

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

PUBLIC CONSULTATION MEETING 3 VALE OF LEVEN VENUE – Vale of Leven Academy (Also made available online) Wednesday 25th April 2023 – 7.00 p.m.

ATTENDING:

Laura Mason (LM), Chief Education Officer, WDC
Andrew Brown (AB), Senior Education Officer, WDC
Claire Cusick (CC), Senior Education Officer, WDC
Julie McGrogan (JM), Senior Education Officer, WDC

In Attendance:

10 members of the public in person, and 3 members of the public online.

Welcome and Introduction

LM opened the meeting and welcomed the members of the public in attendance to the statutory consultation meeting. LM introduced herself and the Council Officers in attendance and outlined the format of the meeting.

Consultation Process

LM continued by explaining the consultation process, and stated that West Dunbartonshire Council are required by law to conduct a statutory consultation for any proposed change to denominational transport, but have taken the opportunity to consult more widely on the changes for all schools affected. LM advised that presently, around 1,200 children and young people are transported to 12 of our schools. At the meeting on the 8th of March, Educational Services committee approved the launch of this consultation, and agreed that it should run from the 9th of March until the 9th May, and that a report outlining the results of this consultation and making appropriate recommendations be presented to a meeting of the educational services committee in the week beginning the 5th July.

LM continued that in terms of the timeline for the consultation, we aim to provide individual outcomes to those in receipt of transport currently this week. This is the third and final of our public events for geographical areas, with two having taken

place last week for the Dumbarton and Clydebank areas. When the consultation formally closes all responses will be collated, and provided to Education Scotland who will then undertake some fieldwork - they will sample visit a number of schools, and look to speak with children and young people, the Parent Council and a wider group of parents. Education Scotland will then produce a report to the Council based on how the consultation was conducted, and this report will form part of the material submitted in the report to the Educational Services committee to be held in the week beginning the 5th of July. West Dunbartonshire Council (WDC) are required by law to publish their Consultation Response Report three weeks before the committee meeting.

Should the Educational Services committee agree to implement any changes, it is proposed to do these in two phases - the first phase affecting children and young people who presently use public transport for their journey to school in time for the start of the next academic year, and the second phase to time with the start of the following year in 2024 - this is of course all subject to the findings of this consultation, and committee approval.

Proposed Changes

AB spoke to the proposed changes being addressed in this consultation. The proposal is to increase the distance a pupil resides in order to qualify for transportation. For primary aged pupils that would mean a change from the existing 1 mile distance to 2 miles, And for secondary, a change from the existing 2 miles to 3 miles. AB stated that throughout the documentation we have stated that this is more in line with legislation, as Scottish Government do not specify a distance for local authorities to provide transport, but instead refer to a 'safe walking distance'. WDC have not measured distances 'as the crow flies', but instead have used the West Dunbartonshire Mapping and Geographical Information Centre tool which is developed by ESRI. This is a tool that is used worldwide, and the same tool that is used for all council mapping applications – for example, the tool on the WDC website allowing residents to find out what day their bins are collected. In education, the tool is used for school catchment areas, and for school transport. Using this tool, we first pinpointed the school gates, or access points to school sites which then allowed us to define, on the maps, the distance from our schools to any address.

AB shared a number of images from the Vale of Leven area. The software used can identify routes that are walkable. The image displayed showed part of the Vale of Leven that has walkable routes to Vale of Leven Academy - those routes were shown as purple lines in the image. The software helps to understand which of those walkable routes are within three miles of Vale of Leven Academy shown here, and a similar exercise was undertaken for each of the schools affected. Understandably, the software highlighted areas that are outwith the 2 or 3 mile distance, showing addresses that would be eligible for transport provision. By plotting on the mapping software the location of the home addresses for children and young people that presently receive transport, allow us to see what this would mean for individuals affected by the proposed changes.

Whilst the mapping software will tell if something is walkable, we need to ensure that it is a safe route to walk. What do we mean by 'safe'? By safe, we mean that there is provision of an accessible footpath, maintained to a suitable quality. There is adequate provision of street lighting, so that this path is lit and can be walked safely. Where crossing points need to be used, is there is safe way to cross the road, and where there is a high volume of traffic, or a higher speed of traffic, this has been taken into consideration. This isn't new to us - we have been providing school transport for decades, so we already have a considerable amount of knowledge and experience in this area. There are presently a number of young people who are provided with transport on the grounds of the being no suitable route for them to walk - this will not change. Where concerns have been raised, we have walked routes, and checked all of those with colleagues in the Roads team.

LM mentioned at the beginning that we would be writing to each family who is presently in receipt of school transport with the outcome of this exercise for your individual circumstances so that each of you know how this will impact you.

AB shared a table highlighting the affect the proposal would have on the number of children and young people presently transported to schools.

School	Existing Numbers	Not Eligible
Gartocharn Primary School	17	
Knoxland Primary School	21	5
Linnvale Primary School	*	*
St. Eunan's Primary School	22	22
St. Mary's (Alexandria) Primary School	16	16
St. Mary's (Duntocher) Primary School	12	*
St. Patrick's Primary School	*	*
Clydebank High School	249	179
Dumbarton Academy	23	5
Our Lady & St. Patrick's High School	533	130
St. Peter the Apostle High School	106	81
Vale of Leven Academy	184	153

If accepted, we would propose to make changes in two phases - first by making the most straightforward change. Many of our children and young people are transported using 'service' buses. At the moment, we pay First Bus to transport our young people on the very same service bus you or I could also get. With the introduction of the Under 22 Travel Pass, young people would be able to get exactly the same transport without additional cost to the council. Technically, the public purse is paying twice for this service. We have been working with SDS, the Senior Phase team and Working4U to maximise the uptake of the travel pass scheme, and would seek to ensure that all young people that need a card have one prior to the summer holidays.

The second phase would see us making changes to the dedicated transport provision that we presently have contractors operating - most notably in this area McColls and a number of local taxi providers. We would be looking to make these

changes in time for the following session starting in August 2024, due to the terms of the existing contracts and termination clauses and timescales.

Education Benefits

AB highlighted the benefits and dis-benefits associated with this proposal. As LM stated at the introduction, the council needs to identify areas where we could reduce our operating costs, and as already made mention of areas here where the public purse is paying twice. There are of course other benefits associated with this proposal.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 3 which affirms that 'in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration', so in all of our decision making, we need to ensure that the long term benefits for our young people are at the centre of our thinking.

The Scottish Government is committed to a long term vision for active travel that encourages promotes walking, cycling, public transport and car sharing in preference to single occupancy car use for movement of people, and encourages efficient and sustainable freight.

There are a number of benefits associated with physical health:

- The World Health Organisation reported that walking for 30 minutes or cycling for 20 minutes on most days reduces mortality risk by at least 10%
- Active commuting is associated with an approximate 10% decrease in risk for cardiovascular disease and a 30% decrease in type 2 diabetes risk
- Cancer-related mortality is 30% lower among bike commuters
- The Scottish Health Survey of 2021 identified 28% of children at risk of being overweight. An active lifestyle combined with a healthy diet can help to reduce this

Equally, there are benefits to mental health:

- Improve focus – in one study, brain activity in the areas of focus and attention were increased following a period of walking. Walking to school can therefore improve focus on school activities
- Walking has been found to improve people's mood and develop creativity

Building relationships with those you walk with. Whether it be a group of friends or family, spending time walking together can help build relationships as people talk about their day or other things that are on their mind. For those children that do not have the required sense of road safety to walk unaccompanied, parents or carers may have to accompany their children on the journey to and from school. In other local authorities, many parents have benefitted from sharing this with a group of other parents whose children live near them. This has reduced the impact on individuals, led to increased connections with neighbours, and an increased sense of community.

Reducing the number of people taking car or bus journeys can help to improve our air quality.

A walking survey in 2021 found that participation was lower amongst residents of the 10% most deprived areas.

Whilst there are benefits to making a change, there are equally dis-benefits associated with this proposal:

- Journey time – for some, the journey to school time will increase if not travelling by bus. This may result in an earlier start to the day for some, as they plan for their journey taking longer.
- Inclement weather – weather in the West of Scotland is frequently inclement, resulting in families having to equip children and young people for wet and windy weather. This may increase financial pressure on households.
- Some benefits are only realised if children and young people swap the passive bus journey for an active means of getting to school

AB concluded by highlighting that The Eco-Schools Scotland programme (with which all of our school are engaged) encourages active travel for our children and young people.

The programme promotes:

- encouraging and enabling parents and children to walk, cycle and use public transport;
- setting up a working group with school, parent, local authority, community, police, and transport representatives to run a school travel or 'safer routes to school' project;
- writing and implementing a school travel plan;
- running an effective road safety awareness programme for pupils;
- raising awareness of the damage caused by transport to the environment and people's health, and;
- providing adequate support and information about travelling to school for pupils and staff who wish to walk, cycle or use public transport.

All schools will be encouraged to revisit their school travel plan to encourage an increasing uptake of active travel.

Questions

LM opened the meeting for questions from those in attendance.

Comment – consultation document should make reference to the source of research.

Comment – There is too much reliance on public transport that is already a poor service .You can't take what works in other parts of the country and expect it work here.

Comment – example given of an 11 year old walking to school if there is poor lighting, gangs and possible predators.

Comment – the proposal actually encourages travel by car, and will not encourage active travel. There is a potential increase in the volume of traffic. The reader is obliged to check legislation to respond to the question in the consultation.

Q. Can you give an indication of the response so far?

A. There have been approximately 400 responses received to the online survey to date.

Q. Has safety been a theme in the other consultation meetings? Why was safety not one of Officers main concerns?

A. Safety has been raised at the two previous meetings. Where routes were not regarded as safe, transport would still be provided.

Q. Was it not considered that children walking along a 40mph route was a safety risk?

A. Colleagues in the Roads team did regard this as a safety issue in some locations, and therefore recommended that some routes were not safe.

Q. What is the safe walking route for my child, and how do I know?

A. It is the parents responsibility to get their child to school.

Q. The Milton bus will still run and go by Garshake. Why is this a saving?

A. The bus will still run for those addresses in Milton eligible for transport. Where there is spare capacity on any contract, we offer 'privilege seats'.

Q. How do I go about getting a privilege seat?

A. Further advice is given about this on the website.

Q. The existing provision is above the statutory requirement. When this was put in place, what were the original reasons for this? What was it based on?

A. Unfortunately, this predates officers and records. The existing provision dates back to Strathclyde Regional Council days.

Comment – Previous Director of Education promised a provision of transport when OLSP moved from Castlehill to Bellsmyre. This is poor to now change this.

Comment – I feel this is impacting on the education of Catholic children more than others.

Comment – the consultation does not feel inclusive. Accessing meetings should have been easy for those most affected. Should have been held in Brucehill or Castlehill.

Comment – the materials produced were not accessible.

Q. HMIe will speak to parents and children – is this cherry picked?

A. Schools will work directly with Education Scotland to identify focus group members.

Comment. The consultation question feels loaded to gather a specific response.

Q. Who was involved in identifying benefits? Were a wide group of stakeholders involved?

A. Central officers were involved in identifying benefits. A wider group of stakeholder were not used.

Next Steps

LM addressed what will happen next in the consultation. The consultation remains open until midnight on 9th May 2023, and anyone wishing to make their views on the proposal known can do so in a number of ways including: online survey (this asks whether you are in favour of the proposal - yes or no), by phone, in writing, or by email. At the end of the consultation period all documents and views obtained through the consultation process are collated and shared with Education Scotland, who will undertake fieldwork to assist them with writing an independent report on the consultation, and respond to Laura Mason. Andrea McMillan and Sheila Brown from Education Scotland will undertake meetings with parents/staff/children from a number of schools affected in the week beginning 15th May 2023. A report including recommendation will be submitted to the Education Services Committee in July 2023 to make a final decision.

Close of Meeting

LM thanked everyone for attending and reminded those attending that views on the consultation can be made through the online survey, by email letter, phone or through an informal chat and you have until 9th May 2023 to submit your response.