

Joint Oireachtas Committee
School Transport Issues
21 September 2022
Opening Statement by Norma Foley TD, Minister for Education

I thank the Chairman and Committee for the invitation to appear before it. To assist me in the discussion, I am joined by officials from my Department Aoife Conduit, Assistant Secretary General, and Shirley Kearney Principal Officer.

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.

The Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2021/2022 year over 121,400 children, including over 15,500 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country. In 2021, the total cost of providing school transport amounted to over 289 million. This includes direct transport services, and grant payments. It also includes funding to schools for the employment of escorts to accompany children with special educational needs whose care and safety needs require this support.

In July 2022, Government announced funding for the waiving of school transport scheme fees for the 2022/2023 school year as part of a wider package of cost of living measures. In the context of increasing costs of living and with a view to easing the financial burden on families, I announced measures to reduce the cost to families for School Transport Services. These temporary measures were in addition to the reductions in the family cap that had been announced by Government in February 2022 to mitigate the cost of living and provided for the waiver of ticket charges for the 2022/23 school year. These measures will provide families with savings of up to €500 on the cost of tickets.

School Transport ticket registration for the 2022/23 school year closed on 29 July by which time almost 130,000 applications/registrations were received for mainstream school transport. This figure includes 44,299 new applications as well as roll-overs from the previous school year.

Already 124,000 tickets for the mainstream scheme alone have been issued to applicants for the 2022/2023 school year. At the start of the last school year, there were circa 103,600 children carried on mainstream school transport services, so already in the region of 20,400 additional places have been created. The temporary waiving of fees has led to an unprecedented expansion of the scheme with many more eligible and concessionary applicants receiving tickets than ever before. There has been an increase in tickets allocated across all counties, with an increase of 18% in the number of tickets issued to eligible pupils compared to start of the 2021/2022 school year and an increase of 27% in the number of tickets issued to concessionary pupils compared to the start of the 2021/2022 school year. Notwithstanding this, I acknowledge that the huge increase in applications has led to frustration over delays in issuing tickets in some instances.

I can assure you that Bus Éireann will continue to work intensively in all regions to process applications and to issue tickets as soon buses and drivers are sourced and become available to provide transport for the higher numbers qualifying for the service.

It is very important to note that the normal eligibility criteria of the scheme still apply and tickets continue to be allocated in line with this criteria. Pupils at primary level are eligible where they live no less than 3.2 kilometres from and are attending their nearest primary school. At post-primary level, students who live no less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest post-primary school or education centre are deemed eligible. Any pupils or students who do not meet these criteria are deemed not eligible, or otherwise known as concessionary applicants, and are allocated a ticket based on the availability of a seat, when all eligible children have been catered for.

As I said before, there has been an unprecedented increase in applications from families whose children are eligible for school transport this year. These children must be prioritised as the Scheme dictates. I am aware that this has led to particular frustration this year where some families, whose children attend their third, fourth or even fifth closest school, or who live within the distance limits, and who have held tickets previously did not receive one. This is directly due to the much higher numbers of eligible children applying who must be facilitated. I know that many families, whatever their eligibility status, rely on the scheme and this consideration is being factored in to the analysis underway as part of the Review of the Scheme.

For this year and in line with normal practice, all eligible children who completed the application and ticket registration process on time for the 2022/2023 school year will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

In addition, pending completion of the outcome of the full review of the School Transport Scheme, Temporary Alleviation Measures at post-primary level will be continued for the 2022/2023 school year. Under these measures transport will be provided for post-primary pupils who are eligible for transport to their nearest school and are attending their second nearest school and who applied by the 29th April and registered for a ticket by the 29th July.

The online account management system, known as the Family Portal, which had been closed since registrations shut on 29th July, reopened on Thursday 25th August. Where applications have been processed, the reopening of the portal will enable account holders to check the status of their application.

While the re-opening of the portal also facilitates a late application process, it is very important for such families to note that the application deadline for 2022/23 was 29th April 2022, and that the deadline to confirm registration for tickets was 29th July 2022. Any application completed after this date is **a 'late application'** and therefore, many school transport services are already operating at full capacity. Late applications will only be assessed after all "on time" applications have been processed and there can be no guarantee of places for late applicants.

My Department is continuing to conduct a review of the School Transport Scheme which includes an examination of the current scheme and how it currently operates, its broader effectiveness and sustainability and that it adequately supports the provision of services to students and their families.

The review encompasses the School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs. The review of the Primary and Post-Primary School Transport Schemes will examine each element of the schemes and include eligibility criteria, trends, costs, cost drivers, and overall effectiveness in meeting the objectives of the schemes. The review will also examine the potential for integration of different strands of the scheme and a more co-ordinated approach with other Government Departments that also use transport services.

Wider considerations relating to operation of the scheme are taking place in the current phase of the review. As part of the current phase of the review, the Technical Working Group has undertaken extensive consultation including running a public survey for parents/guardians and students who use the service and those who do not use the service but who would like to. These engagements have yielded extensive data for consideration. The Group has also consulted with a broad array of stakeholders including schools, special education interest groups, industry representatives and other Government Departments.

While work on the review was impacted somewhat by the challenges of the pandemic and the impact of the current conflict in Ukraine, it is anticipated that the final phases of the review will be completed shortly with recommendations on the future operation of the Department's School Transport Scheme. The Steering Group will continue to report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses.

Once again I thank the Committee for the invitation to appear here today and I am happy to take questions and deal with any queries that the Committee Members have.