

Top Line Travel of York Limited

Home to School bus services: safety issues

1. Seat belts on home to school contracts.

Seat belts are a legal requirement on coaches but not on buses. Therefore, some home to school contracts already use seatbelt-equipped vehicles and some do not.

There are several issues to take into account where seatbelts are concerned.

I fully accept the advantages, and support the use, of seat belts in cars and coaches, and am by no means anti-seat belt. However, my main concern is that a ruling to require seat belt equipped vehicles on all home to school contracts would be a misguided attempt to be seen to be doing something about safety without achieving much or, indeed, anything.

The first issue to address is to ensure that, if fitted, seat belts are worn. My experience, in using seatbelt equipped coaches on the F3 and other contracts in the past, is that this will not happen. Unless and until a way is found to ensure that seatbelts are used properly, such a ruling would involve a great deal of expense for no benefit.

The claim "seatbelts save lives" is too simplistic in this context. Seat belts would not have saved the lives of the bus driver and the schoolgirl who were killed when an out-of-control lorry collided with their bus at Wilberfoss in 1992. The construction of buses, and indeed the construction of their seats, affords much more protection without a seatbelt than is available in a car.

Buses on home to school contracts tend to be used in areas where overall speeds are low; the risks associated with high speed motorway driving are vastly different from those involved in urban areas.

2. Many school contract operators tend to use end-of-life vehicles because the competition for contracts keeps prices down to a level where the cost of new buses or coaches cannot be justified. On the occasions when newer buses or coaches are used, it is usually because they are also used on other work, which spreads the cost.

The implication for this company, were there to be a requirement for seat belts on home to school transport, is that we could no longer participate in this work because we have no seatbelt equipped vehicles and could not justify the cost of replacing them unless contract prices are increased to reflect the extra cost.

The loss of school contracts would make it harder to recruit drivers, because we need some work on schooldays to balance the heavy commitment to weekends and school holidays when our tour buses are at their busiest.

Our existing buses were not designed to be fitted with seatbelts, and we believe that any attempt to fit them would be unsafe and unacceptable.

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2. continued

The option of buying seatbelt equipped buses, or buying some which could be fitted with seatbelts, is not practical because the Council's policy of accepting the lowest tender means that we could not compete with other operators who would offer to do this work with elderly (but seatbelt equipped) coaches.

While seatbelt equipped double deck buses are available, many of these (for example, the Scania's used by Harrogate Coach Travel) are high floor buses of pre-euro emissions standard and we now wish to buy only low floor vehicles of euro 2 standard or better. Contract prices are not sufficient to allow this additional investment.

3. We do not have any buses equipped with seat belts. However, as explained above, I do have experience of using seatbelt-equipped coaches at York Pullman Limited during the period 1997-2000.

My experience was that very few children used them and we did have the occasional instance of damage which could not be repaired immediately; if a seat belt is damaged, the seat cannot be used. The refusal to use belts is particularly noticeable among secondary school pupils - peer pressure among teenagers to be "cool" is not an easy attitude to reform.

- 3a. There are probably two options - technology involving seat detectors (as on some cars when a "fasten seat belt" light is triggered by a person sitting in the seat without the belt being fastened), which is expensive both to fit and maintain; or the use of an escort specifically for this purpose. It would be impractical to expect the driver, whose attention should be directed entirely to driving, to supervise the use of seat belts as well.

In either case, there will be a greatly increased cost and this will ultimately be passed on to the local authority. While some operators may be tempted to ignore the additional cost of providing, maintaining and repairing seatbelts, they will eventually find that they cannot do so and there will be a price to pay.

This could be additional contract costs, the cost of re-tendering if a contractor surrenders a contract or goes out of business, or the potential cost of a less scrupulous operator economising on other maintenance.

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4. My main concerns regarding safety on school transport are about the behaviour of those being carried. To this end, my company has invested in closed circuit television on several buses, and this has successfully been used on several occasions to allow the school to deal with problems such as rowdy behaviour, damage and bullying. On at least two occasions, parents who did not believe that their children had been involved in rowdy behaviour were convinced when shown the CCTV recordings.

However, no account is taken of this when tenders are considered: I believe that CCTV is invaluable and should be specified. Those of us who provide it already are at a disadvantage when tendering because of the extra cost.

Specific areas for attention are: an inability to queue; rushing towards the bus when it arrives at a stop (with a risk of somebody falling or being pushed under the front wheel); standing up or walking around the bus (with a risk of falling if the driver has to stop suddenly); fighting; throwing items around the bus or from the bus; stamping of feet and other behaviour which distracts the driver; crowding the platform as the bus arrives at the stop; leaving food and other rubbish on the bus; or causing damage. We take a strong line on all of these, and on the use of foul language, and will not allow children to travel on the platform of the bus (which, although illegal, does happen elsewhere).

We wish to acknowledge the invaluable help given by Fulford, Canon Lee and St Wilfrid's Schools, in particular, and the staff of the CoYC Education Transport section, whenever problems have arisen.

Safety can be improved, and problems such as these minimised, by the insistence on scholars (and their parents) signing a code of conduct, and rigorous enforcement by the Council and the schools.

We make it clear that any complaints about our staff will be treated seriously, investigated and action taken if necessary. This emphasises that a code of conduct is fair.

5. We do make CRB checks but believe that this should be done by the local authority or the Traffic Commissioner. It would be much simpler if this were to be undertaken by the City Council, or by a partnership of local authorities to avoid the need for separate checks to be carried out for different authorities. It would be even more acceptable if this information becomes the province of the Traffic Commissioner, who has the power to remove a PCV licence from anyone who is not suited to hold one.

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6. Compulsory CRB checking would be welcome on condition that bureaucratic delays do not make it impossible to staff such contracts. Also, in view of the number of drivers from Eastern Europe currently employed in this industry, a secure method of checks for non-UK nationals is needed.

It would be unjust if a situation were to arise where one driver could not be used on a school service because CRIB checks had not been completed, but another driver from another country could be used because such checks could not properly be carried out at all.

7. If the contractors had to carry out the checks, there would be a great deal of inconsistency, delays and a need for more administrative time. It would be preferable for the local authorities to do this, as NYCC do already.
8. Five year contracts would encourage operators to invest in newer buses, which will improve quality. However, depreciation on a new bus used only on school services can be around £60 per day. Contract prices do not reflect this.
9. There has been some deterioration of behaviour with some scholars, but this is relatively minor and is by no means universal. York has, to the best of my knowledge, never suffered the appalling behaviour experienced on school buses in some areas, although there have been some notable exceptions.

On the whole, behaviour is good so long as the school and the local authority are prepared to take action to deal with any trouble immediately - and this includes having staff available to assist or give advice on a Friday afternoon.

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