Improving Home-to-school Transport for Children with Special Educational Needs
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For more information on the work of the Commission, please contact:

Sir Andrew Foster, Controller, Audit Commission, 1 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PN, Tel: 020 7828 1212

Website: www.audit-commission.gov.uk
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Accessing and using special educational needs transport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility for special educational needs transport</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Vehicles and equipment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Arrangements and procedures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Use of passenger assistants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Screening vehicle crews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Staff training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality and standards</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Involving stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Day-to-day communication with parents, carers and schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ensuring children get to school on time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Journey quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service flexibility</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-assessment checklist</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Balancing costs and service quality</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The context – increasing costs</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic responses to cost pressures</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reviewing policies and provision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Monitoring and benchmarking costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Improving procurement and provision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Monitoring contracts and service level agreements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Co-operation with others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational responses to cost pressures</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Improving route planning and scheduling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reviewing use of taxis and hired-cars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Using in-house resources effectively</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-assessment checklist</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Managing the transport service</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying roles and responsibilities</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy making</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget holding and setting</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Achieving best value</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting terms of reference for best value reviews</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying the four Cs</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Challenging current approaches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Comparisons with others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Consulting stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Embracing fair competition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing review recommendations</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-assessment checklist</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusion</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

The Audit Commission has been examining transport arrangements made by local authorities and health bodies in England and Wales to allow people to access education, social services and health services. The work has focused on free home-to-school travel, social services transport and non-emergency patient transport in the National Health Service.

A national report, *Going Places: Taking People to and from Education, Social Services and Healthcare*, which the Commission has recently published, summarises the Commission’s overall findings and contains recommendations for action by central government and by senior managers in local government and the health service.

This handbook, *Improving Home-to-School Transport for Children with Special Educational Needs*, contains detailed examples of good practice together with self-assessment checklists. It can be used by local authority officers who deal with policy on, and eligibility for, home-to-school travel for children with special educational needs (SEN), those who are arranging, managing and providing that transport and those carrying out best value reviews of the service. As the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has been examining travel support arrangements for students aged 16 and over, this guidance focuses particularly on travel by pupils aged under 16. However, many of the ideas, examples of good practice and self-assessment checklists in this handbook can also be applied to post-16 travel to education by students who have special needs.

This material is based upon findings from field visits to ten local authorities; focus groups with children and parents; findings from best value inspections carried out by the Audit Commission’s Best Value Inspection Service; and inspections of local education authorities (LEAs) carried out by OFSTED with the Audit Commission. The study team has also analysed national data provided by the DfES, the National Assembly for Wales and OFSTED. The work also draws upon work with London boroughs that has been carried out by the Commission’s auditors, together with a follow-up questionnaire survey by the Commission. It thus expands upon a report on special educational needs transport in London, *The Special School Run*, that the Commission published in March 2001. The handbook also refers to OFSTED and Estyn inspections of special schools and to material issued by the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR).

Further details of the research are given in the national report, *Going Places*. In addition, the Commission is also issuing similar handbooks on each of the other three areas examined in its study, mainstream home-to-school transport, social services transport and non-emergency patient transport. The Commission is grateful to all who have helped, but, as always, responsibility for the contents of this handbook lies with the Commission alone.

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II Unless another source is given, quotes from service users and other stakeholders in this handbook are from Audit Commission focus groups and other interviews by the Commission.


Introduction

This handbook draws together the good practice lessons emerging from the Commission’s research under four themes:

- **Accessing and using special educational needs transport.** This section sets out LEAs’ legal obligations and discretionary powers. It then considers what it is like for children with special educational needs to use home-to-school transport, reflecting the user experience that is central to the modern provision of public services and to best value.

- **Balancing costs and service quality.** Financial pressures mean that many authorities are seeking to reduce, or to control increases in, their expenditure on home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs. This section discusses the options and trade-offs that may exist between cost-saving and better service quality, and the links between reviewing policies and setting budgets. It also covers options for linking the provision of home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs with other transport such as social services transport.

- **Managing the transport service.** This section discusses the roles of the policymakers, that is of the client department (Education); and the budgetholders. Getting the process right will help to prevent the budget control problems that have been common with home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs. Though some of these reflect weaknesses in monitoring, others stem from poor budget setting. It also covers the role of the transport organiser who lets and manages contracts, or oversees a service level agreement with an internal trading organisation; and of the service provider, whether contractor or internal trading organisation. It shares some material with the equivalent sections in the Commission’s handbooks for managers of social services transport and mainstream home-to-school transport.

- **Achieving best value.** The material in the earlier sections will help authorities carrying out best value reviews to assess how the service is currently performing. This section discusses other issues to consider when carrying out reviews and preparing implementation plans. It also shares some material with the equivalent sections in the Commission’s handbooks on mainstream home-to-school transport for children and social services transport.

This treatment seeks to address the key issues of concern to stakeholders [BOX A, overleaf].

Each section ends with a comprehensive checklist which enables an authority to compare its own service provision with examples of good practice found in the Commission’s study. Some of these questions describe ‘ideal’ practice, which not all authorities currently achieve, but the checklists will help authorities to identify local priorities for action.
BOX A

What do stakeholders think about the service?

**Pupils**

Discussion with pupils at one special school showed a range of views on the transport service. Comments included many positive points:

‘The escorts are brilliant.’

‘I fainted and they phoned an ambulance. All the taxi people came to help and took me to hospital.’

‘We get cake on birthdays and presents at Christmas from the escorts and drivers.’

‘If we’re early, we get to see the driver’s dog.’

On the other hand there were some children who were unhappy with the service:

‘There’s no legroom – you feel like [you’re sitting on] squished worms – your bottom sinks in.’

‘The younger kids annoy us a bit. We have some from the other side of the school [primary age]. [One of the girls] she screams to death and [one boy] he just talks, being cheeky to the escorts. I feel like smacking him.’

**Focus group with pupils with special educational needs**

**Parents**

‘Punctuality’s good, the escorts are brilliant – they do quirky things like ring me five minutes before [arrival] because my son’s autistic, but there have been personal clashes with the driver.’

‘My bus is new – it’s immaculate – we went on a trip today to the park. Every day our driver sweeps out the step so the mechanism works. There’s a happy atmosphere – they’re laughing all the time.’

‘It’d be nice if it was the same taxi driver all the time. There’s one driver who comes and is so nice but some are so eager to drive off – they don’t give you a chance.’

**Focus group with parents at a special school**

**Schools**

‘One feature is transport policies vary considerably [between LEAs] whether they provide an escort and to what age. Some are very strict and provide one up to [the age of] 18, others to 13 or 14. Some don’t provide an escort at all – this could be a high risk, especially if there is a male driver and female pupil driving long distances. It is surprising there’s such a disparity with child protection issues when there is national legislation – the Children Act is common. You’d think up to age 16, all LEAs should provide them. At 16, a child could decide with the aid of parents.’

‘I assume vetting is done – but I think it’s another area that needs looking at – sometimes the council does it, sometimes the driver is expected to do it. Taxi drivers and their integrity vary enormously.’

**Interview with staff at a school for the deaf**

**Drivers**

One driver felt the biggest problem he faced (other than traffic) was the car parking area at the school. With only one entrance, arrangements had been made in the afternoon for taxis to come in first, then minibuses to follow, but in the morning there was a free for all. The restricted space in the unloading area made it difficult for drivers to leave immediately and allow other vehicles into the area after children had disembarked. This could take time and cause arguments between drivers.
Another driver, responsible for supervising and maintaining minibuses at a special school, was concerned about a lack of depots for in-house vehicles. He described the logistics of keeping track of vehicles based at schools to ‘provide a professional service’ as ‘phenomenal’.

Interviews with drivers at a city council

Operators

One authority consulted sixteen private hire contractors for its best value review and found:

‘Two-thirds were either happy or satisfied with their contract conditions but fewer were satisfied with contract monitoring or communication with the authority. Half the contractors felt quite strongly that the playing field was not level. Some were vociferous about their feelings that large companies were faring better than smaller companies under the current system…

‘The most frequently cited suggestions [for change] related to better co-ordination between education and social services – 69 per cent of those consulted requested that opening times of establishments be staggered to allow contractors to undertake work for both departments… Other suggestions included reviewing runs more often than annually, first aid training for drivers and improving the image of the vehicles. … All companies questioned were willing to undertake MiDAS training if it was a contract condition… many also wanted more regular meetings – none did not wish for regular meetings.

‘Most contractors felt that longer contracts were better suited to the facilitation of a quality service as they would be better able to plan purchases of new vehicles to fulfil contract conditions. This would be more financially viable if contractors could guarantee income for a longer period.’

One city council’s best value review

LEA officers

‘At the end of the day we can have the best education provision in the world, but if we can’t get the kids to it, it’s worse than useless.’

Officer, quoted in a Best Value Inspection Service report

‘The problem is responsible officers [preparing statements of special educational needs] put transport on “willy nilly” – it seems to be automatic – it’s our budget but we don’t control it, and it’s not reviewed as thoroughly as we would like… We also transport very short distances – parents seem to push away responsibility on special needs – even for a half-mile journey. There is no political will to change it because of adverse publicity.’

Interview with an officer at a city council

Source: Audit Commission
1. **Accessing and using special educational needs transport**

‘It’s very convenient. You know where they’re going, that they’re safe...The fact that someone else can take responsibility is great.’

Parent, London

1. The experience of users is central to any review or attempt to improve transport services. Children with special educational needs are a diverse group, ranging from those with Down’s syndrome or other learning disabilities, to those with sensory impairments or emotional and behavioural problems. Some children may also have physical mobility problems that mean they use wheelchairs. School transport for these children, while not a ‘front line’ service, is often regarded by parents not only as an immense support, but also as essential to enable their children to attend school. It will also be particularly important for children with special educational needs who are looked after by the local authority and do not have parental support.

2. This section looks at service users’ and other stakeholders’ experiences of accessing and using school transport services. It covers:

   - **Eligibility.** Arrangements fail users at the first hurdle if children do not receive free transport to school when they should.
   
   - **Safety.** While not always considered by service users, safety is fundamental to delivery of transport services. This section looks at the safety of vehicles and equipment, the provision of passenger assistants or escorts and the training and vetting of vehicle crews. It also looks at arrangements and procedures such as the provision of information that drivers and passenger assistants need to ensure that they can adequately fulfil their responsibilities.
   
   - **Quality and standards.** This section looks at broader aspects of service quality, including the comfort of the journey and its reliability and punctuality. LEAs should take account of the views of pupils, their parents or carers, schools and other stakeholders in setting local quality standards.
   
   - **Service flexibility.** More schools are likely to specialise and schools are also likely to provide more after-school activities under new Government proposals. LEAs may need to adapt their transport provision.

**Eligibility for special educational needs transport**

3. Decisions to provide free transport for children of statutory school age should follow the revised *SEN Code of Practice*. The new Code, which takes effect from January 2002 states that,

‘The school named in a child’s statement must be capable of meeting the child’s educational needs. LEAs should not, therefore, promulgate general

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1 Those staff who accompany service users in vehicles are known as passenger assistants or escorts.
transport policies that seek to limit the schools for which parents of children with statements may express a preference if free transport is provided.’

4. Decisions should be made as part of the statutory assessment process and be re-examined regularly as part of the annual review of the statement of special educational needs. Free transport can be very important to parents, and essential where they have no other travel options – of using either local public transport or their own car – to take children to school. It will also be important to promote social inclusion for some families, particularly to assist parents, including single parents, who are working and unable to combine the journey to work with taking children to school, as well as those with children at more than one school [BOX B].

5. It is also necessary, where it is appropriate and safe to do so, to develop children’s independence as they mature and approach adult life. In some cases, authorities provide door-to-door pick-up; elsewhere those who can walk are asked to make their way to a set point on the route. Nottingham City Council, for example, uses a maximum walking distance of approximately half a mile. Where safety permits, LEAs should promote travel options that encourage young people with special educational needs to become responsible for making their own way to school, to increase their independence. The DfES has been reviewing transport provision and support for post-16 students in further education. Officials will be recommending to ministers that there be more consistency and equity in provision and support; the reform of legislation surrounding post-16 transport; and that LGAs take the lead in partnerships with colleges, local learning and skills councils and other key stakeholders to provide more effective transport arrangements.  

BOX B

The importance of transport for parents

‘I couldn’t work properly [as a midwife] without the transport because I’m a single parent. If I had to take her to school I couldn’t do it – the same with collecting her – I couldn’t work.’

‘My son would [have to] go to another school; I couldn’t be here at the same time to pick him up [as I have to pick up my other child at another school].’

‘[Without it] my daughter wouldn’t come to school full stop, because I’ve got three other children [to get to school].’

Parents, focus groups

‘I don’t know what I’d do without it.’

Parent, Hounslow

Source: Audit Commission


[II] The Department for Education and Skills report is expected to be published at the end of 2001.

6. Clear, written local guidance on how to interpret the Code and on the procedures to follow will help to ensure that officers apply the Code correctly and that parents are informed about eligibility and know how and when to apply for transport. For example, the London Borough of Enfield has been consulting on its policies and on supporting guidance on the roles of different council departments in identifying need and in arranging special educational needs transport [CASE STUDY 1]. Clear policies will also help to promote fair and equitable treatment. This is particularly important as elected members can be under pressure to intervene in individual cases. Even so, some appeals are inevitable, for example, there may be disputes over which is the ‘nearest appropriate school’. LEAs should have clear processes to deal with these. Suffolk’s policy document, for example, explains how parents can appeal do and how appeals will be dealt with.

CASE STUDY 1
Consulting on policies and guidance: London Borough of Enfield
Enfield has been consulting on a draft policy document that includes formal statements on a number of key areas:

- The principles the authority will apply when providing transport. Under these: ‘wherever possible, children and young people with special educational needs will be treated in the same way as those without such needs ... Wherever possible, a child, young person or young adult with special educational needs will also be encouraged to travel on public transport, especially when this is considered to be a factor in developing their independence, life and social skills.’

- Criteria for providing transport. These include the statutory distance tests. The authority may also provide transport in other circumstances including: ‘where the route to the special educational provision is considered to be hazardous, bearing in mind the special educational needs of the child or young person ... when supportive medical evidence indicates that the child or young person would be unable to attend educational provision without transport arrangements being made by the LEA.’

The criteria cover personal circumstances that prevent the parent from getting the child to its educational provision (including the need to take other children to other schools). Families receiving income support, family credit or income-based jobseeker’s allowance are also eligible for support. However, the LEA will not arrange transport: ‘where the preferences of the parents or young adult results in a child, young person or young adult attending educational provision other than the nearest available and suitable provision to their home as determined by the LEA.’

- The factors to consider when determining the mode of transport to use. These include the nature of the child or young person’s special educational needs; their age; their medical needs; the viability of using contracted services; public transport or (for a young adult) the person’s own transport; the need for specialist transport and/or escorts and the efficient use of resources.

- Policy on escorts, or passenger assistants: ‘An escort will usually accompany all children and young persons under 16 transported by the LEA. Decisions about the need for an escort will be based on the child’s needs, parental preference, child protection procedures and the safety of council staff.’

Source: Audit Commission, drawing on Enfield’s draft ‘Policy and Guidance’. (This is expected to be put to members for agreement in late November 2001.)
Safety

7. Safety can be taken for granted by users, and only come to the fore when something goes wrong, but meeting health and safety requirements is essential. Ensuring safety can involve:
   - checking vehicles and equipment;
   - establishing safety arrangements and procedures;
   - use of passenger assistants;
   - screening vehicle crews; and
   - staff training.

Vehicles and equipment

8. The vehicles themselves and associated equipment – including seatbelts, wheelchair lifts and wheelchair restraints – must be safe and also comply with legal requirements. As well as having comprehensive fault-recording procedures, and daily safety checks before vehicles leave the depot, one London borough insists that its minibuses must have no known faults when brought in for routine servicing. This ensures that drivers do not store up faults for rectification during a service but instead have them dealt with immediately.

9. Checks and controls should cover contractors’ vehicles and equipment, including taxis and hired-cars, as well as in-house operations. Internal trading organisations (ITOs)\(^1\) should be treated similarly. As in Devon, authorities can include in their contracts the right to carry out unannounced on-the-spot sample checks. Vehicles and equipment also need to be operated correctly by properly trained staff; a simple error, such as failing to lock a wheelchair’s brakes before raising or lowering it in a tail-lift, could have disastrous consequences for a child.

10. Sanctions should be applied if there are persistent safety breaches. In extremis, authorities should be prepared to terminate contracts and re-tender routes. Some authorities use only an approved list of contractors to deliver the service, and carry out thorough checks on operators before adding them to this list. If this system is used, operators should easily be able to find out how to join the scheme. Those wishing to join, and who meet the authority’s requirements, should be added to the list without undue delay.

Arrangements and procedures

11. Safety procedures are also essential, as is training on them. These include arrangements to record the children picked up and subsequently to ensure that they have all been handed over safely at school, or to parents and carers when returning from school. In one authority, recently, a child was left asleep in the back of a vehicle when the driver returned to the depot at the end of the run and was only found after the parents contacted the authority asking why the child had not been brought home. There should be fall-back procedures if a parent or carer is not at home to receive a child. Mobile phones, or radios, on vehicles, as at Lewisham, will help to ensure rapid and effective communication between transport managers, LEA staff, schools and parents. They also allow staff on vehicles to seek help quickly if a child becomes unwell during a journey.

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\(^1\) Formerly known as direct service organisations or DSOs.
12. Children need careful supervision getting on and off vehicles. Arrangements for disembarking children at school and for picking them up in the evening when they leave school need to pay particular attention to safety. Meadowgate School in Lewisham, for example, is regularly served by five vehicles; in the morning, all aim to be parked inside the school grounds fifteen minutes before the school day, with engines off. The school gates are then closed and children leave the vehicles supervised by drivers, passenger assistants and teachers. If any vehicles arrive late they wait outside until the main disembarkation is complete and the other buses have left; pupils then leave the late arriving vehicles in a similar way.

13. Elsewhere, however, arrangements are sometimes not as good, as noted by OFSTED in some of its inspections of special schools [BOX C]. Use of specialist transport is likely to remain a long-term feature of education at special and other schools. Schools and LEAs should thus actively work to address problems whether by better staff training and procedures, investment in facilities within a school or by working with their authorities’ traffic management and highways departments to improve traffic management and road safety around the school.

**BOX C**

**OFSTED comments on safety when leaving and boarding special educational needs transport at school**

- ‘Three pupils were observed running, between the buses, across this extremely busy road, where no school crossing patrol is provided... pupils are ... at times, left on the buses alone.’
- ‘The small car parking area does not allow for the safe movement of taxis when delivering and collecting pupils... a significant health and safety hazard.’
- ‘An informal approach to health and safety has resulted in the school becoming “comfortable” with situations that may be hazardous. For example, when children are getting out of their taxis, cars going to the social services centre next door often pass uncomfortably close. The school is not undertaking any form of risk assessment ...’
- ‘The arrangement for pupils’ arrival at school by transport is unsafe. For example, minibuses arriving late drive through children already playing on the playground. The speed of these vehicles is excessive. The departure routines, more closely organised and monitored by many more staff are much safer.’
- ‘There is no space on the premises for the school transport to park, or to unload or pick up the children, and it has to park on the road outside. This is managed very well, and due attention is paid to the health and safety issues; but the arrangement is unsatisfactory.’
- ‘The arrangements for the transport of pupils and their setting down at the school are unsatisfactory, as there is a lack of suitable training for escorts and present arrangements for the arrival of pupils at school are potentially unsafe... While pupils are being unloaded or are walking into school, other vehicles are arriving and departing alongside them. These arrangements are unsatisfactory because they are putting the safety of pupils at risk. Parents expressed concern over transport arrangements at the pre-inspection meeting.’
- ‘The governors should seek the help of the local education authority to reduce the congestion caused by the arrival and departure of pupils’ transport, and, in the meantime, provide directive supervision of the arrival and departure of such transport, so as to reduce the potential hazards to the safety of pupils.’

*Source: Audit Commission based on OFSTED reports on special schools*
Use of passenger assistants

14. Passenger assistants are not always used on special educational needs transport. However, drivers cannot supervise or assist their passengers while driving. The medical condition of some children and the behaviour of others means that, in many instances, a lack of assistants may be placing passengers’ safety at risk. Wherever necessary, therefore, children should be accompanied on their journeys by suitably trained passenger assistants who are aware of, and know how to respond to, individual children’s problems or difficulties. However, in some instances, there is no one trained or available to do this. In other cases, there are disparities between authorities in the number of passenger assistants used for children with similar conditions.

Screening vehicle crews

‘We were concerned that although council staff have undergone police checks, there was no system to ensure that this was equally applied to both agency staff and taxi drivers.’ [The authority has since changed its arrangements]

Best Value Inspection Service report on one authority

15. Police checks on drivers, passenger assistants and other staff who come into contact with children are also important. Section 7 (1) of the Protection of Children Act 1999 requires employers to carry out pre-employment checks in regulated organisations concerned with ‘the supervision of children’. This suggests that, if a driver is regularly acting in a supervisory capacity and is in sole charge of any children, he or she may need to be police checked; that if there is a passenger assistant present to supervise the children, the assistant would need to be police checked prior to employment; and that police checks should also cover taxi drivers and hired-car drivers, and passenger assistants, regularly taking children on such vehicles. In a school for deaf children, staff had been informed by children of inappropriate behaviour between a driver and assistant in a vehicle. The school informed the authority, which terminated that contract, but staff at the school felt ‘there is always potential for that to happen if drivers are recruiting escorts’. In addition to police vetting, authorities should check driving licences. Identification cards, bearing photographs, and staff uniforms can also help to reassure parents, carers and schools that children are being collected by people from the special educational needs transport service.

16. Police checks can take a long time, creating pressures to allow new employees or agency staff to begin work before vetting has been completed. A high turnover among passenger assistants and drivers can lead to pressures to use unvetted and poorly trained stand-ins. Fieldwork has revealed that some managers view occasional use of unvetted staff as unavoidable if the service is to respond to unexpected severe short-term staffing

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II This may change. The new Criminal Records Bureau, an executive agency of the Home Office, is offering disclosures of criminal records and other checks on employees from Spring 2002. Local authorities and other employers will deal directly with the Bureau when vetting employees rather than asking individual police forces to carry out checks and can already register with the service.
difficulties. Precautions they then take include: re-allocating staff to different transport work so that unvetted staff do not work with children (or with vulnerable adults); or ensuring that people who have not been vetted work in tandem with experienced, fully vetted staff, who know this, and can supervise them. Many authorities issue identity badges to drivers and passenger assistants. In Devon, staff who have not yet been fully vetted are issued with differently colour coded identity badges which are valid for only a short period.

Staff training

‘You’re not carrying sacks of potatoes... you’re carrying people.’

Staff member, quoted in a Best Value Inspection Service report on on authority

17. In order to help ensure safety, LEAs need to have confidence in the skills of the staff employed on the transport. Drivers should receive suitable training. One option, as at Leeds, is the Community Transport Association’s MiDAS minibus drivers’ training scheme. Training can also be provided in-house; for example, Devon County Council requires that all drivers of vehicles under 16 seats, the size used on its SEN contracts, who do not hold a PSV licence, attend the county’s driver training course. Devon also provides a Drivers’ Handbook for Transport Contracts to all drivers working under contract to it and a similar handbook for the minority of drivers who are employed directly by the County Council. These cover other aspects of the work, for example responses to vandalism, as well as driving and vehicle safety. Derbyshire also has a handbook and code of duties for drivers and passenger assistants as well as a Code of Good Practice for the Conveyance of Pupils with Special Educational Needs.

18. Passenger assistants and drivers can bear great responsibilities. The vulnerability of the children on board and the concern of their parents should not be underestimated. Where staff are responsible for children with such specialised needs, specific training should be provided. However, one authority visited reported that an assistant trained to administer rectal valium had refused to do so, because of the responsibility involved.

19. Children with special educational needs who are looked after by the local authority may also require particular support for transport, which may include transport to hospital as well as to school. Close liaison is needed between social services and education departments. The extent of this demand can be significant. In one authority visited, for example, 50 per cent of looked after children had special educational needs. In Carmarthenshire, a corporate parenting officer has been appointed to deal with the transport requirements of children looked after by the authority. In Suffolk County Council, the education department organises transport to respite care and has links with the families concerned. Passenger assistants will also play an important role in assisting these children and liaising with care homes about their needs.

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1 The MiDAS minibus driver awareness scheme is organised by the Community Transport Association. Details can be found at www.communitytransport.com/midas.htm.
20. In practice, the training given to passenger assistants varies considerably from authority to authority. For example, in London only a minority of authorities reported giving first aid training to their staff [EXHIBIT 1, overleaf]. The extent to which passenger assistants, and drivers, have been equipped to meet children’s needs, thus varies widely. Some staff are unhappy with what they see as weaknesses in their own understanding of problems and of how to respond to them. In one authority visited, some vehicle crews were concerned that the LEA was not providing them with information about children’s medical conditions and resulting support needs, on confidentiality grounds. Two recent best value inspection reports in other authorities recommended action to address similar issues. OFSTED has also occasionally commented upon weaknesses in passenger assistants’ training in some of its reports on its inspections of special schools [BOX E, overleaf]. Parents are naturally concerned about these issues.
EXHIBIT 1

Training for passenger assistants in London

The training given to passenger assistants varies considerably.

Source: Audit Commission survey. Based on data from 26 boroughs. Two boroughs that did not train passenger assistants before they started work report giving training later.

BOX E

Ensuring children are appropriately looked after

‘The issue of information available to staff on medical needs of customers needs addressing to ensure that they are trained and feel able to cope with all situations.’

Best Value Inspection Service report on one authority

‘They [passenger assistants] have received no training on escorting pupils with serious medical conditions or in the safe lifting of pupils, and have no list of emergency medical telephone numbers.’

OFSTED inspection report on a special school

‘It’s not clear what they know about the children – my daughter may need a wheelchair – [it seems] they don’t know what will happen to her.’

Parent

Source: Audit Commission based on Best Value Inspection Service and OFSTED reports and focus group with parents
21. Other aspects of training also vary greatly. For example, in London, only a minority of boroughs reported that they trained newly recruited passenger assistants in how to respond to fire on a vehicle [EXHIBIT 1]. Yet other London authorities provide such training. These include Lewisham Borough Council, whose staff practice emergency vehicle evacuation procedures with the aid of a smoke machine. Some school heads interviewed by the Commission have raised the need for specific training for passenger assistants on handling challenging behaviour in vehicles.

22. The headteacher of one special school visited during the study described two other difficulties caused by poorly trained or supervised passenger assistants. Firstly, her school has a policy of not responding when pupils with behavioural difficulties use foul and abusive language. However, some passenger assistants tell the child off or threaten to report the pupil to the school or to his or her parents. Secondly, passenger assistants standing outside the school can see through the glass front door into the school hall where some lessons take place. The head had to intervene to stop passenger assistants, whose vehicles had arrived early, from rapping on the glass to try to persuade teachers to end lessons and let the children out early. Other schools have reported similar problems. Parents and children also report that, while many drivers and passenger assistants behave extremely well, some do not [BOX F].

23. Poor training may contribute to these problems; any deficiencies in training thus need to be remedied. Children are travelling in transport provided by, or arranged and paid for by, local authorities. Councils have responsibilities for ensuring the health and safety of those children while they travel. Passenger assistants and drivers should also behave appropriately.

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**BOX F**

**Parents’ views on drivers and passenger assistants**

Some parents report that passenger assistants are ‘wonderful, they remember birthdays’ or that ‘our driver is lovely’:

‘They’re always smiling. They greet each child as they get on. They treat each child as an individual.’

‘I sat and thought about it and I can’t see how they can improve it.’

But others are less happy, particularly about drivers:

‘The driver said, “Can you teach her another song? Twinkle, twinkle little star. If she sings it once more I’ll deck her.”’

‘When my son first came on the bus he [the driver] made him wear nappies …I’d had him out of nappies for a year and I was so upset.’

‘Currently there are two nice escorts with a bad driver – he’s completely unpredictable and harsh. I feel it’s like a cattle truck sometimes, that he [the child] is not treated like a person.’

‘One day [the driver]’s chatty, another day he’s downright rude, he practically throws my daughter in … if I take too long [taking the child out of the house] he’s quite rude.’

*Source: Audit Commission focus groups*
24. A high turnover among passenger assistants and drivers brings recruitment and training costs and can increase the pressures to use unvetted and poorly trained stand-ins. To aid retention, passenger assistants and drivers, including part-time staff, should be paid whenever they attend managerial briefings as well as for attending formal training. These events should be at times that part-time staff find convenient to attend. In organising escorting, authorities should consider whether passenger assistants are to join vehicles at depots in the morning, and return in them in the evening, or be picked up and dropped off by vehicles en route from and to depots. The latter may help to reduce the time and cost to assistants of travelling to work but this advantage needs to be set against the extent to which it may distort network planning and reduce vehicle use. Some authorities, including Lewisham Borough Council, also argue that ensuring that passenger assistants report for duty at the depot at the start of the day, and sign off there in the evening, helps to ensure that they are properly briefed, managed and supervised and creates a sense of belonging and professionalism. These arrangements are also a defence against possible ‘ghost employee’ frauds.

Quality and standards

‘I think it’s worth mentioning how vulnerable the children are – I cannot have a conversation with my daughter – so if someone said something hurtful to my daughter I wouldn’t know.’

Mother

25. In addressing service quality, authorities should:
- involve stakeholders in setting standards and assessing performance;
- communicate effectively with parents and others about the day-to-day working of the service;
- ensure children get to school on time;
- address other aspects of journey quality – ensuring that services are punctual and reliable, that journey times are not overly long and that a reasonable standard of comfort is provided; and
- where possible, have flexible services, for instance, to allow children to take part in after-school activities.

Involving stakeholders

26. Users’ and other stakeholders’ views are integral to assessing and improving performance [EXHIBIT 2]. By consulting regularly with stakeholders, including parents or carers and pupils, the LEA should be able to identify problems that require action, for example, if routes are inappropriately long for those on board. Parental concerns may be particularly acute with children with special educational needs. Equally, discussion with schools (and an examination of local OFSTED or Estyn reports on schools) and with contractors, drivers and passenger assistants can be revealing and may raise the need for improvements in safety or punctuality, or other aspects of the service.
Consultation with stakeholders is integral to assessing and improving performance.

Consultation can be a powerful way of assessing customer satisfaction and identifying good practice, as well as gaining insight into issues of concern [BOX G]. It should take account of the linguistic diversity of the borough’s area – for example, it may not be appropriate to assume that all those being surveyed can speak or read English. Welsh authorities will need to consider Welsh language needs. Authorities will also need to consider their target audiences for example whether to consult potential as well as existing service users.

Authorities should take a strategic approach to consultation, and think about it in the context of their overall arrangements for transport. They need to develop appropriate methods to consult with different groups of users and to feed back to them the results of that consultation. Options for consultation include:

- **questionnaires** – which allow for easy comparison of findings but may be inappropriate for people with learning difficulties or for people who have visual impairments;
- **one-to-one interviews** – which will elicit more detailed information on individual concerns on specific aspects of services; and
- **group discussion** – which will be more suitable for those who are better placed to discuss their views than to give them in writing.
Identifying stakeholder views through consultation

Consultation can demonstrate customer satisfaction ...

‘She [the child] thinks it’s wonderful and so do I ... We’re very satisfied, they’re very supportive, spot on.’

‘Our driver and escort have always been reliable, friendly and helpful. They go out of their way to make the children’s journeys comfortable and pleasurable.’

Parents

‘It’s nice and warm and dry and I like the style of the taxi. I enjoy the conversation with my friends – it’s easy because all the other children are deaf.’

‘My taxi never breaks down. I feel safe in it. The taxi has got good electric windows and I play with them.’

‘The taxi driver laughs and jokes with me. He sometimes writes notes to me and can sign a little bit.’

Deaf pupils

but can also reveal problems ...

‘I was involved in an accident because the driver was going too fast. The taxi driver is not always concentrating, he uses two fingers on the wheel.’

‘The seatbelts [in the taxi] are too tight – they’re tight round your neck.’

‘They don’t have the windows open and there’s no air conditioning. You feel like throwing up.’

‘I am a weekly resident ... I travel ... on a Monday and return home on a Friday ... The journey time is three hours each way ... They don’t let me go to the toilet if I need to go.’

Pupils

‘I think he [the driver] shouldn’t be allowed to drive because he breaks the speed limit. He sets off at about 50 miles an hour.’

‘The [transport is] always late, both [arriving] at school and home.’

Parents

Source: Audit Commission focus groups and Best Value Inspection Service reports
29. The Central Office of Information's Informability Manual sets out Government expectations in terms of making information accessible to different audiences, including those with sensory impairments and learning difficulties. In seeking the views of children, teachers can help to develop an interactive approach which ensures that children's attention is focused and retained in any consultation. Feedback mechanisms should also be considered. For example, written feedback may again sometimes be inappropriate; for blind and visually impaired users and people with learning difficulties, tapes could be used instead. Alternatively, for those with learning difficulties, information could be produced in Makaton typescript or with clip art illustrations.

30. Complaints are an important way of identifying service failures. Officers in some authorities tend to discourage them, for instance, requiring that they are made in writing, to depress the numbers recorded and so present their service in a good light. Others recognise the benefits of capturing all comments about the service. For example, Devon County Council's Incident Recording system seeks to capture all comments irrespective of source or how made. Leeds City Council's education transport team is also monitoring phone complaints as part of its supervision of its contractors. Three justified complaints lead to a warning and three warnings may lead to the operator losing a route. This process has led to the removal of a route from one operator and allowed the LEA to provide feedback to other contractors on their performance at year-end.

31. Detailed and frequent consultation can also enable the LEA to monitor the service. Parents are often keen to have better links with councils. Deaf parents involved in Audit Commission focus groups felt it would be beneficial to have a feedback mechanism on a termly, or failing that, annual basis, to give the LEA their views on transport (as was the case for comments on school dinners).

32. One explained that parents often got passed around, from department to department and suggested that there

‘[There] needs to be a clear process or channel … maybe somebody independent.’

Another added,

‘My local authority do respond…I don’t want to make a big complaint…[I] just [want to have] a dialogue so that I can make suggestions.’

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council has a procedure for obtaining parents’ comments on transport before the end of the second term of the school year. The council has acted on responses, including one incident where the passenger assistant was not getting into the vehicle at the start of the journey, for which the contractor suffered financial penalties. Lewisham Borough Council is planning to introduce comment cards.

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II A focus group was held with profoundly deaf parents of deaf children, whose first language is sign language. They and their children sometimes face communication difficulties.
33. In addition to service users and their parents or carers, school heads, drivers, passenger assistants and contractors can also make useful comments on the transport service. For example, in one authority, information from the school enabled the LEA to intervene where an assistant was behaving in a racist manner towards children. After a dossier of evidence was collected, the assistant was disciplined. Councils should use consultation to inform and set service quality standards.

Day-to-day communication with parents, carers and schools

34. Parents, carers and schools should be provided with a contact number to use, for instance, if the bus fails to turn up. This should include provision for out-of-hours contact to deal with any problems on the morning run to school. There should also be clarity over who parents should contact to make arrangements for travel to and from respite care. In some cases, communication can break down between education and social services units, leading either to no transport at all or to double bookings of vehicles, and confusion at schools.

35. LEAs need up-to-date contact information on all parents and carers. Telephone communication will not always be appropriate. One deaf parent complained about a lack of communication during the 2000 petrol crisis, saying ‘Nobody told me that the service was not operating’. Neither the council nor the contractor used minicom, and the only quick and effective way to contact the parent was by fax. No contact was made, even though the parent had previously provided the council with these details.

36. LEAs can assist stakeholders by providing clear information, not only about eligibility for the service they provide, but also the roles and responsibilities of each player, for example, parental roles’ in ensuring children are ready to leave at the pick-up time, and expectations for children’s behaviour. This can also clarify how schools and passenger assistants or drivers should respond to challenging behaviour on the journey.

Ensuring children get to school on time

37. Occasional punctuality problems and late arrivals at school may be unavoidable, for example, ones caused by unexpected roadworks or by accidents involving other road users that cause temporary local gridlock. But regular late arrival at school is highly undesirable. It can be damaging to the education of the pupils who arrive late and for other pupils, whose teaching is disrupted by their arrival [BOX H]. OFSTED has thus, on occasion, been critical of late arrival in its reports on inspections of special schools [BOX I].
BOX I

OFSTED comments on late arrival

‘There are persistent and sometimes chronic problems with transport for pupils. Pupils arrive late, and after the start of the school day regularly. This may be anything between five and twenty five minutes after the start of the school day … it is difficult to make a suitable start to lessons with a whole class until 9.30, when the majority of pupils has arrived … some pupils are missing significant parts of their education, that accumulates over time to many days of lost opportunities.’

‘In some cases pupils arrive well after the start of school, missing significant parts of their education.’

‘Pupils on minibuses often late – unfortunately the start of the lesson is delayed regularly by the late arrival of one or more of these buses. This causes a disrupted start and can often affect what the teachers have planned for the period, particularly in RE.’

‘A minority of the transport is regularly late because of the distance travelled and congestion on the roads...’

Source: Audit Commission based on OFSTED reports on special schools

BOX H

Headteachers’ views on reliability

The two heads of special schools interviewed during the inspection:

‘suggested the importance of a reliable transport service to bring children to school on time and to enable them to settle for the day. If there are transport problems there is a direct effect on the child’s learning for the day.’ [Both heads also praised their authority’s service for its ability to respond to problems.]

The transport service thus:

‘regards its key indicator as “per cent of children arriving on time”. This … is also regarded as the key indicator by schools, since late arrival at school has a serious impact on the child’s performance and motivation.’

Journey quality

38. Journeys should not be so long that they overtire pupils or exacerbate medical or behavioural difficulties and so impact adversely on children’s performance at school. Pupils should arrive alert and able to gain maximum benefit from their education. Some authorities have no formal policy on maximum permitted times. Others have set standards but sometimes struggle to meet this. OFSTED has drawn attention to lengthy journey times in some reports on its inspections of special schools. Long journey times may be unavoidable in some instances, for example if the only, or most suitable, placement for a child is some distance from his or her home. In Devon, the authority’s transport co-ordination service (which arranges transport) identifies such cases and discusses them with the council’s Education, Arts and Libraries Department, the client department for special educational needs transport. Any children whose journey times lie outside the Council’s standards are then individually authorised by the client.

39. The time taken for passengers with special educational needs to get on and off vehicles when they are picked up in the morning and set down in the evening can have a particular impact on journey times. When passengers travel in wheelchairs, the need to secure the child and the chair before the vehicle drives off can further add to the overall journey time. Ensuring that staff know, in advance, the types of wheelchair used by their passengers, have the most appropriate equipment for securing chairs and the children using them, and are well trained in its use, is not only, therefore, a safety requirement but may also help to speed up journeys.

40. Passenger comfort can be adversely affected by drivers who do not show consideration for passengers and other road users, and repeatedly accelerate and brake sharply, or take corners at speed; lack of care when going over road humps can also be unpleasant. Driver training can address these points. Those on board can feel uncomfortably cold if all the doors on a vehicle are left open for long periods in winter, for example, while wheelchairs are loaded or unloaded; and, in summer, passengers may find the glare of direct sunlight in their eyes unpleasant. As at Lewisham, tinted glass or blinds on vehicles and fans can help. Air conditioning is another option. The image projected by the service can also be important – some children may prefer not to travel in vehicles labelled as ‘ambulances’ or which have an institutional appearance.

41. The seating arrangements can also impact upon the perceived quality of the journey and children’s behaviour. Allowing friends to sit together can make the journey more pleasant. Conversely, it will be best to separate children whose behaviours irritate each other. In some cases, it may even be necessary to place them on different vehicles. One headteacher interviewed during the Commission’s study spoke strongly about her dissatisfaction with transport arrangements that placed pupils in close proximity on vehicles when they were kept apart during the school day because of adverse interactions between their behaviours.

42. Passenger assistants play an important role in stimulating children and alleviating boredom on what can be a long journey, but may need guidance on handling challenging behaviour. Good communication with children can help to alleviate problems, and some allowances will need to be made for children’s inevitably boisterous behaviour, but further boundary setting may be needed [BOX I]. The LEA will need to decide whether efficient vehicle usage is compromising passenger safety where children are sharing vehicles.
Bullying can also be a problem. Pupils with special educational needs attending mainstream schools may be a particular target. LEAs should work with schools to ensure that policies and practice to address vandalism, bullying and other unacceptable behaviours cover school transport.

Children and their parents may place particular value on the attitude and friendliness of drivers and passenger assistants and on continuity and stability in the arrangements. For autistic children this can be amplified; as one parent said ‘my child worries about seeing a new face.’ Deaf parents of deaf children have also expressed concerns about passenger assistants’ ability to use sign language in order to communicate with their children. They felt that at the least, their children’s assistants should have some basic deaf awareness training. Surrey County Council has produced a leaflet to promote deaf awareness, which parents have praised.¹

¹ Surrey County Council, Taxi Drivers Information Leaflet; Transporting Hearing Impaired Pupils Who Use Sign Language, undated.
A pupil who does not use English as a first language may prefer to be accompanied by someone who speaks the language that he or she uses at home. In Wales, Welsh language speakers may be important to some children. Sensitivity to religious and cultural needs can also be important. Responding to these needs and concerns will be easier if passenger assistants reflect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children using the service. Recruitment practices that successfully address diversity will help; but changes to job specifications may sometimes be needed, to ensure that passenger assistants include people with necessary linguistic or other skills.

**Service flexibility**

LEAs should recognise that, in some instances, children will want to take part in after-school activities, such as sport, drama and homework clubs. Greater participation in after-school activities has been advocated in recent Government proposals and may be an important means of improving the self-confidence of those with special educational needs. Participation may, however, be difficult if parents or carers have no way of collecting their children from after-school activities or are still at work in the evening. Parents, pupils and OFSTED inspectors have raised concerns about transport for after-school activities [BOX K].

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**BOX K**

**Views of transport provision for after-school activities**

‘It’s up to the taxi driver to say yes or no [to whether the child could attend after-school activities], not the parent.’

Deaf parent

‘When I stay late for the after-school activities I don’t have an escort and I don’t like that.’

Deaf pupil

‘There is satisfactory provision for extra-curricular activities. Arrangements are limited by the distance that must pupils travel to school and complications in transport arrangements.’

‘There is no after-school provision, but this is difficult to provide as most pupils are transported home by bus or taxi.’

OFSTED inspection reports on special schools

*Source: Audit Commission based on Audit Commission focus groups and OFSTED reports on special schools*

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47. In some schools, parent teacher associations pay for transport after school, or activities are held at lunchtime to reduce the chance of pupils missing out due to transport problems. Surrey County Council has responded positively to parental concerns. It exercises its discretion to decide whether transport should be provided for after-school activities for children with special educational needs. Although provision is not made for one-off requests, because of the costs involved, transport may be provided for children who need to travel later on a regular basis, where after-school activities are seen as beneficial for the children concerned. Taxis are used for this work. LEAs should try to respond flexibly to such requests if they wish to ensure that transport arrangements do not unreasonably prevent equal access to after-school activities.

*     *     *

48. Authorities can answer the following questions to identify any gaps and priorities for action, and to inform policy development.
### Accessing and using special educational needs transport

#### Eligibility for special educational needs transport

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do decisions about eligibility comply with the SEN Code of Practice?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is eligibility for free transport:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• decided as part of the assessment process?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• re-examined regularly as part of the annual review of the SEN statement?</td>
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<td>Do decisions and reviews take account of the child’s and family’s needs including, where safe and appropriate, the need to develop independence?</td>
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<td>Is there clear, written local guidance which:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• covers all circumstances in which pupils with special educational needs receive free transport?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• has been produced following consultation with parents/carers and schools?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• sets out the roles of schools and different council units in identifying eligibility and making arrangements?</td>
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<td>• does not create cultural barriers to access?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• addresses linguistic differences within the local population (for example, catering for Welsh language speakers in Wales, or other languages where appropriate)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• is accessible to parents or carers who may themselves have disabilities?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• parents/carers and schools understand?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• is reviewed in response to changes in local needs and provision?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• is also reviewed when national policy changes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• has been agreed by elected members?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• complies with section 509 of the Education Act 1996 (for example, treats school pupils aged over 16 and students at FE colleges in the same way)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is this guidance followed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do parents/carers receive details of how the authority will decide whether their child is eligible for free transport before they express preferences about schools?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are arrangements for dealing with appeals and complaints about decisions on whether to provide free transport:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• clear and formally set out?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• understood by parents/carers and schools?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• agreed by elected members?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• followed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there effective, on-going quality assurance of decisions on entitlement?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

#### Safety

**Vehicles and equipment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are there effective systems for ensuring that all vehicles and equipment are well maintained, safe, taxed and insured?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there adequate systems for ensuring that section 19 vehicles carry a working fire extinguisher and properly stocked first aid kit?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there effective systems to check that other equipment is well maintained and safe?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do these arrangements cover contractors’ vehicles, including taxis and hired-cars, and spares or stand-in vehicles used by contractors and taxi and hired-car operators?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is equipment, required when transporting pupils, available when needed, so that pupils’ starts at school are not delayed, waiting for equipment?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there effective systems to check that all the staff who use equipment such as ramps and wheelchair lifts, including contractors’ staff and agency or temporary staff, have been trained in its use?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has the authority considered having an ‘approved operators’ list for which specific checks are carried out?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are operators informed of how to join any such schemes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can they do so speedily if they meet its requirements?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Arrangements and procedures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the allocation of pupils to particular types of vehicle – bus, taxi etc – take account of the individual pupil’s disabilities and needs?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do parents/carers, schools and service providers know who to contact when there are problems with the service?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do these arrangements include ‘out-of-hours’ contact?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do staff on the vehicles know what to do and who to contact if a child becomes unwell while on a vehicle?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are vehicles equipped with mobile phones (or radios), with the same phone and phone number staying with a route even if the driver and/or passenger assistant changes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are people notified of changes to contact arrangements in good time (for example, when routes are changed and mobile phones reassigned or new ones brought into use)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do pick-up points – if the service is not door-to-door – reflect pupils’ capabilities to travel to them safely?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within safety constraints, do-pick-up arrangements seek to encourage independence?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are pick-up and drop-off arrangements at the child’s home safe (for example, pupils board and leave vehicles from the kerb-side or rear not the road-side; pupils are supervised when boarding and leaving vehicles)?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are drop-off and pick-up arrangements at school safe (for example, pupils do not leave vehicles until all engines are off; all pupils are supervised; pupils are not in danger from vehicles, whether home-to-school transport or other traffic)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are tail-lifts and ramps used correctly?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are wheelchair brakes on when lifts are used?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are wheelchairs and the children travelling in them secured correctly within vehicles?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are seatbelts used and correctly fastened during trips?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are the procedures to follow when children are not waiting at pick-up points in the morning:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• clear?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• understood by drivers/passenger assistants, parents/carers, schools and staff in depots or the education department who may be contacted by parents/carers or schools?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there clear procedures for recording the numbers and identities of the children picked up?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there clear procedures for recording the numbers and identities of the children delivered to school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there clear procedures for recording and notifying schools of children who were not picked up (for example, if they were not at the pick-up point)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there clear procedures for recording the numbers and identities of the children collected from school and delivered home to parents/carers at the end of the school day?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are procedures to follow when parents/carers are not waiting at drop-off points:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• clear?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• understood by drivers/passenger assistants, parents/carers and others involved (for example, staff at any social services centre or other safe place at which a child may be left for collection)?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do all of these procedures work well?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are they all followed?</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there effective arrangements for recording any incidents or accidents that do occur?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are arrangements, procedures and training subsequently reviewed and modified as necessary?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there effective arrangements for identifying and responding to potential safety problems noticed by parents, children, schools and staff on the vehicles?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Has the safety of special educational needs transport arrangements emerged well in recent Estyn or OFSTED inspection reports on the authority’s schools (for example, no criticism over entrances or parking areas)?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Estyn or OFSTED has drawn attention to problems, have schools and the authority taken effective action to address the issue?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are parents and carers satisfied with safety arrangements?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are schools satisfied with safety arrangements?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>If they are not, is action in hand to address their concerns?</td>
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</table>

**Use of passenger assistants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are decisions on whether to provide a passenger assistant based on the individual child’s health and safety requirements?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are the criteria to apply clear?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do they also take account of the total number of children on a vehicle?

Do children, parents and schools understand them?

Are the criteria being applied equitably?

**Screening vehicle crews**

Are there adequate arrangements to ensure that all drivers, including contractors’ drivers and all taxi and hired-car drivers, temporary and agency drivers are:

- security checked with police before they first carry children where required by the Protection of Children Act 1999?
- given written guidance on their duties?
- in possession of a valid driving licence?
- given necessary information about the disabilities and needs of each pupil before they first carry that pupil?

Are there adequate arrangements to ensure that all passenger assistants, including agency staff who are regularly in contact with children, are:

- security checked with police before they first carry children where required by the Protection of Children Act 1999?
- given written guidance on their duties?
- given necessary information about the disabilities and needs of each pupil before they first carry that pupil?

Is the authority also satisfied that the following staff have been security screened where required by the Protection of Children Act 1999 before working on school transport:

- voluntary sector or volunteer drivers;
- contractors’ passenger assistants and taxi and hired-car passenger assistants?

If any staff have not yet been security vetted, do they work in tandem with experienced, security-cleared staff (so that they do not have unsupervised contact with children)?

**Staff training**

Are there effective systems to ensure that all drivers, including contractors’ drivers and all taxi and hired-car drivers and temporary and agency drivers, are appropriately trained before they start work?

Are there effective systems to ensure that all passenger assistants, including contractors’ staff and agency staff are appropriately trained before they begin duties?

Does the training for drivers and passenger assistants include disability awareness training and the ways in which they are to behave towards the children?

Does the training and guidance cover other behaviour (for example, smoking on duty; behaviour when waiting for children to leave school)?

Are drivers and passenger assistants working in the ways set out in their training and guidance?
SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

**Do drivers and passenger assistants, including ones provided by contractors, and including temporary or agency staff, have photocard identity badges?**

**Has the authority considered whether drivers and passenger assistants, including ones provided by contractors, and including temporary or agency staff, should wear uniforms?**

**Does the authority regularly check that all drivers and passenger assistants provided by contractors display their identity badges and, where these are used, wear their uniforms?**

**Are contractors following these requirements?**

**Are drivers and passenger assistants satisfied with their training?**

**Do drivers and passenger assistants feel adequately informed about the needs of children travelling with them?**

**Are parents and carers satisfied with driver and passenger assistant performance?**

**Are schools satisfied with driver and passenger assistant performance?**

**If they are not, is action in hand to address their concerns?**

**Quality and standards**

**Involving stakeholders**

**Has the LEA consulted about standards for service quality and customer care with:**

- children;
- parents;
- carers; and
- schools?

**Are there effective arrangements for consulting parents or carers for whom English is not a first language or who are not familiar with written English, (including, in Wales, Welsh speakers)?**

**Are there effective arrangements for consulting parents who may themselves have communication difficulties, or sensory impairments, for example deaf parents of deaf children?**

**Has the LEA also consulted other stakeholders (for example, its own frontline staff, contractors, contractors’ frontline staff)?**

**Does the authority effectively feedback decisions made following consultation to those it has consulted?**

**Are there formal standards for customer care?**

**Do these take full account of the results of consultation?**

**Is performance against these standards monitored regularly?**

**Do surveys of children’s, parents’, carers’, and schools’ satisfaction form part of this performance monitoring?**

**Is there a formal complaints system?**

**Are parents, carers and schools aware of how to complain?**

**Are complaints monitored?**
Does the authority collect, analyse and act upon ‘informal’ comments (for example, ones made face-to-face to staff or made by telephone) as well as written complaints?

**Day-to-day communication with parents, carers and schools**

Are parents and carers aware of how to access free transport?

Do they receive details of how the authority will decide whether their child is eligible for free transport early enough for this to inform their choice of a preferred school?

Are communication arrangements between parents/carers, service providers, schools and the council clear and effective?

Is there an information pack for parents setting out eligibility, roles and responsibilities of the pupil, parent, school, transport provider and LEA (with contact numbers)?

Is there a contact number for parents/schools/drivers if there are problems out of hours with breakdowns or late pick-ups (for example between 7.00 and 9.00am and between 3.30 and 6.30pm)?

Are authority contact names and telephone numbers up to date?

Does the authority have up-to-date contact details for all parents, for example to notify them of changes to routes/ operators?

Do all schools have a member of staff who acts as the LEA’s contact on transport issues?

Do these arrangements deal satisfactorily with communication with parents:

- who do not speak English or who are not fluent in written English (including, in Wales, Welsh speakers)?
- with learning or communication difficulties or sensory impairments?

Are there arrangements that allow parents to notify the special educational needs transport service (either directly, via the school or via the education department) when they know in advance that a child will not be attending school (for example, because of sickness or a hospital appointment)?

Do parents know who to contact when making arrangements for respite care (which may involve social services but will impact on special educational needs transport)?

Is there a formal mechanism for schools to raise problems?

Is there a formal mechanism for drivers/operators to raise problems?

Is there a formal mechanism for pupils/parents to raise problems?

Are issues raised in this way acted upon?

Do these arrangements work well?

**Ensuring children get to school on time**

Do children reach school on time?

Do standards cover:

- punctuality and reliability?
- pick-up times from home?
### Self-Assessment Checklist

- **Arrival at school?**
- **Pick-up from school?**
- **Arrival home?**

Have these been set following consultation with children, parents, carers and schools?

Is performance against them being monitored?

Are the standards being met?

Have parents and carers been asked whether they are satisfied with current performance?

Are they satisfied?

Have schools been asked whether they are satisfied with current performance?

Are they satisfied?

If parents, carers and schools are dissatisfied, is action in hand to address their concerns?

Has the arrival of children using special educational needs transport emerged well in recent inspection reports on the LEA’s schools by Estyn or OFSTED (for example, no criticisms over punctuality)?

If Estyn or OFSTED has drawn attention to problems, has the LEA taken effective action to address the issues?

### Journey quality

Are travel times reasonable (journeys do not overtire pupils or exacerbate medical or behavioural difficulties and do not impact adversely on performance at school)?

Do standards cover journey times?

Are any exceptional cases, where local geography prevents standards being met, individually identified and agreed by the education department?

Have standards been set following consultation with children, parents, carers and schools?

Is performance against them being monitored?

Are the standards being met?

Are parents and carers satisfied with current performance?

Are schools satisfied with current performance?

If they are not, is action in hand to address their concerns?

Have the journey times of children using special educational needs transport emerged well in recent Estyn or OFSTED inspection reports on the LEA’s schools (for example, no criticism over length of journey)?

If Estyn or OFSTED has drawn attention to problems, has the LEA taken effective action to address the issue?

Do pupils travel in comfort (for example, conditions do not overtire them or exacerbate medical or behavioural difficulties and do not impact adversely on their performance at school)?

Do standards cover journey quality?
**SELF–ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Status</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have standards been set following consultation with children, parents, carers and schools?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is performance against them being monitored?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are they being met?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are children satisfied with current performance?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are parents and carers satisfied with current performance?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are schools satisfied with current performance?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If they are not, is action in hand to address their concerns?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has journey quality emerged well from recent Estyn or OFSTED reports (for example, no criticisms over comfort or reliability)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Estyn or OFSTED has drawn attention to problems, has the LEA taken effective action to address the issues?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Service flexibility**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Status</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has the LEA consulted with parents, carers and schools about the need for after-hours school transport (so that children can attend after-school activities)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is provision made for after-hours transport where needed?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Has the LEA considered the implications for transport services of greater specialisation of schools and more after-school activities?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Balancing costs and service quality

49. The previous section discussed service quality. However, transport has to be provided within financial constraints. Transport spending forms a significant part of the centrally retained LEA budget; cost pressures and overspends can therefore have a major impact on other LEA functions. Managing the tensions between these and the desire to maintain and improve standards can be challenging. This section covers:

- The context – increasing costs: the nature of transport cost increases and factors which contribute to these.
- Strategic responses to cost pressures: this can involve reviewing policies and provision; monitoring and benchmarking costs; improving procurement, including jointly procuring and integrating services where possible, and better contract monitoring.
- Operational responses to cost pressures: authorities need to review their day-to-day management arrangements to ensure staff and vehicles are used effectively; examine route planning and scheduling, review the management of in-house transport; and review the use of taxis and hired-cars.

50. This section shows how costs have increased and discusses some of the trade-offs that may exist between costing-saving and service quality. These tensions can be heightened by increasing demand and by above-inflation rises in transport costs. There are opportunities to use resources more effectively. In some instances, however, authorities will need to identify whether possible cost savings and efficiency improvements adversely affect service quality and, if they do, whether the impact is acceptable. These policy issues need to be considered when setting budgets.

The context – increasing costs

51. The number of children with statements of special educational need in England rose from just over 160,000 in 1991 to almost 270,000 in 2000 (an increase from 2 to 3 per cent of all pupils). Inclusion – policies of, where possible and appropriate, educating children who have special educational needs in mainstream schools rather than at special schools – means that, despite these increases, the number of pupils attending special schools in England has fallen slightly over the same period. OFSTED data shows about 120,000 children at special schools in England are receiving free transport. At the same time expenditure on home-to-school transport to special schools rose slightly, by 2 per cent [EXHIBIT 3]I. In Wales, there were just under 17,000 children with statements in 2000 – 3 per cent of the school population. About 3,600 of them attended special schoolsII, and transport to these schools cost £11 millionIII.

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I There is no nationally available data on expenditure on home-to-school transport for children who have special educational needs but who are not attending special school.

II The number of statemented pupils in mainstream schools has increased to 75 per cent, up 5 percentage points since 1990. National Assembly for Wales, The Learning Country, National Assembly for Wales, 2001.

III 21 per cent of the total expenditure on home-to-school transport in Wales.
Exhibit 3

Expenditure by English LEAs on home-to-school transport

Expenditure on special educational needs transport has increased in the last ten years.

Source: Audit Commission based on data from the DfES

There are a number of reasons for increases in expenditure. Tender prices for both mainstream and special educational needs home-to-school transport, and for publicly supported bus routes, have increased at above inflation rates across the country in recent years. The House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs examined these increases in 1999 and expressed concerns about them. The Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) subsequently reported, in November 2000, that recently re-tendered school bus contract prices (that is, prices on routes covered by existing contracts that were expiring) were 11.1 per cent higher than the contracts that they replaced. ATCO also reported that authorities would need a 7.4 per cent increase in budget from April 2001 to retain existing levels of school bus services.

Though the Office of Fair Trading has successfully acted against two illegal anti-competitive price fixing arrangements, between contractors bidding for home-to-school work, in Hull and in Staffordshire, there is no evidence that anti-competitive practices by contractors have contributed to the general rise in prices. Explanations offered for the rises – by the Government, in its response to the Select Committee and by local authority officers and contractors interviewed by the Commission – include:

- increases in driver costs. As unemployment levels have eased many transport providers have had to increase wages to retain or recruit drivers. Even so, driver recruitment remains a problem, especially in the south of England;

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- the extension to part-time staff of the same employment rights as full-time staff –
  escorts, or passenger assistants, have commonly been employed part-time;
- above inflation rises in fuel, insurance and other vehicle running costs;
- increases in the number of contracts used for special educational needs transport, as
  vehicles are required to take children to more locations. The increasing inclusion of
  children with special educational needs in mainstream schools helps to explain this. The
  increase in the number of locations may reduce opportunities for economies of scale in
  vehicle use and increase use of taxis or other small vehicles;
- additional moves towards smaller vehicles because traffic-calming measures are making
  it difficult for larger vehicles to collect children from, and deliver them to, addresses in
  side streets;
- changes to vehicle specifications, as a result of changing seatbelt specifications and
  regulations on how to secure wheelchairs within vehicles. The latter has also tended to
  reduce the number of wheelchairs carried by each vehicle; and
- increased training costs as health and safety requirements lead to a greater focus on
  staff training.

54. In 1999/2000, the majority of expenditure on free transport for children with special
educational needs was by counties – 45 per cent of the £216 million spent that year in England.
This reflects the numbers of children carried, just under 60,000, or half, of those in England
receiving free special educational needs transport. On average, English counties spent under
£10 per pupil carried per school day while London boroughs spent over £15 [EXHIBIT 4].

55. In 2001, the DfEE published national guidance suggesting some possible responses to the
factors that can increase transport costs for children with special educational needs [TABLE 1].
These and other issues can be considered under two headings: strategic issues and
operational arrangements.
Exhibit 4

Expenditure per pupil with special needs carried per school day in England in 1999/2000

Expenditure varies significantly but most LEAs spend between five and fifteen pounds per pupil carried per pupil day.

Source: Audit Commission based on LEA expenditure data collated by DfES and pupil numbers carried collected by OFSTED.

Note that the combination of data sets revealed some data errors – outliers have been excluded. The graph is based on data from 109 authorities. There is no equivalent data on actual pupils carried collected for Wales.
### TABLE 1

**Ways of responding to cost pressures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors influencing cost</th>
<th>Possible responses</th>
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| Total numbers of pupils, of pupils with special educational needs and of pupils with severe needs. | • Have clear policies on entitlement to SEN transport.  
• Assess individual SEN pupils to identify whether transport is required and, if it is, the appropriate provision (for example, use of public or dedicated transport; pick-up points; escorting requirements). Do not automatically provide free transport to all SEN pupils but adhere to the SEN Code.  
• Transport requirements are considered at the annual meeting to review each child's statement of special educational need. |
| Location of pupils/schools etc | • Consider transport costs when planning new schools or to extend or close existing ones.  
• Regularly review transport arrangements to rationalise provision (routes; use of taxis and hired-cars) as requirements alter. |
| Pupils may be placed at distant, out-of-borough schools, because of a lack of nearer suitable places, parental preference etc. | • Assess transport costs prior to placement, considering possible trade-offs between transport and education costs but adhere to the SEN Code.  
• Provide transport only to the nearest suitable school.  
• Publicise policy on placements and on the provision of free transport.  
• Have conflict resolution mechanisms, when parents disagree with placement decisions. |
| Impact of policies on inclusion, day placements and respite care. | • Have clear policy and agreement on the roles of the education department, the social services department and health bodies in providing transport/meeting transport costs.  
• Full-day inclusion sessions make more cost-effective use of transport, but are possible only where such sessions are preferable for, or without any detrimental effect upon, the pupil's health/education. |
| Traffic congestion reduces vehicle speed, and thus utilisation, or lengthens journey times. | • Consider staggering school start/finish times; consult schools, parents and carers about this option.  
• Use collective rather than individual (door-step) pick-up points, where appropriate. |
| High in-house costs. | • Minimise vehicle down times by also using them for other school work (for example, trips to sports facilities during the school day; after-school activities).  
• Pool vehicles with social services.  
• Use vehicles for social services work, during the school day.  
• Use drivers for other work during the middle of the day.  
• Avoid paying passenger assistants for when they are not working, but retain competitive remuneration that holds down staff turnover.  
• Review where vehicles are kept overnight. Garaging some securely in satellite depots, close to pick-up and drop-off points or drivers' homes, may improve utilisation. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors influencing cost</th>
<th>Possible responses</th>
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</table>
| Rising contract prices or lack of interest from potential contractors. | • Exercise flexibility over contract length – for example, open-ended, rather than fixed-term, contracts may attract more bids and keener prices.  
• Use standard tender terms/contract requirements (ie, the same terms and requirements as neighbouring authorities) as this may reduce bidders’ tender preparation costs.  
• Joint tendering (for example, with social services) may also reduce bidders’ tender preparation costs and offer them economies of scale in providing services.  
• Examine the use of alternative providers (for example, from the voluntary sector).  
• Retain some in-house capacity, to provide a fall-back, if tender prices rise excessively or if there are no bids, and to offer a yardstick against which to judge external prices. |
| Improving vehicle standards (for example, seatbelt requirements). | • Fully meet all of the legal requirements but identify the reasons for, and then cost and prioritise, other improvements. |
| Increasing parental expectations about service quality.      | • Consult with parents and schools to identify concerns and priorities.  
• Cost possible improvements to services, identifying alternative uses for the money and then consult parents and schools further about priorities.  
• Effective publicity about policy and standards.  
• Effective liaison with schools and parents.  
• Effective complaints procedures, which speedily identify and resolve individual problems. |
| Increasing escorting costs as health and safety standards improve. | • Have clear criteria on when passenger assistants will and will not be provided.  
• Apply these pupil by pupil in the light of the child’s needs.  
• Regularly review individual pupil’s requirements.  
• Have a clear policy and agreement on the role of social services departments and health bodies in providing passenger assistants for pupils with day placements or receiving respite care.  
• Encourage passenger assistant retention to minimise recruitment and training costs, for example, by treating them as part of the education/transport team. |

Source: Audit Commission drawing upon DfEE guidance\(^1\)

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Strategic responses to cost pressures

56. In strategic terms, there are several critical issues to address. LEAs will need to:

- ensure that they fully consider transport costs when making major policy decisions about how and where they will educate children with special educational needs;
- monitor and benchmark costs and patterns of service provision regularly;
- improve how transport is procured and provided;
- examine how they monitor contracts and service level agreements; and
- consider co-ordinating with others to encourage efficient procurement.

In doing so, authorities will often need to consult children, parents and carers, schools and other stakeholders to identify the potential impact upon them of any changes.

Reviewing policies and provision

57. Members play a key role in considering the trade-offs between improving service quality and reducing expenditure. They should be well informed and involved in discussions about options, to ensure that appropriate local decisions are made. Transport should be considered when an authority reviews its policies on, and its provision of, education for children with special needs and this should be reflected in consultations with stakeholders.

58. Approaches to inclusion, and decisions on the locations of special schools and other facilities, have a direct impact on expenditure on special educational needs transport. There will often be no conflicts between quality of service and expenditure issues; for example, locations with low transport costs will tend to be ones that are easy to reach from many pupils’ homes and thus also reduce the time that children spend on vehicles. School closures may, however, lead to increasing demand for children to travel further to school and, in some instances, parents may prefer their children to travel out of area to attend specialised facilities. In addition, increasing inclusion may lead to greater use of taxis and smaller minibuses and may therefore impact significantly on costs.

Monitoring and benchmarking costs

59. Regular monitoring of costs and benchmarking of these, alongside service standards and performance, will help to identify opportunities for improvements to services and for cost savings. Annual or other regular reporting on this to members is one option. Participation in local benchmarking clubs may also help to identify reasons for disparities between similar authorities. Good monitoring can also help to identify problems and opportunities for cost savings within the authority [CASE STUDY 2].
Improving procurement and provision

60. Services can be provided by in-house internal trading organisations, by contractors or by a mix of the two. Best value requires that councils embrace fair competition as a means of securing efficient and effective services. Market testing the service, or parts of it, from time to time offers one way of doing this. The best solutions to meeting local needs will, however, vary from place to place, for example, because of differences in the local market.

61. When going to the market, authorities should monitor the number of bids received and tender prices and examine trends over time. They should compare the prices they pay to successful tenderers with the prices paid by other authorities. One authority visited by the Commission has addressed the issue of tender price rises by documenting cumulative inflationary increases granted from the beginning of contracts, in order to inform discussions with operators. Developing in-house services may improve local provision by providing competition with external operators and setting higher service standards. If they suspect cartel activity, authorities should seek advice from the Office of Fair Trading.

62. One key decision is whether to put the whole operation out to tender or to offer different contracts for individual routes or parts of the network. A second key decision involves the contract periods to use. Some authorities currently prefer to tender parts of the network, believing that there is no local operator capable of providing the entire service. Some also prefer to retain some in-house capacity, as a defence against possible anti-competitive practices by suppliers. Even though the internal trading organisation may not bid for every contract, the possibility that it may bid can destabilise a cartel. The internal trading organisation also gives a yardstick against which to judge outside bidders’ prices.

63. Authorities typically use three- or five-year contracts, let on a rolling programme under which a third (or a fifth) of the network is offered to tender each year. This helps to manage the authority’s annual tendering workload and provides successful contractors with a degree of certainty about future work. It may also increase suppliers’ willingness to invest in new vehicles or staff training. Careful selection of the package of routes offered each year – for example, routes serving particular geographical areas or particular schools – allows contractors to exploit economies of scale or other efficiencies and to offer prices for individual routes plus other, lower prices, if they win particular combinations of routes.
Another option is to move to longer or open-ended contracts. These may attract more bidders and keener prices as well as encouraging suppliers to invest but may also lock an authority into arrangements that increasingly fail to meet its needs, and which thus need to be renegotiated. In addition, a price that was competitive when a contract was let may become less so with time. Operators can also be asked to bid for a core service quality but allowed to quote too for higher quality services. Quality improvements can either be specified by the authority or be proposed by bidders.

Periodic re-tendering may lead to changes in supplier when the existing contractor, or internal trading organisation, fails to retain a route. This in turn can lead to changes in drivers or passenger assistants that some children find upsetting. Three- or five-year contract periods reduce the frequency with which such disruptions may happen. Using in-house passenger assistants, when provision of vehicles and drivers has been outsourced, is one way of maintaining some staffing continuity on services.

**Monitoring contracts and service level agreements**

Contracts need to allow for changes in the network within the contract period, for example, following the annual network review and in response to new intakes of pupils and phase transfer. Contract terms and contract management arrangements should seek to ensure service quality. This can be done not only by specifying quality requirements but by including, in the financial arrangements, measures that reward service providers who meet or exceed these requirements and by then monitoring performance and applying the incentives. Service level agreements with ITOs should take a similar approach.

Effective monitoring of performance against contract, or SLA, requirements is an essential part of achieving value for money, as well as of ensuring service quality. Where responsibilities for contract monitoring are split between the education department and other parts of the authority, or shared with a Passenger Transport Executive (PTE), the LEA will need clarity of roles and effective reporting procedures. Without this, LEA staff may be unaware of complaints or problems with the service. Regular consultation with schools, operators and drivers will also help to manage performance, by identifying problems and highlighting good practice which can be transferred across the service.

**Co-operation with others**

Co-operation with others is another important way of improving efficiency. Options include co-operating on procurement with others in the council, co-operation with the local PTE (in the case of metropolitan districts) and working with outside bodies.

Letting and managing transport contracts involves specialist skills. Other parts of a council, for example social services, also use transport services and require access to the same expertise. A number of authorities have therefore created council-wide transport coordinating units. Examples include Devon County Council, which has had such a unit since 1986, and Cheshire County Council, where a recent best value inspection found the service to be both ‘good’ and ‘likely to improve’ [CASE STUDY 3].

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1 In England, the Passenger Transport Executives sometimes act as agents for the metropolitan district councils in their areas, organising mainstream home-to-school travel on their behalf. Occasionally they also organise home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs.
CASE STUDY 3

Transport Co-ordinating Services: Devon and Cheshire

Devon County Council

The Council’s Transport Co-ordination Service:

- co-ordinates, manages and administers the provision of home-to-school transport, for both ‘mainstream’ pupils and for pupils with special educational needs, on behalf of the authority’s Department of Education, Arts and Libraries (including post-16 travel to education);
- provides similar services for the Social Services Department;
- manages and arranges subsidised public transport (bus) services;
- provides support and advice for community transport schemes, working with operators, other public sector bodies and voluntary bodies;
- administers a concessionary fare scheme on behalf of district councils in Devon and Torbay unitary authority;
- co-ordinates and manages the County Council’s vehicle fleet;
- provides identity badges for drivers and passenger assistants; and
- deals with contract compliance including adherence to vehicle safety requirements and provides driver training.

The County transports about 20,000 pupils and students each day, about 800 of whom attend special schools. Some mainstream pupils travel on public bus (or rail) services, using passes purchased by the Co-ordination Service but most pupils use transport provided by contractors or on council-owned vehicles driven by contractors.

Cheshire County Council

The Audit Commission’s Best Value Inspection Service published its report on its inspection of Cheshire County Council’s Transport Co-ordinating service in May 2001. The Commission concluded that the service was ‘good’ and ‘likely to improve’.

The Service deals with:

- mainstream home-to-school transport;
- transport for children with special educational needs;
- transport for elderly people, people with disabilities and children in care;
- public transport – supported (that is, subsidised) public bus services; information on public transport; concessionary fares (on behalf of nine district and unitary councils); and rural bus grant;
- school crossing patrols; and
- fleet management.

It arranges transport daily for 24,000 clients, 2,000 of whom are children with special educational needs. Children, and adults, with special needs travel on a mix of in-house and externally provided transport.

The Co-ordination Service works closely with other council departments and with other local authorities. It had a budget of £23 million in 1999/2000, £19m of which was covered by service level agreements with the council’s Education Department, Social Services Department, other parts of the County Council and other local authorities.

The inspectors found that the Service contained good practice and innovation; was held in high regard by its customers; had good comparative performance; and was cost-conscious. It had carried out a thorough best value review and had a track record of innovation and improvement and worked within the County Council corporate framework for performance review. One example of internal partnership working is the joint work between the client departments (Education and Social Services) to develop a specification for buses for special needs transport.

Source: Audit Commission
70. Such central co-ordination can offer economies of scale and make effective use of technical skills. It also ensures that different parts of an authority do not unwittingly go to the market at the same time, compete against each other for suppliers’ resources and so drive up prices. Additionally, it allows authorities to offer packages of work that cover several services. Contractors can then identify opportunities to share resources across, for example, special educational needs transport and social services transport, and reflect this in their prices. Authorities using in-house providers, including many London boroughs, often achieve the same effect by allowing one internal trading organisation to provide both special educational needs transport and social services transport. Costs may then be reduced by pooling spare vehicles, by sharing reserve drivers and by using joint vehicle leasing or maintenance contracts. In London, work by District Audit has revealed the extent to which co-ordination of special educational needs and social services transport, and employing vehicles for a wide range of other purposes, improves vehicle utilisation [EXHIBIT 5].

71. As at Lewisham [CASE STUDY 4], this co-ordination can be extended to operational integration of transport services, to guarantee that the same vehicles can be used for several types of work. One advantage is that the same training and standards of care are then used when dealing with pupils and social services clients. Commonly, authorities that do not co-ordinate social services and special educational needs transport apply inconsistent standards and approaches to escorting the two client groups, even though they may share similar needs. Co-ordination may be particularly useful, for example, for children in the care of the local authority, or for those being taken from school to respite care, as it should prevent duplication of effort when arranging transport.

**EXHIBIT 5**

**Minibus utilisation in two London boroughs**

Borough B gets higher use from its vehicles as it employs them for a wide range of purposes.

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**Source: District Audit**
Full operational integration can deliver considerable savings. However, changes to special school (or day centre) start times, to ensure that this happens, can have major implications for teachers and other school staff (or for social services staff) and for children and their parents or carers (or for social services’ clients). Consultation is thus essential; financial benefits need to be weighed against the other potential impacts.

Operational integration can also sometimes create unwelcome interdependencies and reduce flexibility. For example, a delay in a morning special school run, caused by heavy rush-hour traffic, might mean that a social services run starts late and that social services clients thus arrive late at a day centre. The times at which clients leave the day centre have to dovetail with the afternoon special school run, reducing the ability of the centre’s staff to adjust their programme of activities during the day. For this reason, co-ordination is sometimes unpopular with frontline social services staff, compared with alternatives in which vehicles are permanently allocated to individual social services centres. However, dedicated vehicles are often poorly utilised and their costs sometimes difficult to identify within centres’ accounts. Frontline social services staff may not, therefore, realise just how much they are paying for flexibility.

In Devon, the authority’s Transport Co-ordination Service identifies options for co-ordinating transport arrangements that offer savings both to the authority’s Education Arts and Libraries Department and to its Social Services Department. Both these client Departments thus support the approach. Worcestershire County Council established an integrated Passenger and Fleet Transport Unit in 2000. The Unit now manages education transport, social services transport and support for local bus services. In Worcestershire, co-ordination has also developed further, with the local authority and health services now working in partnership to improve the integration of transport services [CASE STUDY 5].
CASE STUDY 5

Integrated transport services: Worcestershire

A joint Worcestershire Health and Transport Partnership was formed in 1999 at the instigation of the County Council and Health Authority. By working together the partnership has substantially improved transport services in the area, with significant funding being provided by both the County Council and the Health Authority. Changes in the acute health sector provided the catalyst for a stakeholder conference in November 1999, which identified the need for a partnership approach. Partners recognised that in some parts of rural Worcestershire there was a dearth of transport provision.

The joint group now includes a wide range of public, private, health and voluntary sector organisations including:

- Worcestershire County Council;
- Worcestershire Health Authority;
- Hereford and Worcester Ambulance Service;
- Wychavon Primary Care Group;
- Hereford and Worcester Chamber of Commerce;
- the local Community Council (representing community transport and the voluntary sector);
- Kidderminster and District Community Health Council; and
- bus operators.

The joint group was set up to develop a co-ordinated approach to transport which:

- produces harmony and synergy of health and local government strategic policy;
- meets the objectives of The NHS Plan to promote partnership and collaboration;
- reduces duplication;
- achieves efficiency savings or service improvements;
- establishes a call centre for Worcestershire that manages community transport requests;
- provides access to premises which maintain health, which is recognised as crucial in terms of rural health; and
- achieves integration, enabling current organisational barriers to be addressed.

Consultants act as facilitators. Although the County Council and the Health Authority in Worcestershire were already pursuing joint working, their common interest in passenger transport was cemented by the need to consider access to hospital facilities. This has focused attention on how the route network can provide direct access to hospital sites. The Transport and Health Partnership has had initial discussions with Hereford and Worcester Ambulance Service to investigate closer working, with potential links between social services transport, non-emergency PTS, and community transport. Worcestershire's Local Transport Plan has been developed in partnership through the Worcestershire Transport and Health Group. As an example of joint working with health, school nurses are being used to monitor the effectiveness of school travel plan initiatives.

Source: Audit Commission
Operational responses to cost pressures

75. In addition to considering co-ordination or operational integration of transport provision through a central unit, the authority may be able to improve its operational efficiencies by looking at other aspects of its day-to-day activity. There may be opportunities to:
- improve the planning and scheduling of routes;
- review the use of taxis and hired-cars, and
- improve the use of resources where services are provided in-house.

Improving route planning and scheduling

76. Some ad-hoc, in-year changes to arrangements are unavoidable, for example, when existing passengers change address or school and when pupils enter or leave the LEA’s area. However, continued long-term incremental change may eventually create a network that uses resources poorly. A regular re-examination of arrangements, to identify opportunities for rationalisation, is desirable. Analysis can be carried out annually in conjunction with planning for the new school year, a time when changes will be required in any event to accommodate children beginning their education and to respond to phase transfer.

77. Sensitivity to children’s needs and consultation with parents and others on changes are essential. Successful network redesign will often, therefore, involve identifying and refining a number of options. Changes that increase technical efficiency – for example, by maximising seat utilisation – may be unacceptable if they have an adverse impact on service quality, for example by increasing journey times. Changes in pick-up and drop-off times can have a major impact on parents or carers; for example, a significantly later pick-up time might make it difficult for a parent to reach work on time. In addition, as discussed earlier, children and their parents can particularly value staffing continuity and some children (especially those with autism) will be particularly upset if their drivers or passenger assistants are changed – or may even refuse to board the vehicle. There are approaches that may help to mitigate some of these difficulties, for example, splitting existing driver and passenger assistant teams so that children travelling on the new routes still know either the driver or the assistant. Authorities should try to respond flexibly to accommodate pupils’ needs.

78. Many authorities still schedule manually. However, used appropriately, computer-assisted scheduling systems – geographical information systems (GIS) and other IT tools – can help to improve route design. For example, they can provide rapid on-screen display of where children live and the schools they attend, together with route options identified by schedulers, replacing the slow and cumbersome use of paper maps. Schedulers should not, therefore, view IT as a threat; it is an aid to, not a substitute for, them. Local knowledge – for example, of one-way systems or of traffic congestion blackspots in urban areas – is essential, as is the requirement to select approaches that are sensitive to the needs of children, parents and schools.
One authority visited by the Commission’s project team had a geographical information system but had not been using it to help with routing and scheduling. During the visit, the authority arranged for its schedulers to access the system for the first time. Within a short time, they were identifying inefficiencies and opportunities to rationalise and improve their existing arrangements. Worcestershire County Council is planning to make extensive use of IT and e-technology to help with its route planning [CASE STUDY 6].

**CASE STUDY 6**

**Clean sheet scheduling exercise and e-technology route planning: Worcestershire**

Worcestershire County Council wants to undertake ‘clean sheet’ reviews of transport provision over the next five years. Officers plan a culture of continual review. Special educational needs and mainstream home-to-school runs are currently reviewed for September each year. The intention is eventually to review routes every half term. Officers feel this would be difficult to achieve manually.

Worcestershire has undertaken a detailed evaluation of alternative computer scheduling software currently available. The local ambulance service already uses computer assisted scheduling and planning. A successful funding bid for a computerised transport booking system compatible with both the County’s own Passenger and Fleet Transport system and the Ambulance Trust system was submitted with the Local Transport Plan. The Ambulance Trust is undertaking a data capture exercise to investigate the potential for integrated scheduling. A sample of social services, special educational needs and non-emergency patient transport data is to be loaded to compare one week’s manual routes with the County’s preferred package.

The Worcestershire Transport and Health Partnership subsequently bid successfully for Invest-to-Save funding for ACTIVATE (Accessible & Co-ordinated Transport Initiatives Via Advanced Technology Enhancements). The central function of ACTIVATE is to implement a computer software system to ensure greater co-ordination in the use of the vehicles of a number of organisations, including the County Council, community transport (dial-a-ride and voluntary car schemes) ambulance service and taxis. As well as using all available vehicles in the most effective way possible, it is intended to integrate their use with local public bus services.

Bookings and referrals for transport are to be made to a central point. The computer system will allocate journeys in the most efficient way, with the most appropriate vehicle despatched. Where a connection with a public bus service is required, the system will provide details of the connection and will inform both transport providers of the requirement.

A phased approach to implementation is planned. Initially, a pilot phase will see the system used to manage a number of flexibly routed and feeder services, together with trials involving the County Council’s social services fleet, the ambulance service and the community transport sector, which is planned for completion in early 2002. Following testing, the system will be extended to special educational needs transport. The third stage will see the system extended to mainstream home-to-school transport. The co-ordinated travel management system will be backed by a state of the art smartcard ticketing and billing system and linked information system introduced in conjunction with First Midland Red.

*Source: Audit Commission*
Authorities, especially those in urban areas, can consider whether to link routes exclusively to schools, so that a particular route serves only one school, or to allow a route to deliver to and collect from two or more schools. The latter may sometimes improve vehicle utilisation but can have disadvantages. For example, the vehicle will have to deliver children earlier in the morning than would otherwise be necessary, to allow it complete its last drop-off before the start of the school day; similarly, some evening pick-ups may be later than might otherwise be the case. This can have staffing and safety implications at schools, if some vehicles arrive and load or unload at different times to others. Staggering school starts might overcome this but has major implications for schools, parents and children, many of whom might not see the upheaval as justified to obtain a marginal improvement in transport costs.

Reviewing use of taxis and hired-cars

Some children’s journeys may be so unusual that they are difficult to accommodate economically on a bus route. In addition, some in-year changes in the numbers of children to be carried, and the places they travel between, can be difficult to accommodate within the existing bus network. Lastly, some pupil’s needs or behaviours mean that it is best that they do not travel with other children. Taxis and hired-cars thus have an important role to play in meeting needs.

They are usually, however, substantially more expensive than dedicated minibus services. For example, in London, the annual transport cost of a single pupil with special educational needs is typically about £5,000 to £6,000 when travelling by taxi or hired-car compared with about £3,000 per pupil per year for internal trading organisation minibuses. Annual network reviews should therefore seek to identify and remove unnecessary use of taxis or hired-cars.

Where taxis and hired-cars are used, it is important that an authority makes effective and accountable use of its purchasing power. Many councils are spending hundreds of thousands of pounds a year in their local taxi and hired-car market. Continued large-scale spot hire is unlikely to be cost effective. The co-ordination of purchasing across departments, and the use of formal contracts, is likely to help to obtain better prices, and, by offering drivers guaranteed work, to help to ensure that service quality is achieved. In one authority, taxis were sometimes late for scheduled SEN runs because drivers had accepted lucrative airport trips; proper contract procedures can help to guard against this. Contracts can include call-off prices for services required at short notices, as well as prices for scheduled work. Ad-hoc purchasing also increases the dangers of corruption; formal contracting procedures, in line with the authority’s standing orders, provide defences against this. Authorities will, need to look at their arrangements for transport to respite care and emergency cover, as these may involve requests for taxis made at short notice.

Using in-house resources effectively

SEN transport is required for only part of the day and only in term time. Where in-house services are used, the extent to which the authority can use vehicles and staff for other work will have an impact on costs. Some councils use their home-to-school transport in the middle of the day for school visits and trips, for social services work and even to carry meals-on-wheels. The use of collective rather than door-step pick-up points, where appropriate, may also allow for quicker journeys. Reviewing where vehicles are kept
overnight may also help efficiency, as garaging some securely in satellite depots, close to pick-up and drop-off points or drivers’ homes, may improve utilisation.

85. In-house drivers are normally employed full-time. Part time and split shifts can be unworkable; if they find their conditions unattractive, bus driver shortages currently mean that drivers may easily find alternative work. In-house passenger assistants commonly work part-time and are not paid for the middle of the day. Some of them have found additional part-time employment with the authority, for example, working as care staff at special schools, as in Leeds.

86. Particular care can be needed to ensure that part-time staff are trained adequately, are managed and supervised well and made to feel part of the overall operation. Attention to these issues may improve morale and reduce staff turnover and sickness rates, and thus reduce costs. A member of staff interviewed in one recent best value inspection commented, ‘we are the forgotten people’. Positively involving staff in the service and generating a sense of worth and professionalism will help to counteract this.

* * *

87. This section looked at the tensions between controlling expenditure and improving service quality. The questions in the following checklist will help authorities to balance these tensions
2 Balancing costs and service quality

The context – increasing costs

Is the LEA monitoring its expenditure on special educational needs transport over time, to monitor trends? □

Has the authority examined trends in tender prices and in-house costs? □

Has the authority analysed recently re-tendered contracts to identify trends? □

Strategic responses to cost pressures

Reviewing policies and provision

Has the LEA considered the impact on special educational needs transport when reviewing:

● policies (for example, on inclusion) □

● provision (for example, the location of schools and other facilities)? □

Monitoring and benchmarking costs

Do members responsible for special educational needs transport:

● review cost and other data, benchmarked against other LEAs, at least annually? □

● know how competitive costs are, compared to alternative suppliers? □

Do officers managing special educational needs transport:

● know the costs and unit costs of each type of special educational needs transport (for example, in-house minibuses; contractors’ minibuses; taxis, etc)? □

● know the split between different types of transport used (that is, the percentage of pupils carried by each type of transport)? □

Does the LEA have a set of local cost-based performance indicators? □

Improving procurement and provision

Has the service been exposed to fair competition? □

Have market testing and contract letting been in accordance with the authority’s standing orders? □

Has the authority consulted operators about its contracting procedures to identify any problems or areas for improvement? □

If the authority has evidence of cartel activity, has this been reported to the Office of Fair Trading? □

Are there arrangements to try to maintain staffing continuity, in appropriate cases, when contracts change (for example, when a change in staffing may severely disturb a child)? □

Do contracts, or service level agreements (SLAs) with an internal trading organisation, allow for changes to the network within the contract period? □

Are operators given the option to offer an enhanced level of service, as well as quote for the core service level specified by the council, when they tender for work? □
### Monitoring contracts and service level agreements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do contracts, or SLAs, specify service quality requirements?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do they include incentives that encourage providers to meet or exceed these standards?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the incentive regime used?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is performance against standards monitored and reported to the education department and to members?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are complaints monitored by the education department and reported upon to members?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the LEA satisfied with current contract monitoring arrangements?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the authority encourage or reward operators who exceed quality standards?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do performance measurement and complaints monitoring inform continuous service improvement?</td>
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### Co-operation with others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the authority using, or has it examined, improving efficiency through:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- co-ordinated purchasing across departments?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- co-ordinated provision across departments (for example, using the same supplier for special educational needs and social services transport)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- operational integration across departments?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- co-operation with outside bodies?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have decisions taken account of the potential impact on children, parents and carers and schools?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Have decisions been made after consultation with children, parents and carers and schools and other stakeholders?</td>
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</table>

### Operational responses to cost pressures

#### Improving route planning and scheduling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does transport allocation (for example, placing a pupil on a particular vehicle/route) take account of both current and likely future vehicle occupancy?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the authority regularly (for example, annually) review the entire network to identify potential savings and efficiency improvements?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do redesigns also take account of issues that concern parents, carers and schools?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the LEA consult with parents, carers and schools before making major changes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the authority use computer-assisted scheduling?</td>
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<tr>
<td>If it does not, has it examined the option (for example, visited councils that use it; arranged for limited trial use)?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Self-Assessment Checklist

#### Reviewing use of taxis and hired-cars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do annual or other regular redesigns of the network seek to minimise the use of taxis and hired-cars (within the constraints imposed by the LEA’s quality standards)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has the authority gone formally to contract for taxi and hired-car services?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are the taxi and hired-car firms used from the authority's approved list of contractors?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do contracts cover other use of taxis and hired-cars as well as for special educational needs transport?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do contracts cover prices for ad hoc, short-notice work (for example, emergency cover and respite care) as well as regular, scheduled journeys?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the authority co-ordinate purchasing of taxis and hired-cars and Taxicard across departments, for example special educational needs, officer and member and social services use of taxis and hired-cars?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has contract letting been in accord with standing orders?</td>
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<tr>
<td>When undertaking work for the authority, are taxi and hired-cars drivers asked to enter start and finish mileage on receipts as well as cost?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has the authority considered whether volunteer drivers offer an alternative to use of taxis and hired-cars?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has the authority considered whether mileage payments to parents or carers offer an alternative to use of taxis and hired-cars?</td>
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#### Using in-house resources effectively

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>staggering school start and finish times, to allow more intensive use of vehicles?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>full day, rather than separate half-day inclusion sessions, where appropriate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>collective rather than door-step collection points, where safe and appropriate to do so?</td>
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<tr>
<td>use of satellite garages?</td>
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<tr>
<td>making other use of in-house vehicles in the middle of the day?</td>
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<tr>
<td>finding other work for in-house drivers during the day?</td>
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<tr>
<td>use of part-time or split shift working (for example, for in-house passenger assistants)?</td>
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Has the authority consulted schools, parents, carers and other stakeholders before introducing significant changes that will impact upon them?
3. Managing the transport service

Clarifying roles and responsibilities

88. The user lies at the heart of modern public services. There are four other key roles, in delivering an efficient, effective, well-managed and client-focused special educational needs transport service [EXHIBIT 6]:
- the policymakers;
- the budgetholder;
- the transport organiser; and
- the transport provider.

89. Responsibilities need to be clearly allocated and effective liaison established between those involved. Good communication and performance management is then essential.

Policy making

90. Elected members, supported by senior officers, set the overall policy framework, and the budget, within which a local education authority provides free home-to-school transport. For example, policies on inclusion, placement criteria and policies on developing independence as a child approaches adult life will all impact on the demand for, and nature of, special educational needs transport. Members should be well informed about expenditure on transport and should ensure that it is monitored effectively. They should also set or agree standards for the transport service.

Budget holding and setting

‘The home-to-school transport budget has been overspent every year since 1994/95. Changes in the duties of the LEA have resulted in a more expensive service, but budgets have not been increased in line with this.’

Officer, London, Audit Commission survey of London boroughs

91. The transport requirement of an individual child with special educational needs should be considered as part of the initial decisions about whether to make a statement and about which school the child should attend. It should also be re-examined regularly, at the annual review meeting about the statement. In making a placement decision, the special educational needs manager should identify the full costs of each potential placement, including the transport costs (which, in some individual instances, can be higher than the costs of the child’s education). Doing so will help with budget monitoring. But authorities must work within the SEN Code which, once the new version comes into effect (see earlier), will preclude general transport policies from limiting the schools for which parents express preference.
EXHIBIT 6

Arranging, managing and providing home-to-school transport

There are four key roles; feedback is essential.

Source: Audit Commission
OFSTED and the Audit Commission have favoured, during their inspections of local education authorities, managerial arrangements under which the special educational needs manager acts as the budgetholder for special educational needs transport.

‘The SEN transport budget is, rightly, held by SEN managers, thus ensuring that placement and transport costs are considered together.’

OFSTED/Audit Commission inspection of London Borough of Waltham Forest LEA, 1999

Budget control problems are common with special educational needs transport. Weaknesses in in-year monitoring are a factor but unrealistic budget setting is another. Overspend pressures are particularly likely if budgets are set by broad-brush, top-down adjustments to the last year’s budget (for example by increasing it by a general inflation allowance). A preferable approach is to forecast demand, taking into account pupil numbers and demographics and any expected changes in the criteria for making statements or for placement [EXHIBIT 7]. Authorities also need to consider the possible impact of other factors, such as any changes to school organisation, and cost pressures, such as likely inflation in transport costs or tender prices. The impact of any improvements to service quality should also be examined. Even if such a bottom-up approach produces figures that are incompatible with overall budgetary constraints, potential problems will be identified earlier, allowing a better managed response, for example, a considered review before year start of options for reducing costs.

Organising transport

The organiser acts as the budgetholder’s agent. He or she receives transport requirements – service standards and details of children and the addresses and schools between which they must travel. The organiser then plans, arranges and manages the necessary transport. The function is normally carried out in-house (though some authorities are examining possible outsourcing when carrying out best value reviews of transport). But, as noted earlier, an in-house organiser may not be located in the education department and may also be arranging transport for other departments or units within the authority, for example, for social services’ clients. Sometimes, the PTE is the organiser in metropolitan areas.

Wherever he or she is located, the organiser needs to ensure that there are appropriate arrangements in place to monitor safety standards and to meet other contracting requirements and that the budgetholder receives feedback on this. This is particularly important if an outside body such as a PTE acts as the organiser, as the LEA will be a further step removed from any operational problems.
EXHIBIT 7

Making the links between policies and budgets

Authorities need to link policies and budgets more realistically.

Source: Audit Commission
96. Difficulties may occur if the organiser’s responsibilities are not clear or if the organiser is not providing relevant, accurate and timely information to the budgetholder. Effective exchanges of information and feedback to the budgetholder are essential to help to manage the current year’s education expenditure, to set future years’ budgets and to reveal whether service standards are being met. A clear delineation of the organiser’s role, for example via a service level agreement (SLA), will help to avoid problems. The agreement should cover responsibilities for performance monitoring and the handling of complaints as well as financial monitoring. Shared IT systems and regular liaison meetings can also help to ensure arrangements work well [CASE STUDY 7].

Providing transport

97. The transport itself may be provided by an internal trading organisation, by contractors (including taxi or private hired-car operators) or by a mixture of external and in-house provision. In some cases, an ITO may pass part of the work on to taxi or private hired-car operators or other external providers.

98. In practice, the organiser and provider roles are sometimes blurred when the service is provided in-house; one officer can then act both as the transport organiser and as the manager of the internal trading organisation. This creates potential conflicts of interest and attendant risks. If, for example, cost pressures within the ITO lead to a decline in service quality, who is to identify this and report upon it to the budgetholder and policymakers? Similarly, it may be difficult to go to the market, and so demonstrate that an authority has embraced fair competition, if all the expertise in transport provision lies within the ITO.

CASE STUDY 7

Clarifying the organiser’s role: Devon

Devon County Council’s Education, Arts and Libraries Department (EAL) has a formal, written ‘Working Agreement’ (that is, a service level agreement) with the County’s Transport Co-ordinating Service.

Devon has recently upgraded its Transport Management System (TRAMS) which is used to manage special educational needs transport and mainstream home-to-school transport (as well as social services transport) and to produce tickets for both contract and local bus and train services.

This Windows-based system contains details of pupils, the schools they attend, the routes on which they travel, their pick-up times and points, the contracts for those routes and the contractors used. The system can be accessed by both EAL, for example when setting up children’s details on the system, and by the Transport Co-ordinating Service, for example when allocating children to particular vehicles and routes.

The Transport Co-ordination Service lets and manages transport contracts. It provides EAL with monthly expenditure breakdowns which highlight deviations from budget profile, give the reasons for this and the reprojected impact on year-end outturn.

Source: Audit Commission
99. This is not to argue that, when provision is in-house, there should always be a separate full-time transport organiser role, separate from an ITO. But education departments using ITOs should recognise the potential dangers of supplier capture. They should ensure that they have specified the information that they require, that they receive it and have confidence in its accuracy. They should also be prepared to seek third party advice, for example from consultants, where appropriate and necessary.

* * *

100. Ensuring clarity over roles and responsibilities is fundamental to ensuring effective service delivery. The following questions should help managers to check that these are in place.
Clarifying roles and responsibilities

Do current arrangements clearly identify who:

- sets policies?
- sets the special educational needs transport budget?
- consults with children, parents, carers and schools about service quality, standards and performance?
- sets safety and service quality standards?
- identifies whether a child has special educational needs?
- decides which school a child with special educational needs is to attend?
- holds the special educational needs transport budget?
- decides whether a child with special educational needs is eligible for free transport?
- decides whether a child with special educational needs is to be escorted?
-安排s transport, letting contracts or entering into SLAs with in-house providers?
- assigns children to particular vehicles/routes?
- provides transport?
- provides passenger assistants?
- liaise with contractors or ITOs?
- monitors performance?

Policy making

At member level, does a single cabinet member/portfolio holder or committee have responsibility for all aspects of the service?

Have members set a separately identifiable budget for special educational needs transport?

Do members receive regular reports on expenditure and how it compares to budget?

Have members set or agreed quality standards?

Do members receive regular reports on performance against quality standards?

Does performance measurement inform continuous service improvement?

Budget holding and setting

Does a single officer in the education department have overall managerial responsibility for the service, covering policy on eligibility, decisions in individual cases, expenditure and quality of service issues (even if day-to-day operational responsibilities are dealt with by other officers)?

Does the person with overall responsibility for placement decisions also have overall responsibility for the budget for special educational needs transport?
### Self-assessment checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the budget profiled to take account of seasonal variations in expenditure?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is outturn regularly and frequently monitored against the budget profile by the budgetholder?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are possible overspends identified, and acted upon, during the year, as they develop?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the LEA satisfied that it is not cross subsidising other transport?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the budget for special educational needs transport generated using reliable assumptions about:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- the impact of any known changes to policy?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- projected pupil numbers?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- inclusion and the proportions of pupils with special educational needs likely to be educated at mainstream and at special schools?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- expected transfer from primary to secondary education and from secondary education to sixth form or further education colleges?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- transport requirements and arrangements, including any changes to service-quality requirements?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- any changes to school organisation?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- tender prices and other costs?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Organising transport**

If another part of the authority (or contractor or PTE) is organising transport on behalf of the education department, have the organiser’s role and responsibilities been clearly and formally defined (for example, in a service level agreement or contract)?

Does the agreement cover performance monitoring, including:

- what is to be monitored?
- who will monitor?
- who will receive monitoring information?
- when this is to be provided?

Are these arrangements working?

Is the LEA manager responsible for special educational needs transport receiving regular and accurate performance monitoring information?

Does the SLA (or contract) cover the timely provision of financial information?

Does the budgetholder receive accurate and timely financial information?

**Providing transport**

Has the organiser reviewed the mix of provision (for example, in-house, contractor, taxi and hired-car)?

Are the provider’s duties and responsibilities clearly and formally defined (for example, in a service level agreement or contract)?

Does the contract cover performance monitoring:

- what is to be monitored?
### SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

- **who will monitor?**
- **who will receive monitoring information?**
- **when this is to be provided?**

**Does the transport organiser know how the provider is performing against quality standards?**

If the service is provided by an ITO whose manager is also acting as transport organiser, is the budgetholder:

- **receiving sufficient timely and accurate information to form a true view of how the service is performing?**
- **able to access independent advice when considering or carrying out market tests?**
- **able to access independent advice when otherwise appropriate or necessary?**
4. Achieving best value

101. When reviewing transport for children with special educational needs, authorities will need to decide their terms of reference, to apply the four Cs and to draw up an implementation plan. The rest of this section discusses these issues. For more general advice on how to carry out successful best value reviews, authorities should refer to Changing Gear: Audit Commission Best Value Annual Statement 2001.\(^1\)

102. Reviews may be followed by best value inspections by the Audit Commission’s Best Value Inspection Service. Newham Borough Council is one authority, which the Commission’s best value inspectors have found to provide ‘good’ services that are ‘likely to improve’ [CASE STUDY 8, overleaf]. A follow up inspection in July 2001 concluded that the service had improved since it was originally inspected. It also found that the service was likely to continue to improve. Other best value inspection reports can be found at the Commission’s best value inspection website\(^\text{II}\).

Setting terms of reference for best value reviews

103. The scope of a best value review is important in focusing the review team’s time and effort. In general, best value reviews should tackle the most important issues for a local community, with review teams being clear about the problems to which they are seeking to find solutions before they begin.

104. In reviewing transport for children with special educational needs, authorities need to consider a number of alternative approaches. One option is to specifically review special educational needs transport. Another is to examine this element as part of a wider review of transport arrangements. Authorities such as Newham, Cheshire, Tower Hamlets, Oldham, Hounslow, Coventry and Barking and Dagenham have preferred this approach. There are strong arguments in its favour when the transport organiser is also organising transport for other council departments or special educational needs transport is operationally integrated with other transport services. And, where services are not currently integrated, the approach allows councils to consider the option.

105. Client departments should actively contribute and play a full part in best value reviews, to ensure that recommendations reflect their current and future policy framework and needs. For this reason, transport reviews – whether of special educational needs transport alone or of this and other transport services – may best be performed after, or as part of, reviews of the services that the transport is supporting.

106. Covering the transport service as part of a wider review has the additional advantage of making it more likely that future plans for transport take account of:

- demographic changes;
- expected changes in the numbers of children with special educational needs;
- changes in the profile of those needs;
- changes in how children with special educational needs are to be educated, which may include changes in, or an expansion of, inclusion policies;

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\(^\text{II}\) www.bestvalueinspections.gov.uk.
CASE STUDY 8

Promoting improvement: London Borough of Newham

Newham’s in-house passenger transport service, a part of the Authority’s Environment Department, takes over 550 children, who have special educational needs, to school. These council-operated vehicles are crewed by a driver and a passenger assistant. Another 60 children are taken to school in taxis; they too are escorted. The service also carries 300 social services clients each day. In all, it has a fleet of 76 vehicles.

The Authority began a best value review of the service in 1997 and evaluated bids, following a market test for provision of the service, in 1999. After evaluation, the Council was of the opinion that the in-house team was best placed to deliver the improved service requirements set out in the specification. However, neither of the bids received – from the internal trading organisation and from an outside supplier – was within the Council’s existing budget for the service, £2.9 million per annum. The Council thus evaluated a range of service levels and costs associated with approval. It selected an option combining reductions in the cost of some items in the original tender with some additional expenditure (£210,000), from its investment strategy, to pay for improvements in service. This gave a budget for 2000/01 of £3.1 million.

The service improvements identified following consultation with users, included:
- leasing a new fleet of vehicles to improve reliability, safety and passenger comfort;
- reducing journey times through better route planning;
- placing mobile phones on each bus, to improve communication with users, parents and schools;
- establishing a helpdesk/hotline for customers;
- setting new standards for journey times; and
- improving staff training.

Users were particularly pleased that they had been consulted about the new buses before they were leased and felt that modifications that they had suggested had been taken on board. One example was users identifying a design fault in a vehicle tail-lift for wheelchairs that allowed the council to specify rectification before fleet renewal started.

Safety is a crucial issue for users, parents (and carers) and the Authority. In Newham:
- all drivers and passenger assistants, including agency drivers, undergo police checks;
- drivers must pass the council driving test; agency drivers have to pass a shortened version of the test;
- the taxi firms that supply part of the service must also arrange police checks on their drivers;
- there is a forward training plan for all drivers and passenger assistants – staff acknowledged to inspectors that training had improved in the past year and that the service was actively responding to requests for additional training from staff (for example, on sign language and dealing with challenging behaviour);
- the Authority carries out regular checks on the driving licences of Newham staff, agency drivers and taxi drivers;
- buses are fully equipped with the appropriate wheelchair clamps and restraints to ensure the safety of passengers and with a first aid kit and fire extinguisher;
- buses do not move off until seatbelts have been fully fastened; and
- drivers and passenger assistants have official identification.

Source: Audit Commission based on Newham’s best value inspection report

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changes to approaches to developing a child’s independence, as he or she approaches adult life, for example, to encourage the use of public transport as it becomes increasingly accessible to people with disabilities in response to the Disability Discrimination Act; and
decisions about the future location of schools and other facilities.

107. Within the terms of reference, authorities should ensure they are addressing all key issues, for instance, covering eligibility for the service as well as quality standards. It may be sensible, where transport services are provided in-house, also to include vehicle maintenance and other depot functions in a review. Alternatively, depot functions can be reviewed after SEN transport and other transport services have been examined. Examining depot functions before reviewing transport services may be inadvisable; the safety, service-quality and other requirements of transport services are key inputs to any review of depot functions.

Applying the four Cs

108. Councils must apply the four Cs of best value to every review:
  • **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
  • **comparing** their performance with that of others (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
  • **consulting** with users and other key stakeholders (including in this case, parents and carers) as well as local taxpayers and the wider business community; and
  • **embracing fair competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services.

109. Best value inspections suggest that, in general, the four Cs are treated reactively and seen as processes in their own right rather than being integral parts of the review process. The four Cs should be used as a framework for improving the service. The second part of the checklist following this section lists specific questions that authorities can use when applying the four Cs to review transport for children with special educational needs.

Challenging current approaches

110. Challenge involves a willingness to go back to first principles, taking a clean sheet of paper, and asking what a service is for and how it is best provided. Authorities need to examine whether they are taking a suitably challenging approach to their services and activities, and whether it has developed an appropriate corporate approach to ‘challenge’. An authority also needs to consider the underlying rationale for its special educational needs transport arrangements and the alternative ways in which they might be provided. Authorities should be willing to question existing commitments as part of their appraisal, including reviewing contract terms where this is appropriate. DETR Circular 10/99 includes a requirement that the review team includes an external member to provide an external perspective to challenge (and sets out additional guidance for conducting reviews).\textsuperscript{1}

Comparisons with others

111. Comparisons can include examinations of:
- eligibility for the service and the equity of access to it;
- demand, including existing and future numbers of children requiring the service, taking account of demographic change and other factors;
- numbers transported and the mix of provision (in-house or contractor, minibus and taxi, etc);
- financial measures, including expenditure on special educational needs transport; and this expenditure as a percentage of the total expenditure on transport and of the total expenditure on education;
- efficiency, for example comparisons of the unit cost – annual spend per pupil travelling or cost per day per pupil travelling; similar comparisons but by mode of travel – for example, minibus, taxi or hired-car; comparisons of the percentage of the expenditure that is on taxis and hired-cars; and of measures of how well transport is used, such as the percentage of vehicle seats occupied;
- policy, including service quality; and
- the service quality achieved.

112. Consistency of definition is essential to allow meaningful comparisons. However, collecting consistent data on financial and other resources used and on the number of users receiving transport assistance can be complex and may be difficult to obtain. For example, an authority’s social services department may be looking after some children who have special educational needs, either in the longer term or because the authority is providing short-term respite care. In some instances, social services budgets may bear the cost of taking such children to and from school; in others the cost may fall on the special educational needs transport budget. Accounting treatments also differ, for example, overhead and management costs may also be calculated differently between authorities. Some cost variations between authorities reflect these variations rather than differences in operational practice. More work is, therefore, needed by many authorities to provide consistent data for financial and other comparisons. Consequently, local benchmarking clubs such as LAPTOP I, the ‘core cities’ group and groups within ATCO have an important role to play in best value.

113. Financial comparisons should be used with care. They are best made in tandem with comparisons of policies and service quality, both of which can influence cost. Results also need to be interpreted in the light of local circumstances, as costs are influenced by factors that are outside the control of those responsible for arranging, managing and providing the transport. These factors include:
- rurality and sparcity of population – relatively long journeys and a high use of taxis and hired-cars, both of which drive up transport costs, may be unavoidable in some rural areas;
- the nature of the disabilities or behavioural problems of the children receiving transport;

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I LAPTOP – the London Authorities Passengers Transport Operational Panel – is a benchmarking club of local authority transport managers from across London.
• the locations of schools and other facilities, which may mean that some journeys involve lengthy out-of-authority trips;
• local traffic congestion; and
• other local factors including the local transport market.

In exploring the reasons for variations, councils should challenge the explanations offered for differences, rather than to accept them at face value.

Consulting stakeholders

114. The essence of best value is to improve services. Those best placed to provide information on the quality of service are existing and potential users, their parents or carers and other stakeholders, including schools, drivers, passenger assistants and contractors. Frontline staff will also contribute an important perspective on how the transport service is perceived and valued and how it can be improved. Advice from external experts can add another important perspective. Authorities that have adopted the good practices described in earlier sections of this guide will already have in place mechanisms that regularly provide them with this information.

Embracing fair competition

115. Fair competition is central to demonstrating that a service is being delivered efficiently, within the constraints imposed by an authority’s quality standards. In England, reference should be made to DETR Circular 10/99 for guidance. This suggests that the main options for service delivery include:
• cessation of the service in part;
• transfer of the service to another provider;
• joint commissioning or delivery of the service;
• externalisation of the service (with no in house bid);
• creation of a public-private partnership, such as a joint venture company;
• market testing of all or part of the service; and
• restructuring of the in-house service or the re-negotiation of an existing contract.

In Wales, guidance is set out in NAW Circular 14/2000.

116. Councils that have adopted the good practices discussed in earlier sections of this handbook will have many of the necessary components for embracing fair competition in place already.

Implementing review recommendations

117. A best value review should identify not just what needs to be done to improve the service but how the changes are to be made. Members should be committed to the proposals; it may be helpful to involve members who do not have cabinet roles in reviews as well as those with cabinet portfolios. The review report should therefore include an improvement plan that meets SMART criteria and be supported by a robust performance management framework. The Commission’s best value inspectors have been critical of best value plans that fail to meet such criteria, judging it ‘unlikely’ that they will lead to service improvement [BOX L overleaf].
The first part of the following checklist will help authorities to ensure they are addressing the four Cs and to deliver an action plan for improvement. The second will help authorities to review their home-to-school transport services for children with special educational needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific</th>
<th>The expected outcomes are clear as are responsibilities for achieving them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measurable</td>
<td>Managers and staff know when they have achieved the outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreed</td>
<td>Managers and staff know what is to be done by whom and by when and have signed up to the targets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td>Those involved believe that the targets, though challenging, are achievable within the time limits and resources available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timebound</td>
<td>There are agreed completion dates or points at which progress will be reviewed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BOX L**

Best Value Inspection Service report on one authority’s review of transport

The report concluded that the service was unlikely to improve. The Inspector commented that:

‘a best value review should produce an improvement plan that sets out what needs to improve, why and how that improvement will be delivered. It should contain targets which are not only challenging but also designed to demonstrate and ensure the continuous improvement necessary to put the service among the top 25 per cent of councils within five years...’

‘The [Council’s] plan assigns broad accountabilities and timescales to specific tasks, but the targets are not SMART. Points identified in the plan for improvement are not expanded in terms of:

- specific actions to be taken to achieve the required changes;
- how progress will be measured and what the success criteria are;
- detailed responsibilities to lead on and contribute to each item;
- realistic assessments of financial and time resources required; and
- milestones to reach target dates for completion...

‘Some deadlines [in the Council’s plan] ...are vague ...The lack of performance management is also of concern to us. There are no formal structures and mechanisms identified to ensure implementation, monitoring and adjustment of the plan. No individual or group is clearly identified as having responsibility for ensuring that action points and timetables are met; or as having authority to ensure that the different departments do what they have to do, or that they have the money to do it. Crucially, officers at key decision-making levels in departments do not universally support the action plan. Social services officers told us the action plan was seen as “just a set of recommendations” which “needs another column, with the detail of what’s actually been agreed subsequently”’.

*Source: Audit Commission*
### Self-assessment checklist

#### 1. Current Arrangements

**Setting terms of reference for best value reviews**

Has the authority considered a range of options when setting terms of reference, including:

- covering special educational needs transport as part of a wider review of special educational needs?
- covering special educational needs transport as part of a wider review of transport (for example, all home-to-school transport and social services transport)?
- covering special educational needs transport in a wider review of just school transport?
- reviewing special educational needs transport by itself?

Has the authority decided the sequence in which it will carry out transport and other reviews (for example, so that transport reviews are informed by wider policy and inform workshop or depot reviews)?

Has the authority considered how the review links to the Local Transport Plan and other strategic plans?

Is the authority following Government guidance set out in DETR Circular 10/99, or in Wales, NAW Circular 14/2000?

Is the review outcome, rather than process, driven (that is, concentrating on how to improve services rather than on the review process for its own sake)?

Are elected members fully involved with and committed to the review?

Does this include members who do not have cabinet portfolios as well as ones who do have such responsibilities?

Is the education department, as the department with the policy remit, fully involved with the review?

If the review also covers other types of transport (for example, social services transport) are the client departments for that transport also involved?

Is the transport organiser fully involved?

Is any in-house provider involved?

Are contractors involved?

Is the timescale realistic?

**Applying the four Cs**

Is the review challenging current approaches, taking a ‘blank sheet of paper’ approach?

Is the review making appropriate comparisons with others?

Do these comparisons cover:

- demand?
- expenditure?
- efficiency measures?
## Self-assessment checklist

- **Policy and service standards?**
- **Service quality?**
- **How the service is managed, organised and provided?**

Is the authority working with others to ensure that it uses consistent definitions when comparing cost and other data?

Are cost comparisons interpreted in the light of:
- **Comparisons of policy, service standards and service quality?**
- **Local circumstances?**

Has the authority consulted:
- **Children?**
- **Parents and carers?**
- **School heads and school transport co-ordinators?**
- **Drivers and passenger assistants?**
- **Contractors?**
- **Other stakeholders?**

Has the authority consulted with a cross section of users and potential users of the service, in ways that seek to overcome language, communication or cultural barriers that might prevent people from offering their views?

Has consultation taken account of the appropriate methods to use with different service users, including those with learning difficulties or sensory impairments?

Has the authority overcome any linguistic or other communication barriers to effective consultation?

Has the authority overcome any linguistic or other communication barriers to providing effective feedback following consultation?

Can the authority demonstrate that its current arrangements for providing the service are competitive, within the constraints of its quality standards?

### Implementing review recommendations

Have members agreed the proposals?

Is there a SMART implementation plan, ie, one that is:

- **Specific** (The expected outcomes are clear as are responsibilities for achieving them)?
- **Measurable** (Managers and staff know when they have achieved the outcomes)?
- **Agreed** (Managers and staff know what is to be done, by whom and by when and have signed up to the targets)?
- **Realistic** (Those involved believe that the targets, though challenging, are achievable within the time limits and resources available)?
SELF–ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

- Timebound (There are agreed completion dates or points at which progress will be reviewed)?
- Has the plan been costed in terms of:
  - the resources required to manage implementation?
  - the direct costs of implementation?
- Have the necessary staff and resources been provided?
- Is achievement against targets being monitored as part of a robust performance management system?

2. Reviewing transport for children with special educational needs using the four Cs

Challenging current approaches

What are the LEA’s statutory obligations?

What discretionary provision does the LEA offer?

How can the authority improve the quality of the service it offers?

How can the authority improve the efficiency of the service it delivers?

How can the authority improve the cost effectiveness of special educational needs transport?

Does the authority communicate effectively with users and carers?

How is the authority addressing equity of access?

How is the authority ensuring effective consultation with people with learning or communication difficulties?

Are there any language issues or cultural sensitivities to which we need to respond?

Does the LEA need to make any changes to arrangements in order to respond to the educational and related transport needs of asylum seekers or refugees?

Is the number of users of SEN transport likely to increase or decrease?

Is the LEA likely to change the number or location of special schools?

What are the likely impacts of inclusion policies on transport provision?

What impact will the Disability Discrimination Act have on the service, as public transport increasingly becomes accessible to people with disabilities?

Has the authority used performance indicators to identify areas where special educational needs transport is not performing well, and then carried out research to identify the reasons why?

Does the authority need to change its policies on entitlement for special educational needs transport?

Does the authority need to change how it meets need?

Does the authority need to alter arrangements in response to changes in demand?

What implications do changes have for expenditure on the service and for how the authority organises the service?
S E L F – A S S E S S M E N T C H E C K L I S T

Does the authority need to do more to ensure that vehicles, equipment and procedures are safe?

Does the authority need to improve quality of service, including reliability and comfort?

Does the authority need to improve how it sets budgets?

Does the LEA need to improve how it monitors and manage the service?

What mix of provision – minibuses; taxis etc – is the authority using?

What criteria have led the authority to select this mix?

Are the criteria still appropriate?

Is the mix still appropriate?

Are the authority’s escorting arrangements good enough?

Are drivers (in-house drivers, contractors’ drivers, taxi and hired-car drivers, including stand-in and replacement drivers) sufficiently trained and vetted properly?

Are passenger assistants (in-house staff, agency staff, passenger assistants provided by contractors, including stand-in and replacement staff) sufficiently trained and vetted properly?

Comparisons with others

How do other authorities approach transport for children with special educational needs?

Is the review making appropriate comparisons with others?

How do the authority’s transport:

- policies;
- arrangements for deciding on, and reviewing, assessment;
- service delivery (including the mix of methods – mini-bus; taxi, etc);
- escorting criteria;
- training and vetting of passenger assistants and drivers;
- arrangements for ensuring passengers’ safety;
- service standards, including standards for comfort and reliability;
- arrangements for consulting users/ carers/schools and others;
- budget setting;
- management and performance monitoring; and
- costs and performance;
compare with those of other authorities?

How do quality standards, costs and performance compare with other transport operations (for example, social services transport or mainstream home-to-school transport)?

Does the authority need to do more work, with other authorities, to develop consistent and comparable measures of cost and performance?
How should the authority interpret existing comparative information in the light of local policies and circumstances?

**Consulting stakeholders**

What do:

- children;
- parents/carers;
- school staff;
- drivers and passenger assistants;
- contractors; and
- other stakeholders;

think about:

- the LEA’s policies;
- LEA service standards;
- quality of service, including safety, comfort and reliability;
- what the authority does well; and
- what the authority needs to improve?

How can the authority further involve children and their parents, staff and contractors in planning and implementing improvements to the transport service?

Has the LEA considered the needs of potential users as well as existing users of the service?

Has consultation revealed any linguistic, cultural or religious barriers to access to the service that the authority needs to address?

How is the authority going to feedback decisions it makes following consultation to the people and organisations with whom it has consulted?

How can the authority develop relationships with its stakeholders to promote an ongoing dialogue?

Has the authority considered introducing a system to regularly monitor ‘compliments and complaints’?

**Embracing fair competition**

Do comparisons of cost, service standards and performance suggest that these are in line with those of other authorities?

How much of the service has the authority exposed to competition and how recently?

Is there a potentially increased role for the voluntary sector?

Would the authority obtain a better service, or reduce costs with no loss of service quality, if more of the service were to be put to competition or to be provided by external suppliers?
SELF–ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

Does the authority need to change its contract tender strategy to ensure a greater number of, or more competitive, bids? (Could there be changes to alter contract periods or move away from fixed terms? Or could the authority package the work differently, either offering smaller packages – such as individual routes or small groups of routes, to encourage bids from smaller suppliers – or larger packages – to offer suppliers opportunities for economies of scale?)

Which of the service delivery options, listed in DETR Circular 10/99 does the authority intend to follow?

Could the authority make savings, without compromising service quality, or improve quality without increasing cost, if it used the same providers to deliver SEN and social services transport?

Could the authority make savings, without unacceptable alterations to service quality and flexibility, if it operationally integrated special educational needs and social services transport?

How much, in total, is council-funded work worth to the local taxi/private hire market?

Does the authority use taxis and hired-cars for other work (for example, travel by officers and members; to carry social services clients)?

Is the authority also funding a Taxicard scheme?

Is the authority fully exploiting its purchasing power in the taxi and hired-car market to obtain keen prices?
5. **Conclusion**

119. The Commission’s national report *Going Places* describes what central government can do to improve the framework within which local authorities work. This includes reviewing the existing legislation, which many transport professionals see as out of date, and a hindrance to meeting the Government’s transport agenda. *Going Places* also summarises the actions that councils can take to improve all home-to-school transport and social services transport within the current framework, as shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCAL AUTHORITIES SHOULD:</th>
<th>THIS WILL:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improve user-focus</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult with service users and their parents/carers and with other stakeholders such as schools and social services centres</td>
<td>Identify whether current arrangements meet user needs and, if they do not, what improvements are needed to create quality, user-focused arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure that services meet health and safety and other legal requirements and also reflect the results of consultation. (Councils should work to national quality standards once these have been set by central Government, enhancing these locally if they choose, so that they reflect local needs and priorities)</td>
<td>Help to ensure that services are safe and meet users’ needs and expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with schools and transport providers to address vandalism and bullying on mainstream home-to-school transport, considering whether it is necessary in appropriate cases to place passenger assistants on vehicles</td>
<td>Reduce vandalism and bullying, making bus-based travel to school more attractive to pupils and parents. This will reduce operators’ losses to vandalism, and so help to control contract prices. Improved pupil behaviour will also make driving school buses less stressful, helping to address driver shortages and associated wage pressures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ensure that drivers and passenger assistants are properly trained and screened</strong></td>
<td>Help to meet health and safety obligations and improve customer care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Take account of the wider policy context</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine arrangements in the context of wider policies on access to, and the location of, education facilities and social services, when carrying out best value reviews</td>
<td>Ensure that best value reviews are not focused narrowly on technical aspects of transport but that they also address fundamental questions about why transport services are needed and about who is to use them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider policies and arrangements in the context of social inclusion, wider environmental policies, broader transport policies and the health and fitness agenda</td>
<td>Integrate approaches with broader transport and travel policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work with others</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider whether there is scope to improve access, efficiency, effectiveness and customer focus, for example by working in partnership. Options include greater co-operation across departments within the authority, working with PTEs (in the metropolitan areas), with community transport bodies from the voluntary sector and with health bodies</td>
<td>Identify opportunities to provide customers with integrated, user-focused services or to use resources more efficiently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Review funding</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set realistic budgets that reflect demand and the authority's service standards, and monitor expenditure regularly and effectively</td>
<td>Take account of service standards when setting budgets and reduce the likelihood of budget overspends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improve efficiency</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review the use of IT, route planning and scheduling and the use of taxis and hired-cars</td>
<td>Release resources to fund improvements in quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improve how the services are managed</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly delineate transport roles, especially when transport is provided in-house</td>
<td>Help ensure that client departments are setting and monitoring performance against quality standards. It will also help with budget setting and monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCAL AUTHORITIES SHOULD:</td>
<td>THIS WILL:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor performance more effectively</td>
<td>Help to ensure that safety and quality standards are met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use contracts or service level agreements that encourage service providers to meet and exceed safety and quality standards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan for change</td>
<td>Ensure that transport arrangements respond to increased joint commissioning of health and social care, to other changes in social care (such as individually designed care packages) and to changes in education (such as greater specialisation by schools and a greater emphasis on after-school activities)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Audit Commission

120. Local authorities have already done much to provide good transport services for children with special educational needs. There are opportunities to improve these still further. Children should be at the centre of the service and their views taken into account in framing and assessing policies and performance. It is therefore important that those dealing with policy and services in education departments work with their authorities’ transport managers during reviews, that they provide proactive strategic direction to the service and that they seek, receive and, where necessary, act upon, information about performance. This strategic direction should include realistic budget setting and monitoring, and paying full attention to safety and to service quality – for example, reliability, journey times and comfort – as well as to costs and efficiency, to ensure delivery of a holistic, user-focused service.
References are to paragraph numbers, appendices, boxes and case studies.

A

Ambulance service Case Study 6 (p48)
Assessment 4
Audit Commission 92
Best Value Inspection Service 102;
Box L (p68), Case Study 3 (p43),
Case Study 8 (p64)

B

Barking and Dagenham, London Borough of 104
Behavioural difficulties and problems 1, 22, 38, 113
Benchmarking 49, 59, 112
Best value reviews 94, 101;
Box A (p5), Box L (p68);
Case Study 3 (p43),
Case Study 8 (p64)
setting terms of reference for 103-107
four Cs 101, 108-118
implementing review recommendations 117
Budget(s) 49-50, 52, 90, 96, 112;
Box A (p5), Case Study 3 (p43),
Case Study 7 (p58),
Case Study 8 (p54);
Exhibit 7 (p57)
budgetholder 88, 91-96, 98;
Exhibit 6 (p55)
budget setting 93, 120
budget monitoring 91-93, 120
Bullying 43

C

Carers 11, 15, 26, 33-5, 46,
56, 72, 77, 108, 114;
Case Study 8 (p54)
Carmarthenshire County Council 19
Cheshire County Council 104
Children in care/looked after 19;
Case Study 2 (p51),
Case Study 3 (p43)
Competition 60-1, 98, 108, 115-116
Complaints 30, 67, 96
Consultation 27-29, 31, 33,
67, 72, 77; Box G (p18);
Case Study 8 (p54);
Exhibit 2 (p17)
Contract management 6
Cost(s) 4, 47, 49-51, 53, 55-56,
58-59, 70, 73, 80, 84,
86, 91-93, 112-113, 120;
Case Study 8 (p54)
responding to cost pressures 6-87,
Table 1 (pp38-39)
see also Expenditure, and,
Service quality, balancing costs and
Coventry City Council 104

D

Deaf pupils/parents 31, 35, 44;
Box A (p5), Box G (p18),
Box J (p23), Box K (p24)
Derbyshire County Council 7
Devon County Council 9, 16, 17, 30,
38, 69, 74;
Case Study 3 (p43),
Case Study 7 (p58)
Disability Discrimination Act 106
Disabilities 106, 113;
Case Study 3 (p43)
see also Learning difficulties/disabilities
District Audit 70; Exhibit 5 (p44)
Driver(s) 11, 15, 17, 40, 77, 85;
Box A (pp4-5), Box D (p13),
Box F (p15), Box G (p18),
Box J (p23), Box K (p24);
Case Study 8 (p64)
costs 53
recruitment 53
training 17, 40; Case Study 3 (p43)

E

Elderly people Case Study 3 (p43)
Eligibility 2-6, 36, 107, 111
Escorts 2, 15, 53; Box A (pp4-5),
Box D (p13), Box F (p15),
Box G (p18), Box K (p24);
Case Study 1 (p8)
see also Passenger assistants

F

First aid 20; Box A (pp4-5);
Case Study 8 (p64)

H

Health and safety 7, 23, 53;
Box C (p10)
Hereford and Worcester Ambulance Service Case Study 5 (p46)
Hired-cars 15, 82-83, 97, 111
Hounslow, London Borough of 104;
Box B (p7)

I

Identity badges 16; Case Study 3 (p43)
Internal trading organisations (ITOs) 62, 65, 70, 82, 97-98;
Case Study 4 (p45),
Case Study 8 (p64)

J

Journey 2, 4, 11, 32, 36;
Box A (pp4-5), Box D (p13);
Case Study 2 (p41)
comfort 2, 25, 40, 120;
Case Study 8 (p64)
quality 25, 38-45
time(s) 25, 77, 120; Box G (p18);
Case Study 8 (p64)

77
Learning difficulties/disabilities 1, 28, 29
see also Severe learning difficulties
Leeds City Council 17, 30, 85
Lewisham, London Borough of 11-12, 21, 24, 32, 40, 71; Case Study 4 (p45)
London Authorities Passengers Transport Operational Panel (LAPTOP) 112
Mainstream home-to-school transport Case Study 3 (p43), Case Study 6 (p48), Case Study 7 (p58)
Members (elected) 6, 57, 59, 90, 117
see also policymaker
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council 32
Minibus 17, 82, 111; Exhibit 5 (p44)
Minibus driver awareness scheme (MiDAS) 17, Box A (pp4-5)
Newham, London Borough of 102, 104; Case Study 8 (p64)
Non-emergency patient transport services (PTS) Case Study 4 (p45), Case Study 5 (p46), Case Study 6 (p48), Case Study 7 (pp43), Case Study 8 (p64)
Nottingham City Council 5
Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council 104
Office of Fair Trading 53, 61
Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) 13, 20, 26, 37-38, 51, 92; Box C (p10), Box E (p14), Box I (p21), Box K (p24); Exhibit 4 (p37)
Parents 1-4, 11, 15, 18, 20, 22, 25-26, 31-35, 44, 46-47, 56, 58, 72, 77-78, 80, 91, 108, 114; Box A (pp4-5), Box B (p7), Box C (p10), Box D (p13), Box E (p14), Box F (p15), Box G (p18), Box J (p23), Box K (p24); Case Study 1 (p8), Case Study 8 (p64)
Passenger assistants 2, 7, 12, 14-24, 26, 32-33, 36, 42, 44, 53, 65, 77, 85, 114; Box D (p13), Box E (p14), Box F (p15), Box J (p23); Case Study 1 (p8), Case Study 7 (p43), Case Study 4 (p45), Case Study 8 (p64); Exhibit 1 (p14)
Patient transport services (PTS) see Non-emergency patient transport services (PTS)
Police checks 15-16; Case Study 8 (p64)
Policymaker 88, 98; Exhibit 6 (p55)
see also Members
Protection of Children Act 1999 15
Public transport 4, 106; Case Study 1 (p8), Case Study 3 (p43)
Punctuality 2, 26, 37; Box A (pp4-5)
Resources, use of 50, 70, 75, 112; Box L (p68); Case Study 1 (p8)
in-house 84-86
Respite care 19, 34, 71, 83, 112
Risk assessment Box C (p10)
Route planning 49; Case Study 6 (p48)
Improving planning and scheduling 76-80; Case Study 6 (p48), Case Study 8 (p64)
Safety 2, 5, 9-17, 26, 39, 42, 80, 95, 107, 120; Box C (p10); Case Study 1 (p8), Case Study 3 (pp43), Case Study 8 (p64)
Screening see Vetting
Service quality 2, 25, 49-87, 93, 98, 107, 111, 113, 120
balancing costs and standards 25-45, 49, 59, 61, 71, 90, 94-96, 107, 115; Case Study 4 (p45), Case Study 8 (p64)
Severe learning difficulties Box D (p13)
Sign language 44; Box G (p18); Box J (p23); Case Study 8 (p64)
Social inclusion 4
Social services transport 70, 74; Case Study 5 (p46), Case Study 7 (p58)
Special schools 13, 20, 37-38, 51, 58, 85; Box C (p10), Box H (p21), Box K (p24); Case Study 3 (p43)
Staffordshire County Council 53
Statements of special educational needs (SEN) 51, 93; Box A (pp4-5)
Suffolk County Council 6, 19
Surrey County Council 44, 47
Tower Hamlets, London Borough of 104
Traffic 13, 53, 73, 78, 113; Box A (pp4-5)
Transport manager 11, 120
Transport organiser 88, 94-96, 98-99, 104; Exhibit 6 (p55)
Transport provider 53, 88, 97-99; Case Study 6 (p48), Exhibit 6 (p55)
User(s) of service 17, 26-29, 33, 88, 108, 112, 114; Case Study 8 (p64)

U
User consultation
see Consultation
User experiences 1-2, 7
User-focused service 120

Vehicle(s) 2, 11, 12, 15, 17, 21-22, 24, 32, 34, 39-42, 49, 53, 58, 63, 65, 70-71, 73, 77, 80, 84, 111;
Box A (pp4-5), Box D (p13);
Case Study 3 (p43),
Case Study 4 (p45),
Case Study 6 (p48),
Case Study 7 (p58),
Case Study 8 (p64);
Exhibit 5 (p44)
and equipment 2, 7, 8-10
maintenance 107
pooling 70; Case Study 6 (p48)
safety 17, Box C (p10);
Case Study 3 (p43)
specifications 53
vehicle crew 2, 7, 15-16, 20,
Box D (p13)
Vetting 2, 15-16; Box A (pp4-5)

Welsh language 27, 45
Wheelchair 1, 8-9, 39-40, 53;
Box E (p14);
Case Study 8 (p64)
Worcestershire County Council 74, 79;
Case Study 2 (p41),
Case Study 5 (p46),
Case Study 6 (p48),
Health Authority Case Study 5 (p46)
Health and Transport Partnership
Case Study 5 (p46),
Case Study 6 (p48)
Wychavon Primary Care Group
Case Study 5 (p46)

Young people 5; Case Study 1 (p8)
The Special School Run  
Reviewing Special Educational Needs Transport in London  
There are useful lessons to be learnt nationally from this London-based study examining special educational needs (SEN) transport. This report focuses on helping authorities to bring about improvement in their home-to-school transport for children with SEN. It includes comparative information on policies, arrangements and costs across London and a self-assessment checklist.


Charging With Care  
How Councils Charge for Home Care  
Charging with Care explores the variations in home-care charging. It looks at why these variations have occurred and at the consequences of different charging arrangements for users. This report also examines what councils can do to improve the way they manage their charges and shows how best value reviews provide an opportunity to improve the design and management of charges. Charging with Care will be of interest in the wider debate surrounding the funding of long-term care.


Getting in on the Act  
Providing for Pupils with Special Educational Needs  
Providing education for pupils with special needs is a significant area of local government activity. It is estimated that 20 per cent of pupils will have a special educational need at some time during their life. Looking at the effectiveness of strategies adopted by LEAs and schools as well as the quality of provision in the classroom, this study highlights a range of relevant issues and recommendations for those working in this area. This report was updated in 1998 to review progress made by local education authorities in improving their support for children with special educational needs.


The Audit Commission has produced a number of reports covering issues related to police services and general management. The following may be of interest to readers of this report:
Home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs enables over 120,000 pupils to attend school and costs local authorities about £230 million a year. While often seen as diverting resources from front line teaching, transport is essential to allow children and young people to access education, and thus plays an important role in promoting social inclusion.

The users of these services are vulnerable, can need to travel in wheelchair-accessible vehicles and often require supervision and support from passenger assistants. Currently, while many children and parents are happy with their transport, others have concerns. These include unprofessional behaviour – such as rudeness; smoking on duty; and swearing – by some drivers and passenger assistants on the vehicles. Service standards also vary. Staff are not always fully trained, screened by the police when they should be or made aware of the needs of the children they carry, which can have serious implications for the safety of those children.

There are opportunities for greater co-ordination of arrangements between different departments within councils and between councils and other transport providers. Arrangements also need to respond to the challenges of the wider policy agenda, including the greater inclusion of children with special educational needs at mainstream schools; and a growing emphasis on after-school activities.

This handbook sets out ideas to help service managers providing transport for children with special educational needs, using a series of self-assessment checklists and examples of good practice for them to review their provision.

Three other handbooks in this series offer guidance on other transport services —travel to social services facilities, mainstream schools and healthcare. The overall issues raised are also addressed in a national report, Going Places: Taking People to and from Education, Social Services and Healthcare which, suggests how central government can help local authorities by reviewing the framework within which they work.