

# SCHOOL TRANSPORT MATTERS

## 2018 UPDATE

School transport matters, particularly for children living in rural areas with long journeys to school and for those with special needs. But it also matters for all of us. It reduces peak hour congestion and buses are safer than travelling in a private car. It provides access to educational opportunities, enables pupils to continue in learning beyond 16 and supports local bus services that otherwise would not exist.

STC has surveyed local authorities since the 1980s to monitor school transport provision. The 2016 survey exposed wide differences in school transport availability across the UK and raised concern about substantial cuts been made to provision in England.

This year's survey shows that **children in England continue to bear the brunt of severe transport cuts**. Few children living in rural areas of England now receive support to enable them to continue in education beyond the age of 16, and choice of school is increasingly dependent upon parental means.

- **Local authorities have continued school transport cuts in rural England - especially in the shire counties and for post 16 pupils**
- If school transport in England had been maintained as elsewhere in the UK, an estimated **1.2 million children in England would be receiving transport today** instead of 560,000.
- To manage budgets, LEAs are cutting discretionary mainstream and post 16 transport, raising charges and tightening entitlement criteria – meaning what is provided is now usually only the statutory minimum and for those with severe/complex special needs.
- As a result, school transport now costs an average of approximately **£2,000 per pupil** in England – double the cost per pupil in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.
- **The cost per pupil in England has risen 25% in 2 years.**

- **Funding remains authorities' main concern**, but the rise in school population and shortages of places are having an impact on transport.
- Despite rising charges generating income from post 16 transport- overall, **expenditure has continued to increase in the UK to over £1.5**

## What the law says

Since 1944, local education authorities have had a duty to provide free transport to eligible pupils – to ensure they can get to school. **They also have extensive powers to provide transport (free or at a charge to other pupils)**

### England:

*Free transport is provided to:*

- Pupils living >2 miles (< 8s) and 3 miles (> 8s) for those of compulsory school age attending nearest suitable school
- Or to a choice of nearest 3 (or denominational school) over 2 miles and up to 6 miles (15 miles for faith school) for those in receipt of free school meals/full working tax credit
- Pupils unable to walk in safety within the walking distance.

*(In England metropolitan areas also have concessionary fare schemes for young people enabling travel on public transport at reduced fares, and in London children travel on buses for free).*

### Scotland:

*Education (Scotland) Act 1980 requires education authorities to provide transport for those who live over 2 miles (<8s) or 3 miles (>8s) from their nearest school.*

### Wales:

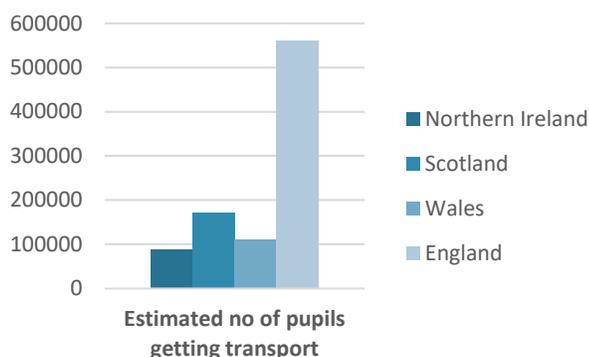
*The Learner Travel (Wales) Measure extended the walking distance to apply the 2-mile distance to all pupils of primary age and 3 miles for secondary school age to 16; this applies to those attending nearest suitable school*

### Northern Ireland:

*Circular 1996/41 requires authorities to provide transport to pupils who live over 2 miles from their nearest primary and 3 miles from their nearest secondary school in that category (integrated, Irish medium, faith or grammar etc).*

billion

## WHO GETS TRANSPORT?

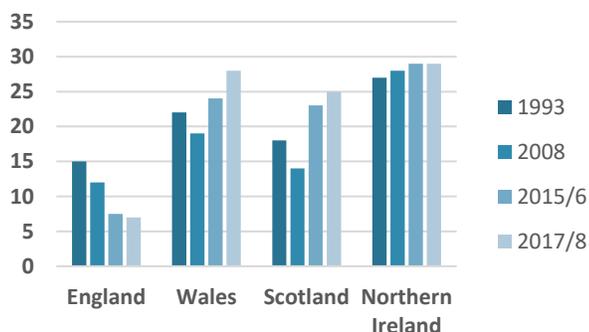


An estimated **938,600 children in the UK receive school transport** - more than half live in England (560,000 pupils). Overall about **10% of the UK school population receives school transport** (but only 7% in England qualify compared to over 25% in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland)

While in the rest of the UK school transport provision has been stable or increased slightly, in England **the proportion of pupils receiving transport has halved since the early 1990s** and fallen from 12% to 7% of pupils in the last ten years.

If school transport in England had been maintained as elsewhere in the UK, an estimated **1.2 million children would be receiving transport today** instead of 560,000.

## % of pupils receiving school transport



This is equivalent to over half a million fewer children travelling to school by bus than in the early 1990s, and 400,000 fewer than 10 years ago - equivalent to an additional 150 million car journeys per year. **Almost all the cuts have been in rural England.**

The largest cuts over the past two years have been seen in the shire counties, for example in:

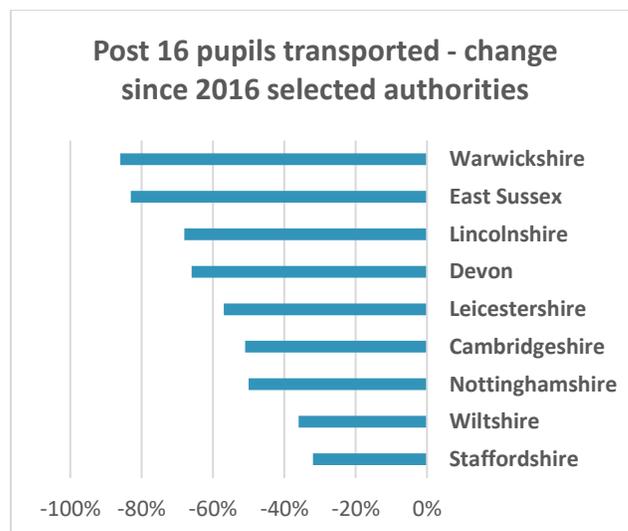
- Leicestershire & Warwickshire (> 20% cut in the number of pupils receiving school transport)
- East Sussex and Kent (-19%)
- Cambridgeshire (-15%)
- Lincolnshire (-10%)
- Devon (-9%)
- Derbyshire (-8%)
- Staffordshire (-5%)

In the 40 authorities who provided data in both 2016 and 2018 there has been a 9% reduction in pupils transported in just two years - that is **equivalent to 320 full single deck buses no longer being provided each day.**

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland fewer than 10% of those receiving free school transport have special needs. In England the proportion continues to rise and now more than **22% of all pupils transported have special needs.** (Although only 1.3% of pupils are educated in special schools and 14% of pupils have identified SEN, and < 3% have a statement of EHCP).

## POST 16 CUTS

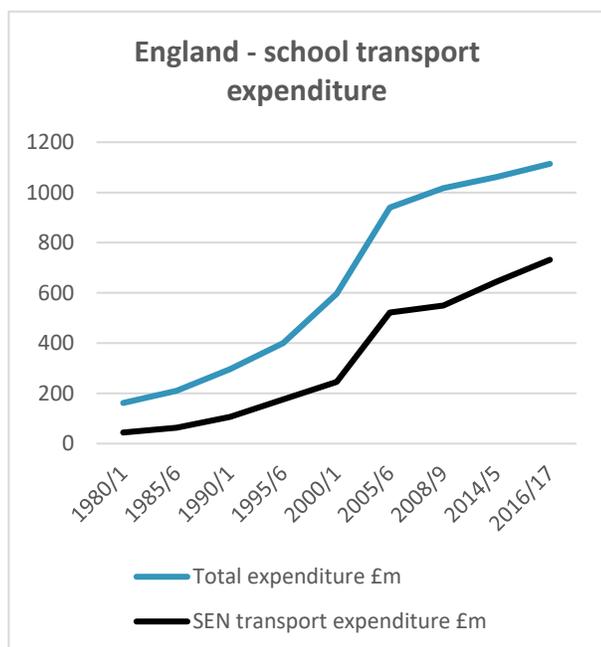
Post 16 transport continues to be particularly hard hit. In the English authorities responding in 2018 only 5,500 post-16 pupils were transported, less than 3% of all those receiving transport – a marked drop from 10% of all pupils travelling two years ago. **Shire authorities especially have seen large falls in transport provision for post 16 pupils as shown:**



## WHAT IT COSTS?

In 2016/17, expenditure on school transport in England has risen to **£1.114 billion per year** – up from £1.062 billion in 2014/15

SEN transport costs have continued to rise and account for a growing proportion of spend and pupils receiving transport – to £732m in England, accounting for two-thirds of expenditure and more than 22% of pupils qualifying.



Overall school transport expenditure in the UK was estimated to be approximately **£1.5 billion p.a.** for 2016/17.

For mainstream pupils the **average cost** of providing transport has risen to £995 per year – an almost **12% increase in unit costs since 2016**.

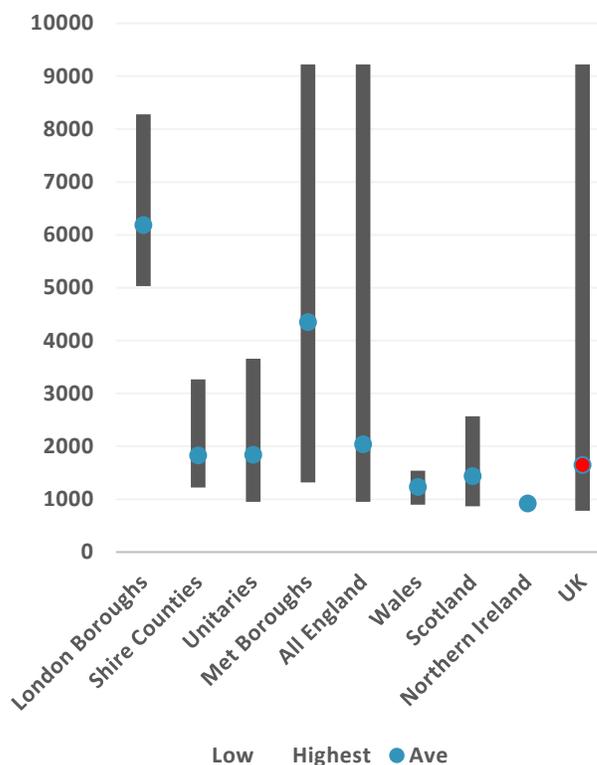
For pupils with **special needs, the average cost of transport is £4,881 per year** – equivalent to £26 per day.

Overall, the average cost of providing transport for pupils in the UK is **approximately £1,600 per year**.

The average unit cost in England is £2,000 - double that elsewhere in the UK and has **risen by nearly 25% in two years**, reflecting the growth in SEN provision.

Across the country costs vary widely – and are highest in the London Boroughs, typically > £5,000 per pupil p.a. and some of the metropolitan districts, where typically mainstream pupils live within walking distances of schools and therefore do not qualify for free transport. In these areas, almost all those who do receive school transport do so because of their special needs.

## Range of unit costs



## INCOME

Authorities can charge pupils who receive transport on a discretionary basis e.g. over 16. They are increasingly applying and increasing charges to those over 16 years of age (with and without special needs).

Although 17 authorities responding (32%) said they continued to provide some free post 16 transport, the majority now charge or make no post 16 transport provision. **Charges currently range from £168 p.a. to £900 p.a.** Overall, income from charges has been rising in recent years – and is now more than £51m in England (DfE 2016/17), with a growing proportion coming from pupils with special needs.

## THE CHALLENGES

Local authorities in 2016 reported that funding cuts were the main challenge facing school transport in coming years - with almost 60% of authorities citing budget cuts as their main concern.

*“The biggest strain on our already reduced budget is the lack of suitable local school placements, meaning more students are placed at a school a considerable distance away. Usually these are solo, or low numbers on transport. This leads to a significant increase in cost – currently 20% of our budget is now spent on out of area school transport) and significantly longer journeys for vulnerable children and young people.*

**Met district**

Funding cuts continue to be the main concern, but over the last two years there has been a shift towards authorities becoming more concerned about the impact on transport of rising school populations and a shortage of school places.

*“There is increased parental expectation of travel assistance, particularly 19-25 for SEN as a result of EHCPs”*

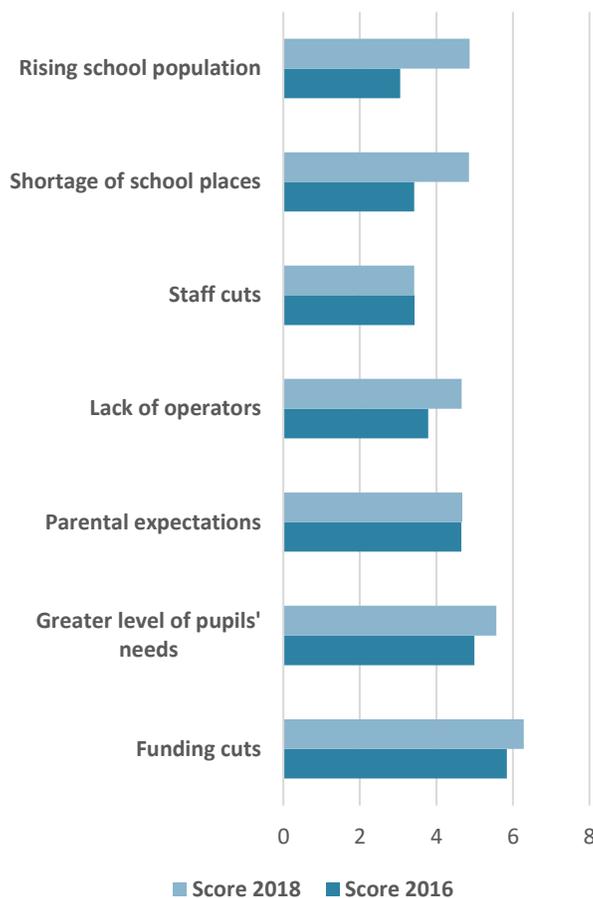
**Shire authority**

However, managing parental expectations and meeting pupils' complexity of medical/physical and behavioural needs is also increasingly challenging for authorities.

*“Parents expect transport to work around the family's ideal routine i.e. the times other children go to school. They also expect transport to take their children to any address e.g. childminder's, other family members. This is to work around their childcare choice.”*

**Met district**

## LEAs' main concerns 2016 and 2018



*“Increasing pressure on availability of SEN places means children are having to be transported further distances increasing transport costs”*

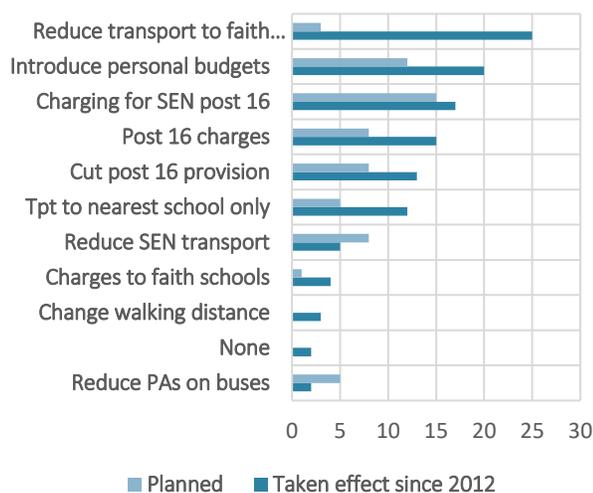
**Unitary authority**

## WHAT NEXT?

The majority of local authorities have and/or are planning to make further changes to tighten entitlement policies for school transport to enable them to manage budgets.

This year's survey confirms that further cuts to SEN transport and post 16 transport, and continued increases in charges, are expected.

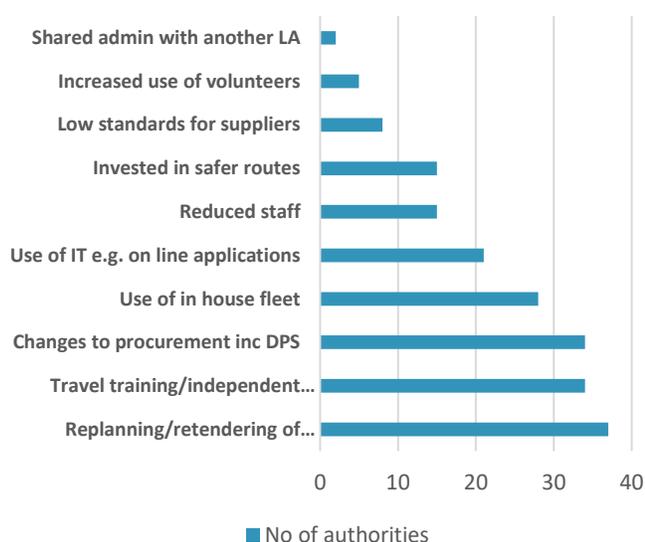
## Actions taken and planned by LEAs



## OTHER COST CUTTING MEASURES

Authorities also reported undertaking other measures to manage costs and improve efficiency. The most frequently cited measures being re-planning and retendering of networks and changes to procurement systems, and the promotion of independent travel. Several authorities also said they had promoted the use of personal travel budgets in lieu of providing transport. Worryingly some are now **reducing standards for contracts to cut costs**

## Measures taken to reduce costs



## WHAT IS NEEDED?

Authorities also made various suggestions as to what would improve the situation, with

“The law needs an urgent review as the expectations are not workable within budgets “  
**Met district**

some arguing that the law urgently required review because funding was short. Conversely, it could be argued that this key service for young people requires additional investment, rather than cutting the service to suit the budget.

Statutory guidance for post 16 transport doesn't properly reflect the expectations of parents for the need to be in education, employment or training”  
**Shire county**

The gap between the requirement for post 16 students to continue in education or learning and the lack of support for them to access that provision urgently requires addressing.

“There is an unwelcome increase in in Ombudsman enquiries, where the Ombudsman is acting as a third level of appeal for parents, rather than investigating process”.  
**Shire County**

The increasingly adversarial nature of entitlement is also a growing concern, with increasingly harsh policies reflecting budget priorities, but prompting recourse to the Ombudsman, appeals and litigation.

## IN CONCLUSION

The **austerity of the past 10 years has been devastating to school transport** provision, particularly for **post 16 pupils and children living in rural areas** in England. This is continuing to:

- **increase inequity across the UK,**
- **add to peak hour car journeys,**
- **have a detrimental effect on safety, and**
- **increase barriers to educational choice, participation post 16 and attainment.**

## RESPONSES

Overall, **53 LEAs responded representing 30% of authorities** in England, 26% of authorities in the UK.

Respondents included 3 London Boroughs, 14 Metropolitan Boroughs, 15 Shire Counties, 14 Unitary authorities, 4 Scottish authorities and 3 Welsh authorities.

Thanks to the following authorities:

Aberdeenshire Council	Leicestershire
Aberdeen City Council	Lincolnshire
Argyll and Bute Council	Newcastle City Council
Bedford Borough Council	North East Lincolnshire
Blackburn with Darwen BC	Nottinghamshire
Bracknell Forest	Oldham Council
Bradford Council	Oxfordshire
Cambridgeshire County Council	Pembrokeshire
Carmarthenshire County Council	Peterborough City Council
Central Bedfordshire Council	Redcar & Cleveland BC
Cheshire West and Chester	Rochdale
Darlington	Rotherham MBC
Denbighshire	Rutland County Council
Derbyshire County Council	Salford
Devon County Council	Sandwell MBC
Doncaster	Scottish Borders Council
East Sussex County Council	Solihull
Essex County Council	South Tyneside Council
Hampshire County Council	Southend-on-Sea
Hartlepool Borough Council	St Helens Council
Havering Council	Staffordshire County Council
Islington	Stockport
Kent CC	Stoke on Trent
LB Waltham Forest	Suffolk County Council
Leeds City Council	Telford and Wrekin Council
	Warwickshire

## ABOUT STC

STC is a specialist transport consultancy, run by Sian Thornthwaite, who has more than 30 years of relevant senior level experience in the school and public transport sectors in the UK and overseas. She has extensive expertise in public sector management having successfully delivered complex, multi-agency/disciplinary, large-scale, high profile projects.

Her experience of school transport includes the UK, US, EU, Middle East, New Zealand and Asia, with clients including Bus Eireann, the World Bank, the US Department of Defence and UK Government departments & agencies.

A trained transport engineer, Sian's particular expertise is in school transport, special needs transport and child safety. She continues to undertake academic research and actively contributes to international organisations involved in school transport and children's safety. Since her PhD research she has written three text books on school transport, contributed to a text on transport policy (one book is in translation in Arabic), and published numerous peer reviewed papers. She regularly presents at international conferences and writes for media in the UK and USA.

She had frequently provided advice to Governments/Ministers on school transport/public policy, practice and standards and has peer reviewed international research projects including the EU Safeway2School pilot. In addition to her academic research, Sian also has had direct operational responsibility for large scale transport reviews and operations.

Sian has a strong legal and management background. She gained a MA in socio legal studies, awarded with Distinction, and as a Sloan Fellow at London Business School her research focused on organisational change management, performance measurement and macro-economics.

In addition to her consultancy work she is a Business Adviser to the Strategic Investment Board in Belfast.