

Home to School Travel Policy

Vacant Seat Scheme (VSS) 2025/2026

Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Scheme Rules – Application	2
3. Scheme Rules – Allocation	3
4. Fees and Payment	4
5. Exemptions	5
6. Bus and Train Passes	6
7. Collection Points and Timings	6
Appendix A – Eligibility for Fee Exemption.....	8
Appendix B – Supporting evidence required for Fee Exemption	8

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1. Introduction

The Vacant Seats Scheme (VSS) 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.

2. Scheme Rules – Application

The local authority has set out some ground rules for the VSS. Parents/ Carers are asked to fully read and understand them before applying. VSS seats are offered on a first come, first serve basis:

- 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.
- Applications will open on 31 July for that year's academic year starting. Parents may not attempt to secure transport for several 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.
- All applications should be made using the [online](#) VSS form.
- A new application must be made each academic year.
- 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 raised concerns about the safety or well-being of others.

Please note that parents/carers are unable to launch a School Travel Assistance Review for a refused VSS application.

3. Scheme Rules – Allocation

Below are the rules of how the VSS seats will be allocated.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Should a statutorily eligible pupil require a seat occupied by a VSS 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.
- Where it is necessary to remove passengers travelling under the VSS from a service to accommodate statutorily eligible students, 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 VSS passengers in specific locations need to be removed in such circumstances.

- 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.
- The Local Authority cannot provide a VSS seat on a public bus as we cannot guarantee the availability of seats on such buses.

4. Fees and Payment

The termly fare for VSS 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.

The fee for this scheme is listed in our [Fees and Charges](#) document.

If you are a low-income family with Free School meals, please attach evidence of this with your application.

Fees 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.

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.

Fees 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.

Drivers are not authorised to collect fees from passengers and Vacant Seats cannot be accessed 'on the day'.

If the fee for any part of the previous year is outstanding when a parent/carer makes a new application for VSS 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.

Where a parent/carer 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.

If a pupil is excluded from transport due to unacceptable behaviour for either a fixed or permanent period, no proportional refund will be payable.

5. Exemptions

Students will not be charged for VSS travel if they are eligible for Free School Meals (determined by the admissions team) or the child is of SEND with high needs attending a Special Educational setting.

If we are not able to determine this, please see a list of qualifying criteria are listed in Appendix A, along with a list of acceptable forms of proof of eligibility in Appendix B.

Students 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 before the current term and will take effect from the date parents/ carers must notify the Home to School Transport team of their change of circumstances.

If the parent/ 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.

6. Travel Passes

Travel Passes must be always carried by passengers 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.

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 VSS.

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.

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.

7. Collection Points and Timings

Passengers travelling under the VSS 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.

The Home to School Transport Team will not extend a route to serve areas other than those where statutorily entitled passengers reside. Therefore, VSS 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.

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.

The Home to School Transport Team will not provide a larger vehicle on a route to accommodate additional passengers travelling under the VSS, but if a vehicle is increased in size to meet a demand for entitled passengers to travel, any remaining seats may be used by VSS passengers.

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.

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 VSS.

Appendix A – Eligibility for Fee Exemption

The eligibility criteria for exemption from fares are:

- Entitled to Free School Meals
- A SEND child with high needs attending a special educational setting or parents/ carers who are eligible to:
- 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 Fee Exemption

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.

Vacant Seat Scheme HTST Travel Policy

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)