

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL - REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:	Town Centres, Economic Growth and Prosperity
2.	Date:	23rd January, 2012
3.	Title:	Withdrawal of free transport assistance to Aston Fence Junior Infants School and Aston Academy. Ward – Rother Vale and Holderness
4.	Directorate:	Environment and Development Services

5. Summary

Pupils at both Aston Fence Junior and Infants School and Aston Academy resident on the Coalbrook Estate at Woodhouse Mill are currently provided with zero fare bus passes. These have been provided since 1997 due to an assessment that the walking route to school was considered unsafe. Recent reviews by Transportation Unit have now identified an available safe walking route which removes the statutory duty for free transport assistance to be provided by the Local Authority. Walking distances to both Aston Fence Junior and Infants School and Aston Academy are less than the statutory distances of 2 and 3 miles respectively.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that free transport assistance, in the form of zero fare bus passes, are not renewed for pupils living on the Coalbrook Estate, Woodhouse Mill attending Aston Fence Junior and Infants School and Aston Academy, with effect from September 2012. Pupils would no longer be classed as “eligible” due to the existence of an available safe walking route.

7. Proposals and Details

Recent reviews of "Safe Walking Routes" by Transportation Unit have identified a safe route to Aston Fence Junior and Infants School. This journey has previously been assessed as unsafe to walk even though it is far less than the statutory walking distances of 2 miles (for pupils between the ages of 5 and 8) and 3 miles (for pupils over the age of 8). Existence of a safe walking route indicates that these pupils are no longer eligible for free transport assistance to/from school. The existence of a safe walking route to Aston Fence Junior and Infants School also indicates that there is a safe walking route to Aston Academy of less than the statutory 3 miles, since much of the route is identical.

An initial risk assessment indicates that a safe walking route does exist although this currently needs further work by means of an official assessment and speed surveys prior to being in a position to discontinue current transport assistance. This assessment is scheduled for w/c 16th January 2012 and a verbal update will be provided at the meeting.

The proposed discontinuation of free transport assistance would not be as a result of any changes to the Transport Policy for Children and Young People; it would be as a result of a safe walking route being available thereby removing eligibility and entitlement to statutory free transport assistance.

The existence of a safe walking route to Aston Fence J&I School also has a knock-on effect in that there is also then a safe walking route to Aston Academy for pupils living on the Coalbrook Estate. It is recommended that the withdrawal of zero fare passes for pupils attending Aston Academy should be made at the same time as those for pupils attending Aston Fence School since disruption will then be restricted to a single time period.

It is proposed to allow all current holders of zero fare passes residing on the Coalbrook Estate, Woodhouse Mill, attending either Aston Fence School or Aston Academy, to retain these until the end of the academic year in July 2012. These will not be renewed in September 2012.

8. Finance

Withdrawal of free transport assistance to Aston Fence School with effect from September 2012 is likely to result in budget savings from the Home to School transport budget of approx. £5,100 p.a. (22 zero fare passes at £233 each).*

Withdrawal of these zero fare passes would also remove the need for a dedicated "school bus" to be provided for these pupils. This, however, would not result in any budget savings from the Home to School transport budget since funding for this bus comes from the LA Levy paid to SYPTE from all 4 SY LA's. It would, however, mean that RMBC would be unlikely to be requested to pay for other "school buses" should the need for extra services be required elsewhere within the Borough.

Withdrawal of free transport assistance to Aston Academy with effect from September 2012 is likely to result in budget savings from the Home to School transport budget of approx. £6,300 p.a. (27 zero fare passes at £233 each).*

The “school bus” to Aston Academy is run by the operator on a commercial basis and originates in Sheffield. There are no financial implications for RMBC regarding this bus and a network service bus also operates which covers most of the journey for Aston Academy pupils.

* **Note:** zero fare passes are purchased to cover academic year September to July. Budget savings therefore do not relate directly to the financial year.

9. Risk and Uncertainties

Clearly removal for free transport assistance from this area to its local primary and secondary schools will have financial implications for families with children at either or both of these schools. However, the existence of a safe walking route indicates that there is no statutory duty for RMBC to continue to provide free transport and this should be withdrawn at the earliest opportunity.

In view of the withdrawal of free transport assistance to Blackburn School from September 2012, zero fare passes should be withdrawn to Aston Fence and Aston Academy pupils in the same time period, although discussions with both Aston schools should commence in February 2012. This would restrict any potential issues to a single time period.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

Failure to act on information regarding availability of a safe walking route would lead to inconsistent application of eligibility criteria.

11. Background and Consultation

Home to School transport assistance is currently being withdrawn for pupils of Blackburn J&I School who reside on the Farm View Estate with effect from September 2012. Free home to school transport for these pupils has been provided according to Council Minute 491 dated April 1997.

Council Minute 491 also makes reference within the same clause to the provision of free home to school transport assistance to Aston Fence J&I School for pupils who reside on the Coalbrook Estate at Woodhouse Mill.

A meeting of Governors and Parents was held at Blackburn School on 10th November 2011 which was attended by Cllrs. S. Walker, B.Kaye and I.Barron together with RMBC staff from Corporate Transport Unit. Blackburn School are aware of Council Minute 491 and have questioned if withdrawal of Home to School transport is being undertaken at other schools. The meeting were advised that all free transport assistance is subject to regular review.

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