

Opening Statement by Bus Éireann to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills – Sept 25th 2018

Introduction

My name is Stephen Kent and I am the Acting Chief Executive of Bus Éireann. With me today is my colleague Miriam Flynn, who is our Chief Schools Officer. We are here at the invitation of the committee to address matters relating to the operation of the School Transport Scheme, to provide an overview of our customer service and in addition to provide information specifically related to the provision of our service to children with special needs.

Background

Bus Éireann administer the School Transport Scheme on behalf of the Department of Education & Skills, in accordance with the schemes' rules & guidelines, and subject to the policy and instruction of the Department. We do not exercise discretion in relation to the policy and all applications are simply dealt with in accordance with the rules and guidelines. It is important to note at the outset, that the delivery of our operation can be highly complex and that the scheme is administered by Bus Éireann on a cost recovery basis only.

We provide the State with an efficient, effective, safe and reliable School Transport Scheme that last year carried almost 117,000 school children every day of the school term on 4,500 vehicles, travelling over 6,500 routes that serve 3,000 schools. While the delivery of the School Transport Scheme is complex, its purpose is simple in terms of supporting access to education. The scheme is one of the largest of its kind in Europe.

More than 40 million individual journeys are made by school children under the scheme annually. It is a classic Public-Private Partnership where more than 90% of the vehicles used every school day are provided by private operators on a network planned and coordinated by Bus Éireann in compliance with rules and guidelines set by the Department of Education and Skills.

Management of the Operation

The operation of a safe school transport service, provided in an efficient and effective manner, is the highest priority for Bus Éireann in its management of the School Transport Scheme. In respect of ensuring the highest standards of safety, we always work with the relevant stakeholders such as the RSA and HSA and other organisations to improve the safety standards across all of the national public service vehicle fleet, and apply very strict compliance criteria to those contractors who operate on our behalf.

Bus Éireann operates three separate schemes on behalf of the Department, each with their own distinct criteria, under the umbrella of the national School Transport Scheme. These are the Primary School Transport Scheme, the Post Primary School Transport Scheme, and the School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs arising from a Diagnosed Disability.

Over the past decade in particular the scheme has expanded dramatically in terms of vehicle numbers as the amount of services provided under the scheme increased, from 1,700 contractor

vehicles in 1998 to almost 4,500 now. This year, in the region of 300 new services are expected to be introduced by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, the vast majority of these implemented to cater for children with special educational needs. All newly sanctioned services are opened to public tender by Bus Éireann. In this respect, procurement of contractors can sometimes prove difficult in certain catchment areas, primarily as the economy recovers and alternative employment is made available and this factor has impacted our ability to deliver a very small number of services on time this year.

Bus Éireann manages the schemes impartially and in a uniform fashion nationally on behalf of the Department, and we do not have unilateral discretion to make local decisions that may be inconsistent with national policy. The eligibility criteria that must be satisfied by students who wish to avail of the service is set out under the guidelines of the scheme and implemented accordingly by Bus Éireann as required by the Department.

A key focus of recent media attention has been in relation to pupils who were ineligible not being accommodated on a service. The rules state that pupils who are eligible for school transport and who have completed the application process on time must be and are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. We have confirmed that there is no shortage of places for these eligible children, who have completed the application process and paid on time.

Children who are not eligible for school transport, but who completed the application process on time, are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats have been referred to as concessionary seats and where the number of these applications for school transport exceeds the number of spare seats available, tickets are allocated using a random selection process. Under the terms of the scheme, the availability of transport for children who are not eligible varies from year to year, but can only be based on the capacity of the buses operating on all of the various routes. Capacity requirements are calculated on the number of eligible children who qualify for the service, and is not expanded for concessionaries - as this is not the scheme's remit.

Because we must always prioritise the provision of places for eligible children, there can be an excess of demand over supply for non-eligible places. It is worth noting however, that over 27,500 tickets of this kind have already been issued this year.

Special Needs Requirements

In relation to special needs requirements, the principle of this scheme is applied not only where children in wheelchairs are concerned but to the transport needs of children attending the wide range of special schools and classes we serve in conjunction with the Department of Education & Skills. We currently utilise over 2,500 vehicles every day to provide services for 12,700 children with special educational needs, the vast majority of which provide services on a door-to-door basis. This year, we have received almost 2,800 new SEN applications/requests for amendments to services for this school year and this increase has certainly proved challenging in certain instances.

There is a significant amount of work involved in many new Special Needs applications as the route has to be newly established, tendered out, an award made - and then an escort must be provided,

in some cases, by the school. Our staff are hugely committed to ensuring that any sanctioned service is provided as quickly as possible but at times it can be a challenge to organise the combined availability of a suitable vehicle, a suitable driver and an escort who must meet the vetting criteria, for a specific case in a specific location. I want to assure the committee however, that we persist on this front and our dedicated staff always strive to ensure that the needs of every child who is sanctioned by the Department of Education are met, as soon as practicably possible.

Customer Service Provision

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

Conclusion

We have been operating this scheme and carrying the children of the State for over 50 years now and we are passionately committed to providing this service for many years to come. We welcome the expansion of the SEN scheme in recent years but must also continue to strategically refine our own resources, processes, procedures and technology supports to ensure we meet the growing needs of the Scheme, in close liaison with the Department of Education and Skills.

I want to thank all the members for the opportunity to address this committee and we are happy to deal with any questions that you now may have.