

Speaking up for the families of
children & young people with
additional needs in Surrey
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Family Voice Surrey

Summary of feedback on Transport Issues

Context and Purpose

As parent carer forum for Surrey representing the families of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), transport issues are a recurring issue with our members. This has increased greatly this year.

Beyond the impact this is having on our members in relation to transport, we feel that these pervasive issues jeopardise the success of the SEND Transformation strategy.

Recently we been receiving reports of:

- Increased operational problems with transport
- Transport guidance becoming less accessible and transparent
- A disconnect between what was promised in the last consultation (date) and what is happening in practice.

Family Voice Surrey were extensively involved with the previous consultation review and new policy, liaising firstly with Leigh Middleton and subsequently with Helena Kulikowska. Many positive proposals were drawn up throughout the process that our members felt would save public funds and improve the effectiveness of travel assistance. There is a feeling of disappointment that very little evidence is seen of these innovative suggestions in the SEND transport system since that consultation.

Family Voice requested a presence on the Member Reference group tasked with reviewing the new policy implementation. This was rejected. We were invited to attend part of some of these meetings, but in effect our involvement in the policy progress review ended after only a few meetings.

Quarterly forums were suggested by parents but these have been annual and have been an information giving exercise with little or no chance for parents to feed back in any meaningful way. Parents requested for budget holders to be at these events so problems could be resolved. This has not been acknowledged. Effective parent engagement in the process could solve a lot of problems and engender trust.

Survey Results

Our survey which ran September to October 2019 received 127 responses. The issues raised confirm those we hear from SEND families at our coffee mornings, training events and attendance at support groups. In addition we are all parent carers and have extensive networks within the SEND community through our personal contacts and social media presence.

It is important to note that it is likely that the most vulnerable families and children will not have been reached by our survey or be in a position to access our events due to caring responsibilities, limited access to social media, limited mobility or limited access to transport. Nevertheless the responses received reveal some consistent themes. There are many reasons for this. For example logistical issues with travel or clashes with caring responsibilities. Perhaps more poignantly, parents with the greatest need in this area may themselves have SEND, mental health issues, or simply feel without hope in the face of an overwhelming bureaucratic system that gives little regard to vulnerable individuals.

87% of respondents have an existing transport plan. Of those 70% were contacted to confirm arrangements; 30% by SCC, 40% by the provider, 30% not at all.

Regarding providers, 36% of respondents reported a change of provider. Of those;

49% reported having been given no notice of the change

28 % reported notice of less than a week with

24% having been given more than a fortnight's notice.

All those who work with SEND Children and Young People (CYP) know that transition and change are extremely traumatic and challenging for the young people and their families. Changes such as those reported in our survey, with no transition period and no chance to meet a new driver can have extremely negative impacts, including absence from school, mental health

difficulties, trauma resulting in a young person's inability to learn and placement breakdowns.

With the new travel assistance team one would expect there to be improved levels of satisfaction from dealings with transport administration. We do not have a similar survey to make direct comparisons to previous periods. Only 39% of respondents felt their questions/concerns were taken into consideration. 13% found the application process good with 8% not knowing how to contact the team, 16% having had no contact and 43% not having had any need for contact.

About feeling prepared for the new school year, 54% said yes and 46% said no.

In response to the question regarding when respondents applied for transport, the majority of parents reported only applying in June, July and August. Many families did not have an appropriate arrangement in place for a September start as a result.

A major theme in the last Consultation overseen by Leigh Middleton and Helena Kulikowska was to encourage and facilitate the use of a new personal allowance for parents to transport children to school. In answer to our question 'If you are driving your child to school and claiming mileage' 26 of the 127 responded. Of these; 23% said this was positive choice, leaving 77% for whom it wasn't. 81% of respondents do not know how mileage is calculated and 81% do not feel able to contact SCC in the event of a change of circumstance.

Here is selection of the many comments on this question:

"the mileage calculated for the payment is 'as the crow flies' yet the shortest distance it is possible to travel is 1 mile further. SCC are therefore making a 25% saving on the real cost for each journey."

"We haven't been told about claiming for mileage even though I have contacted the transport team many times."

"Positive"? Are you joking? It was my only choice to get my daughter into the only school in the country that could meet her complex special needs. Surrey threatened to oppose the placement if the cost was too high. Eventually they acknowledged they had a legal obligation to provide transport if they named the school on the Statement/EHCP, but then they refused to provide an escort, despite overwhelming evidence of need. I didn't have enough money to get legal representation to fight it as I'd spent out on preparing for two previous Educational Tribunals already. I have petrol reimbursement by default. I lost my business because of this school transport commitment - a commute of nearly 100 miles a day for me. Ridiculous mileage calculation: "as the crow flies" and assuming petrol is 79p a litre. What a joke! Outrageous exploitation of SEND families.

We previously claimed mileage when our daughter was at a more local school. We feel that the distance to school now is too far/takes too much time out of our work day and the mileage given doesn't cover return journeys...as far as I know, all of which means there is no incentive to take on the school run.

Given the emphasis on encouraging parents to take up the allowance, consider the following comments:

"I have offered to do one journey in return for mileage, they haven't responded to my request yet."

"Never been given a choice to claim mileage"

There was also a great emphasis from SCC in the last consultation about making transport a collaboration where SCC and families share the journeys in cases where parents want to transport the child but are unable to do all. Please note the following comments:

"No entirely as the process is so inflexible. We may have to review our travel plan to cover the college days better, not sure though if this is possible. It takes so long to change anything."

"Have not been contacted by surrey, I have left messages and emails since July to no avail. "

Comments on using the Transport in general:

"I had to chase up transport for my son to find out what was being provided. The taxi company spoke to me the friday before he started. Surrey CC were beyond unhelpful. I sent an email to express my concerns and ask for them to consider my sons short days, no response received, even now I've heard nothing! My email was never acknowledged. I then rang SCC and got sent a complaint form. I don't want to complain I just need to know what they are providing and what the gaps are. I have no problem making alternative plans if I have to but the lack of communication/lateness of plans made it very difficult. Caused a lot of stress for my son too."

"Been trying to get this resolved since February. 4th September we spoke to the taxi firm, they were expecting to collect him on 6th September. Then they were told by SCC on 5th September not to collect him the following morning"

We hear lots of feedback regarding the impact on families and how they feel about SCC due to transport difficulties;

"We found out 2 days before that my 4 yr old with ASD was on a bus with no passenger assistant"

"I did not budget for having to take out a loan to pay for 2 months' plus petrol while I await the petrol reimbursement to start."

"Drive myself , have no choice . Have two at different schools."

"We are greatly concerned about what is to come with transport. If our daughter stays at her current setting for secondary (she is now Yr 6) we know she will not be allowed transport under their new ruling. We will appeal if we are not given transport as we cannot transport our daughter to school and she has had transport since the reception year when she started. Also a bus goes from our area. Current Year 7's are having real problems with transport and families having to transport children to school. The LA are putting clauses into EHCP offering school places but no transport. It is a dreadful situation for any family to be in with SEN."

Conclusions

From all of our sources of information, the problems identified fall into three categories.

1. Lack of Apparent Action on Proposals from Previous Consultation

SCC individuals involved in the current consultation seem unaware of these previous promises.

- Increased use of community transport
- Parent app to improve comms and ensure SCC only pays for journeys undertaken and families have a quick and easy way of updating taxi firms and the TCC
- Low uptake of personal travel allowance - the allowance doesn't reflect the journeys undertaken - using 'as the crow flies' often significantly underplays the reality of the route. Using Google maps to calculate the shortest possible route provides a free, transparent and equitable way to calculate mileage allowances, without the need for disputes or short changing parents.
- The guidance around mileage payments is unclear to some parents.
- Low uptake of personal allowance - it doesn't recognise the impact on family and work life of parents undertaking these journeys.
- Low uptake of personal allowance - some parents have tried to take up personal allowance but been ignored.
- Low uptake of shared journeys - difficulties dealing with the TCC,
- Rigidity in the system and slow responsiveness has resulted in a feeling of mistrust. Parents are unwilling to try undertaking the journey as they lack confidence that they will be supported if it doesn't work out.

2. Administrative Issues

There is a strong feeling that SCC's own administrative problems may be the cause of the cost escalation rooted in:

- Poor communication within SCC and with parents and schools.
- Little sign of joined up thinking. The TCC meet with special schools re the next year's transport issue but parent knowledge and expertise is disregarded, even when parents proactively try to be a positive part of this process.
- Late allocation of school places must inevitable create routing inefficiencies - again apparent lack of joined up thinking.
- Failure to reward good practice with taxi firms - experienced drivers and firms taken off routes.
- The new travel assistance team has added another layer of bureaucracy and another layer of people to not return parents calls. There appears to be little good communication between the transport team, the travel assistance team and case officers.

3. Communications

- Parents report that communicating with the transport team is difficult and the team come across as disinterested in the impact of their decisions on the child and family.
- Parents are left feeling they are a burden – there is no recognition that most parents would dearly love their children to be in an appropriate local school but these do not exist.
- Apparent policy of not proactively telling parents of travel resulting in late applications and routing inefficiencies thus increased costs and negative impacts on family resilience.
- The failure to start conversations early with eligible parents about their rights and options for support with the home school journey results in late applications and routing inefficiencies and almost inevitably leads to increased costs and negative impact on family resilience. It is not clear whether the perennial failure to begin processing SEND travel support arrangements until late in the summer term is due to inefficiency or reflects an unofficial policy that lack of information to parents will be likely to reduce demand for support or delay the onset of costs. At Family Voice we are coming across cases where children end up on solo transport when this could be avoided. TCC do not always respond when alerted.
- Many parents report occasions where SCC employees seem unaware of SEND law or the criteria for Travel Assistance– this is even before the recent communications issues regarding changes to changes to discretionary assistance.

Proposed Next Steps

1. Proposals from previous consultation

- Create and implement parent app
- Use community transport providers wherever possible, as not for profit must in most cases provide better value services.
- Focus groups with parents whose children are eligible for support with travel costs to work out a fair model of travel allowance.
- Consider introducing a basic rate per mile plus a series of top up payments for longer distances to reflect the significant time taken out of a parents day to cover longer journeys and the financial impact of restricting their ability to take on paid employment.
- Robust comparative analysis of the risks and benefits of increasing the levels of the current travel allowance. Greater take-up would lead to significant savings while providing an allowance that recognises the impact on families of undertaking transport. Keep in mind that SEND families often do not have the luxury of choosing a

local school. This is NOT a 'bonus' to parents but a small redress of imbalance AND a way of saving money overall.

- Encourage wider discussion of post 16 travel options for young people. Perhaps assistance with driving from 16 (for those who qualify for this) as for those who find public transport inaccessible due to high anxiety levels, who live in areas or travel to areas with poor transport links this could be a game changer. Supporting young people with SEND to learn to drive would also provide them with skill that would increase their employability as well as increasing their independence.

2. Administrative Issues

- People within the case work and transport teams know where the problems lie. Access this knowledge through consultation and exit interviews for those who have left these teams for other parts of the council.
- It would be a valuable piece of work to analyse the timing of all applications and break this down between new and existing arrangements. Late contract arrangements must inevitably lead to increased costs as opportunities for a complete tender process are severely restricted when carried out at short notice.
- Consider reabsorbing the travel assistance team into the case worker team or improving communication between the two teams – from parents' perspective this has just added a level of complexity and made everything harder.

3. Communications

- Bear in mind that most SEND families are at a huge disadvantage to non-SEND families. Travel assistance is NOT a bonus, it is a very small way redresses the difficulties.
- Bear in mind that families are often already under considerable strain.
- Parent app would help efficiencies and communications
- Inform parents of travel assistance option as early as possible to allow the options to be considered in a collaborative way.
- Consider enlisting SEND parents in an advisory capacity.

In the last consultation many parents asked why SCC doesn't run the transport in house and the response was that it would be too costly, for reasons such as local authority employment terms. When was this last seriously costed, maybe on a model that includes community service providers? Different working contracts?

Given that the costs have increased exponentially, FVS would like to know what analysis has been carried out to ascertain the root of this.

It is worth noting that Contact, a national charity, has recently undertaken a survey on the issue of discretionary SEND travel provision. We are aware that the precedent of other counties applying such changes is being cited as a

reason for doing so within Surrey, and would suggest that a national charity finding cause to survey their members is an indication that the negative impacts may be greater than has been assumed.

We would also urge that some level of analysis is carried out regarding the knock on effect on other areas of public expenditure in these counties. Overall impact on the public purse is surely the prime driver of any change.

Appendix One – Survey Results

Our Survey was open in September 2019. It was completed through Survey Monkey and attracted 128 responses. The results are summarised over the following pages.