



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Surrey Education Services  
Surrey County Council  
Cockshot Hill  
Woodhatch  
Reigate  
Surrey

Our reference: BS15581

31 March 2022

Dear Sir/ Madam,

### **Re: SEND school travel policy consultation response**

I write in response to the consultation on proposed changes to Surrey's Home to School Travel Assistance Policy.

Clear communication with families will be vital throughout this process, and I therefore welcome that Surrey County Council are developing a parent guide that will sit alongside the agreed policy document to help simplify guidance and explain the council's processes in greater detail.

While I welcome changes to simplify the travel assistance system and make it easier for parents to engage with Surrey County Council, it is vital that safety and access to education remain the priority when considering the provision of support for children and families.

The Council proposes changes to the policy in a number of areas, several of which I have sought to address below.

### **Delivering on commitment to SCC climate policy agenda, promoting more sustainable modes of travel assistance, and reducing reliance on one-child per vehicle transport.**

While the consideration of environmental factors are to be welcomed, the priority must be to ensure children have access to education. There will undoubtedly be some circumstances in which sustainable travel options are not capable of meeting the needs of the family, for example children with SEN needs who cannot safely access public transport or shared transport. It is essential that each case be determined based on the child's needs, with safety and access to education as the priority in any determination of transport provision and support.

### **Clarification on transport journey times**

The national recommendations on the maximum length of journey time for a child to get to and from school is 45 minutes for a primary aged child and 75 minutes for a secondary aged child attending placements both within and outside the County. The Council is proposing that the recommend journey times will not apply to pupils travelling to out of county schools, and are also proposing to change the maximum journey times for primary aged children to 75 minutes.

Long journey times to school may have an adverse effect on children, and 75 minutes seems excessive for primary schools. What assessment has been made of the impact on children and how this can be mitigated?

Change the measuring system for determining Independent Travel Allowance (ITA) from Straight Lines to Road Routes and introduce a simplified mileage reimbursement system

I welcome this change as a reflection of the actual journeys undertaken. The simplified process will hopefully make it easier for parents and carers to understand what they are entitled to and to engage with the system.

### **Change the notice period for the removal of travel assistance**

The current policy requires travel assistance to remain in place until the end of the academic year in instances where low-income status of a child ends, and in instances where a walking route previously deemed unsafe becomes safe after review. The proposal is to remove assistance after four weeks in cases where a review determines a walking route is now safe. I support this move where the family and Authority are in agreement that there is a safe alternative for the child. However, this is subject to the review engaging with the family and there being a right of appeal should the family continue to have concerns over safety. As stated above, safety and access to education should be the primary factors in decision making, and therefore transport should not be removed if these concerns are raised until an appeal has been considered.

In cases where a family's low-income status has ended, I welcome the commitment to continue provision to the end of the academic year and to continue to further support by signposting to additional services and transport options available.

### **Provision of travel assistance for under 5s**

While education is not a statutory requirement for under 5s, early years engagement is incredibly important to children's learning and development. I am concerned that the proposals would limit discretionary assistance for under 5s to reception aged children only, and that even assistance for children who are aged four and entering into the reception year at primary school would only be provided if extenuating circumstances have been demonstrated. I have an excellent maintained nursery school in my constituency and many more settings which provide essential support for young children with SEND. I would welcome a guarantee of travel assistance where needed for children attending nursery and early years settings.

The SEND Review and Green Paper published by the Department for Education this week highlights the importance of early intervention and proposes changes to prioritise this. I am concerned that removing or weakening the policy regarding the provision of SEN transport assistance for under 5s is contrary to these aims and could have a detrimental impact on the life chances of children in Surrey with SEN. It is vital that the national framework, County and health services work together to provide co-ordinated and consistent approach to support children with SEND, in order to break the vicious cycle of late intervention leading to disruption to education, low confidence and poorer outcomes and opportunities. I would urge the Authority to reconsider this proposal.

### **Proposed changes to the travel assistance appeals process**

It is important that families have confidence in the independence of the appeals process. Currently the first level appeal is conducted by officers and, in line with requirements for the second stage to be independent of the first, the latter is conducted by councillors.

Proposals to allow the second stage to also include council officers may undermine the perception of this independence, to the detriment of the process. This may also place officers in a difficult position, having to review the judgments of their colleagues, friends, and peers. Should concerns regarding this change be raised by families as part of this consultation, I would welcome reconsideration of this proposed change.

In addition to these proposed changes, I also wish to highlight a number of areas of concern raised to me by constituents. I understand that decisions regarding SEND transport provision are often incredibly difficult, and I wish to thank the council officers who work incredibly hard to support children with SEND across Surrey. However, where difficulties arise in securing

travel arrangements, I am aware this has led to children not being able to access education for extended periods of time. As part of this review I would therefore also welcome:

- Consideration of how the Authority can ensure that where an eligible child changes school transport provision or assistance is in place from day one.
- Clarification of the consultation process for families who have had their cases reviewed.
- Provision of a single point of contact for parents, carers or advocates to raise questions or concerns regarding SEND travel assistance
- Transport provision for children who are unable to access school due to other family circumstance, such as disability or illness of a parent or carer.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Spencer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**Dr Ben Spencer MP**  
**Runnymede and Weybridge**

cc. Cllr Denise Turner-Stewart, Cabinet Member for Education and Learning