



29/10/2025

OIA 1352883: Review of Palmerston North school bus provision

Thank you for your email of 3 September 2025 to the Ministry of Education (the Ministry) requesting the following information:

The full internal review of the Manawatū school bus route review, referred to in response to WPQ 39340 (2025).

Your request has been considered under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act).

There are no standalone documents that comprise the review referred to in WPQ 39340 (2025), so your request is refused under section 18(e) of the Act, as the document alleged to contain the information requested does not exist. However, in recognition of the public interest, and as envisaged under section 16(1)(e) of the Act, I can summarise the background and outcome of the review as follows.

The Ministry provides school transport assistance through a range of services and funding agreements, at a total cost of \$255m in 2023/24. Funding for school transport assistance is demand-driven and based on forecast numbers of eligible students, with changes in volume and input costs met through baseline updates.

To be eligible for school transport assistance, students must attend the nearest state or state-integrated school where they can enrol. They must also live more than a certain distance from that school (3.2 km for Years 1-8; or 4.8 km for Years 9-13) and lack access to suitable public transport.

For a student attending a state-integrated school, it must be the closest school of its designated character as defined under Section 204 of the Education and Training Act 202 (e.g. the closest Catholic school). For ākonga attending a Māori-medium school, whichever kura is chosen is generally considered the closest. Single-sex or co-ed schools are not considered 'types' of schools for the purposes of determining eligibility, but they may determine the closest school where a student can enrol.

Where there are multiple schools of the same type within a defined geographical area, the Ministry uses Transport Eligibility Zones (TEZs) to determine the closest school where students can enrol.

TEZ boundaries are set at the half-way point by road or the shortest pedestrian route between schools of the same type (e.g. between two state secondary schools with the same designated character).

Routes are designed based on the numbers and locations of eligible students only. However, there is precedent for making exceptions to the nearest school rule under specific circumstances. For example, students who do not attend their closest school but meet all other eligibility criteria can access a Ministry-funded school bus through Transfer of Eligibility, provided they are assessed as eligible from the TEZ boundary between schools of the same type. Students who access school bus routes under this arrangement must make their own way to an existing stop on a school bus route within the TEZ of their chosen school.

School bus services in Palmerston North had not been comprehensively reviewed since at least 2017. Over time, a complex network of school bus routes has developed based on a hub-and-spoke design, where students transfer between routes during their journey.

In April 2024, we began a review of Ministry-funded school bus services in Palmerston North. The review covered 25 school bus routes, serving 15 primary and secondary schools. The review found that, of the 8,465 students in the Palmerston North area, only 581 students are eligible for school transport assistance. A further 49 students may access services through transfer of eligibility. Most of the remaining students are ineligible because they live too close to school (36 percent of ineligible students), do not attend their closest school (54 percent), or because public transport is available (10 percent).

Because of the layout of the Palmerston North secondary school network, many students are ineligible for school transport assistance by a very narrow margin. The table below shows the distance between secondary schools in Palmerston North:

Distance between schools	Palmerston North schools
0km - 1km	Queen Elizabeth College & Palmerston North Boys' High School
1.01km – 2km	Awatapu College & Palmerston North Girls' High School
2.01km – 3km	Freyberg High School & Palmerston North Boys' High School Freyberg High School & Queen Elizabeth College Queen Elizabeth College & Palmerston North Girls High School

The provisional outcome of the review was that 10 of the 25 existing routes would be cancelled, and the remaining 15 routes would be adjusted to better serve areas where eligible students live.

The Ministry met with affected schools to share the outcome of the review during the week of 16 June 2025. The proposed changes were met with significant sector and community opposition, particularly in outlying suburbs such as Ashhurst, 15km northeast of Palmerston North, where the Ministry proposed to replace six existing services with a single route. 141 of 235 Ashhurst students assessed through this review are ineligible for a place on a school bus because they do not attend their closest school. A further 90 students are ineligible because public transport is available.

The Ashhurst community is concerned that there is insufficient capacity on public transport services to meet additional demand from ineligible students. Horizons Regional Council has declined to provide additional services between Palmerston North and Ashhurst, citing a lack of co-funding from the New Zealand Transport Agency.

As a result of the feedback received, the Ministry undertook an internal review that comprised of a further assessment of the extent and impact of proposed changes on Ashhurst students. This resulted in changes to the original proposed outcome for ineligible students living in Ashhurst. The current Ashhurst school bus services will be replaced from Term 1, 2026 with a number of transitional bus services from Ashhurst to specific schools in Palmerston North. These would remain in place while we worked with Horizons Regional Council on a long-term solution. We expect to provide schools with a confirmed end date for these services in Term 1, 2026.

The Minister of Education requested advice on options for more flexible and responsive school transport assistance for Palmerston North students. I am withholding the detail of those options under section 9(2)(f)(iv) of the Act, to maintain the constitutional conventions for the time being which protect the confidentiality of advice tendered by Ministers of the Crown and officials.

Although Horizons Regional Council requested Ministry funding to support public transport services from Ashhurst, they declined our offer to co-fund their services from Ashhurst. We remain open to further discussions should the Council wish to reconsider the proposed co-funding arrangement.

As required under section 9(1) of the Act, I have considered the public interest in releasing the information withheld. I do not consider that the public interest considerations favouring the release of this information are sufficient to outweigh the need to withhold it at this time.

Please note, we may publish this response on our website after five working days. Your name and contact details will be removed.

Thank you again for your email. You have the right to ask an Ombudsman to review my decision on your request, in accordance with section 28 of the Act. You can do this by writing to info@ombudsman.parliament.nz or to Office of the Ombudsman, PO Box 10152, Wellington 6143.

Nāku noa, nā



James Meffan
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Te Mahau | Te Pae Aronui | Operations and Integration