a review of school transport contracts in Scotland
Chairman’s preface

School transport is often a major concern for parents and pupils. At the same time, parents transporting kids to school themselves are frequently identified as the source of morning traffic congestion, with the subsequent environmental and safety problems this creates. Government policy in general is currently focused on changing behaviour away from the private car, and onto public transport and there are many initiatives encouraging walking, cycling and safer routes to school. However, contracted school transport is often overlooked in this debate.

In relation to school transport, local authorities have a legal responsibility to ensure that pupils who live outwith defined distances from school are transported there and back each day and under certain conditions have a duty to provide free transport for children who live outwith the statutory walking distance to school. This research examined local authority policy and practice in school transport provision to determine whether the needs of pupils and parents are being met. We looked at a range of issues including the arrangements for contracting and monitoring of school transport services; information to parents; issues around pupil behaviour, and complaints handling.

We found too much variation in practice. Some of the practice is very good and should be applauded. However, some of it needs to be improved. There should be a more consistent quality of service across Scotland; otherwise the quality of school transport service is in danger of being determined by local authority boundaries. If all pupils are to have a safe and reliable school transport service, which will encourage them to use public transport beyond their school days, and give confidence to parents, then this is not acceptable.

Graeme Millar
CHAIRMAN
Local authorities have a legal responsibility to ensure that pupils who live outwith defined distances from school are transported there and back each day. While it is the parent’s responsibility to ensure that their child gets to school, local authorities have a duty to provide free transport or transport facilities for children who live outwith the statutory walking distance to school. In many cases this school transport provision is contracted out. Anecdotal evidence from earlier Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) work on local authority contract monitoring *Who Deals With This?* in 1998 suggested concerns with both school transport provision and the subsequent monitoring of contracts.

The aim of this report is to examine local authority policy and practice in school transport provision and determine whether the needs of pupils and parents are being met. The research involved sending a self-completion postal survey to local authorities in Scotland. The response was good with 27 local authorities returning completed questionnaires.

The key finding of the research is that there is not a consistent quality of service across Scotland and that there are unacceptable variations in local authority practice, even accounting for necessary local circumstances and discretion. Parents and pupils should be entitled to the same level of quality service across Scotland.

This is not to say that local authorities are failing to discharge their duties; indeed 90% exceed the current statutory minimums in relation to walking distances. However, for others there is much less consistency. For example, length of contracts varied between one and five years. Use of attendants was very inconsistent and there is a need to look much more closely at their use in terms of improving pupil behaviour and safety in particular. Potentially the most serious variation in practice we found was in relation to the use of Disclosure Scotland checks. There appears to be wide variation in the level and application of such checks; for example one authority was found not to check school bus drivers at all, which is unacceptable.

We also found variation in pre-contract checks on operators and vehicles. We did find that close liaison between authorities and other agencies including the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA) and the police was particularly useful and should be undertaken by all authorities. Equally, spot checks were very variable. This is a vital part of ensuring safety and there must be a greater programme of spot checks across Scotland. This situation was echoed in terms of contract monitoring generally, with many authorities being concerned that they could not monitor contracts as closely as they would like to due to resource constraints.
We found some excellent and innovative practice in developing safety initiatives for pupils, in terms of pupil management, vehicles and drivers. However, this was extremely inconsistent across Scotland. Pupil behaviour on school transport is an important issue and many authorities found this was an increasing problem; however, importantly, this tended to be on certain routes and for particular periods of time.

Effective complaint mechanisms are a key way services can improve but practice in school transport was again inconsistent, with potential for positive systems to be put in place to aid pupils, parents and authorities themselves.

Finally, we found that there are a number of wider strategic issues including links to sustainable development, local authority resource issues and socio-economic factors such as declining school rolls and the complexity of many working parents’ lives.

Recommendations

We make 14 recommendations in the report, aimed at the Scottish Executive and local authorities, and particularly relating to ensuring a more consistently good service across Scotland. These are outlined below:

1. The Scottish Executive and local authorities consider how a more consistent national approach to school transport can be achieved, particularly through revised guidance and the sharing of best practice and, if required, legislation.

2. The Scottish Executive undertake a review of the criteria used for free school transport provision in the context of current and changing travel patterns and the acceptability of existing criteria.

3. Further research is conducted to determine whether there is a need for extending the use of attendants on school transport in Scotland. The Scottish Executive should review the practice amongst local authorities.

4. All drivers responsible for transporting children to school (including bus, minibus, taxi and parental contacts) should have Enhanced Disclosure Scotland checks undertaken before a contract is awarded.

5. All attendants with responsibility for travelling with children to school should have Enhanced Disclosure Scotland checks undertaken prior to a contract being awarded.
6. Local authorities should liaise with the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency within the Traffic Commissioners Office prior to awarding contracts to obtain relevant information on maintenance and reliability records.

7. Local authorities should ensure that standardised conduct training is provided for all school transport drivers and attendants and that this should be quality assured.

8. Local authorities should ensure that regular unannounced safety spot checks of school transport vehicles occur, either through their own inspections, Strathclyde Passenger Transport, (where applicable) or through liaison with Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA).

9. Local authorities should review the level of resources dedicated to monitoring school transport contracts to ensure high levels of vehicle safety and service standards are being met.

10. Local authorities should continue to develop aspects of increased pupil safety in school transport, and in particular the need to share good practice and emerging experience in this area.

11. All local authorities should have contingency plans in place as recommended in Scottish Executive guidance. This will help to ensure that parents, schools and transport operators are better informed and able to effectively deal with situations as they emerge.

12. National and local strategies relating to positive pupil behaviour should also embrace behaviour on school transport.

13. All local authorities should ensure parents have full information available on how to complain and that the outcomes of complaints are fed back to help service improvements.

14. Local authorities should review the conditions set out within contracts and their arrangements for monitoring their school transport contracts to ensure both value for money and improvements in quality are kept up to date.
Acknowledgements

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) would like to thank everyone in local authorities and SPT who took time to respond to the survey.

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1. **Context and research methods**

1.1 **Introduction**

Local authorities have a legal responsibility to ensure that pupils who live outwith defined distances from school are transported there and back each day. In most cases, the transport used is provided by the private sector under contract to the local authority or Strathclyde Passenger Transport (SPT) in the west of Scotland. The effective provision and monitoring of these services have a range of implications affecting, for example, pupil safety and supervision, parental information and complaint handling, as well as driver conduct. Anecdotal evidence drawn from earlier Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) work on local authority contract monitoring *Who Deals With This?* in 1998 suggested concerns with both school transport provision and the subsequent monitoring of contracts.

Recent Scottish Executive policy has attempted to increase walking and cycling to school, as alternatives to car use. While walking and cycling offer many benefits to pupils, and are particularly important in urban areas, bus, taxi or ferry services are the only realistic alternative to being driven by car for many pupils. The SCC, therefore, felt that it was timely to carry out research into how school transport services could better meet the needs of school pupils in Scotland.

1.2 **Provision of school transport by local authorities**

It is the parent’s responsibility to ensure that their child gets to school; however, under sections 50 and 51 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 local authorities have a duty to provide free transport or transport facilities for children who live outwith the statutory walking distance to school – two miles for any pupil under eight years old and three miles for any other. Local authorities are required to offer any vacant seats on a school bus to pupils who would not otherwise be entitled. Where the demand for these seats exceeds the vacancies the authority has discretion over who receives them. Authorities also have a more general duty to ensure that transport provisions are in place to allow pupils to attend school. This can be with or without charge and allows authorities greater autonomy regarding suitable transport provision.

The Education (Scotland) Act 1996 amended section 51 of the previous Act, adding the requirement that local authorities consider the safety of pupils when making decisions regarding the provision of school transport. This is the case even in instances where a private company provides the service.

In 2003, the Scottish Executive issued Circular No. 7/2003, which provided updated guidance to local authorities about the provision of school transport.\(^1\) This covered the statutory duties of education authorities, including provision of free school transport.

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\(^1\) Scottish Executive (2003a) *School Transport, Circular No 7/2003, ED/S2/03/52.*
Almost one-fifth of Scottish school pupils received free transport to school in 2000-01. However, this figure varies considerably for individual authorities, with some areas providing free school transport to 60% of pupils. The highest entitlement was in rural and island areas and the lowest in city areas.

Overall, for about a fifth of school pupils in Scotland, the bus is the usual method of travel to school, and of these 14% travelled by school bus and 8% by service bus. Walking is the usual method of travel to school for over half of school pupils.

1.3 Current government policy on school travel

The proportion of school children being driven to school is increasing rapidly, from 6% in 1986 to 20% in 2004. Although levels of car-based travel are lower in Scotland than England, it still represents a worrying trend because of implications on pupil health and safety, the impact on the environment, and the consequence of creating additional peak time congestion on the roads. These concerns exist in relation to wider car use in general and the Scottish Executive has stated its commitment to the reduction of the private car in favour of an accessible integrated transport system that is safe, reliable and sustainable. The Scottish Executive has also sought to reduce car use for school journeys in particular.

A particular emphasis of school transport policy has been in developing ‘safer routes to school’. The Scottish Executive is committed to a 50% reduction in child road casualties by 2010. Dedicated funding of nearly £38 million is being provided between 2000 and 2006 for cycling, walking and safer street projects, including safer routes to schools. It is also providing funding to enable local authorities to introduce 20 mile per hour speed limits outside schools and in residential areas.

In 2000, the Scottish Executive established the Scottish School Travel Advisory Group (SSTAG) whose objective is to increase the proportion of non-car travel to school. Their report rejected setting of national targets for reduction of car use in school journeys due to diversity of geography and social circumstances across and within local authorities and because they suggest that ‘encouraging a modal shift on the school journey will depend on local action in identifying and removing local barriers to walking, cycling and bus use’. Instead, the report set out 20 recommendations, which included the creation of school travel co-ordinators within each local authority.

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7 Scottish Executive (2004b) News Release, Minister determined to cut road deaths, 24 June.
8 Scottish Executive (undated) Scottish School Travel Advisory Group.
The recommendations of the SSTAG report are being taken forward and the Scottish Executive announced a further two years funding of school travel co-ordinators’ posts in all 32 Scottish local authorities, to promote healthier travel choices for schoolchildren.9

### 1.4 Alternatives to car use

Recent Scottish Executive research (2002)10 found that parents actively choose to drive their children to school due to perceived benefits, including safety and convenience. The findings suggested that ‘it will be a long process to achieve, to any great extent, a reduction in actual number of journeys undertaken by car as parents who drive offer many justifications for their actions.’

Bus travel is the realistic alternative to the car for many home to school journeys in Scotland. However, the Scottish Executive acknowledge the poor image of the bus as a cause for concern to consumers and notes that:

‘Greater respect for buses as a mode [of transport] needs to build on the greater social and independence opportunities provided by bus travel when compared with car travel. However, delivering the required change in image will require significant changes in the ways that services are provided and operated.’11

This echoes the conclusions of the SCC report on local bus use A New Route? (2002) which suggests that the Scottish Executive’s policy to increase use of public transport as an alternative to the car requires improvements to both the perceived and actual levels of service required.

### 1.5 Research methods

The aim of the research is to examine local authority policy and practice in school transport provision and determine whether the needs of pupils and parents are being met.

The research involved sending a self-completion postal survey to local authority officers with a remit for school transport. The SCC developed a questionnaire, with advice from external transport experts and this was sent to all local authorities in Scotland in January and February 2004.

A copy of the questionnaire was also sent to Strathclyde Passenger Transport12 for completion.

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10 Scottish Executive (2002b) Why Do Parents Drive their Children to School?
11 Scottish Executive (2002c) Review of Research on School Travel.
12 Some local authorities contract out the management of the school transport element of their function to SPT. The former Strathclyde Regional Council, prior to local government re-organisation in 1996, used to take responsibility for school transport. Although SPT has no statutory responsibility for school transport, 11 out of 12 local authorities that fall within the SPT boundary have asked for the former arrangement to be retained.
1.6 Scope of the study

The main focus of the research is with the provision of transport to and from mainstream state schools. School transport provision specifically for pupils attending special schools or attending private schools is outwith the scope of the study.

Similarly, the private transport arrangements made by parents and between parents are outwith the scope of the study. However, we do differentiate between this and the situation of ‘parental contracts’. The latter involves an arrangement made between parents and local authorities where the parent is under a legal contract to provide a service on behalf of the local authority. This might mean the parent is paid to drive their child (possibly with other children) to school, and the local authority may cover their insurance. This falls within the scope of the study.
2. Local authority survey

2.1 Chapter outline

This chapter of the report outlines the main results from the survey of local authority school transport officers. A questionnaire was sent out to each of the 32 local authorities in Scotland (see Appendix 1).

The sections in this chapter reflect the structure of the questionnaire. These are general background information from respondents; the contracting of school transport services and the subsequent monitoring of it; parental information; pupils using school transport services and pupil behaviour; complaints handling and a section outlining other issues identified by respondents.

2.2 Background

Respondent profile

The response from local authorities was good. Out of the 32 local authorities in Scotland, 27 returned completed questionnaires, giving a response rate of 84%. From these, 12 can be described as urban, eight as rural and seven as mixed authorities.

The five non-respondents were from the local authorities that contracted out the management of their school transport services to SPT. However, responses were received from six local authorities that have their school transport functions managed by SPT. We also received a response from SPT. The results from this are analysed separately and mentioned within each relevant section.

Lead department

The SCC wanted to find out which department in the local authority took the lead in managing school transport services. This is generally transportation or education, and appears to be based on historic responsibility within each local authority. The results indicate that there were equal numbers of transportation and education (13) with responsibility for school transport.

We were particularly interested in any significant differences in the way the two lead departments conduct business and analysed the results for differences. In our analysis we explored the relationship between the lead departments and key variables. We found few significant relationships, however two are worthy of note:

- education departments are more likely to provide conduct training for attendants than transport; and
- the communication methods are different, in that education departments are more likely to communicate with parents through schools while transport are more likely to communicate through the post.

13 In our covering letter sent out with the questionnaires, the SCC asked that those who contract the management of school transport to SPT complete and return the questionnaire as we were still interested in the views of these authorities.
School transport policy

The SCC asked whether local authorities produce any written school transport policy documents.

The majority (89%) indicated they had produced a dedicated school transport policy paper and only one respondent said they did not produce any document outlining their policy on school transport.

In addition, four respondents indicated that their local transport strategy included school transport. Local transport strategies are intended to support, at the local level, the principles of the national transport policy. The Scottish Executive therefore encourages local authorities to produce local transport strategies, and they are a prerequisite for gaining Scottish Executive funding of transport projects.

Three respondents said they produce other types of documents. These were generally dedicated information for parents, such as parental guidance leaflets or booklets.

The results suggest that most local authorities do have a school transport policy paper or other document, with only one authority indicating that they do not.

Eligibility for free school transport

Current policy states that the statutory minimum allows free school transport for children aged under eight years and living two miles or more from their designated school; and for children aged eight years or over and living three or more miles from their designated school. The SCC was aware that practice varied amongst authorities, and was interested in the criteria used by local authorities to establish pupil eligibility for free school transport, and whether this differs from the statutory minimum.

The majority of respondents (93%) said that their local authority differed from the statutory requirements, with only two saying they complied directly. However, in all cases, those that differed were more generous and went beyond what they were legally required to do.

In two cases, free transport was provided over the statutory minimum, but only for part of the year, in the winter months running from October to March.

The results therefore show that most local authorities are using criteria that go beyond what they need to do. This suggests that the Scottish Executive guidance may need to be reviewed to examine whether the existing criteria should be altered, to more fully reflect safe acceptable walking distances to schools.

Although the SCC did not ask about boundary issues, 12 local authorities specifically mentioned the criteria applied only to the local catchment area schools and did not include pupils who travel outwith their local school, for example to include placing requests. This is consistent with the Scottish Executive guidelines.

14 Scottish Executive (2003a) op.cit.
**Additional needs**
The SCC wanted to know what provision is made for pupils who attend mainstream schools but have a physical disability or injury.

The results show that the majority of respondents provide school transport as part of special educational needs provision (85%) and three-quarters use accessible mainstream school transport, when appropriate (74%). Some mentioned that the provision was dependent on circumstances. For example one respondent noted ‘where appropriate, specialist provision, e.g. for broken leg victim.’

The results indicate that all respondents make some form of provision for these pupils.

**Type of transport used**
The range of different transport modes and contract types that local authorities were managing in their area was investigated. See table 1.

All respondents indicated that they use both privately contracted vehicles and local service buses to provide school transport. Just over 80% of respondents said they also used local authority owned vehicles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table1: Types of transport used</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Which of the following do you use to provide school transport in your area?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA owned vehicles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privately contracted vehicles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local bus services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rail services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracts providing parents with travel expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Roughly the same amount said they use ‘parental contracts’, that is contracts where parents are the drivers of the car, and are under contract by the local authority to provide this service (82%). These parents are usually given travel expenses, and may also be insured by the local authority. However, in one case, the authority stated that although in theory the policy makes it possible to do this, in reality it is not used at the present time.

It should be noted that the SCC regards ‘parental contracts’ as different and raising very different issues to private arrangements between parents who drive their children (possibly with other children) to school without any involvement by the local authority. These private arrangements fall outwith the scope of the study.
Twelve local authorities said they use rail services in their areas (44%). Other types of transport contracts that local authorities are managing include ferries and private boat hire; aeroplanes; and a walking or cycle allowance.

Given the very varying geographical context that exists in Scotland, the results demonstrate that, as expected, a wide range of school transport services are being used and managed to transport children to school in Scotland.

Integration of transport services
Local authorities were asked whether they promote the integration of school transport services with other services, for example, other local authority services, community transport or other public transport services. The majority of respondents did undertake the promotion of integrated school transport services (93%) while two said they did not integrate services.

2.3 Contracting of services

This section reviews information about the nature of contracts, including numbers, use of attendants, checks and training.

Contract numbers
Data was collected on the numbers of school transport contracts that local authorities manage. The majority of respondents provided information about their contract numbers (85%). The most common range, for eight local authorities, was between 101 and 150 contracts. Five local authorities managed over 201 contracts and three of these were in rural authorities. The highest number of contracts for any local authority was 600, (a large rural authority) and the lowest number was 40 (a small mixed authority).

The large number of contracts being operated reflects the complexity of the task facing most local authorities, particularly those serving wide rural areas.

Duration of contracts
When local authorities were asked what the usual duration of contract for the provision of school transport services in their area was, the most common response was to have contracts of three years in length (44%). Just under a fifth of respondents said their contracts were for four years and about a fifth also said five years. For two local authorities the usual duration of contract is one year. Two authorities said the duration of contract was determined by the size of vehicles; that is, the bigger the vehicle, the longer the contract.

The results reveal a high degree of variability of practice amongst local authorities in relation to duration of contract. The industry body, the Confederation of Passenger Transport favours longer-term contracts as they believe these have the advantage of encouraging the operator to invest in newer vehicles, therefore presenting a more positive experience for pupils. However, from the research evidence, we were unable to determine whether longer contracts lead to better services.

Use of Attendants

There is no statutory requirement for local authorities to provide attendants or supervisors on school transport. However, recent guidance by the Scottish Executive\textsuperscript{16} notes that discipline problems which start on the journey to school, can carry on over into the school day and that ‘Supervision on transport can help maintain good behaviour amongst pupils and this in turn can contribute to more positive behaviour within the classroom.’

The guidance suggests ‘It is for education authorities themselves to determine, in the light of local circumstances, whether or to what extent to provide supervision.’

The SCC was interested in whether supervision is carried out and if so when and on what type of transport. The survey therefore asked local authorities about their use of attendants. See table 2.

Table 2: Use of attendants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you provide an attendant on school transport vehicles?</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single-decker buses</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double-decker buses only</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When transporting children below a certain age</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results indicate that just over half (52\%) of respondents never use attendants on school transport vehicles. Just over a quarter of respondents indicated that they use attendants only on double-decker buses. Two local authorities use attendants only on single-decker buses and one uses attendants depending on the age of pupils.

A number of authorities said that attendants were used, but not routinely, and only under certain conditions. For example, for pupils with medical needs or based on previous behavioural problems, length of route or for bus security ‘where the operator deems it necessary for vehicle protection’.

The results indicate that there is varying practice, both on whether attendants are used, and in what situations, throughout Scotland, reflecting Scottish Executive guidance on supervision. However, it is surprising that just under a third of local authorities never use attendants on school transport, particularly when the guidance emphasises their potential benefits.

Pre-contract checks

The SCC reviewed checks that were carried out in relation to school transport services as a condition of contract. We asked about any conducted on drivers, attendants and school vehicles by the local authority prior to awarding a contract.

\textsuperscript{16} Scottish Executive (2003a) op.cit.
A number of different checks are available for drivers and attendants, including driving licences, taxi and Private Hire Vehicle licences, and Disclosure Scotland Service checks. We were particularly interested in Disclosure Scotland checks.

Under the Disclosure Scotland Service three different types of disclosures are available. These are Basic, Standard and Enhanced Disclosures. The Basic Disclosure provides details of current convictions (considered unspent) and is available to anyone for any purpose. The Standard Disclosure includes convictions held on central records, even where minor, including both spent and unspent conditions. These will include convictions dating back for many years. One category where a Standard disclosure may be required is for occupations that involve those in regular contact with children and vulnerable adults. Enhanced Disclosures are the third type available and these may contain non-conviction information that a Chief Constable may choose to disclose, which is felt to be relevant to the job. This is available for work that typically involves being in sole charge of children and vulnerable adults or, for example, those registering for child minding.

The Executive guidance includes reference to Disclosure Scotland checks, and states that ‘Scottish Ministers expect authorities, when negotiating school transport contracts, to require that all drivers and escorts are fully scrutinised by Disclosure Scotland’. However, the guidance does not state what level of check this equates to.

a) Pre-contract checks on drivers

When asked what kind of pre-contract checks are undertaken, the results show that the majority of authorities mentioned they undertake a Disclosure Scotland check on drivers. Almost 78% of respondents say they undertake a Disclosure Scotland (or the predecessor, the Scottish Criminal Records Office) check. However, some do not specify whether it is Basic, Standard or Enhanced. Just over a third of authorities (37%) specified that they undertake Enhanced Disclosure Scotland checks on drivers. However, three authorities do not mention that they undertake any Disclosure Scotland checks on drivers.

Another authority said they will ‘soon be undertaking Enhanced Disclosure checks.’

One local authority said the checks are applied only to taxi drivers, but do not include bus drivers. The SCC did not ask for specific practice in each local authority in relation to taxi licences. However, checks are likely to be more rigorous as the local authority licences them and this generally involves background police checks to confirm the driver is a ‘fit and proper person’ (amongst other checks) prior to licences being awarded. However, there is still a variety of practice across Scotland. For example, some authorities award taxi licences when the applicant is 18 years of age, while others only award to applicants over 21.

A variety of other checks are carried out on drivers prior to the contract being awarded; some authorities check driving licences and taxi licences; some authorities ask for first aid certificates.

17 www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/typedisc.htm.
The results indicate that most local authorities are undertaking some form of check on drivers before awarding a contract. However, not all are, and there appears to be a lack of consistency in both the level of checks being undertaken and in the drivers who are being checked. To ensure consistently high levels of child protection across the country, it is necessary that these checks are standardised and the highest level of Disclosure Scotland checks are carried out.

b) Pre-contract checks on attendants

Similarly, the SCC wanted to find out whether pre-contract checks were also carried out on attendants on school transport. Eleven local authorities responded to this question.

The results show that all who responded carry out Disclosure Scotland checks on attendants and four specifically mention that they undertake Enhanced checks. Of those who previously mentioned that they used attendants on school transport, one did not respond to this question.

As with checks on drivers, it is important on child protection grounds that these checks are at the highest level and are standardised across Scotland.

c) Pre-contract checks on vehicles

Pre-contact checks on vehicles were also investigated. The results indicate the majority of respondents (85%) said they were carrying out some form of pre-contract check. Two authorities said no checks were carried out.

The results show that a range of checks was being carried out. For the purposes of analysis we examine two variables; checks on documents that are basic legal requirements, and checks that go beyond the legal minimum.

Two-thirds of respondents stated that they checked the relevant legal documentation prior to awarding a contract. Responses typically include Certificate of Fitness or equivalent Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA) checks or MOTs; insurance cover, taxi drivers’ licence and taxi plates. One authority also noted they check ‘details of any vehicle prohibition notices served.’

There were a number of authorities that responded that they carried out inspection checks on vehicles. Thirty per cent of respondents said that vehicle inspections were undertaken typically either in-house ‘vehicle checks undertaken by staff’, or externally, ‘vehicle checks undertaken by SPT’. One authority said that although they did not undertake vehicle checks themselves, they checked out vehicles, as they ‘talk to the vehicle inspectorate’ prior to awarding a contract.

The results indicate that most local authorities carry out some form of vehicle check, and most commonly this involves confirming the necessary legal documentation is in order.

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18 Also known as the Vehicle Inspectorate prior to 2003.
However, almost a third of authorities carry out their own inspection of vehicles prior to awarding a contract, essentially inspecting school transport independently of MOT/VOSA checks. It would be useful to examine this in more detail to see whether this additional check is resulting in safer or more reliable transport for pupils in the authorities who do this, and whether there is a need for this practice to be extended more widely.

SPT carry out inspections for all its local authorities.

**Codes of conduct for staff**

Conduct of employees on school transport contracts was explored in relation to both written codes of conduct and training for staff.

The results indicate that almost 75% of respondents said drivers employed on all school transport services in their area should adhere to a written code of conduct. However, over a fifth of respondents say they do not require codes of conduct for drivers. When asked about codes of conduct for attendants, just under three-quarters of those who use attendants responded that there was a written code of conduct that attendants should observe, while 27% said there was not.

The results suggest a variety of practice across local authorities, and the SCC recommends that a standardised written code of conduct should be produced for all drivers and attendants on school transport contracts.

**Staff training on conduct**

When asked about staff training, a third of local authorities say that conduct training is provided for drivers, and of those who say they use attendants, 45% say that training is provided for attendants.

Training is most frequently provided by local authorities (22%); followed by the operator or is contracted out to a third party (both account for 15% of responses). One local authority mentioned that conduct training is to be introduced.

There is no explicit guidance on conduct training for drivers or attendants in the recent Scottish Executive circular. However, in order to make the school transport experience as positive for pupils as possible, it is important that the staff that take or accompany pupils on their school journeys treat them in a positive manner. It is important that they are also trained in dealing with potentially dangerous situations. To this end, it is necessary that conduct training is perceived as important and should be introduced and that this is standardised and based on good customer care principles.
2.4 Monitoring of contracts

This section reviews contract monitoring and includes issues around safety checks, inspections and sanctions that apply when contractors fail to meet the contract standards.

Monitoring safety standards

It is a legal requirement that vehicles are in a fit and roadworthy condition. The SCC wanted to know how school vehicle standards are inspected, once the contract has been awarded, to ensure they are in a fit and roadworthy condition.

The most common response was to make use of statutory inspection requirements (75%) for example, through MOT testing or VOSA.

Some other mechanisms are used. Just over a quarter of respondents said they employ their own, or contract out, engineers to inspect vehicles. Other responses include close joint working with other bodies (such as the police), either routinely or when the need arises, such as when problems are reported.

SPT carry out inspections for all its local authorities.

The response to this question indicates that some authorities rely on the statutory bodies to inspect vehicles. However, similar to pre-inspection checks on vehicles, other authorities go beyond this and make use of their own engineers to check vehicles.

How good are the safety checks?

The majority of respondents indicate that they have high levels of satisfaction with the arrangements for vehicle inspections on safety grounds. The majority of local authorities were either satisfied or very satisfied with the current arrangements (77%). A number of authorities took the middle ground, and indicated they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with arrangements for inspections on safety grounds (15%). One local authority said they were very dissatisfied with the process. See table 3.

Table 3: Satisfaction with vehicle inspections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How satisfied are you with the current arrangements for vehicle inspections on safety grounds?</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very dissatisfied</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some positive comments were received. For example:

- ‘while we can never be complacent, our exercises have already removed individual operators where vehicle maintenance is an issue’
- ‘response from the Vehicle Inspectorate excellent’
- ‘qualified vehicle plant maintenance staff – minimal problems – striving for continual improvements’
- ‘regular rigorous checks are undertaken’

However, more concerning comments were also received, and these frequently related to resources. For example:

- ‘spot checks, not carried out very frequently, less in recent years’
- ‘given additional financial resources an increased inspection regime would be desirable’
- ‘frequency and number of checks could be improved’
- ‘lack of resources to carry out ongoing monitoring’

The monitoring of any contract is crucial to ensure the requirements of the contract are being met. The results show a general satisfaction with the process, however they also indicate that some authorities are going beyond the statutory minimum and conducting their own safety checks.

**Monitoring standards checks**

We asked who inspects service standards on school transport routes (for example to ensure that buses run on time, and safety guidelines are observed).

The majority of respondents (63%) answered that they employ dedicated staff to inspect service standards. However, a number of other types of inspectors are used; from non-dedicated local authority staff to third party contractors. Although we did not specifically ask about parental and pupil input to inspection of service standards, four local authorities mention they also receive feedback from schools and parents. It is important that the service users have a mechanism to feed their views back to the local authorities and the SCC would encourage local authorities to actively seek the views of their users and feed this back as an additional factor in the process when contracts are being renewed.

SPT also carry out this function for local authorities in their area.

**How good are the standards checks?**

Just over half of respondents indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with service inspections. A quarter of respondents answered in the middle range, being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with service inspections and just over 10% indicated they were dissatisfied with service inspections. See table 4.
A number of comments highlighted positive experiences. For example:

- our internal surveyor covers all schools across [our area] on a regular basis
- operational issues are addressed within specified timescales. High level of resolution achieved – otherwise contractual sanctions imposed
- existing arrangements provide a satisfactory mechanism/procedure for reporting non-compliance

However, other less positive comments were received. For example:

- service inspections are limited due to the numbers of personnel
- if staff resources were improved inspections could be carried out on a more regular basis
- one staff member to cover whole region

While the overall picture appears to be one of general satisfaction, there are nevertheless a number of authorities that seem fairly dissatisfied with service inspections. Many of the comments received on this focus the dissatisfaction on lack of staff or resources to carry out this function as comprehensively as they would like.

**Recording breaches in contracts**

The SCC wanted to find out what methods are used to record breaches in contracts. The results suggest that a range of methods is used for safety standards and service standards. The most popular method was in the use of logbooks (74%), followed by cameras (37%). Three local authorities use video cameras. The use of CCTV in some buses was also mentioned.

**Sanctions for failing standards**

The SCC asked about sanctions available to local authorities for breaches in contract. All authorities mentioned the ultimate sanction was the removal of the contract. Three-quarters mentioned monitoring the situation with a return inspection and 70% mentioned the use of financial penalties. Other actions mentioned include warning letters, suspension of contract and representation to VOSA or Traffic Commissioner.
**Termination of contract**

The SCC was interested in the circumstances where a school transport contract would be terminated. Answers include safety and maintenance breaches; repeated breaches of contract; illegality of vehicles and inappropriate driver behaviour.

The results from this section indicate that policies are in place to deal with breaches in contract. However, what is not clear is whether local authorities are consistently monitoring the situation (as evidenced by responses to the earlier section on satisfaction with safety and service standards). The results would suggest the need for local authorities to review the resources dedicated to monitoring of service and safety standards, and that the importance of this should not be underestimated.

**Reports on the performance of operators**

We asked how often the local authority receives reports on the performance of operators. The most common response seems to indicate that reports are rarely received. Nine suggest there is no fixed reporting on performance, for example ‘when required; ad hoc; on occasion; only if concerns are raised to the operators conduct’.

**2.5 Parental information**

It is a legal requirement that parents are provided with written information about transport arrangements.\(^{19}\)

This section examines whether parents are notified of changes to services, who notifies them and how.

All but one respondent said parents were notified of changes to transport services or when a new contractor is appointed (96%) and parents appear to gain this information from a variety of places. The most common response is that local authorities notify parents of changes (74%), followed by the school (37%). Fifteen per cent of authorities say the operator notifies parents of changes. All SPT authorities said SPT informs parents of changes in service or contractor.

A range of methods is used to get this information to parents. Most commonly information is issued to parents via the schools (70%) or posted directly to parents (52%). A small number of other methods were given, including press notices, information available at local authority offices, or on their website.

SPT provide a telephone helpline for parents as well as notifying parents of changes in all its local authority areas.

The results from this section suggest that parents are generally being provided with information relating to changes in transport services. Most commonly, this is provided by local authorities, and is generally issued through the school, although half of respondents

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say they post information directly to parents. However, this section does highlight that the practice in keeping parents informed is not a uniform process across local authority areas. It is important that parents are kept fully informed about changes to services, and know where to go to access information when they need it.

2.6 Pupils using school transport services

This section examines issues relating to pupil safety and pupil behaviour.

**Improved pupil safety**

Local authorities are expected to keep their school transport provision under review to secure, as far as is reasonable and practicable, the safety of pupils at all times. The SCC were interested in whether steps had been taken to improve pupil safety on school transport vehicles.

The majority of respondents, over 80%, said they had taken steps to improve pupil safety on school transport. Fifteen per cent said they had not.

A range of safety measures has been introduced. These are based on different objectives and have been categorised into five methods and summarised below:

- **Provision of information** (such as safety booklets; parent/pupil charters; guidelines for embarking; notice boards; seminars for parents);
- **Pupil behaviour** (CCTV on vehicles; photo identification passes; pupil behaviour reports; monitoring; sanctions);
- **Pupil management** (colour coding to spread loading; one seat per child; good practice guidance for schools; no standing policy);
- **Planning** (risk assessments; route safety assessments; multi-agency monitoring);
- **Vehicle improvements** (reducing age of vehicles; single decker buses only; encouraging purchase of fleet with seatbelts for replacement; all vehicles fitted with seatbelts; accessible vehicles; mobile phones); and
- **Drivers** (establishing maximum age limit; induction course).

These examples given from local authorities suggest a wide range of safety measures have been introduced to improve pupil safety on school transport vehicles. Many of these will be relevant to a specific area or problem. However, it would be useful to review these and share good practice more widely.

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20 Scottish Executive (2003a) op.cit.
It is surprising that four local authorities said no steps to improve safety had been taken, which would appear to be against the spirit of the Scottish Executive guidance. All authorities, and in particular these four, should keep their safety procedures under constant review, and introduce safety measures in response to new developments and changing circumstances.

**Parents accompanying children**

Anecdotal evidence raised the issue to the SCC that in some areas, parents were allowed to accompany children, particularly younger children, on the journey to school. The SCC was interested in what local authority policy was on this. The results show that no respondent allow parents to accompany children on school transport vehicles.

**Contingency plans**

In relation to contingency plans the Scottish Executive guidance\(^ {21} \) refers local authorities to the Scottish School Board Association publication *A Safe School Travel Pack*.\(^ {22} \) This pack was endorsed by the Scottish Executive and sent to all education authorities for distribution to schools in 1996. In relation to contingency plans, the Scottish Executive guidance refers to contractor responsibilities as outlined in the pack. Specifically that ‘contingency plans are in place to deal with vehicle failures, staff unavailability, emergency closures of schools and other emergencies.’

The SCC was interested in whether local authorities have contingency plans in place to deal with emergency situations. The majority of respondents (78%) said they do have contingency plans in place while just over 10% do not.

The results indicate that contingency plans exist for a range of situations. These include plans for early closure due to adverse weather (commonly snow); for emergency school closures; for severe congestion on roads and potential discipline situations.

**Rules on conduct of pupils**

The SCC wanted to know whether parents are provided with information on the rules that pupils must observe while using school transport. We were interested in whether parents received this information, as they are responsible for their children’s behaviour.

The survey asked whether parents are provided with information on the rules pupils must adhere to while using school transport. The results indicate that the majority of respondents said parents were provided with this information (78%), while 15% responded that they were not.

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\(^ {21}\) Scottish Executive (2003a)op cit.

\(^ {22}\) Scottish School Board Association (1996) *A Safe School Travel Pack*, This pack consisted of a guide book, a video, a CD-ROM and curriculum material and was updated in 1998.
Changing behaviour

The SCC wanted to know how local authorities view pupil misbehaviour on school transport, and whether it was an issue of concern in their area. The Scottish Executive Discipline Task Group report Better Behaviour – Better Learning23 noted there were concerns over the increasing levels of ‘indiscipline and anti-social behaviour’ on school buses.

When asked which statement best reflected local authority views, the most common response was that it was ‘an occasional problem for certain routes/schools’ (44%), while just over a fifth felt that the statement best reflecting their view was ‘it is a serious problem for certain routes/schools’. See table 5. Fifteen per cent felt it was ‘an occasional problem throughout the local authority area’ and two local authorities suggest ‘it is rarely a problem’.

Table 5: Pupil misbehaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which of these statements best reflects pupil misbehaviour on school transport as an issue of concern in your area?</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is rarely a problem</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is an occasional problem for certain schools/routes</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is an occasional problem throughout the LA area</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a serious problem for certain schools/routes</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a serious problem throughout the LA area</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We were also interested in whether respondents felt that pupil behaviour was changing over recent years in relation to school transport in their local area. Forty-five per cent of local authorities responded that pupil behaviour has worsened over recent years, with 37% responding that it has stayed the same. See table 6. Just over 11% responded that they feel it has improved.

Table 6: Change in behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you feel that over recent years pupil behaviour on school transport has</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worsened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the information supplied by local authorities, it appears the majority view is that pupil behaviour is a concern, particularly in certain areas and that it is worsening over time. Strategies need to be adopted at three levels to deal with this – school, local authority and Scottish Executive.

2.7 Complaint handling

This section focuses on complaints procedures for parents, information on how to complain, and records of complaints.

Complaint procedures for parents

The SCC asked about complaints procedures for parents. A complaints procedure is part of good customer service; it can be indicative of wider problems or as a mechanism to help improve services in the future. It is also important that parents know a complaints procedure exists, and that if they do complain, it will be acted upon.

We asked whether school transport services have a written complaints procedure for parents. The most common response (74%) was the local authorities own corporate complaints procedure. Forty-four per cent cited the lead departments’ own procedure (either transportation or education department). Just over a quarter indicated the school complaints procedure was available to parents. One mentioned that the contractor had a complaints procedure and one respondent mentioned they used complaints postcards in each school. Surprisingly, one respondent said they did not have a written complaints procedure.

The SPT also has a complaints procedure, which was mentioned by each of the authorities that contract to SPT.

The majority of respondents (85%) said they provide information to parents on how to make a complaint about the school transport service. However, surprisingly, 15% of local authorities say information is not provided to parents on making a complaint.

The information is generally produced by the local authority (82%) or by the school (19%).

We asked when the information is given to parents and the most common response from respondents is that this is given to parents when information about school transport arrangements are issued (56%). A third of respondents say parents get this information when they want to make a complaint. Almost a fifth of respondents say parents get the information when they enrol their child at school, and of these, two local authorities say this information is given only when the child is enrolled. Other responses mention it is given out when parents apply for free school transport.

Record of complaints

The majority of respondents (89%) indicate that they keep a record of complaints which are taken into consideration when awarding future contracts. Surprisingly, however, three local authorities indicate they do not keep a record of complaints.

2.8 Other issues

The SCC were interested in the views of respondents on what were the main issues facing local authority provision of school transport over the next five years, or any other comments
by respondents. There was a broad range of issues highlighted, with over 88% of respondents making some comment. These are summarised below; however, many of the issues are inter-related and could fall within more than one category.

There was a range of comments on **resources**. For example in relation to increasing costs ‘The ever increasing cost and budget limitations’, and ‘Cost of provision is rising at around an extra 30% each time we retender – this is unsustainable’. Some commented on the implication of the Disability Discrimination Act, ‘potential price increase of contract when DDA compliance statutory’.

There was a range of comments relating to the lack of **availability** of contractors. For example ‘lack of contractors’ and ‘larger operators arriving at a monopoly situation’. Some comments related to the availability of staff, ‘sourcing escorts; and driver shortages’ or vehicles ‘availability of accessible vehicles’ and ‘as older vehicles are replaced, the carrying capacity declines. Need for additional buses to cope with demand’.

Some comments focused on the changing **demographic patterns** in their areas and the implications this will have for future provision. For example ‘increased demand as rural areas repopulate’ or, conversely, ‘falling school rolls’. Similarly, changes in development patterns were felt likely to be an issue affecting provision. For example ‘New housing often not close to existing schools’ and ‘out of town residential developments’ were mentioned.

Some comments reflected the additional impact that wider **societal changes** would have over the next five years. For example ‘challenge of providing more flexible school transport to accommodate ‘pre-’ and ‘after-’ school clubs’ or potential additional demands from ‘pre-school – non-statutory’ and ‘review of entitlement post 16 years’.

**Traffic management and congestion** were raised as issues for the next five years. For example ‘Dealing with congestion/conflict [between] school contract vehicles and parents’ car’ and issues around managing this were raised, including the need to ‘Encourage pupils to travel by bus by enhancing the bus network’ and ‘The need to reduce traffic congestion and discourage parents from bringing pupils to school by car. It must be made safe and acceptable for pupils to walk up to the two mile limit.’ Policy mechanisms to achieve this were mentioned as issues. For example ‘development of local school transport plans’ and ‘Safer routes to school – encouraging pupils to walk/ cycle to school by improving safety’.

General concerns over **safety** were raised, some in relation to seatbelts on school transport and Disclosure Scotland ‘delays in receiving Disclosure Scotland information’.

A number of comments were made over **parental expectations**, generally indicating that they were too high. For example ‘increased expectancy from parents who expect the local authority to provide a service that will meet all their needs as working parents’ and ‘entitlement expectations – parental pressure for provision outwith 2/3 miles’.

Finally, a range of comments focused on the challenge of dealing with **pupil behaviour** on school transport.
3. Conclusions and recommendations

3.1 Introduction

The research has identified a considerable amount of good practice by Scottish local authorities in relation to school transport, particularly in terms of provision of free school transport beyond the statutory minimum and excellent local examples of contract monitoring and safety improvements.

While school transport is clearly a priority for many local authorities what is apparent from this research is that there is not a consistent service quality across Scotland. This is the case in terms of monitoring, improvements to safety, and use of attendants, for example.

The SCC is concerned that such variations exist. It does not seem reasonable for local authority boundaries to determine the quality of school transport. While we recognise the importance of maintaining local discretion, and allowing authorities to take local circumstances into account, there is also a real need to ensure a consistent approach is applied and that all authorities are working to the same high standards.

Recommendation 1

That the Scottish Executive and local authorities consider how a more consistent national approach to school transport can be achieved, particularly through revised guidance and the sharing of best practice and, if required, legislation.

In the context of this over-arching conclusion it is useful to draw together the main conclusions from the research.

3.2 Context and eligibility

We were initially interested in which department of the local authority led on school transport issues. However, detailed analysis did not support our initial proposition that this may be an important factor in the implementation of school transport. Most authorities had in place polices for school transport, some utilising local transport strategies. Surprisingly, one authority did indicate that it did not have a policy on school transport in place. We also noted that all the local authorities had provision for pupils needing accessible transport, whether on a short or long-term basis.

The research also highlighted, as would be expected in a highly geographically diverse country as Scotland, that a very wide range of transport modes and scale were apparent, reflecting the complexity of the task for local authorities. Importantly, most authorities indicated that they promoted the integration of school transport services with other services.
Our findings on eligibility criteria were interesting in that around 90% of authorities indicated that they operated more generous criteria than the statutory minimum. This does tend to suggest that the statutory minimum, which has been in place for some years, is in need of revision to reflect changing travel patterns and societal trends.

**Recommendation 2**

The Scottish Executive should undertake a review of the criteria used for free school transport provision in the context of current and changing travel patterns and the acceptability of existing criteria.

### 3.3 Contracting and monitoring of services

The complexity of the task for authorities was clearly highlighted by the information we collected on numbers of contracts awarded, with a number of authorities operating over 200 contracts and one rural authority managing 600 contracts.

Particularly interesting in terms of contracts was the variation in their length, ranging from one year to five years. However, we were unable to determine from our research whether longer contracts lead to better services.

The use of attendants was a particular area of inconsistency across the country, with over half of authorities never using attendants. The most common reasons for using attendants would appear to be for double-decker buses and where there have been particular behavioural difficulties on routes. The Scottish Executive advocates that supervision can improve behaviour on school transport, which can then have a positive effect on behaviour throughout the school day. We believe the experience of those authorities using attendants should be reviewed to assess whether this is an area where a more consistent national policy should be developed.

**Recommendation 3**

Further research is conducted to determine whether there is a need for extending the use of attendants on school transport in Scotland. The Scottish Executive should review the practice amongst local authorities.

We were particularly interested in the research to investigate pre-contract checks undertaken by authorities in terms of drivers, attendants and vehicles.

In terms of drivers, while we found that authorities were undertaking checks on drivers, including through Disclosure Scotland, we were concerned that there appears to be variation across the country in terms of levels of these checks and, in a minority of cases, checks not being done on certain categories of drivers. For example, one authority did Disclosure Scotland checks on taxi drivers but not bus drivers. We believe that on such a crucial child protection issue there must be a consistent approach across the country, reflecting best practice in place in many authorities. This should extend to ‘parental contract’ parents if they fall under a contract with the local authority, but not for parent drivers operating on an informal basis.
**Recommendation 4**

All drivers responsible for transporting children to school (including bus, minibus, taxi and parental contacts) should have Enhanced Disclosure Scotland checks undertaken before a contract is awarded.

We also believe the same level of check is required with regard to attendants, where the research also suggests that there is inconsistency in terms of checks undertaken. Although like drivers, the research does suggest that most authorities will undertake checks on attendants, again this is not always at the Enhanced level.

**Recommendation 5**

All attendants with responsibility for travelling with children to school should have Enhanced Disclosure Scotland checks undertaken prior to a contract being awarded.

The survey indicated that 85% of authorities will undertake some form of pre-contract check on vehicles. We believe this is an important task for the authority. The basic level of checking is related to legal documentation – ensuring the operator has the required licence and vehicles have appropriate MOT/VOSA tests and insurance. Around two-thirds of authorities indicated they checked this type of documentation.

However, interestingly, a third of authorities went further and actually checked vehicles. In many cases in-house engineers, including SPT engineers, will undertake this. Other authorities rely on the fact that the operator will be subject to the inspection regime of VOSA or taxi licensing authority (also part of the local authority) as a condition of holding a licence to operate. We have been unable to conclude from this survey whether such additional inspections by SPT and individual authorities improve safety and maintenance on school transport contracts.

It is our view from the research results that close liaison between the local authority and the Traffic Commissioners Office (who house VOSA) can give authorities vital information in terms of the operator’s maintenance and reliability record.

**Recommendation 6**

Local authorities should liaise with the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency within the Traffic Commissioners Office prior to awarding contracts to obtain relevant information on maintenance and reliability records.

As well as use of Disclosure Scotland checks on drivers and attendants, the survey looked at the use of codes of conduct for staff working on school contracts. Three-quarters of authorities responded that drivers and attendants should adhere to codes of conduct. Only a third of authorities had training on conduct in place for drivers, and slightly less have this in place for attendants, through a variety of training outlets. Drivers and attendants on school contracts perform responsible and often difficult jobs and the SCC believes training, particularly in terms of conduct with pupils, can enhance the service they are providing.
Recommendation 7
Local authorities should ensure that standardised conduct training is provided for all school transport drivers and attendants and that this should be quality assured.

Monitoring of any commercial contract is crucial to ensure the contractor is meeting the requirements of the contract. Three-quarters of operators rely on the statutory inspection regimes to ensure vehicle safety standards. However, as with pre-contract inspections just over 25% of authorities (mainly in the SPT area) use their own inspections over and above the statutory ones. Only one authority was dissatisfied with the process for safety checks with most being generally satisfied. However, the research did highlight that spot checks are not undertaken as frequently as authorities would wish, usually because of resource restrictions.

While recognising resource constraints facing local authorities, we believe spot checks of vehicles are crucial to ensure safety standards. This should extend to ‘parental contract’ vehicles if they fall under a contract with the local authority, but not for parent drivers operating in an informal basis.

Recommendation 8
Local authorities should ensure that regular unannounced safety spot checks of school transport vehicles occur either through their own inspections, SPT (where applicable) or through liaison with VOSA.

Local authorities also monitor service standards such as punctuality and observation of safety guidelines. Over 60% of respondents had dedicated staff to undertake such inspections and some used external contractors. However, while local authorities were generally satisfied with these inspections, as with the spot-checks for vehicle maintenance, the key issue was the ability to dedicate enough resources to such service monitoring, with 11% of respondents actually dissatisfied with this area of monitoring.

The research highlighted that logbooks and cameras were used to record breaches in contracts. All authorities indicated that the ultimate sanction for poor performance was removal of contract, with a variety of intermediate stages before this would occur. Seventy per cent also utilised financial penalties in such contracts. Contract removal is likely to occur for breaches of safety, illegal vehicles or inappropriate driver behaviour.

The research highlights some good practice in local authority contract monitoring but it also highlights that monitoring in terms of vehicle safety and service standards generally are not as frequent as they could be and an increase in such monitoring could have considerable benefits.

Recommendation 9
Local authorities should review the level of resources dedicated to monitoring school transport contracts to ensure high levels of vehicle safety and service standards are being met.
3.4 Information for parents

As noted earlier it is a legal requirement for parents to be provided with written information about the transport arrangements for their children. All but one authority indicated that parents were informed of changes to transport arrangements, such as a change of operator. For those authorities in the SPT area that authority usually undertook this. A range of methods of informing parents of changes was used. SPT also operate a telephone helpline for parents.

Through a range of methods it appears from the research that parents are generally provided with information about school transport. As with all information to parents this requires to be up to date and be easily understood.

3.5 Pupil safety

Pupil safety should be central to the operation of school transport services. Eighty per cent of respondents indicated they had taken positive steps to improve pupil safety, although significantly 15% said they had not. Such steps, as summarised earlier, have related to information, behaviour, management, planning, vehicle improvements and drivers. The research has highlighted that there are significant aspects of good practice related to safety.

Recommendation 10

Local authorities continue to develop aspects of increased pupil safety in school transport, and in particular the need to share good practice and emerging experience in this area.

Scottish Executive guidance on school transport indicates that contingency plans should be in place to ensure a wide range of situations, from bad weather to accidents, can be dealt with appropriately. However, despite this guidance, a number of respondents indicated that they did not have such plans in place.

Recommendation 11

All local authorities should have contingency plans in place as recommended in Scottish Executive guidance. This will help to ensure that parents, schools and transport operators are better informed and able to effectively deal with situations as they emerge.

3.6 Pupil behaviour

The research has highlighted that the majority of local authorities provided parents with information on the expected behaviour of pupils on school transport services. Most authorities surveyed felt behaviour was an issue, most commonly only occasionally on certain routes. However, for some schools and routes this is a continual problem. Forty-
four per cent of respondents also felt that the problem was worsening. We have discussed earlier that there is a viewpoint that behaviour on the incoming school transport service can set the tone for behaviour in school during the day. This was mentioned in the Scottish Executive Discipline Task Group report *Better Behaviour – Better Learning* in 2001.

**Recommendation 12**

National and local strategies relating to positive pupil behaviour should also embrace behaviour on school transport.

### 3.7 Complaints

School transport services, like any other public service, should have an open and accessible complaints procedure. While SPT has a dedicated complaints procedure, most individual local authorities relied on the corporate complaints systems of authority, department or school. Although most authorities did offer parents information on how to complain if they need to, a significant number did not. Complaints are an important way of improving the service, as well as alerting the authority to potential safety and reliability issues. It is our view that there is a lack of consistency in how authorities deal with the complaints process and this should be addressed.

It is an essential principle of the Service First guidelines that every service provider should have a written procedure in place for dealing with complaints. This should be written in clear and simple language to enable parents to understand the procedure and how it works. It is important that parents feel their complaint has been addressed fairly, and a written complaints procedure will go some way to satisfying this.

**Recommendation 13**

Local authorities should ensure parents have full information on how to complain and that the outcome of complaints are fed back to help service improvement.

### 3.8 Future strategic issues

This research has highlighted that local authorities are generally operating the school transport service in a professional and effective manner; however, there are issues that require to be addressed, particularly in relation to consistency of standards, approach and importantly the spreading of good practice across Scotland. There are also specific issues in relation to driver and attendant checks, contract monitoring and safety and behaviour improvements. The development of these issues is key to improving the school transport service and increasing parental confidence in it.
**Recommendation 14**

Local authorities should review the conditions set out within contracts and their arrangements for monitoring their school transport contracts to ensure that both value for money and improvements in quality are kept up to date.

There are a number of wider strategic issues that also need to be considered:

- Links to sustainable development, and reducing congestion in and around schools.
- Resource issues, which mean local authorities will be seeking to reduce tender costs.
- Social and economic aspects such as the general downward trend in school rolls and the increasingly complex lives of working parents.

Finally, the SCC is undertaking further quantitative research on the views of pupils travelling to school to complement this work. This will be reported in Summer 2005.
**APPENDIX 1 Questionnaire**

**Provision of Free School Transport in Scotland**

**Section 1: General information**

1) Please give the name of your local authority: _____________________________

2) What is the lead department in the management of school transport services in your authority?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) Does your local authority have a document outlining its policy on school transport? (please tick all applicable options)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Transport policy paper</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Transport Strategy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4) Are your local authority’s eligibility criteria for free school transport different from the statutory requirement? (please circle)

- Yes [25]
- No [2]

If yes, please give details: __________________________________________

5) What provisions are made for children who attend mainstream education but have additional needs (e.g. a disability or injury)? (please tick all applicable options)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provision</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accessible mainstream school transport</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of special educational needs provision</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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24 Free for children aged under eight years and living two or more miles from their designated school; and aged eight years or over and residing three or more miles from their designated school.
6) Which of the following do you use to provide school transport in your area? 
(please tick all applicable options)

- Local authority owned vehicles 22
- Privately contracted vehicles 27
- Local service buses 27
- Rail services 12
- Contracts providing parents with travel expenses 22
- Other (please specify) 3

7) Do you promote integration of school transport services with other services? 
For example other local authority services, community transport services or 
other public transport services. (Please circle)

- Yes 25
- No 2

Section 2: Contracting of services

8) How many school transport contracts does your local authority currently have?

- less than 50 1
- 51-100 4
- 101-150 8
- 151-200 5
- more than 201 5

9) What is the usual duration of contract for provision of school transport 
services in your area? (please circle one option only)

- 1 year 2
- 2 years 0
- 3 years 12
- 4 years 5
- 5 years 5
- Other (please specify) 2

10) Do you provide an attendant on school transport vehicles? 
(please tick all applicable options)

- Single-decker buses 2
- Double-decker vehicles only 7
- When transporting children below a certain age (please state age:....) 1
- Never 14
- Other (please specify) 6
11) What kind of pre-contract checks are undertaken on an operator?

Drivers __________________________________________

Attendants __________________________________________

Vehicles __________________________________________

12) Is there a written code of conduct that must be adhered to by employees on all school transport services in your area? (Please circle)

Drivers
Yes 20  No 6  Not applicable 0

Attendants
Yes 8  No 4  Not applicable 15

13) Is conduct training provided for? (Please circle)

Drivers
Yes 9  No 17  Not applicable 0

Attendants
Yes 5  No 6  Not applicable 15

14) If yes, who provides this training?

Local authority 6
Contracted out to third party 4
Operator 4
Other (please specify) 1

Contract monitoring

15) How are school vehicle standards inspected to ensure that they are in a fit and roadworthy condition? (please tick all applicable options)

Statutory inspection requirements 20
Local authority employs or contracts own engineers 7
Other (please specify) 5
SPT carries out inspections 6

16) How satisfied are you with the current arrangements for vehicle inspections on safety grounds? (Please circle)

Very dissatisfied
1 2 0 3 4 4 15 5 6

Please give reasons for your answer __________________________________________
17) Who inspects service standards on school transport routes? 
(e.g. to ensure that buses run on time, adhere to safety guidelines etc.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated local authority staff</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracted out to third party</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other local authority officers</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPT</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18) How satisfied are you with the current arrangements for service inspections? 
(Please circle)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very dissatisfied</th>
<th>Very satisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please give reasons for your answer: ____________________________________________

19) How do inspectors record evidence of breaches of contract relating to vehicle or service standards? (please tick all applicable options)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Logbook</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camera</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video camera</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20) What actions can the local authority take against operators who do not meet standards set out in the contract? (please tick all applicable options)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Return inspector visits to ensure action has been taken</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial penalties</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal of contract</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21) Under what circumstances would a school transport contract be terminated?

---------------------------------------------------------------------

---------------------------------------------------------------------
22) How often does the local authority receive reports on the performance of operators? 
(please tick one option only)

- Quarterly: 5
- Bi-annually: 0
- Annually: 2
- Other (please specify): 17

Section 3: Parental information

23) Are parents notified of changes to service or when a new contractor is appointed? 
(Please circle)

- Yes: 26
- No: 1

24) If yes, who notifies parents of changes to service or when a new contractor is appointed? (please tick all applicable options)

- Local authority: 20
- School: 10
- Operator: 4
- Parents not notified: 1
- Other (please specify): 1
- SPT: 6

25) If yes, how are parents notified of changes to service or when a new contractor is appointed? (please tick all applicable options)

- Information available for inspection at local authority offices: 1
- Information available on local authority website: 2
- Information issued to parents via schools: 19
- Press notice: 2
- Other (please specify): 1
- Information posted directly to parents: 14
Section 4: Pupils using school transport services

Pupil safety

26) Have you taken steps to improve/pupil safety on school transport vehicles? (Please circle)

- Yes 22
- No 4

If yes, please give details

27) Do you allow parents to accompany children below a certain age on school transport vehicles? (Please circle)

- Yes 0
- No 24

(IF yes, please specify maximum age ___________)

28) Do you have contingency plans in place for adverse weather or other emergency situations? (Please circle)

- Yes 21
- No 3

If yes, please give examples of situations where contingency plans are used:

Pupil behaviour

29) Are parents provided with information on the rules pupils must adhere to while using school transport? (Please circle)

- Yes 21
- No 4

30) Which of these statements best reflects pupil misbehaviour on school transport as an issue of concern in your area? (Please tick one option only)

- It is rarely a problem 2
- It is an occasional problem for certain routes/schools 12
- It is an occasional problem throughout the local authority area 4
- It is a serious problem for certain routes/schools 6
- It is a serious problem throughout the local authority area 0
31) Do you feel that over recent years pupil behaviour on school transport has:

- Improved: 3
- Worsened: 12
- Stayed the same: 10
- Don’t know: 0

**Section 5: Complaint handling**

32) Does your school transport service have a written complaints procedure for parents? *(Please tick all applicable options)*

- The local authority’s corporate complaints procedure: 20
- The lead department’s own complaints procedure: 12
- Schools’ own complaints procedures: 7
- Contractors’ own complaints procedures: 1
- Other (please specify): 1
- SPT: 6
- No: 1

33) Are parents provided with information on how to make a complaint about the school transport service? *(Please circle)*

- Yes: 23
- No: 4

If yes, is this information produced by the: *(please tick all applicable options)*

- School: 5
- Local authority: 22
- Operator: 0

If yes, when is the information on making a complaint given to parents? *(Please tick all applicable options)*

- When information is given to parents about school transport arrangements: 15
- When parents want to make a complaint: 9
- When parents enrol their child to school: 5
- Other (please specify): 3

34) Do you keep a record of complaints that are taken into consideration when awarding future contracts? *(Please circle)*

- Yes: 24
- No: 3
Other issues

35) What are the main issues facing local authority provision of school transport over the next five years?

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

36) Please use the space provided to include any other comments that you feel is relevant to the research:

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

Please return this completed questionnaire by **Friday 23rd January 2004** to:

Andrew Pulford
Scottish Consumer Council
FREEPOST G2 5277
G1 3DN

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.