

Angus McDonald Esq
Managing Director
Travel Health Check Ltd/ Knowledge Mappers Ltd
Unit 5/B, Cockenzie Business Centre
23 Edinburgh Road, Cockenzie
PRESTONPANS
East Lothian
EH32 0XL

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Dear Mr McDonald

SCHOOL CENSUS: PUPIL'S USUAL MODE OF TRAVEL

Thank you for your letter of 13 September, with attachments, to the Minister of State for Schools, Nick Gibb MP, concerning the removal of the 'Pupil's Usual Mode of Travel' item from the School Census. I have been asked to reply.

The Department introduced 'Usual Mode of Travel' into the School Census a few years ago, primarily to inform the Travelling to School Initiative (TTSI). However, the TTSI ended last year and the Department no longer has any need to collect the data.

Additionally, shortly after taking office, in line with the Coalition Government's commitment to reduce burdens and cut red tape on front line services, the Secretary of State for Education commissioned a review of our data collections. The review has not included a full public consultation, although the review was noted in the 'Reducing Bureaucracy' section of the Department's Structural Reform plan, published in July 2010. Consultation in the review was primarily with those in schools and local authorities who provide the Department with data, and deliberately so, with the following representative groups involved:

Bureaucracy Reference Group
Star Chamber Scrutiny Board
LA volunteers from Summer 2010 Sub-ICES meeting
Primary Heads Reference Group
Secondary Heads Reference Group
Key Stakeholder Group (e.g. children's charities)
Education Forum (Trade unions representing school staff)

Many within these groups are those who experience the burden of supplying the information, and our data review has had the aim of streamlining the work involved in returning data to the centre and freeing up the front-line to carry out their core business, at a time when resources are under very heavy pressure. This also fits with the wider localism agenda.

In the review, regarding this item, comments were made that collecting it accurately took up a lot of resource, while it was possible to enter incorrect information with much less resource devoted to the task, and with no validation possible to stop this happening and ensure accurate data. Additionally, evaluation of the TTSI showed that school travel advisers were unsure of the validity of the data that had been collected, nor how robust it was.

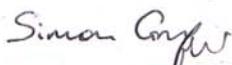
We were aware during the discussions about the item that there were those working nationally and locally on transport matters who would have liked it to remain in the Census. Ministers were made aware of these views but nevertheless after consideration agreed that reducing burdens on providers of data was of paramount importance.

It is important to note that, although the commercial suppliers of schools' management information (MI) software have been asked to remove the item from their January School Census extract routines, they have not been told to take the item out of schools' MI systems, nor was any such message given to schools and authorities when announcing decisions about removals from School Census. We have no authority to make requests of suppliers regarding their products for use in schools' MI systems. What they include in these products are a matter for them in discussion with their customer schools and authorities. I doubt that a request to remove items from a School Census extract routine would also lead them removing those items wholesale from school systems, certainly not without consulting with their customer schools and authorities.

There should be no reason why an authority that mutually agrees with its schools that continuing a local collection of such data would be valuable should not still be able to get the data: your letter and attachments suggests that there are some who would like to continue doing so. Importantly, however, that would be through local agreement: the legal obligation on schools to return the data centrally, and incur a burden (if they so judge it) in doing so, will not be there. Similarly, a school that wishes to continue to enter such data into its MI system should still be able to do so, for analysis within the school.

I realise that you are likely to find this a disappointing reply, but hope that this information is helpful nonetheless.

Yours sincerely



SIMON GRIGOR