

Guidance on walking to school routes

In order to establish the nearest suitable school the distance between home and school is measured using the Council's in-house digital mapping system – GIS (Geographical Information System). This system measures along the footpath network, from the pupil's home gate or drive nearest to the school to the nearest gate/entrance of the school grounds, by way of the nearest available walking route. Some internet packages might show a different measurement, as they use the road network to measure distances.

The measurement of **walking** distance continues to be taken from home to the school by the shortest available walking route. In order for a route to be deemed suitable, this Authority considers that any footpaths should be metalled or have a reasonably even and firm surface. In instances where the suitability of a path is in question the final decision will rest with the Council. All walking routes also assume that a child is accompanied as necessary by a responsible adult.

However, the measurements associated with the upper thresholds for school transport, ie the maximum distances of six and fifteen miles for those who qualify on the grounds of free school meals or working tax credits (extended rights legislation) are to be made along roads, and do not include footpaths or other routes. On this basis, when comparing distances to the nearest school with other schools (and where the distances are driving distances), the routes will also be measured by roads rather than footpaths.

An assessment of the route will be made, if necessary, on the basis of appropriate professional advice on all of the relevant factors relating to distance and safety.

Free school travel assistance is provided to children and young people who attend their nearest school and who live more than the statutory walking distance from that school. The statutory walking distance is two miles for children aged under eight years old and three miles for children aged eight years old and over.

We measure the shortest available walking route from a child/young person's home address to school and use this measurement to assess each child/young person's eligibility for school travel assistance. The measured statutory walking distance must be a route, which a child or young person, **accompanied**, as necessary, can walk with reasonable safety to school. The law states that it is the responsibility of the parent to ensure that a child is accompanied, as necessary, on the walking journey to school.

In some instances, the shortest available walking route may be considered hazardous. In order to determine whether the route is deemed safe or unsuitable, a route assessment will take place.

The route will be walked by a member of the road safety team, starting from the home address to the school.

We always assess the route on a school day and at the same time as if you were walking to or from school at the start or end of the normal school day. This way we get an accurate idea of the nature of the road. We also obtain statistical data, including road traffic accidents or fatalities, to get a full understanding of the route.

If we find that a section of the route is considered unsuitable, it can no longer be included as part of the statutory walking distance measurement.

If there is an alternative route to school avoiding the unsuitable section we measure the new route. If the new route measured from the home address to the school is further than the statutory walking distance then free school travel assistance will be provided. However, if the new route is still less than the statutory walking distance free school travel assistance will not be provided.

If there is no alternative walking route which avoids the unsuitable section, the child or young person will be eligible for free school travel assistance.

If we receive a request for a route to be assessed, which has previously been walked and judged to be suitable, we will not re-assess it unless there has been a significant change to the route.

The guidelines below have been adopted by Cheshire West and Chester to assess whether a route is an available walking route to school. All walking routes are assessed in accordance with the Road Safety GB and ROSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents) guidelines. These guidelines are used to assess the safety of routes and consider traffic and highways conditions, on the assumption that a pupil/student is accompanied by a responsible adult.

For a route to be available, it must be a route to school, along which a child, accompanied as necessary, can walk with reasonable safety from traffic hazards.

The following procedure is taken from the guidelines:

The route assessment procedure:

- in assessing the safety of an available route consideration is given only to the potential risk created by traffic, highway and topographical conditions
- it is essential that each case be considered objectively on its merits
- it is assumed that the child is accompanied as necessary by a responsible parent or carer. The law states that it is the responsibility of the parent to ensure that a child is accompanied as necessary on the walking journey to school
- where there is a footpath or roadside strip of reasonable width and condition, public footpath or bridleway, this will normally be assumed to provide an available route for that part of the journey.
- where a verge exists, on a lightly trafficked or narrow road, which can be stepped on to by the child and accompanying person when vehicles are passing, it can normally be assumed to provide an available route for that part of the route. This is what is referred to in these guidelines as a step-off

- these guidelines assume that the pedestrian will cross the road in order to use the footway or roadside strip
- even if there isn't a footway the walking route might still be assessed as available. The assessment will take account of traffic flows and whether car drivers have enough time to slow down or pedestrians have time to step-off the road or verge
- where road crossing are necessary, the availability of any facility (e.g. central refuges, pedestrian crossings, traffic signals, etc.) to assist such crossing should be taken into consideration. Where no crossing facilities exist the assessment will include consideration of each crossing bearing in mind the traffic speeds and flows, sight lines etc. No crossing point can be absolutely safe; the term used in the guidance is "reasonable safety" which would make the walking route available
- the road casualty records for the last three years will be considered as part of the assessment.
- a written record of the assessment will be produced for each route considered under the guidelines.

The assessment – summary

For a route to be classified as non-hazardous there needs to be:

Both

- a continuous adequate footpath on roads which carry normal to heavy traffic

Or

- step-offs on roads which are lightly trafficked but have adequate sight lines to provide sufficient advance warning to drivers and pedestrians

Or

- on roads with low traffic flow, no step-offs, but sufficient good sight lines to provide adequate advance warning

And

If there is a need to cross roads there must be:

- crossing facilities (zebra / pelican crossings)
- pedestrian phases at traffic signals (including necessary refuges)
- school crossing patrols
- pedestrian refuges

Or

- sufficient gaps in the traffic flow and sight lines to allow enough opportunity to cross safely (minimum of four opportunities in any five minute period).

The following definitions are also used in the guidelines

Footway

An adequate footway is defined as one that is “of adequate usable walking width for the circumstances”

Step Off

The term "step-off" refers to the facility for pedestrians to be able to step clear of the roadway onto a reasonably even and firm surface

Such a "step-off" must be capable of being accessed quickly and easily by pedestrians who may be in charge of small children or prams/pushchairs

Visibility

The term "visibility" means the horizontal distances of unobstructed vision when measured from the eye point of a driver (usually taken as being 1.05m from the road surface)

The unobstructed distance a pedestrian can see from the point at which they have to cross the road or can see traffic when walking on the roadway

Further, this distance must be equal to, or greater than the appropriate minimum overall stopping distance as shown in the table in the Highway Code.

We do not take into account an individual's circumstances, for instance personal availability to walk with the child/young person or the fact that younger children or prams may impede the walk. We also do not take into account the following:

- parental finances
- local weather conditions - severe weather would be regarded as a reason for a pupil to be absent from school
- transient events - road closures, construction work, flooding
- lack of street lighting
- lack of pavements - the lack of a paved footpath is not necessarily a reason to grant a route unsuitable
- the presence of uncut hedges
- difficult terrain/arduousness of the route - steep hills are not a hazard
- practicality or the time taken to walk the route.