BRIEFING

The transport challenges of the return to schools and colleges following the easing of the COVID-19 lockdown

(Version three, 19/06/2020)

Overview

In normal circumstances public transport plays a key role in enabling access to education at schools and colleges. However, the COVID-19 crisis has led to the capacity of public transport to be heavily constrained which creates formidable operational and financial challenges for transport authorities as schools begin to return and, eventually, colleges.

We urgently need the Government to lead joined-up dialogue between the education and transport sectors on how best to resolve the operational challenges and to meet the full additional transport costs of the return to schools and colleges.

General issues around a return to school and college

What we know about the Government’s intentions

Announced on 10th May, the Government’s ambition was for all primary school children in England to return to school before the summer, for a month if feasible. On 9th June, the Government said that this ambition would not be achievable. Factors behind this include social distancing requirements, space constraints and staff shortages. Headteachers have the flexibility to decide if and when to admit more pupils.

In line with the Government’s original plans, pupils in Reception and Years 1 and 6 have, however, begun returning to school from the 1st June onwards, although the extent and phasing varies between schools.

Some Year 10 and 12 pupils have now begun returning to schools and colleges to help them to prepare for exams.

On the 19th June, the education secretary said that the Government is ‘signed up’ to all pupils being back in school full time for September. To achieve this, the Government is looking at dropping the 15-pupil cap and expanding the size of protective class bubbles to enable whole classes of 30 to be taught together. This raises questions about the extent to which social distancing will be in place by then. Retaining the 2m rule will certainly not be possible. Even if social distancing for pupils is reduced to 1m, many schools will still struggle for space (see response of
NEU and the experience in Northern Ireland, below). Guidance to help schools in England to prepare for September is expected within the next two weeks.

Elsewhere in the United Kingdom:

- All schools in Wales will reopen on 29th June to pupils from all year groups for limited periods during the week, with only a third of pupils in school at any one time. Schools and councils will make their own decisions over managing this. The summer term has been extended by one week to 27th July, and the autumn half-term holiday will be stretched to two weeks.

- In Scotland, all schools will re-open from 11th August using a blended model of part-time study in school and home learning. The precise date for pupils to return to class will be confirmed by local authorities.

- In Northern Ireland, social distancing in schools has been halved to one metre, where ministers are aiming for a full reopening of schools on 24 August. Some schools have said that their classrooms will still be unable to cater for 30 pupils, even with the 1m rule and expressed unease at the First Minister’s suggestion that schools use extra spaces, such as assembly and dining halls, for teaching.

But implementation is patchy…

Across England, 52% of schools opened to the three eligible year groups from the 1st June, although this is likely to have increased over time. Some 88% of secondary schools and colleges planned to open to more Year 10 and/or Year 12 pupils from the 15th June, but only 62% expected to bring in all eligible pupils.

Furthermore, those that have reopened are taking a range of approaches as to how many pupils they can welcome back, depending on local circumstances and factors such as available classroom space to allow for social distancing. Many parents have also decided to keep their children at home. Of the pupils eligible to return on 1st June, just 25% did so.

Teaching union, continue to express concern. NEU responded to the announcement that all pupils are expected to return to school full-time by September by saying that, whilst it was the right aspiration, it was not clear how it would be achieved. It

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1 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53104586
highlighted that even if social distancing is reduced to 1m, most schools would still struggle to accommodate 30 children in a classroom\(^5\).

These latest developments contribute to an overall picture of uncertainty and pose considerable challenges for the effective planning of transport to support a return to school.

**The role of transport authorities in supporting a return to school and college**

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, 2018\(^6\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Percentage of trips</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5-10 year olds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car/van</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private bus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local bus</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface rail</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:

- 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

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\(^6\) DfT National Travel Survey Table NTS0613
• 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:
  o the nearest suitable school is beyond 2 miles (if the child is over 8 and under 11); or
  o the nearest school is between 2 and 6 miles (if 11-16 and there are not three or more suitable nearer schools); or
  o 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 or 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 bus7.

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,

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7 Association of Colleges (2011) AoC EMA Transport Survey
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 and colleges

In addition to the general uncertainty around when and how schools will return, transport authorities have identified a number of other challenges for the safe and sustainable travel to school:

Overarching

- At the time of writing, transport authorities have not been directly involved in discussions between DfE and DfT on the transport ramifications of the return to schools and colleges. Transport authorities were not involved or consulted in earlier discussions around the implications of a 1st June reopening.

- Transport authorities are not given sufficient advanced warning of many key government decisions that have the potential to affect transport demand.

- Transport authorities are liaising with schools to plan for September. However, a lack of clarity in messages and guidance to schools from DfE is making this a challenge – schools do not know what to expect and it is difficult to make plans around transport in the midst of this uncertainty. NEW: Guidance from government to help schools to prepare for the return of all pupils, full-time, from September is due within the next two weeks.

- It is difficult to predict in advance a) which schools and colleges will be opening for whom and when b) the extent of the take up of school places which become available c) to what extent and where schools traffic will shift to active travel and the car and thus what demand there will be for capacity on dedicated and regular bus services for schools traffic (nor how this will change from day to day or from week to week). This in turn makes it very difficult to
plan public transport provision accordingly which increases the risks to this vulnerable cohort of users.

- Messages from Government at national level, encouraging people to drive are unhelpful. Such messages could cause problems as more children return to school and more parents decide to drive them to school, presenting challenges for road safety and congestion. Transport authorities are best placed to manage demand locally.

- **NEW:** A survey by the Association of School and College Leaders found that 26% of secondary schools expected to bring back some, but not all, eligible (Year 10/12) pupils from 15th June. Amongst the reasons for being unable to welcome back all eligible pupils was problems with transport arrangements given government advice to keep the use of public transport to a minimum.

**Active travel**

- The need to encourage children to walk, cycle or scoot to school sitting alongside the risks posed by a rise in speeding and other dangerous driving on empty roads.

**Bus services**

**Capacity and social distancing**

- **NEW:** The Government’s pledge for all pupils to return to school full-time in September suggests that social distancing will be reduced, even if only for schools. How does this relate to social distancing for the wider public? Older pupils in particular will need to use public transport to get to school, but if 2m remains for the wider public, there will be insufficient capacity. Even if social distancing is universally reduced to 1m, capacity on-board will still be constrained, potentially causing continuing difficulties for some pupils in getting to school.

- Social distancing will dramatically increase the costs of the provision of dedicated services (and for the provision of capacity for school journeys on regular services) and there is no clarity about how these costs will be covered.

- School children and students tend to travel at similar times creating peaks that could easily overwhelm the capacity of socially distanced bus services.

- Staggering school start and end times may help with managing capacity without needing significantly more vehicles. It is likely that schools are considering this in any case to help manage social distancing at pick-up and drop-off. However, it also comes at a cost because it means that a bus has to...
do four of five runs to and from a school rather than one ‘there and back’ journey.

- Capacity could be further constrained due to operators being unable to provide a full service (due to staff self-isolating, or staff shortage due to them exiting the industry during the lockdown) or vehicles not being operational following on from the lockdown.

- A number of primary school services link with secondary school services to reduce costs. With social distancing, many of the secondary school services will have to be operated by double deck buses but these will not meet the requirement for the use of seatbelts for primary school children.

- The approach the bus industry is taking to ensuring socially distanced capacity is not breached is to stop allowing passengers to board once socially distanced capacity has been reached. But this could mean children are left at bus stops which would have significant implications for their welfare. Avoiding this scenario implies the re-planning of services and networks to prioritise the availability of capacity for school traffic. Registering places on school services is one possible approach – however this presents challenges given turn up and go nature of regular services. And how and by whom would registration be organised?

- Even with a registration/booking system, buses will only be able to meet a fraction of demand as, in normal circumstances, many school buses are very full and there simply are not enough vehicles to service demand with social distancing in place.

- Halving the social distance from 2m to 1m does not translate as doubling capacity on buses.

- Social distancing issues at bus stops where parents or guardians accompany children. There are also challenges if grandparents perform this role in normal times.

**Vehicles and drivers**

- If social distancing remains in place, there will not be enough vehicles to meet demand if all pupils were to return to school. Drivers may also be in short supply, but even if all were to return to work, there would still be a shortage of vehicles.

- Vehicles which provide dedicated services may need fitting with additional safety features, such as screens, which could add costs as well as delaying the entry of vehicles into service.
• School buses with seatbelts create an additional touchpoint.

• Many schools services are provided by smaller bus and coach operators who would face many challenges – including small fleets, so limits on additional capacity they can provide to ensure social distancing; older vehicles which are harder to keep clean and adapt to the new circumstances; limited investment budgets to spend on additional cleaning, PPE and safety features (such as screens); older drivers who may not return or may be at risk; narrow margins based on maximum utilisation of vehicles (including use of vehicles for school trips, swimming lessons, etc during the day which won’t now be taking place or on linked schools work across different schools and age groups which may not now be taking place).

Managing the journey

• If children are required to wear face coverings / socially distance, who is responsible for ensuring this happens in practice? How is this managed for both dedicated schools services and on regular services which normally carry significant volumes of school traffic?

• Dedicated school services often have a passenger assistant on board:
  o Presence of an assistant further reduces capacity on board.
  o How can they safely manage children’s behaviour on board and ensure social distancing is maintained throughout the journey?

What do we need from Government?

• The full additional costs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on the provision of transport to schools and colleges to be met.

• Government to ensure a coordinated dialogue between DfT / DfE / transport authorities on how best to manage the operational challenges of the provision of transport to schools and colleges in a way which is safe and achievable.