

Report on The Future of Home to School Transport

Date of meeting 23 August 2024

Date of report 7 August 2024

Report by Head of Bus Strategy & Delivery

1. Object of report

To update the Committee on the recommendations from the draft Home to School Transport (HST) study commissioned by SPT.

2. Background to report

As noted in the report's findings and previous reports to the Committee, including most recently in April¹, the ongoing delivery of HST faces a number of challenges and risks including but not limited to the following:

- Changes to the number of pupils eligible for HST as a result of walking distance policy changes by Local Authorities;
- The location of new housing developments relative to schools;
- Changes to the school estate and school catchment areas;
- The extent to which pupils use Under 22 concessionary passes to travel on commercial public transport services;
- Inflationary pressures, including in relation to fuel price volatility and wages;
- Continuing recruitment challenges of sufficient bus and coach drivers;
- Levels of government support for bus and coach; and
- Concerns over the ongoing viability of bus, coach and taxi operators in the HST market resulting in a lack of competition for tenders.

To help address these issues, SPT commissioned consultants AECOM to undertake a study to review and consider options related to mainstream HST provision in Strathclyde. (N.B. School transport for pupils with Additional Support Needs is out of scope for this work. For the purposes of this report, HST refers to mainstream provision only).

The study included the following key tasks:

- Identification of problems and opportunities, informed by data provided by SPT and a review of relevant policies;
- Engagement with key stakeholder groups, which formed a central part of the commission - the purpose of this was to further identify problems, opportunities and potential options and stakeholder groups engaged with included local authorities, HST operators and schools;
- Development of study objectives, which have been directly informed by the problems and opportunities identified;

¹ https://spt.production.d8.studio/media/erobghvb/ops260424_agenda6.pdf

- Generation of options for improvements, which were primarily identified through stakeholder engagement; and
- Development of assessment criteria and assessment of options.

As noted above, the study involved extensive engagement undertaken with key stakeholders. Specifically, the following engagement was undertaken:

- A total of four workshops were held, with representatives from all 11 local authorities attending one of the workshops. Representatives included officers from Transportation, Planning and Education.
- 1-2-1 calls were held with a targeted number of operators. In addition, all operators were also contacted via e-mail to make them aware of the study and to invite comments.
- An online questionnaire was circulated to all schools that have pupils which qualify for mainstream HST.
- The Scottish Government's Education team were also contacted but elected not to have a meeting on this occasion.

3. Outline of proposals

The study identified problems / challenges and opportunities through a policy review and data review as part of the extensive stakeholder engagement. Objectives were then identified that have been directly informed by problems / challenges and opportunities, as below:

- Objective 1: Provide a high-quality service which allows pupils to access education equitably and safely.
- Objective 2: Support the decarbonisation of home to school transport, promote active travel and contribute towards net zero targets.
- Objective 3: Develop a financially sustainable model for the provision of home to school transport.
- Objective 4: Strengthen communications internally and externally between partners involved in the provision of home to school transport, including SPT, schools, local authorities and operators.
- Objective 5: Reduce the number of incidents of anti-social pupil behaviour on home to school transport.
- Objective 6: Improve the efficiency and scheduling of home to school transport provision.

In addition, an option generation process identified a long list of options for improvement for consideration. Of these, the following 11 options are recommended to be taken forward for further consideration in collaboration with partners:

- OP1: Local Authorities to review and implement walking distances to schools to be in line with statutory requirements (for local authorities which currently provide HST above the statutory requirement) where this has not already been done.
- OP2: Local Authorities to assess walking / cycling routes to / from school, including what could be changed, with a view to increase the number of pupils travelling to school by active modes.
- OP3: Local Authorities and Schools to encourage use of the Under 22 concessionary pass for travel to / from school.
- OP5: SPT and local authorities to press the Scottish Government to implement a Scotland wide scheme to encourage people into the HST industry, including scholarships and funding of training costs including for drivers.
- OP6: Working with all partners, consider measures to address poor pupil behaviour on HST, including deterrent measures such as: additional staff on board; exclusion from using HST; a contractual requirement to have on board CCTV; strengthen partnership with parents and pupils; and work with appropriate bodies to educate pupils. Further to this, working with local

- authorities and schools, SPT to issue clear guidance on responsibilities to address and report upon poor pupil behaviour on Home to School Transport.
- OP7: Working with local authorities, to review contract arrangements, including consideration of:
 - placing less emphasis on lowest cost tender;
 - increase length of contracts;
 - have continuity of operator where possible.
 - review of penalties for slight discrepancies to drop off times.
 - streamline the number of compliance requirements / specifications so these are consistent across all local authorities; and
 - local authorities to determine whether to cap maximum contract costs.
 - OP8: Local authorities to review planning guidance to provide greater priority to HST when implementing planning decisions, including increased engagement across teams within local authorities to support education estate management; and review of planning guidance to secure developer contributions to improve walking and cycling routes to / from schools.
 - OP9: Local Authorities to consider options to improve efficiency of HST services through modification of school start / finish times and consider changes to drop off times for pupils; and SPT to consider use of technology to assist routeing, where possible.
 - OP10: Local authorities to consider whether to operate HST services directly, or support HST through provision of commercial services through powers granted in the Transport Scotland Act 2019.
 - OP11: Local Authorities to consider inclusion of environmentally friendly vehicles within contract specification(s) for Home to School Transport, where possible and in consultation with SPT, taking cognisance of local authority budget availability and need to deliver best value.
 - O12: Further strengthen communication between stakeholders (Local Authorities, Operators and Schools), including through more frequent engagement events.

Following consideration, one of the options for recommendation was removed from the final recommendations, namely:

OP4: SPT and local authorities to work with commercial operators to increase the frequency and coverage of services across the SPT area.

While this option generally scored well against the assessment criteria, it was considered to have high feasibility risks associated, as commercial operators based on previous experience are likely to increase services where it was commercially viable to do so. As such, the option was not retained.

Going forward, SPT will consider which options merit further consideration, including taking into account the potential costs associated with implementing options and whether savings can be made with regard to the overall HST budget. Officers will continue to update the Committee on progress going forward. The report will also be shared with all local authorities.

4. Committee action

The Committee is recommended to note the outcomes for the HST study, and the future action proposed by SPT to take the recommendations forward.

5. Consequences

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| Policy consequences | <i>Delivery of school transport supports RTS outcomes OBJ1: To improve accessibility, affordability, availability, and safety of the transport system and OBJ2: To reduce carbon emissions.</i> |
| Legal consequences | <i>None directly.</i> |

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| Financial consequences | <i>None directly. 2024/25 budgets have already been provided to Councils. Future year budgets will be drafted taking cognisance of individual Councils aspirations in respect of Home to School transport including any future changes as a result of this study.</i> |
| Personnel consequences | <i>None directly.</i> |
| Equalities consequences | <i>Future action will be dependent on further assessment including an Equality Impact Assessment.</i> |
| Risk consequences | <i>None directly. The fragility of the Home to School Transport market remains an ongoing risk to delivering services effectively and efficiently.</i> |
| Climate Change, Adaptation & Carbon consequences | <i>School transport has a positive benefit through reducing the need for journeys by less sustainable modes.</i> |

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