

MEMBER QUESTIONS

AGENDA ITEM 16

QUESTION 1

MR ROGER EVANS will ask the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and Education:

"I note on the Shropshire Council website the following statement is made.

Shropshire Council provide travel passes for entitled students who normally reside in Shropshire and who meet the Post/16 transport assistance criteria. Following a recent consultation it has been agreed that the contribution level for 2017/18 academic year will be £875. Families may also contribute for a termly pass. For families on defined benefits, an annual contribution towards the cost of the transport assistance has been set at £142.50 for each entitled student.

I am aware of a so called consultation that was carried out in 2014 and letters that were sent out in each of the subsequent 3 year listing the increase that parents would have to pay in order for their children to receive the education we all want them to have. My understanding is that this consultation was to cover the academic years of 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17. The statement on the council website is for the Academic year 2017/18 and the word "recent" is used in it.

I note in an e-mail sent to me in 2015 querying the large increases the following statement was made; "I can confirm that following the Post/16 consultation last year whereby the Council listened to parents and all stakeholders, it was agreed to implement a phased increase over 3 years which took effect from September 2014".

During these 3 years the cost has increased for those whose parent(s) earn over £16,190 per year from £450 in September 2012, to £875 from September 2017. Almost doubling the amount a parent has to pay, a huge increase. However for those students whose parent(s) earn less than £16,190 the cost has increased even more, from £30 to £142.50, an increase of almost 500%. These increases were all delegated by previous policyholders to officers so members were not allowed, unable to call the decisions in for debate or even scrutinise them as to their value plus look at their true cost to the council. The decisions were in effect made behind closed doors with no public debate allowed.

I also note the following statement on the council website. This appears on the same page as the quote highlighted above.

Travel passes to school or sixth form/college are normally issued for one returnable journey a day. This would be to travel into college up until 12 noon and return home after 12 noon. However many transport operators including

Arriva Trains Wales now offer unlimited travel on their network and students may wish to contact their local operators to find out what options are available to them.

I understand that most of these options cost less than the cost of the travel card that Shropshire Council provides. I understand that many of the cards supplied by transport operators can be used on any day of the week and for multi-journeys against the council's 5 day and just one return journey allowed on each college day. I note that many schools and colleges are now having to use their own education money to finance transport so that their students can attend their courses. Money that is provided and should be used to provide the education our young people deserve is now having to be used to provide transport.

Can the portfolio holder inform me when this recent consultation was carried out, who was consulted and when the decision was made to implement the above charges for the Academic year 2017/18 please. Also can Council be informed how many applications for a travel card were made to Shropshire Council in the Academic year 2012/13 and how many cards have been issued so far this Academic year."

MR NICHOLAS BARDSLEY, the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and Education will reply:

Whilst the Director of Children's Services has delegated powers relating to the Post 16 Contribution Scheme, a full and comprehensive consultation was carried out in 2014 with the various stakeholders, including town and parish councils, students and parents. Following this consultation the proposals were agreed and fully implemented over a period of 3 academic years, commencing in September 2014 (14/15, 15/16 & 16/17). For those students who unfortunately did not qualify for Post/16 transport assistance through Shropshire Council, a bursary is available through colleges which can help the student pay for items including clothing, books, transport and lunch on days the student has to study.

A further consultation was carried out for each of the academic years in which the contribution levels were to change in 2015 and 2016 prior to the commencement of each academic year. Following consideration of the low number of comments received from each of these subsequent consultations, the phased changes agreed in 2014 were introduced in the 2015/16 & 2016/17 academic years.

There is no increase to the contribution levels for the 17/18 academic year which is of course good news for students and their families who currently access this scheme and It is perhaps helpful to know that whilst contribution levels have changed since 2014 they do still represent good value, especially where students have to travel long distances with a current average fare of £2.43. The contribution for those families on low income of £142.50 represents an average fare per journey of 40p. All students are also able to approach their colleges to apply for funding for the contribution element via their bursary schemes.