



A N R O I N N | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

SCHOOL TRANSPORT

**A VALUE FOR MONEY REVIEW
OF THE SCHOOL TRANSPORT SCHEME**

MARCH 2011

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Abbreviations

ABA	Applied Behavioural Analysis
ABS	Anti-locking Breaking System
APO	Assistant Principal Officer
BAC	Bus Atha Cliath
BÉ	Bus Éireann
BSFCA	Back to School Footwear and Clothing Allowance
CC	Community College
CCTV	Closed Circuit Television
Cert.	Certificate
CIE	Córas Iompair Éireann
CME	Chief Mechanical Engineers
CO	Clerical Officer
Co.	County
COI	Church of Ireland
CPC	Certificate of Professional Competence
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CSR	Closed School Rule
CTTC	Coach Tourism and Transport Council
Dept	Department
DES	Department of Education and Skills Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government
DoEHLG	Department of Social Protection
DSP	Department of Social Protection
EO	Executive Officer
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
ERI	Expenditure Review Initiative
EU	European Union
FGS	Farrell Grant Sparks
FOTO	Federation of Transport Operators
FTA	Freight Transport Association
GIS	Geographical Information System
HEO	Higher Executive Officer
HGV	Heavy Goods Vehicles
HSE	Health Service Executive
IT	Information Technology
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association
kms	Kilometres
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Education Psychological Service
NEWB	National Education Welfare Board
No	Number
NS	National School
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLM	Programme Logic Model
PO	Principal Officer
PP	Post Primary
PPF	Programme for Prosperity and Fairness
PQs	Parliamentary Questions
PSO	Public Service Obligation
PSV	Public Service Vehicle
RSA	Road Safety Authority

SENO	Special Education Needs Organiser
SI	Statutory Instrument
SMI	Strategic Management Initiative
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
STAB	School Transport Appeals Board
STS	School Transport Scheme
TLO	Transport Liaison Officer
UK	United Kingdom
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VFM	Value for Money
VTT	Visiting Teacher for Travellers
WTE	Whole Time Equivalent

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Executive Summary

This Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme has been undertaken to assess the efficiency, effectiveness and value for money of the scheme by carrying out a root and branch examination of the scheme as it currently operates. The Review evaluates the extent to which the scheme warrants the continuing allocation of public funding and, having regard to this, makes recommendations on the future operation of the scheme.

School Transport is a significant operation, which currently supports over 125,000 pupils and their families on a daily basis. The general service is operated on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills by Bus Éireann with a number of grant schemes being operated directly by the Department. The basic eligibility criteria in respect of the primary and the post primary school transport schemes, first introduced in 1967 following the Report of the Survey Team appointed in 1962 by the then Minister for Education entitled "Investment in Education", have remained largely unchanged during the intervening period. The main criteria for provision of a service are distance from school and a prescribed minimum number of pupils requiring transport from a distinct locality.

Expenditure on the Scheme has grown from €49.6 million in 1997 to €196 million in 2009, an increase of 295%, while in the same period the numbers of children carried have reduced from 157,000 per day to 125,000 per day.

The review identifies the objectives of the school transport scheme and examines the current validity of these objectives and their compatibility with education policy. It defines the outputs associated with the Scheme and identifies the level and trend of these outputs. It also examines the extent to which the Scheme's objectives have been achieved and comments on the effectiveness with which they have been achieved. Having identified the level and trend of costs and staffing resources associated with the School Transport Scheme it considers the efficiency with which the Scheme has achieved its objectives. It also evaluates the degree to which the scheme and its objectives warrant the allocation of public funding on a current and ongoing basis and examines the scope for alternative policy or organisational approaches, including changes to the current eligibility criteria, to achieving these objectives on a more efficient and/or effective basis. A number of recommendations are made in the Report on the future operation of the scheme. Future performance indicators that might be used to better monitor the performance of the School Transport Scheme are also specified.

Cost and Efficiency of Achievement Findings

The report examined the current unit cost per pupil and how this had changed in recent years. The overall unit cost per pupil transported has increased from €354 in 1997 to €1,438 in 2008 an increase of over 306%. This compares to an increase in the inflation rate of 49.2% and an increase of 51.2% in the inflation rate for transport services. It should be noted, however, that this figure is an average overall cost, does not distinguish between primary/post primary or children with special educational needs and does not take account of the diverse range and variety of routes required throughout the country. More detailed analysis revealed that the average cost of transport is €1,020 at primary, €958 at post primary and €9,087 for children with special needs.

When comparing the unit cost per pupil transported by Bus Éireann compared to per pupil transported by private contractors, the data reviewed in the report indicate that the private contractor cost per mile on large buses at both primary and post-primary levels are on average 21 % less than the equivalent Bus Éireann costs, when costs relating to inspection costs are excluded, and approx 19 % less when inspection costs are included.

The report also noted that the proportion of the scheme operated by private contractors has increased significantly in recent years. In 2008, private contractors carried two thirds of all pupils transported on the scheme. Linked to this, the Review highlighted that payments to contractors are the single largest area of expenditure in the STS, amounting to some 60% of the cost of the entire scheme in 2008. There has been an overall increase in the level of payments to contractors of some 227% in the period since 2000. This reflects Bus Éireann policy in recent years to increase the proportion of the STS that is provided directly by private contractors, the increase in special

needs transport which is almost exclusively undertaken by private contractors, the fact that private contractors tend to operate minibuses, medium sized vehicles and taxis which invariably have a higher unit cost than larger buses, and that there has been an increase of almost 15,000 pupils transported by private contractors since 2000.

Expenditure on transport for pupils with special needs was also identified as a key cost driver behind STS with in excess of €66 million spent on the provision of transport for students with special needs in 2008, representing almost 34% of all STS expenditure in that year. The bulk of the expenditure on special needs arises in relation to primary level due to the fact that the vast majority of special needs pupils are currently enrolled at primary level.

Factors contributing to the high costs in this area include the fact that: (i) pupils often have to be transported longer distances due to the dispersed nature of special needs provision, (ii) many students need to be accompanied by escorts due to their particular conditions, (iii) many special needs students require individualised transport in taxis, (iv) educational provision for special needs pupils continues in July and August and School Transport Services are required to support this provision, and (v) the fact that all children with special needs are entitled to free transport.

The report found that revenue generated from receipts from fare paying passengers has not been linked or indexed to the cost of the scheme. In 1997 parental charges accounted for 10.8% of the total cost of the scheme whereas in 2008 such charges only constituted 4.3% of the cost of the scheme. If parental charges in 2008 had accounted for the same proportion of the total cost of the scheme as they had in 1997, such charges would have amounted to €20.9 million rather than the €8.4 million actually paid.

The current charge imposed for school transport at post-primary level (€300 per annum per pupil) represents 31% of the cost of transporting a post-primary pupil (€958). There is currently no charge for primary pupils, with the exception of concessionary pupils, or special needs pupils while the unit cost of transporting such pupils is €1,020 and €9,087 respectively.

Extent of Achievement and Effectiveness

In relation to the effectiveness of the scheme, the report concluded that the target population for the STS was originally those pupils for whom distance was an obstacle to attending school and that this remains the main target population of the scheme, although new categories of pupils have also been targeted in recent years.

The report also concluded that distance is an effective criterion for assessing eligibility for a school transport service that is targeted at physical as well as economic hardship, it is generally used in EU and OECD countries that operate such a service and the current prescribed distance requirements are generally in line with international practice. However, it is not possible, due to lack of appropriate data, to definitively conclude whether there are children who would not be able to get to and from school in the absence of the STS. Analyses of the number of tickets issued to post-primary pupils, and seat occupancy rates from a sample of primary and post-primary routes, indicate that a significant number of parents who have access to school transport services choose to make, and are able to make, alternative arrangements to get their children to school at certain times of the school day / school year.

Recommendations

The report considers that it is appropriate for the State to continue to support school transport provision for children to schools, including the provision of grants, where appropriate, where it would be difficult for the children including children with special educational needs to attend school otherwise. School transport provision supports the DES high level goal to *“To support and improve the quality of relevance and inclusiveness of education for every learner in our schools”*.

The new objectives of such support have been identified as

- to support the transport to and from school of children who would have difficulty travelling, for reasons of distance, to their nearest school if transport is not supported;

- to support the transport to and from school of children who have a special educational need where those needs necessitate assistance for them in travelling to and from school.

It is considered that support by the State for school transport, in a way consistent with the recommendations contained in the report, will make a major contribution to meeting the overall objectives of the Smarter Travel Policy.

A number of possible approaches were considered through which the State can seek to support transport to school in line with the overall objectives for the support of school transport. The options considered included the provision of grants directly to families to support them in seeking to arrange school transport themselves and State support to transport operators in applying to an agent of the State to provide transport for groups of children, subject to certain eligibility requirements.

The preferred option was to continue with the organisation, on behalf of the State, of a school transport system as currently operated including for children with special needs. This option fed into the first main recommendation of the report *“that the organisation, on behalf of the State, of a school transport system should continue”*.

When examining the future administration of the scheme, the report noted that at present a range of organisations at national, regional or local level are involved in different aspects of the transport system. In consideration of the existing complex and fragmented arrangements the report further recommended *“that a single national organiser (separate from the Department of Education and Skills with a regional dimension) should operate the scheme”*. The report notes that under the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008 and the Public Transport Regulation Act 2009 that the National Transport Authority (NTA) has a new role in relation to commercial bus licensing, bus and rail subvention and the regulation of taxis. The report considers that the NTA may have potential to administer school transport or parts of it on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills. The report further noted the commitment in the Renewed Programme for Government for a key role for the Department of Transport in consultation with other departments in ensuring joined up provision of services in relation to rural transport, HSE supported transport and school transport. Having regard to all of the above, the report recommends *“in the medium term that the single organiser should continue to be Bus Éireann”*. In light of these recommendations it is also recommended that *“the existing administrative arrangements with Bus Éireann be further revised having regard to how the role of Bus Éireann has developed over a number of years and that the revised arrangements are put in place for the 2011/12 school year, building on the findings of this review and the recent FGS report”*.

On finalisation of the updated administrative arrangements, this will include transferring the processing of grants; it is recommended that *a formalised mechanism be put in place to ensure that the costs allocated to school transport by Bus Éireann are proportionate and that the DE&S monitors these costs with professional support*. This support would include financial and legal expertise.

In line with its recommendations the report concluded that the school transport responsibilities currently undertaken by the Chief Executive Officers of Vocational Education Committees as Transport Liaison Officers should cease and that these duties will be absorbed into the functions of the national transport organiser (Bus Éireann).

Balance between provision of transport by Bus Éireann and Private Contractors

The VFM review identified the extent to which there has been an increase in private provision provided under the school transport scheme. The report noted that the costs of school transport provided directly by Bus Éireann are somewhat more expensive than that provided by the private sector. However, the report considers that it is unclear what the impact would be of a free market in operation were Bus Éireann to cease providing school transport completely and that it is quite possible that the cost of private provision could increase in such an instance.

At the same time, the transport market is rapidly developing and changing. Given these circumstances, the report recommends

- *that the provision of direct transport services by Bus Éireann be reduced on a phased basis in the school transport scheme while Bus Éireann would still maintain a limited number of buses in reserve for alternative provision should the need arise*
- *that the cascading of buses into the school transport fleet by Bus Éireann would now cease and that Bus Éireann would gradually reduce its direct provision of school transport using its existing services.*

Closed School Rule and Central School Rule (CSR)

Currently approximately 52% of all mainstream primary pupils avail of transport under the closed/central school rule to some 817 primary schools. It is noted that in the majority of cases where transport has been provided under the CSR, pupils continue to attend their nearest primary school and that, while the application of the CSR is referred to in these cases, it does not mean that they are not travelling to their nearest school. Under the CSR reference is not made to distance and while some pupils availing of transport under the CSR may still qualify for transport under the distance criterion even in the absence of the CSR, the evidence suggests that the CSR is a factor in the overall cost of the scheme.

The recommendations arising from the Review in this regard are:

- *That with effect from September 2012 the closed school rule and central school rule be set aside for all new pupils in areas where it previously applied.*
- *That with effect from the start of the 2011/2012 school year the distance criteria should apply to all pupils attending primary schools and that the exemption for closed schools should cease*

Post-Primary – Catchment Boundary Area System

With the introduction of free post-primary education, the country was divided for planning purposes into geographic districts, each with several primary schools feeding into a post-primary centre with one or more post-primary schools. These catchment areas were determined following consultation with local educational interests. The intention was, and continues to be, that these defined districts facilitate the orderly planning of school provision and accommodation needs. They are also the basis for the operation of the STS at post-primary level. There are approximately 280 catchment areas.

While the report did not find any evidence that the Catchment Boundary system is a key factor in the rising cost of the School Transport Scheme, other than noting that transport for some pupils is not to the nearest post-primary centre, it is not clear whether this is an efficient organisation of school transport at post-primary level. In particular, given the number of complaints about the existing catchment boundaries from parents and schools this system is a source of considerable administrative burden to the School Transport Section as a lot of staff time is consumed in answering queries or processing complaints in relation to this issue.

In relation to the planning of school infrastructure, the general approach of the Department currently is to plan on the basis of attendance of pupils at their nearest primary schools and that following completion of their primary level education those primary school pupils then transfer into attendance at their nearest post-primary schools or the nearest post-primary centre except in cases where parental choice is exercised in certain circumstances.

Accordingly, the report recommends *that the school transport catchment boundary policy should be ceased and that eligibility for post-primary transport should be on the basis of the nearest post-primary centre or school for any new pupils.*

Choice of Schools in Primary and Post-Primary Education

The growth in diversity in Irish society in recent years has added to the costs of school transport as the variety of school types has increased in response to parental preferences.

The report recognises that it is appropriate that there be some level of State support for such choice. Such support is important in the context of the overall constitutional and legal basis for the education system and the need to have regard to various religious denominations and the provision of education through the medium of either Irish or English.

Accordingly, the report considers that eligibility should apply for a child to travel to a school, which is not their nearest school, in order, at primary level, to access schooling entirely through the medium of Irish or English or to attend a school of a particular ethos.

The report considered that this same type of eligibility should apply to post primary pupils who wish to be transported to a centre which is not their nearest if this is to access schooling entirely through the medium of English or Irish, or to access schooling of a particular ethos.

The report also noted that these provisions will result in those children residing in Gaeltacht areas being eligible to apply for transport to travel to a school which is not their nearest in order to access schooling entirely through the medium of English.

Charges

The current unit costs per pupil have been outlined earlier. There is currently no charge for primary pupils, with the exception of concessionary pupils. In addition, children who hold medical cards are exempted from paying charges and children with special education needs also travel free.

Several submissions received by the Committee for the VFM Study expressed the view that those who could afford school transport should pay for it, and that this could be a means of eliminating the practice of irregular use of the school transport service. Also taken into account were the recommendations of the McCarthy Report:

- there should be a much greater contribution paid towards the cost of providing the school transport service
- charges should be introduced in respect of the primary school transport system
- a charge should be levied at both primary and post-primary level at a rate of 50% of the full economic cost of providing the service. This would likely be in the order of €500 per annum per child.
- The exemption for social welfare recipients would continue to apply

From survey work undertaken by the group, the average seat occupancy over the two surveys on primary routes is 69% on the morning service and 64% on the evening service and at post-primary level it is 80% for the morning service and 74% for the evening service.

Taking account of these, findings, the report recommends:

- *that an annual primary charge be introduced. As an initial step, the group recommends that the level of this charge be €200 per pupil per year.*
- *that post-primary charge should remain at the current level of €300 per pupil for the present*
- *that in the light of the evidence on occupancy rates and in order to ensure that school transport provided for pupils holding medical cards is fully utilised, a nominal charge of €30 should be introduced.*
- *In relation to pupils with special education needs, that a charge be put in place where the children are not holders of medical cards and that this charge would be €200 per primary or €300 per post-primary special needs child to be paid in two instalments in the same way as the primary or post-primary charge*

On the basis of these revised charges, the group notes that charges will still only make up to 20% of the overall anticipated cost of primary and post-primary school transport and that school transport would, therefore, remain heavily State-subsidised.

Distance Criteria

The report considers that, having regard to the Smarter Travel agenda, the lengthening of the distance requirements should not be considered. Taking into account that the existing criteria are in line with international practice, the group recommends *“that the existing distance criteria be maintained”* and *“that all schools should put in place policies to keep at as low as level as possible vehicle congestion resulting from bringing children to and from school”*.

Minimum Numbers required to establish/maintain a Service

Establishing a Service

The provision of a school transport service (even if a pupil is eligible on age/distance grounds), and the continuation of that service, depends on a minimum number of pupils being available for transport.

Up until relatively recently, no services had been terminated as a result of falling below the minimum numbers threshold. This is in spite of the fact that there were 142 services operating under the minimum number threshold in the 2007/2008 school year operating either single school routes or combined with other routes.

From the start of the 2009 school year, those services that operated a single trip service and fell below the minimum numbers criteria have been terminated. The position in relation to double trip services that fall below the minimum number threshold is currently under examination.

The report considers that the minimum numbers should be revised upwards from the current requirement of 7, in the context of the need to focus the school transport system on areas where there is sufficient critical mass to provide school transport services. This would apply both for the establishment of new services *and* for the maintenance of existing services. Where eligible pupils apply and there are not sufficient numbers to establish a service, such families would then be eligible for the remote area grant. The report recommends *“that a service will be provided where there are ten or more eligible pupils in a distinct locality to a particular school for that service”* and further recommends *“that a service will cease to be provided where there are less than ten eligible pupils”*.

Special Educational Needs

The report recommends *“that the current arrangements continue to apply viz. eligibility for transport based on attendance at the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class/special school or unit, that is or can be resourced to meet their educational needs.”* That is to say that a parent may choose to send their child to a school that is not the nearest such school but transport will only be provided to the nearest. In liaising with individual parents, the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) currently makes it clear that under the terms of the scheme transport is only provided on this basis. The report also recommends *“that clearer communication and information is needed, to ensure that parents are fully briefed on the conditions governing the provision of the school transport service”*.

The report considered the current assessment and decision making process from completion of the initial application form to transport provision by way of grant/bus/taxi. The current process which involves the SENO, School Transport Section and the national organiser is complex and the report considers that this should be simplified to involve only the SENO and the national organiser. Therefore, the recommendation of the report is *“that the national organiser should be directly advised by the SENO in relation to transport and escorts for pupils with special educational needs to the nearest recognised school, class or unit and that the Department should not be involved in the decision-making process.”*

Traveller Children

The report considers that Traveller children should have eligibility for school transport on the same basis as all other children in line with the Traveller Education Strategy and recommends *“that the*

primary (3.2kms) and post-primary (4.8kms) distance criteria should be applied, that the remaining arrangements should begin to be phased out with effect from September 2011 and that the national organiser organise all necessary transport arrangements henceforth”.

Grants

The report recommends that the administration of grants be undertaken by the same organisation which is responsible for the administration of the school transport scheme, including assessment of distance eligibility. The report therefore considers that the national organiser will also take responsibility for these grants for as long as the national organiser has responsibility for the school transport scheme. This will ensure that the application form and the different elements of the school transport scheme are effectively administered and that the national organiser both assesses and pays appropriate grants where school transport is not being directly made available.

The report further recommends the following changes to the current grant schemes in operation:

Mainstream Pupils:

- *the introduction of a standardised grant scheme and that the Remote Area Grants Scheme and the Scheme D Grant Scheme be amalgamated into a single scheme*

Pupils with Disabilities/Special Educational Needs

- *that the Department of Education and Skills should agree the new scheme and rates with the Department of Finance and that these rates should be linked to the Civil Service Motor Rates and that the new more unified scheme should be delivered on a cost neutral basis.*

Sustainable Transport and Synergies in Transport Provision

The Government’s Smarter Travel Policy for Ireland (2009 to 2020) includes a commitment to ensure that every school in Ireland has a travel plan to encourage students to take alternatives to the car. The new Smarter Travel policy also commits to improving the rural transport service and to examining existing services such as the school transport scheme in the development of a broader rural transport service.

These commitments are reinforced in the Renewed Programme for Government.

While there is a specific reference to rolling out a “Safe routes to School” programme nationwide a second element of note in the Renewed Programme relates to the greater integration of transport services. Bus Éireann is exploring synergies between its own services (including both its own direct provision and the provision by other school transport service contractors) and the transport services of the Rural Transport Programme/Pobal and the Health Service Executive. The Renewed Programme for Government provides that Bus Éireann will continue to explore these synergies and implement new arrangements arising out of these.

One of the pilots is to investigate the potential for utilising school buses outside school hours for other rural transport services and further pilots are to be advanced in relation to the potential for putting the utilisation of special education transport between the school transport services and the HSE. The report recommends *“that the assessment of these pilots be taken on board and put in place on a national basis should the outcomes create savings in school transport expenditure”*. While there will not be significant immediate savings from these synergies, the report considers that potential exists for significant savings in the two areas for the school transport scheme. Furthermore, the report considers that Bus Éireann should maximise the potential of, and publicise, existing transport facilities to ensure maximum usage and efficiency.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1. Introduction

This Chapter outlines the background to the Value for Money and Policy Review process, defines the scope of the Review, discusses the role of the steering committee established to guide the Review and outlines the terms of reference for the Review.

2. Background to the Value for Money Review Process

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) has conducted this Value for Money (VFM) Review of School Transport under the Value for Money and Policy Review Process. This process was introduced in June 2006 to replace the Expenditure Review Initiative (ERI) which had commenced in 1997. The ERI had derived from the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) and the 1996 report *Delivering Better Government*, which recognised the need for a systematic analysis of Government expenditure.

The Value for Money and Policy Review Initiative is a systematic process of evaluation conducted by Government Departments and Offices under the guidance of the Value for Money and Policy Review Central Steering Committee and the Department of Finance. Its objectives are to analyse Exchequer spending in a systematic manner and to provide a basis on which more informed decisions can be made on priorities within and between programmes.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act, 1993 and the Public Service Management Act, 1997 set the context for expenditure reviews in terms of the achievement of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and the maintenance of appropriate systems, practices and procedures for the purpose of evaluating effectiveness¹.

3. Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference for the review of the School Transport Scheme are based on standard Terms of Reference which apply to all reviews across the Civil Service, with appropriate modifications specific to this review. The agreed terms of reference for the review are to:

- a) Identify the objectives of the school transport scheme and examine the current validity of those objectives, their compatibility with education policy, and to make recommendations on the Scheme.
- b) Define the outputs associated with the Scheme and identify the level and trend of these outputs
- c) Examine the extent that the Scheme's objectives have been achieved and comment on the effectiveness with which they have been achieved.

¹ Expenditure Review Initiative First Formal Report to the Minister of Finance by the Expenditure Review Central Steering Committee, For the period June 2002 – June 2004, page 41

- d) Identify the level and trend of costs and staffing resources associated with the School Transport Scheme and thus comment on the efficiency with which it has achieved its objectives.
- e) Evaluate the degree to which the scheme and its objectives warrant the allocation of public funding on a current and ongoing basis and examine the scope for alternative policy or organisational approaches, including changes to the current eligibility criteria, to achieving these objectives on a more efficient and/or effective basis.
- f) Specify potential future performance indicators that might be used to better monitor the performance of the School Transport Scheme.

4 Steering Committee

Membership of the Steering Committee was drawn from the DES, other relevant Government Departments and also included two independent experts. Details of the membership are as follows:

Mr. William Soffe, Chairperson
 Mr. Seán Ó Foghlú, Assistant Secretary General, School Transport Section, DES
 Ms. Patricia O'Connor, Principal Officer, School Transport Section, DES
 Mr. Alan McMullan, Department of Education Northern Ireland
 Mr. Brendan Ellison, Department of Finance
 Mr. Cormac Gilhooly, Department of Finance
 Mr. John Weafer, Department of Transport
 Mr. John Dowling, Department of Transport
 Mr. Philip Cribbin, Retired Transport Liaison Officer
 Dr. Tony Gaynor, Assistant Principal Officer, DES
 Ms. Breeda Connaughton, Assistant Principal Officer, Central Policy Unit, DES

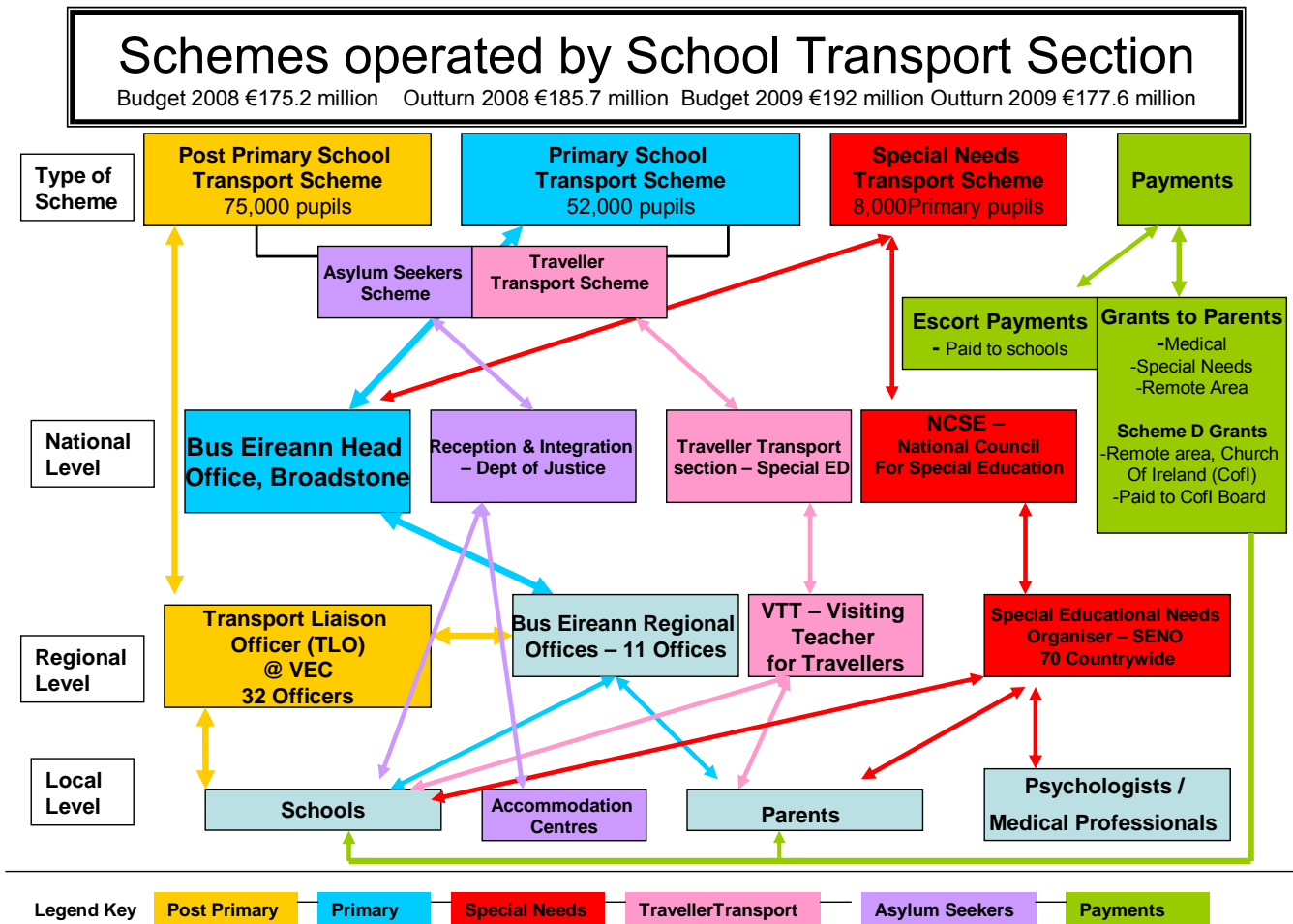
The Steering Committee agreed the terms of reference for the VFM review at its first meeting on 5th February 2009. These terms of reference were then approved by the Secretary General of the DES and by the Department of Finance.

The Committee met on 9 occasions in total. An interim report was produced in July 2009.

5. Scope of the Review

The Steering Committee agreed the scope of the review to encompass the entire School Transport Scheme including catchment boundaries. A specific focus on catchment boundaries was included in determining the scope of this Review due to a commitment in the Programme for Government, 2007, to review the school transport system including catchment boundaries. This review involves an examination of the work of the School Transport Section itself, as well as a focus on the school transport related activities of Bus Éireann, Transport Liaison Officers, the National Council for Special Education and other relevant sections within the Department of Education and Skills. The review also assesses the efficiency, effectiveness and value for money of the school transport scheme by carrying out a comprehensive examination of the scheme as it currently exists. The complexity of the scheme is illustrated by the diagram below which outlines the linkages between the different elements of the school transport scheme. The review evaluates the extent to which the scheme warrants the continuing allocation of public funding and, having regard to this, makes recommendations on the future operation of the scheme.

Figure 1.1 Schemes operated by School Transport Section



Chapter 2

General Overview of the School Transport Scheme

2.1 Introduction

This Chapter provides a general overview of the School Transport Scheme. This involves an outline of the work of the School Transport Section and a focus on the role of Bus Éireann in relation to the School Transport Scheme.

2.2 History of School Transport

The provision of school transport services in this country dates as far back as 1909, when the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury authorised the Lord Lieutenant to provide what they called “covered vans” to convey children to national schools. These vans could be provided, however, only where a national school was closed and its pupils transferred to another school and subject to the condition that the number of pupils habitually using them would not be less than ten. The vans were horse drawn. While no specific age or distance limits were laid down, the Commissioners of National Education applied the scheme only to “children whose homes are so distant from any existing school as to make their attendance thereat by walking either impracticable or very irregular”.

There were few changes in the scheme until the School Attendance Act of 1926 was passed, although motor vans gradually superseded the old vans. A number of boat services from islands around the coast were also set up. The new Act indicated that a national school was “accessible” to a child if,

- (a) S/he lived within two miles of it and was under 10 years of age;
- (b) S/he lived within three miles of it and was over 10 years of age.

On passing of the Act, grant-aided school transport was limited to children to whom schools were not “accessible” in accordance with these provisions.

From the outset, because of the sparsity of the Protestant population, special transport schemes were devised to suit the circumstances of Protestant National Schools

In the early 1950s the Department intensified its policy of closing small national schools as part of a rationalisation of school building provision. The pattern of national schools in the past had resulted from a very limited mobility on the part of school-children and schools generally were provided within “walking distance” of the children’s homes (walking distance estimated to be approximately 3 miles). Developments both in mechanical transport and in the road network meant that a new pattern of larger schools was possible at a more economic cost and with greater benefits to the children, educationally and otherwise. To facilitate the new policy the transport scheme was liberalised with all the children in the area of a closed school being given free transport to the new school, irrespective of their distance from it.

These earlier schemes therefore had two broad objectives:

- (a) to relieve hardship where children had too far to travel to their nearest school
- (b) to support an alternative policy to the continuance of small schools

The schemes were all grant-aided and allowed for considerable local initiative and control. The school manager employed and paid the transport contractor, subject to the

Department's sanction, and was recouped the greater portion of his expenditure by a state grant. All the fieldwork – checking of mileage etc - was done by school inspectors.

None of these schemes applied to post-primary pupils. Free transport to post-primary schools was introduced with the advent of free post-primary education in 1967. The post-primary scheme provided free transport to second level pupils who lived three or more miles from a centre in which free post-primary education was available and the organisation and administration of these services was given to C oras Iompair  ireann (CIE) acting as agents of the Minister for Education. It was therefore, from the beginning, a comprehensive countrywide scheme, serving every post-primary centre in the country. The introduction of this scheme altered the picture for primary school transport also. Following the establishment of the free transport scheme for post-primary pupils, all those duties in regard to primary transport formerly carried out by the school manager were transferred to C.I.E. and the services were made free of charge, apart from a voluntary nominal local contribution.

2.3 The Current School Transport Scheme

Today, the school transport scheme is a significant operation, directly supporting over 135,000 pupils and their families on a daily basis. School children make about 42 million journeys every school year travelling over 82 million kilometres on 6,000 routes to and from school. School Transport provision comprises 3 schemes:

- Primary Scheme:

Pupils are eligible for free school transport if they reside 3.2 kilometres or more from, and are attending their nearest national school or school of amalgamation as determined by the Department. In the case of amalgamations, pupils residing in a closed school area may be deemed eligible for transport to the school of amalgamation only.

A "closed school area" is defined as an area where a primary school has been closed and amalgamated with another. Children for whom the closed school would have been the nearest are eligible for transport, without reference to distance rules, to the school of amalgamation, even though this school may currently not be the nearest school.

- Post-primary Scheme:

Pupils are eligible for transport if they reside 4.8 kilometres or more from their local post-primary education centre, that is, the centre serving the catchment area in which they live. The scheme is not designed to facilitate parents who choose to send their children to centres outside of the catchment area² in which they reside. However, children who are fully eligible for transport to the post-primary centre in the catchment area in which they reside may apply for transport on a concessionary basis to a post-primary centre outside of their own catchment area – otherwise known as catchment boundary transport.

- Transport for Children with Special Needs:

The purpose of the scheme is to provide a reasonable level of transport service for children with a diagnosed disability and/or special educational need who because of the nature of

² In 1966, when the Government announced the introduction of free post-primary education, the country was divided for planning purposes into geographic districts each with several primary schools feeding into a post-primary centre with one or more post-primary schools. These catchment areas were determined following consultation with local educational interests. They facilitate planning of school provision and accommodation and are also the basis for the operation of the School Transport Scheme at post primary level. There are approximately 280 catchment areas.

their disability may not be in a position to avail of a school bus service. Children are eligible if they are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school, special school, class or a unit that is, or can be, resourced to meet their special educational needs under Department of Education and Skills criteria.

2.4 Grants

In certain circumstances, a grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements may be paid to eligible pupils. To be eligible for a grant, an application for transport must first be made and eligibility determined. There are four different grant schemes:

Remote Area Grant

A remote area grant may be paid by the Department to the parent/guardian of a pupil eligible for transport in the following circumstances:

- where there are not enough children residing in a distinct locality to warrant a service;
- where no suitable service is available, or
- where the child resides 3.2 kilometres or more from a pick up point of an existing service.

The remote area grant is based on distance from and level of attendance at the school.

Scheme D Grant

This type of grant is payable to eligible pupils of Church of Ireland denomination, attending their nearest Church of Ireland School subject to certain conditions.

While the qualifying conditions are exactly the same as the Remote Area Grant, the procedures for processing the grant are different.

Medical Grant

A grant may also be paid to a parent/guardian of a pupil who has special medical needs. Payment of a medical grant is considered by the Department where pupils cannot be facilitated on the normal network of school transport. This may be because there is no transport service operating in their area, the cost of extending a service to accommodate them would be prohibitive, or because, for physical reasons, the child cannot board a bus (e.g. a child who is confined to a wheelchair). The Medical Grant is an annual grant based on distance from and level of attendance at the school.

Enhanced Grant

Where a medical Grant has been approved and the parent/guardian makes an appeal on grounds of "hardship" then the Enhanced Grant is paid. The Enhanced Grant is calculated at a current rate of 0.39 cents per kilometre, for undertaking a four way journey from home to school.

2.5 The responsibilities of School Transport Section

School Transport Section is responsible for policy formulation, estimation, monitoring and controlling of expenditure; processing of the various grant schemes; payment of escorts, secretariat to the School Transport Appeals Board and liaising as necessary, with Bus Éireann, the Department of Transport, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the Road Safety Authority and the National Council for Special Education. Expenditure for transport provision for pre-school Traveller children and primary Traveller children under exceptional circumstances while administered through Primary Administration and Special Education and more recently Early Childhood Sections of the Department, is accounted for from the School Transport sub-head.

2.6 Bus Éireann

Administrative arrangements exist between Bus Éireann (formerly CIÉ) and the Department since 1968 to provide the general school transport service, which were

updated in 1975 and which have been adapted as required to meet evolving needs and renewed automatically each year. Operational matters regarding the provision of transport for primary, post-primary, special needs and asylum seeker children are operated by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

The scope of the work carried out by Bus Éireann goes beyond the direct provision of school buses and recruiting private contractors. The company plans and manages the countrywide network on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, to ensure that services are provided in line with the specific requirements of the Department.

In fulfilling its mandate, Bus Éireann and its network of regional offices discharge the following functions:

- a. annual review of every route to reflect the changes in pupil turnover;
- b. planning the provision of new services, including route itineraries and scheduling;
- c. continuous monitoring of contractor operations;
- d. contracting private operators and payment of contractor accounts;
- e. assessment of pupil eligibility;
- f. collection and accounting for pupil contributions;
- g. issuing of tickets/passes to pupils;
- h. planning and deploying the fleet of Bus Éireann school vehicles;
- i. day-to-day supervision and monitoring of service performance and standards;
- j. all administrative support necessary for the operation of the scheme and its accountability as a State service
- k. Garda Vetting of all drivers involved in school transport duties in conjunction with the Garda Síochána Central Vetting Unit
- l. ensuring, before engaging contractors, that every contractor, driver and vehicle procured meets all relevant standards and legislative requirements.

The Bus Éireann Regional School Transport Offices have a back-up of legal, financial, technical and IT expertise and systems within Bus Éireann.

Bus Éireann Inspectors plan every bus route – primary and post-primary - from the point of view of its suitability to accommodate the size of vehicle that will be used. A safety assessment of every route and of all pick-up points is carried out and services are monitored and checked by Inspectors on an ongoing basis.

When routes have been finalised, Bus Éireann then arranges transport either on scheduled services or on special school bus services as outlined above.

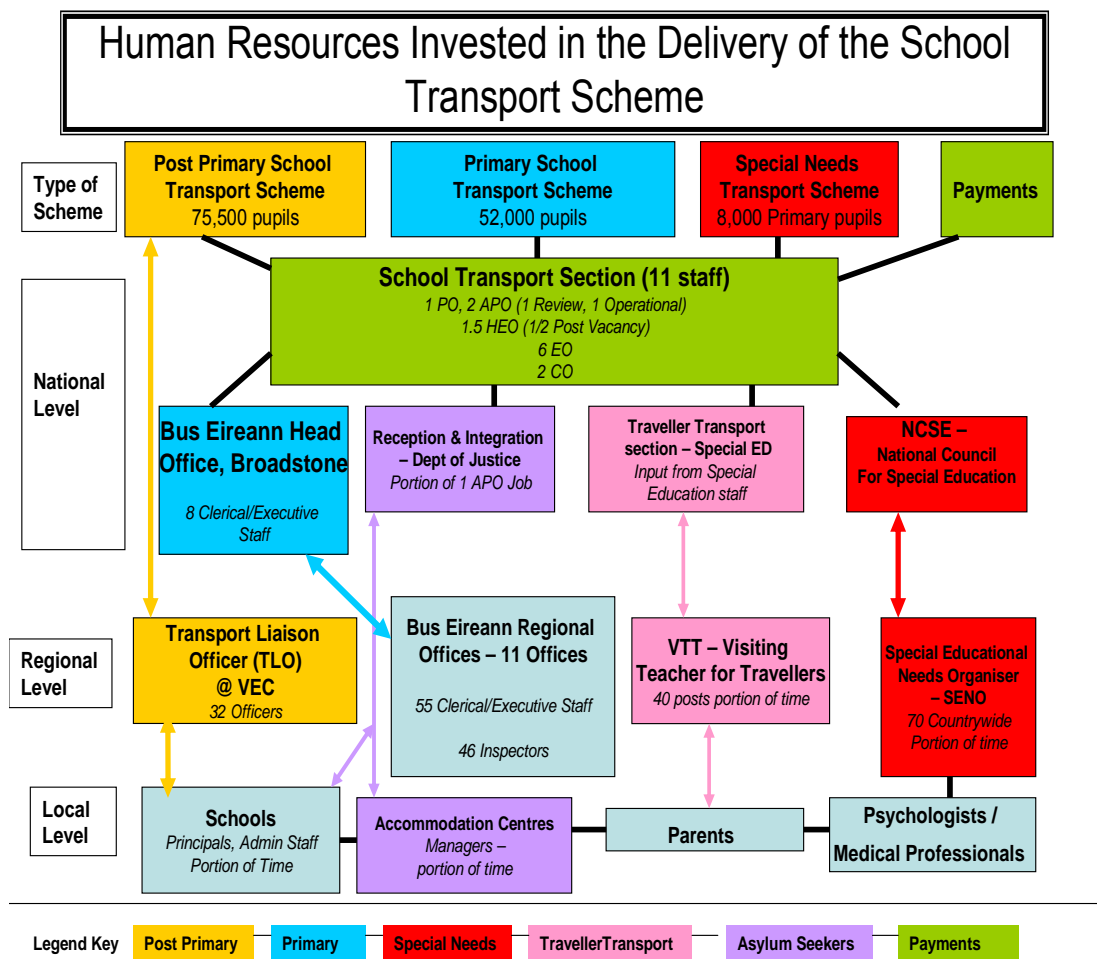
2.7 Transport Liaison Officer

With the decentralised structure of Bus Éireann, it is possible to carry out a great deal of the routine work at local level. To facilitate this, local agents, known as Transport Liaison Officers, were appointed. The Chief Executive Officer in 32 of the 33 Vocational Education Committees acts as a Transport Liaison Officer mainly in relation to the Post-primary Scheme and gets an allowance for fulfilling this role (in the case of City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee this function is fulfilled by a staff member in School Transport Section). The functions of the Transport Liaison Officer include providing Bus Éireann with completed application forms, ensuring forms/computer listings received from Bus Éireann of pupils availing of transport are updated and returned within deadlines, processing applications from parents for extensions of service (including payable extensions), advising and corresponding with school principals/authorities/parents on the terms of the scheme, coordinating opening and closing times both at primary and post-primary level within their administrative area and other relevant matters. They are also responsible for ensuring that circulars and documentation circulated by the Department regarding discipline on school buses and safety either on or in the vicinity of school buses are brought to the attention of school authorities.

The level of the allowance is based on the number of children in the school transport scheme in their area. In 2008, with the agreement of the Department's post-primary administration division, the payment of this allowance was incorporated into the general VEC pay system, which has significantly reduced the annual administration involved in processing these payments.

A diagram outlining the various stakeholders involved in the School Transport Scheme is outlined below

Figure 2.1 Stakeholders involved in the School Transport Scheme



Chapter Three

Value for Money Review - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

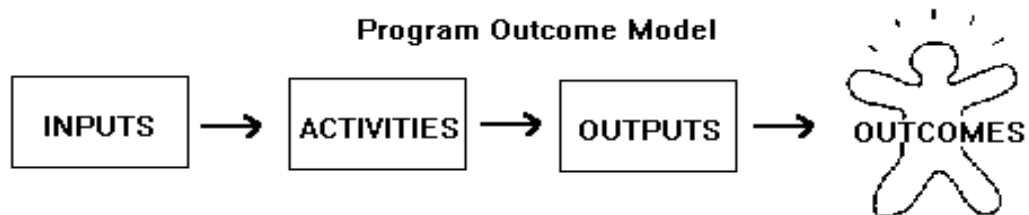
This Chapter describes the methodology adopted to conduct this VFM review of the School Transport Scheme (STS). This includes an outline of the Programme Logic Model and the application of this model to the STS. It also identifies the research methods employed as part of the review and highlights the performance indicators and key questions that will be used to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the STS.

3.2 Programme Logic Model

This VFM review uses the Programme Logic Model (PLM) as a framework for evaluating the STS. The PLM attempts to do two things. In the first instance it attempts to identify and describe the individual components of the programme under review. These can be defined as follows:

- *Inputs* – the resources dedicated to or consumed by the programme.
- *Activities* – the actions or tasks that transform inputs into outputs.
- *Outputs* – the direct products of programme activities.
- *Intermediate outcomes* – the effects of the outputs on the targeted beneficiaries in the immediate or short term.
- *Long-term outcomes (or impacts)* – the ultimate impact of the programme in the medium to long term.

The diagram below³ illustrates the relationship between the various elements of the PLM and highlights the fact that the outcome of a programme or service is generally measured by reference to its impact on those targeted by the programme or service as well as the impact on wider society (where this can be measured).



The PLM also attempts to identify the ‘theory of change’ underlying the programme under review, illustrating how the day to day activities of the programme contribute to the outcome that the programme is trying to achieve. Through data collection and analysis, the goal of the evaluation is to compare how the programme under review is intended to work with what is actually occurring.

Performance indicators are measures that can be used to determine if the various stages in the logic model have been achieved. When applied and interpreted together, they will help to determine whether the programme is operating as shown in the logic model.

³ Adapted from the European Commission model. European Commission (2004), *Evaluation of socio-economic development – the GUIDE* publication website, <http://www.evaled.info>

Following identification of the performance indicators, the final stage in the PLM process is to track the indicators – by collecting data/information through a variety of methods such as document analysis, literature review, questionnaires, surveys, interviews and focus groups, and interpreting the data that is collated through these means.

3.3 Application of the PLM to the School Transport Scheme

In applying the PLM to the School Transport Scheme, it is first necessary to identify the inputs, outputs and outcomes associated with the scheme in order to surface the 'theory of change' underpinning the scheme. The rationale for or the theory behind the School Transport Scheme is that through the provision of inputs (financial resources, buses and taxis, escorts, staff time) pupils who may have difficulties in accessing schools are transported to school (the output of the scheme). These pupils are allowed to participate fully in the education system and access to education is equitable to all (the intermediate outcome). By participating fully in education, pupils are enabled to develop to their full potential and thereby contribute to the economy and wider society (the final outcome of the scheme). Another outcome (albeit unintended) of the scheme is a reduction in the number of 'school run' journeys undertaken by private cars as parents avail of school transport provision rather than driving their children to school. This has positive environmental benefits.

The following table illustrates the application of the PLM to the School Transport Scheme.

Table 3.1 : Application of PLM to the School Transport Scheme

Inputs	Activities (inputs into output)	Output	Theory – how and why outputs contribute to outcome	Expected intermediate outcome	Theory – how and why intermediate outcome contributes to final outcome	Final outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Money allocated to Bus Éireann • Grants issued by School Transport section • Payments to TLOs • Payments by STS users • Staff time in School Transport Section and in Bus Éireann • Buses, Taxis • Drivers, inspectors and escorts. <p><i>Input indicators</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of grant allocated to Bus Éireann • Level of grant allocated by School Transport Section • Level of grant to TLOs • Payments by STS users • No. and cost of staff in School Transport Section • No. and cost of staff assigned to School Transport in Bus Éireann • No. and cost of drivers, inspectors + escorts. • No. of buses + taxis. • No. of routes 	<p>Bus Éireann</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processing payments to contractors • Organising services • Operating and monitoring routes • Tendering for routes • Monitoring safety of • Monitoring catchment areas <p>School Transport Section</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processing grants to users and TLOs • Monitoring current and future demand. • Monitoring catchment areas • Monitoring eligibility criteria 	<p>Eligible school children safely transported to and from school</p> <p><i>Output indicators</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No. of students transported (primary and post-primary) • No. of special needs students transported (primary and post-primary) • Length of waiting / travelling times • No. of children transported safely 	<p>Eligible students who may otherwise have difficulty in accessing schools. are safely transported to school.</p> <p>People choose to avail of STS who would otherwise drive their children to school.</p>	<p>Eligible students, who may otherwise have difficulty in accessing schools, participate fully in education and access to education is made equitable to all users. The number of private car journeys is also reduced.</p> <p><i>Intermediate outcome indicators</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No. of students who travel by bus who would otherwise have difficulty in accessing school • The number of school run journeys prevented as result of STS • Level of satisfaction among service users 	<p>Eligible students participate fully in school life and receive an education that enables them to benefit both socially and academically.</p>	<p>Eligible students receive benefits of full education and in turn contribute to society/economy.</p>

The biggest challenge in applying the PLM to the School Transport Scheme arises in relation to measuring the outcome of the scheme. This is a challenge common to the evaluation of many public sector programmes due to the lack of available data on the outcomes associated with much public sector activity.

The final outcome of the scheme has been defined in Table 3.1 as enabling pupils to develop to their full potential and thereby contribute to the economy and wider society. It is almost impossible to identify a performance indicator or indicators that would facilitate a measurement of the relationship between the transportation of pupils to school (the output of the School Transport Scheme) and the extent to which those pupils develop to their full potential and contribute to the economy and society (the final outcome). In the absence of such an indicator, this review will seek to measure the effectiveness of the School Transport Scheme by measuring the relationship between the output and the *intermediate outcome* – the extent to which the School Transport Scheme enables pupils who would otherwise have difficulties in accessing schools to do so, thereby making access to education equitable to all. The unintended outcome of the School Transport Scheme, that it contributes to a reduction in the number of private car ‘school run’ journeys will also be considered.

The intermediate outcome of the School Transport Scheme, as identified in Table 3.1 is reproduced below.

Table 3.2: Intermediate outcome of the School Transport Scheme

Output	Theory – how and why	Expected intermediate outcome
Eligible students safely transported to and from school	Eligible students who may otherwise have difficulty in accessing schools are safely transported to school. People choose to avail of the School Transport Scheme who would otherwise drive their children to school.	Eligible students participate fully in education and access to education is made equitable to all users. The number of private car journeys is also reduced.

While it will not be possible to measure the extent to which the final outcome of the School Transport Scheme is being achieved, the expectation (and the theory underpinning the scheme) is that the intermediate outcome will in turn contribute towards the achievement of the final outcome.

The next stage of the PLM is the development of indicators for each component of the logic model. Table 3.1 identified indicators for the main inputs, outputs and outcomes associated with the scheme. However, in order to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the scheme, it is necessary to establish performance indicators that link inputs to outputs (*efficiency* indicators) and outputs to outcomes (*effectiveness* indicators).

Each of the performance indicators identified for this review is linked to one or more ‘key questions’. These key questions help to identify the type of data that needs to be collated and interpreted in order to establish whether the scheme is operating efficiently and effectively. The tables below identify the performance indicators and the key questions that will be addressed in chapters 5 and 6 to track the performance indicators and thereby measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the School Transport Scheme.

Table 3.3: Performance indicators and key questions used to assess efficiency

Performance Indicator	Key question (s)
The unit cost per student transported	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is the current unit cost per student and how has this changed in recent years? ○ How does the unit cost compare to equivalent programmes elsewhere? ○ What are the key cost drivers behind the scheme?
Unit cost per student transported by Bus Éireann vs private contractor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is the unit cost per student transported by Bus Éireann compared to per student transported by private contractors?
Ratio of administrative staff employed on duties related to STS compared to students transported on the STS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is the ratio of administrative staff to the number of children transported in (i) Bus Éireann and (ii) School Transport Section.
Revenue raised through parental charges as a percentage of the full economic cost of school transport provision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How much revenue is raised through parental charges? ○ What is this as a proportion of the full economic cost of the scheme?

Table 3.4: Performance indicators and key questions used to assess effectiveness

Performance Indicator	Key question (s)
Proportion of target population that avails of the scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is the target population? ● Is the scheme targeting those people that are intended to be targeted by the scheme? ● How effective are the current eligibility criteria? ● Are there more effective criteria that could be used?
Number of students who would not otherwise have been able to attend school in the absence of the STS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How many students would not be able to attend school without the scheme? ● How many students would have had to travel by private car in the absence of the scheme?
Level of satisfaction among service users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How satisfied are the end users with the scheme? ● Does the administrative basis of the scheme impact on its effectiveness?
Extent of compliance with national safety requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How safe is the scheme?
Length of waiting /travel times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How long are travel times? ● How long are students left waiting for collection? ● Is there an optimum waiting/travel time?

3.4 Research Methodology

The final stage in the PLM process is to track the performance indicators, through data collection and interpretation, and assess the overall performance of the scheme or programme under review by collecting data/information through a variety of methods such as document analysis, case studies, surveys, interviews and focus groups.

The following six different but inter-related research methods were adopted in this review:

- *Document analysis*
- *Consultation process with transport providers and stakeholders*
- *Interviews with officials in Bus Éireann and School Transport Section*
- *Case studies*
- *Public submissions*
- *International comparison*

Chapter Four

Value for Money Review – Review of Objectives

4.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Terms of Reference for this Review include an examination of the current validity of the objectives of the School Transport Scheme, their compatibility with education policy and making recommendations on the Scheme.

The scheme was established on an administrative basis and this continues to be the case. There are three distinct components within the School Transport Scheme namely Primary, Post-Primary and for Children with Special Needs. This Chapter provides such an examination and appraisal by outlining each scheme's objectives and their evolution arising from changing demands since the establishment of the scheme in 1967.

4.2 Objectives of the Schemes

4.2.1. Objectives of the Primary School Transport Scheme from 1967:

The central tenets of earlier primary transport schemes dating from 1909, organised at individual school level, were adopted for the centrally CIÉ organised *primary* school transport scheme that was introduced in 1967 at the same time as the introduction of free post-primary education. These were:

- **To relieve hardship where children had to travel too far to their nearest school**
- **An alternative to continuance of small schools**

Following the establishment of the post-primary scheme, the subsequent Department circular letter 23.67 on the primary school transport scheme dealt with the organisation of the primary school services by CIE and eligibility criteria but did not explicitly set out these objectives.

4.2.2. Objectives of the Post-primary School Transport Scheme 1967:

The post-primary school transport scheme was introduced as part of a comprehensive package of measures, agreed by Government in November 1966, to support free education which also included free tuition, free books and maintenance.

The then Minister for Education Donagh O'Malley in his budget speech sets out the policy context for this measure viz. *"In the light of the Government decision to raise the school leaving age to 15 by 1970 and the policy of providing up to three years post-primary education for all children, it is absolutely essential to provide a State supported transport system to post-primary schools. Full scale attendance at post-primary schools could not be achieved in rural areas without a service because of the heavy burden which would fall on parents in respect of transport costs. Moreover, the rationalisation of post-primary educational facilities requires that we insist on reasonable sized units. But it will not be possible to adhere to the present policy of refusal to sanction smaller schools, which could not provide an adequate curriculum and would be un-economic in terms of buildings, equipment and teachers, unless transport is provided to larger centres.*

State assistance towards transport costs will have to be provided in respect of pupils attending both types of post-primary school. Primary, Vocational and Secondary pupils often travel on the same bus. No new principle would be involved in State subsidisation as in addition to travel scholarships awarded by VECs, the Department of Education already subsidises transport schemes in respect of national schools, special schools and the new comprehensive schools, while Roinn na Gaeltachta subsidises transport services in Gaeltacht areas”

The objective of the post-primary scheme, set out in the subsequent Department Circular Letter 2/67, was:

“ To provide equality of opportunity for children who have excessive distances to travel to the nearest post-primary school or who are unable to attend such a school because their homes are too far away

This wording was modified slightly the following year in Department circular 8/68 viz. *“To provide the opportunity of post-primary education for country children previously denied this opportunity because they lived too far away from the nearest post-primary school”*

Two special provisions were included within the scheme from the outset:

- a) *Education through the Irish Language:* Having regard to national policy on the Irish language, Department circular 2/67 stated that “A pupil who wishes to obtain post-primary education through Irish in an “A” school (or Gael Coláiste) will be allowed free transport to the nearest centre in which there is an “A” school (Gael Coláiste), provided a satisfactory and economic service can be made available”.

This approval was subject to the condition that there were a minimum of 7 eligible children before a special service was initiated to any centre

- b) *Provisions for Protestant Children:* In October 1969, following representations on behalf of the Protestant community the Minister for Education reviewed the operation of the post-primary scheme as it affected pupils attending Protestant secondary schools. He decided to allow Protestants the option of free transport to the nearest school under Protestant management, even though they lived within three miles of a vocational school. In effect, for transport purposes, in these instances transport eligibility is not restricted by catchment boundaries and it may mean that a pupil is crossing catchment boundaries to attend the nearest school under Protestant management. The eligibility criteria applied is that it is the nearest such school and that the requisite distance of 4.8kms from home to school is met.

4.2.3. Objectives of the Scheme for Children with Special Needs 1975

The genesis of the scheme dates back to 1975 when the Department of Education sought Department of Finance sanction to pay a special medical grant of £100 per annum to the parents of a child with spina bifida. The Department considered that *“a direct grant to the parents is the most economical way of providing educational facilities for the child”* taking into account the alternatives were residential accommodation in a hospital or the provision of home-tuition for the child. Sanction to proceed was given by the Department of Finance in December 1975.

Sanction was also given to pay similar grants in other equivalent circumstances. The Department of Finance sanction specified that *“the grant should, of course be reduced if the pupil concerned does not attend school for a substantial portion of the year for which it is paid.”*

It was envisaged that the grant would equate to about 50% of the cost of bringing a child to school. No family income criteria were applied in determining whether grants should be paid.

In 1996, arising from an Ombudsman's case, a Department leaflet "School Transport for Children with Special Needs" was published and circulated. The leaflet stated, inter alia, that *"The Department of Education and Science endeavours to provide suitable transport for all pupils attending special schools and special classes. In this regard, every effort will be made to ensure that no pupil is disadvantaged by the distance from a school or by their isolation from other special needs pupils"*

In November 2008, an updated school transport scheme for children with special needs was published stating that

"The purpose of the scheme is to provide a reasonable level of transport service for children with a diagnosed disability and/or special educational need, who, because of the nature of their disability, may not be in a position to avail of a school bus service which would be time-tabled to pick up other children along the route of service".

4.3. Evolution of the Original Objectives of the Scheme

Since 1967, other dimensions of the school transport scheme have evolved to include the following:

- Special arrangements for Traveller Children
- Extension of school transport to Multi-Denominational and Inter-Denominational schools
- Special summer arrangements for Special Needs Children with severe/profound disability and autism
- Transport for Asylum Seekers and Refugees.
- Transport of children to and from Respite Centres
- Transport for Foreign exchange students
- Transport of pupils from the border with Northern Ireland to post-primary schools
- Transport for over 18 year olds.

4.3.1 Special Scheme for Traveller Children:

Transport for Traveller children was organised by Special Education Section to meet what were considered exceptional circumstances for families. While no specific objective or the year of introduction was identified, transport arrangements took a wide range of individual circumstances into account.

4.3.2 Extension to Multi-Denominational and Inter-Denominational Primary Schools:

In 1989 the principle was established of transport being provided to parents who wished to send their children to a Multi /Inter Denominational school that is farther away than their nearest school. The Minister for Education decided that where parents opted that a pupil attend the nearest Multi/Inter denominational primary school which is not the pupil's nearest primary school, the pupil may be allowed free transport subject to the usual conditions of the primary school transport scheme. Where the Multi/Inter Denominational was the nearest, normal conditions applied.

The objective of the primary school transport scheme as follows *" To provide a basic level of service to those who would otherwise have difficulty in attending school regularly"* was referred to.

4.3.3 Summer Provision for Special Needs Children with severe/profound disability and autism:

The July Provision Scheme was first introduced in 1997. The scheme originally facilitated the option of a four week extension for all classes catering for children with severe and profound general learning disability. In 2001, the scheme was extended to include children with autism in special schools and classes and home based tuition was allocated to children attending schools which were not participating in the scheme.

4.3.4 Transport for Asylum Seekers and Refugees:

This demand-led dimension of the scheme was introduced circa 1999 to meet the needs of children accommodated in reception centres nationwide. BE school transport arrangements are generally used. This dimension is managed in conjunction with the Department representative working with the Reception Integration Agency.

The imperative was to provide school transport commensurate with need e.g. Mosney reception centre to suitable schools. Unlike any group of immigrants they do not have the means to pay for private transport arrangements, particularly since the introduction of the habitual residency conditions in 2005. The throughput of residents and processing of asylum seeker applications affects annual school transport demands.

From time to time, special transport has to be arranged for refugees who are part of the Government's re-settlement programme. These children are usually accommodated in houses and enrolled in schools, not necessarily the nearest to the place of residence.

4.3.5. Transport of children to Respite Centres

The early scheme for pupils with special needs evolved to include transport, on an incidental basis, for children attending special schools and residing in Respite Centres, either on a full time or part time basis. This arrangement dates back to the early 1980s and has continued over the years. It was allowed where it was feasible to do so without changing the nature of or adversely affecting the core school transport service on an "incidental basis", i.e. that it could be provided within an existing service, at no additional cost to the State or inconvenience to existing pupils. These arrangements arose from individual reports and requests from some special schools catering for children with special educational needs.

The current position is that transport is allowed for children who are in residential settings and the respite centre is their home/home for part of the week. Availability of this transport is currently determined by and confined to the existence of an existing transport service from the school to the respite centre and the availability of a seat on that service.

4.3.6 Transport for Foreign exchange students

The practice has evolved where foreign exchange students staying for a short term and attending post-primary education for a number of days or weeks are eligible for school transport under the normal conditions – students pay €9 per week or €1.80 per day. A foreign student staying for a year is charged the annual rate applicable.

4.3.7. Transport of pupils from the border with Northern Ireland to post-primary schools in Donegal

Subsequent to the introduction of the Department's Post-primary Transport Scheme in 1967, a tradition has been established whereby a small number of pupils from adjacent counties in Northern Ireland who travel across the Border to locations in County Donegal are provided with school transport on a concessionary basis (i.e. where places are available) to second level schools (Gaelcholáistí or second level schools with All-Irish Units) within County Donegal

provided they were otherwise eligible in terms of age and completion of primary education. These pupils make their own way to a pick-up point within the Irish State and pay the relevant charge.

In the 2008/09 school year, 9 pupils with addresses in Northern Ireland attended second-level schools that teach through the medium of Irish, in the Irish State.

4.3.8. Transport for over 18 year olds.

Three dimensions have evolved namely young adults attending post-primary/special schools in their 20th year, transport to rehabilitative training programmes on an “incidental basis” and incidental travel to Post Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs)/Youthreach.

BE figures for 2008/2009 show (based on the applications returned for post-primary transport) that the number of post-primary/special needs pupils born before 25th August 1989 on school transport arrangements was as follows:

Post-primary Senior Cycle pupils	: 123
Special Needs	: 95

From the 2009/2010 school year, School Transport section in conjunction with Special Needs Section has adopted a position that school transport services will continue to be provided for pupils who have been allocated a placement within a special class/special school or Department recognised unit for a further academic year to ensure the young person’s successful transition to adult services within the health services. In 2009/2010, 43 such placements were approved by Special Education Section.

Transport to Rehabilitative Training Programmes

Trainees attending rehabilitative training programmes have availed of school transport on an “incidental basis” i.e. if spare seats were available.

In July 1986, the Department wrote to principals of all special schools with training centres or day care units attached. The letter emphasised that only pupils attending special schools should be included on the school transport requisitions. It was stated that transport for trainees or day care students is a matter for the local health board (now HSE) but the letter acknowledged that “this Department has occasionally sanctioned transport on school buses in order to facilitate persons attending such centre, but only on an “incidental basis”, and subject to the following conditions:

- That there is spare capacity on the bus
- That no extra cost or mileage is incurred in catering for them
- They can no longer be accommodated should their seat be required for a school-going child
- They cannot be taken into account for the establishment or continuance of school service

In recent years in consideration of health and safety issues, while a small number of arrangements remain in place, the DES is no longer approving transport under these arrangements.

Transport to PLC’s/Youthreach

Transport was provided on an incidental basis to Youthreach centres for students aged 15-18 years of age and for students attending PLC courses. Department letters dated May 1997 and February 1999 outlined the terms and conditions under which this incidental travel was permitted. There was no charge applicable for students attending Youthreach Centres but students attending PLCs were required to pay the school transport charge. A review of the provision of school transport for pupils to attend Youthreach Centres and PLCs is currently being undertaken.

4.5. How does the scheme fit in with the current Department Strategy?

The mission statement of the Department of Education and Skills Strategy 2008-2010 is

“To provide for high-quality education, which will enable individuals to develop their full potential and to participate fully as members of society and contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development”

In pursuit of this mission one of the Departments four high level goals is *“To support and improve the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of education for every learner in our schools.* The following table shows the strategies and outputs for school transport associated with achievement of this goal.

Objective 1.1: Develop appropriate policy initiatives and responses to underpin the effective day to day management and operation of schools including the provision of a range of financial, staffing and administrative supports:

Strategy: Provide through Bus Éireann, a school transport service

Outputs:

- Safe and efficient school transport service operated by Bus Éireann within available resources
- Review the School transport scheme including catchment areas as provided for in the programme for Government
- Operate an Appeals system for students/parents in relation to school transport

Objective 1.5: Provision of targeted financial supports for learners with special needs

Strategy: Provision of targeted financial supports for learners with special needs

Output: Provision through Bus Éireann of school transport services, and transport grants for learners with special needs

A number of specific policy issues within the Department of Education and Skills impact on the demand led school transport scheme namely:

- Policy in relation to the Irish language
- Meeting religious choice and more broadly parental choice in relation to education ethos
- Forward Planning Policy in relation to new schools
- Supervision Agreements in place

These are dealt with in detail later in the Review.

4.6 How does the scheme fit in with broader Government Policy?

The School Transport Scheme was referred to under Action 14 of the *Government Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future 2009-2020*, particularly in relation to the distance eligibility criteria where it is not feasible to provide safe walkways and/or cycle paths. The focus, both in this policy and the National Cycle and Walking Strategies, which are also in line with the Government National Obesity Strategy, is to promote a modal shift in transport usage away from the car. The Renewed Programme for Government (October 2009) commits to vigorously pursuing the delivery of these policies.

In addition, a commitment is given in the Renewed Programme for Government to

- Roll out the Safe Routes to School Programme nationwide by 2012
and

- Exploring the provision of a full-scale transport system in rural Ireland using the network expertise of Bus Éireann, the physical infrastructure and personal resources of the school transport system and the financial resources currently being spent on transport by the HSE and the Department of Education and Skills.

Finally, in the context of spatial planning and the National Spatial Strategy the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in its submission to this Review states that “the provision of a school transport system is considered as a general principle to be an essential component in ensuring the accessibility of the education system to both urban and rural dwellers and achievement of high levels of participation”.

4.7. Ongoing relevance and validity of the scheme

The current objectives of the scheme continue to be around relieving hardship, especially for those children residing in rural areas who have to travel long distances to school and for children with special educational needs. The transport service continues to facilitate the amalgamation of schools and to support the choice of school in terms of language and ethos provisions as included in the scheme from the outset in 1967 or provisions which have evolved in the intervening period.

The ongoing relevance and validity of the scheme is considered by the Review Group and its deliberations in this regard are found in Chapter 7.

Chapter 5

School Transport Scheme Objectives – Cost and Efficiency of Achievement

5.1 Introduction

This Chapter sets out to identify the level and trend of costs and staffing resources associated with the School Transport Scheme and thereby comment on the *efficiency* with which the scheme has achieved its objectives (fourth term of reference).

An assessment of efficiency involves an examination of the relationship between inputs and outputs. The inputs and outputs, and the efficiency indicators used to measure the relationship between them, of the School Transport Scheme, were identified in chapter three as part of the application of the Programme Logic Model (PLM). The efficiency indicators identified in chapter three are reproduced below:

Table 5.1: Efficiency indicators

- Unit cost per pupil transported.
- Unit cost per special needs pupil.
- Unit cost per pupil transported by Bus Éireann vs. private contractor.
- Ratio of administrative staff employed on duties related to STS compared to pupils transported.
- Revenue raised through parental charges as a percentage of the full economic cost of school transport provision.

A series of key questions, designed to track these efficiency indicators will be addressed in this chapter in order to contribute to an overall assessment of the efficiency of the STS. This chapter concentrates on identifying *findings* from the analysis undertaken. Arising from these findings, a number of issues are identified that require further analysis and this is undertaken in Chapter Seven, where recommendations are also made for the future operation of the scheme. Chapter Eight details the performance indicators that will assist in the future monitoring of the scheme.

5.2 Key question 1: What is the current unit cost per student and how has this changed in recent years?

Table 5.2 below details expenditure on the School Transport Scheme (STS) in the period since 1997. The total outturn figure in column 8 of the table encompasses expenditure on the STS as well as the revenue raised from fare paying passengers. The figures in this column represent the full cost of the scheme and are therefore used as the basis for calculations in this chapter unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Expenditure trends on the School Transport Scheme

Between 1997 and 2008 expenditure on the STS rose by €138m or 249%. The level of increase has not been consistent. The largest increases occurred in 2006 (28% increase) and 2002 (23% increase). While the cost drivers behind the increase in expenditure since 1997 will be examined in Section 5.5, the specific increases in 2002 and 2006 are related in part to significant improvements that were introduced to the scheme in 2001 (in terms of a reduction in waiting times and a reduction in the minimum number threshold for establishing /maintaining a

service) and 2005 (safety improvements). The lowest increase in this period occurred in 1998 when there was an increase in expenditure of 3.6% over the previous year's outturn cost.

Comparison with overall expenditure by the Department of Education and Skills

Overall expenditure by the DES has risen by €6.1 billion since 1997, an increase of approximately 197%. In six of the eleven years for which data are available, the percentage rate of increase in school transport expenditure was greater than the increase in overall DES expenditure. In 2001 and 2002 the rate of increase in STS expenditure was almost double that of overall expenditure, while in 2006 it was three times higher.

Comparison with inflation rate

In the period since 1996, the overall inflation rate has risen by 49.2% whereas expenditure on the STS (since 1997) has risen by 249%. While the annual percentage increase in school transport expenditure has been considerably higher than the inflation rate in each year, it was more than eight times higher in 1999 and seven times higher in 2006.

The rate of increase in school transport expenditure has also been higher than the overall increase in the cost of transport services. *In the ten year period 1998 to 2008, the overall inflation rate for transport services was 48.5%. 'Transport services' comprises rail transport, road transport, bus fares, taxis, air transport and sea transport.*⁴ *Road transport inflation rate for the ten year period was 50.6% and bus fare inflation was 48%. However, the largest single increase in transport inflation occurred in relation to the cost of taxi services which increased by 115% since 1997.*

The rate of increase in the cost of the STS is considerably higher. Expenditure on the STS increased at a faster rate than the annual transport inflation rate in eight of the eleven years since 1997. In some years, the cost of the scheme rose by three times the annual transport inflation rate (1999 and 2002), four times (2005 and 2006) and even seven times (2001). In 2008, the cost of the STS increased by 8.6% while the annual transport inflation rate actually decreased by 8.8%.

⁴ Data supplied by Department of Transport, Transport Omnibus 2008, published November 2009, CSO

Table 5.2: Expenditure on School Transport Scheme, 1997-2008

(1) Year	(2) STS Outturn €	(3) % increase in STS outturn	(4) % increase in overall DES outturn	(5) STS outturn as % of total DES outturn	(6) Receipts from fare paying pupils €	(7) % increase in receipts from fare paying pupils	(8) Total cost of STS (including outturn cost and receipts from fare paying pupils) €	Receipts from fare paying pupils as % of total cost	(10) % increase in overall cost of STS	(11) % increase in annual inflation rate	(12) % increase in annual transport inflation rate
1997	49,571,631	-	-	1.59	6,020,000	-	55,591,631	10.83	-	-	-
1998	51,200,918	3.29	9.78	1.50	6,406,000	6.4	57,606,918	11.12	3.6	2.4	7.6
1999	57,977,510	13.24	7.42	1.58	6,429,000	0.3	64,406,510	9.98	11.8	1.6	3.3
2000	65,081,695	12.25	18.06	1.50	6,173,000	-4.0	71,254,695	8.66	10.6	5.6	4.4
2001	77,057,865	18.40	9.15	1.63	6,113,000	-1.0	83,170,865	7.35	16.7	4.9	2.6
2002	95,986,000	24.56	12.36	1.80	6,321,000	3.4	102,307,000	6.18	23.0	4.6	6.8
2003	101,732,742	5.99	9.34	1.75	6,461,000	2.2	108,193,742	5.97	5.8	3.5	8.5
2004	109,846,000	7.98	12.34	1.68	6,317,000	-2.2	116,163,000	5.44	7.4	2.2	5.8
2005	123,136,661	12.10	9.46	1.72	6,611,000	4.7	129,747,661	5.10	11.7	2.5	2.4
2006	159,683,745	29.68	9.41	2.04	6,634,000	0.3	166,317,745	3.99	28.2	4.0	6.7
2007	172,106,255	7.78	10.48	1.99	6,626,000	-0.1	178,732,255	3.71	7.5	4.9	11.9
2008	185,724,971	7.91	6.91	2.01	8,751,000	26.8	194,475,971	4.50	8.1	4.1	-8.8

Comparison with expenditure on public transport

For comparative purposes, the table below details the total cost of the individual CIE companies in 1997 and 2008. This comprises operating costs, subvention received and revenues.

Table 5.3: Total cost of CIE companies 1997 to 2008⁵

	Total cost €000	
	1997	2008
Iarnród Éireann	418,490	856,496
Bus Éireann	212,215	690,827
Dublin Bus	216,723	597,759
Total	847,428	2,145,082

Overall, expenditure on the STS has risen considerably faster than expenditure on the CIE group as a whole in the period since 1997 (249% compared to 153%), and also faster than each of the individual CIE companies. Of the CIE companies, Bus Éireann experienced the most significant increase in cost since 1997 – an increase of 226% - but this is still not as significant an increase as that experienced by the STS.

Impact of future enrolments

One factor that will influence the future cost of the STS is projected enrolment patterns. The latest data indicate that enrolments in primary and post-primary level could rise from approximately 500,000 and 310,000 respectively in the 2008/2009 school year to 545,000 and 320,000 in the 2013/2014 school year⁶ and that the upward trend will continue up until 2025. This would represent an increase of some 45,000 primary and 10,000 post-primary pupils over the next five years. Should this scenario be realised, and this is contingent on the continuation of a number of social and demographic trends that have been apparent in Irish society in recent years, this will have funding implications for the STS if the scheme continues to operate along the same lines as present.

For example, those children that are transported on the STS represented approximately 16.7% of the total school going population in 2008/09. If the same proportion of children require school transport into the future this will mean that there will be approximately 145,000 pupils being transported in 2013/2014 (i.e. 16.7% of the projected enrolments in that year). It will be indicated below that the overall current unit cost per child transported on the STS is €1,438 per child. Based on this unit cost, the STS would cost in the region of €208 million in 2013/2014 (i.e. €1,438 x 145,000) compared to the cost of €194 million in 2008.

Unit costs

The key indicator chosen to measure the efficiency of the School Transport Scheme is the overall unit cost per student transported. This is calculated by relating the number of pupils carried in a year to the total cost of providing the service for that year (i.e. the figures in column 8 in Table 5.2). This relates the major input to the scheme (the level of resources) to the major output (the number of pupils transported). It allows for some assessment of the efficiency with which the resources allocated to the scheme have been used over time.

⁵ Data supplied by Department of Transport.

⁶ Based on Data published on the website of the Department of Education and Science, *Projections of Full Time Enrolment in teaching institutions aided by the Department of Education and Science* (February 2010)

In relation to the number of pupils transported, it should be noted that the number of children availing of school transport services in a school year can vary from day to day or term to term (for example, for reasons explained in the next chapter, there is often a drop off in the number of post-primary pupils transported in the final term). Accordingly, the number of pupils in Table 5.4 below are averages of pupils availing of the service within the years identified.

Apart from the large volume of pupils transported, it is noticeable from Table 5.4 that the number of pupils transported decreased by 22,000 between 1997 and 2008. This represents a decline of 14% in those pupils using the STS, which is a more significant decrease, in relative terms, than the decrease in the general school going population which declined by 16,150 pupils or 1.9% during the same period.⁷ There was an additional decline of 10,000 in the number of pupils transported on the STS in 2009. This decrease is due to a combination of increased charges at post-primary level and a transition to an annual charge paid in two instalments from the previous system of paying by academic term.

What is most significant about the decrease in the number of pupils transported since 1997 is the fact that during the same period expenditure on the scheme has increased by €138m. The specific reasons for this, including the improvements in the quality of the service provided, will be examined in more detail later.

Table 5.4: Overall unit cost per pupil transported

Year	No. of pupils	Total cost	Unit cost	% increase	% increase in annual inflation rate	% increase in annual transport inflation rate
1997	157,000	€55,590,631	€354	-		-
1998	151,000	€57,606,918	€382	7.9	2.4	7.6
1999	145,000	€64,404,510	€444	16.2	1.6	3.3
2000	140,000	€71,254,695	€509	14.6	5.6	4.4
2001	142,000	€83,170,865	€586	15.1	4.9	2.6
2002	136,000	€102,307,000	€752	28.3	4.6	6.8
2003	138,000	€108,193,742	€784	4.3	3.5	8.5
2004	136,000	€116,163,000	€854	8.9	2.2	5.8
2005	136,000	€129,747,661	€954	11.7	2.5	2.4
2006	134,000	€166,317,745	€1,241	30.1	4.0	6.7
2007	136,000	€178,732,255	€1,314	5.9	4.9	11.9
2008	135,000	€194,124,971	€1,438	9.4	4.1	-8.8

Table 5.4 above outlines the unit cost per child for the period 1997 to 2008. However, there are a number of qualifications that must be acknowledged in interpreting this data. For example, this represents the *overall* unit cost per child transported. It does not distinguish between a primary and post-primary pupil, nor by category of pupil (e.g. mainstream, special needs etc). In addition, this represents an average unit cost. It is inevitable that, for some services, unit cost is considerably higher and for others considerably lower than the average. A short-range service to a large school will have a low unit cost whereas one involving a long, circuitous route through a sparsely populated region will have a high unit cost. Although effective operational management – through choosing the optimal vehicle, route planning and scheduling to maximise load factors – will attempt to minimise unit cost for the service for any given group of pupils, large variations in unit costs are inescapable as a consequence of large variations in population density.

The unit cost per child transported on the STS was €1,438 in 2008. This has increased from a unit cost of €354 in 1997, representing an increase of some 306%. This compares to the

⁷ Data supplied by Statistics Section, Department of Education and Science.

increase of 49.2% in the inflation rate since 1996 and an increase of 51.2% in the inflation rate for transport services. In addition, the increase of 306% in the unit cost since 1997 has occurred in spite of the fact that the number of pupils transported has fallen over this period.

The level of increase in unit cost has not been consistent. The largest increases occurred in 2002 and 2006, despite the fact that in both of these years the number of pupils transported declined from the previous year.

The increases in unit cost in 2002 and 2006 are related to significant alterations in the operation of the STS in 2001 and 2005. In 2001 the following alterations were made:

- A reduction in the minimum number of primary pupils needed to establish a service from 10 to 7 pupils;
- The threshold for maintaining a post-primary service was reduced from 7 to 4 eligible pupils, provided there is a minimum of 6 fare-paying pupils;
- At post-primary level, the combined daily travelling and waiting times were reduced from a maximum of 3 hours to 2.5 hours;
- The distance requirement for the Remote Area grants for primary and post-primary pupils was reduced from 4.8 kilometres to 3.2 kilometres; and
- The distance requirement from the nearest route was reduced from 4.8 kilometres to 3.2 kilometres in respect of fully eligible post-primary pupils;
- A reduction in the qualifying distance for primary pupils over 10 years of age from 4.8 to 3.2 kilometres in line with that which applies for under 10's;
- An increase in the rates of the Remote Area Grant; and
- A reduction in the loading capacity of some vehicles in the scheme.

These changes, in terms of expenditure, impacted the following year in 2002, when expenditure on the STS increased by 23%.

Similarly there were a number of enhanced safety measures introduced from September 2005. These included the following:

- The "3-for-2" seating arrangement was phased out on post-primary services by end December, 2005 and on primary services by end December, 2006.
- As a result of the ending of the "3 for 2" seating policy and allowing for a transitional arrangement to cater for the concessionary students, Bus Éireann was given approval to acquire 161 buses, including 50 new buses (delivered between 2005 and 2007). In addition, over 300 extra vehicles were hired from the private sector.
- A requirement that all buses engaged as part of the school transport scheme were equipped with safety belts.
- In August 2006, a safety information campaign was launched to make parents and children aware that it is the law to wear the safety belts provided on school buses.
- Vetting procedures were introduced for school bus drivers and revised procedures for school bus escorts on all services operating under the school transport scheme with effect from 1st September, 2006. (Vetting procedures were already in place for bus escorts and special needs assistants prior to September, 2006).
- A pilot Warning Flashing Light System on school buses was launched in Ennis in January, 2005.

The cost of introducing these measures contributed to the increase in expenditure on the scheme (28% increase) and in the rise in unit costs (30% increase) in 2006. There were other factors that contributed to these increases. These issues, including the expansion of transport services for pupils with special needs, are examined in Section 5.5.

While Table 5.4 outlined the *overall* unit cost per pupil travelled on the STS, the tables below provide the unit cost per primary and post-primary pupil for the specific period since 2006. These unit costs exclude costs relating to the provision of transport for pupils with special educational needs as this issue is analysed separately in Section 5.5.7

Table 5.5: Unit cost per primary pupil, 2006 - 2008.

	2006	2007	2008
Total expenditure on primary scheme (excluding expenditure on special needs transport)	€45,965,538	€50,926,821	€53,924,553
Number of primary pupils (excluding special needs pupils)	50,748	52,141	52,871
Unit cost per primary pupil (excluding special needs pupils)	€906	€977	€1,020

Table 5.6: Unit cost per post-primary pupil, 2006 - 2008.

	2006	2007	2008
Total expenditure on post-primary scheme (excluding expenditure on special needs transport)	€59,176,753	€65,773,683	€71,924,219
Number of post-primary pupils (excluding special needs pupils)	75,747	75,526	75,100
Unit cost per post-primary pupil (excluding special needs)	€781	€871	€958

There are two main findings that emerge from the tables above. In the first instance, the cost of transporting mainstream post-primary pupils is slightly less expensive than the cost of transporting mainstream primary pupils. The unit cost at post-primary was €62 less per pupil than the equivalent primary level unit cost in 2008.

The reason for the higher unit cost at primary level may arise from the fact that there are more, smaller sized buses, operating to more, smaller, schools at primary level.

The second point to note is that the unit cost of transporting a post-primary pupil is €958 per annum. The current school transport charge at post-primary level is €300 per pupil per annum. This charge represents 31% of the post-primary unit cost. There is currently no charge for primary pupils, with the exception of concessionary pupils, while the unit cost per primary pupil is €1,020 per annum.

Findings

1. Expenditure on school transport has risen by 249% in the period 1997 – 2008. The largest single increase occurred in 2006 when expenditure was almost 30% higher than in the previous year. This was mainly occasioned by significant improvements to the quality of the service that had been introduced in the previous year.
2. The increase in the cost of the STS has been greater than:
 - a. the increase in expenditure by the Department of Education and Skills as a whole: 249% compared to 197%.
 - b. the increase in expenditure on the CIE companies (as a whole and individually) in the period since 1997: 249% compared to 153% for CIE overall, and compared to 226% for Bus Éireann;
 - c. the rate of inflation. In the period since 1996, the inflation rate has risen by 49.2%, while the inflation rate for transport services rose by 51.2%.

3. The number of pupils transported has decreased by 22,000 in the period 1997 to 2008 while expenditure on the scheme has increased by some €138m.
4. The overall unit cost per child transported on the STS, including special needs costs, was €1,438 in 2008, an increase of 306% since 1997.
5. The cost of transporting post-primary pupils is slightly less expensive than the cost of transporting primary pupils.
6. The unit cost of transporting a mainstream post-primary pupil is €958 per annum. The current school transport charge at post-primary level is €300 per pupil per annum. This charge represents 31% of the post-primary unit cost. There is currently no charge for primary pupils, with the exception of concessionary pupils, while the unit cost per primary pupil is €1,020 per annum.

Key question 2: How does the School Transport Scheme compare to equivalent programmes elsewhere, particularly in relation to unit cost?

As part of this review, data was sought on the operation of school transport services in a number of other jurisdictions. Complete (or partially complete) responses were provided by the relevant authorities in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, New Zealand and the State/Province of Ontario while some information was provided by ten other jurisdictions.⁸

The data provided indicates that school transport services are operated on a fairly similar basis in all of the countries that supplied information.

- The main eligibility criteria for school transport in each jurisdiction is distance, with some distinctions between countries in relation to the actual qualifying distance and the age of the pupil for eligibility.
- As in Ireland, special provision is made for pupils who have been professionally assessed with special educational needs in the 5 jurisdictions that provided complete responses. Where such pupils are not able to travel on school buses provision is made for travel by taxi or other specialised vehicle.
- Special provision is also made available in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and New Zealand to facilitate pupils of minority religious / linguistic groups in attending schools that cater for their needs, with some restrictions in certain jurisdictions.
- As is the case with the STS, arrangements are in place in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and New Zealand, to provide a grant or a fuel allowance where it is not economically feasible to provide a service for otherwise eligible pupils.

There are also some important distinctions between the operation of the STS and other school transport services. In the first instance, school transport is free to eligible pupils in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, New Zealand and the State/Province of Ontario. It is also the case that responsibility for the operational element of the scheme is devolved to regional or local authorities in fourteen of the fifteen jurisdictions that provided information on this issue. Only in Bulgaria is the scheme managed centrally.

While the information provided by other jurisdictions is useful in contextualising the STS against international standards, it does not facilitate a direct cost comparison. However it is possible to compare the overall unit cost associated with transporting pupils under the STS with the unit cost per pupil transported on the school transport service in Northern Ireland.

5.3.1 Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland the five Education & Library Boards are required to make arrangements for the provision of transport and otherwise as they consider necessary for the purpose of

⁸ Sweden, Italy, Hungary, France, Finland, Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Latvia and Austria.

facilitating the attendance of pupils at grant-aided schools. The arrangements made by the Boards are subject to the approval of the Department of Education.

The arrangements are founded upon two eligibility criteria:

- (a) **Distance.** A pupil will only be eligible for transport assistance if he/she has enrolled at a school which is beyond the relevant distance criterion from the home: two miles for pupils of Primary age; three miles for pupils of post-Primary age, and have been unsuccessful in gaining a place at all suitable schools within the distance criteria; **and**
- (b) **Suitable school.** The term 'suitable school' has a precise definition. It is a school in one of the recognised (i.e. grant-aided) categories of Controlled, Integrated, Irish-medium, Maintained, Denominational or non-Denominational grammar. No other definition of 'suitable' is permitted within the current arrangements.

Having determined the number of pupils who are eligible for transport assistance and the location of their homes in relation to their chosen school, Boards then consider how best to provide that assistance. In making their consideration, Boards must have regard to Article 44 of The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 which indicates that pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents only in so far as this is compatible with the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.

In order to meet the terms of Article 44, Boards first consider providing transport assistance through one of the available forms of mass transport listed below in order of efficiency.

- (a) Translink bus network carries some 49,000 pupils on Ulsterbus (primarily rural) or Metro (town) buses. Translink provides two different forms of service (i) stage carriage service - a public service that carries adults and pupils; and, (ii) designated service - often referred to as a 'school bus'. Designated school buses are provided where there is a large number of pupils in one location (such as a town), or residing on a route between an initial location and a school, or where the number of pupils could not be accommodated by an existing stage carriage service.
- (b) Board buses carry 26,000 pupils.
- (c) Private operator buses carry 7,000 pupils.
- (d) The majority of the remaining pupils either travel by taxi, or their parents are paid an allowance in lieu of transport. In the majority of cases where taxis are provided, the recipient is a pupil with a statement of special educational needs and the terms of their statement requires such assistance.

The table below provides details of the cost of the school transport scheme in Northern Ireland, and the number of pupils transported, in the 2008/2009 school year.

Table 5.7: Unit cost on School Transport in Northern Ireland, 2008/2009

Mode of transport	Cost (£ stg)	Number of pupils
Board Vehicle	23,073,644	25,638
Private Hire Public transport	277,958	705
Lough Swilly / Bus Éireann	89,841	216
Ulsterbus	28,786,663	45,711
Citybus (Metro)	1,638,192	3,049
NI Railways	352,868	735
Taxi Hire	7,807,481	3,293
Privately operated coaches/minibus	5,886,616	7,178
Strangford/Rathlin ferry	12,060	105
Daily allowances provided to parents	1,635,365	2,764
Building maintenance	124,383	
Administration costs	1,918,465	
Other	2,628,500	
Income from Board vehicles	-432,961	
Capital costs of replacing buses	4,693,000	
Total cost	£78,492,075	89,394

The data indicate that in the 2008/2009 school year there were a total of 89,394 pupils transported at a total cost of £78.5 m. This gives a unit cost, calculated along the same lines as the unit cost in Table 5.4, of £878. Using the average exchange rate over the period September 2008 to June 2009, this equates to a unit cost of €1,015.⁹ The equivalent unit cost per pupil on the STS in 2008 (as outlined in Table 5.4) was €1,438. This indicates that the unit cost on the STS in 2008 was 42% more than the equivalent average unit cost on the school transport scheme in Northern Ireland in 2008/2009.

There are a number of caveats to this analysis. In the first instance, the reservations relating to the method of unit cost calculation remain the same as outlined earlier on page 6. In addition, there are issues of comparing like with like – it is not clear whether the type of routes covered by school buses in Northern Ireland, are exactly similar to those in the rest of Ireland. There are also issues relating to the differential in costs (e.g. salary costs, vehicle costs, diesel costs) and have not been factored into the unit cost calculation.¹⁰ However, while these limitations must be acknowledged, the two schemes are broadly similar in terms of criteria and the type of transport used, and the method of calculating the unit cost is the same.

There are two other issues to note from the table above. The first is the level of expenditure on the transport of special needs children. The data indicate that approximately £14.4 million was spent on transport of special needs pupils in Northern Ireland in 2008 / 2009. This means that approximately 19% of the cost of school transport services in Northern Ireland is incurred in this area compared to 34% of the total cost of the STS (see Table 5.18). While facilitating pupils with special needs involves considerable cost in both transport schemes, the proportion of expenditure in this area incurred under the STS is considerably higher than the equivalent scheme in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, the reliance on private contractors is relatively small in Northern Ireland in comparison to the STS. Expenditure on private contractors (encompassing private coaches /minibus operators and taxi hire) amounts to approximately 19% of expenditure on school transport in Northern Ireland, whereas payments to private contractors represent approximately 60% of the cost of the STS. In addition, only 12% of pupils transported on school transport services in Northern Ireland are transported by private operators (privately operated coaches / minibuses and taxis) compared to 65% in the STS.

⁹ Average exchange rate £ to € from 01.09.2008 to 30.06.09 was 1.15545.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the data provided for the school transport scheme in Northern Ireland in 2008/2009 do not include capital costs or depreciation whereas the figures provided in relation to the School Transport Scheme include the cost of depreciation.

5.3.2 United Kingdom¹¹

Gross expenditure by local authorities on home to school transport now exceeds £1billion for England and is estimated to be £1.3 billion for 2008/9 for the UK overall. This has risen considerably faster than the rate of inflation over the past twenty years – more than doubling in real terms in that period.

Likewise, home to school transport expenditure by authorities in Wales has been rising, from approximately £77 million in 2002/3 to more than £102.2 million in 2007/8 (a 33% increase, compared to more than 40% in England during the same period).

The largest element of this remains transport for pupils attending secondary school, but expenditure for special needs transport has increased from less than £19 million to over £26 million during the past five years. In Scotland, expenditure during that time has increased from £105 million to £139 million (a similar increase of 33%).

The marked trend throughout the 1980s and 1990s was for special needs transport (both to special schools and into mainstream schools for pupils with special needs) to account for an increasing proportion of expenditure. Since the mid-1980s, whilst there has been a nearly fivefold increase in home to school transport expenditure, there has been almost an eightfold increase in special needs expenditure. Budget summaries show this has levelled off since 2005, with special needs transport expenditure typically 55% of overall home to school transport expenditure.

More recent increases appear to be due to primary school pupils accounting for a larger proportion of home to school transport. Unit costs have more than doubled in real terms in the past 15 years, and now exceed £1,000 per pupil transported per annum in England.

The proportion of children receiving local authority transport has remained largely stable – at about 12-13% of the overall population, rising slightly in England and Wales, reflecting changes to entitlement legislation, and falling in Scotland, reflecting reduced use of discretionary powers.

There appears to have been a significant change in the way children in receipt of home to school transport travel, with reducing levels of use of local bus services and increasing use of contracted services.

Table 5.8 U.K Unit Cost – home to school transport 2008/9

Average Cost per pupil transported		
England	£1,088	€1,257
Wales	£911	€1,053
Scotland	£993	€1,078

Findings

1. Comparison with the school transport services operated by the Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland indicates that the average unit cost per child transported is approximately 42% less than the equivalent cost on the STS.
2. Expenditure on special needs transport, as a proportion of the total cost of school transport services, is significantly higher under the STS than in Northern Ireland.
3. Expenditure on private contractors amounts to approximately 19% of expenditure on school transport in Northern Ireland, compared to approximately 60% of the cost of the

¹¹ Data taken from “School Transport: Policy and Practice” (2009) by Sian Thornthwaite

STS. Only 12% of pupils transported on school transport services in Northern Ireland are transported by private operators compared to 65% in the STS.

4. School transport costs per pupil in the U.K. also show that the unit cost is less than that on the STS with England approximately 14% less, Wales 37% less and Scotland 33% less.

5.4 Key question 3: What is the unit cost per pupil transported by Bus Éireann compared to per pupil transported by private contractors?

Services under the STS are provided either directly by Bus Éireann or by private contractors that are engaged through Bus Éireann. The table below identifies the number of pupils carried by each category of service operator and indicates that the proportion of pupils carried by private contractors has increased from 48% in 1997 to 65% in 2008.

Table 5.9: Number of pupils carried by Bus Éireann and by Private Contractors, 1997 to 2008.

YEAR	Bus Éireann	Contractors	Total	Split (%)
1997	68669	62880	131549	52/ 48
1998	65493	62135	127628	51/ 49
1999	61507	62054	123561	50/ 50
2000	56075	63384	119459	47 / 53
2001	53733	67726	121459	44 / 56
2002	50631	67716	118347	43 / 57
2003	51273	68898	120171	43/ 57
2004	50009	69202	119211	42/ 58
2005	47574	72036	119610	40/ 60
2006	44509	74700	119209	37/ 63
2007	43261	76981	120242	36 / 64
2008	42306	78394	120700	35 / 65

The difference between the total column in this table and the number of pupils identified in Table 5.4 arises from the fact that (i) the figures in this table relate to eligible pupils only – approximately 5,000 concessionary pupils are not recorded as it is not possible to identify whether such pupils are transported by Bus Éireann or private contractors and (ii) the table above also does not include the 9,000 pupils (approximately) who travel on scheduled Dublin Bus/Irish Rail/Bus Éireann/Private Operated scheduled services.

There are two main reasons for the growth in the share of the STS operated directly by private contractors. In the first instance, in managing the overall operation of the scheme, it has become Bus Éireann policy in recent years that all new services are fulfilled by contractors, except in situations where no suitable private bus operators express an interest or where quotations received are considered by Bus Éireann to be unreasonably expensive.

In addition, the number of new services required for children with special needs has increased dramatically in recent years as more specialised and individual tailor made services have been provided. In general, all special needs services are provided by contractors.

The trend in the number of pupils carried by Bus Éireann and private contractors is mirrored in the number of vehicles engaged by both providers. As outlined below, there has been an increase of approximately 1,000 private contractor vehicles since October 2003 while the number of Bus Éireann vehicles engaged in school transport services has decreased by 8 in the same period. Not all of the Bus Éireann buses engaged in school transport services are actively engaged on a full time basis. A number of these buses remain in reserve in the event of breakdowns or if private contractors cannot provide a service at any particular time.

Table 5.10: Total number of vehicles engaged in STS by operator

	October 2003		October / November 2008*	
	Bus Éireann	Private Contractors	Bus Éireann	Private Contractors
Large Buses Over 35 adult seats	628	465	622	635
Medium Buses Up to 34 adult seats	0	432	0	696
Mini Buses Up to 18 adult seats	2	1031	0	1334
Taxis	0	406	0	662
Total	630	2334	622	3327

* Bus Éireann data relates to October 2008, Private contractor data relates to November 2008

Overall, there has been an increase of 33% in the number of vehicles engaged in the STS since October 2003. Over the same period, the number of pupils transported has declined by 3,000. The explanation for the significant increase in the number of vehicles engaged in the scheme is twofold.

In the first instance, between 2003 and 2009 the accommodation ratio was amended from three pupils per two adult seats to a one pupil per adult seat position, with the result that more buses and more trips were needed to carry children who were already on board services.

Secondly, the growth in the provision of services for children with special needs has also been a significant factor in the increase in the number of vehicles engaged in the STS. This is particularly evident in relation to taxis, as many children with special needs require individualised transport in taxis. As indicated in the table above, there has been a 63% increase in the number of taxis engaged since 2003.

The fact that services are provided by both Bus Éireann and by private contractors should facilitate an analysis of the relative cost efficiency of the public and private sectors in terms of transporting children under the STS. However, Bus Éireann and private contractors do not compete for the same routes, as Bus Éireann organises the scheme as a whole on behalf of the DES and therefore decides which routes it will operate and which routes will be offered for tender to private contractors (as outlined earlier, all new routes are offered for tender to private contractors). In effect, therefore, it is not possible to compare Bus Éireann and private contractor costs for identical routes. In practice, no two routes are exactly the same and this may mean that the costs are not being compared on a strictly equitable basis.

Similarly, the type of vehicles operated by Bus Éireann and private contractors is an important consideration. As the tables above indicate, Bus Éireann tends to operate larger vehicles while private contractors use a mixture of large, medium sized and smaller vehicles. It is likely that there will be variations between the operating costs associated with different vehicle sizes. Again, this raises the issue of comparability and whether it is possible to compare public and private provision on a like for like basis.

Despite these caveats, details provided to the group on the cost per mile associated with the transport of pupils on large buses by both Bus Éireann and private contractors excluding costs relating to Bus Éireann management of the school transport scheme and inspection costs show that the private contractor cost per mile at both primary and post-primary levels are on average 21 % less than the equivalent Bus Éireann costs. Given the importance of the inspection functions as part of the school transport scheme, the group considered that the most useful direct comparison was between Bus Éireann and private contractor costs including these inspection functions of all services undertaken by Bus Éireann personnel. Using this basis, the private contractor cost per mile is approx 19 % less than the equivalent Bus Éireann costs.

Using the child week¹² as the basis for comparison, including the BE inspection functions, this shows that BE costs per child week are 15% and 11% less at primary and post-primary respectively than private contractor costs.

The analysis of unit costs leads on to the broader question of procurement mix and specifically, whether there are any efficiencies to be gained by a different mix of public and private sector provision of school transport services.

At the time the STS was introduced in the late 1960s, there was no real alternative to engaging CIÉ (now Bus Éireann) to support and manage the roll out and provision of the STS. The only practical option at that time was the one adopted, namely, to operate the scheme chiefly through CIÉ (and to avail of its infrastructure of supporting services and the experience of its staff) in conjunction with the TLOs and the staff of the Department.

The scope of the work carried out by Bus Éireann goes beyond the direct provision of school buses and recruiting private contractors. The company plans and manages the countrywide network on behalf of the Department, to ensure that services are provided in line with the specific requirements of the Department. In fulfilling its mandate, Bus Éireann and its network of regional offices discharge the following functions:

- annual review of every route to reflect the changes in pupil turnover;
- safety assessments of every route and all pick up points
- planning the provision of new services, including route itineraries and scheduling;
- continuous monitoring of contractor operations;
- contracting private operators and payment of contractor accounts;
- assessment of pupil eligibility;
- collection and accounting for pupil contributions;
- issue of tickets/passes to pupils;
- planning and deploying the fleet of Bus Éireann vehicles;
- day-to-day supervision and monitoring of service performance and standards;
- all administrative support necessary for the operation of the scheme and its accountability as a State service
- Garda vetting of all drivers involved in school transport duties in conjunction with the Garda Síochána Central Vetting Unit
- ensure, before engaging contractors, that every contractor, driver and vehicle procured meets all relevant standards and legislative requirements.

The chief advantage of these extended agency arrangements is that the services are unified within a single large organisation with countrywide resources and representation, which relieves the Department of a wide range of responsibilities. It also relieves the private operators of any responsibility other than simply providing the transport services for which they have been contracted and it allows for some degree of supervision of their activities and performance. Bus Éireann, by virtue of its capacity both for school and general public passenger bus services, can provide back up vehicles when breakdowns occur, to a degree which would not normally be possible for a single private operator.

As noted earlier, operational responsibility for school transport services in other jurisdictions has been devolved to regional or local authorities with the role of central Government limited largely to policy making issues. In effect, Bus Éireann currently fulfils this operational responsibility on behalf of the Department.

Different views have been expressed to the Review Group on the issue of whether there is additional capacity among private contractors to provide school transport services. Bus Éireann has pointed to their policy that all new services are fulfilled by contractors wherever

¹² Child weeks are based on the number of valid school transport tickets on issue at the time of computing the revenue. Each ticket on issue during a normal school week irrespective of the duration of its availability is counted as one child week

possible. In accordance with this policy, Bus Éireann operates an annual process inviting applications from private contractors interested in providing a school transport service. Bus Éireann has indicated to the Review Group that the number of private bus operators that apply to be considered for the provision of school transport service has been below the number required for the past ten years and that this implies that there is not sufficient capacity to further increase the private sector share of the provision of school transport services. Bus Éireann has also highlighted the fact that a proportion of those operators who do apply for consideration under the STS do not meet the appropriate standards (viz. seat belts, vehicles, tax compliance) to qualify them to operate school transport services. An additional factor of relevance here is the fact that the level of interest from private contractors is unevenly spread across the country, depending on the perceived attractiveness of a particular route and the ability of individual contractors to provide services in a particular area, among other factors. However, Bus Éireann concedes that the change in the current economic climate is now leading to a situation where school transport work is more valued among private contractors.¹³

Groups representing private contractors have expressed a contrary view to the Review Group. Both the Federation of Transport Operators (FOTO) and the Coach Tourism and Transport Council (CTTC) have expressed an interest in increasing the private sector role in the provision of school transport services. They advocate a scenario where Bus Éireann retains its position as network manager of the service, and continues to have responsibility for administrative issues such as planning routes, issuing tickets, and ensuring appropriate standards are maintained, but that all routes are operated by the private sector. The private contractors argue that there is sufficient extra capacity to facilitate an expansion of the role of the private sector in the school transport scheme but they point to the annual nature of the contract for school transport routes as a disincentive to many operators as it is difficult to obtain the finances necessary to support investment in new or second hand buses on the basis of a one year contract. In their view if longer 2-5 year contracts were offered, more contractors, particularly with larger buses, may express an interest in participating.¹⁴

Findings

1. The proportion of the scheme operated by private contractors has increased significantly in recent years. In 2008, private contractors carried two thirds of all pupils transported on the scheme. This is due to the fact that it is now Bus Éireann policy to contract out all new services to contractors wherever possible and the increase in special needs transport which is almost exclusively undertaken by private contractors.
2. There has been an increase of 33% in the number of vehicles engaged in the STS since 2003 while the number of pupils transported has declined by 3,000. This is due mainly to the abolition of the 3 for 2 seating policy and the growth in special needs transport.
3. The data indicate that the private contractor cost per mile on large buses at both primary and post-primary levels are on average 21 % less than the equivalent Bus Éireann costs, when costs relating to inspection costs are excluded, and approx 19 % less when inspection costs are included.
4. There are differences of opinion among school transport providers about the scope that exists for further private sector involvement in the scheme. While Bus Éireann suggests that there is not sufficient capacity to increase the private sector share of school transport services, groups representing private contractors have recommended a greater level of private sector involvement in the scheme and have

¹³ Bus Éireann submission to VFM Review Group, pp. 20-21 and views expressed in a consultative session held on 15th. October 2009

¹⁴ The views of Bus Éireann, FOTO and the CTTC were expressed to the Review Group in written submissions and in a consultative session held on 15th. October 2009.

argued that this could be facilitated through a more extensive open tendering process and longer term contracts.

5.5 Key question 4: What are the key cost drivers behind the STS?

In order to identify the main cost drivers responsible for the upward trend in the cost of the STS it is necessary to examine a specific breakdown of expenditure on the scheme. This is provided in the table below for the period 2000 – 2008.

Table 5.11: Detailed breakdown of expenditure on STS, 2000 – 2008

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
	€M	€M	€M	€M	€M	€M	€M	€M	
1. Payments to Contractors: ST services	33.27	40.67	47.28	52.92	55.40	64.04	80.23	96.45	108.927
2. BE: School Bus Scheme									
- BE Driver Costs	5.78	6.97	7.90	8.15	8.27	8.63	8.77	8.87	10.312
- BE Running Costs	10.23	11.30	14.70	13.77	13.61	14.48	17.65	18.00	19.108
- Depreciation, Tax & Insurance	3.21	2.77	5.17	4.05	4.07	4.32	3.92	3.01	3.06
	19.22	21.04	27.77	25.97	25.95	27.43	30.34	29.88	32.48
3. BE: Management/Supervision of All Services (BE and contractor operated)	3.73	4.20	5.24	4.85	4.92	5.25	5.82	6.00	6.768
4. Cost of tickets issued on Scheduled Services -Dublin Bus/BE/Irish Rail/Private Op Scheduled	3.05	3.10	3.41	3.76	3.71	3.56	3.49	3.61	3.635
5. BE: Allocation of Shared Costs	7.03	8.30	10.00	10.55	10.89	12.31	14.84	16.84	*18.965
TOTAL COSTS – BE	66.30	77.31	93.70	98.05	100.87	112.59	134.72	152.78	170.775
Income from pupil charges	6.173	6.113	6.321	6.461	6.317	6.611	6.634	6.626	8.751
Grants paid by School Transport Section including escorts	4.946	5.713	8.607	9.126	15.288	12.583	15.742	19.618	21.184
Acquisition of school buses	0	0	0	0	0	3.70	12.9	7.7	0.3
Retrofit/Visual Inspection/ Media campaigns	0	0	0	0	0	0	6.3	1.1	0
Overall STransport Expenditure	65.073	76.910	95.986	100.715	109.841	122.262	163.028	174.572	185.508

Note: (i) Grants paid by STS 2000 – 2004 are estimates; (ii) any small differences between the overall total figures in table above and those figures in column 2 of Table 5.2 arise from fact that figures above are from Bus Éireann audited accounts while figures in Table 5.2 are from DES and differences can arise due to the timing of payments from the DES to Bus Éireann. * does not include a reduction of €500k agreed in 2008

From Table 5.12 it is clear that the main recurrent cost drivers behind the STS, in terms of significance, are the payments to contractors, the grants paid by School Transport Section, Bus Éireann running costs, the Bus Éireann allocation of shared costs and Bus Éireann driver costs. These costs are analysed in turn below.

Also analysed below are some of the policy / scheme design issues that have been identified separately, either from previous reports on the STS, from discussion with School Transport Section, or in submissions to the VFM steering group, as potentially having a significant bearing on the overall scheme costs. These include the costs arising from the provision of transport for special needs pupils, the Transport Liaison Officers, the closed school rule, the minimum numbers required to establish/maintain a service, the catchment boundary system, and catering for parental choice in terms of school ethos/language.

5.5.1 Payments to Contractors

This is the single largest area of expenditure in the STS, amounting to approximately 60% of the cost of the entire scheme in 2008. There has been an overall increase in the level of such payments of 227% in the period since 2000. The increase in expenditure in this area is linked to the following:

- Bus Éireann policy in recent years has been to increase the proportion of the STS that is provided directly by private contractors.
- Private contractors tend to operate mini buses, medium sized vehicles and taxis which invariably have a higher unit cost than larger buses. In particular the increase of 63% in the number of taxis employed since 2003 (Table 5.10) suggests that this is one clear reason for the rise in payments to contractors. It was noted earlier (page 7) that the inflation rate associated with taxi fares is in the region of 115% since 1997.
- While the number of pupils transported on school transport services has declined by 5,000 since 2000, the number of pupils transported by private contractors has actually increased by almost 15,000 pupils in the same period (Table 5.9).

5.5.2 Grants paid by School Transport Section

The Department of Education and Skills administers a number of grants related to the STS. These grants, details of which were outlined in chapter two, are targeted at pupils with special needs, pupils who live long distances from their nearest school or from their near suitable school in terms of denominational or linguistic ethos, asylum seekers and Travellers.

In relation to medical grants, these are paid where:

- Bus Éireann is not in a position to arrange a reasonable level of transport for the child.
- The nature of the disability is such that the child would be unable to avail of a school bus service which would be timetabled to pick up other children along the route of the service.
- An escort is considered necessary and the provision of such support is feasible
- The cost of establishing a service is prohibitive.

In these cases the levels of grant are higher than the Remote Area and the Scheme D schemes and are provided on the basis of at least 80% of attendance in a particular school year. Pro rata deductions are made for less than 80% attendance.

Since 1997, the Department has also dealt with hardship cases and this is a flat rate of grant payable instead of the medical grant on hardship grounds. The normal financial amounts in terms of grant payments are exceeded in the following circumstances:

- Where the Department is not in a position to provide a school transport service due to excessive costs, and where the maximum level of grant offer does not cover the assessed cost of the journey involved.

- Following investigation of an appeal the Department is satisfied that the child parents/guardians were not in a position to transport the child, or that the circumstances of the family were such that hardship would be involved by requiring the family to pay for private transport.

In such cases, a grant at a rate of 0.39 cent per kilometre currently applies. These grants are paid on the basis of a parent undertaking four journeys. Where payments under the enhancement grant are more beneficial, the practice is that most families claim this and are provided with this.

Details of expenditure on the individual grants that are related to the School Transport Scheme are outlined in the table below. Also included is the number of payments made under each grant scheme in 2008 as well as the number of grant recipients.

Significant elements of the grants paid by the School Transport Section relate to escorts for special needs children. In 2008, expenditure on escorts was in the region of €15 million. These grants are analysed separately in the later section on special needs expenditure and are not reflected in the analysis in this section.

Table 5.12. Direct and Indirect Expenditure by School Transport Section, 2006 - 2008

	2006	2007	2008	No. of payees 2008	No. of payments 2008
PRIMARY					
Special Needs Grant (Enhanced medical grant)	1,944,086	2,203,727	2,359,414	440	1,360
Medical Grant	358,961	296,934	174,114	194	214
Remote Area Grant Scheme	555,342	580,722	529,823	838	894
Traveller Transport	53,982	84,562	26,563	4	21
Traveller Transport (exp by Special Education Section)	1,731,755	1,719,023	1,623,845	58	306
Asylum seekers	89,997	110,494	95,827	5	21
Scheme D	163,208	183,307	189,866	1	1
<i>Subtotal</i>	4,897,331	5,178,769	4,999,452	1540	2817
Post-primary					
Special Needs Grant (Enhanced medical grant)	153,012	188,248	258,844	72	128
Medical Grant	49,382	54,598	54,216	54	56
Remote Area Grant Scheme	93,868	109,396	104,024	151	157
Traveller Transport	127,623	54,598	75,934	4	8
Asylum seekers	750	1,348	1,336	1	2
Transport Liaison Officers	185,480	731,655	122,864	32	32
<i>Subtotal</i>	610,115	1,139,843	245,728	314	383
Total	5,507,446	6,318,612	5,245,180	1854	3200

There are a number of points that emerge from analysis of expenditure in this area.

- In the first instance, the grants paid relating to the School Transport Section as outlined above are not significant in the context of overall expenditure on the STS, representing less than two percent of the total cost of the scheme in 2008. (However, as noted earlier, this does not include the payments to escorts which are analysed separately later in the section on special needs).

- Expenditure on particular grants is inconsistent from year to year. For example, expenditure on transport for Travellers at primary level increased in 2007 but decreased again in 2008 while there has been a decline of more than 50% in Medical Grant payments at primary level over the same period.
- A total of €3.87million was disbursed under the six grant schemes referred to in the table above in 2008. This money was paid to a total of 1,854 individuals and a total of 3,200 payments were made as some recipients received more than one payment. This is a very high number of transactions for a relatively small sum of money and the processing of these transactions creates a significant administrative burden for staff working in the School Transport Section.
- None of the grant schemes under consideration here are means tested. The Remote Area Grant Scheme and the Scheme D grant are based primarily on distance from a suitable school or a pick up point. Similarly there is no link to disadvantage in the Medical Grant scheme as assessment is based on access to a transport service and the medical needs of the child. There is a clearer link to disadvantage in the Enhanced Medical Grant as this is targeted at 'hardship' cases but there is no clear definition of what constitutes hardship, whether this is economic or physical hardship, and in practice it tends to be linked more to special needs than disadvantage. The only schemes where there is a link to disadvantage, as opposed to distance from school, are the Asylum seekers and Traveller grant schemes which are targeted at specific sectors of society in order to promote social inclusion. The fact that eligibility for these grant schemes is primarily on the basis of distance is perhaps inevitable given that the scheme as initially envisaged was designed to tackle physical rather than economic hardship (this issue is discussed in chapter six) but whether this should continue to be the case will be the subject of further consideration in chapter seven.
- There are maximum grant levels payable under the Remote Area Grant / Scheme D (€933 at primary, €852 at post-primary) and the Medical Grant Scheme (€2,100 per annum). There are no maximum thresholds in the Enhanced Medical Grant.

5.5.3 Bus Éireann allocation of shared costs

This refers to the administration charge paid by the DES to Bus Éireann on an annual basis in relation to overhead and other indirect costs attributable to work carried out in administering the School Transport Scheme. This payment has increased by 170% since 2000, from €7.03m to €18.965m. The level of the charge fluctuates according to the level of expenditure incurred by Bus Éireann in any particular year and there were significant increases in 2001 (18%), 2002 (20%) and 2006 (21%) owing to the rise in expenditure in these years. These increases have occurred in spite of the fact that in the period since 2000 the number of pupils transported on the STS has declined by 5,000 pupils.

There have been discussions between Department officials and Bus Éireann about the nature and level of the administration charge in recent years. This has resulted in a reduction in the charge by €0.5m and €0.75m in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Consultants were engaged to examine the methodology behind the administration charge and also to identify potential alternative methods of calculating the appropriate charge to the DES from Bus Éireann for supporting the administration and organisation of the STS.

The consultants report concludes that the administration charge originally agreed between the DES and CIÉ in 1975 represents a simple and transparent mechanism for developing a budget to cover the overheads and indirect costs of the STS. However, the formula does assume that indirect costs vary proportionally with direct costs, and in so doing, creates a single budgetary pool within which the operator must recover all related costs including one-off projects. The consultants are of the view that a more complex costing adopting some of the principles of activity-based costing may reveal a more appropriate apportionment methodology than is currently used and that such a costing may derive a different monetary result. In the longer term such a costing may best be partially automated, particularly in relation to cost drivers, if it is to be used for budget setting or monitoring. While recognising that there may be costs associated

with developing a new budgetary system, the Report concludes that the costing of the indirect and overheads costs of the STS can be developed substantially from the existing arrangements and recommends the adoption of a new approach that centres around a bottom-up budget for indirect costs and overheads that has the facility to allow for both one-off costs and an agreed risk element, with these being updated on a rolling incremental basis with periodic zero-basing exercises.

Given that contractors payments are now a large and highly material cost to the STS, the report considered that further analysis and meaningful separation into sub-categories or separated from Bus Éireann expenditure entirely would be beneficial to users of the STS financial information. In particular, separation of the “in house” and the contractors’ services was considered beneficial to enable benchmarking to be carried out.

5.5.4 Bus Éireann running costs

This category of expenditure comprises costs associated with the operation and maintenance of the STS fleet. It includes costs relating to diesel as well as maintenance and servicing costs.

Overall, there has been an increase of some 87% in expenditure in this area since 2000. There were significantly large increases in 2002 (30%) and 2006 (21%).

It is noteworthy that the increase in running costs over the period since 2000 has coincided with a decline in the number of Bus Éireann vehicles engaged in the STS. The number of such vehicles has declined from 630 in 2003 to 622 in October 2008 and the number of pupils transported by Bus Éireann has declined by 14,000 in that period (as per Table 5.9).

Bus Éireann have attributed the increase in running costs to an increase of 76% in maintenance costs and a 130% increase in fuel costs in the period since 2000, as per the table below.

Table 5.13: Breakdown of Bus Éireann running costs 2000 - 2008

	2000	2008	Increase	% increase
Maintenance	8.222 m	14.488 m	6.266 m	76%
Fuel	2.011 m	4.620 m	2.609 m	130%
Total	10.233 m	19.108 m	8.875 m	87%

Bus Éireann have attributed the increase in maintenance costs to a number of different factors. These include the following:

- Increasing the vehicle safety inspection intervals from a 12 week interval to a 6 week interval from 2005. This gave rise to an overall increase in the number of maintenance checks on school buses contributing to considerable increases in overall maintenance costs.
- Introduction of internal vehicle standards and maintenance compliance audits as part of the overall Bus Éireann Maintenance Audit system. Bus Éireann engaged the services of an Independent Fleet Auditing company (UK based FTA) to audit vehicle standards and maintenance system compliance in relation to both Bus Éireann school and road passenger service bus fleets, and in regard to private contractors operating the STS. Other maintenance processes such as wheel tightening procedures and ABS system check procedures were also reviewed and are subjected to much tighter quality control.
- The addition of additional safety features on buses such as ABS, and emergency door automatic locks fitted to more modern vehicles which prevent children falling out of vehicles while in transit.
- Retrofitting of fire suppression systems to the engine bay area of all Bus Éireann school bus vehicles in order to overcome any potential for fires breaking out on bus engines, and the maintenance of these suppression systems.

- The elimination of '3 for 2' seating and the introduction of seat belts has given rise to additional cost associated with maintaining the seat belts in good condition which did not apply heretofore.
- The change from onsite testing of Bus Éireann vehicles, as part of the annual DoEHLG test, in Bus Éireann garages to independent testing of the vehicles in independent authorised test centres gave rise to additional logistical costs.
- Additional maintenance costs arising from more advanced technology on modern vehicles, including better electrical systems, on-board-electronics, more complex braking systems, technologically advanced engines etc. The depth of maintenance involved in relation to these systems also contributes to increased training costs and general maintenance requirements.

5.5.5 Bus Éireann driver costs

Drivers are employed by Bus Éireann on a part-time basis, being paid by the hour for hours worked. The total cost associated with Bus Éireann drivers working on the STS, is outlined in the table below.

Table 5.14: Number and cost of Bus Éireann drivers, 2000 – 2008

Year	Driver costs (€M)	No. of drivers
2000	5.78	570
2001	6.97	544
2002	7.90	548
2003	8.15	545
2004	8.27	552
2005	8/63	543
2006	8.77	536
2007	8.87	538
2008	10.312	539

Since 2000, the number of drivers has decreased, by 31, which is in line with the reduction in the number of school transport services operated directly by Bus Éireann. Over the same period, driver costs have risen by 78%. It is therefore an increase in wages and salaries, rather than an increase in the number of drivers employed on STS related duties, that accounts for the increase in driver costs.¹⁵

There is no directly comparable data that allow for the increase in driver costs in Bus Éireann to be contextualised. However, data is available from the CSO that can be used as indicators of wage increases in comparable sectors during this period. Data collated by the CSO on average weekly earnings in distribution and business services contains a classification on 'land transport' and commercial semi state workers for the period 2000 to 2008 is outlined in the table below.

¹⁵ It was not possible to obtain a breakdown of the number of driver hours per annum.

Table 5.15: Average weekly earnings in ‘land transport’, and commercial semi state workers, 2000 and 2008¹⁶

Year	Average weekly earnings in land transport * (€)	Commercial semi state weekly earning (€)
2000	502.83	634.98
2008	742.88	1,050.11

*Land transport’ includes all transport workers such as HGV drivers, delivery men etc

This data indicate that the increase in average weekly earnings for land transport services in the period since 2000 has been in the region of 48% while weekly earnings for commercial semi state workers has increased by 65%, compared to the 78% increase in the cost of drivers employed by Bus Éireann on the STS.

Bus Éireann have indicated that the increases in wages and salaries were related to national wage agreements. Details of these agreements are outlined below¹⁷.

Table 5.16: Total combined increases paid under National Wage Agreements, 1999 to 2008

Category of employee	Total combined increase awarded under national wage agreements (%)
Clerical	36%
Inspectors	41%
Drivers	38.25%

The increases under the national wage agreements in the period 1999 to 2008 provided increases in driver wages of approximately 38% whereas the actual cost of wages increased by 78% over the same period. Bus Éireann have highlighted the fact that there were two additional pay increases in 2001 and 2008 arising from Labour Relations Commission recommendations in 2001 and 2007. This resulted in the rate per driver hour increasing by 38% in 2001 and by a further 7% in 2008.

¹⁶ Data provided by Department of Transport statistician from CSO.

¹⁷ The wage agreements included in this analysis are Partnership 2000; Programme for Prosperity and Fairness; Sustaining Progress; and Towards 2016.

Table 5.17: Increases paid under National Wage Agreements, 1999 to 2008

Agreement	Date awarded	Clerical	Inspectors	Drivers
P2000	01.01.1999	-	-	2.25%
P2000	01.10.1999	-	1.5%	-
P2000	01.01.2000	-	-	1.5
P.2000	01.07.2000	1%	-	-
P2000	01.08.2000	-	-	1%
PPF	01.01.2001	1%	5.5%	5.5%
PPF	01.04.2001	2%	2%	2%
PPF	01.01.2002	5.5%	5.5%	5.5%
PPF	01.01.2003	4%	4%	4%
Sustaining Progress	01.10.2003	3%	3%	3%
Sustaining Progress	01.07.2004	2%	2%	4%
Sustaining Progress	01.01.2005	2%	2%	2%
Sustaining Progress	01.04.2005	1.5%	1.5%	1.5%
Sustaining Progress	01.10.2005	1.5%	1.5%	1.5%
Sustaining Progress	01.04.2006	2.5%	2.5%	2.5%
Towards 2016	01.10.2006	3%	3%	3%
Towards 2016	01.04.2007	2%	2%	2%
Towards 2016	01.01.2008	2.5%	2.5%	2.5%
Towards 2016	01.07.2008	2.5%	2.5%	-
Total		36%	41%	38.25%

5.5.6 Other costs incurred by Bus Éireann

One other area of expenditure by Bus Éireann that merits attention is that of depreciation. The table below details the amount paid by the Department of Education and Skills in depreciation since 1997. Depreciation is charged on Bus Éireann vehicles that are engaged full time as part of the school transport fleet. Over the period since 1997 there has been an increase of 97% in the amount paid in respect of depreciation. The amount of money paid for depreciation purposes annually fluctuates as more modern buses enter and old buses are withdrawn from the school bus fleet. The value of buses entering the fleet may change depending on the age, remaining operational life, and type of bus involved, and this influences the depreciation charge that year. If, for example, a large number of fully depreciated buses are withdrawn and replaced by more modern buses the annual depreciation charge will understandably rise. There were significant decreases in expenditure in this area in 2001, 2004, 2005 and 2008 as well as a small decrease in 2003. There were large increases in a number of years, the highest occurring in 2002 when there was an increase of 98% in the amount of depreciation paid.

Table 5.18: Depreciation on Bus Éireann vehicles engaged as part of the school bus fleet, 1997 – 2008

Year	Amount €000	% Change
1997	1013	-
1998	1265	24.88
1999	1632	29.01
2000	1760	7.84
2001	1516	-13.86
2002	2999	97.82
2003	2984	-0.50
2004	2231	-25.23
2005	1855	-16.85
2006	1934	4.26
2007	2460	27.20
2008	2000	-18.70

Bus Éireann decides on the vehicles to be purchased or cascaded and reports on its activities to the Department of Education and Skills. Vehicles are cascaded from the Road Passenger Fleet, which has traditionally been an important source of buses suitable for school transport purposes made available at competitive rates and with known service history and readily available spare parts. In a more recent development, since 2008 a number of buses originally funded by the Department of Transport for the PSO fleet were cascaded with appropriate arrangements being made for depreciation purposes. Bus Éireann has also purchased buses from time to time specifically to augment and improve the quality and standard of the school transport fleet. In addition, a once-off investment was made by the Department of Education and Skills in the 2005-2007 period to facilitate the purchase of new/second hand buses.

Vehicles cascaded from the Road Passenger Fleet

Vehicles are transferred from the road passenger fleet into the schools fleet in order to ensure an optimum schools fleet. A detailed technical evaluation of the buses is carried out by the Chief Mechanical Engineers (CME) Department in conjunction with School Transport Operations. Only vehicles that meet the requirements of the school transport scheme in terms of for example their size, design, age, and seating configuration are cascaded into the schools fleet. The age of the vehicle at the time of cascading is also a factor to be considered along with the remaining life of the vehicle in the schools fleet. Bus Éireann has indicated to the Review Group that the practice of cascading older buses into school transport is in line with the approach taken by public bus operators internationally. The mileage operated on school bus services is lower than the mileage typically encountered annually on a road passenger service. This makes school transport a more suitable operation for an older bus provided that the vehicle is maintained regularly to a good standard and continues to meet the RSA statutory requirements (e.g. Annual Roadworthiness Test).

When vehicles are cascaded into the school fleet from the road passenger fleet the requirement for capital funding does not arise. In the vast majority of cases to date, the vehicles cascaded into the schools fleet were originally purchased by Bus Éireann and charges in respect of interest and depreciation are paid for by the Department of Education & Skills in line with agreed procedures. Depreciation is calculated on the replacement costs for each vehicle type. The remaining useful life of the vehicle is also taken into account. From time to time a road passenger vehicle may operate a school service on an exceptional basis and an appropriate charge is made for this. Equally if a school bus operates a road passenger service for any reason, for example, during school holidays, then a credit is given to the Department of Education and Skills for the use of the school bus on road passenger services, the annuity factor to calculate interest is sourced from the Treasury Department, CIE.

Vehicles originally funded by the exchequer for the PSO fleet:

Starting in 2008/2009, vehicles which were fully funded by the Department of Transport for the Public Service Obligation services are being cascaded into the schools fleet. In the case of these vehicles no income will accrue to Bus Éireann in respect of the use of these vehicles on the schools fleet as the vehicles were entirely funded by the Exchequer. An interdepartmental charge will however arise between the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Transport. This means that the Department of Transport will receive credit for the use of the vehicles on the schools fleet and the Department of Education and Skills will pay the corresponding charge which will be the subject of agreement between all parties. This interdepartmental charge is required in order to fully comply with EU regulations in respect of public funding of Public Service Obligation bus routes. Bus Éireann discussed this issue with the Department of Transport in order to agree an appropriate mechanism for this process. No charge was made in 2008 but this charge was made to the Department of Education and Skills in the 2009 account and thereafter, and money passed over to the Department of Transport. This charge had been included in the estimates provided to the Department of Education and Skills for 2009.

Purchase of Second Hand buses funded by Bus Éireann.

If required, additional vehicles are purchased second hand by Bus Éireann to augment the cascading of service buses from the Bus Éireann Road Passenger Service fleet. A detailed technical evaluation of these buses is also carried out by the Bus Éireann CME Department in conjunction with School Transport Operations. Vehicles purchased under this option are charged to the Department of Education and Skills in line with the agreed depreciation and interest procedure set out above. 34 buses were purchased second hand in the 2005-2008 period.

Purchase of New and Second Hand buses funded by the Department of Education and Skills.

This practice is not in place at present. The vehicles purchased were funded by the Department of Education and Skills on a once-off basis during 2005-2007. Bus Éireann made the original payment in respect of these vehicles and subsequently invoiced the Department of Education and Skills in line with the agreed procedures. No further charges accrue to the Department in respect of depreciation or interest as these vehicles were funded by the Department.

The table below provides information on the number of buses in the STS and the manner in which they have been engaged i.e. whether purchased new, purchased second hand, or cascaded from the Bus Éireann fleet.

Table 5.19: Breakdown of vehicles cascaded from Bus Éireann into the STS fleet in the 2005-2008 period

		2005		2006		2007		2008		Total	
		In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out
BÉ fleet: cascade to schools	Coach	18	23	62	4	0	23	112	32	192	82
	City	-	51	2	85	-	77	-	89	2	302
BÉ transfer from BAC	City	1	1	9	-	-	11	-	4	10	16
School Bus Purchase	Schools	-	-	20	-	30	-	-	1	50	1
2 nd Hand school	Coach	12	-	42	-	49	-	8	-	111	-
	City	18	-	12	5	4	19	-	1	34	25
Total		49	75	147	94	83	130	120	127	399	426
Difference			-26		53		-47		-7		-27

In summary, of the 399 buses cascaded into the school bus fleet from 2005-2009,

- 194 are BE buses which have been transferred from the road passenger fleet including PSO. Depreciation and interest is charged to Department of Education and Skills in line with agreed procedures.
- 10 Buses transferred from BAC. Depreciation and interest is charged to Department of Education and Skills in line with agreed procedures.
- 50 are new buses which were purchased by BE funded by the Department of Education and Skills
- 111 are second hand which were purchased by BE from a variety of sources funded by the Department of Education and Skills.
- 34 were purchased by BE during this period to augment the school transport fleet

During the same period 426 buses were withdrawn from the School Bus Fleet in the 2005-2008 period resulting in 27 less buses in the fleet. These buses are normally fully depreciated, in which case no further charges occur on the School Transport Account, and are properly disposed of by BE.

5.5.7 Other significant drivers of expenditure

This section analyses those other areas of activity that have been suggested by various sources as being potential contributors to the increased cost of the scheme in recent years.

5.5.7. (i) Provision for special needs students

The purpose of the School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Needs is to provide a reasonable level of transport service for children with a diagnosed disability and/or special educational need, who, because of the nature of their disability, may not be in a position to avail of a school bus service which would be timetabled to pick up other children along the route of service.

Such a child is eligible for School Transport if s/he is attending the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class/ special school or a unit, that is or can be resourced, to meet the child's special educational needs under Department of Education and Skills criteria. There is no distance criteria used to determine eligibility and there is currently no maximum distance limit imposed on the scheme.

In general, children are expected to share Bus Éireann school transport services and, where possible, to avail of standard school transport. While the decision regarding the provision of transport is a matter for School Transport Section, the section is guided by the factual information provided by the Special Education Needs Organisers. The Department considers the payment of a grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements where:

- Bus Éireann is not in a position to arrange a reasonable level of transport service for the child;
- The SENO considers that the nature of the child's disability is such that he or she would be unable to avail of a school bus service which would be time-tabled to pick up other children along the route of service; or
- An escort is considered necessary and the provision of such support is not feasible
- The cost of establishing a service is prohibitive.

The provision of specific travel arrangements is considered on a case by case basis in circumstances where travel in the company of other children is not feasible.

School Transport Section also allocates funding to schools for the employment of escorts to accompany certain children with special educational needs whose care requirements necessitate continuous support on school transport services. The SENO advises the Department of Education and Skills, where s/he is aware, by reference to relevant professional reports or through information supplied by the relevant school authority, that the child's care and safety needs are such as to require the support of an escort.

The cost associated with the provision of transport services to pupils with special needs is outlined below.

Table 5.20: Expenditure on transport for students with special needs, 2006 - 2008

	2006	2007	2008
PRIMARY			
Sp Needs Taxi	341,608	212,887	522,483
Sp Needs Grant	1,944,086	2,203,727	2,359,414
Sp. Needs Escorts	9,618,314	12,898,421	14,635,843
Summer Project	3,028	-	-
Escort Summer Project	20,879	-	-
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>11,927,915</i>	<i>15,315,035</i>	<i>17,517,740</i>
POST-PRIMARY			
Sp. Needs Taxi	84,067	48,266	29,305
Sp Needs Grants	153,012	188,248	258,844
Sp Needs Escorts	152,362	143,491	304,048
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>389,441</i>	<i>380,005</i>	<i>592,197</i>
<i>Total special needs expenditure by School Transport Section</i>	<i>12,317,356</i>	<i>15,695,040</i>	<i>18,109,937</i>
<i>Estimated Bus Éireann expenditure on special needs transport (primary and post-primary)</i>	<i>33,000,000</i>	<i>40,000,000</i>	<i>48,000,000</i>
Total expenditure on special needs transport	45,317,356	55,695,040	66,109,937
<i>Total special needs expenditure as % of total STS expenditure</i>	<i>27%</i>	<i>31%</i>	<i>34%</i>

The provision of education for pupils with special needs is an area that has received a significant increase in resources in recent years. This is also evident in relation to the STS. The data indicate that in excess of €66 million was spent on the provision of transport for students with special needs in 2008, representing almost 34% of all STS expenditure in that year. This represents an increase of €21 million or 47% since 2006. Over the same period, the total cost of the STS has increased by 17%, which means that expenditure on transport of special needs pupils increased at almost three times the rate of overall expenditure on the scheme.

In total, this expenditure facilitates an average of 8,000 pupils with special needs annually being transported to some 100 special schools and 400 special classes in mainstream schools. In all, special needs students are transported using more than 1,300 vehicles, all of which are privately operated mini-buses or taxis

The bulk of the expenditure on special needs arises at primary level due to the fact that the vast majority of special needs pupils are currently enrolled at primary level. In the 2008/09 school year approximately 520 post-primary pupils with special needs were transported on the STS. This means that there is a strong possibility of a significant increase in expenditure at second level in the future as these primary pupils progress to post-primary level. It is noteworthy that special school enrolments include pupils of post-primary age and there is evidence in a recent report commissioned by the NCSE that special needs pupils enrolled in mainstream primary schools are transferring to Special Schools rather than to post-primary schools.

The cost of transporting pupils with special needs is a significant element of the overall cost of the scheme for a number of reasons. In the first instance, the distances that pupils have to be transported is often longer due to the dispersed nature of the population and the fact that centres catering exclusively for pupils with special needs are also often geographically dispersed. Average

travelling distances and journey times are therefore generally greater for those with special needs compared to mainstream pupils.

The second reason is the fact that many special needs students require to be escorted while travelling on school buses and taxis. Many students need help embarking on and disembarking from the bus and many lack the control mechanisms required for comfortable and safe travel in a group and so need help and supervision during the journey.

The Department first introduced a pilot scheme to support the provision of escorts on certain school transport services for children with a disability in 1994, with a budget of £150,000 (€190,460) per year designed to provide £3,200 (€4,063) per escort. The approach adopted was for the Department to provide grants to the selected schools to enable them to hire local people to act as escorts on routes serving individual schools. This grant rate was calculated on the basis of four journeys of a maximum of 1.5 hours per day for 183 days school days and a rate of £3 (€3.81) per hour. The current hourly rate, inclusive of holiday pay and effective from 1st September 2008, is €13.28.

Expenditure on escorts is now the single highest expenditure item in relation to the transport of special needs students (as evident from Table 5.19). The amount spent in this area has increased from € 9.7million (primary and post-primary) in 2006 to €14.9 million in 2008. Overall, this represents an increase of some 52% in three years. At present there are some 1,300 escorts employed on the STS, compared to 600 in 2004. This is at a time when there are more than 10,000 Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) employed in schools at a cost of €270 million in 2008/09. The following table illustrates the increased level of funding and the trend in escort numbers since 2004. Figures for 2009 show however that escort numbers and expenditure have stabilised for that year.

Table 5.21 Escorts: 2004 – 2008

Year	Escorts	Est Cost
2004	600	€5.8 m
2005	700	€6.8 m
2006	970	€9.7 m
2007	1240	€13 m
2008	1300	€14.9m

The third main factor behind the cost of special needs transport is the fact that many students require individualised transport in taxis. It was noted earlier that the number of taxis engaged in the STS has increased by 63% since 2003 while the overall inflation rate associated with taxi costs has increased by 115% since 1997.

Figures provided by Bus Éireann show that in November 2008 approx. 1,714 children were being transported in 654 taxis (vehicles of 8 seats and under), representing 23% of all special needs children using school transport at that time (7,500). Comparable figures from Northern Ireland indicate that in the 2008/2009 school year there were 2,139 children with special needs transported to school in taxis. This represented 25% of all pupils with special needs that were transported on school transport services

Some 131 or 20% of these taxis carry one child to or from school i.e. they have single occupancy. Estimates from two of the five Education Library Board areas in Northern Ireland indicate that approximately 7% and 3.5% of taxis respectively have single occupancy for either medical or behavioural reasons.

A review of a sample of 54 individual taxi services transporting only one child, limited to primary age children, was conducted by the Department in 2009 in conjunction with the NCSE and a number of special school principals. Parents were notified in advance in cases involving the NCSE/SENO. The aim of this review was to reassess if local circumstances had changed, whether the particular child's independence had increased to the extent that an individual

service is no longer necessary or that where applicable school programmes were underway aimed at supporting pupils travelling on the regular school transport system (in circumstances where this is a realistic education goal). This work helped to inform school transport planning arrangements for the 2009/2010 school year.

Another reason impacting on the level of expenditure on special needs transport is the fact that the range of pupils identified as special needs is very wide – from children with relatively mild special needs to those with severe incapacities. All children identified as having special needs are eligible for consideration for free school transport and as a result children who formerly might have travelled on scheduled services now avail of transport under STS.

One final factor behind the costs associated with the provision of transport for special needs pupils, as stated in section 4.3.3, is the fact that education provision is provided through the summer for many children with severe / profound disability and autism, and transport is provided to bring such pupils to and from the educational centre.

The cost of school transport to facilitate summer provision has increased incrementally over a number of years as follows:

Table 5.22: Summary of Summer Provision Transport July/August 2001 to 2008.

Year July – August	Amount	% increase
2001	€ 84, 920	-
2002	€ 297,413	250 %
2003	€ 344,564	16 %
2004	€ 389,255	13 %
2005	€ 423,579	9 %
2006	€ 586,548	38 %
2007	€ 784,720	34 %
2008	€ 1,033,616	32 %

In total, the cost of this scheme has risen by more than 1100% since 2001 with increases of 250% in 2002 and increases in excess of 30% in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

The basis of the summer provision for children with autism has been reviewed by Special Education Section in conjunction with NEPS and a final outcome is due shortly.

The factors outlined above - longer travelling distances for special needs pupils, the provision of escorts, the use of taxis and single occupancy taxis in particular, the fact that all pupils with special needs are entitled to free transport, the summer provision for special needs pupils – results in a higher unit cost per special needs pupil transported compared to the unit cost per mainstream pupil. The table below identifies the unit cost per special needs pupil transported. This is the overall unit cost for special needs pupils, encompassing both primary and post-primary. It is not possible to disaggregate the data into a unit cost for primary and post-primary pupils respectively

Table 5.23: Unit cost per pupil with special educational needs transported on STS

	2006	2007	2008
Total expenditure on special needs by Bus Éireann and School Transport section (primary and post-primary)	€45,317,356	€55,695,040	€66,109,937
Estimated ¹⁸ number of special needs pupils	7315	7458	7275
Unit cost per special needs pupil (primary + post-primary) incl. escort costs	€6,195	€7,468	€9,087
Unit cost per special needs pupil (primary + pp) excl escort costs	€4,857	€5,719	€7,034

The unit cost per special needs pupil transported in 2008 (€9,087) is six times higher than the overall unit cost of €1,438 calculated in Table 5.4. This is also significantly higher than the unit cost per mainstream pupil as calculated in Tables 5.5 and 5.6, where the unit cost was established as €1,020 and €958 per primary and post-primary pupil (excluding special needs) respectively. The table above also calculates the unit cost per special needs pupils when the cost of providing escorts is excluded. This results in a unit cost per special needs pupil that is approximately 30% lower, thereby highlighting the fact that the cost of providing escorts is a significant cost element of special needs transport.

(ii) Closed school rule.

One of the original objectives of the STS was to support the Department's policy of rationalisation of school provision. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a large number of closures and amalgamations of small rural primary schools in pursuit of this policy of rationalisation. Amalgamations continue to be a feature of the educational system. In the past 10 years there have been a total of 84 amalgamations.

Where a primary school has been closed and amalgamated with another, children for whom the closed school would have been the nearest are eligible for transport, without reference to distance rules, to the school of amalgamation, even though this school may not be the nearest school. This is called the closed school rule.¹⁹

The following case study illustrates the transport issues that arise from the closed school rule.

School A, closed in 1973 and amalgamated with School B thus creating school AB. Under the closed school rule, children residing in the closed school area of School A are eligible for free transport to School AB without reference to the distance criteria of 3.2kms.

For some families who reside in the closed school area of School A, a third School X is actually a nearer school to them than School AB, and these children attend the nearer school, School X.

¹⁸ The data in relation to the number of special needs pupils relates solely to primary level as there are no accurate data for the number of special needs pupils at post primary level. The vast majority of special needs pupils are, however, enrolled at primary level.

¹⁹ There is also what is called a *central school rule* resulting from the amalgamation of a greater number of schools. In these instances the Department decided/sanctioned transport to be provided for children residing *not less than 1 mile* from the new central school.

Under the terms of the scheme and the “closed school rule”, these children are only eligible for free transport to School AB, which is further away than School X. They are not eligible for free school transport to School X though in some cases the children meet the requisite distance of residing 3.2kms or more from School X.

Some of the children in these families avail of concessionary school transport to School X. To avail of such concessionary transport, the agreement of School AB i.e. by signed Evidence of Agreement Forms must be obtained for each applicant for this concessionary transport. In addition, there must be spare capacity on the bus after all other eligible children have been catered for and the annual charge, currently €200, is applicable.

Of the 51 pupils availing of school transport to School AB, 35 pupils (69%) are eligible for transport to School AB under the “closed school rule”. 15 of these 35 pupils (**43%**), reside closer to School X while the remaining 20 pupils are still eligible for transport to School AB under the general terms of the scheme.

In 2008, BE figures show that almost 27,000 pupils availed of transport under the closed school rule. This represents approximately 52% of all mainstream primary pupils transported. The transport of such a significant number of children, some of whom would not qualify for transport on the basis of the distance criterion alone, involves a cost. For example, if the unit cost per primary pupil is €1,020 in 2008 – as per Table 5.5 – this means that the cost of transporting 26,845 children as a result of the closed school rule in 2008 was in the region of €27.4 million. While some of these pupils may still qualify for transport under the distance criterion even in the absence of the closed school rule, the evidence suggests that the closed school rule is a factor in the overall cost of the scheme.

At present, nationally transport services under the closed school rule operate to some 817 primary schools. A sample study of 92 of these schools indicated that approximately 12% of the schools have pupils availing of school transport, who have a closer school than that to which they are travelling, to attend the school to which they are eligible for transport. Based on the evidence of this survey this would mean that there may be approximately 98 cases nationally (12% of 817 schools) where the closed school rule means that pupils are not always travelling to their nearest school.

In addition, the expected upturn in enrolments in the years ahead, as outlined earlier in section 5.2, has the potential to impact on the number of pupils who may be eligible for transport on the basis of the closed school rule. These latest projections show that there will be approximately 565,000 pupils in primary school in 2013/2014. If, as at present, 11% of mainstream primary pupils require school transport this will mean that there will be 62,000 pupils in this category.

If 52% of this cohort is eligible under the closed school rule, as are eligible at present, there will be approximately 32,000 pupils eligible under this heading in 2013/2014. Based on the current unit cost of €1,020 per pupil transported, this has the potential to contribute an additional €5.2 million to the cost of the STS in 2013/2014 (i.e. the potential future cost of €32.6m minus the estimated current cost of €27.4 m).

As the case study shows, there is an anomaly associated with the closed school rule given there is no time limit. In some cases the primary school in question was closed up to 40 years ago and amalgamated with another school. In some instances, a newer school has subsequently been built in the general area of the original closed school. Under the Primary School Transport Scheme, however, the transport provided will be to the amalgamated school only, even in circumstances where there is actually a newer school closer to the pupil's home. A pupil in these circumstances is not eligible for free transport to the newer school.

Previous reports have recommended that consideration be given to the imposition of a time limit on the concept of school of amalgamation for transport purposes.²⁰ The Ombudsman has also recommended a review of this concession with a view to restricting it to a limited period after the amalgamation. The need to address the closed school rule was also a common theme in the submissions received by the VFM committee. In some submissions it was suggested that the rule be rescinded immediately while other submissions favoured a more phased process with consideration being given over time, to charging for transport services to schools of amalgamation and other non-nearest schools. Conversely, the view of some submissions was that transport to schools of amalgamations should be retained.

One wider consideration to be borne in mind in any proposals in this area is the potential for the termination of the closed school rule to impact on the future enrolment of both the amalgamated school and of a school which may be nearer, particularly in very rural locations. This in turn, therefore, would impact on teacher allocation and future school accommodation needs.

(iii) Costs associated with catering for parental choice

When the STS was introduced in 1967, the scheme at both primary and post-primary level allowed for choice of school on religious grounds and thus allowed transport for Catholic or Protestant children to attend the nearest schools under the management of their religion. At the same time the Department also provided for transport to the nearest Irish language schools – this particularly applied in the Gaeltacht at the time and has now been extended given the number of Gaelscoileanna at primary level and to a lesser extent, of Gaelcholaistí at post-primary level, now in place. Furthermore, this scheme was extended to multi-denominational schools at primary level when these were introduced.

At present, children attending such schools are entitled to school transport if they reside 3.2 kilometres or 4.8 kilometres from that primary / post-primary school. It makes no difference if they bypass a nearer school if that school is not deemed suitable (in terms of religious or linguistic ethos) by the parents of the child. There is no clear definition of what constitutes a suitable school and who determines suitability.

The growth in diversity in Irish society in recent years has added to the costs of school choice as the variety of school types has increased in response to parental preferences. The increased diversity in school provision is evident in the emergence of the new model of Community National School at primary level, the growth in the number of Gaelscoileanna and Educate Together schools at primary level, and an application by Educate Together to become a patron body at post-primary level. Because of the more dispersed geographical distribution of such schools, children in general travel longer distances than in other cases with the result that school transport costs are higher. This involves an additional cost to the Exchequer.

The following provisions also apply in relation to the facilitation of school choice:

- In relation to transport to second level fee-charging schools, transport is available to the nearest protestant second-level school on the basis of denominational choice, whether it is fee-charging or not, should a parent wish to send their child to such a school. However, given the large number of Catholic second-level schools that do not charge fees, direct transport is not provided to Catholic fee-charging schools unless there is space available on school transport already provided to a post-primary centre in which a Catholic fee-charging school is also located.
- In relation to choice of school by religion, this is a matter of parental choice and the scheme does not require that a child travelling to a school that is not their nearest school be of the religion associated with that school or any evidence of this.

²⁰ Report of the School Transport Review Committee (Bristow report), (Published, 1998), p.18; J.P. Hyland, Study of School Transport Scheme,(1978), p.5.19

- The scheme provides for transport at primary level for children in the Gaeltacht to their local Gaeltacht school. However, where children in the Gaeltacht wish to attend a school teaching through the medium of English, the scheme does not provide for this.
- There is no maximum distance which a pupil will be transported to the nearest suitable school in terms of religious or linguistic ethos.

It is not possible to calculate the additional cost arising from facilitating school choice. As part of this review, Bus Éireann provided costs in six cases associated with transporting those pupils who bypassed a nearer school to get to their school of choice. In these cases, some 511 pupils were transported on the grounds of parental choice in 2008 at a cost of €737,237. This gives an average unit cost of €1,443. The unit cost per mainstream primary pupils calculated earlier was €1,986, or €1,020 excluding special needs pupils. The unit cost per pupil in the sample cases is indicative only and is not directly comparable to the unit costs calculated earlier as the former only includes those costs directly related to the transport of the pupils in question. It does not include any share of overhead costs or administration of the scheme and is therefore not an accurate reflection of the true cost of transporting such children.

While the Education Act, 1998, recognises the importance of facilitating diversity, there is recognition that there must also be a balance with value for money considerations. Section 6 (e) of the Act identifies one of the objectives of the Minister for Education and Skills as being 'to promote the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parents' choice having regard to the rights of patrons and the effective and efficient use of resources'.

(iv) Minimum numbers required to establish / maintain a service.

The provision of a school transport service (even if a pupil is eligible on age/distance grounds), and the continuation of that service, depends on a minimum number of pupils being available for transport.

At primary and post-primary level, there must be a sufficient number of children in a distinct locality attending their nearest school to ensure that the average daily number of eligible children conveyed each term is at least 7 (for pupils of the Protestant faith, the minimum number required is 5 per term). At primary level, a transport service to the nearest suitable school may also be established, provided this can be done within reasonable cost limits, if:

- there are 5 eligible children in a distinct locality and who are attending their nearest suitable school and who are available for transport and who are residing at least 4.8 kilometres from the school;
- there are 4 such children in a distinct locality residing at least 6.4 kilometres from the school;
- there are 3 such children in a distinct locality residing at least 8 kilometres from the school.

Two previous reviews of the STS have examined whether there is a more accurate criterion than minimum numbers that could be used as a means of assessing whether to establish/continue a service. The Hyland report (1978) recommended moving away from a system based on a minimum number of pupils and relying instead on financial criterion: it recommended that the criteria for establishing new services and extending existing ones should be based on the extra cost per pupil, when determined by standard costing procedures, being no greater than a specified amount.²¹ A Committee established in the late 1990s to review the STS was of a similar view. However, that Committee abandoned its search for a system of cost limits, due to the difficulty in identifying transparent unit cost limits, and recommended instead the retention of the current system of triggers defined in terms of minimum number of passengers as it had the advantage of being a transparent system.²²

²¹ , J.P. Hyland, Study of School Transport Scheme.,(1978) p.3.6)

²² Report of the School Transport Review Committee (Bristow report) (Published, 1998) pp.24-25).

If minimum numbers is accepted as the optimum criterion for establishing whether a service should be provided or not, the question remains as to what minimum number of pupils should be used as a determining factor. Up until 2001 the minimum number requirement at primary level was 10 pupils. In that year the minimum number requirement was reduced from 10 to 7 pupils. This was one of the factors that contributed to an increase in expenditure on the STS in 2002.

Procedures for terminating a service

The rules in relation to the minimum numbers required for the continuation of a service are identical at both primary and post-primary level – a service may be continued for as long as there are four eligible children and a minimum of six fare-paying children (i.e. concessionary pupils) availing themselves of the service. (Prior to 2001 the threshold for maintaining a post-primary service was seven eligible pupils).

Up until relatively recently, no services had been terminated as a result of falling below the minimum numbers threshold. This is in spite of the fact that there were 142 services operating under the minimum number threshold in the 2007/2008 school year operating either single school routes or combined with other routes.

Research undertaken by Bus Éireann, using data from November 2007, indicates that if the minimum numbers criteria was enforced by the Department of Education and Skills this could result in savings of approximately €390,000 per annum. This estimate is based on terminating all services that currently have under the minimum number and assuming that all pupils would be eligible for the maximum grant available under the Remote Area Grant Scheme of €5.10 per day. The potential savings arising from this measure are therefore likely to be higher than the estimate of €390,000 as not all pupils would be eligible for the maximum grant (the minimum grant payable in respect of eligible pupils is €1.30 per day).

From the start of the 2009 school year, those services that operate a single trip service and that fall below the minimum numbers criteria have been terminated. The position in relation to double trip services that fall below the minimum number threshold is currently under examination.

(v) Catchment boundaries

In 1966, when the Government announced the introduction of free post-primary education, the country was divided for planning purposes into geographic districts each with several primary schools feeding into a post-primary centre with one or more post-primary schools. These catchment areas were determined following consultation with local educational interests. The intention was and continues to be that these defined districts facilitate the orderly planning of school provision and accommodation needs. They are also the basis for the operation of the STS at post-primary level. There are approximately 280 catchment areas.

Post-primary pupils are eligible for transport if they reside 4.8 kilometres or more from their local post-primary education centre, that is, the centre serving the catchment area in which they live. While the school transport scheme is not designed to facilitate parents who choose to send their children to a post-primary centre outside of the catchment area in which they reside, a facility is available whereby pupils can avail of concessionary transport. This means that a pupil who is fully eligible for transport to the post-primary centre in the catchment area in which they reside may apply for transport to a post-primary centre outside of their own catchment area – otherwise known as catchment boundary transport. These children can only be facilitated if spare seats are available on the bus after all other eligible children travelling to their 'own' post-primary centre have been catered for. Such children have to make their own way either to the catchment boundary or to the nearest pick up point within that catchment area.

Issues relating to catchment boundaries are frequently raised in parliamentary questions, representations and via other avenues. Such issues were also raised in a number of the submissions made to the committee. When raised in submissions, the common view was the

fact that many catchment boundaries as they exist today do not reflect changing demographics. The choice factor of parents is not facilitated within what are seen as limitations of the catchment boundary system. Also raised in the submissions was the fact that enrolment policies of schools are not necessarily similarly reflected in the use of the catchment boundary system for school transport provision.

While the committee did not find any evidence that the Catchment Boundary system is a key factor in the rising cost of the School Transport Scheme, other than noting that transport for some pupils is not to the nearest post-primary centre, it is not clear whether this is an efficient organisation of school transport at post-primary level. In particular, given the number of complaints about the existing catchment boundaries from parents and schools this system is a source of considerable administrative burden to the School Transport Section as a lot of staff time is consumed in answering queries or processing complaints in relation to this issue.

Despite complaints about the boundaries of specific catchment areas, a review of a particular catchment boundary would be a lengthy process and would require considerable time on the part of School Transport Section and Bus Éireann, particularly as it would involve consultation with local stakeholders. The problems would be multiplied if a review of all 280 catchment boundaries was required. This is not possible at present given the level of administrative burden already associated with the management of the scheme.

The view of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children is that the current school transport system as provided is entirely dependent on a number of key principles necessary to ensure its proper implementation:

1. The Department of Education through its Planning Section devises the catchment boundary areas in relation to secondary schools
2. These boundaries are contained in a master map held by the Planning Section and copied and distributed to the relevant stakeholders in the process.
3. These maps would not be changed unilaterally or arbitrarily by any of those parties. Any change would constitute a review into which the complainants/public would be entitled to seek an input.
4. A system of monitoring would exist to ensure proper compliance with the scheme and, in particular, the accuracy and integrity of all maps held.
5. Each stakeholder in the process would be working within their own clearly defined parameters, each with a clear understanding of the role of the other.
6. Disputes involving eligibility could be expediently resolved by consulting the relevant maps, and failing that, the Department of Education would be able to determine matters conclusively.

The following case highlights the issues around the use of the catchment area system for determining transport eligibility.

A number of pupils residing in the Place name A of a County attend second-level schools in a post primary centre. These pupils reside either very close to or are on the actual boundary line between catchment area "A" and catchment area "B".

These pupils were deemed fully eligible for school transport by the relevant TLO officer to schools in catchment area A, as according to the TLO map, Place name A is in the Catchment area A. Bus Éireann indicated however, that there was a discrepancy between its map and the map held by the TLO office and that according to the Bus Éireann map, Place name A is in catchment area "B" and therefore under the terms of the post primary transport scheme the children residing in Place name A are fully eligible for school transport to schools in catchment area "B" but can only avail of *catchment boundary transport* to the second level schools in the post primary centre of catchment area A.

An independent report on the two catchment areas concerned held that Place name A, as delineated on the TLO and Bus Éireann maps conforms to the DES maps and is in Catchment Area "B".

A complaint was subsequently lodged with the Ombudsman for Children's Office. Following an investigation into the complaint, the Ombudsman issued a statement based on the complaint regarding the provision of school transport for the pupils concerned and a number of actions were recommended by the Ombudsman for Children to the Department as follows:

1. School bus transport to be provided for the children who had been deemed Fully Eligible by the VEC (TLO) in October 2005 to attend school in the post-primary catchment area. This transport arrangement is to remain in place for the duration of their schooling.
2. The current 2008 school bus transport arrangement with respect to the children of the Place name A area to remain in place pending the outcome of the mapping review as outlined below.
3. The Department of Education and Science to undertake and complete a nationwide review of the mapping procedure with respect to the post-primary catchment boundary areas.
4. This review to take place within a reasonable timeframe and have due regard to best practice in the area of geo-computation and digital mapping.

The Department accepted the key principles contained in the investigation statement and the need for a nationwide review of the mapping procedure with respect to post-primary catchment boundary areas.

(v) Transport Liaison Officers

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in 32 of the 33 Vocational Education Committees acts as a Transport Liaison Officer (TLO) in relation primarily to the post-primary element of the STS and gets an allowance for fulfilling this role (in the case of City of Dublin VEC this function is fulfilled by a staff member in School Transport Section). Their functions include providing Bus Éireann with completed application forms plus applications for children with special needs who have enrolled in post-primary schools, ensuring forms/computer listings received from Bus Éireann of pupils availing of transport are updated and returned within deadlines, processing applications from parents for extensions of service, and advising and corresponding with relevant parties (e.g. school principals, parents, public representatives) on the terms of the scheme and other relevant matters. TLO's also co-ordinate school opening and closing times, both at primary and post-primary levels, including special schools, within the TLO's administrative area.

While payments are made to TLOs, much of the day-to-day administrative support necessary for fulfilment of this role by the CEO is provided by the staff in a particular VEC. There are no data on the number of staff that are engaged in VECs in providing administrative support for school transport related activities. It is the CEO, however, who has responsibility for the management and supervision of the operation of the scheme in a particular TLO administrative area.

The level of the allowance is based on the number of children in the STS in each TLO administrative area. In 2008, the payment to TLOs of this allowance has been incorporated into the general VEC pay system, which significantly reduced the annual administration involved in processing these payments. The level of individual allowances range from €5.5k to €13k per annum. The cost of all such allowances in 2008 was approximately €300,000. Expenditure on TLOs is therefore not significant in terms of overall expenditure on the STS. In 2008, it represented less than 0.2 per cent of the total cost of the scheme.

In contrast to the post-primary scheme no TLOs were ever appointed for the primary element of the STS scheme. At primary level, school principals apply to Bus Éireann on behalf of new pupils whom they consider may be eligible for school transport provision. Decisions on pupil eligibility are taken by Bus Éireann while decisions on the provision of new transport services are taken by the Department of Education and Skills on the basis of reports supplied by Bus Éireann. The fact that the school principal applies on behalf of new pupils rather than parents of pupils applying directly, as is the case at post-primary level where applications are made by parents to the TLOs, means that the process does not require parents to decide that they wish to apply for transport on behalf of their child(ren).

Previous reports had explored the possibility of devolving greater responsibility to the TLOs, in terms of giving them a greater role in relation to primary level transport services and/or procurement of services. However, these recommendations were never acted upon.²³

Findings

1. The main recurrent cost drivers behind the STS are the payments to contractors, the grants paid by School Transport Section (including special needs costs), Bus Éireann running costs, the Bus Éireann allocation of shared costs, and Bus Éireann driver costs.
2. Payments to contractors are the single largest area of expenditure in the STS, amounting to some 60% of the cost of the entire scheme in 2008. There has been an overall increase in the level of payments to contractors of some 227% in the period since 2000. This reflects Bus Éireann policy in recent years to increase the proportion of the STS that is provided directly by private contractors, the fact that private contractors tend to operate minibuses, medium sized vehicles and taxis which invariably have a higher unit cost than larger buses, and that there has been an increase of almost 15,000 pupils transported by private contractors since 2000.
3. The administration charge paid by the Department to Bus Éireann in relation to overhead and other indirect costs associated with the management of the STS amounted to almost €19 million in 2008, an increase of 170% since 2000. These increases have occurred in spite of the fact that in the period since 2000 the number of pupils transported has declined by 5,000 pupils. Discussions with Bus Éireann have resulted in savings in this area in 2008 and 2009. The consultants engaged to review the method of payment to Bus Éireann for administration costs have recommended that changes be made to the existing arrangements in this area.
4. There has been an increase of 87% in expenditure on Bus Éireann running costs since 2000. The increase in running costs over the period since has coincided with a decline in the number of Bus Éireann vehicles engaged in the STS. Bus Éireann have attributed the increase in running costs to an increase of 76% in maintenance costs and a 130% increase in fuel costs in the period since 2000. The increase in maintenance costs arises from a number of factors relating to increased safety as well as the introduction of more advanced technology on modern vehicles which require increased training costs and general maintenance requirements.

²³ Bastow Charleton Chartered Accountants, Report to the Department of Education on School Transport, (1992), p.1

5. Since 2000, the number of Bus Éireann drivers engaged on school transport activities has decreased, by 31, which is in line with the reduction in the number of school transport services operated directly by Bus Éireann. Over the same period, driver costs have risen by 78% due to increases under the relevant national wage agreements and two Labour Relations Commission recommendations. There has been an increase of 97% in the amount paid by the Department since 1997 in respect of depreciation. The amount of money paid for depreciation purposes fluctuates annually as more modern buses enter and old buses are withdrawn. The buses utilised by BE on the direct provision of their school transport services are cascaded from the BE Road Passenger Fleet and more recently the PSO Fleet. In addition, from 2005 - 2007/8 a number of new/second hand buses were funded on a once-off basis by the Department of Education and Skills and BE purchased 34 second hand buses.
7. The annual cost of TLOs is approximately €300,000. Typically, the TLO is assisted in their work on school transport by one or two of the administrative staff of the VEC on a part-time basis. Detailed information is not available across the VEC sector on the level of engagement of staff on school transport and the costs associated with same.
8. In excess of €66 million was spent on the provision of transport for students with special needs in 2008, representing almost 34% of all STS expenditure in that year. The bulk of the expenditure on special needs arises in relation to primary level due to the fact that the vast majority of special needs pupils are currently enrolled at primary level.
9. The transport of pupils with special needs is a significant factor in the overall cost of the School Transport Scheme for a number of reasons, including the fact that: (i) pupils often have to be transported longer distances due to dispersed nature of special needs provision, (ii) many students need to be accompanied by escorts due to their particular conditions, (iii) many special needs students require individualised transport in taxis, (iv) educational provision for special needs pupils continues in July and August and School Transport Services are required to support this provision, and (v) the fact that all children with special needs are entitled to free transport.
10. The unit cost per special needs pupil transported in 2008 (€9,087) is six times higher than the overall unit cost (€1,438). When the cost of providing escorts is excluded, the unit cost per special needs pupil is approximately 30% lower. This highlights the fact that the cost of providing escorts is one of the key factors in the cost of transporting special needs pupils.
11. In total approximately 1,700 special needs children were transported by taxi, in November 2008, representing 23% of the total number of special needs pupils carried on school transport services. This compares to 25% of special needs pupils being transported by taxi in Northern Ireland. There are currently in the region of 700 taxis providing transport services for pupils with special needs. Approximately 20% of all taxis have single occupancy.
12. Approximately 52% of all mainstream primary pupils transported qualify for school transport under the closed school rule. The cost of transporting these pupils in 2008 was estimated at €27.4 million.
13. The growth in diversity in Irish society in recent years has added to the costs of school choice as the variety of school types has increased in response to parental preferences. Because of the dispersed geographical distribution of such schools, children in general travel longer distances with the result that school transport costs are higher.
14. The provision of a school transport service (even if a pupil is eligible on age/distance grounds), and the continuation of that service, depends on a minimum number of pupils being available for transport. There does not appear to be a better criterion for establishing a service than minimum numbers.
15. From the start of the 2009 school year those school transport services that operate a single trip service and that fall below the minimum numbers criterion were terminated. The position

in relation to double trip services that fall below the minimum number threshold is currently under examination.

16. While the committee did not find any evidence that the Catchment Boundary system is a key factor in the rising cost of the School Transport Scheme, other than noting that transport for some pupils is not to the nearest post-primary centre, it is not clear whether this is an efficient organisation of school transport at post-primary level.
17. A review of Catchment Boundaries is not practical, given the length of time and the administrative workload involved.

5.6 Key question 5: How much revenue is raised through parental charges? What is this as proportion of full economic cost of the scheme?

At primary level, eligible pupils and pupils with special educational needs travel free of charge. Since 1983, at post-primary level, parents of eligible post-primary children (excluding those with medical cards) pay a charge. At post-primary level, approximately 36% of the pupils travelling on school transport services are exempt from charges on medical card grounds. At both primary and post-primary level, 'concessionary' pupils have always had to pay a charge, even if they are in possession of a medical card.

Exemption from payment of current post-primary school transport charges:

At present children who hold valid *medical cards* are entitled to seek a waiver from post-primary school transport charges. Doctor visit only medical cards are not accepted. Parents of applicants are required to present the valid medical card at the local BE office once a year as evidence and details are then recorded. The committee looked at possible options for deciding on exemptions from school transport charges and these were discussed with the Department of Social Protection (DSP). In particular, the means test applied to the Back to School Footwear and Clothing Allowance (BSFCA) which has similar age cohorts to school transport was reviewed. The BSFCA allowance includes a range of qualification requirements including social welfare or HSE payments, or participating in approved training courses and satisfying the other conditions, getting a qualified child increase with the social welfare payment and the application of household income limits.

The committee was advised by the DSP that using the BSCFA as the qualification criteria could lead to delays for customers if used as a "passport" for the school transport scheme as an identification system would be needed to confirm eligibility, which would have significant administrative implications for processing same. With the medical card, children already have evidence of eligibility for exemption from charges i.e. the physical medical card. In terms of policy, the medical card and the BSCFA schemes are both targeted at those most in need by using a means test. In the case of BSCFA approx 30-40% of all children benefit under the scheme which is roughly the same number of households who qualify for a medical card, so the groups should by and large overlap.

The committee also noted the report of the working group on the Simplification of Means Assessments (November 2009). The committee noted that in 2008, 300,000 applications were received for means tested for medical cards with a further 300,000 reviewed. This makes it the largest single – in volume terms - means tested scheme. Among the report recommendations is that a common data set is agreed and adopted by all participating public service organisations for use in relation to the collection of information to determine eligibility for any scheme or services provided on a means tested basis.

Details of the trend in recent years in the level of charge paid by parents of children travelling on the STS are outlined below:

Table 5.24: Increase in charges per Term 1997-2009*

Category of pupil	1997	1998	1999 – 2006	2007 3 rd Term	2008	2009
Eligible Junior Cycle Pupil	€29 €87	€33 per term €99 annual	Same as 1998	€46 per term €138 annual	€56 per term €168 annual	€300 annual
Eligible Senior Cycle Pupil	€47 €141	€51-153- annual	Same as 1998	€71 per term €213 annual	€78 per term €234 annual	300 annual
Concessionary primary pupil	€22 €66	€26 €78 - annual	Same as 1998	€36 per term €108 annual	€40 per term €120 annual	200 annual
Concessionary Post-primary Pupil	€47 €141	€51 €153 - annual	Same as 1998	€71 per term €213 annual	€78 per term €234- annual	300 annual
Maximum family contribution	€99 €297	€107 €321 - annual	Same as 1998	€150 per term €450 annual	€165 per term €495 annual	650 annual

* Rates effective from September (except 2007 when increases introduced in 3rd term)

The most noticeable aspect of the above table is the fact that the parental charge remained constant throughout most of this period. Charges were only increased for the first time since 1997 in the third term of 2007, and were increased again in 2008.

Charges payable by parents of Junior Cycle pupils have increased by €201 since 1998, an increase of 203%. The increase in relation to Senior Cycle pupils has been in the order of 96%. The increases in the charge for concessionary primary and post-primary pupils over the same period have been in the region of 156% and 96% respectively. However, the cost of the scheme has risen at a much faster rate than the increase in parental charges (249% compared to 40%).

Even with the recent increases in the charges payable, the level of revenue raised from such charges represents a very small element of the overall cost of the STS. The table below outlines the revenue raised from parental charges since 1997:

Table 5.25: Revenue raised from children carried on STS

	Receipts from fare-paying passengers	As % of total STS outturn cost
1997	6,019,000	10.8
1998	6,406,000	11.1
1999	6,427,000	10.0
2000	6,173,000	8.7
2001	6,133,000	7.4
2002	6,321,000	6.2
2003	6,461,000	6.0
2004	6,317,000	5.4
2005	6,611,000	5.1
2006	6,634,000	4.0
2007	6,626,000	3.7
2008	8,400,000	4.3

While the revenue raised from parental charges has increased in absolute terms since 1997 it has decreased significantly as a proportion of the overall cost of the STS which means that the percentage of the scheme funded by service users has decreased significantly while the cost to the Exchequer has increased. In 1997 parental charges represented almost 11% of the total cost of the scheme whereas in 2008 they represented 4.3%.

If parental charges in 2008 had accounted for the same proportion of the total cost of the scheme as they had in 1997, such charges would have amounted to €20.9 million rather than the €8.4 million actually paid. This indicates that the revenue generated from receipts from fare paying passengers was not linked or indexed to the cost of the scheme. It also reflects the fact that there were no increases in the fares charged by the Department to parents of post-primary pupils (or concessionary primary pupils) using the STS in the period from 1997 until the third term of 2007.

This review has calculated the unit cost of transporting a post-primary pupil in 2008 to be in the region of €958. The current charge for transporting post-primary pupils is €300 per annum. The €300 charge represents 31% of the actual unit cost of transporting a post-primary pupil. There is currently no charge for primary pupils, with the exception of concessionary pupils, while the unit cost of transporting such pupils is €1,020. Similarly, this review has calculated the estimated unit cost of transporting a pupil with special needs to be in the region of €9,087 while such pupils currently travel free of charge.

The issue of whether primary charges should be introduced was considered in the 1990s by two review groups established to review the operation of the scheme. Both groups concluded that charges should be introduced at primary level. The basis for this recommendation was a consideration of two key factors – that the increase in car ownership levels meant that parents were not as reliant on the school transport service as when it had been established in 1966, and secondly, on grounds of equity, that no distinction should be drawn between primary and post-primary pupils.²⁴

The Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (July 2009) considered that

- there should be a much greater contribution paid towards the cost of providing the school transport service
- charges should be introduced in respect of the primary school transport system
- a charge should be levied at both primary and post-primary level at a rate of 50% of the full economic cost of providing the service. This would likely be in the order of €500 per annum per child.
- The exemption for social welfare recipients would continue to apply

The Special Group was also of the view that there is also scope to charge some limited means tested contributions for special needs school transport, similar as those applied to other pupils, given the average annual cost of €6,000 per pupil which reflects the widespread use of taxis. This represents a total cost of about €48m per annum on the basis of a 42 week school year.

Several submissions received by the committee for this VFM Study expressed the view that those who could afford for school transport should pay for it and that this could be a means of eliminating the practice of irregular use of the school transport service (the issue of seat occupancy is examined further in the next chapter). Some submissions also suggested that pupils in possession of a medical card should not necessarily be exempt from a nominal charge for using the STS.

²⁴ Report of the School Transport Review Committee (Bristow report) (Published, 1998), pp. 29-30; Bastow Charleton Chartered Accountants, Report to the Department of Education on School Transport, (1992), p.41

Findings

1. The revenue generated from receipts from fare paying passengers has not been linked or indexed to the cost of the scheme. In 1997 parental charges accounted for 10.8% of the total cost of the scheme whereas in 2008 such charges only constituted 4.3% of the cost of the scheme. If parental charges in 2008 had accounted for the same proportion of the total cost of the scheme as they had in 1997, such charges would have amounted to €20.9 million rather than the €8.4 million actually paid.
2. The current charge imposed for school transport at post-primary level (€300 per annum per pupil) represents 31% of the cost of transporting a post-primary pupil (€958). There is currently no charge for primary pupils, with the exception of concessionary pupils, or special needs pupils while the unit cost of transporting such pupils is €1,020 and €9,087 respectively.
3. The means tested medical card should continue to the test applied for exemption from school transport charges pending the finalisation of the common assessment process.

5.7 Key question 6: What is the ratio of administrative staff to the number of children transported in (i) Bus Éireann and (ii) School Transport Section.

The number of people employed in school transport related services within Bus Éireann is relatively significant in the context of overall staff numbers in the organisation. This includes drivers, administrative and clerical staff, as well as inspectors who plan routes and monitor safety levels. The table below identifies the total number of staff employed in school transport related duties, including drivers.

Table 5.26: Proportion of Bus Éireann staff employed in STS related activities.

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Total number of staff employed in STS related activities	707	690	666	640	644	641	648	640	633	644	648
Total Bus Éireann staff	2471	2439	2586	2642	2696	2704	2717	2722	2732	2786	2818
As % of total Bus Éireann staff	29%	28%	26%	24%	24%	24%	24%	24%	23%	23%	23%

The data indicate that approximately a quarter of all of the staff employed in Bus Éireann are involved in school transport related activities. This figure has decreased in recent years, from a high of 29% in 1998. This occurs on account of the fact that the number of such staff has decreased from 707 in 1998 to 648 in 2008 while the overall number of Bus Éireann staff has increased from 2,471 to 2,818 in the same period. The decrease in Bus Éireann staff dealing with school transport related activities is accounted for mainly by a reduction in the number of drivers, as Bus Éireann is relying increasingly on the services of private contractors.

The table below details the ratio of the number of pupils transported to the number of WTE staff in Bus Éireann and the School Transport Section.

Table 5.27: Ratio of WTE administrative staff in Bus Éireann and School Transport Section to pupils transported, 2000 - 2008

Year	No. of pupils transported	No of Bus Éireann admin staff (WTE)	Ratio of Bus Éireann staff to pupils transported	No of School Transport admin staff (WTE)*	Ratio of school transport section staff to pupils transported
1997	157,000	-		8	19625
1998	151,000	56	2696	8	18875
1999	145,000	56	2589	8	18125
2000	140,000	56	2500	8	17500
2001	142,000	56	2536	8	17750
2002	136,000	56	2429	9	15111
2003	138,000	56	2464	9	15333
2004	136,000	56	2429	9	15111
2005	136,000	57	2386	10	13600
2006	134,000	57	2351	11.5**	11652
2007	136,000	63	2159	10.5***	12952
2008	135,000	63	2143	12	11250

* From 1997 to 2008 the Principal Officer for School Transport had other areas of responsibility. Principal Officer appointed on 26/3/2008 with responsibility for School Transport solely.

** This includes 1 temporary clerical officer who left the section in September 2006 and was not replaced.

*** This includes 1 temporary clerical officer who left the section in March 2007 and was not replaced.

The activities undertaken by Bus Éireann as part of its management of the STS was outlined earlier (see section 2.6. chapter two). The role of the School Transport Section comprises the development of policy as well as *directly* delivering a number of schemes and programmes as outlined earlier (see section 5.5.2.)

The number of *administrative* staff working on school transport related activities in Bus Éireann has increased by 7 since 1997 despite the fact that the number of pupils transported has declined by 22,000 since 1997. This represents an increase of 12.5%. The ratio of such staff to the number of pupils transported has decreased from 1:2686 to 1:2143 over the period 1998 - 2008. This means that for each staff member dealing with the STS in Bus Éireann in 1998 there were 2,686 pupils being transported on transport services, whereas this had reduced to 2,143 pupils for each administrative official in 2008, a drop of 20%.

The number of staff working in the School Transport Section has increased from 8 in 1997 to 12 in 2008, representing an increase of 50%. The decline in the number of pupils transported over this period has meant that the ratio of staff in the section to the number of pupils transported has decreased from 1:19,625 pupils to 1:11,250 pupils.

The School Transport Section assumed responsibility for transport for pupils with special needs in 2002 without any corresponding increase in staff numbers. Discussions with the School Transport Section indicate that there is a considerable workload associated with special needs issues in conjunction with the NCSE and BE. It is estimated that such issues can account for approximately 70% of staff time in the section. In addition, Table 5.12 (section 5.5.2) shows that in 2008, 3,200 individual payments to 1,854 recipients were processed.

In addition, while the number of pupils being transported on the School Transport Scheme has decreased in recent years, the number of actual school transport routes has increased, from 5000 in the year 2000 to 6,000 in 2008. This represents an increase of 20% over this period.

Findings

1. Approximately a quarter of all of the staff employed in Bus Éireann are involved in school transport related activities. This figure has decreased in recent years, from a high of 29% of all staff in 1998.
2. There have been increases in the number of administrative staff working in the School Transport Section and Bus Éireann staff working directly in the school transport area in since 1997. School transport staff numbers have increased by 50% while administrative staff numbers in Bus Éireann have increased by 12.5%.
3. The ratio of administrative staff working in Bus Éireann in connection with school transport activities has decreased from 1:2686 to 1:2143 over the period 1998 - 2008. The ratio of staff in the School Transport section to the number of pupils transported has decreased from 1:19,625 pupils to 1:11,250 pupils.

Chapter 6

Programme Objectives - Extent of Achievement - and Effectiveness

6.1 Introduction

Having established in Chapter 4 the objectives of the School Transport Scheme (STS) and having put forward arguments as to the current and continuing validity of those objectives, this chapter assesses the extent to which the STS has achieved its objectives and comments on the effectiveness with which they have been achieved (third term of reference).

6.2 Key questions

The rationale for, or the theory behind, the STS is that through the provision of inputs (e.g. financial resources, administrative staff) pupils who may have difficulties in accessing schools are transported to school safely (the output of the scheme). These pupils are allowed to participate fully in the education system and access to education is therefore equitable to all (intermediate outcome). By participating fully in education, pupils are enabled to develop to their full potential and thereby contribute to the economy and wider society (the final outcome of the scheme). Another outcome (albeit initially unintended) of the scheme is a reduction in the number of 'school run' journeys undertaken by private cars as parents avail of school transport provision rather than driving their children to school. This has positive environmental benefits.

Ideally, measurement of the effectiveness of the STS would seek to assess the extent to which the service has enabled those pupils transported under the scheme to participate fully in education, to develop to their full potential, and thereby to contribute to the economy and society (i.e. the final outcome of the scheme). However, it was noted in chapter three that the biggest challenge in applying the PLM to the STS arises in relation to measuring the outcomes, and consequently the effectiveness (which involves comparing output to outcomes), of the scheme.

The main difficulty is that it is not possible to identify a performance indicator or indicators that would facilitate a measurement of the relationship between the transportation of pupils to school (the output of the STS) and the extent to which those pupils develop to their full potential and contribute to the economy and society (the final outcome). In the absence of such an indicator, this review seeks to measure the effectiveness of the STS by measuring the relationship between the output and the *intermediate outcome* – i.e. this chapter will aim instead to measure the extent to which the scheme enables pupils who would otherwise have difficulty in accessing schools to do so, thereby making access to education equitable to all. The unintended outcome of the STS, that it contributes to a reduction in the number of private car 'school run' journeys will also be considered.

The intermediate outcome of the STS, as identified in Chapter three, is reproduced below.

Table 6.1: Intermediate outcomes associated with the School Transport Scheme

Output	Theory – how and why	Expected intermediate outcome
Eligible school children safely transported to and from school.	Eligible students who may otherwise have difficulty in accessing schools are safely transported to school. Parents choose to avail of STS who would otherwise drive their children to school.	Eligible students participate fully in education and access to education is made equitable to all users. The number of private car journeys is also reduced.

While it will not be possible to measure the extent to which the final outcome of the STS is being achieved, for reasons outlined above, the expectation (and the rationale behind the scheme) is that the intermediate outcome will in turn contribute towards the achievement of the final outcome and that by making education accessible to all, each pupil will be allowed to develop to their full potential and contribute to the economy and society.

Chapter three identified a number of key performance indicators that link outputs to outcomes. In turn, each of the performance indicators was linked to one or more 'key questions' that will be addressed to track the performance indicators and thereby measure the effectiveness of the STS. The effectiveness indicators and the relevant key questions, as identified in chapter three, are reproduced below.

Table 6.2: Performance indicators and key questions – effectiveness

Performance indicator	Key question(s)
Proportion of target population that avails of the scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the target population? • Is the STS targeting those people that are intended to be targeted by the scheme? • How effective are the current eligibility criteria? • Are there more effective criteria that could be used?
Number of students who would not otherwise have been able to attend school in the absence of the STS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many students would not be able to attend school without the STS? • How many students would have had to travel by private car in the absence of the STS?
Level of satisfaction among service users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How satisfied are the end users with the STS? • Does the administrative basis of the scheme impact on its effectiveness?
Extent of compliance with national safety requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How safe is the STS?
Length of waiting /travel times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long are travel times? • How long are students left waiting for collection? • Is there an optimum waiting/travel time?

This chapter will address each of these key questions in turn, thereby establishing the effectiveness with which the STS has met its objectives.

6.3 Key question(s) 1: What is the target population? Is the STS targeting those people that are intended to be targeted by the scheme? How effective are the current eligibility criteria? Are there more effective criteria that could be used?

The data indicate that there were approximately 500,000 primary and 310,000 post-primary pupils in the education system in the 2008/2009 school year. In total some 135,000 pupils were transported on school transport services in 2008 which means that approximately 16.7% of the school going population was availing of school transport services.²⁵

The STS, as originally envisaged in 1967, was designed to relieve physical hardship in the cases of children who had to travel too far to their nearest primary school and at post-primary level, to provide equality of opportunity for children who had excessive distances to travel to the nearest school or who were unable to attend such a school because their homes were too far away. From the outset, therefore, distance has been the key qualifying criteria and the scheme was intended to tackle physical rather than economic hardship.

This is also reflected in the fact that there is no means test, which would in effect represent an economic eligibility criterion for families, applied at present to the STS. However, post-primary children in families who hold a current medical card are exempt from paying charges. In this regard, the proportion of post-primary pupils in this category has increased from 27% in 2008/2009 to 36.5% or 23,901 children in the 2009/2010 school year. As primary transport and transport for children with special needs is free, data on the rate of medical card possession are not routinely collected for this group.

The focus on minimum distance (i.e. pupils must live more than 3.2 or 4.8 kilometres from their nearest suitable primary or post-primary school to be eligible) as the main eligibility criteria for the School Transport Scheme continues to the present day for the majority of those children who travel under the scheme. While there must also be a minimum level of demand for the establishment - and maintenance - of a primary or post-primary service, minimum distance from the nearest school is the main qualifying criterion.

However, as the scheme has developed since 1967 it has evolved to encompass a number of different categories of pupils including the following:

- Children with special educational needs (including special summer arrangements for special needs children with severe/profound disability and autism)
- Special arrangements for Traveller Children
- Extension of school transport to Multi-Denominational and Inter-Denominational schools
- Transport for Asylum Seekers and Refugees.
- Transport of children to and from Respite Centres
- Transport for Foreign exchange students
- Transport of pupils from the border with Northern Ireland to post-primary schools
- Transport for over 18 year olds.

The minimum distance criterion does not apply to all of the children who benefit from the scheme. For example, children with special needs are entitled to transport to the nearest recognised school that is, or can be, resourced to meet the child's particular educational needs irrespective of how close they live to that school. Minimum distance is also not a factor in determining eligibility for certain primary pupils under the closed school rule. Pupils who live in a

²⁵ Data taken from Projections of full time enrolment in teaching institutions aided by the Department of Education and Science at Primary, Second and Higher level, 2009 – 2030 (February 2010), available at www.education.ie The latest data indicate that there are approximately 510,000 primary and 314,000 post primary pupils in the education system in the 2010/2011 school year.

closed school area and are less than 3.2 kilometres from their nearest school, provided that school is their school of amalgamation, are entitled to transport to that school even though they would not be eligible if the normal minimum distance requirements were applied.

There is no limit imposed on the maximum distance that school transport will be provided to the nearest recognised school. This is particularly relevant to the transport of pupils with special educational needs who are entitled to be transported to the nearest recognised school that can be resourced to meet their needs, and also in the case of pupils who are transported to schools other than their nearest school on the basis of parental choice. Where provision of a dedicated service is not feasible due to length of distance or a lack of pupil numbers, the Department provides grants to parents of eligible children towards the cost of transport. The result is that some pupils are being transported considerable distances. This gives rise to additional expenditure, particularly at primary level where currently no charges are imposed on the majority of pupils travelling on school transport services. As extreme examples, two primary pupils are being paid a grant to travel more than 70 kilometres daily to their nearest school of choice on religious/linguistic grounds, while at post-primary level one pupil is travelling approximately 230 kilometres daily with a remote area grant being paid to a pick up point where the pupil joins an existing school transport service.

Distance is used as the main qualifying criterion for establishing eligibility for school transport services in each of the five jurisdictions surveyed as part of this review.²⁶ The table below details the distance requirements in each jurisdiction that provided data on this issue.

Table 6.3: Eligibility Criteria for School Transport

Country	Eligibility criteria
England	Under the age of 8, the child must be at least 2 miles away and attending their nearest suitable school. Children aged 8 or more must be 3 miles from and attending their nearest suitable school.
Wales	Same as England
Northern Ireland	Distance of at least 2 miles for Primary pupils attending their nearest suitable school. At least 3 miles for Post-Primary students attending their nearest suitable school.
New Zealand	Distance for under 10 years old is 3.2 km from their nearest school. Over 10 years old is more than 4.8 km from the nearest school
Canada (Ontario)	Age 5 is 1.6 km or more. Age 6 to 12 is 3.2 km or more. Age 12 to 16 - 4.8 km or more.

Distance is also the main basis for eligibility in a number of the other countries that provided partial information on their school transport service.²⁷ The STS in Ireland is therefore generally in line with other European and OECD countries in determining eligibility for school transport services.

On that basis, if distance is accepted as the main qualifying criterion, then the STS is targeted appropriately for the most part, as it either provides transport for those pupils who live more than 3.2 or 4.8 kilometres from their nearest suitable primary or post-primary school or it provides grant assistance to parents who live too far from their school to make provision of a transport service a feasible option. The general consensus in the submissions received as part of the VFM review was that the main target group of the STS should continue to be primary and

²⁶ England, Wales, Northern Ireland, New Zealand and the State/Province of Ontario

²⁷ This includes Sweden, Bulgaria, Finland, Poland, Austria and the Czech Republic.

post-primary pupils living in rural areas where alternative public transport does not exist. However, while minimum distance is used as the main basis for assessing eligibility for those mainstream pupils travelling under the primary and post-primary schemes, it is not used in relation to pupils with special educational needs or in relation to certain pupils qualifying under the closed school rule.

Findings

1. The target population for the STS was originally those pupils for whom distance was an obstacle to attending school. This is still the main target population of the scheme although new categories of pupils have also been targeted in recent years.
2. Distance is an effective criterion for assessing eligibility for a school transport service that is targeted at physical rather than economic hardship, and it is generally used in EU and OECD countries that operate such a service.
3. The current prescribed distance requirements are generally in line with international practice.
4. Minimum distance is not used consistently in determining eligibility for school transport services for all categories of pupils.
5. There is no maximum limit to the distance that certain categories of pupils will be transported on the STS.

6.4 Key question(s) 2: How many students would not be able to attend school without the STS? How many students would have to travel by private car in the absence of the STS?

6.4.1 Number of students who would not be able to attend school without the STS

In order to assess the effectiveness of the STS in facilitating participation at school by pupils who would otherwise have difficulty in attending, it is necessary to establish how many pupils would not be able to attend school without the scheme. The most accurate way of establishing this information would be to ask parents how essential the STS is to the attendance of their children in school. However, such a survey was not undertaken as part of this review for two reasons: (i) it is questionable whether any meaningful or objective data would result – when asked if a service is important to them, most beneficiaries of the service (particularly those who benefit from it without contributing towards its cost) are likely to respond positively, and (ii) the timeframe for the review did not allow time for such a comprehensive survey to be undertaken.

In the absence of survey data, three data sources were analysed in an effort to assess the relationship between the STS and school attendance: (i) the level of car ownership in Ireland, (ii) the trend in the level of uptake of the STS by post-primary pupils during the third term of the academic year, which is a shorter term but in respect of which parents, up to the end of the 2008 / 2009 school year, were asked to pay the same level of contribution as per the other two terms, and (iii) the seat occupancy rate on school transport services.

6.4.2. Level of car ownership

The original target population of the STS was those children living in rural areas who lived too far from school to walk or cycle. The only alternative to walking or cycling, due to the low level of car ownership in the country at the time, was the provision of a publicly funded school transport service. The figures indicate that there were 314,434 cars in Ireland in 1967 compared to more than 1.9 million in 2008.

Table 6.4: Levels of car ownership in Ireland, 1967 and 2008.

	1967	2008
No. of private cars	314,434	1,924,281
Population	2,978,248* (1971)	4,239,848* (2006)
No. of private cars per population	0.11	0.45

*Figures on population taken from WWW.CSO.ie

In 2008 there were 1.6 million more cars in the country than forty years earlier, an increase of approximately 512%. Over roughly the same period, the population increased by 42%.

This section endeavours to assess whether there are currently many households with children in rural areas that own a car or cars but would not be able to send their children to school if there was no STS. The analysis is focussed on areas of lowest population density, primarily those areas with population clusters less than 1,500 people. These are the areas where pupils would be expected to travel longer distances in order to get to school.

The latest CSO data, outlined in the table below, indicate that there are 306,674 private households with children in population clusters less than 1,500. Some 96% of these households have access to at least one car. This means that there are 13,000 (4%) such households without access to a car. There is a lower number of households with access to at least two cars – approximately 72% of households are in this category, leaving 84,000 households (28%) without access to at least two cars. Overall, therefore, the data suggest that there is a high level of car ownership in those rural areas that the STS is intended to target.

Table 6.5: Private households (usually resident in the State) in population clusters < 1,500 with children (by selected age groups) with accessibility to (i) at least one car and (ii) at least two cars*

	One car		Two cars	
	N	%	N	%
All households with children present	293,702	96%	222,315	72%

N = 306,674 i.e. total number of private households with children in population clusters < 1,500.

* 2006 Census

Having access to a car does not necessarily mean that the car is available to transport the children to school in the morning and take them home in the evening. Time constraints or work patterns among parents, different children in the same family attending different schools, different opening and closing times for some schools may all contribute to making it impossible for parents to drive their children to, or collect them from, school. While this is an issue for parents in both rural and urban areas, it can be more problematic for parents in rural areas to make alternative arrangements in the absence of appropriate public transport.

6.4.3 Numbers availing of STS in third academic term

An examination of the number of tickets issued in respect of post-primary pupils travelling on the STS in the summer and autumn term was undertaken to ascertain whether there is evidence to suggest that parents choose to make their own arrangements to get their children to/from school in the third term of the school year, when the school transport charge remains the same as in the first two terms but when the duration of the term is generally about a third shorter.

The data on the number of post-primary tickets issued by Bus Éireann in the autumn and summer term of each academic year since 2001/2002 are outlined below. Data have not been routinely collected in respect of primary pupils given that the service is currently free of charge.

Table 6.6 Comparison of tickets issued by Bus Éireann in summer and autumn terms.

Year		Autumn Term	Summer Term*	Decrease In Tickets Issued	% Decrease in Tickets Issued
2001/2002	PP Eligible	78912	71380	-7532.00	-10.55%
	PP Concessionary	1097	847	-250.00	-29.52%
	P Concessionary	6284	5584	-700.00	-12.54%
2002/2003	PP Eligible	75742	69085	-6657.00	-9.64%
	PP Concessionary	1121	920	-201.00	-21.85%
	P Concessionary	5840	5640	-200.00	-3.55%
2003/2004	PP Eligible	75695	69980	-5715.00	-8.17%
	PP Concessionary	1207	991	-216.00	-21.80%
	P Concessionary	6125	5687	-438.00	-7.70%
2004/2005	PP Eligible	74927	69633	-5294	-7.60%
	PP Concessionary	1163	1044	-119	-11.40%
	P Concessionary	5737	5692	-45	-0.79%
2005/2006	PP Eligible	75805	68005	-7800	-11.47%
	PP Concessionary	934	817	-117	-14.32%
	P Concessionary	5623	4967	-656	-13.21%
2006/2007	PP Eligible	74758	68749	-6009	-8.74%
	PP Concessionary	989	874	-115	-13.16%
	P Concessionary	5296	5104	-192	-3.76%
2007/2008	PP Eligible	74499	69349	-5150	-7.43%
	PP Concessionary	1027	897	-130	-14.49%
	P Concessionary	5761	5451	-310	-5.69%
2008/2009	PP Eligible	74135	66267	-7868	-11.87%
	PP Concessionary	965	718	-247	-34.40%
	P Concessionary	5450	4822	-628	-13.02%

* The date of the commencement of summer term varies from year to year (from March 25th in 2002 to 24th April in 2006) but remains the same length throughout the period since 2001/2002 and remains shorter than the previous two academic terms.

The data indicate that there was a significant decline in the number of tickets issued by Bus Éireann in the third academic term in comparison to the number of tickets issued in the first term. The decline is most noticeable among parents of concessionary post-primary pupils. In this category there was a decline of more than 10% in each year but a decline of between 20 - 30% in some years. It is not surprising that parents of concessionary pupils are more sensitive to price increases than parents of pupils who are fully eligible for a transport service, as the former have to arrange to bring their children to the particular 'catchment boundary' or bus route and this may be less convenient than if their children were fully eligible for transport. The single biggest decline occurred in 2008/2009 and this suggests that the increase in school transport charges in the third term of 2007, and the further increase in 2008, acted as an incentive for some parents to make alternative arrangements to get their children to and from school in order to avoid paying increased charges in the shorter third academic term. It may be the case that those parents who are able to make alternative arrangements during the final term of the school year may also be able to make similar arrangements in the first or second term.

It is not possible to disaggregate the data into those who do and do not hold medical cards, but as eligible medical card holders are eligible for free transport any increases in charges would not be expected to affect their use of school transport services. It is to be expected therefore that the decline in pupil passenger numbers will be most pronounced among those who currently pay for the service.

The introduction in 2009 of annual charges, spread over two payments in July and December, rather than payment by term, will resolve the decline in take up in the third academic term as parents will have to commit to the annual charge and this change therefore acts as a financial disincentive to making alternative arrangements to get their children to school. The latest

evidence is that the introduction of the annual school transport charge combined with the increases in the charge in recent years has led to a reduction of approx 10,000 (7%) of eligible post-primary pupils being transported in the 2009/2010 school year down to 65,365 while the number of concessionary pupils has reduced by 309 to 656 (or 32%)²⁸

6.4.4. Seat occupancy rate

At primary and post-primary level tickets are issued by Bus Éireann in respect of each child eligible for school transport and seats on buses are reserved for each eligible child. This has been a necessary element of planning for school transport services since the elimination of the '3 for 2' seating policy as it is now policy that each child has a seat to himself / herself. There has been some evidence in recent years that seats are being reserved for some children on school transport services but that the seats are not always utilised as children are transported to school using alternative arrangements. This complicates the administration and cost of the scheme as Bus Éireann, on behalf of the Department, has to plan routes and services based on the level of demand from eligible children at the start of the school year.

As part of this VFM review, Bus Éireann, on behalf of the Department undertook an initial survey on sample loadings at primary and post-primary level over 23 routes and 13 routes respectively to assess the level of seat occupancy in the travel to and from school on particular school transport routes. While the data are based on a small sample, they indicate that the percentage seat occupancy on primary routes ranged between 22% and 93% and between 45% and 91% at post-primary level. An average seat occupancy on primary routes of 68% was recorded on the morning service with an average of 64% recorded for the evening service. At post-primary level, the average seat occupancy was 76% for the morning service with an average of 71% for the evening service.

A further survey on seat occupancy was carried out in October 2009. The result of this survey shows an average seat occupancy at primary level of 78% in the mornings with a 73% average occupancy on the evening journey. At post-primary level the average seat occupancy for the morning journey was 86% and 78% for the evening service. While the results of this second survey show an increase in seat occupancy at primary and post-primary level, both on the morning and evening journeys, the results of the May and October surveys are not strictly comparable, as the two surveys were based on different sample sizes, involved different routes, and were not conducted over the same number of days. In addition, feedback from Bus Éireann highlights the fact that seat occupancy is generally higher in the first term of a new school year compared to later terms and this may also be a factor in the higher seat occupancy rates in October 2009.

The increase in charges at post-primary level from September 2009 may have an impact on the level of seat occupancy in the future as it is unlikely that occasional school transport users will continue to pay the increased charges. More frequent and extensive sample surveys by Bus Éireann would allow for the monitoring of trends in this area.

6.4.5 Number of students who would be transported by car in the absence of the STS

It was noted in Chapter 3 that one of the unintended outcomes of the STS is that it contributes to a reduction in the number of private car 'school run' journeys as parents who might drive their children to school avail of the transport service provided instead. The scheme would therefore be expected to have positive environmental benefits as it reduces the number of school run journeys undertaken by parents, and this in turn contributes to a reduction in the traffic congestion that would be caused if the scheme did not exist.

It is not possible to measure the extent to which the existence of the STS reduces the number of private car journeys as this could only be assessed in the absence of the scheme. What is clear is that there are high levels of car ownership in the country, and particularly among the

²⁸ Data as at 16th. October 2009

families of those children in rural areas that the scheme is designed to target. It is also evident that the majority of pupils qualify for the scheme on the basis that they live more than 3.2 or 4.8 kilometres from their nearest school and that this is too far a distance to walk or even to cycle, due to the rural location of many pupils' houses. It is also the case that many rural areas lack the public transport options that are available in more urbanised areas. It is therefore reasonable to assume that parents with cars in rural locations where there is no public transport alternative would be heavily reliant on their cars for bringing their children to school if there were no school transport services. However, it is not possible to quantify the numbers involved.

Government transport policy is currently attempting to discourage reliance on private transport and encourage more frequent and extensive use of public transport services. The role that the STS can play in this regard is recognised in a number of Government initiatives.

In February 2009, the Minister for Transport announced "Smarter Travel- A Sustainable Transport Future" 2009/2020 which outlines Department of Transport policies including Transport 21. The report contains Government transport targets for 2020, including the following:

- 500,000 more people will take alternative means to commute to work (and school) to the extent that the total share of car commuting will drop from 65% to 45%,
- Alternatives such as walking, cycling and public transport will be supported and provided to the extent that these will rise to 55% of total travel to work and education journeys,
- Total kilometres travelled by the car fleet will not increase significantly from current levels,
- A reduction will be achieved on the 2005 figure for greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector.

The key goals of the Government strategy in relation to social inclusion and modal shift include the following:

- Improve the quality of life and accessibility to transport for all and in particular, for people with reduced mobility and those who may experience isolation due to lack of transport,
- Reduce overall travel demand and commuting distances travelled by the private car.

The new strategy calls for greater integration of spatial and transport planning. In relation to schools it commits to ensuring that, for all new schools planned, priority should be given, as far as practicable, to access by walking, cycling and public transport. In relation to existing schools local authorities are required to prepare plans to retrofit existing neighbourhoods so that, for example, cycling and walking are the best options for accessing schools.

The strategy specifically refers to the "Green Schools Travel Programme" committing to:

- Ensure that every school and college in Ireland has a school travel plan to encourage students to take alternatives to the car.
- Provide safe walking and cycling routes to and from schools and other educational institutions
- Where safe routes cannot be provided to consider an extension to the existing school transport scheme.

The Green Schools Programme aims to reach 265,000 schoolchildren by 2012 at a cost of €2million per annum. The Department of Transport has indicated that in 2009 some 99,000 schoolchildren have been reached and results show:

- A reduction in car travel to school from 56% to 44% (21% reduction)
- Walking increased from 17.5% to 25% (43% increase on numbers walking)
- In schools provided with cycle training and cycle parking, cycling increased to 6.6%, over three times the national average of 2%
- Other benefits of the Programme include estimated annual savings of up to €3.7 million annually by 2012 in obesity and congestion costs.

The policy also refers to alternative ways of travelling that relate to rural based services and to the school transport scheme, including the following commitments to,

- Offer a 7-day a week transport service for rural communities and those in smaller urban areas, and
- Examine the potential for the expanded use of school and other publicly funded buses as a “local transport bus” to bring people to a range of services with (in the case of school buses) the primary emphasis continuing to be on transporting children to and from school at the necessary times.

Subsequent to the launch of the new *Smarter Travel* policy, the Government then published Ireland's first National Cycle Policy Framework in February 2009 which among other actions seeks to have cycling and walking as the primary means of accessing schools. It also reiterated the policy of favouring the location of schools in areas that are serviced by non-motorised modes. Furthermore it commits to developing rural cycle networks as well as urban ones and to providing safe cycling routes in the vicinity of all schools. This is to be complemented by formal cycle training for all schoolchildren and a Department of Transport led working group was established in July to develop a certificate in cycle competence for schoolchildren

The *Smarter Travel* and National Cycle Policy Framework will take time to implement with overall targets set out to year 2020. Nevertheless, these aims have long-term implications for the STS both in shifting more students to non-motorised transport and in the need to integrate all publicly funded transport services in rural areas. In the light of these strategies, the Department of Transport is proposing that one area is examined in greater depth on a pilot basis to assess the implications of investing in cycling and walking as options for those children living within 5 and 3 kilometres of a school as an alternative to investment in a school bus service. In relation to the integration of rural bus services it is noted that two pilot studies are currently being undertaken in counties Louth / Meath, and Sligo/ Leitrim which will help to identify what potential exists to increase the effectiveness of the STS as part of a greater integrated rural transport service. One of the pilots will investigate the potential for utilising school buses outside school hours for other rural transport services. Further pilots are to be advanced in relation to the potential for better utilisation of special education transport between the school transport services and the HSE.

Findings

1. It is not possible, due to lack of appropriate data, to definitively conclude whether there are children who would not be able to get to and from school in the absence of the STS.
2. Data on the level of car ownership in the country indicate that there is a relatively high proportion of parents in those areas with the lowest population density (i.e. the target population for the STS) who have access to at least one car, and a significant proportion of such parents who have access to at least two cars.
3. Analyses of the number of tickets issued to post-primary pupils, and seat occupancy rates from a sample of primary and post-primary routes, indicate that a significant number of parents who have access to school transport services choose to make, and are able to make, alternative arrangements to get their children to school at certain times of the school day / school year.
4. There are regularly empty seats on school transport services. The recent increase in school transport charges appears to have contributed to an increase in seat occupancy rates and further increases in charges may result in a greater number of those allocated seats on school buses actually availing of them on a regular basis. This has the potential to result in a reduction in the number, and associated cost, of school buses required to provide transport services.
5. It is not possible to establish the number of children who would be transported by private car in the absence of the STS.

6. Any future changes to the operation or management of the STS must take account of wider Government policy on sustainable transport, as evident in policies such as Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future and the National Cycle Policy Framework.

6.5 Key Question 3: How satisfied are the end users with the STS?

In order to establish the true level of satisfaction with the STS it would be necessary to survey a representative sample of the service users to obtain their views on the service. However, this was not possible in light of the timeframe associated with this review. Instead, it was decided to use a number of data sources as proxy indicators for the level of satisfaction with the STS. This included the following data sources:

- The submissions received as part of the consultation process for this VFM Review
- The number of complaints received by the School Transport Appeals Board
- The number of appeals received by the Ombudsman / Ombudsman for Children's Office
- The number of PQs relating to complaints from service users
- The number of written representations received on behalf of service users.

Analysis of each of these data sources is outlined below.

6.5.1 Submissions received as part of the review

To assist with its deliberations, the committee invited written submissions in relation to this VFM Review. In total, 84 submissions were made to the committee from a variety of different organisations and individuals (see Appendix 2). The submissions made to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education on School Transport Catchment Boundaries were also considered by the committee (see Appendix 3). In general the submissions emphasised the continued need for a State subsidised school transport service and this was the most frequently repeated opinion expressed in the submissions received. The STS is seen by those making submissions as an indispensable component of the educational system.

Within the broad endorsement of the scheme, some areas were highlighted as potential anomalies or as areas where improvements could be made. These included the closed school rule, catchment boundaries, and school transport charges. Overall these were broadly similar to the type of issues that were raised in submissions to a previous group which reviewed the STS in the 1990s.

In relation to the closed school rule, submissions to the current committee recommended that the rule should be rescinded immediately while other submissions favoured a more phased process with consideration being given over time, to charging for transport services to schools of amalgamation and other non-nearest schools. Conversely, the view of some submissions was that transport to schools of amalgamation should be retained.

A variety of views were expressed in relation to school transport catchment boundaries. When raised in submissions, the common view was the fact that many catchment boundaries as they exist today do not reflect changing demographics, neither was the choice factor for parents facilitated within what are seen as the limitations of the current system. The fact that enrolment policies of schools are not necessarily similarly reflected in the use of the catchment boundary system for school transport provision was also raised.

Overall, the issues raised in submissions did not question the fundamental relevance of the STS and no recommendations were made for its termination. Rather the points highlighted in submissions generally endorsed the validity of the scheme but advocated that it be amended or extended in various ways.

6.5.2 Appeals received by the School Transport Appeals Board

The School Transport Appeals Board (STAB) was first established in 2003. The Board is appointed by the Minister of State, Department of Education and Skills, for a period of three years and may be removed by him/her for stated reasons. It currently comprises of a chairperson and five other members appointed by the Minister. The Board is independent in the performance of its functions but acts in accordance with (a) its Terms of Reference as determined by the Minister and (b) a set of published Operating Procedures.

The Board currently examines and determines appeals against decisions made by, or on behalf of, the Department regarding the provision of school transport services and/or grant-aid under the terms of the STS.

An analysis of the number and type of appeals considered by the School Transport Appeals Board since its establishment in 2003 highlights three issues.

In the first instance, as outlined in the table below, there have been a total of 240 appeals in the period up to 2009 which represents a relatively small number of appeals considering the volume of pupils transported under the STS each day.

Table 6.7: Number of appeals considered by the School Transport Appeals Board 2003-2009

Year	No. of appeals
2003	15
2004	27
2005	29
2006	38
2007	15
2008	41
2009	75
Total	240

Secondly, of the 240 appeals considered, only 20 (or 8.3%) were actually successful. This indicates that the independent appeals board rejected 220 of the appeals received and concluded that the scheme is being implemented in line with the terms of the scheme.

Finally, there are 7 main categories to which the majority of appeals to the Board can be attributed: catchment boundaries, the distance from pick up points, requests for transport to schools other than the nearest school, requests for funding through the grants available from School Transport Section, the closed school rule, requests relating to distance where appellants argue that they are entitled to a transport service even though they are less than the required minimum distance and the placement of pupils with Special Educational Needs. These represent a mix of process type and appeals on aspects of the criteria with the majority focussing on the latter.

Overall, appeals in 2009 increased by 83% compared to 2008 figures. Areas of significant increase in appeal in 2009 relate to the placement of a pupil with special educational needs, distance and attendance at schools other than the nearest.

Table 6.8: Breakdown of appeals received by the School Transport Appeals Board 2003-2009 by category

Type of Appeal	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Catchment Boundaries	2	6	6	8	3	13	14
Closed School	3	1	2	3	3	5	2
Distance to Pick Up point	4	7	6	5	3	6	4
Special Needs Placement	0	2	1	3	0	1	16
Special Needs Other	2	0	0	0	0	0	1
Non nearest School	1	3	3	6	1	13	19
Grants	1	3	2	5	4	2	6
Distance	1	1	4	4	1	1	12
Other	1	4	5	4	0	0	1
Total	15	27	29	38	15	41	75

6.5.3 Appeals received by the Ombudsman's Office / Ombudsman for Children's Office

As in the case with other schemes operated by Government Departments, members of the public that are dissatisfied with the level of service provided under the STS are entitled to submit a complaint to the Office of the Ombudsman or the Ombudsman for Children.

The tables below outline the number of complaints forwarded to the School Transport Section from either the Office of the Ombudsman or the Ombudsman for Children's Office and disaggregates the type of complaints received.

Table 6.9: Number of complaints received by Ombudsman / Ombudsman for Children.

Year	Ombudsman			Ombudsman for Children	
	Total DES	ST	ST as % of DES	DES as % of all complaints rec'd	ST as % of DES Complaints
2008	57	1	1.8	41	n/a
2007	86	2	2.3	44	n/a
2006	77	2	2.6	41	11.7
2005	99	8	8.1	51.4	n/a
2004	116	10	8.6	Established	
2003	75	9	12		
2002	96	8	8.3		
2001	112	11	9.8		
2000	84	9	10.7		
1999	123	21	17.1		
1998	143	33	23		
1997	135	17	13		

* Data taken from annual reports of Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children

The Department of Education and Skills is a Department that has a broad impact on society and it is to be expected that a Department with such a significant role to play in supporting the provision of front line public services will attract a significant number of complaints through the

Ombudsman's office. Of the number of complaints received that relate to the Department, the number involving the STS is relatively low. In some years in the past there were a proportionately high number of STS related complaints – for example from the Ombudsman in 1999 and 2000 – however in recent years STS related complaints have not featured as significantly in the complaints processed through the Office of the Ombudsman. Again, considering that 135,000 children are transported each school day this appears to be a relatively small number of complaints.

As complainants to the Ombudsman/Ombudsman for Children must first have been examined by the School Transport Appeals Board, it follows that the type of complaints received by both the Ombudsman / Ombudsman for Children relate to the same type of issues as raised in appeals to the STAB. They are also the same type of issues raised in the submissions to the committee, namely distance from pick up points, catchment boundaries, travel / waiting times, the closed school rule and school placement.

6.5.4 Parliamentary Questions

Parliamentary Questions (PQs) are tabled by Deputies in Dáil Éireann and answered by relevant Ministers while the Dáil is sitting. The Department of Education and Skills is a Department that receives one of the largest amounts of PQs, answering more than 6,000 PQs in 2008 alone. These PQs relate to a variety of different aspects of the work of the Department, including the STS. The table below details the number of PQs received by the Department of Education and Skills for each of the years 2004 to 2008 inclusive, as well as the number of PQs that relate directly to the STS.

Table 6.10: Number of Parliamentary Questions relating to STS, 2004 – 2009

Year	No of PQs relating to STS	Total no. of PQs received by DES	PQs relating to STS as % of total no. of PQs
2004	114	4096	2.8
2005	195	5371	3.6
2006	225	5352	4.2
2007	161	4556	3.5
2008	120	6265	1.9
2009	164	4035	4.1

While there have been more than a hundred PQs tabled in relation to the STS in each year since 2004, and more than two hundred in 2006, this needs to be viewed in the context of the total number of PQs answered by the Department. In each year since 2004, the proportion of PQs that relate to the STS represents no more than 4.2% of the total number of PQs.

An analysis of the PQs relating to the STS that were answered in 2008 and 2009 indicates that the main issues raised are broadly similar to those raised through the other avenues outlined earlier: queries about eligibility for the scheme, school transport charges, catchment boundaries, special needs transport, and the closed school rule. There are also a high proportion of PQs asking about the eligibility of individuals viz. a viz. the STS. This illustrates a belief among many individuals that there is a degree of flexibility about some of the criteria governing the scheme and that intervention by a public representative can result in a beneficial outcome to an application for access to the service.

6.5.5 Representations

Representations are received in the Department in relation to the STS from public representatives, parents, principals and other sources. Since 2006 alone there have been more

than 1,829 representations received in relation to the STS. The actual number of representations received is outlined in the table below.

Table 6.11: Number of representations received in relation to the STS, 2006 - 2009

Year	Number of representations
2006	355
2007	463
2008	543
2009	468
Total	1,829

An analysis of the type of representations received in 2008 and 2009 indicates that the issues raised are broadly similar to those raised in PQs, appeals to the STAB and Ombudsman, and submissions to the committee, namely requests for extension to existing services, catchment boundaries, the closed school rule, and transport for children with special needs.

6.5.6 Telephone calls to School Transport Section

One final data source that can be use as a proxy indicator for the volume of interaction with members of the public and other stakeholders is the number of telephone calls received by School Transport Section. In the 84 working day period encompassing January to April 2009 the section received 3037 phone calls which is an average of 36 calls per day. In total, the calls answered by the section in this period amounted to 102 hours and 29 minutes of talk time. This does not include the number of calls made by the section itself nor does it take account of time spent by officials in answering written representations, parliamentary questions and other queries. While this is not an indicator of the level of satisfaction with the STS it serves as indicator of the activity levels within the School Transport Section itself.

6.5.7 Overall

Overall, the analysis of representations, Parliamentary Questions, appeals to the STAB and the Ombudsman Offices, as well as the volume of telephone activity, illustrate the considerable level of activity within School Transport Section in administering the scheme. It is also important to note that many of the queries received by the School Transport Section, whether through PQs, representations or other means, relate mainly to the criteria governing the scheme.

Findings

1. It is not possible, due to the lack of appropriate data, to make a definitive judgement on the level of customer satisfaction with the STS.
2. The available evidence suggests that the number of complaints made about the scheme is relatively low, given the size and complexity of the scheme, in terms of the number of pupils transported, and the number of routes and vehicles involved.
3. The majority of complaints received in the School Transport Section relate mainly to the criteria governing the scheme.

6. 6. Key question 4: Does the administrative basis of the scheme impact on its effectiveness?

The STS is currently operated on an administrative basis. This means that there are circulars governing each element of the scheme (primary, post-primary and special needs) rather than a

piece of legislation or a regulation that has legal status. The key issue for consideration is whether the current administrative nature of the scheme has any impact on its effectiveness.

There are three main issues that are relevant to this analysis namely the extent of the administrative burden arising from the scheme as it is currently organised, costs and flexibility.

Administrative burden

It is clear that a large portion of the day to day work of the School Transport Section is taken up with dealing with queries from members of the public or parliamentary questions and representations from public representatives seeking to query the operation of aspects of the scheme.

This perception is fuelled by the circulars governing the scheme itself which state 'the granting of facilities under the terms of this scheme will be at the discretion of the Minister for Education and Skills'. This allows a considerable degree of Ministerial involvement in the scheme and suggests that what should be purely administrative decisions may be influenced by other considerations. This can lead to an expectation among service users that lobbying on behalf of an individual by a local public representative may result in the Department amending some decisions that are taken on purely administrative grounds.

Further evidence of the potential divergence between administrative and other considerations is evident in the fact that it is only from September 2009 that school transport services that have been operating under the minimum numbers threshold are being terminated, despite the fact that many of these services have been operating under the minimum threshold for a number of years. Those benefiting from such services have been active in campaigning for their retention for some time.

As indicated in the previous section, officials in the School Transport Section spend considerable time in processing representations, Parliamentary Questions, appeals to the STAB and the Ombudsman Offices, as well as answering telephone calls that relate in large part to operational aspects of the scheme. The pressure is felt more keenly due to the strict deadlines associated with much of this work – for example there are absolute deadlines associated with responding to Parliamentary Questions and complaints from the Ombudsman, and customer service charter guidelines for responding to representations. This places a considerable administrative burden on the section and the significant focus on operational issues means that there is less time within the section for dealing with strategic and policy issues. Operational issues tend to dominate at the expense of more long term strategic issues.

It can also be the case that time is spent by officials within the School Transport Section in processing Parliamentary Questions, representations, Ombudsman complaints on the same issue. For example, one catchment boundary related query in Kildare has been the subject of five Parliamentary Questions and one adjournment debate in the Dáil in the period May to October 2009. This is not uncommon but is perhaps surprising given the existence of the STAB.

It is also important to note that queries such as this relate mainly to the criteria governing the scheme and it may be the case that greater clarity on the scheme criteria and on the type of appeals that can be directed to the STAB would reduce the number of queries and complaints received by the School Transport Section. This could potentially be achieved by placing the scheme on a statutory footing with a resulting reduction in such queries and complaints. However, there is the possibility that establishing the scheme on a statutory footing would not reduce the administrative burden on the School Transport Section as it could increase litigation in this area as people seek to vindicate their statutory rights through recourse to the courts.

In addition, while placing the scheme on a statutory footing may provide greater clarity on the scheme criteria, it may be that it is the lack of clarity surrounding the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders (Bus Éireann, TLOs, school principals, NCSE, SENOs, STAB, School Transport Section) in the scheme that is of more significance in determining that the main focus of School Transport Section is on operational rather than strategic issues. Greater clarity on the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders, and even a reduced number of

stakeholders, would assist in reducing the administrative burden within the School Transport Section and thereby increase the time available to focus on more strategic issues. This clarification could be provided through a revised administrative scheme and does not require placing the scheme on a statutory footing.

Costs

The second issue for consideration is the potential impact in terms of cost to the Exchequer of placing the scheme on a statutory footing. A scheme that is statutorily based means that pupils have rights and entitlements under that scheme and on occasion parents may feel the need to have legal recourse to exercise those rights on behalf of their children. Any increase in litigation of this nature has the potential to contribute to an increase in the costs associated with the scheme.

On the other hand, a clearly defined statutory scheme with clear rules governing eligibility might be sufficiently transparent to discourage some potential appellants from challenging decisions made in relation to the scheme and might also reduce the number of queries received by the School Transport Section through PQs, representations and the Office of the Ombudsman.

Flexibility

The final issue for consideration relates to flexibility. It is much more straightforward to amend a scheme that is administrative in nature than a statutory scheme. The STS has a number of eligibility criteria and requirements in relation to minimum number thresholds but these have not changed in recent years. However, the school transport charge, while remaining stable for a long period after 1997, had been increased on three separate occasions in recent years. As the scheme is currently organised, making changes to the transport charge presents no difficulty from an administrative point of view, and if changes need to be made to the eligibility criteria this can be done in a straightforward manner through amending the Department Circulars governing each element of the scheme. If the scheme was organised on a statutory basis such changes would be less straightforward and more time consuming to bring into effect.

Other considerations

A number of reports in recent years that have commented on the operation of the STS have recommended that the scheme be established on a statutory basis. This includes a report on the internal management and organisation of the Department itself.²⁹

The Ombudsman has also advocated on a number of occasions that the STS be placed on a statutory footing. In his 1995 annual report the Ombudsman noted in respect of certain non-statutory schemes operated by the Department, including the STS that *"instances of unfair discrimination ... might be less likely to occur if the Department's schemes were placed on a statutory footing"*. He expanded on his reasoning for this view in his 1998 annual report where he emphasised the need to fully publish the rules or criteria underpinning a scheme and the grounds on which exceptions should be made. He criticised inconsistency in how the Department applied exceptions to the STS and this led him to again request the Department to place the STS (and other non-statutory schemes) on a statutory basis. The Ombudsman repeated his request in his 1999 annual report and summarised the basis for his request in the following terms: *"The advantage of operating on a statutory basis is that the objectives and governing criteria of the scheme are likely to be made clear and the likelihood of arbitrary decision-making is reduced"*.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Department is currently moving to place its administrative student grant schemes on a statutory footing. Three of the existing four schemes, those administered by the VEC sector, are administrative schemes. Currently, only the Higher Education Grants Scheme is a statutory-based scheme under the Local Authorities (Higher Education Grants) Acts, 1968-1992. The Student Support Bill, 2008 currently progressing

²⁹ Review of Department's Operations, Systems and Staffing needs (Unpublished internal Department of Education and Science report, 2000), and the Deloitte & Touche organisational review of the Department (1999).

through the Oireachtas, is intended to provide for a single unified scheme of grants on a statutory basis.

Findings

1. Evidence from the School Transport Section indicates that the administrative burden associated with operating and managing the scheme as it is currently organised, on an administrative basis, is impacting on effectiveness as policy makers are focussed on day to day operational issues at the expense of more long term strategic issues. It is not clear, however, whether establishing the scheme on a statutory basis would reduce the administrative burden and improve effectiveness in this regard.
2. Greater clarity on the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders, and even a reduced number of stakeholders, would assist in reducing the administrative burden within the School Transport Section and thereby increase the time available to focus on more strategic issues. This clarification could be provided through a revised administrative scheme and does not require placing the scheme on a statutory footing.
3. A number of reports in recent years that have commented on the operation of the STS have recommended that the scheme be established on a statutory basis.

6.7 Key question 5: How safe is the STS?

A key objective of the STS is to transport children to school safely. RSA records indicate that during the 20 year period 1989 to 2008 some 26 children lost their lives while being transported on the STS or while in the vicinity of school buses operated under the STS. Ten of these fatalities were as a result of two serious accidents in 1998 and 2005. Of the twenty six fatalities, fifteen were in the vicinity of the school bus while eleven occurred on a school bus. There have also been a number of non fatal serious accidents³⁰ and less serious accidents that involved minor injuries. In total during the period 2000 to 2008 there were 29 serious accidents where pupils were seriously injured and 88 minor accidents which led to minor injuries.

While 26 pupils constitutes a significant loss of life and while any death is a death too many, the number of fatalities (and accidents in general) must be related to the volume of pupils being transported over this period. In the period from 1997 to 2008 alone, a total of some 1.6 million children were transported on the STS. When considered against this volume of transport activity, acknowledging and regretting the loss of lives, it is reasonable to conclude that the STS, has been effective in transporting children safely to school.

The number of fatalities arising from the STS can also be compared to the number of road fatalities in general over this period. In the period 1998 to 2007 there were 3881 fatalities arising from road traffic accidents and between 1998 and 2007 a total of 98,412 people have been injured on the roads.

Considerable efforts have been made in recent years to maintain and improve the safety features on the STS. This includes the purchase by the Department of 161 buses (50 new buses and 111 'modern' second hand buses) in the period 2005 – 2008 at a cost of some €25million, as well as a retrofitting safety campaign on all Bus Éireann and private contractor buses engaged in the STS. This campaign ensured that all buses engaged in school transport services were equipped with safety belts and has been a requirement since 2006. The retrofitting was a significant undertaking, as for example none of the Bus Éireann school transport fleet of over 600 buses had safety belts fitted.

³⁰ Accident is defined as an incident resulting in personal injury sustained either on the school bus or prior to boarding/after alighting from school bus

The full cost of retrofitting the Bus Éireann school bus fleet was met by the Department. Grant-aid equivalent to half the cost of retrofitting safety belts to their vehicles, subject to a maximum of €3,000 for a large bus, was offered to private operators on contract to Bus Éireann to have their buses, where necessary, retrofitted with belts to a similar standard. Only a small number of private contractors availed of the grant-aid on offer to retrofit their buses with safety belts. Many chose to purchase newer vehicles with safety belts already fitted to an approved standard. The cost of the Bus Éireann “once off” retrofit programme was approximately €5m. A further €1.5 million approx has been expended to-date on the development of specifications, visual inspections of private contractors’ vehicles and grant-aid payments amounting to over €120,000 for 45 contractors’ vehicles.

The table below indicates that the total cost associated with improving safety features on the STS fleet amounted to some €31 million in the period 2005 – 2008.

Table 6.12: Expenditure related to improvements in age and safety standards of vehicles in the STS, 2005-2008 (€)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
Purchase of buses (capital cost)	3,718,737	12,920,979	7,726,063	278,765	24,644,544
Retrofit programme Bus Éireann (<i>once off to fit lap belts</i>)	0	4,949,854	145,940	0	5,095,794
Retrofit programme private contractors (<i>once off retrofit; on going visual inspections during this period</i>)	0	317,343*	1,733*		319,076*
		238,947**	10,083**		249,030**
		787,460***	85,480***	140,027***	1,012,967***
Overall total					31,321,411

* Development of pull test specifications

** Retrofitting of safety belts

*** Visual Inspections

In relation to safety, the focus is on four distinct areas namely vehicular safety standards including the standard of safety belts, driver vetting to conform with child protection guidelines and safety awareness on or around buses. In addition, a number of other measures undertaken by Bus Éireann support safety in the delivery of the school transport scheme.

Vehicular Safety:

Vehicles operating under the School Transport Scheme are required to meet the statutory regulations as laid down by the Department of Transport. Where vehicles have over eight adult seats and are more than one year old, they are required to pass the *RSA Annual Roadworthiness Test*. The Roadworthiness Test is the same for all bus operators, whether a private operator owned bus or a Bus Éireann owned bus. Goods vehicles, goods trailers with design gross vehicle weight of more than 3,500 kg, ambulances, buses (including minibuses) and coaches that are over one year must have a valid roadworthiness certificate.

In addition to the statutory regulations, all vehicles used to operate school transport services must be specifically nominated and their documentary details produced for Bus Éireann, in advance of utilisation. Vehicles nominated for use under the Scheme must be suitable for the conveyance of school children and be fitted with safety belts of an appropriate standard, and must have complete and current documentation in respect of both buses and drivers as required by law (i.e. Vehicle Insurance, Roadworthiness Cert, PSV Licence, Road Passenger Transport Operators Licence (over 9 seats), Driving Licence for nominated class of vehicle, Tax Clearance Cert). A database is maintained to monitor this situation and reminders are issued by BE in respect of safety critical documents namely Vehicle Roadworthiness and insurance. The vehicles have to be kept and maintained in a safe and roadworthy condition and to comply in all respects with the Road Traffic Acts.

Bus Éireann vehicles are subject to routine scheduled maintenance in addition to statutory Roadworthiness Testing. The Company's own servicing arrangements for the fleet include a programme of regular scheduled maintenance checks known as 'docks', which take place every 6-8 weeks. In addition, drivers have a mechanism for reporting mechanical faults that may arise from time to time.

Bus Éireann conducts a process of random checks of maintenance standards and audits of maintenance records to include contractors' school buses and their maintenance premises. These are carried out over and above the standard RSA Annual Roadworthiness Tests by an internationally recognised independent agency, and are funded by the Department of Education and Skills. The committee noted that any additional standards required for school buses whether publicly or privately operated is a matter for the RSA.

Safety Belts: These are statutorily required on all new buses manufactured in a series of more than 500 units since October 2007. In relation to safety belts on school buses, the Road Safety Authority has defined the standard of fitment for safety belts on buses and the new requirements in relation to the organised transport of children.

Buses operating in the school transport scheme operated by Bus Éireann are required to have safety belts fitted. This additional safety measure was introduced by Bus Éireann as a contract requirement for services provided under the school transport scheme, which also put in place a process of visual inspection of safety belts, conducted by independent experts, to ensure that vehicles entering the School Transport Scheme, for the first time, are fitted with safety belts of an appropriate standard. Following the liquidation of the company contracted to undertake this work, an interim inspection mechanism has been put in place funded by the Department of Education and Skills which will be maintained pending the full introduction of the new standards.

Driver vetting: All drivers of services provided under the School Transport Scheme are required by Bus Éireann to undergo background vetting conducted by the Garda Central Vetting Unit.

Driver Testing: Driving tests for professional bus drivers were expanded in 2008 to meet the requirements of EU Directive 2003/59 with the Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) test introduced in September 2008. All professional bus drivers will now have to undergo one days training per year in a syllabus developed in line with the EU Directive.

Safety Awareness;

In relation to safety on or around buses, all School Transport Scheme services offer accommodation on a one child per adult seat basis. A safety assessment of each route and pick up point, whether used by a Bus Éireann school bus or contractor's bus, is carried out by Bus Éireann School Transport Inspectors. A planned programme of checks is in place whereby mobile Bus Éireann School Transport Inspectors monitor the operational performance of all School Transport Scheme services including those performed by contractors

In order to promote safety in the vicinity of buses, three pilot Warning Flashing Lights projects on school buses were completed in Ennis, Co Clare (2005) and Castlebar, Co Mayo, Ferbane, Co Offaly and Carnew, Co Wicklow (2008). The report on the pilot projects, not yet published, concluded that there is no evidence to suggest that warning flashing lights impact on driver behaviour. Other factors identified which have a greater influence are school bus vehicle type, the speed limits in operation, the position of the stopped bus (degree to which it could pull in off the roadway), weather and traffic levels. The key findings were that there is no statistical evidence to support the roll out of warning flashing lights nationwide which would require legislative changes to the Rules of the Road, further research into other influencing factors would be beneficial and future publicity campaigns needed to be strengthened.

Safety campaigns were conducted by Bus Éireann in 2006 and 2007 to make parents and children aware that it is the law to wear safety belts on school buses and to encourage children to behave in a safety-conscious manner on, and in the vicinity of, school buses. Safety Awareness campaigns and work to raise awareness continue to be undertaken by BE on an on going basis frequently in conjunction with other agencies. The committee noted the intention of

the Department of Education and Skills to establish a safety awareness group representing all interest groups including the National Parents Councils to raise and maintain awareness of safety issues on and around school buses.

Other safety measures undertaken by Bus Éireann

- School bus drivers are required to undergo a pre-employment medical examination by a nominated doctor, and may be subject to ongoing medical review.
- Contractors' school bus drivers are also required to undergo a pre-employment medical examination by a nominated doctor, and may be subject to ongoing medical review by the Chief Medical Officer of CIE. It is a condition of the contract agreement that no person shall be allowed to drive a school bus if having been requested, they refuse to submit themselves for medical examination, or if they are certified unfit.
- Twenty two BE Inspectors qualified as driving instructors at Institute of Advanced Motorists Course level facilitate relevant training and refresher courses for BE school bus drivers
- Bus Éireann's mobile School Transport Inspectors carry out service checks on the performance of some 6,000 routes provided under the scheme, throughout the year. During this check the Inspector conducts an on-board inspection of the vehicle to ensure that the vehicle and driver are as nominated, and checks that other safety requirements are being observed. Follow up action is taken by the local Bus Éireann office, which can include termination of contract, if deficiencies are detected.
- Contractors engaged by Bus Éireann to provide school transport services must use only nominated drivers who are subject to medical examination and are competent, experienced and duly licensed to drive the size of vehicle required. Bus Éireann maintains a record of driving licences on file for all nominated contractors. Bus Éireann provides training to bring its drivers up to the requisite standard, if necessary. In addition, Bus Éireann school bus drivers must pass a driving assessment conducted by specially trained and qualified Bus Éireann Inspectors. Vehicle familiarisation with different types of school buses is carried out on an ongoing basis.
- Contractors are provided with detailed operating instructions by Bus Éireann with which they are obliged to comply and are given signs to place in the front and back window of the bus to indicate to other drivers that the vehicle is a school bus. Safety instructions are also provided, and these services are monitored by the mobile Bus Éireann Inspectors.

Findings

1. The School Transport Scheme is compliant with national safety requirements as prescribed by the Department of Transport.
2. Considerable efforts have been made in recent years to maintain and improve the safety features on the STS. The total cost associated with improving safety features on the school transport fleet amounted to some €31 million in the period 2005 – 2008.

6.8 Key question(s) 6: How long are waiting / travel times? Is there an optimum waiting / travel time?

The Department and its network organiser Bus Éireann are conscious of the need to balance economic considerations with the need to ensure that pupils do not spend excessive time travelling to and from school or waiting to be collected by the school bus. In the organisation of school transport services, all routes are planned in such a way as to ensure that, as far as possible, every eligible pupil has a reasonable standard of transport service timetable, while ensuring that vehicles are fully utilised in the most efficient manner.

In order to achieve this, individual vehicles are generally required to operate more than one service. A double trip comprises of two trips to the same centre using the same bus. It does not mean two trips each morning and evening, one to primary and one to post-primary. In this case the trip to a primary and the trip to a post-primary are regarded as two single trips, which is a different situation to the traditional double trip. For economic reasons a double trip is preferred

to utilising two separate vehicles. It is considerably more expensive to engage two buses with two drivers than one bus with one driver doing an extra trip on a bus that is already at work.

The inevitable consequence of 'double tripping' is that some pupils have to make an early start in the mornings and to wait for some time before being collected in the evenings. Since a double trip involves two trips to the same place with the same bus, one group of children must be picked up earlier and dropped off earlier than the other, and vice versa in the evening. This is particularly an issue in primary schools given the age of the children and the fact that at post-primary school level provision of transport is generally to a post-primary centre rather than to an individual school.

The extent of double tripping is highlighted by the fact that of the more than 2,500 vehicles currently operating mainstream school transport services (excluding special needs services), approximately 1,500 operate both Primary & Post-primary services, i.e. 2 trips each morning & afternoon, while 300 operate at least 2 Primary Trips and a small number operate 3 Primary Trips. About 200 of these buses operate 2 Post-primary Trips.

In order to ensure that there is a balance between economic considerations and avoiding undue discomfort for pupils, the guidelines for the STS prescribe that no pupil should have a total waiting and journey time per day of more than 2.5 hours for post-primary pupils and 1.5 hours for primary pupils. The combined daily travelling and waiting times for pupils at post-primary level were reduced in 2001 from a maximum of 3 hours to the current level of 2.5 hours. These are maximum waiting / travel times and for the majority of pupils their waiting and travel times operate effectively within these guidelines. However, this guideline may not always be feasible in the case of children with special educational needs given the distance between the child's residence and the location of the specialised school/unit. In some instances with all services, delays can occur associated with traffic congestion or an unexpected occurrence and impacts on the times that children are collected.

While it is not possible to estimate the specific cost associated with this reduction in travelling / waiting time, it was one of a number of alterations to the scheme introduced in 2001 which contributed to an increase of 23% in expenditure on the scheme in 2002.

Wherever possible, within operational constraints, (such as the location of the base of the driver), a system of first in/first home and last in/last home is used. The routing may even be alternated in cases where this is feasible so that the same pupils are not disadvantaged all the time.

It would be possible to reduce or eliminate waiting time completely by terminating double tripping entirely. This could be done by ensuring that every trip is provided with a separate vehicle – each school would have a tailor made service designed to drop and collect children within minutes of class beginning and ending (this is assuming that in the case of post-primary all schools in the centre open and close at the same time). However, this would involve considerable expenditure. Bus Éireann has estimated that the cost of eliminating double tripping completely would be in the region of €523,000 per school day, or €95 million per annum.

Waiting and travelling times are influenced by school opening and closing times. Many primary schools are opting to open earlier than the traditional 9.30am start, and at post-primary closing times sometimes vary significantly in the same centre. This means that even if primary and post-primary schools in one town had entirely separate primary and post-primary buses, it could still mean that separate schools at primary or post-primary level in the same town could need their own separate school bus if the goal is the elimination of waiting time.

Linked to the issue of school opening and closing times is the issue of supervision of the children who are dropped to school first in the morning or are last to be collected from the schoolyard in the evening. The issue of the supervision of pupils on arrival at and dismissal from school affects all pupils that arrive and depart from school before and after school opening times, and not just those transported on school buses.

Under the Education Act, 1998, the Board of Management has responsibility for the day to day management of the school. Issues in relation to the supervision of pupils is therefore a matter

for each Board of Management and while the Department does not issue specific guidelines on the requirements for the supervision of pupils, it acknowledges that the degree of supervision required by school authorities varies with the circumstances of the school concerned and that it is the responsibility of each individual managerial authority to arrange for appropriate supervision of its pupils.

The Department is currently exploring the school time issue and consideration is being given to seeking more flexible arrangements at local level in which the issue of the supervision of pupils on arrival and dismissal can be addressed. The current rules for National Schools provide that a school can open no later than 9.30am and must provide 5 hours and forty minutes instruction per day. Payments for supervision to primary do not include payments for supervision before and after school. However, as conveyed in Department Circular 29/30, the contractual terms of the teaching hours of primary school teachers are set at 37 hours supervision per annum for each full-time teaching post or to a minimum of 122 hours per school, whichever is the greater. In light of the current fiscal climate, it is unlikely that any potential exists for additional pay to allow for paid supervision of pupils at arrival and dismissal times.

Findings

1. There is no optimum combined waiting / travel time for children using school transport services. The current maximum travel and waiting times, combined with double tripping, are designed to strike a balance between economic considerations and avoiding excessive discomfort for children using the service.
2. The cost of eliminating 'double tripping' entirely would be in the region of €95 million per annum.
3. Ensuring that there is a coordinated approach to school opening and closing times in particular areas is one means of ensuring that waiting times on specific routes are kept as short as possible.

CHAPTER 7

Analysis of Findings and Options for Change

7.1 Introduction

The purpose of the Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme is to assess the efficiency, effectiveness and value for money of the scheme by carrying out a root and branch examination of the scheme as it currently operates. The review aims to evaluate the extent to which the scheme warrants the continuing allocation of public funding and, having regard to this, make recommendations on the future of the scheme. This chapter takes account of the work undertaken in previous chapters and, in particular, analyses the findings of Chapters 5 and 6 and looks at options for change with a view to drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

The committee notes the large increases in expenditure that have occurred over the last twelve years on school transport. The principal cost drivers for these increases are as follows:

- the introduction of new safety requirements over the last few years which eliminated the allocation of two seats for every three children and ensured that each child is now allocated with a seat;
- enhanced support for children with special educational needs;
- increased availability and take-up of choice of types of schools particularly at primary level where parents are choosing to send their children to a school, other than their nearest school in order to avail of a more suitable school in terms of denomination, ethos or linguistics e.g. Educate Together Schools or Gaelscoileanna; and
- a relaxation of some of the criteria in relation to school transport e.g. a reduction in the numbers of pupils needed to establish a service and a reduction in travel and waiting times.
- An increase in operational costs by service providers

The committee considers that the rates of increase in the school transport system over the recent years, particularly those since the introduction of a seat for every child, are not sustainable. Indeed, the committee considers that it is vital that the school transport system be provided on a more efficient and effective basis, that expenditure on the school transport system be, at most, retained at current levels if not reduced over the coming years as the numbers of pupils in primary and post-primary education increase, and that parents contribute more towards meeting the economic costs of the scheme.

7.1.2 Findings of Review

The report contains fifty four findings mainly in relation to the efficiency and effectiveness of the scheme. The main findings are summarised below:

7.1.3 Objectives of the scheme;

The existing objectives of the scheme remain valid as the scheme continues to be targeted at relieving hardship especially for children residing in rural areas who have long distances to travel to school and for children with special educational needs. (ref:4.7).

7.1.4 Efficiency;

Expenditure on school transport has risen by 249% in the period 1997-2008 while the number of pupils transported on an annual basis has decreased by 22,000. (ref: 5.2)

The overall unit cost per child transported was €1,438 in 2008 an increase of 306% since 1997 (ref: 5.2)

The average school transport unit cost in Northern Ireland and the cost of transport for children with

special educational needs is significantly less than the school transport scheme; similarly school transport costs in the UK (ref: 5.3).

The proportion of children transported by private contractors has increased from 48% in 1997 to 65% in 2008 (ref: 5.4).

The private contractor cost per mile on large buses is on average 21% less than the equivalent Bus Éireann costs, when costs related to inspection costs are excluded, and approx 19% less when inspection costs are included (ref: 5.4)

The main recurrent cost drivers behind the school transport scheme are payments to contractors to meet “demand led” needs, grants paid directly by school transport section, Bus Éireann running costs, overhead and other indirect costs associated with the management of the school transport scheme, parental school choice and transport costs for children with Special Educational Needs, which alone accounted for almost 34% of all school transport service expenditure in 2008 – (ref: section 5.5)

The unit cost, including the cost of providing escorts, for children with special educational needs is € 9,087 or over 6 times the overall unit cost per child transported of €1,438. (ref 5.5.7 (i))

Approx 52% (or 27,000 primary children) qualify for school transport under the closed school rule (ref: 5.5.7 (ii))

The 1967 scheme at both primary and post-primary level allowed for choice of school on religious grounds and thus allowed transport for Catholic or Protestant children to attend the nearest school of their respective denomination. Transport was also provided to the nearest Irish language schools; this particularly applied in the Gaeltacht at the time and has now been extended given the number of Gaelscoileanna at primary level and to a lesser extent, of Gaelcholaistí at post-primary level. This scheme was further extended to multi-denominational schools at primary level when these were introduced. Growth in diversity has added to the costs of school choice, including the cost of school transport (ref:5.5.7 (iii))

The criterion of using minimum numbers to establish new or maintain services is the best available (ref: 5.5.7 (iv))

There is no evidence that the catchment boundary system is a key factor in the rising cost of the school transport service but the system results in transport for some pupils to a centre which is not their nearest. (ref; 5.5.7.(v))

A review of catchment boundaries is not practical given the length of time and administrative workload involved (ref: 5.5.7 (v))

The revenue generated from STS charges has not been linked or indexed to the cost of the scheme. If the same ratio of charges to cost of the scheme that applied in 1997 had applied in 2008 the revenue generated from charges in 2008 would have amounted to €20.9m rather than the €8.4m generated. In 1997 parental charges represented almost 11% of the total cost of the scheme whereas in 2008 they represented 4.3%. (ref: 5.6)

The current €300 charge represents 31% of the actual unit cost of transporting a post-primary pupil (ref: 5.6).

Approx 25% of Bus Éireann staff is involved in school transport service related activities. Staff numbers in the Department’s School transport section increased in recent years to take account of school transport for children with special educational needs(ref: 5.7)

7.1.5 Effectiveness

The scheme continues to target children for whom distance is an obstacle to attending school. New categories have been targeted in recent years (ref; 6.3)

Distance is an effective criterion for assessing eligibility; the current prescribed distances of 3.2 kms

and 4.8 kms are in line with international practice (ref: 6.3)

There is no maximum distance that certain categories of pupils will be transported irrespective of the cost of arranging transport (ref; 6.3)

Due to lack of appropriate data no conclusion could be drawn on whether there are children who would not be able to get to and from school in the absence of school transport. (ref: 6.4) – Based on a sample survey, there are regularly empty seats on school transport services (ref: 6.4.4)

The majority of complaints in school transport section relate mainly to the criteria governing the scheme (ref: 6.5)

The administrative basis of the scheme leads to a focus on day to day issues rather than strategic matters; it is unclear whether placing the scheme on a statutory basis would improve effectiveness (ref: 6.6)

Greater clarity on roles of stakeholders through a revised administrative footing would facilitate a more strategic focus (ref: 6.6).

In order to address the key findings, the committee divided Chapter 7 into a number of sections as follows:

- New objectives for support of School Transport
- Consideration of options in relation to providing transport or supporting the provision of transport
- Administration of the School Transport Scheme
- Relationship & governance of the scheme to ensure strengthened monitoring & evaluation of costs
- The Closed School Rule in primary level education
- School Transport catchment boundary area rules in post-primary education
- Choice of schools in primary and post-primary education
- Distance criteria
- Minimum numbers required to establish/maintain a Service
- Special educational needs
- Traveller Children
- Providing for Children 16 or under in non mainstream provision
- Charges
- Primary application process
- Grants
- Timing
- Supervision/Double Tripping
- School Transport Appeals Process
- Balance between provision of transport by Bus Éireann and Private Contractors
- Administrative basis of the School Transport Scheme
- Safety
- Sustainable Transport and Synergies in Transport provision

7.2 New objectives for support of School Transport

The committee considers that it is appropriate for the State to support school transport provision for children to schools, including the provision of grants, where appropriate, where it would be difficult for the children including children with special educational needs to attend school otherwise. Furthermore, the committee considers that the state subsidised services provided through the national network of over 6,000 school bus routes must be fully utilised to maximise efficiency. The committee notes the benefits of sustainable public transport and the relevance of an effective school transport scheme to this.

At the same time, the committee considers that, while there should continue to be support by the State for school transport, the extent and objectives of the support by the state for school transport must have regard to the finances available to the Government, in general, and to the Department of Education and Skills, in particular, in relation to school transport. The committee also considers that the support by the State for school transport, in a way consistent with the recommendations contained in this report, will make a major contribution to meeting the overall objectives of the Smarter Travel Policy.

Reference was made in Chapter 4 to the mission statement of the Department, namely *“To provide for high-quality education, which will enable individuals to develop their full potential and to participate fully as members of society and contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development”* In pursuit of this mission the Department’s high level goals include a goal to *“To support and improve the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of education for every learner in our schools”*. The school transport scheme supports this goal by provision, through Bus Éireann, of a school transport service complemented by grants paid directly by school transport section including for learners with special needs.

The committee considers that the new objectives of such support should be:

- to support the transport to and from school of children who would have difficulty travelling, for reasons of distance, to their nearest school if transport is not supported
- to support the transport to and from school of children who have a special educational need where those needs necessitate assistance for them in travelling to and from school

In implementing the objectives, the committee considers that there should be support provided for the availability of transport on the basis of critical mass of those being transported, and that support should be provided on the basis of the family contributing towards the costs of the transport having regard to the means of the family and thus to minimise state subvention of the scheme. The State sub-vented school transport system should encourage and facilitate attendance at the nearest school.

7.3 Consideration of Options in relation to providing transport or supporting the provision of transport

There are a number of possible approaches through which the State can seek to support transport to school in line with the overall objectives for the support of school transport.

The first option is to continue with the organisation, on behalf of the State, of a school transport system as currently operated including for children with special needs. This would mean building upon and developing the existing approach as appropriate with a view to the submission of all applications for transport to an organisation operating on behalf of the State and the full range of operational and administrative arrangements being made by that organisation on behalf of the State for school transport. Such a national organiser, currently Bus Éireann, would then organise the provision of transport services by a range of transport providers, including private contractors.

A second option would be the provision of grants to families in particular circumstances and based on need. This would mean that funding would be provided directly to families to support them in seeking to arrange school transport themselves. There would still be a need for detailed eligibility criteria in relation to distance from schools, choice of schools etc. for the provision of a grant to a family and means would need to be taken account of.

The third option would be for the State to seek to support transport operators in applying to an agent of the State to provide transport for groups of children, subject to certain eligibility requirements. This would mean that the State would not be directly providing the transport itself but would have a mechanism in place to encourage transport operators to make school transport services available subject to certain eligibility criteria for pupils. This would need to be complemented by a grant system for those eligible and in need of support but who do not have

access to such transport services. There would also need to be consideration of whether it would be possible to incorporate special education needs within an option such as this.

Analysis of Options

Clearly, increasing cost pressures and administrative challenges with the existing system demonstrates the continuing issues which will arise with option 1, even if the existing arrangements are to be amended somewhat. However, the big advantage with this option is that the school transport scheme is an entitlement based scheme and that, subject to minimum requirements and general eligibility rules, transport arrangements are put in place for eligible pupils based on applications received using a network of approx. 6,000 school transport routes, with a grant provided where provision under such transport arrangements is not possible. These grants are paid to parents of eligible children in remote areas where there are insufficient numbers to establish services.

The second option in relation to the development of a grants system would still require a central administration to ensure that the grants are paid and would mean that it would then be a matter for parents themselves to arrange transport. The central administration would still be required to ensure eligibility requirements, including distance are complied with. A national standardised grant system could not take into account localised transport price variations which have the potential to create localised difficulties. Any arrangements for transport would be subject to the overall regulation of privately contracted transport by the Department of Transport. However, there is no guarantee that the making available of grants would ensure that appropriate transport is paid for by parents. While this option would ensure that the State is providing support for the availability of school transport, this option would not ensure the development of sustainable transport. The State would not be facilitating the provision of transport services other than by making money available and, while it is very likely that many families would pool together to purchase shared transportation, it is also likely that the numbers travelling to school in cars and the number of cars travelling would increase, notwithstanding that there would most likely be a large increase in car pooling.

The third option would build upon the approach which has been established with the development of the pre-school year. In essence, arrangements for the pre-school year involve application by a pre-school provider to the Department of Health and Children for funding on a per capita basis for every child in a certain age range. The pre-school in question must provide evidence of the identities of the children and the pre-school education is subject to certain quality standards and inspection. Furthermore, a top-up charge is not allowed by the Department of Health and Children. Thus, there is a requirement that the payment from the Department of Health and Children meets the costs of pre-school provision. This approach was implemented with effect from January 2010.

The third option is addressed in some detail below given the complexity of the option and the issues arising. In considering a possible approach for school transport similar to that now being implemented for pre-schooling, a number of considerations arise. Firstly, there would need to continue to be a system to calculate eligibility for State support. This would mean that there would be need to continue with a set of rules for eligibility relating to distance from school/post-primary centre, choice of school etc. Secondly, there would be the question of continuing with a parental contribution for certain families but not for all. At present, this exemption applies for all primary pupils and for post-primary pupils who hold medical cards. Later in this chapter the committee recommends ending the distinction and that all families should pay some level of charges. A third consideration would be the need to ensure quality in the provision of school transport services. This would include safety requirements in relation to vehicles and vetting of drivers. Clearly here there would be a requirement to meet the overall transport standards put in place by the Department of Transport. However, there would be additional requirements relating to the provision of school transport such as the vetting of drivers and the availability of safety belts, as well as an inspection system to ensure that all requirements are met.

Thus, the way that such a system might work in practice could be that a transport operator (this could either be Bus Éireann or a private contractor) would apply for the funding based on the number of eligible students to be transported to a school. There may be variations in the

amount of funding having regard to whether the families hold medical cards or the distance that the families live from the school in question. The funding of the contractor would be on the basis of a combination of State funding and payments by families. The issue would also arise about whether there would be a limit on the amount that a family might be charged for the provision of this transport. As with option 2, a national standardised system could not take into account transport price variations across the country, which has the potential to create localised difficulties.

The development of this system would require a central administration and this would probably need to have a regional dimension. While the administration would be somewhat reduced from that which is currently necessary for arranging a network of bus routes, engaging bus contractors etc., there would still be a need to determine eligibility and make payments, including payments to either bus operators or families. It is likely that there could be reduced costs but the result could also be increased pressures on parents to provide top-up payments. It would be a matter for the State to determine the level of funding they would make available to the operators to provide the service, provided that families could subsidise the service.

There would also be major issues in relation to those families for whom such a transport option would not be available. This is likely to arise given that transport operators would be selecting routes to maximise the numbers travelling. In such instances, there would be a need to provide a grant for families in particular hardship.

Furthermore, this model of provision would not adequately cater for all special education requirements, and thus, arrangements would still need to be made to support or provide special education transport. There would be an added difficulty in that many children with special education needs now travel on regular school transport services and this may result in such children needing separate transport leading to cost pressures on the special education school transport budget. In addition, particularly in more isolated areas, it is possible that the absence of contractors may result in pupils not being catered for, or contractors may not pursue such work due to the additional unit cost per pupil arising from factors such as location and/or terrain. Finally, this option would not be facilitative of a clear school transport network.

The committee recognises that options 2 and 3 represent quite a radical change. Furthermore, those options would take some time to introduce and operationalise and would not be part of the gradual and incremental development of the school transport scheme, rather they would be a radical change in relation to the nature of school transport.

In seeking to recommend what option to follow, the key issue for the committee to consider is whether the State itself should ensure that transport is organised and provided or whether the State should put in place supports to encourage the provision of transport. Option 2 of providing grants would place a certain level of support in place. The third option of encouraging operators to seek to have aid from the State to provide a service would be closer to ensuring that transport is organised. However, the development and continuation of the existing arrangements would absolutely ensure that transport is organised and is in place. Furthermore, to move to a more transport operator-based system under option 3 would mean that it would not be possible to join up the provision of State funded transport services to the extent that is now being sought in the Government Programme in terms of linking rural transport, transport funded by the Health Service Executive and the School Transport services. Notwithstanding this, the committee considers that in light of the tight availability of resources at national level, future consideration could be given to option 3 or a variant of this option in looking at the future of school transport. In considering this, the committee noted that under the Public Transport Regulation Act 2009 the National Transport Authority has been given a role in relation to commercial bus licensing, bus and rail subvention and the regulation of taxis. However, noting that all other countries studied under this review have gone with an approach along the lines of option 1, ***the committee therefore recommends that the organisation, on behalf of the State, of a school transport system should continue.***

7.4 Administration of the School Transport Scheme

The school transport scheme is funded by the Department of Education and Skills and is administered, in the main, by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department, with particular additional

roles for the Department, the Transport Liaison Officers in the VECs and the SENOs in the NCSE.

In fulfilling its mandate, Bus Éireann and its network of regional offices discharge the following functions:

- annual review of every route to reflect the changes in pupil turnover;
- planning the provision of new services, including route itineraries and scheduling;
- continuous monitoring of contractor operations;
- contracting private operators and payment of contractor accounts;
- assessment of pupil eligibility;
- collection and accounting for pupil contributions;
- Issue of tickets/passes to pupils;
- planning and deploying the fleet of Bus Éireann vehicles;
- day-to-day supervision and monitoring of service performance and standards;
- all administrative support necessary for the operation of the scheme and its accountability as a State service.

Bus Éireann Inspectors plan every bus route – primary and post-primary - from the point of view of its suitability to accommodate the size of vehicle that will be used. A safety assessment of every route and of all pick-up points is carried out and services are monitored and checked by Inspectors on an ongoing basis. When routes have been finalised, Bus Éireann then arranges transport either on scheduled services or on special school bus services.

The Chief Executive Officer in 32 of the 33 Vocational Education Committees acts as a Transport Liaison Officer (TLO). This role relates primarily to the post-primary element of the school transport scheme and includes catchment boundary issues. TLOs co-ordinate school opening and closing, both at primary and post-primary levels including special schools within the TLO's administrative area,. TLO's do not have a function in relation to applications for primary school transport which is dealt with by school principals directly with the local Bus Éireann office. The functions of the Transport Liaison Officer (undertaken by that officer as well as some staff in each VEC) includes providing Bus Éireann with completed post-primary application forms (including applications for children with special education needs, who have enrolled in post-primary schools), the consideration of eligibility having regard to catchment boundaries, ensuring forms/computer listings received from Bus Éireann of pupils availing of transport are updated and returned within deadlines, processing applications from parents for extensions of service (including payable extensions) and advising and corresponding with relevant parties (e.g. schools principals, parents, public representatives) on the terms of the scheme and other relevant matters. The effect of this role has been the addition of another administration layer in the post-primary school transport scheme.

The committee noted the recommendations of the Special Group that the number of VECs be reduced from 33 to 22 and be aligned with the functional areas of the Local Authorities. In addition, the renewed Programme for Government commits the Government to develop proposals for the re-organisation in the number of VECs. Any new configuration would have immediate implications for the TLO duties in respect of larger geographic areas. Proposals for the restructuring of the VEC system, which can contribute significantly to the public service transformation agenda, have now been agreed by Government and will result in reducing the number of VECs from 33 to 16 through the merger of existing VECs.

Other elements of central administration include applications for grants which are processed based on information provided by BE concerning eligibility, applications for the employment of escorts which are processed based on advice from the National Council of Special Education (NCSE) / SENOs and processing of payments to school authorities for these escorts – these are all undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills at the moment. In relation to special needs transport generally, advice is given by the NCSE on whether separate transport arrangements are necessary and the Department of Education and Skills is involved in processing these prior to the arrangement of transport, as appropriate, by Bus Éireann.

A key issue that arises for consideration in the continuance of the scheme is how the future administration of the scheme should be organised.

The committee considers that an important issue in relation to the future administration of the scheme is the extent to which different organisations at national, regional or local level should have a role in running the scheme. The committee has noted that, at present, a range of organisations is involved in different aspects of the transport system – e.g., different organisations for accepting applications, arranging transport and receiving payments from parents and paying grants to parents. The committee considers that the existing arrangements are too complex and fragmented with significant duplication and overlap in the assessment and processing of transport arrangements/claims. ***The committee recommends that a single national organiser (separate from the Department of Education and Skills) with a regional dimension should operate the scheme.***

The committee considers that an important issue in relation to the future administration of the scheme is whether the administration of the scheme primarily continues to be undertaken by Bus Éireann or whether there are any alternatives to this. The committee notes that BÉ is a semi-state company. The committee also notes that the school transport scheme does not come within the scope of EU regulation 1370/2007 on public passenger transport services by rail and road. This is because the scheme does not provide public passenger transport within the meaning of that term as defined in the regulation and in that sense is not provided to the public – essentially the service is not non-discriminatory nor is it provided on a continuous basis. The committee also noted that as the scheme evolved since 1975 to meet evolving needs so too have the administrative functions of BE to meet these needs.

Were the Department of Education and Skills to consider moving away from Bus Éireann there will be a need to plan extensively for the hand over of all of the functions currently undertaken by Bus Éireann.

The committee notes that

- The VECs have offered to provide an enhanced role in relation to the administration of the scheme.
- Some representatives of private contractors have also offered to undertake such a role.
- Expertise in transport management has been developed and used by Bus Éireann over a number of years both in relation to the school transport scheme and in relation to its transport provision generally.
- The review by Deloitte consultants on behalf of the Department of Transport of BÉ operations (outside of school transport) concluded that BÉ operated in a generally efficient manner.

The committee considers that there is not an alternative national organisation with a regional dimension currently operating in Ireland which is an alternative to Bus Éireann for operating the school transport system. No existing organisation is operating in Ireland with the range of expertise in place other than Bus Éireann.

In considering this, the committee noted that the Government has now approved the Public Transportation Regulation Act which sets out that the new Dublin Transport Authority would be reconstituted as the National Transport Authority and would be given a role in relation to commercial bus licensing, future bus and rail subvention and the regulation of small public service vehicles.

The committee notes that it will take some time before the new National Transport Authority will be fully operational and that over time it may have the potential to administer the school transport scheme or parts of it on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills. Consideration has not been given as to whether it could take on part of this function, but if it were it is unlikely that it will be in operation to such an extent that it could consider taking responsibility for school transport for at least another three to five years. Neither is such a role appropriate to the Department of Education and Skills which has no expertise in transport network management. Furthermore, the committee considers that the priority for change at the moment in relation to the school transport scheme is to have an updated set of administrative

arrangements implemented rather than to change the nature of the main organiser of the scheme. The committee considers that the changes arising from the updated set of arrangements will be quite substantial and that it would be very risky for the operation of the scheme if the organiser was to change at the same time as the updated arrangements are being implemented.

The committee also notes the commitment in the Revised Programme for Government for a key role for the Department of Transport in consultation with other Departments in ensuring joined up provision of services in relation to rural transport, HSE supported transport and school transport. It would be very difficult to work towards this joining up were the Bus Éireann role in school transport to be significantly reduced.

The current arrangements provide for applications to be made by primary schools on behalf of their pupils directly to Bus Éireann. Later in this chapter the committee recommends that this be changed to applications by parents on behalf of their children so that it be necessary for parents to decide that their child would benefit from school transport rather than being given a ticket whether they wished to avail of school transport or not.

A key part of the rationale for a separate TLO administration relates to the role of the TLO in relation to the operation of distinct school transport catchment boundaries, in addition to the other functions already outlined. While the committee recognises the valuable role fulfilled by TLOs/VECs in post-primary transport, transport provision is of its nature a specialist service and TLOs/VECs have no transport planning expertise. Furthermore, while the committee notes that the planned reform of the VECs, including a reduction in the number of VECs, will, over time, involve VECs taking on additional responsibilities, the committee does not consider that school transport responsibilities should be among those that might be envisaged and therefore ***the committee recommends that the role of the TLO should cease***. Later in this Chapter, the committee recommends ending the organisation of post-primary school transport on the basis of school transport catchment boundaries. The committee does not consider that the TLOs/VECs offer an alternative to Bus Éireann in organising the scheme given that Bus Éireann is a national organisation with a regional dimension, while the VECs are separate local entities and also that the contractor engagement and route planning and management roles of the national organiser would be difficult to develop in the medium term outside of Bus Éireann. While the committee notes that with a reduced number of VECs there will be a reduction in the number of routes that cross VEC boundaries, the committee considers that many routes will still need to cross the new boundaries. Accordingly, while the committee considers that it will be necessary for the national organiser to work closely with VECs, both in relation to their own schools and in relation to linking in with the broader educational knowledge of VECs, ***the committee recommends therefore that in the medium term that the single national organiser should continue to be Bus Éireann***.

Similarly, there are issues about updating administrative arrangements in relation to the processing of grants to eligible children for whom transport is not provided. In keeping with the evolving nature of the scheme, ***the committee also recommends that the role of processing such grants should transfer to the national organiser***. The committee makes this recommendation in light of the overall thrust of its recommendation that a single organisation should be responsible for all elements of the implementation of the school transport scheme.

A further issue relates to the extent to which the Department of Education and Skills should continue to make payments to schools to employ escorts. The section on special education needs considers the issue of escorts later in this chapter. The committee considers that further analysis should be undertaken in this regard. Notwithstanding this, the committee does not consider that, whatever the outcome of this work, the Department should continue to be responsible for making grant payments for the employment of escorts.

The committee considers that the arrangement to have a national organiser responsible for the administration of the scheme should not be set in stone and ***recommends that this arrangement should be subject to review by the Department of Education and Skills every five years***, particularly in the context of the development of the National Transport Authority.

It is also recommended that the existing administrative arrangements with Bus Éireann should be further revised having regard to how the role has developed over a number of years and that the revised arrangements should be put in place for the 2011/12 school year, building on the findings of this review and the recent FGS report.

Updated arrangements will therefore include:

- Setting out the unique role of Bus Éireann being fulfilled in planning for school transport, including the tendering process
- Administering the system, including application of the rules governing the primary, post-primary and children with special needs schemes, including grant schemes and dealing directly with all queries
- Provision for automatically ceasing transport where the numbers on a particular route fall below a certain level or establishing new routes where sufficient numbers apply for transport already provided for under the current scheme
- Setting out the diminishing role of Bus Éireann in the direct provision of school transport
- Updated accounting arrangements, taking into account the FGS Report
- Provision for the availability within Bus Éireann of some transport facilities should the need arise for Bus Éireann to provide transport on an emergency basis.
- Protocols for dealing directly with the NCSE with regard to transport for children with special educational needs thus simplifying the current administrative arrangements
- Provision for review every five years

The committee recommends that the attainment of substantial savings should be pursued by the Department in the context of the updated administrative arrangements.

Future Administration of the School Transport Scheme:

The committee notes that, in order to realise further efficiencies in the administration of the school transport scheme and in line with the relevant findings in this report, greater responsibility for the day to day operation and management of the scheme should be devolved to the national organiser with the Department's School Transport section assuming a more strategic focus in relation to overall school transport policy and a detailed monitoring role in relation to school transport expenditure. It is recognised that the updated responsibilities of the national organiser will further update existing responsibilities currently with BE given the additional direct contact with pupils and schools, grant-paying responsibilities and direct dialogue with SENOs.

Under these updated arrangements the national organiser will therefore have direct operational links with the following groupings:

- Parents of primary and post primary age children in relation to the direct application process for transport;
- Primary and post-primary schools in relation to the completion of the transport application forms in a timely manner
- Parents of primary and post-primary children applying for grants in cases where there is no existing service/ it is not feasible to establish a service/the numbers fall under the minimum required to retain a service
- SENOs in relation to transport applications in respect of children with special needs

The role of the Department's School Transport Section will as a consequence move towards a policy, oversight and financial monitoring role which will have implications for the staffing of the section given that currently the majority of staff time is taken up with special needs cases and grant payments. The removal of the TLO functions will mean that parents and schools will have one focal point, namely the national organiser. The independent appeals process is dealt with later in the Chapter in section 20.

The committee considers that the benefits of the changed arrangements will mean that the national organiser will have sole responsibility for network planning, management and operations to meet the transport needs of primary, post-primary and children with special needs. This includes as currently the collection of all charges as set out later in the chapter. It is

envisaged that all school transport routes will be clearly set out on the website of the national organiser which will help inform parents when they are considering school options. In addition, the transfer of the grants function to the national organiser from school transport section and direct dialogue with SENOs in respect of children with special needs will result in a fully unified system and data base thus leading to greater efficiency and effectiveness in the application processes and in responding to queries. It will also facilitate improved data collection and thereby contribute to an improvement in monitoring the operation of the scheme. As a further consequence, routes and the numbers of children travelling on routes can be closely monitored and adjusted directly in a timely and efficient manner. This new operational system will form part of the updated administrative arrangements with Bus Éireann, within which staffing resources may be kept under review and which may necessitate investment in upgraded IT systems.

7.5 Relationship & governance of the scheme to ensure strengthened monitoring & evaluation of costs.

On finalisation of the updated administrative arrangements with the national transport organiser in order to ensure effective oversight and monitoring of the scheme, ***the committee recommends that a formalised mechanism should be put in place to ensure that the costs allocated to school transport by Bus Éireann are proportionate and that the Department of Education and Skills should monitor these costs with professional support.***

In relation to the Department relationship with Bus Éireann, the committee considers that the focus of staff within the School Transport section would be to monitor the costs being charged by Bus Éireann, including the implementation of the revised arrangements for a new balance between direct Bus Éireann provision and provision by private contractors, in line with the recommendations in the FGS report. This will ensure that these costs are being evaluated/reviewed on a regular basis to ensure they are consistent with prior periods and that any variations are explained. These staff will deal directly with Bus Éireann on a regular formal basis to ensure transparent data is received from BE in relation to all costs and charges and ensure that costs are being allocated as agreed between Department and BE. The revised agreement to be finalised will reflect these new arrangements

An annual bi-lateral meeting will be arranged with the Department of Transport to review and monitor transport policy taking account the Smarter Travel policy and the regulatory framework generally

7.6 Closed School Rule (CSR) and Central School Rule in primary level education

Chapter 5 highlighted the issues around the CSR, the extent to which children are carried to school under the closed school rule and the costs arising accordingly. The committee notes that currently 52% of primary pupils avail of CSR transport arrangements involving 817 primary schools around the country. The committee further notes that in the majority of cases where transport has been provided under the CSR, pupils continue to attend their nearest primary school and that, while the application of the CSR is referred to in these cases, it does not mean that they are not travelling to their nearest school. However approximately 12% of schools operating under the CSR have pupils availing of school transport who travel beyond a closer school to get to the school to which they are eligible for transport. This is on the basis of a sample of 92 of the 817 schools covered by the CSR. This would mean that there may be approximately 98 cases where the effect of the CSR means that pupils are not always travelling to their nearest school.

The expected upturn in enrolments in the years ahead, as outlined earlier in Chapter 5 has the potential to impact on the number of pupils who may be eligible for transport on the basis of the CSR. As indicated earlier, the latest projection is that there will be approximately 565,000 pupils in primary school in 2013/2014 (ref; section 5.5.7(ii)). If, as at present, 11% of mainstream primary pupils require school transport this will mean that there will be 62,000 pupils in this

category. If 52% of this cohort is eligible under the CSR, as are eligible at present, there will be approximately 32,000 pupils eligible under this heading in 2013/2014.

There is one other potential driver of costs in this area in the future. The Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (July 2009) recommended a rationalisation of small primary schools. Under the STS as it currently stands, any closure of small primary schools would involve additional costs in terms of transporting pupils from such schools to new or amalgamated schools and this fact is acknowledged in the Report of the Special Group. This is an added incentive to resolve any issues associated with the CSR sooner rather than later.

The Department examined detailed cases in relation to 11 of the sample of 92 schools which have a nearer open similar school for some of the pupils. This included looking at the building infrastructure in the schools involved and the existing enrolment in the area and how this would impact if transport was only available to the nearest school. Overall, there would not be significant additional building costs arising from ceasing the application of the closed school rule, given that planning for school places is already on the basis of the nearest school.

In the aforementioned 11 schools surveyed, 58% of the pupils are attending their nearest school, with 42% residing closer to a nearer open similar school than the school of attendance. Of the 42% who reside closer to a nearer open school 53% would be eligible for transport to that nearer school with 47% of the pupils not being eligible for transport as they reside less than 3.2kms from the nearer open school.

On examining the cost implications, it would appear that by terminating the closed school rule and applying the distance criteria savings can be achieved.

Applying the results of the survey nationally to 26,845 pupils availing of such transport in 2008, by terminating the CSR approximately 2,800 pupils would no longer be eligible on distance grounds. However, in the region of 700 pupils would become eligible for transport if they were attending/were to start attending the nearer open school. This means that savings in transport provision for approximately 2,000 pupils could be achieved by terminating the CSR and applying distance criteria. While allowing for the fact that there will be a reduction in the number of pupils eligible for transport on distance grounds, it still may be the case that in some instances it may not be possible to reduce the size of the bus.

In recent years, the Department has put in place a system whereby a school may agree to cede part of its catchment area to another school if that part of its catchment boundary area is closer to that other school but is with the school itself under the CSR. However, the Department has not supported the putting in place of shared boundary areas whereby students would have the option of travelling to at least two primary schools. It has been difficult for local communities to agree to the ceding of particular areas as they can often consider that the future of their school depends on such arrangements being in place to ensure that the numbers stay sufficiently high in their school. However, at the same time, the committee notes that the Department has had many requests from parents in certain areas that their children should be eligible for school transport to a school that is nearer to them than the school to which they are eligible for travel.

Furthermore, in all cases children are eligible for transport under the CSR and Central School Rule no matter how far they live from the school – i.e. even within 3.2 kilometres (CSR) or 1 mile (Central School Rule) of the school.

The committee notes that one possibility for the Department to consider would be to seek to negotiate and agree revised boundaries in all of the approximately 114 closed school areas where children may only be eligible for transport to a school that is not their nearest school. However, it is very unlikely that agreement will be forthcoming in all cases and this would be a very detailed and lengthy and administrative and negotiation task. It would take up extensive staff time and would therefore need to be undertaken over a number of years. The committee does not consider this is appropriate. ***The committee recommends that with effect from September 2012 the closed school rule and central school rule should be set aside for all new pupils in areas where it previously applied.***

The committee considers that existing pupils attending the schools of amalgamation should continue to be eligible for transport provided that they meet the distance criteria but all future applications should be on the basis of transport to the nearest primary school. **Therefore, the committee recommends that with effect from the start of the 2011/2012 school year the distance criteria should apply to all pupils attending primary schools and that the exemption for closed schools should cease.** In making this recommendation, the committee understands that this will remove an existing eligibility for school transport. However, the committee considers that it is difficult to justify that the scheme should continue to provide eligibility on different grounds just because there has been a school amalgamation in previous years and in some cases over 40 years ago.

In the context of future amalgamations, **the committee recommends that eligibility for transport for children to the amalgamated / central school should be based on the distance criteria applying at that time, currently 3.2kms.** Thus, over a short period of time, the CSR and central school rule will be set aside. The committee recognises that this will impact, in some cases, on traditional catchment areas for schools. However, the committee notes that it is not precluding the attendance of children at particular schools and that this is a matter for parents to decide having regard to the enrolment policies of schools. The issue here is rather the extent to which the State should support such choices by parents in terms of providing eligibility for school transport.

The committee considers that the requirement for evidence of agreement forms should be dispensed with. Concessionary travel at primary level will be provided from any location on a route provided that no additional costs arise for the State and there are seats available.

7.7 School Transport Catchment Boundary rules in post-primary education

Post-primary pupils are eligible for transport if they reside 4.8 kilometres or more from their local post-primary education centre, that is, the centre serving the school transport catchment area in which they live. The scheme is not designed to facilitate parents who chose to send their children to centres outside of the school transport catchment area in which they reside. However, children who are fully eligible for transport to the post-primary centre in the catchment area in which they reside may apply for transport on a concessionary basis to a post-primary centre outside of their own catchment area – otherwise known as “catchment boundary transport”. The issue of the definition of school transport catchment boundaries is one which has been subject to various submissions in this review and is also the cause of many submissions and representations to the Department over the years.

The key issue in terms of planning future school infrastructure, and the school transport system that supports it, is whether school planning and the associated school transport is designed on the basis of school transport catchment areas or on the basis of proximity or closeness to a post-primary centre. It is also important to note the additional level of bureaucracy which is associated with school transport catchment boundaries and the consideration of changes in relation to these.

Chapter 5 has identified the issues that arise in relation to school transport catchment boundaries and highlights the common view that many catchment boundaries as they exist today do not reflect changing demographics. In relation to the planning of school infrastructure, the general approach of the Department is to plan on the basis of attendance of pupils at their nearest primary schools and that those primary schools then feed into attendance at the nearest post-primary schools or the nearest post-primary centre generally.

Given that there are approximately 280 school transport catchment areas within the State, the committee considers that a detailed review with local consultation of each of the catchment areas would be quite lengthy and would give rise to very detailed discussions and negotiations at local level in a way that parallels discussions in relation to boundaries of local authorities or of Dáil constituencies. The committee considers that this would not be an efficient use of time and

that, in any case, it is very difficult to establish criteria on which to judge how existing boundaries should be changed.

The committee has looked at a selection of school transport catchment boundary areas and tested the application of an arrangement where transport is available to the nearest post-primary centre. The committee notes that there are not any large numbers of pupils which would impact on enrolment in second-level schools to a significant extent.

In a survey of 58 routes catering for 1,595 eligible pupils, 95% of the pupils are attending their nearest post-primary centre. 5% were not attending their nearest centre.

221 pupils in the survey, both fully eligible and catchment boundary pupils resided nearer to other schools. This represents 12% of the total number of such pupils in the survey. 198 of these 221 pupils would be eligible for transport to their nearer school.

Based on the results of the survey, it would appear that savings can be achieved by assessing eligibility for school transport at post-primary level by reference to distance to the nearest post-primary school.

As stated, the results of the survey indicate that 95% of the pupils are attending their nearest post-primary school. Applied nationally, this means that 62,700 pupils currently being transported would continue to be transported to school. However, 12%, or almost 8,000 pupils nationally, reside closer to other schools than the school of attendance. Of these pupils, 90% or approximately 7,000 pupils would in turn be eligible for transport to the other closer school. Therefore transport provision for approximately 1,000 pupils would not be required under revised eligibility criteria. As with termination of the closed school rule, while there may be a reduction in the number of pupils eligible for transport under the revised eligibility criteria it still may be the case that in some instances it may not be possible to reduce the size of the bus.

There would be very little overall impact on teacher allocations at the schools surveyed due to the relatively small number of pupils who would be defined as not attending their nearest school.

Accordingly, ***the committee recommends that the school transport catchment boundary policy should be ceased and that eligibility for post-primary transport should be on the basis of the nearest post-primary centre or school for any new pupils. The committee considers that the existing arrangements should remain in place for existing post-primary pupils for the duration of their schooling.*** Catchment Boundary pupils who currently benefit from transport on the basis of spare seats being available and the annual charge is paid would continue to benefit if capacity exists to accommodate them.

In relation to the provision of concessionary transport, the committee recommends that under the new arrangements that pupils travelling beyond their nearest post primary centre or school may apply for concessionary transport subject to the general terms for such transport.

The committee notes that a central organisation needs to be responsible for the definition of post-primary centres for the purposes of school transport. ***The committee recommends that the Department of Education and Skills should have responsibility for the definition of post-primary centres and that the definition of the central point in a post-primary centre (for distance measurement purposes) should be the responsibility of the national organiser.*** The committee notes that, in urban areas, this may involve the definition of post-primary centres for the first time.

In terms of distance, the committee notes that the issue of distance to the nearest school or the nearest post-primary centre has been raised in recent years. This issue is addressed in the section relating to distance.

The transition for families and schools to the new arrangements is one which the committee has considered. While it may mean that pupils in the same area, or family, of different ages are eligible for transport to different schools for a transitional period, ***the committee recommends***

that eligibility should be determined in relation to the nearest post-primary centre for all new pupils with effect from September 2012.

The committee further recommends that the national organiser, in implementing the school transport system, should publish on its website detailed maps setting out the precise location of each post-primary centre or school within the school transport scheme thus making it clear how the school transport scheme operates and details the school transport network currently in place.

7.8 Assessment process used to exempt children from school transport charges

The committee notes that the use of medical cards as a quasi-means test may have some limitations. However, the committee does not consider it appropriate that a wide scale means testing arrangement be put in place associated with the school transport system. Was the State to put in place a broader means testing system across the board, the committee considers that current arrangements to provide nominal payments/exemptions from school transport charges should also be reviewed.

The committee recommends that while efforts should be made to ensure the checking procedures used by BE in conjunction with the HSE for families and children seeking exemptions from school transport charges are robust, the means tested medical card should continue to be the test applied for school transport exemptions pending the finalisation of a common assessment process.

7.9 Choice of Schools in primary and post-primary education

Chapter 5 sets out the extent to which the availability of a choice of schools, under certain circumstances, gives rise to increased costs for school transport. When the scheme was introduced in 1967, the scheme at primary level allowed for choice of school on religious grounds and thus allowed transport for Catholic or Protestant children to attend the nearest schools under the management of their religion. At post-primary level, the scheme provided school transport to the nearest post-primary centre. In addition, the scheme provided for transport to the nearest Protestant post-primary school. At the same time the Department also provided for transport to the nearest Irish language schools – this particularly applied in the Gaeltacht at the time and has now been extended given the number of Gaelscoileanna at primary level and to a lesser extent, of Gaelcholaistí at post-primary level, that are now in place. Furthermore, this scheme was extended to multi-denominational schools at primary level when these were introduced.

Chapter 5 notes the increase in the diverse type of schools which have evolved. Furthermore, it has anticipated that such diversity will continue.

In relation to transport to second level fee-charging schools, transport is available to the nearest Protestant second-level school on the basis of denominational choice, whether it is fee charging or not, should a parent wish to send their child to such a school. However, given that there are a large number of Catholic second-level schools that do not charge fees, direct transport is not provided to Catholic fee-charging schools other than where school transport arrangements are already provided to a centre in which a Catholic fee-charging school is also located.

The scheme provides for transport at primary level for children in the Gaeltacht to their local Gaeltacht school. However, where children in the Gaeltacht wish to attend a school teaching through the medium of English, the scheme does not provide for this except for those students who have been granted an exemption from Irish.

In looking at the issues in relation to school transport and choice of schools, the group notes that there are different arrangements in place at primary and post-primary level. In this context, it is not possible to have a one size fits all education system or transport system. In particular, at primary level the scheme operates in terms of the closest school under a certain type of

patronage and, at post-primary level the scheme operates in terms of post-primary centres, and the Department has determined post-primary centres which may include catholic secondary schools, community and comprehensive schools, and VEC schools.

The trend in the establishment of new schools has been to have enhanced school choice particularly at primary level. However, the key issue for the group is the extent to which this needs to be supported by the provision of school transport. The committee considers that this relates to what the overall objective of the scheme is. The committee also considers that there is a need to move the scheme more towards ensuring that there is transport for those who need it and who live a minimum distance from their nearest school. This focuses the scheme on the availability of school transport as an entitlement for children to their nearest school rather than to their school of choice.

At the same time, the committee recognises that it is appropriate that there be some level of State support for such choice. Such support is important in the context of the overall constitutional and legal basis for the education system and the need to have regard to various religious denominations and the provision of education entirely through the medium of either Irish or English.

Accordingly, the committee considers that eligibility should apply for a child to travel to a school, which is not their nearest school, in order, to access primary schooling entirely through the medium of Irish or English or to attend a school of a particular ethos.

The committee further considers that the same eligibility should apply to post-primary transport to a centre other than to the nearest centre if this is to access schooling entirely through the medium of English or Irish, or to access schooling of protestant ethos.

The committee notes that these provisions will result in those in the Gaeltacht wishing to access schooling entirely through the medium of English being eligible for transport provided the requisite distance criteria is met.

The committee notes that there is no state support for separate transport services to fee-charging catholic schools given the choice of catholic second-level schools available. The committee considers that, where a child wishes to attend a post-primary protestant fee-charging school of choice which is their nearest protestant school, on the basis of the religion of the school support should be available. The committee considers that it is appropriate to give this support, which is in line with other state supports to children attending these schools. **The committee recommends that the manner of identifying children who are eligible for such transport should be developed as part of the considerations already underway in the Department in relation to state support for children in these schools.**

For the purposes of the primary school transport scheme, the committee notes that there are a number of different types of multi-denominational schools in place. These include Educate Together schools, Steiner schools and community national schools established by VECs under the new patronage arrangements. For the purposes of school choice, the committee considers that these should all be grouped together as they have similar types of multi-denominational ethos and that all of these schools combined should be considered as a single type in terms of school transport eligibility. The committee considers the community national schools established by VECs should also be considered to be schools of all relevant denominations for school transport eligibility purposes. The committee also considers that, should new types of school patronage emerge at either primary or post-primary level, there will be a need to ensure that the treatment of such types of school should be considered in relation to eligibility for school transport. **It is recommended that the Department should bear this in mind when considering establishing any such new types of schools.**

The implementation of these policies may give rise to increased cases where it is claimed that a school is full. **The committee recommends that the Department should examine school transport eligibility in such cases having regard to the application process, accommodation capacity and provision and that the issue should form part of the**

Department's considerations relating to the nature and implementation of school enrolment policies.

Concessionary transport at primary level currently requires evidence of agreement from the school to which a primary pupil is eligible to travel in order to permit that child to avail of concessionary transport to a different school. This gives the school to which the child is eligible to travel control over the availability of transport for that child to another school. The committee considers that such a process is inappropriate and should cease. Furthermore, the committee supports the continuation of the current arrangement whereby concessionary transport is only available on an annual basis at no additional cost to the State, where there is space on the existing transport and that additional places should not be provided on transport to ensure that those seeking access to school transport on a concessionary basis are provided with transport.

Issues relating to special needs children are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The approach, in summary terms, that the committee recommends for transport is set out below.

For primary transport

- The main eligibility will be for transport to the nearest school.
- There will also be an eligibility for transport to the nearest Gaelscoil or English-language medium school where it is not the closest school.
- Furthermore, there will also be an eligibility to the nearest school of a particular ethos.

For post-primary transport,

- The main eligibility will be for transport to the nearest post-primary centre.
- There will also be an eligibility for transport to the nearest post-primary centre with a Gaelcholáiste or English-language medium school where it is not in the closest post-primary centre.
- Furthermore, there will be an eligibility to the nearest school of a protestant ethos where it is not in the closest post-primary centre.
- For transport to protestant fee charging schools, the manner of identifying children who are eligible for such transport should be developed as part of the considerations already underway in the Department in relation to state support for children in these schools.

7.10 Distance criteria

Primary pupils are eligible for free transport if they reside 3.2 kilometres or more from and are attending their nearest school, subject to the closed school rule. The relevant distance for post-primary pupils to their nearest post-primary centre is 4.8 kilometres. The committee noted that similar distance criteria apply in Northern Ireland.

The length of distance which determines eligibility for school transport is a matter of contention in the consultative process. From the point of view of sustainable public transport, the overall policy approach is to provide as much public transport as possible to enable children to be brought to school on public transport and in this regard the VFM Review has been asked in the Government policy document "Smarter Travel A Sustainable Transport Future 2009-2020" to "examine the current distance eligibility criteria, where it is not feasible to provide safe walkways and/or cycle paths". Balancing this, there is much evidence in Chapter 6 of the availability of cars having increased substantially since the school transport scheme was introduced and that there is further evidence in relation to the low proportion of seat usage on school transport.

The committee considers that the amount of distance that should be covered for eligibility under the scheme is effectively dependent on the overall objectives of the scheme and that the revised objectives relate to support the transport to and from school of children who would have difficulty travelling, for reasons of distance, to school if transport is not supported. The

committee considers that, having regard to the smarter travel agenda and international comparisons, the lengthening of the distance requirements should not be considered.

The committee supports initiatives at school level to encourage reduced car usage and encourage parents to ensure that their children walk or cycle to school or at least that car pooling is in place to reduce traffic usage. ***The committee recommends that all schools should put in place policies to keep at as low as level as possible vehicle congestion resulting from bringing children to and from school.***

On balance, therefore, ***the committee recommends that the existing distance criteria should be maintained.*** The committee notes however that if it is necessary to make savings from the school transport scheme it may be necessary to increase these distances and that the likely impact of any such change would be to increase the number of pupils travelling to schools by car. The committee recognises any lengthening of distance criteria will impact in removing eligibility for transport to school from many children. At the same time, the committee is of the overall view that there is a need to ensure that school transport prioritises the needs of those who are relatively long distances from their nearest school.

The committee notes that the issue of measuring distances has been raised. The current arrangement is the distance from the residence of the family involved to the school or post-primary centre in question. ***The committee recommends that the distance for the purpose of working out eligibility at post-primary level should be from the residence of the pupil to the nearest school, or in centres with more than one school, the measurement is to the central point.*** In any case of doubt, recourse must be had to the fundamental principle of the scheme – eligibility is decided by distance from the nearest school and not the school attended. ***The committee recommends that the Geographical Information System (GIS) should be used for distance measurement to define both primary and post-primary eligibility for school transport purposes.***

The committee notes that there have been requests for the scheme to become more flexible, for example, that the scheme would provide for transport to, or from, childminders on a regular basis or children could be provided with transport just in the morning or the evening. The committee, while noting the desirability of having a flexible system, considers that the overriding issue relates to ensuring that transport operates on a continuous basis and that such flexibility would present significant challenges. The committee notes that such transport was facilitated in the past on an “incidental basis” where no additional cost to the State is incurred. In such instances a huge onus is, and would be, placed on bus drivers in relation to responsibility for children to ensure that such flexible arrangements are implemented and that children are appropriately met by parents/guardians in different locations. For these reasons, ***the committee recommends that children can only use official designated pick up and drop off points on a route and furthermore that any incidental arrangements such as the use of non designated pick up and drop off points will cease.*** This does not stop children who have been issued with tickets for the use of the transport at all times from using the service on either mornings or evenings. However, as the service for pupils with SEN is from home to school and back to home, there should be no deviation from this.

Issues in relation to measuring from child-minders, from former residences etc. have also arisen. ***The committee recommends that the distance for eligibility purposes needs to be that from the child’s residence and that it continues to be a requirement of the scheme that changes of residence are notified immediately to the central national organiser.***

7.11 Minimum Numbers required to establish/maintain a Service

Chapter 5 notes that school transport costs are very dependent on the pick-up density of pupils residing in a distinct locality along a particular route. Current arrangements for the provision of a school transport service, and the continuation of that service, depend on the rules for the establishment of services and the rules for maintenance of services which are based on the minimum numbers of pupils travelling.

These rules have been applied for the establishment of the services. However, in relation to the maintenance of a service, the rules have only been applied from autumn 2009 in relation to discontinuing single services. ***The committee recommends the discontinuation of services under the minimum numbers which are part of double tripping arrangements with effect from September 2011.***

The committee considers that the minimum numbers should be revised upwards from 7 eligible pupils in the context of the need to focus the school transport system on areas where there is sufficient critical mass to provide school transport services. This would apply for the establishment of new services and for the maintenance of services. Where eligible pupils apply and there are not sufficient numbers to establish a service, such families would then be eligible for a grant. ***The committee recommends that a service will be provided where there are ten or more eligible pupils to a particular school residing in a distinct locality for that service. The committee further recommends that a service will cease to be provided where there are less than ten eligible pupils.***

The committee considers it important that the same numbers are in place for the establishment of a service as there are for the continuity of a service; otherwise those availing of a service are treated more favourably under the scheme than those seeking to have a new service established.

7.12 Special Educational Needs

Section 2 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN) defines inclusive education, stating that a child with special educational needs “shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child are such that to do so would be inconsistent with the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act or the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated”.

In support of this policy, Chapter 5 set out the purpose of the school transport scheme for children with special needs, namely to provide a reasonable level of transport service for children with a diagnosed disability and/or special education need, who, because of the nature of their disability, may not be in a position to avail of a school bus service which would be timetabled to pick up other children along the route of the service. Children are eligible for School Transport if s/he is attending the nearest recognised: mainstream school, special class/special school or a unit, that is or can be resourced, to meet the child’s special educational needs under Department of Education and Skills criteria.

Material in Chapter 5 also set out the high level of costs associated with special education needs and highlighted that the total expenditure on special education needs now accounts for 34% of the expenditure on school transport.

The committee recommends that the current arrangements continue to apply viz. eligibility for transport based on attendance at the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class/special school or unit, that is or can be resourced to meet their educational needs. That is to say that a parent may choose to send their child to a school that is not the nearest such school but transport will only be provided to the nearest. In liaising with individual parents, the SENO currently makes it clear that under the terms of the scheme transport is only provided on this basis. ***The committee recommends that clearer communication and information is needed, to ensure that parents are fully briefed on the conditions governing the provision of the school transport service.*** Later in this chapter the committee makes recommendations in relation to raising awareness about the school transport scheme and the committee considers that it is important that there is enhanced information on school transport for children with special educational needs. It will be important that appropriate information leaflets are made available by the central organiser to enable SENOs and schools to have these available for parents.

The committee also recommends that parents should provide to the SENO, at the time of application for school transport, written evidence of the enrolment application to the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class, special school or unit that is or can be resourced to meet the educational needs of their child. However, that does not put an onus on the State to provide or support transport to that school. Application deadlines, as applied to the general primary and post-primary schemes, will apply where possible.

The SENO role in the application process is based on evidence which includes professional reports. The committee considered that part of the factual information from the SENO in relation to the application for school transport could include setting out whether the child has any additional school transport needs above and beyond that of a child who does not have special needs, and why such needs would warrant the provision of transport if they reside within the minimum distances applied under the general schemes.

The committee recognises that, in cases where more specialised placements are needed for children with special needs, in some instances the nearest special class/ special school or a unit may be full at the time of application and/or for the beginning of the next school year. In these cases the application process will include verification of this position by written evidence from the school principal. In such cases, the next nearest school will then be considered in respect of school transport eligibility.

The committee considered the current assessment and decision making process from completion of the initial application form to transport provision by way of grant/bus/taxi. The current process which involves the SENO, School Transport Section and the national organiser is complex and the committee considered that this should be simplified to involve only the SENO and the national organiser. ***The committee recommends that the national organiser should be directly advised by the SENO in relation to transport and escorts for pupils with special education needs to the nearest recognised school, class or unit and that the Department should not be involved in the decision-making process.***

In an initial application, clarity should be established by the SENO on whether the need for separate transport will most likely be continuous (e.g., in the case of a particular physical disability) or whether the need might reduce over time (e.g. behavioural difficulties or the child's independence increases to the extent that transport is no longer necessary). The committee considers it both appropriate and vital that the separate arrangements be revisited on a regular basis. ***The committee recommends that all single taxi and shared taxi services should be reviewed on a regular basis by the national organiser in consultation with the SENO and/or school principal as appropriate.***

Chapter 5 also highlighted instances of significant travel times for certain special needs children. The committee is concerned at the impact of this on the education experience of the children and therefore considers that, where feasible, a maximum daily travel guideline time be applied similar to the general primary and post-primary schemes to be incorporated into the scheme with effect from the 2011/2012 school year. In certain circumstances, given the distances between the child's residence and the location of the specialised school/unit, this may not always be feasible. The impact of traffic congestion in urban settings on travel and waiting times is also a factor

The section below on grants sets out recommendations in relation to grants payable in relation to transport for children with special educational needs.

Expenditure on escorts is now the single highest expenditure item in relation to transport for children with special needs. As stated in Chapter 5 this accounted for €14.9m in 2008. At present, some 1,300 escorts are used in the school transport service, compared to 600 in 2004. The committee considers that the availability of escorts should not diminish the parental responsibilities in relation to their children and escorts should only be provided where it is necessary to assist parents in ensuring that their children get to school. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) through its network of SENOs provides advice to the Department as part of the application process when an escort is required for a child with special needs. The committee considers that as part of this advice on the need for an escort, the advice should be

clear about whether the need for an escort will be a definitive continuing one (for example, in the case of certain physical disabilities) or whether it is possible that the need for an escort will not continue indefinitely. ***In cases where the need for an escort will not continue indefinitely, the committee recommends that there should be a regular review of this provision by the national organiser with the appropriate involvement of the NCSE.***

The committee notes that escorts are required to meet a school transport service at the place where a special needs pupil joins the service and travel from there with them to school. Similarly, they are required for the journey for the pupil home. The current arrangement in some instances is that escorts are collected from home prior to the collection of the pupil that they need to escort and that they are returned to home following the delivery of that pupil to school. There is a particular inefficiency in relation to the collection of escorts and their return to home. The committee considers that this could be arranged more efficiently on an individual basis by the national organiser. This would depend on where the taxi or bus was travelling to following completion of its school transport run and the closeness of that to an agreed location where the escort could be both picked up and dropped off. It is possible that there may be some savings in undertaking this more efficiently.

The committee recommends that the feasibility of synergies between Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and escorts should be explored in the case of schools where escorts and SNAs are employed. The committee noted that the escort function was included as a duty for SNAs in the original Department circular 07/02 but for practical reasons viz. where SNAs reside it proved logistically impracticable to implement. Further consideration is needed on the possibilities in this regard taking account of the practical experience of schools to date.

At present escorts are employed by school managements to accompany children to and from school at an hourly rate of pay determined by the Department of Education and Skills. As is set out in Chapter 5, the hourly rate of pay has increased significantly in recent years and has been a significant factor in the increased costs associated with escorts. There is some unease among some school managers about this role which they consider to be separate from their school management role therefore the committee considers that other ways to employ escorts need consideration.

In summary, there is a need to have coherent and coordinated involvement of the SENO in relation to transport for children with special educational needs. SENO advice is required in relation to whether a child is able to attend their nearest school, whether special transport needs need to be put in place, including either a separate service or an escort. This in addition to the regular work of a SENO advising in relation to the supports needed in schools for a child. The committee recommends above that the advice of a SENO would make it clear whether the needs of a child would be likely to continue for the duration of schooling or whether they could change and would be subjected to a review. The committee considers that it is very important that the advice of a SENO on an individual child is joined up across all of the education and transport needs of that child. The committee recognised that it was not possible to complete the detailed assessment of all aspects of school transport for children with special needs including escorts within the timeframe of this review. ***The committee recommends therefore that detailed follow on work should be undertaken by the Department in conjunction with the NCSE and the Department of Finance.***

This work will include a desk analysis of separate transport provision, the appropriateness of escorts currently employed, and whether minimum distance criteria should be applied similar to the general schemes. The analysis will include a study of a sample of cases of dedicated/shared escorts supporting children transported by bus/taxi attending a mix of mainstream schools, special classes/special schools or units. Furthermore, ***the committee recommends that clear criteria are identified on the circumstances in which a dedicated/shared escort is needed.*** This work should be put into effect from the 2011/2012 school year.

Another area of provision for special needs pupils is summer provision for children with severe/profound disability and autism. This aspect of transport service developed arising out of a legal judgement in 1993. In October 2000, this was extended to include provision for pupils

with autism. The annual cost to the Department of Education and Skills for this dimension of the scheme is over €1m. The committee noted that where summer provision is made school transport is continuing to be provided.

The committee also considered an aspect of the school transport scheme, which in certain instances facilitates transport of children with special needs, who would normally be provided with transport from home to school, to a respite centre and back to the school once/more than once during the course of the school week. The committee considers that this is a matter that also requires follow up work in conjunction with the HSE in order to clarify the role of the State in this regard and clearly define the roles and responsibilities for such services.

7.13 Traveller children

In general, Traveller pupils benefit under the normal criteria for the Primary and Post-primary transport schemes. Chapter 5 noted however that in 2008 an additional €1.67 million was allocated through Special Education section to provide exceptional transport arrangements for primary Traveller children and School Transport section to support post-primary children (of which approx. €135k) to promote and support participation in education. The Special Education Section scheme provided 98% grant-aid towards the cost of approved special transport services operated to cater solely for Traveller children. Such services were organised and managed by schools and local voluntary bodies such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society and Traveller Support committees and catered for Traveller children attending Traveller special schools, primary schools and in some cases, post-primary schools.

The committee considers that Traveller children should have eligibility for school transport on the same basis as all other children in line with the Traveller Education Strategy and ***recommends that the primary (3.2kms) and post-primary (4.8kms) distance criteria should be fully applied with effect from September 2011 and that the national organiser organise all necessary transport arrangements henceforth. The committee considers that the phasing out of arrangements should include unique arrangements in relation to minimum numbers.***

7.14 Providing for Youthreach/Children 16 or under in non mainstream provision

The committee notes that Youthreach participants 16 years of age and over are eligible for travel allowances as part of the overall training allowances. The school transport scheme evolved to provide for Youthreach participants on an incidental free basis in instances where eligible children are catered for, spare seats are available and there is no extra cost to the State. The committee furthermore notes that there are some children of school going age (16 or under) who are not in a position to attend mainstream post-primary schools. The committee considers that it is appropriate that consideration be given by the Department of Education and Skills to the transport arrangements for such children.

The committee notes the intention of the Department of Education and Skills to review the incidental free transport for Youthreach participants and to examine the necessity of providing school transport for such children attending the education centres in question rather than mainstream schools and considers that this is not something that either the School Transport Section or the national organiser can make a judgement on. The committee considers that it may be necessary to involve the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and/or the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) in this process.

7.15 Charges

Chapter 5 sets out the level of charges that have been in place in the school transport system since 1997. Parental charges remained constant from 1997 until the third term of 2007 and charges have been increased twice since then. However there are no charges for eligible primary pupils or for special needs pupils.

The committee also notes that the Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and expenditure Programmes (July 2009) considered that

- there should be a much greater contribution paid towards the cost of providing the school transport service
- charges should be introduced in respect of the primary school transport system
- a charge should be levied at both primary and post-primary level at a rate of 50% of the full economic cost of providing the service. This would likely be in the order of €500 per annum per child.
- The exemption for social welfare recipients would continue to apply

The Special Group was also of the view that there is also scope to charge some limited means tested contributions for special needs school transport, similar as those applied to other pupils, given the average annual cost of €6,000 per pupil which reflects the widespread use of taxis. This represents a total cost of about €48m per annum on the basis of a 42 week school year.

Chapter 6 also sets out information on seat occupancy rates. From survey work undertaken by the committee, the average seat occupancy over the two surveys on primary routes is 69% on the morning service and 64% on the evening service and at post-primary level it is 80% for the morning service and 74% for the evening service. The committee notes that prior to the introduction of a separate seat for every child in 2006, there would not have been empty seats on buses if all pupils with tickets were not travelling. However, now that the policy is to have a seat for each child on the basis of safety, this means that buses are running with many empty seats.

In considering the issue of charges the committee examined the recommendations in the Special Report fully and, given the significant escalating costs incurred by the exchequer, understood the arguments put forward. In this regard, the committee notes that the approximate unit costs per pupil are €1,020 for primary level and €958 for post-primary level in 2008. The current charge for transporting post-primary pupils is €300 per annum which represents 31% of the actual unit cost of transporting a post-primary pupil while the family charge is capped at €650 currently. There is currently no charge for primary pupils, with the exception of concessionary pupils. This review has calculated the estimated unit cost of transporting a pupil with special needs to be in the region of €9,087 while such pupils currently travel free of charge. The committee further noted that while ideally from the Department of Finance perspective there should be an additional charge for choice they noted that this was not possible in the context of the legal and constitutional underpinning of school choice.

The committee recommends that an annual primary charge should be introduced. As an initial step, the committee recommends that the level of this charge be €200 per pupil per year. The committee further recommends that post-primary charge should remain at the current level of €300 per pupil for the present

In the case of all charges, ***the committee recommends that in the light of the evidence on occupancy rates and in order to ensure that school transport provided for pupils holding medical cards is fully utilised, a nominal charge of €30 should be introduced.***

The committee recommends that the level of the charges should be reviewed annually having regard to analysis of the uptake and the resources available.

In relation to special education needs, ***the committee recommends that a charge should be put in place where families are not holders of medical cards and that this charge would be €200 per primary or €300 per post-primary special needs child to be paid in two instalments in the same way as the primary or post-primary charge.***

On the basis of these revised charges, the committee notes that charges will still only make up to 20% of the overall anticipated cost of primary and post-primary school transport and that school transport would, therefore, remain heavily State-subsidised.

Table 7.1 Summary of recommendations on charges

Category	Existing Annual charge	Proposed Annual charge	Full economic Cost Average
PRIMARY			
Eligible primary children	none	€200	€1020
Children not attending nearest primary school-school of choice	€200 (concessionary)	€200	€1020
Children with Special Needs whose family do not hold medical card; primary level	none	€200	€6,000
POST-PRIMARY			
Post-primary attending nearest pp school	€300	€300	€958
Post-primary not attending nearest pp school-school of choice;	€300 (concessionary)	€300	€958
Post-primary: Special needs children attending nearest recognised school//unit/class	None	€300	
FAMILY			
Family holding medical cards whose children attending nearest school	None	€30	
Family holding medical cards whose children not attending nearest school	None	€30	
Max family charge where children attending nearest schools/not attending their nearest schools	€650	€650	

7.16 Applications process – Primary and Post-Primary

The current arrangements provide for applications to be made by primary schools on behalf of the eligible pupils meeting the distance criteria directly to Bus Éireann local offices within the timeframe set down and for applications to be made by parents of post-primary pupils to be made to their local TLO. The list of pupils provided by a primary school determines the transport arrangements needed for the coming school year. Given the costs involved and the evidence in Chapter 6 in relation to the average seat occupancy on primary routes, the committee considers that a more structured application process is essential. The committee considers that it is important that parents apply for transport rather than having it arranged for their children even if they are not seeking for it to be provided. The implementation of the Committee's recommendation on primary charges would also necessitate applications by parents. Therefore, ***the committee recommends that parents of primary and post-primary pupils should apply directly to the national organiser for school transport within the new recommended timescale.***

The committee also considers that it be necessary for the national organiser to develop a checking system with all schools to ensure that the children who have transport or a grant provided are enrolled in the relevant school.

7.17 Grants

Chapter 5 sets out the number of grants which are paid directly by the School Transport Section that are targeted at pupils with special needs, pupils who live long distances from the nearest school or from the nearest suitable school in terms of school choice, or where a pupil resides 3.2kms or more from a pick up point . These grants include the Remote Areas Grants Scheme, Scheme D Grants, Medical Grants Scheme and the Enhanced Medical Grant.

Later in this chapter the committee recommends that the administration of grants be undertaken by the same organisation which is responsible for the administration of the school transport scheme, including assessment of distance eligibility. The committee therefore considers that the national organiser will also take responsibility for these grants for as long as the national organiser has responsibility for the school transport scheme. This will ensure that the application form and the different school transport schemes are effectively administered and that the national organiser both assesses and pays appropriate grants where school transport is not being directly made available.

The Remote Area and Scheme D Grant rates were effective from January 2002 and the medical/enhanced medical grants have not increased since the guidelines were introduced in September 1999.

The committee recommends the introduction of a standardised grant scheme and that the Remote Area Grants Scheme and the Scheme D Grant Scheme should be amalgamated into a single scheme made payable by the national organiser of the school transport scheme rather than by the Department of Education and Skills or the Church of Ireland Board of Education. ***The committee recommends that there should continue to be a scaled amount of grant payable per day depending on the distance that a child lives from school and that the grant should continue to be calculated on this basis subject to a maximum amount, that the rates would remain unchanged for the present.***

The committee further recommends that a grant continue to be made payable for the distance that a child lives from a pick-up point, provided that that distance is more than the minimum distance for eligibility for transport generally (3.2kms primary or 4.8kms post-primary).

The committee also recommends that these grants continue to be made available on a per family basis and that the same level of grant is available to each family, independent of the number of children attending any particular school or neighbouring schools. In some instances this may also include families with a child that has special educational needs.

The committee considers that revised arrangements to cover both medical grants and hardship cases should be developed. In the first instance, and this would also apply to recommendations under special transport, grants for distances within the normal eligibility (3.2 kms or 4.8kms) would only be paid where, on the advice of a SENO, it is considered that the child has additional school transport needs above and beyond that of a child normally benefiting under the primary and post-primary schemes.

Furthermore, a grant scheme based on the distance in kilometres to be travelled by the family will remain in place. A maximum distance of 9.7 kilometres will be applied for mainstream children and in the case of children with special educational needs the grant will be payable only to the nearest recognised school/unit/class. ***The committee recommends that the Department of Education and Skills should agree the new scheme and rates with the Department of Finance and that these rates should be linked to the Civil Service Motor Rates and that the new more unified scheme should be delivered on a cost neutral basis.***

7.18 Timing

One of the difficult issues that the committee noted during its work was the extent to which detailed route planning needs to be undertaken in relation to the school transport scheme and yet information in relation to numbers to be transported under the scheme is currently not readily available to Bus Éireann, in some instances, until late August of any given year. Notwithstanding the efforts of the Department and Bus Éireann to ensure that applications and payments were received in a timely manner in 2009, all applications were sought by April and initial/full payments by the end of July, but many late applications/payments were still being received well into August. This made planning very difficult. These issues are particularly important given the need for routes to be planned and tendered to ensure optimum efficiency. It is also particularly important given the recommendations of the committee in relation to minimum numbers to maintain services.

The committee considers that a deadline date at end July in a given year is too late for the planning for services. The committee would favour a date earlier in the year which would enable detailed planning to take place and proposes that the national organiser, in consultation with the Department of Education and Skills, and having regard to school enrolment policies, would gradually move the date back to early June.

As a first step in this process, ***the committee recommends that the current closing dates for applications of mid April and for payments by the end of July in respect of both children entering a new school in 2011 and those remaining in the same school should be fully enforced.*** The committee considers that those applying after these dates should not be automatically eligible for transport and that consideration should be given to the charging of a late application fee. In the case of children with special education needs, children who are diagnosed after the closing date and need to change schools following such a diagnosis would not be liable for a late application fee. The committee considers that the time given to the national organiser to plan routes is vital and that it is quite likely that the operation of the school transport scheme will change to quite a large extent should the recommendations in this report be implemented.

The committee also considers that there should be increased public awareness about the school transport scheme and the details of the application times. The national organiser should inform all schools so that existing pupils and their families are informed of deadlines and so that prospective pupils are informed when they are seeking details about school applications. Furthermore, ***the committee recommends that the national organiser should establish a dedicated school transport website with all of the relevant information clearly set out.***

7.19 Supervision/Double Tripping

The committee notes that double tripping is a regular feature of the school transport system. Using one bus to make two trips is more economical and saves money for the Exchequer rather than using two vehicles to make two separate trips. However, the result can be that some children transported either arrive at school before classes commence or remain at school after classes finish. This is particularly an issue in primary schools given that children are younger than in post-primary schools. Also, in post-primary schools, provision of transport is generally to a post-primary centre rather than to a school itself.

The committee noted the extensive costs if the current arrangements were to be changed and buses to be provided on a single basis for all journeys. The committee does not consider that this was an option.

Even if double tripping were to be eliminated, the committee does not consider that this would necessarily mean that every child would be delivered and collected at schools very close to opening and closing times all of the time. The transport system must operate with a degree of

flexibility and within reasonable travelling and waiting times for pupils. For example, there could be delays associated with traffic congestion or an unexpected occurrence and this would impact on the times that children are collected.

The committee also noted that under the Education Act, 1998, the Board of Management has responsibility for the day to day management of the school. The committee notes that issues in relation to the supervision of pupils are matters for each Board of Management and that while the Department does not issue specific guidelines on the requirements for the supervision of pupils, it acknowledges that the degree of supervision required by school authorities varies with the circumstances of the school concerned and that it is the responsibility of each individual managerial authority to arrange for appropriate supervision of its pupils.

Notwithstanding this, the committee also notes that, in primary education, the payments for supervision to teachers do not include payments for supervision before and after school. However, there is some potential to address some of the supervision issues in the implementation of the Croke Park Agreement.

The committee considers that this is an area which must be managed with flexibility. In the first instance, the committee considers that where school transport is being provided to a school, the school should be flexible in relation to opening times to cater for the arrangements of the national organiser. In relation to primary schools, this flexibility would have to operate within the current rules for National Schools which provide that a school can open no later than 9.30am and must provide 5 hours and forty minutes instruction per day. This means that a dialogue is needed between the national organiser and at least two schools where the issue of double tripping arises. The committee does not consider that this is an area that can be centrally organised by the Department of Education and Skills. However, given the cost factors, ***the committee recommends that school transport should only be provided for pupils to schools where schools demonstrate that they are willing to be flexible and that the role of the State in providing for school transport is not an absolute one and does require schools to look at options.*** Earlier in this report, the committee recommends that school transport will only be provided for ten eligible pupils or more to a given school and the committee considers that this should necessitate schools to be flexible in relation to opening times and should enable the national organiser to minimise the amount of waiting time necessary for pupils before and after schools.

The committee also considers that the approach should be one that ensures that the needs of children and schools are addressed. The committee does not consider that this should necessarily cost additional money as the routes are generally tendered on the basis of the typical distance of the school run and the scheme should not provide for funding for buses on the way to, or returning home from, their transport requirements. This should not either increase the costs on operators as the cost of any individual job would now be based on the work involved rather than on the distance from the operator to the commencement of the job. The issue of double tripping particularly impacts on primary schools where the committee notes that it can be the case that the same school has children dropped off early as has children collected late. Changing the arrangements as set out in the recommendations here should seek to reduce such challenges on schools.

These considerations in relation to flexibility of opening times underpin the necessity for planning for school transport to take place in advance of the finalisation of arrangements for schools for the following school year. It is not reasonable to expect that school transport should just fall in with all of the needs and demands of schools rather than each side being as flexible as possible.

In relation to guidelines on travelling and waiting times generally, the committee notes that there are already some general guidelines in place. The committee does not consider that these should be absolute requirements, as again, there may always be a need for certain flexibility.

The arrangements set out in this section will result in a new culture of schools and the national organiser working more closely together. If a school decides not to be flexible about its opening times in response to a request from the national organiser, the committee considers that the

national organiser should not be required to provide a transport service and that a grant should be paid to the eligible pupils. This is particularly important given that the cost of providing school transport for one extra day is estimated by BE to be in the order of €1m per day. In order to achieve optimum efficiency local co-operation is needed between boards of management benefiting from particular routes to ensure that common school calendars and closures are in place, including where possible, planning and in-service days. An integral part of the annual route planning process will be consultation by the national organiser with groups of school principals in relation to route planning and enhanced efforts to ensure that this can be achieved.

7.20 School Transport Appeals Process

The committee reviewed the current terms of reference and guidelines of the School Transport Appeals Board. The committee considered the range and type of appeals identified in Chapter 6, namely catchment boundaries, the distance from pick-up points, requests for transport to schools other than the nearest school, requests for funding through the grants available from School Transport Section, the closed school rule, and requests relating to distance where appellants argue that they are entitled to a transport service even though they are less than the required minimum distance. The majority of appeals centre on aspects of the criteria. The committee considers that clarity on the criteria governing the schemes in addition to well-publicised information should address any queries on criteria matters. The committee considers that the future role of the Board requires redefinition and **recommends that appeals should be confined to school transport application process appeals to establish any shortcomings in that process.** The committee considers that this is the appropriate appeals mechanism and that the appeals process would identify any process deficits and that these would then be rectified and the application process undertaken again. In recommending a move to a process appeal, the committee notes that there are already a number of professional calls made in the applications process – e.g., on transport planning and on special education needs – and that these should not be second-guessed in the appeals process.

7.21 Balance between provision of transport by Bus Éireann and Private Contractors

The VFM review has identified the extent to which there has been an increase in private provision provided under the school transport scheme. It is further noted that each year, Bus Éireann places general advertisements in the press inviting private operators who are interested in providing services under the school transport scheme to submit expressions of interest to their local Bus Éireann office. Following evaluation of the applications and an assessment of potential operators, taking into account for example proximity to routes, size of bus, and standard of vehicle documentation, a proportion of existing routes, including taxi services and new work, are opened to tender. These annual tendering arrangements appear to demonstrate that there is not extensive availability of transport above that which is used by Bus Éireann.

The committee notes that the costs of school transport provided directly by Bus Éireann are somewhat more expensive than that provided by the private sector. However, the committee considers that it is unclear what the impact would be of a free market in operation were Bus Éireann to cease providing school transport completely and that it is quite possible that the cost of private provision could increase in such an instance. At the same time, the transport market is rapidly developing and changing. Given these circumstances, **the committee recommends that the provision of direct transport services by Bus Éireann should be reduced on a phased basis in the school transport scheme while Bus Éireann would still maintain a limited number of buses in reserve for alternative provision should the need arise.**

This recommendation has implications for the manner in which buses are cascaded by Bus Éireann into the school transport fleet. **The committee recommends that the cascading of buses into the school transport fleet by Bus Éireann should now cease and that Bus Éireann would gradually reduce its direct provision of school transport using its existing services.** Bus Éireann and the Department of Education and Skills will need to keep these cascading arrangements under review with a view to ensuring that Bus Éireann has sufficient

buses available for transport and it may be appropriate that a small number of buses would need to be cascaded into the school transport fleet.

The committee notes that in recent years there have sometimes been annual increases in the level to be paid to private contractors which have been put in place by Bus Éireann with the agreement of the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Finance having regard to the cost of living. ***The committee recommends that the practice of annual increases for private contractors determined by the Department should discontinue and that the level to be paid to private contractors should be a matter for negotiation and agreement between the national organiser and private contractors having regard to tendering as appropriate and within the overall funding available to the national organiser from the State.***

The committee notes that the private contractors, in the interests of purchasing new buses to use in part on the school transport scheme, are seeking to have longer term contracts in place with Bus Éireann. ***The committee recommends the putting in place of some longer term contracts of up to three years with private contractors by the national organiser for newer buses and related investment.*** However, the committee does not consider that the national organiser can guarantee that any particular route will continue to be available given the necessity to route plan every year and that all that could be agreed in such a contract would be that a route with a certain distance would be available and that the private contractor would need to be flexible in relation to the possible location of this.

7.22 Administrative basis of the School Transport Scheme

At present, the school transport scheme is organised on an administrative basis. Chapter 6 considered whether the administrative nature of the scheme has impacted on its effectiveness.

There are advantages and disadvantages to organising a publicly-funded scheme on an administrative rather than a statutory basis. The Department is currently moving to place the higher education grants scheme on a statutory footing and consideration has been given to providing a statutory basis for the school transport scheme.

A principal reason for moving to a statutory scheme, which has been articulated by the Ombudsman for example, is that consistency in the application of the scheme can be addressed by putting it on a statutory basis – the objectives and governing criteria of the scheme are likely to be made clear and the likelihood of arbitrary decision-making is thus reduced. On the other hand, having a statutory based scheme would reduce the flexibility that may be advantageous in some areas depending on the nature of the statutory basis.

The committee considers that the priority for the development of the school transport scheme is to update the existing administrative scheme. The committee considers that along the lines outlined later in this chapter, the basis of the school transport scheme should be amended and publicised using principles of transparency, accessibility and decisions based on clear rules. The committee further considers that the decision making in relation to operational aspects of the scheme should be updated and fully devolved to the national organiser with a broader responsibility. Thus some of the decisions which have returned for decision to the Department of Education and Skills would now fall to be made by the national organiser rather than by the Department – for example, confirmation that transport would cease to be provided where the numbers on a particular route fall below a certain level. The updated arrangements for the scheme would make it clear where the separate roles and responsibilities of the Department of Education and Skills and the national organiser are in relation to the scheme. The committee considers that this increased clarity should address many of the concerns about the over-complexity in the school transport scheme that have been identified. ***The committee recommends that moving to updated arrangements for the school transport scheme with a single transport organiser responsible for grants and transport for children with special needs should be the priority.***

However, the committee considers that further consideration of the possible need for a statutory basis to this scheme should be informed by legal advice in relation to the necessity for providing such a statutory basis.

7.23 Safety

The safety of the 135,000 children travelling on the school transport service was considered of paramount importance to the committee. The work undertaken in recent years to maintain and improve the safety features of the School Transport Scheme outlined in Chapter 6 was noted by the committee. This chapter outlined the four distinct areas around safety, namely vehicular safety standards, including the standard of seat belts, driver testing, driver vetting to conform with child protection guidelines and safety on or around buses.

In relation to vehicular safety standards the committee noted that any additional standards required for school buses whether publicly or privately operated is a matter for the Road Safety Authority (RSA). The committee also noted that over and above the standard Annual Roadworthiness Tests, Bus Éireann conducts random checks of vehicle maintenance standards and audits of maintenance records, which are carried out by an internationally recognised independent agency. These checks, funded by the Department of Education and Skills, include contractors' school buses and their maintenance premises. The Department of Transport has confirmed that in addition to the current roadworthiness testing and Garda roadside enforcement of roadworthiness standards, measures proposed by the RSA to overhaul and enforce the commercial vehicle roadworthiness testing regime are under consideration.

In relation to safety belts on school buses, the committee noted that the RSA has defined the standard for safety belts on buses and the new requirements in relation to the organised transport of children. Safety Belts have been a contract requirement for some years for vehicles providing services under the school transport scheme. The committee also noted that Bus Éireann, at the request of the Department of Education and Skills, had put in place an appropriate inspection mechanism, building on its own expertise, to address visual inspection of seat belts. This process will be maintained until the end of the 2010/2011 school year to ensure all vehicles meet the standards introduced on 29th October 2010.

In relation to driver vetting, the committee noted that all drivers of services provided under the School Transport Scheme are required by BÉ to undergo background vetting conducted by the Garda Central Vetting Unit. This process will continue to be a requirement into the future.

The committee also noted that driving tests for professional bus drivers were expanded in 2008 to meet the requirements of EU Directive 2003/59. This Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) test was introduced in September 2008 for buses. All professional bus drivers will now also have to undergo one day's training per year in a syllabus developed in line with the EU Directive.

In relation to safety on or around schools buses, the committee noted that all school transport scheme services offer accommodation on a one child per adult seat basis. Safety assessment in route planning and monitoring is undertaken by BE School Transport Inspectors on an ongoing basis. Safety Awareness campaigns and ongoing awareness work is undertaken by BE frequently in conjunction with other agencies. The committee notes the intention of the Department of Education and Skills to establish a safety awareness group representing all interest groups including the National Parents Councils to raise and maintain awareness of safety issues on and around school buses.

7.24 Sustainable Transport and Synergies in Transport Provision

The Government's Smarter Travel Policy; A Sustainable Transport Future (2009-2020) includes an action, in relation to mobility management, to ensure that every school and college in Ireland has a travel plan to encourage students to take alternatives to the car. This policy seeks to ensure that the local authorities identify and implement safe walking and cycling routes to and from schools, as well as providing better access for people with disabilities. It also indicates that, where such safe routes cannot be provided, an extension of the existing school transport system will be considered.

The new Smarter Travel policy also commits to improving the rural transport service and to examining existing services such as the school transport scheme in the development of a broader rural transport service.

These commitments are reinforced in the Revised Programme for Government.

There is a specific reference to rolling out a "Safe routes to School" programme nationwide. In this regard, the Department of Transport is rolling out a Green Schools Travel Programme nationwide and it has established an advisory group of relevant stakeholders to achieve better cooperation and delivery of these.

The second element of note in the Revised Programme for Government relates to the greater integration of transport services. Bus Éireann is exploring synergies between its own services (including both its own direct provision and the provision by another school transport service) and the transport services of the Rural Transport Programme/Pobal and the Health Service Executive. The Revised Programme for Government provides that Bus Éireann will continue to explore these synergies and implement new arrangements arising out of these. A framework is currently being agreed between the three organisations whereby a range of projects can be piloted to test the potential for increased coordination and efficiencies in the following areas:

- Increased integration between transport services
- Increased integration between transport services and medical/social services
- Better utilisation of the fleet available to the three organisations
- The building of skills, common knowledge and IT systems

One of the pilots is to investigate the potential for utilising school buses outside school hours for other rural transport services. Further pilots are to be advanced in relation to the potential for putting the utilisation of special education transport between the school transport services and the HSE. A number of pilots have commenced and are to be independently assessed. They are taking place in Louth/Meath and Sligo/Leitrim. ***The committee recommends that the assessment of these pilots should be taken on board and put in place on a national basis should the outcomes create savings in school transport expenditure.*** While there will not be huge immediate savings arising from these synergies, the committee considers that potential exists for significant savings in the two areas for the school transport scheme. Furthermore, the committee considers that Bus Éireann should maximise the potential of, and publicise, existing transport facilities to ensure maximum usage and efficiency.

The committee considers that further synergies may emerge in relation to the "Safe routes to Schools" programme. However, the committee's main role concerns value for money and not to look at sustainable transport to schools generally. The committee considers that each school needs to ensure that it works to develop a Green School policy and works to implement these. The committee notes that it is important that local authorities undertake their role and that issues in relation to encouraging such sustainable transport to schools are already taken on board in terms of the planning and building of new schools.

Chapter 8

Future Performance Indicators

8.1 Introduction

This Chapter identifies the performance indicators that should be used to monitor the future performance of the School Transport Scheme. It also identifies the data sources that will need to be utilised or developed in order to facilitate the monitoring process. The identification of future performance indicators fulfills the sixth term of reference for this review.

8.2 Performance Indicators

This review is based upon the evaluative framework established by the Programme Logic Model (PLM). Part of the process of constructing the PLM, as outlined in chapter 3, was the identification of performance indicators that could be used to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness with which the School Transport Scheme achieved its objectives.

The performance indicators link inputs to outputs (*efficiency* indicators) and outputs to outcomes (*effectiveness* indicators). The performance indicators identified for the STS are outlined in the tables below.

The data sources required to support monitoring of these performance indicators are identified in section 8.3 below. This encompasses both existing data sources and new sources that will need to be developed.

The performance indicators outlined below are mainly quantitative in nature and the majority of the indicators are designed to monitor efficiency rather than effectiveness. This reflects the importance attached to monitoring the efficiency of a scheme that has experienced significant increases in cost in recent years, as well as monitoring trends in relation to particular cost drivers such as expenditure in the area of special needs.

It is not proposed to include a performance indicator to monitor safety on the School Transport Scheme. This is primarily because all children travelling on the School Transport Scheme have to be transported safely to their destination. This is a fundamental requirement of the scheme and it is therefore considered unnecessary to include a performance indicator that seeks to measure an area where underperformance is simply not an option. Furthermore, all buses engaged as part of the School Transport Scheme must meet the safety standards prescribed by the Department of Transport or they are not permitted to transport pupils.

8. 1: Performance indicators for use in monitoring the future efficiency of the School Transport Scheme

Number	Indicator	Data sources required	Data available	Who should collate data
1	The unit cost per pupil transported per annum (Overall unit cost per primary and post-primary combined; and also separate unit costs for primary and post-primary respectively)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> The number of pupils transported per annum (and also the number of primary and post-primary pupils respectively) The total cost of the scheme (and the total cost of the primary and post-primary schemes respectively) 	<p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bus Éireann School Transport Section in conjunction with Bus Éireann
2	Unit cost per special needs pupil per annum (Overall unit cost per primary and post-primary combined; and also separate unit costs for primary and post-primary respectively)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Total number of special needs pupils transported per annum (and also primary and post-primary respectively) Total expenditure on transporting special needs pupils per annum by mainstream, special class/unit and special school (and also total expenditure on primary and post-primary respectively) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Yes at primary No for pupils who travel on normal services 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bus Éireann School Transport Section in conjunction with Bus Éireann
3	Unit cost per pupil transported by Bus Éireann vs private contractor (large buses).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Total expenditure by Bus Éireann as part of the STS Total number of pupils transported by Bus Éireann and private contractors in large buses 	Yes	Bus Éireann
4.	Number of pupils transported by Bus Éireann and private contractors respectively as percentage of total cohort (primary and post-primary respectively)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Total number of pupils transported on STS (disaggregated by primary and post-primary) Number of pupils transported by Bus Éireann and private contractors respectively 	Yes	Bus Éireann
5	Distance travelled to school	Average distance travelled by pupils at primary, post-primary and to special school, special class/unit	No	Bus Éireann
6	Unit cost per pupil by vehicle type	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Total number of pupils transported on STS broken down by vehicle type Total number of vehicles engaged in school transport services by vehicle type Total cost associated with operating each vehicle type 	Some	Bus Éireann
7	Number of primary and post-primary pupils using the STS as percentage of overall primary and post-primary pupil cohort.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Number of primary and post-primary pupils enrolled in school Number of primary and post-primary pupils availing of school transport 	Yes	School Transport Section 1. Bus Éireann
8	Revenue raised through parental charges as a percentage of the full economic cost of school transport provision.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Total cost of the School Transport Scheme Total revenue raised from school transport charges 	Yes	School Transport Section in conjunction with Bus Éireann.
9	Ratio of administrative staff employed on duties related to STS compared to number of pupils transported.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Total number of WTE administrative staff employed in School Transport Section Total number of WTE administrative staff employed by Bus Éireann and working on school transport related activities Total number of pupils transported on the STS 	Yes	School Transport Section in conjunction with Bus Éireann
10.	Number of grants allocated per annum and average grant allocated per annum	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Number of grants sanctioned by Bus Éireann Amount of each grant paid by Bus Éireann 	Yes	Bus Éireann
11	Percentage of children travelling on the STS that are in receipt of a grant	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Number of children travelling on the STS Number of children in receipt of a grant 	Yes	Bus Éireann

8. 2: Performance indicators for use in monitoring the future effectiveness of the School Transport Scheme

Number	Indicator	Data sources required	Data readily available	Who should collate data
10	Number of pupils travelling to school by transport mode	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of pupils attending school 2. Number of pupils attending school by mode of transport used 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Yes 2. Yes (census? If not, annual sample?) 	School Transport Section
11	Number of seats occupied as percentage of total available seats on school transport services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of seats on school transport vehicle 2. Number of vacant seats on each school transport service 	Yes	Bus Éireann
12	Percentage of service users who are satisfied with the quality of the service provided	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of service users who indicate satisfaction with the quality of the service 	No would require survey of sample of service users	School Transport Section
13	Percentage of pupils availing of school transport services that have longer waiting / travelling times than prescribed times	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Total number of pupils travelling on School Transport Services 2. Waiting / Travelling time for each pupil 	No	Bus Éireann

8.3 Data sources

The third column in each of the above tables identifies the data sources that could be used to track the recommended performance indicators. This data would be collected on an annual basis.

Many of these data sources are already routinely collated by Bus Éireann or School Transport Section. This includes basic data relating to the total cost of the scheme, the total number of pupils transported, the number of vehicles involved, and the revenue raised through transport charges. There will therefore not be an additional administrative burden in monitoring the performance indicators associated with these data sources.

However, the monitoring of other performance indicators will require new data sources to be developed. For example, while there are some data available on special needs pupils transported on the STS, further data could be developed to enable examination of the specific unit cost per special needs pupil transported at primary and post-primary level respectively and by school type mainstream/special school/special class or unit. Similarly, any monitoring of unit cost per pupil by vehicle type will require calculation of the costs associated with transport on the different type of vehicles engaged as part of the scheme. Similarly, there are currently no data on the average or range of waiting / travelling times experienced by pupils on the STS.

Although a considerable amount of data are currently collated by either Bus Éireann or the School Transport Section, the focus of both Bus Éireann and the School Transport Section tends of necessity to be on operational issues with the result that there is insufficient time for analysis of the data that are currently available. The issue of grant payments is relevant here – while information is available on the number and type of grant payments made by School Transport Section it is not routinely analysed and its collection in a format that facilitates detailed analysis viz. the number of parents receiving the various grants is only at the initial stages.

Linked to the above point is the fact that existing data sources could be strengthened in some instances. For example, while some data are available in relation to special needs transport, further data could be collected to facilitate more in-depth analysis of the costs associated with this policy area. In addition, there are some areas where data was specifically collated for this review but is not routinely collected – for example in relation to sampling of the number of pupils that are transported past their nearest school to attend another school, and the average distance travelled by pupils on particular routes. It would also be beneficial to be able to cross reference some of the data that are collected both internally and externally.

In relation to internal cross referencing, links with the Department's Forward Planning section in relation to amalgamations/closures, Special Education Section in relation to children with special needs, and enrolment databases in relation to projected pupil numbers will support a unified approach. A common set of codifiers will be applied for schools viz. school roll numbers with school type identified in addition to common codes for all types of vehicles.

External cross referencing will include links with the Green School Travel Programme in order to review transport modal shift in participating schools daily over time as a result of the investment.

The tables above identify the agency that will be responsible for collating the data that will facilitate tracking of performance indicators. In most instances the data will be collected by Bus Éireann, but for some particular indicators the data will be collated by the School Transport Section in conjunction with Bus Éireann. The greater

emphasis on data collection by Bus Éireann is in line with the recommendation made elsewhere in this Review, that the School Transport Section should focus more on strategic issues and policy making in the future.

Finally, the type and level of data needed to monitor the scheme should be kept under review taking into account new developments in technology.

Appendix 1

Index of submissions made to the Steering Committee of the Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme

- Nicholas Sweetman
Principal, Gorey Community School, Co. Wexford
- Mary Brennan
Principal, SN Phádraig Naofa, Wicklow
- Tom McGann
Principal, Scoil na Coróine Mhuire, Wicklow
- Patricia Fouhy-Barry
BOM, Curraglass NS, Mallow, Co. Cork
- Federation of Transport Operators
Kill, Co. Kildare
- Joyce Gillmor
Principal, St. Paul's NS, Collooney, Sligo
- Helen Oxley
Principal, Kiltegan NS, Wicklow
- Fergal McMahon
Principal, St. Cynoc's NS, Ferbane, Co. Offaly
- Mary White
Principal, Dominican College, Wicklow
- Angela Byrne
Knockmourne, Conna, Co. Cork
- Mary Richardson
St. Kilian's Community School, Ballywaltrim, Wicklow
- Dr. Rory O'Hanlon TD
Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan
- The Transport Liaison Officers Group
c/o South Tipperary VEC
- National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals,
Lr Leeson Street, Dublin 2
- Joint Managerial Body
Milltown, Dublin 14
- Peggy Connolly
Ballyellen, Goresbridge, Kilkenny
- Catherine Blake
Kilcara, Bagnelstown, Carlow
- James O'Reilly
Cootehill, Co. Cavan
- Knockminna School Parents Association,
Ballymote, Co. Sligo
- Colette and Peter Breen,
Goresbridge, Co. Kilkenny
- Marie Buckley
Skibbereen, Co. Cork
- St. Kevins Primary School Board of Management,
Glendalough, Co. Wicklow
- Paul Condon
Curraglass Development Association,
Mallow, Co. Cork
- Peter O'Leary
Ennis, Co. Clare
- Grace Murphy
Naas, Co. Kildare
- Parents of children in Coolaney area of Sligo
- Josephine Frisby

- Fermoy, Co. Cork
- Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD,
Teach Laighean, Sráid Chill Dara, Baile Átha Cliath 2
- Ulick Burke TD
Constitutency Office, Loughrea, Co. Galway
- Anne Keane
Kilmacthomas, Co. Waterford
- Dónal Hunt
BOM, Dromclough NS, Listowel, Co. Kerry
- Mayo TLO
- Eithne Spain
Parents Committee Ardcroney NS,
Nenagh, Co. Tipperary
- David Delamere
Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow
- Marie Diskin
Acting Principal, Ramsgrange CS, Wexford
- Marie Wright
Coláiste Chiaráin Parents Association, Croom, Co. Limerick
- Road Safety Authority ,
Ballina, Co. Mayo
- Mary & Tommy Clancy,
Ennis, Co. Clare
- Olive Walker
- Seamus Bannon
BOM, Ardcoil na mBraithre, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary
- Bernie Redddan
Borrisokane Community College Parents Association,
Tipperary
- Co. Laois TLO
Portlaoise, Co. Laois
- Rachel Cullen
St. Kevin's Primary School Parents Association, Glendalough, Wicklow
- Marie Gayson
Cashel, Co. Tipperary
- Bernadette Keating
Kilkenny
- Karen Roche
Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow
- Joanne O'Driscoll
Mallow, Co. Cork
- John Byrne
Moneystown NS, Roundwood, Wicklow
- National Council for Special Education,
Trim, Co. Meath
- Bus Éireann,
Broadstone, Dublin 7
- Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government
- Eamon Scanlon TD
Ballymote, Co. Sligo
- Angela Condon
Mallow, Co. Cork
- Co. Galway TLO
Athenry, Co. Galway
- Co. Donegal TLO
Letterkenny, Co. Donegal
- Joe Behan TD
Bray, Co. Wicklow

- Seán Sherlock TD
Mallow, Co. Cork
- Irish Rural Link
Moate, Co. Westmeath
- Margaret McColgan
Central Parents Committee, Carndonagh CS, Donegal
- Irish Primary Principal's Network
- Reception and Integration Agency, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform,
Dublin 2
- Coach Tourism and Transport Council,
Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan
- National Parents Council – Post Primary,
Glasnevin Business Centre, Dublin 11
- Ombudsman for Children
Millennium House, Dublin 1
- John McGuinness TD
O'Loughlin Road, Kilkenny
- Máire Hóctor TD
- Jean Fox
Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath
- Irish National Teachers Organisation,
Parnell Square, Dublin 1
- Co. Waterford VEC,
Dungarvan, Co. Waterford
- Flexibus
Navan, Co. Meath
- Irene Farrell
Collinstown, Co. Westmeath
- The Independent School Transport Appeals Board
- John Byrne & Maeve Tierney,
Moneystown NS, Roundwood, Co. Wicklow
- Citizens Information Board
- National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
- Gillian Cheatley
Villiers School, Limerick
- Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland
- Cllr Michael Clarke
Dromore West, Sligo
- Rural Transport Programme,
Hollis Street, Dublin 2
- Rebecca Cleary,
Principal Christ the Saviour NS, Ballingarry
- Caroline Griffin,
Dunmore East, Co. Waterford
- Parents, Gibbstown area ,
Navan, Co. Meath
- Church of Ireland Board of Education,
Rathmines, Dublin 6
- Joe Kenny
Principal, St. Muredach's College, Mayo

Appendix 2: Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education & Skills

SUBMISSIONS INDEX

1. Ms Mary Crawford Principal
Mean Scoil Sheosaimh Rinn Na Spáinneach
Sráid Na Cathrach Co Clare
2. Mr Patrick McDonagh Principal & Secretary Board of Management
St Mary's College Ballygar Co Galway
3. Ms Mary McGillicuddy Principal
Tarbert Comprehensive School Listowel Co Kerry
4. Mr Jim Twohig & Mrs Mary Jones Principal & Deputy Principal
John the Baptist Community School Hospital Co Limerick
5. Ms Marie Wright Secretary Parents Council
Coláiste Chiaráin Crecora Co Limerick
6. Mr Paddy O'Neill Principal
Salesian Secondary College Pallaskenry Co Limerick
7. Mrs Teresa Carrig Representative of Parents Group
Patrickswell Co Limerick
8. Mr Michael McSweeney & Ms Elizabeth Hayes
Chairperson & Secretary
Patrickswell Community Council Ltd
9. Ms Bernadette Cullen
County Limerick VEC
10. Mr Noel P Malone Principal & Secretary Board of Management
Coláiste Chiaráin Croom Co Limerick
11. Mr Liam Faughnan Secretary Board of Management
Moyne Community School Co Longford
12. Ms Irene Moore Isaacstown Rathmoylon Co Meath
13. Curragha Parish – St Andrew's NS, Ratoath College & Curragha Parish Council Co Meath
14. Ms Andrea McGuinness Ballyhack Fairyhouse Road Ratoath Co Meath
15. Councillor Seamus Coyle Castleblayney Co Monaghan
16. Mr Vincent O'Neill & Ms Maire Durkin
Castleblayney and Ballymay Co Monaghan
17. Mr Liam Fallon Secretary Dysart Parents – Athlone School Bus
Committee Dysart Ballinasloe Co Galway
18. Mr Francis Carr on behalf of Parent of Mote Park Roscommon
19. Ms Colette O'Hagan Principal
Corran College Ballymote Co Sligo

20. Ms Rosaleen Oldfield Principal
Coláiste Iascaigh Easkey Co Sligo
21. Mr Damien McGoldrick Principal
Coola Post-Primary School Riverstown via Boyle Co Sligo
22. Sr Mary Kelly RJM Principal & Theresa Doherty Secretary of Parents Council Jesus & Mary Secondary School Enniscrone Co Sligo
23. Mr Eddie Murphy Principal/Secretary Board of Management
Cashel Community School, Cashel, Co Tipperary
24. Mr Nicholas Sweetman Secretary Board of Management
Gorey Community School Co Wexford
25. Mr Gerard Kerins Mullycagh Upper Donard Co Wicklow
26. Deputy Niall Collins TD on behalf of Parents of Caherconlish Co Limerick
27. Sr. Margaret Ryan Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools
28. Mr Ferdia Kelly General Secretary – Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools
29. Mr Pdraig O'Shea Principal
St. Joseph's College Borrisoleigh Co Tipperary
30. Ms Marion Flanagan Parents Association of Gurrane NS
Clondrohid Macroom Co Cork
31. The Office of Ombudsman For Children
32. Aida Loughnan & Pat Keogh
66 The Orchard Bellfield Enniscorthy Co Wexford
33. Mr Andrew England Newtown Ballynoe Conna Co Cork
34. Pupil at Blackwater Community School Lismore Co Waterford
35. Mrs Aisling Fannon Bushfield Castleplunkett Castlerea Co Roscommon
36. Castleplunkett NS Castlerea Co Roscommon
37. Mr Patrick Murphy Coolbawn House Ferns Co Wexford
38. Mr Michael Nolan Secretary Board of Management
Killina Presentation Secondary School Co Offaly
39. St Aidan's Comprehensive School Co Cavan
40. St Joseph's School Tulla Co Clare
41. Mountshannon Community Council Co Clare
42. Connolly School Ennis Co Clare
43. Kildysart NS Co Clare
44. Ardscoil Phobal Bantry Co Cork
45. CBS Charleville Co Cork

46. Colaiste Mhuire Co Cork
47. Colaiste Muire Realt Na Mara Co Cork
48. Rosscarbery School Co Cork
49. Ballinora NS Co Cork
50. Ballincollig Community School Co Cork
51. Scoil Cill Criodain Co Cork
52. Colaiste Na Toirbhirte Bandon Co Cork
53. Sacred Heart Secondary School Clonakilty Co Cork
54. Kilmurray NS Lissarda Co Cork
55. Mount St Michael Secondary School Co Cork
56. Schull Community School Co Cork
57. Scoil Phobail Bhaile An Chollaigh Co Cork
58. St Marys Secondary School Charleville Co Cork
59. St Patrick's NS Whitechurch Co Cork
60. Concerned Parents Maam Co Galway
61. Seamount College Kinvara Co Galway
62. St Josephs Secondary School Co Kerry
63. Mercy Secondary School Tralee Co Kerry
64. St Michaels College Co Kerry
65. Scoil Phobail Sliabh Luachra Co Kerry
66. St Fergal's College Rathdowney Co Laois
67. Coiste Ghairmoideach Co Laois
68. Scoil Pól Kilfinane Co Limerick
69. Ard Scoil Mhuire Bruff Co Limerick
70. Colaiste Mhuire Co Mayo
71. Ballybay Community College Co Monaghan
72. Ardscoil na mBraithre Clonmel Co Tipperary
73. St Joseph's College Newport Co Tipperary
74. Borrisokane Community College Co Tipperary
75. Blackwater Community College Co Waterford

76. Mullingar Post-Primary School Co Westmeath
77. Moate Community College Co Westmeath
78. Ballymahon Secondary Schools Co Westmeath
79. Castlepollard Community College Co Westmeath
80. Blackwater Parents Co Wexford
81. FCJ Secondary School Bunclody Co Wexford
82. Gorey Community School Co Wexford
83. Loreto Secondary School Co Wexford
84. Moneystown NS Co Wicklow
85. James Breen TD
86. Cúram
87. National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
88. National Parents Association for Vocational Schools and Community Colleges
89. Church of Ireland – The Board of Education
90. Féach
91. National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
92. Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools
93. County Wexford VEC
94. North Tipperary VEC
95. County Cavan VEC
96. County Carlow VEC
97. County Longford VEC
98. County Monaghan VEC
99. Flexibus (Meath Transport)