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Public Petitions Committee
TG.01
The Scottish Parliament
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Dear Frank

CONSIDERATION OF PETITIONS PE1098 & PE1223

Thank you for your letter of 31 March seeking a response to questions to clarify issues that arose in the course of my attendance at the Committee's meeting in Fraserburgh on 30 March. The questions together with my responses are set out below.

1. We asked you about the Scottish Government's forthcoming road safety framework. We would welcome a detailed response from you, once this has been published, on what specific improvements it will make with regards school bus safety and the specific issues identified in these petitions.

The Road Safety Framework for Scotland will be published within the next few weeks. I will be happy to provide the Committee with a copy of the Framework following its publication, together with a summary to indicate how the Framework addresses the issues raised by these petitions.

2. Does the Scottish Government have any plans to refresh the 2001 Safer Routes to School guidance? If so, what issues arising from these petitions will be covered in that?

The Scottish Government do not have any plans to refresh the guidance. However, we will continue to provide funding to Sustrans, the UK's leading sustainable transport charity, for the development of safe routes to school projects and to provide support to school travel coordinators in local authorities. As part of this funding, Sustrans will continue to produce safe routes to school leaflets which are widely distributed to schools and those working in the active travel sector.



3. Do we not have a situation that pupils in one local authority area are safer than pupils in another? Is there a need for a uniform approach when it comes to the safety of children?

Local situations and circumstances vary from authority to authority. The Scottish Government recognises that local authorities are best placed to determine how to address needs in their own area. The Scottish Government published *School transport: survey of good practice* in March 2007 as an important and effective aid to authorities in driving up the quality and standard of school transport provision. In practice, however, it is for authorities themselves to negotiate the terms of school bus contracts with local providers, taking into account all local circumstances. Ministers cannot intervene, and nor can they impose particular terms and conditions on authorities or their contractors.

4. What more will the Scottish Government do to encourage other councils to follow the example of Moray Council and specify within its contracts with school transport providers that they will only accept vehicles fitted with seat belts?

The Scottish Government has to recognize not only that the Scotland Act reserves legislation relating to road safety and seatbelt matters to Westminster, but also that the current Scottish legislative framework places the statutory duty upon local authorities to make appropriate school transport arrangements, having regard to the safety of pupils. In the Government's view it is appropriate that such decisions are taken at a local level. Local situations and circumstances do differ across the country. Ministers have nevertheless made clear, through guidance, the policy direction in which they would wish authorities to consider proceeding. We have also taken steps to support and encourage them to review the stance which they take in respect of seatbelts when the time for renewal of school transport contracts comes around.

5. Do you agree with the principle that buses used to transport school children should have improved signage, which is highly visible, and hazard warning lights? If yes, will you put this measure into place?

I agree that these buses when transporting children should have such facilities. However, as previously notified to the Committee, I have no power to insist that local authorities stipulate these measures when preparing contracts with school bus operators. The terms of contracts fall to local authorities themselves. See also the response to Question 8.

6. What steps will the Scottish Government take to encourage authorities to increase the size of signage given that that there are no legal impediments as legislation only refers to minimum sizes?

Local authorities are already aware that the legislation stipulates only minimum sizes for the school bus sign. It is for the local authorities themselves to give consideration to stipulating larger signs when they are negotiating the terms of contracts with their school bus operators. See also the response to Question 8.

7. COSLA and ATCO (Scotland) support bus operators removing school bus signs when the vehicle is not carrying school children to and from school. Do you support this view and how will you take this issue forward?

The Scottish Government supports any measure that improves the safety of pupils on their journey to and from school. We are pleased to hear that this particular measure has support from both CoSLA and ATCO. The Scottish Government cannot dictate to authorities that they must make this a condition of school bus contracts but does encourage all local authorities to do so. See also the response to Question 8.

8. The way things stand in relation to school bus safety in terms of the current legislative framework and guidance it has issued, is it the best it can be? If not, what action is it taking, with Department for Transport support or not, and when to bring about improvements and improve safety?

I wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport asking that consideration be given to strengthening legislation in respect of school buses. The UK Government has confirmed that it has no plans to amend current legislation in respect of school buses. The Scottish Government is, however, working with Aberdeenshire Council on a range of measures, which aims to improve the safety of children boarding school buses including options to increase the visibility of the school bus sign; reaffirming the appropriate use of the school bus sign; clear requirement within current bus contracts for the use of hazard warning lights when picking up and dropping off pupils; requesting that all operators also use dipped headlights when picking up and dropping off pupils; and an education resource and publicity campaign for schoolchildren and drivers urging extreme caution when approaching school buses (entitled "1 second, 1 life").

Where these measures provide evidence, I will write once again to the UK Government calling for specific measures to be enshrined in legislation should this prove to enhance school bus safety. One of these measures may be to make it compulsory to remove school bus signs when not carrying schoolchildren.

Other measures being considered by Aberdeenshire Council includes a pilot of innovative new technology. The "SeeMe Bus Stop" technology, which warns drivers to exercise extreme caution when school buses are in operation, has already proven a success in Sweden. Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council and Moray Council are now evaluating options to test the technology.



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