

Submissions to the Education Scrutiny Committee from Cllr David Scott

I'm sure that all members of this Scrutiny Committee will agree that York's children are its most valuable resource.

I was at the Executive Member for Education Advisory Panel in April 2006 when Cllr Janet Hopton first raised the concerns of pupils travelling on buses taking them from their home to St Mary's Primary School. At that time the Executive Member for Education promised action. I am therefore disappointed that almost a year later nothing has actually been done to address these concerns.

Having said that I commend the hard work of this Scrutiny Committee. I would however like to raise some concerns with the draft report before you today.

The Scrutiny Committee have properly identified a number of important issues.

- The Education and Inspection Bill will increase the provision of home to school transport that will be provided by this Council.
- There are environmental issues associated with the provision of School transport
 - Parents that boycott a service that is perceived to be unsafe will add to the carbon footprint of the home to school transport arrangements by using their own cars
 - Older buses used by some contractors will cause more environmental damage than newer vehicles
- Different Schools have different experiences with home to school transport arrangements and have different concerns
- The contracts for this service do not currently guarantee minimum specifications for bus safety, seatbelts and vehicle emissions. It is possible for a contractor to switch an acceptable vehicle to an unacceptable vehicle without notice or penalty.
- Only 4 out of the 10 contractors carry out CRB checks
- Contractors have concerns about pupils behaviour at times, but that there are options for contractors, schools and this Council to address this.
- Current contracts for some primary schools run up to 2011, but have a 6 months notice provision to bring them to an end sooner.
- Some vehicles used for home to school transport would not be allowed to be used for school trips.

At the last meeting the Bus and Coach Operators made a number of submissions to this committee. I must take issue with some of those.

The Bus and Coach Operators said

“There was little evidence to suggest that fitting seatbelts in buses made journeys safer, rather the lack of seatbelts was a perceived problem.”

And

“BUSK (Belt Up School Kids) a school transport organisation dedicated to helping reduce injuries and fatalities on school buses had found no evidence to suggest that seatbelts on vehicles made them safer. Independent research had shown that transport by bus was one of the safest forms of transport.

The main problem to safety was the behaviour of pupils on transport and this was exacerbated on double decker buses where drivers had less visibility.”

I e-mailed Pat Harris, Director of BUSK and BUSK would give the following submissions to this Committee

“I can confirm that I am the person responsible for making any public statements about any issue surrounding the transportation at children and young people.

I have carried out much research over the last 14 years in all aspects of road safety and worked alongside experts in crash impact research and well as manufacturers of buses, coaches, minibuses and cars. I have also been advised by consultants in accident and emergency medicine about different types of injuries including permanent and fatal injury to passengers travelling in all types of vehicles, wearing different types of safety belts correctly, incorrectly and not wearing any at all and also those passengers who are standees.

I can confirm that as a result of this research and working partnerships that I continue to have with outside agencies, that I never have, or never would make a statement that to say that there was no evidence to suggest that seatbelts on vehicles made them safer. The fact is, that passengers who are protected by a properly engineered safety belt are less likely to sustain serious, permanent or fatal injury unless of course the accident is of a very high speed or the accident for instance is a car passenger whose car impacts with 40 tonne truck or tanker.

I am more than happy to talk to you about these issues if you think this might be helpful. I have a lot of experience in working to make transport safer for everybody, that is, pupils, drivers and all other road users. I led a Task Group within the core team of Monmouthshire County Council's Best Value Review and resulting from this they are currently running a pilot which so far has had great success in improving the behaviour of pupils and saving money as well.

I work for various local authority and the police in projects to help educate pupils how to keep safe on their daily journey to school. BUSK also provides resource materials that are used by schools, RSOs, the police and transport operators.

BUSK would support the use of properly engineered safety belts in any transport used for home to school transport although I have, in the past, voiced concern over buses and even some older coaches, that are fitted with safety belts. The reason for this is that the buses I have seen that have belts installed are the older vehicles that were not built to take belts and where the seats are not of the correct structure to take the stress loads that would be imposed upon them during an impact. In these circumstances I would advise against the use of belts because there is evidence to show that belts fitted into these types of vehicles with inadequate structures etc., could prove to be lethal to the passengers.

I would also point out that the statistics that are often quoted by some in the coach and bus industry are flawed. They talk about passenger miles and compare this with car passenger miles. What they do not say is that the passenger miles they refer to often include trains and air miles. Also car passenger miles very often includes minibuses.

I can also tell you that between 10,000 and 11,000 passengers are injured inside buses each year and around 2500 children are injured inside buses and coaches each year as a direct result of not wearing belts.

Around 20% of the injuries to children are permanent which means they will not be able to live a normal life. Children aged between 10-14 are more likely to be injured.

There is some evidence that if children are wearing belts then they do not cause the same distraction to the driver. Driver distraction is a huge problem.”

I would ask this Committee to consider serious those comments

The issue of older vehicles being used on the contracts has been raised before this Committee. One must ask why our young people are asked to travel in buses that couldn't be used once they were in school. If it isn't economic or safe to fit a bus with £5,000 worth of seat belts then that bus shouldn't be used.

It is strange that the contractors complain that old buses are used because of cost pressures, whilst at the same time the Council sees the home to school transport rising above inflation.

I would also like to comment on some of your draft recommendations.

Recommendation 1

I agree that there is a need to provide seat belts to St Mary's School home to school transport service. However I cannot accept that this requirement should only be done if it is at a "reasonable cost".

What price can you put on a child's life? It needs to be an absolute, not at a reasonable cost.

I would ask for an addition that requirement apply to all current primary school contracts.

There is also a need to ensure that vehicles that are currently used and meet this Council's desired standards are not switched. There is a need for guarantees to be obtained from Contractors to ensure this.

Recommendation 2

I agree with it. But I would like it to make clear that this recommendation applies to all new contracts, including secondary school home to school transport,

There is also a need for newer vehicles to be used. The recent West Coast rail crash show that new vehicle designs are safer for all in the event that the worst happens. I would remind you that BUSK believe that seatbelts can also reduce the possibility of an accident occurring as well as reducing injuries in the event of an accident.

Additional Recommendation

I would ask you to consider an additional recommendation be adopted:-

“That as a matter of urgency current contracts providing home to school transport for secondary schools be examined and reviewed to ensure that vehicles used have seat belts fitted. Where Contractors are unable to do so that those contracts are brought to an end and contracts compliant with Recommendation 2 are entered into.

That where suitable vehicles are currently being used that suitable guarantees are obtained from Contractors that they will continue to be used until such time as the contract is renewed.”

I hope that the Executive and the Council will act quickly upon your report.