

For Immediate Release PR 2907

Council takes action over school transport problems

Dorset County Council has taken action in response to concerns by parents regarding problems with some school transport services since the start of the new term.

The problems have centred on a number of routes contracted to Damory Coaches, part of the larger Go Ahead group, following the re-procurement of transport services this summer. In a number of instances, children were not collected from specific stops and some journeys ran late or failed to run.

In response, the county council and Damory have worked together to identify specific problems to help ensure children get to and from school safely.

The council made arrangements using its own fleet and other contractors to cover five specific school journeys for one week. The total contract placed with Damory covers some 200 journeys. These journeys will revert to Damory once all other journeys are operating normally.

Toni Coombs, the county council's Cabinet member for children's services, said:

"Children should be transported to school safely. I am extremely concerned that the situation in the past week has been unacceptable and we are working closely with Damory to understand why this has happened.

"I have every sympathy with parents and children who have been affected and would like to reassure them we are doing everything we can to improve the situation.

"This is a new contract and we would always expect some teething problems as it beds in. However, the scale of these problems is unprecedented, and we appreciate that the effect is significant and a major concern to parents."

Senior council managers are in constant discussion and planning with Damory's management and are working rapidly to deal with the problems that arose last week."

Mrs Coombs added:

"Damory have been open in explaining the issues facing them in the implementation of this substantial new contract, and the number of the problems that have occurred.

Following detailed discussions, our managers have been assured by Damory that it has suitable plans in place to correct the problems and improve performance. I shall personally be closely monitoring this to ensure that we keep on track.

"We are also launching an internal investigation to probe into the issues we've had with the transition into this new contract. We are taking this matter extremely seriously and will do everything we can to prevent this sort of failure from happening again.

"The county council has incurred additional costs in managing the failure of some services. We have made it clear to Damory that we will be seeking to recover costs."

Many families have also expressed concerns related to changes to the county council's concessionary school travel policy. These include a reduction in the number of free school transport places and an increase in the cost of school bus passes.

Mrs Coombs said:

"The policy on concessionary fares and the number of seats available changed in June and parents were informed of this. If parents are unhappy with decisions about their child's entitlement they can appeal against the decision. We are organising extra appeal hearings to make sure we can process them as quickly as possible."

Parents who would like to complain as a result of a failure in the service can submit an online complaint form at <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/complaints/countyor>, if they do not have internet access, telephone (01305) 221061.

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