

2.1 Senator J.L. Perchard of the Minister for Transport and Technical Services regarding school bus services seats:

Would the Minister inform Members how many school bus services seats are being provided on a daily basis by the new service provider, Connex, and whether there is sufficient seating capacity to deliver the service properly and, most of all, safely?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye of St. Helier (The Minister for Transport and Technical Services):

There are a total of 2,443 seats being offered on a daily basis on the school bus service and this is in excess of the number of students travelling each day. Last week the average number of students carried in the morning was 800 and 1,050 seats were provided. In the afternoon 1,393 seats were provided and an average of 1,200 students were carried each day. I should point out; averages have been used in this analysis because the daily totals differ significantly, as has always been the case. Moreover, some services may be overcrowded on some days while others are under-utilised. However, as the service has by its nature uncontrolled access, any eligible student wishing to travel who has a valid ticket must try to be accommodated. After-school activities - which differ each day and during the terms, as well as whether the student travels to and from the same place every day - have a significant influence on demand. At times students may need to stand to allow greater capacity, as indeed they may be required to do on the scheduled services but this is only ever meant to be on an *ad hoc* basis and will always be in a safe manner to protect passengers, drivers and other road users. Incidentally, the previous operator encountered exactly the same issues on a regular basis. My department is working very closely with Connex, as indeed it did with the previous operator, to ensure that the occasional overloads are minimised and that the service provided is both effective and safe.

2.1.1 Senator J.L. Perchard:

I am surprised to hear the Minister suggest to this Assembly that students standing on buses is acceptable. In my book, Sir, it is completely unacceptable and may I remind the Minister it is against the law for children under the age of 14 to travel in private vehicles without seatbelts. My question is; will the Minister insist as from tomorrow that Connex deliver the service they tendered for and what action will he take against them if they do not?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I have insisted from the moment that the tender was awarded to Connex that Connex deliver the service they tendered for and Connex are doing just that. I can assure the Senator I am well aware of the law that applies to seatbelt Regulations. The fact is that I should remind the Senator that standing on an omnibus is not against the law and that in due course, although regrettably seatbelts were not fitted to some of the school buses on arrival, seatbelts are being fitted to the school buses and parents need have no concerns about overall safety.

2.1.2 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Will the Minister confirm that Connex's successful tender did include the provision to supply seats for all the children travelling in their care and that children standing was not part of the tender process?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I can confirm that Connex fulfilled the same brief as the other tenderer, which was to read the tendered document and provide a tender to cater for the capacity that was required but the question of whether students were standing or not was not a feature of the tender process.

2.1.3 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier:

Does the Minister confirm that it is simply not good enough to dismiss these concerns as mere teething problems, as he is reported to have done; that he needs to provide a service which meets all

reasonable needs - and this is a reasonable one - if he is to achieve his target reduction of reducing car use by 15 per cent in the near future?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I am quite satisfied that the problems that are being exhibited in the first 10 days or so of the school service this term are no different from the problems that are exhibited at the beginning of any term because the behaviour and travel patterns of students change on a regular basis and what we are witnessing is absolutely no different to what has gone before. I am also quite satisfied with the tender process and I am very happy with the new buses that have been provided by the new operator. The service, in my opinion, is of much higher quality than previously.

2.1.4 Deputy P.N. Troy of St. Brelade:

Can the Minister confirm that his department has received complaints from parents of children who have to travel long distances while standing and confirm what he has done about resolving the situation?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I can confirm the department has received a very small number of complaints. Unfortunately it seems that most complaints are being directed toward Senator Perchard, at a request he made through the media, so there may be more complaints out there than I am aware of. At the moment Senator Perchard is conveying those complaints to me via the columns of the local newspaper, so the procedure of dealing with complaints is somewhat chaotic.

2.1.5 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Once again we have seen the arrogance of this Minister at first hand. This is a very serious subject, Sir. Children as young as 11 are standing on buses. I want to know if the Minister thinks this is acceptable and what immediate action does the Minister intend to take regarding this unacceptable situation?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I am not sure if I can compete with the Senator in terms of arrogance, Sir, but I will do my best. I am quite satisfied with the way the department is handling the services operated by the new operator. I have said previously in public that there have been one or 2 minor glitches. In general, though, the service is working extremely well and I expect it to bed down in due course but the reality, which I think that most Members do understand, is that our young students are intelligent and they often use the service in the way that they see fit; not necessarily the way the service was planned. In fact, much of the overloading is caused by students switching from their normal routes because they have decided to take another one. They are entitled to do that and we try and cater for this on a rolling basis and I am happy that between the department and Connex a proper and safe and effective service is being provided.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am going to allow one more question on this because we have a number of questions to get through. Deputy Le Claire.

2.1.6 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire of St. Helier:

Would the Minister agree with me that perhaps setting a more responsible approach and a more responsible attitude to this issue by discussing the matters with the Senator, and perhaps Senator Vibert, would be a clear way forward and also demonstrates to those in the gallery that we are taking the matter seriously and would he, while giving that undertaking, also inform Members - if he is able - as to how much this service is costing the States of Jersey in subsidy and how much it is costing per child that travels while standing?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I can inform Members that the school bus service is in fact a very expensive service to operate. In broad terms it costs, in terms of subsidy paid for by the taxpayer, £2 per student per ride. I would be happy to continue discussions on an alternative basis with Senator Perchard and I look forward to doing so, a bit.

2.1.7 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Point of order, Sir. I did ask the Minister a question on a very important subject that he failed to answer; about the immediate action he intends to take to solve this unacceptable situation?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I am sorry, Sir, the Senator seems to be appearing to suffer from a little deafness. I indicated quite clearly there is no need for me to take any immediate action because I am quite satisfied that Connex is delivering what it promised in the contract that it won under the tender process. There is absolutely no need to do anything drastic at this stage because there is no requirement for any drastic remedial action. The service is operating in a perfectly satisfactory way.