



Rapid Response: Tasman / West Coast school bus service cancellations

To:	Hon Erica Stanford, Minister of Education		
Cc:			
Date:	19 August 2024	Priority:	Choose an item.
Security Level:	Choose an item.	METIS No:	1334439
Drafter:	Shelley Grant	DDI:	04 439 5364
Key Contact and Hautū Deputy Secretary:	Scott Evans	DDI:	
Seen by the Communications Team:	Choose an item.	Round Robin:	Choose an item.

Request

- Your office has requested information about bus service changes in Tasman/West Coast, in particular:
 - What prompts reviews?
 - What determines student eligibility?
 - What is the minimum number of students required?
 - If the services are terminated due to low patronage numbers, what alternatives are available?

Ministry Response

- The primary responsibility for transporting children to and from school rests with their caregivers. The Ministry may be able to help where distance and/or accessibility may be a barrier for students attending their closest state or state-integrated school.

Eligibility criteria for school transport assistance

- To meet its obligations under the Public Finance Act, policy requires that the Ministry ensures routes are designed to serve students who meet its eligibility criteria.
- There are three criteria that students must meet in order to qualify for school transport assistance:
 - The student must attend their closest state or state-integrated school.
 - The student must live more than a certain distance from the school:
 - Years 1-8: At least 3.2 km
 - Years 9-13: At least 4.8 km
 - There must be no suitable public transport options.



4. The Ministry routinely undertakes route reviews to ensure routes are operating within policy. For a number of reasons, proactive route reviews have been delayed in recent years which means there is a need to catch up on a backlog of reviews.

Patronage audits

5. The Ministry also carries out regular nationwide patronage audits of its school bus services. The Ministry requires a minimum of eight students who meet its eligibility criteria to maintain a service. Where an audit identifies services with low patronage, a routine route review is triggered.
6. Our April 2024 patronage audit identified a school bus service in Reefton (D110115) servicing Reefton Area School and Sacred Heart School Reefton, and a school bus service in Greymouth (D110212) servicing Paparoa Range School – Blackball, that had low patronage numbers.
7. In May 2024 we received updated student data from the schools which showed:
 - a. D110115 (Reefton Area School and Sacred Heart School Reefton) – three eligible students.
 - b. D110212 (Paparoa Range School – Blackball) – six eligible students.
8. In June 2024 the schools were notified that D110115 and D110212 would be terminated at the end of Term 3 2024 (27 September 2024).
9. When a route is not viable due to low patronage, eligible students may be able to apply for a conveyance allowance to assist with their transport costs. Caregivers can apply for a conveyance allowance via the Ministry's [website](#).
10. The Ministry will continue to monitor the number and location of eligible students who live in Reefton and Greymouth and have encouraged the schools with cancelled services to reach out to us if there is any change.



Information Update: Meeting with Rural Women New Zealand, 13 February 2025

To:	Hon Erica Stanford, Minister of Education		
Date:	5 February 2025	Priority:	Medium
Security Level:	In-Confidence	METIS No:	1342112
Drafter:	Alistair Murray	DDI:	04 463 0931
Key Contact and Hautū Deputy Secretary:	James Meffan Scotty Evans	DDI:	9(2)(a) 9(2)(a)
Seen by the Communications Team:	No	Round Robin:	No

Request

You are meeting with Rural Women New Zealand on 13 February 2025 at 9:00 am. Rural Women NZ have indicated that they wish to discuss:

- the impact of recent reviews of school bus services on rural communities
- opportunities for a review of current policy settings, including eligibility criteria for school transport assistance.

Hon Mark Patterson is attending in his capacity as Minister for Rural Communities.

Information

Background and current eligibility criteria

- 1 School transport assistance was funded from an annual appropriation of \$255m in 2024/25. Ministry-funded school bus services are fully subsidised for eligible students and operate almost exclusively in rural areas.
- 2 To be eligible for school transport assistance, students must attend their nearest school, live more than more than 3.2km (Year 1-8) or 4.8km (Year 9-13) from school. There must be no public transport available. These criteria have been in place in various forms for up to a century and initially emerged in response to the consolidation of rural schools, beginning in 1924.

Reviews are a key mechanism for ensuring school bus routes are efficient and fit for purpose

- 3 The Ministry regularly reviews existing school transport services (including funding agreements and daily bus routes) to reflect changes in the numbers and locations of eligible students over time. Route reviews are the main way we deliver school transport services that:
 - are fit for purpose and reflect the current numbers and locations of eligible students
 - respond to demographic shifts, population growth, or changes in local schooling networks
 - do not duplicate public transport services



- are optimised for efficiency and provide value for money.
- 4 Reviews have a range of possible outcomes. While reviews may result in some routes being cancelled or shortened, new routes may also be established or existing routes may be extended to meet demand from eligible students. Where a review finds that services have low patronage (i.e. fewer than 8 eligible students), the Ministry will work with schools to address this and may merge or consolidate routes to ensure that they remain viable.

The Ministry is taking steps to manage the impact of reviews on rural communities

- 5 Where route changes are required following a review, schools and communities are given at least a term's notice before these are implemented. This transition period is intended to give affected students and caregivers sufficient time to make alternative travel arrangements. Where services are cancelled following a review, eligible students may apply for a Conveyance Allowance to contribute to transport costs.
- 6 In response to concerns raised by the sector and communities, the Ministry is taking additional steps to adjust the pace and scale of routine route reviews with a view to minimising disruption for schools and caregivers. This includes:
- limiting the number of area-wide reviews or delaying some complex reviews
 - phasing or staging route reviews over a longer period where practical and using longer implementation timeframes for significant changes
 - undertaking further stakeholder engagement during the route review process
 - identifying opportunities for alignment with changes in public transport networks to provide continuity of service for students.
- 7 The Ministry is also improving the clarity and consistency of its engagement with communities about route reviews and any changes to school bus routes following a review. Regional staff will follow up with schools to ensure that relevant information is communicated to caregivers in a clear and timely way, well in advance of planned changes. The Ministry has also worked with Federated Farmers on collateral to support engagement with their members about school transport assistance.

The Ministry has been exploring opportunities to improve school transport services

- 8 Some communities and rural sector groups, including Rural Women NZ, consider that the current eligibility criteria are no longer fit for purpose and that there are opportunities to provide fairer and less contested services to students and communities. Rural Women NZ have expressed their support for a review of current policy settings, with a view to supporting the resilience of rural communities.
- 9 Education officials have engaged with Rural Women New Zealand and Federated Farmers on these issues, including their ideas for specific opportunities to improve the effectiveness of school bus services. The Ministry has also discussed these opportunities with transport agencies and the Bus and Coach Association, and both have expressed interest in further work in this area.
- 10 9(2)(g)(i) [REDACTED] You may wish to use this meeting to discuss their ideas in greater detail.