

# Presentation at Welsh Assembly 19 May 2004

## School Transport

**By Pat Harris, Corporate Director, BUSK**

BUSK believes the safety of travelling school children is the responsibility of everyone including the very children we are trying to protect.

The problems surrounding Home to School Transport facilities are many, but in the time allocated to me today I can only highlight the main areas of concern to BUSK.

Why do parents think their children are at risk on transport provided by the education department? Simple, because often the transport provided should have gone to the scrap heap years ago. Parents lack confidence in an LEA that do not listen to their fears and do not respond to complaints of overcrowding. In short, many LEAs ignore parents, the very people who they should be working in partnership with.

Education authorities often have no clear procedures set down. This can result in officers not working to a structure designed to ensure everyone within the team understands the important tasks they have to implement. There would appear to be a worrying lack of risk assessments to identify potential risks to children where they are not provided with a safety belt, where no adult supervision is provided or a CCTV system in place in an effort to deal with driver distraction, bullying and other problems that affect the safety of all road users.

Local authorities cannot expect transport operators to have confidence in investing in new vehicles that meet BUSK's minimum safety standards when they are not offered the option of a long term contract of five or ten years.

Lack of support for school bus drivers resulting in their complaints about unruly pupils not being handled effectively and immediately could be one reason why there is a national shortage of bus and coach drivers. Perhaps another reason is that they are underpaid for what is a very responsible job. We must remember that these people are professionals in their own right and we need to keep them in the industry, not only to work on school contracts but to ensure the whole transport system grows if we are to make more use of public transport generally.

An operator cannot afford to employ full time drivers and pay them the going rate if they, in turn, are not paid enough for their contract. One only has to read the Traffic Commissioner's Annual Report each year, to see that LEAs are often the best customer of transport companies who do not maintain their fleet to an acceptable, legal and safe standard. We need to ask LEAs why they are still using these companies.

We also need to ask questions about the Vehicle Inspectorate who do not respond to serious complaints. More than a week ago I left four messages with an intelligence officer about a bus company where the driver was allowing pupils to stand in the stairwell, lean on the entrance doors and sit on the dashboard while he was driving. This complaint is supported with photographic evidence. This driver is committing a serious offence and putting young lives at risk. The member of the public who reported this to BUSK said "This is another Stuart Cunningham-Jones waiting to happen. I had to tell you about it otherwise I won't sleep tonight." Yesterday the same member of public rang me to ask what BUSK had done about the situation because the same driver was still committing the same offence.

I am sure you will be as horrified as I am when I tell you that most schools are blissfully aware of their legal obligations to pupils in their care when it comes to Home to School Transport and school trips. When we talk about school transport, most people think of the school run, but there are also significant safety issues surrounding the organisation of school trips. Too many schools are not discharging their legal duty of care for pupils, often because the trip organiser is not a transport manager. The organiser will be a teacher or the school secretary who simply has little or no knowledge of health and safety laws they must comply with.

Children with special needs is an area that requires urgent attention too. The fact that the escort provided for these children, does not understand the individual need of each child, will not often be briefed about potential problems en route such as a child prone to having fits and how to deal with this is not acceptable. Many children require the administration of medication during the journey and others are travelling in seats when their consultant has clearly stated that they must travel in their wheelchairs clamped to a tracking system. Think of the parent who must deal with just one special child, a difficult job- now consider the escort who is expected to cope with a busload of special needs children. That escort is unlikely to be trained for this job.

In summary, I believe we should be looking at a way of providing all pupils with a good school transport facility, no matter how far they lived from the school gate. More parents would allow their children to travel on school transport if the vehicle had met BUSK's minimum standard. Most parents BUSK has come into contact with would be prepared to pay a nominal fare. One way perhaps to ease congestion at the school gate.

I would refer to BUSK's Recommendations to deal with unruly behaviour that have been provided to the Assembly some weeks ago. A system as outlined in those documents we believe is the only way forward which would also make all parties accountable for discharging their legal duty of care for children.