

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The deliberations of the Committee lead to the conclusion that the present policy is robust, and that changes to improve service delivery would have significant resource implications. This report does not therefore recommend any major changes to policy or practice, but both need to be carefully monitored and regularly reviewed in the light of national and local circumstances that are constantly changing. The report highlights a number of areas that call for further consideration as the national picture becomes clearer.

OVERARCHING POLICY

The Committee recommend the adoption of the following overarching policy statement:

The education transport policy of the Nottinghamshire County Council will operate within the aims and objectives of the Council's Strategic Plan and ensure that the Council fulfils its statutory obligations. Within that context the aim of the policy is to provide a high quality transport service as efficiently and economically as possible designed to ensure that pupils get to school within a reasonable time and travel in a safe and stress free environment. The policy will have regard to the school admission arrangements operating within the County.

PUBLICATION AND REVIEW

It is recommended that a policy statement for the provision of transport for pupils of compulsory school age be published annually by the 31st May, and that the policy be reviewed every 4 years, more frequently in the event of significant changes in national or local circumstances.

CHAPTER THREE

Transport and parental preference

1. Those responsible for school transport need to work closely with those responsible for admissions including the new statutory Admission Forum.
2. For the purpose of verifying claims for assistance with transport to denominational schools it should be possible under the proposed co-ordinated admission arrangements for the LEA to identify those pupils in respect of whom an offer has been made on denominational grounds, so

- that this can be readily checked by TGP when requests for assistance are received.
3. Nottinghamshire's policy on eligibility for free transport to both denominational and non-denominational schools is broadly in line with that of most other LEAs. This conclusion is borne out by the findings of the Audit Commission and EMIE. Most shire LEAs spend between £1 and £5 per day per pupil carried. All are confronted by escalating costs. Nottinghamshire is still very cost effective compared with other LEAs. Given this and the minimum requirements of the 1996 Act there are no obviously overwhelming arguments for amending these aspects of the transport policy at this time.
 4. To vary the policy by providing free transport to any preference school that is outside the walking distance would go beyond what is legally required and would have significant financial and logistical implications even with journey length/time restrictions in place. Whilst the provision of free or assisted transport to denominational schools is at the discretion of the LEA there is the requirement to have regard to parental wishes in such cases, and the policy presently adopted by the LEA in this regard is consistent with the policy adopted for provision of free or assisted transport to non-denominational schools. Consistency of policy is important in order to avoid charges of discrimination. At present one LEA is being challenged on its policy. A number of others have decided to modify their policies by significantly reducing entitlement or eligibility in relation to denominational places. The policy needs to be kept under review, and the national picture needs to be monitored particularly in the light of burgeoning costs.
 5. Whilst recognising this increasing cost the government is looking to LEAs to examine ways in which support can be given to pupils attending denominational schools. Now is not really the time to be reducing the present level of support, and at the moment the issue that should be rigorously addressed is the proper application of the current policy to ensure that it is not abused and that only those pupils attending their nearest denominational catchment school on denominational grounds are eligible for support, with the exception of those children admitted on non-denominational grounds who live beyond the walking distance and for whom the school is their catchment school. (This is most likely to occur in relation to Church of England VA secondary schools).
 6. The Committee therefore recommends that the current policy with regard to walking distances and eligibility for free transport be continued.

Bluecoat and Emmanuel Schools

7. In the short term the LEA should make specific arrangements for these 2 schools by limiting eligibility for free transport to whichever of the 2 schools is closer to the pupil's home address, and that school should be treated as the catchment school for transport purposes.
8. To seek a longer term solution the LEA ought to raise the issue with the 2 governing bodies with a view to it being referred to the Admission Forum for consideration.

Withdrawal of Service

9. The Committee recommends that it be made explicit in the school transport policy that the LEA reserves the right to withdraw a service that is uneconomic, and therefore withdraw the pass, provided that where there is an entitlement to free travel alternative provision is made.

CHAPTER FOUR

Concessionary Travel

1. To safeguard the needs of pupils entitled to free travel and to avoid expense it should be made explicit that the option to continue to purchase a discounted season pass will be withdrawn if the seat occupied by a child should become needed for a pupil entitled to free travel.
2. Rather than extend concessionary travel an option that may be more welcome to schools could be supporting school travel plans in the provision of school transport.
3. The Committee recommends that the current scheme for concessionary education transport be continued, subject to this position being reviewed if necessary in the light of the new framework for support to public transport.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nottingham City Pupils

1. These pupils remain the responsibility of the City LEA and the County LEA is not responsible for their transport.
2. Arguably the school at which the pupil is registered could assist in the provision of transport for pupils if that benefits the school.

CHAPTER SIX

Behaviour on School Buses

1. The LEA should consider ways of establishing regular Consultation with pupils perhaps by a mixture of short questionnaires and in the case of those routes experiencing particular difficulty by talking to pupils. Schools that do not already have them should be encouraged to establish school councils, representative of all year groups, and to have school transport as a regular agenda item. Consideration should be given to the establishment of a stakeholder group including representatives of parents, pupils, head teachers, teachers, operators and the LEA.
2. The LEA should consider establishing a similar Protocol to that operated by Devon LEA that links into both the procedure for withdrawing passes and the school's discipline code. The LEA should examine the extent to which school discipline codes support the mainstream school transport policy in this regard.
3. The LEA's present policy operates on the basis that the provision of escorts would only be considered where circumstances demanded it. There is no compelling reason to change present practice. The suggestion has been made by the Principal of Dukeries Community College, which has experienced this problem, that consideration be given to inviting school staff who travel by the same route to travel on the school bus in a supervisory capacity in return for a free pass. The suggestion has much to commend it. The staff will already be authority figures for the pupils travelling on the bus, they will already have been subject to CRB checks, and will be in a position to provide valuable evidence of misbehaviour in the context of possible school discipline. The prime purpose will be to inhibit bad behaviour. If this can be negotiated with teachers it may be well worthwhile pursuing on a pilot basis. Consideration could also be given, as already happens in some cases, to asking 6th form pupils to report any Incidents of bad behaviour they witness whilst travelling on school transport.
4. To emphasise the part to be played by school disciplinary codes those schools that have not already done so should be recommended to include a requirement for acceptable standards of conduct while travelling on school buses and other means of transport in home/school agreements.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Standards

Safety Issues – loading and unloading

1. The findings of the safety audit need to be evaluated in greater depth with a view to identifying and prioritising the measures that should be taken to address the safety problems identified. Clearly many of the problems can be addressed without incurring significant expenditure of either revenue or capital, and these should be given top priority. At the same time consideration needs to be given to the feasibility and cost of implementing long term solutions, recognising that special schools can face additional problems arising from pupil mobility and the nature of the transport that has to be provided.
2. Consideration should be given to mounting a major publicity campaign jointly organised by the LEA and the police aimed at preventing the parking of cars in places that obstruct or interfere with the safe loading of school buses. Where necessary consideration should be given to the introduction of waiting restrictions to reinforce such a campaign.
3. The Committee recommends that a manual of good practice is produced and circulated to all schools.

Vehicle Type

4. There are no recorded injury accidents in the county relating to school transport where the use of a double-decker was the cause.
5. The perception that behaviour is more of a problem on double-deckers is not borne out by the available evidence.
6. In conclusion there are no overwhelming reasons either on grounds of safety or pupil behaviour for changing the practice of using double-decker vehicles where appropriate for home to school transport. At present there are compelling reasons related to market forces, cost and logistics for not departing from current practice.

Three to a Seat

7. The evidence indicates that the limited application of the three to a seat rule is not the root cause of complaints of overcrowding.
8. There is no compelling evidence that the present policy needs to be amended on grounds of safety.

Seatbelts

9. A policy of using only single-decker vehicles fitted with seatbelts is estimated to cost an additional £2m to £2.5m per annum including the associated costs referred to in Chapter Seven. Whilst value for money does not mean having to accept the lowest tender the benefits to be derived from such a change of policy, even if feasible, would need to be great to justify such significant additional expenditure. At the moment that does not appear to be the case.

The longer term

10. Ideally when, resources permit, the ultimate aim should be to phase out double-deckers for school transport and replace them with single-decker vehicles fitted with seat-belts. This would increase the number of vehicles and vehicle movements, but should be more than counter-balanced by increased pupil numbers travelling on school transport with a significant reduction in the use of cars at peak times.

Journey Times

11. Waiting times are not a significant problem and a maximum journey time of 45 minutes is reasonable. Journeys to the catchment school will rarely exceed this time. Parents expressing a preference for a school other than the catchment school whether for denominational or other reasons must expect that it may involve their child in longer journey times

CHAPTER NINE

Special Educational Needs Transport

1. It is clear that an examination of SEN transport requirements, whilst necessary, will be an extensive exercise that cannot be tackled within the present remit and timescale. It is recommended that a decision on whether or not to conduct a separate review of these needs should be deferred at least until the expected government report(s) has been published, as this may give clearer guidance on current government thinking.

CHAPTER TEN

Travelling to School: an action plan.

Curriculum needs of 14-19 age group

1. This is an area that could be examined outside of any government initiative with a view to the LEA publishing its own guidance and best practice. PTG points out that in many ways this area of provision would be

organised best by schools, which are in a position to respond quickly to individual pupil/student needs. Some schools have shown themselves to be quite effective in arranging, often with the help of PTG, their own transport, but most schools have neither the inclination nor expertise to do this. There are also the associated issues of funding and audit. The dilemma is that the staff best placed to produce a manual of guidance and best practice are already hard pressed. If this is to be taken forward it needs a steering group comprising key officers from PTG, Education Department and Schools with specialist input when needed working to an action plan that identifies individual responsibilities and timelines. The size of such a task should not be under-estimated.

The extended school day and after school activities

2. This is a very suitable subject for a pilot. Apart from addressing the fundamental issues identified in the report it embraces innovative ideas such as the creative use of community transport, collaboration between schools both in the provision of extra-curricular activities and the possibility of schools owning their own transport. The thrust of all the pilots will be to reduce the use of cars (which might involve the sponsoring of parent car-sharing schemes) and increase the use of buses or other means of public transport. The expectation is that where pilots are mounted more than one authority will be involved, and that will allow for the sharing of ideas and experiences during the course of the pilot. However all those involved with similar pilots will be expected to commit equivalent levels of budgetary provision. Careful consideration would therefore need to be given to the possible financial implications as well as to the adequacy of staffing resources before committing to a pilot. For the pilot, even though for 3 years, to be manageable it would probably need to be restricted geographically to a couple of areas, one urban and one rural. If the LEA were minded to get involved in such a pilot it ought to reserve its position until further guidance has been published.

Staggered Hours

3. Desirable though the aim may be a pilot would be very resource intensive and difficult to manage.

Conclusion

4. The most appropriate pilot would appear to be that relating to the extended school day/after school activities. Whilst this would require close co-operation from schools the benefits to be gained by them should provide compelling reasons for such co-operation. Lack of transport in this area of provision is primarily a problem for schools, whilst mainstream transport is more of a problem for the LEA. Any pilot designed to address this ought to be welcomed by schools. The Committee is mindful of the resource implications of involvement with any pilot, and that the

government is unlikely to provide significant additional funds, although it will be looking to pilot LEAs to commit sufficient funding to their pilots for three years at least. The Committee is of the view that Nottinghamshire could embark on its own pilot into ways of addressing transport problems associated with the extended school day and after school activities, outside of any government initiative, within its own resource capabilities, and recommends that that should be done, in the first instance examining an urban area and a rural area as a desk top exercise to test the economic feasibility.