



Fife Council's Response to Petition PE1098

I refer to the above petition and offer the following response on behalf of Fife Council.

Prior liaison with the petitioner and others on the issue.

Since late 2006 Fife Council has responded to parents who raised concerns that the school transport provision between Kingseat and Townhill PS is provided by a local school service (i.e. available to fare payers) and is not normally operated by a seat belted vehicle. The enquiries were initially parental phone calls to the school which were re-directed to Transportation Services. The Head Teacher advised Education Services that this issue was to be raised at the Townhill School Board meeting in January 2007. The petitioner, Ms Merrifield, initially made enquiries on a number of occasions by phone and received a comprehensive explanation from Transportation staff of how school transport is organised. This included an explanation of policy and various initiatives promoted by Fife Council to encourage safer travel to school. Ms Merrifield then contacted H Eadie MSP who corresponded on her behalf with Fife Council seeking clarification on some of these issues. A response was sent in April 2007. The Community Council also requested and was provided with information on this particular issue in March 2007. Local Councillor, William Clarke, requested and was provided with information on this service in June 2007. The Head Teacher also requested information through Education Service in June 2007. Councillors Clarke and Rowley convened a meeting with Education & Transportation Services staff in June 2007 at which a full explanation of how school transport was organised and funded was given. There was a specific reference to Townhill PS transport. Since I have received requests for further information from Councillors Chapman and Sullivan which was duly provided.

In summer 2006, Ms Merrifield's child qualified for primary school transport, she was issued with a travel information package which included the Councils "Getting to School" publication which provides reasonably comprehensive information for parents and pupils on school transport.

Council Policy on Seat Belts

The law allows the use of buses without seatbelts and requires that coaches and minibuses have seatbelts fitted. In order that there is a fully integrated passenger transport service and as one would expect, the Council procures all its transport requiring operators to comply with the law.

The following extract from the Conditions of Contract for Conveyance of Pupils 2007/08 dated 29 June 2007 illustrates the Councils policy on seat belts.

Contractors shall comply with all relevant current legislation in respect of seat belt provision and the wearing of seat belts, including the current seat belt requirement for children as contained in The Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) (Amendment)(No. 2) Regulations 1996, Statutory Instrument No. 163 and The Motor Vehicle (Wearing of Seatbelts) (Amendment) Regulations 2006. In addition:

- *on all vehicle(s) of up to 16 passenger seats the Contractor shall be responsible for ensuring passengers are wearing seat belts.*
- *all vehicles, regardless of size, used to provide Nursery transport must be fitted with appropriate seat belts for all passengers regardless of age and the Contractor shall be responsible for ensuring the passengers are wearing seat belts.*

In having this condition the Council makes clear that only vehicles that comply with the law in all aspects of fitness for purpose including seat belts where required on coaches and minibuses will be allowed on school transport.

For the purpose of the regulation a “*minibus*” is defined as a motor vehicle which is constructed or adapted to carry more than 8 but not more than 16 seated passengers in addition to the driver.

A “*coach*” is defined as a “large bus with a maximum gross weight of more than 7.5 tonnes and with a maximum speed exceeding 60 mph”. The main legal difference between a *bus* and a *coach* is that a bus is governed to a maximum speed of 60 mph.

75% of “large buses” used to provide school local bus services in Fife fall into the *bus* category.

Seat Belts - discussion

Road Safety Scotland and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) have commented “that buses still tend to be among the safest modes of transporting children to school”.

There are various issues to be considered before deciding that seat belts should be fitted to vehicles and used to transport school children.

Seat belts on any vehicle are a difficult issue. Different sizes and fitting of belts are required to provide an effective restraint to greatly varying sizes of pupils on a typical bus. There are also issues of maintenance. If a belt is damaged by vandalism the bus has then to be removed from service until an effective repair is carried out. This will increase vehicle availability problems to operators. The majority of “large buses” used for school transport are additionally used on the public transport network. This generally entails short journeys, boarding and alighting frequently and standing passengers. Seat belts in such a situation can become a trip hazard.

The seat belt issue has been debated at national level and specialists in the field have suggested that there is no proven safety case for the provision of seat belts on buses specifically for use by school children.

Fife, in common with many other Local Authorities, transport many children to school by purchasing season tickets for children’s use on normal public transport local service buses. As described above, these vehicles do not have to have seatbelts. In Fife all school bus transport are registered local services and operators can supply any vehicle. It is important to note that the same level of provision is being delivered whether the journey is a journey to school or a journey on a public service vehicle.

The previous Administration in Fife sought tenders for the provision of seat belts for school children and the result was reported to the Policy and Resources Committee on the 24 June 2004 in Appendix 1 Section 2 (Minute No. 130). This committee decided not to proceed with seat belt provision for school pupils mainly due to cost constraints.

If in the future national legislation mandates the use of seatbelts for school local service buses then the Council would clearly have to meet such requirement at whatever cost is determined through a competitive tender process.

Yellow Buses

The Council has examined providing school transport with dedicated “yellow buses”. Evidence elsewhere suggests that they are liked by young children although there appears to be a bit of a stigma associated with them from older pupils. However, unit costs are substantially higher than we currently achieve. Typical Costs (2004 prices) were £28k per conventional bus per annum as currently specified compared with £55k for a yellow school bus. These figures are extracted from a Fife Council internal report “Schools Local Bus Services Bench Marking Exercise (Nov 04) Report No. STBE01”.

This significant cost difference stems from the fact that yellow buses are not suited to work other than transporting children and are therefore used for a very limited part of the day and over a limited number of days in the year. This has to be compared with the use of vehicles suited to local bus service work where vehicles are frequently on the road in excess of 16 hours per day. This increased utilisation goes a long way to explaining the cost differential above.

Yellow buses are not suited to normal public transport work as they are configured as 3+2 seating with narrow seats and a narrow aisle making accessibility an issue compared with the latest conventional low floored local service buses.

Yellow buses, even with 3+2 seating, generally have a lower seating capacity than double deckers. In Fife we currently procure 247 "large bus" school journeys using 192 contracted vehicles. If yellow buses were contracted to provide school transport there would be additional numbers of vehicles required. Costs vary mainly with number of vehicles rather than number of seats per vehicle.

A further constraint would be available parking space at schools. Even using multiple double deckers, existing bus parks and on street parking around some schools are at full capacity. In some instances it is difficult to see how additional capacity could be provided. Where it could be provided this would be a further additional cost.

Escorts on Mainstream School Transport

Escorts on school buses have been considered many times with a view to improving behaviour standards on school transport. They have been ruled out on the grounds of cost and extremely limited effectiveness. It is very difficult to recruit suitable disclosed staff for what is effectively an observational role. I would suggest that Fife Council's continued increasing investment in CCTV on school transport is a better use of resources. If a parent is concerned regarding safety/ behavioural issues on a school local service bus the parent can travel with the child on the service as a fare-payer.