

Oldham Council Internal Audit Function

Home to School Transport Service (SEND)

Audit Report

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Home to School Transport Service

1 Background

- 1.1 Section 508A of the Education Act (1996) stipulates that local authorities must promote the use of sustainable travel and transport for all eligible children and young people of compulsory school age who travel to receive education in the local authority's area. There are five main elements to the duty which local authorities must undertake:
- an assessment of the travel and transport needs of children and young people within the authority's area;
 - an audit of the sustainable travel and transport infrastructure within the authority's area that may be used when travelling to and from, or between schools / institutions;
 - a strategy to develop the sustainable travel and transport infrastructure within the authority so that the travel and transport needs of children and young people are best catered for;
 - the promotion of sustainable travel and transport modes on the journey to, from, and between schools and other institutions; and,
 - the publication of Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy.
- 1.2 The local authority must also make transport arrangements for all children who cannot reasonably be expected to walk to school because of their mobility problems or because of associated health and safety reasons related to their special education needs (SEN) or disability. Eligibility in these cases should be assessed on an individual basis to identify their particular transport requirements.
- 1.3 Free public transport should also be provided where pupils are entitled to free school meals, or their parents are in receipt of maximum Working Tax Credit.

2 Objectives and Scope

- 2.1 The objective of this audit was to review progress against the recommendations that were raised in the previous audit review, to test the operation of the system, including controls, and to ensure that appropriate procedures and controls have been implemented and are operating effectively.
- 2.2 Key control objectives reviewed included ensuring the following:
- the transition to online Home to School applications is progressing.
 - the process for Stage Two appeals is effective, with appeal's held within statutory timelines.
 - adequate safeguarding training is rolled out to all applicable parties, including drivers and travel assistants.
 - mandatory health and safety training courses are rolled out to passenger assistants.
 - a current Home to School travel policy is completed and agreed.
 - there is a Sustainable Travel Policy.
 - the TRANSYS System is supported and fit for purpose.
 - that the budgetary control of the service is effective.

- there is regular monitoring and benchmarking of the service against other local Authorities.

3 Summary of Findings

3.1 Home to School Transport Applications

In order to apply for Home to School transport, applicants can either fill in a form online and email the form through to the service, or apply by sending the application by post.

Once the forms are received, they are recorded on a spreadsheet and sent to the Presentation Panel who will decide what transport, if any, should be provided.

At the time of the review the service was undergoing a procurement exercise in order to update their systems, part of which will ensure that it is possible to submit online applications directly to the service.

Please refer to Recommendation 1 in the Action Plan below.

3.2 Application Spreadsheet

The Council's policy is that all appeals made when applications have been unsuccessful must be processed within 20 working days.

A review of the spreadsheet used in order to record and process Home to School applications was formulated to show the actual number of days between appeals being received and actioned.

A sample was selected of those appeal applications where the 20 working days had been exceeded by the greatest number of days.

A number of these appeals showed long delays in the respective days of processing, The Service stated that some of these are typing errors, but were unsure of the reasons for delay in some other cases.

The remaining cases were due to appeals being received too early.

Please refer to Recommendation 2 in the Action Plan below.

3.3 Training

Government guidelines state that Local Authorities should ensure that drivers and passenger assistants working on dedicated school transport have undertaken appropriate training and that this is kept up to date.

As a minimum training should include:

- safeguarding
- the handling of emergency situations such as a medical emergency
- equality, for example recognising, supporting and communicating with children with disabilities
- training required to meet the specific needs of the children travelling.

Whilst training has been rolled out to all passenger assistants, no training has been provided to dedicated drivers.

Please refer to Recommendation 3 in the Action Plan below.

3.4 Sustainable Travel Policy

There is a duty on all Local Authorities to promote the use of sustainable travel in relation to travel to and from:

- schools
- further education institutions
- 16 to 19 Academies

Local Authorities must publish a sustainable modes of transport strategy for each academic year. The strategy should:

- set out the local authority's vision, objectives and work programme for improving the infrastructure for sustainable travel and promoting sustainable travel to places of education
- aim to provide health benefits to children and their families through active journeys, and environmental improvements through reduced congestion and improved air quality

Local authorities must:

- publish their strategy on their website
- make paper copies available on request
- include information about their strategy in their composite prospectus for school admissions

No Sustainable Travel Policy has been drafted and agreed by the service.

Please refer to Recommendation 4 in the Action Plan below.

3.5 TRANSYS System

The system used by the service for plotting the shortest travel routes etc. is called the TRANSYS System. At the time of our initial review the TRANSYS System was being phased out and would no longer be supported from July 2023.

The company which provides the TRANSYS System have their own alternative 'Flexiroute' system, and it was presumed this system will be rolled out when the TRANSYS System is no longer supported.

At the time of the follow up review the TRANSYS System was still in use, and the procurement exercise for a replacement system is being linked with the procurement exercise being undertaken in order to set up online applications.

Please refer to Recommendation 5 in the Action Plan below.

3.6 Finance

The Home to School Transport budget has been overspent for the last four financial years, and at the time of this review it was anticipated there would be a budget overspend for the 2025/26 financial year of around £69k.

The transport service is demand led and demand for this service remains high. Within this period the cost of fuel has increased, and this has had a knock-on effect on service costs. Replacing the TRANSYS System may provide savings with more efficient route planning and absences may be better tracked within the new system. The service budget and expenditure should continue to be monitored to ensure the service is delivered as cost effectively as possible.

In our previous report we recommended that the Service should benchmark their performance both locally and nationally to identify areas for further improvement. The Service has provided some high-level benchmarking information which indicates that they are performing well in comparison to other Authorities. However, this information was not collated by the Service themselves, and the Service does not have details of the comparator Authorities used in these comparisons.

We would recommend that, for all benchmarking exercises, the Service should retain details of those Authorities it is benchmarking against to help ensure that comparisons made, and conclusions drawn from this data, are appropriate. Should any areas of underperformance be identified, the comparator Authorities can then be contacted to help understand the reasons for any underperformance identified.

Please refer to Recommendations 6 and 7 in the Action Plan below.

4 Audit Opinion

4.1 The Home to School Service provide a good service in many areas of its core business, and a comprehensive Home to School Policy has now been agreed and the effective process in place for hearing appeals showing only three outstanding appeals at the time of the review.

4.2 Seven of the fourteen recommendations made in the initial report remain incomplete, including four which are high priority as follows:

- the lack of comprehensive training for drivers.
- the lack of a Sustainable Travel Policy.
- the continued budget overspend.
- the unsupported use of important IT Systems.

As a result, the Audit Opinion remains Limited.

4.3 An Action Plan to address these areas is included in Section 6 of this report, with the Action Plan for the initial review in March 2023 included as Appendix 1.

5 Acknowledgement

5.1 Internal Audit would like to thank officers in Service for their help in this review. In the meantime, once the report has been finalised, Internal Audit would be grateful if you would complete the Customer Service Questionnaire so that Internal Audit can continuously review its service delivery.

- 5.2 This review will be conducted in accordance with the Global Internal Audit Standards (GIAS) 2024 and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance (CIPFA) Local Government Application Note (LGAN) 2024.

6 Action Plan

The table below shows the recommendations for the findings arising from our review. We have prioritised the recommendations to provide you with an indication of the importance for each nominated officer. If an officer disagrees with the prioritisation they should discuss this with the auditor as part of the finalisation process.

High Priority - Significant risk to the Council or Service, the recommendation is essential for sound or effective control.

Medium Priority - Moderate risk to the Service it is important that the recommendation is completed

Low Priority - Small risk to the Service it would improve control if the recommendation were to be completed.

No	Recommendation	Priority	Management Comments	Responsibility	When
1	Online Applications: The process by which applications are submitted to the Council should continue to be progressed with a view to ensuring applications for Home to School transport can be made directly online.	Low	Agreed. Not had the support or systems from IT previously, although this has been requested. Will pursue.	Head of SEND and Inclusion	Spring Term 2026
2	Application Spreadsheet: The spreadsheet used to record applications for Home to School transport should include a column detailing the time it is taking to process appeals. This should be monitored on a frequent basis, and action taken where required.	Low	Agreed.	Head of SEND and Inclusion	Spring Term 2026
3	Training: The safeguarding training should be rolled out to include drivers in addition to contracted travel assistants.	High	Agreed. All PA's have been trained and all drivers will be by start of new academic year 2026/27.	Head of SEND and Inclusion	By September 2026
4	Sustainable Travel Policy:	High	Agreed.	Head of SEND and Inclusion	By September 2026

No	Recommendation	Priority	Management Comments	Responsibility	When
	A Sustainable Travel Policy should be drafted, agreed, with it being displayed on the Councils website and paper copies made.				
5	TRANSYS System: Measures should be put in place to ensure adequate support is in place if needed in respect of the TRANSYS System, with consideration given to getting a replacement system as soon as possible.	High	Agreed. This is currently going through procurement and DMT process currently.	Head of SEND and Inclusion	Spring Term 2026
6	Finance: The budget and expenditure for the service should be monitored on an ongoing basis to ensure the service is delivered as efficiently as possible.	High	Agreed. Finance meetings now ongoing, forecasts in place and budget monitoring robust.	Head of SEND and Inclusion	Completed and ongoing
7	Benchmarking: The service should be benchmarked both nationally and against other Greater Manchester authorities to ensure it is providing good value to all stakeholders. The Authorities against which this benchmarking is conducted should be identified to ensure comparisons are appropriate.	High	Agreed. If data is available. Source would need to be found.	Head of Send and Inclusion	TBC

