

Sections 239, 240, 246 and 260

Highways Act 1980

Acquisition of Land Act 1981

**THE WARRINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL (OMEGA TO
BURTONWOOD ACCESSIBILITY IMPROVEMENTS)
COMPULSORY PURCHASE ORDER 2019**

REFERENCE:

NATTRAN/NW/LAO/194

**Summary proof of evidence of
CATHERINE THOMPSON
(IMPACT ON SCHOOL STUDENTS)**

1 INTRODUCTION AND QUALIFICATIONS

- 1.1 I am Catherine Thompson and I am the Principal Manager of School Admissions and Planning, based in Education Services at Warrington Borough Council ("the Council"). I have been in post for just over 3 years and contributed to the drafting of the Council's Home to School Transport policy [**document 23** to the Council's Statement of Case ("SoC")].
- 1.2 In total, I have 16 years' experience in local authority education services, with 13 years of this being employed at Warrington Borough Council.

Scope of Evidence

- 1.3 This proof of evidence has been prepared regarding the impact on school students, particularly in terms of school transport policies, as a result of the Scheme and the Order [**document 1** to the Council's SoC]. The Scheme is described fully in the Council's Statement of Case. This proof of evidence has been prepared in connection with the Public Inquiry due to open on Tuesday 5 November 2019.
- 1.4 I confirm that the evidence that I have prepared in respect of this Inquiry is given in accordance with the Home to School Travel and Transport Guidance: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities (the "Statutory Guidance") published by the Department for Education in July 2014 [**Appendix 1**]. I can confirm that the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions.
- 1.5 The purpose of my evidence is to explain the impact on school students and access to transport, in support of the Scheme. I also address the grounds of objection raised by Mr Alexander Abbey in his non-statutory objection lodged on 17 May 2019 [**document 21** to the SoC] ("the Non Statutory Objection"), insofar as they relate to my area of expertise.
- 1.6 My proof of evidence should be read in conjunction with other separate but interrelated proofs of evidence submitted on behalf of the Council: Keith Sanders; Kate Okell; and John Nichol.

2 HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY

- 2.1 The Education Act 1996 includes a requirement for local authorities to provide free transport for all pupils of compulsory school age (5-16) if their nearest suitable school is beyond 3 miles (if aged between 8 and 16), where a 'suitable school' is defined as the nearest establishment to the home address that can meet the needs of the child, and has a place available in the appropriate year group.
- 2.2 Travel assistance must also be provided where a family's circumstances meet the extended rights criteria. The extended rights criteria apply when:
- 2.2.1 The child or young person is attending a suitable school which is one of the three nearest secondary schools, including cross boundary, and the shortest walking distance from home to that school is more than 2 miles but less than 6 miles; or
- 2.2.2 The child or young person is attending a school and the shortest walking distance from home to that school is more than 2 miles but less than 15 miles and is the nearest school preferred on the basis of the parent's/carer's religion or belief.
- 2.3 Qualification for the extended rights criteria is assessed on the basis of low income and is defined in accordance with Schedule 35B of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, as further described in my proof of evidence.
- 2.4 Guidelines produced on behalf of Road Safety GB states that "the walking route must be measured by the "nearest available route" rather than a direct distance or 'as the crow flies'. In all cases, the shortest walking distance from home to school is calculated from the central point of the child's home address to the central point of the school, and is the shortest route along which a child, accompanied as necessary, may walk safely.
- 2.5 The Council is also required by law to provide or pay for free transport where the shortest walking route from home to school is less than 3 miles but the route in question has been classified as hazardous.
- 2.6 As the vast majority of pupils accessing free travel from Burtonwood are eligible for free travel due to exceeding the statutory distance or meeting the extended rights criteria, no routes in Burtonwood have been classed as hazardous.
- 2.7 Notwithstanding this, when the Home to School Transport Policy was reviewed in 2012/2013, the Council was satisfied that there was sufficient evidence to suggest that, if an assessment of this route was undertaken, the likelihood would be for the outcome to be to classify it as hazardous due to a lack of pavements. A decision was, therefore, taken by the Council that any school aged pupil applying for transport assistance where the journey would involve walking along the route from Burtonwood to Great Sankey High School would be eligible for free travel due to the hazardous nature of the route.

3 OBJECTIONS TO THE ORDER

Objection submitted by Alexander Abbey

- 3.1 Mr Abbey's objection is set out in Section 3 of my proof of evidence.
- 3.2 It is my view that the Scheme:
- will not result in the removal of existing transport to the local secondary school for pupils from the village and beyond; and
 - will not remove the direct feeder school status for the local primary school.
- 3.3 At present, there are 99 school aged pupils living in Burtonwood entitled to claim free transport assistance to Great Sankey High School. Of these, 85 are in receipt of free travel as they live more than the statutory distance from their nearest suitable school; 2 are eligible due to meeting the extended rights criteria; and 12 pupils are eligible due to the hazardous nature of the route.
- 3.4 On the basis of the improvements proposed as part of the Scheme, it is unlikely that free transport would continue to be granted on the basis of it being a hazardous route.
- 3.5 Although it is not possible to pre-determine the impact of the Scheme for the 12 pupils impacted, in my professional opinion it is likely to be the case that any pupil with an existing entitlement to free transport would be protected for the remainder of their secondary phase of education.
- 3.6 Any new applicants would be assessed taking account of the proposed improvements and, if found to be ineligible to claim free travel to school, would still be able to access the school bus as fare paying passengers. Therefore, improvement of the route is unlikely to make the village a less attractive place for young families to move to.
- 3.7 It is incorrect to say that the feeder school status of the primary schools in Burtonwood to Great Sankey High School would be affected by the Scheme.
- 3.8 The School Admissions Code ('the Code') [**Appendix 2**] ensures that all school places for maintained schools and Academies are allocated and offered in an open and fair way. Burtonwood Primary School is part of the Omega Multi Academy Trust, which includes Great Sankey High School as the only secondary school.
- 3.9 The oversubscription criteria determined by the Academy Trust at Great Sankey High are as follows:
1. Children in care and children formerly in care;
 2. Siblings;
 3. Children with significant medical needs;
 4. Pupils attending Burtonwood Primary School;
 5. Pupils living nearest to the school defined as a direct distance from the child's permanent place of residence to the school.
- 3.10 Applicants meeting one of the higher ranked criteria are more likely to be successful in gaining a place at the school, but this is never guaranteed. It can, however, be said that, to date, no children on roll at Burtonwood Primary for whom a secondary school

application was submitted on-time, expressing a first preference for Great Sankey High School have been refused a place at the School.

- 3.11 Additional housing being built in and around Great Sankey High School would not have a direct impact, as those applicants at Burtonwood Primary School are considered over and above applicants meeting the distance criterion.

Summary

- 3.12 It is my professional opinion that, on balance, the impact of the Scheme on a small number of students does not outweigh the greater benefits of the Scheme, and consequently, the reasons for the objection do not justify the refusal of the Scheme.
- 3.13 The Council will act at all times in accordance with national and local guidance and legislation in relation to travel to school policies, and these will not be altered by the Scheme.
- 3.14 Taking all of the information into account, it is concluded that the use of compulsory purchase powers is justified.

4 STATEMENT OF TRUTH AND DECLARATION

- 4.1 My statement of truth is contained in full within Section 4 of my proof of evidence. I can confirm that the contents of that section apply equally to my summary proof of evidence.

CATHERINE THOMPSON

October 2019