

5. YOUNG PERSON AND PARENT FOCUS GROUPS

Overview of key issues from this chapter

The key issues raised by respondents in eight youth groups and eight parents groups were;

- Traffic congestion, especially outside the school gates
- Parking outside school gates
- The provision of footpaths, especially in rural areas and alongside busy roads
- The state and general repair of footpaths
- Crossing roads safely
- The provision of crossing points and patrols to assist in the crossing of roads, especially busy routes close to schools and in both urban and rural areas
- Safety concerns while walking – as a result of traffic concerns and worries about personal security in some areas
- The provision of cycle lanes and associated facilities
- Arrangements for dropping off and collecting children from school
- The availability of seatbelts on school buses
- The enforcement of the wearing of seatbelts on school buses
- Standing on school buses
- Issues of overcrowding on school buses, mainly provided by Translink
- The reliability of school bus services – the condition of vehicles, timekeeping and concerns about times when services failed to show up
- The behaviour of other young people, especially onboard buses and while walking or cycling to and from school
- Concerns about sectarianism
- Concerns about bullying
- Poor behaviour and attitudes of bus drivers towards young people
- Concerns about child protection issues in taxis and on occasions when small numbers or even individuals are on a school bus with the driver
- The provision of transport for disabled pupils
- The safety of transport for disabled pupils – strapping and securing of wheelchairs etc.

5.1 Introduction

Following the schools workshops, a number of focus groups were carried out with youth organisations and parents associations. These groups were drawn from across the province, representing all sections of society – Chinese children, disabled youth, blind children and parents from both an inner city interface area and from an area with a high proportion of immigrant workers and families. These four groups were selected to ensure a representation of sections of society who are included in S75 Equality Impact Assessments – ethnic minorities, those from deprived areas, the disabled and those with statements of special educational needs. A total of eight focus groups took place with young people and a further eight with parents.

The themes explored in these focus groups included travel experiences; behaviour of other young people and how this affected travel. The key issues coming from these discussion groups included safety concerns, standing and overcrowding on school buses, provision of seatbelts on buses, congestion, journey times and personal likes and dislikes of the ways in which pupils travel to and from school. The concerns and experiences from these focus groups in addition to those issues raised in the peer to peer focus groups add more weight to claims made about the performance of school transport, the problems experienced and perceptions held by young people and parents.

Parental concerns about school travel were explored at length in eight differing focus groups. Concerns voiced at these meetings included bullying, sectarianism, overcrowded buses and safety concerns. A topic guide was used to direct discussions with both the parents' groups and the young people. Children were given the opportunity to express their thoughts through drawings and by writing their answers to a number of questions. A description of the methodology used in this study is provided in the annex section.

5.2 Overview of groups

The groups which participated in this phase of the research came from L/Derry, Belfast, North Antrim, County Down and Armagh. In the group arranged by the Derry Children's Commission, eight young people participated in a discussion. These young people were drawn from a regular meeting group and covered a number of secondary schools in the area. Many travelled into the city from outlying areas to attend school, while a number also travelled to their schools from within the housing estates in the city. A further five young people took part in a group at Broughshane Scout Group. These participants were drawn from the immediate Broughshane area with two primary school pupils and three secondary school pupils. The schools they attend are located in Broughshane and Ballymena, with all pupils travelling from outlying rural areas.

At a Girl's Brigade group in Dromore, County Down, eight young people took part in a workshop. These girls were drawn from both primary and secondary schools in the

Dromore and Banbridge area. Some members of the group walk to school while others travel by car and bus. This discussion group of young people was followed by a discussion amongst three parents.

The Rainbow Factory is a drama workshop organised by Youth Action in Belfast, drawing young people from across the city. A total of fifteen secondary school pupils participated in a discussion group and workshop which also involved a short drama sketch by two groups illustrating their experiences of travel to school by bus. The sketch was performed after a short period of preparation and highlighted difficulties experienced in terms of the level of comfort, behaviour and the attitude of drivers.

A number of Chinese children who attend an after school club in South Belfast also participated in a short workshop. All children were of primary school age and described their journeys to and from school, mainly by car while one child walked with her mother. Many children travelled a significant distance into Belfast to school, mainly at Fullerton House Preparatory School. Blind children who attended Jordanstown School and their parents also took part in a group discussion. The group also included one child who attended a mainstream school. The majority of transport to Jordanstown is by taxi, with a smaller proportion of pupils using bus services provided by the Education and Library Boards. In the case of the child who attended mainstream school, it was highlighted that, despite living close to the school, he was unable to walk as his vision posed serious difficulties when crossing roads. A total of six young people and three parents participated in this group.

In Armagh city a focus group consisting of young disabled people was held. In this group twelve young people were joined by three parents to discuss their school travel and transport experiences. A number of these participants travelled to Belfast for their schooling in Fleming Fulton and other special schools. This resulted in quite a long trip in the mornings and afternoons for many. The main mode of transport here was Education Board bus, but many also had experiences of taxis and private minibus operators. The nature of their disabilities meant that there was a need for transport that could meet their needs. This was an issue that was discussed at length.

Twinbrook is considered to be a deprived area of West Belfast. A group of young people, aged twelve to thirteen, who attend St Colm's High School in the estate and parents took part in a discussion and workshop. Transport used, by participants, included Ulsterbus school services, private car and walking. Discussion centred on traffic congestion and safety outside the school gates in the mornings and afternoons. Six parents were involved in a focus group on the Antrim Road; this is an interface area of North Belfast. All parents in this group had children at primary school that walked to school from the surrounding area. Concerns raised included traffic levels and the behaviour of children from other schools.

At Harberton Special School in South Belfast a group of parents attended a focus group. These parents had children who all have statements of special educational need. Virtually all transport to the school is provided by the Education Board in a fleet of yellow ELB buses with a smaller number of contracted operators of

minibuses and taxis. Some children travelled a significant distance to attend the school. Issues raised in the group included routing of services and journey lengths.

In Craigavon, a focus group with eight parents was held and arranged by an organisation that holds regular meetings in the area. Travel experiences were discussed for children attending school in Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge with transport from outlying areas such as Aghalee, Dollingstown, Donacloney and Waringstown. Transport by school bus dominated the discussion, while situations were also highlighted by parents whose children refuse to use the bus.

A meeting was arranged for parents from Larne, involving some from a situation where their local school had been closed, but no parents attended this. Full details about the make up of the focus groups can be found in annex 1.

5.3 Travel in a typical school week

Among the young people in L/Derry, three used the bus everyday while three travelled by car and got lifts with parents on the way to somewhere else. The remaining two walked to and from school. In Broughshane, the respondents all use a bus to travel to and from school. Those at Secondary school have free transport on Ulsterbus services while the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) operated a yellow bus for two participants who travel to primary school. In this group it was stated that all their parents work and they *'have to get the bus'* (male respondent, Broughshane). Children from other groups complained about the timings of school buses with particular reference to early starts. In one case, the school bus picks a child up *'just after 6.30am'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory), *'sometimes in the winter we have to be ready for the bus much earlier to make sure we get to school on time'* (female respondent, Barnardos Disabled Youth).

The children from the Blind Association and Harberton Special School all have transport provided by the Education and Library Boards to Jordanstown School, except one who travels to a mainstream school. One parent described how her son's journey to Harberton Special School by ELB bus, which until recently, took more than an hour – *'I talked to the bus driver about the possibility of re-routing so that the journey would be shorter and that my son wouldn't be so badly affected by it. He said that he could do nothing about it'* (parent, Harberton Special School). The situation was resolved in consultation with the ELB's transport officer. The journey is now much better for this child – *'I am much happier with the new arrangements, the safety is good, the bus is good and the trip now takes less than half the time'* (parent, Harberton Special School).

Many parents also described journeys on foot and by taxi. Parents whose children walk short distances to and from school expressed satisfaction with the provision of footpaths and crossing patrols. Safety was not considered to be a concern in this instance. Some of the young people, however, who walk for more than fifteen minutes expressed concerns at traffic levels, walking in the rain and in bad weather along with some issues about personal safety when walking alone or in certain

areas, and through some darker streets. A handful of those who participated in the focus groups travelled by taxi. This, it was stated, is a largely satisfactory arrangement as it is 'a door to door service' (parent, Craigavon group). *'The taxi comes to collect me outside the house and takes me right into school'* (female respondent, Blind Assoc Youth). Some minor concerns raised by children about travelling by taxi surrounded the sharing of the vehicle with other children who they *'don't always get on with'* (female respondent, Blind Assoc Youth) and that they sometimes *'don't like being in the taxi on my own'* (female respondent, Barnardos Disabled Youth).

5.4 School bus safety



Drawing by female respondent,
Dromore Cathedral GB

In L/Derry, Belfast and Dromore, the young people who use the bus provided by Translink expressed a number of concerns. Initially, discussion centred on seating and seatbelts onboard the vehicles used. It was stated that *'we sometimes get a seat, but it depends on what time the bus comes at'* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission) and *'I normally have to stand because the bus is nearly full when I get on'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). There was also discussion about putting seatbelts in buses - *'we should have seatbelts provided'* (male respondent,

Rainbow Factory) and *'they should at least be there for us to use if we want to'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). The practicalities of seatbelts on school buses were also discussed – *'we couldn't wear seatbelts the way things are at the moment 'cos there are too many people on the bus'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory). More concerns were expressed that *'if everyone had to sit and wear a seatbelt, there wouldn't be room for everyone to travel, what would happen then?'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). The need for more buses was widely recognised as was the lack of funding to secure these additional vehicles – *'we need more buses, but there's no money to pay for them'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory).

It was also felt that, when using the bus, waiting for it to come is an issue of concern. In many areas there are no bus shelters or the shelters have been removed and this *'is a problem, especially in the bad weather'* (group leader, Derry Children's Commission). There were also concerns about the design of the bus stop all those who used the bus stated that they *'don't feel safe waiting for the bus, when it comes close'* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission). Furthermore, crossing the road was cited as a problem when they are walking to the bus stop or leaving the vehicle. This, it was felt, is a problem compounded by a number of large junctions that cause difficulties when crossing the road in some areas. Pupils in Dromore stated that *'there's not enough room at the bus stop in the square for 3 bus loads of*

pupils to wait for their buses to the (Banbridge) Academy' (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). In Belfast respondents reported that *'the bus stops are crowded'* (female respondent, Rainbow Factory).

5.5 School bus likes and dislikes

Some of the respondents provided a list of likes and dislikes when travelling by bus;

Dislikes

- *'bus drivers are cheeky'* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission)
- *'smoking'* (male respondent, Derry Children's Commission)
- *'chewing gum on seats'* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission)

Likes

- *'heating'* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission)
- *'good for getting to school'* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission)
- *'friends on bus'* (male respondent, Derry Children's Commission)

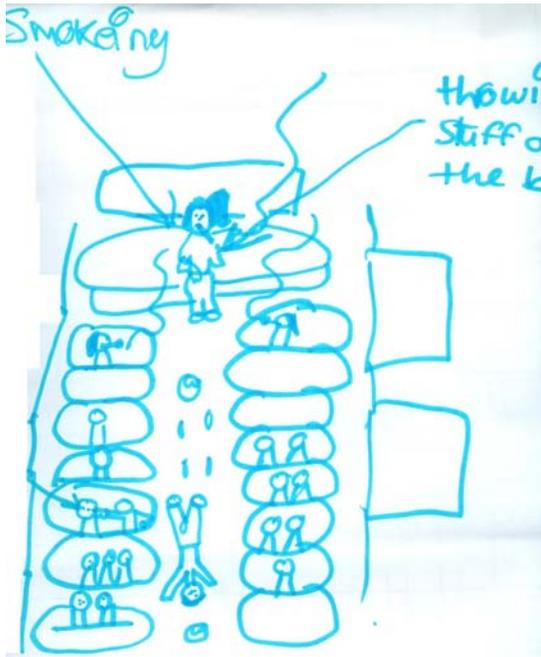
This list was reinforced by concerns about *'rude and arrogant bus drivers'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB) and *'bus drivers with a really bad attitude towards school kids'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory). Moreover, increased concerns were raised about smoking and drinking onboard buses – *'the drivers won't do anything'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory) and *'how can we expect the drivers to do anything for us if they smoke themselves when they are driving... its ridiculous'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Concerns about heating and cleanliness of many buses were an issue – *'especially the older buses'* (male respondent, Broughshane) and *'buses need cleaned'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). On a more positive note, many respondents enjoy the company of their friends on the bus – *'its good craic'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory) and *'we enjoy being able to spend time talking to each other... it means the trip passes faster!'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB).

It was also stated that all the children who use the school bus pay for the bus and that this is *'not fair'* (male respondent, Derry Children's Commission), especially for those who live more than five miles away from their school. It was the belief that all pupils who travel from Dromore to Banbridge Academy get free bus passes, but this was not the case at Belfast schools – *'we have to pay for our ticket on the Metro bus... I don't think we should have to'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory).

Many pupils and parents stated that they were satisfied with school buses provided by the Education and Library Boards. One parent said *'my boy loves the bus. It's great social activity, it's safe and I'm happy with the service and the escort provided'* (parent, Harberton Special School). Others continued by stating that some drivers are preferred and that some escorts are not sufficiently trained, in their opinion.

5.6 Behaviour on the school bus

In Broughshane, concerns were raised about using the bus at Ballymena Bus Station. This was also a problem highlighted by pupils from Cambridge House Grammar School (see Chapter 4). The *'behaviour of older pupils can make us feel unsafe'* (male respondent, Broughshane). The presence of the police at the bus station in recent months, it was stated, *'does not make people feel safe'* (male respondent, Broughshane). Fireworks seem to be let off irrespective of police



Drawing by female respondent, Rainbow Factory, illustrating smoking at the back of the bus, people fighting and items being thrown onboard.

presence. This has meant that those who use the bus station in Ballymena feel *'scared'* (male respondent, Broughshane).

It was also stated that drivers just let bad behaviour continue onboard – *'some drivers just don't care'* (male respondent, Broughshane). The respondents shared their concerns that some other pupils do not behave well at all, with instances of bottle throwing on buses. This was further reinforced by incidents of drivers swearing at children, many drivers not checking bus passes, and bad seating on older buses which made for an unpleasant experience for many – *'seating is not good on old buses. There's graffiti and chewing gum on the Ulsterbus and on the yellow buses'* (male respondent, Broughshane). Furthermore, it was suggested that *'the newer buses are good, the older buses are just no good at all – I don't think they're safe!'* (female respondent,

Broughshane). Of those who use Ulsterbus, old vehicles are the norm on schools services. Concerns about the drivers were also raised in Belfast – *'bus drivers don't know what bus passes are...the bus driver doesn't wait for people and just drives on'* (female respondent, Rainbow Factory). More concerns were raised about bus drivers in Craigavon – *'some of them drive very aggressively, they don't use their fog lamps in foggy weather and I have seen them race each other and doing 48mph in a 30mph zone'* (parent, Craigavon group). This parent has, thus, decided to drive his children to and from school as they refuse to use the bus for these reasons.

The children in Broughshane stated that when faced with unpleasant situations they cope by getting on the bus with friends and staying with them on board. It was also stated that they feel more comfortable and that *'buses are ok if all the pupils are from the same school'* (female respondent, Broughshane). Older children tended to sit at the back in Broughshane, L/Derry, Belfast and Dromore with the younger ones towards the front – this was stated as the accepted norm and that most poor behaviour takes place towards the rear of the vehicle – *'that's where all messing about goes on'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory) and *'I don't go near the back of*

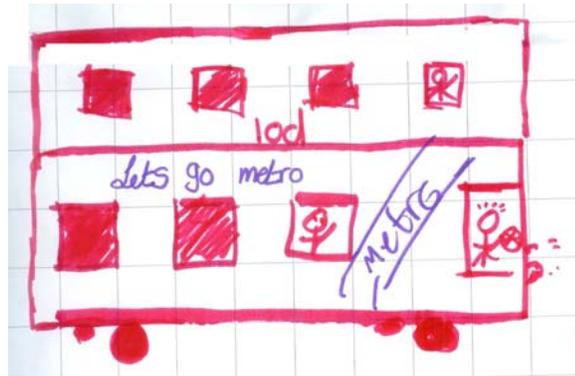
the bus as that's where all the rowdies sit' (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Seatbelts were found not to be available on Translink vehicles for those who participated in these workshops, while overcrowding was considered the norm on many Ulsterbus and Metro public and school services – *'It can get really horrible if you have to stand'* (female respondent, Broughshane) and *'when the bus is packed it can get really warm and I sometimes feel faint if I'm standing'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory). Many of the experiences of children using Ulsterbus and Metro services in the Greater Belfast area are the same. It was also highlighted that *'people push on the bus and you can get hurt easily'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Moreover, unpleasant situations experienced also consist of *'smoking, shouting, screaming, standing'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory). This was reinforced by concerns about the upper deck of many double deckers used in Belfast – *'people fight and you can't sit on the top deck because people burn paper and smoke all the time'* (female respondent, Rainbow Factory). Many of the respondents, however, who travel by bus, stated that they enjoy spending time with their friends on board the school buses – *'I like getting the bus because I am with my mates'* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission).

The experiences of parents in Craigavon whose children use Ulsterbus services to travel to and from school are remarkably similar. Concerns were raised about a number of issues. One parent whose son has Aspergers Syndrome stated a list of issues she had with the public transport provided for him to travel from Waringstown to Banbridge. These included: no shelter at bus stops, road dangerous to cross to get to bus, bullying and overcrowding on the bus. There have also been occasions when the bus driver has stopped at a shop and left the vehicle and passengers unattended. A situation was also described in the group where the child forgot his bus pass and as a result has been refused travel – *'this was quite distressing to him and to us, as parents. I now regret not availing of free education board taxi provision offered to us – I wanted him to use the bus so he could have as normal a life as possible'* (parent, Craigavon group). Another parent also highlighted concerns about the school bus provision, this time from Aghagallon to Lurgan. It was stated that *'even though there are four buses in the morning leaving from the same stop, there is still no shelter!'* (parent, Craigavon group). This was reinforced by concerns about the fact that the bus often runs late and that *'unruly behaviour'* is the norm but it was recognised that *'the school does try to manage this problem'* (parent, Craigavon group).

Concerns were also raised about bullying on the ELB buses. It was felt that the escorts and drivers do nothing to prevent or discipline those who bully or taunt others enroute to or from school – *'they just ignore what's going on next to them'* (female respondent, Barnardos group). One parent described in detail how her child was consistently bullied on the ELB school bus – *'his arms were bleeding, he couldn't speak, but the school would not take responsibility because they said that once the children are on board the bus they are no longer responsible for them. I feel the escort should be held responsible.'* (parent, Harberton Special School).

5.7 Overcrowding on the school bus

Reported experiences of bus travel on Translink services among young people in Dromore, Broughshane and Belfast largely included overcrowding on the bus and at bus stops as well as broken and uncomfortable seats – *‘they need bigger buses to fit more people on. It is really bad when you have a lot of stuff to carry’* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory). Concerns were raised in Dromore about *‘bus drivers smoking while they are driving...bus drivers*



Drawing by male respondent,
Rainbow Factory

should not be talking on their mobile phones while they are driving’ (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). This was an issue that particularly worried all the girls who use the Banbridge Academy school buses from Dromore but, it should be emphasised, does not apply to all drivers and the girls acknowledged this. On those occasions when this does happen it was stated that *‘they obviously don’t care about our safety at all’* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Other concerns were raised by those who use the bus. These included statements that buses *‘go too fast’* and that *bus drivers like to race each other’* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB).

Waiting for the bus, at the bus stop, in Dromore square was an issue of concern raised by some of the girls and parents alike. This, it was stated, is located on a narrow footpath. Messing around at the bus stop could result in a child *‘being pushed onto the road in front of a car or bus’* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Parents also raised concerns about overcrowding and a lack of seatbelts on buses. It was a particular worry that *‘pupils are crammed in like sardines’* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB) as well as the general condition in terms of upkeep and cleanliness of some of the buses.

Both parents and young people in Belfast expressed serious concerns about overcrowding. One young person complained about the fact that *‘buses are too small...buses are full all the time...older pupils block the way for younger ones trying to get on and off the bus’* (female respondent, Rainbow Factory). It was stated that *‘sometimes you see buses with school children on them and they are so jammed full it’s inhuman’* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB) and *‘it’s (overcrowding and standing) not acceptable’* (parent, Craigavon Group). Many pupils felt that they are *‘jammed into the buses like sardines’* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB) and that *‘there’s hardly room to breathe’* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory). Moreover, concerns were aired about standing in an overcrowded bus when the driver drives erratically or *‘when some people near the back think it would be funny to push the people down the aisle’* (male respondent, Broughshane). *‘I have seen people crying, especially younger pupils when pushing happens’* (female respondent, Dromore

Cathedral GB) and *'there have been cases when people have got hurt in the scrum or when trying to get through to get out'* (male respondent, Derry Children's Commission). There have also been cases when *'people can't get past to get down to the door to get off and the bus driver refuses to let them off because they missed their stop'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory).

5.8 School bus travel in poor conditions



Drawing by male respondent, Rainbow Factory illustrating school bus being bricked during civil unrest in Belfast

In many situations, weather conditions present problems for those trying to get the bus. More respondents expressed concerns about what happens when it is raining heavily – *'buses are late and when they come they don't stop for you and then you are stuck at the bus stop...buses get stuck in the snow!'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory). There were many situations where it was stated that *'the bus is either too early or too late, especially during bad weather'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). It was a

perception that *many bus drivers use snow or ice as an excuse to take a morning off work!* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission) and that *'they just can't be bothered taking the bus out in bad weather... if they do take it out, then they don't stop for us'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory).

During times of unrest, many pupils in Belfast felt there are serious safety issues and concerns. It was stated that during the period of unrest in September 2005, *'buses drive through riots!'* (female respondent, Rainbow Factory). This was felt to be a worrying situation for many of the respondents who had travelled to school in Belfast during this period. It was also stated that many *'school buses were bricked during the troubles and that some people were quite badly hurt'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory).

5.9 Transport for disabled pupils and those with Special Educational Needs

Travel by ELB bus for many of the young people from the Barnardos Disabled Youth group in Armagh posed a daily challenge. Accessibility, it was stated, is largely satisfactory in the vehicles – *'the chair lifts work well and we hardly ever have any bother'* (male respondent, Barnardos group). Problems were, however, cited regarding the securing of wheelchairs in transit. Some of the young people feel that their chairs are not secured adequately on a regular basis and that situations have arisen when some chairs have become loose. Many of the young people also stated

that they felt unable to express their concerns about safety, particularly the securing of wheelchairs, as they are *'afraid of losing the only transport we have'* (female respondent, Barnardos group). The positive elements of their travel by bus included socialising and, in some cases, an opportunity to sleep and relax during the journey. This was reinforced by some young people who use the yellow bus to travel to and from Jordanstown School. *'It is nice being with my friends and if we want to we can just sleep on the way home'* (male respondent, Blind Assoc Youth).

The parents who participated in the Barnardos Disabled and Blind Association focus groups expressed a high level of satisfaction with the yellow bus provision – *'we have had no problems'* (parent, Blind Assoc Youth), *'I know we are happy and have no concerns for her safety'* (parent, Barnardos Disabled Youth). The same satisfaction was not expressed in terms of private contracted minibus operators or taxi services provided for school transport. Issues surrounding the poor restraint of wheelchairs in the vehicles created a lot of discussion – *'she is now scared to travel, but knows she has no alternative'* (parent, Barnardos Disabled Youth). This is an issue that some parents in this group have grappled with and approaches have been made to those concerned. It was suggested that *'they need to be forced to do their jobs properly'* (parent, Barnardos Disabled Youth).

A respondent from the Barnardos group explained how his transport provider had to be changed as he couldn't easily get on board with his wheelchair – *'I banged my head but didn't inform anyone immediately. When it happened again, I told them and we stopped using that company'* (male respondent, Barnardos Disabled Youth). One parent in Harberton Special School described a catalogue of problems experienced with her child's transport provided by ELB bus. Many recent issues included two occasions when the bus *'drove past without picking him up...there was snow and the bus didn't arrive one morning, we only live 5 miles from the school'* (parent, Harberton Special School). This resulted in having to take the day off as there is no other means of getting her son to school. Experiences of travel to and from school by bus are remarkably similar across all areas. These include positive experiences of travelling and socialising with friends, but also a number of negative aspects including: overcrowding, poor behaviour, poor condition and cleanliness of vehicles and safety concerns emanating from the large numbers of school pupils who have to stand regularly and for long periods of time as well as a lack of seatbelts. A few young people expressed embarrassment regarding the use of the yellow education and library board buses – *'I sometimes hide when I see people I know'* (male respondent, Barnardos Disabled Youth), *'it can be embarrassing'* (female respondent, Blind Assoc Youth).

5.10 Arrangements, Lateness and Escorts

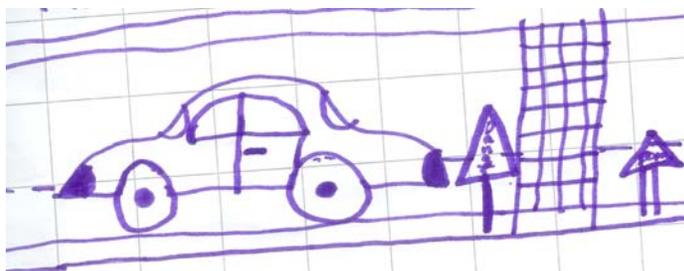
A mother and father described a situation of concern when they were told to take their child to the top of the road to meet the school bus. *'One morning we waited there for 45 minutes and the bus didn't come. This led us to make arrangements so that the driver would phone our house and let the phone ring twice. Then we would leave the house and the bus would be coming so we could meet it at the top of the*

road' (parent, Harberton Special School). Circumstances have also meant that *'sometimes the bus arrives in school late'* (female respondent, Barnardos Disabled Youth). It was stated that this sometimes means pupils miss some class time and many parents have had to make approaches to the schools as a result. *'The school was no help, so we had to go to the board'* (parent, Blind Assoc Youth).

Many parents of children attending special schools expressed concerns about escorts on the school buses. *'We wonder if they get any training'* (parent, Harberton Special School). Supervision was an issue of concern also. It was suggested that, quite frequently, escorts won't get involved if bad behaviour is taking place on the bus and simply *'turn a blind eye 'cos they can't be bothered'* (female respondent, Barnardos Disabled Youth).

5.11 Travel by Car

Of those respondents who travel to and from school by car, congestion is considered a problem by many of them. In Derry/Londonderry, reasons cited for using the car included in bad and dark weather. This however, it was stated, stops pupils from



Drawing by male respondent, Twinbrook Group

'seeing friends' (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission) but *'keeps you warm and comfortable'* (male respondent, Derry Children's Commission) and *'I like the heat and feel safe in the car'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). A large proportion of respondents in Twinbrook stated that they use

the car to travel to and from school. This was mainly as a result of convenience and the fact that this is considered the most reliable mode – there are also only two buses serving St Colm's school on the estate and the routes do not cover the areas many of the pupils come from – *'we have to use the car, 'cos there's no bus and it's too far to walk from Poleglass'* (male respondent, Twinbrook group). Moreover, many stated a preference for the car even when living within easy walking distance – *'it's so much better, I don't have to get up as early'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB) and *'I could walk, but my mum takes me in the car 'cos it's better'* (male respondent, Rainbow Factory).

A number of parents stated that they take their children to school by car *'because it's much handier'* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB) and *'I don't have to worry about their safety'* (parent, Rainbow Factory). It was also discovered that many parents take their children to school in the car, but don't collect them in the afternoon – *'I leave them off on my way to work and they walk home'* (parent, Twinbrook Group).

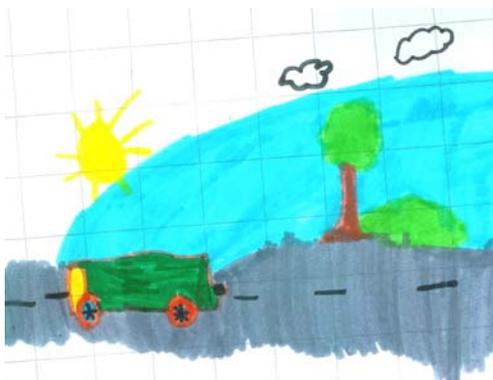
5.12 Congestion, Access and Safety

A familiar sight for those on the 'school run' (photo: S. Mackey, 2005)

to St Colm's High School can cause problems however, as cars park on both sides of the road causing serious congestion and safety problems. Major problems were cited regarding accessibility at virtually all schools during the morning and afternoon peaks. In Twinbrook, for example, cars cannot get close to the school '*because the road is too narrow*' (parent, Twinbrook group). Further problems were cited because congestion '*can make the journey longer*' (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB).

While many respondents highlighted concerns about traffic congestion levels, they all stated that there are no occasions in which they '*don't feel safe*' (male respondent, Twinbrook). The access road

The girls at Dromore Cathedral GB all stated that they would prefer to travel by car than walk to school – '*cars are more comfortable... cars are warmer and safer*' (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). All of the children of primary school age here travelled to and from school by car on a regular basis. Many of them travel from outlying rural areas and surrounding villages to Dromore Central Primary School – '*it takes me 15 minutes to get to school because I live in the countryside and the traffic isn't busy. I think its mostly the safest way*' (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Contrasting with - '*To get to school it would take me more than 15 minutes and the traffic is very busy the closer we get*' (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Moreover, two children stated that they could walk but prefer not to because '*I don't really like walking to school because the footpath is too skinny, so I get the car*' (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB) and '*I don't feel safe walking and crossing roads*' (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB).



Drawing by male respondent,
Chinese After School Club

Further concerns aired included the fact that parking is difficult close to the school at all times, but particularly at 3.00pm – '*dropping children off without proper parking facilities is dangerous*' (parent, Antrim Road Group).

All but one of the children attending the Chinese After School Club travel to school by car. These children attend the after school club every afternoon until their parents collect them when they finish work. Many of them stated that this was an enjoyable experience as they like their mothers and/or fathers dropping them off. Two expressed concern

about the length of time it takes them to travel from Carryduff and from Carnmoney to Fullerton House Prep. This, it was stated, '*means we have to get up very early some mornings*' (female respondent, Chinese After School). It was suggested that this is because there are '*far too many cars all going to the same place*' (male respondent, Chinese After School). '*We all walk back here (the club) together after*

school and then wait 'til we can go home' (female respondent, Chinese After School).

5.13 Footpaths and crossing roads

A key safety concern expressed by both children and parents alike is crossing roads. This is mainly as a result of heavy and fast moving traffic. Some children who walk to school in Belfast stated that there are *'too many roads for us to cross without crossing points or patrols'* (female respondent, Rainbow Factory). This was reinforced by the belief that many crossing patrols are only present for primary school children and *'some patrol men and women have gone home by the time the secondary schools get out'* (parent, Rainbow Factory). Concerns were also raised about this in Dromore and on the Antrim Road.

Many parents were worried about the possibility of crossing patrols being cut back – *'I don't want the patrol to disappear'* (parent, Antrim Road Group). The school children like having the crossing patrols available – *'my girls think the patrol lady is nice'* (parent, Antrim Road group) *'We are happy with the existing patrol provision in some of the areas, but it could be better'* (parent, Antrim Road Group). There are no crossing patrols outside the school in Twinbrook Estate which means that – *'children frequently have to cross in front of or behind the buses'* (parent, Twinbrook group). It was also stated that children have to face a number of busy and dangerous roads in the area if they walk home. This, it was suggested also means that many crossing areas, particularly on the Stewartstown Road are not suitable as *'people who drink hang around near one and there was an occasion when someone exposed themselves at another... you can understand why many children don't like walking, especially between the Poleglass, Lagmore and Twinbrook estates'* (parent, Twinbrook group). Instances were also described where children had to cross roads *'in the dark and wet'* (parent, Twinbrook group) *'on a roundabout'* (parent, Antrim Road Group) and *'on a busy main rural road'* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB).



Drawing by female respondent,
Chinese After School Club

Parents on the Antrim Road and in Twinbrook expressed concerns about so called 'joy riders' in the areas, especially at school finishing times when pupils are walking home and crossing roads. *'Quad bikes that are not supposed to be on the road and joy riders...we contacted the DoE about this, but they were not much help'* (parent, Twinbrook group). On the Antrim Road and Limestone Road it was stated that *'young drivers are fast...traffic calming doesn't slow them down...they veer around the ramps and show off to the school*

girls' (parent, Antrim Road Group). This, it was stated, has caused accidents and many near misses, particularly on one occasion when the granddaughter of one of the participants was *'nearly hit by a flying car'* (grandparent, Antrim Road Group). *'I don't feel safe crossing the road even when the green man is up because I'm never sure if the cars are really going to stop'* (male respondent, Twinbrook Group).

The poor condition and absence of footpaths in some areas was a topic of substantial discussion. Many children are worried about works that involve digging the footpaths up and *'mean that we sometimes have to walk on the road'* (male respondent, Derry Children's Commission). This, it was suggested, means that *'we'd rather not walk even though we would like to sometimes... we end up going in the car'* (female respondent, Rainbow Factory). *'How can we be expected to let our children walk to school, if we can't even rely on them being able to stay on the footpath for the entire journey?'* (parent, Antrim Road Group).

5.14 Safety while walking

Issues that make some children feel unsafe and create serious worries for many parents are fears of bullying and sectarianism. This was an issue that was raised by parents on the Antrim Road. *'When they see the uniform and know what school the children go to, sometimes things are thrown at them, stuff taken off them and abuse shouted at them'* (parent, Antrim Road Group). Bullying of younger children often occurs at the hands of older pupils, sometimes from the same school. This may involve *'pushing, shouting abuse and taking money or belongings off them...this is why many parents walk with their younger children or drive them to school themselves'* (parent, Rainbow Factory).

Fear of bullying was cited as one of the main reasons parents prefer to take many younger children to school by car. Some young people also stated that they prefer to travel by car because *'I feel much safer and don't have to see people I don't like'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Many parents were wary about letting their children walk to and from school for fear of what could happen to them on the way – *'I'd rather take them in the car, even though we live close enough to walk... you just don't know who could do what... bullies, muggers... paedophiles...'* (parent, Twinbrook group).

Some parents cited occasions when children had experienced bullying and stated that they now take them to and from school by car – *'I feel as if I have no alternative in this day and age'* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Personal security in the face of crime, drugs and alcohol abuse was an issue that greatly concerned parents and pupils alike – this was cited as one of the main reasons for choosing not to walk and for the decline in children walking to and from school in recent years – *'parents simply have to prevent their children from having anything horrible happening to them'* (parent, Twinbrook Group) and *'we have to make sure they are as safe as possible, so we put up with the traffic and drive them to and from school'* (parent, Rainbow Factory).

5.15 Taxi experiences

The majority of pupils and parents who use taxis to travel to and from school expressed satisfaction with the service provided. *'The taxi operates a door to door service, so I have no complaints'* (parent, Harberton Special School). Many people stated that they have *'no problem at all'* (female respondent, Barnardos Disabled Youth) with the service they get from their taxi providers.

Some disabled pupils expressed concerns about using taxis that are not designed for the disabled. This, it was stated, means that *'it's not very secure for wheelchairs'* (female respondent, Barnardos Disabled Youth). More negative experiences of taxi travel were recorded by young people in L/Derry. These mainly centred on the attitude of drivers – *'the drivers are really nasty, they curse and swear at us and drive like maniacs'* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission). It was also highlighted that the condition of some of the taxis here posed concerns for many – *'they are dirty, seats are ripped and door locks don't always work properly'* (male respondent, Derry Children's Commission). A desire to *'stop the drivers being selfish'* (female respondent, Derry Children's Commission) was expressed.

Pupils who travel by taxi to Jordanstown school described positive experiences *'it's good fun...I have friends in the taxi with me'* (male respondent, Blind Assoc Youth). A few parents, however, raised concerns about child protection, especially with regard to taxis. Worries were expressed in situations where there is one child alone with the taxi driver – *'a parent should be in the taxi to guard the children'* (parent, Antrim Road Group). This concern was also raised by some parents whose children are frequently the last left on the bus on the way home – *'my daughter was the last person to be dropped home and there was just her and the bus driver on the bus – this was something that worried me. There needs to be someone else there'* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB).

5.16 Suggestions for improvements on school buses

Many parents and young people in Dromore, Belfast, L/Derry and Broughshane stated that they want to see seatbelts provided and problems of standing and overcrowding addressed. A list of improvements to school bus provision was proposed in one of the focus groups;

- *'bus driver training is necessary*
- *cameras on the bus that work would improve situations*
- *supervision is required*
- *sports equipment should be secured*
- *seatbelts should be provided on all buses*
- *standing should not be allowed at all'* (parents, Dromore Cathedral GB).

Suggestions to solve problems of overcrowding included *'using double deckers or two buses at the same time'* (male respondent, Broughshane). Cleaning and maintenance was an issue that respondents felt needs improvements in all areas –

'buses need to be looked after better, they need properly cleaned, broken seats need fixed and old buses must be taken off the road and replaced with newer ones' (male respondent, Broughshane). Problems of poor maintenance need to be ironed out *'especially in Ulsterbus'* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB) and *'the state of some of the older Ulsterbuses is no longer acceptable, especially in the 21st Century'* (parent, Craigavon group). Furthermore, issues of *'overcrowding need addressed urgently...it's just not safe or acceptable'* (parent, Rainbow Factory). *'Seatbelts have to be worn in a car, why should buses be any different...'* (parent, Rainbow Factory).

In some situations, the routing of school buses was called into question, considering *'some buses are empty while others are jammed full...surely something is wrong and the routes need looked at closely?'* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Concerns were also raised about school term times and holidays. It was suggested that *'holidays should be the same in all schools, but especially those which share buses...some days this means that one school is on but there is no bus for them, while on other days buses are running with a handful of pupils on them because one school is off!'* (parent, Craigavon group). In Twinbrook, it was felt that a school bus should be provided between estates – *'we need a school bus to and from Lagmore and Poleglass for pupils coming to St Colm's'* (parent, Twinbrook Group). Furthermore, particular emphasis was placed on the need for seatbelts, the removal of standing allowances and a reduction in overcrowding. This was followed up by a desire to see driver attitudes change towards school pupils – *'drivers need to learn some manners'* (male respondent, Derry Children's Commission). It was also suggested that some sort of training should be provided for bus drivers *'to smarten up their attitudes and prepare them for the privilege and responsibility that comes with their job... they should take pride in what they do, but just lack training'* (parent, Twinbrook group). Furthermore, it was also felt that *'all bus drivers in Ulsterbus, private companies and education board buses need to be properly vetted to work close to children and child protection training needs to be given to them all'* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB).

5.17 Suggestions for infrastructure improvements

A desire to see improvements to footpaths was expressed – *'our children have to be able to walk safely on the footpaths and should not have to walk on the road at all'* (parent, Antrim Road Group). Issues of maintenance and poor repair of surfaces were of concern and it was felt that *'footpaths should be provided in good repair if children are to be encouraged to walk'* (parent, Dromore Cathedral GB). Traffic calming and controlling measures were factors that, it was felt, would improve situations in and around schools – *'traffic islands to make crossing roads easier...yellow lines to control parking'* (parent, Twinbrook group). Further suggestions included parking provision for parents dropping off and collecting pupils at many schools to avoid dangerous parking causing safety problems and increased congestion. It was also felt that *'cars should not be allowed into school grounds and that they should keep the gate and areas outside the school clear at all times'* (parent, Antrim Road Group).

It was suggested that children who walk should also be provided with reflective clothing or markings – *‘high visibility baseball caps, jackets, arm bands or markers for the heels of shoes would be a really good idea’* (parent, Twinbrook group). It was widely agreed that *‘the children need to be made more visible to drivers, especially in the dark and wet’* (parent, Antrim Road Group).

5.18 Conclusions

The discussion groups have identified a number of common issues of concern, and these are similarly prevalent across all schools and in both urban and rural situations. These concerns take into account safety on public transport, safety and security while walking, traffic congestion, behaviour and capacity. Table 5.2 highlights the key issues raised across the 8 groups of parents and 8 groups of young people who participated. According to both pupils and parents, overcrowding on buses, poor supervision and behaviour on buses, traffic congestion and poor infrastructure for walking and cycling were identified. Serious worries were also expressed regarding the safety of children, especially on overcrowded buses and on dangerously busy roads. It was also recognised by focus group participants that there are serious financial constraints surrounding the development of initiatives to reduce travel by cars on the school run, fit buses with seatbelts, provide more buses, and make infrastructure improvements. While the concerns regarding safety and security are extremely valid ones on the part of both parents and pupils, a major change in mindset also needs to be achieved. Evidence within this chapter and chapter 4 clearly indicates that many pupils and parents simply choose to travel by car because it is the easiest and most convenient way of getting to school. It is evident that many parents choose to drive or walk their children to school personally due to safety and personal security fears.

Serious concerns were also raised about transport for disabled pupils. Some potentially dangerous situations were highlighted in discussions where wheelchairs had not been securely fastened in place at the start of a journey and that this in turn had created feelings of insecurity, fear and a lack of confidence when travelling.

Table 5.2 Summary of key issues

Issue	Parents	Young People
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Congestion	Y	Y
Provision of footpaths	Y	Y
Condition of footpaths	Y	Y
Crossing roads	Y	Y
Safety concerns while walking	Y	Y
Provision of cycle lanes	Y	
Parking at schools	Y	
Drop off and collecting arrangements	Y	Y
Seatbelts on buses	Y	Y
Standing on buses	Y	Y
Overcrowding on buses	Y	Y
Reliability of buses	Y	Y
Behaviour of other young people	Y	Y
Sectarianism	Y	
Bullying	Y	
Behaviour of bus drivers	Y	Y
Child protection concerns	Y	
Provision for the disabled	Y	Y