

STAR CONFERENCE 2007

Assessment of School Transport Pick Up Points

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Introduction

This project has been undertaken jointly by Education and Cultural Services and Roads Services of West Dunbartonshire Council. Support has been provided by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT).

In Scotland, under Sections 50 and 51 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, local authorities have a duty to provide free transport or transport facilities for children who live outwith the statutory walking distances to school, which are:

- 3.2 kilometres (two miles) or more for pupils under eight years old; and
- 4.8 kilometres (three miles) or more for older pupils.

Within West Dunbartonshire, school transport is provided for children who live more than **one mile** from primary schools and more than **two miles** from secondary schools. There are more than 100 pick-up points where buses stop to uplift school pupils. These range from public bus stops to rural roadside locations and the number of pupils uplifted at any one stop varies up to about 20.

The Scottish Executive's Circular No. 7/2003 provides guidance to local authorities about the provision of school transport and their statutory duties including provision of free school transport and safety of pupils when using school transport. The Circular states that:

“Scottish Ministers expect authorities to keep their school transport provision under review to secure, as far as is reasonable and practicable, the safety of pupils at all times, in accordance with their duties under the Act and the Schools (Safety and Supervision of Pupils)(Scotland) Regulations 1990.”

In light of the Scottish Executive guidance, West Dunbartonshire Council, as part of its continuous improvement agenda for local education and transport services, chose to initiate research into the methods which should be used to undertake engineering assessments of school bus pick-up points and give consideration to the hazards associated with such points.

This work is the first of its kind in the country and West Dunbartonshire is the only local authority engaged in such work. The project meets the Council's corporate priorities of sustainability, social inclusion and environmental improvement.

The Council commissioned MVA Consultancy to undertake the initial desk research exercise which aimed to identify:

- whether there was any policy to undertake such an exercise elsewhere in the country;
- whether there was any prevailing experience in this country or beyond; and
- what the important issues were.

As part of this exercise, contact was made with Passenger Transport Executives in England and contacts in other countries. In the end, despite extensive research, the only useful advice came from North America, but even then, their approach was not immediately transferable to our local environments.

Based on all of the research, a detailed pro-forma was developed for site assessments. It covers many topics including provision of guardrails, lighting, signing, the footway width, approach visibility, shelter, stopping location for parents dropping children off or waiting for the bus to arrive, road conditions, vehicle speed and the likelihood of the hazard being a danger. The differences between urban and rural sites were also considered and included in the methodology.

As a pilot, a few site assessments were undertaken to confirm the suitability of the pro-forma and to accurately assess the detailed challenges that may be faced in the field and the costs associated with undertaking such exercises. Following the pilot a modified assessment was developed, and a formal assessment procedure and recording process was developed. Arrangements have now been made to carry out assessments of the remaining pick-up points across West Dunbartonshire and to start to implement the recommended improvements.

In partnership with SPT, information is to be shared across Scotland and beyond, through presentations and written material. The initial interest from other UK Passenger Transport Executives is very positive.

Project Identification, Business case and Benefits

The opportunity was originally identified through consultation with parents and schools, and the regular liaison between the Education and Roads Services to discuss the transportation of children to school, in particular in view of the forthcoming rationalisation of the Council's School's estate. Initial traffic assessments at the proposed sites for new schools, and the changes to travel behaviour of pupils being re-located suggested that a review of all aspects of school transport should be undertaken. One aspect of this review was safety at the designated points for pick-up / drop-off.

It was clear from the outset that there was a gap in knowledge between road safety professionals and Education (transport) advisors. SPT confirmed that public bus stops have generally only a very limited assessment carried out. There were no assessments for non public bus stops sites. The benefits of this new work were then very clear – the improvement of safety of children waiting at the roadside at locations defined by the Council (hence the Council's particular responsibilities).

Objectives

SMART objectives were established, with the work being very specific, quantifiable through there being a fixed number of locations being considered; agreed by all partners and stakeholders; realistic given the natural environment in which the work is being undertaken; and a tight timescale of 3 months was available for the initial work.

The objectives of the project are:

- Create an assessment methodology by September 2006;
- Carry out assessments to identify and prioritise needs at all 180 sites by April 2007, with on-going annual assessment of any newly proposed PUDO location due to the changes in the school roll ;

- Carry out improvements in a planned and affordable manner within two years after assessment;
- Create a user manual and train staff by June 2007;
- Sustain the project indefinitely through use of in-house resources; and
- Raise customer satisfaction through improvement of service

Option appraisal and delivery method

There were several ways identified to achieve this goal, through in-house development or using external assistance or a combination of both. Although several in-house staff could have worked together representing their own fields of expertise, it was felt that this would require too much time away from normal working duties and could delay this necessary work for too long. Also, it was thought that there should be an independence about the methodology to protect the work from potential future criticism by those who might think that the Council has chosen limited criteria to consider and would seek to skew the assessments.

It was agreed therefore that consultants would be commissioned to a tight brief, developed in-house and with restricted budget provision. A Council/SPT steering group was established.

For cost sustainability it was agreed that early involvement of Council staff was essential, and for such close involvement to continue throughout the development period such that the final methodology would be user-friendly, allowing in-house staff to be used in order to minimise the need for consultants in the future. This will involve a training programme for relevant staff.

The Client staff were also responsible for liaising with SPT and were successful in obtaining 'regional' funding for the research, given that the work has much more than a local perspective.

Joint information gathering and stakeholder consultation and partnerships

Between the partners we created an information-sharing protocol to allow effective and efficient planning and execution of the assessments. For example assessors carrying out the pilot exercise were given access to detailed route maps of school bus routes and pick up & drop of points, numbers of pupils etc. In addition, a database is being created, to be shared with several council departments, to store all engineering assessments and list of remedial work undertaken.

The partners are also planning a training programme for staff in the use of the pro-forma and in the interpretation of the results, with a view to introducing a quality trademark scheme to build parents' confidence in their chosen pick-up/drop-of point. It is now intended to share what we have learned through information-sharing seminars and meetings within all education establishments, both locally and wider afield.

SPT, acting partly in their permanent role as the Council's agents for home to school transport have a unique role in collecting and collating national information on bus stop hazard assessment. SPT also regularly share good practice with other local authorities, including in the field of analysis of risk at bus stops. SPT are supporting the introduction of an award scheme and trademark symbol indicating a high level of quality assurance, and will assist in the identification and application for national funding.

MVA Consultancy was selected as preferred consultants, as market leaders in their knowledge and understanding of education-related transportation. They had previously carried out detailed traffic and pedestrian modelling work for the Council relating to the proposed schools estate improvement programme and were best placed to carry out this new work quickly and to the required high quality. They developed the desk top research exercise to examine any prevailing expertise of engineering assessments of bus stops; whether any authorities were planning work in this area; and identifying the important issues. From the research, they produced a unique pro forma for site assessments in order to highlight the hazards associated with the full range of issues faced at rural and urban school bus PUDOs.

Whilst the initial work was undertaken by specialist transportation professionals, the work has been developed to be easily transferred to non-specialist staff, who will have some training. MVA are currently preparing a training manual with a tailored course and an element of practical assessment which will enable the Council to train their own staff in undertaking the required engineering assessments in the future and to use the results from them.

The opportunity has been taken at this time to take the work to a stage which directly greatly benefits the people of West Dunbartonshire. It will form a key part of our ongoing programme of Charter Mark accreditation successes and will be incorporated into the Best Value Review process by the respective service departments.

Barriers and how they have been overcome

There have been barriers along the way and probably new ones will appear in the future. From the inception stage we have taken senior management of the council, elected members and SPT along a route from scepticism and reluctance to admit there was a need for tackling the problem, to whole scale buy-in and support. This has been successfully achieved through excellence in procurement, research and deliverables and through a most successful partnership.

Potential barriers created through bringing together technical engineering assessment criteria with more 'real' and tangible issues of child behaviour, volume of passengers etc. have been avoided from the outset through mutual understanding of partner's perspectives and priorities, and is arguably the greatest success of this project.

Measuring our performance

The project has been developed without the aid of comparator information, but the methodology now developed can be used by anyone in the future to generically benchmark and compare performance between organisations. The lack of comparator work did not eventually pose too large a problem.

Performance measurement is vital to demonstrating the success of the initiative and a number of measures have been established to keep this high on the Departmental and Corporate monitoring process.

The pilot scheme evaluation identified a number of recommendations and issues to consider prior to and during full implementation which will form the basis of future Action Plans.

Baseline data regarding number of road traffic accidents has been established for future impact analysis and target setting. We will monitor child accident statistics particularly at local cluster sites.

The initiative will reduce the number of service complaints received and will increase stakeholder satisfaction determined through survey. The methodology will allow accurate tracking of complaints and link them directly to action.

All assessment information will be carefully analysed by Education and Roads professionals to determine appropriate improvement actions which may typically be changes to contractual procedures with bus companies, physical changes at pick-up points, or moving of pick-up point. This will relate directly to funding availability. Actual spend on the ground to implement the recommended improvements will be monitored.

Performance against the defined objectives will be analysed and reported annually to the Children's Services Committee. There are no opportunities to benchmark this work as the project is unique. However as more authorities take on the work there will be opportunities for benchmarking in the future.

Early Results

Pilot assessments were undertaken for one of our 6 secondary schools (which incorporates clusters of local primary schools) in June 2006 and the recommendations were brought forward in the form of local improvements before the start of the 2006/07 term. This proved to be a highly successful pilot and resulted in the assessment criteria being refined. The future assessments will now be improved and focus more on improvement action rather than just recording problems.

Feedback from the school involved in the pilot work has been very positive and the measures taken have been welcomed by parents.

Once a year has passed after implementation of improvements we will be able to gauge the success for the work, and set detailed targets, but it is still early days for the project.

Economy

To date some £12,000 has been spent to take this project from nothing to its current advance stage. This was joint funded by SPT and the Council and considering the innovation developed and the robustness of the methodology, this has been a small amount of money very well spent.

The use of a very experienced external consultant with specialist knowledge of school-related transport issues, has kept costs to a minimum whilst maximising the quality of the outcomes and brought about delivery in only a few months. Whilst in-house resources could have been used to carry out the work, the overall staff time and project time saved through our approach has resulted in significant savings.

However, it has always been appreciated that any assessment work which results in a long list of improvement actions / aspirations will not be successful in an environment of funding constraint. Our methodology has recognised the reality of the street environment, to highlight prioritised actions which can be efficiently and effectively undertaken in a programmed manner. The pilot work illustrated that the majority of improvement actions will not be costly and by effective prioritisation, funding will be used to greatest effect.

Effectiveness and Efficiency

The assessment results are being combined into our normal road infrastructure inspection and repair system, and where road improvements are planned for an area, effective communication between staff will ensure that the additional actions arising from the PUDO assessments are incorporated. The effectiveness of this has already been demonstrated through the pilot work.

Undertaking the assessment of all remaining pick-up points at the same time will allow efficient resource and funding planning. We believe that there could be some £50,000 to £75,000 of actions recommended across our transport network, to be undertaken over a 2 to 3 year rolling programme and it is expected that partners will share this cost. Funding bids have already been identified by partners and longer term commitments given.

By using well-trained in-house staff the implementation will be efficient and effective, and this will be monitored through Corporate and Departmental targets, accident / incident statistics and customer feedback.

The low cost of this project, and the very high rate of return (what value can we place on a child accident?) make this a highly beneficial initiative.

The ability to easily replicate the methodology to any school transport situations makes the whole project extremely effective and efficient.

The Council regularly receives requests for new pick-up points as families move, and the methodology developed will be used indefinitely in the future to keep all pick-up points assessed and up to date.

The future?

There is considerable potential to raise the current service standard. A branding exercise will introduce a trademark indicating that a minimum standard has been achieved. Varying levels of branding will be introduced, and all sites will be identified as having been assessed. This should increase the confidence of parents and encourage more use of school transport instead of private cars.

A series of information leaflets are being developed reflecting the much improved school transport service, as part of our drive to provide new and innovative ways of communication with our communities. The leaflets provide practical safety advice to School Children/Parents on how to use Public Transport Safely as well as what to do when safety concerns are identified.

There is scope to develop computer based management systems to improve further the assessment, implementation and performance measurement process.

Using this review as a starting point, all aspects of the school transport service have been reviewed and improved. From now on we have excellent base for monitoring performance and continuous improvement.