally, the cost of transport should not be a barrier to education.

(e) Clarity of aims and desired outcomes / (f) Explanation of the options considered and giving reasons for decisions

Looking at the paperwork, there is very little detail regarding the level of financial support which will be provided to children and young people with SEND who cannot afford to pay £500 towards their transport costs. The report states that 'it is intended that an instalment option will be provided to all families', but that does not solve the problem if families simply cannot afford to pay £500, especially during a cost of living crisis. Granted, a higher subsidy option will be made available to families who qualify for low-income support, but again where is the explanation of what support will be made available to those families on low incomes who, fundamentally, cannot afford to contribute £250? Again, these were questions that I raised during the July CYPE Cabinet Committee but were not properly addressed by the Cabinet Member. What support will KCC provide to families of those children and young people with SEND who cannot afford the £500 or £250 contribution? Will we simply turn those young people away, denying them access to education? These questions are somewhat answered in the EqIA – it is stated that 'exceptional circumstances based on extreme financial hardship can still be considered via appeal' – but not fully. What constitutes 'exceptional circumstances' and 'extreme financial hardship'? The report lacks detail and lots of my questions remain unanswered, which is why I have decided to submit this call-in request.

a). The decision is not in line with the Council's Policy Framework

As we know, KCC has committed to improving SEND services across the board - mistakes have been made and these need to be put right. This commitment is reflected in Framing Kent's Future, where we pledge to 'work with our partners including schools and with the families of children with SEND to find sustainable solutions that provide the tailored support that these children need to access appropriate education and opportunities that will help them lead a good

life'. I appreciate that we are currently experiencing extremely difficult financial pressures, not least in the area of SEND, and that in order to deliver 'sustainable' services moving forward we will need to start looking at doing things differently. However, do we really think that charging families of children and young people with SEND (who are some of our most vulnerable individuals) for their transport is really the right call? Is this going to help restore trust and faith with parents (which is currently at an all-time low), or is it simply going to exacerbate the disconnect between the Local Authority and families of children with SEND, whilst potentially further disenfranchising those in our society who are most vulnerable?

Perhaps most importantly, in our commitment to working with parents to help put things right, we have said that we will listen to them and that we will take their advice and views on board. In this particular instance, however, this does not appear to be the case. If we look at page 5 of the consultation report, it is stated that '68% of respondents disagree with the proposal to remove wholly free post-16 transport for learners with SEND and/or mobility problems, with 59% of this cohort strongly disagreeing'. While this may not necessarily be representative of the wider Kentish population (it is a small sample size), it does demonstrate that the majority of respondents (over 2/3rds) are against this proposal. Why are we choosing to press ahead with this decision when we know it does not have the support of local residents, we know it will most likely lead to a further breakdown in already-poor relations between the Local Authority and parents of children with SEND, and when we know family budgets are already incredibly stretched. The timing of this decision really could not be any worse, and I urge the Executive to reconsider.