

Getting School Transport Ready for the New Academic Year:

A Comprehensive Guide for School Leaders

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As focus shifts to the new academic year, it's crucial for school leaders to ensure that their school transport system is well-prepared to meet the evolving needs of students and parents. A well-organised and efficient transport system contributes significantly to the overall school experience, offering safety, convenience, and peace of mind to parents and staff. It is also a highly effective marketing tool, putting you on the radar for the widest possible catchment of families and giving schools an edge over a less accessible destination.

To help you navigate this process, we've created a comprehensive checklist of 12 essential steps to carry out in advance of the new school year, as well as a plan for the weeks in the immediate run-up to your new service starting.

Consider these steps carefully to build a year-round strategy for getting the best out of your school transport and making the process run as smoothly as possible.

You can use this guide on your existing service or get in touch with our Customer Success Team to learn how we combine technology and logistical planning expertise to lighten the workload on your staff and give you back time and money through identifying efficiencies and managing parent and student communication.

12 Steps For Success: Planning Ahead

1. Mapping the New Student Intake

Before the academic year begins, it's essential to understand the changing student demographics. Assess where new students live, how it affects your transport routes, and the impact of departing students or those with siblings already using the transport service.

Steps to Consider

- Evaluate the geographical distribution of new student cohorts and potential expansion of your student catchment - use postcodes to identify clusters
- Consider how this will impact your existing transport routes.
- Consider the impact of school leavers and those families with siblings already using the transport service.

2. Carrying Out Parent Surveys

Gathering feedback from parents is crucial for improving your transport service. Conduct effective parent surveys, assess satisfaction levels, and establish key performance indicators to continuously enhance your transport offerings.

Steps to Consider

- Launch parent surveys to gather feedback on the current transport service.
 - Assess satisfaction levels and identify areas for improvement.
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- Over time, establish key performance indicators (KPIs) for continuous satisfaction assessment.
- Make use of online survey tools such as Google Forms (Free), SurveyMonkey or Typeform to streamline data collection and analysis and Google MyMaps to plot location data

3. Carrying Out Initial Route Planning

Efficient route planning is at the core of a successful transport system. Utilising gathered data to create safe and efficient routes for the new academic year.

Steps to Consider

- Utilise the information gathered from the previous steps (and from last year's operational data) to plan routes that efficiently accommodate the new student cohort.
- Ensure that routes are designed to be both safe and time-effective. Also addressing issues such as fuel efficiency and the impact on environmental factors such as air quality.
- Address any unserved areas and what solutions could be created.
- Create initial timetables for review.

4. Check That All Necessary Procedures are in Place

Ensure that all essential procedures are updated and in place to guarantee the safety and satisfaction of students and parents. From passenger codes of conduct to contingency plans, address every eventuality.

Steps to Consider

- Review and update the passenger code of conduct to reflect current expectations and safety measures.
- Revise booking terms and conditions based on parent feedback and previous issues.
- Protect your investment in the service and consider if your cancellation notice period for parents reflects those required by your service operator should there be a drop in demand after the start of term.
- Develop contingency plans for situations such as extreme weather conditions or other potential disruptions.

5. Plan The Booking Process

Effectively communicate booking dates and materials to parents, while also advertising your transport service to both incoming and prospective students and parents.

Steps to Consider

- Determine whether parents pay up front yearly/termly or on a pay-as-you-use basis – or a combination of the above.
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- If booking in advance, consider the best time to request these bookings from parents - will they be away on holiday? Do they know their child(ren)'s schedule for the next term yet?
- Effectively advertise the transport service to both the incoming student cohort and prospective parents of future students, e.g. during Open Days

6. Consider the Billing System

Explore billing options, from upfront payments to different billing periods. Assess the benefits of using third-party payment systems to streamline the billing process.

Steps to Consider

- Will you be able to reduce subsidy by offering empty seats to occasional users to supplement recurring passenger usage?
- Ensure that parents accept the terms and conditions when making bookings, are they aware of the cancellation notice period?
- Will you offer refunds for journeys not taken? Can you reconcile payments against journeys taken?
- Do you have a ticketing system in place to register who has travelled on a given service?

7. Open the Booking Window (Skip this step if following a pay-as-you-use model)

If you're asking parents to book or book and pay termly or yearly in advance, think about the best time to request this. Remember the importance of early bookings to ascertaining levels of uptake and securing favourable rates from third party transport operators or making best use of your vehicle capacity. Timing is crucial when opening the booking window. It's easier to get a response from parents during term time so don't leave it too late, ensure you open your booking window before the summer holidays – May half term is ideal.

Steps to Consider

- Open the booking window well in advance of the end of the current academic year to assess next year's requirements accurately.
- Recognise that "Expressions of interest" are less reliable than confirmed bookings, which provide concrete data for capacity and routing decisions.
- Early booking numbers also allows more time to secure the best possible solutions and rates from transport operators.

8. Final Route and Capacity Planning

Match vehicles to capacity based on bookings and conduct a risk assessment of new stops to ensure safety and suitability for year-round travel conditions.

Steps to Consider

- Match owned vehicles to capacity based on the bookings received.
- Request quotes from transport operators to ensure the availability of appropriately sized vehicles for each route.
- Conduct a risk assessment of new stops, considering factors such as accessibility, safety, and suitability for year-round travel conditions - will there be suitable lighting during winter months? Can you make use of public bus stops that have been assessed against these criteria already?

9. Assign Passengers to Routes

Develop passenger lists, identify specific requirements for passengers, and communicate these instructions to drivers.

Steps to Consider

- Create and maintain passenger lists (whether in paper format or a digital, updateable passenger management system).
- Identify passengers with specific requirements, such as those who cannot travel independently onwards from their stop.
- Ensure that drivers are aware of any special considerations or instructions related to specific passengers.

10. Vehicle Operations

Ensure that your transport vehicles are clearly identified, and your drivers are well-trained and informed about procedures and safety measures.

Steps to Consider

- Produce and deliver vehicle signage to clearly identify school transport vehicles.
- Provide comprehensive driver training that covers procedures, expectations, and any special requirements, including those related to specific routes or passengers with special needs.
- Develop an ongoing communication plan to keep drivers informed about route changes, safety measures, and any other important updates.
- Ensure drivers hold all relevant, in-date licences including eDBS certification

11. Route Testing

Before the academic year begins, conduct thorough route testing to identify and address potential issues. Pay close attention to factors such as current or future road closures and stop safety.

Steps to Consider

- Conduct a thorough “dry-run” of routes to identify potential issues and areas for improvement.
 - Drivers should familiarise themselves with the routes to ensure smooth operation once the academic year begins.
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- Pay particular attention to factors like height/width restrictions and the availability of alternative routes in case of road closures or other unforeseen circumstances.
- Ensure that all bus stops meet safety and accessibility criteria for year-round travel, taking into consideration factors such as pavement quality, shelter, kerb height, and lighting.

12. Launch!

Immediate Run-up to the Start of the School Year:

Pre-Service Start:

- **Passenger cards/passes or tickets:** Either create and distribute passenger cards, passes or tickets or ensure you have a system in place to generate digital tickets. They are a crucial tool for managing usage versus paid-for journeys. Scanned cards/tickets also prove vital in case of a safeguarding incident, providing a record of where a student boarded or alighted the service.
- **Introductory parent communications:** Reach out to parents with introductory communications to inform them about the upcoming school transport service, including key details, timetables, and contact information.
- **Parent and student ongoing communication:** Consider how you will manage communicating with parents and passengers in the event of a breakdown or service delay - is your communication platform
- **Brief On-the-Day Controllers/Transport Manager(s):** Ensure that on the first day of service, your controllers and transport manager(s) are well-prepared and briefed to handle any potential issues or inquiries from students and parents.

First Day of Service:

- **Day Before Double Check:** The day before the service begins, double-check with drivers and operators. Ensure they have their route details, can log in to any technology you may require, and are otherwise fully prepared for the first day of service.
 - **Additional Resourcing:** Recognise that the first few days of service are critical for identifying and addressing any issues before they escalate. Be prepared to allocate additional resources as needed to provide support.
 - **Dealing with Last-Minute Parent-Bookers:** Be ready to assist last-minute parent-bookers or those whose situations have changed and require assistance in getting their child to school. Flexibility and responsiveness are key during this period.
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First Week of Service:

- **Stress-test plans:** The first week of service is a true stress test for your transport plans. It's a period of adjustment for parents, students, and school staff, combined with the typical traffic chaos that September brings. Effective communication is crucial to ensure that parents understand the service and allow it the time it needs to "bed in."
- **Monitor timings:** Continuously monitor service timings against the planned timetable and adjust as necessary. Identify any "choke-points" or problem junctions and address them promptly.
- **Communicate changes:** If there are any changes to the service, promptly communicate these to parents to keep them informed and minimise disruptions.
- **Traffic considerations:** Keep in mind that traffic in the first week or two of service is usually heavier as everyone gets used to the new routine. Consider running your route 10 minutes earlier during this period to account for potential delays.
- **Feedback loop:** Establish a feedback loop with drivers and parents to gather insights and observations. While dry runs are helpful, they may not fully prepare for real-world road conditions under the weight of traffic.
- **Monitor card/ticket usage:** Keep a close eye on the use of passenger cards or tickets to ensure that students are boarding the correct vehicles at the designated stops and no errors have been made during the booking process.

How Can We Help?

As you embark on the journey of preparing your school's transport services for the upcoming academic year, we hope this comprehensive checklist proves invaluable in your planning and execution.

At Zeelo, we understand the intricate challenges schools face in managing transportation effectively, and our commitment to providing solutions has been at the forefront of our mission.

Zeelo's expertise extends beyond just software; we're here to support you every step of the way. Our state-of-the-art technology empowers schools to streamline operations, ensure the safety of students, and enhance communication with parents.

Whether it's route planning, billing management, or real-time tracking, our platform is designed to simplify the complexities of school transport.

We invite you to explore how Zeelo can elevate your school's transport services and make the start of the new academic year a smooth and stress-free experience. With experience and dedication honed on providing transport for thousands of students



every day, we're ready to partner with you in ensuring that your transport system not only meets the demands of the new academic year but also sets new standards for efficiency and safety.

Contact us today to learn more about Zeelo and how we can tailor our solutions to your school's unique needs. Your journey towards building a seamless and effective transport service that differentiates your school begins here.

