



Berinsfield Parish Council

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OPEN LETTER – School Transport Arrangements for Berinsfield

This letter is issued pursuant to a resolution of Berinsfield Parish Council made at its meeting on 5 October 2026.

To Oxfordshire County Council, the Secretary of State for Education and other relevant elected representatives,

Berinsfield Parish Council recently considered school transport and the issues that many residents within Berinsfield have experienced for a number of years in transporting their children to secondary school. This matter was item 13 of the agenda of the meeting of Berinsfield Parish Council on 5 October 2026. I have been asked to draft an open letter on behalf of the Parish Council in response.

The Parish Council is aware that there has been some action taken, including in the form of formal complaints to Oxfordshire County Council, the Secretary of State and other elected representatives serving residents within Berinsfield. It is our understanding that this matter has been raised, although not for the first time, by a former Parish Councillor and resident on behalf of existing residents in Berinsfield.

Berinsfield Parish Council does not seek to prejudge the legal merits of individual transport decisions, but it shares the resident's concern that the interaction between admissions arrangements, school availability and transport eligibility appears to be producing outcomes that are inequitable and impractical for Berinsfield families.

In particular, the Parish Council is concerned that Berinsfield has no secondary school of its own and that families are therefore necessarily reliant on secondary schools outside the village. In practice, many Berinsfield pupils attend schools in Abingdon, yet families can find themselves without funded transport where Oxfordshire County Council determines that another school is the nearest suitable school for transport purposes.

The Parish Council recognises that admissions catchment arrangements and statutory school transport entitlement are governed by different criteria. However, it is difficult for residents to understand a system in which a school may be regarded as the relevant or practical destination for admissions purposes, while transport support is assessed by reference to a different school which may not realistically have been available to the individual child concerned.

We therefore believe there is a legitimate need for greater clarity as to how Oxfordshire County Council determines whether a school has places available when identifying the nearest suitable school for transport purposes.

The County Council's published policy states that the nearest suitable school is the nearest qualifying school with places available and that if a place cannot be offered at the nearest suitable school, travel assistance may be provided to the next nearest suitable school. Berinsfield Parish Council would therefore welcome a clear explanation of how this test has been applied historically and currently to pupils living in Berinsfield.

The Parish Council is also particularly concerned about the financial burden placed on families who are required to fund school transport themselves. This concern must be considered in the context of Berinsfield's socioeconomic profile.

Oxfordshire County Council's own Community Insight data demonstrates that Berinsfield experiences significantly greater financial vulnerability than Oxfordshire as a whole. In January 2024, 27.5% of primary and secondary pupils living in the Berinsfield Community Insight area were eligible for Free School Meals, compared with 15.7% across Oxfordshire and 12.7% across South Oxfordshire.

More recent Department for Work and Pensions data has identified that approximately 21% of children in Berinsfield live in absolute poverty, more than twice the Oxfordshire average of 10%, while approximately 26% of Berinsfield households receive Universal Credit compared with 16% across Oxfordshire.

The Berinsfield Community Insight Profile also records that 36.9% of residents live in socially rented accommodation and that 60.7% of households are deprived in at least one Census deprivation dimension. Local engagement undertaken as part of that work found that 48% of adult respondents identified cost and affordability as one of the principal challenges to maintaining their health and wellbeing.

These figures are particularly significant because Oxfordshire as a whole is one of the least deprived counties in England. County-wide averages therefore risk masking the substantially greater financial pressures experienced within individual communities such as Berinsfield.

Against that background, requiring families to meet recurring school transport costs of several hundred pounds per child is not a minor inconvenience. For households with more than one child in secondary education, the cumulative annual cost can be substantial and can fall disproportionately on families already experiencing financial pressure.

There are also practical concerns regarding reliance on commercial bus services. Residents have reported occasions where buses serving Berinsfield have reached capacity and have been unable to collect waiting students. This can result in pupils missing education, parents being required to make alternative arrangements at very short notice and particular difficulties for families without access to private transport.

The Parish Council is concerned that where a child is unable to reach school because commercial public transport is unavailable or at capacity, families may nevertheless face the consequences associated with non-attendance. In a community where a significant proportion of households are already experiencing financial pressure, the possibility of attendance

penalties arising in circumstances where transport difficulties were outside the reasonable control of the family would be particularly concerning. We would therefore ask that such circumstances are properly taken into account when attendance enforcement decisions are made.

The significance of transport access is also reflected in Oxfordshire County Council's own Community Insight work, in which 59% of young respondents in Berinsfield identified lack of transport as a barrier to maintaining their health and wellbeing.

The Parish Council is also concerned that children and young people with SEND or Education, Health and Care Plans should have their transport needs considered individually and appropriately, including whether ordinary commercial transport is genuinely suitable for their needs.

Berinsfield Parish Council is not seeking to assert that every pupil in the village has an automatic statutory entitlement to free transport to an Abingdon school. However, we do believe that the current position warrants a wider review.

We would therefore ask Oxfordshire County Council to:

1. Review how school transport eligibility is being applied to Berinsfield pupils as a community;
2. Clarify how actual school-place availability is determined when identifying the nearest suitable school;
3. Consider whether the interaction between Berinsfield's admissions arrangements and transport policy is producing reasonable and equitable outcomes;
4. Consider the particular financial and practical impact on families in a community experiencing demonstrably higher levels of deprivation than the Oxfordshire average; and
5. Ensure that individual transport needs for children and young people with SEND or EHCPs are being appropriately assessed.

Berinsfield Parish Council wishes to support the concerns raised by residents and would welcome constructive engagement with Oxfordshire County Council and other relevant authorities to identify a fair and sustainable way forward.

Yours faithfully,

Alex Marasco
Clerk and Responsible Finance Officer
Berinsfield Parish Council