Merseytravel Schools Transport Policy

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Merseytravel School Transport Policy

Aims of Policy

It is acknowledged that there are various ways that children can travel to school. While ideally as many as possible should be encouraged to walk or cycle, realistically this is not always possible. In such instances, preferable options include mainstream public transport, and “school buses”, with the private car being the least preferable.

The aims of this school transport policy are to support Merseytravel’s wider aims, in relation to the way that it provides and funds transport services, so as to:-

• Secure effective use of resources;
• Maximise revenue generated through school bus services;
• Support the Merseyside Local Transport Plan, TravelWise and TravelSafe agendas;
• Ensure that bus provision is integrated with wider policy objectives and in particular, with legislation relating to choice, changes to eligibility for free travel and accessibility audits of school sites (the Education and Inspections Act 2006);
• Review the arrangements by which Merseytravel considers requests for school bus services from schools and from Local Education Authorities and explore a ‘penalty and reward’ system;
• Ensure that Merseytravel actively engages with schools and LEAs to pursue efficiencies and improvements in bus provision, by staggering school opening times; and
• Encourage greater use of public transport in the longer term, by fostering a sense of respect amongst school children and making bus use an acceptable experience, such that they continue to use public transport into adulthood.

The overall objective of this policy is:-

“To secure best value from Merseytravel’s bus services budget, so as to provide bus services that are principally aimed at serving schools where and when appropriate and in a way that supports the aims of the Local Transport Plan for Merseyside.”

The need for this policy stems from a clear statement of intent within the adopted Merseyside Bus Strategy 2006-2011.
Background – (August 2007)

There are 612 schools in Merseyside, for which Merseytravel currently provides 150 school bus services per day. This equates to around £5m, out of a total bus revenue budget of approximately £30m. In addition, a large number of children travel on the mainstream bus network, and a number use Merseyrail. Many Local Education Authorities, that provide free school transport for school children, do so via pre-paid tickets, such as Solo tickets, whilst some schools provide their own services at their expense.

In addition to providing school bus services, Merseytravel also provides indirect benefits for many schoolchildren, by means of its educational outreach programmes through the Community Links Team. These are aimed at fostering good behaviour, respect, awareness of sustainable transport and good citizenship. Merseytravel also supports the Merseyside TravelWise initiative, aimed at fostering more sustainable travel patterns amongst schoolchildren and addressing the many problems associated with the “school run”.

The Education Act 1944 (subsequently updated by the Education Act 1996) places a statutory duty on Local Education Authorities to provide free transport to schools for pupils living over three miles from their closest school. Section 88 of the 1985 Transport Act, however, places a duty on local transport authorities to provide socially necessary bus services that would not otherwise be provided by the commercial network. Merseytravel have interpreted school bus services as falling within this duty.

Merseytravel is required to operate within constrained budgets for both revenue and capital spend, and in so doing secure value for money. Criteria are in place in respect of supported bus services, to ensure that resources used to fund this 20% of the bus network that is not commercially viable, deliver best value for money.

These criteria include established patronage criteria, acknowledging that it does not constitute good value for money to fund services that are very poorly used. In addition, a criterion relating to the use of the DfT’s “Accession” mapping software system has been included, as a means of calculating the purpose and accessibility of a service, so as to reflect the social importance of a service, not just its cost. This approach needs to apply equally to school travel, being a major part of the supported bus services budget, as described above.

A further consideration is the acknowledgement that encouraging school children to walk and cycle to school helps to maximise the benefits of the capital investment that the Merseyside local authorities and Merseytravel have put into pedestrian and cycling facilities. In addition to these health benefits, which can help to combat the worrying increase in childhood obesity, research suggests that even moderate levels of exercise make children concentrate better and boosts academic achievement.
Merseytravel is committed to reducing congestion and encouraging more sustainable forms of transport. Schools contribute significantly to congestion, with 20% of vehicles on the roads in the morning peak reportedly being on the school run. This also contributes to air quality problems, with trips generally being short, and short trips are acknowledged as the most environmentally damaging. Therefore, encouraging children and parents to use alternative forms of transport to the car will help to reduce congestion and improve air quality.

Clearly, although the use of public transport by children is beneficial, Merseytravel face a range of challenges (outlined below) surrounding school bus services in the short to medium term; some specific to school transport but others generic to the bus industry.

**Rising Cost of Bus Tenders**

Bus costs are rising substantially above inflation - primarily due to fuel and insurance costs - and this has reflected in the growing cost of bus tenders for school transport services as well as other tendered bus services. This has resulted in almost exponential growth in the size of the bus services budget, which is unsustainable.

**Lack of Competition for School Services**

The last few years have been particularly difficult with respect to school services, in that there is a marked reluctance amongst operators to bid for the contracts, which narrows the market and pushes up the cost. This is because such services often have high associated maintenance costs resulting from damage caused by a small minority of the children, and securing drivers can be problematic, as some children can, on occasion, be abusive and disruptive.

**Changes to School Opening Times**

Scheduling buses to serve, where possible, a number of different schools, minimises the need for, and cost of, additional buses. Therefore changing opening times can have a substantial impact on the bus services budget, and at present, schools are not required to liaise with Merseytravel over such changes. This can place an increased burden on the bus budget that is already under pressure from cost inflation and the increase in the subsidised bus market, such that the level of funding required to secure school transport fluctuates greatly, and is consequently hard to predict. It is known that the planning process for schools to change their opening hours is lengthy. Consequently, Merseytravel will act proactively in this respect, in seeking to secure dialogue at an early stage, with those schools considering changes to opening hours.
The Education and Inspections Act

At present, school transport must be available, free of charge, to children that live further than 3 miles from the nearest school. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 outlines the extension of this right, to all children from low-income families, to any of the 3 most suitable secondary schools closest to their home, where these schools are between 2 and 6 miles away. Allied to this is the need, under the Act, for Local Education Authorities to produce School Travel Strategies and to conduct accessibility audits of schools, in support of the School Travel Plan process. It is envisaged that this policy will contribute to this process.

Parental Choice

The policy of parental choice, and the planned increase in the number of faith schools and special schools, will tend to mean that pupils will travel further to reach their school of choice, again affecting travel patterns. In addition, the Education White Paper alludes to the idea of the levels of schools admissions being aligned to bands of ability, to ensure that schools take children with a wide range of ability. Should this be introduced, it is likely that travel patterns will be affected, given that children may consequently have to travel further, for schools to comply with the admissions procedure.

Schools Reorganisation

In some areas of Merseyside, the collegiate system of education is being introduced, whereby a number of schools share facilities and expertise. Therefore, pupils are likely, within any one school day, to be required to move between a maximum of 2 sites. At present the impact on transport and travel patterns are unclear.

“Building Schools for the Future” is a programme of refurbishment and rebuilding whereby all high schools will be modernised in some way by 2020. As a point of principle, it is essential that transport and access considerations are addressed at the outset in any schools reorganisation.

Demographic changes mean that the next few years will see substantial school closures, particularly primary schools, with pupils transferring to neighbouring schools. Therefore, although at present there is little demand for primary school services, future developments may result in pressure for Merseytravel to provide school buses to address these needs. This again reinforces the need for a transparent and robust approach to the provision of schools services, as demand will quickly outstrip supply.
The Policies

Policy 1 - Hierarchy of Transport Modes

Merseytravel supports a hierarchy of transport modes by which schoolchildren will travel to and from school and between sites and facilities. This hierarchy will seek to promote the most sustainable modes of transport, in preference to less sustainable modes.

Walking and cycling to school will always be the best options for schoolchildren. In addition to the health benefits of walking and cycling, which can help to combat the worrying increase in childhood obesity, research suggests that even moderate levels of exercise improve children’s concentration, and boosts academic achievement. Walking buses and the development of “Safe Routes to Schools” by local authorities are crucially important to this, aided by their effective promotion to parents (eg How To Get To…” guides).

In addition to the health benefits that children gain from walking to and from bus stops and railway stations, travel by bus is over seven times safer than by car, with rail travel is safer still, and by being exposed to public transport children will develop improved roadcraft.

Encouraging children to make use of the mainstream bus network ensures the best use of Merseytravel’s funding. For example, utilising existing subsidised services increases the revenue on such services, and thus the value for money of that spend. Increased use of buses by school children will also contribute to Merseytravel’s LTP target of increasing bus patronage by 1% by 2010/11.

Furthermore encouraging greater use of public transport amongst children will have the longer-term benefits, by fostering a sense of respect amongst school children, such that they continue to use public transport into adulthood.

Where it is neither possible nor practical for children to travel to school by mainstream public transport (eg the remoteness of the school from main areas of population), the option of a school bus service should be examined. However, school bus services do not expose children to the full experience of using public transport. From a value for money perspective, there is little sense in Merseytravel subsidising a bus service when the same trip could be made using existing bus services. This is entirely consistent with principles incorporated within the Merseytravel Supported Bus Service criteria and policy framework.
The car should always be a last resort for trips to school, as an alternative is nearly always available. School travel plans, through TravelWise, thus have a key role to play in highlighting the options that are available for children to get to school and so address the concerns that lead some parents to drive their children to school. Selfish, indiscriminate and illegal parking outside schools is a cause for concern and Merseytravel will press for the strongest possible enforcement against offenders by the local authorities and agencies concerned.

In summary, the hierarchy of transport modes should be:

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<th>Mode</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Most preferable</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>Walking is an environmentally sustainable mode of transport. In addition walking provides health benefits and so can help tackle the increasing health problems of obesity and sedentary lifestyles. Walking buses and ‘safe routes to schools’ are integral components in this respect and are encouraged by Merseytravel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycling</td>
<td>Cycling is an environmentally sustainable mode of transport, provides health benefits, and can help tackle the increasing health problems of obesity. Cycling is sometimes perceived as being more dangerous than walking, and training is available through the Merseybike scheme for on-road training to minimise risk and build skills and confidence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainstream Public Transport</td>
<td>Merseyside has a comprehensive public transport network. Public transport is considerably more environmentally sustainable than the private car. Using the public transport network provides more health benefits than using a private car, as most journeys require a walk to and from bus stops. Switching from car use to public transport also contributes substantially to reducing congestion and road safety concerns around schools, whilst also developing social skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Bus Services</td>
<td>School bus services are provided as and when necessary, when mainstream public transport does not fulfil the journey to school needs of a particular school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Least preferable</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Car</td>
<td>Private cars, although providing high levels of convenience, are environmentally damaging compared with other options. The private car is also the main contributor to congestion. It also has adverse effects on health and on safety around schools, when cars are parked indiscriminately or illegally outside schools.</td>
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Policy 2 - School Travel Plans

All schools for which Merseytravel provides school buses should have, or be in the process, of developing an adoptable School Travel Plan (STP), to fully assess the transport needs of the school, in terms of the provision of walking, cycling and bus services.

STPs are designed to reduce the use of cars in the school run and usually include an assessment of the available transport to a particular school including walking, cycling and public transport. They set out an action plan of initiatives, with associated targets, that aim to change the way that pupils get to school, perhaps by setting up a walking bus or cycle train or by holding events that encourage the different ways to travel to school. Travel plans are signed-up to by teachers, governors, pupils and parents and in addition are acknowledged by OFSTED as part of their schools inspection regime.

STPs are fully supported by Merseytravel, given that they not only encourage greater use of all sustainable modes, but also allow a thorough assessment of the need for, and availability of, school buses, Merseytravel’s pre-paid tickets and other forms of public transport. They also provide a highly effective means of engagement with schools, local councils and local education authorities, so as to pool resources and effort.

This policy fully supports the intention of the DfT and DfES for all schools to have an STP in place by 2010, by creating a further impetus for the production of high-quality STPs. In addition, Merseytravel supports the inclusion of staff (both teachers and support staff) within School Travel Plan targets, so as to set a good example to pupils.

At present (Aug ’07), of the 612 schools across Merseyside, some 370 schools (62%) have an adopted STP in place, or are working towards production of one. There remains a challenge, therefore, if this target is to be achieved by 2010 in Merseyside and in a way that does not prejudice the quality and integrity of individual STPs.

The Local Education Authorities have received grants from DfES to employ School Travel Advisors to support the delivery of STPs, though this funding is time-limited to 2008. Merseytravel calls upon DfES and the Local Education Authorities to extend these bursaries, in view of the importance of the STP process and the challenges that remain in working towards the 2010 target.

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1 This is subject to the availability of resources within the relevant LA and the Merseyside TravelWise team to support the STP.
Policy 3 - Communication

Schools for which Merseytravel provides School Bus Services will be expected to consult on proposed changes to operational arrangements, such as locations or school opening hours. This should be 12 months prior to any change being implemented, with Merseytravel reserving the right to withdraw the said services\(^2\).

Merseytravel will also proactively approach clusters of schools to seek to rationalise and secure better use of existing bus services. Promoting the appropriate ‘staggering’ of school start times will help to support this. Breakfast Clubs and the like can also assist with this.

Merseytravel will write to each school and Local Education Authority for which it provides School Bus Services in January, enclosing the School Transport Policy, to remind them of the need to consult on any proposed timetable changes.

Where schools for which Merseytravel provides School Bus Services change opening times, and so impact on the provision of that transport, there is a need for Merseytravel to be consulted early in the deliberations. Such consultation has not always been forthcoming, and there have been occasions where schools have informed Merseytravel of changes a matter of weeks before the new hours came into operation.

It is acknowledged that there are a variety of reasons why schools wish to change their hours. Transport is not often seen as the overriding consideration by schools, but this is an aspect that Merseytravel wishes to change. From Merseytravel’s perspective early engagement is crucial, even if any negotiation ultimately does not influence the eventual decision. Where the change does have transport implications, notification well in advance does permit Merseytravel to plan more effectively for the changes.

\(^2\) Each case will be taken on its own merit, and mitigating circumstances can be taken into consideration
Policy 4 - Penalties and Rewards

Schools that fail to consult Merseytravel over changes, resulting in additional demand for buses, are likely to be made liable to bear these costs themselves or else will forfeit a service.

Merseytravel will consider sharing with the school any savings that accrue from the rationalisation in School Bus Services, in order to fund measures that support the production of, or delivery of the STP.

Alternatively, Merseytravel will provide incentives through curriculum support materials or outreach work, as appropriate to the school in question.

By staggering opening hours, schools can contribute to significant savings for the Merseytravel bus budget and a much more effective use of that transport spend. Where a school’s actions lead to savings it is proposed that they should share in that benefit.

But equally where a school’s actions lead to increased costs for Merseytravel, they should bear some, or all of the additional costs. By being aware of the transport cost implication of their actions, this can be included within a school’s decision-making process. In short, whilst it is unreasonable to expect a school to decide an issue as wide-ranging as school opening hours solely on the transport implications, it is equally unreasonable for the transport implications and costs to be excluded from this process.

Where a school consults Merseytravel on changing its opening hours and the resulting change leads to a cost saving, Merseytravel and the school will share either savings accrued or provide an equivalent level of reward. This could take the form of relevant “in kind” resources (eg “Your Choice” Schools Conferences or specialist education packs). Schools receiving an element of reward funding will be required to allocate these funds to the delivery of measures contained within the School Travel Plan, such as cycle lockers, parking ‘zig-zags’ outside the school or improvements to a walking route.
Policy 5 - Good Land-Use Planning

Where schools are being consolidated or relocated, Merseytravel will require Local Education Authorities to secure the selection of the most appropriate sites in terms of their accessibility.

Sites that facilitate walking, cycling and the use of mainstream public transport services should be the preferred choice.

The use of accessibility mapping techniques (eg “Accession”) will be encouraged in the selection of sites and Merseytravel will assist LEAs as required with this process.

An STP must be prepared as part of the planning application for the rebuilding of the school.

This policy supports the principle of accessibility planning, whereby transport implications and solutions are integrated with the wider decision making processes.

As in the case of Policy 4, decisions taken in isolation by LEAs on the location of schools and which subsequently put pressure on Merseytravel to provide additional school bus services are inequitable; schools that fail to select the most appropriate sites to which children can safely walk, cycle and use mainstream public transport will be liable to pay the full cost of any additional buses required. Similarly, Merseytravel will require STPs to be produced as part of the planning application for a new or relocated school.
Policy 6 - Good Behaviour, Monitoring and Enforcement

Anti social behaviour, fare-evasion and similar abuse of school bus services will not be tolerated by Merseytravel and may result in the loss of the privilege by individual pupils or by schools. Initiatives will include the development of a School Travel Charter and the promotion of innovative schools outreach work (eg “Your Choice” Conferences) to tackle problems of anti-social behaviour and criminality.

Merseytravel will also stipulate the use of CCTV on board buses to enable action to be taken action against anti-social behaviour, criminality and fare evasion. Merseytravel will work with operators and schools to more effectively monitor usage of school services (eg through ticket receipts), to facilitate the effective management of the contracts.

The knock-on effect of disruptive children is such that there is a marked reluctance amongst operators to bid for the contracts, which narrows the market and pushes up the cost; such services often have high associated maintenance costs resulting from damage caused by a small minority of children. School children who receive school bus travel or travel passes provided by Merseytravel will be required to abide by a School Travel Charter, or else could forfeit their right to travel by bus. It is expected that this aspect will be monitored and enforced by the schools.

Problems of anti-social behaviour on-board tendered school bus services will be monitored by Merseytravel’s TravelSafe team and the Police and tackled via warnings, prosecutions or the reporting of specific problems to the relevant school. The use of IRiS (a database of all incidents of crime on public transport) will be used to record incidents, to enable enforcement to be taken forward by an appropriate authority. Schools will be encouraged to report problems of crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour on board buses, working with Merseytravel’s TravelSafe Team.

Fare evasion is common on some school buses and the relatively short distances over which they operate means that normal revenue protection measures are not fully effective. This does not maximise “fare box” income for Merseytravel and increases the net cost of school bus services. Working with the operators and schools, Merseytravel will stress the need for the children to board in an orderly manner, and for the driver to record every pass-holder. Children will be taught to expect to receive a ticket for each fare tendered, and to retain that ticket. To assist with this, schools may be asked to supervise schoolchildren boarding buses, or risk forfeiting the provision of the School Bus Service. Furthermore, CCTV and receipts of tickets issued can then more effectively be used to provide evidence for Merseytravel to take action against any alleged incidents of driver fraud.
**Policy 7 - The School Bus Fleet**

Merseytravel will require all School Bus Services to be of the highest quality in terms of their environmental and operational performance; operators will be encouraged to exceed minimum standards as set out within bus contract specifications. As per Policy Area 6, the installation of appropriate CCTV equipment will be a pre-requisite for all tendered schools services.

Because of the difficulties in attracting competition to the school bus market, Merseytravel will explore a range of options to ensure best value and also best quality.

Amongst these options, Merseytravel will explore the feasibility of purchasing and operating a dedicated school bus fleet, where legislation permits, and where this would provide a better value for money solution than inviting tenders from commercial operators.

A further option will include an examination of the role of the Community Transport sector in the delivery of school transport services.

As part of its commitment to the creation of a high quality and fully accessible public transport network, Merseytravel is striving to secure the highest standard in terms of bus quality and bus performance.

The above policy thus encourages bus operators to exceed minimum standards, via the support and incentives outlined in the preceding policies to tackle problems of anti social behaviour and vandalism.

In particular, this will include a requirement for CCTV to be installed on board school buses. Merseytravel, through its TravelSafe programme may also be able to provide financial assistance with the installation of CCTV in appropriate circumstances.

In line with commitments within its approved policy on Supported Bus Services, a further option will include an examination of the role of the Community Transport sector in the delivery of school transport services.