



**Tithe an
Oireachtais
Houses of the
Oireachtas**

Tithe an Oireachtais
An Comhchoiste um Oideachas agus Scileanna
Tuarascáil maidir le hoibriú na
Scéime Iompair Scoile
Samhain 2018

Houses of the Oireachtas
Joint Committee on Education and Skills
Report on the operation of the School
Transport Scheme
November 2018

32/ES/15

Contents

1. Foreword	2
2. Engagement with Stakeholders	5
3. Introduction	7
4. Changes to the School Transport Scheme	8
5. Ticket Charges	10
6. Concessionary Tickets	11
7. Remote Area Grants	14
8. Oversubscribed Schools	14
9. School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs	15
10. The Provision of School Transport	19
11. Roadworthiness of Vehicles used for School Transport	20
12. Recommendations	21
13. Appendices	22

1. Chairman's Foreword

The purpose of the meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills was to discuss with a number of stakeholders matters related to the operation of the school transport scheme.

Each year, families present with issues surrounding the provision of school transport for their children and this can be a matter of great concern as parents try to make arrangements for their children to get to school. This year has been no different. Communication between Bus Éireann and parents continues to be an issue and the Committee is keen that this is addressed.

Children in this country have a right to a free education as provided for under article 42 of the Constitution¹, however the provision of transport to and from school is not an absolute right, and requires minimum numbers of eligible children residing in a distinct locality before the service can be established and retained. Whilst the Committee understands this and acknowledges the mammoth task of transporting approximately 117,000 children including more than 12,700 with special educational needs on a daily basis across the country to and from school, the Committee is aware that there are major issues surrounding the scheme. This gives rise to uncertainty at the start of every new school term for both parents and children alike and also gives rise to challenges for service providers.

The school transport scheme has evolved considerably since it was introduced in 1968. The aim of the scheme was to provide transport for students from rural areas to the nearest second-level school with school catchment areas being established. Since changes to the school transport scheme were announced in Budget 2011, a number of issues have arisen, including children not being able to travel on the same bus as their siblings.

¹ Information on Article 42 of the Irish Constitution available at:
http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/the_irish_education_system/constitution_and_education.html
Last accessed 18 July 2018

This is due to changes in policy, whereby, the child must attend the nearest school to be eligible to travel on the school bus, even if the school is not in the same parish as the family or even in the same county. Particular difficulties were highlighted regarding children being deemed ineligible to attend schools with which there are family, sporting and other strong associations.

The Committee is aware that there is very little flexibility in relation to children who have special needs and are deemed eligible if they are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school or unit that is or can be resourced to meet their special educational needs. The Committee recognises that the provision of education for children with special educational needs, is a complex issue and schools that fall within the catchment area may not be the best resourced facility to adequately address the child's individual needs. There needs to be flexibility within the scheme, to ensure that the children with special educational needs, get the best education possible and that the school transport scheme facilitates this.

The Committee is aware of the importance of these issues and public hearings were held to explore in more detail, these concerns and others as discussed in this report.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank the witnesses who appeared before the Committee to assist in our examinations of this matter. I would also like to thank the large number of Oireachtas Members who are not Members of this Committee, but who attended in their own-right to contribute to the discussion. This in itself highlights the importance of the issue at hand.

Fiona O'Loughlin

Fiona O'Loughlin T.D.

Chairman

November 2018



2. Engagement with Stakeholders

The Joint Committee on Education and Skills requested written submissions from various stakeholders, identified by the Committee. Arising from the submissions received on this matter, a public meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills was held, on 11th July 2017, to further explore points made in the submissions. A submission was also received from the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland (CTTC). Representatives of the Council were not in a position to attend, however their submission was considered as part of this process.

In addition to this, the Committee arranged a meeting with the Department of Education and Skills and Bus Éireann when issues surrounding the provision of the school transport scheme came to light at the start of the 2018-19 school year.

At the meeting of the **11th July, 2017** the Committee heard from the following witnesses:

Mr. Richard Dolan, Principal Officer, School Transport Unit	Department of Education and Skills
Ms. Niamh McElduff, Assistant Principal Officer, School Transport Unit	Department of Education and Skills
Mr. Ray Hernan Acting CEO	Bus Éireann
Mr. Gerry Gannon, School Transport Manager	Bus Éireann
Ms. Margaret Hubbard, Procurement and Materials Manager	Bus Éireann

Mr. Sé Goulding, Head of Operations	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Ms. Noelle Connolly, Head of Local Services	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Ms. Breda Corr, General Secretary	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)
Ms. Áine Lynch CEO	National Parents' Council [Primary]

At the meeting of the **25th September, 2018** the Committee heard from the following witnesses:

Mr. Stephen Kent, Acting CEO	Bus Éireann
Ms. Miriam Flynn, Chief Schools Officer	Bus Éireann
Mr. Richard Dolan, Principal Officer	Department of Education and Skills
Ms. Shirley Kearney, Assistant Principal Officer	Department of Education and Skills

3. Introduction

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) funds the provision of transport services to and from primary and post-primary schools for children who live some distance from their nearest school. The scheme is operated by Bus Éireann on behalf of the DES. Primary school children are eligible to avail of school transport services if they live not less than 3.2 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school, having regard to ethos and language. The eligible minimum distance for post-primary pupils is 4.8 kilometres. Pupils who do not qualify under the eligibility rules may use the school transport service if there is spare capacity on a bus route — these are known as concessionary ticket holders. The purpose of the Department's school transport scheme is, having regard to the available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remotely from their nearest school. Families of eligible children for whom there is no school transport service available are eligible for the remote area grant towards the cost of making private transport arrangements. In general, children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for it on a concessionary basis, subject to meeting a number of terms and conditions detailed in the scheme.

The cost for the provision of school transport services in 2016 was approximately €182 million rising to €190 million in 2017, and included the cost of direct transport services, grant payments, funding to schools for the employment of escorts to accompany children with special educational needs whose care and safety needs were such as to require the support of an escort. During 2016-17, 116,000 children, including 12,000 children with special educational needs were transported in approximately 4,000 vehicles, covering over 100 million kilometres. In 2017-18, 117,000 children including 12,700 children were transported in approximately 4,500 vehicles covering over 100 million kilometres over the course of the year.

4. Changes to the School Transport Scheme

Changes to the school transport scheme were announced in Budget 2011 and derived from recommendations made in a value for money review of the scheme. The changes announced included the cessation of the closed-Central School Rule (CSR) at primary level, the cessation of the catchment boundary area system to determine eligibility at post-primary level and an increase, from seven to ten, in the minimum number of eligible children required to establish or retain a service. The school transport scheme is in a transitional phase which began in the 2011-12 school year in which children in the same family or area have school transport eligibility to different schools.²

As a consequence of these changes, the school transport approach now correlates with the Department of Education and Skills policy, which is said to ensure that specific school accommodation needs for defined geographical areas are addressed. Children, who had eligibility for school transport prior to the introduction of the changes retained this eligibility for the duration of their education at that school, providing there was no change in their circumstances. However, all new children, including siblings of existing eligible children are assessed for school transport eligibility under the revised criteria. This means that children in the same family or indeed in the same parish, may have school transport eligibility to different schools.

Members asked the witnesses to explain how distance to the school was calculated and was told that "It does not have to be motorised. For instance, the bus does not have to be able to traverse the route for the route to be the shortest traversable distance. If it is traversable on foot it is

² Available at:

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/2017-07-11/debate/mul@/main.pdf> Last accessed 17 July, 2018

suitable for measuring purposes. That is the current policy.”³ The Committee was further advised that the shortest traversable route does not necessarily equate to the route the bus will take. The Committee voiced its concerns in that there is a lack of clarity about local routes and a lack of flexibility in administering the system which leads to families having to send their children to schools outside their parish or county boundaries, if they wish to avail of school transport.

The Committee enquired about siblings in the same family not being eligible for the same bus route and were informed that “It is possible that some siblings might get a ticket and another sibling might not. That is the application of policy under the scheme.”⁴

The Committee wishes for this policy to be reviewed. Minister Halligan advised the Seanad on the 12th July, 2017 that he is constrained by legislation.

Summary of Accounting Arrangement 1975

The Summary of Accounting Arrangement 1975 provides for the provision of the School Transport Management Charge. The School Transport Management Charge is comprised of two elements – the direct service cost and the administrative service costs. According to Report 98 of the Comptroller and Auditor General, August 2017 “The 1975 arrangements provide for the Department to pay an annual lump sum to cover Bus Éireann’s indirect and unspecified ‘other direct’ costs. The lump sum – referred to as the transport management charge – is provided for in the agreement at 13% of direct costs. By agreement between Bus Éireann and the Department, the charge was capped at €16.7 million in 2011, at €15 million between 2012 and 2014, and at €11.3 million for 2015.”⁵ This report further states that the Summary of Accounting Arrangement 1975 has not been reviewed since its introduction.

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

⁵ Report 98, Provision of School Transport, August 2017, Comptroller and Auditor General Available at: <http://www.audgen.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=2702> Last accessed 23 July, 2018

The Committee wishes for the School Transport Management Charge to be reviewed to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

5. Ticket Charges

There are two payment options for the School Year:

Option 1 is to pay full amount on or before 27th July and a ticket for the full school year and option 2 allows the applicant to pay for the ticket biannually, with 50% being due by 27th July and the rest falling due by 1st December.

Figure 1

Ticket Charges 2018/2019	Option 1		Option 2	
Category	100%	<i>or</i>	50%	50%
Due	28 July 2018		28 July 2018	2 December 2018
Primary	€100.00	<i>or</i>	€50.00	€50.00
Maximum Payment for Primary	€220.00	<i>or</i>	€110.00	€110.00
Post Primary	€350.00	<i>or</i>	€175.00	€175.00
Maximum Family Contribution	€650.00	<i>or</i>	€325.00	€325.00

(Source: <http://www.buseireann.ie/inner.php?id=257>)

Eligible pupils holding valid Medical Cards (GMS Scheme) must submit Medical Card details online before the last Friday in July in order to avail of the exemption from school transport charges.

6. Concessionary Tickets

Children who are not eligible, under the terms of the schemes may apply to Bus Éireann for a ticket on a concessionary basis.

The conditions are:

- that Bus Éireann determines that a suitable service exists to school or education centre;
- that the service has spare capacity;
- that routes are not extended or altered, additional vehicles are not introduced, larger vehicles or extra trips using existing vehicles are not provided. No additional State cost is incurred; and
- that the appropriate annual charge is paid, Medical Cards are not applicable.

Availability may vary from year to year and is not available on public scheduled services. Concessionary transport cannot be guaranteed for the duration of the school cycle.⁶

Concessionary ticket holders, whether in possession of a Medical Card or not, must pay the full fare as opposed to those who are eligible and holding a Medical Card. Following a Review of the Concessionary Charges and Rules Element of the School Transport Scheme by Minister of State, Mr. John Halligan T.D., which was published in 2016, this position remains unchanged.⁷

⁶ Details of Concessionary tickets available at <http://www.buseireann.ie/inner.php?id=257>

⁷ <https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/School-Transport/Review-of-the-Concessionary-Charges-and-Rules-Element-of-the-School-Transport-Scheme.pdf>

The Committee voiced their concerns as to how the concessionary tickets are allocated and was informed that Bus Éireann endeavour to accommodate as many eligible children as possible, and in so doing assess how many seats are available for concessionary children. The Committee was further advised that the availability of concessionary tickets cannot be assessed until payments by those deemed eligible were received. This leaves families in the precarious position of not knowing if their children are going to get a place on the bus or if other arrangements will have to be made until the very last minute.

The Committee also raised concerns about the fact that applicants for concessionary tickets who have a Medical Card do not receive a waiver of the bus fare as is the case with children deemed eligible for school transport and who have a medical card.

Following on from the meeting, Minister of State, Mr John Halligan TD addressed the Seanad on 12th July, 2017 in relation to the school transport scheme and stated that "Senators have spoken about medical cards. We probably should look at that. Concessionary children, whether in possession of a medical card or not, must pay. That, itself, could be a significant cost. I am willing to have a look at that."⁸

The Committee calls for the publication of any report arising from an examination of policy relating to concessionary children with medical cards that has been undertaken since the publication of a 'Review of the Concessionary Charges and Rules Element of the School Transport Scheme' in 2016 and prior to Minister of State, Mr John Halligan T.D.'s address in the Seanad as outlined above.

The Committee is most concerned that families, who are deemed eligible for medical cards, have to pay as much as €650 per family for concessionary tickets in order to get their children to school.

⁸Statement in the Seanad by Minister of State, Mr John Halligan TD, 12 July 2017
<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/2017-07-12/10/>

At both meetings the Committee also raised difficulties in communicating with Bus Éireann in a timely manner. The Committee asked that a dedicated Oireachtas Liaison Officer be assigned, from within their communication unit, as is the case with other Departments, to deal with Members queries in an efficient and effective manner on behalf of their constituents.

Bus Éireann informed the Committee at its public hearing of the 25th September 2018 that “This year we set up in conjunction with the Department a full programme of communications to try to improve our customer service provision. This included a dedicated call centre to assist parents with queries. An email was sent to all Deputies and Senators with information on the scheme addressing many of their frequently asked questions. This also included mobile numbers for all our regional school transport managers and our chief schools officer. We put in place a dedicated email, reps@buseireann.ie, monitored daily to ensure we get back to the public representatives. This year we have set up four email reminders to all the applicants to remind them of the closing date for payments. A fifth email was also sent to all eligible applicants who had not paid by the closing date. In addition, we deployed social media channels and a website to provide additional reminders, trying to ensure we got all the applications in on time.”⁹

The Committee acknowledged the efforts of Bus Éireann, however Members highlighted that communications still remains a significant issue for both Members and parents and this needs to be addressed.

⁹Available at:

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/2017-07-11/debate/mul@/main.pdf> Last accessed 31 October, 2018

7. Remote Area Grants

Remote area grants are payable by the Department as a contribution towards private transport arrangements for eligible pupils for whom no transport service is available. These grants may also be paid for eligible pupils who live 3.2 km or more from the nearest pick-up point for school transport.¹⁰

8. Oversubscribed Schools

In cases where the Department is satisfied that the nearest school is full, eligibility for school transport will be determined based on the distance the family resides, from the next nearest school having regard to ethos and language.

To establish that the nearest school is full parents must provide:

- evidence that an application for enrollment was made within the deadline dates specified by the school; and
- a letter from the school authorities confirming that the school is fully subscribed; and
- a copy of the decision reached following an appeal under section 29 of the Education Act 1998; [this Act provides for an appeal by a parent to the Secretary General of the Department where a Board of Management of a school has refused to enroll a child].¹¹

The Committee was informed by witnesses that most parents are not aware that there is an appeals process available for when the nearest school is over-subscribed and highlighting a lack of awareness in relation to the above process.

¹⁰Details of School Transport Scheme available at <http://www.buseireann.ie/inner.php?id=257>
Last accessed 18 July, 2018

¹¹Frequently Asked Questions: <https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/School-Transport/FAQs.html>, last accessed 18 July, 2018

9. School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs

The purpose of the Department’s school transport scheme for children with special educational needs is, having regard to the available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children with special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability. In general, these children are eligible for school transport if they are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school or unit that is or can be resourced to meet their special educational needs under the Department’s criteria. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of special educational needs organisers (SENOs).

The Committee was advised that “there are many stages in the approval process for pupils with special educational needs. This can take some time and schools are often not informed of the progress of the application, nor do they receive an approval in writing in many cases. Thus, schools and parents are often not informed of the final decision until the beginning of the school year. That is extremely stressful for parents who do not know at what time or by whom their child is being picked up for school. On the selection criteria and awarding of contracts, many school contracts are changed and awarded without any notice to the school. Very often, the school is only aware of the change in contract when the contractor loses the route or when a different bus driver arrives. This leaves no time to prepare children with special educational needs for this, causing difficulties for everyone involved.”¹²

¹² Available at:

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/2017-07-11/debate/mul@/main.pdf> Last accessed 17 July, 2018

- **Escort provision**

Applications can be made to the Department by SENO to employ an escort to accompany a child, if the child's care and safety needs require that support.

- **Special class arrangements**

Transport services for children with special needs are only provided for the period of enrollment in a special class. If the child returns to mainstream classes, special transport arrangements will no longer be provided.

Eligible children who are enrolled in an autism class/unit attached to a mainstream school and who subsequently mainstream in that school will retain their transport eligibility for the duration of their primary education in this school. However, a new application must be made if they transfer to a new school.

The Committee was informed that both "the Department and Bus Éireann are very conscious of the specialised nature of transport provision for children with special educational needs under the scheme. This is reflected in the standard of service provided by Bus Éireann factoring the individual requirements of the children concerned into the planning of services which generally operate on a door-to-door basis. The number of children availing of the special educational needs scheme has increased by 3,512, from more than 9,000 in 2013-14 to almost 13,000 in 2017-18, and the overall costs of the scheme, including grants, payments to contractors and funding for school transport escorts, has risen by over €27 million, from €64 million to almost €91 million over the same period."¹³

¹³Transcript of meeting of 25 September, 2018
https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/2018-09-25/debate/mul@/main.pdf Last accessed 30 October, 2018

The Committee raised many areas of concern in relation to the provision of transport for children with special educational needs under the school transport scheme.

These included:

- That the school transport policy deems that no distance criterion applies to children with special educational needs, but these children must meet the Department's criteria for special educational needs and must also be attending the nearest facility that is, or can be, resourced to meet their special educational needs. However, the Committee raised questions that the situation for the provision of education for children with special educational needs, is a complex issue and schools that fall within the catchment area may not be the best resourced facility to adequately address the child's individual needs and that a more appropriate school may be located outside of the confines as set-down by the policy. The fact that there is no discretion in relation to this scheme means that families whose children's needs will be better served in a school outside of the area are not given the supports to get the best education possible for their child. The Committee is of the view that this gives rise to unequal access to education and therefore needs to be addressed.
- Concerns in relation to the provision of autism awareness training for bus drivers, bus escorts or other school staff so that they may gain a better understanding of autism so they are better equipped with skills to help these children. Also, the Committee was told that parents report that, at times, schools have difficulty in recruiting appropriate escorts. In addition to the recruitment difficulties parents are concerned that it is not mandatory that transport escorts receive training with regard to the particular needs of the child/children that they are escorting.

- The provision of nurses on school transportation who would be able to administer medication if needed.
- That there is no provision in the policy to provide children with special educational needs transport to and from respite to school.
- The issue of distance to and from the special educational needs schools/facilities was raised and the Committee wishes for routes to be reviewed where the journey is deemed to be excessive.

Minister of State, Mr John Halligan TD, advised the Seanad on the day following the meeting of the Committee that, "There is no way a child with special needs should be on a bus for two hours, and I will look at that. This is the first I have heard of that. That would be unacceptable to me, if that is the case."¹⁴

The Committee wishes to be advised as to what the outcome of the examination of this issue was and if any changes have been made in relation to this policy.

The Committee was told at the meeting of 25th September, 2018 that "On planning for special needs children and journey times, the special needs scheme is an individual service. We are very conscious of this and that what works for one child may not work for the next. On journey times and so on, if we become aware of excessive journey times, we work with the

¹⁴ Statement in the Seanad by Minister of State, Mr John Halligan TD, 12 July 2017
<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/2017-07-12/10/>

NCSE and its special needs adviser to ensure a service is within guidelines and suitable for the child.”¹⁵

Notwithstanding that, the Committee wishes to know what conclusions Minister of State, Mr. John Halligan T.D. has come to, following his address to the Seanad.

10. The Provision of School Transport

A total of 90% of the vehicles used to provide services under the school transport scheme are provided by private operators under contract to Bus Éireann with the other 10% being provided by Bus Éireann.

The Committee was advised that there were approximately 4,500 vehicles, at a cost of approximately €190 million in 2017.

In 2011 a revised tendering process was introduced for the provision of contracted services. The aim is to re-tender all existing subcontracted work a minimum of once every five years at the rate of about 20% a year, with a five-year contract awarded to the successful tenderer on each occasion.

The Committee was told that the tendering process allows Bus Éireann to achieve the procurement objectives of value for money, access to contracts for all interested parties, transparency on how contracts are awarded and equality of treatment. It is also in-line with Government policy where the expenditure of public funds is concerned.

The Committee highlighted their concerns in relation to the procurement process with particular regard to the impact that changes in service providers can have on children with special educational needs. Bus Éireann

¹⁵ Available at:

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/2017-07-11/debate/mul@/main.pdf > Last accessed 31 October, 2018

advised that it is obliged to abide by EU Directive 2014/24/EU which causes delays in the procurement process.¹⁶

11. Roadworthiness of Vehicles used for School Transport

The Committee was advised that under the School Transport Scheme almost 4,500 buses, mostly operated by private contractors on behalf of Bus Éireann, bring 117,000 children to and from schools.

The Committee raised concerns in relation to the roadworthiness of vehicles used for the provision of school transport and highlighted the fact that the Chairperson of the Road Safety Authority (RSA) had written to Bus Éireann directly to bring attention to concerns relating to the roadworthiness of vehicles used for school transportation.

The Committee considers the safety of the children who avail of this scheme as paramount and calls for a full safety audit of all vehicles used to provide school transport to be carried out at the earliest possible date.

¹⁶ EU Directive 2014/24/EU Available at :<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32014L0024> Last accessed 30 October, 2018

12. Recommendations

- 1.** The Committee recommends that the Accounting Arrangement 1975, which provides for the provision of the School Transport Management Charge, be fully reviewed so that policy changes to the school transport scheme can be implemented where required.
- 2.** The Committee recommends that a review of the entire school transport scheme be undertaken following a review of the Accounting Arrangement 1975, taking into account the concerns raised by the Committee on Education and Skills in this report and in particular the concerns raised in relation to the provision of transport for children with special educational needs.
- 3.** The Committee recommends that a dedicated Oireachtas Liaison Officer be appointed from within the Communication Unit of Bus Éireann to deal with queries from Oireachtas Members relating to the school transport team to ensure efficient and effective communication.
- 4.** The Committee recommends that a full safety audit of all vehicles used to provide school transport is carried out at the earliest possible date.

13. Appendices

Appendix 1

Committee Membership

Deputies: Thomas Byrne (FF)
Kathleen Funchion (SF)
Catherine Martin (GP)
Tony McLoughlin (FG)
Hildegarde Naughton (FG)
Fiona O'Loughlin (FF) [Chair]
Jan O'Sullivan (Lab)

Senators: Maria Byrne (FG)
Robbie Gallagher (FF)
Paul Gavan (SF)
Lynn Ruane (Ind)

Notes:

1. Deputies nominated by the Dáil Committee of Selection and appointed by Order of the Dáil on 16 June 2016.
2. Senators nominated by the Seanad Committee of Selection and appointed by Order of the Seanad on 22 July 2016.
3. Deputies Carol Nolan, Ciaran Cannon, Joan Burton, and Jim Daly discharged and Deputies Kathleen Funchion, Tony McLoughlin, Jan O'Sullivan, and Josepha Madigan nominated to serve in their stead by the Twelfth Report of the Dáil Committee of Selection as agreed by Dáil Éireann on 3 October 2017.
4. Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh resigned with effect from 27 February 2018.
5. Senator Paul Gavan nominated by the Seanad Committee of Selection and appointed by Order of the Seanad on 8 March 2018.
6. Deputy Josepha Madigan discharged and Deputy Hildegarde Naughton nominated to serve in her stead by the Twentieth Report of the Dáil Committee of Selection as agreed by Dáil Éireann on 1 May 2018.

Appendix 2

Orders of Reference

(1) The Select Committee shall consider and report to the Dáil on—

(a) such aspects of the expenditure, administration and policy of a Government Department or Departments and associated public bodies as the Committee may select, and

(b) European Union matters within the remit of the relevant Department or Departments.

(2) The Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann for the purposes of the functions set out in this Standing Order, other than at paragraph (3), and to report thereon to both Houses of the Oireachtas.

(3) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), the Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall consider, in respect of the relevant Department or Departments, such—

(a) Bills,

(b) proposals contained in any motion, including any motion within the meaning of Standing Order 187,

(c) Estimates for Public Services, and

(d) other matters as shall be referred to the Select Committee by the Dáil, and

(e) Annual Output Statements including performance, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public monies, and

- (f) such Value for Money and Policy Reviews as the Select Committee may select.
- (4) The Joint Committee may consider the following matters in respect of the relevant Department or Departments and associated public bodies:
- (a) matters of policy and governance for which the Minister is officially responsible,
 - (b) public affairs administered by the Department,
 - (c) policy issues arising from Value for Money and Policy Reviews conducted or commissioned by the Department,
 - (d) Government policy and governance in respect of bodies under the aegis of the Department,
 - (e) policy and governance issues concerning bodies which are partly or wholly funded by the State or which are established or appointed by a member of the Government or the Oireachtas,
 - (f) the general scheme or draft heads of any Bill,
 - (g) any post-enactment report laid before either House or both Houses by a member of the Government or Minister of State on any Bill enacted by the Houses of the Oireachtas,
 - (h) statutory instruments, including those laid or laid in draft before either House or both Houses and those made under the European Communities Acts 1972 to 2009,
 - (i) strategy statements laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas pursuant to the Public Service Management Act 1997,

- (j) annual reports or annual reports and accounts, required by law, and laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas, of the Department or bodies referred to in subparagraphs (d) and (e) and the overall performance and operational results, statements of strategy and corporate plans of such bodies, and
 - (k) such other matters as may be referred to it by the Dáil from time to time.
- (5) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), the Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall consider, in respect of the relevant Department or Departments—
 - (a) EU draft legislative acts standing referred to the Select Committee under Standing Order 114, including the compliance of such acts with the principle of subsidiarity,
 - (b) other proposals for EU legislation and related policy issues, including programmes and guidelines prepared by the European Commission as a basis of possible legislative action,
 - (c) non-legislative documents published by any EU institution in relation to EU policy matters, and
 - (d) matters listed for consideration on the agenda for meetings of the relevant EU Council of Ministers and the outcome of such meetings.
- (6) The Chairman of the Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order, who shall be a member of Dáil Éireann, shall also be the Chairman of the Select Committee.
- (7) The following may attend meetings of the Select or Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order, for the purposes of the

functions set out in paragraph (5) and may take part in proceedings without having a right to vote or to move motions and amendments:

- (a) Members of the European Parliament elected from constituencies in Ireland, including Northern Ireland,
- (b) Members of the Irish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and
- (c) at the invitation of the Committee, other Members of the European Parliament.

b. Scope and Context of Activities of Committees (as derived from Standing Orders) [DSO 84; SSO 70]

- (1) The Joint Committee may only consider such matters, engage in such activities, exercise such powers and discharge such functions as are specifically authorised under its orders of reference and under Standing Orders.
- (2) Such matters, activities, powers and functions shall be relevant to, and shall arise only in the context of, the preparation of a report to the Dáil and/or Seanad.
- (3) The Joint Committee shall not consider any matter which is being considered, or of which notice has been given of a proposal to consider, by the Committee of Public Accounts pursuant to Standing Order 186 and/or the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993.
- (4) The Joint Committee shall refrain from inquiring into in public session or publishing confidential information regarding any matter if so requested, for stated reasons given in writing, by—

a) a member of the Government or a Minister of State,

b) the principal office-holder of a body under the aegis of a Department or which is partly or wholly funded by the State or established or appointed by a member of the Government or by the Oireachtas:

Provided that the Chairman may appeal any such request made to the Ceann Comhairle / Cathaoirleach whose decision shall be final.

(5) It shall be an instruction to all Select Committees to which Bills are referred that they shall ensure that not more than two Select Committees shall meet to consider a Bill on any given day, unless the Dáil, after due notice given by the Chairman of the Select Committee, waives this instruction on motion made by the Taoiseach pursuant to Dáil Standing Order 28. The Chairmen of Select Committees shall have responsibility for compliance with this instruction.

Appendix 3

List of Stakeholders

Department of Education and Skills

Bus Éireann

National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)

National Parents' Council Primary

Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland

Appendix 4

Submissions by Stakeholders

Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland

Submission by the

Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland

On

“The School Transport Programme”

July 2017

Introduction

Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland

The Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to make a Submission on this issue.

The Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland (CTTC) is the representative body for Ireland's coach touring companies and Ireland's private bus operators. The CTTC's members are experts in all types of coach hire and transport solutions, including: airport transfers, day tours, extended touring, incentive travel, golf tours, school transport and provision of scheduled services. In addition to specialising in long distance scheduled services, many of CTTC's members also operate licensed bus services in town and cities throughout Ireland.

All CTTC members are family owned companies, with a combined fleet of over 1,500 coaches, employing over 3,000 people directly. The CTTC comments and makes representations regularly on matters of concern to its members such as public transport, school transport, the coach tourism sector and the transport industry generally. It is our opinion that every school going student has the right to the provision of School Transport.

Overview

CTTC believe that a cost effective and efficient School Transport Programme that is fit for purpose and ensures value for money is essential to provide transport for the 113,000 school-going students in a safe and punctual manner to the school network.

Currently 89% of services under the School Transport Programme are sub-contracted out by Bus Éireann to private operators. Bus Éireann currently receive in excess of €150 million to administer the programme, despite only providing 11% of their own fleet to deliver same. Since the review of the tendering process in 2011 significant savings have accrued, however, there is little evidence of these savings being passed to the state, nor is it reflected in any reduction of the state subsidy to administer the programme.

Recommendations

1. CTTC believe that the current tendering process is fundamentally flawed, as the weighting criteria is weighted more heavily in favour of price than the vehicle quality, thus allowing older vehicles to win contracts, thereby reducing quality standards.
2. The CTTC recommends a review of the interpretation of the tendering criteria as it appears there is no uniformity in the marking of same by Bus Éireann staff from region to region.
3. Additional cost is incurred in the programme, as it would appear Bus Éireann are of the opinion that the current national CVRT test is not fit for purpose and insist on an independent test carried out under sub-contract with an institution that is a representative body. CTTC recommends that the CVRT standard should be revised to satisfy the standards required by Bus Éireann under the School Transport Programme.
4. The present pricing structure is unsustainable as private operators who are engaged to complete the vast majority of the services will not have the funding to replace fleet in the future.
5. There is an urgent requirement for a review of the costing methodology in relation to apportionment of direct and indirect costs attributed to the programme to ensure clear financial transparency.
6. It is the duty of the State to provide specialised transport to facilitate students with special needs, however, there is currently no state funding available to private operators, who provide the majority of these services, to upgrade their fleets to meet this demand.
7. In view of the fact that the National Transport Authority was set up in 2009 to administer public transport in this country, it is our view that this programme should be overseen by that organisation.

Conclusion

The Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland, in light of the above and the significant amount of state subvention given to this programme, recommend that the School Transport Programme should be the subject of an open procurement process to ensure it is fit for purpose, value for money and is open and transparent.

Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Submission on the Special Education transport System

National Council for Special Education

6th July 2017

Introduction

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) welcomes the opportunity to submit a report on matters related to the operation of the School Transport System. This submission focuses on the role of the NCSE in the context of the scheme and issues arising.

The NCSE has a national network of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) who work with schools and parents in their geographical area to provide advice and resources to schools in relation to students who have special educational needs. Part of this role involves SENOs processing applications for special school transport arrangements for students who are unable, for a variety of reasons, to avail of the school bus service arrangements provided under the general school transport scheme.

School Transport for Students with Special Educational Needs

The majority of students with special educational needs are educated in the mainstream setting and do not need special transport arrangements.

However, some students attending mainstream schools may have particular difficulties arising from their disabilities which mean that they cannot use the school bus provided under the general school transport scheme. For example, they may need a wheelchair accessible bus. Other students may attend a special class in a mainstream school or special school. Not all mainstream schools have special classes and therefore the special class or special school can be some distance from the student's home and not on the route of the local school bus. Approximately 15,000 students attend special schools or a special class in a mainstream school.

In such situations, the Department's scheme allows for special school transport arrangements to be put in place. Under the terms of the scheme, transport is provided to the nearest school that is, or can be, resourced to meet the special educational needs of the student concerned.

The role of the NCSE in such cases is to confirm to the DES that the school in question is the nearest such school.

Applications Process

Schools must have parental or guardian consent before applying for special school transport arrangements for an enrolling or enrolled student. Schools then send an application for school transport to their SENO.

On average, the NCSE receives approximately 3,500 applications for transport annually from schools. Each application is accompanied by the relevant professional reports.

The SENO examines the application to establish if the school is the nearest school that is, or could be, resourced to meet the student's needs. In doing so, SENOs check that:

- The student has a diagnosed disability in accordance with DES criteria
- The professional report recommends that a special class/special school setting is required or

- The student's needs are such that they cannot avail of the general school transport arrangements.

Sometimes, a school may consider that a student's needs are so complex and they cannot avail of even the special school bus. For example, they may need to be transported by taxi. In such circumstances, the school would have to detail the reasons for exceptionality and these reasons would need to be supported by a professional report.

SENOs also consider applications from school for an escort on school transport. In such situations, schools have to make a case for such a provision e.g. significant medical or behavioural reasons and these applications would have to be supported by a professional report confirming the need.

The SENO will report their findings on these matters to the DES who then make a formal decision on the application for transport and inform the school.

The NCSE does not generally have a role in the appeals process put in place by the DES but our SENOs can be consulted if necessary in this regard.

The scheme generally works well and, generally, issues only arise where the parents are seeking to enrol their child in a school which is not the nearest school that is, or can be, resourced to meet the needs of the child. In such circumstances, the SENO has no discretion. Special transport arrangements can only be put in place for the nearer school.

NCSE Policy Advice on Matters Relating to School Transport

The NCSE has a role in providing policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills in relation to the education of students with special educational needs.

The role of the school transport service has been considered briefly in this context. NCSE acknowledges the significant effort, commitment and investment by the Department of Education and Skills in providing special transport arrangements. There is no doubt that these arrangements are costly but without these special arrangements, many students with special needs would be unable to attend school. We have concluded that, generally, the special transport scheme works well and parents appreciate the service.

However in our policy advice to the Minister on Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools, the NCSE recognised that parents encounter difficulties where they choose to send their child to a special school, which is further away from the nearest school, which is or can be resourced to meet their child's special educational needs. This may be because therapy supports are available there and not in the nearer school or class. Another concern can be where bus drivers, bus escorts or other school staff have not received autism awareness training. As a result, there may not be a full understanding of how even the most innocuous interaction can cause distress to some students with autism.

A further concern occasionally arises with transport between school and respite homes. Respite is a much cherished and sought-after service and families are anxious to avail of it whenever it is available. It has been brought to the NCSE's attention that some students are not transported from their respite care centre to and from school. In our view, school is school, home is home and the respite care centre is de facto the child's home while s/he stays there. The purpose of respite care is

to give parents and families a well needed break from the 24-hour, 7-day a week care that some children with special needs require. Some parents have advised us of the considerable practical difficulties occasionally encountered when their child is not transported to and from the respite care centre. For example, the school bus collects and drops the child to school in the morning but the parent has to collect the child after school and bring them to respite care. They need to collect the child the following morning from respite and bring him/her to school. The NCSE does not wish to overstate this difficulty. Sometimes, respite centres provide transport if this is available to them. In many other situations, we have been advised that a local solution is found. However, where parents have to collect the child, the full value of respite is diminished as parents do not in fact get the full break they are due. These difficulties can be further compounded for parents when there is a gap between the school's starting/finishing times and respite care cover.

Current DES policy is that where possible, transport to respite is facilitated on school transport services with due regard to student safety, where there is no deviation from an existing route, where there is a regular pattern to respite care and where no additional cost to the State is involved. Except under these circumstances, the DES considers it is not possible to provide tailored services to and from respite care.

The NCSE considers that respite breaks are vital for parents, carers and families. Reliable arrangements should be put in place to transport the student between the respite centre and school. Such arrangements should be consistently available wherever a child is in respite.

The NCSE policy advice paper no.5, *'Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder'* made the following recommendations:

- School personnel working with students with ASD, including bus escorts, drivers and caretakers should receive training to promote and develop a common basic understanding of ASD and how it may affect students.
- The Departments of Health and Education & Skills should jointly consider and put in place appropriate practical arrangements to enable students with complex special educational needs, including ASD to be transported
 - To and from respite care settings to school, on the same basis they are transported from their homes; and
 - Pending full roll-out of the progressing disabilities policy – to alternative special schools and classes where the HSE is unable to provide necessary therapy supports for a student in his/her local school.

13th September 2018

Safety of Bus Éireann contracted school buses

Dear Deputy,

I am contacting you in relation to recent publicity regarding school buses and Road Safety Authority (RSA) roadside safety inspections. The recent publicity states that just over half of the buses inspected by the RSA in the past year failed roadside safety checks.

It should be noted the figures do not exclusively pertain to operators contracted on the School Transport Scheme. Many buses included in the figures were operating on privately engaged school services or other private hire work at the time of inspection. The RSA have also acknowledged that the inspections were targeted at operators of known concern and the published figures reflect this.

In light of the publicity, I am writing to reassure you that Bus Éireann never compromise on safety and that we have requirements and checks in place to ensure our contractors maintain a high level of safety at all times. The safe transport of school children is absolutely paramount to Bus Éireann. Please see some details below re this:

The School Transport Scheme

The scheme supports transport to and from school for children throughout the country who reside remote from their nearest school. Bus Éireann operates the schemes on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills with a fleet of over 4,500 vehicles. There were over 40 million school transport journeys in 2017. Some 90% of these vehicles are owned by independent contractors. There are numerous other private operators who have vehicles used as school buses in a private capacity, which are not connected to the Scheme we administer, and are outside the Scheme's remit.

Vehicle roadworthiness

In order to be considered roadworthy a bus must pass an annual Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness Test (CVRT), conducted under the auspices of the Road Safety Authority (RSA) at approved test centres around the country. Bus Éireann school transport providers are contractually obliged to ensure that their vehicle has an up to date roadworthiness certificate issued by an RSA accredited test centre when a contract is signed. The contractor is obliged to keep their roadworthiness certificate current and up to date at all times and provide Bus Éireann with evidence of this.

All school buses in service - procured by Bus Éireann to provide services under the School Transport Scheme - are subject to roadside inspections, must have current roadworthiness certification at the time of inspection.

Agreements with contracted providers

A detailed contract is put in place for all contracted services – which includes numerous safety-related items. There is a strict process in place before any vehicle or driver is added to the approved list for

www.buseireann.ie

provision of services under the School Transport Scheme. Required documentation is checked and copies are held by Bus Éireann offices. This documentation includes insurance and insurance indemnity, valid Road Passenger Transport Operator Licence (with required vehicles added), valid Certificate of Roadworthiness (CRW), appropriate valid Public Service Vehicle licence (large/small) (PSV) and evidence of Tax Clearance.

Bus Éireann contracts also include a stipulation that requires all contractors to have planned maintenance programmes, with checking intervals of not more than six weeks. Every Contractor is also responsible as an individual bus operator, licensed by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, to ensure they comply with legislation in all respects.

Additional vehicle checks

In addition to statutory requirements, Bus Éireann arranges for additional sample auditing of contractors vehicles operating under the Scheme, throughout the year. These additional quality assurance checks are carried out by independent vehicle inspection auditors on our behalf, on both a targeted and random basis. Almost one in five buses contracted to the School Transport Scheme are audited under these quality assurance checks, which are designed to monitor the condition and roadworthiness status of each vehicle checked.

Any vehicles that fall short of the standards required during the audits are immediately withdrawn from further service until all identified issues are rectified by the contractor. If contractors are found not to have carried out the required improvements to their fleet and systems, they face penalties up to and including termination of contract.

Drivers

Drivers have a key role to play in the safe delivery of services under the Scheme. Contractor's drivers must be medically checked by a qualified doctor before being added to the list of approved drivers under the Scheme. The assessment is required to be based on the latest RSA 'Medical Fitness to Drive' guidelines and is checked by Bus Éireann and records are maintained. All drivers are also Garda vetted when first added to the approved list of drivers and are then re-vetted at five yearly intervals if still on the approved panel. A new process of e-vetting has been successfully introduced in 2018.

Supervision of services in local areas

Our team of dedicated mobile School Transport Supervisors ensure the safe and effective delivery of services and respond to any complaints made by schools, parents, children or other stakeholders. In the rare occurrence of any incidents or emergencies, our Supervisors also respond promptly to co-ordinate the appropriate required action. They also carry out unannounced inspections on every School Transport service. This inspection includes a check on tickets to ensure that all those on board have valid tickets, but also includes a check on the driver and a visual check on key vehicle safety items. Immediate action is taken following detection of non-compliance and follow-up checks are subsequently carried out. Our Supervisors also carry out checks on new school transport routes and stops, and also assess pick-up points from a safety point of view. We do as much as practicable to reduce the risk to students, drivers, escorts and other road users.

Students and their parents/guardians

Bus Éireann recognises the important role that parents and guardians play in a child's education and in the safe transport of the child to and from school. An advice booklet with important safety information is circulated at the start of each school term along with the term ticket. Our website is updated to offer advice on student safety when using transport. Particular emphasis is placed on getting the child safely to and from the pick-up point.

Bus Éireann promotes an environment where children are welcomed, respected, cared for and protected from harm. Our staff, contractors and their employees understand that they have a duty and responsibility to safeguard children and comply with company guidelines and procedures. Our information booklets and website guidance focus on encouraging good student behaviour, careful boarding/alighting, seat belt wearing, stowing of school bags etc.

Safety First

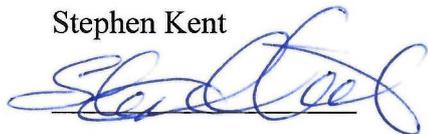
Safety is our number one priority. We will always work with the Department of Education and Skills, RSA, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, HSA and other organisations to improve the safety standards across all of the national public service vehicle fleet and this collaboration continues on an ongoing basis. We also have the wider responsibility for the overall safe operation of the Scheme and protection of children when travelling. We continually add new safety measures and safety awareness initiatives for the school transport sector, the most recent of which includes the roll-out of a mandatory maintenance questionnaire for current and prospective contract holders to augment and align contractor maintenance practices with RSA guidelines and Bus Éireann contract requirements.

Our Child Protection Policy and Guidelines are consistent with the principles set out in "Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children" and are in line with best practice in this area. We also have a detailed Bullying and Harassment policy covering services provided under the Scheme.

If you have any queries or concerns regarding any of the above please feel to contact me at ceo@buseireann.ie

Kind regards,

Stephen Kent



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Bus Éireann

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Kind regards,

Stephen Kent



Acting Chief Executive
Bus Éireann

Joint Oireachtas Questions and Issues Raised

25th September 2018

Deputy Thomas Byrne (FF) Meath East

Q. Why was notification for SEN transport only sanctioned/approved for a family on 13 September?

A. We are unable to investigate further without having the details of the pupil involved. Due to the specialist nature of Special Needs, transport applications are accepted all year around by the Department and transport is sanctioned taking into account the individual requirements of the child involved.

Q. Parents were told by staff on a few occasions that staff were seconded for the Papal Visit – is that true?

A. Please note we did have some School Transport Service Supervisors in the East Region worked on Sunday 26th August to assist RP during the Papal Visit. This did not impact on school transport services and they also dealt with any phone calls or queries received from Contractors on this date relating to school transport matters.

Deputy Catherine Martin (Greens) Dublin Rathdown

Q. Her office called and were on hold for an average 20 mins, so would have to call central services and did not get a response so called back two days later and call rang out 15 times

A. Bus Éireann handled in excess of 35,000 calls over the summer period by our dedicated call centre. The last two weeks in August were particularly busy and all efforts were made to deal with the volume of calls including our full time call centre handling up to 1,200 calls a day.

We regret any inconvenience caused during this period. We did email all TD and Senators on the 13th July with information fact sheets and dedicated mobile numbers for our five Regional School Transport Managers and Chief School Officer. We will review the area of customer service again taking into account this peak period as part of our planning for the next school year.

Q. Local Gaelscoil eligible passengers were told they were not getting a bus again this year – Other Gaelscoil got a bus without effort or applying?

A. *The Schools referred to are Gaelscoil Thaobh na Coille and Gael Scoil Shliabh Rua and information relating to both is as follows:*

- Applications were received from parents of Galescoil Shliabh Rua Stepside and two services were sanctioned to commence in September 2017.
 - 2 Eligible applications received 2015/16
 - 8 Eligible applications received 2016/2017
 - 30* Eligible applications received 2017/2018 – at different dates. Two services introduced in Sept 17. (*10 eligible students required for a service to commence)
- Applications were received from parents of Gaelscoil Thaobh na Coille and a service was established early September 2018.
 - 2015/16 – no applications received
 - 2016/2017 – 18 applications all concessionary
 - 2017/2018 – 11 eligible applications received – transport sanctioned in February 2018 by the Department of Transport for September 2018. Service commenced early September.

Q. The School in Dundrum moved, so pupils automatically did not retain place on bus. Why is this so?

- A. Ballinteer ETNS moved to Churchtown
- 2015/2016 school year - no applications
 - 2016/2017 school year - 2 applications that were both concessionary
 - 2017/2018 school year - 33 applications with 4 eligible and 29 Concessionary
 - 2018/2019 school year - 102 applications which are all concessionary. The shortest traversable route includes pedestrian walk ways.

Q. A Spreadsheet was sent to Bus Éireann from DoES – out of 100, 19 were valid but only 9 had applied. All got confirmation of application and were denied – what is going on?

- Ballinteer ET NS – as above
 - Bus Éireann received the spreadsheet and contacted the families to apply on-line
 - All applications are sent confirmation of application, an automatic process
 - Applications were re-assessed due to change of location which also takes into account pedestrian walk ways, shortest traversable route.
 - *Should the Deputy require any further clarification on the above query ,Siobhan Griffin Regional School Transport Manager East may able to provide further assistance Tel: (087) 9659142*

Q. What is being done to improve for next year?

- A. Bus Éireann will be undertaking a full review of the current school year's transport operations in conjunction with the Department of Education and Skills. Key issues that need to be addressed - such as customer service and planning/resourcing for peak periods in relation to the tight timelines for the delivery of Mainstream/SEN transport - will be assessed with a view to augmenting existing resources or systems to improve these.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion (SF) Carlow/Kilkenny

Q. Issues in Kilkenny area about 30 kids with no way of getting to school. Parents are having to take leave to get their kids to school.

A. Our Regional School Manager, Ken Robinson has requested that the office supply him with further details of the schools and children involved and he will address the query accordingly

Q. Parents are seeing the spaces on the buses as they pass - Why is this so?

A. On occasion the pupils may not use the service e.g. a morning or an evening, however the number of tickets issued for a vehicle will always correspond to the capacity of the vehicle itself.

Q. No support – no human contact at the end of a phone?

A. This year, Bus Éireann in conjunction with DoES set up a full programme of communications to improve our customer service provision. This included:

- A dedicated call centre to assist parents with queries
- An email was sent to all TD and Senators with an information circular on the scheme and addressing FAQs – this also included mobile numbers for all Regional School Transport Managers & the Chief Schools Officer
- The dedicated email for Political Representatives was in place again this year, and details circulated accordingly [reps@buseireann.ie] - it is monitored on a daily basis
- Four email reminders were sent out to all applicants for school transport reminding them of the closing date for payments – a fifth email was sent to those eligible applicants who had not paid by the closing date
- Social media channels and the website were also used this year to provide additional reminders

Senator Robbie Gallagher (FF) Monaghan

Q. Three buses lifting kids going to school and spaces on the bus passing kids on the side of the road. Please clarify?

A. This query refers to Latton NS. Whilst it may appear there is room available on the service, Bus Éireann is aware that not all pupils travel on a regular basis, in particular over the first number of weeks at the start of the school year. The number of tickets issued can only correspond with the capacity of the vehicle operating the route
There are three buses operating to Latton NS (2 x Large & 1 x Medium). Pupils on the medium bus are concessionary and a number of them lost out due to random selection.

Following a check of the route, the Inspector had to refuse concessionary pupils who lost out on the random selection and who had presented for travel. Parents were with their children at the time when they were advised they did not have seats allocated to them.

Senator Maria Byrne (FG) Limerick

Q. With a difference of 500m distance between GPO in Limerick and Hospital, why are children declined by Bus Éireann. Kids can't get into nearest school so how can they get the bus?

A. Pupils from Caherconlish and Ballyneety reside closer to Limerick Post Primary Centre and are therefore deemed concessionary to Hospital Post Primary under the terms of the Scheme. Children who are not eligible for transport may avail of transport on a **concessionary** basis provided there are spare seats on the service and they pay the annual charge. Due to the amount of concessionary pupils offering for this school, a number of families cannot be accommodated on the services from Caherconlish and Ballyneety area to Hospital for this current school year.

Pupils for Limerick Post Primary Centre apply through a common application system where they will receive a place in one of listed Limerick schools.

Paul Gavan (SF) Limerick

Q. Does BÉ believe the system needs to be reviewed?

A. Bus Éireann administers the scheme on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills. Any policy matters relating to the scheme itself is within the remit of the Department.

R. Accident in Caherconlish – one child did not get on bus and another (involved in accident) was asked to get on at a point bus that an accident happened?

A. Pupils from Caherconlish and Ballyneety reside closer to Limerick Post Primary Centre therefore are deemed concessionary to Hospital Post Primary under the terms of the Scheme. Children who are not eligible for transport may avail of transport on a **concessionary** basis provided there are spare seats on the service and they pay the annual charge. Due to the amount of concessionary pupils offering for this school a number of families cannot be accommodated on the services from Caherconlish and Ballyneety area to Hospital for this school year.

Where possible Bus Eireann does try and facilitate families with access to alternative service where capacity may exist. In offering such a service, Bus Éireann must ensure the safest possible pick up point is designated for students. It is a matter for the individual families if they wish to avail of such options. The safest pick up point is in the vicinity of the accident, but safety is always the priority.

Declan Breathnach (FF) Louth

Q. Is it a demand led scheme?

- A. All pupils who are eligible for transport and who apply and pay on time will be facilitated with places on a school transport services.

Q. Did introduction of TY throw out the scheme?

- A. Families of pupils who complete the transition year are requested to update their application.

Q. It has to be possible to plan in advance – is there a planning issue?

- A. Bus Éireann and the Department of Education and Skills review the planning for the new school year on a continuous basis. The deadline for receipt of payments for the new school year was July 27th last. It is a tight timeline to ensure eligible and concessionary pupils are assigned to routes, and services ready to commence for August 28th. It is critical that payments deadlines are met to allow service to be arranged in a timely fashion, and there was a significant communications campaign put in place this year in this regard.

Senator Lynn Ruane

Q. Who is responsible for Garda vetting and why does it take so long?

- A. Bus Éireann is responsible for ensuring all drivers operating services as part of the School Transport Scheme have been vetted. Due to the fact that a new on-line system for vetting has been introduced, this has seen improvements in the time involved in the overall process.

Q. Do schools do the vetting for escorts?

- A. Yes

Q. What provisions are in place for this?

- A. This is the responsibility of the individual schools

Q. Is there a multi-year admission if you are eligible on SEN scheme?

- A. Yes

Q. What is the waiting time for the 450 on the list currently?

- A. These are being addressed as soon as practicable and in line with the needs of each child.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon (FF) Sligo-Leitrim

- Q. Dangerous pick up point on N17 Tubbercurry to Ballinacarrow – yellow lines & kids walking on grass verge? Can the bus not turn safely in the area that crosses into the other jurisdiction, and not 1.5km of a turn as is now?**

- A. Two eligible pupils and three concessionary pupils travel along the referred stretch of road to meet the school bus to St. Attracta's Post Primary school at the Aurivo store in Achonry.

Our local School Transport Inspector has advised that the current pick up point is as safe as other pick up points we use throughout the county. This pick up point is off the main N17 at the side of the Aurivo store. The two eligible pupils have to travel no more than 1 km to the pickup point. Our Inspector cannot confirm that any child is walking along this road, as he has not seen this happening.

The suggested pick up point at the 'Woodside Inn' is in the Ballymote Post Primary School area and is now home to one of the concessionary pupils travelling to St Attracta's PP. We cannot extend the bus into another school area to give concessionary pupils a home pick up.

Pupils living off a main route are expected to get to -or be brought to - a convenient pick up point on the main route. The routes are planned so that, as far as possible, no eligible pupil will have more than 3.2km to travel to a pick up point. The service is not designed to provide a door-to-door service. The only pupils provided with a door-to-door service are pupils with special educational needs.

The guidelines of the School Transport Scheme outline that parents/guardians are responsible for ensuring that pupils are brought safely to - and collected from - pick up and set down points, and they should take whatever safety precautions are necessary in doing so.

Deputy Robert Troy (FF) Longford-Westmeath

- Outstanding questions to be answered other than those answered on the day is as follows:

Q. Where there is ample space on a vehicle could students undertaking a PLC use it?

A. The scheme is designed to provide children who are eligible for transport with access to and from their nearest Primary and Post- Primary centres, and not any other types of students.

Deputy James Brown (FF) Wexford

Q. Do you report dangerous or defective vehicles to the Gardaí?

A. Overall road safety is a matter for the Road Safety Authority

If any vehicle operating school transport services is found to have a major defect - following an independent inspection by the FTA (Freight Transport Association), who oversee random and targeted checks for Bus Éireann - is stood down from operating school transport services with immediate effect. This vehicle is not permitted to go back into service until it has been

re-inspected and approved for service by the FTA. On some occasions a contract may be terminated if improvements are not made, following random safety inspections.

Deputy Danny Healy Rae (Ind) Kerry

Q. What has happened to the commitment that if a school closed down the kids there would continue to be transported – this is not happening in a local parish school?

A. This question has been referred to the Department of Education and Skills.

Deputy Micheal Collins (Ind) Cork Southwest

Q. If a route was re-organised it could be sorted (for a concessionary) – but nine times out of ten an inspector is shut down if they try to change it. Why is this not allowed to happen?

A. Bus Éireann is obliged to comply with all guidelines as set down by the Department of Education and Skills when operating school transport services.

Q. Parents have two on a bus, the third won't be taken – lots of instances in west Cork. Why is this so?

A. The Regional School Transport Manager Ken Robinson has requested that more information is provided on individual cases and he will respond directly on them. Changes were made to the School Transport Scheme in 2011/12 which mean different criteria may apply in families.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin (FF) Kildare South, Chair of JOC Committee

Q. Would it be better for Bus Éireann to be in charge of the scheme in its entirety?

A. This was addressed on the day

Q. Do drivers get a route map? Should they not do a dummy run the week beforehand?

A. A number of contractors will draw the route on their own maps and contractors are advised to do a trial run prior to commencing the route. This is also one of their obligations as part of the Procurement Process.

Q. Is 'good fluency of language and communications' part of the criteria for a driver?

A. Yes. This is part of the contract.

Q. Is the travel time of SEN routes reviewed?

A. Yes - routes can be reviewed by the School Transport Supervisor where a concern may be raised. Travel time in many instances is determined by the distance from where the pupil resides to the location of the school they are attending.

Q. I have written about a case – Conor – no wheelchair accessible transport available for him and his mother is doing 50km round trips for last three weeks. Understand the need for an accessible vehicle may not have been communicated by Dept. Please clarify the status?

A. Whilst we were transporting Conor for a number of years to one school, a new application was received for a different school and it was deemed that he did not require a wheelchair. Non-wheelchair transport was first arranged but was not suitable for his needs.

The contractor now assigned to the route is adapting the vehicle for wheelchair use and is expected to have this completed over the next week. The local school transport office and the contractor have both been in touch with the family to keep them updated on progress. We regret any upset caused to Conor and his family as a result of this issue.