

A blue-tinted photograph showing the interior of a school bus. Several children are visible, some looking towards the camera. The text is overlaid on this image.

# Improving Mainstream Home-to-School Transport

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## Preface

The Audit Commission has been examining transport arrangements made by local authorities and health bodies in England and Wales to allow people to access education, social services and health services. The work has focused on free home-to-school travel (for both mainstream pupils and those with special needs), social services transport and non-emergency patient transport in the National Health Service.

A national report, *Going Places: Taking People to and from Education, Social Services and Healthcare*,<sup>I</sup> which the Commission has recently published, summarises the Commission's overall findings and contains recommendations for action by central government and by senior managers in local government and the health service.

This handbook, *Improving Mainstream Home-to-School Transport*, contains detailed examples of good practice together with self-assessment checklists. It can be used by local authority officers who deal with policy on, and eligibility for, mainstream home-to-school travel, those who are arranging, managing and providing that transport and those carrying out best value reviews of the service.

Alongside this handbook, a separate guide is being produced for local authority officers providing transport for children with special educational needs. This is being published separately because of the different issues this provision may raise for local authorities. It expands upon a report on transport for children with special educational needs in London, *The Special School Run*, that the Commission published in March 2001.<sup>II</sup>

As the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has been examining travel support arrangements for students aged 16 and over, this handbook focuses particularly on travel by pupils aged under 16. However, many of the ideas, good practice and self-assessment checklists here can also be applied to post-16 student travel.

This handbook is based upon: field visits to ten local authorities; findings from best value inspections carried out by the Audit Commission's Best Value Inspection Service; inspections of local education authorities (LEAs) carried out by OFSTED with the Audit Commission; and OFSTED and Estyn inspections of schools. The Commission has also drawn upon data from the DfES, the National Assembly for Wales and OFSTED.

Further details of the research are given in the national report. In addition to the handbooks on mainstream home-to-school transport and transport for children with special educational needs, the Commission is also issuing similar handbooks on the two other areas examined in its study, social services transport and non-emergency patient transport. The Commission is grateful to all those who have helped, but, as always, responsibility for the contents of this handbook lies with the Commission alone.

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I Audit Commission, *Going Places: Taking People to and from Education, Social Services and Healthcare*, Audit Commission, November 2001.

II Audit Commission, *The Special School Run: Reviewing Special Educational Needs Transport in London*, Audit Commission, March 2001.

## Introduction

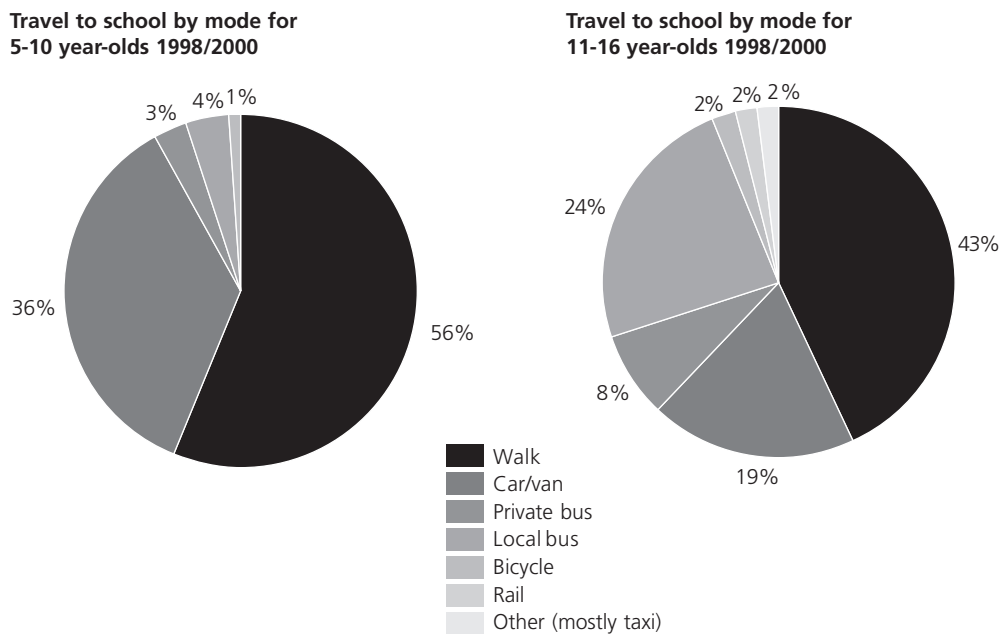
School journeys account for a quarter of all travel by children [EXHIBIT 1]. While, nationally, almost half of children walk or cycle to school, about half a million of the eight million pupils in England receive free transport every day<sup>I</sup>, and several million more use public transport for their school journey, paying their own fares.<sup>II</sup>

Support for travel to education costs local education authorities in England and Wales about £600 million a year.<sup>III</sup> Over half of this is spent on transport to mainstream schools. County councils spend most on this, largely because of the distances many pupils live from their schools. At the other extreme, some authorities, serving densely populated urban areas, spend very little on mainstream transport, as their children live close to their schools.

EXHIBIT 1

### Travel to school by mode

School journeys account for a quarter of all travel by children, with about one-fifth of journeys to school made by bus.



Source: Audit Commission based on data from the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), *Transport Statistics Bulletin, National Travel Survey: 1998/2000 update*, DTLR, 2001, see [www.transtat.dtlr.gov.uk](http://www.transtat.dtlr.gov.uk).

- I LEAs in England reported that 456,080 pupils received free transport (LEA Inspection Form 4 Annual Return data, collected by OFSTED, 2001). Fourteen LEAs did not return data. No equivalent data is collected for Wales.
- II Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions (DETR), *Young People and Crime on Public Transport*, DETR, 1999.
- III In 1999/2000, DfES figures show £542 million of expenditure in England of which £270 million was spent on statutory transport for mainstream schools and £216 million on transport for children attending special schools. The remainder was spent on post-16 travel to education, support for travel to adult education and other continuing education or youth services. Estimated expenditure for 2000/01 is about £560 million (Department for Education and Employment, *Working Group on LEA Central Budgets, LEACB (00)11*, 9 October 2000). In 1999/2000, the National Assembly for Wales reported expenditure of £52 million by Welsh councils on home-to-school transport, of which £41 million was spent on transport to mainstream schools.

The role of local authorities in providing school transport is particularly important in the context of increasing car use and congestion on the roads. During the morning rush hour, one in six cars on urban roads is taking children to school. The number of car trips to school has increased more rapidly than the overall rise in car journeys; 16 per cent of children travelled to school by car in 1985/86. Just over a decade later, the figure had almost doubled, although latest figures show a slight decline in this trend.<sup>1</sup> Local education authorities can help to offer alternatives. By linking with their colleagues in the local transport department – or, in metropolitan areas, the Passenger Transport Executive (PTE) – and with road safety officers developing safe routes to school, education transport managers can maximise safe travel to school in ways that avoid car use. By supporting walking or cycling initiatives, public transport and directly funded home-to-school transport, authorities can have a direct impact on both the environmental agenda and, by helping people to access education, on social inclusion.

This handbook draws together the good practice lessons from the Commission's research under four themes:

- *Accessing and using mainstream home-to-school transport.* This section sets out LEAs' legal obligations and discretionary powers. It then considers the views of users and stakeholders in the service, reflecting the user experience that is central to the modern provision of public services and to best value.
- *Balancing costs and service quality.* Financial pressures mean that many authorities are seeking to reduce, or to control increases in, their expenditure on home-to-school transport. Affordability influences policy choice. This section discusses the options and the trade-offs that may exist between cost saving and better service quality. It also covers options for linking the provision of transport for mainstream home-to-school transport with other transport such as support for socially necessary public bus services.
- *Managing the transport service.* This section discusses the roles of the policymakers and budgetholders. Getting the process right will help to prevent the budget control problems that have been common for home-to-school transport. Though some of these reflect weaknesses in monitoring, others stem from poor budget setting processes. It also covers the role of the transport organiser, letting and managing contracts, or overseeing a service level agreement with an internal trading organisation (ITO), and the role of the service provider, whether contractor or ITO. It shares some material with the equivalent sections in the Commission's handbooks for managers of home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs and social services transport.
- *Achieving best value.* The material in the earlier sections will help authorities carrying out best value reviews to assess how the service is currently performing. This section discusses other issues to consider when carrying out reviews and preparing implementation plans. It also shares some material with the equivalent sections in the Commission's handbooks on home-to-school travel for children with special educational needs and social services transport.

This treatment seeks to address the key issues concerning stakeholders [BOX A].

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<sup>1</sup> Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *Transport Statistics: Travel to School, Personal Factsheet 2*, DETR, 2001.

Each section ends with a comprehensive checklist which enables an authority to compare its own service with examples of good practice found in the Commission's study. Some of these questions describe 'ideal' practice, which not all authorities currently achieve, but the checklists will assist authorities to identify local priorities for action.

#### BOX A

##### What do stakeholders think about the service?

###### Pupils

Pupils in a rural county, asked about the transport service they used, said:

*'It takes ages.'*

*'It doesn't turn up on time.'*

*'The bus is not clean, seats are ripped.'*

*'The driver does not put the radio on' (or 'we haven't got a radio').*

*'You could see the road through a hole in the floor.'*

Asked how the service could be improved, pupils said they wanted:

- the bus to be warmer;
- the radio on;
- the bus not to leak in the rain; and
- the bus to go faster.

##### Discussion with pupils at one authority

In another county, consultation with pupils showed least satisfaction related to:

- *'the punctuality of the buses. Pupils were concerned that coaches often arrived late in the morning... for some pupils the lack of punctuality for the morning journey is made worse by having to wait in poor weather without a shelter...'*
- *'the space on the buses was seen as limited...'*
- *'the helpfulness of drivers. Some pupils referred to swearing and smoking by drivers...'*

##### One county council's best value review

###### Parents

Concerns raised by parents and pupils in one best value review included:

- pupils standing up and throwing things;
- *'emergency stop once when my child was hurt – [the] driver did not stop to check on his passengers';*
- overcrowding and no supervision;
- *'the buses often rattle and smoke';*
- exhaust leaking through the rear seats;
- moving off before all children were seated;
- *'if [the] bus breaks down and there is no radio on the bus, the driver has to leave the vehicle unsupervised to make a call';*
- smoking and spitting, verbal bullying;
- not all coaches fitted with seatbelts, and

- no one to sort out disputes that occur or monitor behaviour.

#### One city council's best value review

*'Many parents have indicated their concerns about the overcrowding, rough and unsafe behaviour which occurs on some buses used to transport pupils to and from school. The school shares these concerns and is seeking to negotiate with the bus company improved provision to resolve these problems.'*

#### OFSTED inspection report on one school

*'...concerns expressed by a few parents before the inspection regarding the boisterous and unacceptable behaviour of a small minority of pupils, particularly out of sight of the teachers and on some school transport, were also reported by some pupils. Incidents are dealt with very speedily if brought to the school's attention but more preventative procedures are required to ensure that such behaviour does not arise.'*

#### OFSTED inspection report on one school

##### Headteachers

The head at a large high school where the majority of the 1,100 pupils used LEA transport was generally happy with the service. His main concern was that he wanted supervision on the buses to deal with behavioural problems but he feared that the cost implications would continue to prevent this. He referred to the expectation that there would be one teacher per 20 pupils on a school trip, in contrast to home-to-school travel where there was no one to supervise the pupils.

#### Audit Commission fieldwork

*'There have been problems in the past with vehicles not arriving on time, or at the right site. This is much improved and the LEA co-ordinator is very helpful in dealing with problems.'*

#### Consultation with headteachers, one city council's best value review

##### Drivers

In a county piloting a new dedicated bus service, based on an adaptation of an American yellow school bus model, one of the drivers said he was very happy driving the route. When previously working for a major local operator, he had experienced problems with unruly behaviour on the bus and had felt unsupported by the operator, which he felt would 'put a monkey on to drive'. He preferred the shorter hours and better pay working for the local authority and had a good rapport with the pupils on the new in-house service. In his view, it was a case of establishing respect with the pupils, in order for them to behave, and encouraging the older pupils to set an example.

#### Audit Commission fieldwork

##### Operators

One operator reported that a driver had suffered serious damage to his eyesight when a pupil shone a laser pen into his eyes and was unable to drive again for some time. The operator had subsequently spoken to children in two schools about safety on buses, is now developing a book on this with the local TEC and has invited school pupils to the depot.

#### Audit Commission fieldwork

##### LEA officers

*'Pupils need to arrive at school on time, without undue stress from their journey and receptive to learning. The absence of a good transport system can undermine effective learning... It is also important that the transport system is well managed and that it provides value for money. Entitlement must be accurately assessed under LEA criteria and a sound service must be secured at a fair price.'*

#### One county council's best value review

Source: Audit Commission

# 1. Accessing and using mainstream home-to-school transport

1. The experiences of users are central to any review or attempt to improve service delivery. This section looks at access to, and service users' and other stakeholders' experiences of, mainstream home-to-school transport. It covers:

- *Eligibility.* Arrangements fail users at the first hurdle if children do not receive free transport when they should.
- *Safety.* While not always considered by service users, safety is fundamental to delivery of transport services. This section looks at the safety aspects of vehicles and equipment, arrangements and procedures and the screening and training of drivers and – where used – passenger assistants (or escorts).<sup>I</sup>
- *Quality and standards.* These include broader concerns, including the comfort of the journey and its reliability and punctuality. LEAs should take account of the views of users, their parents or carers, schools and other service stakeholders when setting local quality standards.
- *Service flexibility.* More schools are likely to specialise and schools are also likely to provide more after-school activities in response to new Government proposals. LEAs may need to alter their transport arrangements.

## Eligibility for mainstream home-to-school transport

2. Free transport to school, while not a 'frontline' service, is important to children, parents and schools. For single parents<sup>II</sup>, for those working, for those without their own car or good local transport services, or for parents with children attending different schools, home-to-school transport can be essential to ensure that their children can travel to and from school safely and arrive on time. Eligibility can be considered under two broad headings: statutory and discretionary provision.

### Statutory provision

3. Under section 509 of the 1996 Education Act, a local education authority has a duty to provide free home-to-school transport when:
- a pupil is of compulsory school age and is under eight years old and the shortest available route on foot to the nearest suitable school is over two miles;
  - a pupil is aged eight or above and the shortest available route on foot to the nearest suitable school is over three miles;
  - the route, whatever its length, is unsafe, even if the child is accompanied by an adult; or
  - there are exceptional circumstances.

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I Those staff who accompany service users on vehicles are known as both passenger assistants and escorts.

II Research in Scotland indicates that seven per cent of all the journeys women make each year are to take children to and from school, as compared with three per cent of men's journeys. Women have less access to cars than men and far fewer women have driving licences. In single parent families, where women are caring for children, and especially where they are also working, school transport may be particularly important to ensure social inclusion. Women on lower incomes often work part time and taking children to school may be hindered by their working patterns. See Scottish Executive, *Women and Transport: Moving Forward*, Scottish Executive 2000 at [www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/kd01/blue/transport-03.htm](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/kd01/blue/transport-03.htm). Similar issues are likely to arise in England and Wales.

## Discretionary provision

4. Local education authorities only have a duty to provide transport to the ‘nearest suitable school’. They also have discretion to provide free transport in other circumstances, which may include:
  - Providing additional transport for shorter distances (that is, below the statutory distance criteria): LEAs may, for example, exercise discretion in this way to tackle social inclusion and the green agenda.
  - Providing transport for children who are attending a school that is not the nearest suitable school: parents may be prepared to send their children further to what they view as a better school<sup>I</sup>. (This may include decisions to send children to single-sex schools or, in Wales, to Welsh language schools.)
  - Providing transport for children attending denominational schools. LEAs are expected to consider separately what transport arrangements are needed for denominational schools:<sup>II</sup> often LEAs provide transport only to the nearest denominational school from the child’s home and then only if the journey meets the statutory distance criteria.
  - Providing transport for children after hours so that they can participate in after school clubs or activities.
  - Providing transport for early years pupils or those aged over 16; LEAs have a duty to treat students aged over 16 who attend schools and colleges in the same way<sup>III</sup>.
5. Approaches to discretionary provision vary significantly [TABLE 1]. Data collected by OFSTED suggests that over 77,000 children in England are given free transport on denominational grounds. Some LEAs have also used their discretionary powers to offer additional free transport to all primary school pupils whose shortest route to school is longer than two miles, rather than apply the three-mile test from age eight. This overcomes problems where, for example, two siblings are attending the same school, and the younger child has a statutory entitlement but the elder child does not. Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council has gone further and provides free transport for those living 1½ miles from school, up to the age of 11, and for those living over 2 miles away, from age 11 onwards.
6. On occasions, authorities may also provide taxis or other transport to children with short-term medical problems (such as a broken leg) which may hinder their travelling by their usual mode of transport.

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I The National Travel Survey showed that a quarter of children attending their first choice of school had chosen a school other than the nearest one. Transport Studies Group University of Westminster, *The Family and the School Run: What Would Make a Real Difference? Scoping Report June 2000*, AA Foundation for Road Safety Research, 2000.

II Section 509 (4) of the Education Act 1996.

III Section 509 (5) of the Education Act 1996.

TABLE 1

**Discretionary policies on mainstream home-to-school transport**

Primary	Secondary	Full time education aged 16-19	Denominational schools
Statutory distances	Statutory distance	Free; to cease in 2004	Free; 8 mile cut-off
Statutory distances	Statutory distance	Half-fare passes	Free
Statutory distances	Statutory distance	Subsidised travel; free if pass means test	Subsidised travel; free if pass means test
Statutory distances	Statutory distance	Free	Free
Statutory distances	Statutory distance	Maintenance grant if travel >5 miles and pass means test	Free
Free if travel > 1½ miles (to age 11)	Free from 2 miles	Free from 2 miles	As per primary and secondary
Statutory distances Discounted bus pass if travel < 2 miles	Statutory distance Discounted bus pass available to others	Free if receiving Education Maintenance Allowance; otherwise half fare Smartcard scheme	Free
Free if travel > 2 miles (to age 11)	Statutory distance	Subsidised travel	Free
Free if travel > 1½ miles (to age 11)	Statutory distance from age 13 Free for 11-13 year olds if travel > 2½ miles	Subsidised travel; free if pass means test and for third child and later children in family	Free
Statutory distances	Statutory distance	Half fare if receiving Education Maintenance Allowance; otherwise subsidised travel with higher subsidy if pass means test	Free

*Source: Audit Commission. Free travel to denominational schools is usually based on similar distance tests to those used by the LEA for other free travel, use of the nearest suitable denominational school plus, in some instances, proof of membership of the denomination. For 16-19 travel, distance tests may also apply and support may be restricted to travel to the nearest suitable school or college.*

7. A number of LEAs subsidise travel rather than offer free transport, when exercising their discretion. Users are thus charged, at rates below full cost; charging is particularly common for post-16 travel. Some discounted rates are means tested, with children or young people in low-income families receiving greater subsidies. In addition, authorities can sell spare places on dedicated home-to-school bus services to those who are not entitled to free transport. Some authorities set different maximum distances that they expect children to walk to and from pick-up and drop-off points – in authorities visited by the Commission, these ranged from three-quarters of a mile to a mile and a half.

8. Best value reviews give local authorities an opportunity to re-examine their eligibility criteria for free home-to-school transport. In one area, consultation revealed that schools supported the extension of free transport to post-16s. The Department for Education and Skills has been reviewing transport and support for post-16 students in further education. Officials expected to recommend to ministers that there be more consistency and equity in provision and support and the reform of legislation surrounding post-16 transport. The Education Bill put to the House of Commons on the 22 November this year (2001) will, when and if it becomes law, alter the duties of LEAs in this area.

### **Addressing the wider policy agenda**

9. In many ways, the existing legal requirements are outdated, based on assumptions in which two parent families are the norm, only one parent works and the other is free to take younger children to and from school. The legislation also dates from a time when road traffic was much lighter and it was more reasonable to expect children to make unaccompanied journeys of up to three miles on foot. Parents were also less concerned about stranger attack. *Going Places* thus recommends that the Government review the law.

10. Examining their discretionary policies on eligibility now gives local authorities the opportunity, within the current law, to address the wider policy agenda – to help to promote social inclusion and to address the environmental implications of pollution and congestion caused by the school run.

11. Significantly, a fifth of car drivers report that they drive their children to school because there is ‘no other transport/no school transport’<sup>I</sup>. In rural areas, there may be specific accessibility problems. In 2000, 29 per cent of all rural settlements had no public bus service or community transport<sup>II</sup>. In addition, pupils may not be provided with free transport when they attend a school in another LEA area, even though it may be nearer than a school in their own authority. In such areas, car use for school travel may be particularly high.

12. For those without cars, there may be real difficulties. One mother commented that it was possible to return from her child’s school, but not get *to* it, by bus, due to the pattern of services.<sup>III</sup> Linking school routes to shopping or work areas and ensuring route timing is

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I University of Westminster Transport Studies Group, *The Family and the School Run: What Would Make a Real Difference? Scoping Report, June 2000*, AA Foundation for Road Safety Research, 2000.

II The Countryside Agency, *Rural Services in 2000*, The Countryside Agency, 2001.

III Scottish Executive, *Women and Transport: Moving Forward*, Scottish Executive, 2000, Section 3, para 3.34.

consistent with school hours could improve the situation for parents who rely on public transport services for their children's journeys. Local authorities may also be able to use Rural Bus Subsidy Grant or Rural Bus Challenge funds to develop services in areas affected by access problems.<sup>1</sup> Worcestershire County Council hopes to address some of the problems for early or late travel for students with its *easyLink* bus scheme. This involves the introduction of smart, modern easy access buses with easy-to-understand timetables. Another option is to encourage shared car use. Worcestershire also, therefore, employs a rural transport adviser who puts parents in touch with each other to share transport. Parents often drive on to work after dropping their children at school; the adviser can encourage employers to promote car-pooling arrangements. A vehicle-sharing officer is to support this work.

13. The Transport White Paper of 1998, highlighted additional issues associated with the school run:

*'The concern goes deeper than a wish to reduce congestion by discouraging parents from taking their children to school by car, although the benefits for the morning rush hour would be considerable. Not walking or cycling to school means that children get much less exercise and builds in car dependency at an early stage in a child's development. These children will find it harder as adults to use cars responsibly and will have fewer opportunities to develop the road sense they need as pedestrians or cyclists.'*<sup>11</sup>

14. LEAs should, therefore, consider the implications for pupils' health of their policies on eligibility for transport. In some instances, the green agenda and health agenda may seem to conflict. Increasing eligibility for free transport, by reducing the mileage requirements, could decrease car use. However, more children at secondary school still walk (or cycle) to school than travel by car. Increasing secondary school children's eligibility for free transport might thus displace children from these healthier modes of transport. The distance children travel, and their ages, impact on how they travel and should thus be considered when looking at these issues [EXHIBIT 2, overleaf].

15. Other factors that affect travel choices and car use will also need to be considered [BOX B, overleaf]. In Surrey, a survey of parents revealed transport problems at Lingfield Primary

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I The DTLR has funds of £20 million available for capital and revenue grants for the Rural Bus Challenge 2001 for bids for services in towns with a population of up to 25,000. In 1998, the Government announced new funding of £50 million a year for three years for rural services. Rural Bus Subsidy grants are for providing new registered rural services, Rural Bus Challenge Fund is to be used for innovation and Rural Bus Transport Partnership funding is intended to reduce the social exclusion of rural people and aims to support community-based initiatives. See DETR, *Social Exclusion and the Provision and Availability of Public Transport*, 27 October 2000. The National Assembly for Wales (NAW) has £6.3 million in 2001/02 in its Local Transport Services Grant, at least £3.6 million of which is to be spent on rural services. See National Assembly for Wales, *Local Transport Services Grant 2001/02, Guidance Note by the National Assembly for Wales*, NAW, 2001.

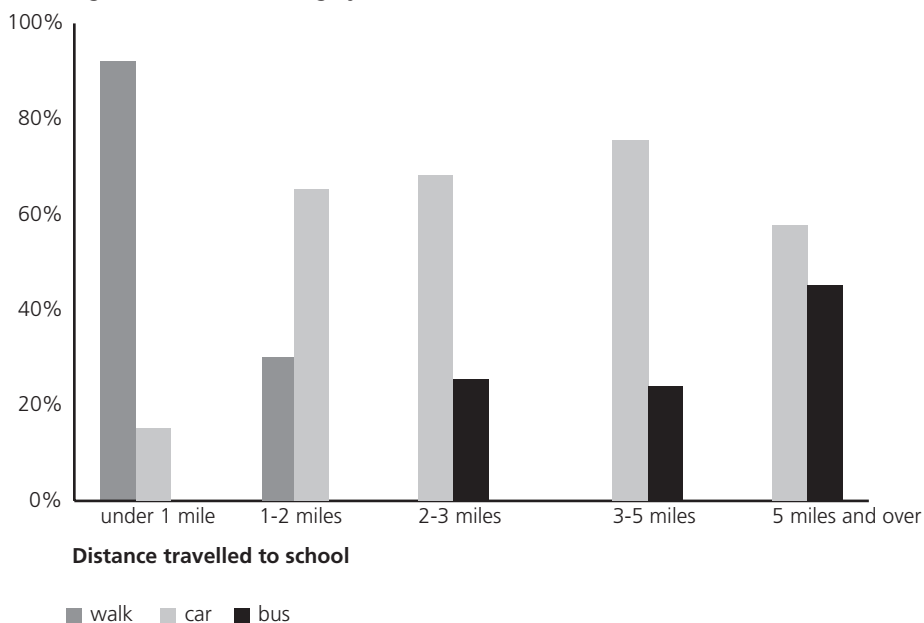
II Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone*, The Stationery Office, London, 1998.

EXHIBIT 2

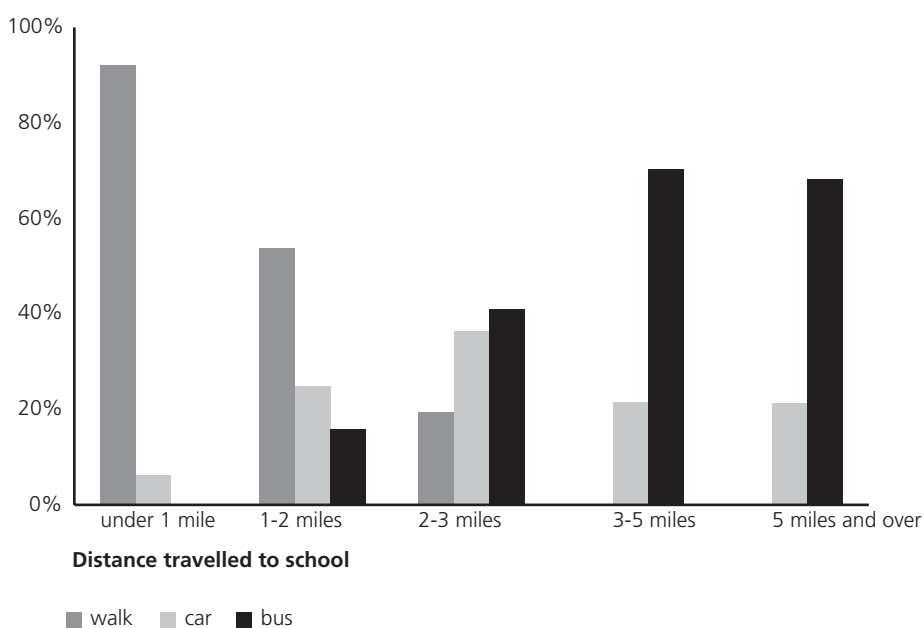
**How children travel to school**

The distance travelled impacts on pupils' mode of travel.

**5-10 year olds**  
Percentage of children travelling by mode



**11-16 year olds**  
Percentage of children travelling by mode



Source: Audit Commission based on DTLR travel statistics for 1998-2000. Other modes of travel (including rail and bicycle) have been excluded from the graphs due to the small percentages involved.

**BOX B****Issues affecting car use**

National travel trends reveal that car use for the school journey is:

- higher for primary school pupils than secondary school pupils;
- higher for females than males;
- less for the journey home from school than the journey to school;
- lowest in the largest urban areas (where walking is much more common);
- highest in the most rural areas (where bus use is also higher);
- most common for children travelling between two and three miles to school but less often used at higher distances;
- highest in households owning two or more cars; and
- higher for children from single parent households with one car than for those from households owning one car where there are two parents.

Source: Audit Commission based on University of Westminster Transport Studies Group, *The Family and the School Run: What Would Make a Real Difference? Scoping Report, June 2000*, AA Foundation for Road Safety Research, 2000.

School – buses running at the wrong time; bus stops too far from pupils’ homes; and parents feeling nervous about children travelling unaccompanied. The Council introduced two new bus services. Around 50 children who used to travel by car now use these – reducing congestion. Children gather at locally agreed pick-up points and a parent is employed as a guide on the bus each day.<sup>I</sup> The Government has also issued a guide for local authorities, bus operators and others with an interest in increasing bus use for school travel.<sup>II</sup>

16. Many LEAs are now working creatively with schools through school travel plans to encourage safe travel for children, and are introducing ‘walking buses’ and local schemes to encourage pupils to cycle to school. Carmarthenshire County Council, for example, holds an annual ‘Walk to school week’ to encourage more children to walk to school. In Odense, Denmark, long term investment in safe routes to school has reduced school transport costs and 45 per cent of children now cycle to school, providing significant public health benefits.<sup>III</sup> The DETR has published a detailed report outlining good practice initiatives by schools around the UK.<sup>IV</sup> School travel plans provide an opportunity to consider these issues at a local level.

I Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *A Safer Journey to School*, DETR, 1999.

II Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *Increasing Bus Use for Journeys to School*, DETR, 2001.

III For further information contact Sustrans: Routes for People, or contact [schools@sustrans.org.uk](mailto:schools@sustrans.org.uk) or see [www.saferoutestoschools.org.uk](http://www.saferoutestoschools.org.uk).

IV Department of the Environment Transport, and the Regions, *School Travel Strategies and Plans: Case Studies Report*, DETR, 1999.

17. The operator *FirstGroup* plans to pilot the use of American-style yellow buses in the UK. Some local authority transport professionals and others have been critical of the idea, arguing that the vehicles are not suitable for other users, thus segmenting transport provision, and that they may not meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. The DTLR is still in discussion with *FirstGroup* over modifications required to ensure that the vehicles used satisfy UK regulatory requirements, and is planning to evaluate the pilots to assess their impact and the views of parents, children and local authorities on the vehicles themselves. Such schemes may be used creatively to try and reduce car use. For instance, a pilot in Calderdale, planned for 2002, will target primary school children in the Hebden Bridge area who currently do not use buses [CASE STUDY 1]. This will throw light on the extent to which the wider use of the vehicles might contribute to home-to-school travel and to meeting the environmental agenda.

### Assessing eligibility in individual cases

18. A clear statement on eligibility, which is easily available to parents, can improve parents' understanding of local arrangements and ensure that they know how and when to apply for transport [CASE STUDY 2]. Clear information should be sent to parents in good time, to ensure that they are informed about transport when making choices about schools.

19. Clear policies, covering all discretionary areas, will help to promote fair and equitable treatment. Even so, some appeals are inevitable, for example, over the exact distance from home to school, which is the 'nearest suitable school' or dangerous routes. LEAs should have clear processes to deal with these. In some authorities, checks on distances are done by hand with a manual, rotating wheel on a map. Other authorities use geographical information system (GIS) technology. When appeals are about safety, officers or, in some cases, members may walk the route to check the situation. Derbyshire has set out dangerous routes criteria and keeps records of decisions made at each school; it also refers routes that are deemed dangerous to the Highways and Transport Department to consider if safety can be addressed by improved highway management. Authorities should also consider the cross-boundary transport implications of their eligibility criteria, for those whose nearest suitable school lies in a neighbouring authority.

#### CASE STUDY 1

##### West Yorkshire FirstGroup pilot

West Yorkshire PTE is working with Calderdale LEA using rural bus grant and safe routes to school funding to provide services for children at a cluster of primary schools, including those living under the statutory distance criteria, and those attending schools other than the nearest appropriate school. Priority will be given to providing transport to those who have the furthest to travel, in order to reduce car use and make the roads safer for those children who are walking to school. A small charge will be made for each journey. The PTE and LEA intend to monitor this scheme in order to consider the implications for expenditure and charging for any longer term initiatives.

Source: Audit Commission

**CASE STUDY 2****Clarifying eligibility to the service and review procedures**

Devon County Council has developed a comprehensive policy document (available in summary form on the internet) that sets out:

- the legislative position;
- eligibility;
- walking distances to pick-up points for primary and secondary pupils;
- maximum journey times for primary and secondary pupils;
- expectations on waiting times;
- seatbelt provision; and
- operating arrangements.

Suffolk County Council's clear, concise document on eligibility also informs parents about the authority's appeals procedure. Worcestershire has a document on school admissions as a whole, which includes information about transport provided in a question and answer format. Merthyr Tydfil has a similar document, in English and Welsh, which includes details of its monitoring and complaints procedures and informs parents of their opportunity to comment on the quality of the service at the end of the second term of each year.

*Source: Audit Commission*

**Safety**

20. Safety can be taken for granted by users, and only come to the fore when something goes wrong, but meeting health and safety requirements is essential. Ensuring safety can involve:

- checking vehicles and equipment;
- establishing safety arrangements and procedures;
- screening vehicle crews; and
- staff training.

**Vehicles and equipment**

21. Most transport to mainstream schools is by dedicated buses or coaches or involves the provision of free bus passes on the public bus network (or for a small proportion of children, tram or rail passes). A minority of children attending mainstream schools travel by taxi or hired-car, when, for example, this is more economical or means shorter journeys for other children than routing a bus to a remote area. When providing bus or rail passes, authorities are usually relying for safety upon the standard licensing and regulatory arrangements for public transport, including PSV licensing arrangements.

22. When using dedicated bus or coach services and taxis or hired-cars, the vehicles themselves and associated equipment – including any seatbelts and entry steps – must comply with legal requirements and be safe. The authority should consider safety issues throughout, for instance, ensuring that child seats are available for, and used by, younger

children in taxis as well as addressing seatbelt requirements in coaches. They will also need to be satisfied that drivers are licensed and vehicles are appropriately taxed, insured and maintained.

**23.** Recent national police operations have, however, identified safety problems with some school buses and coaches [BOX C]. Authorities can guard against this by setting safety standards in contracts and including in the contract the right to carry out unannounced on-the-spot sample checks on vehicles and equipment (as in Devon). Inspections can include checks on licences. Where services are provided in-house, LEAs should also be satisfied that their internal trading organisations meet similar safety standards.

**24.** Checks and controls should also cover taxis and hired-cars, where these are used. Here again, authorities may be relying upon licensing arrangements to help to ensure safety. They should, however, have systems for checking that licences have been granted and that vehicles are taxed and insured.

**25.** Sanctions should be applied if there are persistent safety breaches. In extremis, authorities should be prepared to terminate contracts and re-tender routes. Some authorities use only an approved list of contractors to deliver the service, and will carry out thorough checks on operators before adding these to their list. If this system is used, operators should easily be able to find out how to join the scheme. Those wishing to join, and who meet the authority's requirements, should also be added to the list without undue delay.

### **Arrangements and procedures**

**26.** Other safety procedures and associated training are also essential. Mobile phones, or radios, on vehicles can help to ensure rapid and effective communication between transport managers, LEA staff, schools and parents in case of an emergency or vehicle breakdown. There should also be agreed procedures for recording safety concerns and for responding to accidents or breakdowns.

#### **BOX C**

##### **Operation Coachman**

During Operation Coachman, an annual two-week national check of public service vehicles, the police and Vehicle Inspectorate banned 250 school buses (seven per cent of vehicles inspected) in March 2000 until their defects had been remedied. Thirty-six police forces across England and Wales inspected 3,712 vehicles including coaches, buses, minibuses and private hire vehicles. Issues they found included: oil or fuel leaks, structural faults, speeding and driving offences by drivers and uninsured and banned drivers at the wheel.

In the national check in 2001, 156 of 1,642 vehicles, or ten per cent of those inspected, were banned. Bob Tatchell the operation's director noted, *"Although the results are disappointing, the higher prohibition rate [than last year] is because buses and coaches which take children to and from school are normally from the older section of the PSV fleet. We are concerned that many of the defects could have been identified by the driver before he commenced his journey if he had completed an adequate check of the vehicle before starting out."*

*Source: Audit Commission based on information provided by the Vehicle Inspectorate*

27. Arrangements at schools need to pay particular attention to safety. In some cases, these can cause problems, as noted by OFSTED in one secondary school inspection:

*‘The school still has serious problems with regard to the site and the accommodation. One of these is that there is a public right of way across the school grounds... Pupils, staff and visitors to the school, whether on foot or using motor transport, are all obliged to use the same entrance. This sometimes creates serious congestion and may be considered a threat to health and safety.’*

28. A school transport co-ordinator, to supervise children boarding and disembarking at schools, can help to promote safety and act as a link between operators, pupils and schools. Schools and LEAs should also consider investment in facilities within a school or working with their authorities’ traffic management and highways departments to improve traffic management and road safety around the school, if this is needed. In some areas, problems have been addressed successfully. In Staffordshire, for example, the LEA has worked with a local school to develop and extend its parking and drop-off areas. In Devon, there is a dedicated pick-up and drop-off area at Exmouth Community College.

### **Screening vehicle crews**

29. Police checks on drivers, passenger assistants and other staff who come into contact with children are another aspect of a quality service – on both in-house and contracted provision. Section 7 (1) of the Protection of Children Act 1999 requires employers to carry out pre-employment checks in regulated organisations concerned with ‘the supervision of children’<sup>I</sup>. This suggests that, if a driver is regularly acting in a supervisory capacity and is in sole charge of any children, he or she may need to be police checked; and, if there is a passenger assistant present to supervise the children, the assistant would need to be police checked prior to employment. In practice, these checks are not always carried out on mainstream home-to-school transport services. Police checks may take weeks to perform<sup>II</sup>, creating pressures to allow staff to begin work before vetting has been completed. Identification cards, bearing photographs, and staff uniforms can be used to reassure parents, carers and schools that children are being collected by people from the transport service.

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I For guidance see Department of Health, *The Protection of Children Act 1999, A Practical Guide to the Act for all Organisations Working with Children*, Department of Health NHS Executive, September 2000, at [www.doh.gov.uk/scg/childprotect](http://www.doh.gov.uk/scg/childprotect).

II This may change. The new Criminal Records Bureau, an executive agency of the Home Office, is offering disclosures of criminal records and other checks on employees from Spring 2002. Local authorities and other employers will deal directly with the Bureau when vetting employees, rather than asking individual police forces to carry out checks, and can already register with the service.

## Staff training

30. Drivers are at the sharp end of service delivery, but may have limited involvement in service development. They can make a big difference to children's experience of the journey, but they can also bear the brunt of misbehaviour and discipline problems. Drivers need to be equipped to handle these issues.

31. In most cases, drivers will be operating under PSV licensing arrangements but these do not cover customer care, or responses to vandalism and bullying. Some private operators will undertake their own driver training, but LEAs could also consider investing in training for all drivers on school routes, or making training a condition of contract. Ensuring drivers are equipped to deal with emergencies, including fires and accidents, can improve standards. When drivers are new, it can also be helpful for them to have mentors on the bus, as in Merthyr Tydfil, to help them to gain familiarity with the route. In Staffordshire, private operators copy map extracts into the driver's route verification sheet as a further aid.

32. Written guidance may also be useful. Devon provides a *Drivers' Handbook for Transport Contracts* to all drivers working under contract to it and a similar handbook for the minority of drivers who are employed directly by the County Council. These cover other aspects of the work, for example responses to vandalism, as well as driving and vehicle safety. Suffolk County Council has a driver's code of good practice included in its contract information for transport operators. It also offers a driver training and assessment service to schools and other departments of the council.

33. Drivers cannot supervise or assist children while driving. Passenger assistants, while rarely used on mainstream home-to-school transport, can help to supervise children and maintain discipline on the journey. Using properly vetted passenger assistants will ensure that authorities comply with the Protection of Children Act 1999. Parents and heads have commented on the need for better supervision and monitoring on buses to improve discipline on the journey and may welcome the use of passenger assistants to counteract discipline or bullying problems (see Box A). LEAs like Merthyr Tydfil and Carmarthenshire have also found assistants to be beneficial on primary school routes where they can promote safety by encouraging children to wear their seatbelts and ensuring that pupils stay seated on the journey. If passenger assistants are used, the LEA should ensure that they too are trained.

## Quality and standards

34. In addressing service quality, LEAs should:

- involve stakeholders in setting standards and assessing performance;
- communicate effectively with parents and other players about the day-to-day working of the service;
- ensure children get to school on time;
- set service standards that promote journey quality and effectively address bullying or vandalism; and,
- where possible, have flexible services, for instance, to enable children to take part in after-school activities.

### Involving stakeholders

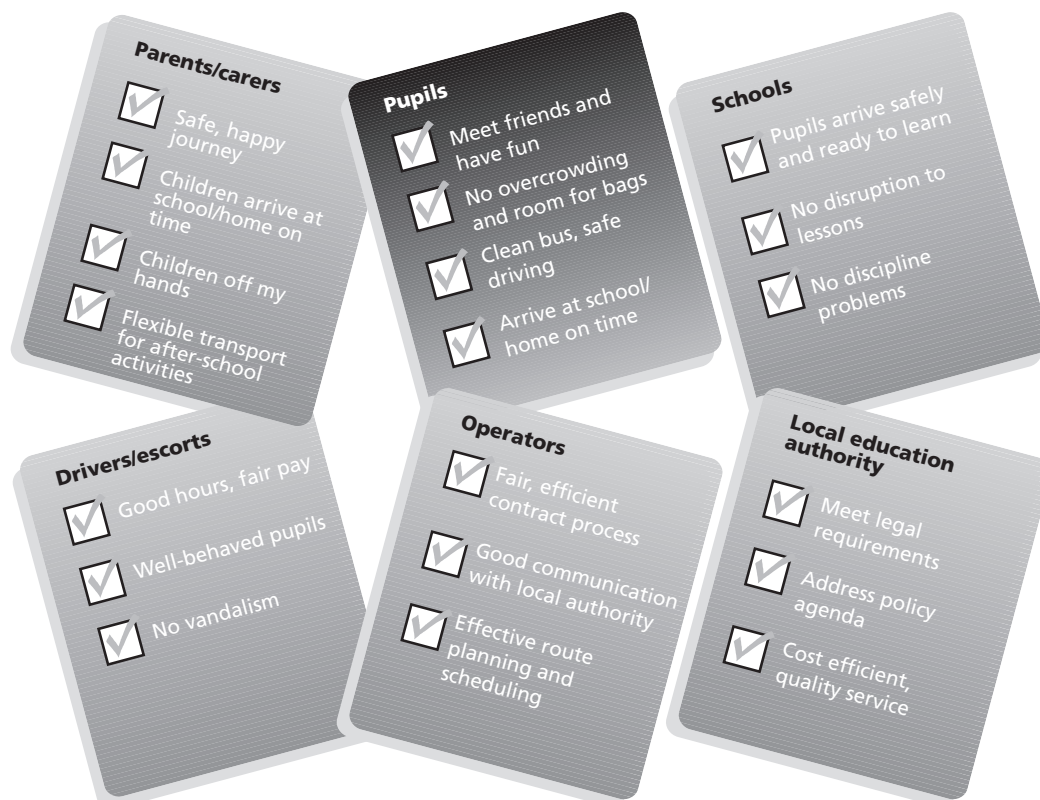
35. Under best value, local authorities must consult service users and other stakeholders. In the case of education transport, stakeholders include parents and carers, schools, transport providers, drivers and – where used – passenger assistants [EXHIBIT 3]. Regular consultation can help to assess and improve performance and is preferable to one-off exercises driven solely by best value. Contact with parents and pupils should help the LEA to identify problems such as bullying or poor discipline. Equally, discussion with schools (and an examination of local OFSTED and Estyn reports on schools) may raise the need for improvements in safety or punctuality.

36. Authorities should take a strategic approach to consultation, and think about it in the context of their overall arrangements for transport, as well as the review process itself. Authorities need to develop appropriate methods to consult with different groups of users and to feed back to them the results of that consultation. They should also take account of the linguistic diversity of the local area in the process. Options for consultation include questionnaires, one-to-one interviews and group discussion.<sup>1</sup> When seeking the views of children, working with teachers to carry out consultation may help to develop an interactive approach to ensure that the children's attention is focused and retained.

#### EXHIBIT 3

#### Taking account of service stakeholders' views

Consultation with stakeholders is integral to assessing and improving performance.



Source: Audit Commission

<sup>1</sup> The Central Office of Information's *Informability Manual* sets out government expectations in terms of making information accessible to different audiences. See Central Office of Information, *Informability Manual*, HMSO, 1996.

37. Pupils can be discerning customers and their views can raise important issues [BOX D]. Journeys to and from school are often their first or main experience of travel by bus and can form their attitudes towards public transport. Positive perceptions of, and experiences using, home-to-school transport among children, and the quality of service they receive, may thus have an impact on young people's future travelling behaviour. Positive experiences may both help to delay the onset of car ownership and influence their use of public transport even after acquisition of a car.

38. Parents' and carers' views about travel to and from school often focus on safety from traffic danger and stranger attacks, and can also relate to bad behaviour by other pupils [BOX E]. Many more parents would send their children to school by either public transport or dedicated home-to-school services if services were available and took account of their concerns.<sup>1</sup> This highlights the links between policies on home-to-school travel and the green agenda.

#### BOX D

##### Pupils' views of school transport

Pupils, in a county, travelling on a new in-house service, based on an adaptation of the American yellow school bus model, generally liked the vehicle. One child compared this favourably with the previous service, where the buses were *'falling apart'*. Several pupils recalled an incident where the previous operator's driver had driven under a low bridge and the skylight glass had broken and crashed in. One girl said that she had glass in her wrist afterwards. On the new service, the driver and children had a good rapport; the driver asked for passes which the children normally had ready to show him and they said hello and goodbye to each other by name. The driver mentioned the importance of establishing respect on board and had encouraged the older boys to set an example to promote discipline. The children had responded and showed their respect, for instance, by using the litter-bin as they left the bus.

Pupils' main dissatisfaction was with the limited space for bags and the width of the aisles – *'we bang people sitting down when we walk down the gangway – there isn't much room!'* One girl also complained that the seats were too narrow and that the seatbelts were too tight.

*Source: Audit Commission, based on interviews with pupils and driver*

<sup>1</sup> Nearly 60 per cent of parents who currently take their children to school by car thought measures could be introduced which would give them the confidence to let their children travel by other means – particularly using public transport. See University of Westminster Transport Studies Group, *The Family and the School Run: What Would Make a Real Difference? Scoping Report, June 2000*, AA Foundation for Road Safety Research, 2000. Research commissioned by the DTLR and carried out by the consultants, WS Atkins, also supports this view. See WS Atkins, *Assessment of Attitudes to, and Potential Take Up of, Additional Home-to-school Transport, DTLR, 2001*.

**BOX E****Parental concerns about the journey to school**

Parents are concerned about safety on the journey – from both traffic danger and stranger attack:

*'I need to make sure that they're safe and I can't rely on the buses I'm afraid.'*

*'She hates the bus. All the children smoke... I would rather pick her up.'*

*'My daughter was bullied on the school bus and that has put her off for life.'*

*'You want to make sure that they've gone to school. How many times have you heard it: "Well I dropped them outside the gate but they never made it to school?" I know it's sad, but it's the society we live in.'*

Where children are not eligible for transport provision, parents can feel forced to drive:

*'I think a lot of mothers are in cars because they've got other children that they can't leave... basically they've got two or three other kids with them... it's a mobile creche.'*

*'It's a matter of having to get to work from school really. I suppose I could walk to school, it's not far but I have to be somewhere at a certain time.'*

*'To me it's a safety thing. I would be worried about her walking home on her own... you just can't be sure that there isn't some stranger watching and just waiting to snatch her away.'*

*'There is a bus that comes through our village but because I choose for them to go to [that school] I would have to pay and it would be about £230 per term... obviously it's not an option.'*

*Source: Audit Commission based on University of Westminster Transport Studies Group, The Family and the School Run: What Would Make a Real Difference? Scoping Report, June 2000, AA Foundation for Road Safety Research, 2000 and WS Atkins, Assessment of Attitudes to, and Potential Take Up of, Additional Home-to-School Transport, DTLR, 2001*

**39.** Detailed and frequent consultation with stakeholders can inform quality standards.

Parents are often keen to have better links with councils. Parents involved in Audit Commission focus groups felt it would be beneficial to have a feedback mechanism on a termly, or failing that, annual basis, to give the LEA their views on transport (as was the case for comments on school dinners).

**40.** Formal complaint monitoring will also help to reveal weaknesses or deficiencies in the service. Some stakeholders may not, however, wish to make formal written complaints even when they have concerns. Devon County Council has an 'incident recording system' to pick up all comments about services, whether written or verbal, made face-to-face or over the telephone – including those which are not formal complaints. In Derbyshire, school councils (which have two representatives from each year and are chaired by pupils from the 5th or 6th form or a teacher) have been a useful forum for raising concerns. In Merthyr Tydfil, parents are asked before the end of the second term of the school year to comment on the quality of the transport service.

41. Consultation with stakeholders can bring improvements and efficiency savings. By working with schools, Carmarthenshire's LEA has successfully integrated some of its services to different schools, saving money and improving vehicle use [CASE STUDY 3].

### **Day-to-day communication with parents and schools**

42. Parents, carers and schools should be provided with a contact number to use, for instance, if the bus fails to turn up. This should include provision for out-of-hours contact to deal with any problems on the morning run to school. Detailed timetables can also be useful; in Derbyshire, a timetable showing dedicated school services, and rail services, used by pupils is available for parents.

43. LEAs can also assist stakeholders by providing clear information, not only about eligibility for the service they provide, but also the roles and responsibilities of each player, for example, parental roles' in ensuring children are at the bus stop on time, and expectations for children's behaviour. This can avoid problems, for instance, by clarifying how schools, operators and drivers should respond to behavioural problems on the journey. Derbyshire has set out a code of practice that offers guidance and sets out responsibilities for each of the key stakeholders on these issues. Carmarthenshire County Council has also been drafting codes of practice for stakeholders.

#### **CASE STUDY 3**

##### **Working with schools to improve transport: Carmarthenshire**

Following consultation with two local schools, St John Lloyd Roman Catholic Secondary School and St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School, Carmarthenshire County Council has integrated transport provision for the two schools and made better use of its vehicles.

The Council reached agreement with the schools, which are adjacent to each other, that primary school pupils could travel on the vehicles serving the secondary school, with supervision as children go to and from the vehicles. On board, passenger assistants supervise the children and ensure that pupils wear seatbelts, improving safety on the journey.

The arrangement allows the primary school to make provision for pupils who would not otherwise qualify for free transport, while, at the same time, minimising the cost to the Council of conveying entitled pupils to both the primary and secondary schools.

*Source: Audit Commission*

### Ensuring children get to school on time

44. At its most basic, the objective of home-to-school transport services is to get children safely to school on time. Occasional punctuality problems and late arrivals at school may be unavoidable, for example, when caused by unexpected roadworks or accidents. But regular late arrival at school is highly undesirable. It is not only damaging to the education of the pupils who arrive late but also for other pupils, whose teaching is disrupted when the latecomers arrive. OFSTED has occasionally been critical of late arrival in some of its inspection reports. The Best Value Inspection Service has also found some problems. In one authority, it noted:

*'[There were] 221 complaints about education transport over the six months between 1 January and 30 June 2000, almost two per school day. During this time, 19,174 journeys were made. Of the complaints made, 163 were about lateness.'*

45. Where mainstream transport is contracted out, punctuality can be monitored. Where children are travelling on public buses using passes, it is up to the children and their parents to ensure that pupils catch an early enough bus to arrive on time. It will thus be more difficult for the LEA to monitor punctuality. However, persistent problems on specific routes can be brought to the attention of the operator and, if necessary, to the traffic commissioner (if, for instance, an operator repeatedly fails to run registered public routes). In Staffordshire, when one school was experiencing problems, parents monitored delays. These were then brought to the attention of the LEA and the operator and, following discussions, punctuality on the route improved significantly.

### Journey quality

46. Pupils' experiences on the journey can be affected by:

- overcrowding and general discomfort;
- bullying and other discipline problems; and
- vandalism.

47. The 'three for two' seat rule for dedicated home-to-school transport generally no longer applies, since the introduction of seatbelt requirements,<sup>1</sup> but overcrowding can still be a problem, especially if children are travelling on public buses. Sometimes these difficulties can be overcome by revising routes early in the school year but, in other cases, there may be more significant underlying problems. Best value consultation with pupils in one area indicated that 64 per cent of respondents felt that school routes were overcrowded all or most of the time, with this being more of a problem on dedicated school buses than public routes. In another area, where pupils complained of overcrowding, the operator was found to be providing smaller buses than it was contracted to use – a situation that was then rectified.

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<sup>1</sup> Pupils aged below 14 can sit 'three for two', that is three pupils on a double seat, but only on vehicles where seatbelts are not fitted. See Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *The Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) (Amendment No.2) Regulations 2001*, DETR, 2001.

48. Comfort on the journey is important to users. Operators play an important role in ensuring that vehicles are kept clean and tidy, and standards are maintained. Where seats are ripped, or there is any damage to vehicles, they will need to ensure that maintenance is carried out quickly. Some pupils have complained about the quality of buses, that they are noisy, that they *'often rattle and smoke'* or that exhaust fumes emitted may leak back into the vehicle. Research by the then DETR has found similar complaints about public bus services used by young people and complaints about drivers' behaviour and attitudes [BOX F]. These issues should be addressed for safety reasons as well as to ensure that those on board have a pleasant journey.

#### BOX F

##### Young people's views on bus travel

*'Just look at the state of some of the buses... the seats ripped, it smells and we have to pay to travel on them.'*

**Young woman in Newcastle**

*'When my grandfather worked on the buses, he says they were cleaned every night, now I reckon some of them are cleaned less than once a fortnight.'*

**Young woman at central Edinburgh youth project**

*'Buses can be very cold in winter and there's no air conditioning in summer...'*

**Young man in Wolverhampton school**

*'Buses need to be a lot cleaner, although they are a lot better than the Tubes... the mess in some carriages is disgusting, they have people keeping the platforms clean now but they don't go into the carriages during the day.'*

**Young woman at North London youth project**

*'The worst problems are on the buses – drivers ignore us, they are rude, they swear or shout, they drive past bus stops where there are groups of young people, and they try to close the doors when we are getting on.'*

**Young Asian woman in South London school**

*'Most of them [drivers] don't smile or say hello... why are they so miserable all the time?'*

**Boy in Leeds secondary school**

*'Yesterday, the bus driver left an elderly disabled man who could hardly walk at the bus stop...we all felt sorry for the old man... I don't think the driver wanted to wait while he got on.'*

**Young woman in Wolverhampton secondary school**

*'Most of the time, they [drivers] are pleasant enough... but it's the nasty ones that stick in your mind.'*

**Girl in Sheffield secondary school**

*Source: Audit Commission based on Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Young People and Crime on Public Transport, DETR, 1999.*

49. Experiences on the journey will also be significantly affected by the children's own behaviour. DETR research on young people using public transport suggested that nearly 70 per cent of those aged 13 or over had experienced rudeness from an adult passenger or driver, bullying by other young people or had something stolen from them. Almost a third of 10-12 year olds said they had been '*bullied by young people from my school/another school*' while using public services. Pupils can also upset drivers and may be unaware of the impact of their own threatening or intimidating behaviour on either drivers or other passengers<sup>I</sup>. Some children themselves raised concerns about fighting on the bus and inter-school rivalry in one authority's best value consultation.

50. LEAs also need to be aware of possible racial tensions. In one secondary school, there were tensions between young Asian students and drivers, which made students feel unsafe. Problems decreased when the bus company employed more Asian drivers. In another area where the pupils also felt unsafe, routes were changed to avoid travel through a predominantly white estate, again reducing tensions<sup>II</sup>.

51. Discipline problems can breed vandalism. In the extreme, this can lead to reports like the following:

*'Bus operators recount tales of vandalism and mayhem. While damage to seating is most common, pupils have set light to vehicles, used hair sprays as flame throwers and broken or wrenched out windows... It is small consolation that behaviour may be better in the mornings than at the end of the school day... The behaviour and total disregard for road safety displayed by pupils milling around roads and pavements close to schools is a fair reflection of an attitude which does not improve once the bus is boarded.'*<sup>III</sup>

52. These problems can have an impact on the availability and cost of operators' services [BOX G, overleaf].

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I Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *Young People and Crime on Public Transport*, DETR, 1999.

II Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Chapter 4, *Young People and Crime on Public Transport*, DETR, 1999.

III *Coach and Bus Week*, 22 June 1996, quoted in DETR, *Young People and Crime on Public Transport*, DETR, 1999.

**BOX G****The impact of vandalism on the local market**

One LEA has used six different operators on one of its routes, each of whom has withdrawn from the work. Only one operator tendered for the current contract; the LEA is concerned that, if this operator withdraws, no one may be prepared to provide the service.

In another area, the main transport provider recently withdrew from certain home-to-school routes, citing problems with pupil behaviour and on-board supervision.

*Source: Audit Commission*

53. While vandalism may not be widespread, problems that do appear should be addressed effectively to prevent recurrence. Devon County Council has recently introduced a protocol to combat bad behaviour and vandalism that sets out the roles of the operator, schools and the LEA in following up incidents. A key feature is that schools should interview pupils either later that day, if the incident occurred on a morning run, or in the next school day, if an incident occurred on an evening run. Devon is prepared to ban pupils from transport for serious repeated bad behaviour, citing its health and safety responsibilities for other passengers. It also seeks to recover vandalism costs from parents. The former DETR's report on young people and crime on public transport cites a number of examples of good practice for combating vandalism [BOX H]. The Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) has also produced a document collating local strategies to address poor behaviour on school buses.<sup>1</sup>

54. It will help if the LEA works closely with operators, schools and the police to address these issues. In Staffordshire, schools, the police, the operator and a local community representative had co-operated to identify individuals causing problems. One operator had given talks to pupils, showing videos on the subject and asked the children to imagine being a driver. The operator has taken seats into the school and explained the costs of repair to the children. In addition, the council has used the threat of police action as a deterrent – and has explained to the children that vandalism was a criminal offence, which the bus company could pursue with the police.

55. In Carmarthenshire, there is a code of practice to address vandalism and a bullying strategy for schools. Pupils who misbehave are required to sit in dedicated seats near the driver and there is a 'behaviour contract' with them. A forum of headteachers, parents and contractors considers each case.

<sup>1</sup> Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers, *Behaviour on School Buses*, ATCO, September 2001.

**BOX H****Examples of good practice for handling vandalism and discipline problems**

Initiatives to address vandalism and raise awareness of security and safety include:

- visits to schools and youth clubs by police (including British Transport Police), local authority staff and transport operators;
- visits by young people to transport depots, or transport-related attractions such as the London Transport Museum or ‘travelling classes’ on trains;
- young people’s direct involvement through action groups – for instance to carry out research into local transport improvements such as initiatives in Bracknell and Wolverhampton;
- junior citizen events – encouraging children to learn how to respond to emergencies;
- videos and books – including action research by children – for instance, in Yorkshire secondary pupils videoed behaviour on buses working with the bus company;
- theatre, music and art projects – such as the project at Wandsworth Council that allowed young people to paint murals at a local station in an anti-graffiti initiative;
- codes of conduct developed with young people on school bus services such as that developed at Kent County Council in liaison with Connex South Eastern;
- truancy patrols – Staffordshire has been involved in initiatives with local police and education welfare officers to identify vulnerable young people and offer support to those at risk; and
- reparation schemes – in Bradford, in a short-term initiative young people cleaned the bus they had been involved in vandalising (though it could be difficult to identify individuals).

*Source: Audit Commission based on Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Young People and Crime on Public Transport, DETR, 1999. More detail and case studies can be found at [www.mobility-unit.detr.gov.uk/ypc](http://www.mobility-unit.detr.gov.uk/ypc).*

**Service flexibility**

56. With increasing specialisation by schools and demand for more extra-curricular provision outside traditional school hours, LEAs may need to develop more flexible transport services. Greater participation in after-school activities, including sport, drama and homework clubs, has been advocated in recent Government proposals and forms an increasingly important part of children’s education and development, especially with proposals for piloting ‘extended school’ days [BOX I, overleaf]. Participation may be difficult for children whose parents have no transport with which to collect them or who are still at work in the evening. Authorities should, therefore, work with schools to ensure transport arrangements do not unreasonably prevent fair and equal access to these activities.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The School Travel Advisory Group has commissioned a research project to identify the effect of study support, childcare facilities and out-of-hours learning on travel decisions, which is due to report in early 2002.

**BOX 1****After-school activities**

In England, the DFES proposes:

*'As resources allow, we need to widen opportunities for primary children so that they all benefit from a broad and rich curriculum and a variety of extra-curricular activities. We want all children to have more opportunities to learn music, PE, sports and a foreign language. Over time, all primary pupils who want to will be able to learn a musical instrument. As the numbers of sports colleges and sports co-ordinators are increased, they will become two important means of offering schools the support necessary to implement our promise that all children will have two hours of high quality PE and sport each week within and beyond the timetabled curriculum. And we will continue to promote the increases in after-school activities that more than two-thirds of schools have made in the last four years...'*

*'We are extending opportunities for children to be involved in sport, adventure, art, music and drama within and outside the school day.'*

*'There will be a programme of in and out-of-school learning and teaching, [for 14-19 year olds] including mentoring and master classes and there will be work with parents and families.'*

*'Many schools already recognise the benefits for them and their communities of providing additional services to their pupils, pupils' families and the wider community. Most schools already provide some before or after-school study support; some provide space for sports or arts activities, community groups or Internet access; others work closely with other public bodies to provide integrated services such as health services, childcare or adult education. We shall legislate to make sure that there are no barriers to schools developing these innovative approaches. We will establish pilots to test out such 'extended schools' and generate examples of good practice. And where schools have already demonstrated the advantages of this approach we will help them develop further to become Centres of Excellence, and celebrate their achievements.'*

\* \* \*

The National Assembly for Wales states:

*'We want to see families supported during and outside the school day... with careful management and the responsible involvement of professional staff this could also extend the life of the school to embrace breakfast clubs and a wide range of out of school hours, cultural and sporting activities. We believe that there should be a prospectus of such activities for every child at school in Wales, possibly incentive or credit based, covering the vacation period also.'*

*Source: Audit Commission based on the Department for Education and Skills, Schools Achieving Success, The Stationery Office, 2001 and the National Assembly for Wales, The Learning Country, NAW, 2001.*

**57.** LEAs can work with stakeholders to address such access issues. In Leeds, West Yorkshire PTE provides national travel tokens to schools for use by children who need to travel home later in the evening than the usual end of the school day. The tokens are funded by the LEA and can be used on public transport routes. In Suffolk, over £80,000 of ring-fenced funding has been made available to local middle and high schools for after-school transport. Wherever possible, the schools work together to organise their activities on the same days, so that they can co-ordinate the use of vehicles. The council then organises the transport on single-decker buses. In schools in other LEAs, parent teacher associations have sometimes paid for transport after school, or, in some cases, activities have been held at lunchtime to reduce the chance of pupils missing out due to transport problems.

\* \* \*

**58.** The authority should answer the following questions to identify any gaps and priorities for action in access to, and the quality of, its services.

## SELF – ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

### 1 Accessing and using the service

#### Eligibility for mainstream home-to-school transport

##### Statutory and discretionary provision

Are there clearly defined criteria on eligibility for free transport, which:

- meet statutory requirements?
- have been set following consultation with parents/carers and schools?
- do not create cultural barriers to access?
- parents/carers and schools understand?
- are reviewed in response to changes in local needs and provision?
- are also reviewed when national policy changes?
- have been agreed by elected members?

Has the LEA produced guidance on when to exercise discretion, whether on the basis of:

- distances which are shorter than those in statute?
- attendance at denominational schools?
- attendance at single-sex schools?
- attendance at Welsh-language schools?
- other exercise of parental preference?
- after-school demand?
- age (for example, early years/post-16)?

Do policies comply with section 509 of the Education Act 1996 (for example, treat school pupils and students at FE colleges in the same way)?

Are there arrangements to deal with children who have short-term medical problems and who attend mainstream schools?

Does the LEA know the percentage of children receiving free transport who do so because of the exercise of discretion?

Has the LEA estimated the costs associated with discretionary provision?

#### Addressing the wider policy agenda

Do eligibility criteria reflect the wider policy agenda (particularly on the environment and social inclusion)?

#### Assessing eligibility in individual cases

Do pupils/parents/carers receive information on eligibility, and how to apply for free or subsidised transport, before they select which school they would prefer their child to attend?

## S E L F – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

Do pupils/parents/carers receive application forms sufficiently ahead so that decisions on eligibility, and arrangements for, home-to-school travel can be set up in good time before the start of the new school year (especially when children start and change schools)?

Are arrangements for dealing with appeals and complaints about decisions on whether to provide free transport:

- clear and formally set out?
- understood by parents/carers and schools?
- agreed by elected members?
- efficient and reliable?





Is there effective, on-going quality assurance of decisions on entitlement?

### **Safety**

#### **Vehicles and equipment**

Are there effective systems to check that all vehicles used for dedicated home-to-school transport are well maintained, safe, taxed and insured?

Are there effective systems to check that other equipment is also well maintained and safe?

Are these applied consistently across all operators and all types of provision?

Do these arrangements cover contractors' vehicles and equipment, including taxis and hired cars and spares/stand-in vehicles used by contractors and taxi and hired-car operators?

If the authority has an 'approved contractors list', are operators aware of the scheme and informed of how to join it?

Are applications to join the scheme processed speedily?

Are operators on the list re-inspected regularly?

#### **Arrangements and procedures**

Does the authority ensure vehicles are equipped with mobile phones/radios where appropriate?

Are there effective arrangements for identifying and responding to potential safety problems reported by users or crew on vehicles?

Are there effective arrangements for recording any accidents or incidents that occur and to seek to prevent them recurring?

Is the walking distance to bus stops appropriate for all pupils?

Has Estyn or OFSTED commented on any problems with pick-up and drop-off at any local schools?

Has the authority checked school entrance and parking facilities to ensure safe entry, boarding and disembarking of pupils for school transport?

Has the LEA liaised with the highways department and schools to address any problems identified?

Has the authority considered whether and when to use passenger assistants?

## SELF – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

### Screening vehicle crews

Are there adequate arrangements to ensure that *all* drivers, including agency staff, contractors' drivers and all taxi and hired-car drivers who regularly carry children, are:

- security checked with police before they first carry children where required by the Protection of Children Act 1999?
- in possession of a valid driving licence?

Are there adequate arrangements to ensure that all passenger assistants – where used – including agency staff and contractors staff who are regularly in contact with children, are security checked with police before they first carry children where required by the Protection of Children Act 1999?

Where voluntary sector or volunteer drivers are in regular contact with children are they police checked where required under the legislation?

Is the authority satisfied that agency and contractors' passenger assistants and taxi and hired-car passenger assistants have been security checked where required by the legislation?

If any staff who should be vetted have not yet been fully cleared, do they work in tandem with experienced, security-cleared staff (so that they do not have unsupervised contact with children)?

Has the authority considered whether all drivers and escorts, including in-house and contractors' staff, should have and use photocard identity badges?

Has the authority considered whether drivers and passenger assistants, including ones provided by contractors, and including temporary or agency staff, should wear uniforms?

Does the authority regularly check that all drivers and escorts provided by contractors display their identity badges and wear their uniforms as required?

### Staff training

Does the authority have a protocol for training drivers?

Is training for drivers provided on:

- fire/emergency procedures?
- vehicle safety?
- customer care?
- reporting problems, incidents and complaints?
- maintaining discipline on the vehicle?
- preventing and responding to vandalism and bullying?

Do drivers also receive written guidance?

Does training and guidance cover other behaviour (for example, smoking on duty; behaviour when waiting for children to leave school)?

Are there effective systems to ensure that all drivers, including contractors' drivers and all taxi and hired-car drivers and temporary and agency drivers, are trained before they start work?

Does the authority have effective arrangements for training passenger assistants, where they are used?

## S E L F – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

- Are there effective systems to ensure that all passenger assistants, including contractors' staff and agency staff, have been given written guidance before they begin duties?
- Are there systems to check that drivers and passenger assistants are working in the ways set out in their training and guidance?
- Are parents and carers satisfied with driver and passenger assistant performance?
- Are schools satisfied with driver and passenger assistant performance?
- If they are not, is action in hand to address their concerns?

### Quality and standards

#### Involving stakeholders

- Does the authority carry out regular consultation with stakeholders on its home-to-school transport service?
- Do these arrangements cover consultation with people:
- who do not speak English or who are not fluent in written English (including, in Wales, Welsh speakers)?
  - who have learning or communication difficulties or sensory impairments?
- Is feedback given on consultation?
- Are there formal standards for customer care, based on the results of consultation?
- Is performance against standards monitored regularly?
- Do surveys of other stakeholders' satisfaction form part of performance monitoring?
- Are survey results and performance against service standards fed back to stakeholders?
- Are complaints monitored?
- Does the authority collect, analyse, and act upon 'informal' comments (for example, ones made face-to-face to staff, ones made by telephone) as well as written complaints?
- Are problems raised by stakeholders taken into account in both contract monitoring and awarding of routes?

#### Day-to-day communication with parents and schools

- Are parents/carers aware of how to apply for free transport?
- Is there an information pack for parents that sets out eligibility and the roles and responsibilities of the pupil, parent, school, transport provider and authority (with contact numbers if things go wrong)?
- Is there a contact number for parents/schools/drivers if there are problems out of hours with breakdowns or late pick-ups (for example, between 7.00 and 9.00am and between 3.30 and 6.30pm)?
- Does the authority have up-to-date contact details for all parents to notify them of changes to routes/ operators?
- Is communication between parents/carers, service providers, schools and the council clear and effective?

## SELF – ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

Do these arrangements deal satisfactorily with communication with parents:

- who do not speak English or who are not fluent in written English (including, in Wales, Welsh speakers, where relevant)?
- who have learning or communication difficulties or sensory impairments?

Do all schools have a member of staff who acts as the authority's contact on transport issues?

Is there a formal mechanism for schools to raise problems?

Is there a formal mechanism for staff/operators to raise problems?

Is there a formal mechanism for pupils/parents to raise problems?

Are problems addressed?

Are responses fed back to those who have raised problems in a timely manner?

### Ensuring children get to school on time

Are pupils picked up on time?

Do they reach school on time?

Do they return home on time?

Has timeliness emerged well from recent Estyn or OFSTED reports on inspections of local schools?

Have any problems been addressed?

### Journey quality

Are travel times reasonable (journeys do not overtire pupils/impact adversely on their performance at school)?

Are there clear procedures for periodically checking the numbers of children picked up for school to check seat occupancy rates for overcrowding (or under-capacity)?

Are there clear procedures for periodically checking the numbers of children delivered home from school to check seat occupancy rates for overcrowding (or under-capacity)?

Do pupils travel in comfort (for example, without inappropriate expectations that children may travel three to a two-person seat)?

Has the authority checked its vehicle standards to try and ensure a pleasant journey, for example, to check:

- that there is not excessive pollution and/or leakage of exhaust fumes into the vehicle?
- that seats and headrests are clean, and not ripped?
- that floors are kept clean and gangways clear?

Can pupils travel without fear of harassment or bullying?

Are there systems in place to identify vandalism or discipline problems?

Are there clear procedures for handling vandalism or discipline problems, with clear roles for drivers, (and escorts, where used) operators, schools, the authority, parents and pupils?

Has the LEA got a policy to address bullying when children are waiting for and using school transport?

## SELF – ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

Are schools, parents, children and operators aware of how the LEA deals with bullying, and are each stakeholder's roles and responsibilities clear?

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### **Service flexibility**

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Has the LEA consulted with schools about the need for after-hours school transport (so that children can attend after-school activities)?

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Is provision made for after-hours transport where needed?

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Has the LEA considered the implications for transport services of greater specialisation of schools?

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## 2. Balancing costs and service quality

59. The previous section discussed service quality. However, transport has to be provided within financial constraints. Managing the tensions between limited budgets and the desire to maintain and improve quality can be challenging. This section covers:

- *The context – increasing costs*: the nature of transport cost increases and factors which contribute to them.
- *Strategic responses to cost pressures*: this can involve reviewing policies and provision; monitoring and benchmarking costs; and improving procurement, including jointly procuring and integrating services where possible.
- *Operational responses to cost pressures*: authorities need to review their administration of bus passes; review their arrangements to ensure that staff and vehicles are used effectively; examine route planning and scheduling; and review the use of taxis and hired-cars.

60. This section shows how costs have increased and discusses some of the trade-offs that may exist between costings and service quality. These tensions can be heightened by increasing demand and by above-inflation increases in transport costs. At the same time, authorities face pressure from central government to increase delegation of budgets to schools. There are opportunities for LEAs to use resources more effectively. In some instances, however, authorities will need to identify whether possible cost savings and efficiency improvements may significantly reduce service quality and, if they do, whether this is acceptable. These policy issues need to be considered when setting budgets.

### The context – increasing costs

61. Expenditure on all home-to-school transport rose in real terms by over 40 per cent between 1991/92 and 1999/2000 [EXHIBIT 4]. Expenditure is increasing both for mainstream and SEN provision.

62. Tender prices for mainstream and special educational needs home-to-school transport, and for publicly supported bus routes<sup>I</sup>, have increased at above inflation rates across the country in recent years<sup>II</sup>. There is no evidence to suggest that anti-competitive practices by contractors have contributed to the general rise in prices, although the Office of Fair Trading has successfully acted against two illegal anti-competitive price fixing arrangements between contractors bidding for home-to-school work, in Hull and in Staffordshire<sup>III</sup>. However, the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, Transport

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I Outside London, public bus services are only lightly regulated and operated commercially. However, local transport authorities can let contracts for supported (that is, subsidised) bus services that are socially necessary but that are not being provided by the market.

II The Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers reported in November 2000 that re-tendered school bus contract prices (that is, prices on routes covered by existing contracts that were expiring) were 11.1 per cent higher than the contracts that they replaced, and that authorities would need a 7.4 per cent increase in budget from April 2001 to retain existing levels of school bus services. See Bernard Dobbs, *Local Authority Bus Contracts: Prices, Expenditure and Competition Survey 2000*, ATCO, 2000. An updated report will be available late in 2001.

III Brief details appear at [www.offt.gov.uk/html/rsearch/press-no/pn28-99.htm](http://www.offt.gov.uk/html/rsearch/press-no/pn28-99.htm) (Hull) and [www.offt.gov.uk/html/rsearch/press-no/pn44-99.htm](http://www.offt.gov.uk/html/rsearch/press-no/pn44-99.htm) (Staffordshire).

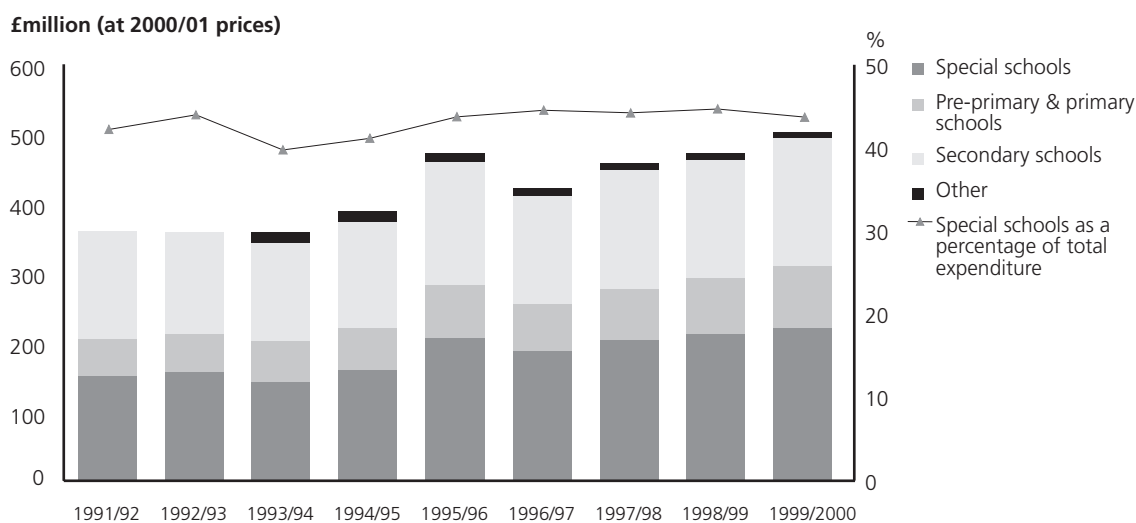
and Regional Affairs has expressed concerns about these increasing prices<sup>I</sup>. Factors identified as contributing to the increases by the Government (in its response to the Select Committee)<sup>II</sup>, and by local authority officers interviewed by the Commission include:

- increases in driver costs – as unemployment levels have eased, many transport providers have had to increase wages to retain or recruit drivers – even so, driver recruitment remains a problem, especially in the southern part of England;
- the extension to part-time staff of the same employment rights as full-time staff;
- above inflation increases in fuel, insurance, and other vehicle running costs;
- changes to vehicle specifications, as a result of the introduction of seatbelt regulations requiring introduction of seatbelts on PSV vehicles, and restrictions in the use of the ‘three for two’ seating rule; and
- increased training costs as health and safety requirements lead to a greater focus on staff training.

## EXHIBIT 4

**Expenditure on home-to-school transport**

Expenditure on all home-to-school transport rose in real terms by over 40 per cent between 1991/92 and 1999/2000.



Source: Audit Commission based on data from the DfES

I Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, *Tendered Bus Services*, The Stationery Office, 1999.

II Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *The Government's Response to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's Report Tendered Bus Services*, DETR, 1999.

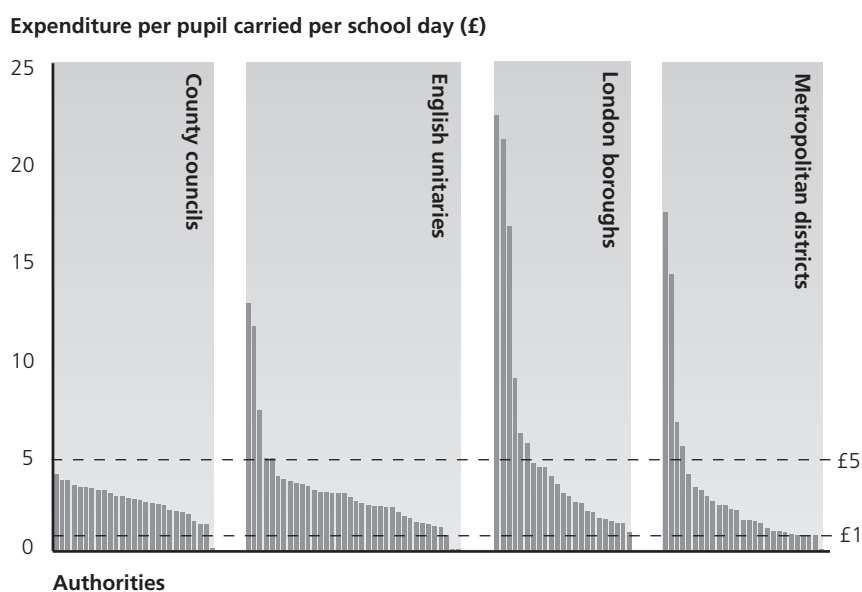
63. In 1999/2000, the majority of mainstream school transport expenditure was by counties – 75 per cent of the £270 million spent in 1999/2000 on pre-primary, primary and secondary mainstream school transport. Most counties spent between one and five pounds per day per pupil carried [EXHIBIT 5]. On average, they provide free transport to a higher proportion of their pupils than other authorities in England, as might be expected given their often more sparsely populated and more rural composition [EXHIBIT 6]. Their unit costs per pupil carried tend to be lower than in unitary authorities, London boroughs and metropolitan areas.

64. In Wales, LEAs spent £52 million on free home-to-school travel in 1999/2000, £41 million of which was spent on transport to mainstream schools. This amounts to £82.81 for every mainstream pupil (under 50 pence per school day), although there is no data on actual pupil numbers carried to compare with the English data in Exhibit 5.

EXHIBIT 5

**Average expenditure per pupil carried on mainstream transport in England, 1999/2000**

Expenditure varies significantly but most LEAs spend between one and five pounds per pupil per school day.



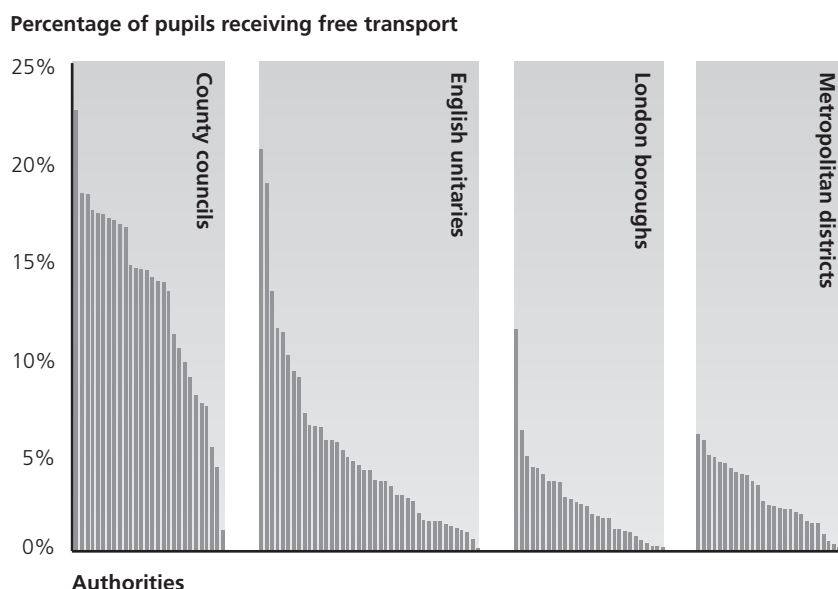
Source: Audit Commission based on data the from DfES and OFSTED<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Graph is based on total LEA pupil numbers receiving free transport in 1999/2000 (excluding pupils with special educational needs) as reported to OFSTED on LEA Inspection Form 4, compared with DfES data on LEAs' total expenditure on mainstream home-to-school transport in 1999/2000. Extreme outliers and LEAs with missing data have been excluded. Expenditure per day is calculated assuming a 190-day school year.

## EXHIBIT 6

**Percentage of mainstream pupils travelling free in England, 2000**

The percentage of pupils travelling free is highest in county councils.



Source: Audit Commission based on data from the DfES and OFSTED

65. LEAs in England are required to delegate most of their budgets to schools. Home-to-school transport is the largest single item retained within LEA central budgets. Rising transport costs, or budget overspends, can, therefore, dramatically impact upon other LEA functions. Home-to-school transport appears unlikely to be included in delegated budgets in the near future. Headteachers do not favour this; a recent MORI poll found that 89 per cent believed that funding of home-to-school transport should remain with LEAs.<sup>I</sup> In 2000, the DfEE also indicated that delegating transport functions ‘would not be an appropriate outcome’.<sup>II</sup> (In Wales, these delegation targets do not apply.)

66. As sparsely populated LEAs tend to spend more per pupil (measured against all pupils not just those receiving free transport) than LEAs in densely populated urban areas [EXHIBIT 7], the DfES is adjusting the calculation of the amount to delegate in England to take account of population sparsity. LEAs spending above the level assumed in this adjustment will find that their central budget comes under particular pressure from home-to-school transport and will especially need to review their arrangements to ensure that they use resources effectively and efficiently.

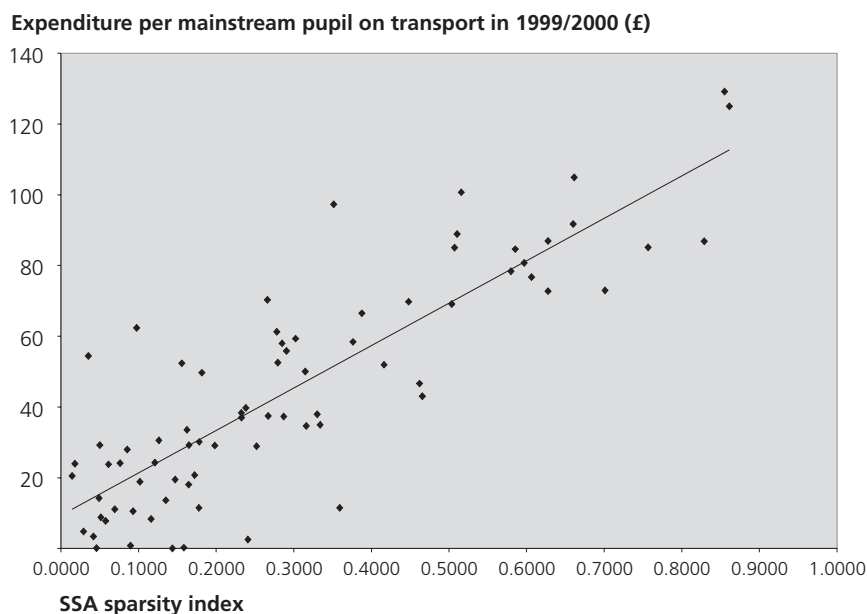
I DfEE, *Press Release: New Heads’ Poll Supports Government’s Approach To Education Reform*, DfEE, 6 March 2001.

II Working Group on LEA Central Budgets, *85% LSB Delegation Target for 2001-02: Treatment of Home-to-School Transport Costs*, LEACB(00)11, 9 October 2000.

## EXHIBIT 7

**Relationship between population sparsity and home-to-school transport expenditure per mainstream pupil in England**

More sparsely populated LEAs tend to spend more on home-to-school transport.



Source: Audit Commission based on data from the DfES

## Strategic responses to cost pressures

67. There are several critical strategic issues to address. LEAs will need to:
- consider the transport implications and costs whenever they review educational policies and provision;
  - regularly monitor and benchmark costs and patterns of service provision;
  - improve how transport is procured and provided;
  - examine how they monitor contracts and service level agreements; and
  - consider co-ordinating with others to encourage efficient procurement and provision.

By making efficiency savings in some areas, authorities may be in a position to invest in improvements in others.

## Reviewing policies and provision

68. Members play a key role in considering the trade-offs between improving service quality and reducing expenditure. They should be well informed and involved in discussions about the options to ensure that appropriate local decisions are made.

69. Transport should be considered whenever an LEA is making major policy decisions about schools, including closures and relocations. Looking at levels of discretionary provision is important when assessing cost pressures. Where dedicated home-to-school services are not fully occupied, LEAs can generate income by selling seats to pupils who are not entitled to free travel, thereby reducing car use on the school run. Devon County Council is one authority that allows children who are not entitled to free transport to use spare seats,

following payment of a contribution towards the cost of travel. However, it leaves some seats vacant on vehicles so that, if additional pupils become entitled to free transport, it can provide them with transport without having to displace fare-paying passengers.

### Monitoring and benchmarking costs

70. Regular monitoring of costs, and benchmarking with other authorities, may help to identify opportunities for improvements to services and for cost savings. Policies on eligibility and standards should also be compared to identify whether potential savings would be at the expense of service quality. LEAs may want to examine how much of their spending is on discretionary provision.

71. Leeds City Council is a member of the core cities benchmarking group and has compared costs with its partners for both education and social services transport. Those with lowest and highest cost then compare their services to assess the reasons for the differences. The six English Passenger Transport Executives have also undertaken comparative work<sup>1</sup> [TABLE 2] and an all-Wales group has also been active.

TABLE 2

#### Comparison of PTE scholar transport policies in England

Policy area	Passenger Transport Executive					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Child population aged 5-15	342,000	166,000	315,000	520,000	362,000	160,000
Number receiving free travel (%)	79,000 (23)	9,300 (6)	12,000 (4)	N/a -	N/a -	Est 20,000 (12.5)
Number of free scholar passes	5,800	9,300	18,000	8,000 free passes 23,000 16 19 permits	11,000	3,500
Percentage of services secured commercially	38%	40%	38%	10%	5%	3%
Cost of contractual provision (to age 18)	£1.3m	£1.2m	£1.4m	£6.8m	£0.5m	£1.8m
Fares charged for students not entitled to free provision	Half fare for under-16s irrespective of journey purpose	33p on bus/tram, 35p on train up to 10.30pm irrespective of journey purpose	Standard concessionary fare	37p all day under-16s, school times only 16-19s	Half fare	School times only, under-11s free, 11-16 25p single, 11-16 30p transfers

Source: Audit Commission based on information from the Passenger Transport Executives' Bus Operations Group. Data is for 2000

<sup>1</sup> In the six former English metropolitan counties, the metropolitan district councils are LEAs but are not transport authorities. The six Passenger Transport Authorities (PTAs) are the public transport authorities. The PTAs fund the legally separate Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) which implement PTA policies. PTEs sometimes act as agents for metropolitan district councils in their areas, organising mainstream home-to-school travel on their behalf.

## Improving procurement and provision

72. Local authorities can purchase bus (or train or tram) passes that allow children to travel on existing public transport or, where there is no suitable public transport, they can:

- use their powers as transport authorities to create subsidised socially necessary registered public services and then provide children entitled to free home-to-school travel, with passes valid on those services<sup>I</sup>; or
- provide dedicated home-to-school vehicles. This can be done under contract or by an in-house operator – an internal trading organisation.

Additionally, taxis and hired-cars may be used in some instances.

73. Authorities need to decide the mix between these approaches and, when using dedicated services, on the mix between external and in-house provision. When using public transport routes, LEAs should ensure they make effective use of the strong bargaining position created by bulk purchasing of passes. They should compare the prices they pay for passes with the costs of daily purchase of individual tickets or with the costs of commercially available weekly or monthly passes. For example, they can periodically select a sample of pupils who travel using passes and compare the costs of those passes with the prices of daily or other tickets on the routes used by those pupils. They should also compare the price of bus passes with the average cost per pupil of providing dedicated services. Devon County Council, for example, has carried out such comparisons.

74. The legislation on public bus services and home-to-school travel can be difficult for local authorities to interpret, affecting, for example, the sale of spare seats. Recent legal advice to the DTLR suggests that contract home-to-school services that also carry fare-paying passengers need to be registered as local bus services, which will involve more stringent contracting arrangements and regulations. Authorities may, as a result, face either higher costs or abandoning the sale of spare places.

75. When going to the market, authorities should monitor the number of bids received and tender prices and examine trends over time. They should compare the prices they pay to successful tenderers with the prices paid by other authorities. One authority visited by the Commission has addressed the issue of tender price rises by documenting cumulative inflationary increases granted from the beginning of contracts to inform discussions with operators. Developing in-house services may improve local provision by providing competition with external operators and setting higher service standards. Staffordshire County Council has developed a dedicated home-to-school transport service to address problems in the market and to improve its mainstream services [CASE STUDY 4]. Cheshire has also developed an in-house service that was praised by best value inspectors<sup>II</sup>. If they suspect cartel activity, authorities should seek advice from the Office of Fair Trading.

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I In the metropolitan areas, the PTEs create socially necessary subsidised services. They can then issue passes for them, acting as agents for the LEA.

II Best Value Inspection Service, *Cheshire County Council: Transport Co-ordination Services*, Audit Commission Best Value Inspection Service, 2001.

### Monitoring contracts and service level agreements

76. For contracted routes, LEAs need to decide what length of contract is appropriate to stimulate competition or to encourage suppliers to invest to provide better services. The LEA should ensure parity of standards between externally contracted dedicated services and internal trading organisation provision to ensure that clear messages about standards are given to providers. In order to ensure service quality, authorities should not only specify their requirements, but also include, in the financial arrangements, measures that reward service providers who meet or exceed these and then monitor performance and apply the incentives.

77. Effective monitoring of performance against contract, or SLA requirements, is an essential part of achieving value for money, as well as of ensuring service quality. Where responsibilities for contract monitoring are split between the education department and other parts of the authority, or shared with a PTE, the LEA will need clarity of roles and effective reporting procedures. Without this, LEA staff may be unaware of complaints or problems with the service.

78. Regular consultation with schools, operators and drivers will help to manage performance, by identifying problems and highlighting good practice which can be transferred. For example, in one area, the best value review helped to highlight concerns over contractual arrangements [BOX J, overleaf].

#### CASE STUDY 4

##### Dedicated school buses based on American yellow bus model: Staffordshire

Staffordshire County Council has taken a positive political decision to invest in improving mainstream school transport services. The council has developed a new in-house 'Bluebird' yellow bus service. It is investing long term in seven vehicles (leased for 12 years) and a further eight vehicles (purchased over 12 years). These buses have been deployed on what were the most expensive routes and contract prices have decreased slightly since.

This development has two main objectives:

- To provide an alternative to the external market in response to past cartel practices by operators in the area. The LEA still uses external suppliers but it can now benchmark their prices against its own. It also hopes to destabilise any possible future cartel practices as outside tenderers for particular routes do not know if there is to be an in-house bid.
- To provide a high quality, safe service, promoting continuity of drivers and comfortable, new vehicles for users.

The initial reaction from schools, parents and pupils has generally been positive, particularly about the continuity of drivers, punctuality and the cleanliness of vehicles delivered by the new service. Parents and drivers have also suggested that discipline has improved on some routes. The only significant reservations have centred on space in the vehicle.

The Council is now proposing to invite private contractors to operate vehicles of a similar specification on a 12-year contract term (to enable them to invest in higher quality vehicles over the length of the contract). It hopes to encourage contractors to provide a higher quality service, which will raise standards further across the county.

*Source: Audit Commission*

**BOX J****Identifying problems with subcontractors**

A best value review found concerns from schools and LEA staff over contracting arrangements:

*'There were significant concerns about the LEA sacrificing quality for cost in the provision of transport. These concerns were about the quality of the vehicles used but to a greater extent about the deficiency in the delivery of the service required of the contractor. By way of example, schools raised the issue of firms subcontracting out transport, and drivers not knowing the routes that they had to follow. Lack of continuity appeared to be accompanied by drivers' poor attitude towards the children...*

*'A major frustration for staff is that their commitment to customer care is not always shared by other agencies, for example, contracted bus companies. There was a sense of powerlessness about having any impact on these agencies but at the same time, having to deal with the 'fall-out' when issues were not dealt with in the way they would have wanted. This was a particular frustration and staff felt that a certain amount of "stick-waving" with contractors would help to improve the quality of the service.'*

*Source: Audit Commission based on one county council's best value review*

**79.** Leeds City Council's education transport team monitors phone complaints as part of its supervision of its contractors. Three justified complaints lead to a warning and three warnings may lead to the operator losing a route. This process has led to the removal of a route from one operator and allowed the authority to provide feedback to other contractors on their performance at year-end. Payments to contractors should take account of the performance. Merthyr Tydfil's contract monitoring system, for instance, is linked to its payments to operators.

**Co-operation with others**

**80.** Co-operation with others is another important way of improving efficiency. Options include co-operating on procurement with others in the council, co-operation with the local PTE (in the case of metropolitan districts) and working with outside bodies.

**81.** Letting and managing transport contracts involves specialist skills. Other parts of a council also require this expertise, for example, the environment department, when letting contracts for subsidised, socially necessary bus services and the social services department, when arranging transport for its clients. A number of councils have thus created council-wide transport co-ordinating units. Examples include Devon and Cheshire [CASE STUDY 5]. Worcestershire also established an integrated Passenger and Fleet Transport Unit in 2000. The Unit now manages education transport, social services transport and support for local bus services. Such co-ordination can offer economies of scale and technical transport skills, and can ensure that different parts of an authority do not compete against each other in the market, driving up prices. It also makes it easier to integrate free home-to-school transport with other bus services targeted on school travel and to make rational choices between purchasing dedicated services and laying on socially necessary services and then providing passes for them.

## CASE STUDY 5

**Integrating mainstream transport with other operations****Devon County Council**

The Council's Transport Co-ordination Service:

- co-ordinates, manages and administers home-to-school transport, for both 'mainstream' pupils and for pupils with special educational needs, on behalf of the authority's Department of Education, Arts and Libraries (including post-16 travel to education);
- provides similar services for social services transport;
- manages and arranges subsidised public transport (bus) services;
- provides support and advice for community transport schemes, working with operators, other public sector bodies and voluntary bodies;
- administers a concessionary fare scheme on behalf of district councils in Devon and for Torbay unitary authority;
- co-ordinates and manages the County Council's vehicle fleet;
- provides identity badges for drivers and passenger assistants; and
- deals with contract compliance including adherence to safety requirements and provides driver training.

The county transports about 20,000 pupils and students each day, about 800 of whom attend special schools. Some mainstream pupils travel on public bus (or rail) services, using passes purchased by the Co-ordination Service but most pupils use transport provided by contractors or on council-owned vehicles driven by contractors.

**Cheshire County Council**

Cheshire County Council's Coordination Service deals with:

- mainstream home-to-school transport;
- transport for children with special educational needs;
- transport for elderly people, people with disabilities and children in care;
- public transport – supported (that is, subsidised) public bus services; information on public transport; concessionary fares (on behalf of nine district and unitary councils); and rural bus grant;
- school crossing patrols; and
- fleet management.

It arranges transport daily for 24,000 clients. The Co-ordination Service works closely with other council departments and with other local authorities. It had a budget of £23million in 1999/2000, £19 million of which was covered by service level agreements with the council's Social Services Department, Education Department, other parts of the County Council and other local authorities.

*Source: Audit Commission*

**82.** In the metropolitan areas, using the PTE as an agent offers similar advantages. The PTE is well placed to maximise efficiency and exploit economies of scale to:

- negotiate for bus passes with operators (with whom it already negotiates on concessionary fares schemes);
- integrate home-to-school transport with the public bus network (as the PTE already arranges subsidised, socially necessary public services), and
- let contracts for dedicated school transport (as the PTE is already purchasing subsidised public services from operators).

**83.** Another option is co-operation with outside bodies. For instance, in Carmarthenshire, costs for post-16 provision are shared between the education department and local colleges [CASE STUDY 6]. In Derbyshire, community transport is also used for school travel – school journeys are integrated with social services trips to day centres, lunch clubs and hospital runs and community transport vehicles are used at night to transport students from rural areas to a local FE college.

### **Operational responses to cost pressures**

**84.** In addition to addressing strategic issues, authorities should look at their day-to-day operational arrangements to see if cost savings can be made and efficiency improved. These include:

- reviewing bus pass administration to reduce opportunities for abuse;
- improving route planning and scheduling to make better use of information technology;
- reviewing the use of taxis and hired-cars, where these are used; and
- examining use of resources to maximise efficiency.

### **Reviewing bus pass administration**

**85.** The provision of bus passes for free travel is common and is a straightforward way of ensuring that those who are eligible have access to the service. However, it can, on occasions, be abused. Some councils have developed systems to address this [CASE STUDY 7]. Ensuring that drivers check passes will also help to prevent fraud.

## CASE STUDY 6

**Partnership to provide post-16 transport: Carmarthenshire**

Historically, Carmarthenshire has provided transport for students aged over 16 attending local colleges. When college management was separated from LEAs in the 1990s, the Council wished to continue to provide support. At the same time, the local college needed to generate income by attracting students and felt good transport was a key factor, given its rural location. It was therefore prepared to pay for an enhanced service to allow individuals who did not qualify for assistance from the Council to travel to and from its site. The College and the Council agreed to co-operate to develop the existing network and to share costs. Where an individual does not qualify for assistance from the LEA, the Council has an agreement to share costs with Carmarthenshire College of Art and Technology (and also, for certain routes only, with Pembrokeshire College).

Under these arrangements:

- the responsibility for costs is split. There is a recharge for specific routes where the College wishes for enhanced provision, usually about 40 per cent of total costs;
- a management charge is levied by the Council for administering the service;
- applications for assistance are processed by the County Transport Department (CTD);
- the transport network is designed by the CTD which also undertakes procurement, contract monitoring and negotiation; and
- driver and student related behavioural problems are approached on a partnership basis.

The advantages include:

- the development of a single comprehensive transport network, allowing the Council to integrate its provision with both public transport and school routes where possible. The alternative would be two separate networks, one for individuals who qualified for assistance from the College and one for those receiving assistance from the Council. Often this would involve vehicles following each other on the same route and picking up different individuals at the same bus stop;
- costs are shared on the basis of responsibility, but allow some flexibility – for example, the College can pay for the vehicle to pick up in an area outside Carmarthenshire; and
- the College has changed its start and finish times to allow greater flexibility in ‘double tripping’ of vehicles that have undertaken school contracts prior to the College run.

The authority believes the system benefits both the Council and the College by reducing costs and enhancing educational choice for those wishing to access further education.

*Source: Audit Commission*

## CASE STUDY 7

**Combating duplication of passes: Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire**

**Derbyshire County Council** faced problems with abuse of its bus pass system. To combat this, it introduced new luminescent passes in 2001. These include a check number, the name and address of the child, and details of how long the pass is valid for. (Temporary passes are covered by the system and are valid for up to one week). The new ID includes a hologram, which the council feels has been particularly important in reducing the potential for fraud. Drivers are now reclaiming fewer passes from children for false use. The Council intends to improve the passes by including a photo of the child and using a new smartcard format further to combat fraud.

**Nottinghamshire County Council's** public transport team is introducing a county-wide smartcard scheme. The Council has developed its own system to produce bus passes using the Fast Frame photo ID system which works with three major suppliers' ticketing machines. Pilot operation of the system has significantly reduced overall fraud, which suppliers' national surveys estimate to be in the range of 6 to 25 per cent.

*Source: Audit Commission*

**Improving route planning and scheduling**

**86.** Some ad hoc, in-year changes to arrangements are unavoidable, for example, when existing passengers change address or school and when pupils enter or leave the LEA's area. At the start of the academic year, problems may need to be ironed out if there is overcrowding, particularly where local public transport is being used. However, continued long-term incremental change to a network of dedicated services may eventually create one that uses resources poorly. Regular re-examination of arrangements, to identify opportunities for rationalisation, is desirable. Reviews can be carried out annually in conjunction with planning for the new school year, when changes will be required in any event to accommodate children beginning their education and to respond to phase transfer.

**87.** Sensitivity to children's needs and consultation with parents and others are essential. Successful network redesign will often, therefore, involve identifying and refining a number of options. Changes that increase technical efficiency – for example, by maximising seat utilisation – may be unacceptable if they have an adverse impact on service quality, for example, by increasing journey times. Changes in pick-up and drop-off times can have a major impact on parents or carers; for example, a significantly later pick-up time might make it difficult for a parent to reach work on time.

**88.** Many authorities still schedule manually. However, used appropriately, computer-assisted scheduling systems – geographic information systems (GIS) and other IT tools – can help to improve design. For example, they can provide rapid on-screen display of where children live and the schools they go to, together with route options. This can replace the slow and cumbersome use of paper maps. Schedulers should not, therefore, view IT as a threat; it is an aid to, not a substitute for, them. Local knowledge – for example, of one-way systems or of traffic congestion blackspots in urban areas – is essential, as is the requirement to select approaches that are sensitive to the needs of children, parents and schools.

89. One authority visited by the Commission's project team had GIS but had not been using it to help with routing and scheduling. During the visit, the authority arranged for its schedulers to access the system for the first time. Within a short time, they were identifying inefficiencies and opportunities to rationalise and improve their existing arrangements. Worcestershire County Council is planning to make extensive use of IT and e-technology to help with its route planning [CASE STUDY 8].

#### CASE STUDY 8

##### **Clean sheet scheduling and e-technology route planning: Worcestershire**

Worcestershire County Council wants to undertake 'clean sheet' reviews of transport provision over the next five years. Officers plan a culture of continual review. Special educational needs and mainstream home-to-school runs are currently reviewed for September each year. The intention is eventually to review routes every half term. Officers feel this would be difficult to achieve manually.

Worcestershire has undertaken a detailed evaluation of alternative computer scheduling software currently available. The local ambulance service already uses computer assisted scheduling and planning. A successful funding bid for a computerised transport booking system compatible with both the County's own Passenger and Fleet Transport system and the Ambulance Trust system was submitted with the Local Transport Plan. The Ambulance Trust is undertaking a data capture exercise to investigate the potential for integrated scheduling. A sample of social services, special educational needs and non-emergency patient transport data is to be loaded to compare one week's manual routes with the County's preferred package.

The Worcestershire Transport and Health Partnership subsequently bid successfully for Invest-to-Save funding for ACTIVATE (Accessible & Co-ordinated Transport Initiatives Via Advanced Technology Enhancements). The central function of ACTIVATE is to implement a computer software system to ensure greater co-ordination in the use of the vehicles of a number of organisations, including the County Council, community transport (dial-a-ride and voluntary car schemes) ambulance service and taxis. As well as using all available vehicles in the most effective way possible, it is intended to integrate their use with local public bus services.

Bookings and referrals for transport are to be made to a central point. The computer system will allocate journeys in the most efficient way, with the most appropriate vehicle despatched. Where a connection with a public bus service is required, the system will provide details of the connection and will inform both transport providers of the requirement.

A phased approach to implementation is planned. Initially a pilot phase will see the system used to manage a number of flexibly routed and feeder services, together with trials involving the County Council's social services fleet, the Ambulance Service and the community transport sector, which is planned for completion in early 2002. Following testing, the system will be extended to special educational needs transport. The third stage will see the system extended to mainstream home-to-school transport. The co-ordinated travel management system will be backed by a state of the art smartcard ticketing and billing system and linked information system introduced in conjunction with First Midland Red.

*Source: Audit Commission*

### **Reviewing use of taxis and hired-cars**

90. Some children's journeys may be so unusual that they are difficult to accommodate economically on a bus route. In addition, some in-year changes in the numbers of children to be carried, and the places they travel between, can be difficult to accommodate within the existing bus network. Taxis and hired-cars thus can have an important role to play in meeting needs. They are usually, however, substantially more expensive than dedicated bus services. Annual network reviews should therefore seek to identify and remove unnecessary use of taxis or hired-cars.

91. Where taxis and hired-cars are used, it is important that an authority makes effective and accountable use of its purchasing power. Many councils are spending hundreds of thousands of pounds a year in their local taxi and hired-car market. Continued large-scale spot hire is unlikely to be cost effective. The co-ordination of purchasing across departments, and the use of formal contracts, is likely to help to obtain better prices, and, by offering guaranteed work, to help to ensure that service quality is achieved. Contracts can include call-off prices for services required at short notices, as well as prices for scheduled work. Ad hoc purchasing also increases the dangers of corruption; formal contracting procedures, in line with the authority's standing orders, provide defences against this.

### **Using resources effectively**

92. Authorities, especially in urban areas, can consider whether to link routes exclusively to schools, so that a particular route serves only one school, or to allow vehicles to deliver to and collect from two or more schools. In Suffolk, staggering school start times has improved vehicle utilisation and, in Carmarthenshire, work with schools has also led to benefits [CASE STUDY 9]. Such initiatives can, however, have disadvantages. For example, the vehicle will have to deliver some children earlier in the morning than would otherwise be necessary, to allow it to complete its last drop-off before the start of the school day. Similarly, some evening pick-ups may be later than might otherwise be the case. This can have staffing and safety implications at schools, if some vehicles arrive and load or unload at different times to others. Staggering school starts will also have major implications for schools, parents and children. Consultation is thus essential before making such changes.

## CASE STUDY 9

**Working with schools to use resources effectively: Suffolk and Carmarthenshire****Staggering session times: Suffolk**

Over several years, Suffolk County Council has developed arrangements with a number of schools to provide staggered session times. This has enabled contracted transport to be timetabled to carry out separate journeys for two schools. In one particular 'pyramid', if the schools had not co-operated, the authority estimates that about 15 additional large coaches, or equivalent vehicles, would be needed. In this 'pyramid', the second school, involved 1,000 pupils who are provided with transport. The afternoon pick-ups, which involve 22 vehicles, are thus scheduled in two stages. This prevents vehicle congestion in the confined area of the school where manoeuvring is already difficult. Staff at the school supervise the operation. While recognising that each individual school's circumstances – the nature of the site and the number of vehicles involved – will be different, and, in some cases, mean this is impractical, Suffolk believes some of its good practice could be followed elsewhere.

**Initiatives with schools: Carmarthenshire**

Tregib County Secondary School serves a large rural catchment area in the north of the county, drawing 942 pupils from some 12 feeder primary schools, the majority of whom receive assistance with transport. The transport network is seen as an integral part of school planning rather than an ancillary unconnected service and good relationships have developed between the transport department and school staff. Tregib and another secondary school and local primary school have altered their start and finish times so as to allow five of the contract vehicles serving other schools to serve Tregib as well. This double tripping allows the most economic use of the vehicles locally. If separate vehicles were provided, the Council estimates that transport would cost almost £100,000 more per annum. The intake of pupils is planned to maximise use of any spare capacity and spare seats are sold to pupils who are not entitled to free travel for which the school meets the costs from its delegated budget. Each year, an induction day is held for pupils who are to transfer to the school from primary schools. These pupils travel on the contract vehicles they will use the following year. School staff meet them to discuss transport arrangements and distribute travel allocations and act as a link with the Council for any concerns pupils express about the vehicles.

*Source: Audit Commission*

93. Linking runs and staggered school starts can be used when the LEA is using dedicated services provided by contractors or internal trading organisations. If the LEA is using in-house provision, it also has choices about how to use the vehicles and staff outside school-run hours. For example, vehicles may be used during the day to provide transport to leisure centres; the LEA can work with schools to see if vehicles can be contracted for this. Additionally, drivers can be employed for these hours on other services to avoid split shifts.

\* \* \*

94. This section looked at the tensions between controlling expenditure and improving service quality. Where cost savings are made, authorities may be able to invest in improving services. The questions in the following checklist will help councils to balance these tensions.

## SELF – ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

## 2 Balancing costs and service quality

### The context – increasing costs

Is the LEA monitoring its expenditure on mainstream school transport over time?

Is it monitoring trends in tender prices and in-house costs?

Has the LEA checked whether its spending on mainstream school transport is above or below the level that would be expected from its sparsity (as rated by the SSA sparsity index)?

### Strategic responses to cost pressures

#### Reviewing policies and provision

Has the LEA considered the impact on mainstream transport when reviewing:

- policies (for example, on denominational schools)?
- provision (for example, following the location/closure of schools and other facilities)?
- charging policies for vacant seats?

#### Monitoring and benchmarking costs

Do members responsible for home-to-school transport:

- review costs and other data, benchmarked against other authorities, at least annually?
- know how competitive costs are, compared to alternative suppliers?

Do officers managing home-to-school transport:

- know the costs and unit costs of each type of transport (for example, in-house buses; contractors' buses, passes for public services, etc)?
- know the split between different types of transport used (that is, the percentage of pupils carried by each type of transport)?

Does the LEA have a set of local cost-based performance indicators?

Has the authority compared the prices of individual bus tickets bought on a daily, weekly or monthly basis with what it spends bulk buying bus passes?

Has the authority compared the costs of dedicated contract vehicles with the cost of bus passes on public routes?

#### Improving procurement and provision

Has the service been exposed to fair competition?

Have market testing and contract letting been in accordance with the council's standing orders?

Has the authority consulted operators about its contracting procedures to identify any problems or areas for improvement?

If the authority has evidence of cartel activity, has this been reported to the Office of Fair Trading?

## S E L F – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

Do contracts, or service level agreements (SLAs) with an internal trading organisation, allow for changes to the network within the contract period?

Does the authority give operators the option of offering an enhanced level of service, as well as quoting for the core service level specified by the council, when they tender for work?

### **Monitoring contracts and service level agreements**

Do contract and service level agreement terms reflect the authority's agreed quality standards?

Is performance against standards monitored and reported to the education department and to members?

Are complaints monitored by the education department and reported upon to members?

Is the LEA satisfied with current contract monitoring arrangements?

Does the authority encourage or reward operators who exceed quality standards?

Do performance measurement and complaints monitoring inform continuous service improvement?

### **Co-operation with others**

Is the authority using, or has it examined, other ways of improving efficiency, such as:

- co-ordinated purchasing across departments?
- integrating arrangements with those for supporting local public transport?
- working with the local PTE (in metropolitan districts)?

Has the authority explored partnership working with other organisations to deliver a more economic service (for example, FE colleges)?

Have decisions taken account of the potential impact on children, parents, carers and schools?

Have decisions been made after consultation with children, parents, carers and schools and other stakeholders?

### **Operational responses to cost pressures**

#### **Reviewing bus pass administration**

Has the authority reviewed its processes for avoiding abuse of bus passes?

Do drivers regularly check school boarding cards or passes on routes on which they are used?

#### **Improving route planning and scheduling**

Does transport allocation (for example, placing a pupil on a particular vehicle/route) take account of both current and likely future vehicle occupancy?

Does the authority regularly (for example, annually) review the entire network to identify potential savings and efficiency improvements?

Do redesigns also take account of issues that concern parents, carers and schools?

Does the LEA consult with parents, carers and schools before making major changes?

Does the authority use computer-assisted scheduling?

## S E L F – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

If it does not, has it examined the option (for example, visited councils that use it; arranged for limited trial use)?

### **Reviewing use of taxis and hired-cars**

Do annual or other regular redesigns of the network seek to minimise the use of taxis and hired-cars (within the constraints imposed by the LEA's quality standards)?

Has the authority gone formally to contract for taxi and hired-car services?

Are taxi and hired-car firms used from the authority's approved list of contractors?

Do contracts cover other use of taxis and hired-cars as well as for mainstream home-to-school transport?

Do contracts cover prices for ad hoc, short-notice work (for example emergency cover) as well as regular, scheduled journeys?

Does the authority co-ordinate purchasing of taxis and hired-cars and Taxicard across departments?

Has contract letting been in accord with standing orders?

When undertaking work for the authority, are taxi and hired-car drivers asked to enter start and finish mileage on receipts as well as cost?

Has the authority considered whether volunteer drivers offer an alternative to use of taxis and hired-cars?

Has the authority considered whether mileage payments to parents or carers offer an alternative to use of taxis and hired-cars?

### **Using resources effectively**

Has the authority explored other options for reducing costs and improving efficiency, such as:

- staggering school start and finish times, to allow more intensive use of vehicles?

- use of satellite garages for large in-house fleets?

Has the LEA consulted schools, parents and carers before introducing any changes that will significantly affect them?

Has the LEA informed all stakeholders of a change in policy once this is agreed?

Is the authority using, or has it examined, other ways of improving efficiency, such as:

- making other use of in-house vehicles in the middle of the day?

- finding other work for in-house drivers during the day?

## 3. Managing the transport service

### Clarifying roles and responsibilities

95. The user lies at the heart of modern public services. There are four other key roles, in delivering an effective, well-managed and client-focused home-to-school transport service [EXHIBIT 8]:

- the policymakers;
- the budgetholder;
- the transport organiser; and
- the transport provider.

96. Responsibilities need to be clearly allocated and effective liaison established between those involved. Good communication and performance management are then essential.

### Policy making

97. Elected members, supported by senior officers, set the overall policy framework, and the budget, within which a local education authority provides free home-to-school transport. For example, policies on transport for denominational schools will impact on the demand for, and nature of, mainstream home-to-school transport. Members should be well informed about expenditure on transport and should ensure that it is monitored effectively. They should also set or agree standards for the transport service.

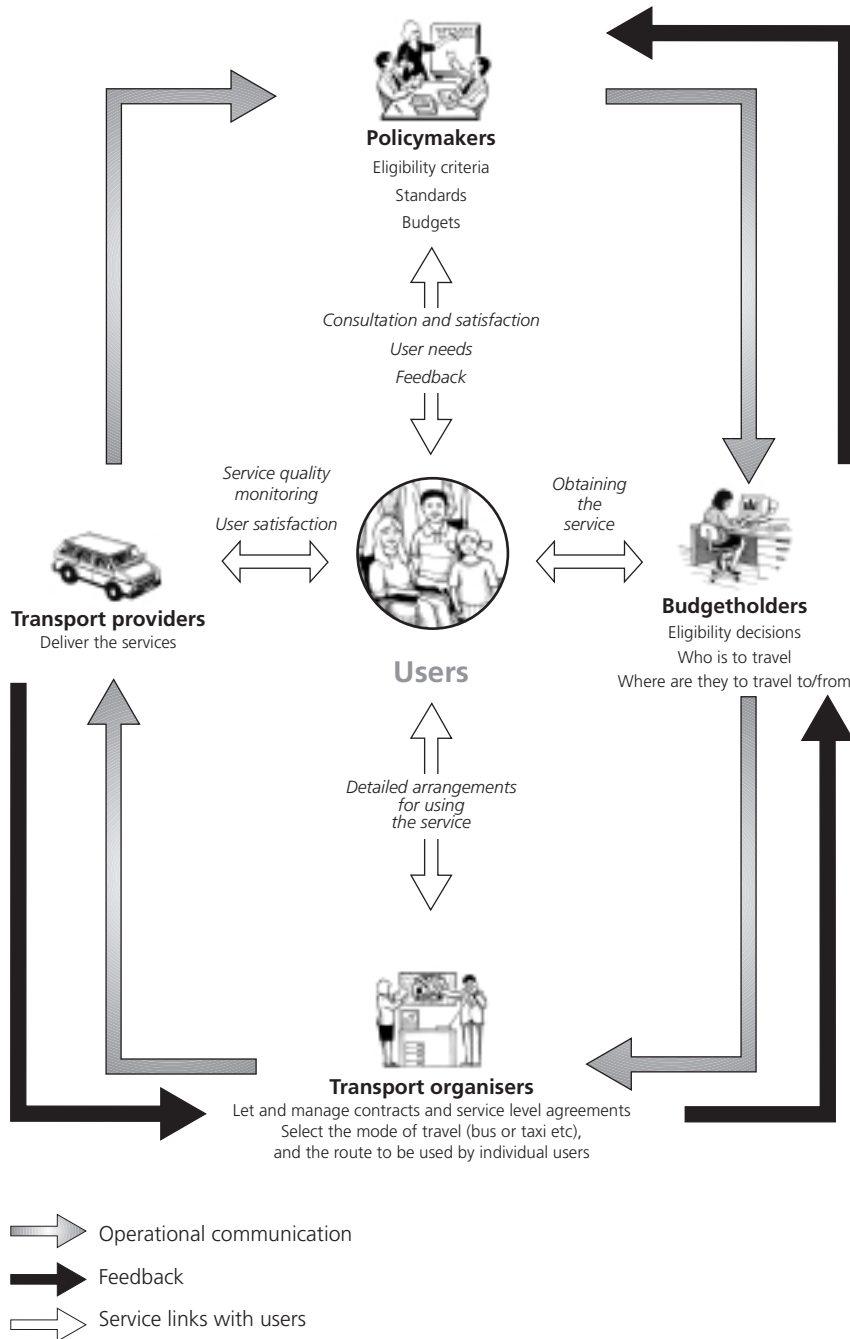
### Budget holding and setting

98. The budgetholder oversees expenditure, is responsible for achieving value for money and will need to report to members on expenditure. Budgeting processes should allow for an understanding of the distinct costs associated with transport to both mainstream and special schools to ensure a full understanding of where costs are increasing and where savings can be made. Clarity over who is monitoring the budget and how this is reported to senior managers is essential, particularly where budget holding and procurement are separate. Where a PTE is arranging mainstream transport under an agency agreement, the LEA should still monitor expenditure and receive sufficient information to be satisfied that it is receiving value for money from these arrangements.

EXHIBIT 8

**Arranging, managing and providing home-to-school transport**

There are four key roles; feedback between them is essential.



Source: Audit Commission

**99.** The budget will need to take account of statutory duties, discretionary policies and quality standards and be informed by stakeholder views. Budget control problems have been evident in many transport services. Overspend pressures are particularly likely if budgets are set by broad-brush, top-down adjustments to the last year's budget (for example, increases for a general inflation allowance). A preferable approach is to forecast demand, taking into account pupil numbers and demographics, phase changes and any policy changes that could affect the transport, such as school closures [EXHIBIT 9]. Additionally, the LEA should take into account possible cost savings (for example, from contract consolidation) or cost pressures, such as likely inflation in transport costs or tender prices. The impact of any improvements to service quality can also be examined. Even if such a bottom-up approach produces figures that are incompatible with overall budgetary constraints, potential problems will be identified earlier, allowing a better-managed response, for example, a considered review before year start of options for reducing costs.

## **Organising transport**

**100.** The organiser acts as the budgetholder's agent. He or she receives transport requirements – service standards and details of children and the addresses and schools between which they must travel. The organiser then plans, arranges and manages the necessary transport. These functions are usually carried out in-house, but may be outsourced. The organiser's role will need to be clearly set out, for example via a service level agreement. This should cover responsibilities for performance monitoring and the handling of complaints as well as financial monitoring.

**101.** In metropolitan areas, the PTE may be the organiser, acting as an agent of the LEA. Elsewhere, when mainstream home-to-school transport is arranged within the authority, it often makes sense for the same unit to procure transport for the LEA and to let contracts for subsidised, socially necessary public bus services. The in-house organiser may also arrange transport for children with special educational needs or social services clients and have other responsibilities.

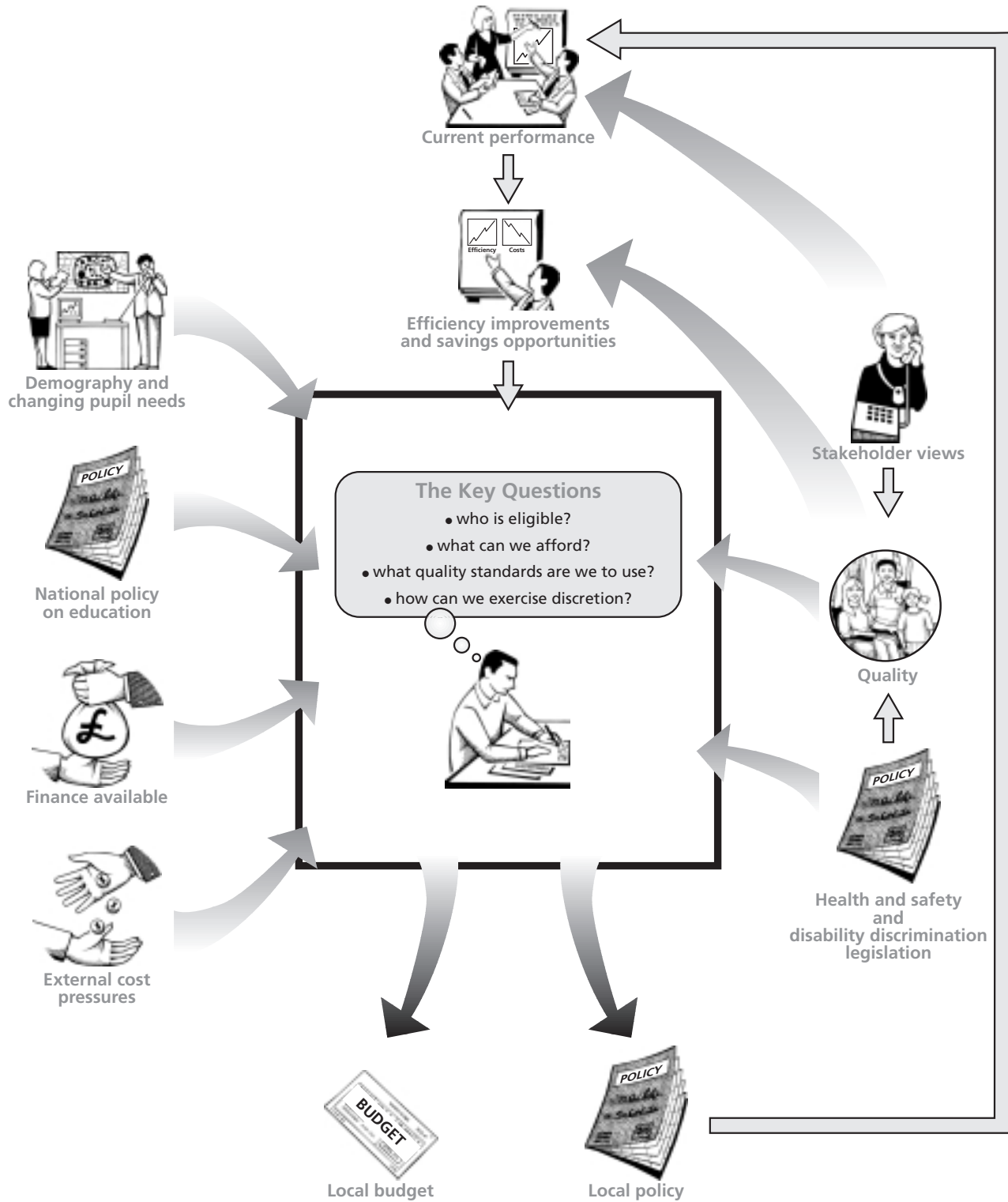
**102.** Wherever he or she is located, the organiser needs to ensure that there are appropriate arrangements in place to monitor safety standards and meet other contractual requirements. This will be more critical if the authority has an agreement with another agency to provide the service, and it is using a number of suppliers, as the LEA will be a further step removed from any operational problems.

**103.** LEAs will need to ensure clear lines of responsibility between themselves, the agent, the bus operators, drivers, children, parents and schools. With many links in the chain, communications can easily break down, resulting in inadequate arrangements to address poor performance. Effective exchanges of information are therefore essential. Shared IT systems, regular liaison meetings and expenditure monitoring can help ensure arrangements work well.

EXHIBIT 9

**Making the links between policies and budgets**

Authorities need to link policies and budgets more realistically.



Source: Audit Commission

## Providing transport

**104.** Normally, mainstream travel involves providing bus passes or travel by dedicated home-to-school buses and coaches, with occasional use of taxis or hired-cars; most providers will therefore be private contractors. Some local authorities have, however, decided to re-establish an in-house operation to provide an element of home-to-school transport (see previous section). Factors prompting this decision include views that in-house provision:

- is cheaper than using externally contracted bus services or other means of purchasing transport;
- will help to ensure a competitive market and restrain contract price growth; or
- will allow local authorities to ensure service quality standards are met.

Authorities need to consider a range of issues when considering whether to develop in-house provision [BOX K].

### BOX K

#### Practical considerations for developing an in-house service

Local authorities must satisfy themselves that providing school transport in-house achieves best value. In doing so they should ensure that each of the four Cs of best value are addressed. Within this context there are a number of financial and organisational factors which local authorities should take into account when considering whether to provide the service in-house. They include:

#### Organisational factors

1. **Dedicated transport organisation vs. integrated transport service:** Authorities will need to consider whether it will be necessary to set up a dedicated home-to-school transport organisation with its own manager, vehicle fleet, drivers and escorts, depot and maintenance facility and ancillary services. Alternatively, it may be possible to reduce overheads by integrating home-to-school transport with another in-house transport service such as social services. However, authorities will need to consider whether integration of these services might create unwelcome interdependencies and reduce flexibility.
2. **Vehicle fleet size:** The cost per vehicle will be high if overheads are spread over a small fleet of vehicles. For a stand-alone operation to be viable the Association of Transport Coordinating Officers suggests a minimum fleet size of around 6 vehicles.
3. **Single vs. multiple depot:** Where the service is based on a single depot, the authority would need to identify whether there are sufficient school routes in the vicinity which can be reasonably and economically operated from that depot. Alternatively, it may be possible to share existing depots (and overhead costs) around the authority's area. Storing vehicles overnight in secure satellite depots, close to pick-up and drop-off points or drivers' homes, may improve utilisation.

- 4. Maximising vehicle utilisation:** Authorities should consider what other school-related uses the in-house service can be put to, such as transporting children to swimming baths or playing fields, or on educational visits. A realistic assessment of potential net additional income may be critical to the viability of an in-house fleet. However, the times when these vehicles and drivers would be available to provide supplementary transport tend to be when external contract rates are at their lowest.

#### **Financial factors**

- 5. Service costing:** When evaluating the cost and justification of an in-house service, local authorities should ensure that all costs (both set-up and annual running costs), including relevant overheads, are fully identified. Authorities may want to consider guidance on 'whole-life' costing such as CIPFA's Competitiveness Joint Committee's *Code of Practice for Commissioning Local Authority Work and Services (Under Best Value)*.
- 6. Risk and exit cost assessment:** It is important that authorities undertake both a risk and exit cost assessment in the event that the external market for school contract changes and prices fall. Establishing an in-house fleet may involve substantial investment, whether vehicles are leased or purchased outright. For this reason, an initial risk analysis will help to ensure there are no unexpected financial consequences if circumstances change.
- 7. Trading unit operation:** To enhance service accountability, transparency and user responsiveness, and to encourage good financial management, it would be good practice for local authorities to establish, operate and manage the service as a trading unit. It would also be good practice for the service to have a strong service plan, a trading account and professional transport management. For the purposes of financial reporting, the definition and principles of total cost contained in CIPFA's *Best Value Accounting Code of Practice* should be applied.
- 8. Workforce management implications:** Authorities should be aware of the scale of the task and costs of establishing and maintaining a quality workforce of drivers (for example, the costs of driver recruitment, vetting, on-going management and training on frontline customer handling).
- 9. Assessing the benefit of an in-house operation:** It is extremely difficult to demonstrate the extent to which in-house transport is restraining market prices, since high general price levels may be due to particular local circumstances. As a general rule, the core justification of in-house provision should be based on the direct savings that can be demonstrated on a contract-by-contract basis. However, authorities may want to consider guidance on how to approach assessments of competitiveness, such as CIPFA's *Competitiveness and Competition: An Occasional Paper by the Competitiveness Joint Committee*.

*Source: Audit Commission drawing on Bernard Dobbs, A Review of In-house Transport Provision Using Large Vehicles, Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers, April 2000*

\* \* \*

**105.** Ensuring clarity over roles and responsibilities is fundamental to ensuring effective service delivery. The following questions should help managers to check that these are in place.

## SELF – ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

### 3 Managing the transport service

#### Clarifying roles and responsibilities

Do current arrangements clearly identify who:

- sets policies?
- sets the mainstream transport budget?
- consults with children, parents, carers and schools about service quality, standards and performance?
- sets safety and service quality standards?
- decides which school a child is to attend?
- holds the mainstream home-to-school transport budget?
- decides whether a child is eligible for free transport?
- decides whether a child is to be escorted?
- arranges transport, letting contracts or entering into SLAs with in-house providers?
- assigns children to particular vehicles/routes?
- provides transport?
- provides passenger assistants?
- liaises with contractors or ITOs?
- monitors safety and performance?

#### Policy making

At member level, does a single cabinet member/portfolio holder or committee have responsibility for all aspects of the service?

Have members set a separately identifiable budget for mainstream home-to-school transport?

Do members receive regular reports on expenditure and how it compares to budget?

Have members set or agreed quality standards?

Do members receive regular reports on performance against these standards?

Does performance measurement inform continuous service improvement?

#### Budget holding and setting

Does a single officer in the education department have overall managerial responsibility for the service, covering policy on eligibility, decisions in individual cases, expenditure and quality of service issues (even if day-to-day operational responsibilities are dealt with by other officers)?

Is the transport budget profiled to take account of seasonal variations in expenditure?

Is outturn regularly and frequently monitored against the budget profile by the budgetholder?

## SELF – ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

- Are possible overspends identified, and acted upon, during the year, as they develop?
- Are agency agreements (for example, with a PTE) analysed for value for money?
- Is the LEA satisfied that it is not cross-subsidising any other transport provision?
- Is the budget for mainstream transport generated using reliable assumptions about:
- the impact of any known changes to policy?
  - projected pupil numbers?
  - inclusion and the proportions of pupils with special educational needs likely to be educated at mainstream schools?
  - expected transfer from primary to secondary education and secondary education to sixth form or FE college?
  - transport requirements and arrangements, including any changes to service-quality requirements?
  - any changes to school organisation?
  - tender prices and other costs?

### Organising transport

- If another part of the authority (or an agent, such as a PTE, or a contractor) is organising transport on behalf of the education department, have the organiser's role and responsibilities been clearly and formally defined (for example, in a service level agreement or contract)?
- Does the agreement cover performance monitoring:
- what is to be monitored?
  - who will monitor?
  - who will receive monitoring information?
  - when information is to be provided?
- Are these arrangements working?
- Is the LEA manager responsible for mainstream home-to-school transport receiving regular and accurate performance monitoring information?
- Does the SLA (or contract) cover the timely provision of financial information?
- Does the budgetholder receive accurate and timely financial information?

### Providing transport

- Has the authority assessed the split in how it has organised its provision (for example, between purchase of passes, internal trading organisation, external contractors)?
- Are the provider's duties and responsibilities clearly and formally defined (for example, in a service level agreement or contract)?
- Does the contract or SLA cover performance monitoring:
- what is to be monitored?

## SELF – ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

- who will monitor? \_\_\_\_\_
  - who will receive monitoring information? \_\_\_\_\_
  - when they will receive it? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does the transport organiser know how the provider is performing against quality standards? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are current arrangements satisfactory? \_\_\_\_\_
- Has the authority referred to ATCO and CIPFA guidance if it is considering developing in-house provision? \_\_\_\_\_

## 4. Achieving best value

**106.** When reviewing mainstream home-to-school transport, authorities will need to decide their terms of reference, to apply the four Cs and to draw up an implementation plan. This section discusses these issues. For more general advice about how to carry out a successful best value review, authorities should refer to *Changing Gear: Best Value Annual Statement 2001*.<sup>I</sup>

**107.** Reviews may be followed by best value inspections by the Audit Commission's Best Value Inspection Service. Following inspection, Cheshire County Council was assessed as providing 'good' services that are 'likely to improve' [CASE STUDY 10]. Other best value inspection reports can be found on the Commission's best value inspection website.<sup>II</sup>

### CASE STUDY 10

#### Improving services: Cheshire

The best value inspection found that Cheshire County Council's Transport Co-ordination Service provides a **good (two star)** service based on the strengths of:

1. good practice and innovation;
2. the high regard of its customers;
3. its comparative performance; and
4. its cost-consciousness.

The service was found to be **likely to improve**. The judgement was based on:

1. a thorough Best Value Review, whose conclusions feed through to an ambitious improvement plan;
2. the service's track record of innovation and improvement; and
3. the Council's corporate frameworks for performance review.

Specific comments referring to mainstream school transport in the inspection report included:

*'Education and Social Services senior managers praised the Transport Co-ordination Service's (TCS)'s ability to use service level agreement funding effectively and to attract funding from elsewhere. TCS works very closely with these client departments at central and local levels. Working relationships are very good, and have been further enhanced by the appointment of dedicated transport managers for each of Education and Social Services, a development which is greatly appreciated by the two departments. In home-to-school transport, area co-ordinators sort out problems 'on the spot'. Although driver training extends only to the in-house fleet, TCS has issued a code of conduct for drivers of contracted vehicles...*

*'During the last two years TCS has re-negotiated rather than re-tendered contracts for Education transport, achieving a saving of around £82,000 to the Education Department (Cheshire County Council estimate).'*

*Source: Best Value Inspector Service, Cheshire County Council, Transport Co-ordination Service, Audit Commission Best Value Inspection Service, May 2001*

I Audit Commission, *Changing Gear: Best Value Annual Statement 2001*, Audit Commission, September 2001.

II [www.bestvalueinspections.gov.uk](http://www.bestvalueinspections.gov.uk).

## Setting terms of reference for best value reviews

**108.** The scope of a best value review is important in focusing the review team's time and efforts. In general, reviews should tackle the most important issues for a local community, with review teams being clear about the problems to which they are seeking to find solutions before they begin.

**109.** In examining mainstream home-to-school transport, authorities need to consider a number of alternative approaches. One option is specifically to review mainstream transport on its own. Another is to examine both mainstream and special educational needs transport. A third is to examine these as part of a wider review of transport arrangements. Authorities such as Cheshire have favoured this approach. There are strong arguments in its favour when the transport organiser is also organising transport for other council departments, and mainstream home-to-school transport is integrated with other support for public transport. And, where services are not currently integrated, the approach allows councils to consider the option.

**110.** Client departments should actively contribute and play a full part in best value reviews, to ensure that recommendations reflect their current and future policy framework and needs. For this reason, transport reviews – whether of mainstream home-to-school transport alone, of all education transport or of education and other transport services – may best be performed after or as part of reviews of the services the transport supports. This has the additional advantage of making it more likely that future plans for mainstream home-to-school transport take account of:

- demographic changes;
- expected changes in the numbers of pupils at different schools (for example, because of school closures);
- changes in the profile of their ages/needs;
- development of 'centres of excellence';
- changes in how children with special needs are to be educated including changes in, or an expansion of, inclusion policies; and
- decisions about the future location of schools and other facilities.

It will also make it easier to feed the transport impact, and likely transport costs, into the examination of options for change to educational arrangements, and offers the opportunity to consider broader agendas, including social inclusion, possible reductions in car use and safe routes to school.

**111.** Within the terms of reference, authorities should ensure they are addressing all key issues, for instance, covering eligibility to the service as well as quality standards. It may be sensible, where transport services are provided in-house, also to include vehicle maintenance and other depot functions in a review. Alternatively, depot functions can be reviewed after mainstream school transport (and other transport services) have been examined. Examining depot functions before reviewing transport services may be inadvisable; the safety, service quality and other requirements of transport services are key inputs to any review of depot functions.

## Applying the four Cs

112. Councils must apply the four Cs of best value to every review

- **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- **comparing** their performance with that of others (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- **consulting** with users and other key stakeholders (including parents and operators) as well as local taxpayers and the wider business community; and
- **embracing fair competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services.

113. Best value inspections suggest that, in general, the four Cs are treated reactively and seen as processes in their own right rather than being integral parts of the review process. The four Cs should be used as a framework for improving the service. The second part of the checklist following this section lists specific questions that authorities can use when applying the four Cs to review mainstream school transport.

### Challenging current approaches

114. Challenge involves a willingness to go back to first principles, taking a clean sheet of paper, and asking what a service is for and how it is best provided. Authorities need to examine whether they are taking a suitably challenging approach to their services and activities, and whether they have developed appropriate corporate approaches to ‘challenge’. An authority also needs to consider the underlying rationale for its mainstream school transport arrangements and the alternative ways in which services might be provided. Authorities should be willing to question existing commitments as part of their appraisal, including reviewing contract terms where this is appropriate. DETR Circular 10/99 includes a requirement that the review team includes an external member, to provide an external perspective to challenge (and sets out additional guidance for conducting reviews).<sup>1</sup>

### Comparisons with others

115. Possible comparisons include:

- policies on eligibility, including discretionary provision of free transport;
- demand, for example, the numbers and percentages of mainstream pupils who are receiving free transport;
- numbers travelling and the mix of provision (bus passes, in-house and contract vehicles, taxis and hired-cars);
- financial comparisons, for example, expenditure on mainstream transport; and this expenditure as a percentage of the total expenditure on home-to-school transport (including special needs transport), and as a percentage of total spend on education;
- efficiency comparisons, for example, comparisons of the unit cost (annual spend per pupil travelling or cost per day per pupil travelling); similar comparisons but by mode of travel (for example, privately contracted bus/coach and in-house/internal trading organisation bus/coach); and of measures of how well transport is used, such as the percentage of vehicle seats occupied;

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<sup>1</sup> *DETR Circular 10/99, Local Government Act 1999, Part 1 Best Value*, DETR, 14 December 1999. In Wales, authorities should consult *NAW Circular 14/2000 Local Government Act 1999, Guidance to Local Authorities in Wales*, National Assembly for Wales, 2000.

- service standards, including safety aspects and other quality measures, such as use of escorts and policies on vandalism and bullying; and
- the service quality achieved.

**116.** Consistency of definition is essential to allow meaningful comparisons. However, even collecting consistent data on the number of children who receive free transport can be complex – for instance, in deciding how to record children who have special educational needs and who attend mainstream schools. Overhead and management costs are also often calculated differently between authorities. Local benchmarking clubs, the ‘core cities’ group and groups within ATCO thus have an important role to play in best value.

**117.** Financial comparisons should be used with care. They are best made in tandem with comparisons of policies and service quality, both of which can influence cost. Results also need to be interpreted in the light of local circumstances, as costs are influenced by factors that are outside the control of those responsible for arranging, managing and providing the transport. These include:

- rurality and sparsity of population – relatively long journeys may drive up transport costs, but be unavoidable in some rural areas;
- local traffic congestion; and
- other local factors such as the state of the local transport market.

However, in exploring the reasons for variations, councils should challenge the explanations offered for differences, in line with best value, rather than to accept them at face value.

### **Consulting stakeholders**

**118.** The essence of best value is to improve services. Those best placed to provide information on quality of service are children, their parents or carers and other stakeholders, including schools, drivers, passenger assistants and contractors. Frontline staff will contribute an important perspective on how the transport service is perceived and valued and how it can be improved. Advice from external experts can add another important perspective. Authorities that have adopted the good practices described in earlier sections of this handbook will already have in place mechanisms that regularly provide them with this information.

### **Embracing fair competition**

**119.** Fair competition is central to demonstrating that a service is being delivered efficiently, within the constraints imposed by an authority’s quality standards. DETR Circular 10/99 suggests that the main options for service delivery include:

- cessation of the service in whole or in part;
- transfer of the service to another provider;
- joint commissioning or delivery of the service;
- developing in-house services;
- creation of a public-private partnership, such as a joint venture company;
- market testing of all or part of the service; and
- re-structuring of the in-house service or the re-negotiation of an existing contract.

In Wales, guidance is set out in NAW Circular 14/2000.

**120.** Councils that have adopted the good practices discussed in the earlier sections of this guide will have many of the necessary components for embracing fair competition in place already.

## Implementing review recommendations

**121.** A best value review should identify not just what needs to be done to improve the service but how the changes are to be made. Members should be committed to the proposals. The review report should therefore include an improvement plan that meets the familiar SMART criteria and be supported by a robust performance management framework. The Commission's best value inspectors have been critical of best value plans that fail to meet such criteria, judging it 'unlikely' that they will lead to service improvement.

<b>Specific</b>	The expected outcomes are clear as are responsibilities for achieving them
<b>Measurable</b>	Managers and staff know when they have achieved the outcomes
<b>Agreed</b>	Managers and staff know what is to be done by whom and by when and have signed up to the targets
<b>Realistic</b>	Those involved believe that the targets, though challenging, are achievable within the time limits and resources available
<b>Timebound</b>	There are agreed completion dates or points at which progress will be reviewed

\* \* \*

**122.** The first part of the following checklist will help authorities to ensure they are addressing the four Cs and to deliver an action plan for improvement. The second will help authorities to review their mainstream home-to-school transport services.

## SELF – ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

# 4

### Achieving best value

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#### 1. Current arrangements

##### Setting terms of reference for best value reviews

Has the authority considered a range of options when setting terms of reference, including:

- covering transport in a wider review of education?
- reviewing just mainstream school transport?
- covering mainstream home-to-school transport and special educational needs transport together?
- whether to include home-to-school transport in a wider transport review?

Has the authority considered the sequence in which it will carry out transport and other reviews (for example, so that transport reviews are informed by wider policy on transport and travel; so that transport reviews inform workshop or depot reviews)?

Has the authority considered how the review links to the Local Transport Plan and other strategic plans?

Is the authority following Government guidance set out in DETR Circular 10/99, or, in Wales, NAW Circular 14/2000, on best value reviews?

Is the review outcome, rather than process, driven (that is, concentrating on how to improve services rather than on process for its own sake)?

Are elected members fully involved with and committed to the review?

Does this include members who do not have cabinet portfolios as well as ones who do have such responsibilities?

Is the education department, as the department with the policy remit, fully involved with the review?

If the review also covers other types of transport, for example, social services transport, are the client departments for that transport also fully involved?

Is the transport organiser fully involved?

Is any in-house provider involved?

Are contractors involved?

Is the time-scale realistic?

##### Applying the four Cs

Is the review challenging current approaches, taking a 'blank sheet of paper' approach?

Is the review making appropriate comparisons with others?

Do these comparisons cover:

- demand?
- expenditure?

## S E L F – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

- efficiency measures?
- policy and service standards?
- service quality?
- how the service is managed, organised and provided?

Is the authority working with others to ensure that it uses consistent definitions when comparing cost and other data?

Are cost comparisons interpreted in the light of:

- comparisons of policy, service standards and service quality?
- local circumstances?

Has the authority consulted:

- children?
- parents and carers?
- schools?
- drivers and passenger assistants?
- contractors or ITOs?
- other stakeholders?

Has the authority overcome any linguistic or other communication barriers to effective consultation?

Has the authority overcome any linguistic or other communication barriers to providing effective feedback following consultation?

Can the authority demonstrate that its current arrangements for providing the service are competitive, within the constraints of its quality standards?

### **Implementing review recommendations**

Have members agreed the proposals?

Is there a SMART implementation plan, ie, one that is

- **S**pecific (The expected outcomes are clear as are responsibilities for achieving them)?
- **M**easurable (Managers and staff know when they have achieved the outcomes)?
- **A**greed (Managers and staff know what is to be done, by whom and by when and have signed up to the targets)?
- **R**ealistic (Those involved believe that the targets, though challenging, are achievable within the time limits and resources available)?
- **T**imebound (There are agreed completion dates or points at which progress will be reviewed)?

## S E L F – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

Has the plan costed:

• the resources required to manage implementation?

• the direct costs of implementation?

Have the necessary resources been provided?

Is achievement against targets being monitored as part of a robust performance management system?

### **2. Reviewing transport for children using mainstream home-to-school transport using the four Cs**

#### ***Challenging current approaches***

What are the LEA's statutory obligations?

What discretionary provision does the LEA offer?

Does the LEA need to change its policies on entitlement?

How is the LEA addressing equity of access?

How is it addressing language issues or cultural sensitivities?

Does the LEA need to make any changes to arrangements in order to respond to the educational and related transport needs of asylum seekers or refugees?

Is the number of users of mainstream transport likely to increase or decrease?

Is the pattern of demand likely to change (for example, in response to school closures or openings)?

What will be the impact of an increase in after-school activities?

Does the authority communicate effectively with children and parents and other stakeholders?

Can the authority:

• improve how it sets budgets?

• improve how it monitors and manages the service?

Has the authority used performance indicators to identify areas where mainstream transport is not performing well, and then carried out research to identify the reasons why?

What mix of provision – dedicated school buses, bus passes on public routes, etc – is the authority using?

What criteria have led to selecting this mix?

Are the criteria still appropriate?

Is the mix still appropriate?

Are drivers (in-house drivers, contractors' drivers, taxi and hired-car drivers, including stand-in and replacement drivers) sufficiently trained and vetted properly?

Are the authority's arrangements for use of passenger assistants good enough?

## SELF – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

Are passenger assistants – where used – sufficiently trained and vetted properly?

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Does the authority need to:

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- alter arrangements in response to changes in demand?

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- do more to ensure that vehicles and equipment are safe?

---

- do more to address vandalism, bullying and other behavioural problems?

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- improve quality of service, including reliability and comfort?

---

- do more to improve efficiency?

---

### **Comparisons with others**

---

How do other authorities approach mainstream home-to-school transport?

---

Is the review making appropriate comparisons with others?

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How do the authority's:

---

- policies;

---

- arrangements for deciding on, and reviewing, eligibility;

---

- service delivery (including the mix of methods – mini-bus; taxi, etc);

---

- training and vetting of passenger assistants and drivers;

---

- arrangements for ensuring passengers' safety;

---

- service standards, including standards for comfort and reliability;

---

- arrangements for consulting children/parents/schools and other stakeholders;

---

- budget setting;

---

- management and performance monitoring; and

---

- costs and performance;

---

compare with those of other authorities?

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How do quality standards, costs and performance compare with other transport operations – for example, special educational needs transport or support for local public transport?

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Does the authority need to do more work, with other authorities, to develop consistent and comparable measures of cost and performance?

---

How should the authority interpret existing comparative information in the light of local policies and circumstances?

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## SELF – ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

### Consulting stakeholders

What do:

- children;
- parents or carers;
- schools;
- drivers and passenger assistants;
- contractors or ITOs;
- other stakeholders;

think about:

- policies;
- service standards;
- quality of service, including safety, comfort and reliability;
- what is working well; and
- what needs to be improved?

How can the authority further involve children and their parents, school staff, contractors and other stakeholders in planning and implementing improvements to the transport service?

Has the LEA considered the needs of potential users as well as existing users of the service?

Has consultation revealed any linguistic, cultural or religious barriers to access to the service that need to be addressed?

How is the authority going to feedback its decisions following consultation to the people and organisations who were consulted?

How can the authority develop relationships with service stakeholders to promote an ongoing dialogue?

Has the authority considered introducing a system to monitor 'compliments and complaints' regularly?

### Embracing fair competition

Do comparisons of cost, service standards and performance suggest that these are in line with those of other authorities?

How much of the service has the authority exposed to competition and how recently?

Is there a potentially increased role for the voluntary sector?

Would the authority obtain a better service, or reduce costs with no loss of service quality, if more of the service were to be put to competition or to be provided by external suppliers?

Does the authority need to change its contract tender strategy to ensure a greater number of, or more competitive, bids? (Could changes be made to alter contract periods or move away from fixed terms? Or could work be packaged differently, either offering smaller packages – such as individual routes or small groups of routes, to encourage bids from smaller suppliers – or larger packages – to offer suppliers opportunities for economies of scale?)

## S E L F – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

Could the authority make savings, without unacceptable alterations to service quality and flexibility, if it operationally integrated mainstream and social services or special educational needs transport?

---

Is the authority fully exploiting its purchasing power in the taxi and hired-car market to obtain keen prices?

---

Which of the service delivery options, listed in DETR Circular 10/99 does the authority intend to follow?

---

Could the authority make savings, without compromising service quality, or improve quality without increasing cost, if it co-ordinated procurement of mainstream home-to-school and other transport services (for example, procurement of subsidised socially necessary public bus services)?

---

How much, in total, is council-funded work worth to the local taxi/private hire market?

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Does the authority use taxis and hired-cars for other work (for example, travel by officers and members; to carry education service clients)?

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Is the authority also funding a Taxicard scheme?

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## Conclusion

**123.** The national report, *Going Places*, describes what central government can do to improve the framework within which local authorities work. This includes reviewing the existing legislation, which many transport professionals see as out-of-date and a hindrance to meeting the Government's transport agenda. *Going Places* also summarises the actions that councils can take to improve all their home-to-school transport, and their social services transport, within the current framework, as shown in the table below.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES SHOULD:	THIS WILL:
<b>Improve user-focus</b>	
Consult with service users and their parents/carers and with other stakeholders such as schools and social services centres	Identify whether current arrangements meet user needs and, if they do not, what improvements are needed to create quality, user-focused arrangements
Ensure that services meet health and safety and other legal requirements and also reflect the results of consultation. (Councils should work to national quality standards once these have been set by central Government, enhancing these locally if they choose, so that they reflect local needs and priorities)	Help to ensure that services are safe and meet users' needs and expectations
Work with schools and transport providers to address vandalism and bullying on mainstream home-to-school transport, considering whether it is necessary in appropriate cases to place passenger assistants on vehicles	Reduce vandalism and bullying, making bus-based travel to school more attractive to pupils and parents. This will reduce operators' losses to vandalism, and so help to control contract prices. Improved pupil behaviour will also make driving school buses less stressful, helping to address driver shortages and associated wage pressures
Ensure that drivers and passenger assistants are properly trained and screened	Help to meet health and safety obligations and improve customer care
<b>Take account of the wider policy context</b>	
Examine arrangements in the context of wider policies on access to, and the location of, education facilities and social services, when carrying out best value reviews	Ensure that best value reviews are not focused narrowly on technical aspects of transport but that they also address fundamental questions about why transport services are needed and about who is to use them
Consider policies and arrangements in the context of social inclusion, wider environmental policies, broader transport policies and the health and fitness agenda	Integrate approaches with broader transport and travel policies
<b>Work with others</b>	
Consider whether there is scope to improve access, efficiency, effectiveness and customer focus, for example by working in partnership. Options include greater co-operation across departments within the authority, working with PTEs (in the metropolitan areas), with community transport bodies from the voluntary sector and with health bodies	Identify opportunities to provide customers with integrated, user-focused services or to use resources more efficiently
<b>Review funding</b>	
Set realistic budgets that reflect demand and the authority's service standards, and monitor expenditure regularly and effectively	Take account of service standards when setting budgets and reduce the likelihood of budget overspends
<b>Improve efficiency</b>	
Review the use of IT, route planning and scheduling and the use of taxis and hired-cars	Release resources to fund improvements in quality
<b>Improve how the services are managed</b>	
Clearly delineate transport roles, especially when transport is provided in-house	Help ensure that client departments are setting and monitoring performance against quality standards. It will also help with budget setting and monitoring
<b>Monitor performance more effectively</b>	
Use contracts or service level agreements that encourage service providers to meet and exceed safety and quality standards	Help to ensure that safety and quality standards are met
<b>Plan for change</b>	
Review how transport requirements and funding need to change in response to the challenges ahead	Ensure that transport arrangements respond to increased joint commissioning of health and social care, to other changes in social care (such as individually designed care packages) and to changes in education (such as greater specialisation by schools and a greater emphasis on after-school activities)

**124.** Local authorities have already done much to provide good school transport. There are opportunities to improve this still further. Users should be at the centre of the service and their views taken into account in framing and assessing policies and performance. It is important that those dealing with policy on mainstream transport in education departments work with their authorities' transport managers, that they provide proactive strategic direction to the service and that they seek, receive and, where necessary, act upon, information about how the service is performing. This should include realistic budget setting and monitoring, and paying full attention to safety and to service quality – for example, reliability, journey times and comfort – as well as costs and efficiency, to ensure delivery of an holistic, user-focused service.

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The Audit Commission has produced a number of reports covering issues related to police services and general management. The following may be of interest to readers of this report:

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*National Report, 2001, ISBN 1862402787, £20, stock code*  
*LNR1532*

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**How Councils Charge for Home Care**

Charging with Care explores the variations in home-care charging. It looks at why these variations occur and at the consequences of different charging arrangements for users. This report also examines what councils can do to improve the way they manage their charges and shows how best value reviews provide an opportunity to improve their design and management. Charging with Care will help to inform wider debate surrounding the funding of long-term care.

*National Report, 2001, ISBN 1862402221, £20, stock code*  
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*National Report, 2001, ISBN 1862402574, £20, stock code*  
*LNR1445*

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Mainstream home-to-school transport enables over half a million pupils each year to attend school and costs local authorities over £300 million a year. While often seen as diverting resources from front line teaching, transport is essential to allow children and young people to access education, and thus plays an important role in promoting social inclusion. It also contributes to the environmental agenda, by reducing the use of cars. This is particularly important as many cars in the morning rush hour are making the school run.

Currently, while many children and parents are happy with their service, others have concerns. These include poor quality vehicles, rude drivers, poor driving and vandalism and bullying on school buses. Some parents would prefer better supervision on buses to reduce discipline problems and improve safety. Service standards also vary, while drivers are not always fully trained or screened by the police when they should be.

There are opportunities to integrate home-to-school transport more effectively with wider transport policies, and for greater co-ordination of arrangements between different departments within councils and between councils and other transport providers. Arrangements also need to respond to the challenges of the wider policy agenda, including the greater inclusion of children with special educational needs at mainstream schools; increased specialisation by schools; and a growing emphasis on after-school activities.

This handbook offers practical advice to help managers responsible for policy on and eligibility for home-to-school transport and for those arranging and providing the service. It includes a series of self-assessment checklists and examples of good practice for them to review their provision.

Three other handbooks in this series offer guidance on other transport services – travel to social services facilities, special schools and health care. The overall issues raised are also addressed in a national report, *Going Places: Taking People to and from Education, Social Services and Healthcare*. This suggests how central Government can help local authorities by reviewing the framework within which they work.

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