

MARCH
2022

Home to school transport - Families experiences



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Over the last few years Southampton has seen a substantial increase in requests for home to school transport. 82% of users of home to school transport identify as have a Special Educational Need and/or Disability (SEND). While there has been large a increase, the Transport Coordination Unit has not grown to match this.

Through our conversations with families and our survey, we had evidence of some great examples of escorts working well with families to support young people. We also heard positive feedback about one officer who was felt to be helpful by parents.

Southampton Parent Carer Forum have heard extensively from families that the provision is often lacking, and that families experience of the Transport Coordination Unit can be very negative. Within this report we will evidence how the impact on families includes:

- Children missing education.
- Siblings missing education/own appointments.
- Loss of income and financial pressures on families

Increased stress for:

- The children using home to school transport
- Parent Carers
- Siblings

We found that the information being provided on home to school transport does not meet the minimum standards required by law and that the processes can be confusing for families, leading to additional stress.

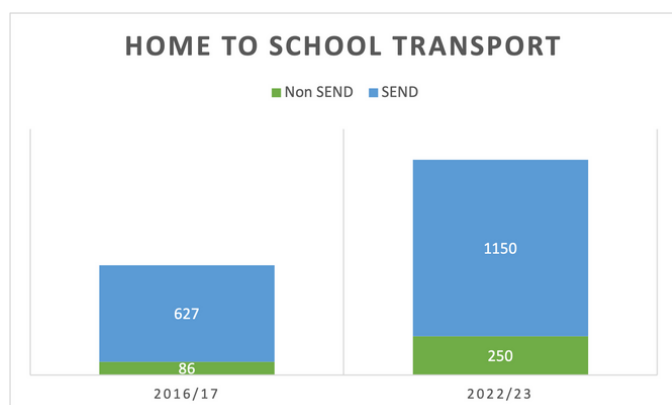
Executive Summary cont...

The findings of this report lead us to recommend the following actions to improve the experience of children and young people and their families.

1. As a matter of urgency, the council complies with its statutory duty and publishes the information on home to school transport within the Local Offer.
2. The information on the council website is reviewed with parent carers to ensure it is fit for purpose.
3. All staff within the Transport Coordination Unit and their managers undertake training on how to communicate with families. This needs to be based on lived experience to help build empathy. This training has started but needs to be delivered to the rest of the team, and a roll out program needs to be in place for new staff.
4. A training program for providers is established which supports them to understand SEND needs and the impact of changes in provision on a child.
5. All families are regularly asked to give feedback on the service, and this is monitored to ensure improvements are having the desired impact.
6. Clinics are established on a termly basis to enable families to meet with the TCU and address any concerns before they become a larger problem.
7. A process is established which informs families in a timely manner if there are changes in provision e.g. change of escort/driver or taxi is running late.
8. Improved information sharing and clarity of who is responsible for doing this. For example, who advises transport providers of inset days so the transport does not arrive.

We hope that the following information helps you to understand what it can be like for a family using home to school transport in Southampton.

Background



Local authorities in England have a duty to ensure that suitable travel arrangements are made, where necessary, to facilitate a child's attendance at school. The Department for Education sets out in its guidance the eligibility criteria that must be used to determine if provision should be made (England. Department for Education 2014, p.10).

Like many local areas, Southampton City Council has seen an increase in children using home to school transport. There has been a 96% growth since 2016/17 and now the area has 472 different transport routes in place.

Changes in the transport market have led to some operators not being able to fulfil contracts, costs increasing, and inevitably this is impacting on the delivery of home to school transport. With an increased demand for transport, including the requirement for additional passenger escorts, the council need to have a robust plan in place to manage the growth.

Feedback from parents has identified concerns within the Transport Coordination Unit (TCU) team. Families have reported a lack of empathy towards them and poor communication.

Southampton City Council have therefore arranged for a review of home to school transport to be undertaken by Edge. Edge is an independent company who have work extensively with councils across England. Edge will undertake the review, and then design a plan for the council to implement, with the aim of improving the experience and efficiency of the service.

Methodology

Southampton Parent Care Forum have undertaken the following actions to underpin the findings within this report.

1. Reviewed existing feedback that we have received from our members and the wider community.
2. Undertaken a survey on transport provision between 11-27 February 2023
3. Collected case studies on the impact of transport provision.
4. Reviewed information available to families via the Council websites
5. Reviewed relevant legislation

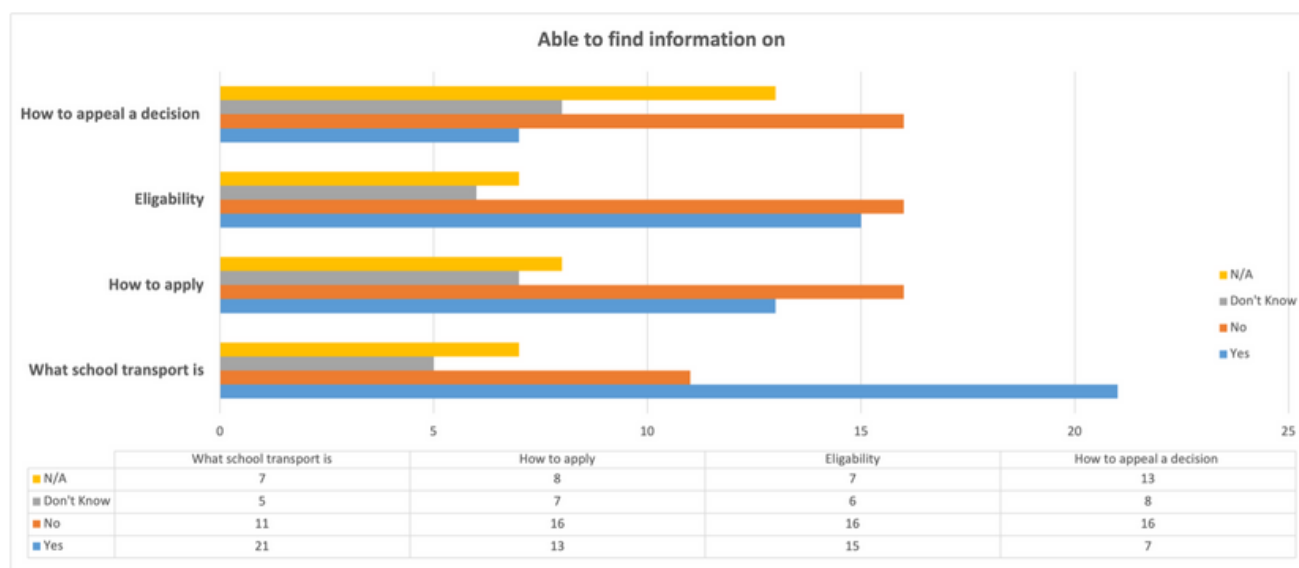
Information about home to school transport

Guidance from the Department for Education states that "Local authorities must publish general arrangements and policies in respect of home to school travel and transport for children of compulsory school age. This information should be clear, easy to understand and provide full information on the travel and transport arrangements. It should explain both statutory transport provision, and that provided on a discretionary basis. It should also set out clearly how parents can hold local authorities to account through their appeals processes" (England. Department for Education 2014, p.20).

Within our survey we asked parents how easy it was to find information on 4 key areas of transport:

- Definition of home to school transport
- How to apply
- Eligibility
- How to appeal a decision

It is clear from the survey responses, and from our wider conversations with families, that they do not always find the information clear and easy to understand.



Undertaking a review of the website on the 10th February 2023 we discovered that some of the information was out of date and this could be confusing for families.

For example, within the section on further education travel support, it stated one eligibility criteria was "They had a Statement of Special Educational Needs or an Education, Health and Care Plan" (Southampton City Council 2023).

The forum acknowledges that the council have since updated the information on their website, which has led to improvements, however the information on the four areas is still not clear.

Information about home to school transport



Definition of home to school transport

The 'Intro' page on the website talks about the duty to support children with their school journey, providing they meet specific criteria for this support. On this page there is no reference to how this could be provided. We note this is provided in the tab 'guidance on home to school service'. It would be helpful to reference this on the 'Intro' page and maybe rename it to 'key information on home to school transport'.

How to apply

The council website splits the application for transport into mainstream and SEN school or placement. There is clear information on how to apply for mainstream school travel, but you have to hunt for how to apply if you have an EHCP.

Splitting the application process in this way does not make it clear about what a parent who has a child with an EHCP attending their local mainstream should do to apply. This needs to be further clarified.

Eligibility

The eligibility section is misleading and does not appear to match the council's policy. The policy clearly identifies the following 3 criteria brackets:

1. Statutory distance.
 - A distance of more than 2 miles if the child is below the age of 8
 - A distance of more than 3 miles if the child is over the age of 8
2. Extended rights
3. Exceptional Circumstances

Within the website page 'Eligibility Criteria' it only refers to Extended rights and does not mention the other 2 criteria brackets. While we acknowledge the exceptional circumstances is in a separate tab, the statutory distance criteria, is only in a linked PDF on the main page and may be missed. This may lead to parents being confused.

How to appeal a decision

The guidance from the Department for Education states that "Local authorities should have in place both complaints and appeals procedures for parents to follow should they have cause for complaint about the service, or wish to appeal about the eligibility of their child for travel support. The procedure should be published alongside the local authority travel policy statement" (England. Department for Education 2014, p.21).

Information about home to school transport

The council website advises parents to email and ask for a form. This form outlines the process and what information is needed. The website further states "If we reject your application again, you may appeal to a panel of senior officers. We can inform you how to do this, should you wish to appeal" (Southampton City Council 2023).

It is our view that this is not transparent and does not meet the requirements to publish the procedure. The process needs to be clearly outlined on the website and parents should not have to ask for this to be sent.

Local Offer

Local authorities have a duty to publish certain information on the Local Offer (Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014) which includes information on home to school transport. Schedule 2 states:

"Transport arrangements for children and young people with special educational needs or a disability to get to and from school or post-16 institution, or other institution in which they are receiving special educational provision or training provision including—

- (a) arrangements for specialist transport;
- (b) arrangements for free or subsidised transport;
- (c) support available in relation to the cost of transport, whether from the local authority or otherwise".



Our review identified that this information is not published on the local offer. The local offer is designed to be a centre of information for families and this gap in information is likely contributing to families not being able to find the information required, as evidenced in the survey results.

Talking to parent carers and through the survey, we found evidence that information once you are receiving home to school transport, is all an issue. Parents report that "Sometimes, people aren't told until the day before what's happening with transport." Parent carers reported that they are not informed when changes are made, including if transport is going to be late or not arrive. The following case study shows the impact that can come from this lack of information.

CASE STUDY 1

C is 13, he has autism, a mood disorder, dissociative disorder, anxiety disorder and depression, he is articulate and does not have any learning difficulties. He attends a special school out of the area, he was unable to cope with the noise of a minibus, so now has a taxi and an escort.

C has a great fear of school and believes he could be murdered when he is there. Getting him ready for school each morning takes a huge amount of planning, which begins the night before with social stories, a visual timetable. Part of C's autism means he needs time to be strictly adhered to.

His taxi is due at 8am, so from 7.50 C is ready and waiting at the window, just to get him ready to leave each morning takes monumental effort from his parents, his uniform must be exactly as he needs, he needs help getting dressed, his cereal has to be ready, the right amount, with the right bowl and spoon, he needs the same thing to watch on the TV and his sisters cannot be near him. Whilst managing C, his parents have 2 other siblings to get ready, one of whom is also autistic.

Several times in one week the taxi was late, the parents were not told it was going to be late, or why, this led to huge meltdowns and sobbing from C, he would then go and hide in his bed and refuse to get up when it did arrive. It would take time to calm him and get him to school, meaning his sisters were left to be late for school, and once his dad left for work his mum was trying to manage this alone, on top of trying to call H2ST to find out what was happening.

When the driver finally did arrive, he would say he could only wait for a few minutes, adding to the pressure and stress or trying to get C into the car. Despite C's mum trying to help her son understand that sometimes there might be reasons for people being late, his fear and anxiety about school meant he could not understand this and it made no difference to him.

On one occasion C's taxi was an hour late. His mum was in tears as she needed to get his sisters to school, they had been in trouble for being late. She knew he could not be left alone so she called her parents to come and look after him while she took the girls to school, out of sheer desperation she left him in the house alone, knowing her parents were on their way. She felt sick and overwhelmed the entire time, not knowing what to do for the best, feeling that she was failing everyone no matter what she did. Her stress impacted on the entire family.

After this incident C was so scared of being left alone again his mental health dipped even further, he began refusing to go to school completely and would go into a dissociative state, unable to communicate. Within a few weeks his mental health led to him being signed off of school, whilst this was entirely down to the home to school transport, it had an impact. Living in a state of constant fear, not knowing when he would be collected, seeing the impact on his sisters and parents all played a role in his deteriorating mental health.

Parent carer experience of travel provision

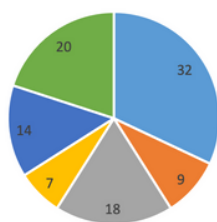
The forum's survey, of family's experiences of home to school transport, showed it varied significantly across all the areas of service. Below we highlight the variance we are seeing in Southampton's home to school transport and the impact this is having.

A higher number of parents reported a positive experience of the provision made by the drivers and passenger escorts than negative. The impact of negative experiences however can be very high.

Several reported having excellent passenger escorts, who understand their children and acknowledged positive changes. Parent carers also shared the positive impact that having consistency in drivers and passenger escorts can make for their child.

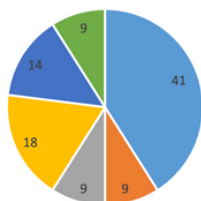
"When my girls first had a taxi to and from school it was awful and the school and I were always on the phone e.g. different drivers late picking up to and from school which caused high anxieties, but since taxi firm has put a regular driver in place it's been smooth so far."

Service given by the passenger assistant/escort



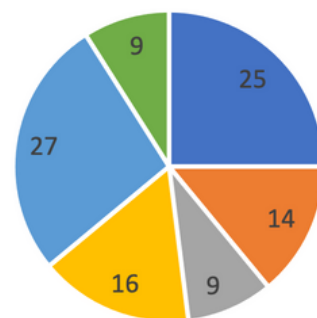
■ Very Happy ■ Happy ■ Neither happy or unhappy ■ Unhappy ■ Very unhappy ■ N/A

Service given by the driver



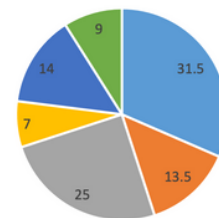
■ Very Happy ■ Happy ■ Neither happy or unhappy ■ Unhappy ■ Very unhappy ■ N/A

Overall experience



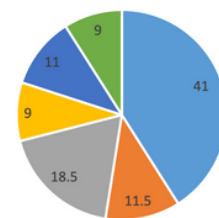
■ Very Happy ■ Happy ■ Neither happy or unhappy ■ Unhappy ■ Very unhappy ■ N/A

Suitability of transport



■ Very Happy ■ Happy ■ Neither happy or unhappy ■ Unhappy ■ Very unhappy ■ N/A

Condition of the vehicle used



■ Very Happy ■ Happy ■ Neither happy or unhappy ■ Unhappy ■ Very unhappy ■ N/A

"It helps to have consistency where possible as change can be difficult for autistic children. If they get to know the escort the escort learns about the children's individual needs which helps them feel safe and supported"

CASE STUDY 2

My son has had a difficult start to life. He has been through a lot of difficult situations. He has been removed from the birth home due to neglect and while there witnessed a lot of domestic violence. He has been adopted so has access to an adoption social worker. He has a CIN plan because of his level of need through jigsaw.

We went through a really bad patch with self-harming, mainly head banging. The head banging got so bad at one point the GP sent us to A&E as they were concerned. We went to them after a sustained period of time as we were worried about long term damage, he could be doing to himself.

When working through our sons worries with him and why he was hurting himself he was able to explain why he was doing it. This was not a quick process. The reason was, he thought he had upset his usual escort in the school transport as she was not there. He had had a few different ones over a few weeks. He thought he needed punishing for upsetting her. This was because no one took the time to say to us she had a medical issue and would be off a couple of weeks so we could explain to him.

Each morning it felt like another temporary escort with no end in sight which was really difficult for him to understand. Had we known she would be off a few weeks we could have explained to him and he would not have been left with the sudden disappearance of someone he trusted and loved. We could have helped him with his feelings a lot more had the staff told us what was going on. We know they can't give all the details but to just say she would be off for approximate period of time would have really helped.

CASE STUDY 3

My son is non verbal and attends one of the local SEN schools. One afternoon he had a different escort in the afternoon. The escort helped the other pupil (also non verbal) into the taxi first. Then met my son and showed him to the other seat. My son then became upset. He then laid on floor, banging head on concrete. Waving arms and legs around. Biting his arms, several scars from this particular incident.

Having seen the distress he was going through, school staff became involved and took him to soft play to calm down. I was then called to collect him. It took a long time for him to be calm enough to get my in car and for me to be able to safely drive home without him waving his arms and legs around or head banging his car seat.

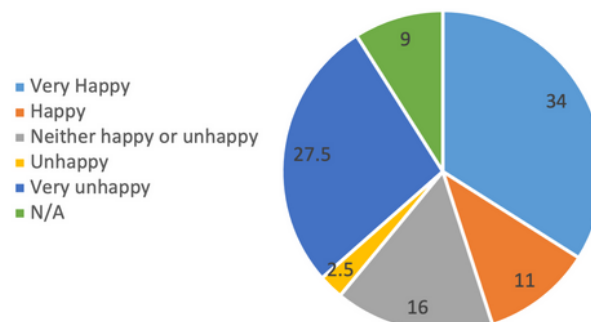
Having spoken to the other pupil's parent it came to light the other pupil was in his seat of the taxi. The driver did not mention the importance of the seats to the relief escort. My son normally loves holding hands with the escort to and from school. He enjoys the taxi ride each way.

Parent carer experience of travel provision cont...

Safety while on home to school transport

Some of the comments raised concerns around the safety of children when using home to school transport. For example, there were several reports of drivers being on the phone while transporting children, and occasions where drivers have had other passengers in the vehicle (e.g. own family members).

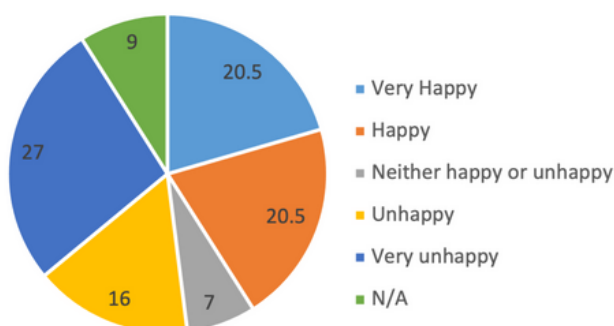
The forum found that parent carers had stop reporting these to the Transport Coordination Unit as they were not taken seriously, and one parent reported she was told “she was lucky to have transport and not to complain”.



How safe do you feel your child is on the journey

From the comments and discussions with families, we can see that the impact when things are not working can be massive. Over half of parent carers in our survey, reported they are not happy with their current transport arrangement's, reliability, and timeliness. The impact felt when you cannot rely on transport is seen across the whole family.

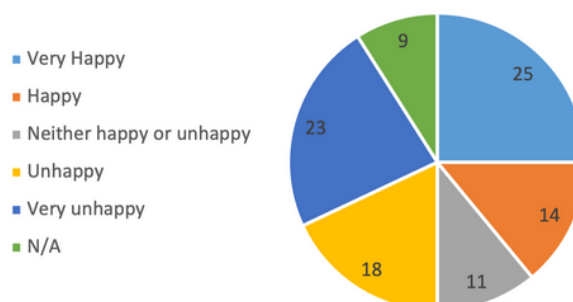
Arriving on time



Comments from families identify that the impacts fall into the following categories:

- Children missing education.
- Siblings missing education/own appointments.
- Loss of income and financial pressures on families
- Increased stress for the:
 - Child
 - Parent Carer
 - Siblings

Reliability of transport



The cost-of-living crisis is impacting many families but for a family that has a child with SEND this is greater.

Research undertaken by Scope in 2019 (pre-pandemic) showed that “on average, a family with a disabled child would have to pay £581 a month to have the same standard of living as a family with a non-disabled child.

For 1 in 5 families, these extra costs come to more than £1000 a month (Scope 2019). We heard about the financial impact that unreliable transport is having locally.


CASE STUDY 4

We have a low income because I have had to give up work because of my daughter and her unpredictable behaviours. When her transport is cancelled either because of no driver or escort, we have no option to use public transport as buses are too busy for her and this will cause her to go into flight or fight mode. Often this is her fighting and wanting to get out of a situation putting herself at risk e.g. running across a road.

This means I have to use what little money we have to get a taxi to her school safely across the city. If we are told in the morning there is no transport and I am due benefit money in the following days, I have had to get a pay day loan to cover the cost of a taxi or borrow from friends and family.

Despite being careful with the limited income we get from benefits; I have had to use food banks to help get through the week if I have had to get a taxi to school for her as I just don't have a spare £20 to £25 around. Using a food bank when you have a child with additional needs is really hard when they will only eat certain foods as not all food banks are as understanding about this. Nor do they routinely stock the 'right' brands of food for my daughter.

Once at her school she will take a long time to calm down and settle because of the taxi ride to school. School have mentioned how unsettled she is after this. This can impact the class as a whole as she is unsettled and needing more support.



CASE STUDY 5

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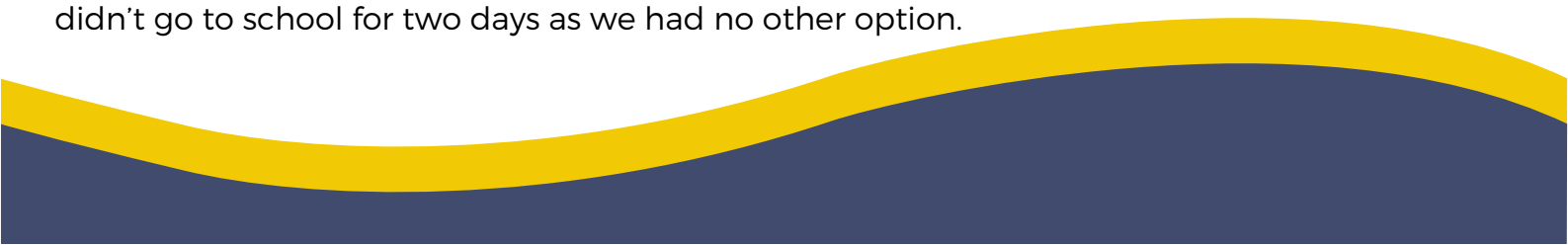
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CASE STUDY 6

I am a single parent. I live on the opposite side of the city to my son's school. I don't drive. The first time his taxi was cancelled we used public transport to get to my son's school. I found this incredibly difficult for a number of reasons.

1. Buses are hourly in to the city centre and not very regular from the city centre to his school.
2. I have autism myself and I really struggle in crowds. Buses in the morning are very busy and I find this difficult to manage my own needs on let alone my sons.
3. My son can't cope with the number of different people on a bus. He will often wave his arms around trying to make himself some personal space. He will shout and growl at those who get too close to him. He doesn't understand that they are not there to hurt him.
4. I find it difficult with members of the public making comments either to us, or to each other about his meltdowns.
5. He arrives to school in a much higher level of anxiety, and I struggle to calm him as I am struggling myself.

On the one occasion we managed it, the school receptionist invited me in to school for a cup of tea because she could see I was struggling with his behaviour and the awful experience on public transport we had had. She arranged a taxi to take me home at school's cost because I could barely afford the buses there and could not manage my own emotions on the bus home. This means last time his transport was cancelled because the driver was unwell, he didn't go to school for two days as we had no other option.



CASE STUDY 7

In the couple of weeks leading up to this situation we had had quite a few different drivers. On Monday our sons transport was cancelled. I ended up taking him to school and then having to spend a while at school settling him down as he was very worried and anxious about not having his routine in the morning and concerned if he would be picked up at the end of the day.

Once home, I rang the transport team and explained that on the Tuesday my daughter had an important test at the hospital, and I wanted to confirm that there would definitely be transport for M in the morning. I explained that we needed to leave home at 8am to make it to the hospital on time for his sister's test. As we would be at the hospital most of the day, I informed them that a relative would be home to meet M in case we were still at the hospital.

That evening was tricky because of his sister being anxious and only allowed a light diet as she would be having an anaesthetic the next day. Tuesday morning came and everyone was ready to go, his sister's bag was in the car etc. We were then left waiting for transport. It didn't arrive at the usual 7.45. By 7.55 I rang the transport team no answer, kept trying until I got hold of someone to be told it was on the way. By 8.15 still no sign.

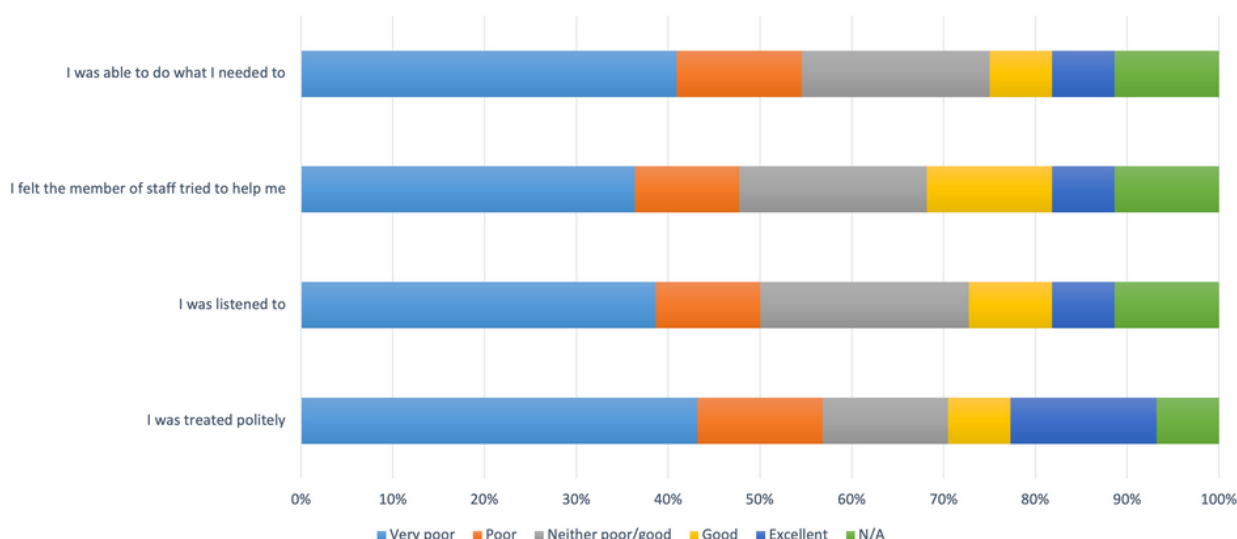
I rang the hospital to say we would be late. They explained we had to be there by 9am (should have been 8.30) and they would let the doctor know. We continued to wait, and they didn't turn up. I ended up taking my son, but I couldn't calm him enough to leave him at the school until 9.15ish.

I then rang the hospital to explain our situation and they explained it was now too late to go in for the procedure and it would need to be re-booked. As you can imagine this was awful for my daughter to continue having to wait for a procedure she had already been waiting too long for. I felt awful as a parent as I had let her down despite doing all I could to make sure everything went as smoothly as it could for her.

Parent Carers Experience of the Transport Coordination Unit (TCU)

One of the areas that prompted an independent review of home to school transport, is the volume of concerns raised by parents about their experience of the Transport Coordination Unit. Through our work with families, we have heard repeatedly that the relationship between TCU and parents is broken.

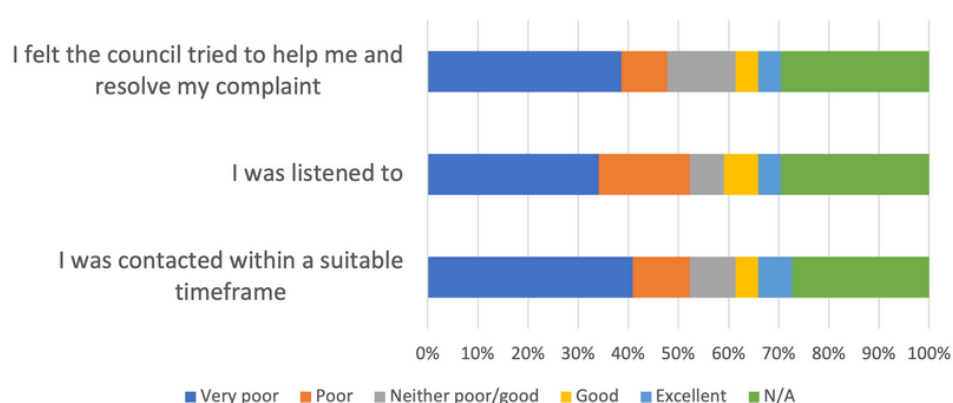
Experience of contacting the transport department



The survey results confirm that only 23% of parents have reported feeling they were treated politely, dropping to 18% feeling listened to and that the staff member tried to help them. Parents reported that staff had been rude and unhelpful. Parents reported being reduced to tears, being left stressed, anxious, and without answers. The forum does want to highlight that one member of staff was named by several parents as always being helpful, and this example needs to be built on across the whole team.

From feedback received, the complaints system for home to school transport appears to be ineffective and is reinforcing a negative relationship between families and the TCU.

Experience of complaints system



It appears there is a lack of empathy and understanding within the team, about the impact decisions being made are having on families. The following case study is just one example we have heard.

CASE STUDY 8

Throughout August I kept calling transport to find out what the plan was for my daughter's transport at the start of September. Every time they could not give any useful information. She really struggles with the unknown. We saw her engaging less and less within the home. She became more and more withdrawn. She would spend long periods of time in her room sensory seeking on her swimming or mini indoor trampoline. This was her way of coping with the unknown.

Over August she lost a lot of weight because of her heightened anxiety as she struggled to eat but was burning a lot of calories with her sensory seeking. Her paediatrician was so concerned about her weight they prescribed her some build up juices to try and help her with her weight. As it got closer and closer to the start of term, she would become more and more physical with us when we tried to interact with her. She became violent with us when we tried to support her with her personal care. Her hair became very matted.

We kept ringing and ringing transport team for updates. But they couldn't give any on the rare occasions anyone answered a phone. We emailed countless times and sometimes it was acknowledged but not always. It was so upsetting seeing her getting so distressed. It was literally the day before the school started, we found out it would be a minibus. We were not given the names of the drivers or escort. Her behaviour continued to decline.

On the first day she managed to look out the window at the minibus and escort. We spoke to the school, and we took her in late. She loves school normally but the unknown with transport was just too much for her. It took several days for us to get to a point she would get on the bus and stay on it to get to school. She needs time to process and understand what is happening and why.

The forum is please to hear that there is a proposed plan to review transport provision alongside the annual review of an EHCP. We welcome the suggestion to have a supplementary sheet which will detail a plan B, if a change to transport arrangements is unavoidable.

We also feel having information about seating arrangements, the use of a harness or other item such as ear defender, will help to improve the communication of the child's needs between providers, settings and families.



Conclusions and recommendations

The experience of home to school transport across Southampton is varied, with some families experiencing a very poor service. The relationship between the Transport Coordination Unit and families is strained at best, but often broken. There is a lack of trust in the service, and many parents do not feel staff want to help. Changes need to be made as a matter of urgency to improve the situation for our families, as the stress some are facing is unacceptable.

There are several things that can be done to improve the service; some will have quick impact while others are going to take time. The following recommendations are some of the things we would like to see happen.

Recommendations

1. As a matter of urgency, the council complies with its statutory duty and publishes the information on home to school transport within the Local Offer.
2. The information on the council website is reviewed with parent carers to ensure it is fit for purpose.
3. All staff within the Transport Coordination Unit and their managers undertake training on how to communicate with families. This needs to be based on lived experience to help build empathy. This training has started but needs to be delivered to the rest of the team, and a roll out program needs to be in place for new staff.
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8. Improved information sharing and clarity of who is responsible for doing this. For example, who advises transport providers of inset days so the transport does not arrive.

References



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**INFLUENCING
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