

26th August 2011

Dear Mr Gibb,

Ref: Removal of “Mode of Travel” from the School Census

I am writing, as the Chair of a national organisation representing those working in sustainable school travel in Local Authorities and schools across England, to urge you to reconsider the decision taken by the Department for Education, announced in ICES Bulletin 50, to remove the collection of Mode of Travel to School data from the School Census.

As an organisation which counts amongst its membership the majority of English Local Authorities, we wish to register our dismay, and that of our members, at what we have been told by DfE officers was a ministerial decision taken after a deliberately limited consultation. We are troubled by the way this decision has been made, whereby a review, described by the Department as being ‘root and branch,’ was deliberately limited so as not to consult, consider, or allow any opportunity for the end users of the data to provide their views. As such the decision to no longer collect this data has been made without full knowledge of the immense value of what will be lost.

The removal of this data collection requirement will mean that Local Authorities are longer able to measure effectively the performance of their policies to encourage active and sustainable travel to school. In addition, Authorities use this invaluable dataset to ensure evidence based planning and implementation in areas as wide ranging as local transport systems and safer routes to schools, increasing physical activity and tackling childhood obesity, the location of new school places and housing developments, the planning of home to school transport provision and, not least, the delivery of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Whilst we and our members understand and support the desire to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic burdens upon schools, we do not agree that this decision will serve that purpose.

Firstly, should Local Authorities continue to collect this essential data by means other than the Census, this will actually lead to an increased burden at both the local authority and school level as alternative systems are set up and additional paperwork generated. When, in 2007, the data collection was made mandatory for schools with approved travel plans, it was the express instruction of the Department that

Local Authorities should cease other methods of collecting this data in order to minimize bureaucratic burdens on schools. As a result, to reinstate such local collection and analysis would represent unreasonable expense in both financial and human resource terms.

Secondly, our extensive consultations with over 1250 schools nationwide, (in contrast to the 16 responses DfE officers report to their consultation on this subject), have shown that the vast majority of schools do not find the collection of this data an undue burden and that they are keen to have access to it on a local and national level for use in the classroom - Mode of Travel is the one School Census field that is actively used in the classroom as a teaching resource rather than being simply a bureaucratic tool.

In addition, and perhaps of greater concern, is the implied message this decision sends to schools and Local Authorities, that the Government are no longer committed to promoting active and sustainable travel to school in spite of the recognized public health benefits for children, families and wider local communities not to mention the positive impacts on improving the running of the transport network and the reductions in carbon emissions that targeted, evidence led work in this field can realise.

With increasing pressures on local resources, Mode of Travel data from the School Census provides the best value foundation for an evidence-based, targeted, approach to achieving greater levels of active and sustainable travel to school. In addition, it is being used as a crucial tool in informing the planning of local services including new school places, housing, local transport initiatives and infrastructure and is the one School Census field that is actively used in the classroom as a teaching resource. If not reversed, this decision will only serve to increase bureaucracy and costs, both financial and human, for schools and Local Authorities at a time when they are already being stretched. On behalf of our members and the hundreds of schools who have told us they make active use of this data we urge you, as minister with responsibility for the School Census, to reinstate this data collection.

Yours sincerely

Emma Sheridan
Chair
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