Introduction

This paper summarises the findings of research into school travel in Scotland.\(^1\) The SCC wanted to examine the views of pupils and parents on travelling to school. The research follows on from recent work that we conducted on the provision of school transport by local authorities, published in 2005.\(^2\)

The aims of the project were to:

- Gather the range of views of parents and pupils on their school transport service.
- Undertake a wider scale survey on specific aspects of travelling to school to gather the views of pupils across Scotland on whether the transport service is meeting their needs.

There were two main elements to the research, focus groups made up of either parents or pupils to explore their views of school transport services that they use; and a survey of secondary school pupils to gather their views on issues around travelling to and from school.\(^3\) While our research primarily focused on travel by bus, we also examined the range of different ways pupils' travel to school.

Research methods: Focus groups

Eight focus groups were conducted at four different locations across Scotland. The locations were selected to capture differences, and similarities, that exist based on urban, accessible small towns and rural locations in Scotland. Two focus groups were undertaken at each location, focusing on users who travel to school on transport provided under local authority contract – one with parents of pupils in S1 and S2, and one with pupils in S1 or S2. There was an average of 6 participants in each group. The focus groups were undertaken by Carole Millar Research on behalf of the SCC.

\(^1\) The full report can be downloaded at www.scotconsumer.org.uk.
\(^2\) Scottish Consumer Council (2005) A review of school transport contracts, February. This can be downloaded from the SCC website.
\(^3\) The survey of pupils was conducted in February 2005 and the focus group research was conducted in February and March 2004.
Overview
The overall conclusion from the focus groups was that pupils were generally getting a reliable service to and from school, and that in this respect most were quite happy with the service. However, there were a number of issues identified, which were of concern to pupils and parents.

This is supported by the quantitative research, which found that the overall perception of pupils on their journey to school appears to be generally positive, with over half giving it a thumbs up in the on-line survey (equating to a positive perception). However, a quarter of pupils rated their overall journey as a negative experience.

As could be anticipated, it was found that many of the issues identified by pupils in the focus group research are mirrored in the quantitative research.

Summary of key results
The key results of the research are summarised below with a discussion on each of the main issues.

Service standards
- Pupils’ perceptions of how modern and clean their buses were varied depending on whether they used local buses or school bus services, with those pupils who used local service buses indicating a more positive perception than pupils who used dedicated school buses.

- However, the overall perception of bus standards was fairly poor – only a third of school bus users and two fifths of local bus users indicated that they felt the buses they used to and from school were quite or very modern. In relation to how clean the bus was just under a third of school bus users suggested their bus was quite or very clean, compared with just over half of local bus users.

- The issue of overcrowding was examined, and although most school bus users appear to get a seat on the bus, this was not always so with local bus users. A small number of both school bus users and local bus users responded that they never get a seat on the bus.

Research methods: On-line survey of school pupils
A web-based survey was developed to gather the views of pupils in secondary schools in Scotland. It was carefully designed to ensure the questions used language and graphics appropriate for school pupils – for example using thumbs up and thumbs down symbols to indicate levels of satisfaction. It consisted of nine parts, one for each of the usual transport options available for pupils to travel to and from school. Pupils were asked how they usually travel to and from school and automatically routed to their relevant section within the survey. Common questions were also asked of all pupils, regardless of how they get to school. This target group appears to be well suited to this methodology as the pupils are in a classroom setting with access to the internet. Just under 900 pupils responded, across 25 local authority areas.

The majority of respondents travelled to school by bus (53%) - either by dedicated school bus, for pupils only, or by local service bus, which the general public can use. Pupils who walked (35%) or went to school by car (10%) were analysed separately; a small number of pupils (2%) travelled to school by other means and are included in the analysis of the common questions.
• We asked questions on pupils’ views in relation to the reliability of the bus service: whether the bus service they got to school had run on time over the past year and whether the bus had broken down. Encouragingly, almost two thirds of both school and local bus users reported that the bus service usually ran on time. However, almost one fifth of school bus users and nearly one quarter of local bus users responded that the bus rarely ran on time.

• Of concern, is that just under two thirds of both school bus and local bus users reported that the bus had broken down over the last year.

• In relation to waiting at school after being dropped off by the bus, almost 60% of both school bus and local bus users reported having a wait of 10 minutes or less before registration. However, over a fifth of both had a wait of more than 15 minutes.

• In relation to whether respondents felt buses were safe to be on, pupils’ views appeared to be split. Just over one third of respondents using both school and local buses agreed or strongly agreed that their bus felt safe to be on; while just under a third of school bus users and just over a quarter of local bus users did not agree that their bus felt safe to be on.

• In contrast, almost three quarters of pupils that walk to school were found to be happy or very happy that the route they took to school was safe.

A recent Scottish Executive research report noted that young people are significant users of public transport, ‘but not considered to be valuable customers by providers (or their drivers/operatives), for reasons of mistrust or lower revenue potential’.\(^4\)

This report also noted that school bus services tend to use older and less comfortable vehicles and this is likely to be as a result of the mistrust held by operators which may lead to a downward circle where bad behaviour and vandalism leads to even poorer services and less respect from young travellers.

The results of the survey of pupils in our research highlight that bus services used to transport pupils to school are commonly perceived as old, dirty, and can often be unreliable and break down. Many pupils also described them as being unsafe. This is however in the context that the overall perception of pupils on their journey to school appears to be generally positive, with over half giving it a thumbs up. This may suggest low expectations among pupils in relation to school transport service provision.

The recent SCC research on school transport contracts made a number of recommendations (which are reproduced in this report). We said that 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 the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA). We also recommended that 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. Both of these earlier recommendations are supported by the evidence from this latest research.

**Seatbelts**

• Another issue of concern was the availability and use of seatbelts. Seat belt availability was more common on school buses than local buses, particularly those operating outside urban areas. However, over two-fifths of school bus respondents and three quarters of local bus respondents said their buses never have seatbelts.

• Even when buses do have seatbelts, pupils tend not to use them: just under sixty percent of school bus pupils reported that they never wear a seat belt when it is provided. Of those who could use one, the reasons given most frequently for not doing so were they didn’t think about it, they are not made to or it is not comfortable.

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The results indicate a low level of seatbelt availability in the buses being used to transport pupils to school and a general unwillingness by pupils to use them when they are supplied. Guidance from the Scottish Executive suggests that ‘education authorities will wish to consider how they might best encourage pupils to wear seat belts for their own comfort and safety’. The evidence from our research suggests a more proactive approach is needed to encourage pupils to wear a seatbelt when one is available.

The issue of seatbelt use was also relevant to pupils who travel to school by car and the results show that almost one third of pupils travelling by car responded that they do not always wear a seatbelt.

**Pupil Behaviour**

- The issue of the behaviour of pupils while travelling to school was a particular concern to parents in the focus group research, especially in relation to safety and whether the behaviour was potentially dangerous.

- Pupils in the focus groups viewed behaviour, as might be expected, differently from their parents – interestingly, their description of it being always much worse. However, they seemed less concerned about it.

- The quantitative research suggests pupils’ views of the behaviour on buses to school, regardless of whether they were local bus services or school bus services, are roughly split, with two-fifths giving it a thumbs up (equating to a positive perception) and equally, two-fifths giving it a thumbs down (equating to a negative view).

- While some of the types of misbehaviour that occurred were relatively minor (for example, moving round the bus while it is in motion was most frequently cited) others were more serious - such as opening emergency exits on the bus.

- However, the problem with all the types of misbehaviour cited is the potential to distract the driver and be dangerous to the pupil, other passengers, or potentially other road users.

The issue of behaviour on buses to school has received much attention in recent years. A Scottish Executive report Anti-Social Behaviour on Buses examined views of bus drivers in Scotland, and although the focus was wider than school transport, this formed part of it. In this report, bus drivers claimed anti-social behaviour was not a feature of all routes, but there were certain bus routes or parts of routes where anti-social behaviour was more prevalent than others. However, they suggested there was one ‘universal exception to this…the school run’. The research suggests that the bus drivers who had been involved in school runs claimed that many pupils on the bus would carry out acts of anti-social behaviour, although these were considered to be of a more minor nature.

The recent SCC research on school transport contracts found that most local authorities suggested that behaviour on school transport was an issue, most commonly only occasionally on certain routes, but that for some schools and routes this is a continual problem. Many felt this was worsening over time. That research found evidence that local authorities are tackling the problem of behaviour on school transport. A recent Scottish Executive review of the School Travel Coordinator Initiative noted that one of a number of successful areas of delivery of School Travel Coordinators includes ‘co-ordinating partners to improve behaviour on school buses’. However, it also concluded that there is ‘some way to go before an efficient, healthy and inclusive approach to school travel is the norm within Scotland’.

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9 School travel coordinators were established following a recommendation in the report of the Scottish School Travel Advisory Group (SSTAG) to create school travel coordinators within each local authority area in Scotland.
In 2001, the Discipline Task Group report Better Behaviour – Better Learning noted there were concerns over the ‘increasing levels of indiscipline and anti-social behaviour’ on school buses. A whole school approach to behaviour has been recognised, however, this generally does not appear to extend beyond the school gates.

In our earlier review of school transport contracts, the SCC recommended that national and local strategies relating to positive behaviour should also embrace behaviour on school transport and this current research based on the evidence from pupils’ supports this recommendation.

Interestingly, pupils who walked to school rated the behaviour of pupils on their route positively, with over half giving behaviour a thumbs up, and a quarter having no strong opinion.

Dealing with poor behaviour

- A common response from parents in the focus group research was that it was difficult for the driver of the bus to maintain discipline on their own – the driver needed to concentrate on driving without distractions.

- Almost three quarters of school buses were found never to have an adult supervisor on the bus other than the driver and this figure rose to 85% of local bus services.

Although there is no statutory requirement for education authorities to provide attendants to supervise behaviour on school transport, the Scottish Executive does suggest ‘Supervision on transport can help to maintain good behaviour amongst pupils and this in turn can contribute to more positive behaviour within the classroom. Discipline problems which start on the journey to school, can spill over into the classroom. Supervision contributes more generally to greater school transport safety.’

The SCC research on school transport contracts made a recommendation that further research is conducted to determine whether there is a need for extending the use of attendants on school transport in Scotland. We suggested that the Scottish Executive should review practice amongst local authorities. Our current research has demonstrated that few pupils say attendants are present on their bus, despite a range of misbehaviour that could be potentially dangerous. The evidence from this current research appears to support the need for such a review.

Guidelines

- Rather surprisingly, the findings from the focus group research and the quantitative research indicate a low awareness of any rules of behaviour and safety by pupils when travelling to school, across all modes.

- The majority of pupils had either not received guidelines on travelling to school safely or on acceptable behaviour standards while travelling to and from school, or did not know whether they had or not (sixty nine percent for safety and sixty one percent for behaviour).

Our previous research on school transport contracts found that four fifths of local authorities said parents were provided with this information. This lack of awareness from pupils suggests a pressing need for pupils to be better informed about rules on safety and behaviour that should be observed while travelling to school.

Bus drivers

- One of the main positive aspects of school transport that was mentioned in the focus groups were bus drivers, with praise from both pupils and parents, particularly in the more rural areas.

- The survey findings appear to support this, with a positive response from the majority of pupils (using both school buses and local buses) in relation to aspects of driver conduct. For example, when asked how often the following had occurred in the past year, typically above 70% reported the driver has rarely or never used offensive language, failed to admit pupils if they had forgotten their bus pass, smoked or put pupils off the bus for bad behaviour.

11 Scottish Executive (2003) op.cit
However, this is not the view of all pupils.

- Over a quarter of both school bus pupils and local bus pupils reported the driver had used offensive language either very often or often; around a fifth of local bus pupils and school bus pupils reported the driver smoked on the bus either very often or often over the last year; over a quarter of local bus pupils and 14% of school bus pupils reported that drivers had refused to admit a pupil who had forgotten their travel pass.

- More seriously, 16% of local bus drivers and just over 10% of school bus drivers were reported to have put pupils off the bus for misbehaving very often or often over the last year. This is contrary to Scottish Executive guidelines, which state in relation to responsibilities of the contractor the need to ensure that ‘operational staff are briefed on issues involving pupil safety and behaviour, and that they know never to eject a pupil from a school transport vehicle’.13

Clearly while the majority of pupils have had a positive experience in relation to bus drivers, there are nevertheless significant numbers of pupils who have experienced problems.

Recent Scottish Executive research noted that when asked, the vast majority (93%) of bus drivers felt that they should have more training on dealing with anti-social behaviour. The research recommended there is an immediate need for such training. The report also notes that ‘some stakeholders suggest that where training on conflict management and resolution has been given to bus drivers, this has been effective in reducing the levels of anti-social behaviour’.14

In the SCC’s earlier report on school transport contracts we suggest a need for standardised driver training that is quality assured. The evidence from this research supports this recommendation, and indeed, this would appear to be supported by bus drivers themselves.

Complaints

- The issue of who is responsible for pupils when they are travelling to and from school was raised in all parent focus groups with uncertainty by most on where this responsibility lies. There is a real need for better information in this respect. Similarly, this lack of awareness on who has responsibility is reflected in complaints, with parents being unsure who they should complain to when problems arise.

- Pupils generally make few complaints in relation to their journey to school. While the research has identified a number of areas where problems are evident, few complaints had been made.

- Just over a fifth of pupils had complained about their journey to school; the most common route for their complaint was to a teacher or head teacher. Less than 10% complained to the driver and only 5% complained to the local authority.

- Just over a third of pupils felt they had reason to complain, but did not do so.

- Of those pupils that had made a complaint, importantly, two thirds suggested that they did not feel their complaint was taken seriously.

Complaints are an important way of improving the service, as well as alerting the local authority to potential safety and reliability issues. School transport related complaints should come under the local authority’s corporate complaints procedure to ensure that cases are recorded and monitored effectively.

However, as our research has demonstrated, there are potentially a number of routes which parents or pupil may use to complain, such as teachers or local authority staff. It is important that complaints should be dealt with at the most local level possible, but this should be combined with central monitoring of complaints. In the SCC’s earlier research we recommended that local authorities should ensure parents have full information on how to complain and that the outcome of complaints are fed back to help service improvements. This earlier recommendation is supported by the findings of this research.

13 Scottish Executive (2003) op.cit.
Earlier SCC research A review of school transport contracts in Scotland

As mentioned earlier, the SCC published a review of school transport contracts in Scotland in February 2005. The Education Committee of the Scottish Parliament has examined issues around school transport and makes reference to the earlier SCC report and its recommendations.\(^5\) We therefore make no new recommendations, but reaffirm the recommendations made in our earlier SCC report. The recommendations relevant to this current research are highlighted below:

**Recommendations**

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 contracts) 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.**

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.

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

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.

14. Local authorities should review the conditions set our 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.

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\(^5\) The Education Committee reviewed School Transport starting from it’s 7th meeting on 20th April, 2005. See the Scottish Parliament website for details www.scottish.parliament.uk
Conclusion

The overall results of the research indicate that the general perception of travel to school by bus is positive. However, there are clearly some problem areas identified in our research. Several related to aspects of service standards, including the quality and reliability of vehicles, the lack of seat belts, and perhaps most importantly, the lack of use of seat belts when they have been provided. Behaviour is a key issue and identified as a particular concern by parents, by pupils as a lesser extent and by drivers as evidenced by other research. Clearly there is considerable national emphasis on addressing this issue. The key finding perhaps of this study on this issue is that most pupils are unaware that rules or guidelines exist on behaviour or safety in travelling to school.

While pupils and parents in the focus groups were generally positive about drivers, especially on rural services, a number of issues about driver conduct have emerged. Previous research has highlighted that drivers themselves would welcome additional training, particularly on anti-social behaviour. Clearly greater training would benefit both the driver and pupils.

Finally, we found that while few pupils or parents did complain about services there was a concern that complaints were not taken seriously. There was often uncertainty about who to lodge a complaint with.

As we have indicated earlier the overall view of pupils in getting to and from school is generally positive. However, a number of significant issues do exist that need to be addressed. One general concern is that there appears to be a low expectation of quality of service. Failing to address this will have both short-term implications for current users of the services, but this may well have long-term implications for the future attitudes and use of public transport by our young people, particularly in realising more sustainable transport in Scotland.