

North Yorkshire Council

Richmond (Yorks) Area Committee

27 January 2025

Receipt of Petition titled 'Rethink North Yorkshire School Transport Cuts'.

Report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal and Democratic Services)

<p>1.0 Purpose of the Report</p> <p>1.1 To advise of a petition containing more than 500 signatures.</p> <p>1.2 To ask the Area Committee to consider a response.</p>
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2.0 The Petition

- 2.1 A combined paper and electronic petition has been received by North Yorkshire Council and contains 2129 signatures of people who live, work or study in the county.
- 2.2 The title of the petition is 'Rethink North Yorkshire School Transport Cuts'. There are two statements attached to the petition which are outlined below (see *italics*):

1. *North Yorkshire Council's recent decision to limit free school transport to the nearest school only is detrimental to rural families. It will divide communities, harm local schools and risk children's safety by requiring travel on remote, often impassable routes. In return, there is no guarantee of any substantial financial savings.*

We the undersigned, led by a team of anxious Upper Dales parents and local residents, demand that councillors rethink and reverse this damaging policy in the light of the negative impact it will have on the safety and education of children across rural North Yorkshire.

2. *North Yorkshire Council has voted to reduce the provision of free home to school transport. None of the pupils that live in Swaledale will be eligible for funded transport to their catchment secondary school in Richmond. Free transport will only be offered to the nearest school, in Leyburn, Kirkby Stephen or Barnard Castle. All of these journeys involve minor, steep, single-track roads over high moorland. In winter, all of these routes become impassable before (and more often than) the low-level route to Richmond. While the nearest school principle is easy to understand in some places, its application in our region requires further consideration.*

The Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, two Conservative and many Independent Councillors voted against the policy. Despite many objections from parents, teachers, school governors and members of the public, the Council has not yet made provision for our community.

The Action Group working on this has decided to send another petition to the Council asking them to rescind their decision, or to make an exemption for Swaledale.

2.3 The petition can be seen on the Council's website here: [Petitions received | North Yorkshire Council](#)

3.0 The Council's Arrangements for Receiving and Responding to Petitions

3.1 The key features of the Council's arrangements for receiving and debating petitions, as published on the Council's website, are as follows:

- Receipt of the petition is published on the Council's website (which has been done in the case of this petition).
- If a petition contains 500 or more signatures (but less than 30,130 signatories), it will be scheduled for debate at the next meeting of the appropriate Area Committee.
- The petition organiser is offered the opportunity to speak for five minutes at the Area Committee meeting to present their petition. Subsequently, at the meeting, the petition will be discussed by Councillors for a maximum of 15 minutes and a decision will be made on how to respond to the petition.
- Possible responses by the Council to petitions, as shown on the website, are:
 - (a) to take the action requested by the petition;
 - (b) not to take the action requested for reasons put forward in the debate;
 - (c) to commission further investigation into the matter, for example by a relevant committee; or
 - (d) where the issue is one on which the council Executive is required to make the final decision, the council will decide whether to make recommendations to inform that decision.
- The petition organiser will receive written confirmation of this decision. This confirmation will also be published on the website.

3.2 In accordance with the arrangements described above, the petition organisers have been invited to join today's meeting to present their petition.

4.0 Officer comments relating to the policy change process

4.1 The Council has a statutory duty to provide home to school travel for eligible children of compulsory school age in accordance with Statutory Guidance issued by the Department for Education (DfE). The Council sets out how it meets these duties in the North Yorkshire Council Home to School Travel Policy. The overall cost to the Council of the provision of home to school travel is significant and has been rising at pace. Expenditure has broadly doubled since the last revision of the policy in 2019.

4.2 The Council consulted on the current policy between 12 February and 26 April 2024. This comprised of consultation meetings for the public and school groups and an online survey that received 1299 responses. In addition to online responses, other correspondence such as letters from parish councils and feedback from transport providers were also included in the consultation. A petition 'Stop school bus cuts' containing 378 signatories was also received.

4.3 During the consultation period meetings were offered and took place with individual councillors and political groups. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee also met informally on 20th May and reviewed the motion to 'halt the cuts' that was proposed and seconded at Full Council on 15th May 2024. The report of the committee was provided and is referenced at point 499 in the minutes of the Executive meeting held on 16th July 2024.

- 4.4 On 16th July, the Executive Committee received a report requesting that the new policy was adopted and that consideration was given to seven recommendations, six of which had been subject to consultation and one which was added subsequently in relation to extending the eligibility for families on low incomes with secondary school age children.
- 4.5 Following consultation, the addition of this discretionary provision was in recognition of the impact of rurality on families where the nearest schools are further from home than in other areas. Eligibility for low income families to attend one of their three nearest suitable schools was extended from 6 to 12 miles.
- 4.6 During the meeting of the Executive, sixteen members of the public provided statements or questions, ten of these were read at the meeting.
- 4.7 At the Executive committee on 16th July 24 it was recommended unanimously to Full Council that a new home to school travel policy be adopted and the recommendations be made. The Full Council met on 24th July 24 and this item was considered and is referenced at point 101 in the minutes of that meeting. A named vote was taken, and the motion was declared carried with 48 votes for, 26 votes against and no abstentions.

Officer comments relating to the petition

1 *The request that ‘councillors rethink and reverse this damaging policy in the light of the negative impact it will have on the safety and education of children across rural North Yorkshire.’*

- 4.8 The Council must include information about their school travel policy in their composite prospectus for school admissions (which must be published by 12 September each year). Following the consultation process and the Full Council decision, the policy has been implemented since 1st September 2024. An up to-date policy is required to be available by 19 September each year so that parents may take it into account when deciding which schools to apply for during the normal admissions round. Parents of pre-school children and those leaving primary school have applied for places in primary schools and secondary schools respectively, to commence in September 2025. Proactive communication about the travel policy change has taken place alongside the admissions rounds. National Offer Days will be held in March and April 2025 and this year’s admissions process is still live. It is therefore not possible for the Council to reverse or rescind the policy during this year’s cycle. To revise the policy at this time would not accord with our duties under The School Information (England) Regulations 2008 and also the Education and Inspections Act 2006. Therefore, the view of officers is that the policy, once approved and published, should not be *reversed* or amended during an admissions cycle.
- 4.9 The Council has agreed to undertake a post implementation review of the policy in summer 2026, when the policy will have been operational for a whole school year cycle. Before this time, it may not be possible to draw sufficient information to analyse and make meaningful recommendations. A full cycle would enable greater levels of analysis of the impacts of the policy across the whole county. The findings of this review will be published in autumn 2026 and should a revision to the policy be required, there would be time for this to be proposed, consulted on and adopted in time for 12th September 2027 at the earliest. Therefore, the view of officers is that this, already agreed review, could address the petitioners’ request for councillors to *rethink* the policy.

2 *The request that councillors ‘make an exemption for Swaledale’.*

- 4.10 The Council is required to set policy for the county. The petition refers to the nearest school principle. This is a term covered by DfE within their statutory guidance ‘Travel to school for

children of compulsory school age' (January 2024) under 'Part 1: local authorities' statutory duty in relation to eligible children'. The Council has both considered and aligned the Home to School Travel Policy to DfE guidance.

- 4.11 Across the county, the journeys that children may take to school are not the same as the distance used to calculate the nearest school. This point has been reiterated to residents who have enquired on the matter before and since the policy change, and it has been publicised widely in media releases put forward by the Council. The journeys being referred to in the petition have not been determined as home to school travel routes; this is because the September 25 admissions round is still live and school places have not been confirmed. By association, eligibility under the travel policy has not yet been assessed for any children in Swaledale who are moving to secondary school in September 2025. The view of officers is that it is too early to consider *exemptions* and that policy changes of any kind should be considered after the post implementation review.
- 4.12 To conclude, the policy was subject to a consultation process and all responses were published alongside the reports at the time the policy was adopted. Today, the policy implementation is still in its early stages, so any changes should (i) only take place once there is sufficient evidence to review the current policy impacts, and (ii) should only be scheduled to occur within the timeframes set out in the school admissions regulations.

5.0 Recommendations

- 5.1 That the Committee notes the petition and provides a response as detailed in paragraph 3.1.

Possible responses by the Council to petitions, as shown on the website, are:

- (a) to take the action requested by the petition;*
- (b) not to take the action requested for reasons put forward in the debate;*
- (c) to commission further investigation into the matter, for example by a relevant committee; or*
- (d) where the issue is one on which the council Executive is required to make the final decision, the council will decide whether to make recommendations to inform that decision.*

Appendices:

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Background Document: North Yorkshire Council's petitions information and advice, a copy of which is on the Council's website [Petitions | North Yorkshire Council](#)