

North Somerset Council Home to School Transport Policy: Vacant Seat Payment Scheme (VSPS)

The Vacant Seats Payment Scheme allows parents of children who are not entitled to free Home to School Transport by statute to purchase vacant seats on vehicles at a competitive, subsidised rate. There is also provision for exemption from fares when pupils are receiving Free School Meals or parents are on qualifying benefits.

Scheme Rules

1. Application and Allocation of Seats

- 1.1. Applications for vacant seats will not be considered until the Home to School Transport team is satisfied that all statutorily entitled pupils have been accommodated. Whilst this will generally mean that vacant places are allocated before the beginning of term, this cannot be guaranteed, and applicants should be aware that the responsibility for their child attending school remains with them.
- 1.2. All applications should be made on the specified electronic form and will only be considered if parents/carers agree to abide by the terms and conditions of the scheme. [Home to school transport | North Somerset Council \(n-somerset.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-somerset.gov.uk/home-to-school-transport/)
- 1.3. A new application must be made each academic year. Occupation of a seat during a previous academic year does not automatically entitle a pupil to travel during the current year and provides no advantage in the future allocation of seats.
- 1.4. Applications will open on 31 July for the following academic year. Parents may not attempt to secure transport for a number of years ahead by submitting multiple forms in advance. The team will not consider applications from parents who have not yet been offered a place at the school for which they are applying for transport.
To apply for a seat under the scheme please complete our online application form, all applications are processed on a first come first served basis.
- 1.5. If seats are available, they will be offered on a 'first come first served' basis, based on the received date stamp on the application form. Where one seat remains on a preferred service and it is impossible to distinguish between several applications, allocation of the seat will be by drawing of lots.
- 1.6. Where a seat on the preferred service is not available but a nearby alternative exists, the Home to School Transport team will usually offer this seat for travel.

- 1.7. Pupils who have previously been excluded from any North Somerset Council provided school transport route or have been found to be misusing their travel ticket will not be considered until all other applications have been dealt with. The Council reserves the right to decline any application where previous behaviour has caused concern for the safety or well-being of others.
- 1.8. Should a statutorily entitled pupil require a seat occupied by a VSPS passenger or should a route cease to operate, a minimum two weeks notice of the need to discontinue travel will be given. If no acceptable alternative vacant seat is available, a proportional refund for the remainder of the term will be paid provided the fare for the term has been paid.
- 1.9. Where it is necessary to remove passengers travelling under the VSPS from a service to accommodate statutorily entitled pupils, the most recent pupil to join the route will generally be asked to cease travelling. However, in some cases, changes to the routing or stopping pattern of the service may mean that VSPS passengers in specific locations need to be removed in such circumstances.
- 1.10. Once a seat has been allocated a request to change seats to another service will not be considered unless supporting information from the school is supplied which indicates that it is necessary for an academic, social or health related reason.

2. Fares and Payment

- 2.1. The termly fare for VSPS travel will be reviewed annually and will be clearly stated in the terms and conditions which form part of the application process and on other communications with scheme users regarding payment.
- 2.2. The cost for this scheme is listed in our 'fees and charges' document on our website. The cost for 2022/23 academic year is £676.00.
www.n-somerset.gov.uk/council-democracy/accounts-spending-insurance/fees-charges *If you are in receipt of maximum working tax credit or free school meals, please attach confirmation of this within your application.*
- 2.3. Fares are payable in advance for each term of travel. If a pupil wishes to begin travelling during a term, a reduction proportional to the elapsed days of the term will be made from the final invoice during the academic year.
- 2.4. If a pupil ceases to travel during a term, a proportional refund based on remaining days in the term will be made on return of the travel ticket, provided the fare has been paid. Where parents are unable to return the ticket, it will not be possible to process a refund.

- 2.5. Fares are based on a seat being reserved for occupation daily and therefore unavailable for use by any other pupil. If a pupil or parent decides not to use the service on any given day or part of a day, there will be no proportional reduction in the fare.
- 2.6. Drivers are not authorised to collect fares from passengers and Vacant Seats cannot be accessed 'on the day'.
- 2.7. If the fare for any part of the previous year is outstanding when a parent/carers makes a new application for VSPS travel, the application will not be considered until the outstanding amount is paid. Further failure to pay may result in the authority taking legal action to recover the debt.
- 2.8. Where a parent/carers has repeatedly failed to pay termly invoices, but requests readmission to the scheme following full payment, the council may in some cases request payment in advance for the full year without discount.
- 2.9. If a pupil is excluded from transport due to unacceptable behaviour for either a fixed or permanent period, no proportional refund will be payable.

3. Exemption from Payment of Fares

- 3.1. Pupils will not be charged for VSPS travel if they are entitled to Free School Meals as determined by the School Admissions Team.
- 3.2. Pupils who have not been or do not wish to be assessed for entitlement to Free School Meals will not be charged for VSPS travel if they would otherwise qualify for this service. In this case, proof of entitlement will be requested by the Home to School Transport Team. The current eligibility criteria are listed in Appendix A, along with a list of acceptable forms of proof of eligibility in Appendix B.
- 3.3. Pupils who become eligible for fare exemption during a term will be entitled to a proportional refund for the remainder of the term if they have already paid for transport. Such refunds will not be backdated prior to the current term and will take effect from the date on which parents/carers notify their change of circumstances to the Home to School Transport team.
- 3.4. If the parent or carers' situation changes such that they are no longer entitled to Free School Meals or other qualifying benefits, they must inform the Home to School Transport Team. The normal fare will become payable at the beginning of the next term. Failure to notify the team of a change in circumstances will result in a request for payment in full and may jeopardise future travel under the scheme.

4. Travel Pass

- 4.1. Travel passes must be carried by passengers at all times when travelling and must be produced when requested by any officer from the Children & Young People's Services directorate, any member of school staff or any representative of a contractor engaged in running a Home to School Transport route. Failure to produce a travel pass on request may result in travel being refused.
- 4.2. Travel passes are issued for use by the named holder only. Use of the travel pass by any other person may result in the right to travel being withdrawn and may jeopardise future travel under the VSPS.
- 4.3. If a travel pass is lost, damaged, or defaced a fee must be paid before the Home to School Transport team will issue a replacement. This fee is listed in our 'fees and charges' document on our website: www.n-somerset.gov.uk/council-democracy/accounts-spending-insurance/fees-charges. The Home to School Transport Manager will consider waiving this fee if a member of staff from the school concerned is able to confirm that the travel pass holder was not negligent in its loss or damage.

5. Collection Points and Timings

- 5.1. Passengers travelling under the VSPS will be allocated a seat from the stop nearest to their home address. If parents wish to use a different stop, they must inform the Home to School Transport Team in writing. Parents are responsible for ensuring their child gets to the requested pickup point at the correct time.
- 5.2. The Home to School Transport Team will not extend a route to serve areas other than those where statutorily entitled passengers reside. Therefore, VSPS passengers will generally be asked to attend an existing stop on the route and requests to alter collection and drop off points will only be considered if they request a move to an existing stopping point.
- 5.3. In exceptional circumstances, it may be possible to add an additional stop along the existing route of a vehicle, provided it does not adversely affect the service offered to other passengers and does not incur any additional cost to the Council.

- 5.4. The Home to School Transport Team will not provide a larger vehicle on a route to accommodate additional passengers travelling under the VSPS, but if a vehicle is increased in size to meet a demand for entitled passengers to travel, any remaining seats may be used by VSPS passengers.
- 5.5. All passengers are expected to be at the collection point at the time indicated on the travel ticket. Services which arrive early will wait at stop until the stated departure time. Tickets are not valid for any other Home to School Transport services which may pass the stop and are not available for use on local public bus services.
- 5.6. Bus times and routes are subject to change to accommodate pupils who are statutorily entitled to transport. The Home to School Transport team will attempt to provide as much notice as possible of any change to all passengers, including those travelling under the VSPS.

Appendix A

Eligibility Criteria for Fare Exemption

The eligibility criteria for exemption from fares are:

- entitled to Free School Meals

or parents who are entitled to:

- Income Support
- Income Based Job Seekers Allowance
- Maximum Working Tax Credit (no deduction due to income)
- Universal Credit – provided you have an annual net earned income of no more than £7400, as assessed by earnings from up to three of your most recent assessment periods

The eligibility criteria will be reviewed annually in April to account for changes in entitlement to Free School Meals as advised by the Department for Education and Skills.

Appendix B

Supporting evidence required for Exemption for Fares

Benefit	Evidence Required
Free School Meals	None – will confirm via internal database.
Income Support	All pages of most recent letter from the Department for Work and Pensions detailing entitlement.
Job Seekers Allowance (Income Based)	All pages of most recent letter from the Department for Work and Pensions detailing entitlement.
Tax Credit	Most recent Tax Credit Award Notice (TC602) or Inland Revenue notice of Change of Circumstance.
Guarantee Element of Pension Credit	Most recent Pension Credit Award Notice (M1000)

Tel: 01934 634 715

Email: schooltransport@n-somerset.gov.uk

Post: ITU, Castlewood, Tickenham Road, Clevedon, BS21 6FW

Web: www.n-somerset.gov.uk/hometoschooltransport