

Demographics Scrutiny Review

Feedback from East Riding of Yorkshire Council on their Withdrawal of Free Denominational Transport

Question

Did you phase denominational transport out or withdraw the assistance outright – and if so, how quickly did you withdraw it/did you phase it out – by year on year or did you keep it for certain year groups – years 10&11 etc?

Response - We actually stopped providing free transport in 2002 when we introduced a charge of 25p each way. The Council decided to phase out support for denominational transport from September 2005 onwards. All those who were receiving support in the 2004/2005 school year continued to get support on the same basis until they left that particular school. The Council also agreed to provide support on the same basis for any younger siblings of those entitled to continue to receive support who started at the same school while the older sibling was still there. This meant that, in theory, the last child entitled to receive support would potentially not finish until 2017. However, in practice, the numbers receiving support have dropped much faster.

Question

Did you continue to run school buses and recharge parents for concessionary fares, did you subsidise any withdrawn routes, or provide no further assistance? Did you provide any allowance that you would have to pay transport costs into their catchment school anyway – and thus the parent only paid the difference?

Response - We provided transport services only for the numbers entitled to receive support. Any spare seats were then made available for fare-paying passengers to use. There was a bit of a delay in the policy change having an effect on our costs because you need a significant drop in numbers to occur before you can move from providing a bus to providing a mini-bus to providing a taxi to withdrawing transport altogether. That said, we have gone from having 380 children entitled to support in 2004/05 to only about 2 under this policy provision now. As numbers have dropped, we have withdrawn services as and when we can to achieve the savings.

I don't think there has been any knock on effects on the costs of transporting children to their catchment area schools, partly because the numbers going to denominational schools has not fallen significantly (see below) and we have enough capacity on the existing home to school services to accommodate these children anyway.

Question

Did you see a fall in demand for denominational schools as a result of these changes or in the years afterward? Or a rise in applications for their catchment schools instead?

Response - When we started looking at this there were 380 children receiving support costing about £280,000. In 2004/2005, the year before the policy change, there were 62 Year 7 children receiving support. For 2005/2006 Year 7 admissions round, 97 children were allocated places at out of authority denominational schools. That figure rose to 106 for 2007/08 and has been around 80 a year ever since. I can't see a fall in demand for denominational school places.

Question

Did you find that you still ended up providing transport on the basis of distance or low income where denominational transport was withdrawn e.g. children in villages still had to be provided transport to a catchment school and so the costs were moved, rather than saved?

Response - I think this is largely answered above. As we have withdrawn support and services, others have stepped in to fill the gap to some extent.

On a couple of routes, commercial public services have been put on by bus companies or the schools have organised their own buses. With regards to low income families, I do not have a separate figure for those receiving support for transport to denominational schools but we only support about 25 children from low income families across the whole of the East Riding.

Question

What kind of savings did you see as a result of this change and were the realised savings in line with what was estimated beforehand?

Response - It is difficult to put an exact figure on the savings but we have gone from running or paying for several bus services and numerous taxis to just a couple of taxis. The costs of £280,000 in 2004 would have risen substantially if we kept the policy as it was. So the real savings are probably substantially more than £280,000 but I couldn't put a figure on it.

Also - one thing to bear in mind is that there are no denominational secondary schools in the East Riding. Any parent wanting to send their child to a denominational school has to send them to schools in North Yorkshire, Hull and York. That means that, when we withdrew support, the parents faced significant transport problems in an area where the public transport network is not good. That said, parents continued to choose denominational schools and found some ways of getting the children there.