

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Dé Máirt, 11 Iúil 2017

Tuesday, 11 July 2017

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 4 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 4 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Joan Burton,	Maria Byrne,
Thomas Byrne,	Robbie Gallagher,
Catherine Martin,	Trevor Ó Clochartaigh,
Carol Nolan.	Lynn Ruane.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies James Lawless, Aindrias Moynihan, Frank O'Rourke, Anne Rabbitte and Eamon Scanlon and Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor.

Teachta / Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session until 4.40 p.m.

School Transport Scheme: Discussion

Chairman: I remind delegates and members to turn off their mobile phones because they interfere with the sound system, making it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the proceedings of the meeting. They also affect the television coverage and web streaming.

The purpose in this part of the meeting is to discuss with a number of stakeholders matters related to the operation of the school transport scheme. Obviously, it is very important to have a school transport scheme that is fit for purpose and efficient and offers value for money. There is particular interest in the concessionary places and the places for children with special needs who have to attend special classes or special schools.

On behalf of the joint committee, I welcome from the Department of Education and Skills Mr. Richard Dolan, principal officer, and Ms Niamh McElduff, assistant principal officer, from the school transport unit. From Bus Éireann I welcome Mr. Ray Hernan, acting CEO; Mr. Gerry Gannon, school transport manager, and Ms Margaret Hubbard, procurement and materials manager. From the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, I welcome Mr. Sé Goulding, head of operations, and Ms Noelle Connolly, head of local services. From the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education I welcome Ms Breda Corr, general secretary; and from the National Parents' Council - Primary, Ms Áine Lynch, CEO.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. If they are directed by me, as Chairman, to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Any opening statement made to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

We have a number of Members in attendance who are not members of the committee and they are very welcome. They will also have an opportunity to comment and contribute to the debate.

I ask all delegates to keep their opening statements to a maximum of five minutes. I thank those who submitted their opening statements in advance. I call on Mr. Dolan to make his opening statement.

Mr. Richard Dolan: I thank the members of the joint committee for affording us this opportunity to discuss the school transport scheme. It is an administrative scheme which was established in 1968. It was created to facilitate equality of access to primary and post-primary education for those children who, because of where they resided, might otherwise have had a difficulty in attending school regularly.

School transport is a significant national operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills. During the 2016-17 school year in the region of 116,000 children, including some 12,000 with special educational needs, were transported in approximately 4,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country, covering over 100 million km annually. In 2016 the total cost of school transport amounted to approximately €182 million. This included the cost of direct transport services, grant payments and 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.

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 remote from their nearest school. In general, children are eligible for school transport if they are attending their nearest school and satisfy the requisite distance criteria. 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 a number of terms and conditions detailed in the scheme.

Changes to the school transport scheme were announced in budget 2011 and derived from recommendations made 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. 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.

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 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 and 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 3,333, from 8,317 in 2012 to 11,650 in 2016, and the overall costs of the scheme, including grants, payments to contractors and funding for school transport escorts, have risen by almost €26 million, from €57.7 million to almost €83.5 million in the same period.

School transport is provided using a mix of Bus Éireann vehicles and private contractors. A total of 90% of the vehicles used to provide services under the school transport scheme, currently equivalent to over 4,000 vehicles, are provided by private operators under contract to Bus Éireann at a cost of approximately €123 million in 2016. The general 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 school transport scheme is very significant in transporting over 116,000 children on a daily basis at a cost of over €182 million. The criteria are applied equitably on a national basis. I thank members of the committee for giving me this opportunity and of their time.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Dolan for his presentation. I should have made the point at the start of the meeting that everybody would have an opportunity to present. When everybody has finished, we will go to the members for comments and questions. There will then be an opportunity for the delegates to clarify or comment or answer questions members might have. We received a submission from the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland. Representatives of the council cannot be with us, but its submission will form part of the hearings today. I presume Mr. Hernan will make the presentation on behalf of Bus Éireann.

Mr. Ray Hernan: Yes. Following my immediate address, the three of us will cover questions asked.

Chairman: That is perfect.

Mr. Ray Hernan: I thank the Chairman for her invitation to me and my colleagues to address the committee and deal with matters arising.

Bus Éireann administers the school transport scheme on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, subject to its policy and instructions. I believe we provide the State with an efficient, effective, safe and reliable school transport service that carries almost 116,000 schoolchildren every day of the school term on 4,500 vehicles travelling over 6,500 routes that serve 3,000 schools. Bus Éireann is one of the largest supporters of rural Ireland, with over €123 million being paid in 2016 to 1,300 school transport contractors nationwide. This provides thousands of jobs in communities across the country and makes Bus Éireann one of the most experienced school transport service providers and managers internationally.

The delivery of the school transport scheme is complex, but its purpose is simple in supporting access to education. More than 40 million individual journeys are made by schoolchildren 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 co-ordinated by Bus Éireann in compliance with rules and guidelines set by the Department of Education and Skills. 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.

Bus Éireann operates three separate schemes on behalf of the Department, each with its own distinct criteria, under the umbrella of the national school transport scheme. They 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.

In the past decade in particular, the school transport scheme has expanded dramatically in terms of vehicle numbers as the number of services provided under the scheme increased from 1,700 contractor vehicles in 1998 to almost 4,100 today. In 2016 a record number of 410 new services were introduced by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, which is equivalent to an average of more than two new services every school day, the vast majority of which were for children with special educational needs. At the same time, the number of Bus Éireann school buses providing services has reduced, from 537 in 2009 to 381 in 2016, a reduction of 30% in daily commitments. Contractor services have replaced these vehicles and

all newly sanctioned services are opened to public tender by Bus Éireann.

In 2011 a revised tendering process was introduced for the provision of contracted services. Under the revised process, 100% of existing contracted work is subject to tender at least once in every five years on the basis of an average of 20% per year. Successful operators under this process are awarded a five-year contract. 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. Between 2009 and 2016, the cost to the Exchequer of providing school transport services declined by €4.5 million to €154.8 million. During this period the number of daily services increased by almost 1,800, or approximately 40%. Further savings are projected to be achieved in 2017-18 following the implementation of the Labour Court's recommendations agreed to by Bus Éireann staff in May this year. It is important to note that the scheme is administered by Bus Éireann on a cost recovery basis only.

Bus Éireann manages the school transport scheme impartially and in a uniform fashion nationally on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills and does 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 scheme is set out under the guidelines of the scheme and implemented accordingly by Bus Éireann as required by the Department. Catchment areas for school transport purposes were abolished by the Government under the post-primary scheme changes announced in the 2011 budget, which indicated that from the 2012-2013 school year, the use of the catchment boundary system would cease for all new post-primary children. Eligibility for all new children entering post-primary school transport is now on the basis of the nearest appropriate post-primary centre, having regard to ethos and language. Existing arrangements remained in place for existing post-primary pupils at the time of these changes for the duration of their schooling.

With special needs requirements, the principle of tailoring school transport services where possible and where economically feasible to meet the individual needs of children carried under 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 under this scheme in conjunction with the Department. We currently utilise over 2,000 vehicles every day to provide services on some 2,300 routes for approximately 12,000 children with special educational needs, the vast majority of which provide services on a door-to-door basis.

My comments are a brief overview of the school transport scheme, which is a very complex undertaking for us, but one which Bus Éireann has been immensely proud to deliver on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills. We have been operating this scheme and carrying the children of the State for 50 years as of this year, and we are passionately committed to providing this service for many years to come. I take this opportunity to thank all the members for the opportunity to address them today and I am happy to deal with any questions in due course.

Mr. Sé Goulding: I thank the committee for the invitation to attend this afternoon's meeting. I am accompanied by my colleague, Ms Noelle Connolly, head of local services at the National Council for Special Education, NCSE. The NCSE has a national network of special educational needs organisers, SENOs, who work with parents and schools to provide advice and resources to schools for students with special educational needs. One of their roles includes processing applications for special school transport arrangements for students who are unable, for a variety of reasons, to avail of school transport under the general school transport scheme.

The majority of students with special educational needs are educated in the mainstream setting and can avail of the Department of Education and Skills general school transport scheme. However, some students in 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 require a wheelchair-accessible bus. There are also approximately 15,000 students who are enrolled in a special class in a mainstream school or in a special school. The Department's scheme allows for special transport arrangements to be put in place in order that transport may be 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 is to confirm to the Department that the school in question is the nearest such school.

When a school submits an application for special school transport, it will have sought and obtained parental or guardian consent beforehand. On average, the NCSE receives approximately 3,500 such applications annually from schools and all applications are accompanied by the relevant professional reports, which will have assessed the student with a diagnosed disability that meets the departmental criteria for support and also confirms that the student's needs are such that he or she cannot avail of the general school transport scheme. In those cases, where the student requires a special class or special school placement, this would also be referenced in the professional reports. Sometimes the needs of the students are such that they cannot avail of the school bus. For example they may need to be transported by taxi, and in such cases the school would have to outline the reasons for this and also provide a professional report that supports this.

The school transport scheme also provides that schools may also apply to the SENO for an escort to assist the student with special educational needs. In such cases, the school would set out the case for such a provision, for example, where a student has significant medical or behavioural reasons for such transport, and again the application would be accompanied by a professional report confirming the need. The SENO reports on these matters to the Department, which then makes a formal decision on the application for transport before informing the school. The scheme generally works well and it is only in a small number of cases that difficulties may arise in the application, and these would mainly relate to a position where the student is enrolled in a school that is not the nearest school which is or can be resourced to meet the student's needs. In such circumstances, the SENO has no discretion as special transport arrangements can only be put in place to the nearer school.

The NCSE has a role in providing policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills relating to the education of students with special educational needs and the role of the school transport scheme has been considered briefly in this context. The NCSE acknowledges the significant effort, commitment and investment by the Department in providing special transport arrangements. There is no doubt these arrangements are costly but without them, many students with special educational needs would not be able to attend school. The NCSE considers that in general, 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 that is not the nearest school that can be or is resourced to meet the child's special educational needs. This may be because therapy supports are not available in the nearest school.

Another concern can be where bus drivers, bus escorts or other school staff have not received autism awareness training. Consequently, there may not be a full understanding of how

the most innocuous interaction may cause distress to some students with autism. A further concern occasionally arises with transport between school and respite homes as it has been brought to the attention of the NCSE that some students are not transported from their respite centre to and from school. This can place pressure on parents when the child is in respite to put in place their own transport arrangements and can impact on the full value of the respite provided.

The NCSE policy advice paper, Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, made the following recommendations. School personnel working with students with autism spectrum disorder, 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 and; the Departments of Health and Education and Skills should jointly consider and put in place appropriate practical arrangements for students with complex special educational needs to be transported to and from care settings to school on the same basis that they are transported from their homes, and, pending full roll-out of the Health Service Executive's progressing disabilities policy, to alternative special schools and special classes where the executive is unable to provide the necessary therapy supports for a student in his or her local school.

Ms Breda Corr: I will probably repeat some of Mr. Goulding's comments. I thank the committee for affording me the opportunity to give the views of our members today. For those who I have not seen before, the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, NABMSE is the recognised management voice of special education in Ireland and we provide countrywide representation for boards of management of special schools and mainstream, primary and post-primary schools providing education for pupils with special educational needs. We represent over 200 schools.

Our members welcome the role and co-operation of the school transport section of the Department of Education and Skills and local Bus Éireann staff in the operation of the school transport scheme for students with special educational needs. This co-operation and relationship has always been the cornerstone of the efficient operation of the scheme for schools on the ground. In the NCSE policy advice paper referred to by Mr. Goulding, it states, "the special transport scheme was considered to work well and to be an important asset for parents and students". We agree with that. However, in research undertaken by ourselves in 2011, we recognised that the student's ability to participate in school is influenced by events and conditions on the bus journey. This research also noted that the skill of the bus escort in ensuring a successful journey is often challenged by the duration of the journey and appropriateness of the bus in accommodating the child's specific needs.

In this statement I will concentrate on four matters. These are the day-to-day management of school transport in the special education setting; the selection criteria or rules relating to the awarding of contracts; catchment areas and the impact on special educational needs; and eligibility of students who can avail of the service. I will give some background and context about transport for students with special educational needs. Due to the geographically dispersed location of both mainstream and special schools in Ireland, as the committee has heard from other witnesses, a significant number of students avail of the school transport scheme. I am not going to go into much more of it. The service is operated by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. The special education needs organiser, SENO, advises the Department if a child's care and safety needs are such that the child requires the support of a bus escort, and the SENO allocates funding to schools, for the employment of bus escorts by the school - which is important - to accompany children on the bus journey to and from school. The role of the bus escort in circulars issued by the Department is described with reference to the need for children with

special educational needs to be escorted while travelling on school buses and taxis, needing help with embarking and disembarking from the bus and needing help and supervision on the journey. Bus escorts also act as a vital link between home and school.

In contrast to other jurisdictions, there is no reference to the level of training that bus escorts should be expected to engage in to do their job effectively, nor is any training provided for bus escorts. Perhaps some is provided on a local level. Some of the issues that have arisen in the provision of school transport for children with special educational needs in the day-to-day management of school transport are these. Having staff on the buses with different employers can be difficult when procedures and protocols are not agreed and followed. Some schools have expressed a preference for the Department to pay bus escorts directly. There can be difficulties when buses and drivers are changed without prior notice to the school. Many pupils with special educational needs are transported in taxis. Some schools have found that, when an issue arises, there may be no personnel in that office who are familiar with the school transport arrangements.

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.

Research demonstrates clearly that children with special educational needs experience most challenges during unstructured periods of the school day such as recess, transition periods and travelling on school transport. Many bus routes are too long, causing difficulties for students with special educational needs. Some students can be on buses for well over three hours per day, which is very long. This has been raised by Mr. Sé Goulding already, and is in the policy paper. Some schools have also found that additional students can be added to routes without notice, making routes longer. Change in routine is not good for children with special educational needs and can cause difficulty for schools. An issue raised in the consultation, which Mr. Sé Goulding referred to, was respite. I am not going to go into any great detail about that.

Eligibility criteria is a matter which has been mentioned by speakers already. School transport is awarded to students on the basis that the student is attending the nearest school or special class which can be resourced to meet his or her needs. However, this can cause problems when parents consider that the nearest special school best suits the needs of the student, and there is another school nearer to the child's home. This may mean that the student is not eligible, and that is difficult. We do not expect people to drive from Roscrea to Limerick, for argument's sake, but there is an issue there that could be considered.

I have some suggestions. On the selection criteria, we are mindful of procurement rules that apply to the provision of school transport and the requirement for routes to be put to tender. However, in the tendering of these routes and awarding of contracts, the following should be considered in the provision of transport for students with special educational needs. The experience of the operator and driver in the provision of transport and working with people with special educational needs and disabilities should be considered. The ability to provide wheel-

chair accessible buses can be a problem in some areas and is a problem nationally. Alternative arrangements could be put in place to provide suitable buses in the event of a breakdown, since that causes trouble with schools as well. Arrangements could be put in place for the replacement of the bus driver. Protocols could be put in place to deal with accidents on the bus. There needs to be willingness to engage in training, for example, to understand students with special educational needs, and so on.

On routes, catchment areas and applications, the length of the bus journey should be considered when planning the route. Schools should be consulted and informed of any changes to a bus route, additional students on the route and changes in bus drivers well in advance so that pupils can be prepared. There needs to be a tracking system for school transport applications. Schools should be provided with an acknowledgement of receipt of the application. Many do not even get that. There needs to be a progress report on applications and a letter from Bus Éireann - more work for Bus Éireann - giving details of the bus provider on approval of the application. Recommendation 6.3 of the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, policy advice paper should be implemented without delay. This recommendation refers to transport to and from respite settings, and for students with complex needs to be transported to alternative special schools and classes where the HSE is unable to provide therapy supports.

The next section covers training for bus personnel. Recommendation 6.2 of the NCSE policy advice paper points out that personnel should be trained, and Mr. Sé Goulding alluded to that already. We consider that this recommendation should apply to all students with special educational needs, not just those with an autism spectrum disorder, ASD. There have been developments in training for bus escorts. St. Angela's College in Sligo developed a pilot training programme for bus escorts at our request and in partnership with us. This project emanated from the summary report of an interdepartmental working group which formed in Sligo in 2005 to provide for all those involved in school transport of children with special educational needs to work together. This group comprised members from the Department of Education and Skills, principals of special schools in Sligo, Bus Éireann and a parent representative. Discussions with bus escorts and occupational therapists also informed the work of the group.

I am happy to say that we rolled out a pilot project in Galway in 2013 and a former member of this committee, then Minister of State with responsibility for training and skills, Deputy Ciarán Cannon, awarded the certificates for it. An independent evaluation was carried out by Dr. Emer Ring of Mary Immaculate College. I am not going to go into her recommendation, but she basically recommends that a specific training programme can impact on the bus escort's ability to have a positive influence on the children with special educational needs, and it should be considered for a national roll-out. We have been talking to the Department about this and we hope that those discussions will yield some results. St. Angela's College has amended this programme to ensure that the specific recommendations are implemented. It is now willing and ready to roll out this programme as continual professional development.

I hope that this statement gives the committee some insights into the issues affecting students with special educational needs, and those are our proposed suggestions. We look forward to working with all partners on these proposals for the improvement of the school transport experience for all students.

Chairman: I now ask Ms Áine Lynch, who is CEO of the National Parents Council Primary, to speak. We invited the National Parents Council Post Primary as well, but unfortunately representatives from it could not attend. We are very happy to have Ms Lynch.

Ms Áine Lynch: I thank the committee for the invitation to attend. Much of what I am going to say has been said before, but I will go through it.

The current school transport scheme works extremely well for a large number of children and families. However, there are some issues that parents have raised with us over the years. Some are more general and some are specifically in the area of special educational needs. I will start with more general issues.

The issues with catchment areas mainly apply to four areas, which include a lack of clarity about appropriate routes and a lack of flexibility in administering the system. Those two issues, when parents ring us, generally apply to local knowledge about routes. For example, people say that one would never go that way because the traffic is bad. That is the kind of discussion that we have. There is also a lack of awareness regarding the appeals procedure. Many parents are not aware that there is an ability to appeal against decisions made.

The other main general area is health and safety. There are concerns among parents about the health and safety of children availing of the school transport system. These include the lack of adult supervision on school buses. Currently, the only adult on a school bus is the driver, who is clearly not in a position to supervise the children travelling on the bus. It is important for the physical safety of the children that there is an adult supervisor on all school buses carrying primary school aged children to ensure they are seated and wearing their seat belts at all times. It is also important for other safety reasons regarding behaviours such as bullying that there is adult supervision on school buses. The journey for a child who is being bullied on school transport can be very difficult and parents have reported difficulty in their child's school attendance solely due to the journey to and from school.

Concerns regarding road safety have also been brought to our attention. School gates are often a very busy area at primary school arrival and dismissal times. It is vital that proper protective factors are put in place as part of the school transport system that ensure children are kept safe on the roads in the area of the school. These could include warning systems on school buses that alert people when children are leaving or getting on the bus, regulations that prevent the overtaking of parked school buses and speed restrictions around schools at appropriate times of the day.

There is also an availability issue. Children in junior and senior infants generally finish one hour earlier than the other classes in the school. In many instances, transport is not available for these children until the other classes have finished. In regard to children with special educational needs, there is an issue around eligibility criteria with regard to the nearest suitable school. The main issue parents have highlighted to NPC regarding these eligibility criteria relates to the "nearest recognised school" element. The nearest recognised school that can be resourced may not be the most suitable school from the parents' point of view. We have spoken to parents who have identified a school which they believe fits their child's needs most closely but it is not the nearest school and, therefore, the child will not be eligible for transport. While NPC understands that the scheme cannot be completely open ended to accommodate all parents' wishes, more flexibility in eligibility criteria would assist better decisions being made in the interests of children.

On the length of time spent travelling to school, in some cases more than one child is availing of the transport to a particular school. This can result in very long journeys to school for children who are coming from different areas. Parents have reported daily round trips of up to three hours for what would otherwise be a 20 minute drive. On transport escorts, many children

need escorts when travelling to school. 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 they are escorting. On time and availability of service, there are two issues regarding time and availability that parents report to NPC as causing difficulties for them. First, children who are eligible for July provision and attend their own school for this provision will not be able to avail of transport and, second, children in junior and senior infants whose day finishes one hour earlier than the rest of the school may not be able to avail of transport at the appropriate time.

In addition to the areas highlighted above regarding the current provision of school transport, NPC believes that a review should be undertaken of school transport. This should include a feasibility report on the delivery of a comprehensive school transport system that is available to all children who need to travel to and from school. Parents consistently inform NPC that a half empty bus travels past their home going to their child's school that they would be happy to pay for; a bus is at risk of being cancelled due to lack of eligible children in an area; and a good bus system in the city areas would reduce traffic congestion and parents would be happy to pay. A full review of school transport should examine these and other issues fully and develop a transport plan that is fit for school children into the future. The school transport system is vital to many children and families in their ability to access primary education. NPC welcomes this review of the school transport system and hopes that it further enhances what is a fundamental service.

Chairman: I thank Ms Lynch. I will now open up the meeting to questions from members of the committee, following which I will invite Deputies and Senators who are not members to put their questions.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank all of the witnesses for their presentations. My first question is directed to the representatives of the Department and Bus Éireann. What is being done to ensure that drivers and escorts have the relevant training in special education needs? Having taught in many schools for children with special educational needs, I know that not only teachers but all staff need training in special educational needs because when it comes to many of the basic interactions we take for granted, without an understanding of disabilities, in particular autism spectrum disorder, issues can escalate. We should be seeking to ensure that all drivers and escorts undergo basic training in this area.

In regard to the establishment of "nearest recognised school", one of the criteria is that a copy be provided of the decision reached following an appeal under section 29 in respect of refusal of entry to a school. Often, a primary school will have only one class which fills up quickly every year such that it is obvious to a parent that a child will not get a place in that school and so the parent does not engage in the section 29 process. Is there any leeway in such cases? In other words, is there any point putting the parent and the school through a section 29 process when it is obvious to everybody there is no way the child can be accommodated in the school?

A school in my constituency, Ballinteer Educate Together, is awaiting a permanent building and is to be relocated outside of the catchment area to Churchtown, which is beyond the 3.2 km for parents to travel. Other schools that are temporarily located are also being moved outside of their catchment areas when planning permissions are unsuccessful. The children currently attending the Ballinteer Educate school are able to walk to the school but following its relocation to Churchtown they will not be able to do so. Many of their parents do not have cars and

so the children will need school transport. What arrangements, if any, are put in place where this happens?

In regard to special educational needs, the phrase “nearest school which is or can be resourced to meet their needs” was mentioned. Am I correct that if a parent identifies the nearest school as not having the resources to meet his or her child’s needs that school can be so resourced? If I have a child with special educational needs I would be seeking to enrol him or her in a school that has special education needs provision in place which has been tried, tested and is working. In terms of special needs allocations, if a parent seeks provision on behalf of a child at what point does the school apply for the resources identified?

At a recent cross-party meeting on school transport, I raised with the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, the issue of the 4,000 school transport vehicles and the 100 million km covered by them annually. What consideration, if any, is being given to the use of bio-fuels or electric vehicles? As a country, we need to reduce our emissions and this small change could help us in achieving our climate change targets.

Senator Maria Byrne: I, too, thank all of the witnesses for their presentations. I also want to raise a number of local issues. I have been contacted by parents in Tipperary who have to drive their children two and a half miles to the nearest bus stop. There are other children whose parents have to do likewise. It does not make sense that so many children have to be driven two and a half miles to meet the school bus. I accept it is not possible to cover all areas on a route but surely in a situation where there are up to 12 children attending the same school living in a particular area, as in this case, it should be possible for the bus to divert to that area to pick them up.

Similar to the issue raised by Deputy Martin in regard to Ballinteer Educate Together, Gaelscoil an Raithin in Limerick is awaiting a permanent site and is due to relocate in September to Mungret, which is 4 km from its current location. Mungret is not served by Bus Éireann and or the school transport system. Up to now, most parents have been able to walk their children to the school at its current location because they live in the catchment area but they will not be able to do so when it is relocated. Are there any plans in place in this regard in terms of school transport? I have contacted the school transport division and I have been told there are no such plans in place.

A number of children in my area do not attend their nearest school, rather they attend another school on the far side of the city because it has more smaller classes and some of them have special needs. The school bus passes them, where they gather at a bus stop, to start the route further down the road, but because they are a little further away, they do not meet the criteria. Approximately eight of them gather every morning and the parents take them to school on a rota basis. Every morning the bus passes them, but it is not part of the route. These practical issues need to be looked at.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank all of the contributors to the discussion. This is a huge issue in my constituency which covers County Offaly and north Tipperary and of concern to many parents. I have been contacted by many of them about it even before they have received decisions. The way many of them were treated last year was nothing short of a disgrace. There is no flexibility whatsoever in the system and that is my main concern. It disregards social and community links. We have had a situation where children in County Offaly have been told to attend the nearest school which is in County Westmeath, even though many of them are connected with GAA clubs in County Offaly, which are at the heart of rural communities. This

totally disregards rural communities, for which there is a lack of respect and understanding. I have made a comprehensive submission to the Minister of State, Deputy John Halligan, a copy of which I have with me, and if anyone from Bus Éireann would like to see a copy, he or she can most certainly do so as it is full of solutions. I am not complaining just for the sake of it and do have solutions to offer.

The system, in its current form, just does not work. Parents complain every year and I am sure Bus Éireann is inundated with complaints. I recognise the fact that it has provided more buses for children with special needs, which I welcome, but there are flaws in the system which is failing children and rural communities. We need to work out the proper way forward.

I find it astounding that not one of the almost 600 appeals to the school transport appeals board since 2014 has been upheld. What does this say to those appealing? In general, parents do not go through this mechanism unless they feel really aggrieved and believe they must do so. Does the Department have a breakdown of appeals? Is there a noticeable trend in the type of appeal submitted? Is an annual report provided for the Department on the decision-making? If so, I would like to see it because there should be transparency. Is the board subject to scrutiny by the Ombudsman? Have appeals been made to the Ombudsman?

I ask the Department, in particular, to reaffirm the commitment that there will be no down-sizing of buses this year. That is what we were led to believe would happen last year.

Given the trend of an increase in the numbers of pupils availing of it, is it likely, in the absence of increased capacity in the school bus service, that those availing of the concessionary transport scheme will lose seats? What percentage of new applicants are seeking to avail of the scheme this year? What percentage of those granted a school transport place for the first time last year were concessionary transport scheme bus pass holders?

The previous review of the school transport service was very disappointing and did little to address this growing issue. As I stated, the nearest school rule is failing communities and we need to work through it in a pragmatic manner. Much of what is happening is not pragmatic and does not make sense. We have a school route in County Donegal that takes the children over a mountain pass. We speak about health and safety in schools all of the time and the Department sends circular after circular, but we see this as ridiculous. It does not make sense to me and must be tackled head on.

A report was to be published in June and I would like to know the reason for the hold-up. I have to meet parents to explain what is happening and would like to be updated before I meet them.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank all of the contributors. The meeting has been very worthwhile and informative.

Deputy Carol Nolan spoke for me and, I am sure, many others. When we came back last September, there was complete mayhem. Deputies and Senators from all parties all had the same story to tell, that the school transport service was not fit for purpose and I take no pleasure in saying this to the delegates. As a result of pressure being exerted from all angles, a review was promised, but it took a while for it to be completed. However, it was obvious to everybody before the review commenced that there was a problem, but when the review was completed, the word was that there was no issue and that it was business as usual. This was very disappointing for all concerned. As Deputy Carol Nolan outlined, there is a problem which collec-

tively we need to address. No schoolchild who is passed by a school bus should be left behind by it. That is absolutely crazy and it makes no sense. The committee should be about recognising that there is a problem and collectively trying to address it. This is something that I hope will come from today's discussion.

On the roles of Bus Éireann and the subcontractors, I briefly read a submission made by the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland which is not represented at this meeting. I do not know whether our guests have had an opportunity to read it, but it might be useful to circulate a copy to them as some interesting points are made in it which I have noted.

How often are the specific assigned routes reviewed? A family from County Monaghan have told me that a particular route has been in operation for eight years but that the built environment has changed considerably in that period, meaning that there are more children seeking to use it. What needs to happen for a review of a route to take place?

The submission received from the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland speaks about facilities on buses to cater children with special needs and wheelchair accessibility. Are the delegates satisfied that the fleet operated - some 90% has been subcontracted to private companies - has been adapted adequately to cater for children with special needs?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Unfortunately, I cannot stay for much more of the meeting, but I invited some of my colleagues to attend and they will ask questions based on their direct experience in their constituencies and they will be the same as the ones I would ask.

Last year I noticed that many of the problems stemmed from the fact parents had not been informed until very late in the summer. This caused not alone huge inconvenience but also huge shock. I hope there will be no surprises this year. We have a "no surprises" clause in the confidence and supply agreement and I would like to think it extends to this issue. It caused a lot of angst last year.

I thank Ms Corr from NABMSE for attending the meeting and all the work it did for us on the schools admission Bill, for which we were very grateful. The school transport system is a very important part of the system of free education. We know that it is limited, but it seems as if some of the rules have been very strictly enforced in recent years.

I do not know whether the particular issue of oversubscribed schools has been raised. For example, Deputy Eugene Murphy has told me that children in Tarmonbarry in Longford cannot always get into the local school. This means that they must attend a school in Strokestown or somewhere else which seems to be a problem. Do the rules allow for oversubscription in the nearest school?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the delegates who have participated in the discussion. I am not a member of the committee and this is the first time I have engaged in a committee other than the one of which I am a member. I am here because of the pure frustration I felt after last year's onslaught, for which nobody could ever have prepared me as a newly elected representative. Ms McElduff and I exchanged numerous emails throughout last summer and at the end of the summer holidays I was still battling the school bus crisis. What happened was shameful and disgraceful. Parents were living in hope the review would bring them salvation, but it did not. What has the Department learned in the past 12 months? Where should the policy change? What should the committee take to the Department of Education and Skills to get it to change the policy? The Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, has highlighted as the top issue

affecting children the rural school transport service. It is a live issue.

As my party's spokesperson on children, I want to know what the Department has learned and taken on board from the recommendations of the Ombudsman for Children? Is the Department considering the introduction of tolerance levels? Currently, we are very restricted. The requirement is that there must be ten concessionary children in order for a service to be provided. In terms of qualification for a service, would a tolerance level ranging from seven to ten, eight to ten or nine to ten children be considered? What changes in most rural schools year in and year out is flexibility in coping with change. We lost a school bus service in my area last year - Ms Niamh McElduff is well aware of this - because the number of eligible children decreased to eight. The number has increased to ten this year and the service will be restored. It was shocking that the service was lost last year.

Parents and teachers are caught in a catch-22 situation in that teachers will not say that they have an issue in their rural schools because that would flag such schools as being at risk. Parents might not think twice about sending their children to a particular school but if it does not have a transport service, then it is a school at risk. Commentary cannot be made on that because we do not want to advertise the enrolment. Teachers do not come forward and engage in the big media campaign - which I would have recommended that they should have done - for fear of schools losing enrolments.

My colleague, Senator Gallagher, spoke about reviews. When was the last time the Department carried out a review? How often are reviews carried out? Population changes occur in catchment areas.

Deputy Nolan spoke about dividing parishes. We do not do that in rural Ireland. If one plays with Portumna GAA, one sticks with playing there, one does not move to play with Mullagh GAA. It is as basic as that. One is loyal to one's community and, as a result, parents make do, but that is not good enough.

Another factor came to light last year. I am going to mention this even though it might not be the right thing to say. People question why, for example, assistance and a bus service can be provided to transport only one child with disabilities in circumstances where the bus passes right by their front doors and their children attend the same school. There should be none of that, no judging of other people. The reason it happens is because the parents are not getting co-operation from the Department and then they contact Bus Éireann and their public representatives. This meeting is about the Department. What has the Department done in the past 12 months to ease the pressure on children trying to get access to schools.

Chairman: Department officials cannot comment on policy matters. They can only tell us what the policy is. They can bring recommendations back to the Minister, which I have no doubt they will. I apologise for not calling Senator Ruane as she had indicated that she wished to speak.

Senator Lynn Ruane: No problem. I thank the witnesses for their presentations. Many members have covered a large number of the concerns to which I had intended to refer. I will not reiterate what has been said. The policy relating to the scheme, which is somewhat of a side issue, has not been raised. I have received several emails on this matter and the committee may have received correspondence on it. The Chairman said that the officials cannot comment on policy matters. They might elaborate on the policy, however, because I did not know that one existed.

People have raised concerns about the disparity in terms of the transport allocation to non-religious families under the ethos provision of the Department's transport policy. Families of children who were previously allocated transport to primary school based on being part of a minority religion or none found they were no longer eligible for that transport when they moved to second level. The officials might provide some insight into that policy and the way the selection process in terms of religion happens. Three religions were named when people requested to know what was a minority religion. What is the selection process in terms of children of minority religions, especially having regard to the change in demographics, and has that process been reviewed?

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I accept that many points have been covered but I need to raise a few particular issues. As other members have said, this is a red-hot issue and I have found that to be the case right through the summer and into September in my constituency of Cork North-West in places such as Newcestown and Aubane near Millstreet. The issue of whether their children will have a school transport service is a constant anxiety for parents. It is also of concern for parents in many other areas stretching from Coachford out to Macroom.

I want to focus on transport for students with special educational needs and those who might need medication administered at school and who would have the facility of a nurse at school. Their parents have told me that they are not able to use school transport unless a nurse is available on the school bus because it would not be possible for the child to have the medication administered in the case of an emergency. In order for children to avail of school transport, are nurses provided on school buses or are carers or drivers trained to administer various medications if students need them? Where parents have a preference for a particular religious ethos and want to send their children a convent school instead of the education and training board, ETB school, that does not seem to be taken into consideration. Some parents in Macroom wanted to send their children to the local convent school but the Coachford ETB school was closer and their children were not accommodated. The latter does not appear to reflect what is in the rules. That is what I have been told by parents but it should not be that way. The witnesses might comment on that.

On the criterion relating to the shortest traversable route, even though the school bus may not travel that route, a student's eligibility is measured by this. For example, if there is a one-way street or no right turn and if one can travel to school by one route but cannot return the same way, I have heard that Bus Éireann will only measure the route that is convenient to it. The journey measurement should at least be an average over the distance. A classic example of this is where traffic joins the N22 at Ovens school. There is no right turn to go back towards Ballincollig, one has to go up around Casey's Road or over Kilumney. Turning right at that point is not an option and it adds 1 km or 1.5 km to people's journeys. There should be at least an averaging of the return journey instead of applying the shortest route principle.

The criterion which stipulates the minimum number of eligible passengers is one with which Aubane near Millstreet and many other places would have a particular issue. This matter was highlighted in the review. While much of the review conducted last year indicated it was a case of business as usual, this was one of the criteria to which consideration would be given to there being a degree of flexibility. Has there been any reduction on that or what is the plan for reducing it? It was one of the few issues to be considered.

The stipulation regarding the central school is often lumped in with that relating to the school that is closest. Despite what the name suggests, when other schools in a catchment area have closed, the central school is not necessarily the central or middle school and may be off

to one side of the catchment area as in the case of Newcestown in Cork. Families over several generations would have associations - through the parish, the school and the wider community - with the central school, yet when the rule was changed and the shortest distance was applied, it has meant that parents on the eastern end of Newcestown catchment area are being told that their children have to attend schools in other areas such as Cloughdub or Laragh in towards Bandon. Those are not communities with which those families would have associated. Their school, football, hurling and everything is in Newcestown. The same situation is replicated throughout the country. The witnesses must take local associations into consideration. For example, there could be a case for having some flexibility in the form of several metres, a couple of hundred metres or a kilometre of a band around the shortest distance in order to accommodate the situation and to allow rural communities to retain their identity.

Chairman: I am conscious there may be some level of detail required in terms of responding to some of the questions. Accordingly, witnesses should feel free to give us a written comment after the meeting and we will ensure the relevant persons get it. It may not be the case that witnesses will be in a position to answer every question.

Deputy James Lawless: Like other Deputies, I am not a member of this committee but I wanted to attend today because I have a number of school transport issues to raise, primarily local ones in my constituency, but also about national policy. I agree with everything that has been said by speakers so far. There is much commonality across the issues. It is unusual to have such a number of non-members attending committee meetings but it is a sign of how passionate people feel about the issue and the fact that people are experiencing difficulty with the system. The high level of attendance in itself says a lot about the system.

School transport is one of the most frequently raised issues in my constituency office. It is also one of the most frustrating. As practising politicians we deal with all kinds of different issues but we can usually make some progress on them or at least get information or a response of some kind. School transport is one of the few issues where one feels one is banging one's head against a wall trying to get any information or updates. Before I was elected to the House I was a public representative on the council and I dealt with the same issues in terms of the Bus Éireann interface and the lines we are encouraged to use. I hate having to say it but it was extremely difficult to get an answer. I do not even mean the right answer, I mean any answer. When one telephoned a number it rang out and eventually one left a voice message. A few months later one would possibly get a call back but usually one would not. That was my experience until recently.

Such was the extent of my frustration I got the Minister of State, Deputy John Halligan, involved. He is the Minister of State with responsibility for school transport. I met him some months ago and expressed my concerns and frustrations to him about the interface with the company and getting information. The Minister of State took the points on board. He said a revamped communications system and interface were being rolled out. I have engaged with it and it is probably a little bit better but there is some distance to go in terms of how parents and public representatives interface on school transport. It should not be up to public representatives. Parents of school-going children should be able to interface with Bus Éireann and the Department of Education and Skills themselves without ever having to invoke us. We should only be contacted in exceptional circumstances but, unfortunately, the interface is so poor that parents do not know how to do that or if they do, they do not get any response and they end up coming to me and my colleagues and we try our best to do something. We often find we make a little more progress than they did.

I have contacted Bus Éireann representatives via the email interface, *buseireann.ie*, recently and it is okay but it can take a while and can be haphazard. One issue I raised was responded to reasonably quickly, as in a few weeks, but another took over a month and it was not entirely satisfactory, but at least it was an improvement that there was an answer even if it was not the desired answer. I give credit to Bus Éireann for that.

I do not wish to overlap with the issues raised by previous speakers but I agree with many of the points made such as the arbitrariness of the rule on the nearest school. Other speakers referred to the linkage and the tradition among families where generations have gone from a particular primary school to a particular secondary school or the fact that a community goes to school in a particular place because of the sporting ties, cultural ties, parish ties, historical affinity or other traditions of parents or grandparents going to a school. There are all kinds of reasons more complex than the pure linear distance from A to B, which seems to be a crude measure.

It is very unfair to say to a parent that a child had a discretionary place on a bus route for the past three, four or even five years in some cases but that it is not available this year because the route was re-tendered, the bus is smaller this year than it was last year and there are fewer places available on it. The view is that it is hard luck but the child cannot get a place even though he or she got one last year and the year before and perhaps a sibling did also. It is very difficult for parents in that situation who would have a legitimate expectation of having a place for the duration of a school term. I accept that it says somewhere in the small print that a place is not always guaranteed but it strikes me as a legitimate expectation that a place would be provided on a bus, or at least if a space was provided initially that it would be available until the end of term. The rules of the scheme need to be looked at in terms of how it operates and how parents can then plan for their own arrangements.

Parents take decisions about the school their children go to, where they go to work and how they organise their commute. They have to consider whether they need one car or two cars. Many people have had to leave their workplace or change their working arrangements to accommodate school transport. The issue is having a serious and detrimental impact not just on the individual child but on the wider family because of the lack of consistency in the scheme and the lack of information and advance planning. One does not know from one year to the next whether one's child will secure a place.

I wish to briefly raise two local issues. As the Chairman said, perhaps the response could be provided in writing or in some other way. I should not have to come before the committee to do this but unfortunately other avenues have not been fruitful. Therefore, we are where we are. I represent Kildare North. There has been a major issue in the north-west Kildare area, in particular Johnstownbridge and Broadford, which are two busy and growing villages with significant numbers among the school-going population going to school in Edenderry. It has been a tradition for generations that children from the area have gone to school in St. Mary's in Edenderry. That was always done. They played sport in that area also. The school bus went from a 60-seater to a 48-seater prior to last September and 12 families lost their places. People just about managed to make do. All kinds of arrangements were worked out. In one case a child was travelling in a car waving to her friends on the bus who were going along the same road beside her, and she was looking at empty bus seats. The child in question was told she could not get a place. There were many such difficulties.

I would like to establish what is the position on that route because what has happened now is that those who can afford to are clubbing together in order to get a private bus and those who

cannot afford it are left in the lurch. It is a case of unequal access to education. It is a fundamental issue that must be examined. I would appreciate it if the Johnstownbridge and Broadford to Edenderry route could be looked at in terms of what capacity will be provided coming into the new school year, and as early as possible because it is already near the end of July and parents must begin to make some plans for next year.

Another local issue relates to Sallins, which has a large rural catchment area and children travel into school in Naas and have done for many years. One particular route covers Sallins, Sherlockstown, Kileenmore, Ardclough and Alasty. It is a rural loop. Without getting into the minutiae of it, the bus goes clockwise in the morning and counter-clockwise in the evening. One would expect that the children who are collected first in the morning would be dropped home first in the evening. They leave the house a little earlier than their schoolmates, up to an hour earlier in some cases, but one would expect that would balance out in the evening and that they would get home an hour earlier. I raised the issue about a month ago and I got an explanation by email yesterday to the effect that this is the way it has been done for the past 25 years since the route was opened. I do not think that is a good enough reason because times change, demographics change and populations and routes change.

The fact that it was always done that way does not mean it is the right way. On the outward journey the bus goes one way and on the return journey it goes the reverse way. It is not right that the children who get picked up first in the morning get dropped off last thing at night, which means they lose out at both ends of the day. The poor children are exhausted going home and the parents are bedraggled trying to keep up with it all. I do not expect an immediate response although it would be great if there was one but I would welcome a response to the issues in due course and in a timely fashion so that we can intercede if we need to for the coming year.

If the witnesses were to take one thing from the meeting it is that Bus Éireann should improve the interface at least so that public representatives and parents can have a decent engagement and be able to get the information in a timely fashion when they need it. That would be a great help.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: First, I thank all the witnesses for their presentations. I wish to raise a number of issues. The meeting is running late and I would appreciate if the witnesses could respond to me in writing because I must attend another meeting at 6 p.m.

Is there a national policy for the way concessionary tickets are allocated? Is it done by lottery or is it based on the first people to pay? How does the system work? It seems to be different in different areas.

I also made a submission to the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, but unfortunately some of the issues we raised with him have not been addressed. I wish to raise two schools with the witnesses and I will be as brief as I can. One is in Blacklion in County Cavan where the children travel to St. Clare's comprehensive school in Manorhamilton. The journey is approximately 14 km from the home to the school. There was a review done in 2013 and the children were eligible at the time to go to the school. I am sure we all have children doing exams or in exam years and the children in this case will be moved 29.5 km, from the school they are in to another school. That is because of the new way the Department is measuring the distance from home to school. Some of these measurements are across boggy and mountain roads that cannot really be traversed by a big school bus. There is not a hope that could happen. Nevertheless, these people are being deprived of the bus that the family has availed of for years to bring the children to St. Clare's Comprehensive School. It is desperately wrong to move children who

are in exam years out of a school. They are being moved 29.5 km to another school where they know absolutely nobody and they have no connection with it in terms of sports, football, etc. It is very wrong and the matter should be considered. It should be recognised that the school transport scheme has done a fantastic job as 116,000 children were transported to school last year. It has operated over 50 years and given people an opportunity they would never have had to improve their lives and position. It has helped their families as well, which should be recognised.

There is a school in Bunninadden in County Sligo that happens to be at the end of one catchment area and the beginning of another. It is probably just outside the catchment of St. Attracta's college in Tubbercurry but it is in the catchment of Coláiste Muire in Ballymote. There is a bus that collects children who want to go to the school. As it happens, in the national school this year there are five pupils going one way and five going the other way. The second bus, which goes to St. Attracta's college, comes into the village of Bunninadden so people can be collected safely. We are talking about country and rural roads, some of which are very busy. That bus is under threat but it should not be. The pupils are being collected from the catchment area but the bus comes to the village, where it is safe to collect children and for parents to park, etc. That example should be examined. I do not see why the second bus should be under threat as it is now.

I will finish with that as it has been a long meeting. I would appreciate a response on the queries I have raised as soon as possible. I thank the witnesses. I am sorry I must go to another meeting that started at 6 p.m.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the witnesses for addressing us today. I am not here on a regular basis but I am just here because I have massive concerns about the bus system. My main concern is about national policies, and it has been mentioned that they were changed in 2011 and 2012. There is no appeal system. I have told people not to appeal decisions. Within my area of Carlow and Borris-Myshall, the people skills of the staff should be looked at. I was speaking with the Minister recently about another case. I can understand there is no medical card waiver for concessionary school transport, and it is something that needs to be addressed, but it really concerns me where the number of applications for transport on a concessionary basis exceeds the number of seats available, Bus Éireann will determine the allocation of the tickets. I know a case where there will not be enough seats on the bus to meet demand so Bus Éireann will decide the allocation. How does it decide that? I have families who do not know if the children will be on the bus this year. It is a concern. As previous speakers indicated, it is about late consultation with the families that is causing massive concerns.

These issues must be addressed. As the previous speaker noted, 116,000 children are being brought to school, which is marvellous. My biggest gripe is with catchment areas. There is no common sense applied when a person approaches the Department and it just will not budge. One might as well be speaking to oneself as it just will not work. Unless there is a will to change the system, policies and the catchment areas, the good work will be defeated. For the sake of children and families worried about what will happen in September, we must get more information and clarification. There should be a bit of common sense with families who know areas and circumstances.

Religion is another issue that is not being addressed and the Department will definitely have to look at it. I thank the witnesses. I came here because I have concerns. Carlow, Borris and Myshall are my areas and as I am a new Senator, I am learning. I was not happy last year with the feedback I got on the appeal system. It was not fit for purpose.

Deputy Frank O'Rourke: I am not a member of this committee and I acknowledge and appreciate that the Chairman has allowed me to speak this afternoon. I will certainly not delay proceedings. When one is last to speak at a committee, the one advantage is that most speakers have said everything else. I concur with Deputy Scanlon. Before we get into changing policies, negatives and problems, it is always good to acknowledge the positives. I definitely want to acknowledge the success of the school transport scheme where it is working. It is frustrating for the public, representatives and everyone in that we can see where it works exceptionally well in most areas. We want to acknowledge that and the benefits brought for so many students and families in so many locations. When it works and runs smoothly, it is seamless. It is important to acknowledge that. The service provider - Bus Éireann is represented here today - does a very positive job. I get feedback from constituents describing the good work being done and how co-operative it is in assisting people while working within very tight guidelines and the restrictive policy that exists. The provider does its best and gives a good service, and it is important we acknowledge that before we start.

I will focus on the policy area as it pertains to three topics. Colleagues have spoken about bus tickets and some tickets are automatically awarded to students based on particular conditions and eligibility for medical cards. That is fine. My information is that people applying for discretionary bus tickets or some people who pay for a ticket are not being awarded a ticket because the bus is operating at full capacity. In a number of audits done by me and constituents, it seems some people awarded a free ticket are not using the seat and it is not being taken up. I can notify the witnesses of the exact circumstances outside the committee. There are bus routes where seats are vacant. On that basis, is it possible that a review could be carried out to ensure the people who are automatically getting tickets are using them? If they are not, could the seat revert to somebody who badly needs it and who has endured much difficulty because of not being able to access it in order to get to school? In some cases that I can speak about later, students have had to change school and it may have been very difficult for parents to leave children to school. A seat on a bus would make a massive difference in such cases. It is a problem.

There is also a problem where students got transport to school last year but they will not get it this year, as colleagues have mentioned. It can be very disruptive. Brothers or sisters may be on the bus but these students cannot travel on them. The logistics are a massive problem for families. If 80 students need a bus to get to school, can the capacity not be organised to meet demand? Why is there a lottery, with parents or children fighting for places on buses when we know the numbers who need transport? Why is transport not being provided in an adequate way? It amazes me because we always seem to put the service in place or put it to tender on the basis that the demand is not met and capacity is less than the demand. It is a problem.

There is also the question of choosing a school closest to the home. That does not always work. The Johnstownbridge and Broadford areas of Kildare spoken about are on the border with Meath. My colleague has spoken about that general area. It is bordering Meath. When students complete primary school and want to go on to post-primary education, first and foremost, they like to follow their peers and stay with their friends. Most importantly of all, they want to stay within their county so they can play sports and represent their county. That might not mean a lot to all students but it means a lot to most students. In the case of Johnstownbridge, which has been alluded to by my colleague, approximately 40 students are being driven by car from Johnstownbridge to Enfield to get the bus to Kilcock. That distance is 3 km. I have met the Department and we have had meetings on the ground. We have highlighted the issues surrounding where the students are picked up and dropped off and the Department is saying they are outside the line and that it cannot do it. The irony is that if those 40 children came from

the post-primary school in Kilcock and went to the one in their catchment area, as identified by the Department, there is no capacity for those 40 students in that school and a bus would be needed to bring those students to that school anyhow because the current bus would not have the capacity to do so. We need a bit of lateral thinking to accommodate people because if those students move to the school identified by the Department, a bus will need to be provided for the students. Why is flexibility not built in to bring them the 3 km to where they get the bus to go to their school of choice given all the reasons we have outlined?

If the Department is drawing up boundaries and trying to bring it into a system, I can see how these problems can occur but surely when these problems are brought to the Department's attention and discussed on the ground for the reasons my colleagues and I, and many more people, have raised with the Department, some flexibility should be built into the policy and guidelines to deal with those situations so they do not arise because, believe it or not, they cause a lot of hardship, pain, hassle, unnecessary worry and stress for families and students. I know of one family where a student is entering the leaving certificate year and who might not be able to get a bus to go to the school they have attended for the past six years, which is a real worry for the family. That is a problem. As I said at the outset, the school transport scheme works well when it works. It is well organised in areas and Bus Éireann and other bus providers provide an excellent service. However, we are talking about a percentage. It is not *carte blanche*. Flexibility needs to be applied in these areas so that we can have a positive outcome for all concerned. This is what needs to happen and I ask the Department to consider it in the area of policy because it matters.

Chairman: Witnesses will be relieved to hear that I will not go into constituency issues with regard to school transport. I will make a few general comments. Ensuring there is an efficient service that is good value for the taxpayer and that provides safe transport for those who need it is a huge quality-of-life issue for the children, their families and their communities. There are low-income families who receive back to school allowances but because they may live a bit nearer the school than 3.2 km for primary schools or 4.8 km for secondary schools, they may have to pay up to €650, which is a very large amount of money for those who cannot afford it.

We have been talking about the health and safety of the students on the school bus, which is of paramount importance, but we must also think about the health and safety of those children who do not qualify for a school bus because of where they live. There seems to have been a policy whereby school buses have been smaller to dissuade the provision of concessionary spaces to those children who need to access them because there might not be a car at home or parents might not be there because of work. Having to wave good-bye to their child when the child must walk 3 km to school because they could not avail of a space on a bus when 3.2 km is the cut-off point is a very difficult situation for any parent. These are areas we must look at.

It seems that since the Department did away with the catchment areas in 2012, this has caused some of the problems. We have had some good recommendations relating to transport for children with special needs and it would be interesting to hear the views of the Department and Bus Éireann on that.

Witnesses can see by the breadth of questions and concerns from Deputies and Senators that there is a communication problem in terms of trying to get answers. I have certainly experienced that. As late as last week, I was told there is one person working in that area. One cannot even get somebody at the end of the line. Many other services provide a dedicated Oireachtas liaison person. This might be worthwhile so that if Members have particular issues, at least they know they can get through to somebody who could come back even with a rationale for why a

decision has been made. I acknowledge the complex job of the Department. When one looks into the number of students and the number of miles travelled every week, one can see that it is a huge job and this must be acknowledged. As Deputy O'Rourke said, we must commend the service for the good work that is being done. Unfortunately, it is at times like this we hear the negativity. Much of that is because Deputies and Senators are not getting an opportunity to voice their concerns or look for reasons specific decisions are made.

I will revert to the witnesses and look for responses. If any of the members feel the need to come back in, that is fine. We will take a second round of questions but I ask everybody to be very brief and to provide an opportunity for the witnesses to come back to me regarding some of the questions they cannot address today. I will ensure that members get the responses.

Ms Breda Corr: I will address the training issue because it was raised by a few people. There is no other real issue for me. Deputies Moynihan and Martin spoke about nurses. As far as we are aware, there are no nurses available for transport. It is very rare that this happens and the Department does not supply it. As I said at the last meeting of this committee I attended, we are lucky to get nurses in schools. A nurse is not supplied unless the HSE supplies one to the family and the family then uses that time for the bus. We have had many queries about the issues of nurses. As I already said, we had a pilot training programme in Galway. We picked Galway because there was a plethora of schools. A Gaeltacht school, the only special school as Gaeilge in the country, a primary school and post-primary school were also involved. That was 2013, so it is a good while ago. Money was an issue for the Department and for everyone. I can send the evaluation to anyone who wants it. It involves the role of the bus escort, policy and legislation and understanding students with special educational needs, so it is more than autism, medical issues, critical incidents, report writing and record keeping, manual handling and positive behaviour strategies. That is the outline of the programme. The only way that would be paid for would be out of the extra amount that the schools get for administration of the scheme or in capitation. The information is available. If anyone wants it I can send it on.

Today, everyone has alluded to the length of the bus route from the point of view of children without special educational needs. I know that Deputy Rabbitte is from Galway. If children with special educational needs had to travel from either end of Galway to Galway city to attend a special school the journey would take two hours each way, which is not on. I was involved in the rural transport programme in Laois a long time ago. An American transport consultant who happened to live in the area recommended a travel journey of an hour maximum each way because people have different needs, particularly people with disabilities and the elderly. One could push the journey time to a little more than an hour but it would result in behavioural difficulties.

Chairman: I thank Ms Corr for her comments. I shall first ask Bus Éireann to respond. Does Mr. Hernan wish to respond or would he prefer to delegate to his colleagues?

Mr. Ray Hernan: We will cover as many questions as we can. Apologies if we do not cover them all but we will endeavour to do so.

My next comment is not a hospital pass in certain respects. We apply the policy dictated by the Department. Many of the issues that have been raised here are policy-related. We engage with and are involved with the Department on a daily basis to provide practical solutions for any policy issues that arise. I am conscious that the next two months in particular are when stress and anxiety levels are at their highest for all of the stakeholders involved. I mean the parents, kids, the Department and, indeed, ourselves or our colleagues.

There are certain things, outside of the policy area, that we have put in place for this year and it is very much around communication. Many of the issues that have been raised here are around communications or the lack thereof or its timeliness. We have taken on board a lot of those concerns. I will not say they are going to be perfect. We have tried to put in place an escalation process. All of the representatives here today, as individual Deputies and Senators, should have been communicated with directly about an escalation process that we have put in place this year. Contact numbers have been communicated to each of their constituency offices to provide assistance if a Deputy or Senator requires information but cannot get a response. The members have also received the mobile phone numbers that belong to our five regional managers in order to escalate issues if a Deputy or Senator has not received a response. Those letters were sent a number of weeks ago.

Chairman: I do not have the contact details. Can they be resent, please?

Mr. Ray Hernan: Yes, no problem. We understood communication was a key issue last year.

Chairman: I accept that.

Mr. Ray Hernan: In terms of more resources, from the beginning of next week a new telephony system will be in place that will, hopefully, allow more issues to be addressed immediately. Instead of having individual regions trying to deal with queries we have installed a more centralised telephony service that can then transfer calls to people who are available to answer calls. From time to time one area might be more busy than another. The new telephony system will allow us to utilise resources across the whole country more effectively, hopefully. Testing of the system will be completed this week.

I shall highlight the practicalities of some of the issues. All families have received an email notification to apply for tickets. The deadline for payments is 28 July. At this point we know that only 60% of those email communications have been opened. It has been our experience that the deadline will have passed yet a significant proportion of the families will not have replied. We could put in a very hard deadline of 28 July but we would have absolute mayhem after that date. As has already started this week, the first reminder email has gone out to all of those people who have not opened their emails to please do so and to please pay if they have not done so. A reminder email is issued each week between now and the end of the month. Beyond that date we allow a grace period.

That is when we get into a very tight timeline of issuing tickets and trying to ensure that we have availability on buses. As the operator of the scheme, we focus on the people who are eligible first and foremost. We do not specifically focus on the concessionary tickets. We ensure that all eligible pupils have a bus seat or access to transport to reach school, assuming they are eligible. Many of the challenges emanate from constituents because the eligible number will increase or decrease each year which, in turn, influences the number of concessionary places that are available. I shall explain the issues that this situation causes. One might have a space one year but not the next year. Our policy is to very much focus on the availability of places for eligible people rather than availability for the total number of people who have expressed an interest in a bus service.

Many points have been raised about local matters. We will contact the members directly about them. We will liaise with the clerk of the committee to ensure that we cover all of the issues.

A question was asked about eco vehicles by the lady who is no longer here. We acquired new buses two years ago and all of them comply with the highest eco standards applied by the European Commission. The last number of tranches of new vehicles all comply with those standards. However, there is not an overall policy in place that requires vehicles being used to provide a service, be it directly by ourselves or subcontract, to meet the most recent standards. I can say, on behalf of Bus Éireann, that buses that have been acquired by ourselves to provide a direct service meet those standards.

Mr. Gerry Gannon: I shall go through the issues as I noted them. I apologise if I have missed some issues but I was writing them down and trying to keep up as best as I could. My shorthand is possibly not the best. I shall do my best to answer the queries.

In terms of SEN services, there was an issue about contract change. Ms Corr raised the issue of contract changes and short notice.

Ms Breda Corr: Yes.

Mr. Gerry Gannon: Bus Éireann is very mindful that change, particularly change for special educational needs children, can be very distressing for the children and their families. We endeavour to keep things as stable as possible and keep changes to an absolute minimum. Nonetheless, there are operational reasons that changes might have to be made at short notice. Safety is one of the issues. Let us remember that all SEN services are provided by contractors. If a contractor's vehicle is not roadworthy, if it does not have a PSV certificate or the insurance was not renewed then it would be a breach of contract situation. As a result we would have to take immediate action and there would not be time to notify people in advance.

Generally speaking, 20% is the average amount of existing services that are retendered every year. The contractors are made aware that their services are open for tender. Our local offices make contact when they become aware of the identify of the new operators. The procurement campaign, which my colleague here is intimately acquainted with, is a very detailed process that begins in January each year and ends with the contracts being awarded towards the end of July. That is how long it takes to get through all of the various stages. Therefore, it is not possible for us to contact special schools when the contracts are awarded. We could contact them but most schools are on holidays when the contracts are awarded. There can be issues arising from the time that the contracts are awarded, which is unavoidable because of the structure of the procurement process and the amount of time that people have to be allowed to respond. I will not go into the details but I can if the committee requires it. There are valid reasons we cannot give the notification that we would otherwise like to give.

On the issue of contact with the office, the point was raised that there was nobody to contact. There is a Bus Éireann mobile school transport inspector in each area. The local offices can contact that inspector if there are contact difficulties. The school authorities in each area should have his phone number.

In terms of suitable replacement buses, contractors are contractually obligated to have spare vehicles of the type that they are providing first-line. They should have suitable replacement buses themselves.

The issue of the lengths of journeys is valid. I have looked at studies down through the years. I saw a 1998 review of the school transport committee. It looked at this area and concluded that because special needs centres were more diverse in comparison to primary and post-

primary schools there would naturally be a greater travel time involved in bringing children who are more diversely located at home to these schools. The solution reached at that time did not necessarily involve more transport provision but possibly more facilities. I mention that as an observation. I do not believe that the Department has been found wanting in terms of investment in school transport provision.

On the issue of bullying in primary school we have extensive child protection procedures in place in Bus Éireann now. If there are complaints about bullying on school buses we have the wherewithal to take action.

In terms of daily travel time it was mentioned that pupils are in some cases spending up to three hours on post-primary services. There is a daily travel and waiting time criteria under the school transport scheme. At primary level the guideline is one and a half hours, and at post-primary it is two and a half hours. We endeavour to keep our services within that criteria.

Deputy Martin mentioned the issue of training for escorts and drivers operating special educational needs services. Bus Éireann would defer to the specialists in the area, in this case the school authorities who are best acquainted with the children and their individual needs and the methods of calming these children when they are in distress. They are certainly the best qualified people to provide training. There was disciplinary awareness training given for contractor drivers as well as Bus Éireann driver in 2007 when funding was available. If funding was available again we could certainly look at that.

Senator Byrne raised questions about 12 children who were two and a half miles off a route. I would be interested to know more about this, and I will write to the Senator after this meeting. I would like to know if the children are eligible or concessionary, because there is a difference under the rules of the school transport scheme. Again, the reasonable distance service criteria kicks in. For eligible children it is up to 3.2 km from a service. That is considered to be a reasonable distance to service, and is something that we take into account when we are planning our routes.

The issue that the Senator raised concerning Mungret is something that I am not aware of, but I will investigate and revert.

Deputy Nolan spoke about concessionaries, and if it is likely that many concessionary children would lose seats. The answer is that we simply do not know at the moment, because the closing date for the payments is, as Mr. Hernan has mentioned, 28 July. We do not know how many eligibles are actually going to come forward on a route-by-route basis until the payments are received. One of the complicating factors is that there is an Irish tradition - which we are encouraging people to break - of late payments. Irrespective of the closing date for payments we continue to receive payments up to and into the start of the new school year. On a route-by-route basis that can complicate matters. We endeavour to accommodate as many eligible children as possible, and in so doing we have seats available for concessionary children. There is a possibility that we might have to reorganise a service to accommodate the eligible children offering at a late stage. Some concessionary transport may also become available as a result, so we withhold moneys until we know that we do not have the seats. It is only when we are absolutely sure that we have tried everything to accommodate people that we refund the money. That is why there can be a delay with the refunds. I know that it can be frustrating, but I believe that it is preferable to refunding all of the money on 29 July. It is better to try to accommodate as many people as we possibly can.

Senator Gallagher asked how often the route is reviewed. The answer to that is that routes are reviewed on an ongoing basis. If there is a particular problem with a route, for example if the route is still operating along a road where nobody is living any more, that should certainly have been brought to the attention of the local school transport office. If there is no one on the route we can certainly review that.

The question of whether buses are adequately adapted was also raised by Senator Gallagher. He mentioned that that was through the Coach, Tourism and Transport Council, CTTC, submission. The answer to that question is “Yes”. When we are procuring the buses or taxis we ensure that we get a suitable vehicle for the needs of the children for that service. The answer to that is yes, they are adequately adapted, whether with ramps, wheelchair lift access or a taxi in the case of a preschool autistic child. Whatever the case may be they are adequately adapted.

I apologise for the length of this response but there were many questions.

Deputy Moynihan asked a number of questions. He asked about the average distance, the distance being different depending on which way one travels on the road system. That would require a change in policy. The current policy is the shortest traversable distance.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Does that apply irrespective of whether one can actually travel it or not?

Mr. Gerry Gannon: It is the shortest traversable distance by a pedestrianised route. If one can walk the distance-----

Chairman: The witness is referring to pedestrianised as opposed to motorised.

Mr. Gerry Gannon: 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 suitable for measuring purposes. That is the current policy.

I have answered the question on escorts, and I believe Mr. Hernan has answered Senator Lawless’s question about getting information and updates.

There were local issues concerning services from Johnstownbridge to Edenderry and in Sal-lins. I will inquire with the local office and report back to the House. I undertake to do that. A local issue was also raised by Deputy Scanlon about Blacklion and a school in the area, Coláiste Muire in Ballymote. Again I would have to refer to the local office. We have more than 6,500 routes. I am acquainted with some of them but obviously not all.

Senator Murnane O’Connor asked questions about how concessionary tickets are issued. Broadly speaking concessionary tickets are issued after the eligibles have been accommodated. In order to try to reduce levels of anxiety this year we have already started to issue eligible and concessionary tickets, beginning yesterday. We will be issuing more than 5,000 tickets which we have ordered from the printers this week. Some concessionary families will know earlier this year than last year that they will have transport. We only started issuing tickets in August last year. That applies where we know that there is not a loading issue, and where people have paid on time, and indeed paid well ahead of the closing date on 28 July. I will answer the question about how concessionary tickets are issued in a little more depth. The concessionary tickets are issued after the eligible children have been accommodated. If the route is over-subscribed there is a random selection process applied. The order of priority is that existing concessionary children and their siblings who have paid by the closing date of 28 July are given first priority.

The second priority is all new applicants who applied and paid on time. The third priority is other families that do not fall into either of those categories, in other words who did not pay on time or apply on time. They would be the third priority if a service is over-subscribed. There has been a huge increase in the number of concessionaries as we all know.

Deputy O'Rourke mentioned people not taking up seats and holding onto a ticket. It is an old chestnut. It was a perennial issue pre-2011 when tickets were free under the school transport scheme for eligible children. It was a very frustrating issue. The answer to it is not simple. Families will purchase a ticket in some cases. The Deputy mentioned free tickets so I presume he means people who have a medical card and are getting the waiver. Some families will use the ticket when it suits. It might suit one day a week. It might suit every morning and not every evening. A parent might be working and might be able to bring a child into school and the child can get the bus home. If one was to consider this, one would have to consider where to draw the line. Must they use the bus every day? What happens if children get sick? How long could they be sick for before we withdraw the ticket? There are a lot of issues around that. I am only making observations because they are policy issues. Bus Éireann has to issue only the number of tickets for seats on the bus. We will not issue more tickets than there are seats on the bus because we cannot risk an overload situation. We could not notionally allow 5% for absenteeism and go 5% over the threshold. We could not do that; we could not take the risk.

The problem with families not getting tickets for all children was another issue that was raised. Some siblings get tickets and others do not. That can be because of the changes to the rules in the scheme. The eligible children who retain their eligibility would likely get their tickets and other children who are concessionary would be subject to the rules governing concessionaries. It is possible that some siblings might get a ticket and another sibling might not. That is the application of policy under the scheme.

Can the capacity of a bus be increased to meet demand was another question the Deputy raised. I think he was talking about Johnstown Bridge to Kilcock. The answer to that is it can be done in line with the criteria of the school transport scheme. If there are more eligible children we have to consider increasing the size of the vehicle serving the school. If the children are concessionary we cannot incur additional State cost to accommodate concessionary children because they are not eligible under the scheme in the first place. It is set out under the rules of the school transport scheme. We have to apply the policy as it is laid down.

The Chairman raised the issue about the dedicated Oireachtas liaison person. Mr. Ray Hernan answered that question.

That is all I have. I hope I have not missed people.

Chairman: Does Ms Margaret Hubbard wish to add anything?

Ms Margaret Hubbard: Mr. Gannon has more or less covered everything. A number of members mentioned the experience. Bus Éireann carries out a two stage process for procurement. The first stage is the pre-qualification stage at which we take into account the experience the drivers have in the provision of transport services. When it comes to the invitation to tender stage, we ask for more comprehensive detail about special needs. They would score more if they had experience working with special needs children.

Chairman: A representative from the Department should comment now.

Mr. Richard Dolan: Quite a number of the operational issues have been dealt with compre-

hensively. Ms Breda Corr has mentioned some of the training issues. I will give an explanation of some of the policy issues. As has been said before, school transport is a national scheme. It brings 116,000 kids to school and home every day. It is one of the largest transport networks in the country and it costs €182 million each year. I apologise if I miss anything. The current policy was introduced in 2012 and it does not take into account the parish or county boundaries. We recognise it is difficult to have a scheme that fits all specific locations in a national scheme on set criteria and it is challenging to have it fit every local area. The current school transport policy is based on a distance criterion of the closest school; it is 3.2 km at primary and 4.8 km at post-primary. Parents choose whichever school they want for their children but if there is a requirement for school transport there are criteria to be met. These criteria are set down in the schemes.

One of the issues mentioned was the flexibility on the number of ten eligible students. Last summer one of the results of the Oireachtas cross-party group's review of concessionary transport was the Minister of State's announcement of some flexibility on the figure of ten if a school can show it will build back up to it in subsequent years.

The shortest traversable route has been mentioned. It should be noted that under the school transport policy, the shortest traversable route is used to establish eligibility. As Mr. Gerry Gannon and Mr. Ray Hernan have pointed out, it does not necessarily equate to the route the bus will take.

The training issue has been mentioned. I am not sure who mentioned the issue of over-subscribed schools. Currently the section 29 appeal is considered the benchmarking of a full school but there is other information available and we can certainly look at that issue.

Concessionary transport is not guaranteed under current policy from year to year. In recent years there has not been a downsizing of buses which is part of the reason why numbers on concessionary transport have grown. Under current school transport policy, bus size will not be increased to cater for concessionary pupils.

On the ethos issue, there is a slight difference between policy at primary and post-primary. For instance, at primary, we have children bypassing a local Catholic school to go to a multi-denominational school. At post-primary the ethos issue occurs in the context of minority religions. It largely involves eligibility for Church of Ireland schools on the post-primary scheme. The appeals system was mentioned by a number of people. The current appeals system is a process appeal but under the programme for Government there was a commitment to review the appeals system and that review is due to be published shortly.

The communications issue was widely mentioned but it has been dealt with very well by my Bus Éireann colleagues. Unless there are further questions, I think it has been dealt with.

They were the notes I have on the policy issues. I apologise if I have missed anything.

Chairman: Does Ms Niamh McElduff have any comments to make?

Ms Niamh McElduff: No.

Chairman: I will go back to committee members first.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am disappointed the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, is not here given it is his brief. I do not think it is good enough. I met Deputy Halligan over the appeals

issue and all the other issues that were raised. When will the appeals review be published? Shortly is not good enough. I have constituents contacting me. I have constituents in Rhode, County Offaly, who felt very aggrieved last year. They are very anxious to see this appeals review. We need a timeframe so I would be grateful if the Department could get back to me directly on it.

Chairman: The Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, was not specifically asked to attend. I am sure he was aware of the meeting but he did not get an invitation from us to attend. Does Senator Ruane want to add anything?

Senator Lynn Ruane: No.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the witnesses for their responses and I appreciate that they will come back to us in writing with details on particular queries. While I do not want to labour the point, we all raised the communications issue, which it is fair to say has improved, but it is still not where we would like it to be. It is better than last year, but that is not saying much.

I wish to finish on a positive note. I did not want to bring it up initially because I wanted to focus on the issues with the service, which are extremely important to our constituents. I attended the Young Scientist exhibition in the RDS earlier this year. In one of the projects, students from Maynooth community college in my constituency had researched school transport. I asked them to send me on the numbers and they stack up. The school transport scheme is normally viewed as an exceptional scheme to get students from rural out-of-the-way places to school as they may find it difficult otherwise.

They turned that on its head and asked if the school transport scheme could become the default for transport to school. Would students living two streets away from school still get the bus as much as they would if they lived two or five miles outside the town? They surveyed a number of obvious benefits to congestion and climate change that accrue from having fewer vehicles on the road. The same argument for adults to use public transport to get to work rather than individuals driving their cars can be made for schoolchildren. This is not just in the far-flung places but also in the towns.

It was an interesting observation and an interesting project. The statistics those second level students produced were very impressive and stood up to scrutiny. I do not expect the witnesses to come back with a comprehensive reply on that today. However, it should be put on the agenda in order that it could be considered as policy at some stage.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the witnesses for their responses. I did not get an answer to one of my earlier questions. I seek a “Yes” or “No” answer from the witnesses from Bus Éireann and the Department. Have they all read what the report of the Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, states about bus transport? Does Bus Éireann carry out a risk assessment for those children who have to walk along dangerous roads to access a bus stop in rural areas?

A departmental official said that the Minister looked at the tolerance level and it is in place, in effect. That is very grey for me. I do not know how it is in place and how long it has been there. How is it being enacted and judged? Is it only for access to Government Deputies or Ministers or is it available throughout the country? I do not understand the tolerance. I was talking about having a tolerance of seven to ten or eight to ten children in order that there would be flexibility where numbers would drop back, for example, to eight, but greater numbers would be coming through in future. I need to know that because it would be a clear mes-

sage for schools in rural areas.

Mr. Gannon said that someone did not need to be able to drive it to be able to access it or to be able to measure it. I think that is absolutely shameful.

Deputy Frank O'Rourke: Mr. Dolan spoke about oversubscribed schools. In one particular case a school is oversubscribed and has no capacity for students to attend. The reason cited not to provide public transport to bring them to an alternative school is that there will be capacity in that school in the future. I know Ms McElduff is shaking her head and saying it is not right. However, the parents got it in writing from the Department to say that there are plans to extend the school in 18 months or two years and in the interim it would not consider providing transport to the alternative school.

It all hinges on the area we discussed earlier, which affects Johnstownbridge and Broadford. The crux of the problem is the lack of flexibility in the Department. I note the officials have said there will be no change on the discretionary side, etc. The reality is that there is a cohort of students who come under three different headings. They need to get to school, whether it is primary or post-primary. That issue needs to be looked at because a student living in the next estate or a mile down the road from a student who has the ticket still has to get to school and may have no way of getting there. Walking there can be an issue because, as Deputy Rabbitte has pointed out, in most cases there is no infrastructure. There is no other public transport. Most households no longer have two cars because circumstances have changed in recent years, as we know. That is the reality and that is why I am appealing to the Department to discuss the practicality of how this affects families, communities and schools.

It is ironic that post-primary schools are approaching parents with children in primary schools that would be identified by the Department as being in a different catchment area, promoting their school and advocating for students to come there. Parents and students are saying, "Yes. I like that. I think I'll do that." Then they do it and find they have no way of getting there because they are outside the boundary or because of a guideline. We need to focus on that area because it is a problem. Irrespective of how much we refer back to guidelines and legislation, that is a practical problem on the ground and it is not appropriate for Ms McElduff to say it does not exist. It does exist because parents have told me it is a problem.

Chairman: Do the witnesses have any responses to the final few interjections?

Mr. Richard Dolan: I ask the Deputy to supply the details of the oversubscribed school. We can certainly look into it. There is a facility within the scheme to take into account where a school is full. That is part of the scheme.

The flexibility on the tolerance of ten children was something the Minister announced. I am not sure of the date of the announcement. If a transport service is falling below ten but the school can show the figure will recover subsequently, it will be held in place. It is over the past few months. I will get the Deputy the date and can send on the announcement to her.

Chairman: Does Mr. Hernan wish to come back?

Mr. Ray Hernan: I do not know if-----

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Mr. Dolan also has to answer my question on the Ombudsman for Children. Have the departmental officials read the report of the Ombudsman for Children?

Chairman: The Deputy should go through the Chair.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I am sorry, Chairman.

Chairman: It has been a long meeting. Did Mr. Dolan have the opportunity?

Mr. Richard Dolan: I have not had the opportunity to read it. However, I will read it.

Chairman: It is recommended reading for everybody.

Mr. Ray Hernan: I was not aware of it and therefore I have not read it. I note that and will do it and will request it to be received. I also wish to comment on route assessments. A route assessment is done for all the vehicles. That also includes an assessment of the pickup points. If a parent expresses a concern on the riskiness of a pickup point, I need to clarify how that is dealt with within the structures.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank Mr. Hernan.

Mr. Gerry Gannon: As with Mr. Hernan, I was not aware of the report of the Ombudsman for Children and have not read it, but I will. Deputy Lawless mentioned the project carried out by students in Maynooth community college. I was aware of that project. I invited the students to my office and we discussed school transport. I am aware of what they were doing and tried to assist as best we could. Mr. Hernan has answered the question about the route assessment and the suitability of pickup points.

Chairman: It has been a few interesting hours and everybody's input has been really important. We look forward to continued engagement to try to improve communication flows. Having listened to the Deputies and Senators, I know that the delegates will appreciate the level of frustration felt in many households that are preparing to send their children back to school in September. We learned a lot from the insights and observations of the delegates and Members. We will need to ensure we invite all of the Members back to the next meeting of the committee to ensure it will be the best-attended session. It is very much appreciated and we look forward to the ongoing dialogue.

The joint committee adjourned at 7 p.m. *sine die*.