School Travel Plans: Walking Buses

Report by Ian L Young, Director Strategic Services

1 Purpose of Report

This report informs Members of the extent of the use of Walking Buses, and includes the results of a survey of all Scottish Councils and related information on Walking Buses in Midlothian.

2 Background

2.1 At its meeting on 11th August 2009 the Committee considered a report on Sustrans National Hands-up Survey and agreed to receive a report on the extent of the use of Walking Buses. This report follows on from the Hands-Up Survey - a joint project between Scotland’s School Travel Co-ordinators and Sustrans which aims to collect information from all schools on how children normally travel to school. The Survey allows comparisons between schools, Councils and years. The 2008 Survey results are generally encouraging for Midlothian, with a high proportion of children using active travel modes (67% for Midlothian, with 58% for the Scottish average). This report considers the extent of Walking Buses and how more children can be encouraged to walk to/from school.

2.2 Most schools in Midlothian now have up-to-date School Travel Plans and Walking Buses are one element of School Travel Plans. They are a way of helping increase walking to school by sharing the responsibility for accompanying the children and making the walk more enjoyable for them. Adults, normally parent/carer volunteers but sometimes school staff or others, escort groups of children en route to or from school to help children to walk even if their own parents/carers are unable to walk with them. On formal Walking Buses the adults are disclosure checked, the routes are risk assessed, and pick-up points and procedures are arranged. The adult: child ratio is 1:8 for P4 and above and 1:4 for P1-3. The children are normally young primary pupils, as older pupils often prefer to walk unsupervised, but nursery pupils can be involved.

2.3 Following the decision of the Committee on 11th August a survey of all other Scottish Councils was undertaken, and replies were received from 28 of the 31 Councils canvassed. Just under half of those replying have Council-run Walking Buses, with some other areas having informal or parent/carer organised Walking Buses. Midlothian currently has 11-12 official Walking Buses, matched only by Edinburgh’s 12 (from 3 times as many primary schools). The majority of Walking Buses in other Council areas operate on 5 days per week but the proportion of schools with Walking Buses is lower than in Midlothian. Here, all but one of our Walking Buses operate on 1 day only
and only for the journey to school in the morning. The exception to this is Woodburn, where the new school now has a Walking Bus each day of the week, and where an afternoon bus from the nursery is under development. Each Walking Bus typically has between 8 and 15 children taking part. Although this is a small proportion of the overall school population, it is felt useful to enable those who perhaps could not otherwise walk to school and by example to encourage others to make their own efforts to walk.

2.4 Until this year the Council has set up all our Walking Buses to operate for 1 day per week rather than trying to ensure daily coverage. This has allowed limited resources to be used to cover more schools and avoids overstretching the volunteers. It is expected that the interest from other pupils and parents/carers may lead to extra days for the Bus. With some children leaving school and others joining, or for other reasons, the numbers using a Walking Bus will change. This often leads to changes of personnel amongst the adults too, as most have volunteered because their children are using the walking bus. So there is usually a need to recruit volunteers each year, a process which involves a significant level of resource input.

2.5 As well as the benefits to the pupils and parents/carers, and to the community in general, incentives to the children on the Walking Bus have been useful to keep their support and to encourage new members. The incentives include hats or caps (in high visibility colours), bags, rulers and pencils - some of these are supplied through Sustrans on behalf of the Scottish Government and some have been supplied through sponsorship/gifts from local businesses and the Lothian and Borders Safety Camera Partnership, of which the Council is a Partner member. Other incentives can be provided by the schools, such as special events for those who walk to school.

3 Report Implications

3.1 Resource

There are no resource implications arising from this report that require any addition to existing budgets.

3.2 Risk

Reducing the level of traffic in and around schools by measures contained in School Travel Plans, including Walking Buses, and thereby increasing road safety and health and environmental benefits, can only be sustained by continued funding of this programme.

3.3 Policy

Strategy

The report findings accord with Single Outcome Indicators involving healthy living, climate change, carbon reduction, road traffic reduction and road safety.

Divisional Priorities:-
10. Promote greater use of public transport and encourage reductions in use of the private car.
11. Introduce and monitor road safety policies and programmes.
15. Target accessibility as a key issue for vulnerable groups in Midlothian.
31. We will improve air quality across Midlothian.

Consultation

The survey of other Scottish Councils involved e-mail/telephone contact with School Travel Plan Co-ordinators at other Councils.

Equalities

This report is not proposing new services, policies, strategies or plans (or significant changes to or reviews of them) and therefore has not been assessed for equalities implications.

Sustainability

Improvements and encouragement of walking and cycling facilities encourages more sustainable forms of transport.

4 Recommendations

Committee is recommended to:

a) note the results of the survey of Walking Buses operating in other Scottish Councils; and
b) welcome the progress being made in Midlothian schools in terms of the numbers of Walking Buses.

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