

<b>MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL</b>	
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<b>Report of:</b>	Director of Environment and Community Services – Geoff Field
<b>Relevant Executive Member:</b>	Executive Member for Environment and Sustainability – Peter Gavigan
<b>Submitted to:</b>	Executive
<b>Date:</b>	8 October 2025
<b>Title:</b>	Final Report of the Place Scrutiny Panel – Home to School Transport Service
<b>Report for:</b>	Decision
<b>Status:</b>	Public
<b>Council Plan priority:</b>	Delivering Best Value
<b>Key decision:</b>	Yes
<b>Why:</b>	Decision(s) will have a significant impact in two or more wards
<b>Subject to call in?</b>	Yes
<b>Why:</b>	Non-Urgent Report

<b>Proposed decision(s)</b>
<b>That Executive:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Notes the report of the Place Scrutiny Panel into Home to School Transport Service and the accompanying recommendations; and</li> <li>2. Approves the Service Response and Action Plan appended to this report which contains several alternative suggestions to the recommendations provided by the Place Scrutiny Panel Report.</li> </ol>

<b>Executive summary</b>
<p>The Place Scrutiny Panel examined Home to School Transport Service in Middlesbrough, with a focus on ensuring that the Council is meeting its obligations to provide Home to School Transport whilst effectively controlling costs. The Scrutiny report can be found at Appendix 1.</p> <p>A service response to the recommendations has been developed in the form of an Action Plan and this is attached as Appendix 2.</p>

The purpose of this report is to inform Executive of the Scrutiny review in the Home to School Transport Service and to set out the proposed actions of the Integrated Transport Unit to address the recommendations from the report.

The review aimed to assist the Local Authority (LA) in achieving its priority of Delivering Best Value – changing how we operate, to deliver affordable and cost-effective outcomes for residents and businesses from the Council Plan 2024-2027. A decision is required, as the proposals contained will impact upon the whole Borough. Approval will ensure that the proposals are aligned with the Council's ambitions and objectives.

It is proposed that Executive note the Place Scrutiny Report attached at Appendix 1 and consider alternative suggestions to the recommendations by the service as detailed in the Action Plan attached at Appendix 2.

Members are advised that while the service welcomes the scrutiny report and its recommendations; the proposals recommended at A, C, D, E and F are not feasible due to either financial or other constraints. Were the service to accept the Scrutiny panel's recommendations that are listed, the impact could be detrimental to the Council when carrying out its legal duties. Alternative service suggestions have been made and are detailed in the Action Plan attached to this report.

Members are advised that recommendations B and G are feasible and detailed in the Action Plan attached to this report.

# 1. Purpose of this report and its contribution to the achievement of the Council Plan ambitions:

- 1.1 To inform Executive of the review undertaken by the Place Scrutiny Panel into the Home to School Transport Service which took place from September 2024- February 2025.
- 1.2 To set out the proposed actions to address the recommendations from the report. Executive approval of these actions is requested as it affects more than two wards and requires approval for the outlined financial implications.
- 1.3 The review aimed to assist the Local Authority (LA) in achieving its priority of Delivering Best Value - changing how we operate, to deliver affordable and cost-effective outcomes for residents and businesses from the Council Plan 2024-2027.

Our ambitions	Summary of how this report will support delivery of these ambitions and the underpinning aims
<b>A successful and ambitious town</b>	Aims within this ambition are to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improve attainment in education and skills by providing travel support to eligible students to meet their needs.</li> </ul>
<b>A healthy place</b>	Aims within this ambition are to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improve life chances of our residents by responding to health inequalities by promoting active travel and travel training.</li> <li>- Protect and improve our environment by encouraging sustainable modes of transport and travel, shared use of vehicles, increased levels of walking, cycling and wheeling.</li> <li>- Promote inclusivity for all by supporting vulnerable pupils to their education setting or providing transport where appropriate based on robust assessments of needs.</li> </ul>
<b>Safe and resilient communities</b>	Aims within this ambition are to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support vulnerable children and adults to be independent for longer by making independent travel training available to eligible students.</li> <li>- Improve transport and digital connectivity in the use of online / web-based journey planning for passengers.</li> </ul>
<b>Delivering best value</b>	Aims within this ambition are to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To deliver best value through operational and financial management, focusing on:</li> <li>- Ensuring effective corporate procurement by extending the supplier chain creating an increased and competitive marketplace, exploring new types of procurement frameworks that can meet cost, demand and sufficiency.</li> <li>- Set a balanced revenue budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan to retain financial resilience and sustainability by validating expenditure monthly with</li> </ul>

	<p>financial partners and managing demand as timely as possible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Compliance with statutory duties for travel and transport support by assessing needs, having effective route planning and journey times, ensuring vehicle maintenance, insurances and DBS checks are conducted timely.</li> <li>- Manage increasing demand whilst supporting sustainable travel and other travel assistance options by carrying out assessments and offering travel support that meets the needs of the pupil in line with discussions with SEND and other colleagues and professionals.</li> <li>- Supporting access to education for young and vulnerable children and adults by providing other travel support options such as use of rail or service bus routes, offering independent travel training or journey planning to eligible students.</li> <li>- Reducing potential future vehicle maintenance costs by utilising revised procurement frameworks or SLA's that include maintenance agreements, having internal staff able to deliver driver assessments and vehicle care to staff</li> <li>- Encouraging modal shift and reducing carbon emissions by encouraging walking, cycling or wheeling as well as other forms of shared travel such as use of service buses, rail or parental travel allowances.</li> </ul>
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## 2. Recommendations

### 2.1 That the Executive:

- Notes the report of the Place Scrutiny Panel into Home to School Transport Service and the accompanying recommendations; and
- Approves the Service Response and Action Plan appended to this report which contains several alternative suggestions to the recommendations provided by the Place Scrutiny Panel Report.

## 3. Rationale for the recommended decision(s)

- 3.1 Implementation of the Action Plan at Appendix 2 will ensure decisions for home to school eligibility are in line with the Home to School Travel Support & Transport Policy, Post 16 Transport Statement and with statutory guidance issued by DfE and align to government reforms for child hunger and SEND.

[Home to school travel assistance policy - academic year 2025/2026](#)  
[Post-16 travel and transport statement - academic year 2025/2026](#)

- 3.2 Ongoing financial governance of the budget is managed to maximise cost avoidance where possible whilst supporting increased demands on the service.
- 3.3 Continuation of working practices to continually review and assess delivery of transport to enable increased demands in both mainstream and SEND provisions to be met.
- 3.4 To apply prudent allocation of resources both staffing and financial to ensure that the Council is not only working toward its ambitions and objectives but is allocating resources to ensure statutory requirements placed upon the Council for home to school travel and transport support is safely delivered.

#### **4. Background and relevant information**

- 4.1 The Place Scrutiny Panel undertook a review of Home to School Transport Service provided by Middlesbrough Council from September 2024 – February 2025. The scrutiny panel report is attached at Appendix 1. The report recommendations are detailed below:

#### **SCRUTINY PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 75. Based on the findings of the scrutiny review, the Place Scrutiny Panel recommends to the Executive that the Council should:
  - A Investigate whether it would be cost effective to devolve the provision of Home to School Transport to individual schools, as they may be able to provide a more localised service. Ideally the funding could be passed directly to the schools making them responsible for controlling costs, ensuring there was no additional cost to the Local Authority.
  - B Review the eligibility requirements for free school travel, especially for post-16 students and for pupils who attend a school that is not in the catchment/nearest school by parental choice, but they meet the low-income criteria. There would need to be an option included for consideration of special circumstances.
  - C Ensure closer collaboration between Children's Services, Schools and the Home to School Transport Unit to make certain that the most cost-effective and suitable transport arrangements are in place for each student, particularly in relation to students with SEND. The requirement for transport assistance should be included as a consideration in SEND assessments.
  - D Prioritise the promotion of independent travel to all parents and students, increase the number of travel trainers and bus buddies and encourage greater use of personal travel budgets.
  - E Introduce a spare seat scheme to offer discretionary transport assistance on existing transport for students who are not eligible for free travel assistance, with an option for part payment of the full cost.

- F Investigate whether increasing the Council's fleet of vehicles and reducing dependency on third party providers would be cost effective and whether this would enable better route planning.
- G Explore whether entering into longer-term contracts with third party providers would provide for greater flexibility and consistency.

Some of the information within the report has been updated for Executive Members:

- Para 17: 1263 SEND pupils received various levels of travel support during Academic Year 2024/25
- Outwood Riverside (non-statutory)
  - Academic 2024/25 - Year 7's = 210
  - Academic 2024/25 - Year 8's = 150
  - ITU operated 189 taxi routes for approx. 349 pupils
- Para 43: Home to School Travel Support and Transport Policy has been reviewed in preparation for Academic Year 2025/26 from September 2025 and is uploaded on to the Home to School Transport page on council's website

[Home to school travel assistance policy - academic year 2025/2026](#)

- ITU intend to explore how 'Teach-ins' can be developed with SEND Caseworkers and colleagues at the Integrated Care Board (ICB) to ensure that any Travel Health Plan can be implemented by the ITU or if an alternative approach needs to be taken i.e. not to delegate the medical care of a child to ITU if staff are not trained or able to accept this responsibility which may also include an alternative offer of support i.e. Parental Travel Allowance.
- ITU re-assess each year the number of students eligible for free travel. The offer of travel may differ from previous offers if the use of a coach or similar vehicle is not economically advantageous to the council. The alternative would be refund of bus fares.
- Para 58:
  - 2024/25 ITU Budget was originally £6.7m
  - Reduced to £6.1m mid financial year
  - 2024/25 Outturn was £5.6m – as predicted
  - 2025/26 ITU Budget is £5.01m
- Para 67: SLA's under review can be affected if the academy setting alters it's operating model and has split sites, each having their own management structure in place

## **5. Ward Member Engagement if relevant and appropriate**

- 5.1 No Ward Member consultation has been undertaken as part of this report. All Members will be consulted on any revised draft policy as part of a wider consultation that will be undertaken for the review of policy if approved by Executive.

## 6. Other potential alternative(s) and why these have not been recommended

- 6.1 Option 1: Do nothing and continue to manage the ITU Budget and Service as it is now.
- 6.2 Option 2: Accept Scrutiny Panel recommendations at A, B C, D, E, F & G and the reasons and risks why the service proposed they are not feasible due to legal, financial or for other reasons are detailed in the action plan attached at Appendix 2.

## 7. Impact(s) of the recommended decision(s)

Topic	Impact
Financial (including procurement and Social Value)	<p>Statutory Home to School Transport for Children of Compulsory School Age, Post 19 Transport and all Post 16 and other discretionary transport is funded from the ITU Budget. Financial Year 2025/26 the ITU budget is set at £5.01m. There is no longer the DfE Grant Funding for Extended Free Rights which was previously £57,700. All other non-Statutory Transport requested by DfE has been confirmed that it will be 100% funded by DfE.</p> <p>Transformation Steering Group receives monthly updates on cost avoidance actions and monthly meetings are held with Finance to validate expenditure and forecasting.</p> <p>Should additional funding be required during the financial year, this will be considered in the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) as a demand pressure and form part of the next financial year budget allocation for Council decision.</p> <p>The utilisation of the ITU Budget should have a positive impact on Social Value as the service provision is delivered by a combination of internal fleet and local private operators.</p>
Legal	<p>Legal or contractual issues associated with the approved programme will be managed through the Council's established procedures. The allocations within this report are indicative, are not committed and can alter during 2025/26. Should the figures vary beyond the delegation sought in this report, appropriate Executive approvals will be sought.</p>
Risk	<p>The Scrutiny Panel proposals will require change to the Council's Home to School Travel Assistance Policy and the Post 16 Education Transport Statement for future years. The risk from the recommendations in the scrutiny can be mitigated by approving the recommendations by the service detailed in the action plan either in part or in full. Offering transport to non-statutory students creates both financial and legal risk as well as the possibility of legal prosecution for operating current routes using vehicles outside of what the law permits.</p>

	<p>Monthly financial management and validation of expenditure and cost avoidance will ensure that any risk is highlighted at the earliest opportunity.</p> <p>By approving service recommendations, the Council is positively and actively managing financial risk to support the outcomes of the service and reflective of demand increases and other changes across the service. Any negative impact on students across the Borough would be mitigated by accepting the service area recommendations in part or in full.</p> <p>If the Service Area proposals are accepted there will be no required change to the Council's Home to School Travel Assistance Policy and the Post 16 Education Transport Statement for Academic Year 2025/26, however depending on the proposals to review policies, the Home to School and Post 16 transport policies and statements may need to be amended for future academic years.</p> <p>The approval of the amended recommendations will allow implementation of service delivery for Academic Year 2025/26 and future planning for other academic years from 2026/27 and beyond.</p> <p>The service area recommendations should mitigate the risk of providing Best Value in the use of the ITU Budget 2025/26.</p>
Human Rights, Public Sector Equality Duty and Community Cohesion	<p>There are potential applicable issues to consider within this report affecting Human Rights or the Equality Duty.</p> <p>There will be no immediate negative, differential impact on protected groups. The report is not seeking a revised policy but an agreement to undertake a review of the Home to School Travel and Transport Policy and Post 16 Transport Statement/Policy whereby an impact assessment will be undertaken against any proposed revised policy.</p>
Reducing Poverty	The proposed decision will not contribute to an increase or reduction in poverty.
Climate Change / Environmental	The proposals may assist the Borough's impact on climate change and the environment by providing support for alternative modes of travel therefore improving the public realm.
Children and Young People Cared for by the Authority and Care Leavers	The proposals outlined will not negatively impact children and young people currently cared for by the authority and care leavers as there are no proposed changes to home to school travel recommended for children of compulsory school age.



Data Protection	There are no concerns that the proposals within the report will impact negatively on data protection or GDPR.
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### Actions to be taken to implement the recommended decision(s)

Action	Responsible Officer	Deadline
Produce an Action Plan and Timeline for approved recommendations in place and start any new process for all actions.	Ged Faint	September 2026 (Start of Academic Year 2026/27)

### Appendices

1	Final Report of the Place Scrutiny Panel
2	Service Area Response

### Background papers

Body	Report title	Date
Central Government	Travel to School for Children of Compulsory School Age Statutory Guidance	January 2024
Central Government	Post 16 transport and travel support to education and training	January 2019
Middlesbrough Council	Home to School Travel Assistance Policy Academic Year 2025/26	29 July 2025
Middlesbrough Council	Post 16 Education Transport Statement Academic Year 2025/26	May 2025

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