No More School Run

Proposal for a national yellow bus scheme in the UK

By the Sutton Trust

Executive summary

The UK needs a national system of school buses. Nearly 20 percent of traffic on the UK's roads during the morning rush hour is on the school run. But the costs of not having an adequate school transport system go beyond congestion and include environmental, social and economic damage.

Environmental and health benefits

This report argues that a system of school buses would increase punctuality for all road users, have economic benefits and improve quality of life. It would also lower greenhouse gas emissions; bring considerable environmental and health benefits, including making the journey safer for pupils on and off buses; reduce truancy and improve discipline; and the wider community would benefit from an accessible and reliable source of transport. Importantly, a system of school buses could make our education system fairer.

Social benefits

If choice of school is to become a reality for everyone, an effective school transport system is required. Those with the time and money to make their own arrangements for taking their children to school are able to choose schools irrespective of distance or the availability of public transport. Those without such resources are forced to choose their local school, regardless of whether it is the best for their child.

Economic benefits

Modelling by The Boston Consulting Group[1] estimates the cost of a yellow bus scheme for primary schools to be around £184 million, but also shows that it would deliver benefits of around £458 million a year – a return of two-and-a-half times the annual cost.[2] The £184m costs could be reduced by £60m if existing travel subsidies were maintained, leaving a requirement for £124m of new funding a year, or £83m if families contributed just 50 pence per journey.

Key facts about school transport

- The number of children travelling to school by car over the past 20 years has doubled.[3]
- A research study for the Department of Transport in 2002 reported that safety and security were the principal reasons why parents continued to rely on their cars, rather than allowing their children to walk or take a public bus. Parents of both primary and secondary age pupils were concerned about

personal security and the risk of road accidents, and perceived driving to be safer than other modes of travel.[4]

- The school run leads directly to as many as 40 deaths and 900 serious injuries a year, and contributes over two million extra tonnes of harmful carbon dioxide annually to the atmosphere.[5]
- Local and national government in England spent £662 million on home-to-school transport in the 2002-2003 school year, itself an 18 percent increase on expenditure two years before.[6]
- Contrary to popular opinion, there is currently no general entitlement to free travel, with only 10 percent of school children in England receiving free transport.[7]
- A number of private operators already run American-style yellow school buses in Britain, mostly as pilot schemes. This includes First Group which estimates its buses are now carrying around 4,000 children on 55 buses in 9 schemes.

Policy recommendations

1 The Government should introduce legislation which goes beyond the 2004 School Transport Bill and which places a statutory requirement on LEAs to provide access to school transport for every pupil.

2 The provision should take the form of a yellow bus scheme, although subsidised access to public transport systems for older children could be substituted where appropriate routes exist.

3 The guarantee of school transport cannot be made open-ended. We propose, therefore, that the statutory obligation should apply to a limited number of schools (say five) nearest to the pupil's home. While central government should set the minimum number of schools to which the obligation will apply, it will of course be open to local authorities to extend the entitlement further if they so wish.

4 LEAs should decide on fare levels, although government guidance should recommend that these should be flat rate and amount to no more than £1 per day, per pupil. It should be open to LEAs to adopt an alternative fare structure if they are able to show that this would meet targets for reductions in the school run and would not disadvantage families on low incomes. LEAs should be encouraged to waive fares for the first few months of any new scheme to encourage take-up.

5 Even a £1 per day, per pupil fare would act as a disincentive to parents on low incomes and to those with more than one child. On that basis, we propose that pupils who are eligible for free school meals should also be eligible for free school transport. In addition, government guidance should recommend that the fares for a parent's second and third child should be reduced to around half that of a full fare, subject to the same right for LEAs to adopt an alternative fare structure.

6 Yellow school buses would be more cost effective if they made more than one journey in the morning and afternoon, and serve both primary and secondary schools. We propose that the start times of schools be appropriately staggered, and that

provision should be made for at least two afternoon journeys per school to allow pupils to participate in after school activities.

7 During weekends, holidays and at certain times during the school day, yellow buses could be used to support other activities. LEAs or their school bus contractors should be free to hire out their yellow buses for community or commercial activities, some of the proceeds of which could be used to subsidise the school run.

8 Funding to meet this statutory obligation should derive from savings on the current LEA obligation to provide free transport for certain categories of pupil and other efficiencies.

9 Smart cards could be used as a mechanism to pay fares. However, it should be noted that some of the research on pilots has indicated that paying large sums in advance is a disincentive to parents on lower incomes.[9] This suggests that the facility to top up cards weekly will be important for ensuring equity.

10 Finally, we propose that the Government publish good practice guidelines for the provision of yellow buses, which promote the lessons learnt from the pilot schemes. These are likely to include establishing pick-up and drop-off points close to home and school, a well-trained driver regularly allocated to a specific route and a guaranteed seat for every child.

Footnotes

1 *Travelling to School* (Boston Consulting Group for the Sutton Trust, 2003)
2 The model assumes that 60 percent of pupils eligible for free school transport would move from their current mode of travel to a yellow bus, but only 15 percent of those who would be expected to pay would do the same. This would give an 85 percent occupancy rate on a network of 4,200 yellow buses, costing approximately £184 million a year to run.
3 *The National Travel Survey*, published by the Department of Transport at www.dft.gov.uk
4 *Attitudes to, and potential take-up of additional home-to-school transport* (DTLR, 2002)
5 Figures from *Travelling to School* (Boston Consulting Group for the Sutton Trust, 2003)
6 House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee op cit, p.7
7 DFES/Confederation of Education and Children's Services Managers (ConfEd) Survey, February 2004
8 Steer Davies Gleave *Evaluation of First Yellow Bus Pilot Schemes*, October 2003 for the Department of Transport