School Travel Strategy – Access to Choice in Surrey

Surrey County Council
August 2007

1 Introduction

1.1 The Education and Inspections Act 2006

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 introduced changes in the provision of home to school transport that will affect the way in which all Local Education Authorities (LEAs) have to undertake their responsibilities in future.

The Act is intended to reduce the impact of transport as a barrier to parents from lower income groups wishing to exercise their choice of school.

It placed a new duty on local authorities to provide free transport for some of the most disadvantaged pupils to enable them to attend any of three suitable secondary schools closest to their home, where these schools are more than two (and less than six) miles away. Alternatively these pupils may choose a school up to fifteen miles away where this is the nearest suitable school preferred on grounds of religion or belief.

Also, local authorities now have a duty to prepare and publish a 'sustainable school travel strategy', which the Government hopes will lead to health and environmental benefits. This document is the first edition of the strategy in Surrey.

This new duty applies to children and young people up to and including sixth form age. It includes residents in the authority's area, those receiving education or training in the authority's area, and those not resident in the authority's area, but who travel within the authority's area to receive education or training.

1.2 Surrey County Council Response to the Act

At a meeting of the Executive on 17th July 2007, members considered a report on the travel and transport changes resulting from the Act, including a first draft of this strategy. The recommendations for taking forward the new rersponsibilites were agreed by members.

1.3 This strategy

This is an initial stage of the school travel strategy.

This initial strategy enables us to develop a sustainable school travel strategy, with a targeted programme of service and infrastructure improvements that facilitates sustainable school travel for all and also meets the legislative requirements of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It is set out in a further four sections:

Section 2 presents a review of our existing policy documents and datasets to assess their comprehensiveness and quality in providing base information for the development of a sustainable school travel strategy.

Section 3 provides a comprehensive methodology for a sustainable school travel strategy that meets the requirements of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 in reducing the impact of transport as a barrier to parents wishing to exercise their choice of school.

Section 4 sets out our implementation programme.

2 Review of Existing Information

2.1 Introduction

The first stage of this report follows a review of our existing planning and transport policy and datasets to assess their current comprehensiveness and quality in providing the base information for developing a sustainable school travel strategy.

The following list of documents and datasets were reviewed as part of this process, with the key observations reported below.

- Surrey School Travel Plans
- Surrey 'Safes Routes to Schools' database
- Surrey County Council Local Transport Plan (2006-2011)
- Surrey County Council Accessibility Strategy
- Surrey Transport Asset Management Plan
- Surrey's Joint Road Safety Strategy

2.2 Key observations

2.2.1 Surrey School Travel Plans

Surrey County Council currently holds an extensive and detailed School Travel Plan database, available online. The composition of the travel plans conform to national guidance and includes information about issues, objectives, targets, actions and the modes of transport that pupils use for their journey to school.

The travel plans themselves also include postcode data collected from pupils which is then converted to grid references to ascertain the straight-line distances between homes and schools. This information is particularly useful in providing some understanding about the distance and geographical catchments of the schools themselves.

One area where additional information would be useful to developing a sustainable school travel strategy is in understanding more about the barriers that some pupils and parents might be facing in terms of undertaking the home to school journey by alternative modes. Some 'hard' physical barriers are generally noted – for example, the lack of crossing facilities, the absence of a suitable bus service, or direct cycle routes or cycle parking facilities. However they do not generally provide information regarding pupil/parental views on the quality, affordability, and access to sustainable transport alternatives from where they live.

Information on additional concerns such as anti-social behaviour, personal safety and security are also potential barriers to transport choice for parents; however it is currently unclear to what extent.

Surrey's school travel plans also record information on both how pupils to travel to school, and importantly, how they would like to travel to school.

Information on household income is also not collected through School Travel Plans, as requesting such information in this context would likely be deemed inappropriate and unethical. However such information would be useful to gain a clearer picture of which households may be experiencing difficulties in exercising a choice of schools due to transport barriers.

School Travel Plans may not be the appropriate method for collecting such information, so the methodology for ensuring pupils from lower income households are able to access their choice of schools will need to ensure they can be identified and catered for.

2.2.2 Surrey County Council Accessibility Strategy

The Accessibility Strategy outlines as a clear policy commitment that;

"The County will work with its partners to increase levels of school and college attendance and increase transport choice for school children, young adults and older people".

Accessibility to Education is essentially considered in two areas; education for children under-16, and post-16 education. The strategy notes that the 'Safe Routes to Schools' programme has a primary focus on under-16 year old school travel and has delivered many benefits.

A priority issue within the plan is addressing access issues for post-16 year olds. The focus is then based on the geographical location of this age range identified within the Accessibility Strategy and mainly focuses on rural restrictions. Schemes identified by Surrey County Council as ways to improve accessibility to education for post-16 year olds include the 'Surrey Bus Student Farecard' and 'Wheels 2 Learn'.

The overall strategy provides a comprehensive approach to addressing issues of social exclusion and would be a key document for informing a sustainable school travel strategy. However, some additional barriers to education amongst this age group may be apparent, for example the ability of post-16 year olds in some areas of Surrey to afford access to the schemes on offer or their desire and views on safety of using a particular mode.

2.3   Summary of additional data to be collected

The overall quality and comprehensiveness of our existing data means that there is a wide range of useful information already being collected across the county for informing a sustainable school travel strategy. However, in order to develop a comprehensive sustainable school travel strategy we will collect the following additional information:

1. A clearer evidence base of the location and transport to education needs of lower income household groups;

2. Consideration of those school journeys by car that have the highest adverse impact on congestion;

3. Parental views on the quality, affordability and convenience of existing public transport, and concerns over anti-social behaviour, personal safety and security for travel to school journeys;

3 Access to Choice - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Our strategy sets out five stages and sets outs a step-by-step approach to gathering the required data, in addition to that already collected by Surrey County Council, and performing the necessary analysis for developing a sustainable school travel strategy, and a targeted programme of investment in sustainable school transport.

Stage 1 - identifying target areas/groups

In order to reduce the impact of transport as a barrier to parents wishing to exercise their choice of school, the first step requires the ability to identify specific target groups within Surrey.

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 'Home to School Travel and Transport Guidance' (2007) suggests that *"local authorities should, to a large degree, be able to base their assessment of children and young people's travel and transport needs on the data provided in school or college travel plans."*

As outlined in section 2.2.2, we will also identify additional key information about those social groups who are most vulnerable to potential transport barriers in order to establish target areas for focus and investment.

To help provide a focus for the development of a sustainable school travel strategy, establishing target areas within Surrey is beneficial. Whilst the strategy needs to ensure provision is adequate across the entire County, there may particular areas whereby specific social issues are identifiable which might command a stronger focus in the prioritisation of investment. Obtaining information on the following factors at Census Super Output Areas (SOAs) level across Surrey will help to build an initial evidence base for prioritisation:

Localities with a high population and child population density

Defining areas with high population and child population density will help provide a focus for a local authority seeking to maximise the potential impact of the resources they have available in promoting sustainable school travel. Investment in these areas may yield a greater overall benefit per capita within the strategy.

Localities with lower household car ownership

Information relating to household car ownership might be used as a proxy for household income and will provide local authorities with an indication of areas that may require specific targeting with transport infrastructure and service investment. Such households are less likely to have access to private transport, will have a stronger reliance on public transport, and may therefore be more likely to consider transport as a key barrier to exercising a choice amongst local schools.

Localities experiencing significant levels of congestion

Establishing those wards experiencing significant congestion within the County will provide an indication of those school journeys that have the highest contributory adverse impact on congestion within the local authority area.

Schools with a wide gap between actual and desired mode share

In addition to defining target SOAs, identifying those schools with the widest gap between the actual mode share for journeys to school and the desired mode share (recorded in Surrey's School Travel Plans) would be beneficial. This would provide a useful indication of those schools with potentially the greatest suppressed demand for sustainable transport, and therefore with a high potential for achieving modal shift away from car-based school journeys.

The application of the above criteria will provide a clearer evidence base for targeting transport investment that both aims to maximise the potential effect of the investment in encouraging modal shift, whilst also seeking to fulfil the legislative requirements of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Application of the above criteria may also highlight specific areas that feature prominently in one, two, or all four categories. This should enable us to consider the prioritisation of investment within the sustainable school travel strategy.

Stage 2 - identifying target schools

Having established target SOAs within the county, the next stage is to establish which schools will be within a geographical radius of these areas. These catchments, as outlined by the Education and Inspections Act 2006, should:

1. enable pupils from lower income households to be able to attend any of three suitable secondary schools closest to their home, where these schools are more than two (and less than six) miles away.

2. enable pupils from lower income households to be able to attend a school up to fifteen miles away where this is the nearest suitable school preferred on grounds of religion or belief.

3. enable all pupils who live within walking and cycling distance of the school to have the opportunity to walk or cycle.

The second stage of this methodology therefore requires the ability to link both households within the target areas with their potential choice of schools.

Generate GIS-Based 'choice accessibility map'

Generating a GIS-based accessibility map showing coverage of school locations and target wards will provide clearer information on which schools may require a stronger focus for sustainable transport investment. This is in line with Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 'Home to School Travel and Transport Guidance'.

These accessibility maps will indicate not only access to a particular school, but access to all schools that could be considered under parental choice from the target localities. This output will provide the County Council with a clearer understanding of areas that may be experiencing a greater degree of social exclusion in home to school transport and provide a focus for an audit of current provision and subsequent investment.

Generate GIS-Based 'propensity for mode shift map'

Another focus for target schools, in addition to covering issues of social exclusion, will be to identifying on a GIS-based output those schools with the widest gap between the actual and desired mode of travel for journeys to school. This output, along with the 'choice accessibility map' will provide Surrey County Council with an additional focus for a subsequent audit of existing sustainable transport service provision and infrastructure, coupled with the location of schools with a greater potential for effecting modal shift.

Stage 3 - audit of existing sustainable transport service provision and infrastructure

When a relationship has been established between target areas and target schools, a subsequent audit of existing sustainable transport provision that may be used when travelling to, from, or between schools will be required.

This will be important in determining what barriers to choice exist in terms of existing public transport service provision, established walking and cycling networks, and car-sharing schemes and opportunities. Identifying the current absence of linkages between target groups and sustainable transport provision will be central to informing the subsequent sustainable school travel strategy.

Much of the information required for undertaking such an audit is already being collected. The County's Transport Asset Management Plan (Chapter 4b), for example, highlights a wide range of databases

related to the Authority's transport assets. The following areas can there fore be audited at this stage through information available to the authority.

Public Transport Linkages

A review of existing scheduled bus services between the zones and the schools within the geographical catchment will provide an indication of public transport availability for journeys to school. This should include school transport provided by Surrey County Council.

However it will be important that a comprehensive review highlights where any service provision may exist, but where the service frequency or journey times may be considered prohibitive to school journeys.

Walking and Cycling Networks

A review of walking and cycling networks between the zones and schools will give an indication of the requirement for any further investment in these areas to ensure safe and direct passage for journeys to school. The review will also include a detailed audit of crossing points and patrols, traffic calming measures and speed limits. Access for those with visual or mobility-impairments will also be assessed.

This may be particularly beneficial in instances where the proximity of the schools to the residential zones is conducive to encouraging walking and cycling as sustainable alternatives to private car travel.

Undertaking this exercise will provide clearer indications of community severance across Surrey as a result of inadequate existing transport infrastructure.

Formal Car Sharing and Car Club opportunities

Formal car sharing schemes and car clubs provide an opportunity for individuals who do not have access to their own privately-owned vehicle to undertake trips by car, albeit in a more sustainable manner.

A review of the location of these schemes and clubs will provide broad information of their geographical coverage across Surrey, and which of the established target areas may be able to benefit. The absence of any such car-sharing or car club opportunities for these zones may indicate a potential transport barrier to parents from lower income households exercising their choice of schools.

Stage 4 - identifying barriers to choice

When the relationships have been established between the target areas and their prospective choice of schools, and an audit of sustainable transport provision has been undertaken, the next stage in the process will be to identify what transport barriers are apparent.

In some instances this may simply be identifying the absence of public transport provision between the target area in question and the schools. However there are a wide range of potential 'soft' and 'hard' factors that will need identifying as potential transport barriers to school choice. This stage of the approach will require an assessment of the following factors, and their potential impact as a transport barrier to sustainable school travel.

Soft Factors

There are a range of 'soft factors' that could serve as barriers to parental choice, and might include for example a lack of information or an unwillingness to use public transport. The following are examples of soft factors that will need to be addressed at this stage:

Information on the alternatives:

- Is there sufficient information available on public transport services, walking and cycling networks to ensure those within target zones feel able to use these modes?

Willingness to use alternatives:

- Are there any misperceptions amongst parents or pupils about the quality of sustainable travel alternatives?

Security:

- Are there any issues such as anti-social behaviour on buses that could impact upon people's desire to use sustainable travel alternatives?

Hard Factors

In addition to the soft factors, there are potentially a wide range of hard factors which relate to the actual physical transport barriers that some parents might face in exercising their choice of schools. The following are examples of hard factors that will need to be addressed at this stage:

Public Transport - Service Provision:

- Are there any existing bus or rail services in operation and can they be accessed within an acceptable distance of target zones and their potential choice of schools?

Public Transport - Affordability:

- If the services exist, would the cost of using them be prohibitive for parents from lower income households?

Public Transport - Journey Times:

- Are the services sufficiently direct between the target zones and the location of schools so that the journey times are not excessive? Are service timetables complementary to the school opening hours?

Public Transport - Reliability:

- Are local services generally punctual and reliable as a form of public transport?

Walking/Cycling networks:

- Are the existing walking and cycling networks both direct and coherent between target zones and the schools? Are there any severance or road safety issues that need overcoming on the existing networks?

Having undertaken an audit of existing provision, identified barriers to choice, and made an assessment of pupil needs, we will then be in a position to identify remedial actions to address these barriers. This might include the provision of cycle training, developing the existing cycle route network, installing adequate crossing facilities, traffic calming measures, or arranging escorts for walking buses. However the investment in remedial measures will be more adequately informed by a stronger evidence base of need.

Stage 5 - developing a targeted approach for investment

The final stage in the process will be to establish a targeted approach for investing in sustainable travel alternatives in the specific target areas that have been identified earlier in the process. This approach will help to ensure that the resulting sustainable school travel strategy;

Has the potential to achieve greater value for money results and make the best use of available resources by targeting investment;

Plays a central role in identifying and providing for lower income families wishing to exercise their choice of schools in line with the legislative requirements of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

4   Programme

The development of a sustainable school travel strategy will have to consider both the legislative requirements of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, and the level and availability of funding and resources to deliver improvements across Surrey. Prioritisation within the school travel investment and school travel plan process will therefore be a key issue for the County Council to help ensure that

resources a targeted appropriately. This will help to both maximise the potential impact on p romoting sustainable alternatives for school travel for all whilst meeting the legislative requirements of the Act.

The strategy implementation programme is as follows:

January 2008 – Stages 1 nad 2 completed

May 2008 – Stage 3 completed

July 2008 – Stage 4 completed

August 2008 onwards – Stage 5