

## **Education and Lifelong Learning Committee**

### **School Transport Review**

#### **Draft supporting evidence presented to the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee at the National Assembly for Wales**

**September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004**

#### **Background**

The safety of transport provided to and from schools through local authorities is an issue which is of great concern to local government. The need for effective arrangements to transport pupils to and from school by bus is widely recognised as a critical safety issue.

Since the 1944 Education Act, local authorities have been legally obliged to provide home to school transport, free of charge, to:

- the nearest or catchment area school for pupils under eight who live more than two miles from the school,
- for pupils age eight to sixteen living more than three miles from the school by the nearest available walking route.

In fact, most Welsh local authorities go beyond this legal requirement to provide free transport to all primary pupils who live over 1.5 miles from their local school, while 3 miles is the general (but not universal) start point for free transport to secondary schools.

More recently, the Education Act 2002 required local authorities to establish post-16 Transport Partnerships to coordinate transport arrangements for post-16 students. Whilst this new duty supports greater coherence in transport arrangements it is an additional responsibility, particularly in the context of the emerging 14-19 agenda and given ELWa's role in the planning and funding of post-16 learning.

It is fair to say that local authorities in most cases far exceed the school transport provision required by law. In Wales, authorities also of course provide transport to Welsh-medium schools. The Assembly Government's stated aim of providing part-time school places to all three-year olds whose parents request it is also supported by local authorities who provide free transport to this non-statutory sector.

The diversity of local provision reflects the needs of different communities across Wales. Many authorities contract out their services completely to private providers; others use a combination of private and public transport. In all cases, the local authority is the key central point of contact.

Making such a commitment has significant cost implications. For example, one Welsh local authority provides a service far in excess of legal requirements and therefore incurs costs of £700,000 over and above that which it would incur by following legal guidance.

## **Current research**

The WLGA is part of a working group which is seeking to provide an all-encompassing review of school transport practice and issues arising within the field. Other members include:

- Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers
- Confederation of Passenger Transport
- Welsh Assembly Government
- Vale of Glamorgan County Borough Council

WLGAs main contribution to this research was to commission work from the National Foundation for Educational Research. The NFER has produced a draft report which is currently under discussion within WLGA. Copies of the final report will of course be circulated more widely. For the time being, this paper, and the accompanying presentation, will attempt to highlight the key issues identified in that research.

## **Key Issues**

### Management of School Transport

School transport is generally managed by the education department within a local authority, sometimes in conjunction with other departments. In many cases, policy and strategy is determined by the education department, while procurement is the responsibility of the transport division. In general terms, school transport is dealt with separately from other transport issues such as social services transport. Whatever the structure, there is a clear line of accountability which ensures that school transport is managed in an efficient manner. All authorities interviewed by the NFER recently noted that they had a designated officer with overall responsibility for school transport charged with providing parents with sufficient information on school transport.

Primary schools manage transport via the headteacher.

Most secondary schools have a transport co-ordinator who is usually a member of the school's Senior Management Team.

Schools, LEAs and contractors generally have a close working relationship which is generally served by contact as and when necessary.

### General economic pressures

Criticism of local authority provided transport often focuses on the perceived poor quality of vehicles used. Maintaining an ageing stock is a challenge to providers, and it is fair to say that local authorities can only work with the available providers and the stock which providers can release for the school run.

Recent Association of Transport Coordinators (ATCO) research suggests that the average cost of replacing expired school bus contracts in 2001/2 was 14.1% higher than the value of the contracts they replaced. Operators are faced with significant inflation from wages, insurance and general operating costs which contributed to a net rise in costs of 8.1% in 2002/3.

Bus services, where they are contracted out, are often provided by one large company or by a consortium of smaller providers which often include many of or most local companies. The inescapable conclusion is that increased costs have forced smaller companies to either withdraw from the market or to link up with other providers. The result is that tenders for school transport contracts often attract one or two bids at most. Local authority choice is consequently limited.

### Safety Issues

There appears to be a general trend away from use of local authority provided school transport. This is particularly acute in urban areas where parents find that it is possible to take their children to school themselves. Where there are perceived concerns about school transport, this trend can be exacerbated.

The recent debate on school transport has at times focused on the condition of buses. There have been calls to:

- fit seatbelts on all buses;
- end the current dispensation of putting a maximum of three children to every two seats;
- the provision of American style "Yellow Buses".

These are all excellent suggestions and could certainly contribute to improving safety. Local authorities have, at various times, trialled each of these initiatives. Indeed, Wrexham County Borough Council accessed UK government funding to successfully pilot "yellow" buses. Each local authority rigorously examines the safety record of contractors before awarding contracts. Around a quarter of local authorities insist that contractors fit seat belts in buses to be used for school transport. Furthermore, most

local authorities have now ended the use of the "three for two" rule, and ensure that each pupil has a seat.

Each of these initiatives has cost implications which could impact on local provision. Where, as mentioned above, potential local tenders are likely to be in short supply, local authorities find that imposing stringent requirements on short-term contracts will often dissuade local providers from tendering. No authority currently awards contracts which exceed 6 years in duration. Local authorities would appreciate guidance and funding to award longer-term contracts – possibly up to 10 years in duration – which would serve to encourage local contractors to make the desired adaptations to, or even to commission additions to, fleets. Long-term improvements to the service can only be made by adopting such a long-term approach, and by the provision of central capital funding.

In general terms, however, recent developments raise hopes that confidence in school transport can be strengthened. The Safer Routes to School programme, the establishment of School Transport Co-ordinator posts and the development of School Travel Plans all contribute to improving service quality. Such initiatives have the added benefit of contributing to easing congestion around schools during peak times. Even so, it is accepted that restoring confidence will take time.

### Behavioural issues

Contractors and local authority staff are acutely aware of an apparent deterioration in pupil behaviour on local authority provided school transport. Anecdotal evidence suggests that pupil misbehaviour is a cause of tension on school buses and is a source of concern for parents. Suggestions that providers are asked to ensure that CCTV cameras are placed on board "problem" buses and that schools employ monitors or escorts on buses are useful. Escorts are widely employed on primary school buses, but local authorities felt that their effectiveness on secondary school buses were limited, while issues surrounding the ownership and use of images captured on CCTV cameras affected authorities' readiness to adopt the technology.

Again, however, these involve cost pressures. School and local authority budgets are currently tightly pressed and the scope to provide escorts is limited. Where contractors are faced with ageing stock and the need to provide seatbelts and so on, a requirement to install CCTV cameras on short-contracts is a disincentive. One Welsh authority has noted that a proposal to require the installation of surveillance equipment led directly to the withdrawal of expressions of interest from the few contractors in the area.

Although drivers are instructed to warn misbehaving pupils, and to contact their employers if problems persist, Local Authorities are currently obliged to provide alternative modes of transport where pupils are banned from mainstream transport for unruly or dangerous behaviour. As another organisation which has contributed to this review told the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee earlier this year, travel on school transport should be a privilege, not a right. Authorities need to be given the power to ban pupils who are behaving in a way likely to cause physical or mental injury to fellow pupils or to drivers and other staff and not to provide an alternative.

Within current constraints, codes of conduct for behaviour are gradually being introduced across Wales. NFER research suggests that these are generally successful in raising pupil awareness of the standards expected of them. Schools were encouraged to implement sanctions against pupils seen to break the code, and this usually improved overall standards of behaviour.

### Changes to school start and finish times

The School of the Future review considered a raft of ideas on he likely make up of schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We understand that Estyn is taking on these considerations in-house, with the possibility that further consultation with outside bodies may take place. The Association would be very interested in these discussions, particularly, in this instance, around the shape of the school day. Much has been made of LGA and WLGA proposals to amend the school year to better reflect the needs of today's society, but less is heard of the impact which changes to the school day could have on school transport issues. Contractors have often stated that they could consider adapting existing stock within shorter contracts provided they were able to use their stock more than twice a day, a practice known as "double tripping".

Where every school begins at 9am and finishes at 3.30pm, it is obvious that a bus can only be used once. Where authorities and schools are given dispensation to vary school start and finish times, contractors will be able to concentrate resources on fewer numbers of higher quality vehicles. This could possibly be achieved by granting local authorities the reserve power to vary start and finish times in accordance with their travel plans.

The Association would appreciate guidance in this respect from the National Assembly and its government.

### Local travel plans

Travel throughout Wales is often characterised by a service which has fragmented component parts. There are some areas in Wales which are serviced by dedicated school buses, tendered local services, marginal commercial services and even concessions on fully commercial services. This can result in over-lapping or even duplicated services. The power of authorities to come to an agreement with incumbent bus operators to provide stable and improved networks of services serving schools. This is one area where the free market may not provide the best environment for best practice.

### School Transport Bill

The School Transport Bill and Prospectus provides a golden opportunity to trial revolutionary new initiatives. It is understood that up to 6 areas in Wales will be given the freedom to trial new approaches to school transport which reflect the particular needs of their locality. Schemes are intended to run from September 2006 until July 2010. This is a welcome contribution to the debate. The Association calls on the Welsh Assembly Government to work with local authorities to ensure that Welsh schemes are complementary and contribute to the debate in Wales, and also to ensure that Welsh authorities are able

to access pump-priming funds to enable authorities to develop new initiatives.