



Northumberland  
County Council

# Home to School Transport Policy Consultation

## Review of free transport on the grounds of Religion or Belief

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In line with the Department of Education's (DfE) guidance [Travel to school for children of compulsory school age](#) , all local authorities in this country have a legal duty to provide Home to School transport for 'eligible' students of compulsory (statutory) school age, which covers the school years Reception to Year 11. The Council carries out an annual consultation on this policy, but this year a significant change to the policy is being proposed.

This proposal relates to the removal of free transport for students to a school of their choice based on the grounds of religion or belief. This element of the Council's transport policy is discretionary i.e. it does not form part of the Council's statutory duty and therefore we would like to hear your views on whether you believe it should continue to be provided. We would also like to hear any alternative proposal(s) you may have to address the issues set out in this document.

## Background to the Proposal

The criteria a student must meet to be considered 'eligible' for statutory transport under legislation are set out in full the Council's current Home to School Transport Policy ([School Transport Policy for Children of Compulsory School Age May 2026.pdf](#)) . In summary, several factors are considered when assessing the general eligibility of a student for statutory home to school transport, which are:

- the distance a student lives from their nearest appropriate school and their age i.e. if under 8 years of age, a student must live more than 2 miles from the nearest appropriate school using the shortest walking route of reasonable safety; if 8 years old or over, a student must live more than 3 miles from the nearest appropriate school using the shortest walking route of reasonable safety;
- whether the student has any Special Educational Needs (SEN), disabilities or mobility issues that would prevent them from walking to school;
- whether the route the student would need to walk to school is reasonably safe.

In addition to the Council's statutory duty to provide free transport to students as set out above, local authorities also have 'discretionary' powers to extend their home to school transport offer to other students beyond the minimum statutory duty. In Northumberland, it has been the case for many years that discretionary powers have been used to provide free transport to students whose parents wish them to attend a faith school (a school with a religious character) and where either the parent or student are able to provide documentary evidence that they practice that particular faith. A list of the designated faith schools in Northumberland is available [here](#).

# What are the challenges to the Home to School Transport Budget?

Currently, the Council spends a total of £26.4m on transporting 7,374 students, (including students with SEN), to their educational provision. Home to School Transport costs in Northumberland have always been high due to the rurality of the County and the distance many students live from school. Transport is currently provided across a range of provision which includes buses, taxis and public transport to meet student needs.

The Council is facing increasing challenges in delivering an effective and sustainable school transport service in the face of rising costs of provision. In particular, the number of SEN students has increased significantly in Northumberland (which is the same nationally) and as a result, the cost of home to school transport for SEND students has more than doubled in the last 5 years. Other factors such as increasing transport operator costs while the cost of providing home to school transport for mainstream students has also risen sharply over the last few years.

The Council has already put in place several measures to make the service more cost-effective, including:

- Introduction of 'Independent Travel Trainers' to work with SEND students; this has benefited students by making them more independent, but is also beginning to help to reduce costs;
- Cost of concessionary fares for students taking up spare seats on vehicles used for statutory school transport has been increased;
- An administration charge for post-16 travel to deter applications from students who wouldn't use the services paid for regularly;
- More recently, 2 SEND Travel Advisors have been engaged to work between education and transport teams to review SEND transport needs with a view to identifying cost savings.
- Reducing transport provider costs through renegotiating contracts, greater use of public transport and working with schools to develop alternative transport solutions e.g. devolving budget.
- Investment in software to review transport routes leading to savings in the re-tendering of provider contracts.

In spite of this work being undertaken, a significant change in current provision is now required if a real impact on reducing costs is to be achieved.

# Why is the removal of Home to School Transport on Grounds of Religion and Belief proposed?

Local authorities are required by law 'to have regard' to parents who wish to send their child to a faith school. This does not mean that the Council is required to have a blanket policy to provide transport but should consider a request on the basis of religion or belief on a case-by-case basis. There is an exception made under 'Extended Rights To Transport' law that means a student aged 11 to 16 from a low-income family wishing to attend a faith school between 2 and 15 miles from home would be eligible for free transport.

While the Equality Act 2010 enshrines in law 'religion or belief' as one of the 9 protected characteristics, it does not go as far as requiring local authorities to take account of religion in their home to school transport provision. The Council has also undertaken an Integrated Impact Assessment as part of this process which is available [here](#).

Currently, Northumberland does have a blanket policy whereby a student aged 4 (Reception class) to 16 (Year 11) is likely to be eligible for transport to their nearest faith school (if it is beyond the statutory walking distance according to their age) and they or their parent are able to provide the required documentary evidence to show they adhere to that faith. As at September 2026, 425 students aged 4 to 16 living in Northumberland receive free transport to a faith school at a cost of almost £977,000. The removal of this discretionary element of the school transport policy would result in an actual saving of around £500,000 that could be re-directed towards the Council's statutory transport duties and the stability of the education transport service.

Most other local authorities in the country are also experiencing spiralling home to school transport costs, particularly as a result of the growth in learners with SEN. Many Councils have removed the discretionary element relating to transport to school on the grounds of religion or belief from their provision many years ago. Our nearest neighbouring local authorities with similar rurality issues are Cumberland Council and Durham County Council. In Cumberland, as well as the statutory requirement to offer transport to a faith school under the Extended Rights provision for students aged 11-16, they also offer transport to the nearest preferred faith school at an annual cost of £655 to parents. In Durham, transport to a faith school is available only where the Extended Rights criteria are met.

# How would the proposed Phased Implementation affect individual students?

The Council has agreed that a consultation on the proposal to remove the discretionary element of the Home to School Transport relating to supporting students aged 4 to 16 to attend their nearest faith school should take place. It is proposed that this change would be implemented in a phased way as follows:

- Students who already benefit from free transport to their nearest faith school would continue to receive it **while they remain at that school**. This means that students on roll at secondary or high faith schools would continue to receive free transport until they are 16 and in Year 11. Students currently in first, primary or middle faith schools would continue to receive free transport until the end of that phase – they would not receive free transport once they move to the next phase.
- Students joining Reception, Year 5, Year 7 or Year 9 in faith schools from September 2028 would not be entitled to free transport. The exception would be students joining a faith school in Year 7 or Year 9 who qualify for free transport under statutory Extended Rights.
- Free provision would not extend to any siblings who were either in nursery provision at the same location or who would come of school age whilst their sibling is still at that school who join school from September 2028 onwards.
- The provision within the Post-16 Transport policy that relates to attendance at a Faith School Sixth Form would also be removed for joiners from September 2028.

Some examples of how the phased implementation would work are given below- boxes shaded grey indicate where transport would remain in place assuming the student remains at that school until their final year at the school, should the proposal be approved:

*Students attending Primary Schools (Reception – Year 6)*

| On Roll In: | Reception | Yr 1 | Yr 2 | Yr 3 | Yr 4 | Yr 5 | Yr 6 |
|-------------|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Sept. 2027  |           |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Sept. 2028  |           |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Sept. 2029  |           |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Sept. 2030  |           |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Sept. 2031  |           |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Sept. 2032  |           |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Sept. 2033  |           |      |      |      |      |      |      |

*Students attending Middle Schools (Year 5-Year 8)*

| On Roll In: | Yr 5 | Yr 6 | Yr 7 | Yr 8 |
|-------------|------|------|------|------|
| Sept. 2027  |      |      |      |      |
| Sept. 2028  |      |      |      |      |
| Sept. 2029  |      |      |      |      |
| Sept. 2030  |      |      |      |      |

*Students attending Secondary Schools (Year 11-Year 13)*

| On Roll In: | Yr 7 | Yr 8 | Yr 9 | Yr 10 | Yr 11 |
|-------------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Sept. 2027  |      |      |      |       |       |
| Sept. 2028  |      |      |      |       |       |
| Sept. 2029  |      |      |      |       |       |
| Sept. 2030  |      |      |      |       |       |
| Sept. 2031  |      |      |      |       |       |

## What is the timeline for Consultation and how can I submit my views?

| Events                                                                                      | Date                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Consultation                                                                                | 19 October to 30 November 2026   |
| Drop-in event<br>Wentworth Leisure Centre, Wentworth Place, Hexham, NE46 3PD                | 4.00-7.00 pm on 5 November 2026  |
| Drop-in event<br>Willowburn Sports and Leisure Centre, Willowburn Avenue, Alnwick, NE66 2JH | 4.00-7.00 pm on 10 November 2026 |
| Drop-in event<br>Ashington Leisure Centre, Lintonville Terrace, Ashington, NE63 9JY         | 4.00-7.00 pm on 17 November 2026 |
| Consideration of consultation outcomes and final decision by Council's Cabinet              | 9 February 2027                  |

The Council is consulting directly on this proposal with a wide range of stakeholders including:

- All parents and carers of students on roll in schools in Northumberland
- Parents of children currently in early years provision (as far as it is possible to contact them)
- All schools and Governing Bodies in Northumberland
- Academy Trusts which include faith academies
- Roman Catholic and Church of England dioceses for Northumberland

The consultation will also be published on the Council's website to enable any other interested party to be able to contribute their views to the consultation.

A link to a consultation response form for you to feedback your views on this proposed change to the Home to School Transport Policy is available via the link below:

<https://haveyoursay.northumberland.gov.uk/education-skills/home-to-school-transport-consultation>



or by the QR Code

and is available on the Council's website. As well as hearing your views on the proposal, we are also asking you for any alternative proposal(s) you may have for addressing the issues set out in this document.

If you would prefer a paper copy of the consultation response form, please contact [Educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk](mailto:Educationconsultation@northumberland.gov.uk).

As noted above, drop-in events will also be held on the following dates and locations when you will be able to speak face-to-face with Council Officers about this proposal:

Wentworth Leisure Centre, 4.00 to 7.00 pm on Thursday 5 November 2026  
Willowburn Leisure Centre, 4.00 to 7.00 pm on Tuesday 10 November 2026  
Ashington Leisure Centre, 4.00 to 7.00 pm on Tuesday 17 November 2026

## **What happens after the consultation?**

After the close of consultation, council officers will analyse the feedback received from all consultees who have responded to the consultation. The feedback will then be presented to the Council's Cabinet (decision-making committee) in February 2027 when they will make a decision on whether or not to approve the implementation of the proposal.

If approval is given, the implementation will start from September 2028 with the new Year 5 intake at that point.

**Thank you for participating in this consultation.**

## **Contact Us**

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