



## THE PRICE OF A CHILD'S LIFE? IT'S £570 A YEAR

In my 30 years in the industry I have never understood why rates, particularly for school-based work, have been a race to the bottom.

When schools book a coach for a trip it's always with the cheapest quote. It's never about quality.

I've said for years now that there's no point educating schools or local authorities about safety or operational practices; they are only interested in who's the cheapest.

You need to educate the parents.

Surely they will see the bigger picture, as you can't put a price on a child's life. I have a seven-year-old son, and I have already

been into his school and told them that when he starts swimming lessons, if the transport is provided by the current supplier I will be taking him in the car as I am not prepared to allow him to travel on its vehicles.

Hopefully if I end up doing this the other parents will take note, ask why, and follow suit.

However, I have just found out that my theory is wrong. You can put a price on a child's life. That price is £3 per day, or £570 per academic year, or £3,990 for the seven years that child is at high school.

There is an operator in the North of England that has recently taken over another operator in its area. The previous operator operated a private home-to-school contract that the parents paid it directly for. It charged £3 per day return for a 53-seater coach, which, if every seat was taken,

comes to £159 per day.

If you take away the fixed costs of insurance, road fund licence, depreciation, and the variable costs of fuel, wages and wear and tear, then it is running at a loss. Not surprisingly, that operator has had its O-Licence revoked recently on grounds of poor maintenance and insufficient financial standing.

Following the purchase, I was asked to value the operator's fleet.

I viewed two vehicles, a 19-year-old Volvo coach, and a 14-year-old Mercedes-Benz minicoach. Had I been a DVSA officer I would have had to issue S-marked prohibitions to both vehicles due to safety issues.

The Volvo had three bald tyres across the back axle, one of which had cords showing, and had done for some time, as they were rusty.

The Mercedes-Benz could not maintain its air pressure when sat with the engine idling, which would potentially have caused both brake and suspension failure.

These vehicles had not been maintained as the operator had no money, as it wasn't charging high enough rates.

So in steps operator number two. A reputable operator with a top score on the OCS table. An operator who spends whatever is needed on maintaining its vehicles. An operator whose drivers are all correctly licensed and DBS cleared. An operator whose vehicles are tracked and equipped with CCTV.

Obviously it has been asked to continue the service that

the previous operator did for £3 per person. Following a costing exercise, the operator has had to double the fare to £6 per person, which just about makes the service viable as long as the coach is full. In reality the fare should be £7 per person.

This has caused uproar from the parents. Greed has been cited. The operator has been accused of taking advantage of the situation; some parents have gone so far as to praise the previous operator for the good service it provided with its unroadworthy vehicles.

A number of them are now refusing to pay the increased fare, preferring to share the cost of an eight-seater taxi, in an industry that is not governed by any form of drivers' hours regulations, which means potentially their children could be driven to school by a driver who has no DBS clearance in a vehicle that has MoTs annually but doesn't need any other form of inspection in that 12 months, and driven by someone who may be at the end of a 12-hour night shift.

So that goes to prove that you can put a price on your child's life. The most precious thing you have in your life, and that price is £570 per year.

How would you feel if your child lost their life in an accident in an unroadworthy vehicle, and you received a cheque for £570 every July until the year they would have left school? I think we all know the answer.

**Darren Critchley**, Odyssey Coach Sales