

# **Technical Note**

Project:	Staffordshire Vacant Seat						
Subject:	Survey Analysis						
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### Document history

Revision	Purpose description	Originated	Checked	Reviewed	Authorised	Date
0.1	Survey Findings Draft	LS	LS			12/10/21
0.2	Survey Findings	LS	LS	ND	ND	17/10/21
0.3	Small edits	LS	LS	ND	ND	20/10/21

# Overview

# 1.1. What is the temporary vacant seat scheme?

The temporary vacant seat scheme has been previously operated by Staffordshire County Council to enable families not eligible for free school transport to pay for spare seats on council services. Where available, spare seats could be applied for through Staffordshire County Council's application process for pupils not entitled to free transport.

The scheme was suspended during the coronavirus pandemic and a decision has been made to keep the suspension of the scheme while Staffordshire County Council:

- prioritised the new arrangements for 8,000 children eligible for free home-to-school transport, involving 900 routes to 150 schools.
- considered the implications of recently published guidance on the impact of Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) on Home to School Transport, and changes to Local Authority exemptions.

The PSVAR permits that seats can only be sold on compliant vehicles. These regulations state that vehicles with more than 22 seats must be wheelchair accessible, as well as meeting more general accessibility requirements. With the majority of routes to high schools using vehicles with more than 22 seats but not being compliant with the PSVAR, the council has been prevented from selling vacant seats for home to school transport. Vehicles which are compliant will be contracted and used when required by an eligible pupil.

# 1.2. Current position

Having reviewed the situation, the Council has concluded that transport operators within the region do not have enough compliant vehicles, therefore Government guidance as to how the scheme should operate cannot be met for several years. Staffordshire County Council has concerns that what could be provided within the law would be an unfair, hybrid system which would potentially result in inequality in the amount families would pay for the scheme, whilst leaving some families without any alternative option.

The Council has made the decision to not reinstate the temporary vacant seat scheme unless a legal and fair solution can be found.



### 1.3. Listening Exercise

Following the Council's recent announcement and as part of the process of identifying a potential solution, Staffordshire residents were invited to share their views and ideas through an online survey. The survey was open between 31st August 2021 and closed at midday on the 12th October 2021. Respondents were asked a series of questions including ones to ascertain previous use of the scheme, impact of the decision not to reinstate the scheme, and thoughts as to how the scheme could run in the future.

A total of **603 responses** were received through the listening exercise period, and additional views were also submitted collectively by the Rural School Transport Action Group. This technical note outlines the feedback received and the options proposed by respondents.

# 2. Survey Findings

### 2.1. Responses received

Of the 603 responses received, the majority were from Staffordshire parents (556 responses, 92%). A small number of responses were from Staffordshire pupil/students (27, 4%) and three responses were from councillors/MPs. In terms of location, the greatest proportion of responses were received from the ST21 6 postcode area (Eccleshall, Cotes Heath, Standon area), followed by B79 9 (Edingale, north Tamworth), and ST15 0 (Stoe, Yarnfield, Swynnerton). The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 2-1.

Raw Head

Creve

Alseer

Nantwon

Nantwon

Nantwon

Stoke-on-Tree

Newsorth

Figure 2-1 - Proportion of responses by postcode area

Respondents were asked to select what year group their child/children would be in from September 2021. As displayed in



Figure 2-2, all year groups were represented; with over a third of respondents noting that they had a child/children in years 1 to 6, 75% with a child/children in years 7-11 and 25% with a child/children in years 12/13. Analysis of responses by location found that the highest proportion of respondents with a child/children in years 1-6 are located in the ST15 8 postcode area (Hilderstone, Little Stoke, Crossgate).



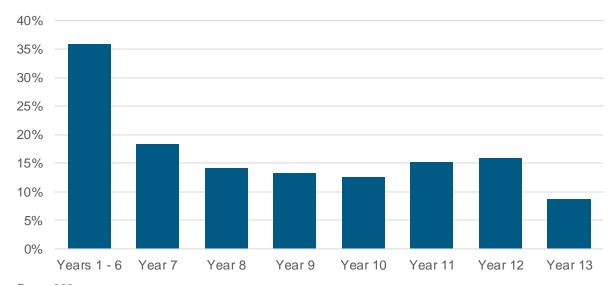


Figure 2-2 - What year group will your child/children be in from September 2021?

Base: 603 responses

# 2.2. Survey findings

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had previously used the temporary vacant seat scheme. Of the 603 responses received, **25% of respondents (150) had used the scheme previously**.

A total of 221 respondents (37%) with a child/children aged 16 or over, said that they were previously entitled to free transport to their high school. Figure 2-3 displays the location of these responses. The postcode areas with the highest proportion of respondents that answered 'yes' to their child/children being entitled to free transport were located in ST21 6 (Cotes Heath, Eccleshall) and B79 9 (Edingale).

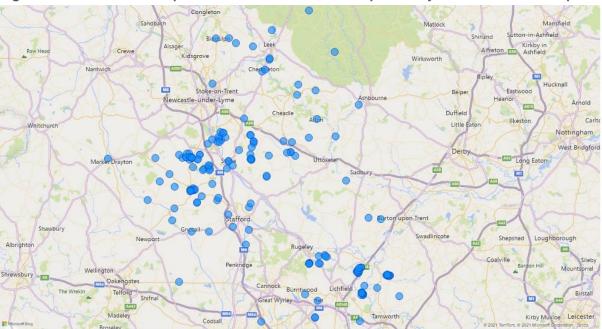
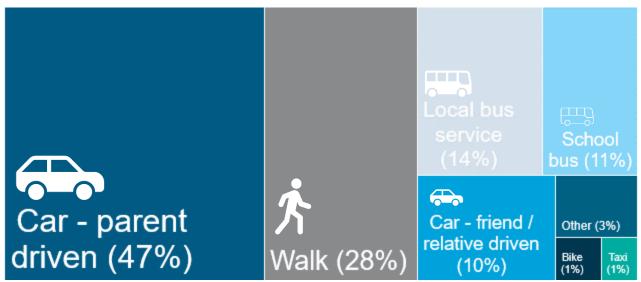


Figure 2-3 - Location of respondents with a child/children previously entitled to free transport

The 382 respondents (63%) who said their child/children was not entitled to free transport previously or that said they were unsure, were asked how their child / children travelled to school last year (September 2020 - July 2021). Nearly half of respondents (181, 47%) answered that their child/children was/were driven to school by a parent, whilst 107 (28%) respondents said their child/children had walked to school. A smaller proportion of respondents said their child/children had used either a local bus service or a school bus (Figure 2-4).



Figure 2-4 - How did your child / children travel to school last year (September 2020 - July 2021)?

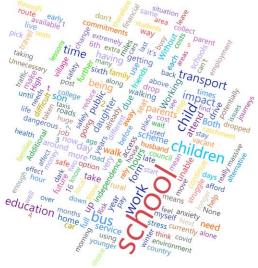


Base: 382 responses

Respondents were invited to provide their views on the proposal not to reinstate the temporary vacant seat scheme. All but one of the 596 respondents that provided a response to this question were opposed to the proposals not to reinstate the scheme.

Following on from this question, respondents were asked what impact the proposals not to reinstate the scheme could have on the respondent and their child/children. The main impacts were as follows:

- Child/children would not be able to attend school / could not attend further education (171 responses, 28%): A quarter of respondents noted that the proposals would leave them without transport options to enable them to get their child/children to school or that their child/children would not be able to go onto further education "Suspension of the scheme has already stopped one of my children attending 6th form and I don't want my younger children to also be prevented". An additional 22 respondents commented that the proposals may mean their child/children are late for school.
- Concerns over the safety impact of walking to school as an alternative option (81 responses, 13%): Some respondents had concerns about their child or children walking to/from school as an alternative along roads that were perceived to be unsafe – "It will prevent my daughter having to walk home during the winter months down a busy dual carriage way or down a country lane."



- **Financial impact** (66 responses, 11%): Ten percent of comments received were from respondents who were concerned about the financial impact the proposals would have on them. This includes alternative transport modes such as taxis, or public bus, and also the cost of before/after school childcare costs "If this is still the case when my children are in 6th form we would have to pay if for expensive taxis every day or I would have to give up my job as a teacher"
- **Mental health impact** (63 responses, 10%): A similar proportion also commented that the proposals would have a negative impact on the mental health of both children and parents due to increased stress over transport arrangements to school "The withdrawal of the vacant seat would make my circumstances impossible to navigate and achieve, impacting on both my children's as well as my own well-being".



Following on from impact considerations, respondents were asked what arrangements they would put in place



if the proposal to remove the scheme was to go ahead. A total of 149 respondents (25%) said they **did not know / had no options available to them** – "I have no idea, it would be a real challenge." Other options for respondents included:

- Parent would take their child to school by car (89 responses, 15%) "We as a family would have to travel by car to the school, increasing the volume of cars and emissions in what is an already heavily congested area."
- Parent would rearrange/reduce working hours (52 responses, 9%) "I would need to significantly reduce my working hours to facilitate the school runs, which is not ideal at present."
- Child would not be able to attend school (50 responses, 8%) "I have no consistent and reliable transport, meaning i would have to miss school on the regular days where i wouldn't have any methods of transport to school."

### 2.3. Future options

#### 2.3.1. Survey responses

The final section of the survey asked respondents whether they had any suggestions or ideas that would enable the service to run in a way that is fair and without cost to the taxpayer. Many proposals were put forward and the most frequent options are presented as follows:

#### Allow parents to pay/contribute towards a seat (212 responses)

Many respondents commented that they would be happy to either pay for their child's seat or make a contribution towards it. There were several suggestions of how a payment system could work in practice. Some respondents suggested that payments could be made through schools rather than directly with the council. A further 23 suggested that schools could hire a minibus with parents then contributing to the cost.

Allow parents the chance to pay to use the otherwise wasted seats on buses and fully maximise the use of the transport that is already out there.

#### Sell/use currently vacant seats on services (132 responses)

Some respondents commented that some bus services are perceived to be regularly running with vacant seats. On the same theme as the proposal above, respondents felt that parents could pay for these seats which would otherwise be empty, and as a result, cover the cost to the taxpayer.

Whilst unutilised capacity exists, there is no logical reason why this should not be offered to commuting pupils in order for them to be able to continue their education.

#### School transport is an essential service (54 responses)

There were comments from some respondents who considered school transport to be an essential service and felt that taxpayers' money should go towards providing the scheme. Many respondents commented that they themselves were taxpayers who were happy for their money to be spent in this way.

It should cost the taxpayer! All public services including those that ensure all children have equal access to education should be funded collectively.

#### Other suggestions included:

- Running a public bus service to rural areas to serve those with limited access to transport
- Raising funds / sponsorship to fund compliant vehicles
- 2.93 Engagement with other Compile to Anderstand down they have managed to continue running the
- he rural school transport action group has written to Staffordshire County Council as part of their campaign to ind a legal and fair solution to the suspension of the temporary vacant seat scheme. The campaign group has

School bus facilities should be available for

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put forward the following proposal (note, several themes are similar to that provided within the listening exercise):

- School transport would pay the bus operator the cost of the number of seats required for students eligible for statutory transport.
- Any remaining seats would then be sold by the bus operator to the 300+ children trying to
  access school who are not entitled for statutory transport. The general public would also have
  the option of accessing this transport too.
- The action group believe that this would provide rural areas with a bus service. The service would not be subsidised by the parish council but instead funded by the school transport service (who already pay for statutory entitled children to travel) and parents of children not entitled to free school transport (who have historically paid for vacant seats and still want to pay).