

REPORT TO EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE – 1 SEPTEMBER 2022

SCHOOL TRANSPORT MEMBER OFFICER WORKING GROUP

1. Executive Summary/Recommendations

1.1 This report provides the Committee with an update on the previous work of the School Transport Member Officer Work Group (MOWG), asks Committee to reconstitute the Group and seeks nominations of Member representatives.

1.2 The Committee is recommended to:

1.2.1 Acknowledge the work undertaken by the School Transport MOWG to date;

1.2.2 Agree to reconstitute the School Transport MOWG;

1.2.3 Nominate five Member representatives for the reconstituted School Transport MOWG based on political proportionality; and

1.2.4 Delegate approval of a revised Terms of Reference to the School Transport MOWG to agree at the first meeting of the reconstituted Group, including the Charing arrangements, following consultation with the Chair, Vice Chair and Opposition Spokesperson.

2 Decision Making Route

2.1 At its meeting on 28 January 2021 the Committee resolved to establish a School Transport MOWG (Item 13), comprising five Members following political proportionality as agreed by Council on 24 September 2020 (Item 12).

2.2 A Terms of Reference was agreed at the first meeting of School Transport MOWG on 29 March 2021, and this report provides Committee with details of the work undertaken by the Group to date.

2.3 Following the local government election, this report seeks Committee approval to reconstitute the School Transport MOWG and to seek five Member nominations based on the current political proportionality. The report also proposes that the Terms of Reference be revised by the reconstituted Group, to reflect current and emerging issues relating to school transport.

3 Discussion

3.1 Working Groups do not have the same formal requirements of Sub-Committees and can consist of Members, officers, and others, for example, representatives from a relevant industry. They cannot act with powers, as the Council can only delegate its powers to Committees, Sub-Committees, a named officer or

another Council. They are not subject to the Scheme of Governance and their proceedings do not require to be recorded as part of the Council Minutes. They are usually set up to consider a report on one project, policy or issue, and consequently often have a limited life.

- 3.2 Under the agreed School Transport MOWG Terms of Reference, the following main tasks were to be progressed:
- a review of mainstream school transport pick-up/drop-off (PUDO) points;
 - consideration of the options available, and associated business case, for additional 'in-house' provision;
 - consideration of the financial and other implications of revised 'distance based' eligibility criteria;
 - consideration of whether existing minimum engine emission standards of school transport vehicles should be increased as part of the Council's commitment to meeting climate change targets; and,
 - consideration of future options on engagement with young people, families/carers, schools, and contractors.
- 3.3 The MOWG has met on four occasions and a summary of the outcomes from these meetings is provided in **Appendix 1**, with the minutes of each available in **Appendix 2**.
- 3.4 In addition to addressing several of the tasks set out in the Group's original Terms of Reference, a number of additional issues have also been considered, including: Covid related matters; amendments to the Terms and Conditions of contract for school transport services; and the implications of the Under-22 free bus scheme.
- 3.5 The MOWG has proved an extremely useful 'sounding board' for Members and officers to discuss wide-ranging aspects of school transport policy and service delivery and therefore it is proposed that the Group be reconstituted. In this respect it is proposed that the previous officer participation be continued with Member representation based on political proportionality comprising 3 Administration Members and 2 Opposition Coalition Members.

4 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

- 4.1 School transport provision helps deliver the Strategic Priority "Education and Health & Wellbeing" within the Pillar "Our People," by having the right people, in the right place, doing the right thing, at the right time.
- 4.2 School transport provision helps deliver the Strategic Priority "Resilient Communities" within the Pillar "Our Environment", through helping to address issues of climate and sustainability.
- 4.3 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if the recommendations are agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial		X	
Staffing		X	
Equalities and Fairer Duty Scotland		X	
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing		X	
Climate Change and Sustainability		X	
Health and Wellbeing		X	
Town Centre First		X	

- 4.4 The screening section as part of Stage One of the Integrated Impact Assessment process had not identified the requirement for any further detailed assessment to be undertaken. Any proposed revised policies and/or changes to service delivery arising from the work of the MOWG will be separately assessed.
- 4.5 There are no staffing or financial implications.
- 4.6 No risks have been identified in terms of the Corporate or Directorate Risk Registers.

5 Scheme of Governance

- 5.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and their comments are incorporated within the report and are satisfied that the report complies with the [Scheme of Governance](#) and relevant legislation.
- 5.2 The Committee is able to consider and take a decision on this item in terms of Section E.1 of the [List of Committee Powers in Part 2A](#) of the Scheme of Governance, as school transport provision relates to policy issues and resource matters (within agreed budgets) relating to those functions which have not been reserved to the Full Council or specifically delegated to any other Committee of the Council for Education.

Laurence Findlay
Director of Education and Children's Services

Report prepared by Richard McKenzie, Passenger Transport Manager
Date: 17 August 2022

List of Appendices:

- Appendix 1 - Summary of Issues Addressed by the School Transport MOWG
Appendix 2 - Minutes of the School Transport MOWG Meetings: 29 March 2021 – 9 December 2021

Appendix 1 Summary of Issues Addressed by the School Transport MOWG

1. MOWG Meeting of 29 March 2021

At its meeting on 29 March, the MOWG discussed the following topics:

- the Terms of Reference for the Group;
- the status of the 'April 2021' ASN school transport procurement exercise;
- the local outcome of the Covid19 School Transport Retrofit Fund;
- the implications of the suspension of school transport contracts that were not required during the Covid19 'Lockdown';
- the implications of the 'phased return' of pupils following the Covid19 'Lockdown';
- a proposal to revise the terms and conditions of contract for mainstream school transport services in advance of the 'August 2021' procurement exercise in north Aberdeenshire, providing for an additional termination clause to allow contractors to be released from contracts; and,
- a proposal to revise the scoring of bids in relation to the quality component of the school transport procurement process, to advance improvements in engine emissions of contracted vehicles.

2. MOWG Meeting of 19 May 2021

At its meeting on 19 May, the MOWG discussed the following topics:

- the spend on Aberdeenshire Council school transport services;
- the various 'one-off' and recurring financial pressures and savings that arose during the course of financial years 2020/21 and 2021/22
- the then profile of engine emission standards of vehicles which operate the Aberdeenshire school transport network; and,
- options to ensure accurate information on vehicles is supplied by companies operating Council school transport contracts.

3. MOWG Meeting of 13 September 2021

At its meeting on 13 September, the MOWG discussed the following topics:

- a proposed framework for undertaking a school transport engagement exercise with interested parties;
- the methodology and timescale for consultation / engagement with young people, families/carers, schools, and transport contractors on school transport provision;
- the Scottish Government's then proposals for free travel for those under the age of 22;
- the implications to school transport service delivery of the proposed Under-22 travel concession; and,
- quality criteria in the procurement of passenger transport services.

4. MOWG Meeting of 9 December 2021

At its meeting on 9 December, the MOWG discussed the following topics:

- the difference in the vehicle engine emission profile between 31 May 2021 and 1 November 2021, following the implementation of new mainstream home-to-school transport contracts in north Aberdeenshire;
- the carbon emissions of school transport services operated by taxi/Private Hire Cars;
- the implications of revising the current distance for free home to school transport eligibility criteria; and,
- the proposed school transport stakeholder consultation and engagement exercise.

**Appendix 2 - Minutes of the School Transport MOWG Meetings: 29 March 2021
– 9 December 2021**

School Transport Member Officer Working Group

Minute of Meeting of 29 March 2021

In Attendance

Cllr Gillian Owen
Cllr James Gifford
Cllr Louise Mcallister
Cllr Anne Simpson
Ruth O'Hare (Legal Services Manager)
Fiona Conti (Category Manager, Commercial & Procurement Shared Services)
Anne Marie Davies McLeod (Head of Resources and Performance, E&CS)
Maxine Booth (Quality Improvement Manager, E&CS)
Gail Dick (Learning Estates Officer, E&CS)
Diane Bain (Business Partner, Finance)
Ewan Wallace (Head of Transportation)
Richard McKenzie (Passenger Transport Manager, Passenger Transport Unit)
Sean Jamieson (Principal Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)
Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)
Alana Bowie (Senior Transport Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)

Apologies

There were no apologies.

Welcome and Introductions

Ewan Wallace (EW) welcomed all to the Member Officer Working Group (MOWG) and outlined the background as to why the Group has been established; in particular, to consider more specifically school transport matters than the Passenger Transport Network Review (PTNR) MOWG, whose remit was to consider all branches of passenger transport.

Nomination of a Chair

EW sought nomination of a Chair.

Cllr James Gifford (JG) nominated Cllr Gillian Owen (GO). The nomination was seconded by Cllr Anne Simpson (AS) and unanimously agreed by those present.

Proposed Terms of Reference

EW provided an overview of the proposed Terms of Reference which formed the Appendix to the report, stating that it was based on the standard Terms of Reference, as used for the PTNR MOWG.

Richard McKenzie (RMcK) advised that the tasks outlined in the current agreed Education and Children's Services (E&CS) Delivery Plan had been included in the proposed Terms of Reference with the exception of those that had been completed, namely: the prioritisation of privilege school transport applications, as agreed by the E&CS Committee at its meeting on 28 January 2021; and the route-optimization exercise of north Aberdeenshire mainstream school transport services. He further advised that two additional tasks had been proposed: how to better communicate and engage with pupils, parents/carers, schools and operators; and, to consider whether existing minimum engine emission standards of school transport vehicles should be increased.

JG queried the wording of the 3rd bullet point under the proposed Terms of Reference ("to agree the outcome(s) of the school transport review, to be reported back to the PTNR MOWG for its consideration and for recommendation to the appropriate Policy Committee(s)") questioning, if this was a stand-alone MOWG, why there was a need to report back to the PTNR MOWG, and not report directly to the E&CS Committee with any recommendations. He also queried the timescale of how long this Group was expected to be in place.

EW advised that no official end date for the Group had been set. It was not for example considered appropriate to restrict the Group's deliberations to the end of this school year, in case any new issues arose over the Summer. However, if an end date was deemed appropriate, this could be included in the Terms of Reference.

In terms of the 3rd bullet point, EW advised that the School Transport MOWG is a stand-alone Group, and that this bullet point had been intended to cover communication between both the MOWGs in the case of matters of mutual interest. He confirmed that the wording of the Terms of Reference will be changed to better reflect this.

Ruth O'Hare (RO) confirmed the wording of this section can be amended to reflect that the Group did not have to revert to the PTNR MOWG with any decisions.

AS asked that the 1st Bullet point ("to oversee and guide a review of school transport operations, policy and service delivery to determine if improvements to service delivery and/or efficiency savings can be achieved") be amended by replacing "if" with "what", as the Group should only be undertaking the exercise if improvements can be made, not a 'just in case'.

In summarising, GO noted that the Group had agreed the draft Terms of Reference, subject to the amendments discussed.

1. School Transport Update

GO began debate of the item by asking whether more financial information could be provided to the Group regarding the current year expenditure, including details of additional costs and savings that have arisen due to Covid19, given there were less vehicles operating at some points, and more required at other times due, for example to social distancing requirements.

EW confirmed that information on the pre-Covid19 spend on school transport, and the subsequent difference in spend during Covid19 would be provided. He advised that the annual spend on average on school transport service delivery is of the order of £18.5 to £19 million but that the grant allocation received from the Scottish Government for school transport provision is between £4 to £5 million. This allocation to Aberdeenshire could be compared with the total grant for school transport across the whole of Scotland which amounts to £55 million.

RMcK in introducing the report, highlighted four main areas of workload that had been undertaken since the update report to the E&CS Committee on 28 January 2021:

- The retendering of Additional Support Needs (ASN) school transport contracts – This procurement exercise has almost been completed, with the second and final round of tenders undergoing evaluation at present. Savings in the region of £800,000 per annum had been achieved, subject to the outcome of the round 2 tendering.
- The Scottish Government's Covid-19 School Transport Retrofit Fund – The Passenger Transport Unit (PTU) have administered the fund, which provides grants to external operators for Covid19 vehicle mitigation measures such as the installation of protective screens and vehicle ventilation systems. There have been three tranches of the fund for local operators to apply for grants and around 50% of the allocated fund has been distributed. This percentage uptake appears similar to that experienced by other authorities.
- Mainstream school transport contract suspensions – savings amounting to approximately £390,000 had been achieved as a result of the suspension of the majority of school transport contracts, which were not required for the children of Key Workers or vulnerable pupils.
- Phased Return of Schools – The phased return of pupils on 22 February, and on 15 March 2021, has meant that additional or larger vehicles have been required on some school transport services, due to physical distancing requirements. Also, several pupils have also only attended school on a half-day basis, and additional lunch-time journeys have had to be provided. The estimated additional costs incurred were £167,000.

Cllr Louise McAllister (LM) queried the total additional costs referred to in the report.

Sean Jamieson (SJ) confirmed that the £167,000 in additional costs associated with the phased return of pupils reflects the estimated additional costs through to the Easter holidays, whilst the £158,000 costs referred to in the financial section of the report were the estimated additional costs this financial year: the difference in the figures reflecting one additional operational day.

AS queried if social distancing was to become the norm.

SJ confirmed that there be no requirement for physical distancing between pupils on school transport after the April Holidays.

GO queried if face coverings would still be required.

SJ confirmed that face coverings would continue to be required on school transport unless the pupil was medically exempt.

JG asked if all the new ASN school transport were all in place, to start after the Easter holidays.

SJ confirmed the majority were, with 13 contracts that had been tendered in round 2 currently awaiting approval. Once these were awarded all will be in place to commence on 19 April 2021 or 12 April 2021 in the case of contracts operating to Aberdeen City schools.

RMcK confirmed that although there would no need for physical distancing between pupils after the Easter holidays, 1m physical distancing would still be required between pupils and any adult travelling on the vehicle, notably the driver, unless a protective screen was fitted. This means there could be some continued loss of seating capacity as the first row of seats behind / next to the driver could not be used and therefore some additional costs may be incurred to continue to provide additional capacity.

GO queried why there had been additional runs to take pupils home at lunchtime.

SJ advised that some schools had closed at lunchtime, and as there was a restriction on the number of pupils allowed in school at one time, many schools also had some pupils in AM or PM only, to ensure all pupils had some time in school whilst remaining under the maximum number of permitted pupils.

Regarding the School Transport Retrofit Fund, JG sought clarification on how long it was available for, and whether there would be a need to change future contract specifications to include the need for any mitigation measures, for example, protective screens.

SJ clarified that the fund was available until 31 March 2021, and any monies not spent by this date would require to be returned to the Scottish Government. He further advised that there was no expectation of a need to amend contract specifications.

GO noted that during the first 'lockdown' all school transport contracts were paid in full, even though they were not running, to ensure operators survived as businesses and asked whether there had been any Scottish Government funding to cover this payment, or whether all the costs were covered by the Council.

SJ confirmed the costs were incurred by the Council.

JG stated that as per COSLA guidance the Council had agreed to pay all operators in first 'lockdown' period even though they were not running, as the costs were already budgeted for, but queried if there was any reduction in payments as operators did not incur fuel costs.

RMcK confirmed that the Council effectively paid 100% of the contract rates, as per the Terms and Conditions of contract. Due to uncertainty during Covid19, it had been necessary to delay the re-tendering of school transport services, and consequently no savings were gained from these scheduled procurement exercises. No Scottish Government Covid19 relief funds were received for this 'missed opportunity' nor for the full payment of contractors.

2. Revisions to School Transport Procurement Documentation

RMcK introduced the report, advising that the report contained two proposals which had also been considered by the PTNR MOWG at its meeting on 24 March 2021, as they also related to supported local bus service contracts.

For the north Aberdeenshire mainstream school transport and local bus service re-tendering exercise, it is recommended that the respective Terms and Conditions of contract are amended to allow operators to terminate contracts with 12-weeks' notice, subject to having operated the service for a minimum of 12 months. It is thought that with 5-year contracts, operators will build in the current financial risks associated with Covid19 related uncertainty into the tender bids, so by adding in this 'break clause' option, it is anticipated that they will submit lower tender prices.

This clause will also allow the Council to terminate contracts more readily, following for example a route-optimization exercise of an area, say a Community School Network (CSN), without having to wait until the end of the standard 5-year procurement cycle. Also, if an expansion of in-house provision were to be pursued, such a 'break clause' would also aid this process.

The report further recommended an amendment to the quality component of the price/quality ratio in the tender evaluation process to encourage operators to invest in new vehicles. The overall tender evaluation is based 90% on price and 10% on technical responses (i.e., quality), which cannot be changed under the current Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) for passenger transport services, but the proposal is to assign higher scores for the deployment of lower emissions vehicles.

LM queried what would trigger the Council to terminate a contract and confirmed she agreed with the proposal which would promote the use of lower emission vehicles.

RMcK advised that, in addition to the examples given, the Council can terminate a school transport contract for any reason, by giving 4-weeks' notice. He confirmed that, over the last 5 years, there has been an increase in contract terminations due to poor performance.

JG welcomed the idea to encourage lower emission vehicles but queried if operators would expect a premium price for using better vehicles or alternatively if they do not

have such vehicles will they simply not bid. He also sought clarification of the difference between Euro 6 and Euro VI.

SJ advised that Euro VI referred to PSVs whilst Euro 6 referred to taxis and private hire cars.

RMcK added that the Euro engine emission standards for distinct types of vehicles, referred to using Roman numerals for PSVs and HGVs and Arabic numbers for cars and light good vehicles, are not comparable. For example, those relating to PSVs had focused on the removal of NOx and Particulates and, consequently, until the advent of Euro VI had done so to the detriment of CO2 emissions.

EW advised that the lead time required to change a whole bus fleet through normal vehicle replacement is quite long, longer than the Council would like, but the amendment to the 'emission scoring' in the tender process is one way in which we can influence and effect carbon emissions. He confirmed that data on fleet composition can be provided to the next meeting of the Group.

AS asked that if, for example, there are three schools in a network, do they all have their own school transport or are they linked. She also queried, in Appendix 1 to the report, whether Option 2a or 2b was being recommended by officers.

RMcK confirmed that Option 2a was the preferred option, i.e., that no set review or termination date is given. It would be likely that any review instigated by the Council would relate to the start of the new school year, however, having no set date would allow for more flexibility in amending the supported Local Bus network. It was also felt that this option could also help to address any potential collusion between operators as suspicions could arise, were several operators to relinquish contracts on the same date.

In terms of linked contracts within a CSN, he advised that it is left to the operator if they wish to combine the operation of two contracts with one vehicle, for example a secondary and primary contract or a secondary feeder and primary contract, therefore allowing operators the ability to allocate vehicles according to their specific operational circumstances. Indeed, the mainstream school transport contract Terms and Conditions specify a 'window', during which operators can drop off pupils any time up to 20 minutes prior to the school bell, in order to maximise this operational flexibility.

AS confirmed, she also favoured Option 2a.

GO noted that recommendations 2.1 (based on Option 2a) and 2.2 were agreed.

3. Date of Next Meeting

GO confirmed that the next meeting would be on 19 May 2021, with papers to be circulated prior to the meeting.

Actions:

RMcK to amend draft Group Terms of Reference, as agreed under Item 3.

RMcK/SJ to provide further details of school transport spend.
RMcK/SJ to report to the next meeting of the Group on the composition of the school transport fleet.

7 April 2021

School Transport Member Officer Working Group

Minute of Meeting 19 May 2021

In Attendance

Cllr Gillian Owen
Cllr Anne Simpson
Cllr Louise Mcallister
Cllr James Gifford
Fiona Conti (Category Manager, Commercial & Procurement Shared Services)
Anne-Marie Davies-McLeod (Head of Resources and Performance, E&CS)
Maxine Booth (Quality Improvement Manager, Learning Estates)
Gail Dick (Learning Estates officer, Education)
Karen Tucker (Team Manager, Resources and Performance)
Diane Bain (Business Partner, Finance)
Ewan Wallace (Head of Transportation)
Richard McKenzie (Passenger Transport Manager, Passenger Transport Unit)
Sean Jamieson (Principal Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)
Alana Bowie (Senior Transport Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)

Apologies

Ruth O'Hare (Legal Services Manager)

Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

Cllr Gillian Owen (GO) welcomed everyone to the meeting, and apologies were noted for Ruth O'Hare.

Minutes of Meeting of 29 March 2021

The minutes of the meeting of 29 March 2021 were approved.

Matters Arising from meeting of 29 March 2021

Ewan Wallace (EW) confirmed the Member Officer Working Group (MOWG) Terms of Reference had been updated and recirculated to the Group. The two other matters arising, a financial update and emissions report, were on the meeting agenda (Items 4 and 5). EW further advised that other tasks identified in the Terms of Reference will form agenda items for future meetings.

Financial Update

Richard McKenzie (RMck) introduced the report. He confirmed some of the information was 'hot off the press' emanating from the ongoing north Aberdeenshire

mainstream school transport tender exercise, and was therefore based on high level figures, which had not yet been discussed in detail with Finance colleagues.

RMcK advised that Appendix 1 which sets out the 2020/21 out-turn includes the effect of 'one-off' savings and costs incurred during the financial year, for example: the Nursery Transport out-turn figure reflects an accrual; and the loss of income from fares on combined school transport/local bus services due to the need to de-register these services because of COVID19 physical distancing guidance, is also reflected in the figures.

RMcK also highlighted that the savings to Additional Support Needs (ASN) and mainstream school transport outlined in Appendix 2 are based on a comparison with current contract costs, and not savings against the budget. Some highlighted additional costs were also 'worst case scenarios' - for example, if physical distancing continues to be required on combined school transport/local bus services throughout the financial year.

RMcK further clarified the last two rows in the table in Appendix 2. The identified savings in ASN school transport contract costs reflected the price difference between the old contracts and the new contracts, which started in April 2021. The mainstream school transport tender exercise is ongoing, with the offers of award having been sent to operators following a first round of tendering. Some contract awards will be rejected, and these contracts will be included in a second round of tendering along with the tendering of further contracts to accommodate pupils travel requirements that have recently emerged. The figure shown is therefore a maximum potential saving and is likely to reduce.

Cllr James Gifford (JG) queried the figure on Appendix 1 referring to 'fares income / ticket sales' and whether this was a cost or an income. He also queried if the contract savings were due to there being less contracts, or if this was due to lower contract prices.

RMcK clarified that the figure for 'fares income / ticket sales' was a cost of approximately £16k. There was no such income generated in financial year 2020/21 as the routes had been de-registered and operated as dedicated school transport services, and those who had bought a season ticket in advance were refunded, hence the cost incurred. RMcK further advised that the identified contract savings were a consequence of both factors, a route optimisation exercise had been completed to reduce the number and size of vehicles required, whilst competition for contracts had increased and the tender prices received were lower.

Cllr Jim Gifford (JG) intimated that whilst he was pleased to hear of the reduction in costs, he wished to check if there was any compromise on quality.

RMcK advised that service delivery quality should not be affected. Tenders are evaluated based on 90% price and 10% quality, with the contract Terms and Conditions setting out minimum quality standards, which all operators must adhere to. As the majority of the successful operators are the same operators as we currently use, it is fair to assume there will be the same standard of quality as currently is the case.

JG queried whether any of the additional costs due to COVID-19 are being assimilated into a claim for reimbursement from Central Government.

RMcK advised that details of all such additional costs incurred were, and continue to be, recorded, so the information is available for inclusion in any claims the Council is entitled to submit.

JG noted that there was such a monthly claim and asked if this was still ongoing.

Anne-Marie Davies-Macleod (AMDM) confirmed that the claim from August related to a fund for operational costs such as PPE, etc.

Diane Bain (DB) clarified that monies were carried forward for the re-opening of schools, so if items can be identified relating to this, these could be covered.

Sean Jamieson (SJ) then confirmed some details regarding the ongoing north Aberdeenshire mainstream school transport tendering exercise. He advised that in total 1138 bids had been received, with an average of six bids per contracts, and a range of between 3-11 bids per contract. The most expensive north Aberdeenshire mainstream school transport contract is currently around £400 per school-day, with the new most expensive contract expected to be £264 per school-day, pending the outcome of the second round of tendering.

GO sought an explanation of the GAE, referred to in the report. She also sought clarification on the budget for School Transport and whether the savings shown in the Appendices of the report had been considered previously,

EW explained that GAE or Grant Aided Expenditure is the grant received from the Scottish Government for such activities as school transport and is based on a formula agreed with COSLA which determines how much of the grant each local authority receives. Aberdeenshire Council receives a school transport allocation of between £4.5 – 4.8 million per year, however actual spending on school transport is clearly much higher than this. The grant allocation is meant to be indicative, however some school transport allocations to local authorities are vastly 'out of kilter' with actual spend. This discrepancy has been highlighted to the Scottish Government.

EW further advised that the overall allocation assigned to school transport, across Scotland, is £55-60 million per year. Although the Council have made savings, the gap between money spent and GAE received is still large. This discrepancy between grant allocation and spend can be presented again to COSLA if the MOWG was so minded.

GO queried what GAE, for example, the City of Glasgow received for School Transport.

SJ advised the Group of the GAE funding received by a number of other local authorities, for example City of Glasgow receives £4.14 million and Highland £5.38 million. He further advised that there was a total of £55.46 million awarded to all local authorities in Scotland.

JG advised that through COSLA he has been involved in this area for a long time. As Aberdeenshire has a very big rural area the GAE allocation formula does not fairly reflect that required, however rural authorities would be outvoted by those in the central belt if they were to try and change the allocation formula, as an increase to the amount received by Aberdeenshire would mean a reduction in the amount received by other local authority areas. There will always been an authority losing out, so addressing this inequity should be seen as a long-term objective.

Cllr Anne Simpson (AS) stated that Government have not seen this as an issue as we are paying the difference out of our budget, but as there was a new Government, this may be an opportune time to raise the matter again.

GO agreed that it is definitely a matter worth pursuing further.

EW confirmed the total school transport budget amounted to £19.5 million, but some final definitive budget allocations require to be looked at offline.

EW further confirmed that such large savings were not anticipated from the tendering exercises, with tender prices expected to rise and therefore the savings were not included in the budget process. He also cautioned that the identified savings may still reduce, following round 2 of the mainstream school transport tendering.

EW advised that officers are looking to clarify what are 'in-year' efficiencies, and what are actual budget savings, and that these would be reported to the Budget group.

Cllr Louise Mcallister (LM) queried if there were any penalties which can be applied to contracts, and, if so, how these penalties worked.

SJ confirmed the Council has a Contract Performance Management System (CPMS) which applies to all contracts, as per contract Terms and Conditions. All contracts can receive points against the contract for a variety of failings, such as late arrival at a

school, failure to drop a pupil at the correct stop, failure to provide the Council with information upon request, etc. Some of these failings also come with a financial deduction (i.e., liquidated damages). If a cumulative 100-point threshold is exceeded, this can lead to termination of contract. The majority of points remain against the contract for twelve months, but for more serious breaches of contract the points remain in place for the life of the contract.

AMDM confirmed that the identified savings reflected a dilemma faced across Services, that there are budget savings but also 'in-year' budget pressures. The savings are therefore probably best to be looked at as 'in year' savings. She also commended the Passenger Transport Unit (PTU) for proceeding with the tender exercises, and the decision to suspend operator payments whilst services were not running to help save costs.

GO sought clarification on the proposed under-22 concessionary travel scheme, in particular whether there was any further information on the scheme and when we can expect to find out full details of the scheme to ascertain if there are financial implications to the Council.

EW advised that there is a Transport Scotland Working Group progressing the matter but that details of the scheme are awaited; although he did not anticipate that the scheme would result in significant financial benefits to the Council. Regarding timescales, further details were expected over summer.

Vehicle Emissions

EW introduced the report by highlighting that vehicle emissions is an increasingly important and complex aspect of service delivery, which it will be necessary to consider in terms of the Services' Climate Change Plans, that are to be developed in the Autumn.

RMcK advised that the report shows the current contracted-in and in-house school transport fleet engine emissions standards and therefore provides a benchmark for future consideration. He further advised that whilst the higher the Euro rating, the higher the improvement or standard of emissions, PCVs (i.e., buses and coaches) have different standards to that of taxis and Private Hire Cars (PHCs), more rigorous standards. In the case of PCVs, the improvements in emissions sought were, until the advent of Euro VI, standards aimed at reducing NOX and particulates rather than CO2. Euro VI vehicles can be considered very clean.

RMcK also advised that the report is still missing information from a number of operators who did not respond to the request for information. Despite this, the figures are considered representative of the current position. Having collated these baseline figures, it is proposed to assess the position again in September, after the start of the

school term, when updated information will be sought from operators who will have, in many instances, deployed newer vehicles to coincide with the start of the new mainstream school transport contracts.

LM queried what options there were to ensure the provision and accuracy and of the information from operators.

RMcK suggested that a letter from the Chair to remind operators of the importance of providing the information may be beneficial and GO confirmed she would be happy to do this.

JG asked whether it was part of their contract that operators had to provide the information, and if not, could this be added to the contract. He also referred to the target that new cars be petrol / diesel free by 2030 and queried whether there was an equivalent date for the bus industry.

RMcK confirmed it was a contractual obligation to provide any reasonable request for information and that those operators who did not respond to the request for information on vehicle emission standards had received CPMS points against any contract for which the information had not been provided.

EW confirmed that in terms of the wider industry, Stagecoach Bluebird and First Aberdeen are partners in the Bus Alliance, and are investing in this area, with Aberdeen City now having the largest fleet of hydrogen buses in the UK. He further confirmed that the UK and Scottish Governments are looking at both passenger fleets, and freight and logistics fleets, to see what the best options are for moving forward. Hydrogen vehicles would appear to be the most attractive option for PCVs, but it would be difficult to replace all vehicles by 2030 and would involve a huge investment in vehicles and infrastructure.

GO confirmed that the Group had agreed the report recommendations including the proposal to defer further work on vehicle emissions until to September 2021.

6 Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting be scheduled for after the Summer Recess. EW confirmed a main item for the agenda would be communication with parents.

Actions:

Ensure reporting of in-year efficiencies and budget savings as part of financial reporting - RMcK/SJ/DB/AMDM

Letter from Chair to be issued to operators who had failed to provide requested information on engine emission standards – SJ

Updated information on school transport vehicle emission standards to be collated in mid-September – SJ

Report to be provided to next meeting of the Group on the options for engagement and communication with all those involved in the delivery and operation of the school transport services funded by the Council – RMcK/SJ

Officers to work on final confirmation of budget allocations - RMcK/SJ/DB

**School Transport Member Officer Working Group
Minute of Meeting of 13 September 2021**

In Attendance:

Cllr Gillian Owen
Cllr James Gifford
Cllr Anne Simpson
Ruth O'Hare (Legal Services Manager)
Fiona Conti (Category Manager, Commercial & Procurement Shared Services)
Anne-Marie Davies-McLeod (Head of Resources and Performance, E&CS)
Gail Dick (Learning Estates Officer, E&CS)
Karen Tucker (Team Manager, Resources and Performance, E&CS)
Diane Bain (Business Partner, Finance)
Ewan Wallace (Head of Transportation)
Richard McKenzie (Passenger Transport Manager, Passenger Transport Unit)
Sean Jamieson (Principal Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)
Alana Bowie (Senior Transport Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)

Apologies:

Angela Keith (Area Manager)
Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)
Cllr Louise Mcallister

1. Welcome and Introductions

Cllr Gillian Owen (GO) welcomed Karen Tucker as a new member of the School Transport Member Officer Working Group (MOWG).

2. Minutes of previous meeting

It was noted that on page 4 the draft minute incorrectly cited Cllr Stirling, rather than Cllr Simpson. The final minute will be amended accordingly.

3. School Transport Stakeholder Consultation and Engagement

GO asked Richard McKenzie (RMcK) to present the report.

RMcK advised that the report sets out a framework for the proposed consultation and engagement exercise, with pupils, parents/carers, schools, and operators, with details of the specific proposals outlined in Section 5.1 of the report. It had been intended to undertake the consultation earlier, but the timeline proposed in the report was considered the earliest that could be achieved, given current staff workloads.

RMcK highlighted that operators will be consulted last in the process, however this should not be problematic as there are no large procurement exercises scheduled in

the near future and a delay will allow issues raised by other consultation participants to be fed into the consultation with operators.

RMcK concluded by advising the Group that the best way to engage and gather information from parents and pupils was still under consideration but that this should follow the normal Education & Children's Services (E&CS) approach to informal consultations, for example, feedback from Primary pupils could be sought via registration classes, and from Secondary pupils through Pupil Councils.

GO queried whether: one week was long enough time for responses to be submitted; Looked After Children would be included in the consultation; and Aberdeenshire Youth Council and MSYP's would be involved. She also asked what outcome we were aiming to achieve from the consultation.

RMcK advised that the Youth Council and MSYPs could be included and that it was the intention to seek the views of all pupils being transported, whether mainstream, Additional Support Needs (ASN) or Looked After Children. With respect to the timeline of one week, this was originally proposed in order to achieve a quick turnaround, but as it was now proposed to defer the consultation from October to November, a two-week response time could be allowed for, if this was considered appropriate. Regarding the overall aim of the exercise, this is the first time a consultation of this type will have been undertaken for school transport, with previous feedback limited to complaints and comments received. The engagement exercise will therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of how customers view school transport provision, what aspects could be improved, and which aspects are well received. Some potential improvements could incur additional costs, but some suggestions may simply be areas that have not been previously thought about.

GO asked whether the parental survey will be issued to parents/carers via email or by means of letters.

RMcK advised such detailed decisions had not yet been addressed, but that Sean Jamieson (SJ) was liaising with E&CS colleagues on how best to contact parents/carers.

Cllr Anne Simpson (AS) emphasised the need to make sure we follow best practice and agreed that involving MSYPs was a good idea. It was also important that Primary pupils should be able to contribute.

Cllr James Gifford (JG) commented that he believed a one-week turnaround was a good thing, as people tend to reply to consultations immediately or not at all, so keeping it 'short and sharp' was preferable. If this timescale was not successful, it can always be amended for future consultation exercises.

Recommendations 2.1 and 2.2 of the report were approved.

4. Under-22 Concessions

In presenting the report, RMcK advised that the Under-22 Concession Scheme is scheduled for implementation on 31 January 2022. All the relevant legislation has now been published, but there still remains many questions regarding the implications for school transport. The Transport Scotland Policy Note highlights that these need to be discussed with COSLA and the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO), but it is our understanding that these discussions have not yet been progressed.

RMcK further advised that the report considers the potential impact on Council income and, in turn, on service delivery costs. Currently income is restricted to the sales of on-bus tickets and season tickets on eight school transport contracts registered to operate as local bus services, where the Council retains the fares income: five contracts to/from Banff Academy; and three to/from Portlethen Academy. It is thought there will be very little change to this income stream given the proposed reimbursement factors. The potential impact on service delivery costs is discussed in Section 5.3.2 of the report. Given the 'constraints' outlined in the report there would appear to be little opportunity to significantly reduce service delivery costs. There may be a minor opportunity, if a school transport route is unlikely to change, it is already operated using a Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) compliant vehicle, there are spare seats on the vehicle and there is a demand for travel from non-entitled seats pupils. If this is the case, the operator may be willing to reduce the daily contract rate if they are permitted to register the route as a local bus service and gain concessionary fares income from non-entitled pupils. It would be the intention to investigate whether any routes were suitable for such conversion.

In concluding, RMcK highlighted to the Group the potential supported local bus service difficulty raised in paragraph 5.4, whereby demand from non-entitled pupils on Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services, such as *Ready2Go around Inverurie*, may increase with free travel, resulting in DRT services having insufficient capacity in peak times.

Both GO and JG commented that it all still seems very unclear, and the effects on school transport needs to be clarified.

RMcK confirmed this is the case, there are still many questions to be answered regarding the impact on, what is currently, dedicated school transport, however it is unlikely that there will be any significant positive or negative effect on the Council's school transport provision.

JG noted that the Council does not currently get sufficient Scottish Government grant funding to cover the service provided and that we have very few pupils paying for travel on school transport services at the moment. Given this, he queried whether we would receive reimbursement from the Scottish Government for pupils who currently pay but will in the future receive free transport.

RMcK advised that, at present, the only pupils who currently pay for travel are those on commercial local bus services, where the government will reimburse the operator; those non-entitled pupils who use supported local bus services, where again the government will reimburse the operator; and, 'theoretically' those on school transport services that are also registered local bus services and the Council retains the fares income. On the last-mentioned services, pupils currently travel free due to Covid-19 but would ordinarily be required to pay a fare. Charges should be reinstated on these services, but it is unclear when best to do so. With regard to these services, the operator would apply for reimbursement of fares revenue foregone on the Council's behalf and any reduction in income because of the free travel concession reimbursement rate is likely to be marginal.

AS stated, the idea of free bus transport for young people centres on travel for leisure purposes, etc., but not much thought has been given to the effect on school transport. More pupils are likely to just use service buses rather than use school transport, so this may cause an issue.

RMcK highlighted that if more children decided to travel on supported combined local bus/school transport services, then seats will still be required to be guaranteed for the entitled school transport pupils. Protocols were already in place for such circumstances, under the contract terms and conditions, but there are understandable practical difficulties for drivers trying to stop to many fare-paying pupils getting on and making sure entitled pupils have access to a seat. Despite such operational difficulties, it was important to recognise that the Under-22 Concession Scheme was a laudable initiative, for example through getting young people in the habit of travelling by public transport.

EW commented that extending free bus transport to under 22-year-olds was a good idea and will assist with access to leisure activities, as well as access to higher education and work. He added that RMcK was working with the ATCO group that are currently engaging with Civil Servants to fine tune the scheme and address any issues which may arise. EW also confirmed he was also on a relevant national group and would raise school transport issues through this channel.

GO commented that the Council should be more innovative and creative, to help with providing bus services, for example for children from the Auchterellon and Esslemont areas of Ellon. The Council should work with operators to provide services to cover more than just the 3-mile area which is served through the school transport policy for secondary school transport.

AS suggested that this could be an opportunity to add alternative scenarios to the proposed Consultation exercise.

GO also requested Officers contact bus operators to see if they would be willing to run a commercial local bus service for pupils from the Meethill area of Peterhead to the new Peterhead Community Campus. RMcK confirmed this will be raised with relevant operators.

5. Quality Criteria in the Procurement of Passenger Transport Services

RMcK advised the MOWG that procurement of all passenger transport services is currently evaluated on a 90% Price, 10% Quality ratio. However, it was the intention to discuss with the Passenger Transport Network Review MOWG the option of adopting a 70% Price, 30% Quality evaluation criteria. In doing so, it was also the intention to look again at the quality scoring relating to vehicle emissions. There is however a concern regarding how this could affect tender prices, and so this potential change is not being recommended to this Group, at this time, in relation to the procurement of school transport services. Given there is only likely to be infrequent 'ad-hoc' tenders for supported local bus services in the near future, it was the intention to trial the new Price/Quality ratio on these tenders in order to help identify any financial implications. Depending upon the outcome of the trial, the matter could be raised with the School Transport MOWG prior to the next major procurement exercise.

Anne-Marie Davies-McLeod (AMDM) queried what exactly the 'Quality Score' related to.

RMcK confirmed there are currently 3 Quality questions used for all school transport, social care transport and supported local bus service procurement exercises: 'Contingency Planning' which refers to the time taken to advise the Council of incidents on services, and which is very difficult to monitor and enforce; 'Maximum Vehicle Emissions'; and 'Minimum Vehicle Emissions'. The proposal is to replace the 'Contingency Planning' question for supported bus services' to one relating to passenger benefits. It is also proposed to remove the 'Maximum Vehicle Emissions' question, and only seek information on 'Minimum Vehicle Emissions'. Presently a prospective operator can say they will use any vehicle in terms of the maximum (highest) engine standard, but the operator is only contractually bound to operate in accordance with the minimum (lowest) vehicle emissions standard, if successful at tender.

GO queried if the letter agreed at the last meeting of the MOWG was sent in her name to operators who had not supplied vehicle engine emission information.

SJ confirmed the letter had been sent and that all the required information had been received.

SJ also confirmed that information on the current engine emissions profile of the school transport fleet was about to be collated and a report on the matter will be produced for the next meeting of the Group.

Actions:

RMcK to raise with relevant operators the possibility of providing a commercial local bus service between Meethill and the Peterhead Community Campus for pupils attending Peterhead Academy.

SJ to report on the September 2021 engine emission profile of the school transport fleet to the next meeting of the MOWG.

School Transport Member Officer Working Group

Draft Minute of Meeting 9 December 2021

In Attendance

Cllr Gillian Owen (Chair)
Cllr Anne Simpson
Cllr Louise Mcallister
Cllr James Gifford
Gail Dick (Learning Estates Officer)
Tina Wight (Accountant, Sub for Diane Bain)
Karen Tucker (Team Manager, Resources and Performance)
Ewan Wallace (Head of Environment & Sustainability)
Richard McKenzie (Passenger Transport Manager, Passenger Transport Unit)
Sean Jamieson (Principal Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)
Alana Bowie (Senior Transport Officer, Passenger Transport Unit)

Apologies

Anne-Marie Davies-McLeod (Head of Resources and Performance)
Fiona Conti (Category Manager, Commercial & Procurement Shared Services)
Diane Bain (Business Partner)

1. Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

Cllr Gillian Owen (GO) welcomed everyone to the meeting, and three apologies noted above were confirmed.

2. Minutes of Meeting of 13 September 2021

GO stated that on Page 2 of the minutes it was noted that the Aberdeenshire Youth Council and MSYPs could be included and queried whether they had in fact been included in the consultation process.

Richard McKenzie (RMcK) confirmed that the point of going out to consultation had not yet been reached, but these groups would be included when this happened.

GO queried how parents/carers would be contacted.

RMcK confirmed that this would be done in liaison with Education colleagues and follow their usual process for contacting parents/carers.

3. School Transport Vehicle Emissions

Sean Jamieson (SJ) remarked that there had been a mandate from a previous MOWG meeting to provide the group with an update of emissions standards of the school transport fleet following the North Aberdeenshire school transport procurement exercise. The new Contracts had commenced at the start of the school year in August 2021 and transport providers had been asked to submit fleet lists for vehicles operating school transport contracts to compare with the results from May 2021.

SJ added that, back in May, a number of transport providers had not responded to the initial request for information prior to the May MOWG meeting, so the information presented at that meeting was not 100% complete. The information was subsequently received, and the May table (Appendix 1) had been updated to allow a correct comparison with the November figures.

SJ continued that the comparison showed that there had been a slight reduction in the number of vehicles used, around 2%, and a reduction in 'live' miles of around 7%. Appendix 3 highlighted that there had been a slight reduction in the emissions standards of taxis/Private Hire Cars (PHCs) whilst, with larger Passenger Carrying Vehicles (PCVs), there had been a significant increase in the use of Euro VI rated vehicles on school transport services.

SJ then advised that an attempt had been made to calculate the annual carbon emissions for all taxis/PHCs operating school transport services, with the total equating to 249 thousand kilograms of carbon dioxide annually. However, as was discussed in the report, making calculations for PCVs was much more difficult for several reasons – for example, PCV emissions are defined by energy output in grammes per Kilowatt hour (g/Kwh) so robust estimates can only be calculated if the fuel economy of the vehicle is known. A fleet of identical vehicles can, for example, produce different fuel economy based on how the vehicle is driven and/or how many customers had been on board. The team would continue to research how an accurate figure for PCVs could be obtained.

Karen Tucker (KT) thanked those involved in collating the information in the report and confirmed she would continue to work with the team and the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland.

GO noted that section 3.4 of this report mentioned that this report would also go to Education & Children's Services (E&CS) Committee and asked whether it would be ready for committee in January.

RMcK advised that it had not been planned to present the report to the January E&CS Committee given ongoing work to identify more accurate information for PCV emissions.

GO confirmed that she thought this report with some minor amendments would be fine to go to Committee.

Ewan Wallace (EW) added that national guidance was being sought on this issue, as the accurate information was also required to be included as part of a Climate Change Committee report.

Cllr James Gifford (JG) queried how the reduction in vehicles and mileage had been achieved and that, other than for reporting purposes, what would come from this information being gathered.

RMcK remarked that the reduction in vehicles and miles was mainly due to the route optimisation exercise carried out by the team, which had led to less miles being operated and the use of less vehicles by specifying whenever possible a larger vehicle rather than multiple smaller ones wherever possible. The figures also reflected changing pupil transport requirements.

RMcK added that there may be other ways to influence the emissions standards going forward. As was reported to the Passenger Transport Network Review (PTNR) MOWG, for upcoming tenders, the Local Bus Services Price to Quality ratio would be changed from a 90%:10% ratio to a 70%:30% ratio to see how the market responds, with the aim to try and push up the emission standards of operator vehicles. There are, however, far less Local Bus service than school transport tenders issued between the main procurement cycles and the Local Bus service market is dominated by Stagecoach Bluebird, so it will be difficult to compare the results with what could be achieved in relation to mainstream school transport.

EW advised that the vehicle emission data would be used to make a case to the Scottish Government regarding the decarbonisation of the network and it would form part of the overall package to Government regarding the Climate Change Route Plan going forward.

Recommendations 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 were approved.

4. Implications of Revised School Transport 'Distance-based' Eligibility Criteria.

RMcK advised that work had been undertaken to identify the implications of reducing the current school transport distance eligibility criteria of 2 miles for Primary pupils and, 3 miles for Secondary pupils to the Statutory minimum of 2 miles for pupils under 8 years old and 3 miles for pupils over 8 years old. As part of this exercise other education authorities had been contacted to ascertain the distance criteria they used. 11 authorities used similar distance criteria to Aberdeenshire Council, 14 had more generous entitlement, and 5 were at or closer to the statutory criteria (however 2 of these 5 were Orkney and Shetland, who offer 'more' in the winter months).

To determine the implications all pupils currently receiving free school transport over the age of 8 who live between 2 and 3 miles from their Primary school had been identified; a total of approximately 400 pupils. However, none resided in urban/suburban areas, all lived in rural locations and so would be guaranteed free transport on safety grounds as they would have no safe walk route to school.

There would therefore be no financial saving to the Council in reducing the distance criteria to 3 miles for pupils over 8 years old, as their entitlement would simply change from 'Distance Entitled' to 'Safety Entitled', and transport would still require to be provided.

GO noted Glasgow City have 1.2-mile eligibility criteria and asked who decides these criteria.

RMcK confirmed Education Authorities set their own distance eligibility criteria.

Cllr Louise Mcallister (LA) sought confirmation that as there is no financial benefit, the Council would retain the current criteria, rather than change the criteria and issue information to pupils / parents of the need to apply for transport on grounds of safety.

GO agreed, that as there is no benefit to changing the distance criteria, these should continue as at present.

JG also agreed but queried whether the Council could look at charging for school transport if that were considered worthwhile.

RMcK advised that Privilege pupils, i.e., anyone pupils granted school transport places but who are not entitled to transport on grounds of distance or safety, used to be charged for transport. However due to changes in legislation, essentially, any PCV with more than 22 passenger seats vehicle carrying passengers who are charged for transport must now comply with the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) and the cost to upgrade the fleet to this standard would be greater than the revenue generated from charging for Privilege transport. Given this, charges had been removed.

JG noted the pending introduction of the Under-22 free bus travel scheme from January 2022 and queried how this affected the position.

RMcK advised that CoSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) and Transport Scotland are looking at the implications of the Under-22 scheme and that CoSLA had asked all Local Authorities to advise of any school transport related concerns.

EW confirmed that CoSLA are aware of the issues facing Local Authority issues and is pursuing the matter.

Cllr Anne Simpson (AS) commented that it had been a worthwhile exercise to see if there would have been any financial benefit.

GO advised that the Council's spend of approximately £20 million on school transport when set against a grant allocation of around £4 million had been raised at a recent meeting with the Cabinet Secretary. She also advised that the matter had been discussed with the Director of Education & Children's Services and would be raised with the Northern Alliance with a view to sending a letter to the Minister on behalf of all constituent authorities highlighting the school transport issues faced by rural authorities.

Gail Dick (GD) queried whether there would be a reduction in the number of pupils entitled to free school transport on grounds of safety with the introduction of safe walking paths, e.g., between Cluny Primary and Sauchen and between the Corsmanhill area of Inverurie and Inverurie Academy and Kellands Primary.

SJ advised that figures were available on the number of pupils affected, but these are a snapshot at this point in time. Cluny walking path was almost completed, and the PTU were aware of the possible introduction of safe walk routes in Inverurie, another being between Hillside and Portlethen Primary, but these will required be assessed and, if appropriate, all affected parties made aware in a timely manner, so parents/carers have plenty of advance notice of any removal of transport. This should minimise any potential backlash as had been in the case of Kingseat to Newmachar Primary.

EW confirmed the School Transport and Strategy teams work together to identify any areas where construction of a footpath may be worth pursuing, as is often also the case with new housing developments.

JG advised that in the case of Cultercullen Primary, many pupils live 1 mile away in Udney Station, and that the possibility of constructing a walking / cycle path had been investigated. The parents however were very aware that if the path were built then school transport would be removed; consequently, they were not keen on the project.

JG then queried the Orkney / Shetland Authorities changes to distance eligibility between what is offered for in summer and winter and how this is done.

RMcK confirmed he was not clear how they managed the different transport scenarios.

GO sought details of a further potential walk route that had been recently profiled.

KT confirmed that the route was between Kintore and Kemnay.

EW further confirmed that there had been a recent consultation exercise regarding a path linking Kintore, Kemnay and Inverurie. However, the path would be over the 3 miles and so school transport would still require to be provided between Kintore and Kemnay Academy.

GD asked whether the Cluny path will have lighting and whether it will be deemed a safe walk route during winter.

SJ confirmed he would source the relevant information.

It was agreed that as per recommendation 2.1 the Group had considered and noted the implications of revising the council's school transport distance-based eligibility criteria.

5. School Transport Stakeholder Consultation and Engagement

RMcK advised the Group that it had been hoped to have progressed this exercise further, however, due to recent adverse weather issues and other work commitments,

this had not been possible. SJ has made up questions to pass on to the stakeholders, it had been hoped these would have been sent to education to consult with how these can be distributed, but they have not been able to do this yet.

GO queried the timescales for completion of this exercise.

RMcK advised that whilst the exercise would not necessarily be completed, considerable progress on aspects of the consultation should be possible by March.

GO asked that a further paper on the consultation and engagement exercise be presented to the next meeting of the Group.

6. Date of Next Meeting

EW confirmed that it was anticipated that the next meeting would be held at the end of February or beginning of March 2022.