








The Report of  
**The Independent Review of  
Home to School Transport**

August 2014





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## **FOREWORD**

Over the past decade, Northern Ireland’s education system has undergone review and fundamental change. Selection in post-primary education, the post-primary curriculum entitlement, pre-school education, Irish medium education, special education and inclusion, and school funding have all received inquiry. Arising from these reviews are policies that focus on developing an education system and a schools’ estate to meet the needs of pupils in a rapidly changing society.

School transport is not just about buses. It is about ensuring pupils arrive at school on time, safely and able to learn; enabling them to participate fully in their education and develop to their potential. If emerging education policies are to be effective, school transport has an important role in supporting their delivery.

School transport plays a fundamental part in cutting peak hour congestion on Northern Ireland’s roads, in reducing child casualties on our roads, supporting rural public transport and encouraging the use of healthier and more sustainable patterns of travel. Additionally, it has a broader social role, in promoting inclusion, facilitating shared education and collaboration, and developing young people’s independence, but it must be delivered efficiently.

This review is not simply a critique of the current provision of home to school transport for young people. Much of the transport pupils use to travel to and from schools across Northern Ireland every day is of a high quality, delivered safely and effectively, by many committed and caring staff.

The review was commissioned to provide an independent and objective assessment of what Northern Ireland’s school transport system should look like in the future. We were asked to question how it can best meet the challenges ahead and to develop recommendations to ensure it is fit for purpose, supporting and working with educational (and other Government) policies going forward.

We recognise the topic of free school transport often provokes strong views. Education and child safety are emotive subjects for parents, schools and pupils. Our recommendations in this report are not about cutting costs or driving down

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expenditure, but rather they provide a coherent framework for the future, where transport can be responsive to the changing delivery of education and aspirations of and for young people. We have proposed changes to the school transport system that have the potential to make it more equitable, transparent, financially and environmentally sustainable, whilst improving the support offered to our most vulnerable children.

It has been a privilege to work with all who have contributed to this review.

My thanks, especially, go to the Secretariat team - Caroline Martin, Adam Eakin, and Laverne Bradley who have provided professional support throughout, and to Panel members, Margaret Martin and Tony McGonagle, whose local knowledge and contributions have been invaluable.



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**Dr Sian E Thornthwaite**  
Panel Chair

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### THE REVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

In December 2013, Education Minister, John O’Dowd commissioned this independent and wide ranging review to ensure the home to school transport policy in Northern Ireland going forward is **fit for purpose, sufficiently targets pupils’ needs and is consistent with, and supports, Departmental policy objectives.**

Introduced in Northern Ireland in the 1940s, the provision of home to school transport was considered necessary to ensure children who lived more than walking distance (defined as two miles for primary pupils and three miles for post-primary pupils) could attend school. Seventy years on, nearly one third of the school population qualifies for transport assistance and its provision accounts for more than £100 million of public funds each year.

The extent of school transport provision, and who qualifies for it, can influence the success or otherwise of a wide range of educational policies - from enabling attendance at school, supporting shared education and collaboration, to facilitating participation in after-school or post-16 education, or targeting support for learners with additional needs. How school transport is delivered can influence young people’s educational experience and opportunities. It can support the wider public transport network, road safety, child health and sustainable travel objectives. The complexity and inter-relationship of these Governmental policies, and how school transport affects them, are reflected in this review.

The review’s findings are based on evidence from many sources. More than eighty stakeholder organisations with an interest in school transport, including trade unions, educational support organisations, schools, parents’ representatives, rural and community groups, and transport providers met with the Panel. The Call for Evidence generated over a thousand responses and the Panel visited schools and school transport operations across Northern Ireland.

Central to this review has been hearing the views of young people. The Panel met with more than two hundred pupils from primary, post-primary, special schools, and

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young people at the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, youth centres and in alternative education provision.

To gain insight into the impact of other school transport policies and practice, including the provision of free transport for all, concessionary fare schemes, parental payment and changes to entitlement policies, the Panel met transport and education organisations in other jurisdictions. These included Wales, Ireland, and rural and urban areas of England.

Throughout the review, the Panel received briefings and information on policy and practice from across Northern Ireland Government Departments. Assessment of the implications of options for change was supported by analysis undertaken by the Strategic Investment Board.

### CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

The Department of Education (DE) Circular 1996/41, updated in 2009, sets out the relevant qualifying criteria for transport assistance with distance from home to school and attendance at a suitable school being the main factors. Provision may also be made for pupils with special educational needs. The qualifying distances, measured according to the shortest walking route are two miles for those of primary school age and three miles for those of post-primary school age. A suitable school is a grant-aided school in any of the following categories: Catholic maintained, controlled or other voluntary, Integrated or Irish medium (primary or post-primary), denominational or non-denominational grammar.

The home to school transport policy is administered by the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs). Each Board considers applications from parents, assesses eligibility, allocates pupils to routes, procures transport, oversees the budget and manages the Board fleet of school buses.

Of the more than 300,000 school pupils in Northern Ireland, about 29% qualify for school transport. Approximately 11% of primary and nearly half (46%) of all post-primary pupils receive transport assistance. Approximately a third of eligible pupils travel on Board buses and about half use Translink (mainly Ulsterbus) services.

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Other pupils travel on private contractors' vehicles, ferries or are in receipt of a monetary allowance.

Travel to and from school represents a third of all young people's travel. School transport is an important element of overall public transport in Northern Ireland, with more than a quarter of all passenger journeys on Translink consisting of pupils travelling to or from school. Nearly 40% of all Ulsterbus passengers are pupils on home to school transport journeys funded by DE, and at least two-thirds of Translink's bus fleet is required to meet this peak-hour travel requirement.

It is conservatively estimated that £100 million recurrent expenditure is provided by Northern Ireland Government Departments to support home to school travel. More than three quarters of this comes from DE, administered by the ELBs. Other sources of funding include post-16 student passes and Education Maintenance Allowances, funded by the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL), concessionary fare reimbursement and rural transport funded by the Department for Regional Development (DRD). In addition, there is significant annual capital investment in the Board and Translink fleets from DE and DRD respectively. The review has highlighted the complexity of funding and the low level of awareness by professionals and the public of the amounts spent on provision of transport to school.

Expenditure on home to school transport by ELBs has risen at more than twice the rate of inflation over the past twenty years. It now accounts for almost 4% of DE's resource budget each year. On average, school transport costs the ELBs approximately £800 a year for each child it transports.

### Is it fit for purpose educationally?

Education policy has undergone extensive review in recent years and DE's Corporate Plan 2012-2015 states the Department has two overarching goals:

- **raising standards for all** - through high quality teaching and learning, ensuring that all young people enjoy and do well in their education; and that their progress is assessed and their attainment recognised, including through qualifications; and

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- **closing the performance gap, increasing access and equality** - addressing the underachievement that exists in our education system: ensuring that young people who face barriers or are at risk of social exclusion are supported to achieve their full potential; and ensuring that our education service is planned effectively on an area basis to provide pupils with full access to the curriculum and Entitlement Framework.

Many children achieve well in their education, but attainment and school leaver destination are more likely to be influenced by social background in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. Data from school leavers' surveys in recent years show underachievement in all school sectors for those entitled to receive free school meals, particularly those who are looked after, newcomers or who have special educational needs. Across all school sectors, non-attendance tends to increase in line with free school meals entitlement rates and, where more than half of their pupils are eligible for Free School Meals, rates of GCSE achievement are 24.7 percentage points lower.

The cost of transport or its un-availability were not cited during this review as the sole or main reason for non-attendance at primary or post-primary schools. However, recent surveys and responses to the Call for Evidence indicate that many households are already struggling financially and have difficulty paying for school uniforms or school trips. Stakeholders were concerned that withdrawal of free school transport would exacerbate already high costs of transport for households. The Panel heard compelling evidence from individuals where transport availability or its cost had affected participation in after-school activities or limited the young person's choice of subject or school.

The level of and type of provision of home to school transport is dependent upon the age of the pupil, the school sector and the Board area. The present system disproportionately benefits those pupils attending grammar schools. These pupils account for nearly 40% of young people receiving transport assistance and a third of school transport expenditure. Almost 60% of voluntary denominational grammar school pupils qualify for transport assistance. In addition, these pupils are most likely to receive Translink passes, which permit travel to 6.30 pm and allow many pupils more opportunity to stay for after-school activities. Conversely, the lack of transport after school, mainly for those reliant on Board buses, means many are unable to participate in after-school activities or need parents to provide lifts home.

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During the course of the review, the Panel heard evidence that, too often, pupils are losing teaching time because of timetabling, or poor scheduling of transport services. There were examples of pupils repeatedly arriving late or having to leave school early, or missing part of lessons when they had to move between sites as part of Entitlement Framework collaboration with other schools.

For those at the margins, at risk of being excluded from school, provision of dedicated, targeted, flexible and responsive transport helps ensure attendance and continued participation in school. For many of these young people, multiple agencies are involved, which further complicates transport funding and administration. Such pupils include those in alternative education provision, school age mothers and children who are looked after. Many of these young people want to continue in education, but face particular personal challenges and circumstances that the additional support of transport may help them overcome.

### Does it meet the needs of all pupils?

The majority (70%) of pupils do not qualify for free school transport. In response to the Call for Evidence, some parents said they were happy to pay for or provide transport for their children. However, many felt the system was out-dated, and that linking transport entitlement to the current categorisation of schools was biased, in that it supported some choice but not others e.g. single sex schools, or choice based on subject. Respondents from rural areas stressed the fact that such pupils were already disadvantaged in terms of access to other facilities. For many ineligible to receive school transport, the cost of travel to school imposed financial hardship, and the inequality of some receiving transport whilst others did not, appeared arbitrary and unfair. There were concerns about the high cost of public transport and lack of information available on concessionary fares. Some pupils gave examples of not having sufficient funds to pay for bus fares or working part-time jobs that barely covered their transport expenditure. Many pupils expressed frustration at being challenged about their age, paying the full adult fare when they still qualified for the concessionary fare.

Pupils in Irish medium education face specific transport challenges. Due to the limited number of schools and units, some pupils undertake long journeys, with changes of bus, or buses arranged primarily for other schools and therefore not tailored to their school days. An enhanced mileage allowance is available for those attending

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Irish medium provision, where it would not be practical to provide another form of assistance. This is often deemed more cost effective by ELBs. However, the Panel heard from many in the Irish medium sector who felt this inadequate to cover costs, impractical for those who work or do not have access to a car, and that it offered a lower level of support than other schools received.

For some pupils, cross border education provision is the closest. Whilst both jurisdictions treat the pupils they receive as they would their own, this has an iniquitous outcome for Northern Ireland's pupils as they are charged for school transport (as pupils in Ireland are). If the same pupils were travelling within Northern Ireland, their transport would be free.

Integrated schools also tend to be more dispersed than other categories of school, with pupils frequently travelling long distances to them. Pupils in Integrated primary schools are often reliant on monetary allowances, but do not receive an enhanced rate. The current policy permits pupils residing outside the statutory walking distance to travel to any school of their choice within category. This, it was argued, results in pupils travelling longer distances to attend schools and bypassing closer Integrated schools. It was submitted that difficulty in obtaining permanent increases in their school enrolment numbers, to prevent any adverse impact on neighbouring school enrolments, had compounded this issue for the Integrated education sector.

Approximately 10,000 pupils receive transport assistance because of their special educational needs. Transport for these pupils is disproportionately expensive due to the need for smaller specialist vehicles and equipment, escorts on buses, and it often involves long journeys. Much of the transport provided for these pupils received praise and demonstrated good practice. However, there is little evidence of systematic assessment or regular review of pupils' transport needs and abilities, or of independent travel training being provided to develop young people's skills. There were also concerns about the long journeys faced by vulnerable pupils, especially those travelling into Belfast schools from other Board areas.

### Does it provide a safe, secure and high quality journey?

Between 2008 and 2012, 73 children were seriously injured or killed on the school journey in Northern Ireland; 80% were pedestrians and 10% were coach, bus or



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minibus passengers. School transport remains safe in relation to distance travelled and the proportion of trips. However, on average each year about 40 children are injured when travelling by bus, minibus or coach to or from school. Children are especially vulnerable walking to or from bus stops, particularly in winter, in the early mornings or in an evening when wearing dark school uniforms. This was raised as a persistent concern during the course of this review.

Pupils reported feeling generally safe when on school transport. The majority were satisfied with the quality of service they received, reflecting in part the significant investment in the Board and Translink fleets in recent years. Pupils and schools often spoke highly of Board bus drivers.

Concerns centred on overcrowding on some bus routes (although this may, in part, be due to passes not being checked to ensure only those eligible to travel are on the bus) and some Translink drivers' attitudes. Young people reported being challenged over eligibility to child fares when paying for transport, and inconsistent approaches to enforcement of the use of sessional passes. Seat belts were rarely, if ever, worn by post-primary school pupils, and older pupils were dismissive of the safety messages and demonstrations they received promoting their use. This was particularly the case when they were unable to get a seat on vehicles or were travelling on buses where seat belts were not fitted.

Overall, bullying and behaviour appear to be well managed by prefects, bus captains, pupil monitors, school staff, Board and Translink staff. A few pupils expressed nervousness about 'flash points', either walking through mixed areas or where large volumes of students congregate, such as at bus stations. However, most pupils reported regularly sharing transport and public areas without incident or comment. Good working relationships between local schools and Translink ensured problems were often managed effectively, and demonstrated the benefits of agreeing local solutions working with young people and schools.

### Does it support Government objectives?

The Programme for Government's sustainable travel targets are for 36% of primary school pupils and 22% of post-primary pupils to walk or cycle to school by 2015. Northern Ireland has low and deteriorating levels of walking. A quarter of primary and

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16% of post-primary pupils walk to school, (compared to 47% and 36% respectively, in Great Britain). The main factor determining mode of transport to school is the distance travelled. In Great Britain overall, 79% of primary and 89% of post-primary trips to school of under one mile are made on foot compared to less than 2% of primary and 10% of post-primary journeys of over two miles.

The current home to school transport framework is complex and generous. If the nearest school in any of the six categories is more than two miles (primary) or three miles (post-primary) from home, pupils can then choose to attend any school in that category over the distance, supported by transport assistance. There is no maximum distance. This means less than a quarter of post-primary school pupils attend their nearest school. Only 12% of grammar school pupils do. Journeys are, therefore, long. Post-primary school journeys are on average nearly three miles longer than those in the rest of the UK. Journeys to grammar schools are, on average, more than six miles each way.

The Programme for Government also seeks to improve the efficient use of public funding. Transport assistance to support extensive choice of school means that nearly twice as many pupils qualify for travel as would be expected given the level of rurality in Northern Ireland. Comparison with other jurisdictions suggests the complexity of the entitlement criteria for school transport adds a further 35,000-40,000 entitled pupils, at a cost of approximately £30 million per year.

### Looking forward

By 2019/20, the school population is expected to rise. This will put additional pressures on the school transport budget. Increasing school enrolments alone are expected to drive up transport costs by a further 10% over the next five years. In addition, the population is becoming more diverse, with higher levels of special educational and medical needs and more pupils demonstrating increasingly complex behavioural, social and mental health problems. All of which will place demands on the transport system, including the need for additional specialist staff training, vehicles and equipment. If current trends in expenditure continue, the estimated cost to DE of supporting pupils' journey to school will be in excess of £100 million by 2019/20 (including support from other Government departments for school travel the total is expected to rise to approximately £133 million).

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Average schools sizes remain small in Northern Ireland. Two-thirds of primary schools have fewer than 200 pupils and more than a third of post-primary schools have fewer than 500 pupils. The emerging Sustainable Schools policy sets minimum enrolment thresholds and the Area Planning process aims to ensure all schools are sustainable in terms of educational experience; enrolment levels; finances; leadership and management; accessibility and community links. This means ELBs are working to ensure a planned network of viable and sustainable schools of the right type, in the right location. How the Area Planning process develops and the resulting location of schools and their type (particularly Irish medium, Integrated and special education) will have an impact on transport demands, journey times and the potential to achieve more sustainable travel.

### A VISION FOR HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Going forward, Northern Ireland's school transport system should ensure **each child is able to travel to and from school (or college) safely and sustainably, so they can participate fully and fulfil their educational potential.**

Any system needs to be:

- robust enough to withstand future demographic changes,
- supportive of current and emerging educational policies,
- simple to administer, more equitable and transparent,
- safe at all stages of the journey, from home to school,
- financially and environmentally sustainable,
- responsive to children's needs, and
- delivered effectively and efficiently, taking into account the wider impact on public transport services and public expenditure.

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### Whose responsibility?

Most Western countries accept there is a need for some state support for the journey to school, usually based on distance thresholds. Consultees and respondents to the Call for Evidence supported this. Throughout the review the importance of regular attendance at school and the role of appropriate, timely, reliable, safe and affordable transport were evident from young people and schools. There remain sound educational, sustainable travel, safety and economic arguments for retaining some free school transport for those pupils having to travel longer distances. The Panel therefore **recommends the state should continue to assume some responsibility for home to school transport, and that a distance-based threshold be retained and applied consistently.**

The review's terms of reference required it to consider the potential for some parents to contribute to costs. Ireland is one jurisdiction that has introduced charges. Experience there shows that up to 40% of primary and 50% of post-primary school children are exempt from charges as they hold a valid medical card or they have special educational needs. Respondents to the Call for Evidence demonstrated little willingness to pay, and anxiety at the financial impact on families, if all transport assistance was withdrawn. Given the administrative costs involved and the wider sustainable travel and safety benefits of high levels of bus use **it is not recommended a system of free school transport for eligible pupils be replaced with one based on parental payment or charges.**

### How much choice & who pays?

The question being considered is not whether parents should have the right to choose which school their child attends, but rather whether the state should continue to support free transport to facilitate that choice. Other jurisdictions' home to school transport policies support relatively limited choice. Northern Ireland is unusual in the extensive school choice supported, the complexity of its school transport system and consequently high levels of entitlement and expenditure. Overall, there were strong feelings from parents and young people that choice should be supported by school transport, even more than at present i.e. that transport should also be provided free of charge to support subject choice or attendance at single sex schools.

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The current system of school transport is inconsistent between Board areas and school sectors, and results in some schools benefitting from generous levels of service and entitlement. Its complexity leads to a highly contested and litigious environment. It undermines the concept of local schools and the policy of Every School A Good School, adds more than 144 million miles a year to peak hour travel across Northern Ireland and an estimated £30 million to the school transport bill.

Three options for change to the entitlement criteria were analysed in this review. Based on this analysis, **it is recommended that transport assistance be provided to the nearest school only (or to the nearest Irish medium school/unit or Integrated school)** and the expected savings of £26 million per annum **be re-directed to reduce the distance threshold to two miles for post-primary school pupils (and retained as two miles for primary pupils), enhance provision of after-school transport and target support for vulnerable children.** This would address the inconsistencies resulting from the diverse categorisation of schools and inequities in the current system of school transport. In addition, it would provide a robust framework going forward that supports Departmental education, transport and safety objectives.

Any change should be introduced on a phased basis applying to new school admissions only, supported by improved and consistent information for parents and schools on respective responsibilities, the rationale for change, the process, and transport options, including public transport and sustainable travel.

### Should transport be provided for intra-day movements of pupils and after-school participation?

Participation in after-school activities is seen as vital by schools and young people, particularly for those from socially deprived backgrounds, who benefit from access to educational facilities such as libraries, supported revision classes and internet after school.

The delivery of the Entitlement Framework (EF) and encouragement of shared education necessitates pupils moving between schools and Further Education (FE) colleges. **It is recommended that earmarked funding continue to support EF intra-day transport targeted via Area Learning Communities (ALCs), and that timetabling is reviewed to ensure transport does not encroach on teaching time.** It

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**is recommended that contract negotiations with Translink explore the potential for allowing more flexible use of sessional tickets for intra-day travel within ALCs. It is also recommended that the 6.30 pm time limit for sessional tickets be extended to facilitate attendance at school after hours and twilight courses at FE colleges.**

Some pupils reliant on Board buses and living in rural areas are precluded from full participation at after-school activities. **It is recommended that financial savings achieved from limiting transport provision to the nearest school only (or to the nearest Irish medium school/unit or Integrated school) be used to enhance transport services to support after-school participation.** Funding should be allocated on a bid basis and enable schools to develop innovative solutions, potentially using Board buses, private contractors, schools' own vehicles or the community transport sector. Funding allocations should be linked to outcomes regarding participation, additional educational needs, and the sharing of good practice.

### How should it meet the needs of those groups that have barriers to learning?

There is much good practice across Northern Ireland in the delivery of school transport for pupils with special educational needs, which should be recognised and shared more widely. The importance of well-trained, consistent and caring drivers and escorts came through repeatedly from parents, pupils and school staff. However, more pupils now have a greater complexity of needs and **it is recommended that a standardised core package of training be provided to all drivers and escorts of transport for pupils with special needs, to address the changing needs of the school population.**

The main criticism of special needs transport was the largely automatic assessment of transport entitlement, which was medic led and does little to foster independence, support effective transition to adult life or to develop young peoples' skills. **It is recommended that the introduction of Co-ordinated Support Plans and any revisions to the Code of Practice be used as an opportunity to consider transport needs at initial assessment, regular reviews and at transition planning, and that independent travel training be introduced to develop pupils' skills.** For those with existing statements of SEN transport assessments should be undertaken at annual and transition reviews.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Safety and quality of transport services for children with special needs were praised, but those travelling in their wheelchairs had specific concerns. **It is recommended that the Wheelchair Passport Scheme be introduced** to improve safety further for this group of pupils. One area of disquiet about transport for pupils with special needs centred on journey times. **It is recommended that the practice of pupils with SEN having to wait on vehicles outside some schools in the morning be stopped**, as this exacerbates already long journey times.

Responsive, appropriate transport was shown to be valuable in supporting many learners with additional needs overcome barriers to participation in education. **It is recommended that a dedicated transport budget be provided for pupils in alternative education provision and for school age mothers to enable more flexible and responsive transport to be arranged where necessary for these young people.** **It is also recommended that an officer within the ELB structure be designated and accountable for home to school transport for looked after children to ensure consistency across Board areas, between agencies and placements.**

Any policy changes introduced should allow for exceptions and provide for an independent appeal mechanism. The current appeals process varies across Boards and lacks independence. **It is recommended that an independent Transport Panel be established to consider transport applications on the grounds of exceptional circumstances**, such as extreme and persistent bullying or temporary illness. Similar models for such a panel exist in the Exceptional Circumstances Body (ECB), which considers applications from parents for post-primary school admissions in Northern Ireland, and the School Transport Appeals Board in Ireland.

### The impact of Area Planning

Area Planning offers opportunities to consider the location and type of school, and assess the impact of transport. Evidence from other jurisdictions highlighted the need for accessibility planning, with consideration of new locations that optimise journey times, minimise travel requirements and encourage the use of sustainable modes of travel. **It is recommended that all new school sites and shared education campuses take into account transport and travel issues, and that there is a strategic approach to Area Planning of special needs, Integrated and Irish medium education** to minimise

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

long distance travel for these pupils. The nearest provision cross border should also be taken into account.

When schools are being relocated, amalgamated or rationalised, **it is recommended that Boards put in place transitional arrangements for home to school transport, on a time bound basis that avoids the creation of inconsistent, ad-hoc legacy arrangements.**

### Cross border education and transport

Relatively few pupils travel across the border for their education in Ireland. However, school rationalisation and Area Planning may mean that the nearest school is in the neighbouring jurisdiction for more pupils in the future. **It is recommended that transport be provided to facilitate cross border attendance where that is the pupil's nearest school, and the parent chooses to send their child to that school. To facilitate this it is recommended that a liaison group be established to look specifically at supporting the cross border transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary education, and their transport needs.**

### Supporting sustainable and safe travel

Departmental policies affecting the school journey are fragmented and inconsistent. **It is recommended that DE lead on developing a Travel to School strategy for Northern Ireland, that links with and supports among others, the Road Safety Strategy, public health objectives to reduce childhood obesity, relevant targets within the Programme for Government, sustainable travel, educational and public transport policies.**

The proposals to restrict transport assistance to the nearest school are expected to result in shorter journeys to schools, which would reduce the overall levels of peak hour travel. It is estimated that if pupils attended their nearest post-primary provision, a third of post-primary pupils would reside within one mile of their school compared to 13% at present. Combined with a reduction in the mileage criterion to two miles for all post-primary pupils, this would be expected to promote more sustainable modes of travel. To support this **it is recommended that DE provide practical guidance to schools on how to promote walking and cycling, including appropriate school uniform design, management of parking and facilities on site, and introduce formal**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**recognition for schools that develop School Travel Plans. It is recommended that DE develop guidance on new school design and location to promote sustainable transport including infrastructure for bus, cycle and walk access.**

**It is recommended that the phrases walking route and walking distance be re-defined as distance criteria** to avoid ambiguity and clarify that this is a threshold to determine entitlement. It is recommended that the current assessment of hazardous route as a basis for entitlement to school transport be phased out. Instead it is recommended that **a formal mechanism be introduced whereby schools can identify routes that require infrastructure improvements for pedestrian and cyclists, which can inform DRD's programme for capital expenditure.**

The practices that encourage pupils to drive to school, such as 'cashing in' of sessional tickets for money that is used to pay for car use, and schools promoting car parking for pupils rather than sustainable and public transport use should cease.

Children are especially vulnerable as pedestrians and the safety of bus stops and walk to pick up locations have been recurring themes in this review. **It is recommended that the maximum walk to a bus stop be reduced to one mile, and that bus stops located on high-speed roads be subject to assessment to minimise risks to pupils. DE should review good practice on bus stop safety from other jurisdictions** such as Sweden where bus stop reflectors and RfID technology are widely used, at low cost, to improve safety. Personal security, bullying, and mis-behaviour were not reported to be widespread concerns, and have often been addressed effectively at the local level by pupils, schools, Translink and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) collaborating to find local solutions. The review would endorse this approach.

Although quality of school transport and safety on buses were not identified as particular concerns, overcrowding and low levels of seat belt wearing remain problematic. **It is recommended that schools, Translink and ELBs monitor vehicle capacity and that the contract with Translink specify clearly outcome measures in terms of capacity, responsiveness to changing school needs and route design as well as quality.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although ELBs attempt to minimise journey times, there are wide discrepancies between aspiration and practice. It is recommended that ELBs adopt a maximum journey time, including walking and waiting time, that ordinarily should be no more than 1.5 hours per day for primary school pupils and 2.5 hours for post-primary school pupils.

The review's terms of reference specifically included consideration of free public transport for all pupils. Such a policy would particularly benefit those in urban rather than rural areas. Given the likely financial implications, and the feedback from young people about potential abuse and disincentives for walking short journeys, the review does not recommend this be introduced. Awareness by young people of existing transport entitlements, including yLink, is low suggesting there is potential for encouraging further public transport use within the existing package of offers. **The review, therefore, recommends improved publicity and promotion of existing public transport concessions for young people, including improved engagement with young people to develop effective marketing strategies.**

To encourage public transport use, **it is recommended that DE liaise with Translink to establish a School Party Travel Scheme that would enable Area Learning Communities or schools to use public transport free or at a reduced rate for school related trips during the school day.** This is offered in London, utilising off peak transport capacity, whilst developing pupils' travel skills, improving awareness of public transport, and supporting travel training

### Value for money and model of delivery

The efficiency of the current home to school transport system compares well with other jurisdictions in terms of the unit cost of transport. The high levels of expenditure are the result of the generous entitlement criteria and complexity of school choice supported by the current framework, resulting in a large proportion of pupils qualifying for transport assistance and travelling long distances. The inter-relationship between rural, public and school transport is evident, **and it is recommended that sessional tickets on Translink services continue to be used where cost comparisons demonstrate this is in the interests of public expenditure overall.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Some efficiency savings could potentially be achieved through improved audit of sessional tickets, but there is little evidence to indicate that a markedly different model of delivery would reduce the costs per pupil transported. In the longer term, to reduce overhead costs, **it is recommended that the Boards move to centralisation of administrative and management functions for transport, and improved used of IT, including the process of applications on-line.**

### Putting pupils first

Throughout the review, engagement with young people has provided context to the broader evidence base. Our discussions with young people highlighted wide divergence between professionals' perceptions about what was delivered and what pupils expected or experienced on their school journey. **Therefore, it is recommended that School Councils include the topic of school travel and transport as a standing item on their agenda and provide feedback to the Board's Transport officer.**

Young people provided thoughtful, well-considered and valuable insight to this review. To ensure school transport reflects their needs and experiences, **it is recommended that DE establish a School Travel Forum to enable young people to provide meaningful input into developing a Travel to School strategy, share information about transport services and offer feedback on safety, quality and security.** This forum should include representatives from all school sectors, and include pupils with additional needs. All modes of travel should be represented, and it should include young people who do not qualify for school transport assistance.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is recommended that the state should continue to assume responsibility for home to school transport for some pupils.
2. It is recommended that a system of free school transport be retained for eligible pupils, and not be replaced by parental payment or charging.
3. It is recommended that a distance-based threshold be retained to determine entitlement to school transport.
4. It is recommended that a consistent measure of distance be used across Board areas, based on home-gate to school-gate measurement.
5. It is recommended that transport assistance be provided to the nearest school only (or to the nearest Irish medium school/unit or Integrated school), and funding be re-directed to reduce the distance threshold to two miles for post-primary school pupils (and retained as two miles for primary school pupils), reduce the walk to bus stop, enhance provision of after-school transport and target transport support for vulnerable children.
6. It is recommended that changes to entitlement criteria be introduced on a phased basis, applying to new school admissions and transfers to post-primary schools.
7. It is recommended that the information for parents about school transport criteria, eligibility, respective responsibilities and standards be improved.
8. It is recommended that any change to entitlement be supported by information from ELBs and Translink setting out the rationale for change, the process, and transport options for parents and young people, complemented by sustainable transport policies and plans to encourage and enable walking and cycling shorter distances.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

9. It is recommended that earmarked funding continue to support Entitlement Framework intra-day transport.
10. It is recommended that DE monitor intra-day movement of pupils and timetabling of collaborative teaching, to ensure that transport does not encroach on teaching time.
11. It is recommended that contract negotiations with Translink explore the potential for allowing more flexible use of sessional tickets for intra-day movements within ALCs. This should allow students to travel to and from sites within the ALC rather than only between home and registered school.
12. It is recommended that all ALCs be provided with advice and guidance on procurement of transport with private contractors.
13. It is recommended that savings achieved from transport provision being provided to the nearest school only (or to the nearest Irish medium school/unit or Integrated school) be used to enhance transport services to support after-school participation.
14. It is recommended that the 6.30 pm time limit for sessional tickets be extended to facilitate attendance at school after hours and twilight courses at FE colleges.
15. It is recommended that ALCs share experience of transport, travel innovation and good practice.
16. It is recommended that a standardised core package of training be provided to all drivers and escorts of transport for pupils with special needs, drawing on best practice from the Boards, and reflecting the changing school population.
17. It is recommended that ELBs improve the sharing of good practice relating to transport of pupils with special educational needs.
18. It is recommended that an annual event be organised for drivers and escorts to receive feedback from parents and pupils, which would recognise staff for excellent service.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

19. It is recommended that transport for pupils with statements of special educational needs be reviewed regularly, including at annual and transition reviews, to ensure the transport provided continues to be appropriate.
20. It is recommended that the introduction of Co-ordinated Support Plans and any revisions to the Statutory Code of Practice be used as an opportunity to consider transport at initial assessment, regular reviews and at transition planning.
21. It is recommended that the practice of pupils with SEN having to wait on vehicles outside school in the morning be stopped.
22. It is recommended that an independent travel training scheme be introduced, for young people with moderate learning difficulties or physical disabilities.
23. It is recommended that the British Standard Wheelchair Passport Scheme be introduced.
24. It is recommended that a dedicated transport budget be provided for those pupils in AEP and for school age mothers to enable more flexible and responsive transport to be arranged for these young people.
25. It is recommended that one officer be designated and accountable for home to school transport for looked after children across Northern Ireland, to ensure consistency across Board areas, between agencies and placements.
26. It is recommended that an independent Exceptional Circumstances Transport Panel be established to consider applications for transport on the grounds of exceptional circumstances.
27. It is recommended that the need for transport be considered as part of a strategic approach to the development of Irish medium education, Integrated and special education.
28. It is recommended that the opportunities offered by the development of new schools be used to minimise travel needs, to promote the use of sustainable modes of travel, and ensure safer routes to school are developed.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

29. It is recommended that the WELB model of special schools provision be explored as part of the wider review of special education across Northern Ireland, to minimise travel times and reduce transport costs.
30. It is recommended that Boards put in place transitional arrangements for home to school transport when schools are earmarked for closure/re-siting or development and this should be on a time bound basis to avoid the creation of inconsistent, ad-hoc legacy arrangements.
31. It is recommended that transport be provided to facilitate cross border attendance where that is the pupil's nearest school, and the parent chooses to send their child to that school.
32. It is recommended that a liaison group be established to look specifically at supporting the cross border transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary education, and their transport needs.
33. It is recommended that Area Planning explicitly consider the travel impact of school closures and rationalisation or re-location for pupils where this would result in the geographically closest primary or post-primary (or special school) being located across the border.
34. It is recommended that DE lead on developing a coherent Travel to School strategy for Northern Ireland, that links with and supports among others, the Road Safety Strategy 2020 Vision, the public health strategy to reduce obesity to 2022, relevant targets within the Programme for Government, sustainable travel, educational and public transport policies.
35. It is recommended that DE take forward the relevant action measures set out in the Road Safety Strategy to 2020.
36. It is recommended that DE provide practical guidance to schools on how to promote walking and cycling to and from school, including appropriate school uniform design, management of parking and facilities on site.



## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

37. It is recommended that accessibility planning, liaison with public transport operators and review of infrastructure for bus, cycle and walk access are all considered when assessing new school locations.
38. It is recommended that DE develop guidance on new school design and/or refurbishment of the schools' estate that promotes sustainable transport.
39. It is recommended that the practice of phasing out school crossing patrols be reviewed.
40. It is recommended that ELBs discontinue the policy of allowing pupils to "cash in" sessional tickets.
41. It is recommended that the phrases walking route and walking distance be redefined as distance criteria.
42. It is recommended that the current assessment of hazardous route as a basis for entitlement to free school transport be phased out.
43. It is recommended that DE establish a formal mechanism by which schools can identify routes that require infrastructure improvements for pedestrians and cyclists, which can inform DRD's programme for capital expenditure.
44. It is recommended that DE develop formal recognition for schools that implement Travel to School Plans.
45. It is recommended that the maximum walk to a bus stop be reduced to one mile.
46. It is recommended that ELBs conduct a risk assessment of all school bus stop locations on high-speed roads, to ensure that sight lines, visibility and waiting off the carriageway are all adequate to minimise risk to pupils.
47. It is recommended that DE liaise with DRD and review good practice from other jurisdictions in improving bus stop safety.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

48. It is recommended that DE develop good practice guidance on handling potential hostility on the school journey, drawing on successful local models such as the Safer School Travel Forum in Ballymena.
49. It is recommended that vehicle and route capacity be monitored by schools, Translink and ELBs.
50. It is recommended that there is an annual forum for schools to provide information to Translink and the Boards about likely future network demands and capacity requirements.
51. It is recommended that future contracts between ELBs and Translink specify clearly the outcomes required for home to school transport.
52. It is recommended that the ELB contract with Translink ensures adequate notification is provided to schools (and parents) about proposed changes to public and school transport routes, times or fares.
53. It is recommended that the casualty reports by the police indicate whether the journey is to/from school, or school trip and that these trends are monitored by DE.
54. It is recommended that DE and DOE develop, in conjunction with young people, a safety campaign that targets seat belt wearing, behaviour, and safety at bus stops to promote safer school travel.
55. It is recommended that ELBs adopt a maximum journey time, including walking and waiting time, that ordinarily should be no more than 1.5 hours per day for primary school pupils and 2.5 hours per day for post-primary school pupils.
56. It is recommended that DE and Translink engage with young people to develop effective marketing strategies and campaigns to promote awareness of public transport entitlements for young people.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

57. It is recommended that a standard set of information be included in ELB school admissions information and distributed via schools, which should include both home to school transport, and public transport entitlements.
58. It is recommended that Translink ensure there is a consistent approach by all drivers in relation to application of child fares and enforcement of use of sessional passes.
59. It is recommended that DE and Translink establish a School Party Travel Scheme that would enable ALCs, individual schools and colleges to use public transport free or at a reduced rate for school related trips during the school day.
60. It is recommended that Translink conduct routine monitoring of pupils' passes to prevent overcrowding and check entitlement to travel.
61. It is recommended that schools consult with ELBs and transport providers over proposed changes to session times.
62. It is recommended that the financial and administrative functions of school transport be streamlined and undertaken by one ELB/organisation.
63. It is recommended that applications for home to school transport be consolidated into an on-line centralised application process to improve efficiency and reduce administrative costs.
64. It is recommended that sessional tickets on Translink services continue to be used where cost comparisons (including revenue and capital) show that this is in the interests of public expenditure overall.
65. It is recommended that the basis of the calculation of sessional ticket costs be reviewed and agreed between ELBs, Translink and DE/DRD/DEL, and regularly benchmarked by market testing and comparison with Board operations.
66. It is recommended that any monetary allowance be at a mileage rate applicable equally to all school sectors.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

67. It is recommended all School Councils include as a standing item on their agenda the topics of school travel and school transport, to provide feedback to the Board's transport officer.
68. It is recommended that DE establish a School Travel Forum to enable young people to provide meaningful input into developing a Travel to School strategy, share information about transport services and offer feedback on safety, quality and security on the school journey.
69. It is recommended that DE establish an annual event that focuses on young people's travel, hosted by the School Travel Forum, which can raise awareness of transport options and report on changes made.

## **GLOSSARY**

AEP	Alternative Education Provision
ALC	Area Learning Community
ARNE	Assessment of Relative Needs Exercise
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder(s)
AWPU	Age Weighted Pupil Unit
BELB	Belfast Education & Library Board
CCMS	Council for Catholic Maintained School
CnaG	Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
CRED	Community Relations, Equality and Diversity
DEL	Department of Employment and Learning
DE	Department of Education
DHSSPS	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
DOE	Department of the Environment
DRD	Department of Regional Development
ECB	Exceptional Circumstances Body
EF	Entitlement Framework
ELB	Education & Library Board
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
EOTAS	Education Other Than At School
ESA	Education & Skills Authority
FE	Further Education
FSM(E)	Free School Meals (Entitlement)

## GLOSSARY

GBA	Governing Bodies Association
HSC	Health and Social Care Trust
LAC	Looked After Child(ren)
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
NEELB	North Eastern Education & Library Board
NEET	Not in Education Employment or Training
NICCY	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
NICIE	Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
SAMs	School Age Mother(s)
SEELB	South Eastern Education & Library Board
SELB	Southern Education & Library Board
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator (proposed to become Learning Support Coordinator)
SIB	Strategic Investment Board
SLD	Severe Learning Disabilities/difficulties
WELB	Western Education & Library Board

## REVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

### 1. Background to the home to school transport review

#### Context of the review

In October 2011, the Minister of Education announced the need for a full review of school transport services and policies across the five Education & Library Board (ELB) areas. This was prompted by the recognition that home to school transport should support access to high quality education, and the appropriate educational pathways that all children and young people need, whilst providing a service that is cost-effective and delivers an efficient service for pupils, schools and the public purse.

The context for this review is summed up well by one response to our Call for Evidence:

*“The current system is a complicated, expensive one that grew gradually over time without strategic planning nor [is it] an approach based on comprehensive analysis of needs”*

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#### Aim and objectives

The aim of the review is, therefore, to ensure that home to school transport policy going forward is:

- fit for purpose,
- sufficiently targets pupils’ needs, and is
- consistent with, and supports, Departmental policy objectives.

The objectives of the review were to undertake a fundamental assessment of home to school transport examining the basis of entitlement for support and the manner in which this should be provided. The review was asked to take into account wider

## REVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

considerations, including the impact of any future policy and delivery of school transport on urban and rural communities, Integrated and Irish medium education and those who have barriers to learning. It was also required to take into account safety, other Government initiatives around transport, including sustainability, as well as cross border attendance and Area Planning, whilst ensuring the effective and efficient use of resources.

A copy of the full terms of reference for the review is included in Annex 1.

### Evidence base

The recommendations in this review are based on extensive evidence and consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. Briefings were provided by officials from the Department of Education (DE), Department of Employment and Learning (DEL), Department of Regional Development (DRD), Department of the Environment (DOE) as well as Translink, on policies and practice across education, transport, road safety, rural issues and finance. The Panel is extremely grateful to all the officials who provided presentations, statistics and insight; and responded quickly and efficiently to queries and questions throughout the review.

The Panel met with 163 individuals (excluding young people) from 83 stakeholder organisations. These individuals and organisations included, among others, school principals, members of the travelling community, trade unions, educational support bodies, rural community interest groups, parent representatives, special needs groups, Irish medium education organisations, Integrated education bodies and transport providers. The Panel appreciates the time and interest from all these organisations' representatives, who provided thorough, well reasoned submissions. (A list of the stakeholder organisations is included in Annex 4).

Comparative reviews were undertaken of school transport policies, practices and operations in other jurisdictions. We are grateful for the time and contributions from representatives of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Ireland, Department for Education (DfE) England, Transport for London (TfL), the Welsh Government (Learner Travel), the Passenger Transport Executive Group (pteg), Liverpool City Council and Merseytravel,<sup>1</sup> as well as Hertfordshire County Council.

<sup>1</sup> Merseytravel is the Executive body that provides professional, strategic and operational transport advice to the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. It is the delivery arm of the organisation, responsible for some direct transport operations and procurement of transport services.



## REVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

A formal written Call for Evidence was launched on the 13th February 2014 and concluded on the 4th April 2014. This elicited 1,029 substantive responses from representatives including charities, parents, educational bodies, primary and post-primary schools and pupils.<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank all those who took the time to respond.

Many ELB officers including Chief Executives, staff from education welfare, area planning, special needs, traveller support and Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) met with the Panel during the course of the review and provided extensive information. We appreciate their considerable contributions and assistance throughout.

Particular thanks go to the transport officials in DE, the Panel's technical adviser and the transport managers and staff at the five ELBs, who arranged meetings, visits to schools, observations of transport services and operations, engagement with drivers and escorts, and provided statistics, data and documentation. They have responded to the Panel's enquiries quickly and efficiently, affording invaluable help and insight into the current home to school transport policies, its day-to-day administration, management and operations.

Modelling of school access patterns for post-primary pupils and testing of options for school transport entitlement were undertaken with the assistance of Dr Martin Spollen, of the Strategic Investment Board. His advice and expertise have been fundamental in assessing options and informing the Panel.

We have used comments from young people, and specific quotes from the Call for Evidence, in the report to provide illustration of general issues and context to the themes that have emerged from the wider review. We met with young people in primary and post-primary schools and youth group settings across Northern Ireland. This was done on a cross-sector, cross-community and bi-lingual basis. The Panel is extremely grateful to the Youth service, schools and NI Youth Forum staff who organised, hosted and assisted with these meetings, and to the more than 200 young people who took the time to provide thoughtful suggestions, constructive criticism, insight and to share their personal experiences with us.

<sup>2</sup> A number of schools coordinated their feedback resulting in duplicate responses. Analysis was therefore undertaken on the total responses and the 477 unique responses received.

**REVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT**

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

# CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

## 2. Home to School Transport Framework

### Role of Transport

Home to school transport has a key role to play in providing a safe, secure and appropriate environment for children travelling to and from school. It can enable children to arrive at school on time, ready and able to learn. Transport can provide children, irrespective of means, including those in more remote rural areas and those who have additional needs, with access to education, and support their attendance at school.

Regular school attendance is necessary to ensure pupils get the best possible outcomes from their period in compulsory education. Poor attendance at school can have an irreversible and long-term impact on the pupil and their educational attainment.<sup>3</sup> Although parents have a legal responsibility to ensure their child attends school regularly, if an ELB fails to provide transport for an eligible pupil, or if transport is provided but a child has to walk further than the statutory walking distance to school, this may be used as a defence by parents for their child's non-attendance at school.

Transport can provide access to and from school, but also increasingly to schools' broader educational offer, including after-school activities, revision classes, sports and, where relevant, the Extended Schools' Initiative, which includes breakfast clubs. Access to the full curriculum (post 14) to enable participation in appropriate educational pathways, whether academic or vocational, is an essential part of education in Northern Ireland. This may necessitate pupils attending schools other than their own (or FE colleges), for either part or full days, or after conventional school hours. The ETI Chief Inspector's report<sup>4</sup> notes that where learners have had their

<sup>3</sup> NIAO (25 February 2014) Improving Pupil Attendance - follow up report. pp 3.

<sup>4</sup> ETI Chief Inspector's Report 2010-2012 pp26.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

educational pathways limited this can adversely affect educational attainment, as well as the emotional health and well-being of young people.

However, it is not simply whether free school transport is available that will be relevant. For many pupils, particularly those with special needs, transport will have to be accessible to meet their needs. For those, especially in low-income households, affordability may be relevant. If school transport is to be effective, parents and pupils need to be aware of their transport options, and to find it acceptable to use, in terms of safety and personal security.

Throughout this review, the Panel heard first-hand from young people on the importance of regular attendance at school and the role of appropriate, timely, reliable, safe and affordable transport. Transport provision was particularly important for those who are more vulnerable, looked after, with additional or special needs or who may be in alternative educational provision.

### Introduction of home to school transport

In England and Wales, the state-aided provision of home to school transport beyond walking distance of two miles (for pupils of under eight years of age) or three miles (for those over eight years of age) was introduced with the Education Act 1944, known as the Butler Act, to ensure attendance at school. This Act was largely replicated in the Education (Scotland) Act 1945 and in Northern Ireland in the Education Act (NI) 1947.

While there are some variations between these pieces of legislation, all provided for compulsory post-primary education. All introduced an entitlement to home to school transport for those pupils who lived beyond walking distances, and allowed the absence of transport assistance for such pupils to be used as a defence for non-attendance at school.

In Northern Ireland, the walking distances were set at two miles for primary school pupils, rather than for those under eight years of age and three miles for post-primary pupils. In Northern Ireland parents can be expected to provide or arrange transport for part of the journey, or a pupil can be expected to walk up to the statutory walking distance before receiving assistance. Current DE Circular guidance 1996/41, updated in September 2009, reiterates that “a Board/ESA has no obligation to assist with travel

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

for the whole of a journey.” In contrast, in England, case law has determined that the obligation is on local authorities to provide free transport from “reasonably near” home to “reasonably near” school for eligible pupils.

The Education Act (NI) 1947 was repealed and largely replaced by the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986. This Order (as amended) requires DE to establish criteria to determine which pupils qualify for transport assistance to grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland.

Previous Circular guidance issued by DE in 1992 stated that Boards should exercise their powers to provide home to school transport “to offset as far as is reasonable and practicable the disadvantages suffered by pupils who live far from their schools or other educational institutions”. In determining the suitability of a mode of transport, Boards were required to consider such matters as whether it would entail an unduly early start, late ending, the distance from pupil’s home to the service, the total length of the journey, changes of buses and age of the pupil.

### Current guidance

The current Circular guidance sets out the relevant qualifying criteria for assistance with transport, with distance **and** attendance at a suitable school the main factors. The distance criteria are determined as walking distances measured by the shortest walking route. Paragraph 3(6) of Schedule 13 to the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 (as amended) establishes the statutory walking distance as two miles in relation to primary school pupils and three miles for post-primary pupils to age 19 (including those in further education). This does not mean that a pupil must walk to school, rather it is a route, which could be walked, accompanied if necessary.

The Circular also provides guidance on what is considered a suitable school. In order to be entitled to transport assistance, a pupil must be attending a grant-aided school in one of the following categories:-

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

PRIMARY/SECONDARY SECTOR	GRAMMAR SECTOR <sup>5</sup>
Catholic Maintained	Denominational
Controlled or other Voluntary	Non-Denominational
Integrated	
Irish-medium	

In practice, the categorisation is more complex than this as several schools do not fit easily into these categories. For example, a grammar stream may exist within a school of another category creating a bilateral school.

The general principle of this current policy is that pupils are educated at a school in accordance with the wishes of their parents, as far as this is compatible with the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.

The Education (NI) Order 1988 placed a duty on DE to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish medium education, and the Circular guidance on home to school transport was amended in 2009 and issued by DE to Boards. This confirmed the practice, in place since 2001, that Boards should, with the approval of the Department, provide an enhanced allowance for Irish medium pupils in lieu of transport services. The aim is to enable pupils to attend Irish medium schools, where it would not be reasonably practicable to provide other assistance.

Current Circular guidance requires Boards to continue to consider, when determining the suitability of a mode of travel for any eligible pupil, whether it would entail an unduly early start or late finish, the duration of the journey and distance to and from the pupil's home or connection point. However, unlike earlier guidance, it no longer includes consideration of the length of journey or change of buses.

<sup>5</sup> A grammar school means a secondary school which immediately before the coming into operation of Article 128 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 was a school in which fees were charged or could have been charged in respect of pupils admitted to the school or has been designated as a grammar school by the Department.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### 3. Overview of provision

#### How school transport is administered

The application of transport policy and delivery of home to school transport services is the responsibility of the five Education & Library Boards (ELBs): South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), Southern Education and Library Board (SELB), North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB), Western Education and Library Board (WELB) and Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB).

The ELBs' home to school transport policies are published in Admissions Guidance Booklets and Transfer Guides, which provide information for parents' about admissions arrangements to primary schools and transfer to post-primary schools. However, the format and level of information about transport in each varies in approach, content and consistency.

Each of the Board areas has a Transport Manager and staff who deal with the day-to-day administration of home to school transport. This includes handling applications for transport, assessing eligibility, procurement of private contracts, payment of parental allowances, liaison with Translink's local depots and schools, managing the transport budget, and oversight of the Board fleet and staff (drivers and escorts). In addition, the Boards administer the school crossing patrol service.

During the Panel's meetings with the Boards it was evident they had been working in a period of uncertainty and reduced staffing levels in anticipation of the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). This has increased pressure on ELB staff workloads. Given the lack of clarity around how the Boards will be constituted in the future, this is likely to continue.

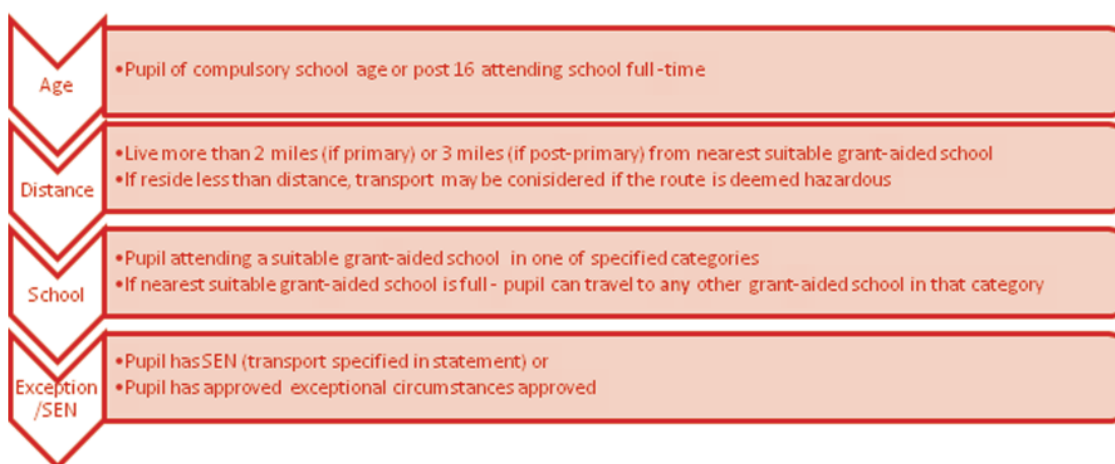
Parents who wish to make an application for school transport assistance must apply to the Board in which their child is resident. Applications are made on paper-forms, from which information is abstracted and then manually entered into each Board's database. Transport arrangements for those pupils continuing in the same school are generally processed in advance of those for pupils starting at a school. There is a presumption that children who stay on will continue to require school transport if that has previously been provided. The Boards, therefore, reissue transport passes to

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

those progressing from year to year within a school, and new applications for transport are required on transfer to post-primary school or to further education (FE) college, or when there has been a change of residence.

### Basis of entitlement for mainstream pupils

Whether a child is eligible for free school transport will be based on their age, location, the school attended and their particular needs.



### Age

Pupils below compulsory school age, including those in reception classes, are generally not eligible for transport assistance. Transport entitlement continues until the end of the academic year in which a full-time pupil attains 19 years of age.

### Distance

The walking distance of two or three miles, depending on age, is measured using the shortest walking route. All ELBs use Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis to measure the distance from the pupil's home to the nearest available, suitable school within category. Whether this is measured from the pupil's home door to the school door or from home gate to the school gate depends on the Board area.



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### School attended

Transport will only be provided if the pupil attends a grant-aided school in one of the categories listed in the Circular, which is beyond the applicable walking distance and they have been unable to gain a place at a suitable school within distance.

One anomaly of this policy is that if a pupil resides over the distance threshold (two miles for primary and three miles for post-primary school) from their nearest suitable school, they are eligible for free school transport to any school in their chosen category, regardless of distance to that school. This may result in a pupil bypassing multiple schools, even within the same category as well as other schools they could have attended, in order to reach the one of their choice, which may be a substantial distance from home. (Annex 2 provides an illustration of how the current entitlement criteria are applied). A Board would not, however, be expected to introduce new bus routes or services for such a child, where the cost of doing so would result in unreasonable expenditure.

### Pupils with special needs

How transport is assessed for pupils with special educational needs varies between ELBs. It is usually provided if it is considered necessary and been noted as a non-educational provision, and included in the pupil's statement. Once the need for transport has been established, the level of assistance, for example whether an escort is required, the type of vehicle or specialist equipment that will be provided, is then decided by ELB officers in conjunction with medical staff.

### Exceptional circumstances

The Circular guidance allows for certain cases where the statutory walking distance may not always be appropriate, examples being where there is an exceptional road safety hazard, or other exceptional circumstances. Elsewhere in the UK road safety of walking route must be considered but is not treated as an exceptional circumstance. It is a legally well tested area, with the expectation being that the route should be safe for the child to walk *accompanied as necessary* by an adult.

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Many local authorities use the local authority road safety officers' association's<sup>6</sup> RoadSafetyGB guidance that takes into account factors such as vehicle flow, speed limits and the availability of pedestrian facilities as the basis for assessing whether a route would be safe.

In Northern Ireland, the ELBs have adopted RoadSafetyGB guidance as their basis for assessing entitlement to school transport on the grounds of road safety. In practice, very few pupils qualify on this basis. Correspondence with transport officers suggests one route is deemed hazardous affecting approximately 50-60 pupils a year in one Board area and in another 64 pupils qualify. In contrast, in another Board area only two pupils qualify on this basis.

To improve consistency of approach in considering other exceptional circumstances, WELB and SELB each have an exceptional circumstances panel. These use the same terms of reference and have one member who sits on both Boards' panels. The panels consider requests from parents as to why their child should be deemed eligible to receive free home to school transport because of exceptional circumstances. The panels were set up to assess transport need and eligibility in the short-term, for cases such as those involving extreme bullying, with transport viewed as an interim measure until the root cause of the problem has been addressed. The panels will take written submissions and consider all evidence, but are seeing an increasing trend of legal representation. For an appeal to be successful, exceptional circumstances must be based on the child's need, not on the wider family need.

### Appeals

In the case of NEELB, the appeals process regarding entitlement to free school transport usually consists of a three officer panel. In other Board areas, the appeal is reviewed by the transport manager in the first instance, and then the case is referred to the Chief Executive Officer for that Board.

Appeals against refusal to grant transport were reported to be an issue in all the ELB areas. The five Boards reported an increasing tendency of parents to take their case to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) or other elected representatives, even in advance of the Board appeal process. This has resulted in extensive administrative

<sup>6</sup> Formerly LARSOA, now RoadSafetyGB.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

time for Board staff responding to parents prior to any appeal process being completed. There was some concern voiced that elected officials are not always aware of what duties ELBs have, which can raise parental expectations and create some tensions between parents and Boards.

It has recently been proposed that the ELBs establish a standardised appeal process and set up a Panel comprised of officers from different sections of each Board. This is likely to include an Education Welfare Officer, SEN officer or other member of staff from that particular Board. It is yet to be determined whether these panels will accept submissions in writing or orally.

### The journey to and from school

Of the 1.8 million population in Northern Ireland in 2012/13, more than 300,000 were children of school age. For these young people the school journey accounts for 30% of all the journeys they make.<sup>7</sup> However, the vast majority of pupils (more than 70% overall, 89% of primary age pupils and 54% of post-primary pupils) do not qualify for free home to school transport.

Approximately a quarter (26%) of all primary school age pupils and 16% of post-primary school pupils walk to school. The majority (61%) of primary school age pupils and a third of secondary school age pupils, travel to school by car.<sup>8</sup> In rural areas, car use accounts for almost all travel to and from school for pupils who do not qualify for free transport. For example, in one rural primary school visited by the Panel, 140 pupils travelled by bus but of the remaining 128 pupils, 118 usually came by car and fewer than 10 walked or cycled.

Nearly, 89,000 pupils do qualify for free home to school transport,<sup>9</sup> equivalent to 29% of the school population. This ranges from 6% in BELB to 38% in WELB, largely reflecting the rurality of the WELB area. Figures received from the ELBs indicate about 11% of primary school pupils, and almost half of all post-primary pupils, qualify for free home to school transport, as do almost all pupils attending special schools.

<sup>7</sup> DRD Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-depth Report 2010-12.

<sup>8</sup> DRD Travel Survey for Northern Ireland Headline Report 2010-2012.

<sup>9</sup> 2012/13 figures from ELBs.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Table 1:

### NUMBER AND PROPORTION OF PUPILS IN RECEIPT OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT BY SCHOOL SECTOR, 2012/13

	Total pupils	Pupils in receipt of transport assistance	% in receipt of transport
Primary	157,082	17,764	11
Post-primary	145,658	66,412	46
Special	4,731	5,028	100*
Total	307,471 <sup>10</sup>	89,351 <sup>*11</sup>	29

*\*Note figures provided by the ELBs include some pupils who receive multiple modes of transport e.g. Board bus and Translink sessional ticket. In practice, some pupils attending special schools qualify for transport and travel using more than one mode e.g. bus and taxi and therefore total exceeds 100%.*

#### How school transport is provided

Circular guidance advises that eligible pupils can be provided with sessional tickets for use on public transport, Board vehicles, private hire taxis or the payment of cycle or car allowances. In deciding the mode of transport to be used, ELBs should take into account cost, availability and convenience both in the short and long term. Factors such as the duration of the journey, whether it entails an unduly early start or late ending to the school day and the age of the pupil should also be considered.<sup>12</sup>

How transport is provided by the ELBs has been largely consistent in recent years. About 30% of entitled pupils travel on Board vehicles and about half on public transport operator Translink's services, including Ulsterbus, Metro and Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) services. There are also some 'closed' contracts provided by Translink for school pupils only, i.e. they are not available to the general public. The remainder travel on private contractors' vehicles, ferries or are in receipt of mileage/parental allowances.

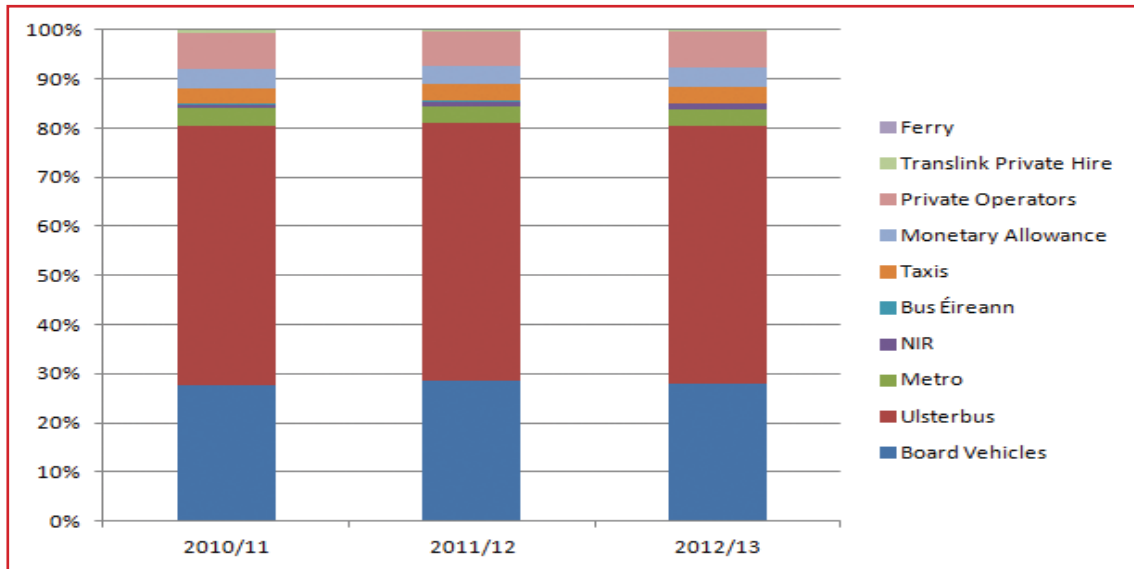
<sup>10</sup> School population excludes those in nursery/pre-school who are below the age at which they could be considered for transport assistance/free transport.

<sup>11</sup> Includes 147 pupils receiving transport in AEP/EOTAS. Note this figure may include some pupils who are included under more than one mode of travel e.g. receiving a sessional ticket and travelling by NIR, or ferry and bus.

<sup>12</sup> Circular 1996/41: School Transport para 6.1-3.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### MODE OF TRAVEL TO SCHOOL, ELIGIBLE PUPILS 2010/11-2012/13



The type of transport provided varies according to the category of school attended and age of pupil. Translink's sessional passes are more typically provided by the ELBs for post-primary grammar school pupils. Board vehicles are more typically used by primary pupils and post-primary pupils attending controlled and maintained categories of school.

#### Translink contract

Public transport in Northern Ireland has been highly regulated under the Transport Act (NI) 1967, which sets out a system of route and service licensing. Although there are 200 bus operators (including Translink) who hold road service licenses in Northern Ireland,<sup>13</sup> only 22 stage-carriage services are provided by operators other than Translink.

<sup>13</sup> Road Service Licenses will be renamed bus operator licenses when the relevant provisions of the Transport Act (NI) 2011 take effect.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

New service delivery arrangements are being put in place to enable DRD to contract directly with transport operators while ensuring compliance with EC Regulation 1370/2007. The Transport Act (NI) 2011 allows DRD to secure public transport services and directly award a contract to Translink in exchange for delivering public service obligations. The contract is expected initially to mirror the existing network of (largely stable and historic) routes, but will specify performance indicators to ensure accessibility, economy, efficiency, safety and sustainability. EC Regulation 1370/2007 requires that any such arrangements must ensure Translink is not overcompensated for this contract.

The Panel sought clarification of how the public transport network is currently determined and what minimum service levels will be required in the future in relation to the public service obligation funding from DRD, for example, whether this is based on route coverage, on settlement size, key journeys such as travel to work or other criteria. Translink's present network obligations relating to bus services appear not to be defined, and it is not yet evident whether a minimum level of public transport coverage will be required as part of any future public service obligation and, if so, how this will be determined. The bus availability indicator used by the Department for Transport in England is that a household should be within 13 minutes walk of a bus stop with an hourly or better service. In 2008, 58% of rural households, 88% of small urban, and over 90% of medium or large urban areas met this.<sup>14</sup> The Northern Ireland Travel Survey suggests that 14% of households have a bus service every 15 minutes, and 20% reported having an hourly or better service (although 28% of households reported not knowing what public transport was available).<sup>15</sup>

However, Translink is, and will remain for the foreseeable future, the dominant transport provider of home to school transport in Northern Ireland. Translink provides transport for about 50,000<sup>16</sup> pupils to travel to schools and a further 7,500-8,000 sessional tickets<sup>17</sup> to eligible students attending FE colleges. A sessional pass allows travel between home and school for up to 190 days per year, and one return journey each day, Monday to Friday, which must be completed before 6.30 pm.<sup>18</sup> The sessional ticket specifies the route, i.e. pick up and set down points, so does not allow the user to travel on other routes.

<sup>14</sup> DfT (March 2010) Travel in Urban and Rural Areas, Personal Travel Factsheet.

<sup>15</sup> Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-depth Report 2010-12.

<sup>16</sup> DE/ELB statistics.

<sup>17</sup> Presentation by Translink to the review Panel.

<sup>18</sup> Translink Terms and Conditions to 23 October 2013.

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The vast majority of pupils travelling on Translink services funded by DE (more than 46,000 a day) use Ulsterbus services, which operate largely outside the Belfast area. Nearly 900 pupils receive a Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) pass. A further 3,000 pupils travel on Metro services within Belfast funded by the ELBs. This suggests more than 18 million journeys<sup>19</sup> are made on public transport by pupils travelling to and from school each year across Northern Ireland funded by ELBs, representing nearly a quarter of all public transport journeys in Northern Ireland, and more than 40% of Ulsterbus journeys, as shown in Table 2. Including FE travel, this rises to nearly 30% of all Translink passenger journeys and almost half of all Ulsterbus passengers.

**Table 2:**

### PUBLIC TRANSPORT JOURNEYS ON TRANSLINK, 2012/13

	Ulsterbus	Metro	NIR	Total
Approx total passenger journeys <sup>20</sup>	40,700,000	26,200,000	11,500,000	78,400,000
Approx total child school journeys funded by ELBs <sup>21</sup>	16,700,000	1,130,000	322,000	18,152,000
ELB funded journeys as % of all passenger journey	40.7%	4.3%	2.8%	23.2%

In 2012/13 Translink had a fleet of 1,420 vehicles<sup>22</sup> used to provide its network of public transport routes and school services, of which 1,136 were Ulsterbus vehicles<sup>23</sup> and 284 were Metro buses. If it assumed that more than 49,000 young people travel to school by bus on ELB purchased sessional tickets, this equates to an estimated daily vehicle requirement of approximately 1,000 vehicles<sup>24</sup> (excluding those provided for post-16 pupils attending FE colleges). This suggests that at least two-thirds of Translink's bus fleet, and an even higher proportion of the Ulsterbus fleet, is required to meet this peak-hour, travel requirement for eligible pupils.

<sup>19</sup> Assumes return journey for 180 school days per year.

<sup>20</sup> Going Places, Connecting People. Translink Corporate Plan 2013/14-2015/16 - Table 2.4.

<sup>21</sup> Assumes return journey for 180 school days per year.

<sup>22</sup> Going Places, Connecting People. Translink Annual Report and Accounts 2012/13 p 62.

<sup>23</sup> Ulsterbus Limited. Report and Financial Statement 31st March 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Assumption of 50 pupils per vehicle.

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### Board vehicles

The five ELBs own and operate a fleet of approximately 850 vehicles, ranging in age from new to 15 years. The fleet is comprised of minibuses, 400 “33” seater vehicles and “57” seater vehicles, of these approximately 200 vehicles are wheelchair accessible. Most of the Board owned vehicles are operated under section 10B permit, but WELB and SELB have restricted “O” operator licenses to allow some vehicles to be used cross border for educational trips. Maintenance of Board vehicles is provided by in house depots (WELB, SEELB and NEELB) or contracted out (BELB and SELB). WELB actively uses its maintenance depots to generate an additional revenue stream.

In the last few years, there has been considerable investment in the Board fleet. Vehicle specifications have been amended to meet changes to lighting regulations and provide for additional signage including chevrons to the rear. The vehicles are also increasingly being fitted with closed circuit television camera systems.

The fleet is used to transport approximately 25,000 pupils, of whom 11,000 are primary school age pupils. The ELBs employ drivers (both part-time and full-time) and escorts, primarily for supervision on routes to special schools. The recruitment and terms and conditions of drivers are broadly similar across all Boards, although SELB and WELB have a policy of only employing full category D license holders, which permits driving any bus with more than eight passenger seats. ELB drivers are employed on a range of contracts for weekly hours ranging from 15 through to 36, although the vast majority are part-time and retained through the holiday periods on half pay.

Down time and use of the fleet during the day varies across the Board areas. In some, the vehicles are used by individual schools (either free of charge or at a nominal charge) for curricular transport or allocated out to special schools. Some of the fleet is utilised for swimming trips, youth work, mail and school meals runs.

### Private contractors

Private contractors are used by the ELBs to deliver home to school transport for about 6,500 pupils, with nearly 3,000 travelling in taxis, which are primarily used for pupils with special needs. Use of private operators varies, with NEELB making very little use of them. In NEELB, private contractors’ vehicles are used to transport only 6% of



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eligible pupils, compared to more than 20% of pupils receiving free home to school transport in SELB.

These vehicles (and drivers/escorts) are generally contracted by the ELBs on an annual basis. Some three year contracts are in place for larger vehicles. Longer contracts are often preferred by operators as they offer an opportunity for them to recoup the costs of investment in vehicles.

Some schools and groups of parents procure transport to/from schools from private operators, for pupils who are ineligible to receive transport assistance.

### Ferry

Approximately 150 eligible pupils use the Strangford Ferry from Portaferry and the Ards Peninsula to travel to schools in Downpatrick and Ballynahinch. Transport assistance is also provided for some pupils who travel by boat from Rathlin Island to Ballycastle.

During the focus group held in Ballynahinch, pupils reported that the Strangford ferry generally worked well for their school journey, although during winter maintenance of the ferry meant use of the smaller vessel was necessary, affording less indoor space in bad weather.

### Parental allowance/pupils driving

Across Northern Ireland, about 3,500 pupils are provided with a monetary allowance in lieu of transport to school. Such an allowance may be provided by ELBs for a number of reasons, for example, because there is no available space on a bus, or a pupil lives in a rural location where there is no other transport available. The amount and payment arrangements for these allowances vary by Board and circumstances, but the allowance is based on a payment per household where siblings are travelling to the same school.

Although all Boards make payments based on the Translink sessional ticket cost, in four of the ELBs this is related to the current cost. In SEELB it is based on the cost of a Translink sessional ticket in 2004. For mainstream pupils, some Boards pay allowances on the basis of 190 days, others on the actual number of days school is attended. In

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SELB it is paid based on an average of 180 days attended, assuming average rates of non-attendance at school. Some Boards, therefore, pay retrospectively when the numbers of days attended are known, and others pay in advance. This means that the rate can vary from £420 to £650 per year.

For pupils in the Irish medium sector, the amount of this allowance is higher depending on the distance from their home to school. For pupils who live 10-15 miles from school, the rate is set at one and a half times the normal allowance. For those residing more than 15 miles from school, the rate is doubled.

In other circumstances, a pupil may choose to “cash in” a sessional pass and be provided with money in lieu of their bus pass. This is available to some Year 13 and Year 14 pupils who have elected to drive to school. These pupils must decide whether to take their sessional ticket or the cash allowance in lieu by October 31st (the point at which payment arrangements are reconciled with Translink for the year). Again, practice regarding this varies between Boards.

### School crossing patrols

In each of the ELBs, the Transport manager is responsible for the school crossing patrol service. Across Northern Ireland, there are approximately 500 patrol staff. All Boards reported facing challenges in recruiting staff for these roles. In part, this is due to the hours and nature of the job. However, the Panel heard evidence that the barrier created by potential recruits having to pay £35 for their own enhanced disclosure check also acted as a disincentive.

The school crossing patrol staff across Northern Ireland are gradually being replaced by signalised crossings where the relevant criteria for vehicle flow and pedestrian numbers merit this. Alternatively, they are being phased out on retirement or resignation, where the location has seen pedestrian numbers fall below a minimum level.

### School transport funding and expenditure

Revenue and capital funding for home to school transport comes from a number of Government Departments. It is complex and fragmented, and includes hypothecated,

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earmarked and unallocated funding streams. Although this review has examined DE's funding of home to school transport for eligible pupils, this needs to be set in the context of wider public financial support for travel for young people.

It is conservatively estimated that in excess of £100 million per annum from disparate funding streams is expended on home to school transport for pupils (and FE college students to age 19) in Northern Ireland, of which approximately 75% is provided by DE via the ELBs.

### Revenue funding

#### DE: Assessment of Relative Needs Exercise (ARNE) funding

DE is responsible for the allocation of resources to the ELBs for those services managed by them and outside the Local Management of Schools (LMS). These services fall under two main headings:

- Centrally held resources attributable to an individual school. This includes areas such as teacher substitution costs, rates, special education in mainstream schools, and property maintenance. These are attributed to schools throughout the year.
- Resources held at the centre. These include services that are managed and funded directly by the ELBs, such as transport, school meals, curriculum advisory and support services, special schools, school library service, pupil support and ELB headquarters. Many of these budgets relate to services provided directly to schools, but under the terms of the LMS scheme are not delegated to individual schools from a budgeting perspective.

The ARNE formula is based on a number of factors, including pupil numbers and uptake of free school meals. The home to school transport budget of approximately £75 million per annum is calculated on the basis of the previous year's expenditure and mode of travel i.e. it is based on sessional ticket numbers, mileage allowance, all private contracts and ELB Board bus running costs. This is part of the overall funding allocation distributed to the Boards and is not earmarked. Each ELB is free to determine the amount they wish to allocate to school transport based on their

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

prioritisation for the use of the overall resources against key expenditure programmes in their area.

### DE: Common Framework Funding

Under common funding arrangements, the formula used to determine the Aggregated Schools Budget (ASB) or formula allocation for each school, is made up of a range of factors. It is designed to take into account the main variables that determine a school's costs, for example pupil numbers, their age, the size of the school and costs associated with the school's building. Funding authorities (ELBs) must pass this money on directly to schools to maximise the amount of resources available for use within the classroom.

Annex A1 of the 2013/14 common funding scheme provides details of items of expenditure that schools are expected to use their formula allocation for. These include teacher costs, repairs and buildings maintenance, vehicle running costs and non-teacher costs, including transport of pupils other than for home to school, and educational visits and journeys.<sup>25</sup>

### DE: Entitlement Framework

Under the Entitlement Framework policy every pupil, regardless of the school they attend or where they live, should have access to a minimum range of economically relevant, broad and balanced courses at Key Stage 4 and post-16. There is a statutory requirement for schools to offer at least 18 courses at Key Stage 4 and 21 courses post-16. This will increase to 21 courses at Key Stage 4 and 24 courses post-16 from September 2014, and again to 24 courses at Key Stage 4 and 27 courses post-16 from September 2015.

As few schools are able to deliver this full offer, since 2008 DE has been providing Entitlement Framework funding to assist schools in collaborating on the delivery of courses with schools, FE colleges or other education providers. All post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are members of an Area Learning Community (ALC). ALCs were established to provide a structure to consider curriculum planning, and collaboratively delivered courses, and the sharing and development of best practice in meeting the needs of all pupils in their area.

<sup>25</sup> DE Local Management of Schools Common Funding Scheme Annex A1.

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During the review, schools reported that a portion of this funding has been used for the purchase of intra-day transport. This earmarked funding is time bound and was expected to be phased out, taking effect from 2013/14. The allocation was £9.9 million in 2012/13 and has declined to £6.9 million in 2014-15. Discussions with ELBs have indicated that it is unclear whether further funding will be put in place, as it had been envisaged that the Entitlement Framework requirements would be met from within the schools' overall delegated budgets.

### Other DE funding

Specific DE funding is aimed at encouraging more shared education and includes some provision for additional transport costs arising from the movement of pupils between school sites. Shared education is defined by DE as the organisation and delivery of education so that it meets the needs of, and provides for, the education together of, learners; involves schools and other education providers of differing ownership, sectoral identity and ethos, management type or governance arrangements; and delivers educational benefits to learners, promotes the efficient and effective use of resources, and promotes equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.

DE provides Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) funding to ELBs who run CRED enhancement schemes. This is a fund to which schools can apply, although transport represents a small proportion of it.

In addition, earmarked funding is being provided by DE to the ELBs and Translink to meet the extra costs incurred from additional capacity on buses needed as a result of the removal of the three-for-two seating concession, whereby previously three children under the age of 14 could share a double seat.

### DEL: Sessional tickets for post-16 students and EMA

DEL reimburses ELBs the direct costs of providing sessional tickets on Translink services for full-time further education students, aged 16-19, attending colleges.

DEL also funds Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs), making payments directly to those students in households with low-income to facilitate them continuing in

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

education. EMAs are available for those who are undertaking a minimum of 15 hours per week at school or FE college, on an eligible course who are aged 16-19. Approximately a third of the 16-19 cohort receives EMA, at a cost of approximately £30 million a year. Research shows that about 40% of students use this money to contribute to home to school or college transport costs.<sup>26</sup>

### DRD: Concessionary fare reimbursement

DRD provides annual reimbursement to Translink for concessionary fares for under 16 year olds. This supports Translink and enables them to offer half fare travel for young people. Overall, the annual cost of the under 16 concessionary fare reimbursement is approximately £0.6 million for NIR, £1.5 million for Metro services and £3.9 million for Ulsterbus.<sup>27</sup> This reimbursement is for all journeys made by young people under 16 years of age on the network using cash fares. (Not all of these will be pupils paying fares for school journeys, as some will be journeys made at weekends and evenings for other purposes).

The total number of child journeys on cash tickets (excluding sessional passes or smart pass) in the 2012/13 academic year is shown in Table 3. Reimbursement of journeys during times when pupils are likely to be travelling to and from school, at half fare, suggests a substantial amount of funding is being added indirectly to support home to school travel for pupils.

**Table 3:**

### NUMBER OF TRANSLINK CHILD JOURNEYS AT PEAK HOURS, 2012/13

	Metro	NI Railways	Ulsterbus	Total <sup>28</sup>
Mon to Fri 07:30 to 09:30	1,242,886	77,117	1,475,362	2,795,365
Mon to Fri 13:30 to 17:00	1,261,358	92,072	1,610,446	2,963,876

<sup>26</sup> DEL/DE (July 2012) Public Consultation on the Future of the Education Maintenance Allowance Scheme pp 18.

<sup>27</sup> Correspondence with DRD re 2012/13 and 2013/14 concessionary fare reimbursement.

<sup>28</sup> Suggests approximately 15,000 pupils purchase their own tickets on Translink services to travel to or from school.

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### Capital funding

DE provides capital funding to the ELBs to enable the replacement of, and investment in, the Boards' vehicles. Procurement of new vehicles for the Boards is centralised through the SELB. DE reports that typically, £4-5 million is required each year to maintain and renew the Boards' vehicles. However, last year, a one off allocation of £11-12 million was made, allowing considerable upgrading of the fleet.

DRD provides capital funding to Translink for the replacement of, and investment in, their fleet of vehicles, which is used to deliver home to school transport and for public transport services. In 2012/13, DRD provided £22.9 million of capital funding for buses, of which £18.3 million capital funding was made to Ulsterbus, enabling Translink to purchase new vehicles including 87 new Goldline coaches to expand its fleet and to replace 58 Metro buses.<sup>29</sup>

### Other funding

Some indirect funding contributes to supporting home to school travel. If a child is entitled to the higher rate of the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), a parent can apply on behalf of a child aged three or over to the Motability scheme to lease a new car supplied by a Motability-accredited dealer for at least three years. Insurance, routine servicing and breakdown assistance are included.

Concerns were raised with the Panel about families receiving both Motability and home to school transport, arguing that this results in dual funding some households.

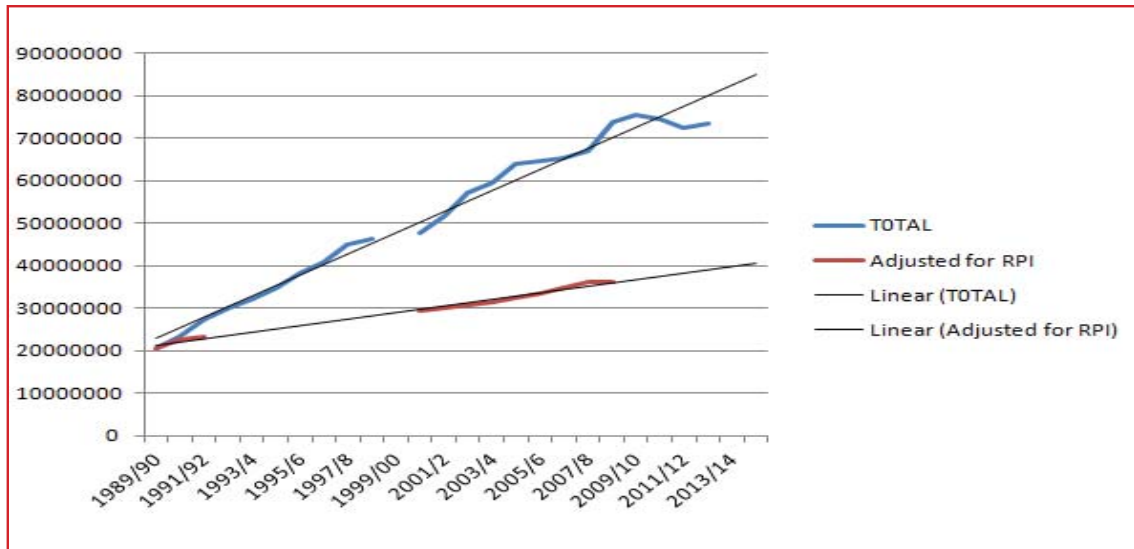
### Overall expenditure

Overall, home to school transport expenditure funded by DE has risen steadily since the late 1980s, despite the school population falling slightly in recent years. The rate of increase in expenditure has been considerably in excess of the rise in inflation. If spending on home to school transport had risen in line with the retail price index, it would be approximately £40 million today, about half the current level.

<sup>29</sup> Going Places, Connecting People. Translink Corporate Plan 2013/14 - 2015/16 pp 4.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

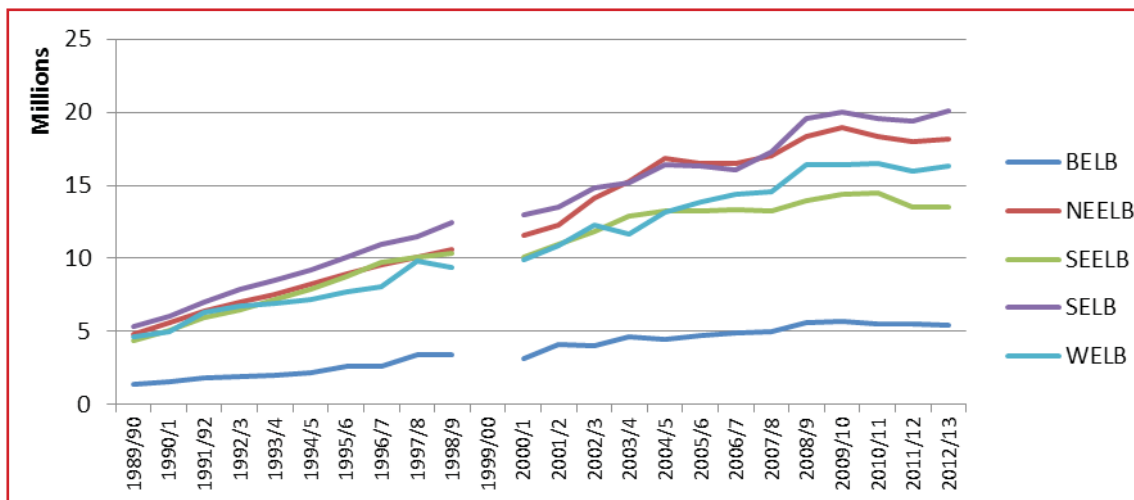
### TRENDS IN SCHOOL POPULATION AND SCHOOL TRANSPORT EXPENDITURE, 1989/90-2012/13



#### Expenditure by ELB area

Home to school transport expenditure in each of the Boards has followed similar trends in recent years as shown below.

### HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT EXPENDITURE BY ELB AREA





## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Expenditure as a proportion of overall education spend

The education budget for 2012/13 was £1.87 billion, with school transport annual revenue expenditure accounting for nearly 4% of the overall departmental education resource budget, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4:**

### **EDUCATION AND SCHOOL TRANSPORT CAPITAL AND RESOURCE BUDGETED EXPENDITURE, 2010/11-2012/13**

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
Resource budget <sup>30</sup> £m	1,914.8	1,894.9	1,876.4
Capital £m	169.3	114.7	103.4
Revised budget £m	1,914.8	1,894.9	1,906.4
Revised capital budget £m	169.3	114.7	101.9
School transport £m	74.46	72.38	73.52
School transport capital £m			11.5
School transport as % of resource budget	3.9	3.8	3.9
School transport as % of capital budget			11.1

### Average unit costs

Average unit costs for home to school transport provision by Board area have been relatively stable in recent years. As shown in Table 5, they range from about £1,600 per pupil in BELB to between £700 and £800 per pupil in the other Board areas. This reflects the fact that in urban areas fewer pupils live over the walking distance thresholds and therefore a higher proportion of the pupils who qualify for transport do so because they have special needs.

<sup>30</sup> DE Corporate Plan for Education 2012-2015 Annex C.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

**Table 5:**

### UNIT COSTS OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT BY BOARD AREA, 2011/12 AND 2012/13

	'2011/12	'2012/13
BELFAST	£1,636.00	£1,560.00
NORTH EASTERN	£834.00	£836.00
SOUTH EASTERN	£739.00	£743.00
SOUTHERN	£798.00	£818.00
WESTERN	£747.00	£763.00

These average unit costs in Northern Ireland are comparable to other areas in the UK (although accurate benchmarking is difficult due to how central and overhead costs are apportioned, and whether depreciation is included). However, the high overall level of expenditure on school transport in Northern Ireland and the relatively large proportion of education budget allocated to this service is due to the volume of travel and high proportion of pupils in receipt of transport, rather than to high unit costs.

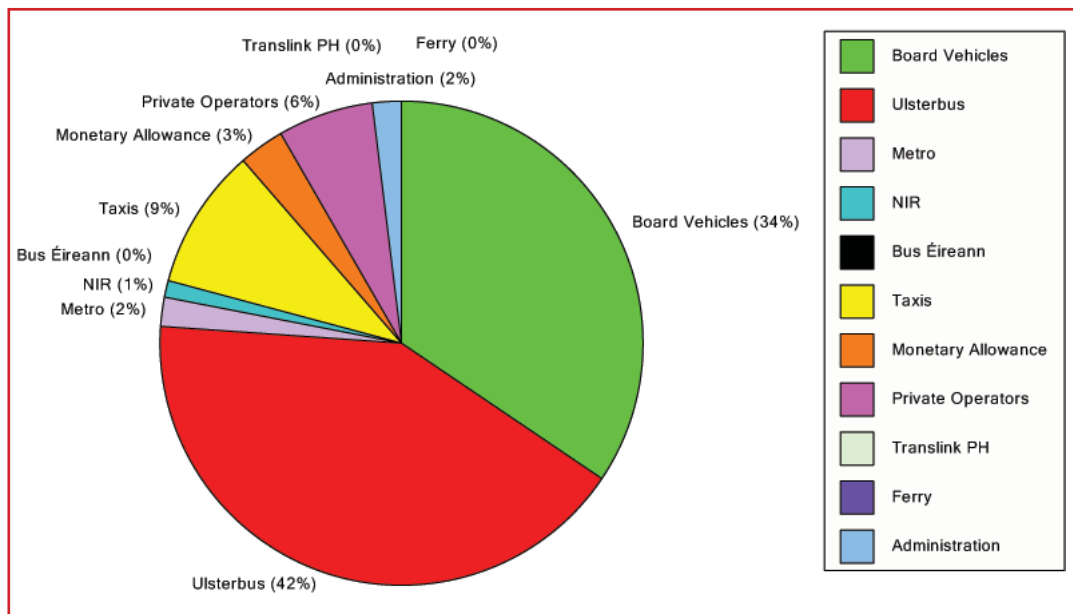
## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Expenditure by mode

About a third of all home to school transport revenue expenditure by the ELBs is accounted for by Board vehicles and about 40% by Translink services.

### PROPORTION OF EXPENDITURE BY MODE, 2012/13 OUTTURN

#### Board fleet



Overall, the Boards' vehicles accounted for £24 million of recurrent expenditure in 2012/13. This excludes administration and capital/depreciation costs, which average £4-£4.5 million per year. Average unit costs for Board bus transport vary widely, from under £500 per year for voluntary grammar school pupils to more than £2,400 per pupil, per year for those attending special schools, as shown in Table 6. This high cost for special school pupils reflects the additional staff costs as many pupils require an escort on the vehicle with them, specialist equipment such as wheelchair securement systems or harnesses, and accessible vehicles required for pupils with more complex needs. Based on 180 days per year, the average cost per trip on Board vehicles is £2.62p. (For mainstream school provision only it is £705 p.a. equivalent to £1.95 per trip).

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

**Table 6:**

### BOARD VEHICLES: AVERAGE UNIT COSTS BY SCHOOL SECTOR, AND COST PER TRIP, 2012/13

		Expenditure	Pupils transported	Unit cost	Cost per trip
<b>POST-PRIMARY</b>					
Voluntary grammar non-denominational	Post-primary	£155,974	362	£431	£1.20
Controlled Integrated	Post-primary	£37,584	63	£597	£1.66
Controlled	Post-primary	£1,629,900	2,664	£612	£1.70
Maintained	Post-primary	£2,774,943	4,266	£650	£1.81
Grant-Maintained Integrated	Post-primary	£369,143	565	£653	£1.81
Voluntary grammar denominational	Post-primary	£1,184,652	1,703	£696	£1.93
Controlled grammar	Post-primary	£446,405	572	£780	£2.17
Irish Medium	Post-primary	£18,859	21	£898	£2.49
Special	Post-primary	£781,042	630	£1,240	£3.44
<b>PRIMARY</b>					
Controlled Integrated	Primary	£51,335	99	£519	£1.44
Grant-Maintained Integrated	Primary	£94,949	170	£559	£1.55
Controlled	Primary	£2,946,824	4,620	£638	£1.77
Irish Medium	Primary	£45,740	66	£693	£1.93
Maintained	Primary	£3,939,185	5,627	£700	£1.94
Special	Primary	£1,011,283	510	£1,983	£5.51
SPECIAL SCHOOLS	Special	£8,439,814	3,429	£2,461	£6.84
<b>TOTAL/AVERAGE</b>		<b>£23,936,562</b>	<b>25,399</b>	<b>£942</b>	<b>£2.62</b>
Capital		£4,500,000			
<b>TOTAL Including CAPITAL</b>		<b>£28,436,562</b>	<b>25,399</b>	<b>£1,120</b>	<b>£3.11</b>

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Income of approximately £1 million is generated by the ELBs from using the fleet to provide other services, such as delivery of school meals and trips.<sup>31</sup> NEELB emphasised the benefits of using the Board vehicles for the delivery of school meals, including it offers consistency of vehicle standards and an assurance of the cleanliness of vehicles in which meals are carried (albeit in sealed containers). The requirement to deliver meals is due to the fact that increasingly schools have no kitchen or canteen facilities. Discussions with other Boards, however, elicited more mixed views. Some preferred to use taxis or private contractors to deliver school meals, as this was considered to be more cost effective by reducing the need for full-time bus drivers. Others raised concerns that delivery of meals was not the core business of the Board vehicles.

### Translink

Translink receives approximately £35.4 million per year in revenue funding from ELBs to provide home to school transport for pupils attending schools (see Table 7). This is comprised of nearly £30 million for Ulsterbus, £1.7 million for Metro services, £0.5 million for NIR, and £0.2 million for private hire services, £2.4 million for three-for-two payments and £0.8 million for lighting and signage compliance on vehicles.

**Table 7:**

### TRANSLINK SCHOOL TRANSPORT REVENUE, 2012/13

Revenue	
Ulsterbus	£29,749,019
Metro	£1,742,211
NIR	£462,672
Translink private hire	£228,143
3 for 2 payments	£2,410,409
Lighting and signing allocation	£800,000
Total revenue 2012/13 from DE	£35,392,454
Revenue for 2012/13 from DEL re FE student	£5,000,000
Capital	
Capital funding from DRD for Ulsterbus fleet <sup>32</sup>	£18,30,000

<sup>31</sup> DE/DFP (2011) Joint efficiency review.

<sup>32</sup> Ulsterbus Limited Report and Financial Statements 31 March 2013 & Citybus Limited report and financial statements 31 March 2013.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

SELB negotiates the contract with Translink each year, on behalf of all the ELBs to supply sessional tickets for use on Translink's services. The ELBs pay a lump sum to Translink, in ten monthly instalments, based on a fixed number of pupils in receipt of sessional tickets as at 31st October each year. Any variation in the numbers travelling after that date is then absorbed on either side, with either leavers or new admissions assumed to balance each other out. This has the advantage of simplicity and is easy to administer. The sessional ticket rate charged by Translink is based on an average adult fare across the network/region, which is then discounted down from the full rate, with an allowance for absenteeism. The shorter and longer journeys in different Board areas are averaged out to provide a standard charge across the network.<sup>33</sup>

Unit costs for home to school transport on Translink's services average £695 per year (excluding any Board administration costs). Ulsterbus sessional ticket rates are typically £600-700 per pupil, equivalent to approximately £2 per passenger journey. Travel on Metro services costs on average £554 per pupil, and on NIR £517 per pupil in 2012/13.

Overall, school transport revenue from the Boards represents nearly 20% of Translink's total annual revenue in 2012/13. For Metro services sessional tickets represent less than 5% of all revenue, however, Ulsterbus' reliance on school transport is evident, with almost a third of its total annual revenue coming from DE, and total public sector funding (which includes concessionary fare reimbursement and DEL funding for sessional tickets) accounting for two-thirds of its revenue.<sup>34</sup>

### Expenditure by school category

A quarter of home to school transport revenue expenditure is for pupils attending special schools or units, with average costs (all modes of transport) of about £1,800 per pupil per year. A further 29% of expenditure is accounted for by pupils attending grammar schools, although unit costs here are low reflecting the large numbers travelling, which enables larger vehicles to be used to provide these services, achieving economies of scale.

<sup>33</sup> Translink presentation to the Panel 3 February 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Ulsterbus Limited Report and Financial Statements 31 March 2013 and Citybus Limited report and financial statements 31 March 2013.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

**Table 8:**

### UNIT COST OF SCHOOL TRANSPORT AND PROPORTION OF EXPENDITURE BY SCHOOL SECTOR, 2012/13

	% of expenditure	Average unit cost
SPECIAL (includes units and schools)	25	£1,800.08
VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR - DENOMINATIONAL	14	£625.67
GRANT-MAINTAINED INTEGRATED POST-PRIMARY	5	£607.711
CONTROLLED GRAMMAR	7	£647.65
VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR - NON-DENOMINATIONAL	8	£615.11
IRISH MEDIUM POST-PRIMARY	<1	£603.43
MAINTAINED POST-PRIMARY	13	£643.74
CONTROLLED INTEGRATED POST-PRIMARY	1	£631.11
CONTROLLED POST-PRIMARY	9	£644.33
GRANT-MAINTAINED INTEGRATED PRIMARY	1	£677.03
CONTROLLED INTEGRATED PRIMARY	1	£713.62
IRISH MEDIUM PRIMARY	1	£1,227.32
MAINTAINED PRIMARY	9	£750.91
CONTROLLED PRIMARY	6	£696.35
TOTAL/AVERAGE ALL SCHOOLS	100	£779.88

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### 4. Is the current system fit for purpose educationally?

#### Policy framework

DE is responsible for education policies in Northern Ireland, with day-to-day administration of many of these being the responsibility of the five ELBs. Controlled schools (nursery, primary, special, secondary and grammar schools) are under the management of each school's board with the employing authorities being the ELBs. Although open to those of all faiths and none, many of these schools were originally church schools, whose control was transferred to the state in the first half of the twentieth century from the three largest Protestant churches. The Transferors Representative Council continues to maintain links with the schools through church representation on controlled schools' Boards of Governors.

Set up in 1988 and formally recognised in 1989, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is the advocate and employing authority for teachers in the Catholic maintained schools in Northern Ireland. The majority of voluntary denominational and non-denominational grammar schools are represented by the Governing Bodies' Association, with these schools being the employing authority for their staff.

Following the introduction in 1989 of the statutory duty on DE to encourage and facilitate the development of Integrated education, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) was established to promote Integrated education. Following the introduction of the 1998 statutory duty on DE, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) was set up in 2000 to be the representative body for Irish medium education.

Overall, there are more than 300,000 pupils attending 1,200 grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland. Approximately 144,000 of these pupils are in post-primary schools. Where children attend school has been historically divided in Northern Ireland, with schools traditionally categorised according to denomination and academic selection. Whilst these schools continue to account for the vast majority of pupils, a growing minority attend Integrated and Irish medium units and schools. There is also a greater emphasis on shared education and collaboration between schools, and between schools and the FE sector in the delivery of 14-19 education.



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Education policy in Northern Ireland has undergone extensive review in recent years, as shown in Table 9, and DE’s Corporate Plan 2012-2015 sets out its two overarching goals of:

- **raising standards for all** - through high quality teaching and learning, ensuring that all young people enjoy and do well in their education; and that their progress is assessed and their attainment recognised, including through qualifications; and
- **closing the performance gap** - increasing access and equality, addressing the underachievement that exists in our education system; ensuring that young people who face barriers or are at risk of social exclusion are supported to achieve their full potential; and ensuring that our education service is planned effectively on an area basis to provide pupils with full access to the curriculum and Entitlement Framework.<sup>35</sup>

**Table 9:**

### PREVIOUS EDUCATIONAL REPORTS AND TRANSPORT ISSUES RAISED

Date	Report	Aims	Recommendations
2001	Burns Report - Education for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	Equality of opportunity access, and excellence for all	Abolition of 11+ transfer/end of academic selection  Creation of local collaborative networks of schools  <b>Transport should be provided to any suitable school within local network</b>

<sup>35</sup> DENI Corporate Plan for Education 2012-2015 Incorporating the DE 2012-13 Annual Business Plan pp 12.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

2004	Costello Report - Future Post-primary Arrangement in NI	<p>Concern at the concentration of socially and educationally disadvantaged in non-grammar schools, and that changing demographics and the growth of new sectors would have on non-grammar enrolments and the viability of these schools.</p> <p><i>“to provide high quality flexible post-primary education that develops all young people, enables them to fulfil their potential and prepares them to participate actively in life and work in a diverse and changing world”</i> (Chapter 3 pp 12)</p> <p>An educational entitlement, which should be the right of every pupil at post-primary level</p>	<p>Area Based Planning and Development Partnerships are proposed to ensure effective use of resources within local areas and avoid duplication in schools and FE colleges</p> <p>Resulted in Entitlement Framework, that every school provides access to specific number and variety of courses by 2015/16:</p> <p>Key Stage 4 - 24 courses offered, and Post-16 - 27 courses offered</p>
2006	Bain Report - Schools for the Future - Funding, Strategy, Sharing	<p>Concerns include the use of resources in education and the need for better strategic planning of the schools’ estate, and improved collaboration.</p> <p><i>“Area based plans should ensure that each area is served by sustainable schools that provide high quality education for all pupils, and that, taken together, balance the expressed wishes of parents and the projected requirements of each school sector with cost-effective use of capital and recurrent funding”</i> (Chapter 9 p123)</p> <p>Education should be used as a vehicle to promote a culture of tolerance and mutual understanding</p>	<p>Area based planning - more strategic planning of the schools’ estate</p> <p>Concept of sustainable schools and inform siting of new schools</p> <p><b><i>Maximum travel distances and maximum travel times for all pupils should be established</i></b></p> <p>Comprehensive and coherent policy for Irish medium education</p> <p>Models for formal arrangements between schools include confederation, federation, co-location and shared campus - with the concept of integrating education through organisational structures and reorganisation carried forward into the Programme for Government</p>

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

2008	Schools for the Future - A Policy for Sustainable Schools	<p>Represents current departmental policy regarding sustainability of schools - educationally and financially.</p> <p>Determines what should be considered for school sustainability, to ensure all schools are strong and vibrant, and sustainable educational and financially.</p>	<p>The criteria to determine sustainability including enrolment, finances, leadership &amp; management, community links, quality of education and accessibility.</p> <p><b>Accessibility: sustainable schools should have home to school travel times of &lt; 30 minutes for primary pupils, 45 minutes for post-primary (cooperative arrangements with other schools/ FE should include maximum journeys of 30 minutes for a single journey - 2 hours per week in total)</b></p>
2009	DE Policy document Every School A Good School	<p>Aims to address underperformance and underachievement through policies and processes to underpin weak schools.</p> <p>Objective is to ensure school works for every child, particularly those facing difficulties such as poverty, acquisition of language to access the curriculum or low aspirations</p>	<p>Defined core components of what constitutes a Good School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• child centred provision,</li> <li>• high quality teaching and learning,</li> <li>• effective leadership and</li> <li>• a school connected to its local community</li> </ul>
2009	DE Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion	<p>Aims to address the bureaucracy around assessment of SEN, changing pupil profile, evidence of unmet need and the capacity of education system to meet needs</p>	<p>Proposed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• new Co-ordinated Support Plans in place of statements,</li> <li>• early intervention,</li> <li>• more partnership working</li> </ul>

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

2009	DE Together Towards Entitlement - Delivering the Entitlement Framework through Area Based Planning	<p>Focused on enabling access for all young people aged 14-19 and including them within the Entitlement Framework.</p> <p>This recognised transport limitations in rural areas, the impact on pastoral care, and logistical issues of timetabling and access to courses</p>	<p>Recommended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• area based planning,</li> <li>• sharing across all sectors to build a better future.</li> </ul>
2009	DE Review of Irish Medium Education	Following the Bain review's recommendation that DE should develop a comprehensive and coherent policy for Irish medium education	<p>CnaG should develop plans for this sector.</p> <p>Recommended schools take into account parental demand but be located at optimal geographical location within local area based plans to draw on feeder primaries and integrate with other services such as transport</p>
2011	Minister's Statement to the Assembly - Putting Pupils First. Shaping Our Future - the next Steps for Education	Minister commissions CCMS/ELBs to undertake strategic planning of education on an area basis	<p>Planning should consider all possible options.</p> <p>School organisational structures should reflect the needs of pupils - there is a need for a network of viable, sustainable schools or the right size, in the right location which meets community needs and provides high quality education.</p>
2012	Pathways to Success	Preventing Exclusion and promoting participation of young people including prevention of those under 16 from becoming NEET and those aged 16-18 who are not in school college or training including those who face specific barriers to participation	Commitment by Northern Ireland Executive to support Translink to continue to offer a range of discounts to facilitate access to education, employment and training
2013	DE An Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme - Salisbury Report	Notes the high and escalating expenditure on home to school transport services as a particular cause for concern	Recommends that transport policy, including eligibility, the definition of suitable school and the potential for some parents to contribute to costs should be reviewed at the earliest opportunity

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

The Programme for Government's Priority 1 relates to sustainable economy and investing in the future. This specifically sets targets for Northern Ireland in terms of educational attainment. These are to

- increase the overall proportion of young people who **achieve at least 5 GCSE A\*-C** including Maths and English from 61% in 2012/13 to 63% in 2013/14 and to 66% in 2014/15; and
- increase this proportion for those from **disadvantaged backgrounds** from 42% to 49% during that time.

### School transport and educational policy

#### HOW TRANSPORT CAN SUPPORT THE DEPARTMENTAL EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:

Ensuring young people enjoy and do well in their education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Providing a safe and secure journey - by all modes e.g.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• safe walking routes</li><li>• safe cycling routes</li><li>• safe bus, coach, taxi, ferry and train journeys</li></ul></li></ul>
Close the performance gap - through improving equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensuring equality of access to schools</li><li>• Providing a level of transport provision that is equitable to all eligible pupils</li></ul>
Close the performance gap - through increasing access to full curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensuring access to extended schools or a wide range of educational opportunities, including after school activities</li></ul>
Close the performance gap - through supporting those at risk of social exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Providing flexible, responsive transport to meet the specific needs of those likely to be excluded and overcome personal circumstances</li><li>• Removing transport barriers to attending school</li><li>• Ensuring appropriate transport for those with additional needs, that promotes independence and inclusion</li></ul>

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Particular challenges for any home to school transport policy in Northern Ireland include the extent of school choice, the diverse categorisation of schools and the small size of schools. Although the number of schools continues to decrease,<sup>36</sup> schools remain small. The average school size is 314 pupils, with two-thirds of primary schools having fewer than 200 pupils, and more than a third of all post-primary schools having fewer than 500 pupils.<sup>37</sup>

The on-going rationalisation of the schools' estate is, therefore, likely to mean a continued programme of closures of unsustainable schools. In order to ensure the delivery of the Entitlement Framework considerable collaborative working will require the transfer of pupils between schools, and between schools and FE colleges, during the school day. This is particularly the case for smaller schools, which are less likely to be able to offer the full range of courses 'in house'.

### Achievement and attainment

Many children in Northern Ireland are achieving well in their education, but others are not and the gap is widening. Northern Ireland's low achieving schools perform less well than the lowest in the English league tables.<sup>38</sup> Using GCSE results as a proxy for attainment, the proportion of school leavers achieving five GCSEs at A\*-C (or equivalent) increased to 76.5% in 2011/12, but pupils in non-selective schools achieved lower levels on this measure (61.3% compared to 97.2% for grammar schools). This remains the case if the measure includes five GCSEs including English and Maths<sup>39</sup>.

Class and socio-economic background, gender and religion all influence educational attainment and school leaver destination and attainment is more likely to be influenced by social background in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK.<sup>40</sup> Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME) is often used as a proxy for low-income or socio-economic deprivation. In 2012/13, 79,810 pupils, equivalent to 25% of the school population in

<sup>36</sup> Statistical press release (10 December 2013) Enrolments at grant-aided schools 2013/14 Basic Statistics.

<sup>37</sup> Statistical press release (10 December 2013) Enrolments at grant-aided schools 2013/14 Basic Statistics.

<sup>38</sup> Nolan P (March 2014) Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report pp 92.

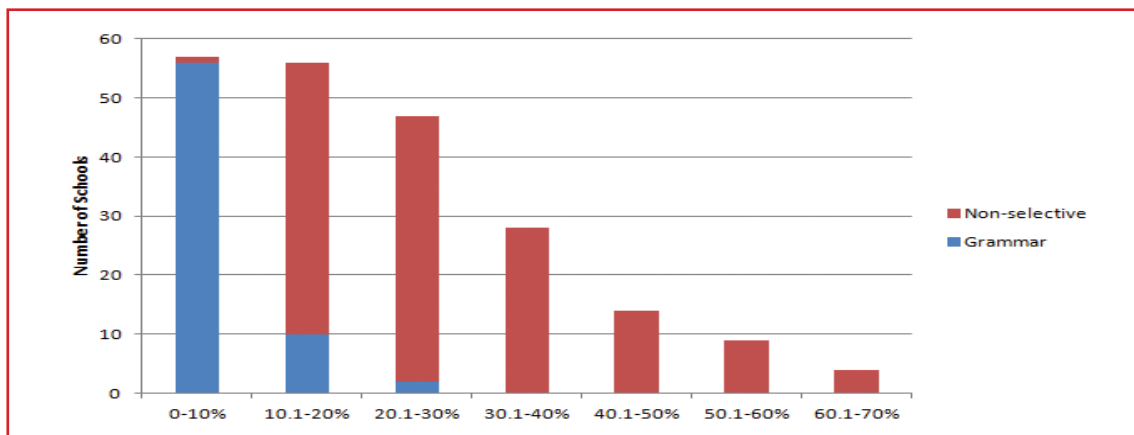
<sup>39</sup> School Leavers Surveys 2012/13.

<sup>40</sup> Nolan P (March 2014) Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report pp 93.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

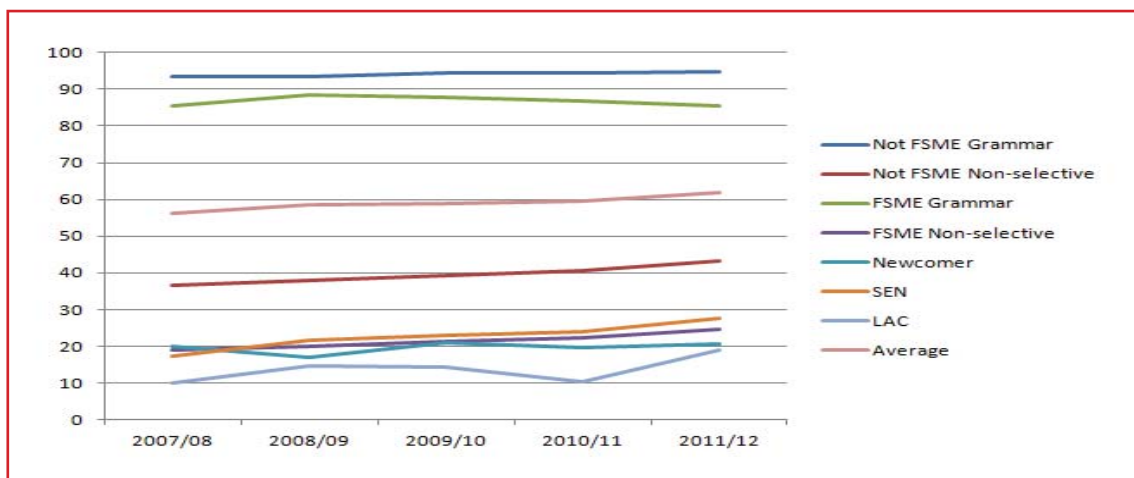
Northern Ireland, were entitled to receive free school meals. Overall, the scale of FSME and free school uniform entitlement is high, with levels of FSME considerably higher in non-selective than selective schools. In non-grammar schools, nearly 28% of pupils qualify for Free School Meals (FSM) compared to less than 7.5% of grammar school pupils.

### DISTRIBUTION OF DISADVANTAGED PUPILS 2012/13



Data from the school leavers' surveys of recent years show the level of under-achievement in all school sectors of those entitled to receive free school meals, especially those who are looked after, newcomers or who have special needs.

### 5+GCSES A\*-C (OR EQUIVALENT) INCLUDING ENGLISH AND MATHS BY SCHOOL SECTOR



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Across all school sectors, non-attendance tends to increase in line with free school meals entitlement rates,<sup>41</sup> and where more than half of their pupils are eligible for Free School Meals, rates of GCSE achievement are 24.7 percentage points lower.<sup>42</sup> However, there are exceptions and some school sectors and individual schools achieve better than expected levels of attainment given their rates of FSM.

### Participation post-16 & exclusion

Education in Northern Ireland is compulsory to the age of 16, but there is encouragement to continue to 18 and beyond. The vast majority of 16 to 18 year olds in Northern Ireland do continue in education, employment or training. In addition to education provision for 16-18 year olds within schools, further education is delivered by six large regional colleges spread across 40 community campuses, which have an enrolment of more than 90,000 students per year.<sup>43</sup>

Although transport to further education is outside the scope of this review, many young people who are enrolled at schools attend FE colleges as part of the delivery of the full Entitlement Framework. Transport to and from FE colleges for these pupils has, therefore, been included within the scope of the review.

An estimated 46,000 16-24 year olds are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET). Fourteen thousand 16-19 year olds are NEET, up from 9,000 in 2000, equivalent to a rise of 56% during this time.<sup>44</sup> Young people who are NEET typically face barriers to continuing in education, and are often described as falling within one or more of the following categories:

- are looked after, in care, left care or who are on the edge of care (LACs);
- have suffered bullying;
- have literacy and numeracy problems;

<sup>41</sup> DE Attendance at grant-aided primary, post-primary and special schools 2012/13 Detailed statistics.

<sup>42</sup> ETI Chief Inspector's Report 2010-2012 pp7.

<sup>43</sup> Colleges NI website.

<sup>44</sup> NI Executive (2012) Pathways to Success - Preventing Exclusion and Promoting Participation Of Young People pp 5.



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

- are young carers;
- are young parents including School Age Mothers (SAMs);
- have special needs (SEN) or have a disability;
- are involved with drug or alcohol misuse;
- are homeless, or
- suffer economic disadvantage.

The Northern Ireland Executive strategy to prevent exclusion and promote participation by young people acknowledges that free transport is one of a range of measures that can encourage, motivate and support young people to continue and complete their studies. It recognises that young people living in rural areas can face additional barriers to participation due to the lack of transport availability. The strategy commits DRD to continue to provide transport opportunities and Translink to offer a range of discounts to facilitate access to education, employment and training.<sup>45</sup>

### Transport's role in attendance and attainment

Facilitating attendance at school is essential if educational attainment is to improve. The cost of transport, its un-affordability or un-availability were not cited during this review as the sole or main reason for non-attendance at primary or post-primary schools, despite concerns being raised by stakeholders about Northern Ireland's high levels of deprivation and rurality. Young people in Belfast at our focus group with the NI Youth Forum cited one example of a pupil having to move school because parents could not afford to pay transport costs to the pupil's school of choice, but this was a notable exception. Chief Education Welfare Officers provided few anecdotal examples of where they had been aware that poverty had affected attendance at school. There were no examples provided where transport had been used as a defence for non-attendance at school. Likewise, transport was not explicitly cited in any case in the Northern Ireland Audit Office report Improving Pupil Attendance Follow Up Report of 2014.

<sup>45</sup> NI Executive (2012) Pathways to Success pp 43.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Responses to the Call for Evidence, however, suggested a more complex picture. Whilst affordability or availability of transport may not actually preclude attendance at school for those currently ineligible to receive school transport, the removal of entitlement for those in receipt of it may place additional burdens on households already struggling financially. The Kids and Young Life and Times surveys do not specifically ask about affordability of transport to and from school. However, in the 2013 survey a quarter of 16 year olds said that their family had problems paying for at least two items from a list that included school uniform, books and materials, day trips during and outside school hours or school organised trips. More than 30% said they had found it difficult to afford school uniforms.<sup>46</sup>

Rural groups spoke of difficulties for parents who worked, having to leave home too early in a morning to enable them to transport children to school. This was particularly the situation where there was no or only one car in a household, and where there were already additional costs of transport due to living in a rural area. Concerns were raised about the hidden nature of rural poverty where, because it is more dispersed, it is often less visible and therefore harder to identify.

*“I feel all children should have equal access to school. By not providing free transport, we are creating further obstacles to learning. If parents had to provide their own transport or pay a subsidy then attendance rates will fall as some parents will be unable to meet these costs and others will not see this as a priority”*

Primary school Principal

*“Parents depend and rely on transport assistance as there are a lot of families on low-income. Buses to school are essential in rural areas”*

Primary school

<sup>46</sup> Financial Wellbeing of Young People Research Update 91 May 2014 [www.ark.ac.uk](http://www.ark.ac.uk).

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

*“We greatly depend on the school bus as we only have one car....if the bus wasn't available for my children I just don't know how I would get them to school”*

Parent

There is an expectation in Northern Ireland that children should have access to the full curriculum, and the ETI have<sup>47</sup> noted that where educational pathways are limited this can adversely affect educational attainment. The Peace Monitoring report<sup>48</sup> makes particular reference to St Dominic's Grammar School for Girls' high levels of attainment. This school is located in one of the most socially deprived areas of Northern Ireland and has double the proportion of FSM pupils than for grammar schools overall, yet it is one of the highest performing schools in terms of its A level results. Pupils from St Dominic's Grammar School and other schools participated in our focus groups and emphasised the importance of achieving well, the contribution made to this by the wider support offered by the school and the importance of transport to enable them to benefit from this. Support offered by schools visited included after-school lessons, internet and library access in an evening, extra-curricular activities, revision classes and Saturday morning lessons, and were seen as especially valuable for pupils whose home backgrounds were without internet access or other educational advantages.

Transport was found to be a factor influencing participation, completion of education and attendance for those at the margins of, and at risk of, being excluded from the education system. Meetings with stakeholders from one Board's EOTAS team noted the need for targeted transport. They reported marked improvements in attendance for those in alternative education since switching to transporting pupils by taxi rather than by bus or expecting pupils to make their own way to the units. This was a view confirmed by visits to Alternative Education Provision (AEP) units, discussions with School Age Mothers (SAMs), and submissions from those working with Looked After Children (LACs). All of which highlighted the vulnerability of these young people and the need for additional transport assistance to help them overcome personal circumstances and practical difficulties in attending school.

<sup>47</sup> ETI Chief Inspector's Report 2010-2012 pp26.

<sup>48</sup> Nolan P (March 2014) Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Equality of school transport policies and provision

The framework for home to school transport results in considerable inequalities in the transport offer pupils receive depending on where they live, which school they attend and how old they are.

#### Between Board areas

The application of home to school transport entitlement criteria and its provision are inconsistent across the five Board areas. This leads to frustration on the part of parents especially at the Board boundaries, where parents and schools are more acutely aware of the differences in approach. This particularly affects large special schools as they often draw their pupils from across several ELB areas. For them, approaches and practice, such as whether escorts are provided on buses, and what training they receive, the type of transport provided and journey times, all vary for their pupils depending on which Board is arranging transport.

Areas where there are anomalies and differences in the application of policies include:

- **Measurement of walking distances.** Four ELBs use door-to-door as the criteria for measurement of walking distance, and SEELB uses the nearest gate of the pupil's home to the nearest gate of the school. (The latter approach is more consistent with that used in the rest of the UK). Recent analysis by the ELBs suggested that approximately 1,500 pupils would cease to be entitled to school transport if all Boards used a gate-to-gate approach. Using an average unit cost for transport, it was calculated this would equate to an annual £1 million saving.
- **Mainstream concessionary transport.** Three Boards, NEELB, SELB and WELB, will offer a seat to a pupil who would be ineligible to qualify for free school transport, if space is available after providing services for eligible children. In SELB and WELB, this may apply to contracted transport as well as Board vehicles. The BELB fleet is used largely for special needs pupils, and no concessionary places are offered.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

- **2 pm services.** This service is provided to any school in SELB, but on a limited basis in other areas, and not at all in BELB. It allows younger primary school children to be transported home immediately after they have finished their school day, which is typically earlier than for older primary school pupils.

### Cross border travel

Several hundred pupils travel cross border into Northern Ireland to schools, and vice versa. Those travelling cross border from Northern Ireland are treated consistently in that they receive the same transport offer as pupils of their age in Ireland. Similarly, those travelling into Northern Ireland are treated as if they resided in Northern Ireland, and lived at the border.

However, the two jurisdictions have very differing policies. In Northern Ireland, school transport is free for eligible pupils. In Ireland, eligible pupils must pay to access the School Transport Scheme. As a result, there is inequity in that some Northern Ireland pupils who live more than the statutory distance from school have to pay, even if their closest education provision is across the border, whereas if they attended a school within Northern Ireland they would receive transport free of charge.

As the criteria to qualify for school transport in Northern Ireland relate to attendance at a grant-aided school, and schools in Ireland are not grant-aided by DE, ELBs are therefore unable, within the current legislative framework, to offer free school transport to pupils travelling out of jurisdiction, even if they are attending their nearest school.

### School sector

Choice of school is supported to some extent by free home to school transport being available for those opting for controlled, Catholic maintained, selective, Integrated or Irish medium education and who live more than the statutory distance from their school. It is not supported where choice of school is based on parental preference for a single sex education, a secular education, or other reason. Responses to the Call for Evidence illustrated examples where this had caused apparent inequity, even within families.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

*“I have twins - a boy and girl. The boy gets a bus pass from the ELB due to distance, girl does not - she chose to put an all girls’ school as first choice because a boy had tormented her in primary school and she did not want to risk being in the same school - her school is over 3 miles away but because there is a closer mixed school she did not receive a bus pass”*

Parent

*“I have two sons who attend different post-primary schools - one gets a bus pass the other doesn’t - I feel penalised for choosing a post-primary school that best suits the needs of my child”*

Parent

Those receiving school transport to exercise choice to attend grammar schools account for nearly 40% of the pupils who receive home to school transport, and almost a third of the overall expenditure. More than half of all grammar school pupils, and nearly 60% of voluntary denominational grammar school pupils, qualify for home to school transport, as shown in Table 10.

Pupils attending non-selective schools are less likely to qualify for home to school transport. Nearly 70% of post-primary pupils in controlled schools are responsible for making their own travel arrangements, and are ineligible to receive free school transport

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

**Table 10:**

### PROPORTION OF PUPILS IN RECEIPT OF SCHOOL TRANSPORT BY SCHOOL SECTOR, 2012/13

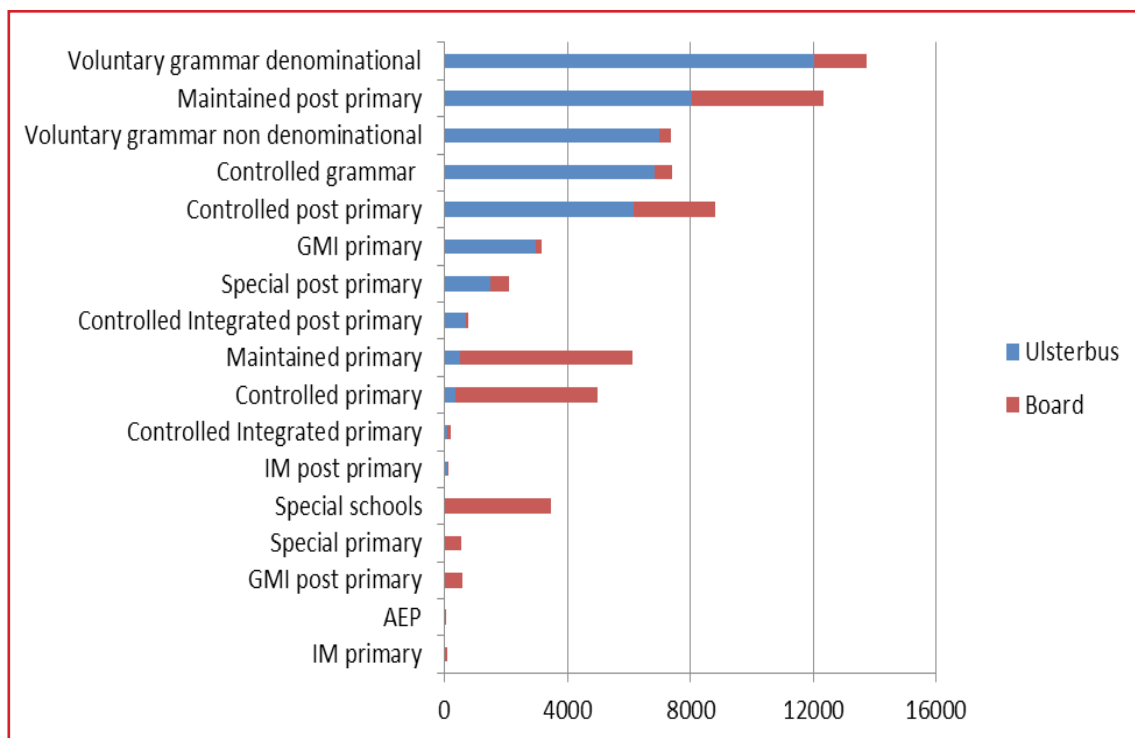
	% in receipt of home to school transport by school sector
VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR - DENOMINATIONAL	59
GRANT MAINTAINED INTEGRATED POST-PRIMARY	58
CONTROLLED GRAMMAR	52
VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR - NON-DENOMINATIONAL	43
IRISH MEDIUM POST-PRIMARY	43
MAINTAINED POST-PRIMARY	34
CONTROLLED INTEGRATED POST-PRIMARY	34
CONTROLLED POST-PRIMARY	32
GRANT MAINTAINED INTEGRATED PRIMARY	23
CONTROLLED INTEGRATED PRIMARY	14
IRISH MEDIUM PRIMARY	14
MAINTAINED PRIMARY	11
CONTROLLED PRIMARY	9
AVERAGE ALL SCHOOLS (Including special)	29

The way in which transport is provided confers additional benefits on many of those attending grammar schools. Pupils at these schools are more likely to receive sessional tickets that allow use of the public transport network up to 6.30 pm in the evening. Of those travelling on Ulsterbus services using sessional tickets, approximately 26,000 pupils (nearly 60%) are travelling to grammar schools. In addition, more than 1,500 pupils travel to grammar schools using Metro bus services. This enables these pupils to avail of after-school activities if there is a public transport service. In contrast, Board vehicles are typically used to provide school transport for those attending controlled and maintained schools, and usually only offer a journey home immediately after school.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

As Board buses are more likely to be used for transport to special schools, several pupils at special and mainstream schools raised the issue of stigmatisation and stated they would prefer to be able to travel on Translink services to avoid this.

### NUMBER OF PUPILS TRANSPORTED ON BOARD BUSES AND ULSTERBUS BY SCHOOL SECTOR, 2012/13



A monetary allowance is payable to some parents who transport their own children, or to young people themselves who opt to 'cash in' a sessional ticket. The rates payable for these allowances vary by Board area, and by school sector, with an enhanced allowance available for those travelling to Irish medium education.



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Adequacy of school transport provision in supporting education

Stakeholders and pupils provided many examples illustrating where and how transport was having a detrimental impact on the quality of education received:

#### Teaching time:

The Panel heard of buses arriving late at school in the morning or leaving early in the afternoon, meaning that teaching time was being lost. Schools in East Belfast, for example, expressed some frustration that bus times were inflexible and unsuitable for their session times. This meant the schools were releasing pupils up to 35 minutes early to enable them to catch buses home. This affected more than 60 pupils from 1 school, and 20 pupils in another. A special school in South Belfast provided examples of some buses arriving so late it meant that children were regularly missing up to 40 minutes a day of teaching time.

Late arrivals at school often worried pupils we heard from across Northern Ireland. This was understandable as for many pupils their records of punctuality and good attendance could be adversely affected by transport factors outside their control. In one school visited, a record of poor punctuality could mean a pupil would not be allowed to continue into Year 13.

*During the winter months, the bus is nearly always late and sometimes does not even arrive due to weather conditions. Buses running late affect the start time of classes and some schools report this as under attendance.*

**Pupil comments from focus group in Ballygawley**

*If the bus breaks down or is late pupils may get detention - and pupils are accepted into upper sixth partially based on good attendance and punctuality.*

**Pupil from focus group at East Belfast school**

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Choice for post-16 students

Many of the difficulties around access to education relate to older pupils who are considering continuing into further or post-16 education. The Panel heard from some young people about the high costs of bus fares and anxiety that any reductions in transport support would mean considerable hardship for them accessing education.

Likewise, meetings with youth groups provided examples of where EMA was being used as essential funding for transport. For example, the Panel heard from one pupil attending a grammar school in Belfast who was paying £9 a week for transport from his EMA to enable him to undertake a specialist course at a nearby school. Conversely, there were instances where the EMA was regarded merely as “beer money” or for socialising.

### Journey times

There are currently no maximum criteria for school transport journey times. Many pupils, especially those attending Irish medium, Integrated, grammar and special schools, face long journeys to and from school. For some pupils this necessitates changes of bus, and waiting in isolated locations for connections to other transport. Journey times are exacerbated by long walks to or from pick up locations for some pupils.

One special school reported some pupils travelling up to three or more hours a day to and from their school. As a result, the children are extremely tired by the time they arrived at school or home. In part, this reflects parental choice, as well as Boards’ policies on the delivery of special needs education. In WELB, special schools cater for a diverse range of needs, and pupils with special needs are all educated within the Board area. In other ELBs, there is reliance on some specialist education provision in Belfast. This underlines the need for a strategic approach to Area Planning, particularly of special schools and units, to minimise travel times and journeys.

### After-school participation

The availability of transport was a crucial factor in enabling participation in after-school and extra-curricular activities in both urban and rural settings. Pupils gave examples of

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

being unable to participate, or able to stay for only part of the extra-curricular activities due to bus times, the lack of buses, and/or cost of transport.

Two distinct issues were raised:

- **Pupils receiving Board bus transport.** Primary age pupils and those in non-selective post-primary schools reported less opportunity to participate after school. They were often reliant on parents or others to provide lifts home. In some areas well served by Translink services pupils said they were able to use public transport to get home after school instead of their Board bus, but then had to pay a fare (some said remembering to take money with them to school for that purpose could be problematic and required planning, meaning they were unable to stay late at short notice).

For those in rural areas who had journeys of up to 20-30 miles that might involve multiple bus services, using both Board and Translink services, they had difficulty staying for after-school activities unless they were able to secure a lift home or they were willing to walk part of the route. This was often compounded by long walks from bus stops.

*“Pupils on Board buses are greatly disadvantaged as they cannot get home after a normal school day - this in turn means schools are disadvantaged, particularly in rural areas”*

**School Vice Principal**

- **Pupils in receipt of a sessional ticket.** Translink passes provide more flexibility, with services offering options to travel up to 6.30 pm. However, participation for some was restricted with the 6.30 pm time limit being before schools finished after-school activities. It also caused difficulties, for those pupils wanting to attend twilight courses at FE colleges. One pupil in West Belfast illustrated this difficulty. She preferred to study in school until 9 pm where she had access to staff, internet, computers and library, but was faced with bus costs in order to do so. Twilight classes from 3.30 pm-5.30 pm have the advantage for schools that they do not have to

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

alter their timetables to enable pupils to attend classes at a college, but this may create difficulty if transport is not available for pupils to travel home.

*Pupils find attending afterschool activities too expensive as they have to pay for transport - need later service especially in rural areas*

**Pupil from Newry and Banbridge area, focus group in Armagh**

*Pupils attending after-school activities have to get lifts home - more would stay if they could get a bus home. For others there are long delays, in some instances having to wait two hours for a bus home.*

**Pupils from focus group at Dungannon school**

However, the Panel did hear of some innovation around after-school transport services, being led by individual schools and ALCs. These involved schools delivering after-school bus services using their own vehicles, or in conjunction with the Community Transport Association (CTA).

### Loss of teaching and learning time due to intra-day movements

DE policy is that all pupils should have full access to the Northern Ireland curriculum and Entitlement Framework, with effect from September 2015. The scale of intraday movement of pupils between local schools and FE colleges as part of this delivery of courses in many areas is now considerable. For example in the Ballymena ALC, every week more than 600 pupils move between sites during the school day, of whom more than 300 are using a mixture of taxis, school minibuses and privately contracted vehicles.

The Panel was provided with many examples where this works well, with timetabling often aligned for half days.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

*Some pupils attend the local FE college - timetabling is good, although classes can be long and pupils enjoy going to the college.*

**Pupil comment, focus group in Ballygawley**

Elsewhere, pupils spoke at length about how transport provision affected their school day. A lack of alignment of timetables meant young people often arrived late for lessons or missed lunch. This was a concern raised in Ballymena and Ballynahinch (and other areas). In Ballynahinch, one school was encouraging walking between sites (and had purchased umbrellas for pupils in case of bad weather) but timetabling difficulties meant some pupils still lost lesson time even though they were not reliant on transport services.

*We are late for class every time - there are problems with timetabling classes which mean some pupils missing their lunch. This has led to pupils taking their own cars so as not to miss lunch or the start of a class in another school*

**Pupil comments, focus group in Ballymena**

*Timetables are not aligned between schools which results in loss of time for those attending classes in other locations. This affects choice of subjects because pupils don't want to walk and because they are missing time out of the lesson and it can be hard to keep up with the work in class.*

**Pupil, focus group Ballynahinch**

Some schools were aware of these problems and were trying to resolve the issues. However, too often transport was having an adverse impact and adding to the challenges for pupils, who clearly benefited from the collaboration between schools and colleges. In all of the young people's focus groups we held, it was evident pupils were working well together and were comfortable in different schools, whilst

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

maintaining their own school identity, however the day-to-day practicalities of travelling between sites was letting them down.

The Entitlement Framework may also require movement between sites and pupils' starting or finishing at places other than their own school, for example they may have half a day at the local FE college. Those in receipt of Translink sessional passes are required to travel back to the school at which they are enrolled to get transport home. This wastes travel and valuable teaching time. Greater flexibility of pick up and drop off locations within ALCs could considerably reduce the amount of travel time by allowing pupils to go directly to the school or college where their lessons are that morning, or return from where they finish lessons in the afternoon rather than having to start and finish each day at their 'home' school. The Panel heard of instances where schools had reached agreements with local Translink staff allowing greater flexibility, but others where requests from an ALC had been refused.

### 5. Does the current system of home to school transport meet the needs of all pupils?

#### Ineligible pupils

Discussion of home to school transport often focuses entirely on those who qualify for and receive free school transport. However, the majority of pupils in Northern Ireland do not qualify for free transport or school transport assistance. It was therefore important for this review to consider their views and experiences.

The majority of pupils who are not entitled to school transport are reliant on cars for travel to and from school, particularly outside the main urban areas. Pupils are able to purchase daily, annual or season tickets for use on local bus services. The Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (2011-13) suggests 50% of post-primary pupils (to age 18) and 12% of primary school pupils travel to school by bus. As 46% of post-primary pupils and 11% of primary pupils qualify for school transport, this indicates the majority of bus trips are paid for by the ELBs, but an estimated 15,000 young people pay for their own fares, which is consistent with data from Translink regarding child fares sold during the peak hours.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Some parents responding to the Call for Evidence said they were happy to pay for or to provide transport to and from their choice of school for their child:

*“My son doesn’t get transport assistance and uses Translink buses. This is because he chose to go to a grammar school that wasn’t his nearest. He is happy in his choice and I’m happy to pay for the transport to enable him to have a happy school life. Most parents should share this view.”*

Parent of pupil at non-denominational grammar school

Other parents and pupils, however, expressed concern at the costs of transport.

*I have to go often to my grandmother’s as mum is a single parent doing shifts - the cost of private taxis to school is a real financial burden.*

Pupil who did not qualify for free transport at Finaghy Youth Centre

*My son does not qualify for assistance as there is a grammar school nearer to our home, but he chose the school for the subjects offered and he felt were best suited to his needs and interests. He did not, under any circumstances want to attend the local grammar school. We as a family fully supported this decision, as we wanted him to be happy - but have been put under financial pressure due to the cost of his monthly train ticket. My two young children also want to attend this school but the travel costs will be too great to facilitate this - very unfair.*

Parent of child at non-denominational grammar school

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Many stakeholders and respondents felt that linking transport entitlement to the present categorisation of schools was biased. They emphasised the need to update transport policies to reflect changing school sectors, including the emergence of non-selective grammar schools.

Several stakeholder groups and responses to the Call for Evidence provided examples of pupils who were not in receipt of school transport and expressed worries around safety for walking and cycling. Other highlighted the arbitrary nature of entitlement and questioned the fairness of the two or three mile thresholds for entitlement:

*It is unfair to pupils who live just under the 3 mile distance not to receive free transport - why should they have to pay for the bus when a pupil who lives one stop away get a free bus pass?*

Pupil at focus group at Poleglass Youth Centre

### Urban and rural

Approximately 60% of pupils in Northern Ireland live in urban areas, but much of Northern Ireland is defined as rural.<sup>49</sup> With school transport entitlement based on walking distances, and rural schools generally having larger catchment areas, the majority of children in receipt of free school transport live in these rural areas.

The need for school transport for children in rural areas was evident in the responses to the Call for Evidence:

*“providing home to school transport is particularly important to facilitate access to post-primary schools for children in rural areas, especially children from low-income families”*

Rural Community Network

*“School transport is vital for those living in rural areas and pupils of working parents. Many people... have to commute big distances to work leaving well before school start times”*

Respondent to Call for Evidence

<sup>49</sup> Based on Report of the Interdepartmental Group on Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements February 2005, where settlements with more than 4,500 population are deemed urban. Data based on 2013/14 school year.



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Equity

Some parents and schools reasoned that as rural residents they received little by way of other public services. They contended that free school transport was needed, as rural children were already disadvantaged in many other ways, for example by having longer journeys and less access to other facilities.

*I live in a remote area of the Sperrin mountains - we pay our taxes and rates and receive very little services i.e. no street lights, our roads are not gritted, we have no leisure facilities and no local schools. Our children leave homes at 7.20 am this already disadvantages them in comparison to town/city children*

Parent of pupils transported.

*transport is essential so they can make the most of the same opportunities as those that can walk to school, children should not be penalised for living in a rural area*

Parent of pupil transported.

Conversely, some young people in Belfast raised the perceived inequity, in that they typically had to pay for bus fares, whereas those living in rural areas coming into the city for school did not.

*Free bus passes are great when you have one - it's different for those who don't!*

Young person, NI Youth Forum

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Type of transport provided

The particular disadvantages for rural children who use Board buses was a recurring theme in responses. Such pupils were often reliant on parents for lifts home if they wanted to participate in after-school activities, as Board buses provided only a journey home immediately after school finishing time. Parenting NI raised concerns that families in rural areas already pay more for transport costs, and this adds to that financial burden. The Rural Community Network argued that pupils using Board buses should be able to use local bus services after school to encourage participation and reduce congestion outside schools.

### Public transport network

The significance of school transport in terms of the overall proportion of journeys, and the financial support for Translink services was demonstrated throughout the review. Nearly half of all passengers travelling on Ulsterbus services, which serve primarily rural areas, are pupils or young people travelling to or from school and colleges funded by DE or DEL.

It is clear from analysis of Translink and Ulsterbus financial statements and accounts, that large-scale withdrawal of sessional ticket revenue from Translink, would be likely to result in increased fares or greater subsidies, if the existing network and fleet size were to be maintained at current levels.

Many of the school bus routes across Northern Ireland are registered as local bus (stage-carriage) services, allowing Translink to claim Fuel Duty Rebate, and to offer spare capacity (i.e. seats not used for school pupils) to the general public. This means many villages and smaller towns have a school day morning and afternoon service to and from a local town that may otherwise be financially unsustainable.

DRD noted in their outline business case for public transport reform that combining home to school transport with other services in rural areas enables unprofitable routes to be provided, which would otherwise be difficult to fund, by creating potential for cross subsidy.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> DRD (December 2010) Review of Outline Business Case for Public Transport Reform Chapter 6.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

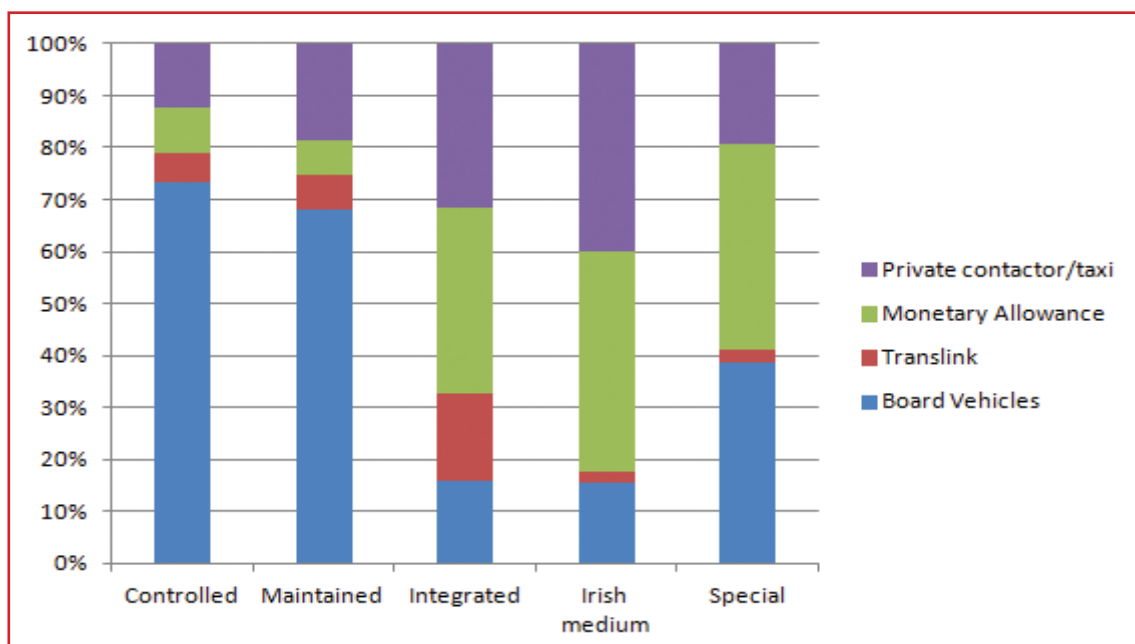
### Safety

The safety of walking to bus stops in rural areas especially where there was a lack of infrastructure such as street lighting, pavements or crossings; and of waiting at bus stops that may be isolated, unlit and with no shelter were all raised by young people. Parents expressed concern about the safety of children waiting at isolated bus stops and cycling in rural areas. These problems are exacerbated by the fact that Boards may expect pupils to walk lengthy distances to a bus stop.

### Primary school pupils

Approximately 18,000 primary school pupils receive free school transport from the ELBs, about 11,000 of these travel on Board vehicles, and 1,200 travel on public transport including Metro, Ulsterbus and NIR services, 3,300 are on private contractor routes and 2,200 receive a mileage allowance. Mileage allowances are more typically used for pupils attending Integrated and Irish medium primary schools, as shown.

### MODE USED, PRIMARY SCHOOL TRANSPORT 2012/13



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

The Call for Evidence asked respondents to indicate which mode(s) of transport they thought suitable for primary school pupils. The vast majority (79%) believed Board buses to be most appropriate, and 42% thought sessional passes should be used, with 36% supporting the use of private hire operators. Only 22% thought either bike allowance or monetary allowance were suitable methods of transport assistance for pupils of this age.

The main area of concern about school transport for this group of pupils related to the length of journeys and time spent travelling. A large majority of respondents to the Call for Evidence considered 30 minutes to be a suitable maximum journey time for pupils of this age.

*“At present we service many school runs where primary children as young as 4 are on the bus home for longer than an hour...most of the children are asleep by the time we reach their home. In recent years we have seen pupil numbers and mileage increase on these school runs hence causing children to be on the bus for much longer periods”.*

Transport contractor

Primary school age pupils themselves raised other concerns including the availability of transport after school for those who finished school at 2 pm. Provision of these services varies across Northern Ireland, with some Boards offering a 2 pm service home for young pupils. One school raised the issue that they provided childcare in school, but queried whether it would be more economical for the 84 children involved to be transported home by bus rather than parents driving to collect their children.

### Irish medium education

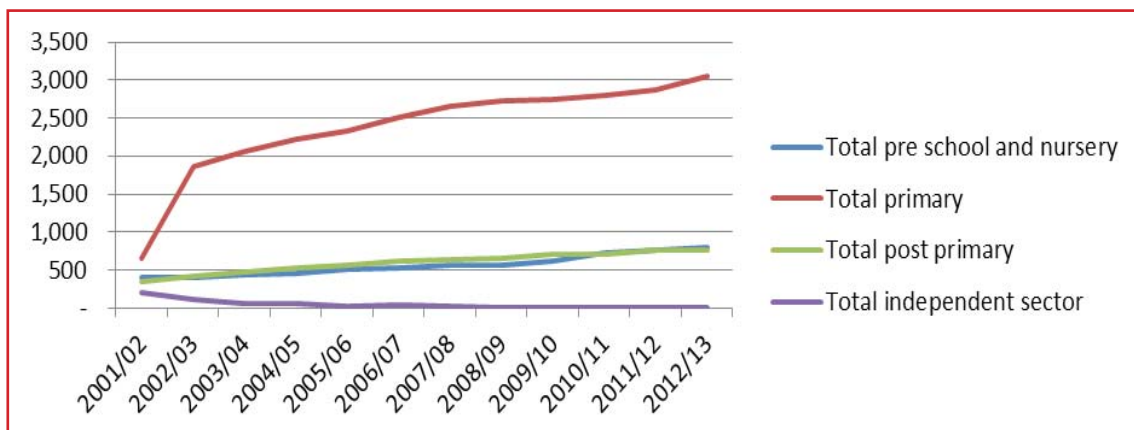
There is one full-immersion Irish medium post-primary school located in Belfast (Coláiste Feirste), and Irish medium post-primary units based in Coláiste Chaitríona, Ard Mhacha (St Catherine’s College Armagh) and Scoil Iósaef, Domhnach Mor (St Joseph’s Grammar School, Donaghmore). In addition, some pupils receive school transport assistance to travel to Ardscoil Mhaolmhaodhóg, which has an Irish medium stream (St Malachy’s High School, Castlewellan).

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

An Irish medium school is defined as one in which more than one half of the classes (including religious education but excluding language and literacy) are taught in the medium of Irish.<sup>51</sup>

In 2012/13, there were 28 grant-aided Irish medium primary schools and seven Irish medium units attached to primary schools. This represents a notable increase from ten schools just over a decade ago, and numbers of pupils attending these schools and units have been growing in recent years.

### NUMBER OF PUPILS IN IRISH MEDIUM SCHOOLS AND UNITS, 2001/2-2012/13



#### Development of Irish medium education

The Good Friday Agreement of the 10th April 1998 included specific agreements regarding Irish medium education including that the Government would:

*“...take resolute action to promote the Irish language, seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language...and place a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Irish medium education in line with provision for Integrated education”*

<sup>51</sup> Article 3(2) of Education (NI) Order 2006.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Entitlement to transport to Irish medium units and schools

Article 89 of the Education (NI) Order 1998 imposed a statutory duty on DE to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish medium education. An additional measure put in place in 2001 was an enhanced mileage allowance for those pupils attending Irish medium schools and eligible to receive school transport.

Following dissatisfaction with transport arrangements to facilitate attendance at Coláiste Feirste, the Vice Chair of its Board of Governors brought a judicial review.<sup>52</sup> In this, it was contended that DE failed to give proper consideration to its Article 89 duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish medium education with respect to pupils' transport to the school. It was argued that the Article 89 duty required DE to take positive steps to encourage Irish medium education and also remove obstacles.

Mr Justice Treacy, finding in favour of the applicant, noted that DE's duty was more than aspirational and was "intended to have practical consequences and legislative significance". He stated that "the provision of transport facilities to schools in any sector is critical to the **development** of that sector and the provision of genuine parental choice" (emphasis added). DE contended that any additional provision would set a costly precedent in respect of other education sectors. This was rejected by the judge, who noted that "the respondent (DE) does not have a corresponding duty in relation to the traditional established education sector". Following this judicial review, DE established pilot bus routes for pupils travelling to the school from the Downpatrick and Crumlin areas.

### Transport provision for the Irish medium sector

In 2012/13, more than 750 children received school transport or transport assistance to attend Irish medium education, at a total cost of approximately £700,000.

<sup>52</sup> Colma McKee as Vice Chairperson of the Board of Governors of Colaiste Feirste v The Department of Education Northern Ireland [2011] NIQB 98.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

**Table 11:**

### TRANSPORT FOR PUPILS IN IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION, BY BOARD AREA, 2012/13

	BELB	SELB	SEELB	NEELB	WELB	TOTAL	% in receipt of transport	Expenditure
IRISH MEDIUM PRIMARY	6	21	85	145	184	441	14%	£510,535.00
IRISH MEDIUM POST-PRIMARY	58	146	103	12	10	329	43%	£198,528.00
TOTAL	64	167	150	188	194	763	20%	£709,063.00
AVERAGE COST								£920.86

It has been apparent throughout this review that there continues to be substantial dissatisfaction among the Irish medium sector with DE and Boards' policies, strategies and response to requests for transport. This has been demonstrated by the recent litigation, and was reiterated in feedback at stakeholder meetings and consultation with post-primary school pupils attending Irish medium units. Concerns about home to school transport centre on the following issues:

#### The type of transport provided

The use of monetary allowances by Boards for pupils attending Irish medium education was introduced in part due to the low numbers of pupils travelling on individual routes, resulting from the wide dispersal of these schools and units. Currently, 43% of the primary pupils (190 pupils), receiving transport assistance get a monetary allowance. The Panel heard substantial evidence about dissatisfaction with the offer of a monetary allowance in lieu of the bus transport more typically provided for pupils in other school sectors. These allowances are seen as a barrier by some parents, especially those with little or no access to private cars, who have other children to transport to school, or where both parents are in full-time employment. The amount of the allowance was also criticised as inadequate. It was argued the amount paid is insufficient to cover the cost of a taxi if a parent is unable to transport their child.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

*“I would gladly forgo my monetary allowance if my children could get home on the bus which goes past our house everyday bringing home every other primary school child. We are a busy working family and badly need the bus service as soon as possible”*

Parent, of Bunscoil pupil

### The quality of transport provided

The limited number of post-primary options for pupils choosing an Irish medium education frequently means long distances to travel for pupils, which may be exacerbated by the transport arrangements made. Pupils from Coláiste Chaitríona and Scoil Iósaef articulated concerns about long journey times and early starts, with some pupils leaving home as early as 7.15 am.

Due to the routing of vehicles their journeys often involve changes of buses and waiting for connections, rather than travelling directly to school, and/or long walks to bus stops.

*Many pupils have multiple bus trips including walking - those from Crossmaglen going to St Catherine’s have to get a bus from Crossmaglen to Drumhill, from Drumhill to Armagh and then walk a mile to the school*

*Many pupils have a 30 minutes walk to the bus stop - which is difficult in the winter months, as there are no footpaths and with the dark uniform there is potential for accidents.*

Comments from pupils, focus group with pupils from IM units held at Scoil Iósaef



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

These pupils spoke of inconvenience as some of the buses they used are organised primarily for another school. If that school's holidays or training days do not coincide with their own school's, these pupils can be left without transport for a day.

The long distances travelled and lack of transport after school meant it was difficult for these young people to participate in after-school activities. Scoil Íosaef instead provided lunchtime sport but this cut the sessions down to 25 minutes and limited time to eat during the day.

### Coláiste Feirste

Coláiste Feirste is the only full immersion Irish medium post-primary school with an enrolment of 541 pupils (2012/13 and 567 pupils in 2013/14). Staff, school governors and elected representatives all raised the issue of transport barriers including the long distances travelled to reach the school, exacerbated by the need for changes of buses to get to their school particularly from the Glengormley and Ardoyne areas. Such journeys, they argued, deterred transfer at P7 from Irish medium primary to Irish medium post-primary education. They argued that pupils ineligible to receive school transport also incurred costs for bus fares, as the shortest walking routes involved crossing perceived "hostile areas" making this a difficult journey for some younger pupils.

The need to change buses in Belfast city centre is not a problem unique to pupils from Coláiste Feirste nor is the shortest available walking route crossing a perceived hostile area. However, their submissions underlined wider dissatisfactions and concerns about the rigidity in Translink's network of bus routes, which appears to be slow to respond to large changes in flows of pupils, as well as the need to address consistently on a local basis exceptional circumstances that relate to personal security.

### Constraints on development of the sector

A more widespread criticism was that the lack of suitable school transport provision constrains the development of the Irish medium sector. One Bunscoil illustrated the challenge:

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

*We are a small rural school - there are 84 pupils in all drawing from across two Board areas.*

*The school must maintain an intake of 15 pupils per year to become vested. Because of transport issues, it is difficult to maintain 15 pupils, as the other 10 English medium schools in the area all have bus transport to them, whereas some parents attending this school receive a monetary allowance - which creates difficulties for those who do not have a car.*

*One Board will not extend a route into another Board area to pick up pupils and therefore the first pick up point would be 2 miles from the pupils' house.*

**Bunscoil parent Governor**

Representatives of the Irish medium sector spoke of pupils being treated as “individual exceptions rather than mainstream”, i.e. being assessed on a case-by-case basis, with a lack of strategic planning. These representatives were often under the impression that Integrated schools had been provided with dedicated school transport to aid the development of their sector, or that the need for transport to encourage the development of Integrated schools had been more readily recognised with bus services put in place from the outset to support such schools. As a result, they felt their situation was addressed inconsistently.

However, as Pobal commented in response to the Call for Evidence, the difficulty faced is not simply one of transport, but rather it relates to the strategic development of the Irish medium sector itself.

*“We do not believe that an appropriate transport system in and of itself will solve the issue. A network of Irish medium schools must be developed so that Irish-medium education is available at every level continuously”*

**Pobal**

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Integrated education

#### Definition and growth of Integrated education

Integrated education was established by parents wanting an inclusive education in term of gender, ability, and religion. The first Integrated school, Lagan College, was set up in 1981, with three further schools open by 1985. The Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 introduced a statutory duty on DE to encourage and facilitate the development of Integrated education, defined as the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils. There are now 62 Integrated schools in Northern Ireland, consisting of 38 grant maintained schools and 24 controlled Integrated schools.

#### Transport to Integrated schools

DE Circular 1996/41 includes the Integrated sector as one of the specified school categories to which pupils can apply and qualify for transport assistance. Fewer than 10% of all post-primary schools are Integrated, and they are unevenly distributed across Northern Ireland, for example, there are only three post-primary Integrated schools in the WELB area. As such, they often have wide catchments areas. Four of the Integrated post-primary schools have over a third of their pupils travelling more than ten miles to school. Nearly two thirds of post-primary school pupils attending Integrated schools live more than three miles away.

NICIE emphasised that Integrated schools are, therefore, dependent on the provision of free school transport, with a high proportion of pupils in receipt of transport at primary and post-primary levels. About 19% of primary pupils and just over half of post-primary pupils attend Integrated schools and qualify for transport, higher than rates for the school population overall. In total, about 8,100 pupils qualify for school transport to Integrated schools at a cost of just over £5 million per annum.

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**Table 12:**

### TRANSPORT FOR PUPILS IN INTEGRATED EDUCATION, BY BOARD AREA, 2012/13

	BELB	SELB	SEELB	NEELB	WELB	TOTAL	% in receipt of transport	Expenditure
INTEGRATED PRIMARY	201	332	381	464	353	1731	19%	£1,189,836.00
INTEGRATED POST-PRIMARY	1016	991	1502	1427	1424	6360	52%	£3,885,587.00
TOTAL	1217	1323	1883	1891	1777	8091	39%	£5,075,423.00
AVERAGE UNIT COST								£627.29

Pupils attending Integrated schools are more likely to receive a monetary allowance for their travel. Nearly 40% of pupils (nearly 2,000 pupils) in Integrated primary schools receive a monetary allowance, compared to 12% overall. Despite this, unlike those attending Irish medium schools, they are not entitled to an enhanced rate for this allowance.

While the Panel did not hear particular concerns about the lack of transport to Integrated schools or about its availability or quality, many pupils attending Integrated schools, as with Irish medium schools, have long journeys given the geographic spread of such schools.

NICIE highlighted the barriers to establishing a new school in their sector, including developing the organisational and financial capacity to overcome cultural and parental reluctance for them to risk moving pupils to a new establishment. Newly Integrated schools receive grant funding when they meet viability criteria, which are a 15 pupil intake for those primary schools in Belfast or Derry, and 12 pupils elsewhere, and a 50 pupil intake and long term enrolment of 400 for post-primary schools. In addition, any grant-aided school except a special school may apply to transform to Integrated status if they can demonstrate that 10% of their first year intake will be drawn from the minority tradition and they have the potential to achieve a minimum of 30% in the longer term. Twenty-two schools have become Integrated by transforming their status.

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The Panel received representations from Integrated education organisations on the limitations being placed on the sector's development, which they argued was being constrained because of consideration of the potential impact that its growth would have on other schools. The current transport policy permits pupils living outside the walking distance to travel to any school of their choice within category. This, they argued, enabled bypassing local Integrated schools to choose a school in another category. It was contended that the issue was being compounded by constraints in obtaining a permanent increase in their school enrolments, meaning that pupils who wanted to attend an Integrated school were they required to bypass it to attend another school.

There have been no judicial review applications from the Integrated sector regarding school transport. However, a recent successful judicial review was brought by Drumragh Integrated College.<sup>53</sup> In this case, it was argued that DE acted contrary to Article 64 of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989, failing to encourage and facilitate the development of Integrated education by refusing to allow an increase to the school's pupil numbers.

### Special Educational Needs (SEN)

A child with special educational needs has a learning difficulty that calls for educational provision which is different from or additional to the provision made generally for children of comparable age. A learning difficulty means that the child has significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of his or her age and/or has a disability which hinders his or her use of everyday educational facilities.<sup>54</sup> ELBs are required to follow a five-stage approach to the identification of such children, the assessment of their needs, and to making whatever provision is necessary.

<sup>53</sup> Drumragh Integrated College's Application and in the matter of a decision of the Department of Education [2014] NIQB 69.

<sup>54</sup> Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 Code of Practice on the Identification and assessment of Special Educational Needs 1 September 1998.

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- Stage 1: teachers identify and register a child's SEN and consult the school's Special Educational Coordinating Officer (SENCO) to take initial action
- Stage 2: the SENCO collects and records information for coordinating the child's SEN provision, working with the child's teachers
- Stage 3: teachers and the SENCO are supported by specialists from outside the school
- Stage 4: the Board considers the need for a statutory assessment and if appropriate makes one
- Stage 5: the Board considers the need for a statement, and if appropriate make a statement, arranges, monitors and reviews it. (Part 4 of the statement will name the school to be attended/placement; Part 5 should set out any non educational needs and Part 6 any non educational provision.

More recent guidance<sup>55</sup> has emphasised the presumption that a child with special educational needs will be educated in a mainstream setting where possible. In recent years, a growing proportion of pupils has been identified as having special educational needs, and Northern Ireland has a high proportion of pupils statemented or identified with SEN in comparison to other jurisdictions within the UK. In 2012/13, 21.2% of pupils were on the SEN register and 4.5% of the school population had a statement of special educational needs, of which 4,422 attended special schools, and the remaining 10,071 attended mainstream schools.

### School transport for pupils with special needs

Approximately 10,000 pupils across Northern Ireland receive school transport because of their special needs, representing about 11% of the total number of pupils receiving school transport. About half of these pupils attend special schools, and the remainder qualify for free school transport due to their special needs but attend either primary or post-primary schools.

<sup>55</sup> Supplement to the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs 1 September 2005.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

**Table 13:**

### TRANSPORT FOR PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS, 2012/13

	Expenditure	Number of pupils transported	Average unit cost
Special - attending primary schools	£2,241,384	1,337	£1,676.43
Special attending post-primary schools	£3,812,494	3,420	£1,114.76
Pupils attending special schools	£11,559,949	5,028	£2,299.11
All pupils with special needs	£17,613,827	9,785	£1,800.08

Special needs transport accounts for approximately a quarter of all ELBs' home to school transport expenditure, with an average unit cost of £1,800 per year (this include transport for those attending mainstream schools, but who qualify for free school transport because of their special needs). For pupils attending special schools, transport costs are higher at £2,300 per pupil per year, as shown in Table 13. (Note these exclude capital costs).

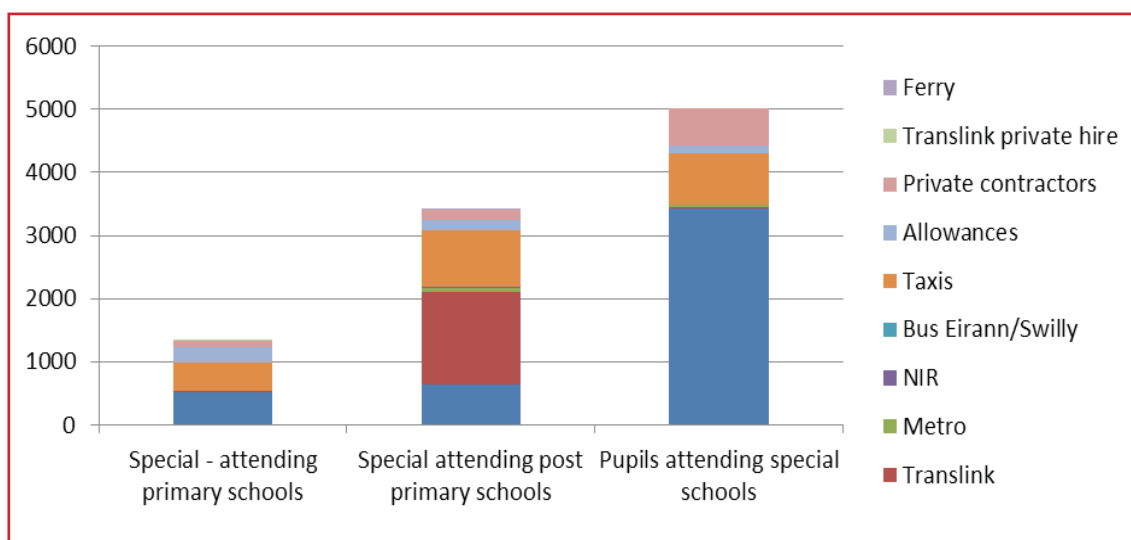
#### Pupils in special schools and/or statemented

For children with statements, transport is largely assumed to be required, specified and/or included in Parts 5 and 6 of their statement. These pupils usually travel on Board vehicles. All free home to school transport for these pupils is provided on a daily basis to travel to and from special schools or units, as there is no residential provision. Board staff felt that this decision was, generally, medic led, subject to little review and at times resulted in over-provision of transport services, nor did it promote inclusion or foster independence. This was a view concurred with by parents' groups.

Discussions with ELBs did highlight some good practice, such as in Belfast where discussions and feedback from the transport and special education staff with senior medical officers had resulted in a more collaborative approach. This had reduced the presumption that free school transport should automatically be provided, but was not the practice elsewhere.

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### MODE OF TRAVEL FOR PUPILS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS BY PLACEMENT, 2012/13



#### Pupils with special needs in mainstream schools

The majority of pupils who have special needs are educated in mainstream schools and may require transport, depending on their level of need. Those attending primary or secondary schools and in receipt of transport are more likely to travel by taxi or at post-primary age by Translink.

SENAC raised concerns that whilst children with statements of SEN who attend special schools are almost always assumed to be eligible for free school transport, those in mainstream placements often face more difficulties:

*“for children with statements of SEN who can and wish to attend mainstream schools the case for [transport] eligibility has to be proven and negotiated and can impact on school choice. This undermines inclusion”*

SENAC



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Quality of transport

#### Journey times

The lack of specified maximum journey times are of concern to parents, pupils and school staff. There were repeated comments during stakeholder meetings and focus groups, and in the responses to the Call for Evidence, about the length of journey times for vulnerable young people. This results in early starts to the day, with pick ups as early as 7.30 am for a 9 am school start. In the Call for Evidence, half of respondents thought journeys for pupils with special needs should be no more than 30 minutes.

Already long travel times are being exacerbated by the practice at some schools of pupils having to wait in vehicles outside until the school chooses to receive them. For pupils with behavioural or physical difficulties this can be problematic, as it does not permit sufficient time for pupils to settle and be ready to learn when they get to school, and may escalate behavioural issues on vehicles.

#### Staff

The majority of escorts on school transport are employed directly by the Boards. Whether transport staff are Board or contractor employed, the need for escorts and drivers to be well trained was emphasised by young people, parents, school staff and special education advocacy groups.

*Drivers need to think about speed of buses as some pupils with specific conditions can slip when going round corners at speed and can be left in a very uncomfortable position and then they are unable to adjust their seating position themselves*

*One driver turns up the radio when a pupil starts screaming and kicking - this just make them worse and is distressing for the others on the bus.*

Student Council special school Belfast

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Consistency in the drivers and escorts on services, and good communication between contractors, Boards and parents/schools, especially about changes to services was essential for parents, schools and young people.

*“We brought our children up to never go with strangers yet we were expected to send our child with Downs Syndrome with total strangers...”*

**Parent of children with special needs, who received no notification of new transport arrangements when routes were reviewed and new operator took over, without driver meeting child or parent in advance.**

The Boards vary in their training of escorts, for example, one uses the Community Transport Association’s Passenger Assistants’ Training (PATs) programme, another offers a three-day course delivered by an external contractor. Both include topics such as child protection, safeguarding and in-vehicle safety. On school visits, the Panel frequently observed excellent relationships between pupils, schools and transport staff. There was often praise for Board buses and their staff in the responses to the Call for Evidence, and from pupils and school staff at focus group meetings:

*Many escorts take time to ensure you are comfortable and make sure you get on and off the bus safely.*

*Drivers and escorts can make the journey pleasant if they speak to you.*

**Pupils from student council at Belfast special school**

### Wheelchair users

A minority of pupils need to travel to school in their wheelchairs. Staff at special schools and at one Board in particular demonstrated considerable knowledge and understanding about the clinical needs of such pupils. They ensure only crash

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

tested chairs are used on transport, and that pupils and equipment are secured with appropriate restraints, and risk assessments are carried out.

Pupils who travel in their wheelchairs raised specific unease and feelings of vulnerability when vehicles broke down. They spoke of difficulties using vehicle ramps and lifts, as a result of the size and weight of chairs, making them feel insecure when boarding and leaving the buses.

*There are a significant number of buses breaking down – this can be a serious issue for pupils in wheelchairs, as the replacement bus may not have the same size access ramp for wheelchairs, higher steps to negotiate, or the replacement bus may not be big enough for wheelchair users*

*Due to the design of the access ramp on the bus some pupils have to speed up their chairs to get up the ramps on to the bus – this has safety implications*

**Pupils, who are wheelchair users,  
at South Belfast special school**

### Board buses/taxis

Perceptions of the Board buses varied, with some examples of pupils being embarrassed and stigmatised by travelling on them, although others liked the fact they had a consistent driver and/or escort whom they got to know. Some worries were expressed about taxis used to transport children with special needs, around sub-contracting, changes of drivers and handling of young children.

*Sub-contracting is a common practice, which pupils and staff consider inappropriate for SEN pupils. These pupils have specific needs and changing the driver on a daily basis can be distressing for certain pupils.*

**School staff, special school, Belfast**

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Needs assessments and appropriate transport

Not all pupils who have a statement of SEN or who have identified SEN will have additional transport needs. In addition, there will be some pupils with medical or temporary needs who would not require special educational support, but who do require additional transport assistance. Transport entitlement and the level of provision, should be needs led.

In 2005, the Equal Lives review of services for people with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland was concerned about the difficulties arising from inadequate transport provision, including for those in rural areas. It highlighted the benefits of travel training schemes that increased the capacity of individuals to make fuller use of public transport, and the on-going cost of maintaining dependency on door-to-door transport, with over a quarter of health and social care day services expenditure being spent on transport.<sup>56</sup> The review recommended that DE and Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) should:

***“ensure that young people with a learning disability are equipped with skills to use public transport where possible through appropriately targeted independent travel training programmes. Where possible these should become part of the curriculum and continuing education plans for young adults.”<sup>57</sup>***

In 2012, the Children’s Commissioner’s research into transition to adulthood again raised the lack of consideration of transport at transition planning stage for pupils with learning disabilities, and the shortage of suitable transport support and independent travel initiatives, particularly for those in rural areas. It reiterated the need for independent travel initiatives for young people with disabilities.<sup>58</sup> This review found there continues to be a need for transition planning to consider transport, and travel training support for young people. This was a view raised by SEN staff and parents themselves, as well as advocacy groups.

<sup>56</sup> Bamford Review (2005) Equal Lives - Independent Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability pp 49.

<sup>57</sup> Bamford Review (2005) Recommendation 21 pp 56.

<sup>58</sup> Lundy L, Byrne & P McKeown (September 2012) Review of Transitions to Adult Services for Young People with Learning Disabilities. NICCY pp 6 & 61.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

*“Many children with autism would benefit from autism specific travel training and training on how to keep safe alongside social skills. ...[this] could play an enormous role in promoting independence and preparing young people for college or life after school”*

National Autistic Society

### Education Other Than At School (EOTAS)

Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) includes all forms of education that takes place outside the formal school environment. This may include provision for School Age Mothers (SAMs), or pupils undertaking home or hospital tuition, although the majority of pupils for whom it applies are those at risk of exclusion from school. All ELBs offer some EOTAS up to the age of 16, using either Board provision or voluntary agencies. Two Boards have facilities for pupils aged 16-19 years.

Pupils being expelled from school or who are at risk of expulsion are usually referred to EOTAS following a Multi Agency Support team meeting, which assesses the range of support already tried within school and at home, and the level of success that has been achieved. In some circumstances, a Board may not approve an EOTAS placement for a pupil, but instead propose further specialist help within the school.

Few of the AEP units in Northern Ireland are purpose built (exceptions include a new establishment in Omagh opening with effect from 2014/15). They are often located in rented properties or small schools no longer in use as mainstream schools. These units have large catchment areas drawing pupils from a wide range of schools, but their location exacerbates the transport issues, as often they are not sited close to areas from where their pupils are drawn.

The AEP placement is funded by drawing down from the Age Weighted Pupil allowance at the pupil's school, based on the proportion of the time in AEP and in school. In practice, this does not cover the full cost of the transport or the placement; therefore, additional funding may come from the ELB for the placement and, in some cases, also for the transport.

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There is no earmarked funding for EOTAS transport provision. Some ELBs use a small part of their EOTAS' allocation to pay for the transport costs, others use their core funding. In some ELBs, the costs of transport are included as part of the overall funding that is required once a decision is made to send a child to a particular EOTAS centre. In other Boards, the transport team have a budget for transport to AEP, and the EOTAS team will pass on a request for transport arrangements to be made on their behalf.

About 600 pupils receive EOTAS, with approximately 65 awaiting a placement at the time of writing. Only a minority of these pupils receive Board funded transport (although other young people may receive transport provided directly by the unit or establishment), which usually involves either use of Board bus or taxi (see Table 14). There are some perceptions that providing door-to-door taxis is seen as “rewarding” bad behaviour, but discussions with young people (and staff) in AEP highlighted that often these young people are particularly vulnerable, and lack the confidence of their peers in using the general public transport network.

**Table 14:**

### TRANSPORT PROVISION FOR PUPILS IN EOTAS, 2012/13

	Board vehicles	Translink	Metro	NIR	Taxis	Private contractors	Total
Expenditure	£8,930	£8,424	£1,068	£107	£144,811	£9,072	£172,412
Number of pupils transported	32	12	2	1	88	12	147
Ave unit cost	£279	£702	£534	£107	£1,646	£756	£1,173

Young people themselves at one AEP agreed they would be unlikely to attend if they had to make their own way to it. One ELB that had moved to using taxis reported having seen attendance increase by 20% as a result. Other AEP centres reported using their own minibuses to collect their pupils, which had the advantage of providing staff opportunities to engage with parents as well as encouraging young people to attend. In Belfast, those in AEP make their own way but are often locally based, with short journeys.

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The Panel heard considerable evidence about children in EOTAS provision, and of their complex needs, with increasing numbers having mental health conditions, chaotic home lives, special educational needs and often behavioural problems. This has implications for the type of transport required, notably the need for drivers' and escorts' training to cover topics such as de-escalation techniques and behaviour management. The lack of co-terminosity of Health and Social Care Trust (HSC) Trusts and ELBs boundaries further complicates planning for these young people, whose additional needs usually span education, social care and health.

### Looked After Children (LACs)

Looked after children (LACs) are children who are looked after by HSC Trusts and who either are in the care of the authority or provided with accommodation by the Trust. Increasing numbers of children in Northern Ireland are defined as being Looked After, which includes those who are in children's homes or living with foster parents (either kinship or other foster carers).

In March 2013, there were 2,807 LACs in Northern Ireland of which approximately 1,600 were of compulsory school age. The majority of young people who are looked after are in foster care (75%), with the remainder placed with family, in residential care or other care.<sup>59</sup> Approximately half of these young people are boys, and nearly a quarter have a statement of special educational needs. The total number of LACs has been rising in recent years and is expected to continue to increase.

Transport issues for these young people centre on ensuring stability of their education, as many of their foster care placements may be short term and volatile, requiring rapid responses in arrangements being made or changed for them. During the year 2012/13, nearly 1,000 children were admitted to care and more than 800 were discharged from care.<sup>60</sup> Transport to and from school is often required to be arranged or changed at short notice. However, there is frequently tension regarding who pays for such transport, whether it is the HSC Trust who place the child or ELB who educate the child. Difficulties (and delays in setting up arrangements) are then compounded when the placement is out of a Trust area, or involves transport to another ELB area.

<sup>59</sup> DHSSPS Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2012/13 Summary and tables 3.1 and 3.3.

<sup>60</sup> DHSSPS Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2012/13 pp 11.

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Even when these children receive taxi transport, they may be precluded from participating in local social contact with friends or after-school activities due to long journeys home, and when they are singled out for individual transport services this can exacerbate bullying. The Panel heard that often the reliance on taxis combined with concerns about risk by children's homes, reduces the opportunities for these young people to develop their independent travel skills. However, taxi transport does provide these children with continued access to their school to maintain some stability of placement.

Concerns were raised with the Panel about poor attendance and attainment being particularly acute for those who are looked after in children's homes. For these young people the lack of peer encouragement, low aspirations and expectations, and inadequate support for homework were all said by advocacy groups to strengthen the need for ensuring timely, consistent and reliable access to school, and to after-school teaching and activities.

*School can be the core element of stability and the care plan often recommends that the child should not move school - but there is a lack of flexibility with transport and pressure to move school - a lack of flexibility that can lead to placement breakdown. If a child needs a taxi to get to school there is tension over who is responsible for paying for it - the Health Trust or ELB.*

*Foster children come with a range additional challenges - it should be made as easy as possible for them to attend school, and transport is a relatively easy barrier to fix.*

Fostering Network NI

Advocacy groups for LACs spoke to the Panel about the growing use of kinship placements and the shortage of foster care placements. This can mean journeys to school are long for these children. This growth in kinship placements can create other transport difficulties, as many of the carers are grandparents who may be older with higher levels of disability or poverty, and have less mobility or lack availability to private transport.



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

It was also suggested that for these young people, there was a need for foster parents to have delegated authority to allow children to use transport to participate in broader educational opportunities e.g. school trips during the day or intra-day transport that involves them moving off site to other schools or colleges. Without this, such children may be excluded from participating fully in their education.

### School Age Mothers (SAMs)

Research has shown that teenage parents and their children are more vulnerable than their peers, but that many of their poor outcomes educationally are preventable if appropriate services are put in place. Most young mothers want to stay in education, and good practice has shown that access to services including child care and transport and coordinated support can make a difference.<sup>61</sup> The ETI, in its survey of educational provision for school age mothers in Northern Ireland in 2005, highlighted the need for consistent approaches across ELBs in relation to transport, security of funding and certainty about on-going support.<sup>62</sup>

The first project for school age mothers in Northern Ireland was set up in NEELB in response to young mothers not completing their education following the birth of their child and the 1997 strategy produced jointly by DE, ELBs and CCMS to encourage improved support for school age mothers. Today the SAMs projects across the Boards differ in design due to the mixture of urban and rural settings and the facilities available in different areas. The nature of them has also changed over the years, with more young mothers now being supported within mainstream education and a minimum amount of time spent outside school.

### School transport for SAMs

Approximately 200 young mothers a year are supported by the ELBs, about a third of whom live within the BELB area, although numbers in all areas have been falling in recent years.

<sup>61</sup> Fullerton D & A Hayes (undated) What Next for School Age Mothers - Barnardo's Northern Ireland

<sup>62</sup> ETI (2005) Report of a Survey of the Educational Provision for School Age Mothers in Northern Ireland

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Table 15:

### SCHOOL AGE MOTHERS BY BOARD AREA, 2009/10-2012/13

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
09/10	97	64	49	54	38	302
10/11	86	55	27	44	31	243
11/12	68	47	30	59	30	234
12/13	66	49	29	47	27	218

DE provides funding to ELBs for a coordinator post, educational tutors and child care costs, as well as to provide transport. The total costs for the child care and taxi provision are approximately £400,000 a year.

The scheme provides transport for young mothers, who are collected from home by taxi with their child, taken to the child's crèche or nursery/child care and then the mother is taken on to school. If the mother does not attend school her child care allowance is affected.

The Panel met with young mothers in BELB who reported being engaged with the project and continuing to participate (and thrive) in education. Discussions with young mothers in Belfast and elsewhere highlighted the importance of taxi transport to enable them to take their children to day care en-route to school. Overall, they were appreciative of the transport support they receive and its role in enabling them to continue in education. However, greater flexibility from transport services was needed by them to accommodate variations in timetables, for example due to exams, or wanting to stay late to catch up on work missed whilst caring for their new born child.

One young mother raised concern about the need for the contract for their transport to be with a taxi company that could offer sufficient capacity and be able to respond quickly if there was an urgent need such as illness.

In Belfast, the SAMs spend one day a week based at Loughshore Education Resource Centre. Staff and young mothers spoke of the value of this in providing a supportive environment for them to come together from across the city, and an opportunity to meet their peers. For the remainder of the week they attend their school. Transport

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is arranged by Loughshore for them to travel to the centre, and for other days it is organised by the Board. This means there are two sets of arrangements and two taxi operators providing transport for some mothers, leading to a lack of clarity and inconsistency.

### Travellers

Under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 each public authority (excluding schools but including DE and ELBs) has a duty to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different racial groups, including travellers.

There are nearly 900 traveller children in Northern Ireland's schools, 617 in primary schools, 249 in post-primary schools and 31 in special schools, representing 0.3% of the school population. These children are more economically disadvantaged than their counterparts, with nearly 80% entitled to FSM, and they have a markedly higher absence rate than any other ethnic group. In 2012/13, Irish traveller children did not attend for 26% of all half days and 13.6% of the half days were unauthorised absences, compared to 5.1% half days missed and 1.4% unauthorised absences for primary school pupils overall. At post-primary level the rates are even more marked. Irish traveller children missed more than 42% of half days in 2012/13 compared to 7.1% for post-primary school pupils overall.<sup>63</sup> Irish travellers also have low education completion rates and underachieve educationally. From 2007/08 -2011/12 (inclusive), 67% did not achieve any GCSEs. (compared to 23.5% for the school population overall).<sup>64</sup>

Most traveller pupils in Northern Ireland attend their local primary or post-primary school without dedicated school transport being provided for them.<sup>65</sup> The exception is an historic arrangement by two Boards, where free transport was introduced to schools in Belfast to prevent bullying and support attendance. Free transport continues to be provided by these Boards, using three vehicles for approximately eighty

<sup>63</sup> DENI Statistical press release (28 February 2014) Attendance at grant-aided primary, postprimary and special schools 2013/14 Detailed statistics.

<sup>64</sup> Email correspondence DE Statistics & Research Team 8 May 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Traveller Education Support Service.

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traveller children to attend primary schools in Belfast, including for pupils who live within the walking distance. Additionally, a small number are transported by taxi to various primary and post-primary schools in the city. This provision is now costing approximately £180,000 per annum.

Evidence from the ELBs' Traveller Education Support Service suggested that targeted transport support is not the main factor influencing attendance or attainment at school; rather it is thought to be related to cultural factors. Despite school transport being provided attendance, although increasing, remains poor. For example, in BELB for travellers at post-primary level it has risen from 48.5% in 2010/11 to 51.7% in 2011/12, but compares to 93% for post-primary pupils overall in Belfast.

It was argued that transport has, in this case, proven to be a 'hindrance' by creating a divisive level of service, with a small number of travellers qualifying in one particular area and stigmatising others by marking out those who receive it. The transport provision into Belfast schools, it was suggested, was based on custom and practice, with little rationale for it to continue.

However, travellers at a focus group in Belfast emphasised the need for their children to attend those schools at which they were welcome, and said that their children would face discrimination if they attended other schools. They stated that if no school transport was provided, they would not send their children to school. Those in receipt of the free transport argued it continued to serve its purpose, although conceding that school attendance by traveller children remained weak.

### Newcomers

Newcomer pupils are those who have enrolled in a school but who do not have the satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum or the wider environment, and do not have a language in common with the teacher. This has previously been referred to as English as an Additional Language.

There has been a seven-fold increase in the number of newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland's schools since 2001/2, from 1,360 registered pupils to over 9,000 by 2012/13.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> DE School Census Number of Newcomer Pupils at schools in Northern Ireland.

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The most marked changes have been in the numbers of pupils in nursery and primary schools, indicating this is a trend that is set to continue. Additionally, there is increasing diversity in the newcomer population.

Entitlement to transport for this group is based on the same criteria as for other pupils, on distance, age, school attended and need. The Panel heard no evidence this group is excluded from school transport, or that school transport policies or its provision adversely affect these pupils, or that there is a lack of awareness of entitlement policies.

### Shared custody

One group whom the current transport policies do not take into account is the increasing number of pupils living between two parents' homes. Those who received sessional tickets, but who lived some of the week with one parent and part with another, felt that they were disadvantaged as transport was provided from only one of the addresses.

## 6. Does the current system of home to school transport provide a safe, secure and high quality journey?

### Transport standards

In addition to assessing the safety of walking route, Boards are required to provide transport for eligible pupils to enable them to travel in safety and reasonable comfort.<sup>67</sup> Transport providers in Northern Ireland, whether Boards, Translink or private contractors must comply with a system of route, vehicle, operator and driver licensing.

All bus and coach operators, using vehicles that can carry nine or more passengers for hire or reward, are required to have a valid operator's licence, which demonstrates their suitability to provide transport services. The Transport Act (NI) 1967 also provides for a permanent exemption from licensing through the 10B permit system. This was

<sup>67</sup> DE Circular 1996/41 Para. 5.3.

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introduced for voluntary groups carrying out a range of activities associated with education, religion, social welfare and other activities that benefit the community. District councils along with ELBs and Health and Social Care Trusts are among the designated bodies that are entitled to grant such permits. Translink services are provided under the terms of an operator's license, and ELBs operate some of their fleet under operator licensing and some under 10B licenses.

The Taxi Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 introduced a new licensing regime for all taxis, taxi drivers and operators. There are approximately 2,000 licensed taxi operators across Northern Ireland. From January 2015, there will be a single tier of taxi licensing, merging formerly public and private hire licenses, and a specific category for wheelchair accessible taxis applicable to those taxis that stand at ranks. An AccessNI enhanced level check is already required for all taxi drivers, but new drivers will be required to take a taxi driving test and all drivers will be required to undertake vocational training.

In Belfast and Derry city, there is a category of a taxi bus, which may claim fuel duty rebate and operate as a bus for specified routes, but as a taxi at other times. There are approximately 200 of these operating in Northern Ireland.

There have been a number of recent changes to school bus and public transport safety standards in Northern Ireland including:

- from 2007 the removal of the concession to allow three children to be seated on a double seat, and no standing on dedicated routes; and
- from September 2014 revised requirements for lighting and signage on Board and dedicated school buses take effect and apply to those buses operated by ELBs, Translink and other private operators providing services not available to the general public.

### School journey safety

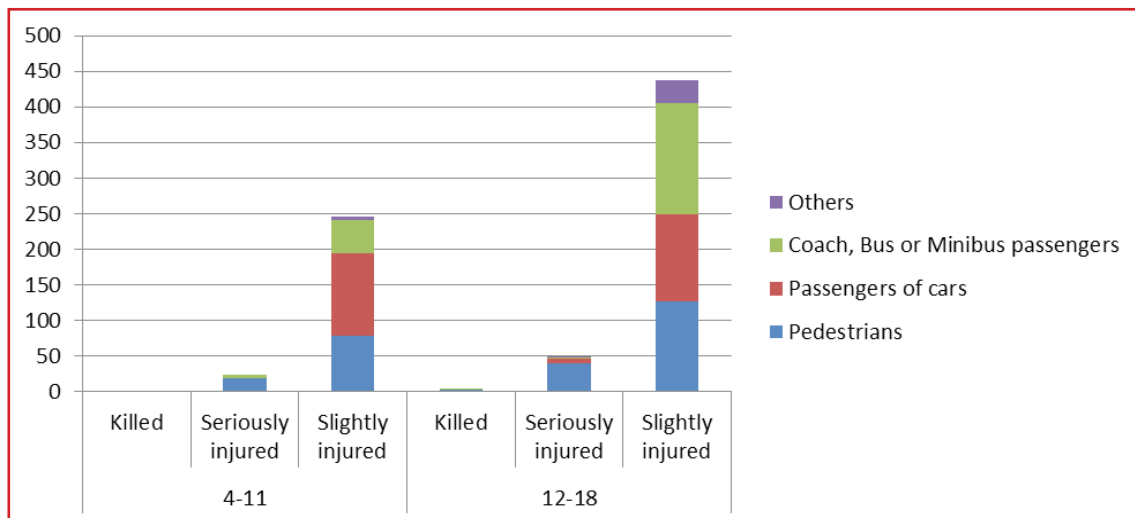
The number of young people involved in road traffic collisions and who are killed or injured in Northern Ireland has been falling in recent years. Despite this, young people (aged 16-24) still represent the highest proportion of those killed or seriously injured

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by age group.<sup>68</sup> Reported traffic injury collisions and casualties per 100,000 population and per 10,000 vehicles remain higher in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK.<sup>69</sup> Children as pedestrians and cyclists remain particularly at risk, and the number of pedal cyclists killed or seriously injured has increased over the past four years.<sup>70</sup>

On the journey to school, three children aged 4-18 years were killed and 73 were seriously injured in the five years between 2008 and 2012, 80% of those killed or seriously injured were pedestrians, 10% were coach, bus or minibus passengers.<sup>71</sup> On average, 42 children are injured each year on the journey to and from school when travelling by bus, minibus or coach. Although buses and coaches remain safe modes in relation to the distance travelled and proportion of trips, those as pedestrians (and all journeys involve some element of walking, including to and from bus stop) remain more vulnerable. Nearly a quarter (23%) of all recorded pedestrian casualties on the school journey were fatally or seriously injured, whereas less than 3.5% of bus and coach casualties were.<sup>72</sup>

### SCHOOL JOURNEY CASUALTIES, AGED 4-18 YEARS BY MODE 2008-2012



<sup>68</sup> PSNI Police recorded injury road traffic collisions and casualties, Northern Ireland. Detailed Trends Report 2013 (25th June 2014).

<sup>69</sup> Reported road traffic injury collisions 317 per 100,000 in NI compared to 243 England, 184 Scotland and 194 Wales; per 10,000 vehicles 54, 44, 36 and 34 respectively. Casualties >70% higher in NI than Wales. NI Transport Statistics 2012-13 Chapter 5 Road Safety.

<sup>70</sup> PSNI Police recorded injury road traffic collisions and casualties, Northern Ireland. Detailed Trends Report 2013 (25th June 2014) pp 10.

<sup>71</sup> DOE email correspondence July 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Note in part this may represent under reporting of slight pedestrian casualties, whereas it is often a contractual requirement for bus/coach operators to report all severity of accident.

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### Public transport and Board buses

Pupils generally reported feeling safe on school transport, with responses from the Call for Evidence ranking Board buses, private hire, taxis and Translink services at between 7-7.6/10 in terms of overall quality.

#### Drivers

Overall, there was considerable praise for Board bus drivers, with whom pupils often developed good relationships. Pupils liked the fact they had a regular driver who got to know them.

*Pupils feel safe on the buses - the drivers are very good.*

*The Board bus driver turns the bus so pupils do not have to cross the road to get the bus.*

Primary school focus group

There was some criticism about Translink drivers, mainly around the issue of forgotten passes, with young people commenting on the inconsistency of approach by Translink drivers. Some drivers were more willing to believe pupils about their entitlement to travel, but others challenged them, charged different rates or did not allow them to travel at all. However, there was also praise for some Translink drivers.

*Some bus drivers can be helpful going the extra mile, particularly if you miss a stop and don't know the way.*

Pupil at focus group at Finaghy Youth Centre

#### Vehicle quality

There has been considerable investment in the Translink and Board fleets in recent years, with a reduction in the average age of both fleets. Translink vehicles are now



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on average only 6.7 years old.<sup>73</sup> In addition, investment since 2006/7 has enabled the removal of the three-for-two seating concession, which allowed three children under 14 years of age to share a double seat, and the updating of lighting and signage of vehicles.

Vehicle quality was not seen as a particular issue on Translink services by most pupils, although some schools reported older vehicles being used with poor quality seating and no seat belts. Feedback from pupils was that generally the provision by Board vehicles worked well, although there were some reports of vehicle breakdowns, and non-operation on occasions, usually in bad weather. The issue of breakdowns was more worrying for those pupils using wheelchairs, who depended on the availability of a replacement lift-equipped vehicle.

Pupils travelling on Board buses liked the fact they were guaranteed a seat on the vehicle or in some cases were allocated a seat. Pupils from one primary school explained how they were able to have a friend travel home with them from school if they wanted, as there was often space on the Board buses when other pupils stayed late for after-school clubs. The afternoon journeys on some Board buses were not being fully utilised every day, and therefore, enabled pupils to invite friends home to visit, which was an important social benefit for young pupils in rural areas.

### Seat belts

The consistent theme at meetings with all young people in post-primary schools was that seat belts on Translink buses, when available, were rarely worn. Similarly, on Board buses they were reportedly often not used. Some of the young people at focus groups told the Panel that first year pupils typically started to wear seat belts, but rapidly realised it was “uncool” and then ceased to bother. Even at a school where there had been a serious (fatal) school bus accident, and the importance of seat belts was known, they were rarely worn.

Pupils reported that Board bus drivers often ensured seat belts were worn at the start of journeys, but that seat belts were then removed. (Likewise, school staff reported

<sup>73</sup> Going Places, Connecting People Translink Annual Report and Accounts 2012/13 pp62.

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that they tried to ensure young children were wearing seat belts when buses left school). The message and importance of wearing seat belts was widely known, but peer pressure prevailed and was seen as the main reason for not wearing seat belts where fitted.

### Overcrowding

Feedback from the NI Youth Forum focus group was that overcrowding on school bus services was a persistent issue on certain routes. These were comments reiterated by almost every group of young people spoken to, and was the most pressing and consistent area of concern to pupils about school transport, across Northern Ireland.

Many reported routes reduced from double deck to single deck capacity or from three buses to two between morning and afternoon runs. However, the Panel's observations at Omagh bus depot<sup>74</sup> and outside several schools during week day afternoons showed little over crowding of buses. At some schools the large numbers of pupils trying to get on buses immediately outside schools did mean they were often full and pupils were observed having to wait for subsequent buses to come past the stop, or to walk to nearby stops to get on alternative services.

School staff reported that overcrowding occurred when pupils tended to wait for and use the latest bus possible, rather than earlier buses that had sufficient capacity.

*Buses are overcrowded; there is not enough seating available. Sometimes they are so overcrowded that pupils are unable to get off at the right stop and school bags fill up bus aisles so it is difficult to get past these. Some days double decker buses are provided others single.*

*Pupil comments from East Belfast schools' focus group.*

*There are lots of people standing some days - although not in a morning as pupils get lifts.*

**Pupil comments, focus group Dungannon school**

<sup>74</sup> March 5th afternoon

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Schools, including some in East Belfast, reported problems with historic public transport networks where capacity was no longer sufficient to reflect the changing catchment areas of pupils. Examples were provided in the Comber and Dundonald areas. Pupils were also worried about bus drivers leaving pupils standing at bus stops due to buses already being full by the time they arrived.

*Sometimes a bus with available places drives past waiting pupils. the bus drivers will refuse pupils entry telling them they can get the next bus, but then the later bus make pupils late for school*

Pupils, focus group at Ballymena

*There's a lack of capacity and some pupils have to stand. Sometimes drivers drive past the stop and don't let pupils on.*

Pupil, focus group at Newtownards

Pupils expressed concern that their passes were not checked, so there was no oversight on who should be travelling. They reported other pupils taking a chance on using the bus, or getting on a more convenient bus for which their pass was not eligible, leading to overcrowding on some routes. School staff and pupils also reported evidence of cashing in, and the “selling on” of sessional tickets to non-eligible pupils.

*There is inconsistency amongst drivers in the checking of passes - some check - others will ask to see if they do not recognise the pupils, some make the pupil pay if they have forgotten their pass, whereas others might complain but would still allow the pupil to travel for free.*

Pupil comment from focus group at Dungannon

*“it is well known that in certain areas, families claim the free travel pass and do not use it and then sell it onto families that aren't eligible”*

Parent of pupil receiving transport

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### Walking & cycling

Pupils repeatedly raised concerns about road safety when walking or cycling, particularly on rural roads, which were often unlit or had no pavements. This included road safety for pupils who had to walk to or from bus routes, as well as for those who did not qualify for school transport.

The long walk to and location of bus stops were frequently highlighted, particularly, but not always in rural areas. One group of rural pupils told us that the distance from home to bus stop could be so long that parents think they might as well take the child the whole journey to school.

*A lot of parents drop off pupils from rural areas at bus stops as there are no buses near to where they live and they have over one mile to walk to get the bus.*

**Pupils at focus group in Ballynahinch**

*The location of the pick up was moved because it was unsafe but this had to be fought for.*

**School staff member, East Belfast school**

Numerous safety concerns were raised by pupils at focus groups about them having to cross roads to or from buses (although at one primary school the Panel was told by pupils that the Board explicitly routed their Board buses to pick up pupils without them needing to cross a road). One specific example that illustrated these worries included a bus stop on the A1 where pupils felt considerable unease about their safety especially in the dark and during the winter crossing this major dual carriageway.

Pupils also reported differing responses from drivers trying to manage safety around the bus when pupils were boarding and alighting:

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*Some drivers are strict and do not allow pupils to cross the road in front of the bus. One driver will blast the horn - the main Dungannon road is very busy and traffic is coming from the motorway.*

*The majority of pupils have to cross the road to get picked up. Older pupils tend to keep a watch on the younger pupils. They have had to grab some of the younger ones when they have tried to cross the road when it wasn't safe.*

**Comments from pupils at focus group in Dungannon**

### Bullying and behaviour on buses

During the review pupil behaviour on Translink services was not seen as a particular problem, although several older pupils commented that first year pupils could be badly behaved. Bus monitors, prefects or bus captains (various terms are used at different schools) helped improve and oversee the behaviour of younger pupils. This worked well when all the pupils on a vehicle were from one school, but was more difficult when buses were carrying pupils from several schools, as monitors or prefects could only be expected to be responsible for their own school's pupils' behaviour.

*Our school has bus captains to monitor behaviour and we have very few bus behaviour issues.*

*The bus monitors are senior prefects and notify the teachers if there are any incidents - this works well.*

**Comments from pupils, focus group Ballynahinch**

*Unsociable behaviour is usually from the First Years - there is no bus monitor or supervisor but sixth formers are on the bus and help with controlling pupils*

**Comment from pupil at focus group**

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There were however, some exceptions.

*The bus is very noisy, pupils running up and down the aisle, boys pulling the girls' hair, teasing, boys distracting the driver, pupils littering the bus - chaos....no supervision so the driver has to stop to tell pupils off which adds time onto the journey.*

**Pupil's comments from focus group in Ballygawley**

Pupils reported that the responses of bus drivers to mis-behaviour varied, with some drivers intervening and maintaining order, and others not.

Many children raised the issue of buses dropping off or picking up pupils at major bus stations and in town centres rather than at schools, necessitating transfers or walks through towns where there were congregations of large numbers of pupils. In general, young people were happy to share facilities with pupils from other schools and reported few difficulties. This was consistent with our observations at schools and bus stations.

One pupil commented on his sympathy with members of the public having to share buses with them, acknowledging that the noise and rowdiness may be an issue for the general public using public transport. Others reported shared use of buses by pupils and the public as not being an issue on their routes, and that although the noise levels were high, generally there was little trouble or conflict.

Observations at several schools highlighted varying practices regarding drop off and pick up arrangements and management of safety at school entrances or within school sites. Some were well organised and well supervised;<sup>75</sup> with parents picking up by car located well away from the areas where buses were loading and unloading or from pedestrians, but others had movement of cars mixing with pedestrians and buses. The need for good quality advice and guidance on the layout of school sites to minimise vehicle/pedestrian/cycle conflicts was evident at many schools. This included several new build schools where there was inadequate area for buses to drop off, poor visibility

<sup>75</sup> Including St Patrick's Academy Dungannon and Lagan College where large numbers of buses had well managed parking and segregated waiting, well supervised by staff.

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of boarding/alighting areas, or drop off areas were located away from school entrances requiring pupils to walk between parked cars.

Parents and special needs groups raised concerns about quality and vetting procedures, (although all drivers and escorts are subject to vetting and background checks).<sup>76</sup> Particular unease involved the use of substitute drivers/escorts. Often there appeared to be a lack of understanding as to what checks were already undertaken by Boards and what standards are required of private contractors, suggesting scope for improved information for parents and schools to provide reassurance.

### Hostile areas

The issue of perceived hostile areas was raised on few occasions. When it was raised, it tended to fall into two categories. Firstly, there are those pupils who must transfer from one bus to another at a mixed location and secondly, those pupils who are ineligible for transport but whose shortest walking route traverses an area perceived as hostile.

The first category of concern raised regarded pupils walking through a “mixed” location, to or from school or after school, in a school uniform that would affiliate them with as attending a school perceived as either Catholic or Protestant. The fear was that they would be targeted because of their religious background. Specific locations the Panel were informed of included Belfast city centre and bus centres or bus stations where large numbers of pupils from multiple schools come together.

Translink and schools have taken steps to ensure that supervision is in place at several locations. The Panel undertook an unannounced visit to observe Omagh bus station when pupils from at least five different schools converge at approximately the same time. The presence and actions of a large number of Translink personnel there demonstrated considerable concern for pupils’ safety and was reflected in an orderly and efficient departure of several hundred pupils by buses.

<sup>76</sup> All taxi and PSV drivers are required to have an AccessNI check, to enhanced standard if working on school contracts. Taxi licensing has recently changed, and there are further improvements proposed including the development of a taxi driver test for new drivers, and requirements for continuous training of 35 hours within the first five years of holding a license, which is likely to focus on disability awareness/carriage of people with disabilities. Enforcement of bus and taxi licensing is with DVA, but it is envisaged that the Transport Regulation Unit recently established to oversee freight standards, will be the model for improvements to the oversight of the bus and taxi industries.

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The NEELB provided an example of a Safe School Transport Group led by the Borough Council in Ballymena, which was set up to combat incidents that might lead to a hostile environment for pupils travelling to and from school. This included representatives from the local schools, NEELB, Translink, and PSNI. NEELB reported that this group met on a monthly basis and proved to be invaluable in dealing with very difficult issues at that time. Although the group no longer meets formally, the contacts made continue to be used regularly. While the type of monitoring and supervision, and levels of staffing observed in Omagh may not be possible in Belfast city centre, a schools' forum approach may provide a method of de-escalating any potential conflicts.

The second category of concern raised related to those pupils ineligible for transport assistance to their chosen school, living within the three mile statutory limit, but whose shortest walking route passes through a perceived hostile area. In 2011, a judicial review<sup>77</sup> was brought regarding this, on behalf of a pupil from Belfast Model School for Girls, challenging a decision of the BELB not to provide her with transport.

One of the arguments put before the court was that exceptional circumstances existed in her case, because if she was to walk through Ardoyne in her school uniform, she would be identified as a Protestant and this could give rise to risks for her. A safe walking route to the school was proposed, which would have increased the walking distance beyond the three-mile limit. As such, the applicant was seeking entitlement to a sessional bus pass to enable the pupil to bypass this area. BELB asserted that the pupil's case was by no means exceptional, as they received many requests for transport on the grounds that the nearest route passed through a perceived hostile area. Furthermore, they pointed out that while the distance measured was the shortest walking route, it did not mean the child had to walk to school by that route or at all. It was merely a calculation of the shortest walking distance upon which responsibility for transport costs was determined.

Rejecting the applicant's case, Mr Justice Treacy found that "the statutory distance operates as "a 'bright line' demarcation between categories of children. Like all such 'bright lines', there is an unavoidable element of arbitrariness both in the selection of the cut-off point and the consequences that may flow from having any such rule". The judgement was clear, that whilst this may appear arbitrary and unfair

<sup>77</sup> Re HR (a minor's) Application [2013] NIQB 105.



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in some cases this is a consequence of the state having “limited resources” and in allocating these resources “it must devise rules of general application to everyone”. The mere perception of a hostile area is, therefore, not sufficient grounds to justify transport assistance outside of the Board policy. However, it is apparent from the judgement that hostility on a school route could possibly be grounds for exceptional circumstances, if there was evidence of actual risk. It is noted that BELB was prepared to “consider evidence of actual and specific risks in any case”.

It is clear that hostile area issues prompt unease for some pupils and their families and that some incidents have occurred, such as in January 2014 when pupils in north Belfast were subject to sectarian abuse and attack on a bus. Despite this incident, these problems do not appear to be widespread, nor do they affect the vast majority of pupils as they travel to and from school.

Neither stakeholders in meetings, young people in focus groups, or responses to the Call for Evidence indicated this was a widespread problem for pupils. On the contrary, many examples were provided of circumstances where pupils from different schools and religious backgrounds regularly shared transport and public areas without incident. As such, it is apparent to the Panel that issues of hostile areas are localised matters and require local solutions. A Safer Travel Group or forum including representatives from all schools and the PSNI can resolve matters, and serves as a good example of how a local solution can be achieved.

### **7. Does home to school transport support other Departmental and Government objectives and policies?**

#### Departmental and Government policies

Home to school transport can support and influence the delivery of a number of DE and broader Government objectives and policies, spanning environmental, educational, safety, sustainable transport and health outcomes. Of particular relevance to this review are:

- The NI Executive’s Programme for Government;

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- Road Safety Strategy, the Department of Environment's strategy to 2020; and
- A Fitter Future for All, which is the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's (DHSSPS) framework to 2022 for preventing and addressing overweight and obesity in Northern Ireland.

### Programme for Government

The Executive's Programme for Government sets out its priorities for the years 2011-2015, which include:

**Priority 2:** Tackling disadvantage and improving health and well being to:

- Improve **literacy and numeracy levels among all school leavers, with additional support targeted at underachieving pupils** through the programme developed, delivered and monitored.

In addition, **Priority 3** of its Programme for Government: Protect people, the environment and safer communities theme relates to **sustainable travel** to schools, setting specific objectives of:

- Continuing to work towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025;
- Investing over £500 million to promote sustainable modes of travel by 2014/15; and
- By 2015 creating the conditions to facilitate at least 36% of primary school pupils and 22% of secondary school pupils to walk or cycle to school as their main mode of transport.

**Under Priority 4:** Building a strong and shared community there are objectives to promote **shared education**, including to:

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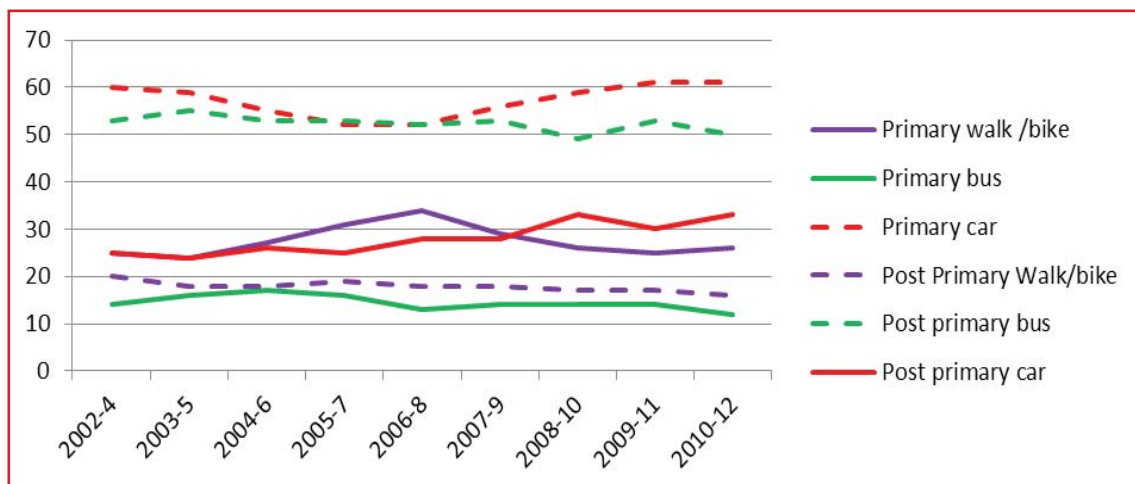
- Progress significantly work on the plan for the Lisanelly Shared Education campus as a key regeneration project, and
- Ensure all children have the opportunity to **participate in shared education** programmes by 2015 and substantially increase the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015.

The Executive's Programme for Government includes an aim of **improving the efficiency of the use of public funding**, including developing Social Clauses in public procurement contracts for supplies, services and construction, streamlining organisational structures and improving online access to Government services.

### Sustainable travel

The Programme for Government target of 36% of primary school pupils and 22% of post-primary school pupils walking or cycling to school as their main mode of transport by 2015 is ambitious given current patterns of travel to school. The National Travel Survey Northern Ireland shows consistently poor and declining levels of walking to and from school. Levels of walking to school are low in comparison to elsewhere in the UK (26% of primary pupils in Northern Ireland compared to 47% in Great Britain in 2010-13, and 16% in post-primary compared to 36% in GB), and levels of car use are high and rising.

### MODE OF TRAVEL TO SCHOOL 2002-2012



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

The exercise of parental choice of school in Northern Ireland is extensive, especially in the denominational and non-denominational grammar sectors where considerable numbers of pupils travel to schools other than the nearest in category, supported by the current home to school transport policy. Analysis undertaken based on 2007/8 data<sup>78</sup> shows (Table 16) that the proportion of post-primary pupils attending their nearest school was only 22% and for grammar schools it was below 12%. Only 5% of grammar school pupils in BELB attended their local school. This pattern of attendance results in long average journeys to school.

**Table 16:**

### AVERAGE DISTANCE AND PROPORTION OF PUPILS ATTENDING THEIR NEAREST SELECTIVE AND NON-SELECTIVE POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL BY BOARD AREA, 2007/8

	Average miles per pupil <sup>79</sup>	% going to nearest school
<b>Grammar</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>11.7%</b>
BELB	5.6	5.1%
NEELB	6.4	17.6%
SEELB	6.2	8.9%
SELB	6.9	15.2%
WELB	6.9	13.1%
<b>Non-selective post-primary</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>29.8%</b>
BELB	2.6	13.3%
NEELB	4.6	31.7%
SEELB	4.1	35.0%
SELB	4.3	38.1%
WELB	4.4	25.4%
<b>All post-primary</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>22.1%</b>

<sup>78</sup> SIB analysis School Access Simulator 2007/08.

<sup>79</sup> Presentation to Panel by Dr Martin Spollen.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

The Travel Survey for Northern Ireland shows average primary school journeys are almost a mile longer than elsewhere in the UK. Post-primary journeys to grammar school are on average nearly three miles longer than the average journey to secondary schools in Britain at more than six miles each way.

The analysis undertaken by SIB suggests that the current journey patterns to post-primary schools result in 1.5 million miles travelled each day. Based on an average attendance at school of 180 days per year, this is equivalent to 270 million miles annually. If all post-primary pupils were attending their nearest school this would fall to 0.7 million miles each day, an estimated 126 million miles annually. In effect, supporting such an extensive choice of school is adding approximately 144 million miles a year in extra travel, and the vast majority of this is by bus or car, as longer journeys to school are less likely to be made on foot or by bike.

Pupils and stakeholders spoke of a range of practical factors dissuading them from walking, even for short journeys. These included uniform design (including heavy, wool blazers) and the colour of uniforms, which are primarily dark, and restrictions on wearing coats and boots to travel to and from school. The lack of storage for books, the need to carry equipment for art, music and sport, and inadequate cloakroom to dry coats were all hindrances and factors deterring pupils from walking. The lack of segregated pedestrian and cycle facilities on roads were also seen as deterrents.

We met few children who cycled to school, although Sustrans claimed there is a latent demand for cycling, and that its pilot schemes in schools have achieved some success in modal shift. Often school sites visited had little, if any, facilities for cyclists. Although cycle proficiency training had been taken by some pupils we spoke to, there was little interest or enthusiasm for cycling due to the lack of segregated cycle ways. Again, the amount of books and equipment for school that pupils were carrying, as well as the uniform designs, were factors making cycling an unattractive mode of travel to school.

School staff expressed anxiety at any proposal to promote cycling given road safety risks in urban areas due to heavy traffic, and in rural areas due to the high speeds and often poor sight lines on rural roads.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

*It is difficult to walk or cycle to school - the roads are too dangerous for cycling and it is difficult to transport books*

**Pupil from East Belfast school**

*There is no encouragement to walk or cycle. Only a select number of pupils in primary school are allowed to do cycling proficiency and that means staying late to 4.15 pm and having to get a bike to/from school by car*

**Pupil, focus group Newtownards**

### Community cohesion and shared education

In its Programme for Government 2011-2015, the Executive committed to advancing shared education through:

- the Lisanelly Shared Education Campus, which is a project to combine six schools (three maintained and two controlled schools and a special school) accommodating nearly 4,000 pupils on one site in Omagh, WELB, with anticipated completion 2020/21;
- providing all children with the opportunity to participate in shared education by 2015; and
- substantially increasing the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015.

The education system in Northern Ireland has traditionally been highly segregated, and arguably remains so with only 7% of pupils attending an Integrated school. In practice, the traditional categorisation of schools is breaking down and today many schools draw pupils from across denominations and a high proportion of schools have some measure of shared education (or collaboration at Key Stage 4 through the Entitlement Framework). Three quarters of schools say they have been involved in shared education during the last academic year, including nearly all post-primary schools.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>80</sup> School Omnibus Survey Shared Education October 2013 - Multi-Purpose Survey of all Principals in grant-aided schools undertaken by DE policy teams.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

The vast majority of parents, children and young people feel that sharing facilities or classes and doing projects with children from other schools is a good idea. Those who have participated in shared education programmes report positive experiences and outcomes.<sup>81</sup> However, common concerns centre on logistical challenges, not least timetabling and transport. Having to travel to get to the other school is the second most frequently cited ‘worst’ thing about shared education.<sup>82</sup>

The Ministerial Advisory Group on advancing shared education<sup>83</sup> concluded that parents should continue to have the choice of an Integrated school, or for a particular faith based education or for a secular school. In effect, this means that a plurality of schools should be respected whilst encouraging collaboration.

Shared education is the organisation and delivery of education so that it meets the needs of, and provides, for, the education together or learners from all Section 75 categories, i.e. children from different racial backgrounds, children with disabilities and without disabilities, children who are carers or school age mothers, and socio-economic status. The Shared Education Signature Project encourages schools to move on a continuum from working in isolation, through organic partnerships, where they are to bring aspects of the schools together on different occasions across the years, through to regular, sustained and shared activity. The higher levels of shared education include developing a culture of collegiality including school planning, budgeting and timetabling and finally interdependence with a federated governance and management structure, and a single resource across the schools. Shared education is to be encouraged throughout a child’s whole education and therefore extends into the earlier years, prior to delivering the Entitlement Framework.

Transport is a cost incurred regularly by schools developing shared education, with 80% of respondents to the School Omnibus survey identifying it as a cost. This is funded from a range of sources including earmarked funding from DE, schools’ own budgets, and external sources (including Peace III and philanthropic sources) as well as other

<sup>81</sup> Advancing Shared Education (March 2013) pp 13.

<sup>82</sup> Shared Education, Views of Children and Young People Research Update No 82 May 2013 ERSC [www.ark.ac.uk](http://www.ark.ac.uk).

<sup>83</sup> Advancing Shared Education (March 2013).

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Government departments. Whilst many advantages were cited by schools involved in shared education including cross community understanding and improved social skills, the time spent travelling was seen as a common disadvantage. The survey concluded, “the greatest concerns [about shared education] appear to be around logistics and financing rather than teaching and learning”.

The current school transport system facilitates travel to an extensive, and more distant, choice of schools and is arguably working against local integration, the development of shared education and Every School A Good School and, with rising costs, is financially unsustainable. However, the development of green-field sites for new school campuses, such as Lisanelly, and of new shared education facilities offer excellent opportunities to achieve coherent travel planning and site improvements to promote greater use of sustainable travel.

### Efficient use of resources

The unit cost, i.e. the cost per pupil transported per year, is often used as a measurement of efficiency for home to school transport. However, using an average figure for all pupils transported can mask wide variations between geographic areas, Boards, modes and school sectors. For example, the cost of transport per pupil would be expected to be higher in BELB as more pupils transported by the Board have special needs, and therefore are more likely to require additional supervision or specialist vehicles, which raises costs.

Achieving meaningful cost comparisons across different school transport operations is difficult due to how costs are apportioned. For example, if one bus carries both primary and post-primary pupils, the cost of the vehicle can be allocated to primary and to post-primary sectors based on the share of the vehicle’s capacity allocated to each school’s pupils. Alternatively, the costs can be allocated based on the share of mileage, or all the costs allocated to the school for which the service was set up, as arguably the spare seats for the other pupils are being provided at a marginal cost, as the service would be operating anyway. How overheads such as central administrative costs and capital/depreciation are reflected will affect unit costs. Although direct comparisons are difficult to make, on a per pupil basis, Northern Ireland’s school transport unit costs appear to compare favourably to the rest of the UK and Ireland.



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Recent reviews of home to school transport in England and Wales, and Ireland, have shown typical unit costs to be £900-£1,100 per year (£750-800 in Ireland - 2008/9 prices). In terms of unit cost of transport, Northern Ireland (at approximately £800) therefore achieves similar levels of costs. This is due to the high volume of pupils travelling and economies of scale achieved, despite journeys being long on average.

A further measure of efficiency is the proportion of the education budget allocated to home to school transport. Home to school transport in Northern Ireland accounts for a large proportion of the overall education budget at 4% compared to 2-2.5% in local authorities in the rest of the UK, and 2% in Ireland.<sup>84</sup>

The high level of expenditure therefore reflects the level of transport, not the efficiency of transport provided. In comparison to other jurisdictions, Northern Ireland has an extremely high proportion of its pupils in receipt of free home to school transport, at nearly 30% compared to about 10-11% in England and Wales. These levels are more comparable to those seen in Sweden and some extremely rural states of the USA.<sup>85</sup> In part, this level of entitlement is due to the rurality of Northern Ireland. However, population density in Northern Ireland at 132 persons/sq km is comparable to Wales at 145 and considerably higher than Scotland at 67. The level of entitlement to free school transport is, therefore, largely determined by the complexity of categorisation and extent of choice of school in Northern Ireland. This is compounded by the policy of allowing eligible pupils to receive school transport to their choice of school in that category, irrespective of distance, rather than only to the nearest school in category.

Whilst rurality of an area is a good predictor of the proportion of pupils who will be in receipt of free school transport, entitlement policies will also influence the level of demand. Data from Ireland, Northern Ireland and local authorities<sup>86</sup> in England show the influence of transport policies on this. Most rural authorities have levels of pupils in receipt of home to school transport about that expected for their population density, however, notable exceptions are those who have retained academic selection and grammar schools. The two rural shire authorities shown below in blue, both adopt

<sup>84</sup> School Transport Scheme as a proportion of total DES outturn expenditure 2008, DES (March 2011) School Transport - A Value for Money Review. pp 31.

<sup>85</sup> Thornthwaite SE (2010) School Transport Policy & Practice. LTT. London.

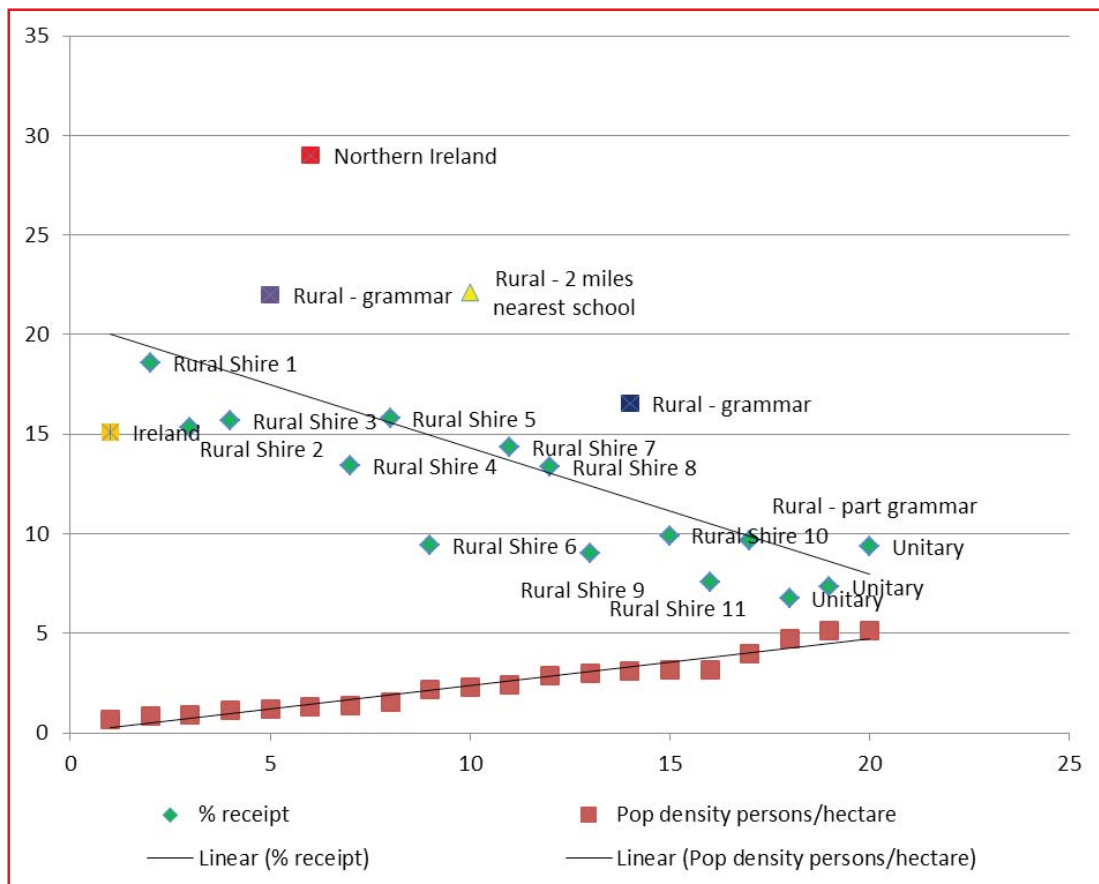
<sup>86</sup> Surveys of local authorities undertaken during 2010 for research for Thornthwaite S E (2011) School Transport Policy & Practice.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

statutory walking distances but do provide free transport to the nearest grammar school only. In both areas, the proportion of pupils in receipt of transport is about five percentage points higher than would otherwise be expected. For the authority that utilises two miles as the distance threshold, but provides transport to the **nearest** school only, such a policy adds approximately eight percentage points to the level of pupils entitled, more than 22% of pupils against an expected 14% given the authority's population density.

DE's policy of allowing transport to any school in category over distance adds a further 13 percentage points to the proportion expected to be entitled given the level of rurality. This equates to about an additional 35,000-40,000 pupils receiving free school transport due to the combination of policies (and additional £30 million expenditure each year).

### IMPACT OF POLICY ON TAKE UP OF FREE SCHOOL TRANSPORT



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Educationalists suggested to the Panel that the expenditure on school transport should be used within the classroom, or that a less generous level of transport would allow redirection of funding to other areas of education, or reinforce the concept of local schools.

There was some evidence of poor auditing of sessional tickets, with anecdotal evidence from pupils of them and others retaining sessional tickets no longer required, so that journeys to visit friends and relatives could be made free of charge, or of selling on their passes when no longer required.

Parents expected audits and checks on the use of such tickets.

*“I assume the Board only pays for journeys actually used and that passes are scanned for this purpose”*

**Parent of pupils receiving transport**

In the Call for Evidence, 69% of respondents were in favour of removing bus passes if pupils did not use them regularly. Although auditing of sessional tickets could be improved, there was little evidence of widespread scope for achieving further efficiency savings other than through improved management of special education transport. Substantive reductions in budget are, therefore, likely to be achieved only through a more effective targeting of entitlement.

### Casualty reduction

Northern Ireland’s Road Safety Strategy to 2020 identifies specific challenges including safety on rural roads, protecting young drivers and improving the understanding of road safety. The Strategy defines targets to reduce the number of children (aged 0 to 15) killed or seriously injured in road collisions by at least 55% by 2020 and to reduce the number of young people (aged 16 to 24) killed or seriously injured in road collisions by at least 55% by 2020, against a baseline of the 2004-8 average.

Several home to school transport policies and practices do not support the delivery of this strategy. Overall, DE’s school transport policy encourages longer journeys. As

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

journey length and the time spent travelling increases, so does exposure to the risk of a road accident, although it is acknowledged that a high proportion of pupils travel by bus or coach, which is a statistically safer mode.

Some visits to schools highlighted poor site design in and around schools, with often poor bus boarding/alighting and parking areas, inadequate pedestrian and cycling infrastructure to and from schools, and little meaningful assessment of route safety for those walking to and from bus stops. Overall, in Northern Ireland the journey to school lacks a coherent vision or approach across Departments, with conflicting policies, ambitions, targets and practice.

One area where home to school transport policy and practice is at variance with road safety aspirations is that of pupils' use of cars to drive to and from school. Feedback from pupils was that considerable numbers of pupils in Years 13 and 14 drive to and from school and between school sites during the day. Many schools had parking available free of charge for pupils' use (one school visited charged £3 per day). One school had actually moved its cycle parking to accommodate more pupils' cars. Another school had provided additional parking to meet demand and to prevent pupils having to park on the main road outside school. Other comments indicated that pupils driving to school were seen by some schools as useful, as they reduced overcrowding on the buses.

The Panel did hear of some good practice in trying to manage this aspect of safety. One school reportedly required pupils driving themselves to register with the school and prove they had insurance, prior to being allowed to drive to school. However, policies allowing pupils to exchange bus passes for monetary allowances, which they use towards the costs of driving cars to school, and the widespread availability of free parking at schools does little to discourage teenage driving.

### Obesity and child health

The number of children aged 2-15 considered overweight in Northern Ireland has remained stable in recent years at about 16%. Overall, nearly 20% of boys and just over a quarter of girls are deemed to be overweight or obese.<sup>87</sup> In its strategy document *A Fitter Future for All*, DHSSPS has set a target of a 3% reduction in levels of childhood obesity by 2022 and 2% in the proportion deemed overweight or obese, compared to 2010-11.

<sup>87</sup> DHSSPS *A Fitter Future for All* pp 27-28.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Outcomes for young people identified in the strategy include no reference to encouraging walking or cycling to school. However, whilst the strategy recognises the need to review planning policies to take into account the impact on opportunities for sustainable physical activity for adults, and to promote the Active Travel Strategy for Northern Ireland, it makes no mention of the journey to school.<sup>88</sup>

This is despite growing evidence of the health benefits of encouraging walking and cycling to schools, and of improved academic learning being linked to higher fitness levels.<sup>89</sup> In addition, the beneficial effects of improving physical health appear to have a more pronounced impact on educational attainment for children at risk and in poverty, as these children are more likely to suffer absences from school due to illness.<sup>90</sup>

### 8. Home to school transport in Northern Ireland today

#### Strengths of the home to school transport system

The system of home to school transport in Northern Ireland has been in place in its present form since the late 1940s, subject only to minor amendments to reflect changes in the education system, including the expansion of Integrated and Irish medium education. An analysis that explores the current system's strengths, weaknesses as well as the opportunities and threats that it is likely to face going forward demonstrates that maintaining the status quo has some strengths:

##### Familiarity & tested regime

The current system of home to school transport has evolved over the past six decades. It is a well-tested approach that has worked in Northern Ireland and across the UK. The approach is based on distance thresholds that are widely understood and recognised, and applied in other jurisdictions. Pupils and schools demonstrated they broadly understood the system, knowing that eligibility to free transport is based on distance from home to school, or on special needs.

<sup>88</sup> DHSSPS A Fitter Future for All pp 64-76.

<sup>89</sup> California Department of Education (2002) News release October 12th 2002.

<sup>90</sup> Powney J, Malcolm H & K Lowman, (2000) Health and Attainment - Review of Literature. University of Glasgow pp 17.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Attendance at school

The review did not find any specific cases where affordability or the lack of transport had been cited as the reason for children being unable to attend school.

For those in receipt of Translink sessional tickets the level of transport offered is often flexible enough to allow for participation in after-school activities, at no additional cost to pupils or parents.

### Safety & Quality

It is a system that delivers safe transport for those in receipt of transport, provided by many high calibre, caring staff within ELBs, Translink and with private contractors, including drivers and escorts. There has been considerable improvement in safety standards and investment in recent years, reducing the average age of Board and Translink fleets, the fitting of seat belts, removal of the three-for-two seating concession, new vehicle signage and lighting, as well as changes to taxi licensing and regulation.

Pupils often spoke highly of the Board bus services they received, with considerable positive feedback being provided about their drivers (and escorts). School staff often praised Translink depot managers at the local level for their flexibility and cooperation in ensuring a high quality and responsive service for schools.

### Efficiency

The cost of service per pupil transported across Northern Ireland remains comparable with other UK areas, and with Ireland, despite often long average journeys to school. These unit costs are being achieved through regular reviews to reduce spare capacity on Board vehicles (“right sizing” the fleet), a move towards greater flexibility of staff contracts in many areas, and renegotiation of charges and procurement of contracts.

The use of Board vehicles during off peak periods offers additional benefits to many schools, with provision for swimming, curricular trips or meals delivery.

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### Bus and public transport use

The current framework of home to school transport in Northern Ireland achieves high levels of bus use, and use of public transport services by eligible pupils. Nearly 30% of Northern Ireland's pupils travel to school by this mode. Figures from SIB suggest that 55% of post-primary age pupils live more than three miles from their school, and data from the Boards indicates that more than 80% of these use free school transport,. This suggests take up of entitlement is high, and results in fewer long distance car journeys for many of these pupils.

Buses and coaches are statistically safer per trip or per mile travelled than other modes including car, walking or cycling. The wide eligibility to free home to school transport is therefore associated with improving overall safety as well as reducing car use during the peak hour, and with the opportunity for the maintenance of a rural public transport network in many areas that would be unlikely otherwise to be sustainable financially.

Several respondents to the Call for Evidence called for maintaining the status quo:

*“Basically - don't radically change what already works well”*

Parent, pupil receiving transport

*“The current system seems to work fairly well”*

Teacher, non-denominational grammar school

### Weaknesses of the home to school transport system

However, there are weaknesses, and considerable dissatisfaction, with the present system highlighted by comments in the Call for Evidence:

*“Free and subsidised transport should be used to further DE policies in particular promoting the Entitlement Framework, inter school curricular provision, use of premises after hours and promotion of a healthier lifestyle”*

Principal, denominational grammar

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

*“Parents expect a free service - this demand has grown to such an extent that children rarely walk, rarely cycle and parents drive short distances and schools feel pressurised into providing transport to keep numbers up. There needs to be RADICAL (sic) change - not encouraging a dependent society”.*

Principal, controlled Primary school

### In-equity

There are notable inequities in the provision of school transport between Board areas, by school sector and age of pupil. The main beneficiaries of the present system of home to school transport are more likely to be those who exercise their choice to attend (distant) grammar schools. Moreover, these pupils are more likely to receive the most flexible transport offer: a sessional ticket, allowing after-school participation up to 6.30 pm for many at no further cost. Whilst this is a strength of the current system for these pupils, those young people benefitting represent a small minority (8%) of the overall school population.

The current system supports some choice of school, largely based on academic selection or attendance at Integrated or Irish medium schools (unit). It does not facilitate choice of school if it is based on subject or single sex education, or if the nearest school is across the border, and therefore the current system is perceived as iniquitous for many.

### Access to education

Transport availability, or the lack of availability, and cost, as well as consistency of funding are a constraint on the delivery of effective intra-day movement of pupils, in addition to after-school participation. This is mainly a problem for those reliant on Board buses and/or who live in deep rural areas.

The cost and availability of transport affects delivery of the Entitlement Framework, limiting participation and affecting choice of subjects as well as the quality of education for many pupils. Current home to school transport policy, therefore, does not



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

reflect the emergence of collaboration between schools to deliver the Entitlement Framework, or the encouragement of a broader educational offer that includes after-school and extended school activities.

### Financial

The high entitlement and uptake of school transport accounts for a large proportion of the education budget in comparison to other jurisdictions. These costs have risen at more than double the rate of inflation. There is a widespread lack of awareness of the costs of school transport amongst professionals and parents/pupils, but a strong expectation that the state should pay for and enable unfettered choice of school, irrespective of the distance to be travelled or the resulting cost to the public purse.

### Safety & Quality

Although the system of school transport is extremely safe for bus and coach occupants, concerns were expressed regarding the quality of service young people received, including unreliability of services, overcrowding on some routes, a lack of responsiveness to changing school needs, and a lack of flexibility to meet changing school timetables, term dates and lesson times.

*Some buses are picking up pupils from five different schools - those pupils getting on at the first stop always get a seat while other pupils may have to stand.*

**Pupil comments from focus group at Poleglass Youth Centre**

*Some pupils have to get off the bus due to overcrowding.*

**Pupil from Craigavon area, focus group at Armagh**

*Previously there were double decker buses, now they are single decker buses so there's overcrowding*

**Pupil from Armagh/Dungannon/Cookstown area  
- focus group at Armagh**

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

There was also considerable disquiet expressed about the safety of walk to pick up locations and bus stops, particularly in rural areas. An assessment of safety of route appears to be undertaken in few cases, with small numbers of children qualifying on these grounds.

### Child-centred

For young people, who are often, but not exclusively, looked after, school age mothers or those in alternative education, and who are among the most vulnerable to underachievement or becoming NEET, receiving school transport is complex. Setting up transport services typically involves multiple agencies and too often its delivery lacks the flexibility and responsiveness necessary to support them. It is these groups of young people for whom the availability of appropriate, timely and consistent transport makes a notable impact on their attendance at school, wellbeing and achievement.

Transport is widely provided for pupils with special educational needs, but the system lacks emphasis on meaningful assessment of young people's transport abilities or potential, is risk averse and based on assumptions linked to statements of SEN or attendance at special schools. It fails to establish a framework that cultivates independence skills, encourage inclusion or the development of travel skills in young people, leaving them poorly equipped for transition to further education or employment.

### Sustainability

The current framework supports considerable choice of school, which lengthens average journeys. This in turn is contributing to already low and deteriorating levels of walking and cycling across Northern Ireland and high levels of and dependency on car use. This does little to foster healthy lifestyles or promote sustainable transport.

Current policies and practices do not discourage young people from driving to school, and therefore conflict with the road safety strategy, which seeks to reduce young driver deaths and casualties.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

The current framework also adversely affects local schools, allowing, facilitating and encouraging pupils to bypass these to attend a more distant school within a different category, or in some cases the same category.

There is little coherence in terms of policy across Departments for the school journey, and they therefore lack a consistent approach to all modes of travel including walking, cycling and bus/car use.

### Relevance

The two and three mile walking distance thresholds no longer reflect the distances pupils (and parents) are willing to walk. They are regarded as out-dated and inappropriate by many, due to the nature of rural roads, the volume and speed of traffic and requirements to wear specific school uniforms or carry books and equipment for lessons. The measurement of the walking distance, and the current system of home to school transport relate to historic categories of school. It is highly complex, leading to increasing litigation, referral to elected representatives, administrative time and contention, as expectations often differ from policies and practice.

### Looking ahead: Sustainability of the policy framework

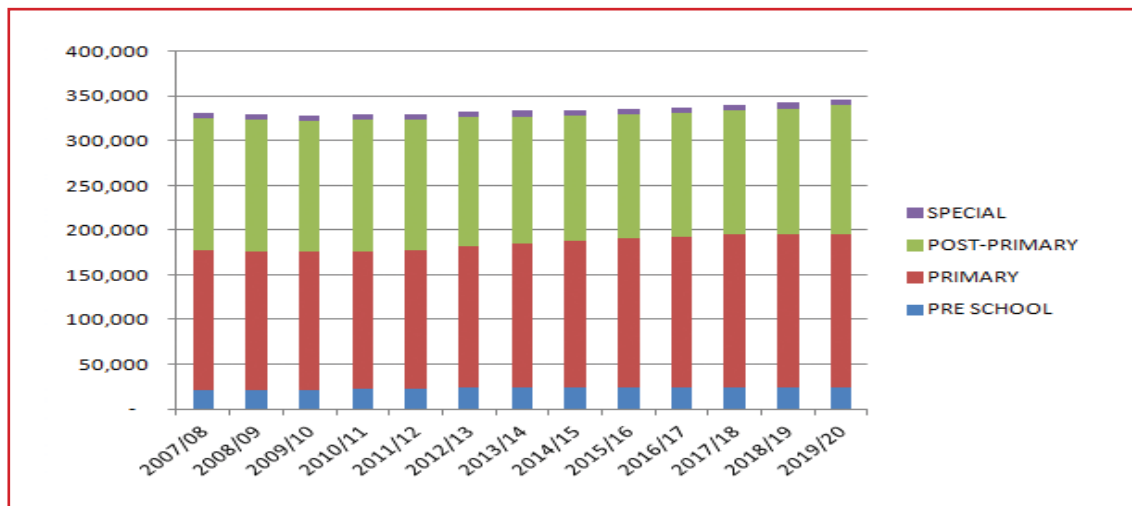
Looking to the future, the home to school transport system will face considerable pressures, which are likely to make it financially unsustainable and place it increasingly out of step with emerging education policies. There will be demographic changes, with increases in the overall size of the school population and changes to the needs of young people. This will be compounded by changes to education provision, including the number, the location and type of schools, which will influence the length and type of journeys to be made.

### Demographic changes

Future projections show the school population overall is set to rise again, by a further 4% by 2019/2020 compared to 2012/13. The primary school age population is expected to show the largest rise, of 9%, during that time.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### SCHOOL POPULATION 2007/8-2019/20



The total estimated number of pupils who would be in receipt of free home to school transport by 2019/20 given **no change** to the entitlement criteria or school location and type of services needed, and no additional costs due to other factors, i.e. based on demographic change alone, is between 90,000 and 100,000 pupils.<sup>91</sup> This equates to an increase of approximately 10% in eligibility for school transport and, at the current average unit cost of approximately £800 per annum, would result in expected expenditure of £80 million per annum by DE (excluding administrative costs and capital costs).

However, based on a projection of trends in home to school transport expenditure since 1990 the total spend by DE by 2019/20 would be expected to rise by about a third, to £100 million per annum excluding administrative costs and capital costs for purchase of fleet vehicles. If all other funding streams currently supporting home to school travel were included, the total would be expected to rise to approximately £133 million.

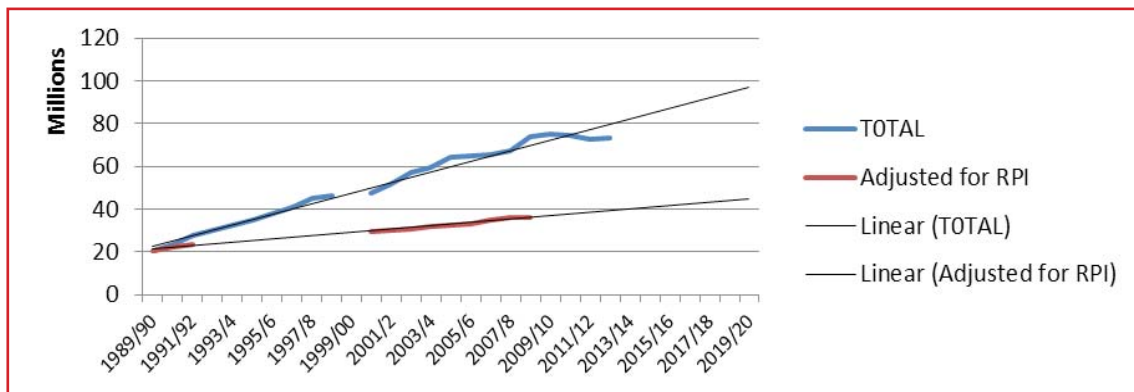
<sup>91</sup> Primary school population to increase by +9% to 172,000 (Estimated proportion in receipt of transport 11% = 19,000).

Assumes post-primary school population remaining approximately stable at 144,000 of which 62,000 in grammar schools as at current proportion of 43%, voluntary grammar = 47,000 = 47000\* 59% in receipt of transport = 28,000, Controlled grammar = 15,000 = 15,000 \*52% in receipt of transport = 7,800 and other post-primary = 82,000 \*0.35% in receipt of transport = 28,700.

Special needs population to rise by 4% to approximately 5,000 in special schools and 1,600 in units = 100% receipt - 6,600.

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### PROJECTED DE HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT EXPENDITURE AT 2012 PRICES



However, the school population is likely to be different going forward, in terms of additional complex special educational, medical, social and behavioural needs and including more looked after children, rising poverty, more lone parent households/ shared custody, greater secularisation, and more ethnic diversity. All of which will place further demands on the school transport system.

### EOTAS & SEN

The review heard evidence from education providers, advocacy groups, schools and other professionals of rising levels of mental health, behavioural and social needs, especially among younger pupils. Those working in EOTAS reported a marked trend of increasing numbers of pupils showing complex behavioural and social problems. There was an expectation this would be a trend likely to continue, resulting in changing demands for placements, additional support required both within schools and from ancillary services such as transport, and more flexible alternative provision and educational arrangements. The escalation of challenging behaviour by some pupils was raised by Transport Managers, who expressed disquiet at the emerging risks for staff, given reports of recent assaults on escorts.

The continued growth in more complex needs due to improved medical advances and greater survival rates, will place additional demands on the transport budget, for more specialised vehicles, equipment and staff training. Overall, the number of pupils with special educational needs in special schools is projected to continue to rise across Northern Ireland, by approximately 4% by 2019/20 and by 9% in units within the

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

primary sector. Evidence from stakeholders repeatedly reiterated the changing nature of special needs, with rising numbers of profoundly disabled children who have high levels of special educational needs, notably those identified with autistic spectrum disorders. These trends are confirmed by data from the Northern Ireland census showing the most marked increases in recent years are for those groups of young people with complex and multi sensory needs, ASD disorders and complex medical conditions.

### Poverty and households

Poverty levels continue to rise in Northern Ireland. Projections by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in January 2014 suggest that relative child poverty in Northern Ireland will increase by five percentage points by 2014/15 and 9.2 percentage points by 2020/21, and absolute poverty will rise by 7.1 percentage points by 2014/15 and 13.5 percentage points by 2020/21.<sup>92</sup> It is expected that households will be under continued financial pressure, and the affordability of school related costs, including transport, could continue to be difficult for many families.

### Provision of education

How, where and when education is provided will influence school transport demands. In recent years, the main change in school population has been the large decline in the population in the controlled non-grammar schools, but stability in the size of the grammar school sector. In 2000/1, of the 155,553 pupils in the post-primary grant-aided schools, 62,197 were in grammar schools, equivalent to 40% (see Table 17). By 2012/13, this proportion had risen to 43%. Whilst the post-primary school population has fallen by 6% during the period since 2001/2, the number of pupils in grammar schools has stayed largely stable.

<sup>92</sup> Nolan P (March 2014) Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report pp 78-80.

**CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION**

**Table 17:**

**NUMBER AND PROPORTION OF POST-PRIMARY PUPILS BY CATEGORY<sup>93</sup> OF SCHOOLS, 2012/13 COMPARED TO 2000/1**

GRANT-AIDED POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS						
2012/13 - 145,658 pupils						
(2000/1 - 155,553 pupils)						
% change during period -6%						
CONTROLLED			VOLUNTARY			GRANT MAINTAINED INTEGRATED
INTEGRATED	GRAMMAR	NON-GRAMMAR	MAINTAINED (NON-GRAMMAR)	OTHER MAINTAINED	VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR	
2,612 (1,968)	15,181 (14,779)	29,763 (38,163)	40,642 (45,008)	541 (342)	47,418 (47,964)	9,501 (7,279)
+33%	+3	-22%	-10%	+68%	-1%	+31%

This trend is expected to continue to 2019/20, with the grammar school sector forecast to remain at current absolute levels, and therefore accounting for a growing share of the post-primary school population. By 2019/20, the school population is expected to have changed, with a 9% increase in primary school enrolment; and the post-primary population remaining stable at 144,000 but grammar school enrolment is expected to remain stable at 43%. There is also expected to be a small rise in the special school population by 4%.

Categorisation of schools

It is anticipated that the breaking down of traditional categories of schools, and the emergence of new categories and types of school seen recently, will continue to add pressure to school transport services if the current framework for eligibility is maintained.

<sup>93</sup> As defined by Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986.

## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

Stakeholders commented on the blurring of traditional categories of schools. Union representatives, for example, commented that grammar schools are now extending their intake beyond those who previously would have been accepted and that all ability grammar schools are developing irrespective of the selection process. The inequity resulting from emerging categories of school was raised by stakeholders and respondents to the Call for Evidence.

*Providing assistance for pupils to attend a certain type of school causes inequalities. My school is the result of a combination of a grammar and secondary school. It was designated a secondary school. We have a successful grammar stream and vibrant sixth form.*

*Pupils who live near this school can get transport to different towns to attend a grammar school as we are not designated a grammar. But pupils in local towns who may wish to avail of our grammar provision without taking the tests of which the DE professes to disapprove, will not be able to get transport as there are secondary schools in those towns*

Principal, Controlled secondary school

*For example this is a school that also has a grammar stream, this results in the inequitable situation where a pupil living more than 3 miles away from the school, and who enters via the grammar stream having sat the unregulated transfer test is deemed eligible for free transport however a pupil living more than 3 miles away and chooses the school on other grounds may be ineligible*

Parent of pupil transported to post-primary school

*"There is a crucial issue of justice and credibility...currently pupils attending grammar schools which are non-selective are continuing to get transport assistance - passing other non-selective schools which have the same entrance criteria"*

School Principal



## CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION

### Location and number of schools

All ELBs are undertaking an Area Planning process to look at the schools' estate and ensure the location and type of school going forward is fit for purpose. Many school enrolments currently fall below what is deemed to be sustainable threshold, or have excess capacity. Further rationalisation of schools in some areas is likely, which will have transport implications. Conversely, there are other areas where population growth is putting pressure on school places and additional capacity will need to be built. The location, type and size of schools going forward, and how this is managed, will influence travel needs, and school transport demands.

### Extended school & Entitlement Framework

Education at school is no longer solely related to pupils of compulsory school age receiving lessons at one location, for a standard school day. Instead schools offer additional activities including breakfast clubs, after-school activities, twilight courses and shared/collaboration education or co-operation with other schools and colleges in the delivery of the Entitlement Framework. The full roll out of the Entitlement Framework and encouraging shared education will continue this trend of greater collaboration and therefore more transfers of pupils between schools, and between schools and college both during the day, and before or after school.

Home to school transport based around an outward morning and a return afternoon journey to one fixed site no longer reflects the needs of parents, pupils or education providers.

## **CURRENT HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROVISION**

## GOING FORWARD: A VISION FOR HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Northern Ireland needs a school transport system that will enable

each child to travel  
to and from school (or college)  
safely and sustainably,  
so they can participate fully and  
fulfil their educational potential

Any future system must be:

- robust enough to withstand future demographic changes in the size and needs of the school population,
- supportive of current and emerging educational policies,
- simple to administer, so that it is more equitable, understandable and transparent,
- safe at all stages of the journey, from home to school, whether walking to or from a bus stop, waiting for a bus, or on the vehicle,
- financially and environmentally sustainable,
- responsive to children's needs particularly the needs of those who are most vulnerable, and,
- delivered effectively and efficiently taking into account the wider impact on public transport services and public expenditure.

## GOING FORWARD: A VISION FOR HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

### 9. Should a pupil's school journey be the responsibility of the state or parent?

A system of state supported home to school transport exists in most Western countries, usually offering transport free of charge for pupils, with eligibility based on special needs or distance from school. In recent years, several school districts in the USA and many local authorities across England have changed the balance between the level of support for transport expected from parents and that provided by the state. In Ireland, DES has recently reviewed its School Transport Scheme resulting in the introduction of charges for primary school age children, increasing charges for post-primary school children, streamlining administrative systems and tightening eligibility criteria.

In many of the local authorities in England, including Hertfordshire, the gradual removal of all or most discretionary transport is underway. Hertfordshire has been one of the leading authorities taking a pro-active approach to changing the balance of responsibility away from the state and transferring this to parents, private transport operators and schools. This has included removing free or subsidised transport for post-16 students, eliminating concessionary places on school transport, and ceasing free or subsidised transport provision to denominational schools and to any school other than the nearest.

In Northern Ireland, discussions with stakeholders, including young people and schools highlighted widespread parental, pupil and school expectation of a right to receive home to school transport, paid for from the public purse. This is despite little awareness of the cost of school transport provision. Overall, nearly 70% of respondents to the Call for Evidence were opposed to the introduction of any parental contribution towards the cost of home to school transport. Half of those representing school officials, 65% of parents whose children **do not** receive transport and 68% of parents of pupils who **do** receive transport all reported that school transport for eligible pupils should be funded completely by the state.

Young people themselves generally expect to be provided with free transport to and from their choice of school, including choice of subject and single sex school, irrespective of the cost to the public purse or distance travelled. In effect, this would widen the criteria for entitlement to school transport even further than the present offer, by including transport support to choice of single sex school, or for a specific subject.

## GOING FORWARD: A VISION FOR HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Experience from elsewhere has shown that any change to home to school transport entitlement criteria must allow adequate lead time for parents to make alternative arrangements, and that a phased introduction is required. If a new system of entitlement were to be introduced it should apply to those pupils starting at a new school rather than to existing pupils. This would mean a transition phase of up to five or seven years. Such an approach provides parents with a reassurance that if they have made a choice of school for their child (or personal arrangements regarding employment or child care) based on the reasonable expectation of school transport continuing, then it will be provided until they complete their education at that school.

### Should a distance threshold be used?

Consultees and respondents to the Call for Evidence felt it was reasonable to maintain distance from home to school as one of the criteria to assess eligibility to transport support and for children to be expected to walk (a short distance). More than 80% of all respondents supported continuing to use distance as a basis for determining eligibility to transport assistance. Although some pupils expressed concern at the inequity of a distance threshold and costs for those within the distance, these were minority voices. The two and three mile limits (or km equivalents) currently used in Northern Ireland are the distances operating in other jurisdictions including England and Ireland.

Rural community organisations made comment that the two and three mile criteria were no longer fit for purpose given the growth in traffic since their introduction and the lack of facilities and infrastructure for pupils as pedestrians in rural areas. Appropriateness of the thresholds (i.e. two and three miles) was questioned in the Call for Evidence. More than a third of respondents specifying a distance (36%) said that the primary school mileage threshold should be reduced to one mile, 37% suggested it be retained at two miles, and 27% indicated the distance should be longer. There was a stronger view that the post-primary mileage should be reduced to two miles (46% of those specifying a distance). Only 27% wanted the status quo maintained. CCMS argued that the walking distance should be one mile for those in receipt of Free School Meals, and the current distances retained for other pupils.

Primary and post-primary pupils supported the use of distance criteria, although what distances should be used was a cause for considerable debate in focus groups. Some

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young people in Belfast said they thought three miles was "fine" as a threshold. Others highlighted the differences in perceptions of distance in rural and urban areas, and argued the three mile threshold was more appropriate when there were alternatives available such as a local bus route that could be used at a charge.

*3 miles is too long - school bags are too heavy to carry long distances and pupils do not want to walk long distances after a day at school - a short distance of 1 mile would be fairer*

**Pupils at focus group at East Belfast school**

*The distance criteria should be 2 miles, and if there is no direct bus route it should be shorter*

*Distance should not be so rigid - it's different for people in different areas, 2 miles in a rural area feels very different to 2 miles in an urban area*

**Young people, NI Youth Forum**

Whilst pupils argued for greater sensitivity over the assessment of safety of route within the distance threshold, and flexibility over its measurement, staff at the ELBs reiterated the need for a system that was unambiguous and administratively practical.

The Panel heard evidence from stakeholders that removing a minimum distance threshold might result in pupils using the bus for very short journeys, rather than walking or cycling. One trade union argued that the walking distance should be reduced to two miles for all pupils. Their view was supported by other stakeholders, who reasoned that this would better reflect today's traffic conditions and parental expectations. In addition, many of the journeys between two and three miles in length were made by car, and a reduction to two miles would, they contended, address this. The trade union also made a very cogent case that reducing the distance would promote attendance at nearer schools, by removing the perverse incentive to attend a more distant school by choosing a category of school that gave entitlement to free transport over three miles, and would therefore reduce average distances travelled.

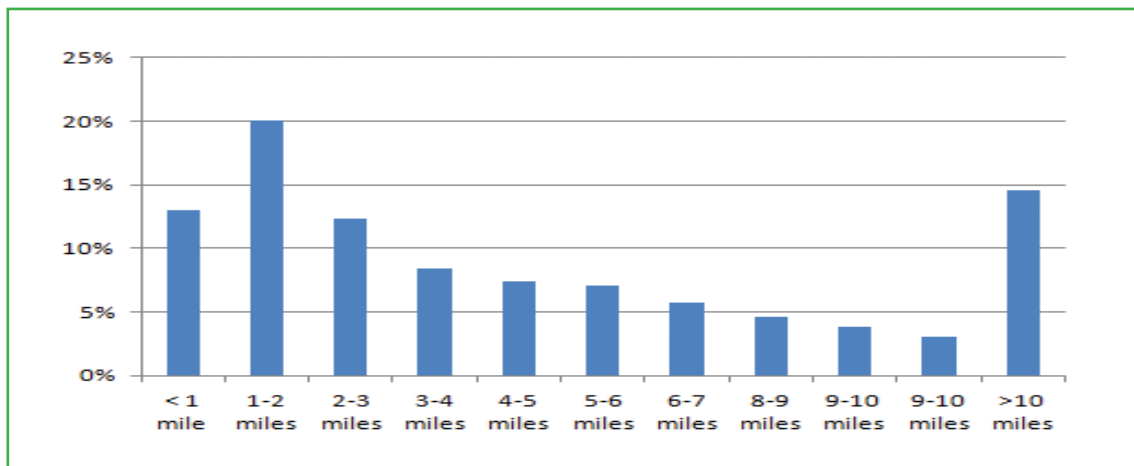
## GOING FORWARD: A VISION FOR HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

### Lowering distance thresholds

Analysis of the distance travelled to schools attended shows that at post-primary school level about 45% of pupils live within three miles of their school.<sup>94</sup> If the distance threshold was reduced to **two miles** (i.e. this assumes that parents and pupils would still choose to attend their current school and that the reduction in the distance criteria would not change school preferences) a further 12% of post-primary pupils would qualify for school transport, equivalent to an additional 18,000-19,000 pupils.

At a nominal average unit cost of £650 per year, reducing the entitlement distance threshold by one mile would equate to an additional expenditure of **£11 million**, or approximately 15% on the current DE home to school transport budget. In practice, it is likely that a lower unit cost would apply given these journeys would be shorter on average than present journeys. For example in the Belfast area a Metro monthly ticket cost would be £300 per year.<sup>95</sup>

### POST-PRIMARY PUPILS BY DISTANCE BAND FROM SCHOOL ATTENDED, 2007/8<sup>96</sup>



<sup>94</sup> This is based on post code analysis for pupils and schools attended in 2007/8, by SIB. This would suggest 55% live over three miles.

Approximately 46% of this cohort currently use free home to school transport. The difference in part is likely to be accounted for by some pupils being eligible but not taking up provision, those choosing a school that is not within category, or making alternative transport arrangements.

<sup>95</sup> Translink website. Network wide Metro child monthly ticket is £29.50, assumes 10 months per year for school year.

<sup>96</sup> SIB analysis using 2007/8 data.

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If the distance threshold was reduced to **one mile** for post-primary pupils it would increase eligibility for free home to school transport by a third above current levels, equating to an additional 47,000 students, adding an estimated **£30 million** to the current level of expenditure. This would leave only 13% of post-primary pupils ineligible for transport.

The walking distance is currently two miles for primary school pupils, and the average distances travelled to primary schools are shorter, as more attend local schools. (Only 11% travel on school transport). However, reducing the distance threshold to one mile for primary school pupils would be expected to increase significantly their levels of entitlement to free transport.

### Should parents be expected to pay?

The review was specifically asked to consider the implications of introducing parental payment and charging for home to school transport. The Salisbury review noted “the high and escalating expenditure on home to school transport services is a particular cause for concern.”<sup>97</sup> It, therefore, recommended that:

***“Transport policy, including eligibility, the definition of suitable school and the potential for some parents to contribute to costs should be reviewed at the earliest opportunity.”<sup>98</sup>***

The Call for Evidence responses (from parents whose children qualified for free transport and those who did not) demonstrated little willingness for means testing entitlement to home to school transport. Almost 70% believed transport should be free and there should be no parental contribution. Even where there was willingness to pay, an appropriate level of charge was considered to be only £50.

<sup>97</sup> Chapter 6; Central Expenditure; Point 26. Recommendation 11 from The Salisbury Report.

<sup>98</sup> Recommendation 11, Salisbury Report.



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*"I feel that transport assistance is crucial to helping parents. If I had to pay for my son to travel by bus it would cost a considerable amount over a year, which would be a big problem for my family"*

Parent of pupil currently receiving transport

*"Charging parents could have a detrimental effect on enrolment for particular schools"*

Parent of pupil transported.

*"It is a basic need that children should have education and transport provided for, families have enough to pay for with uniforms, shoes, sports equipment, music tuition, trips, meals stationary etc. Money is tight everywhere, but it's time to keep what matters"*

Parent of pupils receiving transport

Calculating the impact of the introduction of any charges is difficult, as fare elasticities for school journeys are poorly researched and there are few other areas where direct comparisons can be made. Most research into fare elasticities relates to incremental changes to fares, not introduction of charges for services that were previously free. In addition, most of the charges introduced for school transport in the rest of the UK relate to post-16 students travel not to pupils of compulsory school age who have no choice as to whether the journey is made.

One of the few jurisdictions that does charge for school transport is Ireland, where annual charges are currently €100 per primary school child up to a maximum of €220 per family, and for post-primary €350 subject to an overall family maximum of €650. Currently, some 13% of pupils in Ireland (114,000) receive school transport, with eligibility linked to attendance at the nearest school determined by distance and having regard to ethos and language. A remote area grant is paid to eligible families,

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based on distance, up to a maximum rate of €5.10 for each day of attendance, where there are not enough pupils from an area to justify a bus service. In Ireland, take up of the School Transport Scheme is lower (by about five percentage points) than would be expected given the rurality of the country, and it is likely that charges do have an impact on uptake and on mode choice.

Research from DES shows that, in 2008, income from pupil charges in Ireland represented less than 5% of the total cost of delivering transport. Although charges have since risen, income still covers a relatively small proportion of the overall costs of providing transport and it was envisaged that higher charges would still only make up some 20% of the overall cost of provision.<sup>99</sup> In practice, up to 40% of the primary school children and half of post-primary school children travelling are exempt from charges because they hold a valid medical card or have special educational needs.

Whilst there is no clear evidence that the cost of transport precludes attendance at school or deters participation post-16 in Northern Ireland, evidence from stakeholders underlined fears that without free school transport, attendance and attainment would be likely to deteriorate. Furthermore, levels of relative and absolute household poverty, child poverty and financial hardship appear to have worsened in recent years across Northern Ireland, with income falls notably pronounced in lower socio-economic groups. The income of the bottom fifth falling by 16% in Northern Ireland, compared to 5% in the UK overall, and for the bottom third by 13% (compared to 7% in the UK overall) between 2006/7 and 2011/12. There have been rises in work-less poverty as well as in-work poverty due to both un- and under-employment,<sup>100</sup> suggesting that any additional costs for families would be of concern for the lower income households.

### Recommendations

- **It is recommended that the state should continue to assume responsibility for home to school transport for some pupils.** Although it is difficult to conclude that the lack of transport or the affordability of transport is a

<sup>99</sup> DES (March 2011) A Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme pp31.

<sup>100</sup> JRF (March 2014) Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland 2014.

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factor adversely affecting the vast majority of pupils attendance at mainstream schools, for those more vulnerable to exclusion or underachievement the provision of flexible, targeted transport does have a demonstrable effect on attendance. In addition, there are fears that withdrawal of free transport would impose additional financial hardship on many families. There are traffic congestion, transport safety and social benefits from the provision of home to school transport, as it achieves high rates of public transport use minimising congestion at peak hours and supporting the rural transport network. Public transport is also statistically safer than other modes, and use of the public transport network by pupils provides a level of support to enable bus services in rural areas to be provided that would otherwise be unlikely to be sustained.

- **It is recommended that a system of free school transport be retained for eligible pupils, and not be replaced by parental payment or charging.** Evidence from other jurisdictions suggests this can be complex and expensive to administer, and subject to wide exemptions. The Call for Evidence demonstrated little enthusiasm for any charging, and certainly not at rates that would outweigh the administrative costs necessary to collect the revenue.
- **It is recommended that a distance-based threshold be retained to determine entitlement to school transport.** Such criteria are simple to understand and relatively easy to administer. This is a widely adopted approach to school transport in Western countries, although the distances used vary.
- **It is recommended that a consistent measure of distance be used across Board areas, based on home-gate to school-gate measurement.** Extensive work has already been undertaken in preparation for harmonising practice across Board areas on this specific aspect of policy, and it is suggested that this apply with effect from new starters at primary and post-primary schools.

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### 10. Should school transport be provided to support school and subject choice?

#### School choice

Several stakeholders underlined the importance of parental choice in education and referred to the European Convention on Human Rights. Article 2 of the Convention states that no person shall be denied the right to education, and that it is the state's duty to respect the rights of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions. However, the UK's Human Rights Act 1998 includes a reservation to this, so that in relation to the principle of educating pupils in accordance with parents' wishes it is only so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training, and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.<sup>101</sup>

The question being considered here is not about whether parents should have the right to choose which school their child attends, but rather whether the state should provide free transport to support that choice.

Other systems of school transport support relatively limited choice. In England, free school transport entitlement is related to a minimum distance from home to school, and attendance at the nearest suitable school. An exception applies to those in receipt of free school meals or maximum working tax credit where parents can choose from three schools (up to a maximum distance of six miles) or the nearest denominational school up to 15 miles away and qualify for transport. Few areas in England have retained academic selection, although those authorities that do offer discretionary free school transport to attend a grammar school only provide it to the nearest school of that type.

In Ireland, transport is provided on the basis of residing a minimum distance from home to nearest school, having regard to ethos or language. A similar issue of emerging categorisation of schools has arisen there, with a "growth in diversity in Irish society" having added to the costs of school transport as the "variety of school types has increased in response to parental preference".<sup>102</sup> In Ireland, school transport for

<sup>101</sup> Human Rights Act 1998 Schedule 3 Part II.

<sup>102</sup> DES (March 2011) A Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme pp5.

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eligible children is provided at a charge (or exemption from this) to the nearest school of Irish or English medium, having regard to ethos.

The home to school transport policy in Northern Ireland supports transport to an extensive choice of school, and permits travel to more distant schools within category if the nearest is over the distance threshold. It provides no support for those whose nearest school in category is within distance, or if choice is to a category of school not listed in the Circular. For example, if a school is chosen on the basis of single sex or to pursue a particular subject, or for other, personal reasons.

Respondents to the Call for Evidence and pupils themselves had clear expectations that choice of school should be supported, including for subject choice. Nearly two-thirds of those who responded said there should be no upper distance limit placed on this assistance. Typical comments included:

*"It is essential that school transport is available for all pupils....this will enable parents and pupils to send children to their chosen school"*

School Principal

*Choice of school is important - you are more likely to excel at school if you are attending the school you want to go to.*

*Some schools do not suit all pupils and if you are not happy in the school you will not do well*

Comments from pupils, focus group, Ballynahinch

*Transport should be free to any school you want to attend over a certain distance*

Young person, NI Youth Forum

## GOING FORWARD: A VISION FOR HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Many of the submissions received argued that the current home to school transport framework undermined the concept of local schools. There were concerns about the inherent inequities around parental choice, in that transport supports choice for some but for not others. Comments were made that bussing pupils past appropriate schools to those further away damaged the viability of local schools, for example where a non-selective school is bypassed by children being transported to attend a selective school.

Other submissions recognised that the wide choice of school categories puts greater strain on the transport budget and education resources, and that exercising such choice militated against the policy of Every School A Good School.

*To qualify for a bus pass should be fairer - people apply to a school they don't want to go to in order to try to get a bus pass*

Young person, NI Youth Forum

*"I do not agree with the current practice that students are provided with free transport to attend schools in Newry and Armagh when there is a grammar school in the town they could attend"*

Parent

*I believe in an end to unfair funding allocations based on type of school, including hidden financial benefits. This includes transport assistance to pupils travelling past perfectly good non-selective schools en route to grammar schools, rather than attending their local non-selective school. They often experience pastoral difficulties as they live so far from friends and therefore become isolated both from school friends and local communities. This may also contribute to problems with social cohesion as more 'middle class' children may attend grammar schools whilst 'working class' children attend non-selective. How can all children learn to mix and help each other grow and develop?*

Principal

## GOING FORWARD: A VISION FOR HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

### Subject choice

There was even stronger endorsement for school transport facilitating subject choice, with more than 80% of respondents to the Call for Evidence stating that this should be provided for. In focus groups pupils expressed concern that subject choice was being constrained at GCSE level and post-16, including A level, because not all schools offered the options of, for example, languages that they wanted to do. They, therefore, felt transport should enable choice of school to support subject choice, not only at post-16 level but also lower down the school career.

### Impact of restricting transport support for choice of school

The review explored a range of alternative criteria for the entitlement to home to school transport.

The analysis presented here assesses the likely number of pupils who would be affected by any change in entitlement criteria, using three scenarios:

- transport is supported to the nearest school in any of the current categories
- transport is supported to the nearest school in any of the current categories (except selective schools)
- transport is supported to the nearest age and gender appropriate school

Although the data in this analysis are from 2007/8, the post-primary school population has been reasonably stable since, and the impact of any changes is likely to be similar to that if analysis had been undertaken on 2013/14 enrolments. However, it would be advisable to undertake further modelling on current data prior to implementing any changes in entitlement.

The estimates presented here apply to post-primary school pupils only. Considerably fewer primary school age pupils qualify for school transport, or travel to more distant schools. Therefore, it is expected that there would be some impact on primary pupils, but the scale of change would be less.

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The cost estimates are based on an assumption that those who would be eligible for transport on the basis of the new entitlement criteria take it up proportionately as they do at present. The analysis and data from the ELBs suggest that although 55% of post-primary pupils live more than three miles from their chosen school, 46% of the post-primary school population presently receives transport. This will be due to pupils who are eligible to receive free transport not taking up their entitlement, for example they may get lifts with parents. Others living over three miles may be exercising choice of school that is not supported by transport entitlement, for example to attend a specific school on the basis of subjects offered or to obtain a single sex education. It has been assumed for the purpose of estimates here that such a pattern of uptake versus entitlement continues.

Additional cost estimates are conservatively based on a unit cost of **£650 per year**. It is assumed that shorter average distances to school would result in lower average sessional ticket prices. The cost (and savings) estimates are based on full implementation. If changes were introduced on a phased basis, savings would be expected to accrue annually as they apply to each additional year group transferring to post-primary school, so that by year five or seven they would show the full cost/savings.

The modelling here does not explore the impact of any changes to schools' admissions criteria. Some account has been taken in estimating the potential impact on costs and benefits of where the nearest school would be likely to be over subscribed and therefore school transport would be required to be provided to the next nearest school. This has been done by examining the current enrolment limit for schools and identifying those schools that would exceed these if all pupils attended their nearest on the basis of the options set out below. However, it is recognised that schools retain considerable discretion over their admissions criteria. Consequently, in practice not all schools will be open to all pupils.



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### Option 1: Transport to nearest school in category

(Controlled, or other voluntary, Catholic maintained, denominational/  
non denominational grammar, Integrated or Irish Medium)

One of the anomalies of the current school transport system is that when pupils qualify for transport this provides transport support to any school in that category over the walking distance, thereby encouraging long journeys to school. Restricting school transport provision for those living over qualifying distance from the **nearest** school of choice of denomination, Irish medium or Integrated education, including to selective schools, would reduce the number of pupils travelling to more distant schools and would simplify the system.

In effect, this would discourage travel to more distant schools that are within the same category. For example if the nearest voluntary grammar schools is over three miles, then at present travel is supported to any voluntary grammar over three miles. In this scenario, school transport would only be provided to the nearest voluntary grammar school, over the distance threshold, which has capacity.

If free school transport was restricted to the nearest school in category (over the distance threshold), it is estimated that approximately 14,000 fewer pupils would be entitled to receive transport. This would save £10 million per year from the current expenditure of approximately £43 million (see Table 18). In addition, it would be expected to reduce average journey length to post-primary schools by about one mile.

However, this would not address concerns around transport provision encouraging or supporting the bypassing of local schools, or the costs for parents having to provide transport for pupils who live within three miles. Neither would it address the issue of inequity between some choices of school being supported but not others, or the emerging new categories of schools (eg non-selective grammars).

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**Table 18:**

### ESTIMATED IMPACT OF FREE TRANSPORT AVAILABLE TO NEAREST SCHOOL IN CATEGORY

	Current	Nearest school in category	Change
Average mileage	5.11 miles	3.99 miles	-1.12 miles
> 3 miles	66,000 (46% take up transport)	51,400 (35% estimated take up transport)	14,000 fewer pupils transported than current
	80,000 (55% qualify for transport)	65,100 (44% qualify for transport)	
> 2 miles	85,100 (58% estimated take up transport)	72,000 (49% estimated take up transport)	6,000 more pupils transported than current
	98,300 (67% qualify for transport)	85,000 (58% qualify for transport)	
Cost at 3 miles	£43 million	£33 million	<b>-£10 million</b> compared to current cost
Cost at 2 miles	£55 million	£47 million	<b>+£4 million</b> compared to current cost

#### Option 2: Transport to nearest school in category excluding selective schools

(Controlled, or other voluntary, Catholic maintained, Integrated or Irish medium)

A second option would be to provide free school transport to attend the nearest school of denomination, Integrated or Irish medium education over the distance threshold; but not to provide support to travel to selective schools, where a non-selective school is closer.

This assumes that school transport would only be provided (over the distance threshold) to the nearest school within these categories i.e. if the nearest school of denomination, Irish medium or Integrated provision was more than the distance

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threshold from home. It would not permit choice of school in that category beyond the nearest available, as is supported by the current system.

This is an approach endorsed by CCMS, at least for primary level, to promote community links.

*"In the primary phase of education where there is no curricular divergence, except in the case of Irish medium education, children should be encouraged to attend the nearest suitable school. We would like to see the structure of the parish protected as it sees the relationship between the school, family and the Church as a positive support and encouragement to learning"*

CCMS

This option would be expected to achieve higher savings and to reduce average journey length by more than two miles each way. It would reduce the number of pupils entitled by more than 26,000 (see Table 19). Such an approach would be expected to result in savings of £17 million per year.

However, this would not address the fundamental challenge of the emerging categories of school across Northern Ireland.

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**Table 19:**

### ESTIMATED IMPACT OF FREE TRANSPORT AVAILABLE TO NEAREST SCHOOL IN CATEGORY, EXCLUDING SELECTIVE SCHOOLS

	Current	Nearest school category except selective	Change
Average mileage	5.11 miles	3.03 miles	-2.08 miles
> 3 miles	66,000 (46% transported)	39,600 (27% transported)	26,400 fewer pupils transported than current
	80,000 (55% qualify)	53,300 (36% qualify)	
> 2 miles	85,100 (58% transported)	57,200 (39% transported)	8,800 fewer pupils transported than current
	98,300 (67% qualify)	69,800 (48% qualify)	
Cost at 3 miles	£43 million	£26 million	<b>-£17 million</b> compared to current cost
Cost at 2 miles	£55 million	£37 million	<b>-£6 million</b> compared to current cost

### Option 3: Transport to nearest school that is age and gender appropriate

Finally, the third option reviewed is that of free school transport entitlement being based on a distance threshold to the nearest age and gender appropriate school.

Several responses to the Call for Evidence endorsed the encouragement of attendance at local schools only, but often for different reasons. These included improving the effective use of resources and encouraging more sustainable travel.

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*"If all children had to attend their closest school there would be no need to burden the already over stretched education budget to transport children all around the country on buses. The more you lift and lay children you remove the responsibility that parents have for their children"*

Call for Evidence, parent of pupil not entitled to transport

The analysis suggests that if school transport was to be provided to the nearest post-primary school that is age and gender appropriate, and over the distance threshold, this would almost halve the number of post-primary pupils entitled to transport, see Table 20. This would equate to a saving of approximately **£26 million** per annum. Furthermore, it would be expected to reduce the average journey length by nearly three miles. It is recognised that an exception would exist for Irish medium and Integrated education, which would minimally reduce any estimated cost savings.

**Table 20:**

**ESTIMATED IMPACT OF FREE TRANSPORT AVAILABLE TO NEAREST AGE AND GENDER APPROPRIATE SCHOOL**

	Current	Nearest age and gender appropriate	Change
Average mileage	5.11 miles	2.34 miles	-2.77 miles
> 3 miles	66,000 (46% transported)	27,900 (19% transported)	38,100 fewer pupils transported than current
	80,000 (55% qualify)	41,300 (28% qualify)	
> 2 miles	85,100 (58% transported)	43,000 (29% transported)	23,000 fewer pupils transported than current
	98,300 (67% qualify)	55,300 (38% qualify)	
Cost at 3 miles	£43 million	£18 million	<b>-£26 million</b> compared to current cost
Cost at 2 miles	£55 million	£28 million	<b>-£15 million</b> compared to current cost

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### Preferred option

Providing school transport entitlement based on a distance threshold to the nearest age and gender appropriate school (or to the nearest Irish medium school/unit, or Integrated school) therefore has the merit of being the simplest approach. It addresses the complex categorisation of schools and deters pupils from making long journeys to schools within category that are not the closest.

Such a policy would be expected to reduce overall peak hour travel, reduce lengths of journeys and increase the proportion of pupils who live within a mile of school, thereby within a distance likely to be walked. It would, therefore, support the Programme for Government's aims to promote more sustainable modes of travel and encourage higher rates of walking and cycling.

The resulting savings would enable funding to be re-directed to **reduce the walking distance threshold to two miles** for post-primary school pupils (and retain the two miles for primary school pupils). This would still achieve an estimated **£15 million** per annum saving to DE. As a result, funding could also be re-directed to improve after-school and intra-day school provision, target funding for more vulnerable young people, and address other weaknesses and inequities of the current system such as long walks to bus stops.

### Managing change

Reducing the level of entitlement to school transport and abstracting large numbers of pupils from Translink and Board bus services would be expected to have an impact on the public transport network, and on the operation of both fleets.

If it is assumed that the majority of those pupils no longer eligible would cease to travel on Translink's services, it is estimated that 17,250 pupils would no longer receive a sessional pass. Currently, approximately two thirds of post-primary school pupils travel on Translink services, and about a third are on Board vehicles. However, the proportion of grammar school pupils on Translink buses is higher than this - exceeding 80%. It is assumed that this policy change would particularly affect those choosing more distant schools i.e. grammar schools. An assumption is made that three quarters of those ceasing to be eligible would come from Translink services and about 25% from Board

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services. This would equate to a reduction in sessional ticket revenue to Translink of an estimated £11 million per annum, and a reduction in Board expenditure of some £4 million per year.

If no pupils pay for their own sessional ticket and instead choose to travel by car, and schools opt not to subsidise/finance bus routes to their school for pupils no longer eligible to free transport, there would be an impact on Translink's services. Ulsterbus would need to reduce its fleet size by up to 175 vehicles (35 per year over five years), to maintain passenger subsidies for the public transport network at approximately current levels. A reduction in peak-hour, Board fleet requirement of up to 140-150 vehicles would also be expected, equivalent to a reduction of 30 vehicles per year as transition to the new policies applies. In practice, it is expected that some schools would choose to retain bus services, or parents would continue to pay for some bus provision.

However, this change to entitlement would mean that nearly a third of post-primary pupils, compared to 13% at present, would live within one mile of their nearest school, suggesting considerable scope for encouragement of walking and cycling, if this was accompanied by investment in infrastructure to improve safety for these pupils.

Experience from Hertfordshire County Council highlighted that local authorities can achieve a substantial re-balancing of the share of home to school transport journeys between state and parent. Their transformation process has demonstrated that for this to be successful it requires careful change management, with the transition supported by timely, high quality information, and information about alternative modes of travel. In Hertfordshire, this has included providing journey-planning software, toolkits for schools to secure their own transport with local operators, and advice on public transport and sustainable travel options.

Lessons learned from other areas where school transport policies have been changed successfully show that effective communication with all stakeholders is essential. This should set out the purpose of any change, the rationale, and provide information about alternative transport whether that is parents purchasing sessional tickets for use on public transport, schools setting up or supporting their own bus services, or walking and cycling options.

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### Recommendations

- **It is recommended that transport assistance be provided to the nearest school only (or to the nearest Irish medium school/unit or Integrated school) and funding be re-directed to reduce the distance threshold to two miles for post-primary school pupils (and retained as two miles for primary school pupils), reduce the walk to bus stop, enhance provision of after-school transport and target transport support for vulnerable children.** The encouragement of community based education, and of local schools serving their community, has been a recurring theme in education policy reviews and reports since the early 2000s. However, today's school transport framework does not reflect this, is inconsistent in its treatment of school categories, and enables and facilitates transport to more distant schools. Focusing provision on travel to the nearest school would support Every School A Good School, and allow for a package of measures to improve transport services to meet pupils' needs and improve the equity of the transport offer. It is recognised that due to the current legislation and duties on DE, that transport would need to support travel to the nearest Irish medium school/unit, or Integrated school, where that is over the distance threshold.
- **It is recommended that changes to entitlement criteria be introduced on a phased basis, applying to new school admissions and transfers to post-primary schools.** This would allow time for existing transport arrangements to be phased out as the school population transitions from primary to post-primary school and means those pupils who have made a choice of school influenced by transport arrangements currently in place, would continue to have those arrangements maintained until the completion of that phase of schooling.
- **It is recommended that the information for parents about school transport criteria, eligibility, respective responsibilities and standards be improved.** Although admissions booklets and transfer guides include information on home to school transport, often this is not consistent. There is a need to ensure that all parents have access to good quality information that is consistent and accurate, to make informed decisions



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at the time of choosing schools. Provision of this would be expected to reduce challenges to the Boards and complaints to elected representatives. Managing expectations, providing timely information to parents and schools about what is on offer and taking into account transport early in the admissions process should be expected to reduce complaints and contested cases. Information about school transport responsibilities should provide clarity about parental responsibility, including in relation to pick up/drop off and walking distance thresholds. This improved information for parents should be provided in a standard format so that all school information booklets include comparable content.

- **It is recommended that any change to entitlement be supported by information from ELBs and Translink setting out the rationale for change, the process and transport options for parents and young people, complemented by sustainable transport policies and plans to encourage and enable walking and cycling shorter distances.** The reduction in the number of eligible pupils is likely to be approximately 23,000 at post-primary school level if the entitlement criteria are changed to restrict support to the nearest age and gender appropriate schools and reduce the distance threshold to two miles for all pupils. However, it is likely that some schools will purchase their own transport either from private contractors, from Translink or Board fleet, to compensate for the loss of free ELB school transport. This underlines the need for any withdrawal of ELB funded transport to be supported by effective school guidance on procurement of transport services from private operators/ELBs or Translink, and investment in walking and cycling to encourage more sustainable shorter journeys to/from school.

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### 11. Should transport be provided for intra-day movement of pupils between schools (colleges and other education providers)?

#### Intra-day transport

There was widespread consensus from stakeholders and respondents throughout the review that transport should be provided to support intra-day movement between schools as well as to and from FE colleges and other education providers. This is seen as important by young people and school (and college) staff, with two-thirds of respondents to the Call for Evidence in favour of supporting intra-day transport.

*"The six regional FE colleges work with nearly all post-primary schools in NI. This enables colleges to provide the Entitlement Framework through all 30 ALCs to over 9,800 pupils on average per year. There is a need to maintain subsidised transport throughout the day. There is evidence of improved education outcomes as a result of the FE engagement, but this can only be sustained through a subsidised and truly flexible system which is fit for purpose"*

Colleges NI

Colleges NI reported that uptake of collaborative courses is higher where schools are within walking distance of the FE colleges, and they argued that lack of, or cost of, transport should not disadvantage those who live further away from colleges. Evidence to the Panel stressed that many larger schools need only send small numbers of pupils to other schools as they can deliver a wider range of subjects 'in house'. Smaller schools are often unable to provide as wide a range of subjects and need to collaborate to deliver the full range of options.

Effective intra-day transport is also seen to enable the delivery of shared education and community cohesion initiatives, where transport and logistics have proven to be more of a barrier to achieving this than teaching challenges. However, pupils are keen that transport be timely and not encroach on lessons or teaching time.

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*There are difficulties. Timetabling differences amongst schools mean missing classes. Some teachers understand and prepare the work they have missed, and pupils cope.*

Pupil comments, from focus group at Dungannon school

Failures to align timetables and poor scheduling of transport are leading to pupils missing part of lessons, arriving late, unable to have a lunch break or resorting to using their own cars to arrive on time. Improved timetabling, regular feedback and monitoring from young people are all urgently required.

### Recommendations

- **It is recommended that earmarked funding continue to support Entitlement Framework intra-day transport**, targeted via Area Learning Communities. This will be required to support the roll out of the Entitlement Framework and its future sustainability.
- **It is recommended that DE monitor intra-day movement of pupils and timetabling of collaborative teaching, to ensure that transport does not encroach on teaching time.** Schools and ALCs should work together to achieve better alignment of timetables and transport arrangements to minimise travel time and disruption for pupils. This should be monitored, including seeking feedback from pupils. Young people highlighted the need to hear their voice on this issue. Late arrivals for classes, poor transport arrangements and lack of coordination with timetables should be monitored regularly and contracts or arrangements amended accordingly.
- **It is recommended that contract negotiations with Translink explore the potential for allowing more flexible use of sessional tickets for intra-day movements within ALCs. This should allow students to travel to and from sites within the ALC rather than only between home and registered school.** Many pupils participating in collaborative classes travel to other schools, FE colleges or other education providers but do not have the flexibility to travel between points during the day.

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*"The Foyle Learning Community spent £73,000 on transporting pupils to and from 14 schools... Principals feel strongly that a common bus pass could negate much of these costs. It would allow pupils to access buses travelling to their host schools and back as well as directly from their homes to host schools... saving time and stress for pupils and parents"*

Foyle Learning Community

- **It is recommended that all Area Learning Communities be provided with advice and guidance on procurement of transport with private contractors,** to ensure appropriate contractors are used.

### After-school transport

The ability to participate in after-school activities, twilight courses and more flexible learning opportunities is seen as important to pupils and schools alike. The Panel heard of many pupils in receipt of sessional tickets where the time limit of 6.30 pm or the absence of a later bus service limited participation. More widespread were comments from those using Board vehicles, mainly in rural areas, where pupils were reliant on parents for lifts, or walked long distances home, and arrived home late if they wanted to participate in after-school activities.

By concentrating home to school transport on supporting access to nearest school only, additional funding could be re-directed to deliver a more equitable level of transport for after-school activities. This includes offering an enhanced level of service to those reliant on Board vehicles.

Such funding should also encourage the continued development of innovative approaches in rural areas, potentially using Board buses, private contractors, schools' own vehicles, the voluntary or community transport sector, such as the CTA operated 5 pm bus from Enniskillen to Belleek, or other transport providers.

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### Recommendations

- **It is recommended that savings achieved from transport provision being provided to the nearest school only (or to the nearest Irish medium school/unit or Integrated school) be used to enhance transport services to support after-school participation.** This would permit wider participation in after-school activities, twilight courses etc and allow the development of more innovative initiatives with other transport providers at a local level to meet specific local needs. Funding allocations each year should be made available and overseen by DE, inviting bids from schools who can demonstrate the funding will achieve meaningful development of enhanced after-school services. This should be linked to achieving outcome measures such as improved uptake of courses or activities, especially by those from socially deprived communities, or those with additional educational needs.
- **It is recommended that the 6.30 pm time limit for sessional tickets be extended to facilitate attendance at school after hours and twilight courses at FE colleges.** Sessional tickets that permit travel home from school later in the evening would improve support for young people and the delivery of the Entitlement Framework.
- **It is recommended that ALCs share experience of transport, travel innovation and good practice.** There is scope for sharing good practice between Area Learning Communities on delivery of the Entitlement Framework, and minimising travel and transport disruption. The Panel heard examples of half day timetabling that minimises movement between sites during the school day, or the purchase of umbrellas to encourage walking short distances between sites, and of flexible use of school minibuses and taxis.

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### 12. How can a system of home to school transport take account of those pupils who may have barriers to learning?

#### Special needs transport

The continued provision of free home to school transport for pupils with special needs is widely endorsed by parents, pupils, schools and other respondents to the Call for Evidence, with 70% suggesting this should be a factor taken into account when assessing entitlement. However, evidence to the Panel indicated that whilst the transport to school provided for many pupils with special needs is appropriate and necessary, for others it offers inadequate support in developing the independence and travel skills necessary for their transition to adult life.

Concerns were expressed about the timing, quality of information shared and the process for assessing transport need. Currently, decisions about transport need are heavily reliant on the advice of a senior medical officer, routinely requested alongside the SEN assessment process, and then subject to little review or challenge. Many pupils with special educational needs also have medical and social needs, and the need for greater coordination between health, social care and education for these young people was raised with the Panel. There is a lack of clarity or agreement as to who should be funding some school transport, particularly where home or education placements for LACs were changed, or where transport is required to respite placements or to schools for assessment.

The proposed introduction of Co-ordinated Support Plans<sup>103</sup> for those with more complex needs who require education, health and social care services is welcomed. This provides an opportunity to embed consideration of transport within the assessment process, coordinate provision, agree support, and review needs.

Schools and parent groups emphasised the need for encouraging the use of walking and independent travel for young people with special needs, not only for the benefit of children themselves, but to persuade parents to take a more active role in bringing children to and from school. Incentives for parents to encourage children to use public transport, or for those in receipt of a care allowance to receive additional funding if they walked their children to or from school were among suggestions proposed. The Panel considered this, but given responsibility already rests with the parent to ensure

<sup>103</sup> DE (2009) Every School A Good School, The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion. Policy proposals consultation document, and subsequent Summary of Key Policy Proposals.

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their child attends education, and many parents already walk or accompany their child to school, the emphasis on travel training development is considered more appropriate.

Much of the transport provided to young people with special needs received considerable praise from parents, pupils and school staff. Observations of school transport at several special schools often demonstrated good practice by drivers and escorts. However, concerns remain around sub contracting of transport routes, handling of pupils, differing policies across Board areas, and the need for consistent and high quality training of staff to reflect changing school population.

*Drivers should have information about how to secure manual and powered wheelchairs*

**Pupil, who is a wheelchair user,  
at South Belfast special school**

Specific issues were raised by pupils who travelled in their wheelchair, who wanted assurance that drivers and escorts had adequate information to secure equipment correctly and safely. The recent British Standard Wheelchair Passport Scheme being introduced in many local authorities offers a consistent approach to risk assessment and sharing of information.

### Recommendations

- The importance of well-trained, consistent, caring escorts and drivers came through repeatedly from parents, pupils and school staff. Escort training currently varies across the Boards, and **it is recommended that a standardised core package of training be provided to all drivers and escorts of transport for pupils with special needs, drawing on best practice from the Boards, and reflecting the changing school population.** This would include additional emphasis on transporting pupils with complex conditions and autistic spectrum disorders, de-escalation techniques, behaviour management and mental health.

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- **It is recommended that ELBs improve the sharing of good practice relating to transport of pupils with special educational needs.** Across Northern Ireland the review Panel saw many excellent examples of joint working with schools on the effective handover of pupils from transport to school staff, of site design and parking/loading and unloading of vehicles within school grounds, and of escort training and driver practice.
- **It is recommended that an annual event be organised for drivers and escorts to receive feedback from parents and pupils which would recognise staff for excellent service.** The importance of the staff to pupils with special needs was a clear message, and pupils told us that good drivers (and escorts) were essential to their well being, safety and education. The Panel, therefore, asked Fleming Fulton pupils to tell us what made a great escort. Their charter for a good escort (and driver) is included below, and it is recommended there is scope to recognise formally the escorts who meet this.



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### TOP TEN Transport Escort Qualities

A great Escort will be:-

- ✓ Someone who will remember your individual needs e.g. they will help you on and off the bus if needed but can take a step back and give independence when appropriate.
- ✓ A good communicator, to build relationships of trust, because you have to be able to trust your escort.
- ✓ Someone who will take an interest in the pupils and talk with them.
- ✓ Has a good awareness of your condition, including any physical, medical and emotional needs and symptoms.
- ✓ Someone who will help you if necessary with bags, coats, crutches, equipment etc.
- ✓ Is good craic with a sense of humour, to make the journey go quicker and to send you into school in good form.
- ✓ Has empathy and can understand difficulties or delays in getting out to the bus for pupils with mobility difficulties e.g. will come to help you on icy days and give you time.
- ✓ Someone who will help you during the journey if you need it e.g. if you drop something.
- ✓ Someone who can take control when a bad situation arises on the bus, for example behavioural problems or accidents.
- ✓ Someone who has a good relationship with the driver as well as the passengers so there is a good atmosphere on the bus.

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These 10 points were compiled by the student council of Fleming Fulton School. They don't necessarily come in this order, and all of these qualities are important.

- **It is recommended that transport for pupils with statements of special educational needs be reviewed regularly, including at annual and transition reviews, to ensure the transport provided continues to be appropriate.** This should ensure that the level of transport provision reflects the child's development, and supports their independence and educational objectives. For those children who currently have a statement of SEN, their transport needs should be assessed individually, rather than entitlement to transport being linked automatically to placement at a special school.
- **It is recommended that the introduction of Co-ordinated Support Plans and any revisions to the Statutory Code of Practice be used as an opportunity to consider transport at initial assessment, regular reviews and at transition planning.** Plans should focus on ensuring transport support is based on children's needs and abilities, and that this is reviewed regularly to ensure age and developmentally appropriate transport is coordinated throughout. Greater coordination between health and social care and education is required for those children most in need, to ensure that their transport requirements are considered early, accurately and regularly reviewed.
- **It is recommended that the practice of pupils with SEN having to wait on vehicles outside school in the morning be stopped.** It is recognised that this may involve changes to teaching assistants' terms and conditions to provide staff cover, but the welfare of pupils should be paramount. Present practice does little to encourage transport providers to operate routes so that they arrive at school in a timely manner, as they are in effect punished for early arrival at school. It also lengthens overall journey times for pupils.
- **It is recommended that an independent travel training scheme be introduced, for young people with moderate learning difficulties or physical disabilities.** There are some examples of pupils receiving travel training to develop their independent travel skills, but overall there was

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little evidence of children being helped to develop their travel skills, with dedicated, door-to-door, and supervised transport continuing largely automatically once it had been agreed. The review would reiterate the recommendations of the Bamford review of services for young people with learning disabilities, and by NICCY in 2012 to improve transition planning and travel training support for young people. Parents, schools, operators and pupils all raised with us the need to develop children's skills to enable them to travel independently and transition successfully to further education or employment. There are many models of existing good practice that can be used as a template, such as Ravenscliffe School in Halifax, on North Tyneside, in Merseyside and Norfolk.

- **It is recommended that the British Standard Wheelchair Passport Scheme be introduced.**<sup>104</sup> Although the number of pupils who are transported in their wheelchairs is relatively small, several raised concerns about the quality of transport they received. Young people felt vulnerable when vehicles broke down, or due to the size of their chairs on ramps and lifts. The wheelchair passport scheme is designed to ensure consistent and accurate information is available to drivers and escorts and its introduction across Northern Ireland would ensure a consistent approach to assessing transport for young people who need to travel in their wheelchairs.

### Targeting support for other pupils

Some of Northern Ireland's most vulnerable pupils are too often being let down by transport availability, its reliability or affordability. Yet these are the very young people for whom transport has the most noticeable impact on attendance and participation in school and arguably who, if they become NEET, will incur the greater societal economic cost.

It is likely that the numbers of young people who have additional needs will continue to rise in the future. More pupils are expected to have complex medical, social and behavioural needs, and it is expected that the numbers of pupils in alternative

<sup>104</sup> BS 8603: 2013 Code of Practice for Wheelchair Passport Schemes.

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education or requiring additional support in schools will rise. Throughout the review the need for flexible and responsive transport for these young people has been emphasised by pupils themselves, parents, education providers and those advocating on their behalf.

More than 80% of the respondents to the Call for Evidence felt pupils with barriers to learning should be afforded additional assistance with transport to school. However, there was considerable divergence of views as to whether transport for these groups should be funded using additional resources targeted to schools, to young people themselves or through ELBs; and whether it should be based on special needs, specific categories, linked to free school meals entitlement or other measures of deprivation.

Several people raised concerns around potential stigmatisation of linking entitlement to home to school transport to FSM, although many thought this could be done without highlighting the basis of provision of transport. The region's rising levels of deprivation were referred to by others as reason to retain free travel for many households, particularly those with disabled family members. They emphasised issues around carers' deprivation, multiple needs and incidence of poverty and low wages.

Unease about family hardship and the difficulties of relying on FSM as a proxy measure for transport poverty were raised by several organisations and individuals. Fluctuations in family income can mean that FSM entitlement can vary through a child's school career on both a short and long-term basis and whilst a child may not currently be in receipt of FSM, the household may still be experiencing considerable hardship. There were also worries about differential uptake of FSM and stigma, and that certain communities may be less willing to take up their entitlement, and therefore this measure may under-represent financial hardship in some areas. Particular points made included:

- the increasing difficulty in using this as a proxy, given the widening of entitlement to FSM to younger pupils and possible future changes to the benefits system e.g. the possible introduction of universal credit;

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- the lack of consistency regarding entitlement to FSM over a pupil's school career and concerns that some children move just above and just below the threshold for entitlement from year to year;
- FSM is a crude measure of deprivation, given the under representation and lower uptake in certain communities, for example in some deprived Protestant areas;
- using FSM as a 'gateway' benefit can exacerbate a benefits' trap, whereby pupils just above this threshold are paying the full cost for services, and those qualifying for FSM then qualify for a multiplicity of benefits and are consequently better off financially than those just above the threshold;
- others regarded FSM as a blunt instrument and preferred a multi agency approach that looked at broader measures of social deprivation e.g. attendance at dentist or doctor, or multi agency measures.

Other organisations, including teacher unions, argued that FSM was as good a measure as any, and that although it was not necessarily suitable for all schools, it was an effective way of targeting individual families.

Alternative mechanisms for targeting additional school transport resources are in place in other areas, and the Panel heard evidence from a number of jurisdictions and organisations on the merits and limits of these including:

- **Targeting funding to ELBs/local authorities.** In England home to school transport entitlement is based on mileage criteria and attendance at the nearest school. However, this is supplemented by a system of entitlement using FSM and working tax credit entitlement, which allows parents a wider choice of school (up to any of three schools between three and six miles from home, and a denominational school between three and 15 miles from home). Additional, earmarked funding was allocated to LEAs to deliver this. This is an administratively complex system requiring assessment of whether there was capacity at one of the relevant schools, and assessment of income or free school meals entitlement. Evidence from the DfE was

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that this scheme has not been readily taken up and therefore funding is in the process of being decreased.

- **Targeted funding to schools.** In England, the preference has been to move towards a funding model where targeted discretionary funding, such as bursaries and pupil premium, has been delegated to schools (and colleges) for them to allocate as they wish.
- **Targeted funding to individual families.** The model of home to school transport in Ireland has been to means test the exemption for charges, based on holding a valid medical card. Increasingly in England, local authorities are introducing personalised budgets, where social care and special education transport funding is being delegated directly to parents, carers or individuals service users depending on age and their capacity. This has generated some concerns about loss of control over standards of transport such as background checks for drivers and escorts, and equipment provision. There are also difficulties about ensuring co-ordination of transport resources. Other experience, would indicate that it provides greater accountability and control over an individual's transport, and allows them to make informed choices about the type of travel and mode of transport that best suits their needs.
- **Targeted support to individual pupils.** In Northern Ireland, individual pupils are targeted for additional support using the Educational Maintenance Allowance. This allows pupils to prioritise their own spending, but does not guarantee that it will be spent on school or public transport. Many pupils reported spending this on their cars or petrol. Adopting this approach received little enthusiasm from students themselves, with many young people highly sceptical about the fairness of the EMA assessment system, citing example of people they knew who they thought should not be entitled to this but who managed to make claims. Comments were made that this allowance reflected parents' income not theirs, and often did not reflect disposable income available within a household.

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*Parents should not be penalised if they earn 'good money'.*

*Gross household income is a poor indicator of what disposable money may be available for a young person's transport - some people have no more disposable income than those qualifying for EMA payments.*

Young person, focus group NI Youth Forum

### Recommendations

- **It is recommended that a dedicated transport budget be provided for those pupils in AEP and for school age mothers to enable more flexible and responsive transport to be arranged for these young people.** The evidence throughout this review has been that targeted transport should be available to support these young people where necessary, either using schools'/centres' own minibuses, Board buses or taxis/sessional tickets.
- **It is recommended that one officer be designated and accountable for home to school transport for looked after children across Northern Ireland, to ensure consistency across Board areas, between agencies and placements.** A coordinated approach is required to ensure that transport is focussed on the best interests of the child. Personal Education Plans should consider transport as part of the overall package of support required for these young people. For those in care and looked after, particularly in residential care homes, transport needs to be available, responsive and consistent. The officer should have responsibility for the transport for LACs (and others with additional needs), delegating to units where appropriate, or commissioning transport directly to ensure consistency of placement.

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- **It is recommended that an independent Exceptional Circumstances Transport Panel be established to consider applications for transport on the grounds of exceptional circumstances.** Exceptions might for example relate to temporary illness or extreme bullying. Currently appeals regarding transport entitlement are handled by Board officers and Chief Executive Officers. There are exceptional circumstances panels in two Boards, who consider grounds for granting free transport due to the circumstances of a child. Two structures are already in place that could provide a template for the format of these. In Northern Ireland there is an Exceptional Circumstances Body, which considers applications from parents for post-primary school admissions. In Ireland, an independent five person, School Transport Appeals Board considers appeals in relation to the school transport application process.

### 13. Home to school transport and the Area Planning process

#### Sustainable Schools

The Sustainable Schools policy is a framework for considering the educational viability of schools. It is a main driver for area planning, using six criteria to determine sustainability including educational experience, enrolment, finances, leadership and management, accessibility and community links. The Sustainable Schools policy sets minimum enrolment thresholds of 105 pupils for a rural primary school, 140 pupils for an urban primary school, and an enrolment of 500 pupils for a post-primary school and 100 pupils for a sixth form. This policy is therefore the key driver for the area planning process, to develop a planned network of viable and sustainable schools of the right type, in the right location.

#### Strategic and Area Planning

Area based planning was proposed more than ten years ago to ensure effective use of resources within local areas to avoid duplication of provision in schools and FE colleges, by involving all sectors to work together to agree a single plan for their area that meets the needs of all their pupils. This was reiterated in the Bain Report in 2006, which recognised the need for a strategic approach to planning of the schools' estate and developing schools that were sustainable, and accessible in terms of travelling



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times. This was about ensuring the right schools, of adequate size to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum efficiently and effectively, being located in the right place to minimise travel times and distances. Proposals were made that travel times to school should not exceed 30 minutes for primary age pupils, and 45 minutes for post-primary school pupils. These maximum travel times would concur with feedback from the Call for Evidence where 75% of respondents wanted a journey time of 30 minutes or less for primary age pupils and 60% wanted a journey of under an hour for post-primary school pupils.

However, this review has shown that travel times for pupils frequently exceed these, with many in special schools, Integrated education and Irish medium schools and units, as well as grammar schools travelling long distances to reach their school.

An Area Planning Steering Group was set up in 2011 to foster community-based education, broader social mixing and support for disadvantaged learners, and to accommodate the reshaping of education delivery in an area to achieve this. Such an approach is widely endorsed by other policies, including the commentary on the Area plans and by views expressed by stakeholders.

All the Area Plans provide details about proposed new schools, arrived at through rationalisation, amalgamation, mergers or new builds. For example, the objectives of the plan for the SELB area are to *“ensure a network of sustainable schools within reasonable travelling distance for pupils and capable of delivering effectively the revised curriculum, and, in post-primary schools, the Entitlement Framework.”* Furthermore, the public consultation undertaken by SELB in relation to the area plan highlighted *“opposition to large distances travelled by pupils, particularly where school closures or amalgamations were proposed”*. The negative impact of travel arrangements on educational achievement and on pupil access to extended curriculum activities was also noted. However, it is unclear whether the decisions being taken about new schools follow the ELBs' recommendations to minimise travel distances or travel times.

The Panel heard considerable evidence about the weaknesses of the current Area Planning system, in particular the need to take a strategic view of the location of special needs, Irish medium and Integrated education, to ensure that they are located to reflect potential and future demands, whilst minimising overall travel requirements.

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Currently, much of the Area Planning is taking place in parallel, with CCMS reviewing area plans for maintained schools and the Boards for the controlled sector, rather than there being a coherent, child centred, sustainable schools and transport approach.

### Special education

The location of special schools across Northern Ireland reflects a largely historic pattern in the type of disability and needs of the population. The shortage of suitable placements and pressure on school resources were repeatedly raised with the Panel during the review and were said to be affecting transport, especially in NEELB, SEELB and BELB. This necessitates long journeys for pupils travelling to distant schools, as much of the specialised school provision is located in (mainly south) Belfast, where many schools have traditionally served as regional centres.

In contrast, in WELB special schools have been planned to serve a wider range of needs.<sup>105</sup> As a result nearly 90% of pupils with SEN attend their nearest school (compared to 16% in BELB). This diversity of educational provision affects the transport demands and its cost, with WELB having a lower proportion of pupils with special needs qualifying for free transport. Transport for those in receipt of SEN transport to special schools in WELB costs on average approximately £1,000 per pupil per year compared to more than £2,300 across Northern Ireland.

SENAC, the Special Educational Needs Advice Centre, commented in its response to the Call for Evidence about the need for a strategic approach to planning to meet the needs of young people with special needs:

*"...this may be an issue in relation to school planning, [but] it cannot be detached from the issue of transport as where school choice is limited, distance becomes an issue and adds additional pressure to transport costs."*

<sup>105</sup> Information received from Special Education Review Team 29 April 2014.

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*With over 60,000 children with SEN ...[there is a need to] map the needs of children to the range of school provision...and ensure appropriate provision to meet the needs of all children is available within each Board area with adequate access to home to school transport."*

SENAC

### New school locations

The Panel heard persuasive evidence of the need for an accessibility planning exercise to be undertaken to inform choice of school location, and for school transport and travel to be considered explicitly at the planning stage. This should be seeking to minimise the need for long journeys, and enable and encourage the use of walking, cycling or existing public transport routes.

Merseytravel demonstrated clearly the value of effective land use planning and accessibility mapping when considering the location of new education facilities or relocation of schools. It provided two illustrations:

- School 1 with 1,200 pupils relocated in September 2013 and did not consider transport demands and provision. The post-primary technology college was built in a village. As a result of its location it now requires 16 supported bus services and 32 contracted vehicles to provide transport for pupils at an annual cost of £629,000 per year.
- School 2 relocated and considered transport in its location decision. It sought a location that could ensure pupils had access to the college on the commercial bus network. It worked with Merseytravel and public transport operators to re-route some bus services and ensure there was no additional cost to providing its transport.

### Transitional arrangements

The ELBs stressed the need for transport needs to be considered in the transition phase of Area Planning from the outset when discussions about school closures or relocations

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are initially raised. Those parents who are able to afford to send their children elsewhere are reportedly 'jumping ship' in advance of any school closure. They can afford to pay for or transport their children to another school of their choice (often knowing they will then become eligible to free transport after the reorganisation).

Where there are transitional periods that involve schools due to be amalgamated being on a split site, prior to their new build being completed, inconsistent mileage criteria between the two parts of the school site(s) and anomalies in entitlement to free transport have to be addressed. This then creates tensions in managing the subsequent relocation onto one combined site if school transport is subsequently withdrawn from some pupils who previously qualified, as the new school is no longer beyond walking distance.

A similar issue to this is school transport arrangements that are set up outside the usual criteria relating to school closures. For example, if a rural primary school in a village is closed and the next nearest school is 1.5 miles away, a discretionary arrangement is set up whereby those pupils from the old school receive transport to the school remaining open, because their school has closed. These legacy arrangements can make transition to a new school easier and facilitate the closure process. However, they often then lead to lasting inequities and historic arrangements that are difficult to administer. The difficulties were well illustrated by the situation in Ireland until the 2011 review of school transport. There, when a primary school closed or amalgamated, children had been deemed eligible for school transport, irrespective of distance. Similarly, where a cluster of schools was closed, transport had been provided from not less than a mile from the new central school. This was found to be applying even 40 years after a school closed, at considerable cost to the system.<sup>106</sup> (As a result of the recent school transport review in Ireland, this system has ceased with effect from the 2011/12 school year).

### Recommendations

- **It is recommended that the need for transport be considered as part of a strategic approach to the development of Irish medium education, Integrated and special education.** The current lack of coherent development of the estate for Irish medium education through units or schools is resulting in long

<sup>106</sup> DES (March 2011) School Transport - A Value For Money Review pp 59-60.

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distance travelled for pupils. The Review of Irish Medium Education Report (2009) recommended, “new post-primary provision should be developed at the optimal geographical location with local Area-Based Plans to draw on feeder primary schools and integrate with other services, such as transport. Development should be preceded by a protocol setting out how the provision will operate, including how it will relate to other Irish-medium provision.” Similar issues are faced by both the Integrated education and special schools estate.

- **It is recommended that the opportunities offered by the development of new schools be used to minimise travel needs, to promote the use of sustainable modes of travel, and ensure safer routes to school are developed.**
- **It is recommended that the WELB model of special schools provision be explored as part of the wider review of special education across Northern Ireland, to minimise travel times, and reduce transport costs.** WELB has restructured its special schools so that local schools provide for a wide range of educational needs. Other Boards are often reliant on specialist provision within Belfast, meaning long and tiring journeys for pupils due to shortages of placements locally.
- **It is recommended that Boards put in place transitional arrangements for home to school transport when schools are earmarked for closure/re-siting or development and this should be on a time bound basis to avoid the creation of inconsistent, ad-hoc legacy arrangements.** Experience from elsewhere has emphasised the need for this to be time limited until the relocation of schools is complete to avoid inconsistent, and often contentious, ad-hoc legacy arrangements remaining in place long term.

### 14. Home to school transport and cross border attendance

#### Cross border education

##### Entitlement criteria

Relatively few pupils travel between home and schools across the border on a daily basis. Less than half of responses to the Call for Evidence thought transport assistance

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should be provided for pupils travelling from Northern Ireland to Ireland, and fewer (40%) thought it should be offered to pupils travelling in the other direction.

For some areas of Northern Ireland, Irish medium schools south of the border offer the closest provision. For example, Buncrana for the Derry area, Letterkenny from Strabane, Monaghan for the Fermanagh area and Dundalk for those living in the Crossmaglen/Newry area. However, transport guidance precludes pupils travelling to these schools from qualifying for free transport, as Boards are permitted only to provide transport for pupils travelling to a grant-aided school.

Following the introduction of the post-primary school transport scheme in Ireland in 1967 a historic arrangement evolved whereby a small number of children from adjacent counties in Northern Ireland were provided with concessionary transport. These children make their way to a pick up point within Ireland and then access their School Transport Scheme (on payment of the post-primary charge).

Free transport is provided for those children wishing to travel across the border into Northern Ireland schools, where in practice, eligibility to transport is assessed as though they lived at the border. This raises inequities. Although each jurisdiction is treating these children as if they were their own resident children, because the two systems differ, the outcome is not the same for Northern Ireland pupils going out of the jurisdiction as it is for those staying within. If Northern Ireland pupils were travelling to the nearest school in category within Northern Ireland and lived more than three miles from it, they would receive free transport. As their nearest school is cross border, they are charged, as the current legislation permits only transport to be provided to a grant-aided school.

### School planning

The Review of Irish Medium Education in 2009 recommended that DE should identify development opportunities for co-operation with other areas in support of Irish medium education, particularly on an all-Ireland basis.

For post-primary schools, this may be of relevance, especially in the deeper rural areas, where wide catchment areas are necessary to ensure viable school enrolments. The WELB's post-primary area plan entitled Putting Pupils First - Shaping Our future

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recognises this, and provides one example where rationalisation of schools around Enniskillen could involve cross border attendance. CCMS has reported that as part of its development work and in advance of consultation on school closure, it will explore the potential for cross-border arrangements to meet the needs of the pupils residing in the area currently served by some schools in that area.

### Shared education/collaboration

Other cross border transport includes that for shared education. Thirty-four schools last year reported collaborating or sharing some aspect of education with a cross border school.<sup>107</sup>

### Cross border transport

Cabotage operations are defined in European regulations<sup>108</sup> as "national road passenger services for hire and reward carried out on a temporary basis by a carrier in a host member state, or the picking up and setting down of passengers within the same member state in the course of international services, provided that it is not the principal purpose of the service". This means a regular service that is open to the general public and requires an international operator's license. Likewise if a service is closed, e.g. provided only for school children it must be covered by a contract between the organiser and the carrier, specifying the route, stopping places and schedule of the services and will also require an international operator's license.

From a transport perspective, delivering cross border transport entails cabotage, i.e. transport operators delivering services in another jurisdiction. The Panel, at the start of the review, heard that some difficulties had been experienced as historically part of WELB's school transport operations had been contracted to operators from Ireland. This resulted in a challenge in 2011, which claimed that an operator from Ireland could not undertake permanent contractual work on this basis in Northern Ireland. In June 2012, WELB requested any Ireland operators wanting to continue school transport contract work in Northern Ireland to obtain a valid Northern Ireland operating license. Subsequent challenge and clarification means that even temporary contracts e.g.

<sup>107</sup> School Omnibus Survey 2013.

<sup>108</sup> DOE July 2013 Cabotage guidance.

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those of under a year or for school visits require operators to have a valid Northern Ireland operator's license. Consequently, this no longer appears to be an area of concern, with ELBs able to use operators from Northern Ireland, or Ireland, subject to all having a valid Northern Ireland operator's license.

One area of collaboration and good practice regarding transport arrangements has been that of vetting and background checks on drivers and escorts. Both jurisdictions require that drivers of pupils to and from school be subject to criminal conviction background checks. Officials in Ireland, and Board staff in Northern Ireland commented on reciprocal arrangements in place to ensure cooperation between PSNI and the Garda Vetting Unit on disclosing and clearance for staff, so that any relevant offences committed in Ireland, Northern Ireland or the rest of the UK are disclosable and information is shared.

### Recommendations

- **It is recommended that transport be provided to facilitate cross border attendance where that is the pupil's nearest school, and the parent chooses to send their child to that school.** This would enable pupils to attend their nearest Irish medium education, even if it is across the border.
- **It is recommended that a liaison group be established to look specifically at supporting the cross border transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary education, and their transport needs.** Such a liaison group should include members of the education Inspectorate (DES and DE), ELBs, and CnaG.
- **It is recommended that Area Planning explicitly consider the travel impact of school closures and rationalisation or re-location for pupils where this would result in the geographically closest primary or post-primary (or special school) being located across the border.** This would enable an assessment of the likely numbers of pupils involved. No child would be required to travel into a neighbouring jurisdiction if that was their nearest school, but in such circumstances where they choose to do so (and met the distance threshold), transport should be provided to that school, or to the closest within Northern Ireland. To assist with this, it is suggested that additional support to address issues involved in pupils transferring between the two differing



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education systems be explored. This is likely to be relevant, particularly at the end of the primary cycle. DE could explore whether EU or collaborative funding could be made available for this, and assess how any barriers including transport, may be overcome.

### 15. How can home to school transport minimise congestion and the environmental impact of school journeys?

#### Sustainable travel strategy

Sustainable transport policy for home to school travel in Northern Ireland is highly fragmented, with little coherence or overall vision. The Panel heard from DRD, which funds a programme to encourage active travel, including walking and cycling to and from school, and provides capital funding for cycling infrastructure and facilities at school. In addition, DRD promotes workplace travel plans in Northern Ireland. Unlike in England, travel plans in Northern Ireland have not been extended and introduced in all schools. Throughout the review the Panel has heard from other jurisdictions that have developed a more strategic policy to sustainable transport and safer travel to school.

#### Transport vision and coherent school travel policies

Discussions with TfL highlighted the importance of a coherent policy framework and articulating a clear vision for school travel and young people's transport:

**"TfL's vision for young people is that they will have access to the right information and help them make appropriate choices for themselves and for London. We promote active, safer and responsible travel that will remain with young people through adult life. We want to ensure they are aware of the travel options available, are educated and engaged in travel related issues that matter to them."**<sup>109</sup>

Within this, they have five programme strands of: community and personal safety; skills and employment using transport to access learning and training; casualty

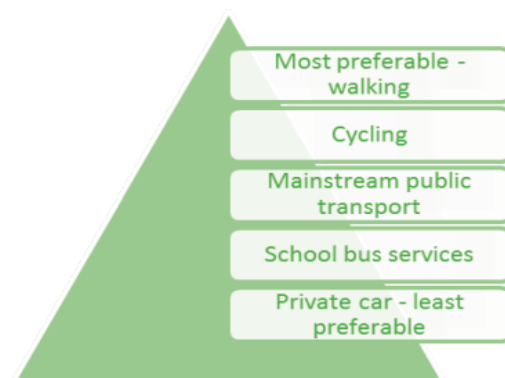
<sup>109</sup> TfL Delivery Plan for Schools and Young People 2013.

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reduction, active and independent travel and youth involvement. Free bus travel for all is a crucial element of this, but other relevant initiatives include the Sustainable Travel Active Responsible Safety (STARS) travel plan initiative, aimed at encouraging schools to receive accreditation at one of three levels: Gold, Silver or Bronze, depending on their use of sustainable modes of travel to school. This encourages schools to take the lead in planning, delivering and monitoring activities and, to date, 40% of London schools are accredited. On average, Gold and Silver STARS schools are achieving reductions in car use, and growth in the numbers of pupils walking and cycling to school. It also affords eligibility to apply for certain TfL grants to promote cycling and walking, and is supported by downloadable toolkits, regional seminars and awards event.

Merseytravel is the Passenger Transport Authority for the greater Merseyside/Liverpool metropolitan area, encompassing five local education authorities. It is responsible for promoting public transport, managing infrastructure, administering travel tickets and concessionary travel, securing non-commercial bus services and leading on transport planning. Recurrent annual expenditure is approximately £26 million. It has taken a strategic lead on school travel, as it recognises the importance of school journeys on the public transport network. It is also responding to changes in education provision such as the emergence of new types of schools including academies and free schools, which are outside local authority control.

Merseytravel has developed a Journey to School Policy (2013), which identifies a hierarchy of preferred modes of travel to school, encourages schools to communicate with them over changes and urges the use of evidence based land use planning to minimise travel demands. It uses a framework within which to consider requests from schools to review public transport service provision.



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Ireland has adopted a Smarter Travel Policy that includes an action to ensure that every school in Ireland has a travel plan to encourage students to take alternatives to the car, and ensure that local authorities identify and implement safe walking and cycling routes to and from school. This has been reinforced in the Revised Programme for Government, and supported by a Green Schools Travel Programme nationwide.<sup>110</sup>

### Measures to encourage walking and cycling

Feedback to the Panel from pupils and school staff indicated little enthusiasm for encouraging young people to walk or cycle to school, other than for (very) short distances. Car use remains high for school journeys across Northern Ireland, despite Government initiatives to improve road safety, to target young drivers and promote walking and cycling.

Walking and cycling levels for the journey to school in Northern Ireland are extremely low. Only a quarter of primary school age pupils walk to school, although the target is to achieve 36% by 2015, and only 16% of post-primary pupils walk against a target of 22%. This compares with 47% of trips to primary schools in Great Britain in 2012, and 38% of secondary pupils (although bus use is high in Northern Ireland at 50% for post-primary journeys compared to 29% elsewhere into the UK). Journey length is the main factor in influencing choice of mode for travel to schools. In Great Britain overall, 79% of primary and 89% of secondary school pupils' journey to school of under one mile are made on foot, compared to less than 2% of primary and 10% of secondary school journeys over two miles.<sup>111</sup>

The current home to school transport framework results in average journey lengths of more than five miles for post-primary school pupils (compared to 3.4 miles in the rest of the UK), and promotes choice of more distant schools. Although it supports bus and public transport use, it does little to minimise overall peak hour travel or to encourage sustainable travel. Currently, more than 20% of post-primary school pupils travel over eight miles to school. If pupils were attending their nearest age and gender appropriate school this figure would be fewer than 2%.

<sup>110</sup> DES (March 2011) School Transport - A Value for Money Review pp 127.

<sup>111</sup> DfT (2012) National Travel Survey Table NTS 0614.

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Improving rates of walking and cycling to school is dependent on encouraging shorter journeys to schools. Targets for Northern Ireland are likely to be achievable, but only if more pupils are travelling less than one or two miles to school. At present, as shown in Table 21, only 13% of post-primary pupils live within one mile of their school, which is the distance deemed by many as acceptable to walk. However, if all pupils attended their nearest school, nearly a third would then have a journey of less than a mile, making the target of 16% walking a realistic aim. Nearly two thirds would live within two miles. Changing the entitlement criteria for home to school transport so that it no longer supports such extensive choice of school, would be expected to encourage the use of more sustainable modes of travel by reducing the average distances to school and increasing the proportion of pupils living within one mile of their school.

**Table 21:**

### ESTIMATED IMPACT OF SCHOOL CHOICE ON DISTANCE TRAVELLED TO SCHOOL

	Current	Option 1: Nearest school in category	Option 2: Nearest school excluding selective	Option 3: Nearest school - age and gender appropriate
Average mileage	5.11 miles	3.99 miles	3.03 miles	2.34 miles
> 3 miles	80,000 (55%)	65,100 (44%)	53,300 (36%)	41,300 (28%)
> 2 miles	98,300 (67%)	85,000 (58%)	69,800 (48%)	55,300 (38%)
< 2 miles	48,500 (33%)	61,700 (42%)	77,000 (52%)	91,500 (62%)
< 1 mile	19,100 (13%)	24,500 (17%)	35,400 (24%)	47,560 (32%)

The review found the same barriers to walking and cycling at most schools, including uniform design. Many pupils complained of heavy, woollen blazers, usually in dark colours and restrictions on wearing coats or waterproof clothing even during winter. The phrase used by one young woman from Newry eloquently summed up how her school's uniform design was impractical for walking, with its ability to soak up the rain!

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*quilts and blankets...*

*A description of school uniform in Newry- and its (un) suitability for cycling and walking!*

*Schools have strict uniform policies meaning pupils have to wear blazers and are not allowed to wear boots or coats into school - this does not encourage walking, particularly in bad weather. Some schools say pupils are not allowed to wear coats at all - and there are no facilities in school to store items.*

**Pupils from focus group at Finaghy Youth Centre**

Poor facilities at schools for storage of bikes and helmets, books or wet clothing were also given as reasons for not walking to school, as were a lack of (segregated and off road) infrastructure. The Call for Evidence showed that respondents thought the priorities for encouraging walking or cycling should be the development of safe walking routes (cited by 77%) and segregated cycle routes (67%), with 64% wanting secure bike parking and school crossing patrols.

Furthermore, there are a number of school transport policies that do not support Government initiatives. These include the practices of cashing in sessional passes and providing free parking for young people at schools, as well as the phasing out of school crossing patrols.

### Recommendations

#### Sustainable school travel strategy

- **It is recommended that DE lead on developing a coherent Travel to School strategy for Northern Ireland, that links with and supports among others, the Road Safety Strategy 2020 Vision, the public health strategy to reduce obesity to 2022, relevant targets within the Programme for Government, sustainable travel, educational and public transport policies.** There is a need to address school travel more broadly, with improved links between ELBs, schools and DRD Travelwise, road safety promotion and sustainable travel initiatives, and DHSSPS

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public health objectives. Pilot school travel plans, supported with coherent pedestrian and cycle infrastructure, Bikeability training (and incorporating bus travel) could be trialled to demonstrate good practice across all modes and assess the potential to achieve mode shift.

- **It is recommended that DE take forward the relevant action measures set out in the Road Safety Strategy<sup>112</sup> to 2020.** The scope for physically segregated cycle ways to and from schools should be reviewed, and continued improvements in pedestrian and cycle infrastructure, supported by road safety training focusing on young people.

### Promoting walking and cycling

- **It is recommended that DE provide practical guidance to schools on how to promote walking and cycling to and from school, including appropriate school uniform design, management of parking and facilities on site.** These should permit wearing of suitable outer coats over uniform. The Road Safety Strategy includes an action measure that DE should issue guidance on school uniforms to highlight issues of visibility related to road safety. Reflective bands and promoting initiatives such as the "Ditch the Dark Day" to dress in bright clothes could also raise awareness.

### Shared education and area planning

- **It is recommended that accessibility planning, liaison with public transport operators and review of infrastructure for bus, cycle and walk access are all considered when assessing new school locations.** Area planning and identification of site location for new build schools offers the opportunity to promote sustainable travel and minimise transport requirement. Base line data on pupils and their mode of travel should be collected and subsequent travel patterns should be monitored.

<sup>112</sup> Road Safety Strategy 2020 Vision Action Measures Children and Young People pp 98-99.

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- **It is recommended that DE develop guidance on new school design and/or refurbishment of the schools' estate that promotes sustainable transport.** This should include adequate lockers, secure cloakrooms to allow storage of and drying of coats and sufficient secure bike parking, and well as site design that minimises vehicle/pedestrian/cycle conflicts and allows adequate bus loading/unloading areas. With area planning, and the introduction of new school campuses such as Lisanelly, there is opportunity to 'design in' improvements to school building and site design to improve safety and promote sustainable travel to school.

### School crossing patrols

- **It is recommended that the practice of phasing out school crossing patrols be reviewed.** The review heard evidence that these are often 'phased out' due to lower levels of walking when existing staff retire or resign. It is unclear whether losing a school crossing patrol actually contributes to the decline in walking. In the interim it is recommended that Access NI fees be paid for by ELBs, to overcome the cost deterrent of taking up the post of school crossing patrol.

### Young drivers

- **It is recommended that ELBs discontinue the policy of allowing pupils to "cash in" sessional tickets.** Young drivers are a focus of the Road Safety Strategy, yet ELBs school transport policies and individual schools' practices actually assist teenagers in driving to school rather than taking more sustainable (and safer) modes.

## 16. Ensuring safety standards are met

The need to provide a safe and secure journey to and from school is fundamental to ensure children are able to attend school and are ready to learn. The safety of walking routes to school and to bus stops, has been a recurring concern throughout this review.

Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy to 2020 highlights the need to implement a range of action measures to improve pedestrian, cyclist, and young driver, safety. This review would echo its recommendations. However, there are a number of changes

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to the home to school transport policies and practices that would complement and reinforce this strategy.

### Safety of route

The majority of young people do not qualify for free school transport because they live within the walking distance of school. All Boards reported that they used the RoadSafetyGB guidance to determine whether, within these walking distances, road safety risks are exceptional. In practice, few children qualify for free transport on these grounds.

The review heard calls from young people of the need for a more sensitive and individualised approach to considering hazards and the safety of route. Conversely, Boards are keen that administratively any basis of entitlement to home to school transport, including safety of route assessment, lack ambiguity and therefore are perceived as fair and easy to assess.

More than 60% of respondents to the Call for Evidence wanted the safety of a walking route to be a factor considered when eligibility to free school transport was being assessed. Elsewhere in the UK, there have been numerous cases testing the safety of route criteria, and it is now assumed the child is accompanied as necessary rather than travelling alone, and takes into account both the nature of the route, and the age of the child.

Wales is in the process of reviewing its approach to assessing safety of route. Their proposal is to replace the RoadSafetyGB guidance with Wales' specific statutory guidance. This will extend the assessment criteria to include more subjective measures, such as traffic risks, lines of sight and visibility, but will also encompass social dangers, environmental hazards and children's opinions.

Northern Ireland is largely rural, with many roads designated at the national speed limit. Outside the main urban areas there is little pedestrian infrastructure. It is unclear how assessments using RoadSafetyGB guidelines are undertaken in practice. Widening any assessment of route safety to become more subjective, as in Wales, would risk introducing a highly contentious system that would be administratively complex, time consuming, expensive and open to challenge.



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### Recommendations

#### Safety of walking route

- **It is recommended that the phrases walking route and walking distance be redefined as distance criteria.** The use of a distance threshold of two miles is recommended as a 'bright line' by which to determine whether a child is eligible for state assistance to transport, not to suggest that the two miles should be walked in all cases. This will need to be accompanied by information for parents that clarifies parental responsibility for the walk to a bus stop and transport to the school within the distance.
- **It is recommended that the current assessment of hazardous route as a basis for entitlement to free school transport be phased out.** The current safety of route guidance appears not to be applied widely, and although it raises expectations in practice applies to few pupils.
- **It is recommended that DE establish a formal mechanism by which schools can identify routes that require infrastructure improvements for pedestrians and cyclists, which can inform DRD's programme for capital expenditure.** This would enable schools (pupils and parents) to identify where there is scope to address road safety hazards on the routes to school, and where remedial action such as footpaths, crossings or lighting would enable and encourage pupils to walk or cycle to school.
- **It is recommended that DE develop formal recognition for schools that implement Travel to School Plans.** Sustainable travel policies within schools should identify targets for mode shift, encourage use of sustainable modes and implement policies that support reducing car use by staff, pupils and visitors.
- **It is recommended that the maximum walk to bus stop be reduced to one mile,** consistent with elsewhere in the UK. This would reduce the number of children travelling rural routes to school bus pick up locations, often in isolated areas, although it is recognised that it will require slightly longer bus routes, or payment of feeder transport/parental allowance to transport children to pick up locations.

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- **It is recommended that ELBs conduct a risk assessment of all school bus stop locations on high-speed roads, to ensure that sight lines, visibility and waiting off the carriageway are all adequate to minimise risk to pupils.** The review heard (and observed) some examples of poor bus stop location and school bus pick ups requiring pupils to cross high-speed roads without pedestrian facilities, such as an over-bridge or signalised crossing.
- **It is recommended that DE liaise with DRD and review good practice from other jurisdictions in improving bus stop safety,** such as simple cheap bus stop reflectors that can indicate when children are present or use of RfID technology to warn bus drivers of the presence of a child. Both systems are operating successfully in rural areas of Sweden,<sup>113</sup> and offer low cost ways to reduce risks of injury at and around bus stops.
- **It is recommended that DE develop good practice guidance on handling potential hostility on the school journey, drawing on successful local models such as the Safer School Travel Forum in Ballymena.** The review heard submissions that some pupils felt unsafe walking through a perceived 'hostile area' particularly where they are clearly identifiable by their school uniforms. In some cases in Belfast this necessitated two bus journeys to avoid walking the measured route to school. However, these were exceptions and the Panel heard of considerable positive work where tensions between different schools had been addressed at 'flash points' through the presence of school staff, use of monitors, collaboration with Translink and the PSNI to develop safety partnerships involving all schools.

### Safety and quality of transport

Home to school transport across Northern Ireland provides a safe journey to and from school for the vast majority of pupils. The casualty data show low numbers of pupils injured on Translink buses, Board transport, and other public transport. However, young people themselves have worries about their school transport. These centred not only on safety, but also on the quality of services provided, especially its reliability and convenience.

<sup>113</sup> Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute.

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Young people at focus groups were scathing about the safety education provided to them about using buses and bus travel. The emphasis on wearing seat belts when there was still standing on vehicles and insufficient capacity to ensure they got a seat was seen as hypocritical.

*Talking about safety on a bus is a joke - when there are not enough spaces to sit down.*

Young person, NI Youth Forum

Pupils repeatedly stressed the need for reliable and timely transport that ensured they arrived at school on time and were not penalised for a lack of punctuality or poor attendance. The lack of defined maximum journey times and long journeys to and from school were of concern for many, especially where these required a change of buses or long walks to pick up points.

*The Dungannon bus is late most days and pupils are late for class and can be marked absent*

Pupil from focus group held in Dungannon school

*If a pupil is late for class due to the bus they are penalised and reprimanded regarding their punctuality*

Pupil from Craigavon area, from focus group in Armagh

There are no specified maximum journey times, although all Boards try to minimise the time spent on vehicles by young people. They route Board bus services and private hire vehicles to balance achieving maximum utilisation of vehicle capacity with minimising travel times. England now has no specified maximum journey times, but case law has determined the journey should not be so long as to preclude the child

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from benefitting from the education received.<sup>114</sup> In practice, some local authorities still have policies based on earlier guidance, which stipulated that, ordinarily, pupils should not be travelling (including time spent waiting or walking to bus stop) more than 45 minutes each way for a child of primary age and 1 hour 15 minutes for a child of post-primary age. Similarly, in Ireland, under the terms of the School Transport Scheme, maximum journey times have been retained. The scheme states that "where practicable, and subject to considerations of cost and logistics, routes are planned to avoid an eligible child to have travel and waiting times in excess of 2.5 hours per day" (post-primary) and 1.5 hours for primary.

### Recommendations

- **It is recommended that vehicle and route capacity be monitored by schools, Translink and ELBs** to prevent overcrowding on routes and ensure there is sufficient capacity for those entitled to free travel or who wish to pay to travel to school.
- **It is recommended that there is an annual forum for schools to provide information to Translink and the Boards about likely future network demands and capacity requirements.** Too often routes appear to lack responsiveness to schools' needs or changing flows of pupils as catchment areas change and pupil numbers vary.
- **It is recommended that future contracts between ELBs and Translink specify clearly the outcomes required for home to school transport,** for example in terms of capacity, responsiveness to changing school needs, route design, and quality. In the Translink agreement with ELBs payment is based on a specified number of sessional tickets, calculated as at October 31<sup>st</sup> each year. The current agreement determines overall likely volume on the network and an average rate per sessional ticket. There are no outcome based performance measures. An improved agreement, with performance based measures relating to quality, safety, capacity and price, is needed. It is recommended that the contract with Translink include key performance indicators such as capacity and quality of service for school pupils.

<sup>114</sup> R v Hereford & Worcester ex parte P (1992) The Times, 13 March 1992.

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- **It is recommended that the ELB contract with Translink ensures adequate notification is provided to schools (and parents) about proposed changes to public and school transport routes, times or fares.** There is a need to improve the notice provided to school and transport users on any changes to Translink's routes. The revised contract with DE/Boards should specify that amendments to routes coincide with changes to school year rather than part way through a year, or at least at start of term, and provide adequate notification to schools and pupils.
- **It is recommended that the casualty reports by the police indicate whether the journey is to/from school or school trip and that trends are monitored by DE.** Casualty reports are currently recorded by the police, but there is little data about school bus casualties specifically, or school journey safety, and therefore it is difficult to prioritise safety measures to ensure the most effective use of resources.
- Feedback from young people highlighted the need for a coherent road safety campaign, to encourage safer bus travel. The DRD Road Safety Strategy Vision 2020 does not include any specific action measures for school buses or young people's use of public transport. **It is recommended that DE and DOE develop, in conjunction with young people, a safety campaign that targets seat belt wearing, behaviour, and safety at bus stops to promote safer school travel.** This should be aimed at P6 and P7 pupils, prior to transferring to post-primary school when many more start making longer/more independent journeys.
- **It is recommended that ELBs adopt a maximum journey time, including walking and waiting time, that ordinarily should be no more than 1.5 hours per day for primary school pupils and 2.5 hours per day for post-primary school pupils.** This would provide clarity to parents of what to expect in terms of journeys to and from school, whilst recognising the need to balance economic considerations and cost efficiency against maintaining reasonable journeys to school.

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### 17. Should free (public) transport be provided for all school pupils?

#### The public transport offer in Northern Ireland

The public transport offer to young people in Northern Ireland is already good in comparison to many rural areas of the UK. Translink has a half fare scheme for under 16s travelling on its network (with concessionary fare reimbursement funded by DRD) and yLink offers a third off for over 16s on payment of £8 to purchase a one off card. This discount is available on cash single fares on Ulsterbus and Metro services, and singles, day returns, weekly and monthly fares on NIR and half fare on Enterprise rail services. Translink markets yLink on its website and has an advertising campaign during September/October each year, which includes presentations at freshers' events at colleges.<sup>115</sup>

#### Public transport use by young people

Although passenger numbers have been rising on bus and rail, public transport use in Northern Ireland is relatively low in terms of the number of passenger journeys. Overall, in Northern Ireland people make about 900 journeys per year, of which about 37 are by bus. (This compares to about 923 trips per year in England of which 42 are by bus).<sup>116</sup>

Public transport use is already high by young people for journeys to and from school and college, with a third of young people qualifying for free school transport many of these are travelling each day on the local bus network. A further estimated 15,000-20,000 pupils travel to/from school or college on Translink services at parental expense.

Young people within the Belfast area told us they made considerable use of public transport for social and work purposes. However, outside Belfast, in more rural areas, the high costs of using public transport and the lack of public transport services were seen as barriers to using buses.

<sup>115</sup> Communication with Translink, 19th March 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In depth Report 2010-2012 & National Travel Survey 2013 Table NTS 0303.

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*Some pupils at 16 are having to pay an adult fare when travelling outside school hours - depending on the driver - fares can be expensive £9 to travel to Belfast*

Comment from young person, focus group Dungannon

*Would like to be able to use sessional pass for other journeys - it costs £16 return to Belfast at the weekend*

Pupil, focus group Ballygawley

Some young people in Belfast also made use of black taxis, which were widely viewed as a more cost effective option than using buses.

*Use black taxis as they charge £1 for under 18s, and they are more regular than buses, very flexible and faster than using the bus*

Young person, NI Youth Forum

*Black taxis are quicker and easier, don't have to wait on a bus. Costs 90p - £1 so it is a real alternative to the bus*

Young person, focus group West Belfast

Should free public transport be offered to all young people?

The terms of reference for this review specifically asked the Panel to consider free public transport for all as a policy option.

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### London - Transport for London (TfL)

London is the only place within the UK where public transport is currently available free of charge to all young people. The Panel met with officers from Transport for London to discuss the implications of this policy. In 2005, free transport was introduced for under 16s across London using the smartcard - Oystercard - branded as Zip. This scheme provides for free travel at all times on buses/trams across London for those young people in full-time education up to the age of 19 who are resident in any of the London Boroughs. In addition, it offers reduced rates on other modes of transport including the underground.

Pupils can apply on-line or using a paper based system. A £10 application fee is charged as a one-off contribution to the costs of administration. This fee is covered by the individual Boroughs for those who are in receipt of free school meals.

About 90% of the 11-15 year olds and more than half of all 16-19 year olds have applied to the scheme. When introduced it was intended to target low-income families to raise attainment with a view to encouraging participation in social activities, and sports. Since 2008, the total number of bus journeys has increased by about 15% for 5-10 year olds and 16-19 year olds, and by 26% for 11-15 year olds.

Evaluation into the public health impacts of this scheme have concluded that with the offer of free transport, transport poverty is no longer a significant problem for young people in London, although it remains a problem for some young disabled people. Research has found that free travel is important to some for access to recreation and sport, and the scheme has reduced the stigma attached to using public transport as it is not means tested. The bus has now become the default mode, even for very short journeys that would be suitable for walking. However, there has been no evidence that free travel has reduced overall levels of physical activity as most public transport journeys include some element of walking, and free travel has encouraged more travel overall.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Goodman A, Jones A, Roberts H, Steinbach R and Green J. (2013 epub) "We can all just get on a bus and go": rethinking independent mobility in the context of universal provision of free bus travel to young Londoners. Mobilities.



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In addition to free travel for all young people, TfL has introduced a scheme targeting schools to inspire them to use public transport, primarily at off peak times. The School Party Travel Scheme, offers schools free travel for their pupils to go on an educational visit in London. The journey must start after 9.30 am and return no later than 4 pm. Although the criteria to use the scheme are quite strict, uptake is growing by about 11% each year, due in part to school budget cuts. This scheme reduces the need for schools to use private contractors and hire coaches for travel.

### Costs of widening availability

Widening the availability of free transport to all, although linked to school journeys, has been estimated by DE and ELB staff as likely to cost between an additional £24-76 million per year, based on the average unit cost of school transport.

The current reimbursement for the under 16s half fare scheme in Northern Ireland equates to about £6 million per annum. If it is assumed, based on the National Travel Survey data, that the majority of public transport journeys are accounted for by travel to school, then it can be assumed this reimbursement largely relates to the six million journeys for under 16 year olds, recorded during the peak hours (see Table 3).

If uptake of free transport was to reach the levels of travel seen in London, it would mean each young person aged 11-15 years inclusive making an average of 360 journeys per year by bus. For 145,000 post-primary pupils this could potentially equate to annual fare reimbursement of more than £100 million. In practice, it is likely to cost less as this includes a large proportion of school travel journeys that are already provided for. The additional costs are, therefore, estimated to be £58-£60 million per year in recurrent expenditure.<sup>118</sup> It is also likely that additional capacity would be required on the public transport network and hence additional capital investment in fleet and infrastructure would be needed, which is not reflected in these estimates.

### Views of young people and stakeholders

Although more than 60% of respondents to the Call for Evidence said they would welcome free transport for all pupils, young people did not universally consider free

<sup>118</sup> Assumed £2 per journey reimbursed to Translink - current reimbursement approximately £1 per journey for half fare. £104 million - less £43 million post-primary home to school transport expenditure.

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public transport either necessary or desirable as a policy option. More than 40% of post-primary age pupils responding to the Call for Evidence said they would not endorse it being available for use at all times, although many young people in Belfast saw it as being beneficial for them.

*Free transport would make a big difference - would be able to use the bus to visit friends, volunteering, getting to work*

*Would be "wonderful"*

*Would make a big difference to family expenses as the bus pass costs £1,000 a year.*

Comments from NI Youth Forum

Many young people told us that such a policy would disproportionately benefit those living in urban areas. Others said it had the potential to be abused or, if it was available, it would be used primarily for additional social journeys, or for those currently unable to stay for after-school activities.

*It would make people lazy - and it would be abused. Walking would not be encouraged by it.*

*If public transport is free it should only be free from over a certain distance*

Young people, Finaghy Youth Centre

*If free transport was provided it would enable more journeys for socialising and attending after-school activities*

Pupil, focus group Dungannon

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In Belfast, after thoughtful consideration, young people proposed a flat fare should be paid by everyone.

*Long journeys should be a certain fee - for example 50p*

**Young person Finaghy Youth Centre**

### Encouraging bus use

Two-thirds of respondents to the Call for Evidence said more bus services would encourage use of public transport, whereas 58% supported further subsidy to reduce fares, and 49% wanted an end to standing on buses. Improved quality of vehicles and driver training were lower ranked improvements.

### Affordability

Stakeholders, young people and responses to the Call for Evidence all queried the appropriateness of 16 years old as the cut off age for child fares, given few teenagers aged 16-19 years are in employment and the aspiration for most is that they continue in education post-16. There were concerns about the high cost of fares, but many thought a fare (even if nominal) should be charged, or that their sessional tickets should enable them to make some other journeys at weekends or after school, rather than transport being free at all times.

*Half fare should be offered up to 18 year olds - there should be student discounts and better travel options*

*Under 18s pay less but still pay sizeable fares charges*

**Comments from NI Youth Forum**

### Availability of services

Overall, responses to the Call for Evidence echoed comments from young people, in that availability of public transport, rather than affordability was the main constraint on

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the use of public transport outside Belfast. Affordability was a factor exacerbated in all areas by a lack of awareness of concessions and discounts available.

### Awareness of services and entitlements

Despite the marketing by Translink, discussions with young people highlighted a very low awareness of their entitlements, including: proof of age card, child fares and discounts, as well as the yLink scheme. Figures for uptake of yLink confirmed this. There are 16,000 yLink passes, which represents only about 8% of the cohort taking up a card.<sup>119</sup> Some leaflets in bus stations were observed during the review, but young people themselves suggested that they should be contacted via schools rather than using other marketing channels. There is a lack of awareness of a proof of age card available from Translink depots and stations despite these being available free of charge.

*Information about schemes available to young adults is not good and feedback from Translink is poor.*

*The best way to target pupils with information is via the school - and to use social media more.*

**Comments from NI Youth Forum**

Although Translink bus drivers received some praise, there were reports of persistent challenges around age and entitlement to a child fare. Young people repeatedly reported being confronted, especially if they were not in their school uniforms, or were wearing a sports kit. This caused problems for young people when parents had given them only enough money to pay for the child fare, but they were required to buy an adult ticket.

<sup>119</sup> Based on assumption of approximately 20,000 young people per year group.

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### Recommendations

- There is a need to improve the Translink website to make it more user and young person friendly. **It is recommended that DE and Translink engage with young people to develop effective marketing strategies and campaigns to promote awareness of public transport entitlements for young people.** This should include yLink, proof of age cards and child fare offers, as well as smarter ticketing initiatives to engage young people and raise awareness of public transport entitlement and services..
- **It is recommended that a standard set of information be included in ELB school admissions information and distributed via schools, which should include both home to school transport, and public transport entitlements.**
- To improve the perception of public transport by young people, **it is recommended that Translink ensure there is a consistent approach by all drivers in relation to the application of child fares and enforcement of use of sessional passes.** This should set out what to do when pupils are not carrying fare money or passes, to ensure young people can see such policies are applied consistently and safely.
- **It is recommended that DE and Translink establish a School Party Travel Scheme that would enable Area Learning Communities, individual schools and colleges to use public transport free or at reduced rates for school related trips during the school day.** It is proposed that all schools would be eligible for one free use of the scheme each year, for a class of pupils. This would offer benefits of encouraging public transport use at other times, develop travel training skills, and utilise off peak spare capacity on the public transport network.

### 18. Achieving value for money and the model of delivery of home to school transport?

#### Value for money

Some respondents to the Call for Evidence felt strongly that the amount of money spent on home to school transport was appropriate and that funding levels should not be changed.

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*"what price can you put on having a child educated?"*

Parent of pupil transported

Conversely, other respondents felt money would be better spent within the class room and that radical change was required.

*"the percentage of the education budget expended on free transport is excessive and should be reduced"*

CCMS

*"efforts should be made to lower the transport bill for education while not compromising the safety of pupils"*

Principal

In comparison to other areas of the UK, Northern Ireland spends a high proportion of its education budget on transport but achieves a comparatively low cost per pupil, due to the high volume of pupils transported. Despite this, there remain some obvious areas for immediate or short term improvements to efficiency, including improved audit of sessional tickets, and management of special education transport.

Ideas relating to improving efficiency suggested at stakeholder meetings included:

- **Double tripping.** It is often argued that double tripping i.e. staggering school start times to permit vehicles to be used to make consecutive runs with one vehicle to two schools would improve efficiencies and reduce costs. It is already used at some schools, but there were calls for it to be used more widely. Counter arguments to this were put by special needs organisations. They were concerned that double tripping at some special schools was resulting in late arrivals and already having an adverse impact on some pupils, with some having early starts or schools having to extend registration to allow for late arrivals. There were worries about the impact

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that a record of low or late attendance would have on pupils, as well as the effect of cutting into teaching hours for vulnerable pupils who required the maximum hours possible in school. Young people from the Crossgar area reported a late start for post-primary school due to their buses double tripping to a primary school. This, they said, regularly caused late arrivals and departures and illustrated the constraints for Boards or Translink of trying to operate such a network.

- Improved use of Board buses throughout the day. In the Call for Evidence responses, the vast majority (84%) believed ELB buses should be used for other purposes including for after-school activities; sports trips by schools (either charged or free), by health and social care trusts, or to deliver meals and post. However, a large proportion of the costs of operating buses is accounted for by staff costs, and as many drivers are on part-time contracts, additional hours would result in increases to expenditure.
- Improved monitoring of take up of Translink sessional tickets was recommended by many respondents to the Call for Evidence and stakeholders. Suggestions made to the Panel were that if a pupil has applied for, and received, a free travel pass they should be using it for a proportion of the time - say 70% - but if it is unused, this should be withdrawn.
- Improved assessment of special needs transport to focus more closely on need and remove the assumption that school transport should automatically be by taxi with an escort.
- Aligning holidays. Some parents and other stakeholders raised the issue of schools having different holidays. This means some days there are only one or two children on a bus making journeys to school. In Ireland, school transport is provided under the School Transport Scheme on the basis of a co-ordinated school calendar agreed among schools at the local level, who rely on the same network of bus services for mid-term closures. This takes account of the DES Circular Standardisation of the School Year. Bus services commence on a specified date in August or September each school year, to facilitate attendance for the standard school year.

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- Use of alternative providers. Private transport operators argued there was potential for achieving savings through more market testing of routes and efficient use of the private sector. CCMS argued that delegating funding to schools could foster a more entrepreneurial approach to the procurement of transport, including the development of social enterprises, which may benefit local communities and reduce costs. The voluntary/community transport sector argued that there was scope for greater use of the community transport sector, particularly in supporting schools deliver after-school services.
- Improved procurement. Private transport operators were concerned that the uncertainty around the introduction of ESA had resulted in year to year, rather than longer term contracts. Such contracts of short duration do increase financial risks for operators and provide inadequate security for them to obtain finance to invest in vehicles.

### Recommendations:

- **It is recommended that Translink conduct routine monitoring of pupils' passes to prevent overcrowding and check entitlement to travel.** In the longer term, it is likely that improved use of smarter ticketing will improve monitoring of use of public transport. Pupils want passes checked to ensure that those travelling on buses are entitled to be there, preventing overcrowding on routes to and from schools, and counter fraudulent use, which, although small, was of concern to many. In addition, a 'use it or lose it' approach could be implemented, whereby if pupils apply for places on Board buses or Translink sessional passes and these are regularly unused and applied for as merely 'rainy day' provision, they should forfeit transport for the remainder of the year. Schools and young people are aware there is abuse in the system and "there are a lot of unused bus passes" (School Principal), which have been paid for!
- **It is recommended that schools consult with ELBs and transport providers over proposed changes to session times.** Changes to school session times can have both adverse and positive effects on the transport network. Schools that are willing to start earlier or later, or finish earlier or later to allow buses to be utilised for other establishments, should be able to benefit from these changes.



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Conversely, schools that choose to change session times that result in additional transport costs by requiring additional vehicles or driver hours potentially should be charged for the costs incurred. In Ireland, when school session times are to be changed, this is assessed by Bus Éireann. It is not regarded as feasible or financially possible for DES to provide school bus services to schools on an individual or stand-alone basis.

This review is not proposing that schools be precluded from amending session times. That is a matter for individual schools. However, the home to school transport budget should not be expected to carry the additional costs imposed as a result. There is already provision in the Common Funding guidance provided to schools that states a funding authority may, in certain circumstances, make a charge against a school's delegated budget. One illustration provided is when a Board of Governors makes a decision, as a result of which, additional transport costs are incurred, for example to vary the hours of attendance and fail to inform the Board.

- **It is recommended that the financial and administrative functions of school transport be streamlined, and undertaken by one ELB/organisation.** Considerable work to establish a central transport unit following the proposals for ESA has already been undertaken.<sup>120</sup> It is anticipated this would include a regional Head of Transport Services, with a senior management structure responsible for: area wide special education transport; transport for pupils with additional needs; LACs and specialist services; a lead on liaison with Translink; private contractors; as well as area wide training; fleet management; IT and applications. These should be supported by area based, local teams providing the day-to-day liaison with ALCs, individual schools and local Translink managers and depots.

<sup>120</sup> ESA (January 2009) Proposal - Single Transport Service.

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- In the longer term, **it is recommended that applications for home to school transport be consolidated into an on-line centralised application process to improve efficiency and reduce administrative costs.** A useful model would be the Bus Éireann system. It is likely that more specialist assessment for pupils with additional needs will be required for those with complex social, medical or behavioural needs.

### Model of delivery

The current model of delivery, with the majority of eligible pupils transported on Board and Translink buses, has remained largely stable over recent years. However, the Panel heard of individual Boards who have been changing the balance of transport, with one moving towards greater use of contracted taxis and private operators to reduce capital expenditure requirements. Conversely, other Boards have moved away from use of taxi and private operators to improve utilisation of their own fleet. The Panel heard divergent views from the Boards as to which mode(s) of transport offered better value for money, and about differing approaches in the use of the private sector.

Analysis of the pupil transport costs for those using Board vehicles to mainstream schools shows that in total these journeys account for approximately £15.5 million expenditure per year, excluding capital or administration costs. (Special school transport has been excluded from this due to the very different requirements for fleet and staff for these services). This is equivalent to £705 per pupil transported per year, or £1.96 per trip, comparable to £1.99 per trip on Ulsterbus and £1.95 on Translink overall.

Total public sector funding represents two-thirds of Ulsterbus' revenue, with £33 million from the ELBs, £5 million from DEL, and £28.5 million from DRD including £16.2 million concessionary fare reimbursement. Nearly 20% of Translink's revenue funding comes from DE or DEL for home to school or college journeys, but these journeys represent 27% of the total passenger journeys. However, for Ulsterbus, DEL and DE funding accounts for nearly 40% of revenue funding, and nearly half of Ulsterbus passengers, which suggests that school journeys are cross subsidised from the wider public transport network funding.

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Translink's 2012/13 annual accounts indicate their cost of sales are £184.4 million to deliver 78.4 million passenger journeys, and £91.6 million for Ulsterbus to deliver 40.7 million passenger journeys. This is equivalent to a cost of £2.35 per trip (although this does include Northern Ireland Railways), and £2.25 per trip for Ulsterbus, higher than the sessional ticket rate charged of about £1.99 per trip. This indicates a cross subsidy of 26p per trip on Ulsterbus for each sessional ticket journey, equivalent to approximately £5 million per annum. However, in Belfast, sessional tickets on Metro services account for 8% of revenue but only 4% of passengers, reflecting the fact these are shorter journeys. The average cost of sessional tickets overall equates to £1.54 per passenger trip paid by DE, compared to a cost per trip of £1.27. In effect, there is therefore, a 27p cross subsidy from DE but these represent relatively few journeys and this equates to a total of £305,000 per year.

Ulsterbus figures indicate cost of sales of nearly £92 million for a fleet of 1,136 vehicles, equivalent to £81,000 per vehicle, compared to a Board bus operating cost of nearly £30,000 per annum. However, this does not include any allocation for depreciation in the Board figures, and it does not reflect the fact that much of the Board fleet consists of smaller vehicles, often operating with lower capacity in rural areas rather than on main routes.

In the absence of an agreed public transport network that is required to be provided under the public service obligation it is not possible to calculate the impact on the network, and Ulsterbus in particular, if there was withdrawal of large numbers of pupil journeys from Ulsterbus. It is evident that if the overall network had to be retained to provide sufficient route coverage for Northern Ireland, and Translink was unable to reduce its fleet size or vehicle mileage, the cost per passenger trip would rise to over £4 without additional revenue from sessional tickets or assuming no additional passenger journeys are generated. The subsidy per passenger would therefore rise by more than £2 per trip.

Responses to the Call for Evidence indicated that Board buses (79% of respondents) were perceived as more suitable for primary age pupils, and sessional passes (79%) or Board buses (72%) for post-primary school pupils. A large majority (70%) thought pupils from different schools should share transport vehicles, a majority were opposed to primary and post-primary pupils sharing the same transport.

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Translink informed the Panel that if they assumed control of Board buses (or at least details of pupils) then the service would be more efficient. They argue this would bring other advantages in that it would provide the option of franchising and a greater number of pupils with special needs could travel on public transport. Their view was that it would be more efficient to have one scheduler with oversight of all Translink and ELB bus services. The ELB buses could then be used to deliver rural public transport services, with Board bus fleet operations benefitting from Translink expertise. Some Board staff have argued that they can provide a more tailored and cost effective service than the sessional ticket rate.

In effect, the model proposed by Translink is that currently operating in Ireland, with Bus Éireann managing the School Transport Scheme for DES, handling applications, route planning and delivery, and procurement of other private operators to provide a significant proportion of routes.

The Panel heard from private sector and voluntary sector transport providers, both expressing considerable frustration at the current procurement practices for school transport services, which in the private sector's case largely excludes them from bidding for many routes. The voluntary/community transport sector is also precluded from taking on contract work, due to restrictions under the 10B permit system. However, there are fundamental proposals to change operator licensing and introduce a two-tier licence, which will replace the road service license and 10B permit system. Only the lower tier will continue to be analogous to the 10B permit, focused on non-commercial operations and allowing volunteer drivers. The main effects of this are expected to be on the rural transport partnerships and to enable further integration with health, social care and community transport sectors.

The Panel received information about the Dungannon transport pilot, which is one example of integration of transport seeking to improve vehicle utilisation across health, social care, education and public transport, and achieve the delivery of 'more for less' by allowing interworking of services and greater coordination of resources. Such a model is highly ambitious, but has potential to improve utilisation of vehicles, particularly in rural areas.

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### Recommendations

- **It is recommended that sessional tickets on Translink services continue to be used where cost comparisons (including revenue and capital) show that this is in the interests of public expenditure overall.** It is evident Ulsterbus operations would require additional subsidy if the existing network was to be retained, and school pupils were removed from it.
- **It is recommended that the basis of the calculation of sessional ticket costs be reviewed and agreed between ELBs, Translink and DE/DRD/DEL and regularly benchmarked by market testing and comparison with Board operations.** As part of the wider contract negotiations performance indicators relating to quality of service, reliability, responsiveness to changes in school catchments and greater flexibility should be agreed. Currently, there appears to be a perception that ELBs should be paying only the marginal cost of sessional tickets. However, the extent of the network's reliance on school sessional tickets especially for Ulsterbus is evident.
- **It is recommended that any monetary allowance be at a mileage rate applicable equally to all school sectors.** It is likely that monetary allowances will continue to be used where these are cost effective, and a parent is willing to transport their child. The rate used should, however, be consistently applied across all school sectors.

## 19. Putting pupils first

### Engaging young people

The recommendations in this review are based on extensive quantitative and qualitative data drawn from a diverse range of stakeholders. Throughout the review the experiences and views of young people have added depth and specific examples. They illustrated the value of meaningful engagement with young people.

The review sought feedback from pupils in all school sectors, young people, youth workers, school principals and staff, as well as young people's advocacy groups, and other professionals representing them. It was evident throughout that there was

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often a wide divergence between professionals' perceptions of the level and standard of home to school transport service delivered and what young people had been told, expected or experienced. This emphasises the need for school transport planners, transport operators, and professionals to hear young people's views and purposefully engage with them in service design, delivery and monitoring.

Translink already has a Youth Forum involving up to 30 young people from across Northern Ireland aged 11 to 23. This provides a formalised mechanism for young people to challenge views, opinions and provide feedback on their experiences of using public transport services in Northern Ireland. However, there is no procedure for young people to meet DE policy makers or Board staff overseeing school transport, or for pupils using other modes of school transport including Board vehicles or private contractors' vehicles, to influence sustainable travel initiatives or provide feedback on school travel generally.

Transport for London provides one model for this, with a youth panel established in 2009. This gives young people from across London a direct voice within TfL's policy making process. The panel of 20 people aged 13 to 25 years old meet regularly and coordinates the Youth Participation Day, where young people from across London share experiences of travelling around the capital.

### Recommendations

- **It is recommended all School Councils include as a standing item on their agenda the topics of school travel and school transport, to provide feedback to the Board's transport officer.** During the review we received excellent feedback from School Councils, who had often canvassed views from throughout their school providing a representative sample of opinions.
- **It is recommended that DE establish a School Travel Forum to enable young people to provide meaningful input into developing a Travel to School strategy, share information about transport services and offer feedback on safety, quality and security on the school journey.** This forum should include representatives from primary and post-primary sectors, including those with additional needs; and those using Board, Translink, and private hire services; as well as those who do not qualify for free travel.

## GOING FORWARD: A VISION FOR HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

- **It is recommended that DE establish an annual event that focuses on young people's travel, hosted by the School Travel Forum, which can raise awareness of transport options and report on changes made.** Many young people are sceptical that issues they raise are taken seriously or acted upon. Such an event could usefully provide feedback on concerns, problems or things working well, and report on remedial measures and actions taken by DE, ELBs, operators or others. This could act as a forum or "ideas lab" for innovation, creative suggestions and service improvements.





**Annex 1:**

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

### **REVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to provide Terms of Reference for the Independent Review of Home to School Transport. The paper defines the strategic context, key objectives, structure and timeframe for the review.

#### **Background**

The requirement to provide Home to School Transport was first established in section 51 of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1947 with section 37(5) specifying the statutory walking distances. When applying the distance criterion, ELBs must take into account the shortest walking route. Although the route must be walkable, the policy does not place an injunction on parents that their child(ren) must walk to school. Latterly, Article 52 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, as substituted by Article 23 of The Education (NI) Order 1997, requires the Department to assign criteria facilitating the attendance at grant-aided schools, and institutions of further education. The Department of Education (DE) circular 1996/41 (as amended) details the terms under which Home to School Transport is operated and defines eligibility for pupils who attend grant-aided schools. The general principle of this means that pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents in so far as is compatible with the avoidance of unrealistic public expenditure. Circular 1996/41 breaks down the provision of transport assistance for qualifying pupils to two criteria: distance and suitable school.

While the policy is set by DE, transport assistance is administered and delivered by the Education and Library Boards/Education and Skills Authority (ESA). Assistance can be provided by a variety of means. In determining the most suitable methods of assisting pupils, Boards/ESA take cost, availability, and convenience into account, both in the short and long term. This results in the Home to School Transport system using a variety of different transport methods, including Board buses, public transport, private buses, taxis, or an allowance to parents, in order to deliver the programme to pupils.

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The key aim of Home to School Transport is to provide assistance with transport to pupils who attend a suitable grant-aided school, and who meet eligibility criteria. Eligibility applies to those pupils who live outside suitable walking distance. Statutory walking distance is defined in paragraph 3(6) of Schedule 13 to the 1986 Education and Libraries Order, i.e. 2 miles in relation to a pupil under 11 years of age and 3 miles for older pupils measured by the nearest available route.

### Strategic Context

The Minister welcomed the opportunity to conduct a review of Home to School Transport policy when the issue was first raised in October 2011, noting:

*“A full review of our transport services and policies across the areas is required. We currently have five Boards that, by and large, run similar programmes.”*

*“I intend to look at our transport services and the planning of education provision in every area. Both should support access to high-quality education and the appropriate educational pathway that all children and young people need.”*

*“We have to ensure that the outcome of the review looks after those who are most needy in our society and young people with special educational needs, and embraces the rights of rural dwellers. We must provide a service that is cost-effective and delivers an efficient service for our pupils, our schools and the public purse.”*

### Aim of the Review

The aim of the Review is to ensure that the revised Home to School Transport policy is fit for purpose, sufficiently targets pupils’ needs and is consistent with, and supports, Departmental policy objectives. The outcome of the Review and subsequent

Ministerial decisions will be taken forward by the Department and Education and Skills Authority/Education and Library Boards.

### Structure of the Review

The Review will be conducted by an independent expert Panel. The Department will provide secretarial support to the Panel.

### Objectives of the Review

To undertake a fundamental review of home to school transport as provided by Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 and contained within Department of Education Circular 1996/41 (as amended). The review must consider and make recommendations on two broad areas:

The objective of home to school transport, in particular, the basis on which entitlement for transport support should be established. This should include:

- To what degree a pupil's school journey is the responsibility of the state or parent.
- The extent to which entitlement should be determined by transport to a particular school; and if so, when the school that a pupil attends is chosen, and when it is not.
- Consideration of the feasibility of providing free [public] transport for all school pupils.
- Whether support should be provided for intra-day movements of pupils between schools.
- Whether it should be related to subject choice and availability.

## ANNEXES

The manner in which support should be provided. This should include:-

- consideration of alternative models to the current model in which transport assistance must be provided by ELBs without charge;
- Consideration and identification of the best delivery model, including where the support to be provided is the direct provision of transport services (e.g. buses, taxis etc), or where transport will be procured from a third party.

### Wider considerations

The review's consideration of the aforementioned areas must take into account that the policy relating to, and delivery of, future school transport:

- Shall provide children in urban and rural communities with access to suitable schools.
- Shall take account of the Department's legal duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish medium education<sup>125</sup>.
- Shall take account of the Department's legal duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Integrated education<sup>126</sup>.
- Shall take account of those pupil groups, which may have barriers to learning<sup>127</sup>.
- Shall ensure that necessary safety standards will be met.
- Shall seek to support other Government initiatives around transport.

<sup>121</sup> Article 89 Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

<sup>122</sup> Article 64 Education Reform (NI) Order 1989.

<sup>123</sup> These groups include, but are not restricted to, pupils with special educational needs, Looked After Children, Traveller Children, Newcomer pupils, School Age Mothers, pupils attending EOTAS settings.

- Shall seek to minimise congestion and the environmental impact of school journeys while delivering on the Department's statutory duties in respect of sustainable development.
- Shall achieve the most effective and efficient co-ordination of public, school transport, and transport services provided by other public bodies. In areas where this is appropriate, this co-ordination should also be between North and South.
- Shall facilitate cross-border school attendance.
- Shall take account of the area planning process announced by the Minister for Education in his Assembly statement of 26 September, 2011.
- Shall achieve value for money through an effective and efficient use of resources.

### Consultation of Stakeholders

The views of stakeholders, including children and young people, should be sought and taken into consideration during the consultation process.



















### Timing of the Review

The independent Panel should complete its Report by the end of August 2014, at the latest.

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Annex 2:

**ASSESSMENT OF ELIGIBILITY TO TRANSPORT**

HOME	< WALKING DISTANCE		> WALKING DISTANCE	TRANSPORT ASSISTANCE IN NI?	TRANSPORT ASSISTANCE ELSEWHERE IN UK?
	 Preferred school	 Designated school		NO	NO
				NO	NO
				NO	ENGLAND ONLY - IF IN RECEIPT OF FSM/MAXIMUM WTC, AND ONE OF NEAREST 3 PREFERRED SCHOOLS OR DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOL
				YES TO DESIGNATED SCHOOL	YES TO DESIGNATED SCHOOL
			 	TO EITHER SCHOOL	TO NEAREST SCHOOL ONLY
			 	TO EITHER SCHOOL <b>UP TO ANY DISTANCE</b> IF TRANSPORT AVAILABLE IN VICINITY	TO DESIGNATED SCHOOL ONLY

**Annex 3:**

## **SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

### **EDUCATION ORDERS AND JUDICIAL REVIEWS**

DE Circular 1992/25 School transport

DE Circular 1996/41 School transport

Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, SI 1986 No.594 (N.I.3)

Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, SI 1997 No.866 (N.I.5) (amendment to 1986 order)

Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, SI 1998 No.1759 (N.I.13) (re Irish medium education)

Colma McKee as Vice Chairperson of the Board of Governors of Cloister Feirste v The Department of Education Northern Ireland [2011] NIQB 98

Education Bill (October 2012): The Education & Skills Authority As Introduced (proposing establishment of ESA)

Drumragh Integrated College's Application and in the matter of a decision of the Department of Education [2014] NIQB 69

### **DE POLICY DOCUMENTS AND REVIEWS**

DE (September 1998): Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs

Costello Report (2004): Future of Post-Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland & Summary report

ETI (April-June 2005): Report of a survey of the Educational Provision for School Age Mothers in Northern Ireland

DE (September 2005): Supplement to the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs

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Bain Review (2006): Schools for the Future Funding, Strategy, Sharing & Summary Report

ETI Chief Inspectors' Report 2010-2012

DE (March 2011): Community Relations - Equality and Diversity in Education

Salisbury Review (2012): A Review of the Common Funding Scheme & Summary Report

DE Corporate Plan for Education 2012-2015 Incorporating the DE 2012-13 Annual Business Plan

Advancing Shared Education (March 2013) Executive summary - Report of the Ministerial Advisory Group, Queen's University, Belfast

DE (October 2013) School Omnibus Survey - Shared Education

### OTHER DEPARTMENTAL DOCUMENTS & POLICY

DRD (November 2009): Public Transport Reform Consultation - Detailed Policy Proposals

Northern Ireland Executive: Programme for Government (2011-2015)

Northern Ireland Executive (2012:) Pathways to Success - Preventing Exclusion and Promoting Participation of Young People

DHSSPS (2012): A Fitter Future for All - Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland (2012-2022)

DOE: NI Road Safety Strategy to 2020 - 2012 Vision: Driving Road Safety Forward

DVA (February 2014): A Guide to Licensing for Bus Service Operators.

### ELBS

ELB Areas Plans

ELB Transport policy documents

Transfer 2014: Guide for Parents - Admission to Post-Primary School



## STATISTICS

DE School Enrolments and numbers Annual data collection - Description of data collection exercise

Home to school transport expenditure and pupil numbers 2002/3-2012/13 by Board area and mode

DRD Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In Depth Report 2010-2012

Department for Transport National Travel Surveys: 2010-12, 2013

DE Statistical press release (10 December 2013) Enrolments at grant-aided schools 2013/14 Basic Statistics

DE Statistical press release (28 February 2014) Attendance at grant-aided primary, post-primary and special schools 2013/14 Detailed statistics.

## EFFICIENCY REVIEWS

DE/DFP (February 2008 & 2012): Joint Efficiency Review - Stage two report (widely referred to as the PEDU report into School Transport)

DES (March 2011): School Transport - A Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme

## ROAD SAFETY

DRD/DENI: Travelwise - Safer Routes to School

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (Undated) - Transport/Road Safety: Policy Paper

DRD: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-depth Report 2010-2012

Northern Ireland Transport Statistics 2012-13 - Chapter 5 Road Safety

DOE: Northern Ireland Road Safety Monitor Annual Report 2013

PSNI (June 2014): Police Recorded Injury Road Traffic Collisions and Casualties NI - Detailed Trends Report 2013

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### TRANSPORT

DOE School Bus Transport - Guidelines for the use of '3 for 2' and Standing Capacity in Exceptional Circumstances September 2007 (updated October 2009 and September 2011)

Translink: Going Places, Connecting People - Annual Report and Accounts 2012/13

Ulsterbus Limited: Report and Financial Statements 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013.

DOE (July 2013:) Cabotage Guidance

DOE: Letter 22 August 2013 regarding cabotage

Brief for Dungannon pilot - October 2013

Copy of Contractual Agreement between Translink and SELB - Nov 2013

Explanatory note on cabotage - Dec 2013

Explanatory note to Translink contract 9<sup>th</sup> December 2013

December 2013 - Explanatory note regarding School Bus Lighting and Signage

DOE: Technical Specification Requirements for Warning Signs and Lights on School Buses - undated

### COMPARATIVE SYSTEMS OF SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Thorntwaite S E (2010) School Transport - Policy & Practice. LTT. London.

DES (March 2011): School Transport - A Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme

Department for Transport National Travel Survey 2012. London

Transport for London (2013 draft) School and Young Person Delivery Plan: Setting our future direction. London

Goodman A, Jones A, Roberts H, Steinbach R and Green J. (2013 epub) "We can all just get on a bus and go": rethinking independent mobility in the context of universal provision of free bus travel to young Londoners. Mobilities.

## OTHER

Bamford Review (September 2005) Equal Lives: Review of Policy and Services for People with a Learning Disability in NI

Fullerton D & A Hayes (undated) What next for school age mothers? Policy and practice briefing. Barnardo's Northern Ireland

Lundy L, Byrne & P McKeown (September 2012) Review of transitions to adult services for young people with Learning Disabilities. NICCY

Shared Education: Views of Children and Young People. Research Update No.82, May 2013 ERSC [www.ark.ac.uk](http://www.ark.ac.uk)

Joseph Rountree Foundation (March 2014) Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusions in Northern Ireland

NIAO (February 2014) Improving Pupil Attendance. Follow up report

Nolan P (March 2014): Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report

Financial Wellbeing of Young People - Research Update 91, May 2014 [www.ark.ac.uk](http://www.ark.ac.uk)

## ANNEXES

### Annex 4:

## STAKEHOLDER ORGANISATIONS CONSULTED

Association of Teachers & Lecturers  
Autism Network NI  
Belfast Education & Library Board\*  
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust  
Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche  
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment  
Council for Catholic Maintained School  
Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta  
Coláiste Dhoire  
Coláiste Feirste  
Colleges NI  
Committee on the Administration of Justice  
Community Transport Association  
Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network  
Department for Employment and Learning\*  
Department of the Environment\*  
Department for Regional Development\*  
Department of Education and Skills, Ireland  
Department for Education, England  
Education & Skills Authority Implementation Team\*  
Education & Training Inspectorate  
Federation of Passenger Transport\* (and several transport operators)  
Fleming Fulton School

Fostering NI  
Governing Bodies' Association  
Hertfordshire County Council  
Irish National Teachers' Organisation  
Liverpool City Council  
Merseytravel  
National Association of Head Teachers  
National Autistic Society  
National Association of Special Educational Needs  
National Association of Schoolmaster & Union of Women Teachers  
North Eastern Education & Library Board\*  
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education  
Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance  
Parenting NI  
Passenger Transport Executive Group (pteg)  
Rural Community Network  
Rural Development Council  
South Eastern Education & Library Board\*  
Southern Education & Library Board\*  
Strategic Investment Board  
Traveller Education Support Service  
Transport for London\*  
Transferors  
Translink  
Ulster Teachers' Union

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Voice of Young People In Care

Western Education & Library Board\*

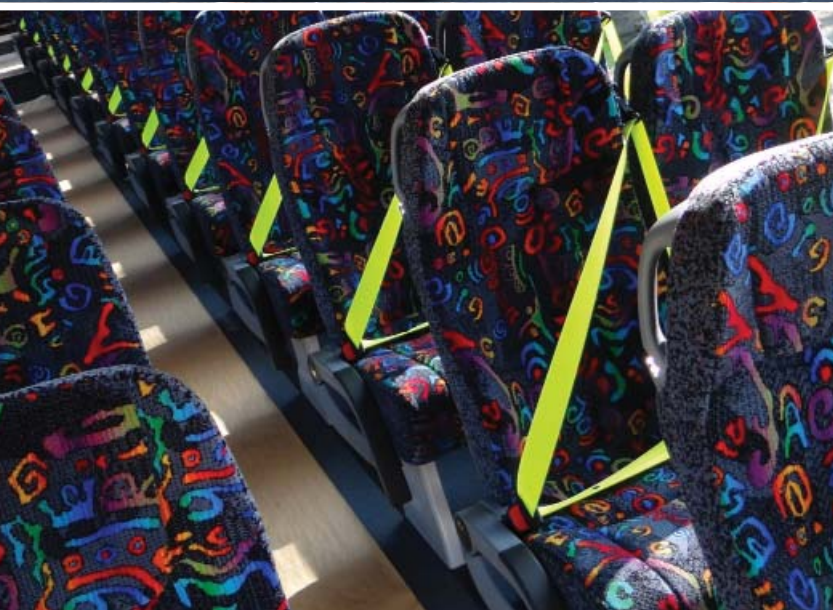
Welsh Government, Learner Travel

Sustrans

WELB Area Learning Community

\* Indicates that consultation/meetings were held with more than one department/  
section of this organisation





The Report of

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**The Independent Review of Home to School Transport**