

BRIEFING

The transport challenges of the return to schools

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Overview

In normal circumstances public transport plays a key role in enabling pupils to get to school. However, the COVID-19 crisis has meant that the capacity of public transport is heavily constrained, creating formidable operational and financial challenges for transport authorities as schools return in September.

To ensure schools can safely return in September, we need a collaborative process between the Department for Transport (DfT), the Department for Education (DfE), transport authorities, local authorities, LEAs and transport operators to ensure that there is a joined-up plan, backed by the funding necessary to support the required transport capacity.

Government plans for September

The Government has stated its commitment to all students being back in school full-time from September and, on 2nd July, published further guidance on its plans to achieve this, including around transport¹.

To reduce the risk of transmission, schools are being asked to keep children in class or year group sized bubbles and encourage older children to keep their distance from each other and from staff. The guidance recognises that the balance between these two measures (bubbles and social distancing) will depend on children's ability to distance, the layout of the school and the feasibility of keeping groups separate while offering a broad curriculum. Distancing is therefore to be maintained 'wherever possible' but schools should put in place 'measures that suit their particular circumstances.' It is recognised that even partial implementation of bubbles and distancing will bring benefits.

Specifically for transport, the guidance states:

- Some schools may allow mixing beyond bubbles in certain circumstances, including for transport.
- Use of public transport by pupils, particularly at peak times should be kept to an 'absolute minimum'.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>

- Schools are being encouraged to stagger start and end times and encourage walking and cycling to school to reduce pressure on limited public transport capacity.
- Distancing on dedicated school transport should be pursued wherever possible but is not a requirement, meaning that the procurement of more dedicated school services (as opposed to expanding socially distanced public transport capacity) could be a more efficient means of transporting greater numbers of pupils.

The role of transport authorities in supporting the return to school

Prior to COVID-19, almost half of primary school children walked to school, whilst 45% travelled by car, making a significant contribution to peak time congestion. For secondary school children, whilst the largest proportion (39%) walked to school, some 29% travelled either by local (21%) or private (8%) bus.

Trips to and from school per child per year by main mode: England, 2018²

Mode	Percentage of trips	
	5-10 year olds	11-16 year olds
Walk	49	39
Cycle	2	4
Car/van	45	24
Private bus	1	8
Local bus	2	21
Surface rail	0	2
Other	1	3

Under the Education Act 1996, in order to fulfil their statutory duties around home to school transport, local authorities must:

- promote the use of sustainable travel and transport (i.e. modes that improve physical wellbeing for users and/or environmental quality) for journeys to and from education and training establishments for children and young people or compulsory school age in the local authority area; and
- make transport arrangements for all eligible children, where necessary, to facilitate attendance at school.

In relation to the latter duty, free travel must be provided for children of compulsory school age if:

² DfT National Travel Survey Table NTS0613

- the child's nearest suitable school is beyond two miles away (if the child is below the age of 8) or beyond three miles away (if the child is aged between 8 and 16); or
- the child cannot reasonably be expected to walk to school because of their mobility problems, special educational needs (SEN) or disability; or
- the child cannot be reasonably expected to walk to their nearest school because the route is deemed unsafe; or
- pupils are entitled to free school meals or their parents are in receipt of maximum Working Tax Credit and:
 - the nearest suitable school is beyond 2 miles (if the child is over 8 and under 11); or
 - the nearest school is between 2 and 6 miles (if 11-16 and there are not three or more suitable nearer schools); or
 - the school is between 2 and 15 miles and is the nearest school preferred on the grounds of religion or belief (aged 11-16).

Local authorities can also make arrangements for children who fall outside of these criteria using discretionary powers granted under the Act.

Whilst the statutory duties around home to school transport sit with local education authorities (LEAs), city region transport authorities frequently play a role in boosting, facilitating or arranging school transport.

The exact role of individual city region transport authorities varies between areas.

In respect of bus services to and from schools, UTG members tend to work to boost the regular, mainstream bus network to support school travel, rather than provide or manage dedicated home to school transport.

In some areas, constituent LEAs arrange school transport using their own fleet, contracting with local taxi services and others or purchasing season tickets from operators and city region transport authorities to use on public transport. In others, transport authorities may plan and commission home to school transport on behalf of LEAs, as well as supporting school services for those not entitled to statutory transport.

Outside of those children who are eligible for free school transport, the wider public transport network also has an important role to play in connecting older children and young people to further education establishments, work-based learning and training. A survey by the Association of Colleges, for example, estimates that around 72% of students travel to college by bus³.

³ Association of Colleges (2011) AoC EMA Transport Survey



As part of their overarching role to keep cities regions moving in a manner that protects health, the environment and quality of life, transport authorities also have an interest in ensuring that the return to school and college does not create congestion, contribute to air pollution or pose a risk in terms of the health and safety of children and their parents or of transport staff and the wider public, including passengers travelling on mainstream routes that serve schools.

In line with this, transport authorities will be looking to ensure that children are able to safely walk, cycle or scoot to school where possible. Indeed, in normal times, transport authorities invest considerable resources in promoting mode shift for school transport and in supporting and training children to travel safely and sustainably.

Given all of the above, transport authorities have a key role to play in supporting a return to school and college, whether through facilitating access to education by bolstering the mainstream public transport network; supporting LEAs in fulfilling statutory duties on school transport; or encouraging children and their parents to walk or cycle.

Challenges for transport authorities in supporting a return to school

The unique circumstances presented by COVID-19 may require the above policy and legislative framework to be adapted. Furthermore, planning for schools returning requires coordination and collaboration between a number of different entities, operating at different geographies, different levels of government and across different sectors. Each will also have its own culture, ways of working and priorities.

To ensure a smooth return in September, DfT, DfE, transport authorities, local authorities, LEAs and transport operators must work together and communicate effectively with one another.

However, there is very little time between now and September to allow for adaptations to the legal and policy framework or for the collaborative planning that is required. Time is further constrained given that many people will be taking annual leave over the school holidays. LEAs and schools will also have a myriad of other non-transport issues to deal with and plan for in advance of September.

Nevertheless, many practical issues need to be urgently resolved before September, not least of which is predicting what the demand for bus services will be and whether there will be sufficient capacity to safely accommodate all the children who need to travel.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen huge change in travel patterns and behaviours. For much of the period, people have been encouraged to avoid travelling, particularly by public transport, the capacity of which has been severely limited. Whilst this



messaging has now shifted, capacity remains constrained and it is difficult to predict how many pupils and parents will choose to travel by bus from September, whether on dedicated services or using the mainstream network.

Whilst social distancing is recommended (but not required) on dedicated school services, many pupils would usually make use of the mainstream public transport network to travel to and from school. In normal circumstances, these services are often very full.

There are questions, therefore, as to whether public bus services will be able to accommodate all the children who need it, not to mention workers who may also return in greater numbers come September. With many adopting more flexible working patterns, demand could change from day-to-day and from week to week adding to uncertainty in terms of predicting and meeting demand. For pupils, travel patterns, modal share and trip length will also vary significantly according to local circumstances and type of school. It will not be acceptable from a welfare perspective to leave children waiting at bus stops when a vehicle has reached capacity. Means to manage and flexibly meet demand must be found.

Approaches that may help to accommodate demand for school travel include staggering school start and finish times; providing more dedicated school bus services (given that social distancing requirements for these are more flexible); and promoting modal shift. However, each in turn brings its own challenges.

Staggering start and end times could mean buses have to make more runs to schools rather than one 'there and back' journey, adding to costs.

Using more dedicated school services raises questions of whether there will be sufficient coaches and drivers available to meet demand, how the costs of securing these will be met and whether the (often older) vehicles can be bought up to COVID-19-secure standards, as regular bus services have been.

In respect of shifting travel demand to other modes, many people have chosen to make more use of active travel during the pandemic, but it is difficult to determine whether these habits will be applied to the school run or whether more parents will turn to their cars.

A significant shift to more car travel to school, whilst easing capacity onboard public transport, would create its own problems in terms of congestion and road safety around schools and, as a result, could deter children and their parents from choosing to walk or cycle to school.

What do we need from Government?

The section above has sought to highlight some of the many challenges transport authorities face in supporting the return to school in September. Addressing these



challenges requires careful coordination and communication between the multiple bodies with responsibility for ensuring pupils return to school in a way that is safe and achievable. The Government must ensure that there is joined-up dialogue between DfT, DfE, transport authorities, local authorities, LEAs and transport operators.

For pupils that travel by bus, additional capacity will need to be provided, whether that is more dedicated school services that can accommodate more children with fewer requirements around social distancing, or more capacity on the mainstream network. Either option requires additional funding. We therefore call on Government to ensure that the full additional costs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on the provision of transport to schools be met.