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SAFER
JOURNEYS
TO SCHOOL   >>>

This report outlines the views of children and young people who travel to school by a variety of modes of transport. It also identifies the views of parents who often decide how their children travel to school. Their collective views are important in terms of what needs to be done to improve their experience now and to make the necessary changes to encourage them to use public transport in the future.

CONTENTS

1.1 Introduction

In 2005 the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (Consumer Council) and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) commissioned the Transport Planning and Policy Group of TRAC at the University of Ulster to undertake research into safer journeys to school.

The Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was established in November 2003, with the principal aim of safeguarding and promoting the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. One of the functions of NICCY under 'The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003' is to 'keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for children and young persons by relevant authorities' (Article 7(3C).) School transport therefore clearly falls within NICCY's remit and the impetus for this research came from children and young people who expressed concerns to NICCY about lack of seatbelts, the '3 for 2' rule, overcrowding and bullying on buses. For those who do not travel by bus, concerns were raised about the absence of footpaths and cycle paths and congestion at school buildings.

The Consumer Council, in its role as the statutory passenger representative for Northern Ireland, has campaigned for improvements in home to school transport and the wider public transport network for many years. The Consumer Council co-commissioned this research to hear the views of young people and parents on current school transport provision and to identify the reasons behind current travel and transport choices. The Consumer Council is also committed to promoting responsible consumer choices and the greater use of sustainable transport options in our everyday lives.

The Department for Regional Development's Roads Service became involved in the project because the Roads Service for some time has been concerned that parents' resistance to independent school travel for children and young people has formed a major and significant barrier to young people travelling to and from school by sustainable modes. The outcome of the research has identified more specifically the key objections from parents. This will enable Roads Service to develop a targeted campaign aimed at making parents aware of the value of independent school travel for children and young people.

This report outlines the views of children and young people who travel to school by a variety of modes of transport. It also identifies the views of parents who often decide how their children travel to school. Their collective views are important in terms of what needs to be done to improve their experience now and to make the necessary changes to encourage them to use public transport in the future.

*Drawing by female respondent,
Chinese After School Club*

1.2 Research Context

This research comes at a time when there have been widespread discussions about the cost and delivery of school transport. 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, have meant school transport is under close scrutiny.

Following an Inquiry by the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2001, attention has also been focused on the overcrowding 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, following publication of the Burns and Costello Reports, Ministerial announcements about parental choice and new post-primary arrangements also raise issues about pupil movements between neighbouring schools (Burns Report, 2001; Costello Report, 2004; DE, 2005).

Drawing by male student, Ballymacrickett Primary School

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.

The views of young people and parents and the travel decisions they make will be a crucial factor in the future delivery of home to school transport and a future school transport system must fully recognise and address their needs.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- Work with children and young people to get their views on safe journeys to school and public transport.

- Discover parent's/carer's views on home to school transport.

- Discover the extent of bullying while travelling to school.

- 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.

- Provide quantitative information on usage of school transport and allocation of funding.

- Identify future changes in supply and/or demand likely to impact on this issue.

1.4 Methodology

The methodology in this study involved five distinct stages:

- Stage one - Literature review and identification of secondary data.

- Stage two – Peer to peer workshops:

Twelve workshops were conducted in schools across Northern Ireland through focus groups. 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.

- Stage three – Focus groups with young people and parents.

A number of community and youth groups participated in this stage of the research. 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. Children had the opportunity to express their thoughts through drawings and by writing their answers to a number of questions. A focus group was undertaken with parents of children who attended a special school and who had special educational needs.

- Stage four – Electronic questionnaire survey of key stakeholders in the statutory and voluntary sectors, including representatives from Translink, Education and Library Boards, Government Departments, Political representatives, private coach hire and taxi operators.

- Stage five – Large-scale quantitative survey of children, young people and parents.

This provided data on the travel behaviour of 1394 children and young people as well as their views on a range of school travel related issues and public transport in general. The sample is broadly representative of children and young people in primary, post primary and special education. The sample was also constructed to be 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 completed by them in the classroom. A total of 293 parents were also surveyed.

1.5 Policy Context

Current Provision

Travel to school in Northern Ireland is provided by a variety of means. Education and Library Boards (ELBs) allow a third of children to travel to school free 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.

Statutory Walking Distances

The operation of the statutory walking distances by ELBs is contentious (as it is elsewhere in the UK). Concerns have recently been expressed to NICCY about these statutory walking distances and their impact on low-income families and how they treat children attending Irish-medium and integrated schools (Kilkelly et al, 2004; NICCY, 2005). Withdrawal of transport assistance can 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.

Travel Modes

In Northern Ireland there is growing concern about trends in car dependence and subsequent increased traffic congestion outside schools. Accident rates outside schools between 8am and 9am have been shown to increase. The majority of journeys to school are made by car. Cycling and walking have declined as a mode of transport for trips to school. In 2002-2004 journeys by car accounted for 40% of trips to school. Bus use now accounts for 24% of journeys to school.

Education Review

As part of the post primary review, pending increased parental choice could result in greater car dependence. Among low-income groups, with lower levels of car ownership, there will be less ability to make this choice.

Funding

Just under one-third (31%) of school children in Northern Ireland receive free school transport. However, this is offered on a restricted basis through the operation of statutory walking distances.

The current system of home to school transport provision is not targeted and may fail those who need it most (e.g. low-income families). Increased targeting of this resource is likely to increase car use among wealthier car owning families. Evidence suggests that there is suppressed demand for school transport and that reductions in school bus transport result in more car journeys.

The costs of providing home to school transport in Northern Ireland are rising. In 2002/2003 the cost was £57 million; in 2004/05 the figure was £62.5 million. This has been attributed to a number of factors:

- A rising proportion of children with special needs.
- The rising cost of public transport provided by Translink, due to increased operating costs.
- Larger numbers of children travelling to integrated schools.

- Scheduling of different services due to schools with different finishing and start times.
- Increasing use of taxis by ELBs for school journeys.

Average unit costs, however, compare favourably with other parts of the UK, although the spend in Northern Ireland accounts for a greater proportion of the education budget.

Safety

The on-board safety of pupils is a key concern in relation to school bus travel. These concerns are not only confined to seating arrangements, the operation of '3 for 2' and seatbelt provision, but also relate to overcrowding, bullying and supervision.

Concern has been expressed about the operation of '3 for 2' regarding the ability of drivers to check for numbers, the difficulty of fitting large numbers of children on a bus, the amount of distraction this could cause the driver and the contribution that overcrowding makes to misbehaviour on buses. A survey of bus occupancy in September 2005 at the start of the school year found that '3 for 2' was in operation on 8% of services overall. The majority of recorded instances of '3 for 2' and standing were found on Translink services.

The progressive introduction of seatbelts occurs on new ELB vehicles only. Operators view the costs of implementation and enforcement as high in terms of labour productivity for drivers, journey time for students and parents, capital investment and compliance costs in terms of penalties for drivers and pupils. More evidence is needed to present an effective cost-benefit analysis.

There is a need to protect children from bullying on buses. Despite a recommendation by the NI Assembly Committee in 2001 nothing has been done at a national level to address this issue. Translink has developed a number of initiatives to address misbehaviour on buses and is involved in an inter-agency partnership to manage anti-social behaviour and bullying on buses in the Ballymena area.

- The vast increase in traffic on the roads and the number of children who now travel to school by car as opposed to walking, cycling or using the bus is adding to the levels of congestion close to schools and adds to safety concerns for those who would continue to walk.

- The common parental perception is that children are safer travelling by car and that, if they could walk, cycle or use the bus, they would be exposed to a number of unacceptable risks.

- Evidence shows that there are many risks to travelling by car and that there have been many more accidents involving children who travel by car.

1.6 Literature Review

- Mode choice and increased journey length are closely related as these studies have shown that as parents choose to transport their children by car, traffic levels and journey times increase as a result. Much of the research has considered the differences in perceptions and realities.

- Many studies have shown some parents refuse to let their children walk or cycle to school alone because of misapprehensions about safety and security.

- The detrimental effects of these choices have also been researched and include impacts on physical and mental health, personal, social and cognitive development and environmental concerns (Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1991; BMA, 1992; Hillman, 1993; Whitelegg, Gatnell & Naumann, 1993; Mayer Hillman, 1999; EPPI, 2001; Begg, 2001; Sutton Trust, 2005).

- Schools across the UK are increasingly adopting school travel plans. Many local authorities are actively encouraging and promoting the development of these plans. Information on the development, planning and implementation can be found on many council websites.

- The aims of a school travel plan should include:
  - a reduction in traffic congestion close to the schools
  - an increase in the personal safety of pupils and parents on the journeys to and from school
  - offers of alternative modes of travel to pupils and parents
  - means by which health and fitness levels can be improved
  - an identification of problems pupils face on their journeys and dealing with them
  - the development of independence and self-esteem among pupils
  - the reduction or removal of the vicious circle of school travel – parents fear danger of traffic so they drive their children to school, resulting in an increased level of traffic and the parents fearing safety from the level of increased traffic (Sustrans)
  - Many of these examples of best practice in school transport can be applied to Northern Ireland. Some have had varying degrees of success because funding causes difficulties
  - Clearly, safety should always be of paramount importance when children are travelling to and from school. This is why safer routes initiatives command such support and have had increasing success throughout the United Kingdom
  - School safety zones, infrastructure improvements, education and harmonisation of school terms are all aspects of the wider picture that have been implemented across Northern Ireland, but should be expanded to cover all schools

2.1 Pupils' Views on Home to School Transport

A total of 12 schools participated in the peer-to-peer workshop phase of the research. Peer researchers from NICCY's youth panel worked with the research team to conduct these discussion groups. They were designed to explore a wide range of issues associated with transport and the journey to school. A further survey was also undertaken in 21 primary and post primary schools across Northern Ireland using pupil self-completion questionnaires in class under teacher supervision and was completed by 1394 pupils. Details of participating schools are included in the annex.

Focus Group Feedback on Bus Travel

- Pupils gave a number of reasons why they do not use the bus. These include that they don't want to do so, they don't like it, it is not reliable, it tends to be overcrowded or they don't think it's safe enough.

- Pupils stated that travelling by bus is a good way to meet and talk with friends.

- Translink bus services were said to be unreliable by pupils at Lagan College and St Joseph's College, with buses turning up late or not at all. Concerns were also expressed about the length of time taken to make relatively short journeys by bus and in relation to the timing of buses and early starts.

- Evidence was found of pupils smoking and drinking alcohol on buses.

- Pupils felt that the drivers' attitudes towards them causes respect to break down. Pupils stated some drivers were rude, drove too fast and aggressively and did not stop at all bus stops.

- Pupils and young people in a number of the focus groups and discussion groups stated that they felt that seatbelts should be provided but were unsure about how their usage could be enforced. However, it was recognised that the operation of seatbelts could cause capacity problems on existing services.
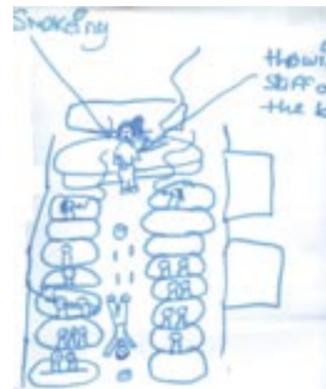
Drawing by female respondent, Rainbow Factory illustrating smoking at the back of the bus, people fighting and items being thrown onboard.

- Discussions among pupils also focused on overcrowding on some services and the perceived inability of providers (both ELB and Translink) to react to the problem in certain situations. Pupils cited examples where lack of seats meant that they had to stand.

- The behaviour of other pupils on buses was discussed in some detail in these focus groups. Arguments were found to break out over seating arrangements and overcrowding. The majority of situations were felt to be trouble free and it was claimed that bullying was a non-issue. Older pupils were found to keep order on buses. However, in some focus groups pupils were worried about the potential for bullying on buses because of overcrowding and poor supervision.

- Children and young people stated that they were happier using buses with pupils from the same school. In situations where different schools are served by the same bus services there were no reported instances of trouble between young people from different schools.

- The need for more buses was widely recognised by young people who expressed concerns about overcrowding on bus services.

- Pupils recognised that if seatbelts were required to be worn, capacity levels on buses would be reduced and this could lead to pupils being refused travel, which would present further safety concerns. Therefore, more vehicles would need to be provided to combat this.

- Accessing bus stops was often cited as a problem because children and young people had to cross busy roads to reach them. Problems were also cited when pupils had to leave the bus in heavy traffic.

- Non-provision of shelters combined with vandalism in some areas and the fact they are too small for large numbers was noted in the focus groups.

- Differences in morning and afternoon bus routes meant that some pupils pay more for one journey than another, for example 60p going to school and £1.00 coming home.

Ulsterbus vehicle on school bus duties (Photo: S. Mackey, 2002)

- Pupils with disabilities and those with special educational needs experienced problems securing wheelchairs in place on ELB vehicles and contract hire taxis. Many young people using these services also felt unable to express their concerns about safety and the securing of wheelchairs.

- Other users of ELB services expressed a high level of satisfaction with yellow bus provision. These services were seen as an important way to meet and catch up with friends.

- Low levels of satisfaction expressed by disabled and special education needs pupils, centered on services being late and a lack of escorts on buses.

- Recommended improvements cited in these discussion groups by young people included: better driver training, cameras on the bus, supervision on the bus, seatbelts and no standing.

Survey Results on Bus Travel

- 53% of pupils stated that they used the bus to travel to and from school every day. 31% of pupils use the bus to and from school while 17% stated that they used the bus for the homeward journey only.

- Younger pupils aged 5-7 stated that they never use the bus for school journeys. Older pupils, aged 10 and over, were found to have higher levels of bus use and were also found in larger numbers to have free bus passes.
  - Reasons for pupils using the bus:
  - bus stop close by (47%)
  - want to (29%)
  - parents want me to (13%)

  - Reasons for not using the bus:
  - no bus stop nearby (25%)
  - don't want to (59%)
  - not reliable (9%)

- 81% of pupils stated that they were unhappy about travelling to school by bus. The negative experience of using the bus is strongly associated with Ulsterbus school and stage carriage services.

- Standing is a regular and significant feature of school bus travel:
  - 35% of 15 year olds stated that they stood on most occasions
  - 40% of 16 year olds stated standing was a frequent occurrence
  - 50% of 17 year olds stated that they stand on bus services

- Seat sharing is also a feature of bus travel to and from school:
  - 91% of 12 year olds stated that they shared a seat
  - 43% of all pupils with a free bus pass also stated that they share a seat

Focus Group Feedback on Cycling

- Cycling to school occurs where special provision has been made for cyclists. Cycling is popular where cycle lanes on the busy roads outside the school are provided and bike sheds and lockers are also provided in the school.

Sheltered cycling facilities at St Brigid's College, Derry/Londonderry (photo: S Mackey, 2005)

- With the exception of the discussion group at St. Brigid's College in Derry/Londonderry, other groups felt cycling was unsafe and stated that there were no facilities for bicycles provided at the school.

Survey Results on Cycling

- Less than 1% (n=13) of pupils stated that they cycled to and/or from school.

- Reasons for not cycling included:
  - busy roads
  - don't like it
  - takes too long
  - not practical in school uniform

Focus Group Feedback on Car Travel

- Congestion outside schools was cited as a major issue in all focus groups.

- Travel by car was seen as comfortable and safe and also meant that they did not have to leave home earlier to get the bus. Many pupils in the groups stated that they travel to school by car in the morning and then walk or get the bus back at the end of the school day.

- Parents prefer to take younger children to school by car to avoid situations where bullying may occur.

- Despite its advantages, car use also created problems for children including not meeting friends and less exercise.

Pupil Survey Results on Car Travel

- 66% of pupils stated that they travelled to and from school every day by car – more than 20% more than that recorded in the Northern Ireland Travel Survey.

- Many pupils travel both to and from school by car but a significant proportion only use the car to get to school in the mornings.

Drawing by male respondent, Chinese After School Club

- 71% of pupils who travel by car stated they were happy with this mode, mainly because of the convenience and safety. However, pupils were unhappy about traffic levels and congestion while travelling by car.

- 22% of pupils stated that even though they were in receipt of a sessional travel pass for school transport they used the car for journeys to and from school.

- Car use was highest among younger pupils.

- Reasons stated by pupils for not using the car included:
  - don't want to (57%)
  - parents don't want me to (13%)
  - don't have a car (30%)

- Reasons for using the car included:
  - want to (60%)
  - fast (14%)
  - parents want me to (3.5%)

Focus Group Feedback on Walking

- Good weather and living close by encouraged children to walk to school whereas traffic speed and congestion discouraged them. Parked cars were also seen as a problem. Young people saw the introduction and enforcement of speed limits outside schools and school safety zones as a positive step.

- Discussions about walking centered on the problems about walking through certain areas because of gangs or groups of people hanging around.

- Reasons for choosing not to walk or parents not allowing pupils to walk tended to centre on safety and crossing busy roads, and the lack of footpaths.

- Young people who walked to school on journeys lasting more than 15 minutes stated that traffic levels intimidated them and that they also had concerns about their personal safety, particularly in certain areas and on some streets in the dark evenings.

- The poor condition and lack of paths/pavements was a key concern for children, particularly in rural areas, where they had to walk to the end of a road to catch a bus.

'The bus leaves me off and then I walk home' drawing by male student, Enniskillen Integrated PS

- Young people expressed strong support for the introduction of infrastructure improvements outside schools to reduce congestion and improve pedestrian safety. Measures included the introduction of traffic calming and traffic islands to make it easier to cross the road and parking for parents dropping off and collecting children.

Pupil Survey Results on Walking

- 23% of pupils stated that they walked to and from school regularly.

- 15% of pupils stated that they walked from school only because many parents drive their children to school on the way to work. Walking is also more prevalent amongst older children.

- Reasons for choosing to walk to school include:
  - want to (49%)
  - no choice (27%)
  - friends walk with me (20%)

Children walking to school (picture by female student, Forge IPS)

- Reasons for not walking to school include:
  - takes too long (88%)
  - crossing busy roads (6%)

- 65% of pupils and 58% of parents felt unhappy about the amount of busy traffic close to schools.

- Other aspects that made walking more difficult included:
  - parked cars near schools
  - traffic speeds
  - behaviour of other young people

- Measures that could make walking safer included:
  - guard rails at kerbs
  - extra crossings
  - less traffic and cars parking around schools
  - wider footpaths

For parents and pupils alike, the introduction of more crossing facilities are the most important intervention (59% of pupils and 68% of parents).

Pupils' Comments on School Transport

Funding for School Transport

- Many students feel that paying to go to school is unfair: *'I have to go to school, I have no choice, but I shouldn't have to pay for transport to get me there'* (male student, Lagan College).

- It was highlighted that no allowances are made for cheaper fares when still in full time education over the age of 16: *'We are still not earning, so we shouldn't have to pay the full fare'* (female student, Lagan College).

Congestion

- Some pupils reported the late running of some buses every morning due to high levels of traffic: *'I never get to school on time, the traffic is so bad'* (female student, Lagan College).

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

- Concerns were expressed about cars parked in the bus lanes and how this annoys those children who use the bus: *'I get so upset when cars block the bus lanes'* (female student, Forge IPS).

- It was suggested that: *'motorists should get fined for parking in the bus lanes and then we could get to school on time'* (male student, Forge IPS).

- Many pupils see congestion as something they can do nothing about and accept it as a: *'fact of life'* (male student, Methodist College). Many pupils prefer to travel by car than walk and, as a result, congestion levels are increased around schools, especially in bad weather.

Bus Journey

- Students expressed concerns about the length of time taken to make short journeys in buses. In some cases: **'route planning leaves a lot to be desired – the bus goes round the world for a shortcut!'** (female student, Lagan College).

*ELB school bus
(Photo: S. Mackey, 2004)*

- Children also stated that they don't always feel safe on the bus because there are no seatbelts: **'you could get badly injured if you crash'** (female student, Forge IPS). It was agreed that there are: **'too many pupils sitting on the seats provided as well'** (female student, Fort Hill College).

- The major issues surrounding the use of transport provided by Translink included: **'severe overcrowding'** (male student, Methodist College).

- Serious concerns were expressed about the number of people trying to use buses and the inadequate number of vehicles. Standing is common and the entire: **'vehicle is often jammed full'** (male student, Cambridge House) on many routes.

- It was widely felt among pupils who use the bus that: **'Translink has no interest in the welfare of those who use the school transport they provide as they get paid for**

it anyway'* (female student, Lagan College) and that: **'the drivers treat school pupils like dirt'** (male student, Cambridge House) and: **'drive like maniacs and don't care about our safety, only to get their shift done and get home or something'** (female student, Dalriada School).

- Pupils stated that funding to provide seatbelts and extra vehicles was considered a necessity in many cases – after all, it was suggested: **'what price a single life'** (female student, Lagan College) if these measures are not paid for?

Road Safety

- In some areas there is only a 'lollypop' woman in the mornings but not in the afternoons. This has caused some concerns, especially among younger students.

- **'We need a crossing patrol in the afternoon too; it's just so dangerous, especially in the winter'** (female student, Fort Hill College).

- Some pupils stated that they have to travel to school by car, as the school is located on a narrow country road, which is dangerous: **'roads too dangerous to walk along'** (female student, Ballymacrickett PS).

Cycling

- The main reasons for those who could cycle but don't centred on the busy and unsafe roads on

the route to school: **'The road outside school is really dangerous because cars speed along it – I wouldn't feel safe cycling even though I live close enough'** (male student, Lagan College).

- Lack of safe and secure cycle facilities on school premises is also a further deterrent: **'There's nowhere to keep bikes safe anyway'** (male student, Fort Hill College).

Bullying

- Some students at certain schools had serious concerns about safety and security conditions at bus stations and on some buses.

- It was stated that: **'intimidation, sectarianism and bullying'** (male student, Cambridge House) are commonplace at a particular station, especially in the afternoons. Incidents involving fireworks, fighting, bullying and crowds of people make this a: **'very scary environment for all, but especially for young people'** (female student, Cambridge House) with many students: **'refusing to travel through the bus station for fear of their own safety'** (female student, Cambridge House).

- Other children raised the issue of bullying, for example, when they approach the bus driver for help in a situation where bullying or fighting (between their own pupils) occurs, the response is to: **'hit them back'** (female student, Enniskillen IPS) and nothing is done to prevent or stop the bad behaviour.

Pupils' Recommendations on making school travel safer and better

- Measures that pupils believe could be adopted to make school travel on buses safer included:
  - supervision on board
  - more and newer buses/more double deckers
  - better seating on public transport
  - seatbelts on buses
  - no standing
  - more reliable bus services
  - trained and more polite or receptive bus drivers
  - inspectors who are more appreciative of the needs and concerns of school pupils

Drawing by male student, Mitchell House

Key Issues for Pupils

- The key issues of concern are the same across all age groups, school types and locations. Road safety was the concern rated the highest by pupils (57%) along with safety on public transport (52%).

- The main pupil concerns are:
  - Standing on school buses
  - Seating on school buses and the use of the '3 for 2' rule
  - Lack of seatbelts on school buses
  - Behaviour of other young people on school buses and while walking or cycling to and from school
  - Behaviour and attitudes of bus drivers
  - Heavy traffic and congestion, especially close to the school
  - Traffic speeds
  - Traffic noise
  - The time taken to make journeys on foot, by bus or in the car
  - The distances to be travelled to and from school
  - Walking and using footpaths safely
  - The provision and maintenance of safe footpaths and cycle lanes
  - Crossing roads and the provision and availability of safe crossing points or crossing patrols

- The behaviour of other people and fear of strangers was rated as more of a concern by parents than pupils.

2.2 Parents' Views on Home to School Transport

Eight focus groups were held with parents of primary and post-primary students across Northern Ireland. Many of the concerns raised by parents in the focus groups and surveys were similar to the concerns and views of pupils. A questionnaire survey of parents was also carried out to obtain information on their perceptions of their children's travel to and from school, and 293 responses were received.

Some of the key concerns that parents raised in the focus groups and the surveys are as follows:

Bus Travel

- Parents recommendations were very similar to those proposed by pupils. They believed that bus services could be improved in the following ways.
  - Better driver training
  - On-board cameras
  - On-board supervision
  - Provision of seatbelts
  - No standing on buses

- Parents expressed concerns about overcrowding on bus services and the levels of escort training and supervision on buses.

- In particular, concerns were raised in relation to service provision for pupils with disabilities and those with special education needs.

- Parents were more strongly in favour of seatbelts on buses compared to pupils.

Safe Routes to Schools

- Parents in urban areas stated that where their children only walked short distances to school they were satisfied with the provision of footpaths and the crossing patrols. They did not view safety as a key concern in these situations.

  Photo by S. Mackey, 2005

- Parents expressed strong support for the introduction of infrastructure improvements outside schools to reduce congestion and improve pedestrian safety.

- Measures parents would like to see more of include traffic calming and traffic islands to make it easier to cross the road and more parking provision for parents dropping off and collecting children.

- Parents believed the following measures could make walking safer
  - Guard rails at kerbs
  - Extra crossings
  - Less traffic and parking
  - Wider footpaths

For parents and pupils alike, the introduction of more crossing facilities was seen as the most important intervention (59% of pupils and 68% of parents).

Car Travel

- 67% of parents stated they took their children to school every day and 92% of them stated they were happy with this choice. This seems to be driven by the convenience and safety of car travel.

- However, parents, like pupils, were unhappy about traffic levels and congestion while travelling by car.

- Congestion outside schools was cited as a major issue. However, only 28% of parents stated that they allow their children to walk to and/or from school.

- Fear of bullying was cited as one of the main reasons parents prefer to take many younger children to school by car.

Safety Concerns

School safety zone at St Brigid's College, Derry/Londonderry (Photo: S. Mackey, 2005)

- Road safety was the concern rated the highest by parents (66% of parents) along with safety on public transport (63% of parents).

- Parents were more concerned with the behaviour of other people and fear of strangers than pupils.

Key Issues for Parents

- The key issues of concern identified by parents include:
  - Traffic congestion, especially outside the school gates
  - The provision of footpaths, especially in rural areas and alongside busy roads
  - The state and general repair of footpaths
  - The provision of crossing points and patrols especially at 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
  - The availability of seatbelts on school buses
  - The enforcement of wearing seatbelts on school buses
  - Issues of standing and overcrowding on school buses, mainly on those provided by Translink
  - The behaviour of other young people, especially on board buses and while walking or cycling to and from school

2.3 Youth Organisations' Views

A further eight focus groups were carried out with youth organisations, in addition to the school and parent focus groups. These groups were drawn from across Northern Ireland and included a representation of sections of society included in Section 75 Equality Impact Assessments – ethnic minorities, those from deprived areas, the disabled and those with statements of special educational needs. The themes discussed included travel experiences and the behaviour of other young people and how this affected travel. A summary of the comments and views of people in these organisations is outlined below.

Summary of Comments

- Some young people 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).

- Some of those who participated in the focus groups travelled by taxi. This is generally satisfactory because 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).

- The practicalities of seatbelts on school buses were also discussed: *'we couldn't wear seatbelts the way things are at the moment because 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).

- 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.

- 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).

- 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… it's ridiculous'* (female respondent, Dromore Cathedral GB).

- The respondents shared their concerns that some other pupils do not behave well, 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 unpleasant journey experiences.

- 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).

- On a more positive note, many respondents enjoy the company of their friends on the bus: *'its good craic'* (male, Rainbow Factory) and *'we enjoy being able to spend time talking to each other… it means the trip passes faster!'* (female, Dromore Cathedral GB).

- Many pupils and parents stated that they were satisfied with school buses provided by the ELBs. 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).

- Some young people cited travel by ELB buses as problematic because of difficulties of securing wheelchairs in transit. Some 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.

- Poor restraint of wheelchairs in private contracted minibuses or taxis services provided for school transport also created a lot of discussion.

- A few young people expressed embarrassment about using yellow ELB buses: *'I sometimes hide when I see people I know'* (male respondent, Barnardos Disabled Youth): *'it can be embarrassing'* (female respondent, Blind Assoc Youth).

- Many stated a preference for the car even when living within 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).

- Fear of bullying was cited as one of the main reasons parents prefer to drive many younger children to school.

- Focus group participants also recognised that there are serious financial constraints in developing initiatives to reduce car travel on the school run, fit buses with seatbelts, provide more buses, and make infrastructure improvements.

- While safety and security concerns are extremely valid for parents and pupils, a major change in mindset must also take place. Evidence from this research and from the peer-to-peer focus groups 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.
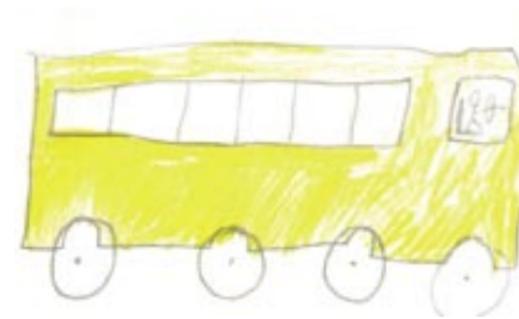
Drawing by male student, Mitchell House

Key Issues for Youth Organisations

- The discussion groups identified a number of common issues of concern that are prevalent across all schools in both urban and rural situations:
  - Traffic congestion, especially outside the school gates
  - The provision and condition of footpaths, especially in rural areas and alongside busy roads
  - The provision of crossing points and patrols, 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
  - The availability and enforcement of seatbelts on school buses
  - Issues of overcrowding and standing on school buses
  - The reliability and punctuality of school bus services
  - The behaviour of other young people, especially on-board buses and while walking or cycling to and from school
  - Concerns about bullying and sectarianism
  - 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 and safety of transport for disabled pupils e.g. securing wheelchairs etc.

2.4 Other Stakeholders' Views

A number of other key stakeholder organisations, including transport providers and political representatives, responded to the stakeholders' questionnaire. Other information, such as press releases and policy statements, was received from stakeholders in relation to the issue of school travel. A brief summary of some of the points raised is outlined below.

Translink Child Safety Bus
(Photo: S. Mackey, 2005)

• Translink stated that the immense cost and practical implications arising from moves to prohibit standing and to implement seatbelts on all buses should be considered carefully.

• Translink stated that the implementation of recommendations by the Northern Ireland Assembly on bus capacity ('3 for 2' rule and standing) in 2001 would require 'additional buses to be provided at additional cost to ELBs and/or users'. It also stated that the implementation of seatbelts would incur a significant financial cost, but would also have implications for the current school bus 'model' in Northern Ireland. It would mean there would have to be increased separation of school services from scheduled stage carriage services, 'with knock-on implications, cost and social, for the future provision of rural bus services across Northern ireland' (Translink, 2005).

• Translink considers that the current school bus model in Northern Ireland provides a sound basis on which to build and that any future changes should be best considered within the bigger picture of overall public transport requirements.

• In general, transport operators were concerned about behaviour issues and providing seatbelts because they believe that many pupils would not wear them.

• Transport providers also stated that travel by bus is up to 10 times safer than by car.

There remain concerns across all stakeholders on the safety implications of standing, overcrowding and inappropriate behaviour on buses. Responses prove that there are prevalent safety and security concerns and that issues about overcrowding, behaviour and walking need to be addressed.

Key Issues for Stakeholders

• Overcrowding on school buses
• Behaviour of school pupils
• Seating arrangements and provision on buses
• Standing on buses
• Provision and enforcement of seatbelt wearing
• The '3 for 2' rule and capacity issues
• Bullying

3. Recommendations and Conclusions

These conclusions and recommendations are drawn from the findings of this research and are based on the following three main policy goals.

1. Maintaining the current system of provision of home to school transport
2. Achieving a modal shift to get people out of their cars
3. Targeting provision of home to school transport to those who need it

1. Establish a steering group

- A steering group should be established to move these issues forward and bring about positive change. This should consist of all key stakeholders who would look at how school transport can be improved in the light of these findings and the recommendations provided by the Assembly Environment Committee in 2001.

2. Review operation of statutory walking distances

- The current statutory walking distances for home to school transport should be reviewed to identify the impact that changes could have on school transport provision.

- To help to achieve modal shift the current walking distances may need to be reduced to make bus use available, attractive and viable for those who need it. On the other hand, current walking distances may need to be increased or removed and provision could be based on household car ownership and/or low household income in order to target need.

3. Review costs of operation

- There is a need for a comprehensive review of the costs of all transport modes to identify the best way of allocating funding to deliver school transport in an effective manner. It is important that this review identifies and fully considers the wider benefits of increasing modal shift to sustainable transport alternatives.

- Bus passes offered for outward and return journeys regardless of use should be replaced with smart passes to ensure that pupils only pay for the journeys they make.

- The provision of Special Education Transport should be reviewed to ensure efficiency, especially with regard to taxi costs.

- A better, integrated school transport network would result in lower average costs. This network would make more effective usage of all available transport providers (Translink, ELB, private coach operator services, taxis).

4. Reduce car based journeys to school

- The implementation of more 'Safer Routes to School' initiatives and school safety zones should be encouraged to reduce car use. These initiatives should be adopted to address the concerns expressed by both parents and young people about the safety of trips to and from school.

- Schools should map routes which children take to and from school and identify the problems or potential problems that exist along the way.

- Safer routes projects should include:
  - Pedestrian and cycle crossing facilities
  - New (lower) speed limits and traffic management schemes
  - Schemes to provide adult accompaniment for children who walk to and from school
  - Classroom activities and lessons about road and personal safety
  - Better facilities for cyclists at schools (secure bike racks/sheds and lockers etc.)

- Safety zones should feature traffic calming measures such as:
  - Crossing islands
  - Lower speed limits
  - Kerbside railings
  - Flashing lights to alert drivers to the location of the school

- Parking should not be permitted outside the school gates. This would help address concerns about congestion at the school and safety for pupils negotiating parked cars to cross roads or use the footpath safely.

- The development of 'Safer Routes to School' projects can lead to:
  - Fewer child casualties and road accidents
  - Healthier lifestyles
  - Safer roads for all – especially pedestrians and cyclists
  - Less pollution and congestion
  - Greater independence and freedom

- Leading examples of safer routes to schools in Northern Ireland can be seen at St Brigid's College in Derry/Londonderry and St Joseph's College on the Ravenhill Road in Belfast.

- Schools should develop travel plans for pupils and adopt some of the following measures to reduce problems caused by the school run:
  - Walking buses (adults walking pupils to school)
  - Crossing facilities
  - Pedestrian training
  - Traffic calming measures (similar to those introduced at St Michael's Primary School, St Joseph's College and Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School, Ravenhill Road Belfast – 'school safety zone')

- Car sharing
- Walk to school weeks
- Information and marketing of alternatives

5. Improve estimation of demand for school transport assistance and provision

- Demand for school transport assistance and provision needs to be more accurate to ensure an eradication of capacity problems experienced on buses at the start of the school year in September.

- Information and communication technology, the existing pupil databases and accurate and reliable information from schools on pupil numbers should be developed to accurately forecast pupil numbers.

6. Remove '3 for 2' rule and standing on school buses

- Serious concerns about standing on buses and the use of the '3 for 2' seating rule were expressed by pupils and parents. While this arrangement is only used as a capacity 'buffer' it was felt by many that this is an unacceptable arrangement.

- It is recommended that measures are implemented to remove the '3 for 2' rule and to provide seating for all pupils when planning services.

- These measures would reduce capacity in some cases and would require more vehicles or finding a more efficient way to use existing vehicles.

- With greater targeting of resources and more efficient management of the school bus fleets, these problems may be eradicated.

- The lack of seatbelts on school buses is an issue of concern for both parents and pupils. The implementation of seatbelts on buses would potentially reduce capacity levels and would also require more buses or more effective use of existing fleets.

- The Government's Accessible Transport Strategy states that a joined up approach is needed to maximise resources to bring about positive changes to school transport. A review of all existing transport resources should be undertaken to see how they could help address capacity issues.

7. Improve physical infrastructure

- Infrastructure improvements are needed to make walking and cycling a more attractive and safer alternative – e.g. school safety zones, safer routes to school initiatives, secure cycle facilities.

- Better walking and cycling infrastructure (footpaths and cycle lanes) should be provided to further promote these modes and increase safety to encourage use.

8. Introduce flexible school hours

- Flexible school start and finishing times and harmonised holiday / term times should be implemented to relieve pressure on the existing school transport system.

- Flexible times where some schools start and finish later than others would ensure there was more seated capacity on school buses and should be used to attract people away from their cars.

9. Introduce measures to tackle inappropriate behaviour on school transport

- There is a clear need for adult supervision or the widespread use of CCTV on school buses to curb the inappropriate behaviour of some pupils.

- School prefects should be more widely used to record and, where necessary, report on offenders.

- There is evidence that the '3 for 2' rule and standing on school buses both contribute to

poor behaviour on board school buses. Pupils tend to misbehave more on a crowded bus where supervision is more problematic and where more individuals collectively cause trouble. Therefore, addressing these issues is important in tackling on-board behavioural problems.

Concluding Comments

The information in this research must not be ignored. It is imperative that steps are taken to improve the safety arrangements of children and young people travelling to school. The three organisations who have commissioned this research urge the government to set up a group to review the findings of this research, highlight a series of actions and set a timetable for changes to the current systems, putting children's rights to travel safely to school at the core.

SAFER JOURNEYS TO SCHOOL >>> ANNEX

Annex

The steering group and supporting organisations with input in the school transport research are as follows:

- Alison Loughlin, Parents Advice Centre
- Andy Bready, Department for Regional Development Roads Service
- Stephen Hewitt, Department for Regional Development Roads Service
- Christina McKeever, NICCY Youth Panel
- Conor Fitzpatrick, NICCY Youth Panel
- Eamonn Brown, Sustrans
- Eddie Lynch, General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland
- Ken Smyth, NICCY Participation Manager
- Mary Anne Webb, NICCY Policy Officer
- Susan Dolan, Department for the Environment, NI
- Teresa Devlin, NICCY Head of Research, Policy and Service Review
- Professor Julian Hine, University of Ulster
- Dr Scott Mackey, University of Ulster
- Dr Banihan Gunay, University of Ulster

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- Victoria Keast
- Swapnil Patra

- Ciara Rehill
- Deboragh Curley

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Workshops:

- St Joseph's College, 518 Ravenhill Road, Belfast, BT6 0BY
- St Brigid's College, Glengallaigh Road, L'derry, BT48 8DU
- Cambridge House Grammar School, Cambridge Avenue, Ballymena, BT42 2EL
- Methodist College, 1 Malone Road, Belfast, BT9 6BY
- Dalriada School, St James Road, Ballymoney, BT53 6EL
- Fort Hill Integrated College, Belfast Road, Lisburn, BT27 4TL
- Lagan College, 44 Manse Road, Lisnabreeny, Castlereagh, BT8 4SA
- Mitchell House Special School, Marmont, Holywood Road, Belfast, BT4 2GT
- Ballymacrickett Primary School, Scroggy Road, Glenavy, Crumlin, BT29 4NE
- Ballinamallard Primary School, Baragh Road, Ballinamallard, BT94 2AJ
- Forge Integrated Primary School, Carolan Road, Belfast, BT7 3HE
- Enniskillen Integrated Primary School, Drumcoo, Enniskillen, BT74 4FW

Pupil/parent questionnaires:

- St Anne's Primary School, Kingsway Finaghy, Belfast BT10 0LF
- St Brigid's Primary School, Rathkeltair Road, Downpatrick, BT30 6NL
- Whiteabbey Primary School, Old Manse Road, Whiteabbey, BT37 0RU
- Edenderry Primary School, Lurgan Road, Banbridge, BT32 4AF
- Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, Castle Park, Bangor, BT20 4ST
- Oakgrove Integrated PS, Rectory Field, Limavady Rd, L'derry, BT47 1JY
- Desertmartin Primary School, 20 Dromore Road, Magherafelt, BT45 5JZ
- Glenlola Collegiate Prep (Signet House) Castle Park Rd, Bangor, BT20 4TH
- Down High School Prep Dept, Mount Crescent, Downpatrick, BT30 6EU
- Fullerton House Prep School, Lisburn Road, Belfast, BT9 6BY
- Dalriada Prep School, St James Road, Ballymoney, BT53 6BL
- Wellington College, Carolan Road, Belfast, BT7 3EF
- Banbridge Academy, Lurgan Road, Banbridge, BT32 4AQ
- The Wallace High School, Clonevin Park, Lisburn, BT28 3AD
- Portora Royal School, Derrygonnelly Road, Enniskillen, BT74 7HA

- Edmund Rice College, Hightown Road, Glengormley, BT36 7AU
- Holy Trinity College, Chapel Street, Cookstown, BT80 8QB
- Dromore High School, Banbridge Road, Dromore, BT25 1ND
- Brownlow College, Tullygally Road, Lurgan, Craigavon, BT65 5BS
- Armagh Integrated College, Abbey Street Complex, Armagh, BT61 8BB
- Meanscoil Feirste, Teach Ard na bhFea, Bothar na bhFal, Belfast, BT12 6FD
- Beechlawn Special School, Dromore Road, Hillsborough, BT26 6PA

Youth Organisations who participated in workshops:

- Derry Childrens Commission, Bishop Street, L'derry, BT48 6PP
- Broughshane Scouts
- Youth Action (Rainbow Factory), College Court, Belfast
- Dromore Cathedral Girl's Brigade, c/o 30 Church St, Dromore
- Collin Community, Dairy Farm, Stewartstown Rd, Twinbrook
- Chinese After School Club, Morton Centre, Lorne St, Belfast
- Blind Association Youth, North Road, Belfast
- Barnardos Disabled Youth Project, Dobbin Street, Armagh

Parents Groups who participated in workshops/discussions:

- Youth Action (Rainbow Factory), College Court, Belfast
- Dromore Cathedral Girl's Brigade, c/o 30 Church St, Dromore
- Collin Community, Dairy Farm, Stewartstown Rd, Twinbrook
- Harberton Special School, Harberton Park, Belfast
- Parents Group, Bocombra Lodge, Old Lurgan Road, Portadown
- Parents Group, Holy Family PS, Newington Avenue, Belfast
- Blind Association Youth, North Road, Belfast
- Barnardos Disabled Youth Project, Dobbin Street, Armagh

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