# WRITTEN STATEMENT

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# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Learner Travel Recommendations Report 2023** |
| **DATE** | **14 March 2024** |
| **BY** | **Lee Waters, Deputy Minister for Climate Change** |

Today, we are publishing the [Learner Travel Recommendations Report 2023](https://www.gov.wales/learner-travel-wales-measure-recommendations-2023), which sets out a series of recommendations to help improve the consistency, quality and safety of learner travel provision across Wales. It follows an internal analysis and evaluation exercise undertaken between February and September 2023.

The cost of running existing school buses is around £160m a year and accounts for about a quarter of non-delegated spending on schools by local authorities. These costs have continued to increase at a time when local authority budgets have come under increased pressure as a result of rising demand and persistently high inflation. Our own settlement, which comes largely from the UK Government in the form of a block grant, is not sufficient to recognize these pressures.

The pandemic had a significant impacted on the business model of bus companies across Wales. The Welsh Government provided an unprecedented £200m rescue package to support the industry but despite this, many companies have withdrawn bus routes because of a fall in passenger numbers, particularly among concessionary card holders. It is clear radical reform is needed across the whole system.

Last week, we published details of the changes we will make in *Our Roadmap to Bus Reform* and later this year a Bus Bill will be introduced in the Senedd. Under the plan, we will end the disjointed system, where private companies decide which routes to run, and instead local authorities and the Welsh Government will agree a local bus network that serves the needs of communities. It will also allow us, through Transport for Wales, to align bus routes with train timetables, to create an integrated public transport system and a single ticket which can be used for both.

Where possible, school transport will be rolled into the scheduled bus service. This will help avoid expensive duplication, allow the investment needed in modern buses, that can carry disabled people, and extend bus coverage for the whole community.

I want to thank colleagues in local authorities who are responsible for delivering statutory learner transport provision, the FE colleges and all our delivery partners for their time and effort in providing valuable information and data to help inform Learner Travel Recommendations Report 2023. I particularly want to thank all the children and young people who, working with Young Wales, expressed their views and insights which have contributed significantly to the next steps to improving learner travel arrangements in Wales.

The recommendations will provide a renewed focus on how we approach the journey to school; to look afresh at the responsibility on us all – children, young people, parents and carers, schools, FE institutions, local authorities and us as Ministers – and the collective role we play in ensuring that our learners develop the skills and confidence to travel to their place of learning in a safe, sustainable and affordable way.

The report recommends a comprehensive update to the statutory guidance documents which outlines the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in learner travel. The guidance will be enhanced to provide a framework for delivering a socially just, environmentally and financially sustainable school travel offer that is learner-focussed and highlights best practice from Wales, and beyond.

We will be working closely with all our delivery partners, as well as our learners to ensure the refreshed guidance documents are fit for purpose; align with legislative and policy developments and reflect the long-term ambitions of this government. This is an opportunity to embed the transport hierarchy set out in Llwybr Newydd into the lives of children, young people, their families and the broader school community. These updates will be subject to formal consultation and we encourage all stakeholders to engage with this process.

The engagement with local authorities and FEIs this year highlighted the innovative and inspirational models of delivery developed by some local authorities using local knowledge, intelligent data, as well as technology to think creatively to be able to offer a range of provision to support learners travelling to school.

We recognise the challenges that are currently facing public transport networks in Wales and an increased focus on the Transport Hierarchy set out in Llwybr Newydd, is of course reliant on people being able to access good public transport. Transport for Wales have been asked to ensure that the network development work they are currently undertaking to inform a franchised model of delivery for our buses in Wales takes in to consideration our learning establishments, schools and FE colleges as well as universities to maximise opportunities that a franchised network can offer to encourage more children and young people to use our public transport networks.

By taking forward the Report’s recommendations we have an opportunity to ensure that our commitments and policy aspirations on active travel, public transport networks – both bus and rail, alongside our ambitious targets on modal shift can be aligned and integrated in to the learner travel agenda.

By working together to redefine, refresh and restructure our learner travel frameworks and infrastructure we believe that together we can foster a socially, environmentally and sustainably culture of responsible travel to school.