

Subject:	Progress Report on the Home to School Transport Service		
Date of Meeting:	9 November 2020		
Report of:	Executive Director of Families, Children and Learning		
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Ward(s) affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT**

- 1.1 To provide the panel with an update and progress report on the Home to School Transport (HTST) service

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the Committee notes this report on the Home to School Transport Service;
- 2.2 That a further report comes to a meeting of the CYPS Committee in the Spring of 2021, which will include progress on the implementation of agreed recommendations from the November 2020 report of the HTST Members' Policy Panel.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 In 2018/19, responding to an escalating overspend in the HTST budget and perceived lack of effective competition in the sector, the council commissioned Edge Public Solutions to introduce a new Dynamic Purchasing and Procurement of Operators System for September 2020. Edge began working in April 2019 and challenges in capacity at every level of the system soon became apparent. It is acknowledged that the introduction of the new system was rushed, and serious problems resulted with the service from September 2019. Although most were resolved by November, there had been a very significant loss of trust and confidence from families and transport operators.
- 3.2 An independent investigation into the issues reported the following March 2020, making a series of recommendations.
- 3.3 All the recommendations from the first independent review are being implemented as part of an action plan to restore trust and confidence in the service.
- 3.4 The service has an agreed co-production policy with PaCC, approved by the HTST Governance Board and included with background reports to this report.

This ensures that all new policy and practice is co-produced in consultation with parent and carer representatives and that parents and carers are part of recruitment panels and key decision-making forums.

- 3.5 New governance arrangements were brought in to ensure all stakeholders were fully involved in the changes. Alongside the Members Policy Panel, a monthly HTST Governance Board was set up with all stakeholders represented. It is chaired by the Assistant Director. The Governance Board will continue to monitor progress with the service, alongside 6-monthly reviews by the CYPS Committee.
- 3.6 The Members Policy Panel has now concluded its review and produced its report. Subject to approval by CYPS Committee, its recommendations will be consolidated into the existing action plan.

4. Planning of Transport Arrangements for September 2020

- 4.1 Notwithstanding the complexities arising from the pandemic, arrangements for transport for this autumn term went very well overall, as evidenced by feedback from all stakeholders.
- 4.2 By the beginning of the autumn term 2020, the service had successfully completed a range of tasks:
- secured new systems to ensure arrangements for September 2020 that ensured no repetition of the inadequate services in September 2019;
 - responded to the COVID 19 pandemic and the significant difficulties raised for safe transport of highly vulnerable children, in terms of social distancing, cleaning vehicles to prevent contamination and PPE for transport staff;
 - helped to ensure the sustainability of transport firms and staff over the school closure period by negotiating supplier relief on an 'open-book' basis with all transport providers;
 - introduced more robust contract management and compliance monitoring to ensure best value and improved budgetary control.
- 4.3 All routes for September were planned to allow social distancing and in line with government guidance.
- 4.4 Our transport providers have been flexible and supportive over a period of much change and uncertainty, working in partnership with the service to ensure that arrangements are the best they can be over the pandemic period and in relation to the return to school. This has included supporting the service with the planning of additional vehicles to support social distancing and also accommodating staggered starts and part-time timetables that some schools introduced this term.
- 4.5 Planning took place in good time, with transport providers being informed about their routes before the end of July and asked to inform families and introduce any new staff teams prior to the 16 August.
- 4.6 In the majority of cases, firms met the deadline of 16 August, but a number had to be chased up beyond this date. In some cases, we have been informed of genuine difficulties making contact with parents and carers at this time of year, and we do not feel this system has worked as well as it should and needs further

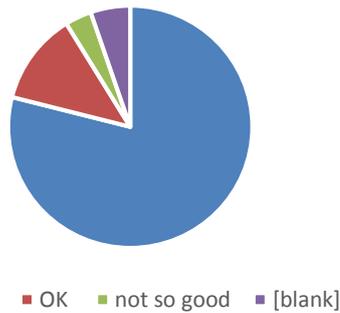
improvement. We have been discussing with a PaCC representative how to make changes to ensure greater compliance with deadlines in the future and will continue to explore options with operators.

- 4.7 The Parent and Carers' Council, often under extreme pressures themselves as parents and carers over the period of school closures, has provided highly valued challenge and support in relation to autumn arrangements and very helpful input into planning and communications.

5. **Survey of Parents and Carers in September 2020**

- 5.1 The service had worked closely with PaCC and with operators to plan for the start of the new school year.
- 5.2 Social distancing meant new vehicles and VPA's had to be added to routes, and there were also changes to school timetables to be accommodated.
- 5.3 To find out how successful plans had been, it was agreed that the service would undertake a quick snapshot survey of satisfaction with autumn term arrangements and this was constructed with the help of PaCC.
- 5.4 A simple survey was sent out by email to 411 parents and carers on 17 September to make replying as easy as possible with three potential scores; good/ OK/ not so good.
- 5.5 Parents and carers were asked to comment on what was going well and what could be improved.
- 5.6 They were also invited to elicit a comment on the service from their child or young person.
- 5.7 Parents were also asked to tick a box if they would like follow-up from their comments and just one parent did so.
- 5.8 Fifty-seven responses were received.
- 5.9 91% of respondents rated the service as at least satisfactory (OK).
- 5.10 Of these, 79% rated the service as at least 'good'.
- 5.11 Two respondents (4%) rated the service as below satisfactory and 3 did not give a score.

HTST user survey 17 September 2020



5.12 Very many positive comments by parents and carers were received with appreciation expressed for individual transport staff and sometimes to members of the HTST service. For example (names removed):

- *My son's driver is fantastic. He knows my son and understands him. He always has classical music playing when my son is picked up, because he knows it comforts, calms and soothes him....*
- *All interactions I have had over the holidays have been positive and beneficial. I've spoken with his driver at the school gate and as always, he was very accommodating for my child's needs and as always a pleasure to deal with.*
- *Drivers have been on time, friendly and helpful. And my son likes them and the chaperones.*
- *Our driver has been lovely and real gem and very reliable and punctual*
- *Very pleased we have the same driver and chaperone as last year. I think this really allowed my child to settle back more quickly.....*
- *Excellent Same great driver as last year which was a big relief. Kind and professional VPA.*
- *Warm and welcoming service. Communication all been great .*
- *The taxi driver is really friendly and my daughter enjoys getting in the taxi.*
- *Everything. The communication from yourself was great. (HTST transport officer) was really helpful. The taxi driver called in advance to introduce himself and my son has had no issues and is happy to go.*

5.13 Parents and carers particularly appreciate the relationships with transport staff, consistency of drivers and VPAs, good timekeeping and good communication.

5.14 Parents also provided some positive comments from children and young people stressing again the importance of good relationships, such as:

Phil is brilliant. I feel good when I'm in his taxi.

I like going on the bus with Nigel and Pat

5.15 Comments about areas for improvement were few in number (3) but related to poor communication and time-keeping, and in one instance to a change of staff team:

- *Communication from the taxi firm. Also, we were supposed to have some contact from the driver before we started, and it came down to the last minute. There was a lot of chasing.*
- *The measures put in place to ensure children were sufficiently prepared, etc. did not take place. Our experiences were very similar to last year. We knew it would be [operator] but no named driver*
- *I'm confused as to why the driver and escort were changed in the first place (when) we were finally provided with a taxi driver and escort who were able to manage both my child and the other child in his taxi without any problems.*

5.16 One person suggested that parents be given access to a vehicle tracker used by some transport firms so they could plan around arrival times. Schools may also like this tool, and this could be a helpful development for all.

5.17 Where parents and carers requested a follow-up, this has happened, and the situation has been resolved to their satisfaction.

5.18 A more thorough survey of users, schools and operators/staff will be organised with PaCC later in the school year. For children, we can perhaps explore opportunities to make it part of a school activity.

6. COVID-19 Guidance for Parents and Operators

6.1 Following government guidance issued on 11 August 2020, new advice was issued to operators on 18 August covered the prevention of transmission and the response to symptoms. This is included with background documents to this report.

6.2 We have also required our operators to send us their risk assessments before the start of term.

6.3 We issued advice to parents and carers on 20 August along with a 'Social Story' to help some children and young people prepare for the changed arrangements for September. This is included with background documents to this report.

6.4 All our communications with parents and carers have been discussed and approved by PaCC.

- 6.5 Social distancing on HTST was not considered mandatory by the government, but their guidance advised councils to implement it if possible and the Brighton and Hove Service has done this.
- 6.6 Social distancing (with a spare seat between each passenger or limits to numbers on vehicles) has necessitated the commissioning of more vehicles and crews, and while we have managed to secure sufficient capacity, resources have been stretched with additional vehicles commissioned and providers have had to recruit extra staff.

7. Vehicle Passenger Assistants

- 7.1 This workforce is often difficult to recruit and retain because of limited hours needed, split shifts and time of day when transport required. A high percentage of VPAs (and drivers on HTST) are an older workforce and their safety is a priority, alongside that of children and young people.
- 7.2 Acknowledging recruitment and retention difficulties, our supplier relief over the period of school closures has paid VPAs at 100% of their expected pay.
- 7.3 To avoid shortages, the HTST service over the summer recruited a small 'bank' of VPAs who can cover for any gaps caused by sickness or any issues that might arise with time taken for acquiring enhanced DBS for new VPAs. These are now all deployed and consideration is being given to further recruitment.

8. Monitoring

- 8.1 The service checks with providers ensured that no staff member began their work in September without an enhanced DBS. No 'waivers' were necessary and are not part of service policy going forward.
- 8.2 Following issues last year, where parents and carers reported feeling burdened by requests for new Pupil Information Sheets annually, this year parents and carers have only been asked to update the existing sheets if there have new information to provide about children's needs.
- 8.3 All operators have been told that they will only get an updated Pupil Information Sheet if the parents or carers have provided updated information. Where routes have changed, transport operators have been provided with Pupil Information Sheets for children and young people new to their service.
- 8.4 A new online application form and pupil information sheet combined has been co-produced with a PaCC representative and will be online this term.
- 8.5 The Home to School Transport Service has conducted risk assessments on all children using our transport and is in the process of undertaking a further risk assessment on all vehicles.
- 8.6 The service is monitoring compliance with COVID-19 safety standards by:
- requiring an updated risk assessment from each firm;

- staff being required to complete the training modules sent out to them by the beginning of term;
- team presence at key school sites in the first week of term to monitor traffic flow;
- spot checks on COVID preventative and cleaning regime compliance at key school sites from the beginning of the autumn term.

8.7 Capacity issues in the HTST team have prevented spot checks starting as soon as we would like, but they will resume shortly.

9. Recruitment

9.1 In May of 2020, the Policy and Resources Committee of the Council agreed an uplift to the budget for the HTST from April 2021 to bring this more in line with the average for our statistical neighbours.

9.2 Part of this funding was allocated to an increase of staffing for the under-resourced HTST service.

9.3 Low capacity in the team at peak times, was referenced in the report from the Independent Review Team, published in March 2020.

9.4 Since then, despite the addition of some temporary staff, the service has continued to struggle with low capacity, especially over the summer holidays this year.

9.5 Complexities in the recruitment process have meant a protracted period without new staff being in post but progress is being made.

9.6 A permanent Team Manager has been appointed to start at the end of October 2020 and a new administrative assistant is recently in post. The service is very grateful for the work of the interim team manager, who was seconded from another part of the council and is returning to his substantive position, after leading the service well through a challenging period.

9.7 Candidates for the HTST SEND Officer post have been short-listed and recruitment will take place in the next few weeks.

9.8 The aim is to complete recruitment and induction of the new team before the end of January 2021, including induction into co-production arrangements with PaCC and Amaze.

10. Training

10.1 Prior to the Spring of 2020, Brighton and Hove had no training offer for transport staff.

10.2 Elements of training were contractually required but the service did not have a robust means of monitoring compliance with training or assessing the quality and suitability of training accessed independently by firms.

- 10.3 The service considers high quality training to be essential for the safety and wellbeing of children and young people on HTST and is mindful that parents and carers are of the same view.
- 10.4 Addressing this issue has therefore been a key priority for the service over the past several months and has taken up much available capacity and resource.
- 10.5 A comprehensive online training programme, consisting of 9 modules has been developed using expertise as appropriate from services across the council, medical services, schools, transport staff and from parents and carers.
- 10.6 This will be supplemented by a series of webinars and post-pandemic, a programme of face-to-face training.
- 10.7 The online modules allow the service to set a uniform standard for training. The Learning Gateway enables the service to monitor that transport staff have undertaken modules and that they have passed the tests embedded in each module.
- 10.8 Dedicated support from the Learning and Development Team has enabled the service to put these modules onto the Learning Gateway and ensure all transport providers have access to this.
- 10.9 We issued our firms the first two training modules for all staff to be completed by the beginning of term. They are:
- 'Introduction to HTST'
 - 'Safeguarding on HTST'
- 10.10 These were not accessible to all on the Learning Gateway by the summer holiday period so were issued as PDFs by email. All operators have assured us that these have been undertaken by all staff.
- 10.11 All modules are now on the Learning Gateway or in the planning cycle to be online by January 20201.
- 10.12 Initial feedback from firms on the content is very positive despite some teething problems with the Learning Gateway.
- 10.13 We are then requiring all staff to have completed a further three modules by this half term and a further four by the end of the autumn term, covering. These are:
- Equalities
 - Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
 - Exploitation
 - Autistic Spectrum Condition
 - Managing Behaviour
 - Epilepsy
 - Language and Communication

- 10.14 We have also accelerated training on epilepsy for staff transporting children with epilepsy plans. Epilepsy plans are also now being written by the specialist nurses at Seaside View with a dedicated section providing advice specifically for transport staff, and with parents' and carers' consent, each updated plan is being forwarded to our operators.
- 10.15 While enormous progress has been made, this training programme has been brought in very fast to fill a significant gap in service and systems still need to embed. All staff completing training modules are asked to fill in a brief evaluation sheet and their responses will be used for further improvement.

11. Summary and Priorities for further Improvement

- 11.1 The service has worked hard over the past many months to improve the service on offer and overcome the challenges of the autumn of 2010
- 11.2 Many new systems have been co-produced and brought in quickly to ensure rapid improvement and that children and young people were once more at the heart and centre of the service on offer.
- 11.3 Those new systems need to embed and consolidate, with further improvements as needed consequent on stakeholder feedback.
- 11.4 In addition, the service has expanded with permanent posts replacing temporary posts and new staff arriving in post. Some new posts still need to be recruited and the new team needs to be fully inducted.
- 11.5 In the above context and despite considerable progress, the service has much work left to do and top priorities include:
- Finalising recruitment and induction of new staff;
 - Ensuring all COVID-related advice and guidance is up-to-date and implemented for the safety and wellbeing of children and staff;
 - Reviewing the current system of procurement and considering any changes to be made;
 - Consulting on an updated HTST and post-16 transport policy;
 - Providing a quality independent travel training option is available to all families for whom independent travel is an option, subject to a budget being secured for this;
 - Extending and improving further links with the SEND team and making sure that HTST processes integrate with the Education, Health and Care plan cycle
 - Reviewing and improving all new systems in the service and making sure they are effectively implemented, recorded and managed;
 - Establishing a regular integrated survey of key stakeholders to provide a 360-degree perspective on the work of the service;
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 - Improving further systems for financial forecasting and ensuring a balanced budget for 21/22.

12. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 12.1 The service now works with an agreed co-production policy with the Parent and Carers' Council (PacC) and is committed to on-going co-production of all communications, new policies and service developments with parents and carers.

13 FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 13.1 Of the reported overspend of £1.122m, it is currently estimated that £0.339m relates to additional costs as a result of COVID-19. The early indicative forecast over spend for 2020/21 (pre-Covid) was £1.200m. Excluding Covid-19 related costs, the forecast over spend for 2020/21 has reduced significantly to £0.783m. This suggests that the careful route planning by the HTST team is having a positive impact on the cost of the service and is capable of producing improved value for money, at the same time as delivering what users regard as a good service.
- 13.2 The HTST budget for 2021/22 will increase by £1.000m as agreed by P&R Committee. It is anticipated that the additional funding, together with the improved route planning, should eliminate the overspend in 2021/22. However, forecasting spending for next year by extrapolating from this year is problematic, due to the service disruption and different financial arrangements that have had an impact on the budget as a result of the pandemic.

Finance Officer Consulted: Louise Hoten / Dave Ellis Date: 19/10/20

Legal Implications:

- 13.3 The context in which the MPP was set up is provided in the body of the report. The report should be read in conjunction with the LGA recommendations, which the panel endorses. The Panel makes a number of recommendations with a view to the council being able to offer an improved service and lawful decision making to meet statutory duties in relation to home to school transport services in the future.

Lawyer Consulted: Natasha Watson Date: dd/mm/yy

Equalities Implications:

- 13.4 The statutory duty on the council to provide free Home to School Transport for children and young people with complex special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is aimed at ensuring their access to schooling is assured, especially given mobility issues and the fact that the nearest suitable school may be further than for children without SEND. In arranging transport, the council must comply with the Equalities Act of 2010 which requires that children and young people with SEND are not treated 'less favourably' than their peers and that there is no indirect discrimination against their parents and carers by requiring of them more than would reasonably be required of other parents.

Sustainability Implications:

- 13.5 The addition of up to 200 vehicles travelling twice a day at peak times across the City adds to pollution and in that context, it is important that transport providers invest in newer more environmentally sustainable vehicles.
- 13.6 It is also important that the best and most efficient route planning minimises the numbers of vehicles needed by using the most suitable vehicles for each shared journey.
- 13.7 While the need to socially distance on transport has necessarily increased the number of vehicles on the road this year, the underlying number of vehicles for when routes return to normal has reduced this year.

Any Other Significant Implications:

- 13.8 None

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 13.9 None

Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

- 13.10 The HTST remains on the corporate risk register. Major improvements have been evidenced above and the level of risk has significantly reduced over the course of 2020.
- 13.11 There are continued risks related to the pandemic, with significant additional safety measures needed on transport. These are mitigated through risk assessments, careful guidance to our transport operators and parents, close consultation with Public Health, and appropriate measures to ensure compliance with national and local advice.
- 13.12 The service is expanding with a number of new posts and also permanent appointments replacing temporary ones. While this will substantially increase capacity to make and sustain improvements, there is a risk in the transition, which will be mitigated through thorough induction processes.

Public Health Implications:

- 13.13 Transporting children with SEND in the enclosed space of vehicles brings inevitable risk for children and staff, but the service has worked with transport providers to mitigate that risk as far as possible.
- 13.14 Guidance to operators has been written in consultation with Public Health and advice sought from Public Health as needed.
- 13.15 Public Health have agreed to transport staff being treated as key workers in terms of accessing COVID testing.

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 13.16 The issues that arose with the service in the summer and autumn of 2019 led to a loss of confidence in this area of the council's service amongst parents and carers of children with SEND, with schools and with transport providers.
- 13.17 Issues with the process of consultation and co-production with key stakeholders were highlighted and have been addressed for the future.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Background Documents

- Co-production agreement with PaCC
- Guidance to Transport Operators on Response to the Pandemic
- Guidance to Parents on September Arrangements and Social Story
- Introductory Training Module for Transport Staff