

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

1. 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.

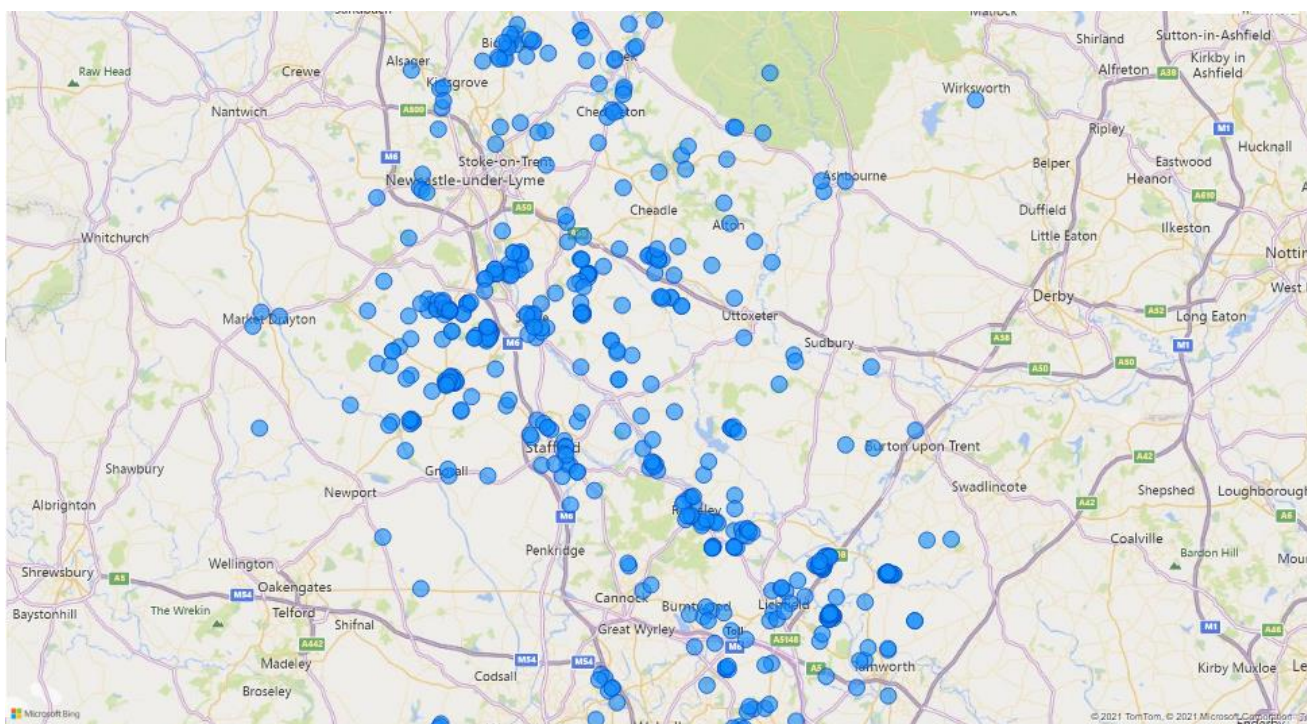
A total of **603 responses** were received through the listening exercise period, and additional views were also submitted collectively by the Rural School Transport Action Group. This technical note outlines the feedback received and the options proposed by respondents.

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.

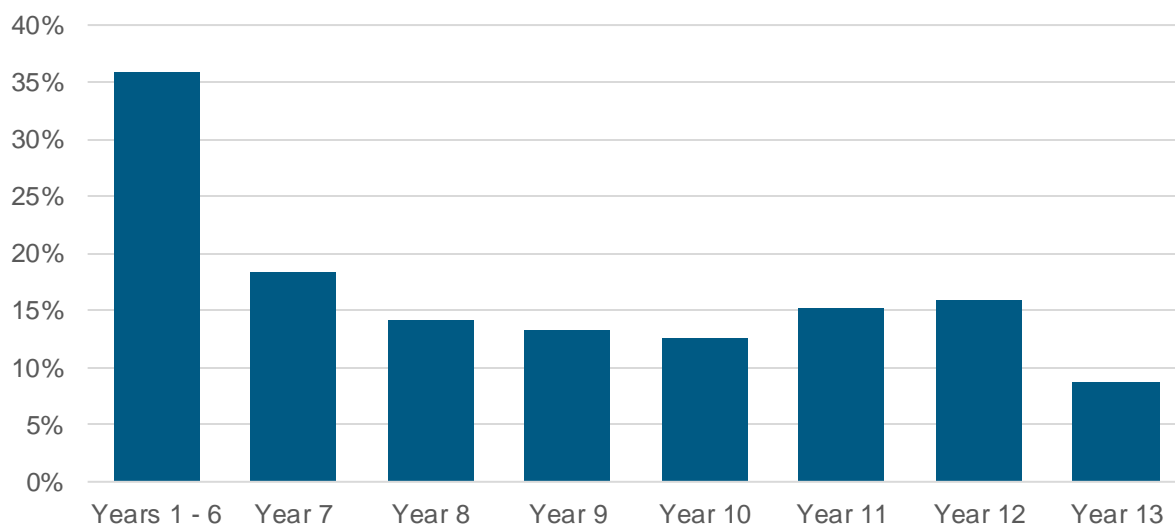
Figure 2-1 – Proportion of responses by postcode area



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?



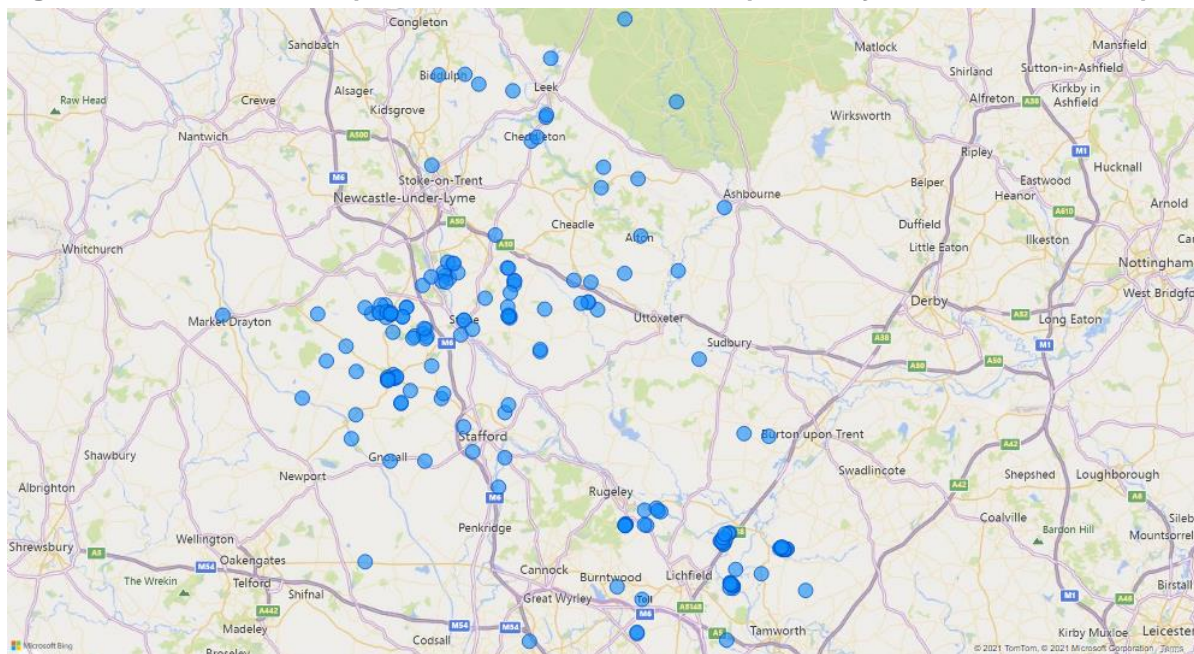
Base: 603 responses

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).

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).