



Department for
Transport

From the Parliamentary
Under Secretary of State

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Dear Mr. McAveety,

Thank you for your letter of 16 December 2009 (which arrived in this Department on 19 January) seeking my response to the points raised in further discussion of Petition PE 1098 about three-point seatbelts on school buses and Petition PE1223 about safety signage and lighting on school buses, and about making overtaking a stationary school bus a criminal offence.

Department for Transport (DfT) have considered very carefully the practicalities of running a trial of the all-stop rule in a limited area. Aside from the issue of creating a new endorseable motoring offence, with the necessary consultation and legislative changes it could entail, such a trial would depend on very wide and enduring publicity reaching not only locals but visitors from other parts of the UK and abroad. Ignorance on the part of drivers, if children were to begin to rely on vehicles stopping for them when they got off their school bus and cross the road immediately instead of waiting for a safe gap, could lead to further tragedies. For these reasons, and as already explained the risk that children would forget that they were not protected by an all stop rule on other journeys, coupled with the fact that only a minority of children would be affected by such a provision, DfT are not minded to take the powers to carry out such a trial.

The Committee asked for clarification on European law and how it could affect the compulsory provision of three-point seat belts on school buses. Buses and coaches are increasingly manufactured to comply with harmonised European standards. These place obligations upon Member States that make it difficult to regulate for anything further on a national basis, for example three point seat belts as any such provisions may be construed as a barrier to free trade.

Finally, the Committee has asked about any other action that DfT has taken or is looking to take, to make provision for every school bus to be installed with three-point seat belts for every child, and to require the installation of further safety signage and lights on school buses for use when school children are on board.

Generally speaking, a three-point seat belt is likely to offer better protection for a vehicle occupant when compared with a two-point lap belt. For this reason three-point seat belts have been a requirement for all forward facing seats in minibuses weighing up to 3500Kg since 2001.

However, for larger and therefore heavier minibuses, buses and coaches required to be fitted with seat belts, a lap belt is offered as a suitable alternative to a three-point belt. This is because the vehicle speeds will generally be slower and the deceleration loads imposed during a collision will be considerably reduced due to the vehicle's increased mass.

As well as the regulations already in place governing the installation of seat belts in minibuses and coaches, buses carrying children to or from school at the start and end of the school day must be fitted with reflective yellow signs indicating children are on board. Buses carrying school children may also display their hazard warning lights, including an optional extra pair on the rear, when children are boarding and alighting from a bus. Secondary signs are also permitted which indicate children are on board or in the vicinity.

Ultimately, the responsibility for choosing the appropriate vehicle for a particular journey rests with those making the arrangements. Independently of any legislation governing the construction of vehicles, schools and local authorities can specify within their contracts with school transport providers that they will only accept vehicles equipped with specific features, such as three point seat belts and additional signage.

Incidents involving buses and coaches are rare. Travel by bus and coach is one of the safest modes of transport in Great Britain, with a rate of killed and seriously injured passengers per mile travelled being approximately one third that of passenger cars. Most children who travel to school by bus do so on public service buses which would be unaffected by any changes that might be introduced for dedicated school transport.

To summarise, the evidence does not indicate that there is a significant road safety benefit to be gained through the introduction of different construction standards for buses used for dedicated home-to-school transport.



PAUL CLARK