GETTING TO SCHOOL BY BUS

SAFETY, SUPERVISION AND STANDARDS OF SERVICE:
An analysis of parents' views and local authority policies

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314 St. Vincent Street
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August 1988

ISBN 0 907067 26 3
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School transport and the law</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 the legal framework</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 legal loopholes/grey areas</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 list of relevant statutes</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An analysis of parents’ questionnaires</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 introduction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 findings</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 dissatisfaction</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 complaints</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 conclusions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Tables of findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 1 dissatisfaction</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2 complaints</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3 recipients of complaints</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4 outcomes of complaints</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5 comparing dissatisfaction and complaints</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authority contracts and policies</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. contracts</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 local authority reactions</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to our survey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 conclusions</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

On my last day at school I calculated that I had travelled the equivalent of once round the Equator— that's a lot of miles — and it accounted for only the three senior secondary years of my school education. I know about the boredom and the consequent problems faced by children in rural Scotland who go to school by bus.

I have since come to appreciate how their parents feel as well. What parent, seeing their child on to the school bus, has not at some time or other been plagued with anxiety? Will my child be safe on those icy roads? Might he be bullied? How can the driver control rowdy behaviour on the bus? Will I be contacted if the bus breaks down on the way home? And so on.

The Scottish Consumer Council decided to build a clearer picture both of parents' concerns and of the policies of local authorities, whose duty it is to arrange school transport, which were relevant to these concerns. We invited parents who were unhappy with the bus services used by their children to give us their views. Hundreds of parents from all over Scotland completed and returned questionnaires, giving us an insight into what they were most worried or angry about. These parents were of course a small minority and we had no reason to suppose that dissatisfaction with school bus services was widespread. On the other hand parental worries might well be very widespread.

Supervision and overcrowding on buses emerged as top concerns for our sample of parents. We asked local authorities what they thought of our survey findings and looked at their policies on school transport. Local authorities seemed to be doing a good job in providing school transport and dealing with complaints, but we felt that they needed to pay more attention to the problems highlighted by our survey.

We make a number of recommendations in the report. We hope that, if accepted, they will lead to improvements in bus services for schoolchildren. An even bigger aim, however, is to encourage local authorities to communicate better with parents and do more to reassure parents that their concerns are taken seriously. Thus we argue for tighter conditions of contract between local authorities and bus operators, a code of good practice on service quality, information on local authority policies and contracts for parents and good channels for making complaints.

Our concern about overcrowding on buses also leads us to recommend that the government abolish the outdated regulation which allows three children under 14 to be allocated to a double seat.

I hope that Regional Councils throughout Scotland will read this report and adopt our proposals. While costing little to implement, they would do much to increase parents' confidence in the bus services used by their children.

Barbara Kelly, Chairman, Scottish Consumer Council. August 1988
INTRODUCTION

This report is about bus services used by children to and from school. It looks at the safety and supervision of children on these services and other aspects of quality of service. The main part of the report is based on a postal survey of parents, who were asked about their satisfaction with the bus services used by their children, including both designated school bus and public services. The Scottish Consumer Council was interested in identifying the areas of particular concern among the those parents who were dissatisfied, with a view to recommending changes in policy or practice.

Our report first of all describes the legal framework in which school bus services are provided and points to some of the anomalies and grey areas in the law. Chapter 2 details the survey findings themselves, whilst Chapter 3 analyses the terms of the contracts made between education authorities and bus operators. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for changes in law and practice.
CHAPTER 1

SCHOOL TRANSPORT AND THE LAW

1. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Responsibility for the safety and supervision of pupils

Parents are legally responsible for ensuring that their child attends school. Parents can make their own transport arrangements, for example, by private car, for their child to journey to and from school, in which case the parents and the driver of the vehicle share responsibility for their child’s safety and supervision. Or parents may arrange for their child to journey to and from school in a vehicle run by a transport operator or other provider (such as an education authority with its own school buses), who is responsible for the safety and supervision of the pupils on board. Parents are responsible for their child’s safety and supervision up to boarding the vehicle on the way to school and after getting off the vehicle on the way home. Parents are responsible for ensuring that their child is received at school, but the education authority is responsible for making sure that suitable arrangements are made for the safety and supervision of pupils upon arrival at or departure from school.

Responsibility for the safety and supervision of pupils on vehicles is not likely, in the view of the court, to extend beyond whatever measures are required by statute law or beyond whatever measures a reasonable and responsible adult would be expected to take for children in their charge. Although the law does not ensure that children will act in the same way as responsible adults, adult responsibility for a child’s safety or supervision is not absolute. Children, depending on their age and other circumstances, could be deemed responsible for accidents or injuries which a responsible adult in charge could not reasonably have foreseen or prevented, for example, unexpected violence or bullying.

1.2 Home-school transport

Education authorities are under a legal duty to provide transport they consider necessary to enable pupils to attend schools or colleges. Transport may be provided on school buses or other vehicles, including taxis, minibuses, trains, ferries, aircraft and even bicycles. The authority may either provide transport of its own or arrange for this to be provided by a transport operator or firm, such as a bus company. Lack of suitable transport for getting to school and back counts as a reasonable excuse for non-attendance at school.

Education authorities must publish information for parents about their provision of school transport, including provision of free school transport. Local authorities must from time to time draw up policies for securing public transport in their areas, including school transport.
1.3 Free school transport

Transport must normally be provided, free of charge, for:

(a) children under eight living two or more miles walking distance away from school.

(b) children aged eight or over living three or more miles walking distance away from school.

(c) children who due to other exceptional circumstances would not be able to attend school without provision of transport, for example children with various disabilities.

This "walking distance" between home and school is measured by the "nearest available route", which may be taken to include public footpaths not running alongside roads. Free transport need not be provided, however, for pupils living these distances away if they are attending a school of their parents' own choice, that is, a school other than the one proposed by the education authority. Any spare places on contract transport arranged by the education authority must nonetheless be provided free of charge to other pupils selected by the authority after places have been taken up by entitled children. The authority may also pay all or part of the travelling expenses of pupils using ordinary public transport, whether entitled to free transport or not.

Education authorities are allowed to carry fare-paying adult passengers on vehicles which they own, and these can also be used for ordinary public transport when not in use for school transport.

1.4 Safety and supervision on school transport

Transport providers are under certain statutory and contractual obligations to take reasonable precautions for the safety and care of passengers, such as driving with due care and consideration and making sure that the vehicle is in roadworthy condition. Regulations also lay down the conduct of passengers, licensing and testing of vehicles. The various licensing and safety standards applying to ordinary public service vehicles, as described below, do not apply to vehicles owned by the education authority and used only for school transport. Permits issued for the running of these vehicles, such as school buses and minibuses, may nonetheless lay down conditions for their maintenance and use.

1.5 Public service vehicles

A vehicle is regarded as a public service vehicle if it is used "for hire or reward" and is adapted to carry more than eight passengers - or up to eight passengers who are charged separate fares as part of a passenger-carrying business. A vehicle is used for hire or reward whenever payment, including
fares and contract prices, is made for the carrying of passengers. As has been explained, most school buses are also public service vehicles. [1981 Act,s.1].

Public service vehicles must normally meet certain conditions of initial fitness run under a PSV operators' licence, and be driven by a holder of a PSV driver's licence. [1981,ss. 6 - 29, as amended]. They are also subject to inspection by the Department of Transport.

Operators' and driver's licences are not, however, issued for "small" (9 - 16 passengers) or "large buses" (over 16 passengers) which have been allowed to run under a permit granted either by a designated body, such as the education authority (in the case of small buses) or the Traffic Commissioner for the area [1985, ss.18-21]. Permits will normally only be granted for buses which are not being used for general public transport or for profit. [s.19(2)]. They could, for example, be issued for school bus or minibus services operated by the education authority. The permit may lay down the conditions under which the bus is used [s.19 (2)] and the conditions of fitness which small buses must meet [s.19(2)(d) and s.21]. Permits for large buses will not be granted unless the Traffic Commissioner is satisfied that there are adequate arrangements for keeping them in a "fit and serviceable condition" [s.19 (6)]. Permits can be withdrawn if any of these conditions are no longer met [s.20(5)]. Large buses operated under a permit require a certificate of initial fitness. [1981, s.6]

"Community bus" permits can also be issued to bodies concerned with "the social and welfare needs of one or more communities", with conditions again laid down as to the use and fitness of vehicles running with a permit.

1.6 School buses

The only explicit legal definition of a "school bus" is found in section 46 of the Public Passenger Vehicles Act 1981, where it is described as a motor vehicle used by an education authority to provide free school transport, that is, transport between home and school or other place of education where required or allowed under section 51 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. It covers vehicles used for free transport belonging to the education authority itself and to ones owned privately (referred to as "contract hire" buses), including ones formerly belonging to the transport department of a local authority. This definition still applies even if vehicles are also used for carrying fare-paying passengers at the same time or at other times, as is allowed under s.46 of the 1981 Act.

Overall, the majority of school buses count as "public service vehicles." This varies from place to place and, in rural areas especially, much school transport is provided by non-PSVs, such as minibuses, cars and taxis. Other exceptions are buses belonging to the education department of a local authority which are only used for free school transport. If buses belonging to the education authority are also used for "hire or reward", such as when
they take fare-paying passengers, then they become public service vehicles. All other buses hired out "under contract" to the education authority are public service vehicles.

Public service vehicles are covered by certain legal requirements concerning the licensing, inspection and testing of motor vehicles, the conduct of drivers and passengers, and other matters such as seating and standing capacity (see para).

The law [1981, ss 46(1); 1985, b:18] does not, however, require buses running under permits issued to bodies concerned, among other things, with education to:

be licensed for initial fitness, [1981, s.6]

have a PSV operator's licence. [1981, s.12(1)]

be driven by the holder of a PSV driver's licence. [1981, s.22]

This applies even if the buses belonging to the education authority are also used for carrying fare-paying passengers which count as public service vehicles. Only a few education departments run their own fleet of school buses, so a very limited number of vehicles are likely to be affected in this way. Such buses have, however, been open to legal inspection for roadworthiness since a change of law in 1985. [1985, s.33]. The great majority of school buses are on "contract" from outside operators, some of which were municipal transport departments before bus deregulation, so they are bound by the law normally applying to public service vehicles.

1.7 Conduct of drivers and passengers

Drivers and conductors of public service vehicles, including school buses used as public service vehicles, must observe certain rules of conduct laid down in government regulations. Rules are also laid down for the conduct of passengers [1981 Act, ss.24-25, SI 1936/619, as amended]. The regulations allow drivers, conductors, or the police to remove offenders from the vehicle [s.12a]. Passengers who are removed by more force than is necessary may be able to take action against the driver or conductor for unlawful assault. Suspected offenders must give their name and address to the driver, conductor or police when asked to [reg 12b] and they can be arrested by the police for not doing so [1981 Act, s.25(2)].
Drivers when on duty must:

* behave in a civil and orderly manner.
* take all reasonable precautions to observe the safety of passengers when in or getting on or off the vehicle.
* not smoke in or on a vehicle during a journey.
* not obstruct or fail to give all reasonable information or assistance to any person authorised to examine the vehicle.
* make sure that all route, destination and fare indicators where provided are correctly and clearly displayed.

Passengers on public service vehicles must not, among other things:

* use obscene or offensive language.
* behave in a disorderly or riotous manner.
* obstruct other passengers getting on or off.
* get or stay on the vehicle when told not to by the driver because it is already full up.
* interfere with the working of the vehicle in any way or do anything which could cause injury or discomfort.
* distract or speak to the driver when the vehicle is moving except to give any necessary directions for the vehicle to stop.
* damage, deface, defile or soil the vehicle.
* cause annoyance by shouting, singing or playing something noisy.
* smoke when forbidden to.
* carry dangerous weapons.
* bring any dangerous animals onto the vehicle without permission.
* cause danger by throwing objects out of windows, etc.

School buses belonging to the education authority and not carrying fare-paying passengers are exempt from these rules because they are not "public service vehicles." Permits for such school bus services and for minibus services may nonetheless contain any of the above conditions.

1.7 Seating and standing capacity

The seating and standing capacity of public service vehicles is either specified on the certificate of initial fitness for the vehicle or as calculated in accordance with government regulations or an approved code of practice. The legal seating and standing capacities must be clearly marked on the inside or outside of the vehicle.
Seating capacity is on the basis of one person per seat, but three children under 14 years are allowed to share a double seat, a double seat separated by a moveable armrest, but not two single seats. A child is not regarded as reaching 14 until the end of August following his or her fourteenth birthday [SI1984/1406].

Up to a third of the passengers or eight people, whichever is the less, are allowed to stand on uncertificated vehicles, but a larger or smaller number may be authorised. No standing is normally allowed on the upper deck of a double decker, on half-decked vehicles or on vehicles with seating for under 13 passengers. Standing is not allowed in the gangway in front of the near part of the driver's seat or in other areas so marked by the operator.

Taxis and private hire cars clearly have to adhere to different seating capacities.

1.8 Initial certificate of fitness

Public service vehicles, such as "contract hire" school buses, must have been issued by the PSV licensing centre with an initial certificate of fitness before they can be used on the road [1981,s.6] The exceptions to this are vehicles such as school buses operating under a permit as well as ones owned by the education authority, when the fitness requirements will normally be stipulated in the permit [1985, s.19 (2) (c) and (d) ].

To be roadworthy, public service vehicles must meet prescribed standards [SI1981/257, as amended] to do with their:

- stability
- suspension
- guard rails
- braking
- steering
- fuel tanks
- exhaust pipes
- lighting
- bodywork
- windscreens and windows
- ventilation
- luggage racks

1.9 Testing

Registered motor vehicles more than one year old and constructed for more than eight passengers, including school buses as well as taxis and ambulances, must have been issued with a test certificate in the last 12 months if they are to stay on the road [1972 Act, s.44(2)(a) as amended by SI 1982/1550]. It is unlawful to keep a vehicle on the road without a test
certificate, and offenders risk fines or imprisonment. Tests must be carried out at an approved garage under the direction of an authorised examiner. [1981 Act, ss.7-8]. Tests [SI1981/1694,r.5,sch.2] must cover items such as:

- lighting
- steering
- tyres
- windscreens
- direction indicators
- braking
- seat belts (where applicable
- exhausts
- audible warning instruments
- bodywork
- suspension

Certain additional tests, covering construction, equipment and safety, must be carried out on public service vehicles, including buses hired for school transport. But this does not apply to vehicles belonging to the education authority, whether carrying fare paying passengers or not.

These additional tests cover items such as:

- speedometer
- view from front window
- mirrors
- windows
- guard rails
- luggage racks
- artificial lighting
- electrical equipment
- steps, platforms and stairs
- number, position, size and width of entrances and exits
- marking, positioning and operation of entrances and exits and emergency exits
- seating
- passenger protection
- ventilation
- passengers' communication with driver
- fire extinguishing apparatus
- first aid equipment. [SI 1981/1694, s.2. item 12]

Reasons must be given for the refusal of a test certificate, which may be appealed against to the Secretary of State [SI 1981/1694 reg.15,18]. A test certificate is required for the use of vehicles on the following Scottish
islands: Arran, Bute, Great Cumbrae, Islay, Lewis, mainland Orkney and Shetland, Mull, North Uist and Skye. On all other Scottish islands a test certificate is not required [SI 1981/1694 reg.36(3)].

2. LEGAL LOOPHOLES/GREY AREAS

2.1 Routing of services

The law does not lay down any upper limits on the length or routing of transport between home and school, so that it is possible for journey time on school transport to be a great deal longer than it would be by the most direct route. To some extent journey times are outwith the control of the transport authority. Thus in rural areas, school catchment areas can be large and it may be necessary to pick up children at widely scattered villages or communities off the main route. Safety considerations may also mean longer routes. In addition there will always be some parents who choose to send their children to a distant school rather than a local one. The fact remains, however, that some children have to spend a long time on the school bus. A survey carried out a few years ago showed that children in remoter areas of Scotland were having to spend an hour or more on journeys to and from school.*

Authorities can lay down their own guidelines limiting the amount of time spent on transport between home and school. In drawing up these policies, authorities must consider the wishes of parents and any other requirements arising from their functions as education authorities. [SI 1985, s.63].

2.2 Pick-up points

Although transport must be provided between home and school for children living certain distances away, the law does not say that transport must be provided from door to door. In theory a child could be expected to walk up to the first two or three miles by the nearest available route to school before transport need be laid on. The law does not say that children must be transported to the school gate; they could be deposited on the other side of a busy road, for example. Local authorities do provide school crossing patrols and larger schools sometimes have pick-up/drop-off points within their grounds.

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2.3 Necessary transport

Other than saying that transport must be provided for children living certain distances away from school, the law gives education authorities discretion to decide on what transport arrangements are necessary to enable children to attend school. Although pupils in exceptional circumstances may be entitled to transport, the law does not say what these are. They are usually taken to apply to pupils with infirmities or handicaps who require provision of special transport to get to school, but they could conceivably cover, say, pupils whose safety might be seriously at risk if they have to cross very busy roads in order to get there.

2.4 Behaviour and supervision of passengers

Although the conduct of drivers and passengers on public service vehicles is governed by government regulations and possibly by contractual obligations as well, there is no legal requirement to provide formal supervision. The driver is usually left in charge of pupils on school buses. While driving, the driver obviously has a limited ability to check pupils behaviour, which may get out of hand.

2.5 Construction and safety of vehicles

Although the law prescribes the construction and safety standards which vehicles must reach before they are allowed on the road, those for vehicles owned by the education authority, whether carrying fare-paying passengers or not, are a great deal less stringent compared with other vehicles carrying fare paying passengers. Drivers of vehicles owned by the authority need not have a PSV drivers' licence.

2.6 Arrival and departure times

In the absence of any legal controls or contractual undertakings, the timetabling of transport services may mean some pupils having to arrive at school too early. It is far from clear whether the education authority could be held legally responsible for children left unsupervised there. Similarly the timetabling of departures at the end of the school day could result in children being left unsupervised for some time until the vehicle turns up.

2.7 Carrying capacity

Although legal limits are placed on the number of passengers public service vehicles may carry, part of the law which allows three passengers under 14 to share a seat for two may in practice result in one of them having to stand up, particularly older children. Legal limits on the number of standing passengers may in turn prevent a pupil from boarding a bus and perhaps involve a long wait for the next bus.
3. LIST OF RELEVANT STATUTES

Acts of Parliament

Education (Scotland) Act 1980 as amended by the Education (Scotland) Act 1981.

Public Passenger Vehicles Act 1981

Transport Act 1985

Regulations (statutory instruments)

SI 619/36 PSV (Conduct of Drivers, Conductors and Passengers) Regs 1936 as amended by SI 461/75.

SI 257/81 PSV (Conditions of Fitness, Equipment and Use Certification) Regs 1981 as amended by SIs 20/82, 1058/82, 1482/82 and 1763/84

SI 142/80 Minibus (Conditions of Fitness, Equipment and Use) Regs 1980, as amended by SIs 1599/81 and 1484/82

SI 1078/1986 Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations.
CHAPTER 2

AN ANALYSIS OF PARENT QUESTIONNAIRES

1. INTRODUCTION

The views of parents about the school bus services used by their children, particularly regarding safety and supervision, are the main subject of this report. In the autumn of 1986, when our survey was carried out, it was already evident, through press and other reports, that school bus services in Scotland were a cause of some concern. This concern partly stemmed from the effects that the deregulation of bus services, which also occurred at this time, was having on the scheduling and reliability of school buses. On the other hand certain problems - particularly concerning safety and supervision - appeared to be perennial and to pre-date deregulation.

We invited parents to fill in a questionnaire about their satisfaction with safety and supervision arrangements and other aspects of school bus services. For each of their children who travelled to school by bus, parents were asked about their satisfaction with:

* the level of supervision
* the seating space
* the safety of the vehicle
* the standard of driving
* the reliability of the service
* the location of bus stops
* the length of journey

Parents were also asked if they had ever formally complained about the school bus services and if so what had been the outcome of the complaint.

Our aim was to secure returns from as many parts of Scotland as possible. Questionnaires were distributed and completed with the help of parent-teacher and parents associations, branches of the Scottish Women's Rural Institute and the SCC's Consumer Network volunteers who in each case passed on questionnaires to parents with children using school buses. Use was also made of the local press, inviting parents to write in or phone the SCC for questionnaires to fill in.

We knew that by eliciting parents' views in this way, dissatisfied parents would be over-represented in the questionnaires. Satisfied parents would have less reason to fill in a questionnaire. Our returns could not therefore be taken as representative of all parents with children using school buses and be used to assess the extent of parental satisfaction or dissatisfaction with safety and supervision on school buses. Although a random sampling of parents would have allowed us to reach such an assessment, it would not,
except at very considerable cost, have generated a large enough sub-sample of parents of children using school buses and permitted the more detailed analysis we were interested in.

Our survey was concerned with pinpointing areas of particular concern among parents of children at a given time and in a broad range of geographical areas. Our basic research question was not "How many parents are dissatisfied with school bus services?" but rather "When parents are unhappy with school buses, what in particular do they take exception to - level of supervision, seating space, standard of driving and so on?" Our sample thus did not need to be representative of all parents with children who used school buses.

One limitation of this approach, however, was that some geographical areas were more highly represented than others, with 20 or more replies coming from parents of children at particular schools, where an issue was of great concern. We have therefore refrained from making regional comparisons and we have made other adjustments to our data, detailed below, to minimise geographical sources of bias.

2. FINDINGS

2.1 The sample

Some 700 completed questionnaires were received from over 180 localities in all the Regions and one Islands authority (Western Isles). We were rather surprised by the size of the response. It considerably exceeded the response we had expected, though of course was still tiny compared with the many thousands of Scottish children who travel to school by bus. We saw this as an indication - albeit imprecise - that school buses were indeed a matter of concern for at least a small minority of parents.

Our first task was to remove from the sample responses from those parents who had made no complaints and who were not dissatisfied with any aspects of their children's bus services. These questionnaires were of little use, because they mostly failed to detail the reasons for satisfaction, and we were somewhat surprised that these parents had bothered to complete them. Removing these responses was consistent with our aim of finding out what parents were dissatisfied about and not trying to guage the extent of dissatisfaction.

We had introduced a deliberate bias which made sense in terms of our research aims. The sample was already biased, however, in two other ways. Firstly, there were far more responses from rural and semi-rural areas than from urban areas. We were not surprised at this, given that most children in cities live within walking distance of school and we assumed that this bias reflected a pattern in the overall provision of school buses.
Secondly, because of the self-selected nature of the sample, certain localities such as Ballantrae, Uddingston and Corstophine in Edinburgh yielded a disproportionate number of responses - ie 20 or more - typically from a group of vocal parents whose children all attended the same school or used the same bus. We did not want the strength of feeling of parents in a few places to distort our overall picture of patterns of dissatisfaction and we decided to remove this bias. Excess questionnaires from these places were eliminated from the sample, so that no more than 6 responses from any one locality were used. When six responses were to be taken from a larger number, we chose in favour of those parents who had made a complaint or who were dissatisfied about more than one aspect of the service.

The final sample comprised 453 families, with data on 756 children who divided roughly half and half into primary and secondary children.

2.2 Geographical spread

The Regional breakdown in descending numerical order was as follows: Strathclyde (220 families), Fife (74), Grampian (58), Highland (40), Central (35), Dumfries and Galloway (24), Tayside (15), Lothian (11), Borders (6).

Strathclyde's responses can be further broken down by division: Argyll and Bute (24), Ayr (30), Dunbarton (72), Lanark (43) and Renfrew (50).

It must be noted that these figures should not be used to compare the levels of difficulties experienced with school buses in the different Regions and divisions. (Henceforth both are referred to simply as "areas".) The number of parents who responded in each reflects how well questionnaires were publicised and distributed as well as the total number of dissatisfied parents in that area. Thus one cannot safely say, for example, that Fife parents are more unhappy with school buses than Lothian parents. It could be that Fife parents were more likely to obtain a questionnaire than Lothian parents.

2.3 Analysing the data

The questionnaires were analysed by microcomputer. Questionnaire responses were recorded separately for each child, because some parents with more than one child using school buses had different things to say about each child. (The children might for instance travel to different schools on different buses). The advantage of making the child and not the parent the unit of our analysis was that we were able to accommodate fully the diversity of questionnaire responses. The disadvantage was that we were sometimes counting parents more than once. For example we were unable to say what proportion of parents were dissatisfied with standards of driving for their children. But we could say that parents of 9% of the children were unhappy about standards of driving.
3. DISSATISFACTION

(See Table 1, pages 24, 25)

It should be remembered that our sample was pre-selected to include only those parents who were dissatisfied about at least one thing. The levels of dissatisfaction recorded below should not be taken to be representative of parental dissatisfaction in the general community. Furthermore the majority of parents do not travel with their children to school, so parental reports are not necessarily an accurate reflection of the transport problems their children face.

3.1 The whole sample

3.1.a Supervision

The biggest source of dissatisfaction was the supervision on buses, or, rather, the lack of it. Parents of 79% of the children were concerned about this. Where parents gave more information, it was clear that they were worried about bad behaviour, bullying, distraction of the driver and in general the absence of supervision. There were reports of children fighting, throwing lighted matches and even letting off fireworks. The high level of concern was not surprising given that parents of fewer than 4% of the children reported that there was a conductor or supervisor on board for even one journey a day.

However, it is interesting to note that when there was a conductor or other adult on board, parents of two thirds of the children were still not satisfied with the level of supervision.

3.1.b Seating space

For parents of more than half (55%) of the children, there was dissatisfaction with the seating space on buses: buses were overcrowded because too few were provided, because buses were too small, or because there was not a separate school bus and children had to share with adults. Only some parents were aware that bus operators were within their legal rights in allocating 3 children under the age of 14 to a double seat, and some commented that they would like to see the law changed to reduce overcrowding.

3.1.c Safety

The next biggest areas of concern were the safety of vehicles and the standard of driving. Parents of 29% and 25% of the children respectively were dissatisfied with these. Speeding was the main stated reason for unhappiness with the driving. Other parents were concerned about emergency
doors being left open, drivers setting off before children were seated, and
drivers braking too sharply. Such concerns can be seen as drawing attention
to the safety implications of unsupervised and boisterous children on buses.
Where unhappiness with the safety of the vehicle was explained it was usually
with reference to the age of the vehicle.

3.1.d Other concerns

Parents of 13% of the children were unhappy about the length of journey
(though it was not always clear whether or not they understood "length of
journey" to include time spent waiting for buses). We do not know how many
of these parents chose to send their children to a more distant school in
preference to a local one.

Parents of 9% of the children were unhappy about the unreliability of the
bus, that is its failure to turn up on time or at all, or its liability to
break down.

Parents of 8% of the children were unhappy about the bus stop from which
children were collected in the morning, either because of its distance from
home or because of its dangerous location, for example, requiring the child
to cross a busy road unattended.

There was a large number of other issues raised by smaller numbers of
parents. There was dissatisfaction with the dirty condition of buses, with
children smoking, children being delivered at school too early, primary
children having to wait until the end of the secondary school day before they
could be taken home and withdrawals of buses and fare concessions.

Drivers came in for a fair amount of criticism: they were rude and
aggressive, ejected children for no good reason, refused to let children on
board and, in one alleged case, handed out cigarettes to children! To some
extent drivers are in a "no-win situation", expected to keep control but
viewed critically when they try to exercise control. Reassuringly, some
parents made a point of praising drivers for their courtesy.

3.2 primary and secondary children

The broad pattern of dissatisfaction was the same among parents of children
at primary compared with secondary. Thus level of supervision and seating
space were by far the biggest areas of concern for both groups. However,
parents of older children were twice as likely to be unhappy about the length
of journey than those of younger children. This was probably because the
average distance travelled by the secondary children, as reported by parents
was eight miles, much greater than the mean of three miles for the primary
children.
Parents of secondary children were also more dissatisfied with seating space (64% compared to parents of 46% of primary children). They also appeared to be slightly more dissatisfied with the standard of driving (29% compared to 21%). Again, greater distances travelled by older children may account for these differences.

### 3.3. regional differences

The patterns of dissatisfaction were broadly similar in all the areas covered. Parents of at least 5 in every 9 children were dissatisfied about the level of supervision in each of the geographical areas from which responses were received. In 10 of the 13 areas, this was a concern for parents of more than three-quarters of the children. Similarly, dissatisfaction about seating space was recorded by parents of more than half the children in 9 of the 13 areas.

The results indicated some differences between areas. Thus the parents from Ayr, Dunbarton, Central and Grampian, reported more unhappiness with the unreliability of buses than did parents in other areas and in Fife, parents of a sixth of the children were unhappy about children smoking on buses. However, as we have already discussed, the self-selected nature of the sample as well as possible variations in the way questionnaires were distributed in each area make it extremely unwise to draw conclusions from the differences found.

### 3.4. relationships between categories of dissatisfaction

From the comments that many parents made it was clear that they saw some of the aspects of the quality of service as closely related. Thus some complained that the job of controlling children was harder on overcrowded buses, that the standard of driving suffered when drivers were distracted by rowdy children, and that unseated children were more vulnerable to injury.

More detailed analysis gave extra insight into the thinking behind parents' recording of areas of dissatisfaction. For example, those parents who were dissatisfied about the safety of the vehicle were more likely to be dissatisfied about the seating space and the standard of driving than was average for the sample.

Thus, of the children whose parents were unhappy with safety, three quarters had parents who were also unhappy about seating, compared with just over half the children in the whole sample. Similarly, 40% of the children whose parents were unhappy with safety had parents who were unhappy about the
standard of driving, compared with 25% for the whole sample. Clearly, many parents were interpreting "safety of vehicle" more widely than with regard simply to mechanical safety.

Similarly, for children whose parents were dissatisfied with standard of driving, there was greater dissatisfaction with seating space - 73% compared to 55% - and with safety of the vehicle - 48% compared to 29% - than for the sample as a whole. This would suggest that parents thought bad driving to be more of a menace on overcrowded buses, where for example children standing can be flung forward by sharp braking.

Where there was unhappiness with the length of journey, there was also greater concern about the safety of the vehicle - 46% of children whose parents were unhappy with length of journey had parents who were also worried about safety. In the whole sample, parents of only 29% of the children were dissatisfied. In brief, parents were more worried about their children the longer the children were on board a bus. Again, it is likely that parents were taking into account the implications of bad driving and poor child behaviour in their estimation of "safety of vehicle."

4. COMPLAINTS

(See Table 2, pages 26,27)

Parents of 353 or 47% of the 756 children in our sample had lodged some sort of complaint about an aspect of the bus services for their children. Complaints were fairly uniformly distributed among parents from all geographical areas represented in the questionnaire responses, although there were geographical variations in the matters complained about.

Please note that in the following analysis a "complaint" means a complaint for each child. If a parent lodged one complaint about both her children this would count as two complaints.

Complaints were classified into the same categories as the areas of dissatisfaction already used. "Other" and "combination" categories were also used.

Although some matters were complained about more frequently than others, the spread of complaints across these categories was much more even than for dissatisfaction, where supervision and seating space had been by far the most dominant issues.
4.1 The areas of complaint

The largest group of parents making a complaint (parents of 24% of the children) said that they had complained about more than one thing, notably overcrowding, lack of supervision, bad behaviour and unreliable timing of buses.

Parents of 24% of the children reported complaining about unreliability of buses. Buses were late to collect children in the morning or afternoon, or failed to turn up.

Seating space elicited the next largest category of complaint. Parents of 14% of all children complained about overcrowding.

Parents of 11% of children made complaints which were responses to lack of supervision. Bad behaviour, including bullying, rowdiness and vandalism was the main area of complaint.

Parents of 6% of the children said they had complained about the time at which children were delivered at school, which was generally earlier than parents wanted.

Complaints about safety, journey time, collection and delivery points, standards of driving and times of evening collection accounted for less 3% of children for each category.

The remaining category was "other", which concerned almost 10% of the children. "Other" included complaints about smoking, the condition of buses, children not being allowed on board, problems with bus passes, buses being withdrawn and changes in timetables.

4.2 primary and secondary children

Parents of children at primary and secondary school made similar complaints about seating space on school buses and the reliability of services and similar proportions complained about more than one matter. However, parents of primary age children were much more likely to complain about problems related to supervision than were those of secondary children. More than four fifths of all complaints about supervision concerned primary age children.

4.3. regional differences

The different areas showed more variation in the pattern of complaints than they had for the pattern of dissatisfaction. It is hard to know if this is a meaningful finding because, as discussed above, differences between areas may be the result of sampling bias. Below is shown the breakdown of complaints
in the 4 areas yielding most complaints in the sample. It is important to emphasise that no conclusions can be drawn from the differences between these areas.

**Dunbarton** 43% (39) of the complaints were about unreliability of buses. 20% (18) were about a combination of things, mostly lateness and overcrowding. 15% (13) were about other matters, such as the condition of the bus, changed bus times and driver not knowing the route after deregulation.

**Renfrew** 33% (16) of complaints were about inadequate seating space. 25% (12) of complaints were about various combinations of overcrowding, bad driving, lack of supervision and lack of afternoon bus specifically for primary children.

**Fife** 29% (12) of complaints were about problems of lack of supervision. 21% (9) of complaints were about combinations of overcrowding, lack of supervision, including bullying and smoking, length of journey and location of collection point.

**Ayr** 55% (18) of complaints were about more than one thing, the main grievances being unreliability of buses and overcrowding.

4.4 Who received the complaints?

(see Table 3, page 28)

Complaints were mostly made to the school (32% of complaints), to the education authority (13%) or to the bus operators themselves (19%). Parents of a further quarter of the children about whom complaints were made complained to more than one of these bodies, the most usual combination being the school and the bus company. A small number of parents complained to other bodies such as school councils and PTAs. And a few parents had complained to the police, usually about safety matters.

Only one parent mentioned as a difficulty uncertainty about which body to complain to.

4.5 outcomes of complaint

(see Table 4, page 28)

(The following figures exclude the fifth of complaints for which no outcome was recorded by parents.)

For only 34% of complaints did parents report a successful resolution of the problem, and in a third of these cases the matter seemed to have resolved itself without any intervention by the body which received the complaint.
For slightly more than half the complaints, parents reported that no action had been taken. It is difficult to draw conclusions from these figures, because whether or not the parent reported the complaint as being resolved would depend on when the complaint had been made. A recent complaint would be less likely to have been resolved at the time the parent completed the questionnaire. See the discussion below. Moreover, a large group of parents, representing a fifth of complaints, did not record the outcome of their complaint.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 dissatisfaction

The survey concerned a Scotland-wide sample of parents who had expressed at least some sort of dissatisfaction with safety, supervision and other aspects of school bus services used by their children. Nearly four fifths of these parents were dissatisfied with the lack of supervision on school buses and over half were unhappy about overcrowding. Over half the parents were concerned about either the safety of the vehicles or the standards of driving. This pattern of dissatisfaction was fairly similar in all the areas from which questionnaires were received.

Some of the different aspects of the quality of service were closely inter-related. Concern about seating space, standard of driving and safety of the vehicle tended to go together. Parental dissatisfaction with length of journey was also linked to dissatisfaction with the safety of the vehicle. It is likely that many parents understood "safety of vehicle" in a general sense, rather than with reference to mechanical soundness.

There was a paradoxical diversity in parents' concerns, so that while, for example, many parents were unhappy about the use of single deck buses because of the lack of seating, quite a few thought double deckers were unsuitable for twisty country roads and would have preferred single deckers. Similarly, whilst the inability of drivers to control children was a common grievance, there was also unhappiness with drivers who were rude and unpleasant to children. It is likely that some of the inconsistencies in parents' dissatisfaction arise from unrealistic expectations based on lack of awareness of the practicalities of providing school transport. Better communication between local authorities and parents would be the best way of dispelling such grievances.

5.2 Complaints

The distribution of complaints amongst the various categories was different from that of dissatisfaction. (See Table 5, page 29 for a comparison). Although complaints concerning supervision and seating space were common, the frequency of these was not as great as the level of dissatisfaction about
these issues would have suggested. Similarly, complaints about the reliability of buses were far more frequent than the overall level of dissatisfaction about reliability of services would have suggested.

The fact that a lot of complaints were about specific incidents may account for this discrepancy. Thus a parent may tolerate lack of supervision for some time but complain when their child is bullied. Conversely, the parent may be generally satisfied with the reliability of the bus, but be sufficiently annoyed to complain on the one occasion when the bus fails to turn up.

If a lot of complaints were about one-off incidents, this would also explain why so many parents reported that no action was taken or did not record how the complaint was handled. The appropriate action in such cases could frequently only be an assurance that there would be no recurrence of the incident. Unfortunately, it was not possible from the questionnaire to differentiate between complaints about one-off incidents and complaints about continuing problems.

In one respect, complaints could be seen as a more accurate reflection of unhappiness with services than "dissatisfaction", which can be criticised for its vagueness as a concept in covering everything from anger to diffuse anxiety. On the other hand dissatisfaction might represent a large undercurrent of unhappiness which surfaces in the form of complaints only occasionally, because of people not knowing who to complain to or -from prior experience or other reasons - believing there is little point in complaining. If this is indeed the case, then this is another reason for having better channels of communication between parents and local authorities, so that parents can more easily air their grievances.

As the questionnaire survey drew on responses from parents in areas where safety and supervision were matters of local concern, we cannot draw conclusions about how satisfied parents in general are. However, even if only a relatively small proportion of parents and school children in Scotland are affected by particular problems, the problems are still real for those concerned. Some of these problems may also have been temporary, pending a satisfactory solution, but they may well re-appear elsewhere from time to time.
### TABLE 1

Percentages of children for whom parents are dissatisfied with:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>category</th>
<th>supervision</th>
<th>seating space</th>
<th>safety of vehicle</th>
<th>journey time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>whole sample (n = 756)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children 11 or less (n = 372)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children over 11 (n = 384)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunbarton (n = 117)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fife (n = 113)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renfrew (n = 83)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lanark (n = 82)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grampian (n = 70)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central (n = 61)</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayr (n = 48)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland (n = 45)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argyll &amp; Bute (n = 43)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumfries &amp; Galloway (n = 37)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayside (n = 20)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lothian (n = 20)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borders (n = 11)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 is continued on the next page.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>category</th>
<th>standard of driving</th>
<th>collection point</th>
<th>other</th>
<th>unreliability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>whole sample (n = 756)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children 11 or less (n = 372)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children over 11 (n = 384)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunbarton (n = 117)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fife (n = 113)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renfrew (n = 83)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lanark (n = 82)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grampian (n = 70)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central (n = 61)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayr (n = 48)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland (n = 45)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argyll &amp; Bute (n = 43)</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dumfries &amp; Galloway (n = 37)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayside (n = 20)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lothian (n = 20)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borders (n = 11)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 2

Percentages of children for whom parents complained about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>category</th>
<th>supervision</th>
<th>vehicle safety</th>
<th>collection points</th>
<th>timetable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>whole sample (n = 353)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children 11 or less (n = 207)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children over 11 (n = 156)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunbarton (n = 91)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renfrew (n = 49)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fife (n = 42)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayr (n = 33)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grampian (n = 32)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Journey time has been removed from this table (only one complaint about this.) "other" has been omitted: this accounted for 10% of the total sample. The 2 categories concerning collection points at the home and school ends of the journey have been collapsed into one, as have the 2 categories concerning morning and afternoon collection/delivery times: "timetable".

Table 2 is continued on the next page
### TABLE 2 (CONTINUED)

Percentage of children for whom parents complained about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>category</th>
<th>seating space</th>
<th>driving standard</th>
<th>reliability</th>
<th>combination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>whole sample</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 353)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children 11 or less</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 207)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children over 11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 156)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunbarton</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 91)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renfrew</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 49)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fife</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 42)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayr</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 33)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Grampian</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 32)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Journey time has been removed from this table (only one complaint about this.) "other" has been omitted: this accounted for 10% of the total sample. The 2 categories concerning collection points at the home and school ends of the journey have been collapsed into one, as have the 2 categories concerning morning and afternoon collection/delivery times: "timetable".
### TABLE 3

**Who received the complaints:**
percentage distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>school</th>
<th>local authority</th>
<th>bus operator</th>
<th>more than one</th>
<th>other</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

whole sample: $n = 352$

### TABLE 4

**Outcomes of complaint:**
percentage distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>matter resolved</th>
<th>action taken but matter not resolved</th>
<th>nothing</th>
<th>not known</th>
<th>combination</th>
<th>other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

whole sample of complainers excluding not recorded: $n = 283$
TABLE 5
Comparing dissatisfaction and complaints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>area of service provision</th>
<th>dissatisfied (%)</th>
<th>complained (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>supervision</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seating space</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vehicle safety</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>standard of driving</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collection points</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>journey time</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>timetabling</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>reliability</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>combination</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>other</td>
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n = 756  n = 353
CHAPTER 3

LOCAL AUTHORITY CONTRACTS AND POLICIES

1. CONTRACTS

Having analysed the nature of parents' dissatisfaction with school transport services, we then examined the contracts which local authorities make with bus operators. Conditions of contract are a fundamental underpinning of the quality of contract services, though obviously not of local bus services used by children. We wanted to see whether contracts made any conditions about the aspects of service of most concern to parents, namely safety, supervision, reliability, standards of driving etc.

Contracts do not of course present the whole picture. The quality of individual operators and the procedures which local authorities have for enforcing their contracts are important factors too. And operators are under no contractual obligations when transporting children on commercially registered services. However, contracts do say a lot about how much priority a local authority gives to the quality of its subsidised school bus services.

Accordingly, we wrote to all the mainland education authorities in Scotland towards the end of 1986 and asked for copies of their standard contracts for school transport. All replied to this request. In 1988, when local authorities were sent copies of the draft of this report for comment, only one authority, Tayside, informed us in any detail about amendments which had since been made to their contract. The information given below about Tayside refers to this revised contract.

The contracts varied considerably in the number and detail of conditions they imposed. However, our main finding was that conditions about safety, supervision and other consumer aspects of bus services were rarer than other kinds of condition. Thus contracts tended to be taken up with conditions on the offering and acceptance of tenders, insurance, pay, working conditions and termination of the contract. Safety and seating were usually dealt with in a strictly legalistic way. Thus contractors would be required to comply with the laws on road safety and seating capacity, but other conditions about seating and, say, standards of driving were rarer.

There was considerable variety in the way contracts dealt with conditions of service of most relevance to consumers. The areas covered form six main groups: supervision, safety, seating provision, timing, dealing with misbehaviour, extra conditions for extreme weather/breakdowns, and other matters. Each of these will be considered in turn. Three authorities had codes of conduct or guidelines for operators in addition to contracts: Tayside, Grampian and Borders. Borders made observation of the code of conduct a condition of contract, so that the terms of the code of contract are counted in the following analysis as conditions of contract.
1.1 Supervision

Only two authorities made any conditions about supervision to be provided by someone other than the driver. Strathclyde stipulated that buses with open ended platforms, including double deckers engaged on school contract services only, must have an "attendant" on board. Tayside Regional Council stipulated that it might, at its own discretion, place conductors on double deckers. Some authorities gave drivers various supervisory tasks. These will be detailed under subsequent headings.

1.2 Safety

Seven authorities made a variety of conditions relating to safety, other than conditions concerning vehicle safety and maintenance.

Borders required that drivers must have at least 12 months' experience and always use safe pick-up and set-down points. They must ensure that childproof locks are in position and try to keep children seated. There were also conditions relating to the allocation of front seats and use of seat belts.

Fife stated that buses must be stationary and waiting in a safe position for collecting children at the end of the school day.

Grampian asked that all doors be secured and the children forbidden to touch them by the driver. Children were all to be seated, with the capacity not exceeded. The driver was to check that the children cross the road safely when dropped at school, and ideally should park on the same side of the road as the school so that the children did not have to cross the road.

Highland required that drivers must be over age 21, with at least 3 years driving experience, and no older than 65. Children on the front seats of taxis and cars used for school transport must wear seat belts.

Lothian also stipulated that children in the front seats of cars and taxis should wear seat belts. In addition the driver must open and shut all doors.

Strathclyde forbade the use of open-platform buses for contracts which were school transport only. Where fitted, all childproof locks must be in operation. If a bus had to turn round, it was to do so before it set down passengers.

Tayside insisted that contractors did not set timetables which would require excessive speeding to fulfill. Drivers were also required to ensure, that doors are fastened and that children remain seated and do not touch handles whilst in transit.
1.3 Seating space

None of the contracts made requirements about seating space which were more generous than the provisions of the Public Service Vehicles (Carrying Capacity) Regulations 1984 (the "3 to 2 rule").

1.4 Timing

Six authorities made stipulations about timing of services.

Borders required that journeys did not run early or more than 15 minutes late. Where connections were required between buses, the driver of the first vehicle must wait up to 10 mins for the next one. Children must not be left to await a late or aborted connection unattended.

In Dumfries and Galloway children were to be delivered to school in "good time" and returned from school "without delay". The other authorities were more specific.

Fife children were to arrive at school at least five minutes before school and to leave not more than ten minutes after the end of school.

Grampian children were as a "general guide" to be delivered no more than 20 minutes before school and collected no more than 10 minutes after school.

Strathclyde required that as a general guide children were delivered no later than 8.55am and collected from school at about 4pm.

Tayside required children to be delivered at least 5 minutes before school and collected at least 5 minutes after school. Tayside had a further requirement, which was that when one service fed onto another the first bus may be required to deliver children at the next pick-up point at least five minutes before the second bus was due.

1.4 Misbehaviour

Grampian’s contract stipulated that drivers must try to check incidents of misbehaviour and report these to the headteacher.

Borders and Strathclyde also requested drivers to report misbehaviour immediately to the headteacher.

Tayside required that drivers check misbehaviour which might lead to an accident and to report such behaviour to the Transport Unit.
1.5 Extra conditions for bad weather/breakdowns

Borders, Fife, Grampian and Highland had extra conditions for bad weather which included ensuring that no pupil was allowed to walk home from the bus-stop unaccompanied. In the event of a breakdown, drivers in Highland were to stay with the children, whilst those in Borders must instruct pupils to stay on the bus whilst they summoned help.

1.6 Other conditions

Borders required that the driver should be the same person every day to allow children and parents easily to identify the vehicle. Grampian had a no smoking rule and also stipulated that all operators were to be provided with guidance notes for dealing with misbehaviour and safety matters. Fife and Highland had extra conditions for the transport of disabled children.

This analysis shows that there is much variation between different local authorities in what they regard as important aspects of school transport services. In dealing with consumer aspects of service, contracts were most likely to make conditions about bad weather and breakdowns, safety and timing. However, they had little to say about the issues which most concerned parents in our survey; namely the level of supervision and seating space. Just two authorities had anything to stipulate about the use of conductors or supervisors. No authorities made requirements about seating space which went further than the law - for example insisting on one seat per child for children under 14.

The contracts did all address the issue of vehicle safety - another of the main areas of parental dissatisfaction - but only three authorities made any conditions about standards of driving, an area which concerned a quarter of the parents who were dissatisfied.

2. LOCAL AUTHORITY REACTIONS TO OUR SURVEY

Having looked at the standards which local authorities set for school transport we were interested to know how these were in practice maintained. In particular, we wished to know how the authorities coped with the problems which had caused parents in our survey to be dissatisfied and to complain.

Thus in the summer of 1987 we sent the interim findings of our survey of parents to all the mainland education authorities and asked for their comments. We also asked three specific questions:
1) What steps, if any, were being taken by the authorities to deal with problems or difficulties as reported by parents in our survey?

2) Could each authority name one or two particular routes where safety or supervision were a major source of difficulty?

The purpose of this question was to allow us to follow up one or two services as detailed case studies, in which we spoke to operators and parents.

3) Could the authorities tell us of any recent or proposed innovations by them or operators for securing the better safety or supervision of children on school buses? (e.g. voluntary supervision schemes) Did they have any other ideas or suggestions for improving provision generally?

In addition, those authorities in Regions which generated very few responses to our questionnaire - Borders, Lothian and Tayside - were invited to suggest why this might be so.

All the authorities responded. The responses were as follows.

2.1 What steps are you taking to deal with problems?

Most of the authorities emphasised that complaints were always taken seriously and investigated promptly, and that a solution was found if possible before a recurrent problem emerged.

Borders told us that its policy of integrating school and public transport, as well its code of conduct for drivers on dealing with misbehaviour, contributed to a relatively high level of satisfaction about supervision. Indeed, most complaints tended to be about timing of bus services and the distances children had to travel to get to and from bus-stops. Borders also told us that the 3 to 2 rule is only applied to primary children on contracted buses.

Dumfries and Galloway said that operators did not see supervision as a problem, whereas Highland stated that supervision was one of the problems raised most often by parents.

Fife stated that part of the effort to monitor school transport and prevent recurrent problems was to encourage headteachers to report regularly on the state of school transport. Ensuring that primary and secondary children were, where possible, transported on different buses was another way of avoiding problems.

Grampian told us that complaints tended to be about one-off incidents such as breakdowns in bad weather and that these did not therefore have implications for changes in transport policy.
Lothian and Tayside offered similar reasons why there might be a high level of parental satisfaction with school transport in their areas - as suggested by the small number of survey responses from these Regions. Tayside said that close working relationships between all the parties involved in school transport enabled immediate action to be taken to stop any problems developing. Lothian also talked about the close partnership between the council, contractors and headteachers, as well as the tight conditions of the contract and the close monitoring of contracts which takes place.

Lothian told us that their latest contract also contains a condition that compliance with the 3 to 2 rule is no longer normally acceptable and that operators should aim at providing a seat for each child.

Tayside provides pupil lists for all its school contract services and therefore controls the numbers of children on each bus. Tayside believes this eliminates the problem of overcrowding on these buses. Hostel accommodation is provided for children with very long journeys. Tayside also tries to minimise long journeys by providing feeder contracts on to main routes.

The overall message which we received was that there were no serious or long-term problems concerning safety and supervision etc. on school buses, and that when problems did emerge they could be detected and dealt with quickly and effectively. Education authorities appeared to see no need to consider fundamental changes in their policies or practices for these aspects of service.

2.2 Name any routes where safety or supervision is a particular problem

Given that safety and supervision on school buses were not seen as a significant problem, we were hardly surprised that authorities could or would point us to routes where safety and supervision were causing difficulties. Those that gave a reason for not mentioning a route said either that most problems were one-off or that problems were nipped in the bud before they had the chance to become chronic.

The replies to questions 1 and 2 are consistent with our own findings but only if it is indeed the case that most complaints made by parents concerned one-off rather than long-term problems. As discussed in Chapter 2, we do not know what proportion of complaints were one-off. But we do know from our survey that a lot of parental dissatisfaction, as distinct from complaints, concerned long-term problems; for example, buses being frequently overcrowded or turning up late. In view of this, and despite the fact that our survey sample probably represents a minority of parents, the responses of the authorities do seem to give a rather complacent picture.
2.3 recent or proposed initiatives to improve services

Borders told us about a scheme which had been used by one school for some time. Older children whose behaviour had been a problem were given the responsibility of supervising the other children. This scheme was seen as successful.

Prefects supervise children on some school buses in Tayside. This too seems to be a successful strategy. One secondary school in Tayside hopes to set up a voluntary supervision scheme in 1988 and has the support of the Transport Unit.

On the other hand, Fife and Highland both expressed doubts about the feasibility of voluntary supervisors on buses with large numbers of secondary children. Fife believed that supervisors could even be counter-productive, becoming the focus of disruptive behaviour. A voluntary supervision scheme had operated on one route in Central Region, but this had folded owing to lack of parental support.

Central stressed that in addition to the dubious effectiveness of using supervisors on school buses, resources were simply not available to provide a force of paid supervisors. They also told us that, in practice, children on most buses in most Regions were often able to have a seat to themselves.

Grampian told us they have recently set up a working party to review all aspects of school transport, including the 3 to 2 rule.

It was hoped that the current upgrading of the A74 would reduce the numbers of complaints about conditions on this road in Dumfries and Galloway.

In all, authorities seemed to see little need to alter their policies and practices in any substantial way. Again, this was consistent with the general view of the authorities that safety and supervision on school buses, and the other consumer issues discussed in this report, were not presenting any major problems.
3. CONCLUSIONS

We were aware that the contracts made between the education authorities and operators may have had only a limited bearing on the quality of their school bus services. Nevertheless, we believed contracts provided us with an important indicator of how well developed were the policies of local authorities with regard to safety, supervision and other consumer aspects for children using school bus services.

Although the terms of the contracts varied considerably they all failed to specify to any great extent conditions relevant to the consumer. Different authorities focused on particular issues but there was no authority which made conditions relating to all of the areas of concern which parents in our survey had identified; namely safety, supervision, collection points, timing, seating space, driving and reliability of service. The areas of greatest concern - supervision/ misbehaviour and seating space - were least likely to be dealt with in contracts.

Borders, Grampian and Tayside can be singled out for producing contracts with the tightest conditions about consumer issues.

In correspondence with us, education authorities seemed satisfied with their arrangements for safety, supervision and other consumer issues about children on school buses and were aware of no services which were prone to continuing problems. Problems either did not arise or, if they did, could be dealt with quickly and effectively before they got out of hand, often because they were the result of one-off incidents, such as breakdowns in bad weather. With one exception, authorities were not considering innovative schemes, such as voluntary supervisors, to improve school bus services. There seemed to be no need for such schemes.

There was a discrepancy between the picture presented by the authorities and the experiences of some of the parents in our survey, some of whom reported protracted battles to secure improvements in the bus services for their children.

On the other hand, authorities were able to enlighten and reassure us on some matters. It was clear that, for example, some were doing more than the law required in their efforts to allocate a seat for each child. Local authorities were also able to justify the lack of supervision on school buses with reference to the prohibitive costs and dubious effectiveness of having supervisors on board. Authorities also emphasised that, at the end of the day, it was parents who had to be considered responsible for the behaviour of their children.
CHAPTER 4

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All contracts drawn up between education authorities and transport operators should contain clauses dealing specifically and comprehensively with consumer aspects of school bus services. In particular, contracts should deal with supervision - and especially the handling of misbehaviour - seating, vehicle safety, standard of driving, position of pick-up points, timing of services, length of journey and special arrangements for bad weather and breakdowns.

Our analysis of contracts for general school bus services showed considerable variation in the number and kinds of conditions relating to these aspects of service, with Borders, Grampian and Tayside producing contracts with the tightest safeguards. Currently, many of the deficiencies of service which parents have shown they are unhappy with do not constitute a breach of contract, which means that there is not much that local authorities can do, or that operators need do, to improve matters. Tightening up contracts would give local authorities greater control over school bus operators. Local authorities should also consider how they can improve other school transport contracts, e.g. special needs contracts, nursery pupil contracts, in the light of this recommendation.

2. Local authorities should provide parents of children using school buses with a plain language summary of the conditions of contract.

Parents have a right to know the agreement that has been made, on their behalf, between the local authority and bus operators. Where they can show that there has been a breach of contract they will have stronger grounds than at present for any complaint. Parents will also be in a better position to press, individually or collectively, for changes to the contract if they are not satisfied with it.

3. A code of good practice should be agreed at Regional level between education authorities and transport operators, in consultation with parents' representatives, for the safety and supervision of children on school buses. Parents should be provided with a copy of this code of practice.

Some authorities, such as Grampian Region, issue operators with a code of practice which sets out how drivers are expected to deal with outbreaks of misbehaviour and other problems. Borders makes compliance with its code of conduct a condition of contract. Codes of practice should be universally adopted as a useful supplement to the contractual obligations which operators must meet. A code of practice is helpful to drivers, because they know exactly what is expected of them when trouble arises. It also reassures parents that the possibility of trouble on school buses is anticipated and taken seriously. Because of parents' concerns about safety and supervision
on school buses, it is only right that their voice should be heard - through their representatives - when codes of practice are drawn up. There could be a useful role for the new school boards in helping to draw up codes of practice.

4. Each education authority should make available to parents of children using school buses a copy of its policy on transport provision, including its policy for the safety and supervision of children on school buses and on the timing and routing of buses. The policy should be clear about who is considered responsible for the safety and supervision of children before they board the bus, when they are on the bus and after they are delivered.

This is a further measure which should be taken to increase the accountability of local authorities and to give parents' views more weight.

As with contracts, parents' knowledge of the education authority's policy on school buses enables them to measure the quality of services against stated intentions and thus to express concerns and grievances with solid grounds. Again, if parents know the Region's policy, they are in a position to press for changes to the policy if they are not happy with it. On the other hand, by defining the limits to the responsibility it will accept for safety, supervision and other aspects of school bus services, the authority may also reassure parents who might otherwise have complained. The authority could also use this opportunity to remind parents of their own responsibilities for the conduct of their children while using school buses.

5. Education authorities should set up clear and simple channels through which parents can make complaints or express concerns. These channels should be efficient in dealing with problems and easy to understand and use for parents. They must be made well known to parents of children using school buses.

Our survey showed that parents complained to a variety of different bodies, ranging from schools to the police. Although confusion about who to complain to was not perceived as a problem for parents in our survey, one wonders how many parents were inhibited from complaining altogether because of such confusion. And we do not know whether those that did complain always chose the best route. For example a complaint made directly to an operator might have had more impact if it had come from the headteacher. Our survey also suggested that better channels of communication would help diffuse dissatisfaction based on unrealistic expectations of quality of service.

There are various ways of setting up efficient and easy-to-use channels of complaint. One approach could be to encourage parents to direct all complaints and concerns to the headteacher. This is a natural and convenient channel for parents. On the other hand, the local authority department responsible for school transport has the best overview of operations and can probably respond fastest to problems which arise. It would also be very useful for parents, particularly in rural areas, if there were somebody who
could be contacted by telephone outwith school and office hours to answer enquiries about delayed or broken-down afternoon buses. Whatever system is devised, it should be well publicised.

6. The regulation permitting three children under age 14 to share a double seat should be repealed. All children should be entitled to a seat each.

Overcrowding on buses was the second largest area of dissatisfaction for parents in our survey and the 3 to 2 rule certainly contributes to overcrowding. We were pleased to find that a number of authorities, including Borders Lothian and Fife, were being more generous than the law with seating allocation. However, legal change is needed to accelerate this trend.

The 3 to 2 rule is now hopelessly outdated. Many 14 year olds are as big as adults, as are many 12 year olds. One could argue for amending the regulation so that age 14 becomes, say, age 12. However, the problem with such a regulation is that it is quite impractical to enforce unless the driver ascertains each child's age and assigns everyone to a seat. These problems are not completely solved even if the rule is made conditional on school membership - i.e. applying only to primary children - since primary and secondary children frequently travel on the same buses. In the interests of the safety and comfort of children as well as legal simplicity it would be far better simply to abolish this regulation.

7. Safety regulations should be tightened to ensure that vehicles owned and maintained by the education authority only for school transport comply with the same licensing and safety requirements as for public transport vehicles.

It is an anomaly that school buses owned by the education authority are not bound by the same laws as public service vehicles (PSVs). As discussed earlier most school buses are also PSVs, but it is nevertheless worrying that the minority which are not PSVs do not require PSV drivers' or operators' licences, nor do they need to conform to all the vehicle testing requirements. The only benefit of this licensing anomaly would seem to be that it does not place restrictions on, say, teachers driving minibuses on school outings. It should nevertheless be possible to tighten the legislation without making impractical the use of buses for educational purposes.