

Committee: **Cabinet**

Date: **1 May 2007**

Title of Report: **Assistance with transport for pupils attending denominational schools**

By: **Director of Children's Services**

Purpose of Report: **To advise the Cabinet of the outcome of the consultation exercise on possible changes to the policy of assisting pupils with transport to denominational schools.**

Recommendation:

The Cabinet is recommended to defer reaching a decision on whether to change the existing policy on denominational home to school transport until 5 June to enable further discussions with diocesan authorities and schools in their areas

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 If the policy is changed, savings of up to £585,000 could be achieved over five years commencing in 2008/09 at the rate of approximately £117,000 per year.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 At its meeting on 30 January 2007 the Cabinet authorised consultation on possible changes to the current policy of providing pupils with assistance with transport costs to denominational schools. Currently, assistance is given to children attending these schools where the distance is over three miles (two miles for pupils under the age of eight) and the child or parent is of that faith. This is a discretionary policy but, from 2008/09, legislation will require such pupils from low income families (children entitled to free school meals or families in receipt of working tax credit) attending denominational secondary schools between three and fifteen miles of the home to be entitled to free transport, subject to religious qualification.

2.2 The consultation exercise commenced on 19 February with a closing date for comments of 30 March. A leaflet, to which the diocesan authorities contributed, was issued to all parents of children attending maintained schools in the county and parents of children attending denominational schools in Kent, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove who receive help with transport. The leaflet summarised the Council's position and emphasised that any assistance currently given will continue to be provided until the child leaves his/her current school. The leaflet was also available on the County Council's website with a reply form and this was also made available to the citizens panel.

2.3 The leaflet was also circulated with a covering letter to the two diocesan authorities, headteachers and chairs of governing bodies of schools in East Sussex and schools outside the county where pupils receive assistance, District, Borough, Parish, Town and neighbouring councils, County Councillors and local Members of Parliament.

2.4 2,217 responses to the leaflet were received. To the question 'Do you think children who go to a denominational school should be entitled to free transport?' 1,533 responded 'yes' and 585 stated 'no'. The remainder either stated 'not sure' or did not reply to the question.

2.5 91 letters were received, all opposing any change of policy. In addition there were two petitions signed by 72 pupils at St Richard's Catholic College and another signed by 37 residents in the Eastbourne area. There were also 379 standard proformas opposing any change, four letters from schools and letters from each of the diocesan authorities.

2.6 Following the commencement of the consultation exercise, a meeting was held between the Principal of St Richard's Catholic College and officers to discuss possible alternative policies.

2.7 In addition, a meeting took place on 2 April involving Councillors Reid and Glazier, the Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, the Deputy Director of the Catholic Schools Services and officers. At that meeting the diocesan representatives asked for more direct discussions to take place with other diocesan representatives and their schools before a final decision is reached.

2.8 In order to consider the alternative proposals suggested by the diocesan authorities which, at the same time, produce financial savings to the County Council, it is proposed that further time to meet again with the diocese is needed. Steps to arrange those discussions have been instigated but will not be completed in time for a report to be made to this Cabinet meeting. Therefore, it is proposed that the Cabinet defer a decision on any change of policy until its meeting on 5 June. A full report on the outcome of the consultation process and the discussions with diocesan authorities will be made to that meeting.

3. Environmental Issues

3.1 In the consultation exercise concerns have been raised that, if the current assistance is withdrawn, it will result in parents using cars to drive their children to and from school rather than use public services. That will mean more cars on the road, thus increasing congestion and adding to the environmental issues.

4. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendation

4.1 In view of the conclusions reached at the meeting described in paragraph 2.7, the Cabinet is asked to defer reaching a decision on a possible change of policy until further discussions with diocesan authorities and their schools have been completed. A further report will be made to the Cabinet on 5 June when a final decision will need to be taken.

MATT DUNKLEY
Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Geoff Evans, Head of Admissions and Transport (client), Tel: 01273 481789

Local Members: All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

Report to Cabinet on 30 January 2007 by the Director of Law and Personnel – 'Executive Review of Passenger Transport – Interim report on denominational home to school transport'

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