

Legislation Committee No 4

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Proposed Safety on Learner Transport Measure

Paper 1 : Response from the Association of Transport Coordinating Officers Cymru (ATCO)

Introduction

The ATCO Cymru is made up of transport professionals from all unitary authorities in Wales. Our members arrange and procure learner transport and co-ordinate public transport which, in many cases, is also used to convey learners. We appreciate the opportunity to give evidence to the legislative committee on this important measure. ATCO supports the aims of the measure. Our members have strived for many years to raise quality standards so that parents will choose to trust their children to collective transport which is by far the safest way of travelling.

Our response to the questions asked is as follows:-

1 – Is there a need for a proposed Measure to deliver the stated objectives of a) improving the safety image and travel experiences of dedicated learner transport, and b) acting to ensure that safety standards are sufficiently high for the public and parents to have confidence in collective learner transport?

There is a perception amongst some parents that buses are not a safe way to travel and this causes some to choose car travel which is, in fact, much less safe and brings with it higher emissions, congestion and danger to other road users. While we should always strive for yet higher standards of safety and fewer casualties on all modes the safety record of bus travel is far better than any other mode. This measure should therefore be accompanied by measures aimed at increasing safety standards for other modes. Walking and cycling are statistically less safe than car travel yet this is partly because pedestrians and cyclists are injured by cars. Should consideration therefore be given to establishing 'car exclusion zones' around schools at peak times so that pupils who walk or cycle can do so safely. This would also add an incentive to use the bus as anyone coming by car would have to walk from the edge of the zone rather than be dropped off outside school by a bus.

2 – How will the proposed Measure change what organisations do currently and what impact will any such changes have?

It will mean higher quality standards being specified for dedicated learner travel contracts by tendering authorities. This is likely to increase tender prices both by adding costs for operators and reducing competition for tenders. This could lead to non statutory provision being withdrawn in some areas or greater use being made of public bus services – both commercial and tendered - where standards may be lower. There is a grey area between 'dedicated school bus' and 'tendered public bus service' that needs defining. Possibly the definition of 'tendered public bus service' could be a low floor vehicle that is used for more than just school journeys. Some public bus contracts may include journeys normally only used by school children as part of the schedule but unless it is accepted that the measure does not apply to such journeys there is a danger that tendered rural bus networks could be seriously undermined. Adopting a higher standard of service on school vehicles will further heighten parental calls for the provision of dedicated transport rather than on local bus services. This may result in an increase in costs or a threat to rural bus services as public transport services with spare capacity would be duplicated by additional contracted school transport following similar routes.

3 – Are the sections of the proposed Measure appropriate in terms of achieving the stated objectives?

1. Seat belts – there is the issue of enforcing the wearing of seatbelts to address and the fact that even some new vehicles have only lap belts. Some local bus service vehicles currently have no belts and this will potentially be a threat to such services, especially in rural areas. The use of the 3+2 concession where there are no belts should cease. There is also an issue regarding how a three point belt can be adjusted to accommodate different ages of children where vehicles go from secondary school runs to convey nursery or primary age children as part of an efficiently scheduled network.

2. Double deck vehicles – the conclusions of the pilot schemes to test the effects of CCTV and supervisors should be considered before concluding whether there is a case for replacing double deck buses with single deck vehicles. Each type of vehicle has its strengths and weaknesses when it comes to safety and the appropriate vehicle for each route should be determined by a risk assessment. Double deck buses tend to be shorter in length than single deckers, typically 9.3m compared with 11 or 12m, with a smaller wheelbase as a consequence. Some schools might not be able to accommodate 11 or 12m vehicles and therefore the cost of replacing double deck buses could be very high, requiring two or even three small vehicles to replace one double deck bus. In order to accommodate longer and more vehicles, physical changes to campuses may result. Such costs need inclusion in the estimates under Part 2, section 8. The issue of what constitutes a school bus also needs definition, as a number of double deck vehicles operate as registered local bus services carrying a mixture of fare paying and entitled pupils.

3. Vehicle age – Maintenance, cleanliness and design are more important than age. A well maintained and regularly serviced 10 year old bus could be much safer than a seriously neglected 1 year old bus. The enforcement of higher safety standards by VOSA therefore could have a greater impact than the imposition of an age limit.

4.CCTV – this is now quite widely used and while there is no specific evidence that it has controlled behaviour where fitted as such, it has nevertheless been welcomed by council staff and suppliers in dealing with incidents and in supporting drivers. Clear guidelines on the use of images would be welcome. The use of supervisors, even roving ones, seem a better option in controlling behaviour, but backed by CCTV for evidence.

5.Yellow Bus Spec – the main difference between this and a bus with all of the features mentioned separately is the use of a register and seat allocations. This has been trialled successfully with the 'Zoom' system but there is a significant cost and additional staffing implication for this, for which allowance might not have been made in the measure. The derogation regarding the use of higher capacity single deck vehicles with some 70 seats is currently being considered and this will have an impact upon the effectiveness for a like-for-like replacement of double deck vehicles.

6.Driver training – this is also a feature of contracts in a number of areas and is considered an effective and worthwhile measure.

7.Risk Assessments – this has been implemented in most areas on a voluntary basis already.

8.Supervisors – pilot scheme evidence needs to be considered before concluding how effective supervisors are. This was broadly positive, even on a roving or rotational basis, with suppliers and head teachers welcoming this aspect. If required there is a need for clear guidelines regarding pupil numbers and ages that are relevant and the training requirements. If supervisors were required on most buses recruiting sufficient numbers could be very difficult.

9.Taxis/PHVs – many authorities currently insist upon booster seat provision, where a child's height would under normal circumstances outside school require one. The Assembly might usefully consider the plethora of regulations used by each authority. There is a need to develop some consistency as often suppliers in one area will operate contracts in another.

Q4 – Barriers

Although some authorities are seeking collaborative opportunities, staff resources remain limited in small unitary authorities to review networks and implement the proposed measures.

There are insufficient VOSA inspectors at present to enforce anything above the minimum safety standards for school buses.

For the avoidance of a 2 tier system of standards the grey area between a 'dedicated school bus' and a 'tendered public bus service' needs defining, for the reasons stated above.

The availability of WAG funding and method of distribution could be a barrier to progress, particularly if only the amounts mentioned in the paper are provided unless they are targeted at the areas that need it. If they are targeted this could be interpreted as unfair on areas already meeting the standards? While individual authorities will accept these measures in principle, this would need proper funding.

The introduction of some of the measures will not necessarily result in a reduction in staffing time as inferred in the paper as, in reality and whether there is CCTV present on board or not, it can take a considerable amount of resource to investigate an incident.

The report only seems to consider or include direct costs. The Assembly would need to consider some of the indirect costs (staffing required to implement, monitor and review these measures; campus changes to accommodate vehicles; the cost of delivering/monitoring training and supervisor etc).

The availability of suitable vehicles could limit progress. If implemented quickly it could increase costs as operators might have no choice but to buy new vehicles.

The measure appears not to consider college transport where, for example, there are double decks in operation.

Q5 – Financial Implications

In addition to the barriers above, costs will fall unevenly on authorities as some already have standards similar to those proposed and others currently fall short. When WAG have increased statutory provision in the past, such as when the distance for free travel for primary pupils aged over 8 was decreased from 3 to 2 miles, funds were allocated to all authorities to implement this but in practice many were already providing it. The resources mentioned in the paper are only those required to bring areas currently below standard up to the standards outlined in the measure.

The highest cost measure of imposing an age limit on vehicles appears to be one of the least certain in terms of effectiveness. Older vehicles can often be refurbished and retrofitted with yellow bus features and can sometimes be more robust and to a higher spec than new low cost school buses.

No provision appears to have been made for the costs of seat allocation and registration systems (the Zoom system).

The figures quoted for the withdrawal of double decks necessarily make assumptions. Do these include services carrying predominantly fare paying pupils with entitled pupils and is this for school rather than college transport only?

Q6 – Other comments

·ATCO welcomed the powers that local education authorities were granted to determine the opening and closing times of schools and this will help to release some resources to improve standards in some areas. Extending this power to apply to colleges would also help

and might reduce the likelihood of provision of free travel for post 16 pupils being withdrawn.

·WAG might consider funding additional VOSA inspectors to enforce higher safety standards or the provision of authority employed inspectors, in collaboration.

·To what extent will supervisors be required and would they be needed on public bus services for certain categories, numbers or ages of pupils?

·The DDA requires all public bus services to be operated by wheelchair accessible vehicles by 2017 (earlier for some vehicle types). Clear guidance is needed on whether this would also apply to dedicated school buses, including those conveying fare paying pupils, as operators would not wish to purchase new vehicles that would not be able to be used after 2017. Should school buses have to conform to the DDA this could be very costly as the capacity of DDA compliant vehicles tends to be much lower than existing step entrance vehicles.

·The measure does not refer to training pupils. In the SWWITCH Region the WLGA School Transport Project team developed a pupil training course. So far over 18,000 of the 60,000 pupils in the Region have been trained. Before and after training data has been collected and the results are exceptionally good. In the term before the training there were 55 recorded incidents in the measured school group. In the term after the training there were only 15 recorded in the same school group. The training takes up to a normal lesson time to complete and is normally undertaken on a bus. The team have also developed an innovative driver training scheme specifically for school bus drivers, this has been approved as part of the Drivers CPC. Training is currently underway.

Should you wish ATCO to expand on any of these points or assist further we would be very willing to do so.

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