

## Evaluation of the School Travel Co-ordinator Initiative

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### Main Findings

- The School Travel Co-ordinator (STC) initiative has increased staff resources for activities that are generally under-resourced by local authorities across Scotland including publicity, joint working with schools and communities and integration of activities across disciplines and between transport functions.
- STCs are currently working with 265 secondary schools and over 1700 primary schools across Scotland. However most schools are at a relatively early stage, with only 15 secondary schools and 179 primary schools having implemented travel plans.
- The general lack of training and support for the STC initiative in its first year was a problem. Although early progress was therefore patchy, overall STCs have helped to support culture change, inject new ideas and build joint approaches in school travel.
- It is difficult to separate the impacts of the STC from the much greater complementary impacts of partners such as Road Safety Officers, Active School Co-ordinators and others, but awareness of the STC role and its aims is generally high amongst partner professions.
- Successful areas of delivery are: assistance with school travel assessments, advice on possible measures for schools, fund assembly and administration of funds to schools, negotiating compromises between different sectors, developing materials and other resources, facilitating changes to school transport provision, negotiating with planners of new schools, developing targets, co-ordinating partners to improve behaviour on school buses and arranging networking and awareness raising events.
- To deliver on such a wide ranging and challenging agenda there are many different skills needed, and the STC initiative has been successful in attracting people with a wide range of skills into a transport planning role. However, the absence of a background in transport means that training has been essential for STCs to undertake their role effectively.
- In some councils there could be advantages if the wide ranging STC roles were incorporated into parts of the job descriptions of more staff within the council, rather than being resourced through a single post. To date some of the best delivery has been by STCs who split their time between the STC role and other functions.
- There are significant benefits if relevant information from school travel plans is communicated to school transport managers to inform decisions on allocations of transport, and to ensure consistency with school travel plans.
- Joint working with partners in so many sectors can be very time consuming, and the most effective STCs emphasised the importance of a clear delivery focus to avoid getting bogged down. A particularly effective approach for joint working and delivery appears to be using STC staff time for fund assembly to ensure that incentives for joint action and delivery are created through the availability of resources controlled by the STC.

## Introduction

In 2002, the Scottish School Travel Advisory Group (SSTAG) recommended that school travel co-ordinators (STCs) should be set up within each local authority, and in February 2003 national funding of the School Travel Co-ordinator Initiative was announced. With co-ordinators now delivering a range of initiatives across Scotland, and funding committed to continue this role until 2007/08, this review considers the lessons learned to date and seeks to highlight best practice to ensure that the committed funding can deliver maximum benefits in the coming years.

The review included: a policy review; questionnaire, telephone, and face to face surveys with nearly 200 people across Scotland; and case studies in six selected areas.

## Proposed and actual roles

In awarding the funding for School Travel Co-ordinators (STCs), the Scottish Executive noted three main roles for STCs: an evangelical role to promote best practice, a practical role working across local authority departments, and a co-ordinating role to work with others towards common goals. In the first two years they have succeeded to a large extent with the evangelical role with a high level of awareness in most areas both of the existence of the STC and of the benefits of efficient school travel. At a practical level, the evidence is more mixed, although there has been some level of delivery in all areas. For co-ordination there are some best practice examples showing that a key role for the STC is to act as a champion for consumers ensuring that messages from schools are communicated to the relevant professionals, and that understanding of transport issues is disseminated through schools as part of “hearts and minds” initiatives.

It will take many more years for STCs to develop all the roles envisaged by SSTAG, and each council has prioritised different areas of work in the short term. However there are clear successes for the STC role in:

- Assistance with school travel assessments and advice on possible measures for schools to consider in their plans covering engineering, curriculum and publicity issues.
- Fund assembly and administration of funds to schools.
- Negotiating compromises between different sectors.
- Developing materials and other resources to help schools with their travel planning including resources consistent with the curriculum.

- Facilitating changes to school transport provision.
- Negotiating best practice for school travel with planners of new schools.
- Developing challenging but achievable targets for school travel within policies and plans of transport, education and health sectors.
- Co-ordinating partners to improve behaviour on school buses.
- Arranging networking and awareness raising events.

## Skills and experience

To deliver on such a challenging agenda there are many different skills needed including partnership building, fund assembly, negotiating and motivational skills, publicity and marketing, project and time management, and a good understanding of transport, education and health policy within the context of a cross sectoral sustainable development agenda. This broadly based agenda has proved attractive for many people, who might not have been attracted to traditional roles in transport, and the STC initiative has therefore been successful in attracting people with new skills into transport planning.

STCs have found that the gaps in delivery relate more to “soft” issues such as travel awareness and encouragement for behaviour change than hard engineering and transport service changes. The initial focus has therefore been on the “soft” activities

In some councils the STC also works part time on road safety and in others the split is with school transport management. These STCs have been able to deliver strongly by linking their complementary roles, perhaps suggesting that there would be advantages if the STC role were incorporated into parts of the job descriptions of more staff within the Council, rather than being a single post.

The more experienced STCs have been able to make more connections so it is unfortunate that there has been a high turnover of STCs. Action is needed now to ensure that uncertainty is avoided about the continuity of STC type functions when the current funding for the STC initiative ends in 2007/08 financial year. The promotion of efficient, safe, healthy, and affordable travel to school is not an optional extra, yet cross sectoral planning is not currently recognised within mainstream funding mechanisms.

## Joint working

Within many councils there is a weak culture of joint working, except amongst management tiers, and many of the STCs have been reliant on their managers making connections with other sectors or services. However in some cases the managers have been unable to prioritise this due to other pressures on their time.

More successful STCs had identified the need to be very focused on project delivery and to be selective about liaison needs. The STC role covers such a wide remit that there is a danger that anyone holding a meeting on a related topic might invite the STC along, resulting in the postholder spending a very high percentage of the working week on liaison activities.

In many cases STCs have been able to build on the long and effective track record of joint working on road safety with health, education and police. These professions have defined joint working aims more clearly and the STC is a natural point of contact within councils.

As the number of school travel plans (STPs) grows the breadth and depth of feedback from these will be important to inform decisions on allocations of school transport and to ensure that operations are consistent with the STPs.

## Impact

Soft and smart transport measures are recognised within government policy to have been much under-resourced in the past. Across Scotland as a whole, the main impacts of the STC initiative have been to increase the level of staff resources to these activities resulting in delivery on a very wide range of tasks that would otherwise have been constrained by lack of staff time.

The case study areas identified the positive impacts made by individual STCs leading innovative projects. The greatest impacts have been to support changing cultures, inject new ideas and build joint approaches into progressively more delivery. As best practice grows, and joint delivery cultures are more widely accepted, the need for the STC role to be distinct from mainstream delivery will decline.

However, mainstreaming has not been achieved within the initial two year funding in most councils, and it will probably take more than another two years for the STC roles to become accepted as mainstream practice.

## Resources required

The scale of the task was well within the reach of STCs under current staff resourcing. Although some STCs were pressed for time, this appeared to be more related to inexperience in time management, than an overall lack of time. This is a very broad agenda, and a systematic and focussed approach is needed to tackle achievable bite sized chunks, to avoid becoming swamped (and swamping partners) and stifling delivery.

Although staff resources for co-ordination by the STC may generally be sufficient, there is a clear need for increased resources to deliver the activities emerging from STPs. Key blockages were identified for cycle training, background marketing, and maintenance of facilities.

Within a year or so it might be expected that there will be a ten-fold increase in the number of completed school travel plans so fundraising can therefore be expected to become an increasingly important role for STCs building on CWSS funds with lottery funding and other sources.

Very negative responses can be expected from schools and communities if their efforts preparing plans are not rewarded with implementation of at least some recommendations. This research has been focused at the resources associated with supporting the STCs, and further work is needed to estimate the resourcing implications from promoting travel plans at more schools.

## Management

The surveys showed that whilst most STCs are clear about their general aims, there is less clarity about their precise role. Their role in the whole network of school initiatives is often confused, leaving it up to individuals in the post to decide their position. It is important that there should be local discretion for councils, but more rigorous management is needed at all levels to ensure that local priorities are more clearly defined.

A more structured approach is therefore needed to improve delivery and consolidate early progress with:

- Joint working protocols to avoid overlaps between initiatives such as health promoting schools, eco schools, active school co-ordinators and to foster joint working.
- Better planning and monitoring of progress including submissions to the Scottish Executive on the outcomes achieved in each area.

- A clear stake for all STCs in target-setting and in managing funding, fundraising, and forecasting of resources needed for school travel plan delivery.
- A more formal support network or networks capable of representing the interests of school travel within local and national policy, supporting STCs and their partners with advice and training, rewarding best practice and facilitating communication between STCs, and auditing STC management approaches to help raise standards.

Given the many difficult issues relating to school travel funding within Grant Aided Expenditure for local authorities, it is likely to take some time for the more integrated approach to school travel being promoted by STCs to be structured into mainstream school travel funding. However the lessons from this review should be used to open discussions with local authority partners and transport providers on how funding formulae might be restructured to recognise not just needs for hard interventions such as crossing patrols and school transport, but the wider softer issues including health promotion, social and environmental factors. The evidence to support such restructuring will require further analysis.

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