yellow school bus
COMMISSION

Report and Recommendations

September 2008

Executive summary

The 'school run' impacts on us all. While it clearly affects parents, pupils and teachers, every road user knows how much easier their journey is during school holidays. But the impact goes well beyond increased travelling time. The effect of school traffic on the economy, the environment and the health of the nation should not be underestimated. As children don't drive and their daily movements are known, why should 'the school run' have such a massive impact? Surely, public transport should cater for such mass movements.

Current school transport policy and car dependency

Congestion is a recognised drain on the economy, yet current school transport policy fails to discourage car use for the school run. Because we have 'managed' in the past, and because funding for school transport has been seen as a lesser issue in terms of both economic and social policy (and ignored almost entirely in terms of educational impact) it has not been regarded as a priority.

Current policy results in many parents driving their children to school. Free transport is generally only available to children under eight years old who live more than two miles (or more than three miles for over-eights) from their respective catchment schools. These entitlement rules (dating from 1944) are out of step with today's lifestyles and evolving changes to education. In addition, the 14-19 education reforms are likely to significantly increase demand for education-related trips during the school day over the next few years.

Children who fail to qualify for free transport are often driven to school because parents see no acceptable alternative. This is particularly true for the parents of primary pupils, who may regard the public bus network as inappropriate for young, unaccompanied children. For parents of secondary age pupils there are concerns about bullying on existing bus services.

The facts speak for themselves.

- **Around 41% of primary pupils get to school by car. Two decades ago only 22% travelled to school by car.**[1]
- **More than twice the number of secondary pupils are driven to school (21%) compared with 20 years ago.**[2]
- **Of pupils living between one and three miles from school, approximately two-thirds of primary pupils and one-quarter of secondary pupils are driven to school by car.**[3]
- **The average length of the trip to school has increased from 1.3 to 1.5 miles for primary and from 2.9 to 3.4 miles for secondary pupils over the last 10 years.**[4]
- **At the peak time of 8:50am on weekdays in term time, the school run generates approximately 20% of all car trips by urban residents.**[5] **On some major roads journey times can increase by over 150%.**[6]
- **The public sector spends £912 million on school transport, representing just 0.5% of local authority spending**[7] **and only 4% of central and local government transport expenditure.**[8]

The effect on the environment is substantial. Even accounting for lift-sharing, the school run contributes around one million extra cars on the roads at peak times and a further 1.2 million cars driving extra distances for school drop-offs on the way to work. The impact on the environment of this is significant with about one million tonnes of CO_2 emitted each year.

The work of the Yellow School Bus Commission

The Yellow School Bus Commission was established to examine and quantify the costs and benefits of a nationwide network (across England, Scotland and Wales) of dedicated home-to-school transport.

In order to fully understand school transport needs and any current successful initiatives, the Commission has undertaken a comprehensive nationwide study of school transport. The Commission reviewed current yellow school bus programmes In England, Scotland and Wales, as well as what is arguably the most successful model in action: the American school bus model.

Yellow school bus operations are not just about buses painted yellow. They represent a standard of quality and safety and generally include the following common features:

- dedicated and vetted drivers fully trained in both bus operation and child supervision
- a guaranteed seat for every pupil with three-point, all-age seat belts
- familiarisation and safety training for pupils
- on-board registers for younger pupils, giving reassurance to parents
- measures to support good behaviour ranging from CCTV to use of prefects and codes of conduct
- dedicated single-deck vehicles designed primarily for the carriage of school children and with yellow livery in line with US practice.

The Commission has examined closely the merits of yellow school bus operations and their strong focus on safety and parental reassurance. In addition, the Commission reviewed previous reports, received evidence, visited initiatives and consulted with operators, authorities and other personnel involved in education. The Commission also met with pupils and parents to seek their views on the issue.

Despite the different circumstances there is much to be learned from the American model. Some organisations and local authorities are already successfully emulating many elements of the yellow school bus approach as outlined in this report. Although currently limited in number and scope, they often achieve impressive modal shift.

By adopting best practice from Great Britain and the US, we aim to develop an implementation menu for those procuring and delivering services and to achieve one of the best school transport systems in the world.

The need for a new approach

In order to achieve its goal of reducing school run impact, the Commission has concluded that we must both improve quality of service and widen access to school transport so it becomes a readily acceptable alternative to driving children to school. Safety, sustainable travel and reassurance to parents are crucial. The Commission strongly believes that walking and cycling should be encouraged and promoted within sensible distances.

Because of safety fears, only 5% of all primary pupils nationwide travel to school by bus. It is essential to provide a new approach that is sufficiently attractive to both parents and pupils to generate significant modal shift. The Commission recommends that significant modal shift can be achieved for this age group through dedicated yellow school bus services for distances over one mile.

Secondary age pupils also deserve an attractive home-to-school service offer. A more flexible approach can be taken with this older age group. 60% of secondary pupils already use bus services to school for distances over two miles, with 44% using the public bus network and 15% using dedicated home-to-school services. Expanding and improving public bus services for school transport offers the best potential solution. The initiative should incorporate measures to tackle behavioural issues, in line with other Government policies such as the Home Office's Respect campaign.

For some secondary schools where overcrowding, school location and behavioural issues create particular problems on public buses, there is a very strong argument for dedicated school transport such as yellow school buses.

With the expansion of dedicated school transport, it should also be easier to cater for special needs pupils attending mainstream schools.

Substantial benefits

Nationwide (England, Scotland and Wales) rollout of yellow school buses for primary age pupils would:

- offer children and parents a safe and attractive option for commuting to and from school
- reduce local traffic congestion
- benefit the environment
- improve safety and wellbeing.

A thorough cost benefit analysis of a nationwide rollout of yellow school buses to primary schools has quantified potential savings. It is estimated that the rollout would reduce car journeys to primary school by 20%, removing up to 3% of all car traffic on the roads between 08:45 and 09:00. The estimated reduction of up to 130 million car journeys per year equates to 55,000 tonnes of CO_2 emissions per annum. Bus use would increase from 5% to 15.5% for primary pupils, with over 80% of this uplift originating from current car users.

Parents could, en masse, save a total of around £362 million per annum. Within this figure, the specific savings in vehicle operating costs for those previously driving their children to school totals £92 million which more than justifies the additional bus fares incurred of £82 million per annum.

Reduced congestion would save other road users £88 million per annum. Further benefits include reductions in accident costs, reduced truancy rates and job creation in the bus industry, altogether valued at £70 million per annum, although there is a cost to the Treasury of £57.6 million per annum in lost tax and duty as a result of less driving on the school run.

In addition there are many non-monetary benefits including greater choice of school and equity of travel options. Schools report anecdotally that children who travel on dedicated bus services arrive more alert and ready to learn. Residents near schools will benefit from reduced traffic around the school gate. Businesses will see improved availability of part-time staff and there will be new weekday job opportunities that align with school term times.

The combined benefits of a fully implemented rollout of yellow school buses for primary age children totals more than £460 million per annum. The Commission believes that funding the additional costs (operational costs, less passenger fare revenue and local authority school transport expenditure transferred from some existing school transport services) of £154 million per annum for a nationwide rollout is a worthwhile investment for central government. The Commission recognises that implementation should be phased and that best practice and efficiency are vital.

Whilst a comprehensive yellow school bus system for secondary school transport has been considered, the Commission believes that this can be achieved at a lower additional cost (estimated between £50 million and £100 million per annum) and with a more flexible approach supported by incentives to schools, operators and improved procurement.

The Commission advocates continuous, local development and enhancement of dedicated and public bus services that improves services to young people, fosters respect amongst users and encourages a culture of public transport use. However, where there is specific demand for dedicated services and/or where poor behaviour is a problem, dedicated yellow school bus initiatives for secondary age pupils offer tangible advantages. This combined approach for secondary pupils offers benefits estimated at between £91 million and £194 million per annum.

Acceptable fare levels will not generate all the required funding but given the clear safety and decongestion benefits, there is a strong case for a contribution to dedicated school transport services from the public purse. Provision of the Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG - a rebate of fuel duty not currently available to dedicated school buses) is one available option. Other incentives for operators and authorities to meet new quality standards should also be developed. Following the ideas emerging from the Pathfinder initiative, alternative charging mechanisms for school transport services should be explored. Local authorities can also consider new supplementary funding opportunities such as local business sponsorship.

The Yellow School Bus Commission stands by the recommendations in this report. The Commission urges decision makers across the entire political spectrum and throughout the transport industry to implement these proposals in partnership and deliver a safe, dedicated school transport system.

Summary of findings and recommendations

The following summarises the findings and recommendations of the Yellow School Bus Commission.

	Findings	Recommendations
1	Over 85% of primary pupils who walk to school live less than one mile from the school they attend, but more than 80% of those driven live further than one mile from their schools. Secondary age children are much less likely to walk journeys of more than two miles.	All schools should continue to promote walking and cycling for pupils living within one mile from primary school and two miles from secondary school (see Section 4.1, page 27).
2	Parents of primary pupils are unwilling to let their children make their way to school alone even for short distances, principally because of safety and security concerns. A package that incorporates yellow school buses, dedicated drivers and other parental reassurance measures is particularly appropriate for this age group.	Yellow school bus services should be offered for all primary school children living over one mile from school. Such buses should feature dedicated drivers and a range of other optional elements such as CCTV, registers and voluntary or employed escorts (see Section 4.2, page 29).
3	Secondary age pupils already use public buses in many locations. There are opportunities to build upon the use of the public bus network for secondary school transport.	Improve secondary school bus services by increasing existing bus provision, raising quality standards, enhancing driver training, and using technology to promote good on-board behaviour (see Section 4.3, page 30).
4	Availability and issues of poor behaviour mean that dedicated school buses for secondary school pupils are necessary in some places.	Consider providing yellow school bus services for distances greater than two miles to secondary schools, where there are special circumstances such as poor existing bus services and use, serious challenging behaviour of pupils on the public bus network or the potential to link services with suitable primary school provision (see Section 4.3, page 31).
5	A full and immediate introduction of yellow school buses for primary age pupils would be logistically challenging. Any introduction should be staged, encouraging partnership between schools, authorities and operators and raising efficiency.	Undertake a phased and properly coordinated expansion of yellow school bus services for primary age pupils over the next five years, with a final annual investment of £154 million revenue per annum at steady state (see Section 5.1, page 33).
6	The benefits of a full rollout of dedicated yellow school buses for secondary age pupils are less than those for a primary school operation. Using an appropriate mix of public bus services and dedicated school transport will reduce costs and maintain the majority of the benefits.	Provide additional funding of up to £100 million for the increased availability and quality of school transport for secondary age pupils. Initially, this will use existing public services where available. Dedicated yellow school buses should be considered where issues of behaviour are particularly acute or the public service cannot cater for the demand (see Section 5.1.2, page 34).
7	The implementation of staggered school hours is key to delivering efficiency. The School Travel Plan process could facilitate the phased introduction of yellow school buses.	A financial incentive should be given to schools that stagger their hours. The Commission recommends that within a more flexible approach to existing capital grants, annual revenue funding of up to £10,000 per school should be available via Travel Plans for new primary yellow school bus services (see Section 5.2.1, page 35).
8	Due to the high capital costs involved, long-term investment should be encouraged.	The Commission appreciates that the purchase of dedicated vehicles demands significant operator investment. In order to reduce risk and uncertainty, long contracts of up to ten years should be introduced to encourage investment in school buses (see Section 5.3.1, page 36).
9	High capacity vehicles help to ensure efficiency and single-deck vehicles allow better supervision. Other categories of vehicle may be used to cater for differing circumstances and assist in the further integration of special educational needs pupils into mainstream school transport services.	In consultation with schools, parents and operators, local authorities should consider the appropriate mix of vehicles to meet needs. Cost effectiveness, quality and local circumstances such as integration with public service requirements in rural areas should be considered. Provision should also enable expansion in the number of mobility-impaired pupils travelling with their peers (see Section 5.3.2, page 36).

	Findings	Recommendations
10	Bus Service Operators Grant (a rebate on fuel duty) is currently unavailable to dedicated school bus services.	Bus Service Operators Grant should be made available to operators and authorities who meet new quality standards matching those of yellow school buses, as part of the proposed funding requirement in Recommendations 5 and 6 (see Section 5.4.1, page 37).
11	Parents recognise the benefits of yellow school buses and in a number of cases are already willing to contribute through fares. Under the Government's recent Pathfinder programme, local authorities were reluctant to introduce a potentially unpopular charging programme.	Consider revising entitlement arrangements supported by improved funding, as originally proposed under the Pathfinder programme (see Section 5.4.2, page 37).
12	Businesses show interest in reducing congestion and freeing their employees from school run duties. There may be some potential to explore financial support for services linked to both promotional and corporate social responsibility programmes.	The Commission considers that (subject to local consultation) local authorities and schools should explore private sector business sponsorship as an additional support mechanism for local yellow school bus operations (see Section 5.4.3, page 38).
13	The best public sector procurement mechanisms are those where socially necessary transport and education services are managed by the same authority (and particularly within the same department). Responsibilities for education and transport in Passenger Transport Executives areas lie with different authorities.	Integrated Transport Units offer the best mechanism for procurement. Where this is not possible due to local government structure, the partnership and understanding between district council and transport authority should be developed to realise and share the subsequent benefits (see Section 5.5.1, page 39).
14	Planning entitled and non-entitled school transport together enables greater efficiency. The travel requirements of many pupils with special educational needs could be integrated with mainstream transport.	Entitled and non-entitled school transport should be procured together, alongside the requirements for pupils with special educational needs attending mainstream schools (see Section 5.5.2, page 39).
15	The public bus network is often the best solution for secondary age pupils, but some services will need additional capacity. There is an opportunity to improve relationships and develop respect between staff and users, particularly as school pupils are potential public transport customers of the future.	Operators and authorities should work in partnership to secure higher quality in service, vehicle standards and driver training for all public bus routes serving schools (see Section 5.5.3, page 39).
16	Inter-peak school work can increase utilisation of dedicated vehicles.	School bus contracts should include regular inter-peak school work, whilst other off-peak work carrying school children should also be sought (see Section 5.5.4, page 40).
17	London's unique, regulated market with its high overall public transport usage and free fares for school children is effective for secondary age pupils and has resulted in primary age use above the national average. At present, London deals inadequately with the travel requirements of those children too young to travel unaccompanied, pupils with special educational needs and the wide catchment areas of the independent sector.	Transport for London should consider future provision for primary age children, independent schools and those with special educational needs. There is potential for integrated dedicated services (ideally meeting yellow school bus standards) to achieve modal shift, and where possible, to reduce borough expenditure, particularly on special educational needs transport (see Section 5.6, page 41).
18	Changes in school transport provision should actively avoid damaging the recent growth in walking and cycling.	The rollout of improved school transport should be conducted in parallel with continued (and perhaps expanded) capital funding for initiatives to improve walking and cycling, coupled with targets to maintain and improve share of all sustainable modes (see Section 5.7, page 41).