



The Chartered
Institute of Logistics
and Transport

School travel

HOW SAFE IS YOUR COACH COMPANY?



Around one third of all serious and fatal road collisions involve someone driving for work.

And yet work-related road safety is not recognised in school transport contracts in the same way as general health and safety.

Raising road safety standards for passenger transport is vital and road risk in school travel needs to be significantly reduced.

All local authorities and schools have the buying power and the influence to help reduce road risk throughout passenger transport provision for schools. This can be achieved by ensuring passenger transport providers fulfil contractual road risk requirements.



SCHOOL TRAVEL - how safe is your coach company?

Risk assessments - the start point

Schools are well versed in carrying out routine risk assessments of the school's physical environment and its activities to protect children and staff from harm. This includes slips, trips and falls in the classroom through to co-ordinating an excursion involving large groups of children visiting a museum or theme park where the risks are even greater.

Ultimately, in a maintained school, the local authority (as the 'employer') holds the legal responsibility for assessing and managing risk, but in most cases this will be delegated to the individual school to manage the risk on the local authority's behalf. With the onus on the school, they are required to demonstrate that every consideration has been given to possible risks in any given situation and must consider their duties under health and safety law when planning any activities.

Transporting children, of any age, whether to and from school on a daily basis; or occasionally off-site is a high-risk activity. This is especially true when using an external supplier to provide the transport, as the level of risk will naturally increase when engaging a third party that is not directly under the control of the school. It is also likely to add a level of complexity to a school's risk assessment process.

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How safe are coaches?

Despite the fact that bus or coach travel in the UK is deemed a safe mode of transport, news reports of children being injured or even killed in bus and coach crashes have been all too frequent very recently. At the time of writing 8 adults were killed in a horrific accident on the M1 involving their minibus and two lorries and in July 14-year-old Holly Brown was killed in July when her school minibus collided with a bin lorry in Birmingham.

Earlier in the year over 20 school children were injured when their school bus veered onto its side and down an embankment in Cumbernauld. At the time of writing investigations were still pending. However the bus involved was over 18 years old. Regular routine safety inspections of vehicles had been abandoned by Scotland's largest public transport group – Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT), who manage school bus contracts on behalf of the local authority.

In the same month, another coach veered off the road when carrying a group of 30 children to a swimming gala in Cornwall. In this instance, fortunately none of the children were injured. However, these are just two examples reported in the UK in 2017. There are also reports of similar road traffic collisions occurring when schools make trips abroad – in the summer of 2016 a driver lost control of his vehicle in France when reportedly looking for his sunglasses. This incident involved a coach company from Gloucestershire carrying students for a camping trip in Italy. Ten students were injured and one pupil was left with life-threatening injuries.

In most of these incidents risk assessments for the trips will undoubtedly have been completed. However, no amount of paperwork completed by a school will prevent operators using vehicles which are not road-worthy or safe, or drivers who are fit to work or properly trained.

The Health and Safety Executive states that most serious school trip accidents involve 'underlying management failures' and is keen to encourage schools and local authorities to focus on how real risks are managed and not on 'paperwork'. They recognise there is a challenge for schools to strike a balance between protecting pupils from risk, while enabling them to learn from educational trips.

With up to 10 million days of activity outside the classroom each year, a school's ability to select a bus or coach operator that will protect the health and safety of children and minimise the risk of death or serious injury is of vital importance. Most parents will rely on their chosen school making this decision on their behalf but is the school properly informed – or is there a better way?

Local authority transport procurement

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Whether a local authority has a list of approved suppliers or a school simply obtains quotes from local transport companies; there may be a misconception that a coach or bus operator would not have a licence to trade if it was not operating safely. Sadly, this is not always the case.

In our routine lives we often leave the quality assessment of products and services to those who know best. For example, fast food outlets are assessed by the Food Standards Agency. They are given a zero to five rating for their food hygiene. Most would not risk eating from anything less than a four or five rated establishment for obvious reasons, three at a push. Food outlets with a less scrupulous hygiene rating still remain open for business. They continue to sell food to the public, despite the obvious risks. However, it is down to the customer to make an informed choice. Extend this same approach to bus and coach companies – those with a casual attitude to safety may still be in operation. The possession of the Operator Licence, although a licence to trade, does not necessarily mean they are operating either legally or safely.

So, what criteria do schools use when selecting passenger transport providers? In general, it would appear that while consideration is given to pupil comfort and safety, much of this appears to be the responsibility of the teachers and often the children themselves. This means the focus will be on the basics of wearing seatbelts and behaviour when travelling, rather than on vehicle roadworthiness or driver competence and fitness.

SCHOOL TRAVEL - how safe is your coach company?

It would appear that risk assessing on the responsibilities of the fleet operators such as vehicle servicing and inspections or driver licencing and training are non-existent. Road safety charity Brake advises schools to ask operators a 'suggested' list of safety-related questions when selecting service provider. But it would seem there are no contractual requirements that fleet operators must adhere to when providing travel services for school children in the same way Health and Safety is contractually required. Needless to say, there are many fleet operators who will go above and beyond to ensure the safety of their passengers, there are also less scrupulous fleet operators who will try and get away with lower operating standards to 'win' work. The issue for schools is that without specialist knowledge it is very difficult to know which is which.

Clearly it is a serious business for schools to make the right decision when choosing a fleet operator to transport children in their care. The ability to make an informed choice is vital and should the worst to happen, the decision maker needs to demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps to ensure the chosen transport provider is operating safely and legally.

Consider how this process could be improved if schools selected passenger transport operators who were able to demonstrate minimum requirements in terms of safety, efficiency, environmental protection and perhaps industry good practice through regular and independent audits.

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Independent accreditation - a simpler way

Risk assessments will continue to be required for school trips, paperwork will need to be completed and confusion may well continue to exist around various health and safety 'myths'. However, there is a simple way to select passenger transport providers to ease the decision-making process, provide managerial confidence and ultimately help to reduce risk to children and staff.

Change is needed. For those who make the decision on price, the cheapest quote may not always be the safest quote but it may be if certain criteria are met. Responsible procurement is a simple process that any organisation with purchasing power can make. By selecting a transport provider that is accredited to a recognised industry standard which actively encourages safe fleet management, drivers and vehicles is key to schools' success in this area.

Any operator that adheres to a fleet accreditation scheme and opens its doors to external, independent scrutiny is a proactive demonstration of a business which aims to operate to industry best practice. It is highly unlikely any teacher, governor or parent will be technically able to properly assess the safety credentials of a commercial fleet operation.

However, by sourcing passenger transport from fleet operators that are independently audited to a recognised industry standard helps remove the need for technical capability and provides a level of assurance not covered by the standard risk assessment approach. It will also mean a school not needing to use its own judgement in selecting an operator who may not have been entirely transparent about its safety credentials.

Health and safety guidelines can often make the process seem complicated and overly technical. Using fleet operators that are independently accredited to a recognised industry standard simplifies this process.

There are three key areas which should be used to identify a safe fleet operator:

- **Safer operations**

Meeting the standard of an approved independent fleet management audit

- **Safer drivers**

Confirming drivers are medically fit, are trained on road risk and their driving licences checked through DVLA

- **Safer vehicles**

Ensuring vehicles are roadworthy and fitted with relevant safety equipment

By implementing simple, cost effective control measures in existing responsible procurement practices demonstrates that road risk is considered, is being managed and will ultimately save lives.



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