

National Assembly for Wales

Report by the Economic Development and Transport Committee

Draft School Transport Bill

The Committee considered the draft School Transport Bill on 19 May 2004. Members also considered the consultation document published with the draft Bill. The Head of Schools Management Division and officials from the Assembly's Transport Department attended the meeting.

By way of introduction, officials made the following points:

- The draft Bill was designed to address the difficulties surrounding statutory walking distances and would allow local education authorities (LEAs) to put forward individualised school transport schemes;
- The legislation would permit LEAs to bid for 6 pilot schemes, from 2006;
- Every scheme would be subject to extensive local consultation;
- The Bill would enable LEAs to charge modest fares with possible exceptions for low income and large families;
- The Free School Meal (FSM) index would be used as an indicator of pupils from low income families in England whereas broader criteria would be considered in Wales; and
- A key measure of the scheme's success would be a reduction in the number of car journeys.

Members made the following suggestions and observations:

- **Scheme Objectives:** Members were broadly content with the objectives of the pilot school travel schemes, subject to the comments below;
- **Acceptable Charges:** the pilot schemes would provide an opportunity to create zones so that pupils could be charged different fares, depending on the length of their journey. Charges may be a disincentive to large families and low-income families and discounted fares might discourage parents from continuing to transport their children by car.
- **Costs:** There was concern that the pilot travel schemes would not be cost neutral and would inhibit, rather than encourage, innovation. Incentives should be provided to local authorities to set up pilot schemes;
- **Safety:** Safety issues should be a primary concern of the Bill, such as the type and condition of buses used for school transport and also the mandatory wearing of seatbelts. The 'three for two' concession also raised concerns with regard to safety.
- **Parent's rights:** The right of parents to send their child to the school of their choice ought to be protected, in light of the changes to free transport provision;
- **Sixth Form/FE College students:** Students of non-compulsory school age could be considered in proposed pilot schemes;
- **Security on school transport:** CCTV systems were more suitable for older children whereas escorts tended to work better with younger children;

Members welcomed the opportunity to discuss the draft Bill, and hoped that the Welsh Assembly Government would take their comments into account when drafting the final Bill. The Committee would make provision in its forward work programme to scrutinise the final Bill, in due course.

The Chair undertook to write to send a copy of this report to the Minister, and also to the Chair of the Assembly's Education and Lifelong Learning Committee, the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the Chair of the House of Commons Select Committee for Education and Skills, the Chair of the Select Committee for Transport and the Secretary of State for Wales.

Christine Gwyther AM
Committee Chair