

**EXTRACT FROM THE JOINT OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL & PUBLIC
PROTECTION AND EDUCATION & CHILDREN SCRUTINY COMMITTEES
HELD ON THE 18TH SEPTEMBER 2015**

MINUTE 6

SUSTAINING POST SIXTEEN COLLEGE/SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Councillor D.J.R. Bartlett declared an interest in that he is a governor at Ysgol Dyffryn Aman.

Councillor C.A. Campbell declared an interest in that he has two children in secondary education who may continue in post-sixteen education.

Councillor A. James declared an interest in that he has children in full time education.

Mr. S. Pearson declared an interest in that he has children in full time education.

The Committee considered a report outlining a proposal to charge for post-sixteen college/school transport. The report was presented to members of both Scrutiny Committees in order that they might offer comments, as part of the formal consultation process.

The Head of Transport & Engineering informed the Committee that at its meeting on the 24th February 2015, the County Council approved a three year budget strategy, part of which included agreement to “continue with a Home to School College Transport Service with the introduction of a charge, which would be introduced on a phased basis over a number of years, subject to “any children on free school meals being exempt as well as children currently at Pantycelyn school also being exempt”.

The Head of Transport & Engineering also reminded the Committee that post-sixteen transport was a non-statutory service and that the Council to date, had chosen to exercise discretion and provide a service. However, due to the significant financial challenge facing the Authority at present and for the foreseeable future, this proposal had been developed in order to sustain a post-sixteen transport service, following discussions with major partners.

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

Reference was made to discussions at a previous meeting of the Environmental & Public Protection Scrutiny Committee in June 2015 when members were informed that discussions with schools and Coleg Sir Gâr were on-going and it was asked what progress had been made. Clarification was also sought in relation to the subsidy currently provided to the service. The Head of Transport & Engineering informed the Committee that throughout discussions, officers had sought to sustain the service. The College was also facing financial pressures and whilst officers had sought further contributions, this was not possible. However, the College had committed to maintain its current contribution of approximately £700,000 to support the service. The net effect of the Authority’s subsidy was

£477,000.

In response to a question about the resolution passed by County Council in February 2015, the Head of Transport & Engineering reaffirmed that any pupils in receipt of free school meals would be exempt from the charge and that all the children currently based at the Pantycelyn Campus of Ysgol Bro Dinefwr, would also be exempt. However, children in primary school in the Llandovery area who would be moving up to Ysgol Bro Dinefwr in the future, would not be exempt should they choose to continue in post-sixteen education.

It was suggested that education was a key factor in improving the well-being of communities and grave concern was expressed that a charge would not only deprive those youngsters who were poorer financially but those who were culturally poor and not necessarily appreciated or supported at home from attaining a good standard of education. The Head of Transport & Engineering recognised that this was a difficult issue and that all the Committee's comments would be considered as part of the consultation process.

Reference was made to the member Focus Group which had met in recent months to discuss school transport policy. It was stated that the Group was united in its opposition to a charge for post-sixteen transport but when faced with the reality of the budget situation, members had considered £100 a head to be a reasonable charge, should it be implemented. However, the charge of £200-250 proposed in the report far exceeded this and was unacceptable, especially as in due course, it would only increase. The Head of Transport & Engineering acknowledged that the Focus Group had been opposed to the charge but could not recall any discussion relating to a charge of £100. He informed the Committee that the charge had been calculated based on the current budget commitment, an assessment of pupil numbers and take up of the service.

It was asked whether youngsters would be expected to pay up front for transport or whether this could be done in stages throughout the year. Reference was also made to the stigma attached to free school meals and reassurance was sought that those receiving free transport would not be identified. The Interim Director of Environment agreed that different methods of payment could be considered and the Head of Transport & Engineering confirmed that this suggestion would be captured as part of the consultation process. He also reassured members that all pupils, regardless of whether they paid or not, would receive the same pass.

Concern was expressed about the divisive nature of the proposed charge by burdening younger people with additional costs for education, even before they considered a degree at university. It was suggested that there was little breakdown of all the figures quoted in the report, especially in relation to the numbers of pupils on existing routes, the numbers currently eligible for free school meals, as well as the potential impact of Universal Credit on those currently eligible for free school meals. Reference was also made to areas such as Brynaman where pupils in different local authority areas would be paying different costs for attending sixth form in schools or colleges (e.g. Neath Port Talbot currently charged £100 whilst Carmarthenshire were looking to charge £200+). The Head of Transport & Engineering reminded the Committee that the principle was agreed by County Council and this was simply the commencement of the consultation process which was required for a change in policy. He acknowledged that charges did vary across the eight Welsh authorities but that it was a continually changing picture.

He noted that a number of students were already travelling to Gower College from Carmarthenshire and paying approximately £280 per year. He also reminded the Committee that the school/college bus network was constantly reviewed to ensure it was being utilised to its full potential (with a current 95% occupancy).

It was suggested that the majority of the Committee was unhappy with the proposed charge and how this had been included within the overall budget strategy leaving members feeling unclear about many issues. It was asked how the other local authorities had approached and consulted on this matter and whether Carmarthenshire's consultation process could be stopped pending more information being sought regarding the implications of this proposal. The Interim Director of Environment stated that the implementation of the consultation process was being undertaken in accordance with the decision made by County Council. He reminded the Committee that the Environment Department had faced large reductions in funding for many years and whilst in the past, such reductions could be absorbed within existing services, proposals such as this were now impacting directly on the county's residents. The Head of Transport & Engineering stated that the consultation process was a statutory requirement which had to be undertaken and could not be postponed. The budget strategy included a reference to post-sixteen transport which was now being consulted on before County Council considered a formal change to policy. He reminded members that they could make additional representations during the consultation process as well as through the forthcoming budget consultation process which would be commencing in the Autumn.

The importance of the principle of a free education was highlighted and concern was expressed that there would be families, who whilst were not eligible for free school meals, would struggle to pay such a charge. It was argued that the Authority should be encouraging young people to remain in education and that charging for post-sixteen transport would actually discourage participation in further education. The consultation referred to in the report was also queried and it was suggested that the majority of those who responded to the last budgetary consultation and who agreed with the proposal to charge, were actually middle-aged with no children. It was also felt that the charge would hinder the development of Welsh-medium education in the County's secondary schools as pupils would opt for the nearest school with a 6th Form rather than one offering Welsh-medium provision.

Reference was made to the increase in school meal costs and along with an additional charge for attending post-sixteen education, it was suggested that the impact on families with two children or more would be significant. It was acknowledged that there were financial and moral duties of care to be considered but that the Authority could learn from other authorities' experiences. It was also asked whether the impact of parents not paying and then driving pupils to school instead (as well as resultant emissions) had been considered and whether the equalities impact assessment had actually taken minority groups would be placed at a disadvantage financially, into consideration. The Head of Engineering & Transport informed the Committee that the Equalities Impact Assessment had been undertaken and as it was a 'live' document it would be amended on an on-going basis, as responses were received during the consultation process. He reminded the Committee that there was a Council resolution in place to proceed with the consultation and that following this, all views submitted would be collated and considered prior to a final decision by County Council.

The Committee declined to endorse the proposal outlined in the report and it was proposed that prior to proceeding further, the Executive Board request further details from the other Welsh local authorities who had already implemented charges for post-sixteen transport, to clarify how these had been implemented and their effect on post-sixteen education in the long term.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Executive Board ask the other Welsh local authorities for full details of how they implemented charges for post-sixteen transport and seek clarification as to whether these had affected post-sixteen education in the long term.