

ELL(2) 08-04(p.6)

National Assembly for Wales

Report by the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Draft School Transport Bill

The Committee considered the draft School Transport Bill on 28 April 2004. Members also considered the consultation document published with the draft Bill. The draft Bill was introduced by Jane Davidson AM, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning. Also present were officials from the Assembly's Department for Training and Education and from the Transport Department.

In her introduction, the Minister made the following points:

- The draft Bill was designed to address the difficulties surrounding statutory walking distances and would allow local education authorities (LEAs) to experiment with local solutions for local problems;
- Every scheme would be subject to extensive local consultation;
- The Bill would enable LEAs to charge modest fares;
- The legislation would permit LEAs to bid for pilot schemes from 2006;
- The Free School Meal (FSM) index would be used as an indicator of pupils from low income families in England but not in Wales; and
- It was hoped that LEAs would be imaginative in their proposed pilot schemes.

Members made the following suggestions and observations:

- Scheme Objectives: Members were broadly content with the objectives of the school travel schemes, subject to comments below;
- Variable Charges: the pilot schemes would provide an opportunity to create zones so that pupils could be charged different fares, depending on the length of their journey: a similar system to that operated by the London underground. It was felt that this might attract more pupils onto buses;
- Disincentives: if charges were levied for transport that was previously free, then more parents might decide to transport their children by car;
- Rural and Upper Valley Areas: travel schemes should take account of the relatively large distances travelled by pupils from rural and upper valley areas;
- Costs: the requirement for pilot travel schemes to be cost neutral was too onerous and would inhibit, rather than encourage, innovation. Funding should be provided by the Welsh Assembly Government, to cover additional administration costs for pilot schemes in Wales;
- Safety: the Bill should address fundamental safety issues, such as the type and condition of buses used for school transport and also the 'three for two' concession, which was considered to be an anachronism;
- Means Testing: this should be avoided, if possible;
- Measuring Benefits: in assessing the bids from LEAs, due account should be taken of how the benefits of schemes could be measured: for example, in reducing the number of cars dropping off and picking up pupils at the start and end of the school day;

- ‘Out of School Hours’ Activities: travel schemes should take account of the needs of pupils attending activities outside normal school hours;
- Consultation Period; it was felt that the consultation period should be extended, in the light of the forthcoming local authority elections.

The Minister noted Members’ comments and undertook to inform the Committee, if there was any latitude in extending the consultation period.

Members welcomed the opportunity to discuss the draft Bill and hoped that their comments would be taken into account by the Welsh Assembly Government when drafting the final Bill. The Committee will make provision in its forward work programme to scrutinise the final Bill, in due course.

The Chair undertook to send a copy of this report to the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning and also the Minister for Economic Development and Transport and also to the Chair of the Economic Development and Transport Committee, the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the Chair of the House of Commons Select Committee for Education and Skills, the Chair of the Select Committee for Transport and the Secretary of State for Wales.

Peter Black AM
Committee Chair