

Update on Mainstream Home to School Transport

Date of meeting 26 April 2024

Date of report 16 April 2024

Report by Head of Bus Strategy & Delivery

1. Object of report

To update the Committee in relation to the plans, procurement and processes to deliver Mainstream Home to School Transport.

2. Background to report

Under agency agreements with 11 councils in the West of Scotland, SPT manages, monitors and procures the provision of Mainstream Home to School Transport (HST). This is achieved through the procurement of contracted services from commercial bus and coach operators, taxi and minibus providers. This combination of operators is required as the complexity of school travel takes account of distance travelled, location of pupils to specific schools, and number of children to be collected on specific routes. In addition, each council determines non-eligible entitlement on varying criteria.

To that end, SPT typically manages approximately 1,200 contracts at any one time, ensuring c. 36,000 primary and secondary pupils get to school and home again, completing around 72,000 journeys per day. The projected current cost of HST provision in 2024/25 is £44 million.

The performance of operators in providing services in fulfilment of these school contracts is actively monitored by the SPT team of Compliance Inspectors, whose role is to ensure that the vehicles and service provided meet the safety requirements, contract specification and quality criteria stipulated by each council (again, this differs across councils).

For the school year 2024/2025, SPT has advertised c.390 contract renewals (to provide HST for around 8,843 pupils) on behalf of our partner Local Authorities. Pupil eligibility for Home to School Transport is determined by each individual Local Authority. Eligibility is based on a pupil's home address being further from school than the designated Walking Distance for the respective Local Authority, as detailed in Appendix 1 for reference.

3. Outline of proposals

The key stages in the HST contract renewals process are summarised as:

- Tender Specification
- Tender Advertisement
- Tender Evaluation
- Notification of Most Economically Advantageous Tender

- Contract Approval(s)
- Contract Award(s)
- Contract Mobilisation
- Contract Monitoring

A robust project management approach to school transport planning is adopted to ensure that the complex process and interactions with individual councils is understood. The above tendering exercise has now been completed timeously, including council approvals and operator notifications. Details of the key milestones for this exercise are included in Appendix 2.

Given pressures on HST transport budgets, and further initiatives including the Under 22's Free Bus Travel Scheme, SPT is aware that a number of local authorities are considering their policy in terms of designated Walking Distance. The statutory designated walking distance is three miles for secondary schools and two miles for primary schools, with HST transport being provided out with these distances in certain council areas. Any such changes are likely to require extensive consultation by local authorities. It is anticipated that prospective savings may also be limited in cases where most eligible pupils reside out with the statutory designated walking distance. SPT officers therefore continue to engage with respective local authorities in this regard, consider any implications for contract renewal durations and will assist local authorities in assessing the benefits and risks of any policy change. For example, SPT continue to meet with NLC/SLC colleagues to discuss such proposed changes and potential impacts.

Notwithstanding the above, the key ongoing risks to HST delivery include the following factors:

- Inflationary pressures, including in relation to fuel price volatility and wages.
- Continuing national shortage of bus and coach drivers.
- Reduced government support for bus and coach; and
- Concerns over the ongoing viability of bus, coach and taxi operators in the HST market.

SPT officers provide regular updates to the Education Transport Liaison Group attended by the 11 partner Local Authorities on matters such as the above and actions to mitigate such risks, where possible. Further pre-contract inception meetings have also been held, where necessary, with operators identified as being particularly impacted by the above risks, to seek assurance and confirm contract readiness ahead of the commencement of the school term.

4. Committee action

The Committee is recommended to note that: The Mainstream Home to School transport provision is essential in supporting and facilitating the education of children across Strathclyde. SPT has successfully managed, monitored, and maintained provision of Mainstream Home to School Transport on behalf of 11 of our partner councils for many years.

As the 2024/2025 HST contract renewal process is now underway in line with the agreed Project Plan and Key Milestones, the ongoing challenges faced remain significant in respect of driver availability, fuel price volatility and wider inflationary pressures – market volatility remains a key risk to successful delivery.

SPT officers continue to collaborate closely with our Local Authority partners and operators, in order to mitigate such risks, where possible.

5. Consequences

Policy consequences	<i>Delivery of school transport is in line with the Regional Transport Strategy.</i>
Legal consequences	<i>None directly.</i>

Financial consequences	<i>Budgets have been provided to Councils for 2024/2025. These will be monitored against actual expenditure during the financial year and reported to Councils on a quarterly basis.</i>
Personnel consequences	<i>None directly.</i>
Equalities consequences	<i>Ongoing monitoring of equalities impacts of school transport.</i>
Risk consequences	<i>The fragility of the Home to School Transport market remains an ongoing risk to delivering services effectively and efficiently.</i>
Climate Change, Adaptation & Carbon consequences	<i>School transport has a positive benefit through reducing the need for journeys by less sustainable modes.</i>

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APPENDIX 1

HST Contract Renewals & Walking Distances by Local Authority

Council	No of Contracts	Number of Pupils	Walking Distance Requirement (High School)	Walking Distance Requirement (Primary School)
East Ayrshire	38	890	3 miles	1.5 miles
South Ayrshire	49	534	3 miles	2 miles
North Ayrshire	20	394	3 miles	2 miles
*North Lanarkshire	87	2522	2 miles	1 mile
**South Lanarkshire	89	796	2 miles	1 mile
West Dunbartonshire	8	225	2 miles	1 mile
East Dunbartonshire	28	1160	3 miles	1 mile
Inverclyde	5	85	2 miles	1 mile
Glasgow	13	499	2.2 miles	1.2 miles
East Renfrewshire	11	67	3 miles	2 miles
Renfrewshire	44	1671	2 miles	1 mile
Overall	392	8843		

*North Lanarkshire: Are implementing 3 miles (High School) August 2024
2 miles (Primary School) August 2025

**South Lanarkshire: Are consulting on changes for High School only from August 2025

Both of the above are not yet confirmed. South Lanarkshire is subject to consultation conclusion.

APPENDIX 2

Key Milestones

- Tender Specification – Target completion Date(s); Phase 1; 10 January 2024
Phase 2; 22 April 2024
- Tender Advertisement – Target completion Date(s); Phase 1; 15 January 2024
Phase 2; 25 April 2024
- Tender Evaluation – Target completion Date(s); Phase 1; 5 April 2024
Phase 2; 7 June 2024
- Notification of Most Economically Advantageous Tender – Target completion
Date(s); Phase 1; 5 April 2024. Phase 2; 7 June 2024
- Contract Approval(s) – Target completion Date(s); Phase 1 5 April to 12 April 2024
Phase 2; 7 June 2024 to 14 June 2024
- Contract Award(s) – Target completion Date(s); Phase 1 19 April 2024
Phase 2; 21 June 2024 (subject to approvals)
- Contract Mobilisation – Target completion Date(s); August 2024 / As per school
return dates.
- Contract Monitoring – Ongoing 2024/2025.