

**Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc  
ac Addysg**

**Children, Young People  
and Education Committee**

Lee Waters MS  
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**Learner Travel**

Dear Lee,

Our Committee is currently looking at whether disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare? This is a wide-ranging piece of work, looking at all aspects of education and childcare from 0 – 16. As you can see from the terms of reference, the scope covers physical, sensory and learning disabilities and neurodiversity.

Alongside taking formal oral and written evidence, we have also been hearing directly from families across Wales about their experiences. These personal testimonies have been incredibly powerful and have identified a wide range of issues that children, young people and their families face in accessing inclusive and accessible education and childcare, and the impacts of this unequal access. We will be exploring many of these issues with the Minister for Education, Minister for Social Justice, and the Deputy Minister for Social Services when they give evidence to us on 29 November 2023.

However, as one of the key issues relates to the issue of transport, we wanted to pursue these issues directly with you. This evidence base also builds on evidence we gathered during our inquiry on Pupil Absence, and work by the Children's Commissioner, Children in Wales and most recently, the Welsh Youth Parliament.

The evidence we have gathered

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We have heard from individual families and stakeholders how a lack of accessible, inclusive and affordable learner travel creates barriers for children, young people and their families to access

education and childcare. We also heard that good learner transport can help build independence, and provide a social space outside of school and the home for children and young people.<sup>1</sup>

The All Wales Forum said that a lack of accessible transport impacts on both the children and wider family in a way that “we don’t necessarily understand the extent of, especially in rural areas.”<sup>2</sup>

One parent told us:

*“I feel that money is placed above the welfare of the child in the scenario of transport.”<sup>3</sup>*

Estyn told us that in their recent thematic report looking at the new additional learning needs system, they had identified as one of the barriers “challenges in transporting children and young people to access education and childcare provision which meets their needs.” They also highlighted that children with additional needs often cannot access extra-curricula activities because of transport restrictions.<sup>4</sup> Both of these issues were also raised in the discussions we had with families.

A parent involved in the Swansea Parent Carer Forum said that breakfast clubs are “not possible” if a child uses shared transport, because the other children they share transport with may not attend, and that the same applies for after school clubs.<sup>5</sup> UCAC told us that an additional barrier is that “any provision offered outside school hours can lead to financial implications for schools, as it is the school and not the local authority that must fund any ‘reasonable adjustments’ made for activities that take place outside school hours.”<sup>6</sup> The Children’s Commissioner said that this lack of transport for after school provision increases children’s isolation and drives “all of their social life outside of school to be completely online.” She said that not being able to access after school activities has an impact both on children and young people’s physical and emotional wellbeing.<sup>7</sup>

Simply getting learner transport in place in the first instance can be challenging. As one family said:

*“At another provision like this we used to be offered two sessions for three hours a week. I had to travel such a distance to get there and back and by the time I had done this it wasn’t worth coming home in between. I had hoped to spend some time with my daughter but in*

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<sup>1</sup> [School visit note 3 – 29 June 2023, paragraph 15](#) and [School visit note 1 – 29 June 2023, paragraph 19](#)

<sup>2</sup> [CYPE Committee, 7 June 2023, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 272](#)

<sup>3</sup> Citizen Engagement – notes of interviews (not published yet)

<sup>4</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 48, Estyn](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 55, Swansea Parent Carer Forum](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 67, UCAC](#)

<sup>7</sup> [CYPE Committee, 18 May 2023, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 46](#)

*the end it just couldn't work because there is no time allowance for the travel. I was then eventually awarded transport.”<sup>8</sup>*

For another family, transport issues factored in their decision to home educate:

*“I've always had to homeschool my child. The schools around where we live wouldn't take them and the nearest school was so far away logistically it wouldn't make sense, we would have spent all day travelling back and forth and with my child's disabilities, that wouldn't be possible.”<sup>9</sup>*

While for another the pandemic led to their transport being removed:

*““Because of the pandemic, the school transport was suspended, which means we had to take our child to school, which we could do whilst we were working from home, but the transport service didn't start again, even after lockdown was lifted and schools had reopened and were back to normal, until we threatened judicial review. It shouldn't be like this; my child has a right to access school.”<sup>10</sup>*

Other families talked about the fight to get transport to the most appropriate school for their child. One parent told us that having secured a place at a school that was the most suited to their autistic child, but not the nearest school, the local authority “point blank refused transport even though legal advice said we were due it as it was named in our statement.” As they could not afford a lawyer, they had to pay for transport “which was a challenge.”<sup>11</sup>

We heard from others about a lack of consistency in decision making by local authorities. At one school visit, we were told of a case with two children living in the same house, but only one child was offered transport.<sup>12</sup> Others raised concerns about a lack of clarity around who is eligible for learner travel provision.<sup>13</sup>

We heard concerns about the quality of transport and escorts where learner travel is made available. For example, we heard that taxi drivers or escorts may have limited knowledge of how to deal with ASD children and young people. We also heard that the transport contracts to provide learner travel are not particularly attractive, especially for those contracts for children with additional needs.<sup>14</sup> Parents told of us “massive safeguarding issues with transport”, and we were told of cases where

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<sup>8</sup> Citizen Engagement – notes of interviews (not published yet)

<sup>9</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 05 Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 05 Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 08 Individual](#)

<sup>12</sup> [School visit note 3 – 29 June 2023, paragraph 15](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Note – Sparkle Focus Group, September 2023, paragraph 40](#)

<sup>14</sup> [School visit note 2 – 29 June 2023, paragraph 15](#)

background checks where not undertaken. We also heard concerns that the procurement process allows sub-contracting which can dilute the quality of the provision.<sup>15</sup>

One parent called for all "escorts and drivers to also receive ALN/disability training, along with escorts to be trained in total communication techniques."<sup>16</sup> While other parents asked whether there was any guidance on the recruitment of taxi escorts, highlighting that a lack of training can cause "direct harm to the child."<sup>17</sup>

One family shared their specific examples about a lack of communication between the school and the escort:

*"What I want to know when he comes off the bus and he's screaming I want to know what is wrong. For example, it stipulated that my child doesn't go into the school hall, however the other day they did sports day in the hall because they had bad weather and he was screaming coming off the bus. I looked in the communications book and I knew it'd say that he'd been in there. The escort didn't know. There is no communication and you are left to just guess what has happened. And there have been many instances like that."<sup>18</sup>*

While another shared an example of challenges when a child has to share transport with another child who is physically abusive:

*"Nothing was done, until one day the children came home hysterical because they had been hit and had their hair pulled out and I complained and said I didn't feel that they were safe. Transport always wants evidence, it's disgusting that they don't listen to what you say. I had to put my children in a taxi with this child until the other child was violent and until that point, nothing could be done."<sup>19</sup>*

While post-16 provision is outside of the remit of the inquiry, we have received evidence on this issue, and in particular transport issues. The National Autistic Society told us that they were concerned that autistic learners who often attend further education beyond the age of 19 are "not currently served by legislation". They highlighted inconsistencies across different local authorities, with some local authorities providing learner travel to colleges and sixth forms on a discretionary basis. They called for this to be brought into the scope of the Learner Travel Measure "to ensure it better aligns with the Additional Learning Needs Act."<sup>20</sup> Natspec said that learners with additional learning needs who are

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<sup>15</sup> [School visit note 2 – 29 June 2023, paragraphs 34-36](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 33, Individual](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 66, Joining the Dots Parents and Carers](#)

<sup>18</sup> Citizen Engagement – notes of interviews (not published yet)

<sup>19</sup> Citizen Engagement – notes of interviews (not published yet)

<sup>20</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 05 Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance](#)

attending a specialist FE college face disadvantage because of a “lack of fit-for-purpose post-16 education transport policy...”<sup>21</sup>

This also echoed with some of experiences we heard directly from parents. One parent told us when their child started at further education college they were quoted a cost of £178 a week for an accessible taxi, yet if they had lived in a neighbouring local authority, this cost would have been met by the local authority. When they raised this, they were told that their child “shouldn’t be enrolled in college when I knew they had no transport.” They then had to change their working patterns so they could take their child to college, with the taxi picking them up. This still costs £88 a week. The young person told us that it was simply discrimination, because they cannot get on a bus.<sup>22</sup> We also heard from other parents about issues with post-16 transport, with one family having to “go to the papers and bring in a solicitor”.<sup>23</sup>

What are your views on the evidence we have gathered? Does this reflect your understanding of the issues across Wales, and the impact it can have on access to education and childcare?

## Pupil Absence report

In our [Pupil Absence report](#) we recommended that the Welsh Government ensures that decisions on learner travel are driven by the individual and specific needs of children and young people. We said that the Welsh Government should ensure that local authorities are funded to deliver a learner first approach to learner travel. We also said that the current review of the learner travel measure should be radical in looking for innovative solutions. While we were pleased to see this recommendation was accepted in principle, the narrative was short on reassurances that our recommendation would ultimately be delivered upon.

Could you outline the Welsh Government’s current position on our recommendation?

## Petitions

There are also a number of petitions currently under consideration by the Petitions Committee on which link to these issues:

[Provide free public transport for all secondary school pupils](#)

[Provide free and accessible public transport for under 18s in Wales to lower carbon emissions and boost growth](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 38, Natspec](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Note – Sparkle Focus Group, September 2023, paragraph 42](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Written evidence, AEC 08, Individual](#)

## For school transport guaranteed for all comprehensive children

In responding to the first petition listed above, you said following the initial review of the Learner Travel Measure which was concluded in 2022, further work had started on the wider review of the measure, and that “Key findings and examples of good practice from local, national and international research will inform advice due to be submitted for me to review this summer.”

As we approach the end of the year, can you advise what has happened since this advice was submitted to you over the summer? What will be the next steps, and when will they result in change on the ground for learners across Wales? While we acknowledge the complexities around learner travel and the ongoing financial challenges faced across the public sector, we believe there is a real need for pace and urgency when dealing with this important issue.

### Children’s Commissioner

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As you will be aware the Children’s Commissioner has repeatedly recommended that public transport should be free to children and young people. In her most recent annual report, the Commissioner called for the child poverty action plan to “include a commitment to a free public transport pilot for children and young people under 18 within this Senedd term.” This builds on similar recommendations made previously by the Commissioner.

In her evidence to the Committee’s current inquiry, she said that “disabled children aren’t always provided with safe accessible transport to education” which certainly chimed with the evidence we have heard directly from parents. She also said that while she was pleased that the review was ongoing she was “...disappointed with the slow progress which has been the case for many years.”<sup>24</sup> She said it was an issue that “makes such a fundamental difference” to children and young people.<sup>25</sup>

We would welcome your views on the Commissioner’s recommendation for a free public transport pilot for children and young people under 18 within this Senedd term.

### Children in Wales

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In Children in Wales Annual Child and Family Poverty Survey findings report 2023, transport costs and availability were identified as one of the top 5 poverty related issues. This was the case in both rural and urban areas. The report indicated that as families struggle with increasing household costs, they are reducing the number of days their children are attending school, because they cannot afford to take their children five days a week. Practitioners in responding to the survey noted that the costs of transport “directly correspond to the rise in flexible schooling requests, or in some cases, full-time

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<sup>24</sup> Written evidence, AEC 01, Children’s Commissioner for Wales

<sup>25</sup> CYPE Committee, 18 May 2023, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 45

home schooling.” This then has broader impacts on children, who become more isolated, and can fall behind on school work. Children in Wales also said that reduced attendance affects parents, with increased food costs, stress and anxiety, and reduced available for work. The practitioners call for free transport for all learners in full time education; increased accessibility and availability of school transport.<sup>26</sup>

What work is the Welsh Government doing to alleviate the cost of living pressures on transport costs for children, young people and their families?

#### Welsh Youth Parliament

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In the recent report by the Welsh Youth Parliament Climate and Environment Committee, [Sustainable Ways](#), they said that it was clear that fares are one of the biggest issues that stop young people from using public transport more than they do now. They called for the introduction of free public transport under the age of 25, along with a number of other measures to improve access to sustainable transport for children and young people.

What are your views on the recommendations made by the Welsh Youth Parliament?

#### Financial pressures on local authorities

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Finally, we are aware that as local authorities consider their budgets for the coming financial year that any discretionary learner travel provision that they currently provide may be at risk. We are conscious that local authorities are carefully considering any non-statutory service or provision.

As an example, we know that Rhondda Cynon Taf Council are considering a review of the learner travel provision. At their Cabinet meeting on 20 November they considered a [report](#) which looked at three options:

- a. Status Quo;
- b. Provide mainstream English, Welsh and Faith primary and secondary school and college transport in line with statutory distance criteria;
- c. Remove all discretionary provision.

The report outlines that the preferred option is option b, which would result in savings of approximately £2.5m a year. Such changes would mean “approximately 2,750 pupils no longer receiving access to free Home to School transport.” It also states that this would mean that the

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<sup>26</sup> [Children in Wales. Annual Child and Family Poverty Survey Findings 2023: School Transport: Summary](#)

Council would be meeting the requirements of the Measure “with 18 of the 22 Council’s in Wales already adopting the statutory distance requirements.”<sup>27</sup>

While we are not commenting on the specifics in RCT, we use this as a case study to highlight discussions that may be happening in other local authorities.

Clearly, as we have recommended previously and have reiterated in this letter, we believe it is important that local authorities are able to make a learner first decision on learner travel, rather than being driven by financial imperative. We understand the financial pressures that both local authorities and Welsh Government are under, but believe that affordable and accessible learner travel is critical to children and young people being able to attend and flourish in school.

To what extent is the Welsh Government monitoring changes in local authority provision as a result of financial constraints; and the impact that is then having on learner engagement and attendance?

I would appreciate if you could provide a response by 3 January 2024.

I am copying this letter to the Welsh Youth Parliament Climate and Environment Committee; Petitions Committee and the Minister for Education and Welsh Language.

Yours sincerely,



Jayne Bryant MS

Chair

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

cc: Jack Sargeant MS, Chair Petitions Committee

Jeremy Miles MS, Minister for Education and Welsh Language

Welsh Youth Parliament, Climate and Environment Committee

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<sup>27</sup> Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Cabinet meeting, Item 4, Review of the Council’s Home to School Transport Policy, 20 November 2023.