

Protests as Luton council cuts free transport to religious schools

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Councillors walked out of a meeting at Luton Town Hall this week when observers in the public gallery began shouting and waving placards in protest at the Council's plans to end free transport for pupils attending religious schools.

Members of the executive refused to return until all members of the public had left the building. The council said the cut could save nearly £300,000 in the first year. In total it needs to cut £49m from its budget.

Luton currently provides discretionary free transport for children under eight who live between two and 15 miles from their school and between three and 15 miles for over eights. The authority said the cut would save about £278k in 2013/14 and £487k in 2014/15.

They are legally obliged to provide the transport for pupils aged 11 to 16 from low income families and this will continue.

About 600 pupils at Cardinal Newman Roman Catholic School will be affected. At present it takes eleven buses a day, including 10 double-deckers, to ferry 600 children to the Cardinal Newman Roman Catholic School in Warden Hill Road.

Parents said it would cost about £600 per child, per year, to make alternative arrangements. They recently boycotted the transport for one day and drove their children to the school to demonstrate to the council what effect it would have on traffic in the area.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "In all the instances of councils cutting free transport to religious schools, the parents have claimed discrimination. But the real discrimination is against children going to community schools who have to find their own way at their own expense. The parents affected in Luton should be grateful that they've had so much extra money pumped into their children's education over such a long period. They are now going to have to give up this very generous perk — provided solely on the grounds that they are Catholic — and pay their way like everyone else has to."

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