

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event

Introduction

The Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum (OxPCF) and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) held a SEND Transport Listening Event on 17th October 2024 in response to significant feedback on issues with SEND transport raised in August and September.

The event provided families and stakeholders an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives on the current transport arrangements for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The primary goals were to highlight what's working well, identify key challenges, and explore ways to improve the service collaboratively.

Participants joined discussions across four breakout rooms, each focusing on essential themes:

- **Processes:** Reviewing the effectiveness and efficiency of transport arrangements.
- **Communication:** Examining how information is shared between parents, OCC, and transport providers.
- **Travel Arrangements:** Discussing the practical aspects of daily transport for SEND students.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Key Attendees

Cllr John Howson: Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Young People's Services, Oxfordshire County Council

Cllr Andrew Gant: Cabinet Member for Transport Management, Oxfordshire County Council

Martin Goff: Head of Access to Learning, Education, Oxfordshire County Council

Sandra Pearce: Head of Supported Transport, Oxfordshire County Council

Sam Harper: Interim Area Service Manager, Oxfordshire County Council

Supported Transport Team:

Stephen Good: Home to School Transport Project Manager

Melanie Graham

Nick Scoble

Andrew Richards

Phillip Earnshaw

OxPCF:

Jules Francis-Sinclair: (Chair)

Nikita Orme: (Forum Manager)

Tressa Verrier: (Parent Rep)

Please see below for summaries of the discussions, Q&A highlights, and confirmed next steps.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Group 1:

What's Working Well?

1. Communication:

- Positive experiences with post-16 transport to Oxford College, with improvements in communication through email and annual contracts.
- Timely adjustments to transport routes, such as reducing travel times from 1 hour to 20 minutes following parent intervention.

2. Communication:

- Consistent drivers and personal assistants (PAs) over the last 18 months have significantly benefited children's well-being.
- Proactive communication, such as email notifications and updates, has made transport more reliable for some families.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Positive experiences when the same driver and PA are assigned consistently, making travel smoother for both children and parents.

What's Not Working Well?

1. Processes:

- Transport arrangements are often finalised late, causing stress, particularly at the start of the academic year.
- Issues with post-16 transport eligibility for students extending their education have been problematic.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

2. Communication:

- Lack of advance notice about changes in drivers or PAs, leading to emotional dysregulation for children who need consistency.
- Traffic delays impacting journey times, with children arriving at school in a dysregulated state.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Long travel times due to inefficient route planning, with some children spending up to 90 minutes in transit each way.

Suggested Improvements:

1. Processes:

- Earlier communication about transport arrangements to alleviate stress during transitions.
- A centralised parent portal where families can track transport applications and decisions.

2. Communication:

- Advance notice of any transport changes, particularly involving drivers or routes.
- More dedicated officers assigned to specific schools or routes to ensure continuity and responsiveness.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- More flexibility in contracts to cater better to the needs of SEND students.
- Consistent training for drivers and PAs to enhance their understanding of SEND needs.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Group 2:

What's Working Well?

1. Processes:

- The Fleet service was praised for its reliability and professionalism, with families experiencing smoother transport services through this provision.

2. Communication:

- When communication is timely, parents feel well-informed, particularly with mid-August notifications that include key contact information.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Consistency with certain providers was noted, where families experienced few issues with drivers, making the service predictable and supportive.

What's Not Working Well?

1. Processes:

- Transport arrangements are often made too late, even when students' destinations are known well in advance.
- The process feels adversarial, with a sense of separation between OCC and parents rather than a partnership approach.

2. Communication:

- Communication lapses when it comes to notifying families of driver changes, leading to anxiety for children, especially those with autism.
- Inconsistent and late communication during the first weeks of the term added to the stress for families.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Families reported significant issues with changing drivers and passenger escorts, which disrupts the consistency that SEND students need.
- Some families are left to collect children when transport fails, which can be impossible when managing other responsibilities.

Suggested Improvements:

1. Processes:

- Clarity and partnership are essential to improve parents' experience. Better transparency is needed about the allocation process and decision timelines.
- Consistency in handling post-16 transport, especially for long-term students, is required.

2. Communication:

- Real-time technological solutions, such as apps showing pick-up delays, should be introduced to keep parents informed.
- Clearer and earlier communication when changes occur, especially when contracts or drivers are changing.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- A longer-term approach to contracts, avoiding annual changes, would provide stability for children and families
- Better training for drivers and escorts to ensure they are equipped to support SEND children on their journeys.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Group 3

What's Working Well?

1. Processes:

- The past two to three years have seen improved consistency with certain transport providers, making it easier for parents to manage transport arrangements.
- Positive feedback on one exceptional transport provider who maintained a high level of service.

2. Communication:

- When communications are provided in advance, they are concise and helpful. Families appreciated receiving contact details and clear expectations ahead of the new school year.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Some drivers have gone above and beyond by using trackers or communicating when they are running late, which reassures families and helps children manage their routines better.

What's Not Working Well?

1. Processes:

- Last-minute changes and allocations during August lead to a “panic rush,” with families receiving information too late to prepare effectively.
- Concerns were raised about safeguarding and GDPR, particularly when new companies are introduced without sufficient notice or transparency.

2. Communication:

- Poor communication around driver changes is a significant issue, especially for children who rely on routine.
- Families experienced long delays in receiving any confirmation when no changes were planned, causing unnecessary stress over the summer holidays.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Long, convoluted routes often lead to children being late for school. This has a knock-on effect on their emotional well-being and ability to engage in learning.
- Inconsistency in drivers, with some families reporting four different providers over recent months, leading to stress for both children and parents.

Suggested Improvements:

1. Processes:

- Earlier communication is essential. Families requested that the council share information well before the summer to avoid the last-minute scramble for arrangements.
- A clearer understanding of how routes and companies are allocated would help parents feel more confident in the system.

2. Communication:

- A **parent booklet** with contact details, service expectations, and information about roles within OCC and taxi companies should be developed and provided to families.
- Regular updates about any potential changes to transport, including unchanged arrangements, would reduce anxiety over the summer.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Shorter, more efficient routes are needed to reduce the length of time children spend in transit.
- Consistency in drivers and transport providers should be a priority, especially for autistic children who thrive on routine.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Group 4

What's Working Well?

1. Processes:

- Consistency in drivers and transport arrangements provided a stable and positive experience for some families over extended periods.
- Quick resolution of transport issues in cases where parents actively pursued solutions, creating a mostly smooth experience.

2. Communication:

- Direct communication between parents and drivers worked well, with some drivers introducing themselves, providing contact information, and notifying families if running late.
- Drivers proactively connecting with families, allowing them to stay updated on daily transport routines and providing reassurance.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Families appreciated the consistent and familiar drivers, which helped reduce stress and build trust, especially for children who thrive on routine.
- Some drivers have been attentive to the children's individual needs during journeys, helping make the transport experience more comfortable.

What's Not Working Well?

1. Processes:

- Delays in transport requests, often submitted at the last minute by social workers, left families with little time to prepare.
- Instances where transport was not arranged in time for children starting new school placements, leading to attendance delays.
- Inflexibility regarding afterschool clubs, with no provision to accommodate alternate drop-off locations, resulting in inefficient and resource-intensive solutions

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

- Transitioning children to college required them to navigate complex transport routes, which some found challenging and unsafe.

2. Communication:

- Frequent, uncommunicated changes in drivers or taxis caused distress, especially for children who rely on consistency.
- Parents often did not receive updates from the transport team, particularly in the summer, which caused unnecessary anxiety.
- Ineffective communication between schools, transport teams, and families during early closures or schedule changes led to missed or delayed pickups.
- There were cases where children ended up in the wrong taxi, which went unnoticed until families tracked them, causing safety concerns.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Long, convoluted routes led to children arriving at school late and fatigued, impacting their ability to learn effectively.
- Transport providers were often inflexible with changes for early school closures, leaving children waiting unnecessarily.
- Some families received transport approval without notification, while others faced restrictions on the number of transport days, leading to additional family expenses.

Suggested Improvements

1. Processes:

- Implement a tracking system where parents can log in and view their child's transport status to reduce anxiety.
- Ensure timely arrangement of transport after school placements are confirmed, preventing delays in the start of school attendance.
- Offer flexible transport options for afterschool clubs to make efficient use of available resources and support children's extracurricular activities.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

2. Communication:

- Develop a detailed Pupil Passport outlining each child's needs, to be reviewed by drivers and transport staff, with confirmation of review
- Update Pupil Passports annually to reflect current needs and ensure driver awareness of any special requirements
- Proactively communicate with families over the summer regarding transport arrangements, even if no changes are expected, to reduce stress.
- Create a system for notifying parents in advance of driver or assistant changes to support children's need for stability.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Establish shorter, more direct routes to reduce travel time and ensure children arrive at school ready for the day.
- Enhance flexibility in transport schedules to accommodate changes for school events or early closures.
- Implement a second safe drop-off location option for emergencies, preventing potential safety risks if the primary contact is unavailable.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Evaluation Summary

The summaries from the SEND Transport Listening Event, organised by the Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum (OxPCF) and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC), capture essential insights across key themes of Processes, Communication, and Travel Arrangements. Each group identified recurring themes in what is working well, what challenges persist, and potential improvements to make the transport experience more reliable and supportive for SEND students.

Common Themes in What's Working Well

1. Processes:

- Across groups, there is a noted improvement in the consistency of certain transport providers, which has helped stabilise arrangements.
- Positive experiences with specific providers were highlighted, particularly for post-16 transport and consistent drivers, which many families found beneficial.

2. Communication:

- Groups appreciated proactive communication when it occurred, including pre-arranged contact details and annual contracts.
- Direct communication between parents and drivers was valued, providing reassurance and flexibility.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Familiar drivers and assistants contributed to smoother routines, reducing stress for both children and parents
- Efforts by drivers to communicate delays or adjust for children's needs were well-received, helping to manage expectations and foster trust.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Recurring Issues in What's Not Working Well

1. Processes:

- A significant issue across groups was the late arrangement of transport, especially at the start of the academic year, which left families with minimal preparation time.
- Limited access to transport for post-16 students and challenges around eligibility also added stress for families.
- Families expressed frustration with a lack of partnership approach from OCC, with some feeling the process was adversarial rather than collaborative.

2. Communication:

- Unannounced changes in drivers or personal assistants (PAs) created distress, particularly for children who rely on consistency.
- Inconsistent communication during term starts, with many families receiving no updates, added to the anxiety of summer transitions.
- Coordination between transport teams, schools, and parents was often lacking, leading to missed pickups or last-minute adjustments not being communicated.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Long and convoluted routes led to delays and affected students' readiness for the school day.
- Frequent changes in drivers disrupted the routine and added stress for children and families.
- Inflexibility around transport options for extracurricular or afterschool clubs was highlighted as a gap in supporting children's broader needs.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Suggested Improvements Across Groups

1. Processes:

- Early communication about transport arrangements and eligibility was a repeated request to reduce the “panic rush” effect in August.
- A central parent portal to track transport requests and arrangements was suggested as a way to increase transparency and reduce anxiety.
- More flexibility in the service to accommodate afterschool activities and adjustments for school events would make the service more adaptable.

2. Communication:

- Regular, proactive updates, particularly over the summer, were suggested to alleviate the uncertainty families face before the school year starts.
- Development of a Pupil Passport, reviewed annually and shared with drivers and transport staff, was seen as a way to improve understanding of each child’s specific needs.
- Real-time solutions, such as a mobile app to track pick-up and delays, were proposed to keep parents informed and reduce last-minute anxieties.

3. Travel Arrangements:

- Streamlining routes and minimising travel times were emphasised to ensure children arrive at school ready to learn.
- A stable, long-term approach to driver assignments was requested to promote consistency and reduce the stress of frequent changes.
- Families suggested including a secondary safe drop-off address option to provide a contingency plan for emergencies.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Conclusion

The summaries provided by each group consistently highlight the need for early, proactive communication, increased transparency, and flexibility in transport services. By prioritising stability, consistency in drivers, and enhanced communication channels, Oxfordshire County Council can address the recurring issues impacting SEND families and create a more supportive, responsive transport system. These insights serve as a solid foundation for collaborative improvement efforts between OCC and transport providers.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Question and Answer Session Summary

During the Q&A session, participants raised several key concerns regarding the transport service. A central issue was the policy requiring families to contact the local authority rather than taxi firms directly for schedule changes, causing delays and frustration. Positive feedback highlighted good communication between families and some drivers, which instilled confidence when drivers were proactive about delays or updates. There was a suggestion to improve “Pupil Passports” by adding more detailed information on children’s needs, as current passports provide limited guidance for drivers and assistants.

Key questions and responses included:

1. Preventing the Wrong Transport: Families reported instances where the wrong vehicle was dispatched. OCC acknowledged communication errors and committed to improving clarity in transport assignments to prevent such issues from reoccurring.

2. Parental Mileage Reimbursement: Families expressed concern over the current policy, which only reimburses travel with the child in the car. OCC explained that while policy currently limits payment to one direction, they are considering a review to align with updated guidance that may allow both ways to be reimbursed.

3. Authorisation Differences between Education and Social Care: OCC clarified that transport for children up to age 18 is handled by education services, while post-19 transport decisions fall under adult social care. Transport for afterschool activities is also managed by social care.

4. Short-Term Contracts: Families questioned the use of brief contracts, which cause instability. OCC explained that procurement regulations require re-contracting when changes occur. They agreed to review procurement practices to address consistency concerns.

5. Inflexibility for Drop-off Locations: Some parents sought flexibility for emergency drop-off locations, but OCC highlighted that transport routes are carefully structured to ensure efficiency. They acknowledged individual circumstances but indicated challenges in applying flexibility broadly across users.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

6. Training of Escorts and Drivers: Concerns were raised about training adequacy, especially for handling children with special needs or medical conditions. OCC confirmed that all escorts and drivers are trained, and further emphasised the expectation for them to review and understand Pupil Passports. They committed to reviewing any gaps in training as needed.

7. First Aid and Emergency Preparedness: Specific concerns were raised about escorts' first-aid training, particularly for children with conditions like epilepsy. OCC reaffirmed that escorts are expected to read and understand each child's health needs as outlined in their Pupil Passports.

In closing, OCC assured families that they are committed to addressing these concerns and will maintain ongoing communication to inform families of any policy changes or improvements. They highlighted the importance of the September start for ensuring a smoother experience and encouraged families to continue sharing feedback through the Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum (OxPCF) or directly with OCC.

OxPCF and OCC SEND Transport Listening Event Summary

Next Steps

OCC will review all feedback from the SEND Transport Listening Event and develop an exciting program of change for the Supported Transport Service. This program will focus on addressing the key issues raised and ensuring a the best possible service for SEND students. As part of this initiative, OCC will form small working groups for parent carers to collaborate on projects that enhance our work in the following areas:

- 1. Communications**
- 2. Procurement/Contract Award**
- 3. Parent Information Leaflet/Booklet**
- 4. Passenger Passports**
- 5. Safeguarding and Training**
- 6. Service Delivery and Service Users Expectations within the available Budget**

The work involved is already being programmed into the Service's calendar and being discussed with OxPCF. Where possible, quick improvements, such as the Information Leaflet will be done sooner while other improvements will take longer. The service is committed to maintaining its 'listening ear' so that feedback from children and families contributes to improvements that benefit all

OCC and OxPCF are committed to working collaboratively with families to bring these improvements to life, aiming to build a more supportive and reliable transport system for all SEND students in Oxfordshire.