

From County Councillor **Nicholas Rushton**

The Rt Hon David Cameron MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

21st May 2013

Dear Prime Minister,

HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

When we met at a Downing Street Reception for Conservative Group Leaders, I had the pleasure of a few minutes of your time during which we discussed home to school transport. I mentioned the emerging difficulties in Leicestershire and you thought that there would inevitably be similar difficulties in Oxfordshire. I undertook to send you a follow up letter.

As briefly as possible, I would summarise the position:

- The introduction of academies, which my Council has fully supported, undoubtedly requires reconsideration of the rules around home to school transport. Academies (and indeed maintained schools) are changing their age ranges and their admission arrangements, with the unintended consequence of destabilising the arrangements for home to school transport, for which upper tier local authorities have a statutory obligation to provide.
- The Education Act 1996 is still the relevant legislation – free transport for primary school pupils attending the nearest qualifying school if the distance is 2 miles plus; the same for secondary school pupils except the distance is 3 miles plus. In Leicestershire, free transport has traditionally been provided to the catchment area school or other school nearer to the home address where the school is beyond the statutory walking distances referred to above. In some places, it is fair to say that, in the time prior to academies and in a non-competitive situation, catchment areas have been artificially extended in order to keep numbers on the roll high.

- Whilst these traditional arrangements are not perfect – nothing is - they are reasonably well understood by parents and schools. However, academies are challenging these arrangements as not reflecting the market place for education, something increasingly understood by parents and schools who look, rightly or wrongly, to the local authority for answers.

The County Council has been in correspondence with the Department for Education and I think it is fair to say the Department's brief response has been just to make it clear that local solutions need to be found.

That is all very well, but such a response does not in my view take proper account of a number of matters, including the potential for a substantial additional cost to the Council/the taxpayer and increasing anxiety amongst parents selecting schools of their choice, anxiety which is finding its way through to councillors and MPs. I would suggest all of these factors and outcomes are going to increase significantly in the next couple of years, and the local political consequences should be taken into account by all concerned – something which is not currently happening.

The County Council, in setting out the position as we see it in some detail to the Department for Education, referred to the need for primary legislation if the ground rules were to change. Such a change could allow delegation to academies of funding for home to school transport, which might seem logical, but which in all probability through longer journeys would increase the cost to the public purse. The propensity of the Department to 'top-slice' crudely the funding base of local authorities to pay for the consequences of its policies would no doubt present further problems.

This last point is but one example of why I believe that the matter deserves more serious consideration than it would currently appear to be receiving from the Government. Frankly, I have been surprised that the concerns have not been picked up before now in other counties with large rural areas, but I do believe it is only a matter of time. For all the reasons I have included in this letter, I hope that you will give the need to find a sensible solution – a solution which supports rather than undermines the academies policy – some early attention. I remain very grateful for your interest.

Yours sincerely,

Nicholas

Nicholas Rushton
Leader of the Council