

Post-16 Travel Assistance Consultation



Questions and Answers

On 2 June 2014 the Council launched a consultation on the Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy and associated charges. As part of the consultation we arranged meetings for parents to talk to us and share their views.

During these meetings we promised to summarise the main questions asked and publish answers for you to see. If we have missed out a question or issue that you feel could be addressed here, then email us on lbrough@solihull.gov.uk and we will endeavour to add to this document and republish as soon as possible.

Q. You told us that you were worried that the impact of these proposals might jeopardise Sixth Forms in Solihull special schools. You said that it could mean an increased in young people staying at home and becoming classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training). You said that these proposals could force children to change their choice of post-16 education and there are already very limited options available to them.

A. We think you are telling us that the current and proposed charges are too high; so high that it could mean many families may be faced with keeping their children at home, and we have reflected on this.

We assure you that the Council has no intention of introducing a Post-16 Travel Assistance Policy which will jeopardise Sixth Forms in our special schools, which the Council wholly supports and is very proud of. The Council's current position is that the cost of travel assistance is very expensive and savings have to be made. We will make sure that the Decision Maker is well aware of your concerns, and has a number of options to consider.

Q. My child has applied for and been offered a place for this September 2014. You (the Council) said I should have been aware of the Council's policy but you also said it has been suspended. My child has accepted a place on a course - what am I supposed to do?

A. We are persuaded by this and will recommend to Cabinet Member that the current Year 11 pupils who are starting a post-16 course in September 2014 will not be subject to the new policy or the policy that has been suspended. Therefore, the new policy and any charges that are introduced will only apply to those starting a post-16 course in September 2015 and beyond.

Q. You expressed concerns to us as to how the "nearest suitable school" will be defined; for example you think that if your child has attended a Solihull special school since they were (say) 3-years old that it is

reasonable for them to continue their post-16 education at the same Solihull special school, even if it is not the nearest.

A. We accept that there will be circumstances where a child is placed in a Solihull special school which is not their nearest, because, for example their nearest Solihull special school did not have places available at the time of first admission. We would recognise that this was your child's "nearest suitable school" for post-16 education.

Q. **You asked us if we fully understood the impact on family life of having a disabled child in the household. For example, it is far more difficult to get other siblings to different schools, employment opportunities are limited and the time available for work is restricted, life as a single parent is more difficult.**

A. We are listening to your views and can confirm that the Council is looking at ways to minimise the disruption to those already committed to a post-16 course. We will be recommending to Cabinet Member to have particular regard to the affordability of a contribution when making his decision.

Q. **You want us to be aware of concerns around your own knowledge and understanding of the proposals, for example:**

"what does it mean for me?"

"I didn't know anything about this"

"what's the difference at age 16?"

"I don't claim mobility at the moment"

"I don't understand the changes"

A. We have listened to your comments and will try to work more closely with families and schools, particularly when changes are introduced.

Q. **You asked us if children with a learning disability that are not physically disabled would qualify for assistance?**

A. Personal Independence Payment (PIP) has replaced Disability Living Allowance for people over the age of 16. As children reach the age of 16 an application for PIP will have to be made and an assessment carried out.

The assessment measures mental as well as physical capability. We think that those who would qualify for mobility element of PIP are those we would want to help with travel assistance. For example, if a young person "cannot plan the route of a journey" they would qualify for the mobility element of PIP.

You can find out more on the Gov.uk website <https://www.gov.uk/pip>. We have found a list of the descriptors which are used for this assessment and they clearly assess mental as well as physical ability. The list of assessment descriptors is on the Age UK website:

http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/Factsheets/FS87_Personal_independence_payment_fcs.pdf?dtrk=true

Q. You asked us if there any assistance for those who do not qualify for mobility allowance?

A. We looked at the description of someone who qualified for mobility element of PIP and felt that it adequately described everyone who we want to help with travel assistance. We thought it was more helpful than the wording in our current policy.

We wonder if there are families who are not fully aware of the benefits that they may qualify for. We will see what we can do to support families in applying for these benefits – see below.

Q. You asked if the Council help people claim PIP?

A. The Council's current policy is that it wishes all of its citizens to claim the benefits they are entitled to. We will work with colleagues to see what support we might be able to offer to people wanting to claim PIP. One suggestion was to see if the Council could arrange "personal drop in sessions" at our special schools.

Q. You told us that PIP is new and there are lots of stories about the time it takes to be assessed and the high level of rejection followed by a success after an appeal. You told us that it is all difficult and complex.

A. We think that when the system is well embedded it will give a fair method of assessment. In the short-term we could have a criterion for travel assistance which includes "those who cannot travel independently". However, we think that it may be difficult for us to judge who qualifies using this criterion.

How would it sound to you if we used qualification for mobility component of DLA (pre-16) until PIP assessment for post-16 is confirmed?

Q. You told us that travelling in a taxi with their friends represents independent travel for children with severe learning difficulties who are normally taken everywhere else by their parents.

A. We acknowledge that, for this group of students, independent travel, in terms of unassisted travel, will never be an option.

Q. You have said to us that a Motability vehicle takes up the whole of the mobility allowance and yet we are asking for a high contribution towards the cost of travel. You said that if you take your child to and from school or college they will miss out on the independence of travelling with their friends and you may not be able to work.

A. We recognise the impact on your family. We are *not* saying that if you have a Motability vehicle you will *not* be eligible for assistance. We also understand the point that a very high charge will be particularly difficult where the whole mobility benefit has gone on the vehicle, but the vehicle cannot be used for travel to school/college.

Q. You told us that you thought that a single rate of contribution is a good idea, but that the options suggested are too high. You said that £990 is much higher than any other local authorities and it is a very high proportion of the mobility allowance. You said that you should not have to pay more than the equivalent cost of a bus pass which able-bodied children would buy. Others are saying a differential rate could make sense if contributions are referenced to benefits.

A. We listen to your comments and want to be clear that the options put forward in the consultation are not the only options, and are intended to illustrate some different ways of thinking what fair charges might look like. We want you to tell us in the survey what level of contribution you feel is fair.

We based one of the options on 38 out of 52 weeks (73%), as this is the number of school weeks in the year. You have told us that this is not fair and that it should be based on the number of school days in the year, 190 out of 365 which is 52%. We do accept this feedback.

Q. You said that we should consider free travel assistance for those with a severe learning difficulty because you felt that this group is a 'soft target' for raising money as they have very few options available.

A. The Council is committed to equality and being fair to everyone, which means treating them all the same. We think there is potentially some unfairness between schools and other post-16 providers; we do think a charge for what is discretionary travel is reasonable, we do accept we need to be clearer about the fairness of the actual charge made; we do have to have regard to the value for money of the current arrangements.

Q. You said that you don't think that we are having regard to low-income families. Other local authorities offer a reduced rate to families on low income.

A. We are considering offering a reduced rate for low-income families, for example those who qualify for free school meals. We want to talk more to the special schools about what might be possible and reasonable from their bursary funds.

Having listened to you, we have already decided that the following *additional* options will be included for consideration by the decision makers:

- 1. That there is an option of no charge for travel assistance**
- 2. That there is an option of the charge being the same as the cost of a Centro travel pass**
- 3. That there is an option of a single charge which is an appropriate proportion of the standard rate of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) e.g. 190/365 of the lower rate/standard rate.**
- 4. Consideration of a reduction for low income families.**

In conclusion we would like to thank you for coming to the meetings and telling us about your circumstances and what this proposal means to you. We appreciate the opportunity to talk to you directly. We have listened carefully to your comments and tried to understand how these changes will impact on your family life. We hope you feel from the meetings themselves and from this document, that we are committed to a proper consultation that does listen to what you are telling us, and that you will see changes as a result of your feedback.

We are waiting until the end of the consultation on 4 July 2014 and still urge you to fill in the survey and tell us your views and suggestions.

If you have already completed the survey, but the additional information in this document means you want to respond again, then please feel free to complete another survey – as we said it is not a vote as such, it is your comments and suggestions that we want to put to the Decision Makers.

Solihull Travel Team

June 2014