

Sheffield Council latest to axe free travel to religious schools

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Sheffield City Council is the latest to scrap free transport for children attending religious schools.

At a meeting last week, Councillors were presented with three options for reforming the discretionary travel policy for denominational schools, as the authority tries to meet a £50 million funding shortfall next year.

The first option was to keep the existing arrangements, whereby many children attending church schools are eligible for free bus passes, to remove them on a phased basis or to remove them entirely.

Alena Bridges, the council's assistant director of inclusion and learning services said that the phased removal would have seen the council save £47,000 a year, but removing them entirely was said to save "just under £250,000".

Removal of the discretionary travel support, mainly affecting children attending Notre Dame and All Saints secondary schools, had generated fierce opposition from parents.

Coun Jackie Drayton, cabinet member responsible for schools, said: "It's with a heavy heart that I asked officers to look into this and it's with a heavy heart that I support option three."

She said that the existing arrangement was "not equitable" as it only covered children attending church schools and left the council open to legal challenge from parents who wanted to send their children to non-church schools which incurred travel costs.

She said that she had written to Bishop John Rawsthorne at the Catholic Diocese of Hallam to ask: "is there any way in which the Catholic Church and schools could set up a hardship fund as a safety net" for the children affected by the removal of travel support.

Children eligible for free school meals will still get free travel.

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