

Challenges and good practice – findings from London Councils' SEN transport research

February 2022



INTRODUCTION

This report sets out the key challenges facing London's Special Educational Needs (SEN) transport services during and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 lockdowns. At the end of 2021 we surveyed all the London borough SEN transport teams to understand the scale of current demand and cost pressures, as well as the impact of Covid and wider issues. Following this, SEN transport officers were invited to a meeting in December to discuss these issues in more detail. This work has fed into the findings set out in this report.

The research identified concerns about the ongoing increase in demand and the impact of Covid on costs and staff time. These issues, coupled with driver and travel assistant shortages, are making it currently very challenging to manage SEN transport services cost effectively and to make improvements to the service. This report identifies opportunities for further work to support London's SEN transport services to be more cost-effective and improve the quality of provision on offer. The report builds on the good practice and recommendations identified in London Councils' report SEN Transport in London published in March 2020 before the Covid 19 lockdowns.¹

SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Spend on SEN transport services will have increased by 37% over four years from 2018/19, based on borough estimates across 28 boroughs. This amounts to a forecast spend of £167,161,600 in 2021/22. Previous analysis by London Councils showed that SEN transport outturn in 2018/19 had risen by 12% over three years from 2016/17 across 32 boroughs.

The ongoing surge in demand for services for children and young people with SEND has put immense pressure on transport services. Local provision is often oversubscribed and increasing numbers of children have to travel out of borough to access specialist education provision. Between 2018/19 and 2020/21 there has been an increase of 12% of the number of children with SEND using transport services.

The ongoing challenge of meeting this rising demand has been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. A number of Covid-related issues have driven up costs, from driver and passenger assistant shortages due to sickness and shielding, raised parental anxieties about using public transport, increased PPE and cleaning requirements, to providers leaving the industry to work in less risky delivery businesses.

¹ [SEN Transport | London Councils](#)

The immediate and significant challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have left services unable to plan strategically or collaborate with other boroughs. Programmes such as independent travel training have had to be stopped in many boroughs because of provider and parental concerns about travelling on public transport. This training empowers young people to travel on their own to school or college, resulting in improved outcomes for young people as well as less demand for SEN transport. Attempts to work collaboratively, such as route sharing between boroughs and schools, have had to stop due to the requirement for children to remain in their social 'bubbles'.

These challenges have had a dramatic impact on costs, but local authorities have been able to maintain a high quality of service in most places. They have concerns though about how long this will last given mounting budgetary pressures.

Given the huge increase in costs in recent years of delivering SEN transport services which are still experiencing growing demand coupled with the impact of Covid, the government should consider urgent funding to support these services. Boroughs need the government's home to school transport guidance to be updated to address the challenges of operating during the pandemic, which will support their decision-making. And there is a clear role for London Councils and the boroughs to identify and share good practice to support service improvements at this challenging time.

London Councils will:

- Develop a lobbying case to put to Ministers for the need for more funding to support SEN transport services, highlighting the long term demand trends and ongoing pressures around Covid-19
- Call on the Department for Education (DfE) to revise the home to school transport guidance to address the current issues around operating in and following a pandemic
- Ask the DfE to support our work to identify and share effective approaches to reducing costs and improving outcomes

BACKGROUND

Whilst most pupils in mainstream schools were not allowed at school during the two lockdown periods from May-July 2020 and January-March 2021 the majority of children with EHCPs were encouraged to continue to attend school. In London most special schools remained open for the duration of the two lockdowns where schools were closed to the majority of pupils. However, attendance of children with SEND at special schools and mainstream schools varied across London, which resulted in differing demand pressures for SEN transport services across the capital.

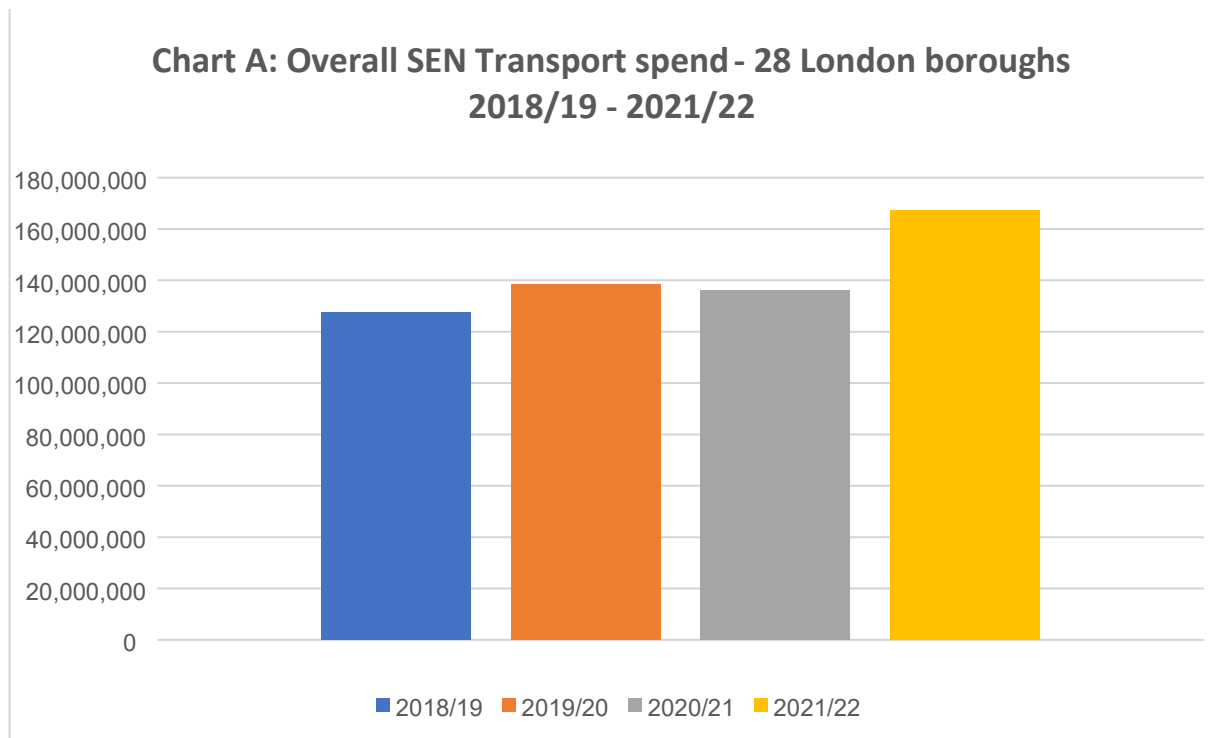
To understand the impact of Covid 19 on SEN transport services, London Councils undertook a survey of all the borough SEN transport services in

November 2021 which received 28 responses (86% response rate). We also convened a meeting at the same time for all SEN transport leads, which 45 officers attended, representing the majority of London boroughs. This report sets out the key findings from the analysis of the survey returns and the discussion points raised at the meeting.

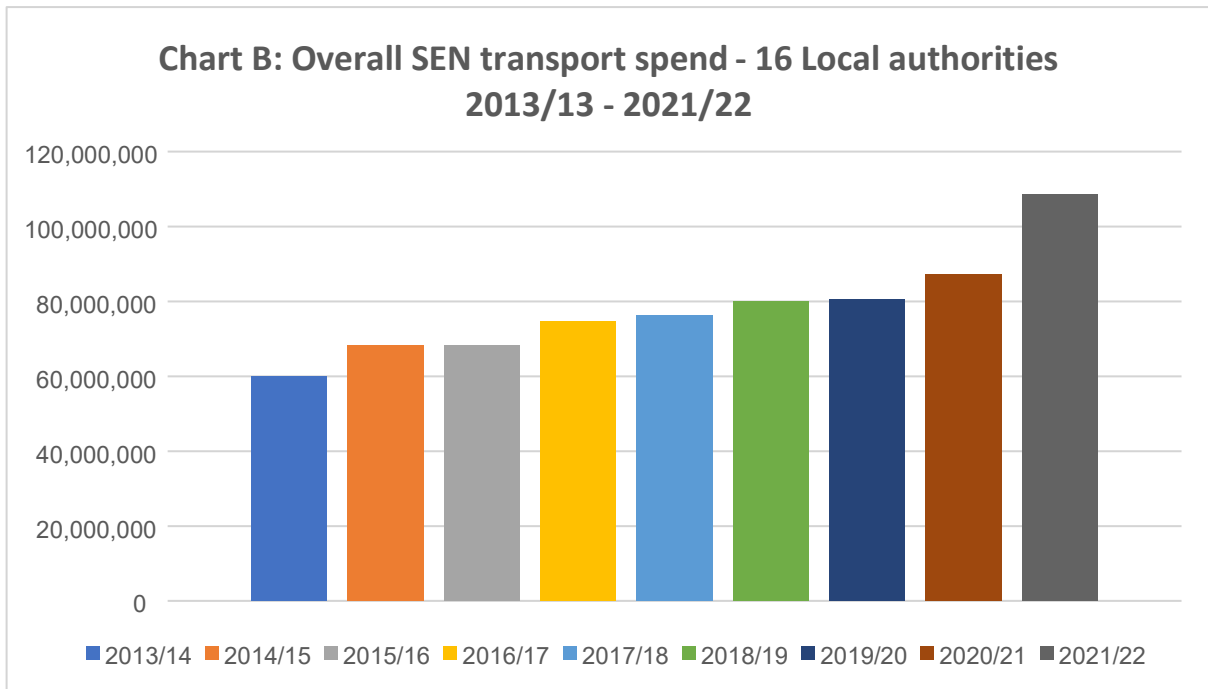
OVERALL COSTS AND DEMAND FOR SEN TRANSPORT SERVICES IN LONDON

Overall spend on SEN transport services will increase by 37% over 4 years across 28 London local authorities. This amounts to a forecast spend of approximately £167,161,600 this year across 28 boroughs.

As chart A demonstrates, these 28 London boroughs experienced a reduction in outturn in 2020/21 as many children with SEND did not attend school for a significant part of that year due to Covid. However the costs in 2021/22 have risen sharply.



Looking at spend since 2013/14 across the 16 London boroughs which we have complete datasets for, as set out in Chart B, it is clear that numbers have steadily been increasing. However, the cost of dealing with Covid in 2021/22 has resulted in a clear increase in spend across these 16 local authorities, which looks to be above expected year on year demand increases.



There has been a 12% increase in number of children accessing SEN transport services in the last three years, across 28 London boroughs. This is an increase from 17,876 in 2018/19 to 20,036 in 2020/21. And this is despite many boroughs experiencing a drop in demand in 2019/20 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2021, London had 72,000 children and young people on an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) – **an increase of 97% since 2010** and 75% since the introduction of the Children’s and Families Act in 2014.

From the survey returns and discussion with SEN transport teams, there are a number of reasons why Covid has led to an increase in the cost of delivery of SEN transport services. These include:

- Requirement to socially distance all vehicles, increasing the number of vehicles and staff required to transport the same number of children
- Additional single passenger routes operated due to social distancing
- High levels of staff absence due to sickness and shielding
- Additional PPE on all transport for drivers and travel assistants
- Many drivers and travel assistants moved to other, less risky jobs during the pandemic, leading to a shortage with boroughs and companies struggling to retain staff.
- Splitting routes between schools or between boroughs due to the need to maintain social bubbles.

In its submission to the Spending Review 2021, London Councils called for the Government to review the impact of Covid-19 on services for children with SEND, including transport, and provide additional funding to enable services to cover costs incurred due to the pandemic.²

² [London Councils' Spending Review 2021 submission | London Councils](#)

Given the huge increase in costs in recent years of delivering SEN transport services which are still experiencing growing demand coupled with the impact of Covid, the government should increase funding to support these services. SEN transport funding is included in the general grant from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). London Councils will be lobbying for a fairer funding allocation for London boroughs as part of the formula review, which is expected this year. SEN transport will be included in this lobbying with an emphasis on ensuring that funding allocations keep up with costs. This will build on London Councils' ongoing lobbying work to ensure that the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) is appropriately funded to keep up with rising demand for services for children with SEND.

BREAKDOWN OF COSTS AND DEMAND

In house travel costs and demand

18 out of the 29 respondent boroughs have internal fleets of minibuses. In-house transport costs are forecast to have risen by 28% between 2018/19 and the end of 2021/22 in the 13 boroughs that have provided full cost breakdowns.

The number of children and young people with SEND using in-house travel services has been relatively stable over the last three years. There was a slight increase of 4% in demand between 2018/19 and 2020/21 across the 18 boroughs with internal fleets.

For many boroughs, particularly those with internal fleets, the biggest challenge around Covid has been managing high sickness levels, which is still ongoing. Some transport services are shared with other internal services, for example adults, which helps to drive down costs. However, during and since Covid-19 the demand for some of these services has significantly reduced. Boroughs are keen to look at other shared service models.

External transport costs and demand

External transport costs have also increased at a similar pace. Between 2018/19 – 2021/2 they have increased by 26% across the 22 boroughs that have provided cost breakdowns.

There has been an increase in the number of children with SEND using external transport of 19% between 2018/19 – 2020/21 across 26 boroughs.

As well as covering the costs of the ongoing rise in demand, boroughs have also had to manage an increase in costs fuelled by the requirement for social distancing. This has meant that boroughs with internal fleets operating at capacity have had to buy in external services to meet requirements, competing with those that solely rely on external providers for SEN transport.

The Covid-19 pandemic has driven up provider costs dramatically, which has become apparent over the summer when boroughs retendered contracts. Many providers are no longer operating, or are struggling to find drivers, which, coupled with increased demand for provision, has led to a significant increase in prices but also a shortage of providers tendering for work.

Travel training

Of the 9 boroughs that have given us a full breakdown of costs for independent travel training these have risen by 13% between 2018/19 – 2021/22. This is due in part to a shortage of travel trainers and providers, which has been exacerbated by Covid-19 when demand reduced, and more providers opted to leave the sector.

The number of children and young people being travel trained has decreased by 40% between 2018/19 and 2020/21 from 299 to 241 across 17 boroughs that currently have a programme in place. Final numbers are not yet available for 2021/22 but many boroughs have been struggling to relaunch their travel training programmes during the pandemic.

Independent travel training can make a significant difference in young people's lives, as well as support demand management. Many London boroughs have been increasing their travel training programme in recent years to support more young people with SEND on the route to independence. However the numbers are still relatively small because young people have to be the right age and able to travel independently with support. Each travel trainer has limited capacity to support young people, and usually the training only takes place at the beginning and end of school. Some boroughs are experimenting with different models, for example training young people during the school day to try to increase numbers that can travel independently.

During the Covid-19 lockdowns most boroughs suspended their travel training programmes, due to parental anxieties about travelling on public transport during the pandemic. Some boroughs have been slow to resume their in-house programmes due to ongoing parental concerns and some providers have also been reluctant.

Personal budgets and mileage allowances

The use of personal budgets is also a significant cost driver. Between 2018/19 and 2021/22 the 16 boroughs that provided a full cost breakdown saw a collective 53% increase in costs.

The number of families accessing personal budgets has increased in line with in-house and external provision between 2018/19 and 2020/21 by 26% across 27 boroughs.

Many boroughs have increased the use of personal budgets in recent years as they are a cost-effective way of providing transport support to families. Many families like having the choice but for some children personal budgets are not the best option, therefore local authorities usually offer a range of provision to meet the needs of individual children.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SERVICE DELIVERY AND QUALITY

Quality of provision

11 boroughs out of 27 responded that Covid had led to a decrease in the quality of service delivery, 10 thought that it had stayed the same and 6 said that there had been an increase in quality.

Reasons why some boroughs stated that the quality of SEN transport services has decreased include:

- Increase in demand has resulted in less time per family, with more application forms and requests for travel assistance to process
- Reduction in crew availability and sickness/ self-isolation requirements has resulted in delays in route mobilisation and a less consistent service
- Medical training of passenger assistants has also been impacted due to low availability of face to face training.
- The rules around Covid are constantly changing which makes it very hard to plan service delivery
- School timetable changes and other issues with schools to accommodate Covid restrictions has made it difficult for SEN teams to share routes with other schools or plan strategically
- Behavioural issues with children returning after lockdown have increased, which is putting further strain on passenger assistants

Reasons why some boroughs stated that the quality had improved as a result of Covid-19:

- The pandemic had led to an improved awareness by staff of the risk of medical infections, and health and safety management, as well as cleaner, more hygienic vehicles.
- The significant reduction in demand during the school lockdowns in some boroughs meant that there were lots of staff available for those boroughs that had in-house fleets, even with some staff self-isolating or shielding.
- The reduction in traffic during the lockdowns meant that vehicles could reduce journey times.
- The reduction in demand in some boroughs resulted in staff providing more support for each child and better communication with parents

Current and ongoing challenges to service delivery during Covid-19:

Since social distancing requirements were lifted in July 2021 most boroughs have returned to normal service levels. However, they are now facing a number of new challenges:

- The impact of Covid on many vulnerable children and young people has led to an increase in demand over for SEND services as a result of lockdowns. SEN

transport staff on the frontline are reporting a considerable increase in need and significant challenging behaviours over the past 18 months.

- Most local provision is heavily oversubscribed now and there is an urgent need to grow local special education provision to accommodate rising needs.
- Since Covid many of the routes that were previously shared across boroughs and across schools have stopped, due to the limits put in place not to mix children from different schools, which is driving up costs. Most of these routes are still paused due to ongoing uncertainty around Covid. Resuming shared routes would reduce the number of drivers required, which would lessen the issue of driver shortage.
- Many schools have introduced new queuing systems due to Covid, which have meant long waits for buses and taxis to unload and sharing routes between schools is still not possible with these schools.
- The boroughs are reporting an increasing number of young people with SEND attending college, particularly with complex needs, who require SEN transport. Colleges often have different start and finish times depending on courses and SEN transport services are struggling to work with colleges in many areas to work around this, e.g. by allowing students to use college facilities before or after their course ends. Some boroughs have worked with colleges to introduce shuttle bus services in some of their biggest colleges, but this relies on colleges accommodating students while they are waiting for the next bus. It is important that colleges recognise the pressures and costs on SEN transport and work with local authorities to support young people.
- During the Covid lockdowns many children with SEND who had previously not been eligible for SEN transport support were temporarily moved on to SEN transport to avoid the risk of infection. Similarly some children who usually travel by bus had been moved to taxis during Covid due to the requirement to socially distance. These temporary changes have raised parental expectations and many boroughs are finding it difficult to change transport support for these families.
- TfL has raised fees for taxi licences across London following Covid, which is making some taxi companies consider whether it is worth their while to continue to operate. Some companies have already closed due to rising costs and have cited the increase in fees for licences as a contributing factor.

SHARING GOOD PRACTICE, INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION

The borough SEN transport teams are looking at a range of innovative, collaborative practice aimed at improving outcomes and reducing costs. The challenge of Covid has made it increasingly difficult to plan strategically but has also increased the impetus to work together with neighbouring boroughs to help to reduce costs. The significant challenge around tackling climate change, particularly whether they can make service innovations to reduce air pollution is also a priority for many boroughs. London Councils surveyed the boroughs on these themes and discussed them with borough officers. This section sets out the findings from the survey and discussions.

Reducing journey times

Long journey times travelling to and from school can have a detrimental effect on a child's mental and physical health, as well as increase costs. The ongoing demand increases have led to an increasing number of children with SEND attending school out of borough and travelling longer distances to school.

Whilst borough responses show that there has been no tangible difference in average journey times to in-borough provision over the past three years, in the boroughs that provided data nearly all were over the 75 minutes recommended, with some significantly more. One borough provided an estimate of an average journey time of 1.3 hours to out of borough schools.

We asked boroughs in the survey what options they have explored to reduce journey times. Some boroughs highlighted that demand is increasing to such an extent that it is very difficult to reduce journey times. However, a number of them have introduced new measures designed to reduce journey times, including introducing pick up points, increasing travel training programmes, using route optimisation software, undertaking regular review of routes, using multi-occupancy taxis instead of mini-buses where appropriate, splitting routes that are too long and encouraging more parents to use personal budgets. To have a considerable impact on journey times, however, local areas need to be able to create more local provision. Some local authorities have been doing this through the creation of Special Resource Provisions (SRPs) on site at mainstream schools or by promoting more inclusion, but at present they are restricted by not being able to set up new specialist provision.

Tackling climate change and air pollution

For all the boroughs it is clear that tackling climate change is a priority. However, concerns were raised about whether the right technology and infrastructure is in place to support switching internal fleets to greener fuels, particularly larger vehicles, and also the significant costs involved.

Some boroughs have managed to switch some of their internal fleet to greener energy sources. However, of the 15 boroughs with internal fleets who responded to the survey, 14 of them use diesel. The other borough uses Gas to Liquid (GTL) fuel in their fleet and they are currently investigating using more environmentally friendly fuels.

Other ways of reducing air pollution need to be explored, besides switching to greener fuels for buses and taxis, by reducing the usage of SEN transport vehicles. Some boroughs are trying to promote more walking to school initiatives, working with schools and parents, and also many have plans to roll out more travel training so that young people are able to use public transport independently.

Some boroughs are considering switching to greener fuels, including:

- Tower Hamlets is currently making a business case to secure funding to switch to a green fleet for all their cars, vans and small transit vehicles. The

next phase will include developing a plan for passenger transport buses to go green, looking at electric or hydrogen fuel as the technology improves

- Hounslow has been trying out a cooking oil diesel on a few of their vehicles to see how that works. Some of the smaller vehicles may switch to electric.
- Camden has purchased new Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG) buses to start replacing bus routes and looking at the procurement of full electric buses.
- Islington is planning on purchasing two electric buses in 2022 and will convert their diesel buses to electric in the coming years.
- Greenwich currently uses Ultra-low sulphur diesel but will be moving towards full HVO diesel (Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil) to run the fleet as an interim running up to electrification of the fleet in 2030. HVO is estimated to reduce up to 90% of carbon emissions.

Innovation and improvement work

We asked boroughs whether they had implemented any changes to their operational services over the last 2 years that have led to either efficiency savings or service improvements. The demand pressures and challenges of operating during a pandemic have significantly impacted on the boroughs' ability to innovate and try out new models of service delivery. However, some boroughs have managed to deliver improvements and cost savings, by introducing new initiatives such as:

- Increasing personal budgets and travel training in many boroughs
- Establishing a Dynamic Purchasing System in a number of boroughs has supported both the delivery of savings and service improvement
- Insourcing minibus provision to reduce costs
- Sharing costs with adult social care
- Regularly reviewing individual risk assessments and/ or reviews of need which has allowed for a reduction in support where appropriate
- Producing a new more consistent travel policy to help make more equitable decisions
- Creating a new online application process which has positive feedback and engagement from parents
- Working closer with the borough SEN placements team to identify the nearest appropriate schools for pupils in transition in December each year
- Stricter implementation of post 16 transport policy and with 'exceptional circumstances' cases
- Increasing mileage offers in some cases to £1 per mile or offering a bespoke package to parents to avoid solo taxis
- Introduction of a new working rota which has allowed an extended working day, so staff are better able to attend to out of hours changes, communicate with parents and schools.
- Introducing a pupil database system provides better routes, quality and financial management
- One bus contractor has recently started using a new live tracking system which initial feedback indicates is beginning to improve services

- Hygiene levels have been improved, in many boroughs they have they have continued with more regular cleaning and encouraging the usage of face masks, even since restrictions were lifted in July 2021.
- Introducing a wheelchair passport system which improves safety on transport

Collaboration

We asked the boroughs whether they currently, or have considered, working in partnership with other authorities to deliver efficiencies and/ or improve services. Most have tried to some extent and a number have shared routes with neighbouring boroughs, although most of these were suspended during the Covid lockdowns.

Many boroughs reported obstacles in dealing with neighbouring boroughs however, which included varying pupil needs, differing local authority policies and standards, data sharing and contractual limitations. A couple of boroughs also highlighted that not all route sharing was cost effective and could often lead to longer journey times, so it was important to consider the routes on a case by case basis.

Some existing examples of collaboration between boroughs include:

- Barking & Dagenham and Redbridge have a joint framework contract
- Camden, Islington and the City have retendered their joint taxi contract
- Sutton has a dynamic purchase system with Kingston and Richmond, and Croydon provides its Independent Travel Training programme. It also works with a number of other boroughs either providing or utilising transport on an ad-hoc basis.
- The London Office for Innovation and Technology (LOTI) had started discussions with interested boroughs before Covid around the potential to establish more route sharing across London. A number of boroughs expressed interest in being involved in this work going forward.

CONCLUSION – NEXT STEPS

This report sets out a number of key challenges currently facing the London borough SEN transport services, particularly long term demand and Covid-related pressures. It also has identified a number of areas where London Councils and can take forward work, including sharing practice where boroughs have managed to overcome these challenges. London Councils will continue to work closely with the boroughs, through their SEN transport teams, to provide a forum for discussion and an opportunity to share good practice. London Councils will also consider how it can support the boroughs to make service improvements and cost savings by brokering collaboration and promoting opportunities to reduce air pollution.

In particular, SEN transport services are clearly facing significant budgetary pressures, which is an area that London Councils can highlight to Government, including in any response to forthcoming Government reviews on SEND services or the local government formula grant. There is also a need for the Department for

Education to update its current Home to School Transport guidance to consider the current context of operating in a pandemic, which would support local authority decision-making at this difficult time.

There is a clear need to continue to focus on the significant challenges facing these services, identifying ways of working to alleviate these pressures and to improve outcomes for children with SEND across London.

London Councils will:

- Develop a lobbying case to put to Ministers for the need for more funding to support SEN transport services, highlighting the long term demand trends and ongoing pressures around Covid-19
- Call on DfE to revise the home to school transport guidance to address the current issues around operating in, and following, a pandemic
- Ask the DfE to support our work to identify and share effective approaches to reducing costs and improving outcomes