

Home to School Transport
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2023 Re-Procurement of home to school transport services

What's happening and why

The council has a legal responsibility to renew its Home to School Transport contract every four years. The current contract started in 2019 so must be renewed by August 2023, with businesses bidding for the routes they want to operate.

We know there were a lot of difficulties at the start of the contract in 2019 which is why the council set up a Procurement Board in April 2021 to agree how to take forward the new contract in plenty of time before it starts in August 2023. This is also why we have been updating you on progress regularly to ensure families are kept informed.

The board brings together a wide range of specialists who will ensure the system we put in place is the best it can be. It includes the council's Assistant Director of Education and Skills, the Head of Home to School Transport, a representative of the Parent Carers' Council (PaCC), a special school Headteacher and representation from the council's Legal, Procurement, Communications and Licensing services.

From the work the board has carried out, councillors were presented with different models and options on how the contracts will be awarded which will ensure a stable service. They chose a model used in most councils, and one that is recommended for this type of procurement.

This is called a 'Dynamic Purchasing System' (DPS) and it means that operators who pass a stringent application process can provide the service.

The DPS allows operators to join at any time during the lifetime of the contract, as opposed to a 'closed framework' which limits the market to a smaller group of operators which can leave the service vulnerable if an operator leaves the framework for any reason.

Will there be changes?

The service has a statutory duty to provide free travel arrangements for eligible children and young people. It's our responsibility, and a priority, to ensure these arrangements are

suitable, safe and without unreasonable levels of stress for the children and young people Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND).

We absolutely recognise that for many of your children and young people changes to their routine can be incredibly difficult for them and for you.

Legally the council must put home to school transport routes out to tender at the start of the new contract. This is about 200 routes. If a different operator to the one who provides your service currently is the successful bidder, it will mean your child would have a new crew taking them to and from school. Even if the same operator continues to provide the service they may choose to use a different crew.

We realise this may cause anxiety. We know that changes can generate stress all round and create a shaky start or even trigger emotion-based transport refusal. Whilst we must comply with the law, we will work together with you, the PaCC and the operators to ensure changes to routines are introduced as smoothly as possible ahead of the new term in September 2023.

This time around we have a dedicated SEND Officer and a Contract and Service Development Manager contributing to route planning and route award. Roles which were unfortunately not in the service during the last procurement exercise.

Once the routes have been allocated, they will become the baseline for the service and much like the current service, there should be some broad continuity year on year over the next four years, although the movement of students in/out of the service does mean that changes do happen.

Could we keep our existing driver and VPA?

It's also possible that the existing operators will win their bid for the routes they run now and choose to use the same crew – in which case there may be little to no change.

Will new drivers and VPAs have proper checks carried out?

An enhanced DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check is carried out on each driver and VPA to ensure they're suitable people to be working with children.

The service offers extensive training which, as well as safeguarding, includes modules on equalities, SEND, exploitation, autism, epilepsy, behaviours that challenge and language and communication.

All drivers and VPA's must have completed these training modules, hold an enhanced DBS and sign up to our [Code of conduct](#) before they transport your child. This helps us to ensure children and young people receive the same level of service regardless of their driver or VPA. [Learn more about how we keep your child safe on home to school transport.](#)

Route Planning for the school year (September 2023)

Councils must issue Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP), naming a school/college for the child or young person to attend by the statutory deadlines of 15 February for children under 16 years old, and 31 March for children over 16 years old.

Home to school route planning starts as soon as all phase transfers and new starter information is shared with the service. Locally we set a deadline of 30 April for under 16s applications, and 31 May for over 16s.

However, meeting this deadline is a challenge as there are a number of factors that drive later applications, for example, if parents/carers are appealing a placement, awaiting an out of area placement or, in the case of post 16, waiting on exam results.

In 2022, 94 applications came in between May and August, with a further 30 applications for transport after school started in September (and another 60 applications between October - December). This makes it extremely difficult to route plan effectively and efficiently and is often the reason why transport arrangements change from time to time.

We want to avoid setting up travel and introductions with transport crew and then having to change arrangements after a few months to incorporate late applicants. It is crucial that applications come in as quickly as possible so we can set up the travel arrangements before schools break up for summer. This reduces the need to make late changes as result of delayed applications.

As part of ensuring the travel arrangements are suitable, safe and reasonably stress free, we risk assess each child, based on their Education Health and Care Plans and Pupil Travel Information Form, as well as undertaking some shared vehicle risk assessments – we aim to do this in consultation with schools, which is why its important applications come in before schools break up.

Over the next few months, as usual, we will begin to make plans for journeys this coming September. Each year we see more and more applications for free transport. We follow government best practice and plan routes to ensure, as far as possible, that no primary aged child is travelling more than 45 mins to their school, and no secondary school aged child more than 75 mins.

As more children join our service each September and throughout the year, the routes will change to ensure we are route planning as efficiently as possible. Routing is based on the geographical location of each child and their distance to their school. It also takes into consideration the needs of each and every child.

We plan journeys for more than 600 children and young people to over 60 education settings.

When will the 2023 routes be awarded and confirmed?

It is important to stress that overbidding and 'handing back' routes is inevitable and unavoidable regardless of when the routes are put out to tender. This is because all operators will want to maximise profitability. The service has introduced an 'admin charge' to try and prevent operators from overbidding/handing back routes.

It is intended that September 2023 travel arrangements, including for post 16 (where the setting has been named), will be completed by the end of July 2023. The expectation is that operators arrange introductions with parents/carers before the end of August.

Whilst operators are asked to name the transport crew when bidding, they don't always know which crew will be delivering the service.

Crews often go on leave during the summer (as they are not able to during term time). Operators may also have lost staff between award and contracts starting as drivers are self-employed and can work for more than one operator.

If you are on holiday in the last two weeks of August 2023 you may unfortunately miss out on the opportunity to meet your child's new crew face to face. At the very least you will receive an email with names and photos of your child's crew, and a short video or facetime introduction may be able to be arranged, crew willing, at your request.

Providing a home to school transport system is extremely complicated, but we've learnt important lessons from what happened in 2019.

Please be reassured the comfort, safety and wellbeing of children and young people are at the forefront of how the new contract will be awarded, operated and managed.

If you would like to talk further about any aspect of this briefing, send an email to HometoSchoolTransport@brighton-hove.gov.uk or phone us on 01273 293 501.