

Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Tuesday 25th September 2018

Opening Statement

The School Transport scheme is an administrative scheme, established in 1968.

It was created to facilitate access to primary and post-primary education for those children, who because of where they reside, might otherwise have difficulty in attending school regularly.

School transport is a significant national operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills.

During the 2017/18 school over 117,000 children, including over 12,000 children with special educational needs were transported daily to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country. This involved over 4,500 vehicles covering over 100 million kilometres. Growth in the numbers of children with special educational needs seeking school transport is a notable development in recent years.

In 2017, the total cost of providing school transport amounted to almost €190 million. This includes direct transport services, and grant payments. It also includes funding schools for the employment of escorts to accompany children with special educational needs whose care and safety needs require this support.

Eligibility Criteria

The purpose of the Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school. The key eligibility criteria for school transport are attendance at the nearest school subject to also meeting the requisite distance criteria (i.e. 3.2 kilometres for primary children and 4.8 kilometres for post primary children).

Families of eligible children living in areas where it is uneconomic to provide a transport service are eligible for the remote area grant towards the cost of making private transport arrangements.

A number of non-eligible children are also transported in those circumstances where bus places are available after all eligible children are catered for. This transport is provided in the interests of maximising the utilisation of the existing fleet and in providing a service to families where the capacity exists to do so. Since the number of spare places available is dependent on the number of eligible children requiring transport, there can be no guarantee from year to year of a place for those who do not meet the eligibility criteria.

Changes to the Mainstream School Transport Scheme were announced in Budget 2011. These were based on the recommendations in a comprehensive 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.

Cognisant of the fact that an immediate application of the changes would result in withdrawal of service to a significant number of children, a number of ministerially approved policy measures were put in place to mitigate the effect on children for the duration of their school cycle.

The effect of these measures has been to facilitate significant numbers of ineligible children availing of school transport over the past number of years.

The provision of such transport comes at a cost as it means we have not restructured the fleet to more optimally cater for eligible children.

Special Education Needs Scheme (SEN) – Background and Criteria

The purpose of the Department's School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children with special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability. In general, such 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 Department of Education and Skills' criteria.

Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs). Decisions regarding transport eligibility are based on the prevailing circumstances at the time of first enrolment.

The Department and Bus Éireann are very conscious of the specialised nature of transport provision for children with special educational needs. This is reflected in the standard of service provided and by Bus Éireann, factoring the individual requirements of the children concerned into the planning of these services which generally operate on a door-to-door basis.

Eligible children are exempt from school transport charges.

A Special Transport Grant (STG) towards the cost of private transport arrangements may be provided in certain situations such as where Bus Éireann is not in a position to provide a transport service; a child's age, behavioural difficulties or medical needs are such as to make the provision of a transport service impracticable; or an escort is considered necessary and the provision of such support is not feasible.

Special Education Needs Scheme – Statistics / Costs

As indicated earlier, the scheme has grown significantly in recent years. The number of children availing of the special education needs scheme has increased by 3,512 from 9,239 children in 2013/14 to 12,751 in 2017/18 and the overall costs of the scheme including grants, payments to contractors and funding in respect of school transport escorts has risen by over €27 million from €64.02m to over €91.7 million over the same period.

Conclusion

At a current cost of €190 million, School Transport represents a significant expenditure of taxpayers' money. The scheme is under financial pressure from increasing demographics at primary and post primary level and from the increase in the numbers of children with special educational needs being transported.

As reflected in the 2011 Value for Money review and consequent 2012 rule changes, current policy is to move to a more optimal structure of the transport fleet in order to deliver value for money, while ensuring that demographic pressures among the growing cohort of eligible children is catered for. The policy and the available exchequer allocation does not support the provision of additional transport services for ineligible children.

At an operational level, the Department is currently engaged with Bus Éireann in reviewing existing route provision to ensure that eligible children are as well served as possible in regard to their transport needs.

Similarly, the Department is engaged with Bus Éireann in looking at how the entire process of ticketing and seat allocation can be streamlined, such that parents and children know on a timely basis as to the availability of places on school transport.