Background
The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) is an independent policy organisation that has a special focus on the needs of disadvantaged consumers. School transport can be a major concern for parents and pupils. Local authorities have a legal responsibility to ensure that pupils who live outwith defined distances from school are transported there and back each day. There is a duty to provide free transport for children who live outwith the statutory walking distance to school and in many cases this school transport provision is contracted out.

The SCC conducted research on local authority policy and practice in relation to school transport provision. The aim of this research was to examine what was in place, and to determine whether the needs of pupils and parents are being met.

The study focuses on:
• the different contexts in which school transport services are operating;
• the contracting of school transport services and subsequent monitoring of the contract;
• information given to parents on the school transport services;
• pupils using school transport, including a focus on safety and behaviour; and
• complaints handling.

The research involved sending a self-completion postal survey to local authorities in Scotland between January and February 2004. It was concerned with mainstream state schools; special and private schools were outside the scope of the study. We received responses from 27 local authorities, serving urban, rural and mixed areas. We also surveyed Strathclyde Passenger Transport (SPT), which manages school transport for 11 authorities of the former Strathclyde Region.

Overview of findings
We found that some local authority practice is very good and should be applauded. For example, the majority of local authorities exceed the statutory walking distance criteria and all make provisions for pupils who have a physical disability or injury.

However, 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. There are unacceptable variations in local authority practice, even accounting for necessary local circumstances and discretion. Our concern is that parents and pupils should be entitled to expect the same minimum level of quality service across Scotland.

Recommendations:
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.

Key findings
Context
Most authorities had in place polices for school transport, some utilising local transport strategies.

All local authorities had provision for pupils needing accessible transport, whether on a short or long-term basis.

We were 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. We found few significant relationships, however two are worthy of note:

• education departments are more likely to provide conduct training for attendants than transport departments; and
• the communication methods are different, in that education departments are more likely to communicate with parents through schools while transport departments are more likely to communicate through the post.
As would be expected in a geographically diverse country such as Scotland, a very wide range of transport modes and variation in the scale of provision were apparent, reflecting the complexity of the task for local authorities. Included within this are buses, rail services, taxis, parental contracts, ferries and private boats and aeroplanes.

Importantly, most authorities indicated that they promoted the integration of school transport services with other services.

Around 90% of authorities indicated that they operated more generous criteria than the statutory minimum for walking distances. This tends 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.

**Recommendations:**

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.

**Contracting and monitoring of services**

The complexity of the task for authorities was clearly highlighted by the information collected on *numbers of contracts* awarded, with a number of authorities operating over 200 contracts and one rural authority managing 600 contracts. The length of contract ranged from one year to five years.

The *use of attendants* was a particular area of inconsistency across the country, with over half of authorities indicating they never use attendants. Their use has been associated with positive effects on pupil behaviour by the Scottish Executive.

We were particularly interested in *pre-contract checks* undertaken by local authorities on drivers, attendants and vehicles. For drivers, the majority of authorities were undertaking checks, including through Disclosure Scotland. However, there is variation across the country in terms of levels of checks (ranging from Basic, Standard and Enhanced) 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 there must be a consistent approach across the country for child protection reasons, reflecting best practice in many authorities. This should extend to parent drivers if they have a contract with the local authority, but not for parent drivers operating on an informal basis.

As with drivers, the research suggests that most authorities will undertake checks on attendants, however, this is not always at the Enhanced level.

85% of authorities undertake some form of pre-contract check on vehicles. The basic level of checking is related to legal documentation – ensuring the operator has the required licence and vehicles have appropriate MOT/ Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA) tests and insurance. Around two-thirds of authorities indicated they checked this type of documentation.

A third of authorities actually checked vehicles. In many cases in-house engineers, including SPT engineers, 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, the Traffic Commissioner and VOSA can give authorities vital information in terms of the operator’s maintenance and reliability record.

The survey looked at the use of *codes of conduct* for staff working on school contracts. Three-quarters of authorities responded that they had codes of conduct that drivers and attendants should adhere to. Only a third of authorities had training on conduct in place for drivers, and slightly less have this in place for attendants. 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.

**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 such resource constraints, 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.

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 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.

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.

### Recommendations:

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, SPT (where applicable) or through liaison with 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.

### Information for parents

All but one authority indicated that parents were informed of changes to transport arrangements, such as a change of operator. SPT undertook this responsibility for those authorities in its area. A range of methods of informing parents was used. SPT also operate a telephone helpline for parents.

### 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. These steps 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. However, this was inconsistent across Scotland.

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.

### Recommendations:

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.

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.

### Pupil behaviour

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. Importantly, the Scottish Executive Discipline Task Group report *Better Behaviour – Better Learning* in 2001 indicated that behaviour on school transport service could set the tone for behaviour in school during the day.

The research has highlighted that the majority of local authorities provided parents with information on the expected behaviour of pupils on school transport services.
The Scottish Consumer Council

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

Complaints handling
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.

Service providers 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.

Recommendations:
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.

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.

Recommendations:
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.

Conclusion
The research found too much variation in practice. Some of the practice is very good and we recognise this. However, some of it needs to be improved.

If there is not a more consistent quality of service across Scotland the 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.

More Information:
The full report of this summary, A review of school transport contracts (ISBN-0-9549004-2-1) is available from the Scottish Consumer Council (SCC), price £12.
All SCC reports are also published on our website www.scotconsumer.org.uk.