

Question for People Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 27th November 2024

Cllr Ruth Houghton

Post 16 education transport

I am aware of a number of families that are already concerned that they may not be able to meet the costs of post 16 home to college transport and in some instances, this is impacting on the choices that their son or daughter may make for next September.

The current policy adversely impacts on young people from rural areas where the alternative of walking or cycling to college is not an option. Can the Chair please confirm how many young people from rural areas are not in education, employment or training (NEET)? Are there any instances where it is due to the family being unable to fund the cost of post 16 travel and if so what additional financial support is available so that college becomes a viable option?

In response to the question raised by Cllr Houghton, I can provide the following responses.

We have been actively working over the last twelve months on how best to support young people and reduce the number who are NEET or Not Known (KN) across Shropshire, particularly following the closure of two school sixth forms in the South East of the County (Oldbury Wells School and William Brookes School).

We are pleased to confirm that the numbers of young people who are NEET or Not Known (NK) are at the lowest levels for many years. In terms of young people who are NEET or Not Known (NK), Shropshire sits as the best of our statistical neighbours and performs really strongly compared to the national average (table below).

Column1	Y12-Y13 NEET %	Y12-Y13 NK %
England	3.64%	4.97%
Devon	3.90%	2.34%
Herefordshire	4.63%	5.19%
Dorset	3.41%	0.43%
Wiltshire	3.18%	1.81%
Somerset	4.35%	3.49%
Gloucestershire	2.83%	1.94%
Suffolk	5.23%	3.98%
Worcestershire	4.22%	1.28%
Cornwall	5.07%	3.18%
Cumberland	3.40%	1.01%
Shropshire	2.88%	0.51%

Shropshire has 3.39% (168 NEET and 30 NK) against a national figure at 8.64% and statistical neighbours at 6.40%, we are positively bucking the trend nationally. This is based on a cohort of c.7000 young people in Shropshire.

However, this does hide an even more positive picture as the data for Y13 students (93 NEET, 26 NK) was much higher than Y12 (75 NEET and 4 NK) due to legacy data issues.

When we look at the split between North, Central and South Shropshire, the following themes emerge. This information is taken directly from the casework of our team of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) advisors or Transition Support Workers (TSW) who note any reasons for NEETs in our monitoring system.

South / Southeast

The reports show that there are 26 NEET cases that have specific notes:

- 6 have health issues including mental health
- 5 have transport related issues

North

There are no specific cases where transport has been expressed as a factor leading to NEET status. There are cases of Mental Health that could be linked as above. One factor worthy of note is that Coleg Cambria (Wrexham), Cheshire South and West College and Reaseheath College all provide free transport from certain areas of Shropshire.

Central

The central team had only one case related to transport. Mental Health and travel times generally have been factors in leading to de-motivation for students, especially with diversions from a straight route to pick up from smaller conurbations leading to a possible doubling of journey time.

To help resolve some of these challenges and others, the transport team are exploring multi-operator ticketing schemes, but there are some challenges hindering its agreement and implementation. However, recent changes to enable Local Authorities to explore Franchising Bus services in their area would greatly assist resolving this challenge and is being actively explored.

An annual bus pass is currently available for young people, with the costs and take up of these offers outlined below.

Currently the present fees per year are:

- Single journey: capped at £2 (rising to £3 in January),
- £933 Annual pass (22 students have purchased the pass)
- An annual pass of £299 if parents are in receipt of certain benefits (7 students have purchased the pass)

We are keen to understand why so few students from low income households are taking up the reduced annual pass, despite such a huge saving, and we would welcome your input into understanding the reasons for this.

We are concerned that the 50% increase in the capped cost of bus travel (£2 cap rising to £3) will be a burden for many parents (£10 per week / £40 pm / £400 per academic year) and we will be lobbying Government for additional resources for Shropshire, so we can reduce this burden through the implementation of our Bus Service Improvement Plan.