

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

In late July 2005 the Transport Planning and Policy Group of TRAC at the University of Ulster were commissioned by NICCY/General Consumer Council Northern Ireland/Department for Regional Development to undertake research into safer journeys to school.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was appointed with principal aim of safeguarding and promoting the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. This research came out of a number of concerns about school transport, which had been made to NICCY including the withdrawal of provision, lack of transport assistance and inadequate supervision. In addition safety and bullying issues had arisen through meetings held by NICCY with school groups of children and young people. The draft Children's Strategy, Making It R Wrld 2, specifically identifies transportation as a key area of concern. The strategy states that in order to ensure the effective participation of children and young people there should be 'visible involvement of children and young people in the development of policies which impact on them across a range of areas such as planning, transport, environment, health, social care and education' (OFMDFM, 2004, p44).

This research also comes at a time when there have been widespread discussions about the cost of school transport provision. It is widely recognised that falling pupil numbers, the existence of selection and separation of pupils by religious denominations combined with the increasing cost of bus operations for home to school transport has meant a close scrutiny of school transport. Travel to school in Northern Ireland is provided by a variety of means. Free home to school transport is provided to a third of school children by Education and Library Boards (ELBs) through free travel on public transport, ELB bus, hire of other buses and taxis and the payment of cycle or car allowances. Since 1997 the provision of free transport has been restricted to the nearest school and where walking distance is greater than 2 miles for children aged less than 11 years and 3 miles for older children. These statutory walking distances are calculated door to door. Children with statements of special need receive free transport. In other parts of the UK many local authorities operate lower walking distance standards, than in Northern Ireland, for determining free transport eligibility.

The operation of the statutory walking distances by ELBs is also contentious (as it is elsewhere in the UK). Concerns have recently been expressed to NICCY about the operation of the statutory walking distances and their impact on low income families, and also how the system treats children attending Irish-medium and integrated schools (Kilkelly et al, 2004; NICCY, 2005). Withdrawal of transport assistance can not only cause difficulties for parents on low incomes in terms of managing employment and child care, but the expectation that children should walk up to three miles can also generate new traffic and traffic congestion outside school gates where parents see this as a safer and cheaper option than the bus.

Following an Inquiry by the Northern Ireland Assembly, attention has also been focused on the overcrowding experienced on school buses and scheduled services

run by Translink (NI Assembly, Committee for the Environment, 2001). This has also prompted a debate about safety on school buses and in particular the provision of seatbelts on buses and the '3 for 2' seat rule. More recently Ministerial announcements in Northern Ireland regarding parental choice and new post-primary arrangements, following publication of the Burns Report and the Costello Report also raise issues about pupil movements between neighbouring schools (DE, 2005; Burns Report, 2001; Costello Report, 2004). There are concerns that increasing parental choice in this manner will further complicate school travel patterns and may result in increased car use by parents/guardians. The continuing growth in car ownership in Northern Ireland has resulted in busier roads and arguably a decline in the quality and safety of the walking and cycling environment for children. This concern comes at a time when the health benefits of walking and cycling have been well established.

## **1.2 Objectives of the study**

1. Work with children and young people to enable them to carry out research into safe journeys to school and views on public transport;
2. Collate information on children and young people's views of their current experiences of travelling to and from school;
3. Collate information on children and young people's views of what could make their journeys easier, and safer;
4. Collate information on the extent of bullying while travelling to school;
5. Collate information on parent's/carer's views on safe journeys to school;
6. Collate information on children and young people's views on public transport in general;
7. Collate information from key agencies in the statutory and voluntary sectors;
8. Carry out a literature and research review;
9. Identify and comment on policy and procedural issues within Government Departments and Education and Library Boards on the assessment of need and allocation of resources to enable children and young people to travel safely to school;
10. Provide quantitative information on usage of school transport and allocation of funding;
11. Identify existing and future known barriers to safe journeys to school;
12. Identify known future changes in supply and or demand likely to impact on this issue;
13. Provide a comparison of the Northern Ireland situation in relation to the provision of these services within the remainder of the UK.

## **1.3 Methodology**

The following section includes a summary of the methodology used. There is also a fuller description of the methodology and copies of the research tools used, included in the Annex and appendices of this report.

The methodology in this study involved four distinct stages:

- Stage one - Literature review and identification of secondary data.
- Stage two - Peer to peer workshops.
- Stage three - Focus groups with young people and parents

- Stage four - Electronic questionnaire of key stakeholders in the statutory and voluntary sectors.
- Stage five - Large scale quantitative survey of children and young people.

Stages 1 and 2 served two purposes' acting as a means to an end as well as being an end in itself. The literature review and collation of secondary data combined with the work that the children and young people conducted in their workshops provided an important guide to the issues that were covered on a larger scale in Stage 5.

### **1.3.1 Stage 1 - Literature review and identification of secondary data**

This phase of the research involved a review of available literature and research on the travel patterns of young people and children. It also identified key issues that can impact on their journeys to school including the use of buses, safety issues, accompanied journeys, bullying. The review also examined the literature on alternatives to car travel to school this has identified ways in which children and young people 's travel to school can be supported, and has identified facilities and particular types of interventions that enable safe walking and cycling. The review phase of the work also looked at factors which impact on supply or demand that are in turn likely to impact on school travel.

### **1.3.2 Stage 2 - Peer to peer workshops**

Twelve peer to peer workshops were conducted in schools across Northern Ireland. These workshops were run as focus/discussion groups. These were felt to be an important element of the research because they will provide insights into perceptions, cognitions in terms of decision-making processes and suggestions for possible improvements. A set of key issues were developed around a topic guide, which acted as a way in which discussions could be focused on key issues. The workshops were conducted in primary, post-primary and a special school. Participants produced posters and drawings detailing their travel to and from school – the modes used, positive and negative experiences as well as improvements they would like to see made. All the groups considered issues such as the provision and use of seatbelts on buses, overcrowding, behaviour, road safety, congestion and personal security

### **1.3.3 Stage 3 - Focus groups with young people and parents**

For this stage of the research, a number of community and youth groups were contacted. These organisations represent the more disadvantaged sections of Northern Ireland society, including the homeless, disabled, different ethnic groups and care sector with a youth work element. A topic guide was developed for the focus groups with parents and with different youth groups. A focus group was undertaken with parents of children who had statements of special need and attended a special school. This approach offered insights into the travel needs within households and how school travel fits within this.

#### **1.3.4 Stage 4 - Electronic survey of key stakeholders in the statutory and voluntary sectors.**

This phase of the research consisted of an emailed questionnaire survey of stakeholders. The survey resulted in further insights into policy and procedural issues within Government Departments and ELBs on the assessment of need and allocation of resources to enable children and young people to travel safely to school. The key stakeholders contacted in this phase of the work included representatives from Translink, ELBs, Government Departments, Councillors, private coach hire and taxi operators.

#### **1.3.5 Stage 5 - Large scale quantitative survey of children and young people.**

A large scale quantitative survey of children and young people was undertaken in this phase of the research. This provided data on travel behaviour of 1394 children and young people. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather information on children and young people's views of their current experiences of travelling to and from school; views of what could make their journeys easier, and safer; information on the extent of bullying while travelling to school; information on children and young people's views on public transport in general; and quantitative information on usage of school transport.

The sample is broadly representative of children and young people in primary, post primary and special education and constructed so as to ensure that it was proportionately representative of those attending schools in different categories (maintained, controlled, Irish medium, integrated, denominational and non-denominational grammar).

The questionnaire survey was implemented in the classroom by the research team. The questionnaires were distributed to children and young people and self-completed by them in the classroom. A questionnaire survey of parents was also implemented in this way through the schools.

### **1.4 Structure of the Report**

The structure of the report is as follows:

- Chapter 2 provides a review of the policy context in which school transport operates. It presents a discussion of the operation of statutory walking distances and the rising costs associated with transport provision. The chapter also looks at a number of health and safety issues including the introduction of seatbelts, 3 for 2 seating, and pupil misbehaviour on buses.
- Chapter 3 presents a wide ranging review of the literature relating to safer journeys to school. It presents a discussion of the different interventions and their effectiveness and also looks at good practice in terms of school travel plans and safer routes to school.
- Chapter 4 documents the findings from the peer-to-peer workshops that were conducted in schools around Northern Ireland. This chapter presents findings on

children and young people's attitudes towards school transport including walking, cycling and provides some insights into travel behaviour of pupils and bullying.

- Chapter 5 provides an account of the findings from the young people and parent focus groups conducted as part of Stage 3 of this research project. The findings present an account of some of school transport issues that face different sections of the community (i.e. disabled, ethnic, low income families).
- Chapter 6 presents the findings from the survey of stakeholders. The chapter looks at a number of operational issues associated with home to school transport raised by operators and stakeholders.
- Chapter 7 presents the findings from the large scale survey of children and young people. This chapter looks at travel patterns and attitudes towards different modes of travel used on the school journey.
- Chapter 8 makes recommendations based on the main conclusions and findings of the project.

A detailed account of the methodology used is presented in the Annex provided at the end of the report. Appendices at the end of the report contain information on the research tools used in the study.