

Contact evidence for Public Accounts Committee Inquiry: Home to school transport.

Written evidence from Contact, the UK charity for families with disabled children.

1. About Contact and Summary

Contact

1.1 Contact is the national charity for the UK's two million disabled children and their family carers. Last year, we helped 381,000 families navigate the education, social care, welfare and health systems and supported parent carer forums enabling 150,000 parent carers to influence local services and national policy. Our life-changing advice over the phone, online and face-to-face in hospitals and in communities, gives families the confidence to take control of their lives.

Families face a constant battle to secure the help they need – a battle that costs time, income, relationships, and wellbeing. On average, parent carers lose £21,174 in household income each year, with 62% reducing or giving up work entirely due to caring responsibilities.

Contact supports some of the poorest households in the country. Around half of the families using Contact's services have an annual income of less than £25K. Yet our family finances team has boosted the incomes of eligible families by an average £5,538 a year.

Our specialist helpline, which receives funding from the Department for Education, regularly hears from families with disabled children facing challenges with home to school transport. We therefore welcome this Inquiry and submit evidence to illustrate why transport is important for disabled students - and the impact when it is removed.

Summary

1.2 For disabled children and young people, school and college transport is not a luxury - it is an essential part of their education. It enables them to arrive safely, ready to learn, and supports independence. Many must travel further than their peers simply to reach the nearest suitable setting, and most cannot travel independently or use public transport. For families already managing intensive caring responsibilities, reliable transport provides vital relief, allowing parents to work, care for other children, and maintain family stability, giving them the chance at an ordinary life.

1.3 Transport for 16-19 year old disabled students needs to change. The law says young people are expected to be in education or training until 18, yet transport for 16-19 year olds – as described in Post 16 guidance - is left to the discretion of local authorities. This gap is referred to as the “loophole” and is a growing problem. Because transport provision is discretionary, and because of financial pressure, local authorities are cutting back, leaving young people without the transport they need for no reason other than their age. Local Authorities need to consider the consequences of their policies and whether the disadvantage disabled young people and their families face is against equalities legislation.

1.4 Recent reports including ISOS Partnership/LGA¹, Education Select Committee² and the National Audit Office³ have all recognised both the rising demand and cost pressures of

¹ ISOS/LGA [The future of home to school transport | Local Government Association](#)

² Education Select Committee [Solving the SEND Crisis](#)

³ National Audit Office [Home to school transport - NAO report](#)

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transport and the particular vulnerability of disabled learners when provision is reduced or removed.

1.5 Whilst we clearly recognise home to school transport as a growing area of cost for local authorities, it must be preserved as an essential service for many disabled children, young people and their families who must not bear the brunt of council cost saving measures or challenges in the education system.

1.6 Our evidence for this Inquiry focusses on the available provision for children and young people; why transport is important, what we are seeing as young people turn 16, and the impact transport has on the lives of disabled young people and their families.

1.7 Our recommendations:

- **SEND Reforms** to fully consider transport as part of the education system – maintaining transport eligibility for SEND students and extending duty to 18 for disabled learners.
- **Develop more local inclusive education**, so fewer disabled students must travel long distances, easing pressure on transport budgets.
- **Change in law** for disabled 16-19 year olds, to close the “loophole” so that decisions are based on need, not age.
- **Improved data** to better understand the relationship between transport and NEET and attendance figures, parent carer employment and benefits and sustainability goals (single occupancy vehicles).
- **Deliver cost equity for disabled young people** by monitoring and capping charges and investigating eligibility and sufficiency of bursary fund support.
- **Address service and cost** by working together with local parent carer forums and transport providers to develop smart commissioning options that help reduce cost whilst maintaining the essential service for disabled students and improving quality and reliability.
- **Ensure equality duties are met** to guard against students and their families being unfairly disadvantaged because of their disability.

2. Why transport for disabled children and young people is needed

2.1 Contact has a long history supporting families with transport challenges and campaigning for policy change, including our influential 2007 inquiry⁴ that informed updates to statutory guidance in 2023.

The statutory framework for transport is across the Education Act 1996 (section 508B), Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice. The Department for Education produce statutory guidance for Compulsory School Age children and Post 16.

⁴ [Inquiry-into-School-Transport-Report Contact-2017.pdf](#)

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DfE data⁵ shows that 470,000 pre 16 students use school transport, and that around 40% (180,000) need it because of their special educational needs and/or disability (SEND). Post 16 data estimates 50,000 students use transport but does not show a figure for SEND.

2.2 Disabled children and young people need school transport because they often have to travel further from home just to get to a school/college that meets their needs, they often can't walk round the corner with their siblings, travel independently or use public transport and may need specially adapted vehicles and passenger assistance to keep them safe. Disabled students are often unable to access breakfast and after school clubs (which extend the school day for working parents) because they are not available in special schools and in mainstream schools transport and/or the required staff support are not available.

Transport is important in affording some equity in life, allowing parents to work, to get other children to school and to have the chance of leading an ordinary life.

2.3 Guidance shows what transport should provide, with point 82 of statutory guidance for compulsory school age children⁶ saying that transport should “*enable the child to travel in reasonable safety and comfort, and with undue stress, strain or difficulty, so that wherever possible they arrive at school ready to learn.*” Where transport is provided evidence from families is largely in support of this, finding transport beneficial to their children and a huge help in juggling complex lives. Parents of disabled children save the country thousands in the unpaid care they provide - many will have had sleepless nights attending to the medical, physical and behavioural needs of their children and have an early start in the morning to administer therapy and medication, to wash dress and feed their disabled children ready for the school day. School transport is a huge support - helping families to carry on. It is often seen as the glue that helps hold families together - preventing them from spiralling into crisis.

“We have the most wonderful transport team - driver and PA. My daughter’s day starts and ends on a positive note thanks to them. They also take an interest in what my daughter does at school and sometimes relay information that I might not get because I cannot be at the school gate. They make a hugely POSITIVE impact on her learning.”

3. Contact research

3.1 In order to explore the experiences of transport Contact have run two surveys with families of disabled children and young people: **Transport Matters** October 2024 and most recently **16-19 Transport**, October 2025.

Contact’s Transport Matters⁷ research, as cited in the recent NAO Report, demonstrates the importance of transport to families with disabled children of all ages:

- 81% of those receiving local authority provided transport were satisfied/extremely satisfied
- 74% said it helps their child arrive ready to learn
- 58% said it helped their child’s independence

⁵ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/home-to-school-transport-la-data-collection/2024-25>

⁶ Statutory guidance [Travel to school for children of compulsory school age](#)

⁷ Contact Transport Matters research [CONTACT - TRANSPORT MATTERS SURVEY 2024.pptx](#)

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- 41% said it enables them to get other children to school
- 50% said it helps them, as parents, to work

It also showed long journeys with an average journey times of 43 minutes one way for those travelling on council provided transport and 51 minutes one way for parents that take their children to school. That's almost 4 hours of driving per day just to get your child to school.

When asked about transport at 16 parents reported change with 87% saying they wanted their child's transport to continue, but almost 60% saying they faced changes.

4. Focus on Post 16

4.1 At 16, Compulsory School Age duties end and the Post 16 guidance⁸ applies. Young people are expected to stay in education or training until 18, but there is a "discretionary" duty towards the provision of transport and councils can charge a contribution towards the service. There is clear evidence from parents that transport provision for this age group is diminishing, with the reduction of school buses, leaving families with arrangements that may be unsuitable (a Personal Transport Budget that doesn't come close to covering costs or a bus pass or Independent Travel Training for someone who cannot travel independently). Recent reports from both the Education Select Committee and NAO have shown that transport for SEND students at Post 16 needs to change. Our campaign to "Close the loophole" in law for this age group, asks for transport decisions to be based on need, not age. It has the support of over 6,000 families.

4.2 Our 2025 16-19 Transport survey shows that:

- Only 29% had unchanged transport at 16 meaning change for 70% of disabled students.
- 13% said their transport had stopped altogether.
- Almost 30% of parents now drive their young person to school or college themselves.
- 55% of those arranging their own transport said they were dissatisfied with this arrangement.
- 17% said council transport arrangements were not in place for the start of term
- 27% said they now had to pay towards council transport

"We have been offered transport but at a cost to us of £630 ... I work full time and have another child and at the moment my life is an absolute stress hell trying to get her to college as she cannot travel on public transport and we cannot afford the council's offer."

4.3 Where transport provision has changed it usually means young people are no longer on the council school bus they were familiar with but may have an alternative offer such as a budget (PTB) for the family to make their own arrangements, are charged towards the cost of council transport or are given a bus pass for public transport. The annual costs parents reported were between £300 and £5,700.

⁸ Statutory guidance [Post-16 transport and travel support to education and training](#)

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4.4 While independent travel can be positive for some, many disabled young people experience a loss of independence when removed from the familiar school bus and forced back into parents' cars. In addition, Independent Travel Training was only working for 4% of students offered it.

4.5 Equalities Legislation is clear that there is a duty to advance equality of opportunity between disabled and non-disabled people and that policy should not put disabled students at a disadvantage. Our evidence shows that changes to transport at age 16 may be discriminatory, offering unsuitable arrangements, which put disabled young people and their families at a significant disadvantage because of their disability, risking missed education, loss of earnings and financial disadvantage.

4.6 Recommendation: Strengthen the equalities duty in relation to transport provision to ensure children, young people and their families are not unfairly disadvantaged because of their disability.

5. The impact on young people

5.1 Our 16-19 Transport Survey shows the impact of transport provision on young people is significant: loss of independence, missing out on education (attendance and NEET risk) or facing increased stress or anxiety.

- 19% report that transport arrangements have had an impact on education – missing school or college, not attending at all or having to choose a different school or college because of transport.
- 14% say young people start the day stressed or anxious because of changes to their transport

Parents commented on the impact of transport on their young people:

“Unable to attend SEN college placement as 2 buses and over an hour one way, not able to travel alone, no sense of danger... vulnerable, autistic, learning disabilities”

“We cannot afford transport so will have to leave at end of term”

“My daughters mental health has been impacted and isn't happy”

However, where transport is provided the benefits are clear, as one parent commented:

“Transport has meant that attendance has increased from 20% to 100%. It has made all the difference”.

5.2 The negative impact on young people is likely to be seen in the longer term in education outcomes, employment opportunities, wellbeing and the readiness to lead as independent an adult life as possible – all with a potential knock-on effect on the cost of other services such as social care, benefits, housing etc.

5.3 Recommendation: It will be important for the department to collect accurate data on the immediate and longer-term impact that the changing picture of transport provision has on attendance and participation outcomes for Post 16 disabled students. We recommend the

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Independent Investigation into Tackling Rising Youth Inactivity led by Alan Milburn looks at the impact of school transport for disabled learners.

6. The impact on families

6.1 The financial impact on families is clear in our Transport Matters survey, showing that at 16:

- 40% of parents had to work fewer hours or give up work to transport their child themselves
- 44% found the cost of transport (often private taxis) has put them in financial difficulty.

We know that where council transport is no longer provided, or is unaffordable or unsuitable, the burden lands firmly with parents. This puts disabled families at a disadvantage and is in stark contrast to the developing “freedom” that families with non-disabled students at 6th form usually find – where their young person’s growing independence leads to greater liberty for parents to work etc.

Comments from our 16-19 Transport survey show the impact on work and finances:

“I have had to leave my professional job of being a specialist nurse to now claim benefits to be able to transport my daughter to and from school. My mental health has deteriorated and I now need to take anti-depressants and have needed counselling.”

“We now get paid 0.45p per mile to take her ourselves so have had cut my hours at work, losing more than they pay in mileage.”

Case study of a working single parent - West Midlands

A student with a learning disability had received school transport throughout school, but at 17 it was stopped, down to a change in Post 16 policy. The students’ needs had not changed and the council assessed that he could not travel independently. But his parent still had to go through several appeals just to be awarded a Personal Transport Budget of £10 per day, instead of a place on the school bus. His single, working parent puts the payment towards the cost of a private taxi which is £46 per day. Meanwhile the school bus still goes past their front door. The financial impact of this is unsustainable for the parent, risking both work and education for this family.

6.2 Where a parent carer has to leave work to get their disabled child to school or college there is not only the loss of earnings to factor, but also their possible need to turn to benefits. The uptake of Universal Credit for a single parent (with one disabled child receiving PIP), finding themselves unable to work, could be an increase of £445 pcm, with an additional £83.30 p/week on Carers Allowance, the estimated total in benefits could be over £9,000 per year - more than the £8,116 median cost of providing SEND transport (NAO, 2024).

6.3 Recommendation: The economics of this would benefit from further scrutiny, given the government’s focus on economic growth and the Get Britain Working White Paper referring to those who face barriers to employment such as unpaid carers.

7. Environmental impact

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7.1 The removal of school buses increases single occupancy cars, both with the use of parents' cars and individual taxis, adding congestion and undermining net-zero targets. Parents have reported queues into school /college in the morning as more children are in individual vehicles rather than on a bus. And one college reported a staggered start to manage traffic. The impact this may be having on the environment and government net zero goals should be carefully considered.

8. Does bursary support help?

8.1 The government bursary (16-19 Bursary Fund or vulnerable groups bursary) is often positioned as support with transport at 16, with the DfE suggesting it will help parents cover the cost of transport. Parents tell us otherwise, saying they are not eligible for the bursary or that the funds (managed by local colleges) have run out. We asked parents about this in our recent survey, the results showing that bursaries were only taken up by 8% of people (49 people) with the majority of those answering the question (80%) saying they don't get any bursary support, they haven't heard about it or they don't know if they receive this financial support. Of those receiving bursary support, 52% said it covered all or most of their transport costs.

8.2 Our survey showed families who had previously received free transport to school at 16 faced an average charge of £522. We also know the cost of families arranging a private taxi can be over £4,000 per year.

"We now have to pay over £1600 per year for his transport, when it's compulsory for him to be in education. It's not his fault (or ours) that the only appropriate placement is 40 mins drive away and that there's no public transport route."

8.3 Recommendation: Control the financial impact on families with disabled children by: capping contributions towards council transport in line with local concessionary fares for students using public transport so that parents of disabled children and young people aren't unfairly disadvantaged. Brighton & Hove council have set their contribution towards council transport for Post 16 at £410 per year (2025/2026) – the equivalent of a Student City Saver ticket⁹. And reviewing eligibility, sufficiency and delivery of bursary funding.

9. Policy implementation and the postcode lottery

9.1 Transport – especially for 16-19 year olds – is a postcode lottery. The way policies are implemented is key to students' varying experiences across the country. Our review of a sample of Post 16 transport statements showed that many contain blanket statements – primarily offering PTBs, ITT or a bus pass, regardless of need. Although many refer to eligibility under "exceptional circumstances" parents tell us that this is an unclear measure and rarely provides the required transport. Recent cases in the High Court¹⁰ (Birmingham) and with the Ombudsman¹¹ (Derby) both affirm that local authorities should not have blanket policies and must consider individual circumstances.

⁹ [Brighton & Hove Post 16 Transport Policy Statement](#)

¹⁰ High Court [TYC, R \(On the Application Of\) v Birmingham City Council \[2025\] EWHC 623 \(Admin\) \(13 March 2025\)](#)

¹¹ Ombudsman Derby [23 013 529 - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#)

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9.2 Our review of Compulsory School age policies found inaccessible language and, in some cases, inaccurate information e.g. wrongly stating that receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or a Motability car affects eligibility - contrary to DfE guidance. These authorities have been made aware of this inaccuracy, and the policies have been corrected.

Case study showing lack of support - North East

An autistic student with multiple health needs had always had council provided transport but at 16 this stopped, due the Post 16 policy. One of the parents is undergoing critical health treatment, the other is a pensioner – they currently drive their son to college paying for the additional £50 per week petrol out of their benefits and say they are going without meals in order to cover the cost. Despite the policy referring to “exceptional circumstances” no transport support at all has been provided for this family.

Recommendation: The Secretary of State should write to all local authorities reminding them of their statutory duties, including equalities duties, and to warn against “blanket” policies.

10. Managing rising demand

10.1 No parent wants their disabled child or young person to have to travel unnecessarily far to get to school or college. Although some students will always need the most specialist provision that could not be in every local area, and may need transport to get there, for many children and young people local, inclusive education with the right specialist support would reduce the need for transport. Developing sufficient inclusive education and considering transport as an essential part of education provision should be a key factor in the development of the SEND reforms.

This should include:

- ✓ Strengthen SEN Support - building confidence in local provision by ensuring appropriate school based support, and robust accountability
- ✓ Better placement planning and procurement – last-minute transport decisions cause stress and disruption to the family and the child’s education and may result in more expensive transport options like single occupancy private taxis.
- ✓ Earlier Preparing for Adulthood planning – including transport in timely discussions to prepare young people for independent travel where appropriate.

11. Summary

11.1 Home to school transport is an essential service to families with disabled children. When transport is not in place children risk their education and families risk their employment and financial stability.

- **SEND Reforms** to fully consider transport as part of the education system – maintaining transport eligibility for SEND students and extending duty to 18 for disabled learners.
- **Develop more local inclusive education**, so fewer disabled students must travel long distances, easing pressure on transport budgets.

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- **Change in law** for disabled 16-19 year olds, to close the “loophole” so that decisions are based on need, not age.
- **Improved data** to better understand the relationship between transport and NEET and attendance figures, parent carer employment and benefits and sustainability goals (single occupancy vehicles).
- **Deliver cost equity for disabled young people** by monitoring and capping charges and investigating eligibility and sufficiency of bursary fund support.
- **Address service and cost** by working together with local parent carer forums and transport providers to develop smart commissioning options that help reduce cost whilst maintaining the essential service for disabled students and improving quality and reliability.
- **Ensure equality duties are met** to guard against students and their families being unfairly disadvantaged because of their disability.

Contact would welcome the opportunity for any further discussions with the committee on home to school transport for disabled children and young people.