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12 April 2021

Dear Ms McIlveen

DECARBONISING ROAD TRANSPORT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for your letter dated 25 March 2021.

I would advise the Department of Education is responsible for home to school transport policy and the Education Authority (EA) for its operation and delivery. The EA have therefore provided the following information on this issue:

What are the main challenges to the uptake of ULEV?

1. The infrastructure to fuel ULEV vehicles in Northern Ireland is currently very limited or concentrated in certain areas. The EA currently manages a fleet of 800+ vehicles which provide urban and rural services across Northern Ireland and would require a fuelling infrastructure across Northern Ireland. It also contracts approx. 1500 private operators as well as significant service provision (for 52,000 pupils) from Translink.
2. There is no indication if fuelling infrastructures will be developed, and if these would be H0, CNG, electric, or other.

3. Market availability of suitable vehicles of the correct size and passenger carrying capacity.

4. The capital cost of ULEV vehicles is currently high in comparison to diesel vehicles. Market research has indicated that the capital cost of a ULEV vehicle being around three times the cost of a diesel vehicle.

5. Investment in school transport fleet remains subject to business case approval by the Department of Education and Department of Finance (depending on investment level).

6. Education and training availability for maintenance staff. Lack of awareness of what is required in a maintenance environment – e.g H0 - leak detection sensors, anti-static flooring, frost protection charging points, etc.

7. Unknown fuel costs. Currently H0 is more expensive per kilo than diesel litre cost.

8. Currently electric ULEV have low mileage range, which places operational restrictions on the vehicle use and hours of operation between charges.

9. Currently battery life is limited and requires replacement during the lifespan of the vehicle. This adds significantly to the Whole Vehicle life costs.

What are the main benefits to the uptake of ULEV?

1. Reduction in harmful emissions improving the air quality and reduce environmental impact.

2. Expected reduction in maintenance costs – less parts as there is no diesel engine.

3. Stimulate the manufacturing industry to develop new technology and create jobs.

4. Reduction in RFL (road tax) costs as these are based on emissions.

5. Reduction in noise pollution from vehicles.

What support to assist a move to ULEV would you like to see from the NI Executive?

1. Development of a Northern Ireland H0, CNG or electric fuelling strategy to lead direction of fuel infrastructure development.

2. Development of green energy supply. For example, electric vehicles not reliant on energy from fossil fuel power stations. Power stations must have a nett zero vision.

3. Funding or incentive schemes to offset high capital cost of ULEV vehicles.

4. Funding to encourage development of technology by manufacturers to improve battery life, or to develop refurbishment or recycling options.

5. Consideration to impact upon non-monetary benefits for options appraisal

Do you believe there should be official targets for your sector and have you any views on the potential timescale this could take?

No, any capital investment is subject to business case approval and award of funding. Timing of such projects is difficult to accurately predict, and funding may not be approved or available so set targets may not be achievable.

Have you begun to plan for decarbonising your fleet and if so could you provide some detail on this?

We have a fleet replacement strategy in place which includes sourcing two ULEV in 2025 to trial against diesel vehicles and identify the correct ULEV solution for the EA. A longer term strategy requires more specialised input and appraisal.

Have you estimated the cost of decarbonising your fleet?"

No, as the correct vehicle solution is yet to be identified through the ULEV trial identified for 2025. Early research would suggest that vehicles under and up to 3500kgs GVW should be electric, and vehicles over 3500kgs should be hydrogen. Cost of decarbonising the EA fleet will include the capital cost of vehicles, difference of the alternative fuel cost, equipping maintenance facilities, and training maintenance staff and drivers.

Yours sincerely

Peter Burns
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer