

**Consultation on London Borough of Barking and
Dagenham
Home to School Travel Assistance Policy**

December 2015

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Methodology	2
2.1 Mixed methods research design	2
2.2 On-line and paper based questionnaire	2
2.3 Focus groups.....	3
3. Findings of the consultation	3
3.1 Demographics.....	3
3.2 Eligibility	4
3.3 Provision.....	4
3.4 Different types of support available.....	6
3.5 Parent/ carer responsibilities	7
3.6 Additional Comments.....	8
3.7 The results of the focus groups	9
4 Conclusion and recommendations.	13
5 Discussion points that have not resulted in a recommendation	14

1. Introduction

French Squared Social Enterprise CIC has undertaken a twelve-week public consultation on The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham's draft "Home to School Travel Assistance Policy" for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), on behalf of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD).

The consultation ran from the 10th August until the 4th November 2015. This report outlines the consultation process, summarises the findings and makes a number of recommendations LBBD may wish to consider. The recommendations give due regard to the Education Act 1996 (Sections 444 and 509), and the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice 2014. The Local Authority's duty is summarised in the Department for Education good practice guidance 'Home to School Travel & Transport Guidance' July 2014.

2. Methodology

2.1 Mixed methods research design

This consultation was best suited to a mixed methods research design, collecting data through different methods. Qualitative data was obtained from focus groups and quantitative and qualitative data was obtained using a questionnaire.

The questionnaire was circulated to all parents and carers of children and young people with SEND in the Borough, through a variety of partner agencies email groups. A paper version was circulated via school transport providers, and the questionnaire was posted on LBBD council website.

The questionnaire was cascaded via email to professionals across the education, health and social care services, the voluntary sector the police and the relevant elected Portfolio Holders on the Local Council.

2.2 On-line and paper based questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to capture opinion around the LBBD proposed policy on Home to School Travel Assistance Policy for children with special educational needs. It was divided into 5 sections: demographics, eligibility, provision, different types of support available, and parental responsibility.

Some questions elicited a "closed" response, and in these cases the number of responses and percentages are reported. Some "open" questions were asked, in these cases, the free text responses have been subjected to a content analysis, where frequently occurring themes are identified, and the frequency of response counted and reported. For these responses, percentages are not reported, as in

some cases more than one response is taken from what it written by a single respondent.

2.3 Focus groups

Two focus groups were facilitated with a total of 12 parents across the groups. The groups were run by three researchers who assumed the role of moderators; responsible for asking questions, directing the discussion, and maintaining the flow of conversation. The groups were small enough for everyone to share their insights, and large enough to provide diversity of perceptions. Discussion was captured in field notes by the researchers who were employees of French Squared CIC and independent of LBBB.

Prior to the start of the focus group, every participant read the shorter and easier to read version of the *LBBB SEND Home to School Travel Assistance Policy*, and read and signed a *Participant Consent Form*. Because each participant spent up to four hours in the focus group, their level of individual contribution exceeded that needed for other forms of data gathering. Consequently, an incentive for participation was offered, and also for their comfort, sandwiches and drinks were provided.

The focus group followed the following format 1) The welcome and introduction of the moderators; 2) Overview of the topic; 3) Ground rules; 4) Opening question; 5) Main discussion; and 6) Conclusion. After the first group, and before the second group, the researchers met and discussed the first focus group for “Lessons Learnt”, and adapted the approach for the second group accordingly.

Each participant was appointed a code name, which has been kept confidential and secure. Participants were referred to in the study findings as ‘Participant’ or ‘P’ only, to maintain anonymity. No children were referred to by name, and the focus groups were identified as ‘Focus Group 1’ or ‘FG1’, and ‘Focus Group 2’ or ‘FG2’.

3. Findings of the consultation

3.1 Demographics

Over the 12-week consultation period, 128 completed questionnaires were received. 91 respondents were parents or carers of young people with SEN (73%). 33 respondents were professionals (27%). This included those working in education, social care, local government and the criminal justice system. Some respondents reported being professionals and carers. 97 respondents reported living in the Borough of Barking and Dagenham (79%) and 89 respondents reported having one or more children with SEN (72%)

Almost half of the 128 residents reported they have a child in a special School.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Mainstream School	36.0%	32
Special School	61.8%	55
Other	9.0%	8

Other responses included 4 parents who have a child or children in Additional Resources Provision (ARP) within mainstream schools, and 4 said they have a child no longer in education.

All respondents reported having read the easy read version of the Barking & Dagenham SEND home to school travel assistance policy; 103 (95%) reported that they had understood it.

3.2 Eligibility

The majority of respondents 71% (69) reported that they felt the eligibility criteria for accessing home to school travel assistance are fair. Reasons for lack of fairness are summarised below:

Reason	Number of responses
The parent should have a right to choose if they want travel assistance	5
Children can have travel challenges, but not statement/ EHCP plan	6
There can be competing definitions of 'disability'	9
Some young people are waiting for their EHCP to be processed but still require transport	2

3.3 Provision

Respondents were asked to comment on the limiting of help with travel to only those where **serious medical or physical problems stop them from walking to school, or going to school on public transport**. Only 47 respondents felt this was fair. 7 respondents said this was fair if there was a clear assessment process. Some respondents identified other specific conditions that may not count as serious medical or physical problem but could require the need for travel assistance.

Response	Number of responses
Autism	4
Sensory	4
Mental health	1
Other mobility	1

Respondents were asked to comment on the assertion that attendance at a special school does not automatically entitle the child to help with travel, and that this **will depend on what the child needs, how far the special school is from home, and how easy it is to travel from home to school**. Responses have been coded and counted as follows:

Response	Number of responses
This is a fair policy	46
This will depend on the individual needs of the child and should be based on a proper assessment	23
Should also be driven by the needs of the rest of the family	9

Respondents were asked to comment on the use of escorts or passenger assistants, as part of the travel needs assessment, and based on **how much supervision or support the child needs and travel arrangements**. Responses have been coded and counted as follows:

Response	Number of responses
This is a fair policy	58
The assessment needs to be thorough/ holistic/ carried out by appropriate professionals	16
The assessment requires parent/ carer input	8

Respondents were asked to comment on the process of applying for transport assistance before the start of each school year. Responses have been coded and counted as follows:

Response	Number of responses
This is a fair policy	49
The assessment needs to be appropriate	3
No re-assessment should be necessary where the child's condition will not change each year	11
Issues with the assessment or application process	8
Re-assessment is an unnecessary burden	9

3.4 Different types of support available

81 respondents (84%) agreed that young people assessed as able to travel independently, could be issued with an Oyster card. Objections to the issuing of an Oyster card focussed on the suitability of the young person for independent travel, including all circumstances around their condition and behavioural traits.

67 respondents (75%) agreed with direct payments to parents or carers to help with travel costs. Objections to direct payments centred on potential abuse of the system, lack of parity with mainstream parents who do not get payments, and concern that payment would not meet the cost of transport

62 respondents (68%) agreed with payment to parents for miles travelled from home to school where their own car is used. Objections centred on a sense that parents were being paid to do what they had a duty to do anyway, concerns about abuse of the system and complexity of the claim process.

Respondents were asked to comment on the possibility of having an escort to walk with a young person, or travel with them on public transport. Responses have been coded and counted as follows:

Response	Number of responses
Supportive of the proposal	44
This role should sit with parents	4
This would need to be assessed on a casewise basis	14
This may be too expensive for the Borough	4
Escorts would need to be appropriate (checked and trained)	6

78 respondents (86%) supported travel training for children to use public transport. Objections centred on ensuring this was only used where appropriate, and subject to assessment.

Respondents were asked to comment on the use of LBBD supplied buses to take children to and from school. Responses have been counted as follows:

Response	Number of responses
Supportive of the proposal	64
Requirement to define "exceptional circumstances"	8
Concerns over timings of service	2

Concerns around loss of social interaction	2
---	---

3.5 Parent/ Carer responsibilities

Respondents were asked to comment on the assertion that **travel arrangements are made for the child, not the parent or carers, so pick-up and drop-off times cannot always be arranged to suit the parents.** Responses have been counted as follows:

Response	Number of responses
Supportive of the proposal	40
There needs to be flexibility on both sides, especially where there are other siblings	26
Do not agree	7
Drop-off points need to be reasonably located	5

Respondents were asked to comment on the assertion that where a child is transported by bus, parents/carers must always be at the set-down point to meet their child at the end of the school day. Responses have been counted as follows:

Response	Number of responses
Supportive of the proposal	72
There needs to be flexibility	5
Drop off points need to be reasonably located	1

Respondents were asked to comment on the LBBD proposal for what happens if the parent or carer is not present at drop off time (wait 5 minutes, leave a note and take child to place of safety). Costs incurred may be charged, and frequent occurrences may lead to withdrawal of transport. Responses have been counted as follows:

Response	Number of responses
Supportive of the proposal	65
Failure to be present should be explored, and withdrawal of transport should be a last resort	9
The wait time should be longer	2
Any arrangement needs to be based on communication between parent/ carer and transport	4

Respondents were asked to comment on the proposed LBBB policy to penalise parents where children are badly behaved on transport, and require payment for any damage caused. Transport could also be withdrawn. Responses have been coded and counted as follows:

Response	Number of responses
Supportive of the proposal	40
Disagree with this proposal	4
Withdrawal should be an option of last resort	2
Challenging behaviour can be a part of a condition	33
Should be subject to case wise review	7
It is wrong to blame parents who are not present	4
Can depend on the escort's training and understanding of the child	8

3.6 Additional Comments

Finally, respondents were asked to add any additional comments not covered elsewhere. A selection of these focussed on:

- Numerous respondents praised the consultation
- Numerous respondents praised the transport service
- Numerous respondents praised the draft policy
- A need for a swift response to parent/ carer questions and an appeals process
- No provision of assistance where a child goes to after school clubs
- Need to challenge double payments for Motability users
- Child safety needs to be considered above cost
- Doorstep drop-offs are favoured above drop-off points
- The needs of siblings need to be taken into consideration

3.7 The results of the focus groups

The following two themes were determined from the analysis of the data in relation to the participants' perceptions of the *LBBB SEND Home to School Travel Assistance Policy*:

- **“A knock-on effect” – the need for reliable services**
- **Child-centredness**

Each theme will now be discussed in turn. The following codes apply: FG1: first focus group; FG2: second focus group; and P: Participant.

i. Theme one: “A knock-on effect” – the need for reliable services

This theme relates to the need for reliable services to exist for successful implementation of the *LBBD SEND Home to School Travel Assistance Policy*. It specifically relates to a discussion around the impact the lack of transportation can have on normal family life. A quotation from a participant illustrates this theme:

FG2 P2: *“It’s a much bigger issue than transport for our children... it has a knock-on effect”*.

Discourse revealed that poor home to school transportation services have a broad impact on family life. For example, participants related poor transport services to children’s late arrival home that equates to late meals for the family, disrupted bed times, and poor sleep patterns.

There was consensus amongst participants concerning the need for appropriate, consistent and reliable transport services; which have broader financial and social implications:

FG1 P2: *“It’s hard to hold down a job”*

FG1 P3: *“With no school support, you can’t work”*

Participants spoke of commitments other than transport, which they have as parents and grandparents. For example, it was reported that some have work commitments, and other children in the family to care for (sibling/s of the child with SEND).

Discourse revealed the importance of support from the LBBD, particularly concerning the assessment of transport needs of children with SEND, which participants agreed should follow and cohere with the Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) review process. Participants agreed that the EHCP be ‘banded’ as follows:

- A: No change in circumstances; EHCP remains;
- B: Child’s needs are the same; school has changed;
- C: Child’s needs have changed.

Participants agreed that transport assistance should continue unless the child’s circumstances change. Many parents and caregivers agreed that the EHCP should be a presumption for children with certain conditions/disabilities, with particular reference made to children with progressive and severe and profound disabilities.

Participants agreed that reapplication for transport assistance each year is not appropriate:

FG1 P3: *"It's a long process... lots of paperwork"*

Concerning the set-down time limit before transport will leave, Group 1 agreed that five minutes was sufficient, however Group 2 felt that drop-off times need to be extended beyond five minutes due to unplanned occurrences and circumstances beyond parents'/caregivers' control:

FG2 P2: *"At least 10 to 15 minutes"*

FG2 P3: *"... a lot can happen in the morning before school"*

Parents and caregivers raised concerns around the suitability of the pick-up point option, with one participant warning that shelter is limited and therefore this option is inappropriate during winter months and bad weather.

Participants considered travel training a viable option, particularly for older children with SEND as it has the potential to promote independence, and prepare young people for college and work. However, it was agreed that travel training is specific to a single route, and therefore the young person will likely need additional training if a new route is required.

Chaperones were a well-supported option, but when they are replaced at short notice, participants identified that this can cause problems for some children with SEND. Parents and caregivers agreed that consistency of staffing is key for the chaperone option to work.

Participants felt that the banding option has limited potential because of issues such as parking restrictions outside schools. However, time banking was considered viable to offer a drop-off service for more than one child.

Discourse found that direct payments pass the responsibility over to parents and caregivers to transport their children to school, and offer greater choice:

FG2 P2: *"It's good because you can choose to drive your child to school, or pay a cab"*

In contrast, participants considered it riskier to commission their own transport such as taxis, and they agreed that these services could be unreliable. To counteract this, parents and caregivers stated that there is a need for approved providers that are vetted and proven to be reliable and safe. Participants agreed that it is LBBB's responsibility to ensure appropriate vetting.

The school bus option was favoured above all, with a designated Local Authority fleet considered the number one option because it offers safety, reliability, security, and peace of mind.

ii. Theme two: Child-centredness

This theme relates to the importance of adopting a child-centered approach when considering the transport needs of children with SEND; the view that not all children are the same, and that children with different conditions, disabilities and diagnoses will have different needs and requirements.

Participants agreed that the needs of each individual child are of paramount importance. They argued that, where a child attends a special school, there should be a presumption that their special educational needs are such that transport is needed.

The current Policy statement regarding “the closest suitable school” raised concerns for the participants. It was agreed that the following exceptions should be considered:

- It would be disruptive to the child if the family moves into the Borough and the child is already settled in a school out-of-Borough;
- Where a new, closer school opens and the child is already settled in a previous nearest school;
- If the Borough recommends a child should attend a specific school, and it is beyond walking distance, transport should be provided.

Furthermore, participants agreed that where the nearest suitable school is not in the Borough (i.e. on the border) both Boroughs must work together for the benefit of the child, whilst also considering the circumstances of the family.

Parents and caregivers agreed that, for some children, escorted public transport is appropriate, however for other children with more profound and severe needs and disabilities, the public transport option should not be considered. Additionally, participants agreed that public transport is advantageous for older children in terms of habituation and training concerning skills required for post-school participation (e.g. going to college and places of work).

The assertion that most or the majority of children with EHCP’s do not need transport was disputed, with one participant asking:

FG1 P3: *“Where is the evidence to support this?”*

Participants agreed that the policy should be re-worded to state “some” children.

The presumption of walking to school was not supported by participants. They agreed that the child’s condition and disability would affect their ability to walk to school, and it was reported that some journeys might be complex and challenging; therefore, the LBBB Transport Policy should consider this.

Participants agreed that some children present with challenging behaviour as an integral part of their condition, therefore the child and parent/caregiver should not be penalised for this by having to pay for damage to the vehicle in which they travel, or property of other passengers. Moreover, it was agreed that there is a difference between willful bad behaviour where sanctions may be applied versus the child's condition. The importance of staff training (transporters) and peer support mechanisms were identified as vital to this end.

Overall, there was strong support for the draft policy, With the exception of one, every question that specifically asked, '**are you in agreement with this policy,**' had a majority of affirmative responses. The average overall satisfaction with the policy was 73.5%. The one question that received a majority of dissenters or suggested additional caveats, related to parents being financially liable for damage caused by their children in transit.

There was strong support for the ethos behind the policy of providing a diversity of different travel assistance options, such as travel/oyster cards, direct payments escorts etc., where respondents disagreed with any particular option; it tended to relate to their own child's situation. In the focus groups, all parents who initially stated they were in disagreement with a particular option acknowledged that it could be right for another child and that the principle of maximising a student's independence of travel, especially for young people at secondary school age was correct. However, there was a comment on the need for reliability in the travel assistance option.

Whilst the majority of respondents are in support of the draft policy as it stands, this report makes a number of recommendations the Local Authority may wish to consider to optimise satisfaction and possibly result in a slightly more equitable policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation One

Due to the fact there is general support for the current draft policy, subject to considering some minor changes recommended below the policy should be signed off by Cabinet.

Recommendation Two

LBBB may wish to align the annual EHC plan review process with the annual travel application process. This could result in a more streamlined and cost effective process.

Recommendation Three

LBBB may wish to remove the section in the draft policy suggesting parents could be liable for the cost of damage to LBBB transport resulting from the behavior of their children. It would be very problematic differentiating between damage caused by behaviors relating to someone's SEND condition and willful damage.

Recommendation Four

Where direct payments are received by parents for taxis, the Local Authority or schools may wish to consider commissioning taxis on behalf of parents as the scale of economy/purchasing power of one commissioner may drive down the overall cost.

4 Discussion points that have not resulted in a recommendation

There were a few questions that generated detailed debate, and some dissension amongst respondents, however this report does not recommend any changes to the policy

Pick up points

Where Local Authority buses are provided some parents objected to collective pick up points instead of collection from home. However, this report does not recommend stopping pick up points. In the current austerity climate there is need for efficiency of the school transport service. Pickup points that have been allocated are all close to the child's home. Pick up points also further promote independence and further promote inclusion in the local communities.

Nearest appropriate school

The draft policy's assertion that where travel assistance is provided, it will only be provided to the nearest school that can meet that child's needs should remain unchanged. The existing tribunal process is the appropriate way for parents or carers to challenge the Local Authorities allocation of school.

Punctuality of parents and careers

The section of the policy that stated parents or carers of children who use school busses cannot be more than five minutes late also generated much debate. However, this report recommends that this remains in the policy. It is essential that parents and carers take the responsibility for being at the drop of point. However, discussion did point out that some older teenagers are independent enough not to need their parents and carers in the home with them all the time and this could be individually agreed with the school in question. One of the key discussion themes across the consultation has been the need for reliability but this is a two-way responsibility between transport provider and the parent career. The local Authority may wish to investigate a technological solution that communicates the real-time location and estimated time of arrival of a particular bus or a taxi to a smart phone.