

2.9 Senator J.L. Perchard of the Minister for Transport and Technical Services regarding seating capacity of new vehicles for the school bus service:

Would the Minister advise Members what the average seating capacity of the vehicles being obtained by Connex for the school bus service is; how this compares with the average capacity of the vehicles under the current contracts; inform Members whether the capacity of the new vehicles will be sufficient to meet demand, and if not, whether the States will be liable to meet the costs of the additional vehicles required?

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

The average capacity of the vehicles that Connex are acquiring for the school bus service is 36. The average for the current contract is 41 seats. However, this overall average figure fails to illustrate that it is the distribution of seats on the school network that is important. Many of the tailored services do not require a bus with a large seating capacity, because the demands for seats varies across the different school routes, although for those that do, the maximum capacity vehicles will be deployed. It is also worth noting that the theoretical basic seating capacity can be increased by running a bus more than once. The capacity offered by the incumbent operator is currently greater than required. The capacity offered under Connex's tender proposals has been estimated to satisfy the network demand, as specified in the tender document. Moreover, Connex has the flexibility of being able to utilise vehicles from its main fleet, should that be required. The demand for the school bus service does vary between school years, between the weeks of the term, and between the days of the week. Should additional services be required over a limited period, Connex will cater for that within existing relief resources as the current operator does. However, I cannot guarantee that current demand may not grow over an extended period when additional provision would have to be paid for, but that outcome would apply irrespective of which operator operated the contract.

2.9.1 Senator J.L. Perchard:

As these new buses will have a reduced capacity - seating just 36 passengers maximum - will the Minister inform the Assembly of the agreement that is being reached with the new providers with regards to children standing on the buses as they are travelling?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I am afraid the Deputy is making some erroneous remarks, Sir. The maximum of the new buses is not 36. I gave that figure as the figure I gave for the average capacity across all the buses that will be operating the new service. There is no current demand or requirement, as I understand, for standing on school buses. We hope that the school buses equipped with seatbelts will encourage children to sit down, but... in fact, no, I apologise. I misled the House. I think the current rule is there is no standing on school buses; however, I do not think that is a legal requirement. I think that is mainly a sensible instruction, in order to maintain order.

2.9.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Going back to the Connex tender, in questions earlier - I think to Deputy Southern - did the Minister say that Connex had been over-optimistic - I think his words were - on the leisure routes, so he had used the figures from Tantivy and Easylink to award the contract to Connex? Did the Minister say this, Sir?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I would have to refer to Hansard, when it is published, to be able to advise the Deputy on what I said, but in terms of the way the department analysed the tenders presented to it, it was the belief of the department that the figures offered by Connex as an estimate for the projection of what the value of summer services may be from next summer were potentially optimistic. Therefore, it was a decision of the department in the analysis of that particular aspect of the tender process that we would simply use figures that we were in a position to confirm because they were figures that were real, did exist, and were the returned revenue figures for a summer season that had happened. That seems to me perfectly sensible.

2.9.3 Deputy C.F. Labey of Grouville:

The Easylink east coast and inner road school buses are full to bursting now. Therefore, will the Minister confirm what arrangements will be made for the school children to accommodate all of them on a daily basis on these routes? Will there be extra buses put on or not?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

I am glad the Assistant Minister for Education, Sport and Culture has raised this matter. It was raised with me by my department only yesterday afternoon, and I understand it results from a move in school timetables - which is the only area where I am aware of a problem existing - has prevented school children who would normally catch the 3A bus from doing so. The fact of the matter is that this is a breakdown in communication between Education, Sport and Culture and my department. I hope Education, Sport and Culture will wake up one day and realise that if they play around with their timetables I simply cannot play around with bus schedules to match.

2.9.4 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister confirm that this level of internal expertise to which he now has access gave him the answer to his question; that the 36 seat bus capacity does not mean anything, because you can simply run the bus again, even though you need it at a certain time? Would he not say there is something very faulty with this logic, and that yet again demonstrates he should have implemented the Committee of Inquiry's very strong recommendation that there be independent and well-qualified experts arbitrating or refereeing these particular issues?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

The only person in this House suffering from faulty logic is the Deputy, who seems to have misheard me on 2 separate occasions. **[Laughter]** I told the House that the average capacity of vehicles that Connex are acquiring for the school bus service is 36. I did not say that was the capacity of any one single bus or that it was the maximum capacity of the Connex buses that are being provided, and the sooner that the Deputy gets his head around that very basic fact, the better. Yes, it is a fact that if you want to increase capacity on a route, you run a vehicle more than once. It is pretty simple stuff.

2.9.5 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Will the Minister confirm that the current operator is contracted to provide a seated-only service, and that the recent tender process was conducted on the clear understanding that all student passengers must be seated; and will he maintain his

position that the new contract will provide sufficient service to get our children to school in a safe environment?

Deputy G.W.J. de Faye:

It is my understanding that there will be capacity for all school children to be seated; indeed, some of them will be belted-up.