



## Pilot Project for First 'Walking Bus' in County Meath *Meath Energy Management Agency, Ireland*

### Summary

MEMA is encouraging primary schools in County Meath to organise a 'Walking Bus' to school. The Walking Bus is an environmentally conscious, safe, fun and healthy way to travel to and from school. The initiative is being promoted by MEMA as a measure to reduce the amount of vehicular traffic congestion, thereby reducing carbon emissions around the school gates in County Meath.

#### End-user area

- New buildings
- Refurbishment of buildings
- Transport and mobility
- Financial instruments
- Industry
- Legal initiatives (regulations, directives, etc)
- Planning issues
- Sustainable communities
- User behaviour
- Education
- Other

#### Target Audience

- Citizens
- Households
- Property owners
- Schools and universities
- Decision makers
- Local and regional authorities
- Transport companies
- Utilities
- ESCOs
- Architects and engineers
- Financial institutions
- Other

#### Technical

- Energy efficiency
- Heating
- Cooling
- Appliances
- Lighting
- CHP
- District Heating
- Solar energy
- Biomass
- Wind
- Geothermal
- Hydro power
- Other

### Context

A group of parents or teachers, who live along and close to a route, walk to school and collect children at "Bus Stops" along the way. They cooperate to walk with the bus on a rota system, thus freeing up time for each supervisor on the days when someone else takes their child to school. The bus comprises a 'Driver', 'Conductor' and other adult volunteers, depending on the number of children and according to a set ratio of adults to children (usually 1:8). The scheme is co-ordinated by one of the parent volunteers or a teacher and is set up to match the availability of the volunteers.

Each Walking Bus operates through an adult 'driver' at the front and an adult 'conductor' at the back. The children walk to school in a group along a set route picking up additional 'passengers' at specific "bus-stops" along the route. The bus operates during all weather - rain or shine, and everyone wears a reflective jacket provided by MEMA. Along the route children can chat to their friends, learn valuable road safety skills, understand the environmental need to reduce fuel emissions and they gain some degree of independence.

In March 2004, MEMA contacted a group of parents from Scoil an Spioraid Naomh in Laytown (Laytown National School), County Meath. Parents had set up a road safety team for the school and were interested in getting involved in a sustainable transport initiative to gain safer routes to school for their children. It was decided that MEMA would work with this school on a pilot project for the 'Walking Bus'. This would run for the month of June 2004 and it would be the first 'Walking Bus' for County Meath.



**Photo 1:** MEMA's 'Walking Bus' as it approached the school (Scoil an Spioraid Naoimh, Laytown, County Meath) on 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2004. The driver (Claire Hennessy, Road Safety Team) 'drives' the bus while the conductor (Genevieve Noone, Road Safety Team) supervises the bus at the rear.

## Objectives

MEMA developed the 'Walking Bus' pilot project to reduce traffic levels and associated vehicular carbon emissions around the school gates, since the majority of students were found to be taken to school by car.

If proved successful this scheme could be promoted and applied to other schools in County Meath. Advantages to setting up a 'Walking Bus' include:

1. **Traffic:** About 20% morning peak time traffic is created by the school run. Therefore these 'Walking Buses' help to alleviate traffic congestion in County Meath.
2. **Environment:** Environmental monitoring around schools has found pollution levels to be higher than in city centres. Every journey made on foot helps reduce the amount of traffic around schools, which will help reduce air pollution and improve the local environment for everyone.
3. **Exercise:** The Walking Bus provides a chance for all participants to take part in regular exercise. Evidence shows that more active children are likely to become more active adults. \*Just a 15-minute journey to and from school can contribute to half the daily-recommended exercise for children. Children who walk are fitter and healthier and have been shown to be less likely to go on to suffer from such conditions as obesity, heart disease and diabetes as adults. Also when students arrive at school, it has been found that those who have walked are more alert and receptive to learning than those who arrive by car.
4. **Easy Breathing:** Research has proven that if you make a short journey in a car, you are exposed to more air pollution, than if you walk! Pedestrians are less susceptible to pollution from car exhausts than car passengers. By participating in a Walking Bus, children will breathe fresh air to help wake them up, before settling down to work in class.
5. **Safety:** Children who walk to school on a Walking Bus are part of a large and visible group supervised by adults and taken safely into school. This mobility initiative reassures parents who are concerned about letting their children walk to school on their own.
6. **Road Sense:** The Walking Bus helps children learn pedestrian skills so that when they begin to walk to school on their own they are better informed in traffic safety rules.
7. **Socialising:** The journey to school gives children a chance to talk and make new friends and when they arrive at school they are more prepared to concentrate on learning.



## Process

Initial contacts for Scoil an Spioraid Naoimh (Laytown National School) were made with the Dublin Transportation Office, North Eastern Health Board, Irish Heart Foundation and the local Gardai (Irish Police). Regular meetings were held at both the MEMA offices and at the school. Initial interest from parents was gauged by issuing a letter of enquiry to all parents having children in the school and responses from the letters indicated that 90 children and 40 volunteers were interested in participating in the pilot project.

It was decided that for this first pilot scheme two 'buses' would be established, one would depart from 1 km north of the school and the other would depart from 1km south of the school. These routes would take approximately 20 minutes to walk. An initial travel questionnaire was given to teachers in the school to assess the travel patterns of the students in each class. The survey requested feedback on preferred modes of travel to school. Results of the survey indicated that 55% of the children were driven to school by their parents, but if given a choice 62% of the children would prefer to walk or cycle to school. A letter was issued to the parents to help identify the address locations of volunteers and children and prizes were offered as incentives to return the forms. Response letters determined the level of interest in the project and also helped to identify 'pick up'/collection points for each travel route. Ninety children and 40 volunteers were interested in participating in the 'Walking Bus' pilot project.

A meeting was arranged for all the parents/ volunteers, the school's road safety committee and the MEMA project co-ordinator. The volunteers were given a presentation on how the 'Walking Bus' would operate. Interested participants were given forms to complete which provided further information on contact details, times and dates volunteers were available each week. They were requested to sign the agreement and consent forms for their children's participation in the project.

Prior to commencing the 'Walking Bus' pilot project, MEMA's Education Coordinator gave Energy Workshops and Presentations to the schools' 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> class students. These presentations were given over three days at the end of May 2004. Sustainable transport was discussed as one of the energy issues and the idea of a 'Walking Bus' was presented to the students. The idea was promoted to the students as an exciting initiative and the students were motivated to become the first school in County Meath to pilot a 'Walking Bus'.



**Photo 2:** Group photograph of MEMA 'Walking Bus' organisers. Included in photograph are Valerie Norton, MEMA (left), Larry Whelan, Road Safety Officer Meath County Council (3<sup>rd</sup> from left), Maurice Daly, School Principal (2<sup>nd</sup> from right), Garda Superintendent (centre of photo) as well as members of the schools road safety team and local Gardai.

*This photograph was taken on the first day of the pilot project for the 'Walking Bus' on 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2004 at Scoil an Spioraid Naoimh, Laytown, County Meath.*



## Financial resources and partners

MEMA co-ordinated the project in partnership with the parents association of Scoil an Spioraid Naoimh, Laytown County Meath. Support was also given by the North Eastern Health Board, the Irish Heart Foundation and the local Gardai (Irish Police). The Road Safety Officer of Meath County Council gave a 'Road Safety' talk to the students prior to the launch of the 'Walking Bus' initiative. The North Eastern Health Board and the Irish Heart Foundation provided promotional materials such as t-shirts and information leaflets. MEMA provided the children and volunteers that were participating in the 'Walking Bus' with reflective jackets promoting the 'Walking Bus' and 'Meath Energy Management Agency'. MEMA also supplied the school group with 18 pedometers (step counters), which were offered as raffle prizes to the participants each week that the bus was in operation.

The Road Safety Team from the school generated funds, and money raised from this covered costs incurred through printing, photocopying and general administration costs. They also acquired sponsorship from local businesses which will fund the cost of purchasing 'trolleys' for carrying the school bags (planned to have by September 2004). Local grocery businesses also sponsored 'goody bags' which included bags of fruit and bottles of water for the children for the month of June 2004.

A funding application was submitted to Meath County Council for allocated funds under the 'Local Agenda 21 Environmental Partnership Fund'. Under this programme, organisations can apply for project funding that contributes to Sustainable Development. A sum of € 1000.00 was awarded to Scoil an Spioraid Naoimh, Laytown.

### Approximate costs to MEMA

Reflective Jackets:	€ 1295
Pedometers:	€ 270
Media Coverage:	FREE
Transport/ Mileage:	€300-400

## Results

The pilot project began on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2004 and operated every weekday throughout the month of June. It rained on three days of the month yet the 'bus' still operated successfully.

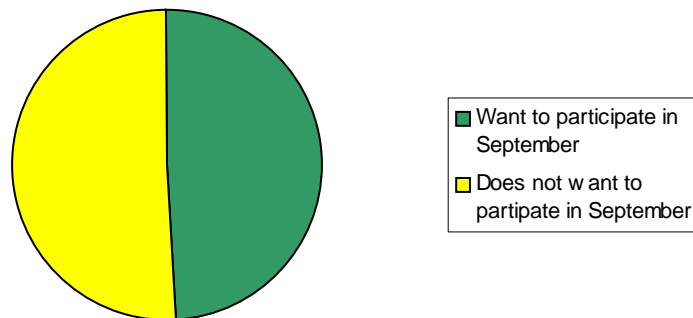


**Photo 3:** Group photograph of the students and supervisors that participated in the 'Walking Bus' pilot project as they arrived at the school (Scoil an Spioraid Naoimh, Laytown, County Meath) on 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2004.

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Evaluation forms were presented to the participants after the pilot programme ended. There were two sections on the form; one for the parents and one for the children. Of the 450 forms that were distributed 109 were returned. Results established that 49 children wanted to be involved in the 'Walking Bus' starting in September 2004 and 55 children did not.

### Walking Bus Evaluation Form Results



Thirty-two of the children who want to participate in the 'Walking Bus' were already involved in the pilot scheme in June 2004. Seven of the children who do not want to participate in September 2004 but who were part of the pilot scheme in June 2004 gave the following reasons for not wanting to continue participating:

- They were too old for the 'Walking Bus'.
- They were teased for being on the 'Walking Bus'.
- The Walking Bus is not feasible due to parents needing to organise their time to manage all their children's schedules for playschools and Secondary Schools for a 9am deadline.
- Their parents had schedule conflicts with managing their child-minding rotas.
- Parents preferred to take their children safely into schools by themselves.

The majority of the children who were involved in the pilot scheme gave very positive comments on the evaluation forms. They found that being part of the 'Walking Bus' was a fun and healthy way to walk to and from school and they enjoyed talking with their friends along the way. Suggestions made by participants highlighted the need for rainwear for bad weather. Lightweight rainwear should be provided for each child and a trolley would also provide assistance to carry the students extra books and physical activity sports bags. The trolley would need to be manageable for all weather conditions.

In general, the school found that there was a noticeable reduction in traffic congestion around the school gates as a direct result of the 'Walking Bus'. As increased numbers of students and parents participate in the 'Walking Bus' there will be measurable results related to reduced vehicular traffic through a reduction of greenhouse gases, reduction of local pollution and improved air quality.

The 'Walking Bus' at Scoil an Spioraid Naoimh, Laytown has raised the school and community spirit, through involving school members and local residents. The 'Walking Bus' has also created awareness within the County Council and has highlighted the need for more road safety provisions in the area. The County Engineers have subsequently initiated a plan for better road markings on school roads in the area.

The school was promoted and profiled as the first school in County Meath to encourage children to travel to school on a 'Walking Bus' and was publicised both locally and nationally in the news and radio media. There was considerable press coverage in the local papers; the Meath Chronicle, Drogheda Independent and Drogheda Leader. National papers that covered the story also included 'The Irish Times' and 'The Irish Independent'. A reporter from the national radio station '2FM' visited the area to view the 'Walking Bus' in operation and interviewed some of the organisers on a live broadcast on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2004.



**Photo 4:** Pictured outside the Londis supermarket in Bettystown are students and participants in the 'Walking Bus' pilot project and Eibhlin Ni Ruairc (reporter from National Radio Station RTE). This photograph was taken during a live interview with RTE on the 'Gerry Ryan Show' on 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2004.

### Lessons learned and repeatability

This was a pilot project for MEMA and MEMA learned the importance of emphasising departure times to the participants for each 'bus stop'. Minor communication problems occurred where children arrived late for a 'bus' or a 'driver' was not notified if a child was not going to return home on the 'bus' in the afternoon. The pilot project provided valuable information on setting up a 'Walking Bus'. MEMA is now in a position to develop a 'Walking Bus' information pack, which can provide baseline information and guidelines to any other schools wishing to participate in such an initiative in County Meath.

Local media coverage proved to be very beneficial and we have received several enquiries from the public as a result of articles that were published in the newspapers about the 'Walking Bus'. The 'Walking Bus' project can be replicated throughout Ireland and Europe and the guidelines and MEMA information pack could be utilised by many schools if MEMA receives funding to produce the packets. The 'Walking Bus' pilot project was a great success and MEMA anticipates that many schools in County Meath will become involved in organising a 'Walking Bus' for their school during the forthcoming academic year 2004/2005.

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