

# Development Department

## Research Programme

### Research Findings No. 143

## Why Do Parents Drive Their Children To School?

George Street Research

As part of its integrated transport strategy, the Scottish Executive encourages sensible road use and, in particular, sensible car use. As one element, Scotland's motorists are urged to reduce the number of unnecessary car journeys undertaken, including the school run, when alternatives to car travel are available. To help achieve this aim, the Scottish School Travel Advisory Group (SSTAG) was established with the objective of increasing the proportion of non-car travel to school. In October 2001, the Scottish Executive commissioned research to explore reasons why parents choose to drive their children to school and the relative importance of contributory factors.

### Key Findings

- Parents actively choose to drive their children to school because they perceive the journey by car to offer a number of benefits including safety and convenience.
- The reasons that parents drive their children to school often occur in multiples and there is no single trigger that is likely to be powerful enough to work against all of these.
- Walking could be more widely used, either for the entire journey or for the final part. The benefits of walking are the extent to which it offers quality time with the child, health and exercise, social contact and cost savings.
- Travel by school bus or public transport bus afford opportunities for building independence, social contact and offer safety, although preferences from parents are generally for the provision of school buses.
- Physical changes in and around schools will be helpful in creating the correct environment for other modes of transport to be used.
- Schools themselves are perceived to have an important part to play in acting as a channel for information and for dissemination of key messages to both parents and children.
- Overall, the research suggests that it will be a long process to achieve, to any great extent, a reduction in actual number of journeys undertaken by car as parents who drive offer many justifications for their actions.
- In the absence of any strong triggers to prevent driving to school we would suggest initially a 'minimising policy' to reduce the distance or frequency of driving. There are indications that it may be easier to shorten the distances travelled by car by parents, than it will be to persuade them to give up using their car at all.

## Key Findings of the Desk Research

In Scotland the percentage of journeys to school by car or van is currently lower than the rest of GB, at only 20%<sup>1</sup>. This can be explained, in part, by the fact that higher proportions of children in Scotland live within one mile of their school (74%) than in England and Wales (63%). Additionally, levels of car ownership are lower in Scotland. This means that more Scottish children are able to, or have to, walk or use some mode of transport other than car to get to school.

The 1999 Scottish Household Survey revealed that 23% of primary school age children and 12% of secondary school age children travel to school by car or van in Scotland. Half of these live within a short distance of school – 1km in the case of primary age children and 2km in the case of secondary age children – while for a fifth the journey is feasible by public transport. Thus, there are children travelling to school by car for whom mode shift from the car is theoretically possible.

Chart 1.1 shows the modes of travel to school by urban and rural classifications in Scotland. Over half (54%) of all children in Scotland are reported to walk to school and just under one quarter (23%) travel by bus. Travel by car accounts for just 19% of the journeys to school as measured in this study (not dissimilar from the figure of 20% reported in Scottish Transport Statistics). Other methods of travelling (including cycling) account for just 3% of journeys to school.

The Scottish Household Survey data also shows quite clearly that patterns of travel vary across the country. Children who live in the cities and other urban areas are the most likely to walk (60% or more do). Amongst children living in more remote and rural areas, where the distances to school are likely to be greater, the incidence of walking to school is less common (23-44%).

Parents often cite safety as the reason for choosing to take their child to school by car. Yet, taking all casualties into account, bus appears to be the safest mode, walking the next, then 'other modes', followed by the car and finally the bicycle. According to the figures, a child travelling by car is almost twice as likely to be a casualty than a pedestrian and more than seven times more likely to be a casualty than a child travelling by bus. Equally, statistics suggest that the danger from strangers is much exaggerated, albeit a real concern to parents. Incidences of intentional harm to children are extremely rare; furthermore, it is widely accepted that children are more at risk from people they know than from strangers<sup>2</sup>.

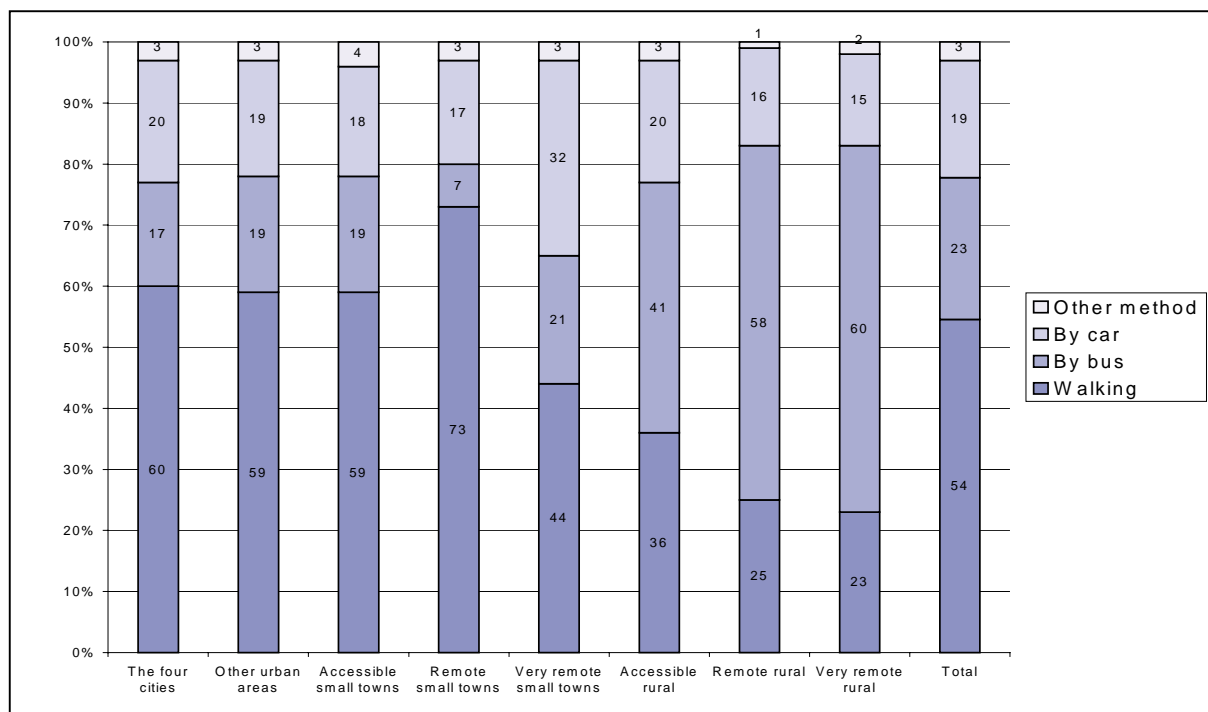
<sup>1</sup> Scottish Transport Statistics, 2001 Edition, Scottish Executive, which compares with 19% recorded by the Scottish Household Survey, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Meikle, J. (6th Feb 2001) "Children's safety bought at a price" Guardian Unlimited.

Chart 1

### Mode of Children's Travel to School by Urban / Rural Classification %

Source: Scottish Household Survey, Bulletin 6, 2001



## An Assessment of Alternatives To Driving

For many parents participating in the primary focus group research, walking is currently the most likely alternative to driving, albeit as much by default as any other reason. It is an option which is recognised as feasible by most parents, although preferences are due more to the perceived unattractiveness of the alternatives than the current appeal of walking per se.

**Walking** offers a number of advantages such as improved quality time between parents and their children, although there is a strong resistance from parents to messages that imply walking is safer than car travel. Walking could be used for most ages of children, although parents of younger children are unlikely to relinquish their supervisory role to the child itself or another adult. This mode of travel has potential as an occasional mode, dependent on the weather and other factors, as well as having potential for use in combination with other travel choices.

**Cycling** is the option offering least potential. There is a perceived lack of a suitable infrastructure to encourage safety for cyclists in and around schools. It would take substantial changes to the infrastructure along with significant alterations in the attitude of drivers to cyclists before any move in favour of cycling to school might be considered.

While most parents and children had no experience of using this form of travel, **school bus services** appear to offer potential. Comments suggest that if certain criteria such as the provision of trained adult supervisors, more bus stops, reliable and frequent services and vehicle safety are met, views towards this would be relatively positive. Views on **public transport bus services** are less positive because of concerns over "stranger danger" and inappropriate behaviour from other bus passengers as well as cost and inconvenience.

Both bus options hold greater potential for older children as those at the younger end of the spectrum are not considered to be old enough to travel without a parent.

## Car Versus Other Travel Methods

Parents and children provide a number of reasons which mitigate against the use of walking, cycling or bus travel for the journey to school. Many of the reasons apply to most of these alternative travel choices to an extent and some are particularly pertinent for younger children, although most apply regardless of age, gender or location.

Car travel avoids many of the weaknesses associated with these alternatives as well as offering many advantages. Preferences for using a car are often reflective of a number of reasons and are much more to do with the appeal of using the car rather than being due to the lack of appeal of the alternatives. Car travel offers high levels of safety and convenience, particularly in terms of flexibility at a time of day when parents are under a lot of pressure.

## Educating and Informing Parents

A mixture of positive encouragement and supporting infrastructure and supervisory changes is needed to encourage increased use of alternative forms of travel. Improvements such as traffic calming can help to decrease concerns over road safety and the dangers imposed by other road users.

Because of the multitude of reasons for car use, it will be difficult to persuade many parents to stop driving and partial solutions may offer more by way of opportunities. For example, some children already drive to school with their parents but travel home by bus. A scheme at schools offering parents a capacity to check that a child has arrived in the morning may serve to reduce fears over non-arrival and increase use of bus services in both directions.

Across each alternative mode of travel, there is some parental unwillingness to take on board any associated benefits and there are instances where gaining wider acceptance of these benefits may have

an impact on reducing use of the car to deliver children to school. However, this would need to be undertaken in association with measures to limit perceptions of the negative aspects of walking, cycling, school bus or public bus use.

There is no indication that there are a raft of messages which will reduce, to a great extent, the actual number of journeys undertaken by car. It is unlikely that any one message would bring about a reduction in car use and there might still be initial resistance from some parents. However, a combination of different approaches, led by the schools, should serve to highlight the alternatives available and bring about change for some parents and children as well as more long term changes in attitude and culture. Schools are perceived to have an important part to play in acting as a channel of information and for dissemination of key messages to both parents and children.

For any initiative which might be introduced, messages need to address both pragmatic and emotional issues – parents and children tend to focus very much on convenience and safety as all important but, in reality, there are various emotional issues which also take on a great deal of importance.

Any education campaign adopted will need to deal with issues at a grass roots level, perhaps which the backing of a national campaign. There is a need to co-ordinate any action within the local community via a range of different bodies including schools, police, local authorities, road safety officers, STAG and other pressure groups.

## Conclusions

- For any scheme under consideration, there is a need to ensure that actions are targeted where they will have greatest impact and that this fits with the needs of parents and the locality of the school. Parents should be consulted about possible new initiatives.
- Any initiatives involving adult supervision, need to ensure that adults involved in the scheme are well trained and have the trust of the parents.

- Schools need to be made aware of the full range of initiatives which they could offer and ensure that they have a full understanding of the advantages and benefits of all in order to help sell these options to parents and children. Schools need to be encouraged to develop their own travel plans in conjunction with other interested parties.
- There are certain practical requirements associated with specific schemes, for example, initiatives aimed at increasing the number of children cycling to school will need to provide adequate cycle training, cycle storage and facilities to dry wet clothing.
- Messages being put out need to positively reinforce the benefits of any new initiatives by clearly and simply portraying advantages and benefits. Allied to this, there is a need to improve parental views of bus travel as being safe from the point of view of road accidents as the assumption of most parents is that the car is a safer way to travel. For any new initiative being introduced, messages need to address pragmatic and emotional issues – parents and children focus on convenience and safety as all important but, in reality, there are also various emotional issues which take on a great deal of importance.
- **Emotional benefits**, both to parent and child include:
  - improved quality time together and better opportunities for bonding;
  - helping to create children who are more independent and confident as they get older;
  - giving parents back their independence;
  - health benefits to parent and child.
- **Pragmatic benefits** include:
  - improved levels of safety for children (both in terms of being more “streetwise” and “traffic wise”);
  - reductions in pollution levels which will benefit children in the longer term.
- Parents identify a number of communication channels for messages aimed at reducing driving and these emphasise the importance of the school in adopting a co-ordinating role.
- Messages about the benefits of initiatives can be delivered to parents via children. Parents admit that “pester power” has an impact on their behaviour. Children have more confidence in their own abilities than their parents give them credit for. Therefore, children should be more open to walking or bus use messages. There is also a capacity to “soft sell” the benefits of travelling with their friends to older children.
- While the focus of any new initiatives need to be concentrated at a local level, national campaigns need to sit alongside these and reinforce the benefits and advantages of each. National campaigns will also need to allow for different messages geared towards certain types of people and in the context of a broader cultural change in relation to driving behaviour.
- There is a need for parents to give consideration to linking different travel modes together. Most parents only consider one type of travel mode for each journey made, and very little consideration is given to ways in which different modes could link into each other for the same journey.

## About the Survey

The study was conducted between November 2001 and January 2002. A staged approach to the research was adopted. The first stage of the project comprised a desk based review of published information sources covering parental choice and decision-making on the school journey and a compilation of evidence on risks to children on different forms of transport and personal safety risks. The final stage of research involved nine group discussions with parents who drive their children to school (six among parents of primary school children and three among parents of secondary school children). Additionally, three groups were undertaken with secondary school children. Respondents were recruited from locations throughout central and southern Scotland and the emphasis was placed on those who drive a short distance only and / or have the option of using public transport, walking or cycling.

The aims of this of this research were :

- To examine parents' reasons for driving children to school, covering issues such as time pressures, cost, lack of public transport, traffic congestion, inclement weather
- To determine parents' and children's opinions regarding the benefits and drawbacks of different transport modes for taking children to school and reasons why they are, or are not, being used
- To assess the perceived risk from traffic on the school journey, covering issues such as traffic congestion, inadequate crossing points and risk of injury
- To assess the perceived personal safety risk on the school journey, covering factors such as gender, age and (lack of) supervision
- To assess awareness and views of different initiatives for safe travel to school
- To explore the package of measures that needs to be put in place in order to encourage parents not to drive their children to school

If you wish a copy of "Why Do Parents Drive their Children to School", the report which is summarised in this Research Findings, please send a cheque for £5.00 made payable to The Stationery Office to:

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