

Thurrock is latest council to charge for transport to faith schools

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Thurrock Council in Essex is the latest to decide that it will no longer fund transport for pupils attending faith schools. Last year it spent £480,000 transporting children to religious schools outside their catchment areas.

The decision came after councillors were told that they had to save £300,000 from their education transport budget in 2014/15.

The council will continue to provide the transport, but will charge parents for its use. It will only be available to pupils aged between five and 16, at a school between two and 15 miles from their home, whose parents have a wish for a particular school based on religious beliefs and where there is no other school available. It will affect some 400 pupils.

Cllr John Kent, leader of Thurrock Council, passed the proposal at last week's cabinet meeting, with charges set for the start of September 2014.

A public consultation showed 72% of parents wanted the transport to continue, but with a charging regime as opposed to it being cancelled altogether.

A scheme will be introduced by the council to help families with children at denominational schools for whom the charges will cause financial strain.

Despite a number of councils moving away from the practice, many local authorities still offer discretionary assistance to children who do not qualify for statutory free travel. This applies almost entirely to children attending schools with a religious character. Research carried out by the National Secular Society suggests that the cost of this to the public purse is around £70 million a year.

Provisions of the Equality Act which place a duty on local authorities not to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their religion or belief do not apply to the exercise of an authority's functions in relation to school transport.

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