

PE1098/U and
PE1223/R



Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland

Transportation & Road Safety WG
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02 September 2010

The Scottish Parliament
Public Petitions Committee
TG.01
EDINBURGH
FAO Ms Alison Wilson

Dear Ms Wilson

Consideration of Petitions PE1098 and PE1223

Thank you for inviting The Society of Chief Officers of Transportation (SCOTS) to provide evidence to the Committee who are currently considering petitions PE1098 and PE1223.

You asked that the 'SCOTS Road Safety and Traffic Management Group provide the Committee with information on any discussions that the Working Group has held on school bus safety issues.'

The work of SCOTS is undertaken by a number of Working Groups who report back to the SCOTS Executive Committee through a Liaison Committee consisting of the Chairs of all the Working Groups. The Transportation and Road Safety Working Groups recently amalgamated and it is this group who deal with the issues relating to these petitions.

Local Authorities are also represented on The Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) by Karl Vanters who is the ATCO Scotland Chair (karl.vanters@midlothian.gov.uk). This group considers the procurement of bus and coach operations, including school travel, in greater detail than SCOTS and the Committee may wish to consult with them.

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This response does cover any discussions that have been held within the SCOTS group and makes observations on the petitions and the impact these may have on Local Authorities.

The SCOTS Transportation and Road Safety WG has received regular updates from the Aberdeenshire representative on the investigatory work they are currently undertaking and the group looks forward to receiving the final report when it will be debated by the Working Group with any recommendations going to the SCOTS Executive Committee.

Other than general discussions following a few high profile accidents there have been no specific discussions regarding school transport by the Working Group. However, our discussions have highlighted the following points:

In respect of travel to/from school there are currently three ways that school pupils can be transported to school using coaches or buses. In the first instance pupils can make use of commercial bus services using either a pass provided by a Local Authority or paying the bus fare themselves.

Secondly an authority may run a bus on a defined route, which is also available for members of the public to use, with the Local Authority subsidising the cost of the service.

Thirdly the Local Authority can charter a bus or coach for the sole use of transporting pupils to/from school.

Outwith travel to/from school an authority may charter a coach or bus for outings organised by the school.

Almost all coaches and minibuses are fitted with seatbelts and it would be very unusual for a Local Authority not to specify seatbelts when issuing tenders for the supply of these vehicles. Service buses such as those operated by First Group or Lothian Buses for example are not fitted with seatbelts and are not likely to have belts fitted within the foreseeable future.

SCOTS would have concerns if the wording of any future legislation was such that it was compulsory for any/all school transport to be fitted with seatbelts as this would exclude the use of service buses which in some areas are the only vehicles available.

Where seatbelts are fitted, careful thought needs to be given to how the wearing of belts is enforced. In home to school travel on vehicles chartered by the Local Authority there are no supervisors on the bus other than the driver and it would be difficult to expect him/her to supervise the wearing of seatbelts during the journey. SCOTS would not like to see non-wearing of seatbelts an endorsable offence for the driver in this situation. The cost of providing additional supervisors on all school travel to ensure the wearing of seatbelts would be prohibitive.

The question of the type of seatbelt also has to be addressed. Seatbelts currently fitted to coaches are often lap belts and in most cases it would be very difficult to convert these to three point seatbelts. There is currently no single seatbelt that will fit all ages

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and some children require the use of a booster seat. Injuries can be caused by the wearing of an unsuitable seatbelt and therefore the question of liability for such injuries arises. While it is rare for injuries to be caused by seatbelts, it is also rare for serious or fatal injuries to be sustained while on a school bus.

Where pupils travel on service buses, whether using a pass supplied by the Council or paying their own fare, there is no opportunity to provide for seatbelt wearing.

In summary the current situation, although not perhaps ideal, has not resulted in many serious injuries to children travelling to/from school (there were 5 recorded killed or serious injuries involving children on all bus/coach journeys including school related journeys between 2007 and 2009 according to recently published Scottish Government Road Accident Statistics). Between 2006 and 2008 there were 7 children killed or seriously injured while on buses/coaches with 2 of them involving school transport. The statistics do not say whether a seatbelt was fitted or worn so it is not possible to say whether or not the 2 casualties might have reduced. The 2005-09 average killed or seriously injured for all bus and coach travel (including school travel) is 3 which is low compared to injuries involving other modes of transport where the 2005-09 average for child pedestrians is 206 casualties, 29 casualties relating to pedal cycles and 65 casualties relating to cars.

Although SCOTS are committed to achieving accident reduction, the current financial situation would make it extremely difficult for Councils to find additional resources should service buses be excluded from operating school contracts as they were not fitted with seatbelts or should any requirement to provide on-bus supervisors emerge.

Yours sincerely

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