



Best Practice guide for school transport

Since 2010, local authorities across England have been removing funding for free transport to and from Catholic schools. As a result, many schools have had to organise their own transport methods or run the risk of losing pupils.

This is a best practice guide for schools who find themselves in the position where they have to develop their own transport network. It is based on conversations with Catholic schools who have set up their own system since 2010.

It will go through the best bits of advice as well as pit-falls to avoid, giving guidance direct from head teachers and other school leaders. The guide will take the shape of a five point plan.

1. Be prepared and have a plan

It should not be a surprise to any school if the local authority decides to remove funding for free school transport. Under pressure to find efficiency savings most local authorities have now removed discretionary funding for free school transport.

Often schools are given little warning when funding has been removed. So the key is to have a plan in place as scrabbling to put together a plan and tender process in less than six months can add to the stress.

Schools have found that putting the time in at the start of the process saved them time and effort in the long run. By approaching it methodically and entering into the procedure with a clear plan of what you require from a provider, you will be more likely to have a successful outcome.

According to one Assistant Head: "The process of setting up new transport arrangements was extremely time consuming in the first year of having to do it however, spending the time at the beginning of the process means that now, four years down the line, we have saved ourselves considerable effort."

2. Consult with parents

The group of people who will be affected most by any change in transport provision will be the poorest families. Because Catholic schools have catchment areas ten times the size of average state-maintained schools, free transport is a lifeline for many families living miles away from the school.

Therefore it is essential that they are consulted with, not only to discuss potential routes and drop-off sites, but also the easiest and most affordable methods of payment.

According to Peter Sweeney, Headmaster at St Joan of Arc Catholic School in Hertfordshire, finding an appropriate payment plan was essential for many parents. He said: "There are many families

at our school who don't have the funds to be able to pay transport fees on a term by term basis, so it was essential that the option was there to pay in smaller instalments.

"For us, we wanted to make the payment system as flexible as possible for parents so that they could pay monthly, weekly or daily if necessary."

Once you have planned and consulted with parents schools should have a clear vision for what they want out of a school transport provider. As Peter Sweeney adds: "Have a clear idea about what you want. If you start putting your transport out for tender without knowing exactly what you need from it then it could lead to problems further down the line.

"We were clear from the outset on what we needed, and because of that our transport system continues to run smoothly to this day."

3. Run a competitive tender process

It should not be a prerequisite that the company which currently provides your state-funded school transport, gets the contract when the Local Authority money stops. You want the best provider, offering the most accessible routes for the best price.

This is where your consultation with parents will come into use. Depending on what priorities have been given to you by parents you will know what aspect to prioritise in your tender process.

Schools have tended to include 3-5 transport companies during their tender process and chosen their preferred company after weighing up the priorities.

One Head teacher said: "After receiving tenders from four providers St Joan of Arc school decided to go with a local bus company because of their local knowledge and ability to adopt previous LA provided routes. Furthermore, the company specialised in school transport.

"Having a company that specialised in school transport made our lives so much easier. It also meant that they had an online payment system in place for parents.

One school said: "After talking to three coach companies and listening to their proposals, we chose one which offered a variety of routes and the best price for the parents.

"We were very fortunate that the company worked very closely with us to ensure that as many pupils would be included on the routes and that the payment system would work smoothly."

4. Negotiate best prices and communicate with parents about their entitlements

Don't be afraid to haggle with your provider to get the best deal. There are many opportunities to get a good price for example agreeing money off if your school uses them exclusively for field trips.

Anna Ramsey, Assistant Head teacher at John Henry Newman Catholic School in Stevenage found that by negotiating with their bus company they were able to offer transport to less popular areas because of the more popular lucrative routes

It was also crucial to her that parents are kept informed about their financial entitlements when it comes to transport. For example, many parents will not be aware that if their child is eligible for free school meals they will also be entitled to free transport.

She said: "Essential is a clear communication strategy for parents. Many parents of children on free school meals were rightly concerned that the removal of funding would make transports costs for their child unviable.

"However, we later found out that funding still remained if the child in question was eligible for free school meals. Once this was conveyed clearly to the parents, the situation was made much easier."

5. Make your provider part of the school team

Building a strong and lasting relationship with your provider is, according to many, the most important aspect of delivering quality school transport and key to that is finding a provider who is willing to be a partner with the school.

A good relationship with the bus company means that any issues either financial or behavioural can be sorted out quickly and effectively, often with very few repercussions.

An Assistant Head said: "The most important piece of advice I can give anyone is to take the time to find a private provider who is prepared to become a partner with the school in providing quality transport.

"Building a successful relationship with the transport provider will allow you to negotiate and get the best possible outcome for both students and parents. Offering to give the bus company exclusivity when it comes to other school trips is one way of achieving this."

There are many ways of strengthening this relationship, one of those is by including your bus company in your school's open day induction day/evening for Year 6s coming into the school.

A Head teacher concluded: "That's the crux of it really, if you can build a strong and lasting relationship with your transport provider, not only can issues be resolved quickly but the long-term results are desirable as well."

February 2016