

## **Limerick Leader**

Tim Ryan, Oireachtas Correspondent

### **School transport crisis in Limerick**

A crisis that has developed in Limerick and most likely in other parts of the country regarding school transport, Fianna Fáil Deputy Niall Collins told the Dáil.

He said he met a group of the school transport service providers recently. They are facing a crisis in the context of two issues. One relates to the recruitment and, in particular, the retention of drivers. The second issue is the upper age limit of 70 applies.

“I have been informed that this is enforced by Bus Éireann,” he said. “We need to move into the modern era and review that age limit. If a person is able-bodied, willing and qualified to drive at 69 years of age, he or she should also be able to drive at the age of 70, 71 or 72 as long as he or she is physically capable and qualified.”

He said the bus transport company operators informed him that retaining drivers is a major issue. “Another issue is that the vetting approval cannot be transferred in circumstances where a driver moves from one bus company to another,” he added.

In reply, Minister of State John Halligan said the school transport scheme is complicated and complex in the sense that thousands of vehicles are used to transport 117,000 children - 12,000 of whom have special needs - twice a day throughout the country and that 100 million km are covered in doing so.

“We are consistently having difficulty in securing appropriate and sufficient vehicles,” he said. “We have been quite successful up to now. The 70 year matter is not an issue that the Government can interfere with. It has been brought to my attention and I have been speaking to the Department about expanding that. I am not sure if it is in my remit to decide how old the driver of a vehicle can be. It is in my remit to make sure that the transport scheme operates efficiently and that every eligible child and child with special needs is carried on that scheme. I will come back to the Deputy regarding the matter.”

### **Directly elected Mayor for Limerick in May**

Following the recent completion of the Local Government Bill by both Houses of the Oireachtas, plebiscites will now be held on directly elected mayors with executive functions in the local authority areas of Limerick City and County, Waterford City and County Council and Cork City Council, Minister of State John Paul Phelan told the Dáil. It is intended that the plebiscites will be held at the same time as the local elections on May 24<sup>th</sup>.

“Local government legislation divides local authority functions into executive and reserved functions,” he said. “The proposed office of directly elected mayor with executive functions should bridge the gap between the two categories of functions. It is my view that, subject to some exceptions, responsibility for executive functions could be transferred in their entirety to directly elected mayors. The directly elected mayor would be an *ex officio* member of the elected council and continue to perform the functions currently exercised by local authority cathaoirleach, mayors and lord mayors, including reserved functions. This would encompass a civic and representational role, where the mayor would act as the ‘face’ of the local authority domestically and internationally.”

Given the potentially wide range of functions performed by local authorities, the directly elected mayor's role would need to be supported by a chief executive officer, he said. The executive mayor would have a similar relationship with the local authority chief executive as a Minister has with a Secretary General of a Department.

“The mayor's functions would exclude executive functions related to planning matters, which would remain with the chief executive,” he said. “Chief executives would also continue to be responsible for organisational and staff related matters. This is similar to arrangements in Departments, where the Secretary General is responsible for such matters.”

Sinn Féin Deputy Maurice Quinlivan said with European and local elections at the same time, people will get confused. “We need to have the discussion as quickly as possible,” he said. “We need to tell people what the Minister of State is proposing. We need him to tell us first of all, obviously. If he wants us to sell the concept at the doors, he needs to start informing us now. Voters are already looking at local election manifestoes in which there will be information on mayors or upcoming referendums.”

Labour Deputy Jan O’Sullivan said if the directly elected mayor comes from a rural part of the county, it will present an issue. “Mayors in other places such as New York, London or Vancouver represent cities,” she said. “There is an understanding internationally that a mayor - a directly elected mayor in particular - is a city-based politician. If we end up with a directly elected mayor of Limerick city and county or Waterford city and county from the rural part of the electoral area, it will pose a problem in how he or she will represent the municipality.”