



19 March 2024

Re: Pre-Scrutiny of the Review of the Council's Home to School Transport Policy

Dear Cabinet Members

I have been instructed by the Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committee to convey the comments and observations of Members in relation to the Review of the Council's Home to School Transport Policy.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee had the opportunity to pre-scrutinise the Cabinet report relating to the review at its meeting on the 18th March 2024. The Committee also heard from non-Committee Member, County Borough Councillor K Johnson who addressed the Committee on his concerns in respect of the impact the proposals may have. The Committee undertook thorough scrutiny and consideration of the potential impact upon pupils and their families. Through the Committee's discussions members noted the significant financial challenges facing the Council and that given that background context understood the need for the Council to consider the level of provision currently provided, which goes beyond what the Council is statutorily required to provide.

The Committee's comments and observations on the proposals are summarised below, however the Vice Chair, Cllr Barry Stephens, who chaired the meeting, has specifically requested for Cabinet to consider the webcast recording of the meeting prior to its meeting, in order to gain as full a picture as possible of the comments and observations of Overview & Scrutiny Committee Members. A link to the recording can be found [here](#).

All Members acknowledged the fact that the Council currently provides transport for pupils over and above what it is required to so do under the relevant legislation and guidance and appreciated why this area was under consideration, noting how costs for providing the current level of provision had escalated in recent years. Several Members felt that comparison with other Councils does not reflect the percentage of children eligible for transport, which is different in each Council area. Neither does it reflect the unique geographical or demographic circumstances of Rhondda Cynon Taf. Members also noted that the number of respondents to the public consultation, as well as the percentage of those who were against the proposals demonstrates the strength of feeling in relation to the proposals.

A number of Members felt strongly that the proposals would impose financial burdens on families already facing economic challenges which the Council, through other decisions, has prioritised protecting. Many Members commented upon the importance of prioritising accessibility to education for all pupils, regardless of their socio-economic background. Some Members believed that the financial burden created by this proposal, would go beyond families having to pay a daily bus fare. A Member reflected that the impact of the proposals on children's wellbeing, where children will potentially be starting their school day in wet clothing, equipment, PE

kits etc, which would have an impact on attendance and could potentially hinder academic performance.

A Member requested that the geographical layout of the County Borough be taken into account by Cabinet when considering this matter, noting that pupils residing in remote or rural areas may face significant difficulties in accessing education, which is already impacted by a reduced public bus service due to the reduction of bus grants.

A number of Members commented that the current public transport infrastructure is not sufficient to meet the needs of the residents, potentially having further impact on school attendance. As part of this discussion point, a Member noted that families could therefore resort to driving their children to school (where this is an option) resulting in a potential increase in traffic. The Committee discussed this point in the context of climate change.

The safety of children walking long distances to school was also raised by Members. Members raised concerns in respect of the location of some schools, near busy, inaccessible roads, with unlit paths and reduced proximity to bus stops or train stations. A member requested that Risk Assessments on safe walking routes should be undertaken prior to a decision being taken, to identify more specifically potential cost saving which could be achieved. In addition to this a Member also proposed that the Council postpone a decision until Welsh Government determine public transport reform proposals, would may enable the Council to stipulate routes, timetables and fares, therefore ensuring that there is sufficient service in place to meet the needs of residents.

Members commented that the proposals may disproportionately affect certain groups with disabilities, Additional Learning Needs and sensory impairments, as well as other protected characteristics, potentially creating barriers to education. A Member specifically requested that Cabinet give careful consideration to the potential inequality this proposal could create, as part of a need to avoid the risk of judicial review or legal challenge. A member stated that the Council should also consider the requirement and availability of The Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) which applies to all new public service vehicles.

Concerns were raised that the some of the options contained within the report could have an adverse impact upon the Welsh language in RCT, and the selection of education through the medium of Welsh by parents, thereby jeopardising the growth of Welsh speakers. It was felt this could also risk undoing the work the Council is undertaking as part of the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). Members queried whether any potential savings would need to be reinvested significantly into achieving the WESP objectives as a result of this proposal. Members noted that the Council has a duty to promote access to Education and Training through to medium of welsh which they believed would be impacted by the proposals.

Members noted that the alternative options arising from consultation feedback in full or in part addressed some of these areas of concern, but noted that 'equity' of provision across all areas of education was important.

A number of Members of the Committee asked that Cabinet reconsider the proposed changes and delay any changes to the current policy until the impact and outcomes of the recommendations from the Welsh Government review of the Learner Travel

Measure are known in addition to consideration of the outcome of the Children's Commissioner Response to the Welsh Government review and what bearing those concerns may have upon this area of policy in the future. I am aware Cabinet have been briefed on the latest Welsh Government update in relation to their review, published on Thursday 14th March, and provided with a copy of it.

A Member moved a motion, which stated that this Committee reports to Cabinet that, having scrutinised the report, that Cabinet should not proceed with the proposals to change the Home to School Transport provision and that the existing provision should be retained. The motion was not supported by the majority of committee members. Cllr Sera Evans, Cllr K Morgan and Cllr M Powell requested that their names in support of this motion be recorded.

The Vice Chair of the Committee, has asked me to convey his thanks, for the constructive way in which scrutiny has again been engaged in the consideration of these proposals, and in particular the opportunity to pre-scrutinise the above report.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Christian Hanagan', written over a faint, light-colored circular stamp or watermark.

Christian Hanagan
Service Director Democratic Services and Communications
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

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