

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

TASK GROUP REPORT NO. 3

TRANSPORT

FEBRUARY 2000

Scrutiny Task Group

TRANSPORT

1. Membership of Task Group

The Task Group comprised Councillors Butler, Elengorn (Chairman), B. Matthews and J. Miller. Councillor Cornwell also attended ex officio. The Task Group was supported by Wyn Williams (Principal Officer, Best Value and Business Planning)

2. Terms of Reference

- To review the current arrangements for transport in order to identify: the range of transport provision, the needs and numbers of clients and the cost of transport
- To examine alternative means of providing transport
- To prepare a paper with recommendations on the way transport should be managed and procured.

3. Scope

This investigation covers the transport arrangements for clients and concentrates on:

- Home to school transport for school pupils
- Transport to and from day centres for elderly people, people with learning difficulties, people with physical disabilities or any other clients of the Social Services Committee.

4. Method of Investigation

The investigation used:

Document Search

Principal documents examined were:

Richmond Accessible Transport Study	(published in 1994)
Committee Reports:	
Social Services Committee	2 October 1995
Policy and Resources	30 October 1995
Education Committee	30 June 1998
Social Services	21 June 1999

Service Plans/Quality of Service Reports

- Accessible Transport Unit 1997/98, 1998/99
- Services for Adults 2000/2001
- Services for Older People 1999/2000
- Services for People with Learning Difficulties 1999/2000
- Specification for Special School Transport
- Draft specification for transport provision to day centres, residential homes, voluntary clubs and ad hoc transport
- Draft specification for the supply of vehicles to services for people with learning difficulties
- Internal Audit Value for Money Review of Social Services Transport to Voluntary Organisations.

Interviews

The following people were interviewed:

- Cllr Brian Miller (Chairman of Education Committee),
- Jessica Saraga (Education)
- Kathy Lindsay (Education)
- Cllr Tony Barnett (Chairman of Social Services Committee)
- Geoff Elford (Services for Adults)
- Jane Pettingale (Services for People with Learning Difficulties)
- Diane Tempest (Accessible Transport Unit)
- Alan Nash (Finance Department)
- Ray Cuthbert (Environmental & Operational Services)
- David Neaves (Environmental & Operational Services).

5. Findings

Current Service Provision

5.1 Education – Transport for Pupils with Special Educational Needs

Transport is provided currently for 271 pupils using a mix of mini cabs, mini buses and coaches according to the needs of the pupil and journey to school. Competitive tenders were sought for contracts for each of the routes with contracts for 5 years that started in April 1999. Of the 71 routes, 9 are operated by the Council's DSO (Environmental & Operational Services) with the remaining 62 operated by 11 private companies. Most routes are for taking single pupils, a few are for groups of pupils to one school but there are rarely more than 5 pupils transported together in one vehicle. A small minority of older pupils are supplied with bus passes and use public transport, but this is a decision of the headteacher.

The cost of Special Educational Needs Transport since 1997/98 is as follows:

1997/98	£658,000	
1998/99	£722,000	
1999/2000	£923,000 (projected)	or £3400 per annum per pupil

Clearly the cost has been increasing and this is due in part to the increase in demand for the service and in part to the increase in the cost of operating transport. The service is needs led and determined by the number of pupils who have statements of special educational need.

Density of traffic with resultant slow journey times leads to some increased costs. The general geography of the borough is a hindrance to transport provision. The location of schools in relation to the catchment area of the whole borough can mean pupils having to start their journey as early as 7.00 a.m. Although the desired maximum travelling time is 1.00 hour there are currently 55 pupils who have a journey time longer than this.

A key issue for the service is that the staff who arrange and co-ordinate transport, whilst able to organise provision, do not have the technical skills to monitor details of contracts such as adequacy of insurance, condition and safety of vehicles. **The staff are administrative and professional staff of the Education service and have no training or experience in transport management.** As a consequence considerable time is taken up each day in sorting out transport matters. The implications could be that there is inadequate check to be certain that all operators are acting safely and legally all the time.

The Education Committee at the meeting on 30 June 1998 agreed to investigations being made into the feasibility of transferring the operations management and contract monitoring of home to school transport to a more suitably qualified section within the Council. We understood that the relatively modest cost of transferring management to professionally qualified staff in Environmental and Operational Services had prevented this decision bearing fruit. Equally the possibility of transfer to the Accessible Transport Unit (see below) has not been pursued.

5.2 Social Services

The Accessible Transport Unit (ATU) is located within Services for Adults and currently organises transport arrangements across the range of social services. The Accessible Transport Unit was set up in 1995 initially to take on the co-ordination and arrangements for social services but with the clear aim that it would take on a wider brief including transport for children with special education needs and co-ordination with health authority transport. **We were**

very disappointed that little progress has been made towards this wider brief.

Currently there is a service level agreement (SLA) with Environmental and Operational Services for transport of people to day centres for older people in the morning and home in the evening. One day centre (Alexandra Hall) has a contract with a private contractor for this service. There is an agreement for Environmental and Operational Services to provide the transport for people with learning difficulties to travel to the two centres in the morning and home in the evening. The centre for people with learning difficulties uses its own, but old, minibuses to transport people during the day to for example college, organised activities. These vehicles have reached the end of their useful life and are driven by care workers. The centre emphasised that their transport requirements are for flexibility and immediacy.

Other ad hoc transport is organised as necessary usually using mini cabs or licensed taxis and mostly used by Services for Children and Families e.g. to take children in foster care to school. An approved list of mini cab providers is maintained by the Accessible Transport Unit.

Transport is also provided for some voluntary organisations to take their members to meetings, clubs etc. (Multiple Sclerosis Society, Hard of Hearing, Twickenham Club for the Blind, Richmond Club for the Blind, Richmond Society for Mental Health, Gateway Club, Arthritis Care, Elleray Hall Handicraft Club, Twickenham Endeavour Club). The cost is about £90,000 per annum.

The Social Services Committee has decided to seek tenders for the provision of transport and this process is currently under way. Tenders are being sought for transport in relation to day centres for older people and a separate contract in relation to transport for people with learning difficulties. We are concerned about this trend towards further fragmentation which is opposite to the requirement for co-ordination of transport. New specifications are being written. In addition it is proposed that a select list of operators for ad hoc taxi/mini cab transport will be set up on the basis of pre agreed rates per mile rather than the present system of seeking the lowest price at the time the transport is needed.

The expenditure profile is as follows:

Service	1997/98 £000	1998/99 £000	1999/2000 £000 projection
Support services	72	2	1
Care Management Children & Families	7	3	1
Children's Homes	1	1	1
Intermediate Treatment	1	1	1
Old Peoples Homes	10	8	8
Old Peoples Day Centres	510	513	530
People with Physical Difficulties Day Centres	108	111	113
Occupational Therapy	3	8	5
Day Centres – Mental Health	18	24	25
People with Learning Difficulties – Day Centres	153	180	192
Accessible Transport	0	88	80
TOTAL	883	939	957

Costs per annum per client are lower than for the education services and are typically around £2000 per annum.

In the last 2 years the main pressure for change and increased use of transport has come from the development of services for people with learning difficulties.

Consultation with Users

There is regular consultation with representatives of families of children with special educational needs and users of social services transport. The main issue in relation to transport is the length of journey times. The Accessible Transport Unit undertook consultation exercises recently with users, carers, and day centre managers as part of the preparation for new specifications for transport. Journey times were the biggest area of concern. Location of destinations, geography of the borough and density of traffic are limiting factors in trying to improve this.

5.3 Environmental and Operational Services

Environmental and Operational Services provide some of the transport for both social services transport and pupils with special education needs. The extent of transport provision Environmental & Operational Services has reduced particularly in Education and generally since the loss of work either

through loss of contracts or reduction in transport. That department, however, employs staff with qualifications, training and expertise in vehicle and transport management and this is a valuable resource to the Council that needs to be fully utilised.

A key role in transport management is to advise on the risks involved in acquiring, using vehicles, ensuring the legal position is covered in operating vehicles including obtaining the necessary licences and insurances. Advice is provided to departments but in view of the trading position of Environmental & Operational Services this advice has to be paid for and this is usually through a service level agreement. It is thus up to departments whether they can and wish to seek advice and assistance. We are concerned that the Education department is not availing itself of this opportunity.

Loss of contracts by Environmental & Operational Services reduces volume and efficiency in transport operations. Any further reduction could become difficult to sustain although some reversal has taken place through obtaining contracts for other authorities e.g. maintenance of London Borough of Ealing's vehicle fleet.

5.4 Further Financial Considerations

The projected out-turn for Social Services for 1999/2000 is £957,000 as against a budget of £883,000. The overspend is concentrated in transport of People with Learning Difficulties to and from Day Centres.

The projected out-turn for Education for 1999/2000 is £923,000 as against a budget of £801,000. The overspend is across the service.

Environmental and Operational Services provide 90% of Social Services transport but only 13% of the SEN Transport. A deficit on these operations of £60,000 is expected for 1999/2000 as against a budgeted deficit of £29,000. The difference reflects greater than anticipated costs.

The provision of transport to certain voluntary organisations at a cost of around £90,000 has been the subject of a Value for Money Review by Internal Audit. From this it appears that there was no specific Social Services Committee decision to authorise this provision nor any written agreement or contract. It seems rather to have "evolved" since the 1980's and to be arbitrary in its application. The provision of this transport is part of the service level agreement with Environmental & Operational Services and has been reported to the Social Services Committee on a number of occasions.

6. Conclusions

The increased use of outside contractors for transport has reduced the extent to which the Council through the Environmental & Operational Services department provides its own transport. This has led to departments taking on a role of managing contracts for transport, monitoring those contracts and co-ordinating the provision of transport. This role requires particular skills, training and knowledge that cannot just be assumed. The Education department in particular lacks the staff, resources and time to undertake anything more than an administrative role in arranging transport.

Transport costs have increased significantly in recent years and continue to do so. The total cost of transport is close to £2 million and a 10% increase is significant. Budgetary control is difficult because of the services being demand led. Annual budgets, however, are based on the previous year's budget plus inflation rather than related to the previous year's actual expenditure. This can lead to a situation where overspending is difficult to control and an assumption that any overspending will be found. We were not convinced that budget management had sufficient priority and the growth of the provision of free transport to certain voluntary organisations seemed to be an example of this.

The trend towards seeking tenders has led to a fragmentation of the service with many providers. This in itself has led to difficulties in control and monitoring. For example insurance documents are not checked regularly and there is no guarantee for example that all drivers have passenger transport liability insurance all the time that they are driving pupils with special education needs to and from school. Similarly there are no regular checks that vehicles are roadworthy. Whilst seeking tenders for routes for parts of services may lead to economies this has to be weighed against dealing daily with a range of providers, co-ordinating arrangements and monitoring a number of contracts. Contracts packaged into larger contracts or even one contract to cover all transport provision are used by some other councils.

The concept behind the Accessible Transport Unit becoming the co-ordinator for transport provision by the authority has never been carried through and it was clear that co-ordination across departments did not exist under present arrangements. There would possibly be some economies of scale in this concept and for example both social services and special education needs use some of the same transport firms. The Accessible Transport Unit is a commissioner of transport and not a manager of transport and lacks the professional transport management expertise and technical information which they currently seek from Environmental & Operational Services. The location of the Accessible Transport Unit within the Council's organisation would need to be considered. Currently it is within the department for Services for Adults. They provide a service for the other social services departments and if their role expanded to include Education transport a different location might be appropriate.

The transport operations section of Environmental & Operational Services has reduced as work has been lost. The long term viability must be in doubt particularly if any transport for day centre work is lost. A valuable resource of professional expertise is now being under-used by the Council.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 That the transfer of the Accessible Transport Unit to a more corporate location be progressed.**
- 7.2 That the concentration and full use of the Council's transport management expertise, probably within the Accessible Transport Unit, be urgently pursued.**
- 7.3 That the management of SEN transport be re-assigned in the light of 7.1 and 7.2.**
- 7.4 That professional support from Environmental & Operational Services be provided to the Education department immediately pending the assignment of the management of Special Educational Needs transport to the Accessible Transport Unit**
- 7.5 That progression of the Social Services tendering exercises for transport be reviewed in the light of these recommendations**
- 7.6 That the arbitrary provision of free transport to certain voluntary organisations be urgently reviewed with a view to any subsidy being transparent and considered corporately as part of grants to voluntary organisations rather than a charge on the Social Services budget.**
- 7.7 That all these recommendations be put into effect within the next six months with the exception of 7.4 which is for immediate implementation.**

Councillors:

Elengorn (Chairman)
Butler
B. Matthews
J. Miller