

Petition-06-1555. To review all guidance on Home to school for ALL of Wales. Free access to an education.

Dear Chair,

Thank you for forwarding the information collated regarding the above mentioned petition which I instigated, as part of my role within the Save the School Transport RCT campaign.

I'm grateful for the time you've spent as a committee considering this matter, which effects pupils and parents all across Wales as is evident from the response to the petition.

It's clear that the Learner Travel Measure and the accompanying guidance is not working as it should in it's current form, and our calls are clear – a review is long overdue, and we need a system that supports children to access education.

A review has been initiated by government a number of times, but three times, the review has been delayed or pushed back. In the meantime, there are increasing concerns about student safety which comes through clearly in the lived experiences of both students and parents which we've collated over the course of our campaign and which has previously been shared with the committee.

The current consultation on guidance suggests that it is reasonable for a 5 to 10 year old to walk 45 minutes one way to school, so potentially 90 minutes a day to and from school, and for a 11 to 19 year old to walk 75 minutes one way, so a total of 150 minutes a day to and from school. This is absurd, especially in winter when it is dark both in the mornings and evenings and also in wet weather. Many of the routes deemed safe are not safe in the eyes of pupils nor their parents, and it is clear – we would not expect adults to walk such distances and such routes to reach a place of work.

Where public transport options are available, affordability is a huge factor with many parents telling us of the financial difficulties this is placing on them with some having to choose between being able to afford food for their family or sending their children to school on certain occasions. Other parents have had to give up work, or reduced their hours, in order to be able to take their children to and from school meaning that they are left in poverty. Given the increasing child poverty levels in Wales, as well as the increasing attainment gap, this should be of great concern.

The Cabinet Secretary references Heledd Fychan MS' debate on Home to school transport which took place on the 8th October, and her advocacy for our campaign. I watched the debate and must admit, I thought the response was appalling and failed to address the concerns expressed by us as parents and pupils. This has been the case for the duration of the campaign, with all of our requests to meet with both RCT Council Cabinet members and the Welsh Government ignored. We weren't even invited as a campaign group to attend the Learner Travel Summit in Pontypridd when it took place earlier this year, despite our interest and research into this issue.

On countless occasions now, we've presented valid information collected from students and parents from not just RCT but all of Wales which would improve the Learner Travel Measure and guidance so that it supports all pupils. And though the Welsh Government has done some things, such as the introduction of the £1 bus fare, too many barriers remain to access education linked to transport.

To take just one recent example -a bus company in Bridgend has gone on strike which impacts both pupils, their parents and all reliant on the bus in that areas. In RCT, we've also had parents reporting since 1st November that some secondary school children are being

charged £1.50 per journey or being advised by the public bus drivers to download the my travel app even if they are 15 years old or younger. There's a great of confusion, and also misinformation, leading to the policy being inconsistently implemented. This has to be addressed, and urgently.

Further, public bus services remain in many areas unreliable, and there are also safeguarding issues identified as well as concerns over how the policy impact children with ALN, disabilities or mental health issues. Furthermore, the measure does not take into account the geography of Wales, and especially the steep inclines which we see in our Valleys. This means that cycling isn't an option for many of our pupils, so that walking is the only active travel option for many.

The Bus Bill, currently going through the Senedd, could address some of these concerns but unfortunately, we understand it is not currently intended that school transport forms part of the Bill. We urge the Welsh Government to reconsider.

In the report produced following the Learner Travel Summit, reference is made to parental responsibility. Parents understand their responsibilities, but currently, we don't see an understanding from local authorities in terms of how this one size fits all approach fails to take into account the individual circumstances of each family. Some families for instance have children in different schools, miles apart, and no means of getting them there as car ownership is low in many of our communities. Some have children with health conditions or anxiety which makes it difficult for them to go on public transport or walk to school, yet this is often disregarded. And even when parents do have access to a vehicle, some have no option but to reduce working hours or leave employment completely because employers were unwilling to change their working hours. The increase in learners being driven to school also increases traffic around our schools as well as emissions.

Many of our parents have also cited that they would be willing to pay for a seat on a bus, but in many authorities, that is no longer an option. We believe this is a real concern as the payment option gave parents the comfort of knowing that their child had a direct and safe way of getting to and from school. This also reduced stress for pupils, especially those with ALN, anxiety or who are being bullied. It also meant less children arriving to school in wet clothes, and also more arriving to school on time. After all, being late to some students can be very stressful. For example, my daughter frets about being two minutes late as she doesn't want a late mark, or to be punished with a warning or detention.

We need a school transport system that works for the whole of Wales, and takes into account the differences in urban and rural areas, as well as different geographical considerations. Every local authority area is different, and every pupils situations are different. Below are some suggestions from students and parents about possible solution:

- a bus pass for all pupils and students, like the one that's available for pensioners.
- regular bus service to and from schools.
- having a option to pay for direct school transport.
- working with students in each school to develop transport plans, including active travel, with a travel advocate to help with suggestions from students.

Students without disabilities don't want to be left behind. ALL student voices should be heard. After conducting research 90% out of 565 students wanted a direct bus to education.

I have attached some students and parent statements and concerns. Hopefully this will help guide your decision for a debate on this important issue.

Another attachment is the research collected and sent to Children and Young people Committee, Local Authorities and some elected representatives.

There are Headteachers, teachers, support staff, coach and taxi companies, Councillors, MSs and MPs who share our concerns and are having to support pupils and parents who are impacted by this policy. It's clear that something has to change.

I will look forward to the 24th November and hopefully, an agreement by the committee to progress a debate on the floor of the Senedd.

Thank you for taking the time to consider the additional information. Should anything further be required, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Kind regards,

Tina Collins