

MAINSTREAM SCHOOL TRANSPORT: CASE STUDY (Cambridgeshire)

1. Developing proposals

- 1.1. Mainstream school transport is the Council's biggest single passenger transport spend, with an annual budget of just under £10m. Securing even a 10% reduction in spending in this area would therefore generate a significant saving.
- 1.2. Two general ways in which a saving could be delivered were identified, as set out below.
 - Each September the secondary school bus networks are adjusted to reflect year 11 pupils leaving and year 7 pupils starting. There isn't sufficient time to conduct a "blank page" review of the networks, however, meaning that efficiency can be gradually lost over time.
 - The Council has previously allocated one seat per eligible pupil, based on the assumption that 100% of pupils travel each day. No data has been available to support or challenge this.
- 1.3. Given the previous two points, we proposed investing in staff time to review networks in the pilot area from scratch, and to base these on the assumption that not all pupils travel every day, therefore allowing more passengers to be allocated to each route (e.g. 75 pupils on a contract for 70 seats).
- 1.4. In order to mitigate the risk of there being insufficient space for pupils on any given bus, it was proposed to replace standard printed tickets with smartcards. Pupils would touch in on boarding, in a similar way to Oyster in London or a contactless payment card. The readers fitted to each vehicle would record and transmit the number of pupils travelling on each trip, providing data that would allow trends and potential overloads to be identified.

2. Piloting the changes

- 2.1. Work on reviewing the school bus networks to Ely College, Soham Village College and Witchford Village College was undertaken during spring/summer 2016. Once formal approval for the pilot was received, arrangements were put in place to introduce the revised routes from September 2016.
- 2.2. The new **smartcards** (as explained above) were despatched later than anticipated, due to issues with the external supplier. This resulted in a number of parents being concerned about their child's travel arrangements, and increased the volume of enquiries to the Council. Whilst it can be noted

that clear and realistic communication about when tickets will be sent out is important, parts of the process will remain outside of the Council's direct control.

- 2.3. One of the main reasons for problems arising on the ground was when the information held about existing journeys did not match the reality of the previous operation, for example if a new **informal stopping arrangement** had been established. In such cases, the revised routes were based on theory rather than practice, and therefore further changes were needed once it became clear what had actually been happening.
- 2.4. A number of potential issues were identified with the new networks, including locations where there was a risk of vehicles **overloading**. Measures were taken to mitigate this risk, including the user of a sweeper vehicle, however there have been no documented cases of more pupils trying to travel than the provided capacity (other than one occasion when the operator supplied a smaller vehicle than specified in the contract). The case studies in Appendix 1 include examples of capacity questions.
- 2.5. One consequence of loading vehicles at or above their contracted capacity is the reduction in the slack that's previously been available to cover for ineligible pupils. These students may be entitled to travel but on a different bus (for example, they're going home with a friend, or they simply prefer to use an alternative route that's more convenient for them). Alternatively they may not be entitled to travel at all. In order to manage this situation in the pilot area, it was necessary to apply the Council's existing "**no pass, no travel**" policy much more strictly. The Council's existing code of conduct for school transport does make it clear that parents remain responsible for their child until and unless the pupil is accepted onto the school bus. Nevertheless, the strict application of this rule has prompted some concern from parents and schools.
- 2.6. Other specific changes have caused concerns relating to **longer journeys** or **mixed age groups**. The new networks have not changed existing policy, which is in parts driven by national guidance, for example with regard to journey times. Whilst individual situations have been explored and issues discussed with parents and schools, few further changes have been introduced after the main review in September. A number of case studies are included in Appendix 1.

3. A transformation bid for 2017/18

- 3.1. As of autumn 2016, the project was assessed to be delivering a saving of more than 15% in the pilot area. This was achieved without removing any

student's entitlement to transport, or any fundamental change in policy. The focus was instead on removing capacity that was, in reality, unused.

- 3.2. The potential to apply this approach on a county-wide basis was considered by members and senior officers, and a business case was produced during the autumn of 2016. This recognised that increased staff time had been key in reviewing networks in the pilot area and managing the change process. The resultant transformation bid therefore included a budget for two additional staff from April 2017 and the extension of the fixed term Project Manager role.
- 3.3. The bid was presented, along with a number of others, to General Purposes Committee in December 2016 and received the support of the committee.

APPENDIX 1: School bus routes – case studies

COMBINED ROUTES

Wicken to Soham Village College / St Andrew's Primary School

Previously two separate vehicles were provided from Wicken to Soham, one for secondary school pupils and one for primary school pupils. Following the Total Transport review, a single vehicle was provided for all pupils. This resulted in a saving of £13.7k per year.

The two schools are adjacent to each other, and their start and finish times are similar. Nevertheless, the door-to-door travel time increased for primary school pupils by 10-15 minutes in the morning, and for secondary school pupils by a similar time in the afternoon. This increase was largely due to additional waiting time at the schools.

However the biggest area of concern, based on feedback from parents and schools, related to the suitability of primary school pupils experiencing the behaviour of secondary school students. A number of reports were received about incidents on the school bus, prompting meetings with staff at both schools and specific action involving individual pupils.

In addition, an agreement was reached with the operator for them to provide a double decker vehicle (previously the allocation was a 70-seat single deck coach). This allowed secondary school pupils to travel upstairs and primary school students to remain on the lower deck; the passenger assistant, who was allocated to the route from the start of term, remained downstairs.

A number of parents remain unhappy with the new arrangements. In the user satisfaction survey carried out in January 2017, four negative comments were received about the arrangements (as well as one positive comment). Discussions at both officer meetings and the Member Steering Group have concluded that the change remains reasonable, however, and it's expected that a single vehicle will continue to provide transport for all pupils from Wicken.

POTENTIAL OVERLOADS

Sutton to Witchford Village College

Previously three vehicles were used to serve Sutton, one of which continued via Mepal. Following the Total Transport review, only two vehicles were used, contributing to the overall saving at Witchford Village College.

The revised routes resulted in 17 fewer seats being provided than the number of pupils entitled to travel. This created the most obvious risk of overloading in the pilot

area, and specific consideration was given to how the risk of an overload could best be mitigated. As a result, a “sweeper minibus” was contracted for the first three weeks of operation, to ensure no pupil was left behind.

Within the first fortnight, it became clear that drivers were regularly being told that there was no space (triggering the use of the sweeper bus, as per the agreed instructions). The numbers being counted indicated that there *was* sufficient capacity on the main buses, suggesting that some pupils may have preferred to travel on the sweeper minibus, perhaps because it allowed them to sit with friends or to travel more comfortably.

Whilst the above are understandable reasons, the sweeper minibus was removed and there have been no documented cases since there being insufficient space on the main buses. This situation did require active management at the start of term, and took a significant amount of time; the outcome avoided the Council making a commitment an additional vehicle throughout the year, however.

LONGER JOURNEYS

Isleham to Soham Village College

Previously two vehicles were used to serve Isleham due to the volume of pupils, with one minibus operating along Hasse Fen. Following the Total Transport review, one of the two main vehicles was diverted to serve Hasse Fen as well, removing the need for the minibus (which cost £20.9k per year).

The impact of this change is that one of the two buses from Isleham operates around fifteen minutes earlier than previously, and that the journey is longer.

A number of comments were received from parents regarding the length of the route and the quality of the roads being driven along. It was additionally noted that pupils have to get up earlier in the morning. Interestingly, there have been few issues with pupils attempting to travel on the other vehicle, presumably because the smartcard system is far more effective at detecting this than visual pass checks by drivers.

In the second half of the autumn term, feedback was received about the bus arriving in school late. This was monitored, including by travelling on the bus and speaking with the operator. A specific consultation letter was then sent to parents of pupils on this route in early 2017. It considered possible solutions, including changes to times and route, although without reinstating the minibus previously removed. Minor changes were introduced shortly after February half-term.

The new route is not ideal, if only due to the road quality, and should future changes in pupil numbers make further alterations possible without incurring extra cost, that would be beneficial. Journeys remain within policy, however, and no immediate changes are therefore planned.