



## **Home to School Transport Report for Children & Young People's Education & Skills Committee 7th March 2022**

Brighton 31<sup>st</sup> January 2022

### **What constitutes suitable Home to School Transport?**

*To be suitable, the transport must enable an eligible child to reach school within stated time-frames, without such stress, strain or difficulty that they would be prevented from benefiting from the education provided. It must allow the child to travel in reasonable safety and in reasonable comfort. (Section 508B of the Education Act ("EA") 1996).*

## **Part A: A General Service Update: PaCC Perspective**

### **Co-production**

The Relationship is working well and families benefit from this, as it aids mutual contextual understanding, and enables PaCC to support and challenge constructively. PaCC recognises the ongoing commitment to maintaining the elevated service standards. This is only possible with collaboration between the team, operators, schools/colleges & students/families. With training now in place and evolving, co-production has focused on scrutinising existing operating procedures, ensuring that practice reflects policy and identifying areas for clarification, to ensure that the service is delivered well, and in a fair and transparent way. This is sometimes prompted by an individual case query. Work is well underway to produce the full set of documents\* that define the Policies, principles and delivery, that will be public and accessible for all to read (council, operators and passengers/families). This continues to be an extremely insightful and useful exercise with the aim of supporting the transition into 2023 arrangements. We do not presently meet with operators, but this may be appropriate as we navigate the proposed transition and in due course if new operators come on board (PaCC time and resource constraints permitting).

\*It should be noted that July 2019 Draft Statutory Guidance Consultation is still to be finalised and published.

### **Covid-19 Update**

Co-production enabled communications to be shared swiftly with families to reassure, and any issues were fed back and dealt with swiftly. We were concerned that service would be very disrupted, but operators have worked hard with officers to ensure that CYP are able to get to school/college, and in the main, this has been achieved. It is important to take care of the health and wellbeing of vehicle crews and we were pleased to see the classification of some staff as 'care workers' of CEV passengers so they could access boosters. We are mindful that future local outbreaks may impact on availability of crew members or necessitate commissioning of additional vehicles as a temporary measure and this may not be supported with central Government funding.

## **Routes and Groupings**

Current routes seem to be working in the main and we have not been made aware of any persistent lateness to school/college. Devising harmonious groupings of students within a logical journey through the city requires extensive knowledge of children's profiles and can be a challenge, especially as children are dynamic and their needs and tolerances may fluctuate or evolve. We will continue to monitor the 18 runs with 6 or more children on board, not just for abidance by statutory journey times, but also for the wellbeing of those passengers, as a busier vehicle can cause a significantly enhanced level of stress for some children, which if sustained for the entire journey, can be detrimental to learning and would then not meet the guidelines for 'stress free' journeys. Individual and Grouped Risk Assessments are even more important in busier vehicles.

## **Travel Alone/Solo & Out of City Runs**

There will always be 'some' children and young people (CYP) who, for complex medical or emotional or mental health reasons, require a 'travel alone' status, and there will inevitably be longer, more expensive journeys within the mix, as our city's education provision does not cater to the diverse needs of all the city's CYP. PaCC recognises that these types of journeys 'stick out' in cost terms, however they may be the key to enabling a student to access education, and every individual's needs & education must drive decision making.

## **Training**

PaCC supports the requirement for all training to be completed across the (currently) 9 modules. E-learning is expedient, on the assumption that it can be accessed in a timely way by all crews and revisited if requested. But as a stand alone it is not fail-safe. Bespoke training is essential to support some young people or combinations, and we are keen to see the addition of some specific nuanced training around more complex social, emotional and mental health SEMH profiles (including Pathological Demand Avoidance) for completeness.

## **Independent Travel Training (ITT)**

Families are very keen to see this introduced, and it's unfortunate that COVID has slowed it down, and some young people have missed out. There will be great expectations and it may be a challenge to define the parameters inclusively. 'Independence' is a progressive step on from existing (more supported) individual arrangements that should align with a young person's transition to adulthood, but it is important to recognise that 'independence' can look different at an individual level. Increasing independence can be liberating and anxiety inducing for a student and their family, so expertise, collaboration and suitable timeframes will be key to a successful scheme. There is a natural fit between ITT and Sustainability objectives, on the presumption that independence will involve increased confidence and competence to move toward active travel or public transport options. Note: this could create an even greater resource demand e.g. introducing Travel PAs (aka Bus Buddy) in addition to the current VPAs.

As the ITT is in very early development, PaCC will be able to add more comment as it begins to take shape.

## **Team**

The addition of the SEND Officer role has been very positive and PaCC looks forward to welcoming a new Officer into the newly vacant post. Transport Officers now attend co-

production meetings on a rolling basis, as the 'engine' of the operations and first point of contact for families. We are concerned at the persistent difficulty of recruiting to the Contracts & Service Development Manager and wonder what fallback option would be, in the event this current round of recruitment fails.

### **Availability and Retention of Crews**

Familiarity of faces can be really important to some of the children and young people using the Service. The same challenges of recruitment and retention for VPAs is evident across the city in Personal Assistant roles and this is something that needs more consideration as the demand for good calibre VPAs will remain.

### **Value for Money & Budget**

There is a tension, and at times, conflict, between meeting the needs of individual/diverse needs of passengers 'well', *within* budgetary constraints *and* sustainability principles. There is a mercurial quality to this service as passengers flow in and out throughout the year, not just entry age students, but also students moving into the area, changing schools, transitioning to college, or students who filter through from SEND Tribunals, (the latter, often travelling to out of area schools or colleges). PaCC recognises the need for value for money - however, budgets must be sufficient to ensure statutory responsibilities are met, in the 'suitable manner' set out within the guidelines.

### **Mileage Payments & Personal Travel Budgets**

Although there are some families who already take mileage payments rather than a seat on a taxi, PaCC would like to see this option scoped out more fully. The current 30p per mile rate stacks poorly against other local authorities who operate between 45p and 60p, and it is below the current 45p per mile that is set for council staff when driving on council business. We welcome more co-production and consultation on this, with a view to making it more attractive, although it must be clearly communicated as a voluntary, not mandatory alternative. Many local authorities already offer personal travel budgets. For some families and some journeys, they could provide more flexibility to tailor a journey and offer value for money but would be weighed up against parent/s physical and emotional capacity and impact on working day. There is also a consideration of how to balance individual choice and options with the Sustainability Strategy, if it could potentially add more individual journeys to the total. PaCC can assist with developing and exploring these options further.

PaCC shares the Lead Officer's concern that the existing budget may not be able to withstand the combined factors of passenger demand - growing numbers, travel alone, out of city journeys; operator demand - Living Wage and uplifts; as well as potential Covid surges. We queried the possibility of setting an additional Reserve for these less predictable and significant costs arising from passenger demand and Covid. We would oppose decisions being made that compromise safety and wellbeing standards, due to budget insufficiency.

### **Satisfaction (Performance) Surveys**

PaCC conducts regular informal check-ins with families, feeding back compliments and any concerns. Social media across PaCC Partners, in addition to our own page for families, captures most (but not all) families. We monitor all of them for HTST related content and signpost to the service when needed, or offer support. Rolling satisfaction surveys are not always welcomed by SEND families, who are somewhat saturated in this respect. But they are important, as some families who use the service are not social media users. The schools/colleges survey provides oversight into arrivals/departures

operations and interactions between crews and passengers in particular. The operators survey ensures that any issues are identified and that arrangements are working properly. The 'Reported Incidents' Agenda item at co-production and governance meetings has been a useful addition, particularly as there is a schools representative at Governance.

### **Priorities for Further Improvement**

PaCC supports the identified Priorities, whilst remaining vigilant to maintaining current service standards, and scoping a more attractive mileage and personal travel budget option for families.

## **Part B: Re-Procurement of the Service post August 2023 Comments**

The HTST PaCC Representative has attended all of the formal Procurement Board meetings. PaCC agrees that the listed options were researched and assessed carefully.

A Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) housing a 'reverse EBay' bidding system would be unwelcome and not supported by us, for fear of 2019 history repeating itself.

For a 2023 HTST Service operating with a Dynamic Purchasing System that is not reverse EBay, PaCC highlights the following observations:

Once the initial retendering has been completed and routes are up and running, they should stay in place, provided they continue to work well and offer good value for money. Unnecessary annual retendering should be avoided to minimise disruption for CYP and their families.

High standards of service must be protected by the detail set out in Contract Agreements, and ensure uniformity of safeguarding practice, including enhanced DBS, training as set out by the Service together with any bespoke requirements, and compliance with this city's Blue Book standards which should apply to *all* operators, crews and vehicle types.

Contractual arrangements must incorporate a clear 'trouble shooting' process, specific sanctions and if required, a swift terminate/reallocate function for any unsatisfactory or unsafe arrangements that do not comply with service standards (including defined customer service expectations). The set up should incentivise operators and crews to strive for excellence in terms of service delivery *and* passenger care.

The DPS must be set up to only accept fully specified runs that detail vehicle size, configuration requirements and passengers' needs, including VPA & any special training/skills requirements to ensure 'conscious and conscientious bidding' and to minimise hand-backs.

If operators are already working within HTST in other areas, there should be an opportunity to research performance and gauge satisfaction via other parent carer fora, as well as the LA's HTST team, in order to avoid any unscrupulous operators from entering.

Running a DPS may not resolve the crew shortage crisis as this is a national issue. There needs to be clear evidence of crew sufficiency from any operators bidding for a run to avoid 'poaching' which could disrupt existing runs and destabilise the CYP on those vehicles. Living Wage and 'pay parity' are a factor, and PaCC recognises the significance of this in budgetary terms, but wellbeing of all staff is essential. Brighton & Hove's DPS should be regarded as well managed and fair and in line with our City Values.

The current number of operators already keeps officers busy. Adding too many active operators could spread officers' resources too thin, to the detriment of CYP and their families. Finding the optimal manageable number that balances security and flexibility is key.

Some families (those who experienced 2019) will feel extremely anxious about this change and will be concerned that this is going to change existing arrangements, some of which are longstanding, where crews have become very well known to CYP and their parents. Communicating these changes in a truthful and reassuring way will be critical. Emphasising that this will NOT be a 'lowest bidder wins' system will be critical (a communications timeline is being developed). We recognise that the initial changeover could result in a lot of switches. Families will be particularly unhappy if the DPS results in them losing a crew, who are then reallocated to other CYP. Families seek and value consistency. New operators must understand this and be able to adopt the 'familiar faces principle' in their planning..

Families would welcome the ability to track journeys and have a more reliable communication mechanism between HTST officers, operators, crews, schools/colleges and parents.

The DPS may initially feel more cumbersome while everyone familiarises. The pressure points will arise after routes are initially put out to bid, due to the domino effect of late additions/changes. Students/families need to know what their September arrangements are before the end of the Summer Term. Last minute changes generate stress all round and can create a shaky start or even trigger emotion based transport refusal. 'Meet & Greet' introductions, bespoke preparations and confirmation of timings should take place before the end of August (taking into account that crew members & families may be away), to ensure a smooth September. The start of a new school year can be triggering for students and families, so an additional 'change' must be delivered with care. These timings should be regarded as critical gateposts, in order to protect the trust and confidence of CYP, parents and carers and schools/colleges that the service has worked hard to rebuild since 2019.

PaCC have flagged the impact on students/families if an operator hands back runs just before September or in those first few weeks and would like to see this covered within contractual arrangements. PaCC would welcome further consideration of a small in-house emergency cover crew, at least for the first 6-12 months while the system settles in. We acknowledge the additional cost, but consider that it will offer a necessary reassurance during the transitional phase that is justifiable given the statutory nature of this service.

**With these considerations in place, and subject to sign off, PaCC will continue to work with the Procurement Board members to take the DPS route forward.**

(Note: This report was written on 31st January 2022 and feedback on current service represents the time period up to that date.)

