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Committee of Public Accounts

Home-to-school transport

Seventieth Report of Session 2024–26

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Committee of Public Accounts

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Summary

Home to school transport is a vital service for the children, young people and families that rely on it, helping to ensure that transport is not a barrier to accessing education, but at a cost of £2.3 billion in 2023–24, it is placing unsustainable pressure on local authority budgets. The most acute cost pressure comes from provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), where real-terms expenditure more than doubled in less than a decade, reaching £1.7 billion in 2023–24. Yet despite this level of spending, the Department for Education (the Department) does not know whether home to school transport is achieving value for money. It will need much better data to further its understanding of the main cost drivers, how changes to policy impact demand for transport, and how access to transport impacts attendance and participation.

Faced with significantly increasing costs, local authorities have adopted a range of cost-saving measures. These have included cuts to non-statutory transport, especially for 16–19-year-olds, with likely effects on attendance and participation, potentially contributing to higher rates of young people not in education, employment or training. The Department and local authorities are relying on long-awaited reforms to local government funding and to the SEND system to ensure the long-term sustainability of the service, but the SEND reforms will take time to affect home to school transport. Given the uncertainty over the eventual impact of these reforms, it is essential the Department takes action to support local authorities and put the service on a more sustainable footing. Government has recently announced the write off of historic SEND deficits, contingent on approved local authority SEND reform plans, but the level of support available for deficits arising from now until March 2028 remains unknown.

While some children with the most significant levels of need may always require bespoke transport from home, savings could be realised by resetting expectations of the service local authorities must provide and ensuring that good practice is shared routinely. In providing “home to school transport”, local authorities can consider a range of options besides offering a door-to-door service, such as financial assistance or transport from a central hub, depending on what support is most suitable. Better local transport, well-integrated with decisions on education, along with school placement nearer to home will offer alternative—lower cost—modes of transport for those able to use them and may offer the added benefit of supporting independence into adulthood.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The Department for Education and local government are highly reliant on recently announced SEND reforms to solve the pressing problems with home to school transport.** Local authority efforts to deliver school transport services at lower cost are not keeping pace with growing demand, particularly for SEND transport, where spending has increased by 106% in real terms over the period 2015–16 to 2023–24. As well as actions such as route optimisation, more sharing of transport, new approaches to contracting and promotion of independent travel training, most authorities have also restricted non-statutory transport provision, particularly for young people aged 16–19. The Department assures us it is working closely with local authorities to understand and promote best practice, and with the transport sector to provide better public transport. However, to achieve the scale of change needed, both the Department and local authorities are looking to long-awaited SEND reforms, which are still subject to consultation. By identifying needs earlier and meeting needs of more children closer to home, the Department expects demand and distances travelled, and therefore costs, to fall. However, even if the recently announced reforms are successful, it is likely to be some time before they translate into savings on school transport.

RECOMMENDATION

The Department should, in its Treasury Minute response, provide the Committee with an update on:

a. how the proposed SEND reforms will affect home-to-school transport costs, when savings will start to materialise, and what the estimated savings by year will be; and

b. what it is doing to address the growing costs of providing home to school transport in the meantime, including how it is facilitating greater sharing of best practice between local authorities.

2. **The Department does not understand how access to transport is affecting attendance, nor how difficult it is for parents to navigate the system, particularly post-16.** While acknowledging that transport is critical to accessing education and training, the Department does not

know how annual spending—£2.3 billion in 2023–24 and £2.6 billion in 2024–25—on home to school transport is impacting overall attendance and participation levels. Instead, it only considers how many sessions children who are already receiving local-authority-provided transport might fail to attend due to problems on a particular day. That is surprising when nearly one in five children misses a day or more of school per fortnight—around one in three at sixth form age—and almost 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Entitlement to transport differs markedly by age, with parents often experiencing a cliff edge post-16. For ages 16–19 local authorities have discretion to decide what support, if any, is necessary to facilitate attendance in education. Despite the weight of evidence that parents find the system hard to navigate, the Department appears unconcerned about the clarity of the offering for this age group or the impact that losing transport at 16 may have. Parents and colleges report young people missing learning or failing to start courses after age 16 because transport is no longer provided or is not suitable.

RECOMMENDATION

In its Treasury Minute response the Department should provide an update on action it is taking to:

a. improve its understanding of the relationship between home to school transport, attendance and those not in education, employment or training; and

b. work with local authorities to ensure parents understand entitlement post 16.

3. **The Department does not yet have the data it needs to oversee home to school transport effectively.** Though local authorities have submitted spending data on home to school transport for many years, the Department has only recently started to collect data on the number of children and young people receiving transport and how they travel. It received a 75% response to its 2025 voluntary data collection, but the way local authorities collect data varies and some were only able to provide partial responses. Without a better understanding of costs per capita—how they compare between authorities, and across different modes and providers of transport—and trends over time, the Department cannot understand if it is achieving value for taxpayers' money. It also lacks a credible baseline against which to measure how future policy changes, such as SEND reforms, affect costs and demand for home to school transport. The Department does not know who receives home to school transport and whether it reaches those most in need. Parents report that provision broadly meets need for children with SEND up to 16, but not beyond.

RECOMMENDATION

a. Alongside its Treasury Minute response the Department should write to the Committee setting out its plans for continuing to improve data quality so it can better understand cost drivers, identify and share best practice, and have a starting point against which to measure the impact of policy changes, for example the recently announced SEND reforms, on demand for home to school transport.

b. The Department should make its data collection from local authorities mandatory and write to the Committee setting out how it is improving consistency and standardising data while minimising cost and burden for local authorities.

4. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has now set out the detail of its new funding formula for home to school transport but not yet set out its plans for monitoring whether it proves to be successful in aligning funding with local need.** In 2023–24, home to school transport (pre-16) accounted for approximately 3.7% of total local government spending, but is one of the fastest growing areas of local authority spending. In response to the escalating pressure it has been placing on local authority budgets in the past decade, MHCLG has announced a new funding formula for home to school transport from April 2026 to better align funding allocated through the local government finance settlement with local need. MHCLG assures us that the formula reflects rural and urban differences, for example, by basing funding on journey time rather than miles travelled. It published details on the formula after the evidence session. Although it represents a much smaller proportion of the total, spending on 'SEND transport' post-16 is growing proportionately faster than for pre-16, but is not covered by the new formula. MHCLG has yet to set out how it intends to monitor the impact the new funding formula has on local authorities.

RECOMMENDATION

MHCLG should write to the Committee to set out how it will assess whether the funding formula changes better align with local needs in practice.

5. **While the Government has now announced plans to write off 90% of the historic deficit from SEND overspending, the plan for deficits arising from now until March 2028 remains unclear.** Funding for SEND-related high-needs spending has not kept pace with demand over the past decade, and local authority cumulative SEND deficits are projected to exceed £5 billion by the end of March 2026. In the November 2025

Budget, the Government announced that from 2028–29, it would meet SEND costs from central departmental budgets. In June 2025, Government extended the statutory override—the mechanism that has allowed local authorities to keep existing SEND high-needs deficits off council budgets—until March 2028. Acknowledging them as a shared responsibility between central and local government, in February 2026 MHCLG announced that all local authorities would be eligible to receive a grant covering 90% of historic deficits up to the end of 2025–26, subject to the Department for Education's approval of a local authority SEND reform plan. MHCLG has not yet said what level of support it will offer on deficits arising from overspending which occurs from now to March 2028 or what, if any, support it will give to local authorities that avoided running up SEND deficits by making cuts to other services. While new funding arrangements will address SEND cost pressures for local authorities from 2028–29, they do not cover associated home to school transport costs, which will continue to put pressure on local authority budgets.

RECOMMENDATION

a. MHCLG should, at the earliest opportunity, clarify the level of support it will provide to local authorities with ongoing deficits from overspending on high-needs budgets.

b. MHCLG should explain the basis on which it will decide to write off historic deficits and how this will work in practice including what, if any, support it will give to local authorities that avoided running up SEND deficits by making cuts to other services.

6. **Better local transport options and an integrated approach to education and transport planning, would reduce home to school transport costs, particularly in the most rural settings.** The ongoing decline of bus services, particularly in rural areas, is a long-standing concern for this Committee. It has reduced travel options and increased reliance on local-authority-provided home to school transport. A move to local bus franchising, where local authorities decide the routes, timetables and fares for local services provides an opportunity to replace expensive contracts with lower-cost alternatives. For many of the children and young people that use it, particularly those with SEND, transport is not just about going from A to B but also about gaining independence. Ensuring bus services better meet the needs of pupils will require coordination between transport and education authorities. There are some good examples of coordination and collaboration between local authority SEND and transport teams already, but the Department could do more to promote this. Safer walking and cycling routes to school could reduce reliance on home to school transport and offer benefits to the community as a whole, while

resetting expectations about what travel assistance looks like beyond a door-to-door service could also create savings. For example, rather than a taxi from home to school, it could be transport from home to a bus stop or from a bus stop to a place of education.

RECOMMENDATION

In its Treasury Minute response, the Department should set out how it is working with the local government sector and with other government departments, such as DfT, to better integrate education and transport planning in all local authorities and harness the benefits that improved local transport can have on home to school transport.

1 Overseeing home to school transport

Introduction

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Department for Education (the Department) and from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on home to school transport in England.[1] We also took evidence from the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (ADEPT), the Local Government Association (LGA) and Contact, a charity for families with disabled children.

2. In 2023–24, local authorities in England spent £2.32 billion transporting an estimated 520,000 eligible children and young people (aged 0–25 years) to school or college. New data for 2024–25, published in December 2025 shows this had increased to £2.6 billion.[2] Real-terms spending on this service increased by 70% over the period 2015–16 to 2023–24, following the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014, which introduced major reforms to the system for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Around three quarters of all home to school transport spending in 2023–24 (£1.7 billion) went on transporting children and young people with SEND, and the majority (£1.5 billion) on children aged 0–16 years.[3] For 2024–25, these figures were £2 billion and £1.7 billion respectively.[4]

3. To ensure that transport is not a barrier to accessing education, the Education Act 1996 requires local authorities to provide free-of-charge transport to and from school to children of compulsory school age (5–16 years) who cannot reasonably be expected to walk there—because of the distance, a special educational need, a disability or mobility problem, or due to the route being unsafe—or because they qualify for support due to low income. While young people must remain in education or training until the age of 18, local authorities do not have to provide free or subsidised transport for young people over 16, and local authorities

1 C&AG's Report, Home to school transport, Session 2024–26, HC 1377, 31 October 2025
2 Department for Education, Local authority and school expenditure, England 2024–25,
3 C&AG's Report, paras 1.19-1.20. Figures in 2023–24 prices.
4 Section 251 data: 2024 to 2025, Local authority expenditure on schools, other education and community

have discretion to decide what support is necessary to facilitate their attendance at school or college. Local authorities have specific legal duties relating to transport for young people aged 16–25 with SEND; the extent of these duties depends on the young person's age and when they started their course. Local authorities must publish an annual transport policy statement outlining the transport arrangements they will make for post-16 learners, with specific regard to those with SEND.[5]

4. The Department has policy responsibility for home to school transport in England. It sets national eligibility criteria and issues statutory guidance to local authorities, who are responsible for arranging transport services. Local authorities normally commission third parties to provide transport, although some have in-house fleets. MHCLG is responsible for the financial framework within which local authorities operate and allocates funding to local authorities through the Local Government Finance Settlement.[6]

5. In this report we use the term 'home-to-school transport' because it is widely used in the sector. However, it is important to note that the travel arrangements offered may not always be required to be to and from a young person's own front door, that qualifying 'schools' may include a variety of educational settings including colleges, and that travel assistance may not necessarily be transport. For example, it could include an escort for walking or wheeling to school, or travel budgets for parents to make their own transport arrangements. It has been suggested that 'home to school transport' should be considered in the broader context of school transport, with the Local Government Association telling us that it should be viewed as "assisted travel to school" instead.[7]

6. We also received written submissions from sources including local authorities and wider local government stakeholders, the voluntary and education sectors, and providers of transport services. A list of the written evidence we received is available on the inquiry page of the Committee's website.[8] Particular issues and concerns drawn to our attention included:

- the significant pressure that home to school transport is putting on local authority budgets, driven by an increase in demand for transport for children and young people with SEND.
- the role for better local transport in facilitating attendance at school or college;
- the impact of losing transport after 16 on participation and attendance at school or college for young people with SEND;

5 C&AG's Report, paras 1,2 and Figure 1
6 C&AG's Report, para 3
7 Q 24
8 Committee of Public Accounts, Home-to-school transport

- the importance of promoting independence in young people through travel assistance; and
- Inconsistency in how local authorities interpret their duties, particularly post 16.

7. Following our evidence session in December 2025, on 23 February 2026 the Government announced the reforms intended "to transform outcomes for children with SEND and end one size fits all approach", and published its schools white paper detailing reforms to the school and SEND systems in England.[9]

Reducing the cost of home to school transport

8. Following the introduction of the Children and Families Act (CFA), local authority spending on school transport for children and young people with SEND increased by 106% in real terms over the period 2015–16 to 2023–24—from £0.85 billion to £1.76 billion—compared to 9% for 'mainstream' transport.[10] Data for 2024–25, published in December 2025, shows spending on 'SEND transport' had risen to £2 billion.[11] While the Department does not yet have reliable data on how demand for transport has changed since the CFA, evidence from local authorities points to an increase in the number of children and young people qualifying for transport due to SEND.[12]

9. When we asked what local authorities were doing to try to reduce the cost of home to school transport, ADEPT told us that local authorities had spent four years going through every conceivable way to bring down the cost. Approaches taken included route optimisation and independent travel training, personal budgets, bringing fleet in-house, more sharing of transport, and other ways to bring contract costs down, for example, through reverse auctions.[13] In written evidence, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) told us that local authorities' efforts to improve efficiency were consistently outpaced by inflationary pressures and

9 DfE, Specialist SEND support in every school and community, 23 February 2026
10 C&AG's Report, paras 10 and 1.9
11 Section 251 data: 2024 to 2025, Local authority expenditure on schools, other education and community
12 County Councils Network (HTS0004); The Association of Directors of Children's Services (HTS0011); Cornwall County Council (HTS0014); Devon County Council (HTS0021); Durham County Council (HTS0022), Association of Transport Coordinating Officers (HTS0023); Oxfordshire County Council (HTS0034); Suffolk County Council (HTS0026); Medway Council (HTS0029)
13 Qq 17-20

rising demand. It described the cost of home to school transport for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) as having "reached crisis point".[14]

10. Contact told us that, in its experience, the main way that local authorities had cut costs was by removing discretionary transport provision for young people aged 16–19.[15] ADEPT acknowledged that a lack of money meant that many local authorities had had to cut all non-statutory transport provision.[16] It explained that despite local authority efforts to bring down costs, if there are insufficient places in local schools and a child needs to travel 50 rather than 30 minutes or if a child has high needs and requires a passenger assistance in a single-occupancy vehicle, then there is nothing a local authority can do to bring those costs down. ADEPT told us that insufficient local places for children and young people with SEND made SEND reform important.[17] ADEPT explained that SEND reform would increase local and mainstream capacity, bring down mileage and therefore cost, and reduce the number of contracts local authorities put out. The LGA told us that SEND reforms would have a huge impact on home to school transport and that it was not possible to fix one without the other.[18] Unison wrote to us after the session, highlighting its concerns about responsibilities for healthcare provision on home to school transport and how it is being funded.[19]

11. We questioned the Department about local authority approaches to cost savings and whether all were learning lessons. The Department noted the wide range of approaches that local authorities were taking and assured us it was working with ADEPT and others in the local authority sector to share best practice.[20] It referenced the ADEPT toolkit from 2023 which, it explained, looks at all the approaches that local authorities had been taking and lists areas for possible savings. However, when it came to identifying good practice, the Department advised caution, noting that, for example, transport planning may look very different in a large rural area, compared with an urban one.[21] The Department told us it was also working closely with the Department for Transport (DfT) on the provision of better public transport.[22]

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14 The Association of Directors of Children's Services (HTS0011)
15 Q 20; C&AG's Report, para 15 and figure 1
16 Q 9
17 Q 17
18 Q 22
19 Letter from Unison, 22 January 2026
20 Qq 45, 46
21 Q 46, ADEPT, SEND Transport Toolkit, 9 November 2023
22 Q 72

12. The Department told us that the biggest driver of cost was SEND provision and described successful SEND reform as the single thing that would make the biggest difference. It told us that children and young people with education, health and care (EHC) plans or in special schools travel further to their educational setting, and, if successful, reform will allow more children to attend an inclusive school that is nearby.[23] By identifying needs earlier and more effectively in local settings, the Department expects fewer children to need transport to distant specialist provision. When we asked the Department how and when the SEND reforms would start to impact transport costs, the Department told us of the work that was ongoing but could not give a definitive answer.[24] The government had initially planned to set out its approach to SEND reform in a Schools White Paper in autumn 2025 but in October 2025 said it would publish early in the new year.[25] The proposals have now been published and are now subject to a consultation period, which will close on 18 May 2026.[26] Even if successful, it could be a long time before SEND reforms translate into savings on school transport.[27]

Understanding the impact of home to school transport on attendance

13. In the academic year 2023/24, around one in five children of compulsory school age in England missed a day or more of school per fortnight – and around one in three at sixth form age.[28] Government data from November 2025 showed that almost one million young people aged 16–24 in the UK were not in education, employment or training (NEET).[29] Improving attendance is a key priority for the Department.[30] It is also unclear whether the Government is ensuring that home-to-school transport is being used to ensure children can access further opportunities, such as by ensuring transport arrives at school before free breakfast clubs. Further clarification would be welcomed.[31]

23 Q 42
24 Q 48; C&AG's Report, para 3.18
25 HMT, Spending Review 2025, 30 June 2025, DfE, SEND Reform: Education Secretary writes to the Education Select Committee, 22 October 2025
26 DfE, SEND reform: putting children and young people first, 23 February 2026
27 C&AG's report, para 3.18
28 HMG, Education statistics, pupil absence in schools, percentage of persistent absentees (10% missed) for autumn and spring term terms, year groups 12 and above, accessed on 18 February 2026
29 C&AG's report, para 1.15; ONS, Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK, 20 November 2024
30 Q 29, DfE, Working together to improve school attendance, August 2024, C&AG's report, para 1.15
31 Qq 32-24

14. Given that home to school transport policy aims to facilitate attendance, we asked the Department if the current system was doing all it could to promote it. The Department told us that it saw transport as critical to ensuring access to education but explained that it only measures the number of total school sessions missed due to problems on a particular day with local-authority-provided home to school transport (for the 6% of children that already receive it). It told us that for the 2024/25 academic year, only around 0.15% of all school sessions missed (by all school children) were due to issues with transport.[32] We asked whether home to school transport was affecting absence and attendance. Contact told us that it heard a lot from families with disabled children that a lack of transport was clearly an issue and was having an impact on attendance, particularly post-16, but noted a lack of good data. Contact told us that in speaking with parents of disabled children up to 16, 80% said transport was helping their children to be in school.[33]

15. Contact explained that the changes in entitlement to transport after age 16 could feel like a "cliff edge" for those that would no longer receive it and that it had huge impacts on the whole family.[34] The charity told us that 40% of families it had consulted said they had had to give up work as a result.[35] In written evidence, Natspec, which represents 140 specialist further education colleges for students aged 16–19 with SEND, said that a lack of suitable transport was affecting learner attendance at college. In a survey of its members, 65% of respondents said that transport issues had resulted in learners being unable to attend college or attending intermittently, with one college seeing 30 students failing to start courses because transport had yet to be agreed.[36] When we asked the Department how changes to transport could reduce the NEET rate, the Department told us that while transport improves access to the labour market, it did not think that a lack of transport was driving the current NEET rate increases. We pressed the Department to do more to understand the relationship between transport and the NEET rate in different areas, particularly rural locations.[37]

16. When we asked how hard it was for parents to navigate the legislation, Contact told us that it was a regular top topic on its helpline and that parents did not really know their rights. It explained that the system was particularly unclear post-16 and that it changed by local authority in real-time. The LGA agreed that the system was complex and particularly difficult for parents. It said it was also difficult for local authority staff,

32 Qq 29, 76; C&AG's Report, par 1.13
33 Qq 4-5
34 C&AG's Report, para 3.11, figure 1
35 Qq 4-7, 9
36 Natspec (HTS0007)
37 Q 76

citing an example authority that transports 10,000 passengers per day through 1,200 contracts and over 200 providers.[38] This sentiment was echoed in written evidence, including from the Challenging Behaviour Foundation, the Association of Colleges and the Transport Studies Unit at the University of Oxford.[39] When we asked the Department about navigability of the system, it told us that it was for local authorities to assess eligibility and ensure their published travel policies were clear. It said it did not see many complaints about the clarity of the offer but acknowledged that the discretionary offer may be less clear.[40]

The Department's understanding of cost and demand drivers

17. Local authorities have submitted spending data on home to school transport for many years through the section 251 returns. The Department has not routinely collected information on how many children and young people receive transport, how they travel or why they are eligible.[41] It acknowledged this limited its ability to understand the challenges and pressures in the system.[42] In February 2025, the Department started to collect this data and told us that it received a 75% response rate to its 2025 voluntary data collection, equivalent to 115 local authorities. However, the dataset has several limitations and not all local authorities answered all questions.[43]

18. When we asked whether the Department's data would enable it to capture best practice by local authorities and help them to benchmark and negotiate better value contracts, ADEPT told us that the Department was making a very good start and that better data of any kind would help.[44] The Department explained that it had worked closely with local authority partners to design the data collection and that it had been able to estimate confidently the total population of children and young people using home to school transport – around 520,000.[45] It told us that it was capturing data on modes of transport and eligibility-type data, and that it was continuing to develop its understanding which would allow benchmarking of local authorities with like-for-like characteristics.[46]

38 Q 12
39 Challenging Behaviour Foundation (HTS0005); Association of Colleges (HTS0016); The Transport Studies Unit, University of Oxford (HTS0025)
40 Q 28
41 C&AG's Report, para 2.2
42 Q 30; C&AG's Report, para 2.2
43 Qq 30, 38; C&AG's report, para 2.2, Appendix para 2.2
44 Qq 11,22
45 Q 30
46 Q 31

19. We suggested that the Department make the data collection mandatory for all local authorities and that they should provide data on a more granular and consistent basis. ADEPT told us the Department had been working with them to understand and improve the data collected without overwhelming local authorities, but said that authorities collect data in lots of different ways using different metrics and different systems. The Department acknowledged there had been challenges with consistency of data, for example, different interpretations of what constituted a single-occupancy vehicle.[47] It said it wanted to continue to refine the dataset and confirmed that it would collect data for a second year, but said that it would keep the question of whether to make it mandatory under review. The Department said it was conscious of the cost and burden on local authorities and was thinking about whether there were easier and better ways to access data, for example, through management information systems.[48]

20. Given its reliance on SEND reform to deliver significant change, we asked the Department if it had sufficient data on the current situation to enable it to evaluate the impact of the new reforms. The Department told us that it had spending data but had not had enough detailed data on modes and patterns of transport, nor on eligibility-type.[49] We asked if transport was going to those that needed it most.[50] Contact told us, with specific reference to families with disabled children, that up to the age of 16, transport was broadly going to those children who otherwise would not be able to get to their place of education. It told us that the policy was not working for children aged 16–19 because financial constraints on councils meant that the service for that group was being pulled.[51]

47 Qq 11, 38
48 Qq 30, 38
49 Q 30
50 Qq 4, 27
51 Q 4

2 Supporting a sustainable home to school transport service

A new funding formula for home to school transport

21. In its June 2025 Fair Funding Review, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) said that home to school transport for children up to 16 accounted for approximately 3.7% of total local government spending in 2023–24.[52] It is one of the fastest growing areas of local authority spending.[53] In response to the escalating pressure it has been putting on local authority budgets in the past decade, MHCLG is introducing a new relative needs formula for pre-16 transport from April 2026.[54] MHCLG told us it recognised that home to school transport was an important issue for some authorities and that the formula would allocate funding to local authorities—through the local government finance settlement—based on need.[55]

22. We asked whether the new formula would take account of the higher costs faced by rural authorities in respect of home to school transport. MHCLG told us that, across the local government finance settlement and in its revision of funding formulae, it was confident it was capturing the needs of both urban and rural authorities. For example, rather than looking at straight-line distances in terms of miles travelled, MHCLG said it would take account of how long it takes to drive, reflecting that it can take a long time to travel short distances in urban areas or that you may not be able to travel fast in rural areas.[56]

52 Q 52, MHCLG, Consultation Outcome, The Fair Funding Review 2.0, June 2025, section 4.11
53 CA&AG's Report, para 5; The Association of Directors of Children's Services (HTS0011)
54 Q 52; C&AG's Report paras 3.25-3.26,
55 Qq 50-52
56 Q 52

23. The Department and MHCLG explained that there were different calculations for SEND and mainstream funding to account for the additional costs associated with SEND transport, but that both were based on pupil populations and adjusted distances to school. For both mainstream and SEND transport, the formula uses pupil populations for children of compulsory school age only (5–16 years); it does not cover funding for post-16 transport.[57] Although at £0.2 billion in 2023–24 it represents a small proportion of overall spending, the Department told us SEND-related transport for 16 to18-year-olds was growing even faster than for those aged 5 to 16.[58]

24. In December 2025, shortly after our oral evidence session, MHCLG published the provisional local government finance settlement for the period 2026–27 to 2028–29 along with a technical note on the new funding formula for home to school transport.[59] MHCLG published the final versions in February 2026.[60]

Addressing SEND deficits

25. We have previously highlighted how SEND-related funding—the high-needs block of the Dedicated Schools Grant—has not kept pace with demand over the past decade, and that local authorities have built up substantial deficits.[61] Cumulative deficits are projected to exceed £5 billion by the end of March 2026.[62] Since 2020, the impact of these deficits on a local authority's financial position has been deferred through a statutory override which has allowed local authorities to exclude these deficits from their main revenue budgets and continue to deliver a balanced budget. In January 2025, we called on central government to work with local authorities towards a sustainable plan for the end of statutory override in March 2026.[63] In June 2025, the Government extended the statutory override until March 2028. In the November 2025 Budget, the Government announced that from 2028–29 it would meet SEND costs from central

57 Q 52, MHCLG, Home to school transport formula technical note , 17 December 2025
58 Q27; C&AG's Report figure 3,
59 MHCLG, Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2026–27 to 2028–29, 17 December 2025; MHCLG, Home to school transport formula technical note , 17 December 2025
60 MHCLG, Final Local Government Finance Settlement: England, 2026–2027 to 2028–2029, 9 February 2026; MHCLG, Home to school transport formula technical note , 17 December 2025
61 Q 53
62 Local Government Finance Settlement 2026–27 to 2028–29, HCWS1315, 9 February 2026
63 Committee of Public Accounts, Support for children and young people with special educational needs, First Report of Session 2024–25, HC 353, 15 January 2025, para 5

departmental budgets. It said it would set out further details on its plans to support local authorities with historic and accruing deficits in the Local Government Finance Settlement.[64]

26. We asked about plans for helping local authorities with historic and accruing deficits from now to March 2028. The Department and MHCLG told us that government recognised that local authorities could not deal with these deficits on their own and that they would be a shared responsibility. They were clear that local authorities would not be able to rack up unlimited deficits and pass it on to central government and MHCLG explained that full details would be published alongside the final settlement in February 2026.[65] Two months after we heard evidence, in February 2026, MHCLG published its Final Local Government Finance Settlement. MHCLG announced that local authorities with SEND deficits would be eligible to receive, in 2026–27, a grant covering 90% of historic deficits up to the end of 2025–26, subject to the Department for Education's approval of a local authority SEND reform plan. For deficits arising in 2026–27 and 2027–28, MHCLG has announced that local authorities can expect MHCLG to take an appropriate and proportionate approach but that its support would not be unlimited.[66]

27. In written evidence, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) raised its concerns about the unsustainable pressure that the costs of SEND transport were placing on local authority general budgets, noting that these transport costs are not covered by the Dedicated Schools Grant. ADCS explained that the current legislative framework allows parents of children with an EHC plan to express a preference for a school outside their local area and requires local authorities to pay for associated transport, even where there is an appropriate school closer to home. In this way, ADCS asserted, statutory duties that were intended to be funded through the high needs block of the Dedicated Schools Grant were increasingly placing additional pressure on local authority general budgets.[67]

64 HMT, Budget 2025 Document, 28 November 2025, section 5.5
65 Qq 53-64
66 Local Government Finance Settlement 2026–27 to 2028–29, HCWS1315, 9 February 2026
67 The Association of Directors of Children's Services (HTS0011); C&AG's Report, para 1.19

Integrating education and transport planning

28. We have previously raised concerns about the long-term decline of buses, particularly in rural areas.[68] On home to school transport, the NAO reported that reductions in public transport services have increased reliance on local-authority-provided transport.[69]

29. We asked about the role of local bus franchising, under which local authorities decide the routes, timetables and fares, in reducing reliance on local-authority-provided home to school transport. ADEPT explained that better working relationships between local transport and education authorities would encourage whole system conversations including better use of commercial bus services for school transport provision.[70] The Department told us that some local authorities were exhibiting good practice in looking at SEND provisions and transport in a more integrated way. It said that franchising could help local authorities to make long-term planning more joined-up; for example, identifying routes where additional provision could reduce reliance on more expensive forms of transport.[71] It said it was working with the Department for Transport (DfT) on guidance for local authorities on "socially necessary" local routes, and on supporting local authorities to ensure routes serve schools well. In this way, it hoped local authorities might reduce spending on school transport while also providing a better service for others in the community.[72]

30. Several witnesses stressed developing independence as an important part of home to school transport provision, while acknowledging that independent travel was not always suitable.[73] The LGA told us that good practice for local authorities was not just about getting a young person from A to B but also about developing an independent person.[74] We heard from ADEPT that travel experience from daily to and from school could help children to become independent and use public transport.[75]

31. The Department told us it was working with DfT on sustainable travel and that supporting active travel, such as walking and cycling, could improve accessibility for children but also offer benefits to the community

68 Committee of Public Accounts, Local bus services in England, Fiftieth report of session 2024–26, HC 892, 29 October 2025.
69 C&AG's Report, para 2.19
70 Qq 16, 23
71 Qq 72-73
72 Q 74
73 Qq 4, 13-15, 20, 36, 73, 78,
74 Q 14
75 Q 13

as a whole.[76] ADEPT told us that a better school transport system would include resetting expectations about what the service would look like. Rather than “home to school”, which implied a door-to-door service, it might be home to a bus stop or a bus stop to a place of education.[77] The Association of Directors of Transport Coordinating Officers (ATCO) also called for more emphasis to be placed on “travel assistance” as (per the Education Act) and replacing the term “free transport” with “funded” or “subsidised travel” so that families understand that it is not free for local authorities to provide.[78]

76 Q 73

77 Q 23

78 Association of Transport Coordinating Officers (HTS0023)

Formal minutes

Monday 2 March 2026

Members present

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, in the Chair

Mr Clive Betts

Sarah Green

Rupert Lowe

Catherine McKinnell

Tristan Osborne

Matt Turmaine

Declaration of interests

The following declarations of interest relating to the inquiry were made:

8 December 2025

Sarah Hall declared the following interest: former Cabinet Member for Children and Young People at Warrington Council.

Catherine McKinnell declared the following interest: former Minister of State at the Department for Education.

Home-to-school transport

Draft Report (*Home-to-school transport*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 31 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Seventieth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Thursday 5 March at 9.30 a.m.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee's website.

Monday 8 December 2025

Anna Bird, Chief Executive Officer, Contact; **Rose McArthur**, Chair, Home to School Transport working group, ADEPT – Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport; **Councillor Amanda Hopgood**, Chair of the Children, Young People and Families Committee, Local Government Association Q1-25

Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education; **Juliet Chua CB**, Director General - Schools, Department for Education; **Nico Heslop**, Director of Local Government Finance, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Q26-83

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee's website.

HTS numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

1	24x7 Group	HTS0018
2	Ambitious about Autism	HTS0012
3	Association of Colleges	HTS0016
4	Association of Directors of children services	HTS0011
5	Association of Transport Coordinating Officers	HTS0023
6	Bridges Outcomes Partnerships	HTS0027
7	Bristol City Council	HTS0035
8	Brooks-Wilson, Sarah (Lecturer in Criminology, University of Birmingham)	HTS0002
9	Buziuk, Hleb (Independent policy researcher and human-rights advocate, FairGo CIC)	HTS0009
10	Cerebra	HTS0013
11	Challenging Behaviour Foundation	HTS0005
12	Community Transport Association	HTS0019
13	Contact	HTS0017
14	Cornwall County Council	HTS0014
15	County Councils Network	HTS0004
16	Devon County Council	HTS0021
17	Durham County Council	HTS0022
18	IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice)	HTS0020
19	LGSCO	HTS0003
20	Magic Breakfast	HTS0030
21	Medway Council	HTS0029
22	Natspec	HTS0007
23	Oxfordshire County Council	HTS0034

24	Suffolk County Council	HTS0026
25	The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT)	HTS0036
26	Transport Studies Unit, University of Oxford	HTS0025

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the publications page of the Committee's website.

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Number	Title	Reference
69th	Whole of Government Accounts 2023–24	HC 1243
68th	Excess Votes 2024-25	HC 1711
67th	NS&I's transformation programme	HC 1237
66th	Tackling fraud and error in benefit expenditure 2024-25	HC 1231
65th	Efficiency and resilience of the Probation Service	HC 1235
64th	Costs of clinical negligence	HC 1234
63rd	Increasing police productivity	HC 1239
62nd	Faulty energy efficiency installations	HC 1229
61st	Financial sustainability of children's care homes	HC 1233
60th	DWP follow-up: Autumn 2025	HC 1447
59th	Ministry of Justice follow-up: Autumn 2025	HC 1240
58th	Government services: Identifying costs	HC 1421
57th	Government services: Generating income	HC 890
56th	BBC Accounts and Trust Statement 2024–25	HC 1230
55th	Reducing NHS waiting times for elective care	HC 820
54th	Afghanistan Response Route	HC 1391
53rd	Cost of maintaining the FCDO's overseas estate	HC 884
52nd	Resilience to threats from animal disease	HC 885
51st	The UK's F-35 stealth fighter capability	HC 1232
50th	Local bus services in England	HC 892
49th	Administration of the Civil Service Pension Scheme	HC 888
48th	Smarter delivery of public services	HC 889

Number	Title	Reference
47th	First Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts	HC 1300
46th	Improving local areas through developer funding	HC 886
45th	Improving family court services for children	HC 883
44th	Governance and decision-making on major projects	HC 642
43rd	MoD’s oversight of Reserve Forces’ and Cadets’ Associations	HC 893
42nd	Water sector regulation	HC 824
41st	UK Research and Innovation	HC 826
40th	Collecting the right tax from wealthy individuals	HC 827
39th	Government’s use of private finance for infrastructure	HC 821
38th	Increasing teacher numbers: Secondary and further education	HC 825
37th	Immigration: Skilled worker visas	HC 819
36th	Jobcentres	HC 823
35th	Introducing T Levels	HC 822
34th	Department for Business and Trade Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24	HC 818
33rd	Supporting the UK’s priority industry sectors	HC 1070
32nd	The Future of the Equipment Plan	HC 716
31st	Local Government Financial Sustainability	HC 647
30th	Antimicrobial resistance: addressing the risks	HC 646
29th	Condition of Government property	HC 641
28th	Decommissioning Sellafield	HC 363
27th	Government’s relationship with digital technology suppliers	HC 640
26th	Tackling Violence against Women and Girls	HC 644
25th	DHSC Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24	HC 639
24th	Government cyber resilience	HC 643
23rd	The cost of the tax system	HC 645
22nd	Government’s support for biomass	HC 715
21st	Fixing NHS Dentistry	HC 648
20th	DCMS management of COVID-19 loans	HC 364
19th	Energy Bills Support	HC 511
18th	Use of AI in Government	HC 356
17th	The Remediation of Dangerous Cladding	HC 362
16th	Whole of Government Accounts 2022-23	HC 367

Number	Title	Reference
15th	Prison estate capacity	HC 366
14th	Public charge points for electric vehicles	HC 512
13th	Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children	HC 365
12th	Crown Court backlogs	HC 348
11th	Excess votes 2023-24	HC 719
10th	HS2: Update following the Northern leg cancellation	HC 357
9th	Tax evasion in the retail sector	HC 355
8th	Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage	HC 351
7th	Asylum accommodation: Home Office acquisition of former HMP Northeye	HC 361
6th	DWP Customer Service and Accounts 2023-24	HC 354
5th	NHS financial sustainability	HC 350
4th	Tackling homelessness	HC 352
3rd	HMRC Customer Service and Accounts	HC 347
2nd	Condition and maintenance of Local Roads in England	HC 349
1st	Support for children and young people with special educational needs	HC 353