

Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny panel

DATE	15/01/2026
REPORT OF	Jenni Steel, Service Director for Education, Inclusion & Integration.
SUBJECT	Education Transport including finance
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

Our ambition for North East Lincolnshire is that all of our children are healthy, resilient, safe and are supported to achieve their full potential. The Council Plan caters for this directly in three of its priorities. The matter outlined in this report (provision of education transport, third priority):

- To deliver high quality statutory, targeted and universal services for children and young people in our borough
- To ensure all children and young people in our community have access to high quality, safe and effective health services when they need it, so they enjoy good health and wellbeing throughout their life
- To ensure our children and young people attain the right skills and learning which enables them to contribute as future citizens, to the continued economic and social development of North East Lincolnshire

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parents/carers are responsible for ensuring their child's regular attendance at school. For most parents this includes making their own arrangements for their child, who is of compulsory school age, to travel to and from school. In some cases, children are entitled to transport support and local authorities must make the travel arrangements, free of charge, for eligible children. (this includes statutory walking distance and/or unsafe walking routes and extended rights such as receipt of free school meals.) This report focusses on the current activity associated with the provision of transport for education purposes, including cost. This includes all children of statutory school age and post 16.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

This report is being presented as an update as requested by the panel.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

The vast majority of children who we provide transport for have SEND.

There is a statutory requirement in the SEND Code of Practice to provide fully funded transport to eligible children who are in receipt of an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) up to the age of 16.

The number of children with an EHCP has increased steadily in NEL over the last 5 years. These numbers have a direct impact on the SEN Transport budget meaning further cost increases are forecast for the service in future years.

Complexity of need has also increased – finding suitable travel solutions with appropriately trained staff is becoming more difficult and becomes more expensive with the level of complexity.

The number and variety of placements has also increased over the last 5 years and the number of education placements outside of NEL has increased significantly, some of which are located a significant distance from NEL and the child's home.

A recent report by the National Audit Office, on behalf of the Department for Education, estimated that 520,000 children and young people aged 0-25 were receiving home to school transport as at February 2025, total spending in 2023-24 was £2.3bn with an estimate of £1.5bn for children aged 0-16 with SEND.

The provision of education transport for children with an EHCP post 16 is non-statutory. In NEL, we continue to fund all children up to the age of 19 when this is requested.

It is acknowledged that for some young people who are 16+, it would still be appropriate to review their transport arrangements, but this may result in the same provision being maintained.

Current activity:

- 907 Children/Young Adults are currently accessing transport – Includes Post 16 numbers up to the age of 25.
- 196 different journeys are made each day, travelling to 71 provisions.

Team:

- 1 FTE – Education Transport Manager
- 2 FTE – Education Transport Supervisors
- 1 – Business Support Officer, 20 hours per week, term time only.
- 8-drivers
- 50 (Part-Time) + 6 (casual) Passenger Assistants (directly employed by NELC with a further 54 employed by our contractors, with an additional 19 parents acting as PA's (unpaid) = 123 Passenger Assts in total. This is an increasing trend due to age of child and complexity of need.
- We have 8 NELC vehicles (6 Mercedes Trekka buses specifically built for accessibility, used on Humberston Park runs and 2 Electric Transit minibuses used for Cambridge Park runs)

2. RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES AND EQUALITY ISSUES

Risks:

- Increase in Solo travellers
- Saturation of the current market to meet demand
- Continued increase in EHCP's
- Increase in the number of children accessing bespoke Education other than at school (EOTAS) packages
- Funding – continued pressure on the budget.

Opportunities & Equality:

- Whilst DfE policy and strategy in relation to home to school transport is unlikely to change, the forthcoming SEND Reforms, which will overhaul the SEND system in England through earlier intervention, better inclusion in

mainstream schools, should result in clearer support and reduced financial strain on Councils. The Schools White Paper is due to be published in 2026.

- Increasing local capacity for children with SEMH will reduce the numbers of children travelling out of Borough and who are most costly
- Developing Resource Specialist Provision (RSP) within our current educational establishments enabling children to remain within setting and Borough and not require (EOTAS) packages
- Increasing capacity within one of our local specialist schools through capital funding to extend the size of the building

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

The positive benefit to the Council's reputation will be the provision of sufficient and suitable pupil places for the children and young people with EHCP's to be educated within their own locality therefore reducing the need, where appropriate, for the costly provision of transport.

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Below is the current quarter 2 position related to the provision of education transport.

Education Transport area	2025/26 Q2 Budget Pressure £'000
SEN – Post 16	£(22)
SEN – School Age	£595
Excluded and Alternative Provision Transport	£(57)
Primary School Transport – over 2 miles	£10
Secondary School Transport - over 3 miles	£55
Other	£37
Total Budget Pressure	£618

The current Dynamic Purchasing System that is used to purchase bus and taxi routes from independent organisations ends in June 2026 so a new contract arrangement is required to be put in place for June 2026 in order to ensure that all provision can be purchased from companies that have been appropriately vetted. We will be seeking permission from Cabinet later this month to agree to undertake an open competitive tender process to establish a new contract arrangement with a number of suppliers for eligible children, in line with the Home to School Transport policy. Individual competition for each route will ensure that the best price is achieved for Council spend.

We have seen significant increases in both cost of provision and pupil volumes which impact on education transport budgets. Cost of provision being impacted by an increase in National Insurance and National Minimum Wage as well as other

inflationary factors (the majority of transport routes being delivered by external contracts), and pupil volumes being impacted by rises in EHCP numbers and complexity of cases.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

Any increase in capacity for school places locally will improve outcomes for children with SEND in North East Lincolnshire enabling less children to require provision out of the area and therefore reducing the need to travel long distances which will be far more beneficial for those children.

Enabling children to attend school within their local community, also supports outcomes for adulthood, and promotes a sense of belonging. Our children who are in schools today, become our adults of tomorrow and need to feel part of the local community, developing skills to access shops, leisure activities and community centres effectively. This is much more difficult to do when young people are educated outside of the borough.

6. CLIMATE CHANGE, NATURE RECOVERY AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Contribution to traffic congestion and emissions.

7. PUBLIC HEALTH, HEALTH INEQUALITIES AND MARMOT IMPLICATIONS

Improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people, particularly those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), by ensuring transport is in place to ensure access to high-quality, safe, and appropriate education provision.

8. MONITORING COMMENTS

In the opinion of the author, this report does not contain recommended changes to policy or resources (people, finance or physical assets). As a result no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Monitoring Officer (Chief Legal Officer), Section 151 Officer (Director of Finance) or Strategic Workforce Lead.

9. WARD IMPLICATIONS

All wards affected.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None at this time.

11. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

Karen Linton
Deputy Service Director - Skills, Employability & Education Transport

Jenni Steel, Service Director for Education, Inclusion & Integration.