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School Crossing Patrols (Dorset)

4.49 pm

Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Weir. I am very pleased to have secured this debate, because parents across Dorset are deeply concerned about the county council's proposals. It is true to say that my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and I will be speaking today on behalf of thousands of parents.

I understand that 2011-2020 is the United Nations decade of action for road safety, and that in Great Britain pedestrian injury is the leading cause of accidental death among children. Each year, 5,000 children under 16 are seriously injured or die on Britain's roads. The incident rate for children peaks between 8 am and 9 am, when they are travelling to school, and again at 3 pm when they are on their way home. Incidents on school journeys account for 14.6% of all five and six-year-old casualties, 21% of all eight to 11-year-old casualties and 23.9% of all 12 to 15-year-old casualties. Although the United Kingdom has the second lowest road death rate in the EU, its child pedestrian death rate is worse than in 10 other EU countries, and eight times higher than in Sweden.

Research by Royal Holloway, university of London shows that children are unable to accurately judge the speed of vehicles travelling at more than 20 miles per hour. The study found that children aged six to 11 suffered from speed illusion, which means that they cannot make a reliable guess at a car's speed if it is going at more than 20 miles per hour, unlike adults, who accurately judge speeds of up to 50 miles per hour. Since 2003, death and injury rates have fallen every year, but road safety groups fear that that trend could end if school crossing patrols were axed.

The Minister will be aware that several authorities, including Dorset, propose changes in their provision of school crossing patrols. Dorset county council proposes to cut 65 jobs and save £200,000 by not paying for lollipop patrols, at least eight of which are in my constituency. Other Dorset councils do not propose to make cuts in the service. Bournemouth council says that it has no plans to cut funding to its 46 crossing patrols, and Poole has no current plans to change its service, which employs 26 people, plus five relief staff to help children to cross the road. Incidentally, neither Poole nor Bournemouth proposes to close any libraries, whereas Dorset proposes to close 20 out of 34.

Of the Dorset county council sites, 55 meet the national criteria for the provision of such crossings. The county council's total budget is about £273 million, and although the council had a better financial settlement than most other councils, it still has to find £31 million of savings this next financial year. However, the benefits of saving £200,000 in this way are minimal compared with the wider costs placed upon communities.

The council insists that its proposal to stop funding the salaries of school crossing patrol guards does not amount to a withdrawal of the service, as it would retain the management, supervision and training responsibility for it. Schools and communities are being given until March 2012 to explore how they can take over the patrols themselves, and it has been

suggested that volunteers could come forward to take over the jobs, or that additional funding streams could be tapped.

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I do not consider that the service could be run reliably by volunteers, because of what the job entails: getting up early in the morning in all weathers; an absolute commitment to be there on time morning and afternoon; and sometimes being placed in a dangerous environment with cars not stopping when requested. In recent years, we have rightly been honouring paid lollipop men and women for their sterling service. The job is very different from that of volunteering in a library. The county council acknowledges that parents can, on an ad hoc basis, escort groups of children across the road, that its road safety team can provide guidance on the safest way to do that, but that the parents cannot legally order traffic to stop. So that does not sound like a permanent solution.

Should, and can, schools find the money from their budgets to pay the £3,000 salary per year? The county council in its report says that schools cannot use their devolved budgets to pay the salaries. So as to provide full clarification, will the Minister answer the following questions, or obtain clear answers from his colleagues in the Department for Education? Are there rules that prohibit a school using some of its delegated school funding for the salary of school crossing patrol staff? Is there any school funding apart from parent-teacher association funds that could be legally used for such purposes?

Even if funds legally could be used, it seems immoral that children should have less spent on their education just because their school is located on a busy road. One of the school crossing patrols in my constituency is for a very small village school, which has about 65 or 69 pupils and is on a busy road, and it would be untenable for a small school such as that to find money within its budget. At any rate, there would still be a cut in front-line education services, which surely goes against the principle of maintaining such services.

The other suggestion is that money could be raised through the parent-teacher association. That, I suggest, is not possible for a small school and, as some PTAs are in a better position than others to raise money from parents, it could lead to an inequitable situation, with deprived areas losing their crossings while affluent areas were able to maintain theirs.

Another option is for a parish or town council to fund the crossing. In my constituency two crossings are under threat—a £6,000 bill—and the parish council's total budget is £30,000, so I really do not think that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government would be pleased with the size of the precept that would be necessary. Another parish has three crossings, but is fully committed to supporting an important youth project and hence cannot possibly fund the crossings. The county council's report says:

"If no funds or volunteers are forthcoming from the local community then as long as the site still meets national criteria it would remain 'dormant'."

That is totally unacceptable, and is incompatible with other Government policies. The Education Act 1996 places upon local authorities the obligation to promote sustainable travel to school, and to produce a strategy for developing the sustainable travel and transportation

infrastructure. To what extent does the Minister believe that the removal of funding for school crossing patrols conflicts with those obligations?

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Dorset county council makes much of the fact that it is parents and carers who are responsible for the safety of their children but, given that in many families both parents work, if the safe crossing point were not there, I believe that there would be a greater incentive for parents to take their children to school by car. The county council, however, says that there is no evidence that more children would be driven to school if the crossings were not staffed. What does the Minister think, and how does he believe that the lack of a safe crossing point will enhance walk to school programmes? In addition, the Government are encouraging single parents to return to work while their children are of school age and that, I suggest, is another conflict of policy.

Dorset county council says that there is no evidence that child pedestrian casualties will increase if school crossing patrol sites are not staffed. I would be interested in the Minister's comments on the evidence, especially in light of the statistics that I quoted at the beginning of the debate. What obligations, statutory and moral, do local authorities have to provide safe crossings for pedestrians, including, but not limited to, children and adults walking to school? Since Dorset county council is proposing a blanket removal of all its school crossing patrols, and says that if a community solution is not found the crossings will be "dormant", should there not have been a risk assessment of the 55 patrols that meet the national criteria?

The roads through communities in my constituency are heavily trafficked, which, as the Minister will be aware, is due to the nature of Dorset's road system. For example, one area that has two patrol crossings on the A351 carries 26,000 vehicles per day at peak season. The county council installed a pelican crossing. In January 2009, it decided that the pelican crossing alone was not safe and retained the patrol crossing person at that point. Has it become more safe since then? Quite the contrary, I would argue.

Lytchett Matravers has a road that is incredibly busy and dangerous for parents and children to cross. In Colehill, three crossing patrols serve five schools. Without a crossing, parents cannot get a child to the middle school and one to a first school on time. The county council recently spent £28,000 on a cycleway and pavement to help to support the walk to school programme, but parents and children reach the end of the pavement and find no safe point to cross the road. Corfe Mullen parish council has vehemently opposed the cut, making the point that children's safety is paramount.

What additional powers would be needed to ensure that local authorities fund school crossings that are shown to meet the agreed national criteria? I am beginning to conclude that the power should not be discretionary, and I point out that if a few authorities cut school crossing patrols this year, it could become widespread across the country, which would be of great concern.

We are discussing vulnerable children who should be walking and cycling to school where practicable. The cut is small in relation to the county council's budget, achieves nothing and destroys a lot. I hope that the Minister will respond with some facts and figures that will help to persuade the county council that it should find savings elsewhere.

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5.1 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Forgive my voice, Mr Weir. It is a bit croaky, so I will try to speak up. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) for securing this debate. It is an excellent topic that affects Dorset. My constituency is more rural than hers, and its nature, topography and make-up demand that lollipop men and women should stay. Many of my local schools are stuck in remote communities. We do not have motorways—we have one dual carriageway, and we hope to have a new relief road—and many schools are at the end of cul-de-sacs or rutted roads, often in ill repair, particularly in the winter months. Cars come flying down those roads at night when children are going home and in the morning when they are going to school, during the rush periods when people try to get between their rural homes and their places of work.

I suspect and fear that the move by the county council will have unintended consequences. As my hon. Friend said, tough spending cuts have, of necessity, been imposed on our county councils. To ease constraints, the Government have removed ring-fencing from local authority grants so that councils can set their own priorities. However, it was not expected that councils would downgrade the importance of road safety.

Tackling road child casualties is a stated priority for this Government and is the subject of recent new initiatives. As the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), said in a recent interview with *The Daily Telegraph*,

"We would expect that road safety would remain a priority for local communities and that local spending would reflect that",

yet in Dorset, in order to cut £200,000, a tiny portion of the county council's huge budget, more than 60 lollipop wardens will go, a decision that was reaffirmed at a full council meeting on 17 February.

As my hon. Friend said, the Government suggest that that role should be taken over by schools, charities and parish councils, but I argue, as she did, that it is not a volunteer role. In the past year, one lollipop person in the United Kingdom was killed, two more were seriously injured and several more were hurt.

The School Crossing Patrol Order 1954 introduced the first lollipop warden to our streets, and the benefits were crystal clear. It was never thought necessary to make their employment compulsory. As a result, local authorities have the power to provide lollipop wardens, but no obligation to do so. I argue that any transport grant made to a council should be conditional on its keeping existing school crossing patrols. Indeed, like my hon. Friend, I believe that local authorities should have a statutory duty to provide this excellent service. Naturally, I understand that such legislation would fly in the face of our Government's move towards localism, but some things are more important than ideology. Our children's safety is clearly of paramount importance. In recent years, this country has managed to reduce road casualties. It would be nothing less than a tragedy if that reduction were reversed.

5.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Norman Baker): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette
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Brooke) on securing this debate on a subject so important to children, families and schools in Dorset and elsewhere. I assure the House that we take the safety of children, and indeed all road users, very seriously indeed. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) correctly quoted my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), on that matter.

I listened with great interest to the points made by both my colleagues, who were eloquent and persuasive in their arguments. I will start by explaining the legislative background to the school crossing patrol service. The service is provided by local authorities. Legislation gives local authorities the power, but not the duty—my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset was quite right—to appoint school crossing patrols to help children cross the road on their way to and from school. A school crossing patrol officer appointed by an appropriate authority, wearing the approved uniform and displaying the familiar sign has the power to require drivers to stop. It is correct that others acting on an informal basis do not have that power. School crossing patrol officers operating outside those conditions have no legal power to stop traffic.

Local authorities have a general duty under section 39 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 to promote road safety. The duty requires them to take such measures as appear appropriate to prevent accidents. It is for them to decide whether those measures should include school crossing patrols. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 introduced a duty on local education authorities to promote sustainable travel to school. If a particular road is considered unsafe for children to cross en route to school, the local authority can address the issue in various ways. School crossing patrols are one of the options available to them.

There are no specific requirements in the rules on school crossing patrols about the funding of the service, and there is nothing in those rules to prevent a school from providing such funding. Schools have considerable freedom in how they spend their delegated budget. Regulations prescribe that they can spend it on anything for the "purposes of the school". That includes expenditure that will benefit pupils at the school and other maintained schools. We therefore believe that it is legitimate for schools to spend their budgets on school crossing patrols as long as governing bodies are satisfied that it is for the purposes of the school. All those matters are the business of the local authority and not something in which my Department can or should intervene.

I understand my hon. Friends' concerns about a power as opposed to a duty, but I must advise them that we do not intend to introduce new legislation to place obligations on local authorities to provide specific road safety measures, whether they are school crossing patrols or any other measures. We believe that local authorities are best placed to decide the priorities for their local areas and the best way to improve road safety in those areas. Dorset county council, like other county councils, is democratically elected and answerable for its decisions to its local electorate. If it makes wrong decisions or decisions that appear to be or are interpreted as wrong, the electorate can make that known in how they cast their votes at subsequent county council elections.

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The Government continue to provide substantial funding for local transport, including for road safety. It is for local authorities and their communities to decide what resources are used to improve road safety, and to determine their own solutions, tailored to the specific needs and priorities of their communities. Dorset county council has decided to seek to continue providing its school crossing patrols by inviting those who value their service to make some contribution. It has advised us that the changes are not due to take effect until September 2012. The word used was "postponed," but I wonder whether that means that they really have been postponed or whether that is in line with the council arrangements that have been voted on and that were referred to earlier. In any case, that is the intended start date. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole and the hon. Member for South Dorset may be interested to know that I am not aware of any other local authority with no crossing patrols at present.

Although we want decisions to be made locally wherever possible, we accept that national Government still have a crucial role in providing leadership on road safety, delivering better driving standards and testing, enforcement, education, and managing the strategic road infrastructure. We also provide information and guidance to support local delivery. We are preparing the strategic framework for road safety and have held workshops to inform its development. We plan to publish it in the near future. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, will lead that process.

The Department for Transport does much to promote the safety of children in many ways. For example, as well as working to protect children by improving driving standards, we issue advice, guidance and teaching materials so that children can be given the skills to become safe road users when they are out and about. In our most recent campaign, we piloted an innovative new partnership between the Think! child road safety campaign and four football clubs located in regions with higher than average casualties of six to 11-year-olds. The football clubs used Think! materials, prepared by the Department for Transport, in their after-school clubs and in activities in schools and on match days to help children learn how to find safe places to cross the road, which evidence shows is a key factor in helping children stay safe on the roads. The materials are on the Department's website and we hope that other authorities will use them, too.

We have also made available to all schools our comprehensive set of road safety teaching resources, so that they have good quality materials that they will want to teach. Think! education is aimed at four to 16-year-olds and covers all aspects of road safety, from car seats for young children to pre-driver attitudes for secondary schools. It includes materials for teachers, pupils and parents and can also be used by out-of-school groups, such as the Cubs and Brownies. The suite of teaching resources is currently being independently evaluated. We have also disseminated the Kerbcraft child pedestrian training scheme, whose evaluation has shown that the scheme is highly effective in delivering a lasting improvement in children's road-crossing skills and understanding.

We strongly advise parents to encourage their children to take cycle training at about the age of 10 onwards. It provides the opportunity to influence their future travel

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behaviour by enthusing them and equipping them with the necessary skills. I want to make it plain that the Government are fully committed to supporting sustainable travel, including cycling. We are delighted to support Bikeability training—the cycling proficiency for the 21st century— for the remainder of this Parliament. It is designed to give children and adults the

skills and confidence to ride their bikes on today's roads. In 2011-12, £11 million will be available to local authorities and school sport partnerships to enable 275,000 more children to receive training.

I recently launched the new local sustainable transport fund, which was mentioned in the Department for Transport's White Paper. The fund makes available £560 million to local authorities to encourage local sustainable travel. I hope that Dorset county council and other highway authorities will submit a bid for the fund. The hon. Members present may want to draw the county council's attention to it in order to encourage sustainable travel initiatives in Dorset.

Annette Brooke: I thank the Minister for drawing attention to that large fund and for the emphasis that the Government are placing on sustainable travel to school. Walking is very important. We are talking about patrol crossings that meet national criteria, so should there not be more leadership from the Government, in the form of conversations with councils, if we are faced with the possibility of those crossings disappearing?

Norman Baker: We in the Department for Transport have a view of what would be desirable for each individual local authority to adopt as best practice, and, as I have indicated, we try to make available the materials and information to enable them to reach sensible conclusions about their own practices. Members will be aware, however, that, ultimately, we are encouraging democratically elected bodies to be responsible for their own actions. As a consequence of that, county councils, district councils and unitary authorities will take decisions that, in some cases, are not the ones that the Department would have taken had the matter been centrally controlled. In the era of localism, it is for county councils to be free to innovate. That might drive up performance, but on some occasions it might drive down performance. That is a consequence of localism. It will be more of a patchwork arrangement across the country.

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What we can do is make it plain from the centre what we believe best practice is—we are beginning to do that through the methods that I have described—but, ultimately, it is up to Dorset and other county councils to decide whether they want to pay attention to that. Obviously, I hope that Dorset and every other county council in the country takes its road safety responsibilities seriously.

I was asked whether there should be a risk assessment before the matter is decided. I am advised that there is no requirement to carry out a risk assessment before stopping the service. As my hon. Friends know, the service is discretionary, so Dorset county council is not duty bound to produce a risk assessment, although it could, of course, have done so had it wished.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to the men and women all over the country who work as school crossing patrol officers—our much-loved lollipop men and women. I am very grateful for the invaluable work that they do. They are important members of the community, performing a difficult job in all weathers to ensure that children get to school as safely as possible. They have a crucial role to play in introducing children to road safety and respect for traffic. Everybody should value their contribution. I know that many have served their community over many years. They have seen the children grow up and then bring their own children to

school, and they are remembered with affection by those of us young enough to have benefited from their help.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole for introducing this debate. The Department, the Government and I consider the issue of child safety to be very important, and I hope that I have demonstrated that this is an area in which we are active. On the specific matter to which my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for South Dorset have referred, they will appreciate that any decisions are to be made, ultimately, by Dorset county council. However, my hon. Friend was absolutely right to introduce the debate and I am grateful that she has received support from her parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for South Dorset. I believe that she has put together a compelling case, and hope that Dorset county council will reflect very carefully indeed on her remarks and those of the hon. Gentleman.

Question put and agreed to.

5.17 pm