

Focus group on Home-School Transport

23rd September 2011, 10am-12pm, Quaker Meeting House

Attendees: Joanne Ferguson (parent, chair of meeting), Nicola Elliott (parent), Maria Fernandes (parent), Amanda Wilcox (parent), Sue Roe (parent), David Roe (parent), Julie Hardcastle (parent), Tony Hardcastle (parent), Rachel Crowther (parent), Geraldine Whittle (parent), Kate Quail (parent), Martin Green (Service Manager, CYPF Travel Service), Jill Siddall (CYPF Travel Service), John Hudson (CYPF Travel Service), Simon Ebbins (Transport Services), Chris Boot (Transport Services), Anne Snowdon (SPCF Development Support Worker), Eva Juusola (SPCF Development Worker, notes)

Apologies: Helen Prescott

1. Minutes of last meeting

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed as a true and accurate record. The following updates were given:

Revision of post-16 transport policy: MG explained that in response to parental feedback, the policy now makes it clearer that Independent Travel Training is optional. The policy will be republished in May 2012. It will need to be approved by the Learning for Life partnership (Progress and Achieve group) and signed off by a Cabinet member. EJ requested that input from parents should be sought at least a month before the submission deadline.

Photo ID cards for drivers and escorts: MG explained that it is a contractual requirement for private sector and council staff to wear photo ID cards. He asked parents to inform the Travel Service if staff do not comply.

Parental Reimbursement Scheme: MG informed parents that the fuel reimbursement allowance payable to parents who wish to make their own transport arrangements has just been increased to 45p per mile.

2. Travel ID cards

JS explained that Travel ID cards are currently being piloted at Talbot special school. The support of the school has been crucial in getting a good response from parents, and all but a handful of parents have returned their forms now.

Parental permission is needed because of the use of photographs, however all of the other information can be taken from the Transport Information Form (TIF), which is filled in by parents and contains information about a child's health needs, mobility, behaviours, etc. All parents agreed that it would be better to have ID cards without photographs, than not to have them at all. Regarding the interim solution discussed at the last meeting (photos tagged onto run sheets), JS stated that this was not safe as photos might fall off. AS felt that some parents might still prefer their child's photo to be tagged onto the run sheet, and that the decision should be left to the parent.

SR observed that some cultures don't want to have children photographed, and that some parents might have language barriers which prevent them from understanding the letter requesting permission. JS suggested that she could ask schools to flag up children where extra support might be needed, and access this support via link workers attached to schools.

JS explained that her aim is to get all Travel ID cards for Talbot done by October half term. Bents Green and the Rowan school will be targeted next. AS enquired whether it would be helpful to have a parent come along to schools to endorse the pilot, and JS felt that it would. **Action: EJ to put JS in touch with volunteers who have children at Bents Green and the Rowan school.**

JS explained that the pilot will initially only involve pupils who use Transport Services, where ID cards can be stored in the run box and taken back to the office after every trip. Different security arrangements are needed for children who travel by taxi where both the driver and the escort are employed by the taxi company (this affects only a small minority of children, as most escorts are Council staff). In this case, the run sheet is stored in the office, and the driver and escort are informed verbally about children's diagnoses, likes and dislikes etc. MF enquired whether it would be possible for parents to see a run sheet, and this was agreed. **Action: Officers to email sample run sheet to EJ to circulate to parents.**

JS is looking at ways of involving private taxi companies in the pilot. AS pointed out that this will be very important due to frequent staff changes and the lack of written information being carried on the taxis. KQ concurred, stating that her daughter who travels by taxi has had numerous staff changes in 3 weeks. RC added that her experience had been similar.

MG stated that a high number of staff changes was not in line with service standards, and encouraged parents to make their concerns known to the Travel Service. JH wondered whether parents knew who to contact with their problems. KQ explained that parents are just grateful to receive the service, and would put it down to teething problems. Parents emphasized that the purpose of the meeting was not to troubleshoot individual cases, but to identify common themes and to improve the service for everybody. JF suggested that the travel service could monitor the number of staff changes in their data collection and intervene if these reached a critical level. MG responded that this should be possible. A reasonable level of consistency is already a service requirement. **Action: MG to investigate a performance indicator for consistency of driver and escorts.**

2. Communication with parents

Officers reported that a new letter confirming transport arrangements (with photos of the escort and driver and contact details) was sent to parents before the start of term. Parents welcomed the letter, but reported that many of them had not received it. This was supported by an informal email survey carried out by the Forum. MG apologised for this and recognised that systems need refining so planning is more timely and effective.

Parents emphasized that they need to know well in advance who the driver and escort will be in order to be able to prepare their children. MF reported that she found out from school that her child's travel arrangements had been changed at the last minute, which was very stressful for her and her child. AS reported that email feedback from parents indicated that many children find unexpected staff changes very difficult; parents requested staff changes should be kept to a minimum, and that they should be informed about staff changes in advance.

Uncertainty about pick-up times can also cause some children great distress. MG stated that it was difficult to give a definitive pick-up/drop-off time at the start of term, but said that it was not acceptable for taxis or minibuses to keep turning up at random times without good reason. MG encouraged parents to let his service know if this happened.

Parents recognised that the first day of term is challenging for the transport service, but it is also a crucial day for the children and can make the difference between a good or a bad start at school. Having to wait 30-50 minutes in school uniform for transport to arrive can make some children extremely anxious. Parents reported that some escorts go the extra mile and call or text if the bus is running late, and that this is very helpful. Some escorts also give parents their work mobile numbers, but this is discretionary. EJ suggested that all parents should receive the same service, and expectations should be made explicit in the service specification. TH added that private escorts should be reimbursed for using their phone, or it should be made explicit that this was included in their wages, as otherwise they might be less willing to use it. **SE reported that he is currently reviewing the escorts' handbook, and could add a requirement to phone or text if the bus is running late or has broken down. Action: MG to discuss the issues with Transport Services and the private sector and come back with some solid proposals.**

JF enquired whether any progress had been made in establishing a single point of contact. MG reported that as part of the Transport Transformation Project, there may be a combination of currently separate services into a single service, with one access point. Ultimately it is likely that all customer enquiries to the Council will be answered by a 24-hour call centre (Customer First), who will redirect customers to the relevant service. The Transport Service is not yet part of this.

Some parents reported difficulties in getting through to the office at the start of term, or not being called back when they left messages. Parents who had not received the letter sent out before the beginning of term were unsure which number to ring when their child was unwell in the morning. **Action: MG to send a letter to parents through the escorts, informing them which numbers to ring.**

3. Staff training

MF observed that transport providers (including escorts employed by private taxi companies) needed training in dealing with behavioural problems; staff needed to understand what triggers problem behaviours in individual children,

and how to avoid these triggers. MF reported a serious transport incident involving her son and that she felt there were issues around training and escorts wearing appropriate clothing which should be addressed. These expectations should be included in the escorts' handbook. MF reported that she had met with JH to develop solutions, and a good day / bad day behaviour log for sharing information between school, transport staff and parents has now been implemented. **It was agreed that the Forum would to contribute to the review of the escort's handbook and basic safety training.**

JF emphasized the need for crucial behavioural information from the TIF to be included on the run sheet. She enquired how often information on the TIF was updated. JH replied that the service was aiming to refresh the information every 18 months. JF observed that parents may not remember what information was included on their child's TIF, and suggested that the service could send out a copy of the information and ask if anything had changed.

Action: JH to email a copy of the TIF to Forum for commenting.

MF requested that the outcomes of risk assessments should also be shared with parents, and that parents should be asked whether they had any strategies that worked at home.

AS stated that some parents had raised concerns about staff behaving inappropriately towards children in their care. Parents enquired what sort of training staff had received. SE explained that all escorts hold an NVQ Level 2 which includes basic training in autism, epilepsy, and basic disability awareness training. He acknowledged that there is a constant need to update training. He encouraged parents to report inappropriate behaviour to himself or JH. Unless gross misconduct was involved, the service would always try to correct the behaviour.

JF suggested that a charter setting out expectations of parents and staff would be useful. MG stated that a set of service standards was already in existence, although the information needed updating. **Action: MG to email existing service standards to Forum for commenting prior to updating.**

4. Independent Travel Training

Independent Travel Training (ITT) provides road safety awareness and public transport skills to enable young people to travel to and from school using public transport.

Several parents felt that their children had been pressurised into taking part in ITT by their school. They objected to teachers putting children's names forward for ITT and telling the children about this without consulting with their parents first. JS explained that her service receives the proposals from schools and acts on them in good faith.

Several parents expressed concerns that their children could be signed off by their travel trainers without parental consent, and would then lose their entitlement to travel assistance. JS stated that this could not happen; the travel trainer's final report has to be shared with parents at a home visit, and if the parents have any concerns at all then more training will be done. Parents

also have the right to stop ITT at any time and return to previous travel arrangements. Doing so does not preclude them from giving ITT another go in the future.

RC reported problems with a travel trainer giving information about the ITT programme to her child without her consent. Parents stressed that travel trainers should seek parental approval before communicating any plans or changes to the children. They also emphasized that trainers needed autism awareness training in order to communicate appropriately with autistic children.

JS undertook to look into the issue with the travel trainer. She emphasized that ITT was all about partnership working and children should only be signed off by mutual consent. **Action: JS to talk to the travel trainers and address the issues raised. JS to remind special school head teachers of the need to obtain parental consent *before* putting children forward for ITT and *before* talking to the children about it.**

TH felt that it was not fair for children to be taken out of lessons to do ITT.

RC and SR requested that travel trainers should be required to provide parents with written updates on progress, e.g. a photocopy of the checklist used. **Action: MG to introduce a requirement for trainers to provide written progress reports.**

AW suggested that teachers, parents and ITT staff could get together for an initial meeting. AS proposed that information about ITT could be sent to parents together with other paperwork before Annual Review meetings, and that a question about ITT could be included in the SEN Travel Assistance Form. AW added that information about behavioural issues could also be collected via this form. **Action: MG to look into revising the SEN Travel Assistance form in liaison with the SEN service.**

5. Review of SEN Transport Policy

MG told parents that he had briefed senior colleagues about frequent parental requests to change the SEN Transport Policy to allow children to be dropped off at alternative addresses, e.g. childminders, after-school clubs, grandparents, in order to enable parents to work. Along with other home to school policies, the SEN Transport Policy is likely to come under review although a timetable for this has not been set.

AS suggested that more flexibility was required in order to accommodate the needs of the whole family. Drop-off and pick-up times should be set in a way that would allow parents to get their non-disabled children to and from school. MG said that the service would use best endeavour, but could not promise to accommodate everybody's needs.

JF suggested that the policy review should take account of the Inclusive Learning Strategy, and consider providing transport for disabled children who need this in order to be able to remain in a mainstream school.

Next meeting: Friday 3rd Feb 2012, 10am-12pm, venue tbc