

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

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*Déardaoin, 12 Meán Fómhair 2019*

*Thursday, 12 September 2019*

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The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

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|------------------------|-------------------|
| Thomas Byrne,          | Robbie Gallagher, |
| Catherine Martin,      | Paul Gavan,       |
| Jan O'Sullivan,        | Lynn Ruane.       |
| Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire. |                   |

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

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** I welcome Deputy Ó Laoghaire to his first meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills and thank Deputy Funchion for the role she played as a member of the committee.

We will now go into private session.

*The joint committee went into private session at 10.35 a.m. and resumed in public session at 10.50 a.m.*

### **Eligibility Criteria of Student Universal Support Ireland: Discussion**

**Chairman:** Our business today is No. 10 on our agenda, engagement with stakeholders on the eligibility, application procedure and appeals process of the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant. On behalf of the committee, I welcome the three stakeholders. We are joined by Ms Lorna Fitzpatrick, president of the Union of Students in Ireland, USI. She is very welcome to her first meeting with the Joint Committee on Education and Skills and I wish her the best of luck in the term she has ahead. I welcome Ms Ciara Fanning, who is president of the Irish Second-Level Students Union. We always make a point of engaging with students and student representative bodies. I wish her well in her year ahead too. I also welcome Mr. Philip Connolly, who is the grants processing manager for Student Universal Support Ireland. I will invite all three witnesses to make a brief opening statement, of a maximum of three minutes each. That will be followed by engagement with members of the committee.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that 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. However, if they are directed by me, as Chair, to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a 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 they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I advise witnesses that any opening statement they make to the committee will be published on the committee website after the meeting.

I remind members 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.

**Ms Lorna Fitzpatrick:** I thank members for having us today. I am here on behalf of the Union of Students in Ireland, which represents more than 374,000 students across the island of Ireland. USI recognises and appreciates that the SUSI grant is a great support to students throughout their time in college. We welcome this review. We believe there is a wider issue with budget decisions that have had an impact on students and their families, such as changes to the adjacency rate and cuts to the levels of awards for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. USI has been lobbying for the reversal of those decisions since 2011, which is laid out in our pre-budget submission, which was circulated to the committee in advance of this meeting.

I will address the eligibility criteria. We understand the need for procedures to facilitate a faster application and decision-making process but we believe there are areas that can be improved, which could lead to a much better system that could better support students through their time in college. We believe there is a need for additional flexibility with regard to the eligibility procedures. As we know, life can be full of unexpected occurrences and as a result, some applications may not fit the criteria as comfortably as others. We believe there should be flexibility to support students throughout the application procedure and that they should be supported when there is a clear need for support but they may not exactly meet each criterion outlined. This flexibility should extend to supporting documentation requested and we believe the documentation accepted should be reviewed and extended, especially about residency and independent status. Given the current costs associated with accessing education, we recommend that the earning limit and specific time period that students can work under be removed from the holiday earnings element of the SUSI application.

The second element we were asked to comment on related to the application procedure. We commend SUSI on the work it has completed in improving the application procedure for students, including the students' union, SU, officer helpline, which is an invaluable source. We believe a change in the system of how SUSI notifies colleges about awards granted to students would be helpful. We have heard from students who have been contacted by colleges about missing fee payment deadlines. However, they received an award and their fees have been covered by SUSI. This has resulted in students being prevented from accessing certain areas on campus and their online learning platforms, which, as the committee will understand, has a significant impact on their educational experience.

We were asked to consider the appeals process. Again, we believe there should be more flexibility allowed for changes in circumstances. Students experience many changes throughout their time in college, some of which are completely out of their control and we do not believe they should be penalised for this. We also recommend that greater emphasis be placed on exceptional circumstances when students are appealing a SUSI decision. If they have applied to SUSI and later experience something that qualifies as an exceptional circumstance, they should be in a position to appeal the original decision and fully understand the procedure available to them to do so.

The Union of Students in Ireland welcomes the opportunity to review the SUSI grants system. We believe this sets the agenda for reforms to ensure students who are in need of financial support can receive such support to further their education. Our submission goes into more detail on some of the topics I have highlighted but also makes additional recommendations, on which I will gladly answer questions. Students and their families are struggling to access post-second level education. SUSI is a great support to students and helps to alleviate some of the financial pressures. However, with fees among the highest in the world and the spiralling cost of living, students need additional financial support. That being said, making the system more user-friendly and flexible would be a welcome advancement. We need to break down the barriers faced by students when accessing education. Reforming the SUSI system would be one step on that path.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Fitzpatrick for her contribution. I now invite Ms Fanning to make an opening statement on behalf of the Irish Second-Level Students Union.

**Ms Ciara Fanning:** On behalf of the Irish Second-Level Students Union, ISSU, I thank the Chairman, Deputies and Senators for inviting us to discuss the SUSI grants system. As the representative voice of second level students, we welcome the consultation with students on

student issues.

One of the biggest barriers facing second level students regarding the SUSI grant is the inability to be classed as a financially independent candidate if one is under 23 years on 1 January preceding the start of one's course. Many students are supporting themselves by working part time while at second level and throughout their third level education. These are the students who are most in need of independent candidate status. Their parents' income, no matter the amount, has no influence on their own financial situation. The criteria for estrangement are very strict, with most students not meeting them but still facing the task of financing themselves if they wish to continue to third level. The ISSU recommends that the criteria for students under the age of 23 years to be eligible for classification as financially independent candidates be made less severe to allow for a more empathic and understanding system for students who are trying to progress their education. With the rising cost of living and education, many second level students work part time throughout their education and during the summer holidays. The number of 16 and 17 year olds in employment increased by more than 20% in three years, from 25,000 in 2015 to 30,650 in 2017. ISSU members have reported having to leave part-time employment in order to be eligible for the SUSI grant, as their own income would put them just over the edge of the eligibility criteria, meaning that there is more to lose than gain by working part time. In an economy where it is necessary for a lot of young people to find part-time work and where many sectors rely on these workers, the system should not be punishing them for so doing. We recommend that the allowance for earnings of students with summer employment be extended to include weekend and part-time work throughout the academic year.

While the SUSI grant, in its current form, still serves its purpose as an accessibility tool to allow students to progress to third level, the amount payable to recipients has remained the same since its introduction in 2012. This is no longer reflective of the cost of living faced by students, particularly for housing in larger cities. Where once a maintenance grant of €3,000 may have covered the full cost of student accommodation for the academic term, now it does not even cover half the cost in major cities such as Dublin, Cork and Galway. For the SUSI grant to fulfil its intended purpose, it is essential that it be increased to reflect the increased cost of living for students in order to make third level education as accessible as possible. Allowances should be made for students attending institutions in larger towns and cities and the rents payable for purpose-built student accommodation on campuses and through private providers should be capped.

Third level education must be accessible to all students, regardless of income and financial background. The SUSI grants system must be as efficient as possible to allow students to progress with the development of their education. The reality is that the cost of living is much higher today than in 2012. We ask committee members to take this into account and take on board our recommendations to ensure SUSI, as intended, will not leave any student behind.

**Chairman:** I now turn to the man who will solve all of our problems, Mr. Philip Connolly from SUSI.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** I thank the joint committee for inviting representatives of SUSI to attend. I am the grant operations manager. SUSI has also been invited by the committee to make a written submission on the grant eligibility criteria which are prescribed in the Student Support Act and the student grant schemes and regulations issued annually by the Minister for Education and Skills. Our written submission summarises the statutory provisions for the information of the committee and outlines the administrative processes and procedures SUSI implements to enable students to avail of grant funding under the schemes.

I take the opportunity to inform the committee briefly about our work and current focus on processing grant applications for the forthcoming 2019-20 academic year. The core work of SUSI is the processing of large volumes of applications within a short timeframe to determine eligibility under the criteria outlined in the legislation. Almost 100,000 applications are received annually and almost 80,000 grants awarded, representing a sum of €350 million annually in grant support for students.

SUSI workflows and staffing levels are seasonally variable, as grant applications are processed from April to October and grant payments made to students and colleges from September to June. Additional temporary assessment staff are recruited annually, while scaleable customer support and document management functions are delivered through outsourced providers. The SUSI support desk provides advice and information for students at all stages of the process through telephone, e-mail and social media communications and our website. We also attend college open days and other information events for students nationwide.

As a modern, centralised Government service, the continuous improvement of service delivery for students is central to our planning and work cycles from year to year. The SUSI application submission process is online and further online services continue to be added. The assessment process is streamlined through the use of information technology. Applications are verified through extended data sharing with other Government agencies. Maintenance grant payments are made directly to students' bank accounts, while fee grants are paid to colleges on their behalf.

Based on these improvements, students have been able to apply to SUSI earlier each year. Application turnaround times are shorter, while the requirement for supporting documents has been greatly reduced, with increasing numbers of students receiving a decision on the basis of their online applications alone without the need for supporting documents. All students receive earlier decisions on their applications and earlier payment of their grants. A very high level of customer support is provided for students throughout the grant application and payment process, including increased communication on opening and closing dates. A service level agreement is in place with the Department of Education and Skills to ensure SUSI continues to meet and improve on its performance targets in all of these areas and, for their part, students are encouraged to apply to SUSI as early as possible to ensure a decision on their grant applications before they accept a college place or return to college.

Since our online application system opened, following the publication of the 2019 grants scheme in April, we have received 90,000 of an expected 96,500 grant applications for the forthcoming 2019-20 academic year. A total of 81% of all expected applications were received before the priority processing dates in June and July. To date, we have finalised 74,000 of these applications. Of the remaining applications, 9,500 are awaiting receipt of documents requested from students, while SUSI has 6,500 applications in hand for processing. Average turnaround times for submitted applications and documents are running at less than two weeks. SUSI is processing more than 5,000 applications a week. A total of 63,000 grants have been awarded to date this year. Subject to confirmation by colleges in the coming weeks that students are registered and attending their courses, we expect to commence payment of 50,000 grants by the end of this month. This represents 69% of the expected total number of grants to be paid this year, a figure which will rise to 91% by the end of October and 98% by the end of November as students enter or return to college. SUSI will also be making payments on a weekly basis from September to December to ensure students receive their first monthly grant payment as soon as possible after their registration is confirmed.

While SUSI does not have an advisory or policy-making role on student grants, we will be happy to answer members' questions about the operational arrangements in place to make the grants scheme accessible to students and ensure grant applications and payments will continue to be processed fairly, uniformly and efficiently.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Connolly. It is important to stress the point that SUSI does not have a policy-making role and that its representatives are here to discuss its operations. Having said that, I have no doubt that there will be plenty of questions from members.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I thank all of the representatives for their presentations. I will focus on Mr. Connolly. I agree with everything included in his submission. I am sure other committee members will pick up on what is included in the other presentations.

I heard what Mr. Connolly had to say about operations, but in a sense it is about policies because to improve operations we might need to improve the policies attached to them. From Mr. Connolly's experience of rolling out the system, what knowledge has he gathered in the time he has spent in his position about the barriers to people accessing SUSI? According to documentation, SUSI is refusing affidavits as a form of proof of parents being estranged. Why is that so? What kind of documentation does SUSI suggest a child or young person should provide to show that he or she has lived with a grandparent for 20 years because of a volatile situation with his or her parents? I will cite an example that I only received yesterday, although the girl in question is not the only person to have experienced this. She supplied an affidavit, a birth certificate with no father named on it, provided an overview of her situation and showed proof of her having lived with her grandmother. SUSI's response was that she needed to get a letter from her mother as proof, a mother to whom she had not spoken in a long time. I wonder about SUSI's training around and understanding of some of the predicaments that young people can be put in just to have their applications processed. Women get affidavit forms signed in order to acquire passports for children who are estranged from their fathers, yet an affidavit, which is a legal document, is being refused by SUSI. What is the policy behind that?

In Mr. Connolly's experience of applications and working with his team, who else should be viewed as a class of people in terms of independence or dependence? Should social determinants be taken into account when, for example, someone exceeds the financial threshold slightly but is the first person in his or her family to go to college? There are other social determinants. A mother might be a hairdresser and a father might work in construction, bringing them slightly over the threshold, but they have no educational background themselves. Since SUSI's establishment, should other classes have been recognised when making refusals? I am not asking Mr. Connolly to comment on policy, but on his wealth of experience of trends among the people applying.

Should family sizes be taken into account? Should we switch from income to outgoings? An income can look one way, but with high rents, mortgages and costs of living, someone could still be in the red and above SUSI's threshold regardless of his or her income. In light of Mr. Connolly's experience of the types of people being refused, should the threshold be tweaked?

I am not asking Mr. Connolly for his personal opinion, but in terms of the grant following the person rather than the institution, do many people fall through the cracks because of their socio-economic backgrounds? They are not in a position to get the points they need, so they are forced into private colleges that they cannot afford. I understand the arguments for not funding private colleges, but should the grant follow particular classes of people instead of institutions?

I hope that all of my questions were clear.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I thank the witnesses for attending and presenting. The financial pressure on students is extraordinary. We could deal with each question and each aspect of the SUSI programme individually, but that would fundamentally be to miss the bigger picture, that being, underinvestment in the core funding of third level institutions by the Government. We should not ignore that in our discussions today - it is the elephant in the room. We have the second highest student fees in the EU. If the UK leaves, we will be promoted to the No. 1 spot. That is the Government unfairly placing the burden on students. It must change.

The Government has chosen to cast a blind eye on the country's crumbling third level institutions. In 2008, State spending on third level education was just under €9,000 per student and it is less than €5,000 per student 11 years later. That does not make sense. It is no wonder we saw reports yesterday that Trinity College Dublin has dropped more than 40 places in the international university ranking. It used to be in the top 100 universities. Core funding is linked to everything we are discussing today and that has been ignored by the Government. Despite every member of this committee seeking to have the concerns raised in the Cassells report addressed, they have been ignored by the Government. Do the student witnesses feel that if core funding were addressed, it would relieve the current pressure on students?

The non-adjacent rate criteria have increased the distance from home to study location from 24 km to 45 km. I have met representatives from the USI a few times. In its pre-budget submission, the USI refers to Birr, County Offaly, which is 40 km from the nearest third level institution, namely, Athlone Institute of Technology. However, the earliest a student from Birr can arrive at Athlone Institute of Technology if using a bus service is 1.25 p.m. That is of no use to students as they will have missed half a day. The USI also mentions that Killarney is 36 km from the Institute of Technology, Tralee, but the cost of commuting to the town is only €1.50 less per week by bus or 10 cent less per week by train than the cost of student accommodation.

The non-adjacent rate criteria must be reviewed. I appreciate that as the criteria apply generally, they may be seen as fair, but the methods of calculation seem to make little or no sense. They do not take into account glaring issues as outlined in the case studies I mention. We have appalling public transport in this country, especially in the more rural parts outside Dublin where students face greater dilemmas when the 45 km criterion applies. We must ensure the calculations are done in a more effective way. I understand the transparency involved in using Google maps but it does not take into account realities for students as outlined in the two case studies I mentioned.

Has there been any engagement with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, specifically with respect to the provision of public transport to third level institutions? Does SUSI envisage a framework that would address some of the issues outlined in the Athlone and Kerry cases I have brought to the attention of the committee thanks to the work of the USI?

We cannot ignore the core funding aspect in discussing these matters but we also cannot ignore equality of access to education. If we are discussing barriers to people accessing SUSI, we must consider barriers to people simply trying to access education. This brings into play the matter of direct provision. Asylum seekers are currently considered international students when applying for higher education, meaning they must pay somewhere between €10,000 and €20,000 in fees. What sort of country are we? This indicates to asylum seekers that they can only go to second level. That is the message we are giving these people who are most vulnerable and who we should try to support and protect. We are meant to ensure they can get a fair

shot in our country but we are saying “No”. It is a policy matter but one we must address. A number of measures have been taken, including a pilot support scheme, but that has been in place since 2015. How long should something remain a pilot scheme before real and long-lasting measures are implemented? We are four years on.

Could the criterion of proving residency for three of the past five years in order to be eligible for SUSI services be reviewed? Those who are seeking asylum do not get to choose how long they will be living in our country so how will they meet that criterion? They are seeking refuge and also a fair shot. Education is the greatest equaliser of all but only if we make it equal. That is a conversation that needs to be had. The criterion regarding residency for three of the last five years must be reviewed.

Ms Fanning outlined the dependency criterion in great detail. I do not understand why all students up to the age of 23 years are classed as dependants, regardless of their living status, whether they are homeless or are not living with their families because they had decided not to or had been forced from their home. We are not considering these cases. Will someone explain the logic of this, as it is not the reality of many students today? I anticipate that it relates to how mature students are classified as such from the age of 23 but that does not relate to dependency. Many people are totally independent from the age of 18, 19 or 20. Does SUSI or the USI have information on how many students fall into this category of being independent under the SUSI criteria were it not for the age restriction?

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** I thank all those who presented to the committee. I will follow on from the point made by Deputy Catherine Martin on the Cassells report. We discussed this in private session. That it has been referred to the European Union means a further delay. It needs to be addressed and this committee wishes to move forward on it.

The other major issue, which Ms Fitzpatrick mentioned, is the cost of accommodation for students, which has vastly increased in recent years. This puts great pressure on students regardless of whether they access SUSI. That is one reason I wished to concentrate on the adjacent rate versus the non-adjacent rate. I understand that Mr. Connolly is not here to discuss policy but can he speak on the use of measuring the shortest distance rather than the indicated journey duration, which is the terminology used in the regulations? We all know of situations where the shortest distance is not the route one can take for whatever reason, whether one takes public transport or not. In many cases, people are forced to drive, which also adds to pollution, etc. Can all the witnesses indicate whether this arises as one of the big issues preventing young people from accessing the full SUSI grant, whereby they cannot live at home but still are unable to access the full grant?

My constituency office receives many cases relating to appeals, as no doubt do others. The appeals system beyond SUSI has some more flexibility. Do Mr. Connolly and the SUSI office find it frustrating that SUSI is unable to show the same flexibility? We have experience of several cases that eventually were overturned and where the grant was given but the regulations under SUSI are very specific. Presumably it is not possible to veer from them. I do not know whether Mr. Connolly can answer that question but it seems that more flexibility in the highly rigid SUSI system might address many of these issues.

The regulations regarding holiday earnings are also very rigid. Both Ms Fanning and Ms Fitzpatrick made the point that a deterrent to students working does not make sense. The holiday period in the summer is just June, July and August, it does not even go into September. There is an argument for more flexibility. The system has been in place since 2012, the legisla-

tion having been passed in 2011. It is time to review the lack of flexibility.

I have another question specifically for Mr. Connolly. My constituency office dealt with a case where a family received an inheritance. That seems to have been taken into account in determining whether the son or daughter of that particular family could get a SUSI grant, even though it was only a once-off payment, not a yearly income. That is totally wrong given it is a once-off amount that accrued because an older family member died and left money to the family.

Others have covered, and will cover again, the issue of dependency. Students could be married with kids and in a partnership at the age of 23 and have no financial dependence on their parents whatsoever and yet still be considered a dependant and have their parents' incomes taken into account when considering their eligibility for a grant. That needs to be reviewed.

I have one more question for Mr. Connolly. Once defined, an applicant's class continues to apply for the duration of their studies at that level and an applicant is, thus, only reclassified on progressing from further education to higher education. It also seems very unfair that, even if circumstances change, one cannot make a change during those studies. Is that correct? That also needs to be reviewed.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** We are talking, to a large extent, about how SUSI applies, its criteria and eligibility. It is worth remarking upon that and I invite comments from ISSU and the USI on this matter because SUSI is constrained. SUSI does not go far enough most of the time. The Minister for Education and Skills is advising people to use the SUSI grant for accommodation, which is not what it is for, and even if it was, it would not go anywhere near far enough, particularly in the large, urban centres. We need to address how this applies and ensure that everyone who is entitled gets a grant but we must acknowledge the fact that, very often, the grant does not go anywhere near far enough to ensure that people have the right to third level education such as they should and as was intended. I invite comments on that.

I have a question for Mr. Connolly, which is similar to that put by Deputy O'Sullivan. SUSI is rules-based. I am, in general, a fan of rules-based systems. For example, 95% of the social welfare system is rules-based but 5% is still discretionary. We experience the value of that in our constituency offices. There is no way that a set of rules can always take into account every set of circumstances; it is impossible. I believe that discretion is of value in the social welfare system. Is there any element of discretion in the SUSI grant process? Do our guests think it would benefit from discretion? Do they think there are circumstances in which discretion could be applied? I imagine there are and discretion exists in many other areas of public provision.

I have also come across the issue of how SUSI deals with evaluating income in instances where overtime is a significant consideration. Could our guests clarify that? I have come across cases of people on a 12-month contract with Apple, or a company such as that, and something big happens in the plant that results in three months of fantastic overtime and, at the end of it, they return to a very modest income. People can sometimes find themselves in difficulty because, on paper and for a period, it looks as if their income is much higher than it is over a longer period and they are under a lot more financial pressure than their overtime-inflated income suggests.

The issue of dependency has been, rightly, commented on a few times. I will give two examples of cases I have come across, one involving a person aged under 23 and the other concerning a person over 23. The first case involves a man who was just out of school and who had

a difficult relationship with his parents. He was couch-surfing and his parents would not give him so much as the money for a cup of coffee; no support was being given at all. The young man could not afford to find accommodation of his own and was couch-surfing in the homes of friends and other relatives. He found it very difficult to establish that he was not dependent on his parents. My recollection of the case is that SUSI deemed him not to be independent but the case went through an independent appeals process and he was found to be independent. It still took a very long time and it was very difficult for him in those circumstances.

I also found one case of someone who was over 23. The automatic assumption concerning those under 23 is difficult but again I refer to discretion. We are in a housing crisis. People find themselves in situations they do not expect. I came across a nursing student who was entering her second year. She supported herself through her first year and the cost of doing so meant she had to return to her parents' home. She was welcome there but she was married with three kids. She moved back to her parents' house because of the accommodation situation. She was a mature student. She discovered SUSI in her second year and sought to apply for the grant to ease the pressure on her income. She was married with three kids but was not treated as an independent student. Surely that cannot be right. It may be within the rules but it indicates the need for discretion.

I was previously a spokesperson on children. People dealing with children leaving care and people in aftercare indicated to me that they found the SUSI system to be very rigid. There is a need for additional flexibility for those who are in aftercare or are leaving care. People might leave a care situation, apply for a third level course, find it is not for them and drop out. Suddenly, that door is closed to them and there is not enough flexibility. Perhaps these people should not be obliged to defer for so long or perhaps they should have the option to defer without losing their entitlements. Like those in direct provision, they are a particular category and supporting them through their education requires a specific approach.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** A rules-based system is important. While I agree that SUSI is rigid, the rules must be changed on this side of the desk and I am not sure whether Mr. Connolly has a role in that. Does he advise the Government on the statutory scheme that is published every year? Can Mr. Connolly comment on the reduction in the SUSI budget this year? Is that having an impact? The Estimate provided for SUSI by the Department of Education and Skills was down by €2 million from last year. Does Mr. Connolly expect that to get worse or better during the year? Can he outline the number of postgraduates who have received grants since that was restored as a result of the confidence and supply agreement? If there has been already a reduction this year and more postgraduates are coming into the system without a change in income thresholds etc., does SUSI expect a reduction in the overall number receiving grants?

I agree with a lot of the points that have been made. I encountered one case that I thought was very unfair. We all have cases like this. A parent got a bonus last year. Crazy, it was taken into account this year although it was a once-off bonus and it put this person over the threshold. I thought provisions for a change of circumstances would apply in that regard. It is having a profound effect. I also had a case concerning an inheritance. It could not be recorded as zero but it was a field which could not be sold. It was not accepted that it was of zero value and it put someone over the limit. I am sure someone would have taken it but it certainly was of no use to the family.

Moreover, in breach of the general data protection regulation, GDPR, legislation, SUSI requires Deputies - and presumably Senators - to provide consents for constituents. Under the GDPR legislation, SUSI can assume that we have the consent if we have the information and

as such, we do not need to call punters to get forms. That is a mistake on SUSI's part. It is not required by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. I am pushing back against a State body in this regard. If someone comes to us, SUSI is entitled to assume that we have his or her consent to make a representation.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** I welcome Ms Fanning, Ms Fitzpatrick and Mr. Connolly and thank them for their presentation. I am conscious that all the guns seem to be pointed in Mr. Connolly's direction this morning and the two ladies are getting an easy ride. To be fair, it is important to acknowledge that for all its faults, a lot of families would not have experienced third level education without SUSI.

As other speakers have already alluded to, there are serious problems with it. What seems to be in vogue is a policy of the door being either shut or open. It is the inflexibility of SUSI that frustrates people and numerous examples of that have been given here this morning. I appreciate that Mr. Connolly is just doing his job and implementing the guidelines and criteria given to him. It is important that we acknowledge that as well. What I would like to see, based on the contributions of witnesses and members here today, is for a review of the refusals to be done on an annual basis, in order to learn what policies should be changed or tweaks made so that more people would avail of the grant. Our key goal here is for there to be no barrier to any child wanting to go on to further education, and that is the backdrop to why we are all here today.

For a certain cohort of people there is no help or financial assistance given to them whatsoever for sending their children to college. If one is living in rural Ireland, or does not live close to the cities of Dublin, Cork, or Galway, then the cost of accommodation is a major issue, and it is increasing year on year. It is putting some families under severe financial pressure, so much so that they are having to make do with very little in order for their children to go to college. For that cohort of people whose gross income may be over the threshold, there is absolutely no help available, and that is something that needs to be looked at. The lack of flexibility in the current system is hurting those people more than most. We can all give numerous examples of different people who have come to our constituency offices. A husband and wife came into mine who had 11 children. Their gross income was over the limit, but one can only imagine the costs of having 11 children and having to rear 11 children in a household. Yet no consideration is given for that within the current system. I know another family whose income is over the limit, but what generates their income is loans they have taken out over the years, and the interest on those loans which they are struggling to pay back. Those payments might include mortgage payments on family dwellings, or for people coming from farming backgrounds, they might relate to a farm they have bought for which they are making repayments to the bank. In most cases those repayments are suffocating those people, yet that is not taken into consideration either when it comes to the grant application.

It is important that there are as few barriers as possible put in place for any child wishing to go to college, and some families are suffering seriously in order to make sure that their child goes to college. As I said earlier, I would like to see more flexibility in the system. A number of speakers referred to how the social welfare system adjudicates over an applicant and how there is flexibility given to individual circumstances. There is zero flexibility, from what I can see, within SUSI. It is either lights off or lights on, and there is no halfway house. I would like to see more flexibility there. I would also like to see a review done on an annual basis of those who are refused admission to college, and for us to learn from that review in order to tweak the system to try to cater to as many people who wish to access third level education as possible.

**Chairman:** I thank Senator Gallagher. I call Senator Gavan.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I thank the witnesses for their presentations. As has been said already, core funding is the issue here. Too many working families in particular are still excluded from many supports for their children to go to third level. That is the major problem and I appreciate that it is not something that can be addressed by the witnesses who are before the committee today. I am not going to repeat everything as I agree with almost everything that has been said here this morning. I accept everything that the USI says and support all its recommendations apart from the issue of grants to the nine private institutions. I do not buy into that particular idea, but everything else needs to be supported.

The representative from ISSU made a good point in relation to PLC courses. I have come across families who have suffered because of that. What enrages us most about applications in our office in Limerick is the way parents are treated as dependants, which has been mentioned already. I appreciate that Mr. Connolly cannot deal with matters of policy. I just want to put on record that this is extremely frustrating. It is also particularly discriminatory against women. Government needs to look at it. It does not make any sense, as we all know. It needs fundamental change. We have heard about the holiday earnings restrictions, which make no sense in today's environment. Students have to work more than those core weeks just to survive, get through college and pay the rent. A common-sense approach and more flexibility are required. I want to echo a point about direct provision, particularly after the happenings in the west yesterday evening. It is just outrageous and so offensive that people in direct provision are effectively excluded from third level education. I do not believe anyone on this panel would support that exclusion. There is great frustration that nothing is done about it. I welcome the fact the ISSU is supporting the call to end direct provision. I thank the witnesses for their really important presentations and for their time.

**Chairman:** I am not going to delay proceedings. My colleagues asked very pertinent questions and made very pertinent comments. We have had three really good presentations. In response to Ms Fitzpatrick, I support the recommendations that have been made and I support the nine private institutions that are receiving SUSI fees. When we had the Wake-up SUSI hearings here, we discovered that when a student is filling in a CAO form, those third level institutions are not marked as fee paying or private. Many students ended up going to them, not realising they were fee paying, which caused a lot of problems down the line. They felt they were disadvantaged. USI made an interesting point that gaining a previous degree within the previous five years should not preclude a student from qualifying for SUSI. Deputy Thomas Byrne has referred to this. We must bear in mind that €2 million has been taken out of the funding this year, which hopefully will not be repeated. If there is a pot and a balance has to be struck, I believe it should be in favour of those accessing college for the first time. That begs another question for Mr. Connolly in terms of the pot SUSI has. Does SUSI ensure that successful applications get 100% of that money? When the funding goes down by €2 million, as it has this year, do the students get less money or is there money left afterwards? Does SUSI then look at other applications that have not been successful but, because there was some extra money there, may be next in line?

Ms Fanning was saying that the current maintenance grant amount does not reflect the reality of the cost of living, which I completely agree with. Does the ISSU have a proposed framework to calculate a more appropriate maintenance amount? Ms Fanning was also talking about the cost of accommodation, which is horrific. The son of a colleague is going to college and received the SUSI grant; however, his accommodation on campus has to be paid for upfront, which costs €8,000. I know the SUSI grant is not to pay accommodation but the fact is that parents who are under the income threshold for a SUSI grant for their son or daughter are ex-

pected to pay €8,000 straight up for accommodation. That causes a crisis within the family. We have seen by how much the cost of accommodation has increased. It is unacceptable that third level accommodation has not been included in the rent pressure zones. A Bill was introduced to provide for such a measure, but that has not happened. I am making a comment rather than asking a question. This is different from what we have been talking about. It is unacceptable that people who got tax breaks to build student accommodation are allowed to increase the fees being charged for that accommodation. They are getting two bites at the same cherry. The Government needs to look at this.

I thank Mr. Connolly for his overview of the work of SUSI. It is a good system. It has been improved. Mr. Connolly has outlined some of the improvements that have been made. Obviously, things need to go further. The flexibility about which everybody has spoken is very important for people in direct provision and for families who find themselves in difficult situations for various reasons. I have dealt with a family whose means exceeded the threshold by €111. Health issues within the family were not being accounted for. As one of 11 children - Senator Gallagher mentioned a similar family - I believe consideration should be given to the number of children in a family. The manner in which the notification of SUSI grants is communicated to third level colleges is very important. Obviously, it needs to be done on a timely basis.

I would like to ask again about the degree of flexibility that exists. Some of my colleagues have mentioned the direct route as opposed to the public transport route. We cannot underestimate that because it is very important. Are there any common mistakes that people make when they are submitting their applications? It is important for any such mistakes to be flagged because they may be of benefit or of help. I appreciate that most of the questions that have been asked have been directed at Mr. Connolly. I will ask Ms Fanning and Ms Fitzpatrick to respond before I bring Mr. Connolly back in.

**Ms Ciara Fanning:** I am happy to respond. It is nice for us to see that so many members of the committee have raised the issue of direct provision. The ISSU is working intensively on this matter. We have taken massive issue with the significant barriers that are being encountered by students in direct provision when they seek to access third level education. If people in direct provision centres or in emergency accommodation have to pay international fees, it can be impossible for them to provide for the unbelievable rates involved, which have been skyrocketing in recent times. I remind the committee that students in direct provision sit the same leaving certificate examinations as Irish students. They do the same work. It is unbelievable that a student in direct provision who gets 625 points might not have an access route to college. It is a massive oversight on the part of the system. When we consider this issue, we must come back to the direct provision system itself. In addition to the massive barriers that are encountered when students in direct provision seek to access third level education, there are issues with the education of people in the direct provision system at second level. Many direct provision centres do not provide proper levels of nutrition. There can be a failure to provide a safe environment for learning and education. When I was studying for my leaving certificate, my mother had the dinner ready when I came home from school and I was able to study at the corner of the kitchen table until 7 p.m. or 8 p.m. Such an environment is not available to people in direct provision. This aspect of the matter needs to be reflected on. We are happy that people are taking notice of this issue.

It is great that members of the joint committee have raised the issue of dependency. We have come across many cases of ISSU members who are not living with their parents for various reasons. Many young people are homeless and might not have access to the documentation

needed to prove to SUSI that they are estranged from their parents. They might not want to go into the personal reasons for their estrangement from their parents. They might not have a stream of communication with their parents or grandparents, or they might be completely isolated from their families, but they can be classed as dependent candidates nonetheless. Whether they have been in the care system, living with their parents or providing for themselves, their income has no influence on whether they can attend third level. There needs to be an intensive review in that regard.

In the context of earning money over the summer period, this is a major restriction on second-level students. We live in an environment where the cost of living is sky high and many students are forced into part-time employment while in education. That can also be a class issue. Many students work part-time in corner shops in order that they might buy clothes, etc., in Penneys or elsewhere; that could be dispensable income. However, we also live in an environment where students from large families are forced to work in order to provide for themselves and ease the financial pressure on their parents or those with whom they are living. That comes back to the issue of private education at second level, grinds schools and the increased competitiveness when it comes to the leaving certificate system in that these students could be working to pay for grinds that will help them get the courses they want. Their parents may be forking out €10,000 a year to send them to grinds schools and they are working to pay for their food and accommodation. That is a major issue in terms of elitism in our education system but also because these students are being forced into work. It is not always an option for them to give up their weekend part-time jobs. Unfortunately, people were forced to do that recently in order to ensure that they qualified for the SUSI grant because their part-time employment put them over the top in terms of the eligibility criteria.

I return to Deputy Ó Laoghaire's point that SUSI does not go far enough. The cost of living and accommodation for students has increased exponentially. While we do not have a proposed framework in place, we would be happy to follow up with an email on that. We can also do some work on it and get back to the committee.

Reference was made to the nine private institutions. This is a major issue in that private colleges often require lower points than many other third-level institutions. If students want to do medicine, business, law or whatever, the points race forces them to put these nine private institutions on their CAO applications but it is not stated in the CAO booklet whether the institution is fee-paying or private. Students are being forced to do that if they want to do particular courses. That might be their only option if they cannot afford grinds or to go to the Institute of Education, or if they live in areas where the schools do not have great teachers and were not in a position to get 500 or 600 points in the leaving certificate as a result. Those private colleges are an option for them. We believe this should be covered by SUSI because it is often the case that the points system is forcing people to choose those institutions.

I am grateful that Senator Gavan mentioned PLC courses. It is important that we respect such courses. The degrees awarded for the completion of PLCs might be seen as being at a lower level than level 8 degrees. However, these courses might be an option for people who want to go into more practical employment and a one-year or two-year course may be the most practical way for them to do that. There is a fee charged to take up a PLC. It might not be as costly as taking up a level 8 course but it could still place an enormous financial burden on families. That issue should be examined. If there is to be a review of SUSI, PLCs should be included in that and some monetary help should be offered to people who wish to pursue them.

We have covered all the issues addressed in the questions. We would be more than happy

to elaborate on some of the answers we have given in a follow-up email. I am conscious that there are many other questions to get through.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Fanning. To follow up on what she said about the private colleges, students attending them receive the same Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, qualifications as those awarded by the other universities. The principle is that the money should follow the student, not the college. I call Ms Fitzpatrick.

**Ms Lorna Fitzpatrick:** I thank the members for the discussion. I will try to follow some kind of structure in my contribution but forgive me if I do not get to address every issue. I will be glad to-----

**Chairman:** Ms Fitzpatrick does not need to do that. She should focus on whatever she believes adds value to the discussion.

**Ms Lorna Fitzpatrick:** Of course. Core funding is a major issue. Time and again we have called for increased supports in terms of funding for the system. The system is underfunded, as has been seen day in and day out. It can be heard from everyone, including students, academic staff, non-academic staff, professional support staff and everybody in between. We can all agree that underfunding is an important issue in the higher education system but we also need to address, on their own merits, the financial supports available to students.

On the system of direct provision, I echo comments made previously and thank members for the comments they have made in that regard. A number of students are able to access third-level education through universities and institutions-of-sanctuary programmes, which are positive but limited. That is why we have asked in our submission for students who are refugees and living in direct provision to be omitted completely from the residency regulations for the SUSI procedures in order that they have access to higher level education and can contribute back to the society in which they live.

The adjacency rate has a significant impact on students. I refer members to our pre-budget submission. In 2011, under the 24 km criterion, 77% of those being paid the maintenance grant were eligible for the non-adjacent rate, which is the higher rate that can support them by enabling them to live closer to their colleges or to commute. In 2018, under the 45 km criterion, the proportion who are eligible dropped to 52%. The situation has not changed for the families in question, that is, the distance they live from colleges has not changed but the support they are offered has. This has a considerable impact on students and their families. The intention of the non-adjacent rate is to provide students with additional support to be able to attend and commute to college or to live closer to the college at which they study. Unfortunately, however, due to the changes made, the rate is no longer sufficient and does not support students with what they need to be able to progress through college.

To respond to comments made by Deputy Ó Laoghaire, SUSI definitely does not go far enough. The current non-adjacent rate, which is a 100% support rate without a special rate, works out at €3,025 per annum in maintenance support, but accommodation alone can cost more than €6,000 before any additional fees, such as for books, transport or bills, are taken into consideration. It does not come close, therefore, to covering the cost of accommodation, not to mention any of the other costs associated with attending education.

The class of applicants is of great concern, as has been highlighted repeatedly during the meeting. It affects a large percentage of students who are under the age of 23 but are forced to

be classed as dependants if they cannot prove estrangement, which was referred to earlier. The difficulty of being able to prove estrangement in order to access support is a matter students' unions deal with day in, day out. Many such cases are overturned when they are appealed and come before the SUSI appeals board but it has left students in a very difficult position for an extended period in respect of financial support and the ability to access education. It is important to note there are students under the age of 23 who are parents themselves and who are classed as dependants under their own parents' income because of the inflexibility of the situation and the SUSI regulations.

On the nine institutions, I echo the comments made earlier. It is very much about following the student rather than the institution and providing the student with the education he or she requires. On the unfortunate circumstances that exist, the points race and so on, I echo the comments made by Senator Ruane and others.

On the point about re-entering education if one has obtained a qualification within the past five years, we are in a changing world of work. There is a statistic, although I cannot recall the figure off the top of my head, to the effect that a large percentage of the jobs that will exist in five years have not yet even been created or that we have not yet even considered them. People being able to access and re-enter education is essential to ensure there is the knowledge economy we discuss so often, with a well-educated workforce, and that students will have access to the courses which will support them in the years ahead. While they may already have gained a qualification, it may not be able to support them in their future because of the changing nature of the world of work. I will be glad to follow up on any other comments with individuals later.

**Chairman:** If our guests want to send anything to us after the meeting, we would be happy to circulate it to the members and include it in our final report and recommendations.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** I will answer the questions in the order they were asked, beginning with those posed by Senator Ruane. Family size does dictate whether someone gets a grant or a higher rate of grant, the income thresholds increase the more children there are in a family. If there are more children going to third level or further education, the thresholds also increase.

As to other class and who else should qualify, I cannot comment too much on that but the most common reason for refusal of an application is income and we review that every year. It is important to note that we have a special high-quality team that deals with the estrangement and affidavit issues. It is not a question of whether we accept particular types of documents we do consider the whole case and try to work with the students to give them the support if we can. We do consider inclusion and try if we can to give the grant to the student and we work with the student to do that. I cannot deal with the individual case to which reference was made because I am not aware of it. However, I will state that do not accept certain types of documents because we do consider the entire case.

The question of the grant following the person into private colleges, rather than following the institution, has come up several times. Each year all the courses and institutions are prescribed by the Minister and we work on that basis. In terms of applying for a SUSI grant, we have worked with the CAO over the past couple of years to make clear what courses will not qualify. This is so that people do not select courses thinking they might be able to apply for support. We have tried to work with the CAO to flag those who will not be eligible on the back of the Wake Up SUSI campaign.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** In respect of documentation that is or is not accepted some people

cannot even appeal because SUSI says it does not know what documentation to request for proof of estrangement. That needs to be cleared up because people who are starting the college year are in limbo. If SUSI has reduced funding, do our guests have a target for refusals that they must reach?

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** If somebody is in limbo and cannot provide the documentation, he or she can make a request to have the case reviewed saying that he or she cannot provide this documentation. The case will then be considered in totality.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** People are not being told what documentation they need. They have provided every sort of documentation they could possibly imagine would be enough and SUSI is saying it does not know.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** In such cases, there is a mechanism whereby they can state that they cannot provide anything more. We will then consider the particular case and if we cannot award the grant, it will be refused and they will have access to the appeals and review mechanisms.

Deputy Thomas Byrne also referred to funding. The grant scheme is demand-led in nature. We are not given a certain amount of money to spend such that if the demand goes over budget we do not have anything else for student support access. It goes up or down each year depending on the number of applications. I could answer the Deputy's question if it was about our corporate budget rather than the student support budget. The student support budget is purely demand-led; the more students apply, the more funding we receive.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Does Mr. Connolly accept that the Department of Education and Skills' estimate for SUSI is reduced this year?

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** Yes, that is based on a projected reduced number of applications. There are fewer applications.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Fewer people will get grants.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** Fewer people are applying for grants and there has been a trend-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Yet there are more students than ever.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** The trend since 2015 and 2016, is that applications have been reducing year-on-year.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Is that because the income limits have not changed?

**Chairman:** One would imagine so.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** Yes.

Deputy Catherine Martin inquired about adjacency and distance. This matter has come up a lot. We work from the guidelines issued by the Minister every year on how we calculate the distance and what is involved. Deputy Jan O'Sullivan raised this issue as well. The guidelines refer to the shortest most direct route. According to those guidelines, we must be transparent with the applicant. That is why Google Maps was mentioned. Those guidelines also must be transparent to the applicant, which is why Google Maps was mentioned. We do that in order that we can display our calculation to the student. That goes out in either an award or a refusal letter and that can be challenged. It is important to note that if the calculation is in any way

close to that threshold, it is given a manual review as well. Consequently, if it is in any way close, we check whether it is correct and whether we can adjust things.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Is Mr. Connolly saying that it can be challenged in respect of the shortest and most direct route? Can it be challenged when a student cannot get to college until 1.25 p.m. and will miss vital lectures? Is this a reason for challenging it?

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** When we apply those guidelines and the rules are in place, it is purely on the distance. That is what we are obliged to do.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Is there any way of reviewing it so it is not just about distance but about access to education? The reason the person is going to college is to attend lectures but what if the transport is not there or if it is there but the student misses his or her lecture? Should that not be the full point and a reason to include-----

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** I apologise for repeating myself but applying the guidelines is based purely on the distance. Changing that is not a matter for SUSI. The guidelines are issued to SUSI on an annual basis and we try to be as fair as possible to the student in applying those. It is not for us to change the guidelines, however.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** We therefore need the Minister to change those guidelines. We need the Department to acknowledge it might be an idea to follow the student and the access to education, rather than transport that will not get that student to college on time.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** It would not be for SUSI to make that judgment. That covers most of the Deputy's questions. The other question she asked involved the residency requirement of three out of the past five years. Again, that is what we are required to apply. The requirement in the Act is that students must be resident in Ireland or the EU for three out of the past five years and we apply that requirement as favourably as possible and work with the student if he or she is having difficulty in providing documentary evidence. We are as flexible as possible with regard to that aspect but we are obliged to put that requirement in place.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I raised the dependency criterion. Again, we need to go the Minister to point out that this does not reflect reality.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** Again, the age of 23 is what is prescribed in the regulations and that is what we must put in place. Did I answer Deputy Jan O'Sullivan's question about the shortest distance? Does she want me to go into-----

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** Even if that involves going over a narrow mountain road, the distance that a person would normally take is longer. Does SUSI have any discretion in that regard?

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** We do not. The shortest and most direct route is what we are obliged to put in place and that is what is in the guidelines. If anything is close to that distance, we look into it in more detail. Applicants can challenge that, which is why we use Google Maps. We use it to display the distance we use and people can come back and challenge that but that is what we are obliged to do.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** Is there more flexibility in the independent appeals process, which is the one a person can go to after SUSI?

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** I cannot comment on its practices or processes but I imagine those

concerned should be working towards the scheme and the regulations that are in place.

Regarding holiday earnings, non-term time is defined as what we can reduce by up to €4,500 and that is what we do. As we give flexibility to students where different institutions have different term times, they can come back to us and challenge that as well. It is not just the standard ones that we may all think of in terms of Christmas or Easter. If there is more non-term time, we can take that off as long as a student gets a letter from the college confirming that this is the case.

As for the inheritance that was included in an application, without knowing the individual case there are certain relationships where that would not be the case. If it is between a mother and daughter, that would not be included. If it was from an uncle to the applicant, however, that would be included. There are certain relationships within the scheme that allow for inheritance not to be included in the calculation of income.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** The person would only get it during one year but he or she would be in college for four years or longer.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** If, unfortunately, an application is refused for the reference year in which an inheritance is received, it is possible for an applicant to come back the following year and make another application. The inheritance would not be included in that application because it would not have been received in that particular reference year.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** That is fine. There is something in the SUSI submission concerning the suggested initial classification, or perhaps that is just around-----

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** That just concerns whether an applicant is classed as a dependent student or a mature student. Income is reviewed each year so an applicant can come back to us at any point each year. We have covered the issues of dependants, those under 23 and whether an applicant’s class can be reclassified. It is the case that if a person is going from further education to higher education or has had a break of three years or more in study, he or she can reclassify. An example is if an applicant went into year one as a dependant, followed by a break and he or she then comes back into year two some three years later. In that case, the person can be reclassified as a mature student.

The next question from Deputy Ó Laoghaire was on the issue of discretion. I have probably outlined the answer in some of my previous responses. We are working on the basis of a statutory scheme and there is very little discretion within the rules.

Regarding working with students and the issue of the documentary evidence required to verify information, we have flexibility in what we can do. We will work with students to support them if we can.

On the issue of overtime, if within the context of the scheme it is not classed as recurring, it can be taken away. I refer to the example given of a person working in Apple receiving overtime in one year but not in the next. As long as we have a letter from the employer stating that this was a once-off payment, that can be taken away from the reckonable income for that particular year.

I have covered the topic of dependency. The Deputy gave the example of an applicant couch-surfing in respect of trying to provide proof. We try to work with students to see what documentary evidence they can provide to class themselves as independent students who are not living with their parents. There is also the case of students returning to college after having

left for a period. Students who come back to college in those circumstances can reclassify as an independent student if they have had a break of three years. I hope that suffices to answer the Deputy's questions.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Mr. Connolly stated there was very little discretion. Is there any?

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** We do not have any in respect of the scheme.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** That is fine.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** Staff have to work with that in mind. The next question came from Senator Gallagher.

**Chairman:** It was Deputy Thomas Byrne.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** I have covered the reduction in the budget. I will go into more detail if the Deputy requires. It is important to state, however, that it is a demand-led scheme and it will go up and down based on the number of applications. This year the number of applications is expected to decrease again.

Turning to postgraduates, maintenance grants were reintroduced in 2017-18. Some 1,051 postgraduate students received grants in that year, and 1,184 in 2018-19. In 2019-20, to date, some 859 students are receiving grants.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** There were 1,051 students in receipt of grants in 2017-18.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** There were 1,051 students in 2017-18 in receipt of grants, 1,184 in 2018-19 and 859 in 2019-20, to date. That latter figure will increase because we still have many applications to process.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Is that figure cumulative or does it refer to extra students?

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** That is each year. It is possible that there could be new students in the following year that were not in college in 2017-18.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** They are not all new students.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** No, they are not. Some students with renewals are included. I think the Deputy also asked about the issue of inheritance.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Yes, I did.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** Certain relationships are defined within the scheme, which would mean that an inheritance would not be included. There are, however, some instances where we include it for that year only and if students move on into year two and year three.

**Chairman:** It does not disappear.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** No, it does not.

Another question referred to the consent we ask elected representatives to get when they come to us with queries. We accept that elected representatives can come to us with queries on behalf of applicants. Regarding the guidance issued by the DPC, we have a more complex scheme. By responding to a query, we may not just be giving information in respect of an ap-

plicant. It is more than likely that there are two or three parties to the application and they are not covered under section 40. We have to be sure as a data controller that we have the consent of those people before we release any information. That is the guidance in the DPC notes on exchanging information with elected representatives. That is why we ask. As regards the process, it is quite smooth in the sense that it is online. Our office contacts the student and asks him or her to consent. In 80% of cases the consent has already been given at that stage and in other cases it is given within 24 to 48 hours. Then we refer back to the Deputy or the Senator on that basis. It is to protect us because we have data not just on the applicant but also on other parties who are party to the application.

I believe those are all the questions asked by Deputy Thomas Byrne. Senator Gallagher asked about the review of refusals. We examine our refusal reasons every year in detail. We do not input into changes to the grants on that basis, but we review with regard to quality to see if there is any way we can improve our process to make it easier for students to approach us as well.

Regarding interest on loans, certain interest is allowed to be deducted within the scheme, but not on the basis of mortgage payments and the like. Again, and I am probably repeating myself, we must adhere to what is in the scheme on those issues.

I hope I have covered all the questions.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** Does the review carried out by SUSI go to the Minister or the Department at the end of each year?

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** No. It is for us, purely looking at quality. SUSI does not have a policy aspect.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** Basically, all the eyes in the room are on the Minister and the Department given that all the queries we have raised will require the Minister to act so they can be addressed.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** Yes. SUSI tries to implement what is in place as efficiently and correctly as possible, but that is what we must implement.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** I must compliment SUSI. It is doing an excellent job.

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** I thank the Senator.

Chairman, you had questions as well. We can probably provide more information on the common mistakes by sending an email with some suggestions. The completeness of the application is key in terms of allowing us to get information from other Government bodies. Incomplete applications, and particularly when documents we request on that basis come back incomplete, delay the process for students. The issue is to try to have everything as clear as possible on the application form and have the documentary evidence ready to go. However, if there are issues, we allow extensions on return of documentation and the like.

I believe I answered your other questions in my replies to the questions from Deputies and Senators.

**Chairman:** You have, and thank you for that. With regard to the review SUSI carries out at the end of the year which does not necessarily go to the Government, can the committee get a copy of that?

**Mr. Philip Connolly:** Yes.

**Chairman:** It might be useful for our deliberations. We produce a report that makes recommendations to the Minister so that would be useful.

With regard to the transport issue in terms of the distance, apparently it is the same system that is used for school transport, which has been *in situ* since 2011. To use Google maps alone does not take account of the topography, such as whether the route is over a mountain or the like. That might be something we could examine in the context of the recommendations as well. If there is any further information, you could send it to the clerk and he can circulate it to members.

This has been a very useful engagement and I appreciate Mr. Connolly, Ms Fanning and Ms Fitzpatrick giving up their morning to attend the meeting. It has been valuable for members of the committee to listen to their contributions and I look forward to hearing more. We will have an opportunity in the next few months to make our recommendations and, of course, we will provide our guests with copies of them at that time.

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes to allow the witnesses to leave.

*Sitting suspended at 12.15 p.m. and resumed at 12.20 p.m.*

### **School Costs: Discussion**

**Chairman:** On behalf of the committee, I welcome Ms Naomi Feely, policy officer with Barnardos; Mr. Seamus Mulconry, general secretary of the Catholic Primary School Management Association, CPSMA; Mr. Adrian Flynn, director of schools with Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board; Mr. John Curtis, general secretary of the Joint Managerial Body and Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools, JMB/AMCSS; Ms Áine Lynch, CEO of the National Parents Council Primary; Mr. Paul Rolston, director of the National Parents Council Post Primary; and Ms Marcella Stakem, policy officer for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. For the information of the committee, I advise that Barnardos has provided a revised opening statement this morning which is different from the one members have in their pack. While the opening statement is in order, it was received significantly after the deadline. We will accept it on this occasion but we will not allow this to happen again as it impacts on our work. In this part of the meeting, I will invite everybody to make a brief opening statement of a maximum of three minutes. The opening statements will be followed by engagement with members of the committee.

Before we begin, I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2) (I) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by me, as Chair, to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a 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, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I advise witnesses that any opening statement they make to the committee will be published on the committee website after the meeting.

I remind members 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 discussed school costs in depth at last year's summer school but it is an issue we have to revisit annually because it is impacting hugely on the lives of students and families. It is important that we draw attention to it where we can. I invite Ms Feely to make her opening statement.

**Ms Naomi Feely:** Good morning, a Chathaoirleach, other members of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills and colleagues in the education and community and voluntary sectors. Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to address the joint committee on these three important issues. We have made a detailed written submission and provided the text of our opening statement, which I will summarise.

For more than ten years, Barnardos has been highlighting the issue of school costs and their impact on parents through the distribution, analysis and publication of our annual survey. In our submission, we present further analysis of the new 2019 survey data. On textbook rental schemes, funding from the Department of Education and Skills under the school book grant scheme allows schools to run such rental schemes or distribute funding at their discretion to those most in need of support. Our analysis shows that access to book rental schemes for primary schools has grown from 50% in 2012 to about 74% in 2019. However, the figure for secondary schools has remained stagnant at around 40%. We urge the Department of Education and Skills to provide further guidance and support in light of the delay in setting up such schemes in secondary schools.

In primary schools, 88% of parents contribute less than €100 to the scheme. However, in secondary schools, only four in ten parents stated they contributed under €100, with one third paying between €101 and €150 and one fifth paying more than €150. There is variation in what is included in the schemes. A further disaggregation of cost by class and school year is available in our submission.

Barnardos recommends the provision of free schoolbooks to all primary school children at a minuscule cost of 0.2% of the Department's overall budget as a first step towards realising the right to free primary school education. The infrastructure of the current schoolbook rental scheme provides a mechanism through which to drive this ambition. Given continued sufficient funding, it could be called a schoolbook distribution scheme. It should be available in all schools.

On technology for educational purposes, our survey found that the use of digital devices is more prevalent in secondary schools. A similar finding was made in previous years. The reported proportion in primary schools remains at approximately 14%. However, Barnardos is concerned that 13% of the usage of digital devices was in infant classes, made up of five and six year olds. There was a jump in usage among secondary students from 25% in 2018 to 32%. The costs associated with purchasing a digital device are substantial and may put further pressure on parents if they are required to pay for the device. In primary schools, 93% of parents indicated that the device is provided by the school. In such circumstances, we assume the school pays for the device. However, only a quarter of secondary school parents stated that the school provides and pays for the device. Half of respondents indicated that although the school organises the device, parents must pay for it. The remaining quarter stated that they provided the digital device.

It is unclear whether the purpose of using digital devices is to defray the use of and costs associated with books. If so, that purpose is not being achieved. Overall, parents of primary school pupils required to have a digital device spent an average of €80 on book costs, compared to €85 for the entire population sampled by the survey. Similarly, those requiring digital devices in secondary school spent €170 on books, compared to a spend of €190 within the entire sample. Barnardos recommends that the committee should explore the pedagogical, developmental and socialisation outcomes of using such approaches in primary and secondary schools. The financial impact on parents and schools also needs to be examined.

On the issue of moneylenders, each year parents tell Barnardos of the impact that the cost of getting their child ready to return to school has on their household budget. For many, the cost they must incur means cutting back on household expenses, not paying bills on time, taking money out of their savings or borrowing from various sources. It is worrying that 8% of primary school parents and 14% of secondary school parents stated that they borrowed money to meet the cost. Further analysis of these data showed that 3% of parents indicated that they borrowed money from a moneylender. A review of our survey data from the three previous years indicates that this figure has remained consistent.

On having to buy a digital device, when we disaggregated the data further we found that almost one fifth of secondary school parents required to do so stated that they borrowed money, which is a slightly higher proportion than that within the general survey sample. Some 5% accessed this money through money lenders. Secondary school parents were slightly more likely to take money from their savings in cases where they had to buy a digital device. Barnardos supports the recent recommendation by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul that advertisements for moneylenders should have tobacco-style warnings about the high costs associated with accessing these products.

In conclusion, Barnardos supports the recommendations of the recent report of this committee on school costs and would like to see them fully implemented. I am happy to address any questions from members regarding our submission. If the Chair permits, I will conclude with two quotes from parents because they will provide an insight into the lived reality as distinct from the statistics I quoted. The first quote highlights the impact that school costs have on a household budget:

My son is due to start Secondary School in August...I have to go short in other areas like food etc to pay for everything. I usually shop in the reduced section in supermarkets this (is) an added stress as I have to be careful that I use the reduced meat etc. quick enough...I am very grateful to receive the Back to School Allowance which I should receive today. This money will pay off some of the loans I had to take out in May to buy an iPad, insurance etc.

Although some parents can manage school costs, they are acutely aware that they may be a burden for others. A parent stated:

The amount of fundraising has increased so much in the past 2 years and the school is putting pressure on children to sell tickets and support events. My kids are ok as I can afford to support but there are others who cannot. It is not right that schools have to source so much funds themselves.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Feely and turn to Mr. Mulcrony, whom I welcome back before the committee.

**Mr. Seamus Mulconry:** On behalf of the Catholic Primary School Management Association, CPSMA, I thank the joint committee for its invitation to present on school costs. It is important to stress that school costs for parents are mainly determined by the Government, not by schools. Persistent and unconstitutional underfunding of the primary school system has led to a situation where parents subvent the basic cost of running primary schools by €46 million per year. The CPSMA has always advised schools that voluntary contributions are voluntary. Schools are aware that some parents are not in a position to compensate for State underfunding by making a voluntary contribution. Schools are sensitive to this issue and we encourage parents to speak to the school principal if they have concerns in that regard.

The CPSMA has noted a tendency among some commentators in the past few weeks to blame primary schools for back-to-school costs. The reality is that primary schools have as much impact on the cost of returning to school as small farmers have on the price of meat in a supermarket. The power to raise or lower the cost of going to school does not lie with primary schools but with the Government and the Department of Public Expenditure.

Although the committee is focused in these hearings on the impact of school costs on parents, my focus is on the impact of underfunding on schools and parents. I would be failing in my duty if I did not alert the committee to our growing concern that the persistent underfunding of primary schools poses a potential threat to the quality of education children receive. Time spent by principals on an ever-growing administrative and fundraising burden is time not spent leading teaching and learning. The restoration of the full capitation grant is urgently needed as a first step towards the proper funding of the primary education system.

I refer the committee to our full submission on the specific issues it is considering. I refer specifically to the textbook rental scheme. The concept of textbook rental schemes was developed by primary schools prior to being embraced by the Government through a formal scheme in 2013. The textbook rental schemes operated by schools have assisted parents with back-to-school costs and created greater accessibility to textbooks for all pupils. The continued funding of textbook rental schemes is an ongoing concern for schools which wish to utilise various textbook schemes, support the implementation of the new curriculum and replace textbooks which have been subject to natural wear and tear. The CPSMA submits that further funding in the form of an enhanced annual book grant is required for all schools.

The operation of a textbook rental scheme is a time-intensive organisational process which is carried out by voluntary groups of parents, school staff or both. Oversight and organisation of the scheme are additional tasks for school management. In the light of the continual workload increases placed on school principals, leadership teams and boards of management, the CPSMA calls for the immediate restoration of leadership and management posts to pre-moratorium levels and the introduction of one release day per week for teaching principals.

Primary schools are local schools run by local voluntary boards of management which are aware of the financial pressures faced by parents in their communities and, consequently, make every effort to reduce costs. A recent OECD report indicates that Ireland is 16th or 17th in the world in the provision of funding in this area, whereas the United States is second.

**Mr. Adrian Flynn:** On behalf of Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, and the 16 education and training boards it represents, I am pleased to make this statement to the joint committee and contribute to the review of the range of impacts on back-to-school costs. ETBs are statutory authorities which have a responsibility for education, training and youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate community national schools,

second level schools, further education colleges, and a range adult and further education centres in communities throughout Ireland.

While our written submission highlights our views and concerns as a sector, we would like to reference some overarching points relating to the specific areas aligned to the committee's review.

I refer to the advantages and disadvantages of textbook rental schemes in schools. On the issues surrounding textbook rental schemes, our ETB schools have a long history of supporting the operation of such a scheme throughout the sector, providing access to the schoolbooks at a significantly lower cost than if books were purchased individually by students. The schemes are operated in many different formats, through staff administration, and sometimes in co-operation with the school's parents' council, which supports and enhances the partnership between schools, parents and guardians.

As noted in our submission, the scheme operates with relative success giving students access to relevant books at reduced cost, ensuring ongoing access to avoid disrupting learning which can subsequently support attendance and inclusion. There are challenges associated with operating a book rental scheme which can impact both financially and administratively on an individual school. For a school to establish a scheme requires significant capital costs, with the recouping of those costs taking a number of years. Administratively, maintaining a quality and up-to-date scheme places significant demands on staff resources, while the storage space required can come at a premium, particularly given the ever-increasing demands for specific-purpose teaching and learning spaces.

I refer to the use of technology for educational purposes. As we continue to be enveloped and engaged by an ever-increasing technological existence, there is no doubt that the impact and influence of technology in all its formats permeates our school environments. In a formal way the new junior cycle curriculum, in particular, incorporates a digital focus for the eight key skills, which elevates its purpose away from the traditional bolt-on approach towards a more appropriate built-in model. The need for digital skills has never been more relevant, supporting learning tasks, the development of autonomous learners and research skills, while also offering the opportunity to explore and expand assessment approaches and opportunities for reflection. Some of the practical disadvantages have been obvious from the outset. Digital learning can be an expensive option. Rapid changes in technology often require frequent updates and when coupled with challenges, such as inconsistent broadband Wi-Fi coverage, lack of technical and digital experience both in school and at home, the technological experience can become one of great demands.

We also cannot ignore the increasing discomfort at the rate of change and unexpected impacts as the use and influence of the various technologies become embedded in our schools. While the school environment may provide a space for shared learning and upskilling, many parents and guardians find that their own lack of knowledge a further challenge when trying to navigate the digital space inhabited by their children. There is also the possible necessity of parents having to resort to moneylenders in order to meet basic costs of educating their children.

The Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, input on the necessity of parents and guardians having to resort to moneylenders to meet the basic costs of educating their children might be the shortest aspect of its written submission. This brevity in no way reflects our lack of consideration of the potential stresses experienced by parents and guardians in this area,

but rather highlights the stigma that may be associated with having to resort to moneylenders. Our written submission references the difficulty ETBI has in providing evidence from the sector based on the fact that parents or guardians are unlikely to share this information or their experience with the school principal. This does not mean that our principals and schools are not sensitive to any potential financial difficulties and would at all times encourage parents and guardians to share these challenges, where they can. Our principals and school staff always endeavour to provide guidance towards any local and national services which might have the capacity to further support individual families.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the committee for inviting ETBI to engage with it on these issues and the varying impacts and experiences that are reflective of the ETB sector. We will be happy to take any questions members may have and if any follow-up is required following this meeting, we will, of course, respond as required.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Flynn. I call Mr. John Curtis from the Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools, JMB/AMCSS, who is welcome back.

**Mr. John Curtis:** We welcome the opportunity to address the joint committee on the issue of school costs. The remit of the Joint Managerial Body, JMB, was to look specifically at the issue of textbook rental and the use of educational technologies in education.

First, on book costs, no one can argue against offering support to families in accessing school textbooks. Schools have been providing low and no-cost supports in a dignified manner for families for many years. The problem, however, lies with the resources schools receive in the first place. In 2011-12 the then Minister published a code of practice for publishers and set out to protect funding for book grants to schools in that recessionary academic year. The publication of a subsequent report and guidelines were welcomed and challenged schools of all kinds to consider the supports available to families and take stock of new ideas and good practice in so many settings. Nonetheless, there remain serious challenges to be overcome in respect of equity and implementation. It is the recommendation of the JMB that we return to an application model, rather than the universal, *per capita* model the Department operates. Although it would add to the administrative burden on school principals, it would, nonetheless, better reflect the local student population and allow for a more proportionate allocation of funds, particularly to DEIS schools.

Schools operate a range of models in distributing book grant moneys, ranging from discreet, targeted individual support to voucher systems, second-hand book sales and rental schemes. It is essential that school autonomy be retained in this process as identifying need is best left to schools which really get to know families. The JMB recommends that schools commencing the operation of school rental schemes be given a capital grant to purchase the initial tranche of textbooks and provide for the additional infrastructural investment required to set up such a scheme. Even buying 400 cardboard boxes for students' book sets represents a significant cost, not to mention shelving, stationery and so on. The abolition of such an initial grant which was in place in the past represents a failure to accept current financial realities for schools and families. The JMB is happy to play its part in encouraging school managements to establish rental schemes. The staffing demands of such schemes, however, will require reliable engagement on the part of parents as the current staffing levels of schools do not provide the capacity to do this work. In addition, the prohibition on using grant moneys for e-books is discouraging schools with digital or mixed medium texts from even considering book rental schemes. We urge the Department to reconsider this barrier. Removing the unreasonable imposition of VAT on e-books, as with paper textbooks, would represent a good initial step. Ongoing changes in

the profile of textbooks required in the new junior cycle programme continue to discourage large numbers of schools from investing in a book rental scheme.

I turn to technologies. The current digital strategy for schools, while welcome, is not an end in itself. We have, however, been focused for too long on hardware, software, networks, etc. Serious teachers will always maintain a focus on pedagogy. That is where our investment should be concentrated. The core business of a school is not teaching and learning but teaching for learning. Everything a school does must have a learning focus which, in the current technological revolution, must begin with the teacher. Technology does not substitute for good teaching; rather, it amplifies it. The spectrum of digital expertise among teachers is very wide. Teachers urgently need to be equipped to use and create digital classroom materials customised to meet their students' particular needs. Students also will generate content; it will be impossible to stop them from doing so. Great things are already happening in Irish schools in that regard. Cost effective models for integrating technologies into teaching are also emerging; therefore, it is not always about buying expensive tablets. BYOD, bring you own device, models are working very well in many schools. It would be helpful if the professional development service for teachers, technology in education, could find out what is working well and cost-effectively in schools and share these ideas with everyone.

We wish the committee well in its consideration of these important issues and look forward to our conversation and the eventual report.

**Ms Áine Lynch:** The National Parents Council Primary welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills on the advantages and disadvantages of textbook rental schemes in schools, the use of technology for educational purposes and the possible necessity of parents and guardians resorting to moneylenders. First, we draw members' attention to the issue of culture within the primary education system in the context of the role played by parents in their children's education and how financial issues can impact on this important responsibility.

Research indicates that the involvement of parents in their children's learning is vital in ensuring that they obtain the optimum benefit from their education. As a result, it is important that the educational relationship between schools and parents is not only protected but further enhanced. Financial communications and requests from schools to parents can significantly harm the home-school relationship. When tension exists between the home and school due to financial requests, the parent-teacher relationship can be damaged. This may prevent the development of the important relationship between the parent and the teacher that supports a child's learning. A parent who feels pressure and stress to meet payment requests from his or her child's school may be reluctant to approach it regarding educational issues relating to his or her child.

Parental involvement in children's education is also important in the context of improving educational outcomes for children. However, parents' associations spend the majority of their time engaging with schools at a funding level rather than an educational one. When parents' associations were first defined in the Education Act, it was in the context of advising the principal and board of management of a school on any matter relating that school. It is also stated in the Act that said principal and board, as the case may be, should have regard to such advice and adopt a programme of activities which will promote the involvement of parents in consultation with the principal in the operation of the school. The Act does not refer to fundraising, which, as we know, is the key activity of parents' associations. The culture within the education system which sees parents as a key funding resource rather than a purely educational support for

children needs to be addressed. This will require a societal prioritisation for education that sees the value of a fully-funded system for a society which supports equality of opportunity for all.

In 2013, the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection recommended the development of a five-year template for the delivery of a system whereby schoolbooks would be entirely free of charge. The NPC welcomed and supported this because it would have made a significant impact in terms of reducing back-to-school costs for parents. If the recommendation had been implemented, we would be starting the second school year with no book costs for parents. It is unfortunate that the recommendation was not acted on. The NPC believes that book rental schemes have had a positive impact on the costs for parents of children attending primary school. It also believes that the schemes do not address all of the issues regarding educational and reference resources for children in school. Six years on from the making of the recommendation in 2013, the NPC feels that a more comprehensive review should be undertaken to establish the most appropriate educational and reference resources that will support children's learning in view of the changing world in which we live and the changing primary school curriculum. The debate in this regard centres on accepting that the current provision offers what children need. In an ever-changing world of information and resource availability, and in light of the redevelopment of the primary curriculum, the NPC believes that a complete examination should be undertaken in this area. We should move on from the debate on who should pay for the books and start discussing and exploring the best supports for children's learning which take into account all of the different opportunities available, including books, teaching methodologies, technology, etc.

The NPC has regularly consulted parents on the issue of technology in education over the past number of years. While safety is always a consideration, parents have consistently told the NPC that they think technology is important in their children's learning and they have concerns regarding the current provision. In particular, parents of children with special educational needs have gone so far as to say that technology has the potential to level the educational playing field for their children. The 2016 the NPC survey showed that 78% of parents wanted more access to computers and computing for their children, with only 15% of parents saying that they did not.

The next issue relates to the possible necessity of parents and guardians to resort to moneylenders to meet the basic costs of educating their children. The NPC is aware of parents who feel that they need to approach moneylenders in order to pay for their children's education and we would like to raise a number of issues in this regard. First, seeking loans from moneylenders is one of the many options that parents choose or resort to in order to meet their children's school costs. Other options include bank loans, loans from friends and relatives, skipping meals due a lack of money, choosing not to pay household bills, etc. All of these options that parents feel forced to make are equally wrong in a modern society that purports to have a free education system.

Second, there is no such thing as a school asking parents for money and there being no pressure on them to pay. For some parents experiencing financial stresses, another request for money that they do not have represents pressure. The act of a school asking parents for money puts them under pressure and creates stress. Third is the basic cost of educating a child. Do children need a uniform to be educated? Do they need a list of schoolbooks? Do they need to fund a school through voluntary and other contributions? In answering these questions, it is difficult to find the basic cost versus the costs being asked of parents. What is the difference between a cost that is about supporting an individual child for a parent versus a cost that is proping up the education system?

I finally reiterate that a parent's relationship with their child's school should relate to their child's learning and education and not finances.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Lynch. We now move to Mr. Rolston, the director of the NPCPP.

**Mr. Paul Rolston:** The NPCPP welcomes the opportunity to engage with this committee and with its partners in education.

Our original submission on this matter highlighted some specific areas of concern to the organisation regarding the focus of this meeting, including books and technology costs. This opening statement, however, refers to the realities and broader core requirements and concerns of parents and guardians.

Post-primary education in Ireland is supposed to have been free since Donogh O'Malley's courageous and insightful decision in 1967. Unfortunately, the funding required for schools to properly meet this commitment has failed to keep up with the demands in the changing education system and gradually, but increasingly, parents are required to subsidise Government responsibilities for education. This situation is, at the very least, disappointing but in reality is negligent of the governmental responsibilities undertaken and promised by Donogh O'Malley to ensure that all children have access to the solid foundation that stems from a full and balanced secondary education.

Parental support to ensure the availability of basic requirements in school through so-called voluntary contributions, which are no longer voluntary in most cases and, therefore, amount to school fees, is absolutely unacceptable and must be addressed as a priority. Our nation's children must have access at no cost to secondary education as committed to by the State. The relationship between a school and a parent should revolve around educational, and not financial, matters, a point made by Ms Lynch with reference to primary education, which I reiterate. Pupils should never suffer any consequences or be in any way highlighted or segregated due to the inability of their parents to meet these costs.

NPCPP strongly urges committee members to demand the return of proper and real free secondary education for our children. Returning school capitation grants to pre-2010 levels would be a positive step in this regard and we ask that this be a demand for delivery in the upcoming budget.

We must strive to return to a position where all basic requirements for effective education in our schools are met by Government. This will allow parents to further invest as they may see fit in some additional education or beneficial activities to enhance their children's learning and preparation for entry into adult life in Ireland. The benefits of a well-educated nation are widely acknowledged and, therefore, the net returns on such action and investment will generate significant benefits for our country and economy. This investment will, in turn, create a more attractive Ireland to which our emigrated children can return and in which multinational businesses and other world-leading organisations will invest.

NPCPP currently receives many complaints from angry parents whose children have been denied school lockers, school diaries, access to daily activities and other basic educational requirements because a parent has been unable to pay a voluntary contribution. Children are, at times, isolated and highlighted amongst their peers because of their parents' financial circumstances. Such practice is a disgrace, totally unacceptable and must cease immediately.

Back to school and college time at the end of August has become one of the most stressful times for parents with so many costs and charges landing at the same time. Parents can be in dreadfully stressed situations.

Our submission on this subject highlighted some of the areas, specifically costs in respect of books and technological areas.

At this stage, we wish to focus in a broader sense on the ongoing excessive costs that parents undertake, effectively subsidising the State's responsibilities. Provision to spread the costs that arise at a particular time of the year, August, which is one of the most stressful times for parents, must be made. Many parents now borrow to meet such requirements. Others are not in a position to avail of, or even approach, a reputable lender such as the credit union. The NPCPP respectfully suggests that some process must be designed whereby Government supported or underwritten facilities should be available to enable families to spread their education costs, including campus accommodation at third level, throughout the year. I was in the Public Gallery when that matter was discussed earlier. The costs in that regard, which again land on parents in August, are excessive. Across the board, for parents it appears that August is a month to run away from rather than to enjoy as a holiday period. The mental stress on parents and students brought about by the costs of education landing in only a two-month period must be acknowledged and addressed.

Parents face excessive costs for basic educational requirements at primary, post-primary and third levels. Most families in Ireland have two to three children and will experience those costs together. They will straddle these three areas of education during the education of their families. Core funding cannot be viewed separately or in isolation for each level. Parents must deal with all of them at the same time of the year so co-ordinating costs and investigation of these matters must take account of that. The State must do the same as parents and deal with these matters so that, potentially, a family has the opportunity to spread the costs and not face an August of fear and stress.

Investment in education has long been demonstrated and confirmed to be the most worthy spend of a nation's government. The return to the State, our economy and society is not in doubt-----

**Chairman:** Will Mr. Rolston conclude? He has gone well over the time.

**Mr. Paul Rolston:** -----having been the cornerstone and key factor driving the development of the economy over recent decades. The NPCPP advocates a State aspiration to return to free secondary education for all children and for a system of financial support to be put in place for parents and families to alleviate the current back-to-school stress. The State must address and deliver the free education committed to in 1967.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to raise these issues.

**Chairman:** The final stakeholder to address the committee is Ms Marcella Stakem of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

**Ms Marcella Stakem:** The SVP welcomes the opportunity to make a presentation to the committee. SVP sees access to education as a critical enabler out of social exclusion and poverty. In the week before the schools reopened, the society took 250 to 300 calls per day from worried parents regarding school costs. The following case study highlights the impact school

costs have on parents, children and young people: “My daughter is starting secondary school in September and the cost is over €1,000 as she needs an iPad. I do not know how I am going to meet this cost as I am really struggling. I do not want her to feel different when she starts secondary school as she was bullied in the past.”

SVP is proposing a number of actions that would reduce the costs of primary and secondary school for parents. The first is to make schoolbooks free for all non-fee paying primary and secondary schools. To begin with, we recommend a €20 million investment in budget 2020 to provide free books for all primary school children. The second is to end the voluntary contribution system for parents and begin that by restoring the capitation grant rate to 2010 levels in budget 2020. Over the medium term, we request that the Department carry out an independent assessment of the adequacy of the capitation rate and incrementally increase funding in order that all children have access to quality, free primary and secondary education. Our members have noted an increase in requests from parents where the use and purchase of digital devices is mandatory. In most cases, there is no financial support in place to help parents meet the costs of equipment and software, which can range from €500 to €800. SVP recommends that the Department of Education and Skills establish a working group to examine the use of digital devices in schools, taking into account the cost impact on parents.

SVP published a research report last year with the title, *Stories of Struggle*. It highlights the reality experienced by households with children the income of which falls below that required for a minimum essential standard of living. In SVP members’ experience, as detailed in the research, the families we assist do not want to go to moneylenders to access loans but they have no alternative and cite the high cost of education.

The underinvestment in the education system is impacting on the most vulnerable in society. If children and young people do not have the resources they require, such as school books and access to digital devices, it hinders their future in education. As a result, it is imperative that we now take long-term measures to ensure that all children have access to proper and free education so that they can participate in school and secure educational opportunities that are on offer regardless of their parents’ economic status.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I thank the many speakers for their detailed opening statements and submissions. This is a significant issue for many parents and families. Several speakers referred to the late Donogh O’Malley’s commitment to free education, which is being seriously undermined. I do not believe we truly have a system of free primary or secondary education. I do not blame the schools for that. There are things I would like to see them do differently but the fundamental problem is the underfunding of primary and secondary schools.

In my experience - perhaps Barnardos or the Society of St. Vincent de Paul will contradict me here - the most significant cost is books, followed by uniforms, voluntary contributions and, in some schools, technology. The Department and various schools are attempting to assist families and students but these efforts are inconsistent in their application and vary from school to school. The application of the schoolbook scheme can vary greatly and requires review. Such assistance is often concentrated, with some of the best schemes concentrated in areas of greatest disadvantage. This is right and sensible. It is the response of schools to the communities in which they exist. However, increasingly, one sees a change in the nature of disadvantage. One sees more dispersed disadvantage. In areas that are ostensibly prosperous one can still have families who are under serious pressure with school costs. Such families have children in schools that do not favour schoolbook schemes or offer the same supports. I offer those as initial observations.

My first question, on the parent and student charter, can be answered by any of the speakers. There has been some discussion about what the charter might involve. I am sure there are many other areas in which the organisations present, particularly the management organisations, seek action. In the specific area of policies on uniforms, book schemes and so forth, what measures should be included in the parent and student charter legislation, which would have a real impact on costs? Would they include, for example, an obligation on schools to have regard to the impact on students of school uniforms?

I have a specific question for Mr. Curtis. I have a concern on which he may be able to reassure me. He identified this issue of bringing one's own device. Although I am not familiar with schools that operate this scheme, I am concerned that if there is an expectation to provide a device, there will be a cost implication because not every family has a device. Even when a family has a device, a child might feel embarrassed that his or her device is a ten year old laptop, as opposed to the very latest tablet. I am sure Mr. Curtis has given thought to this issue and he might be in a position to respond.

We have not discussed uniforms much but perhaps school boards of management, the JMB, the education and training boards and the CPSMA could examine the issue. While some schools have done great work in ensuring that as much of the uniform as possible is generic but other schools require a unique shirt or blazer and so on. That is a major obligation and place serious pressure on families. Do the witnesses have views on how we might further tackle that issue and ensure that as much of the uniform as possible is generic in order to reduce the cost implication? To address the panel as a whole, in the North schoolbooks are free. Is that what we need to work towards? It is the case in many jurisdictions.

I have a final example that I meant to outline at the outset. In addition to reducing costs, every family needs some help. Fewer than a third of families get the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance. I am familiar with a family in which one parent is working and one is not. The working parent works for a multinational but is relatively low paid. The family were over the threshold by €7 or €8 and received no assistance. They have a child going into the leaving certificate year, which involves great costs. That is really difficult. I am sure the schools are doing their best to help such families but they deserve more support from the State. We need to tackle the issue of cost in addition to providing more support.

**Chairman:** On the issue of uniforms, the committee held comprehensive hearings on the issue and made some very strong recommendations in recent months. I will ensure the Deputy gets a copy. Deputy Ó Laoghaire is a new member of our committee. He is a very welcome addition.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I thank the witnesses for their presentations. As Deputy Ó Laoghaire has said, issues related to going back to school put immense stress on many vulnerable families. This should never be the case if we claim to have free education. Schools should never have to ask parents to fund their basic running costs. Government must fund schools appropriately. This could start in primary schools with the full restoration of the capitation grant to 2010 levels.

I respectfully suggest that there needs to be a change in how schools engage if they are to continue with voluntary contributions. The voluntary contribution should be abolished. We are encouraging parents to speak with school principals about their inability to make voluntary contributions but the very thought of doing so is petrifying to parents. It is very intimidating to have to meet the school principal to explain that one cannot afford a contribution. It could

lead to parents not engaging with schools at all and avoiding going to parent-teacher meetings, school plays or award ceremonies or even allowing their children to participate in such activities because it might lead to bumping into the school principal they are supposed to meet to discuss why they cannot afford the voluntary contribution. That needs to be examined. What Mr. Robinson referred to is very worrisome. It should never be the case that a child is denied access to basic requirements such as lockers or school activities because he or she cannot afford the voluntary contribution. We should never let that happen. It needs to be stamped out immediately.

With regard to other issues such as the school uniform, to which Deputy Ó Laoghaire referred, what is the position in respect of the circular on cost-effective practice that was sent out in April 2017? What information has been gathered about how schools are implementing the circular? It should not be sporadic. Every single school should be implementing the measures called for in that circular. In response to Ms Stakem and the stories of struggle, I was particularly struck by the children in direct provision and their stories of struggle. How are they coping and how is information on access to grants being provided to their parents? Surely, children in direct provision should be getting extra support. If one in three of our homeless is a child and if more than 40% of our homeless are women, it strikes me that they need information on how to access support. What is happening to help our homeless and other people who are struggling get that support?

The cost of books is a significant burden. Ms Feely mentioned the provision of guidelines and support. What is the reason for the delay within the Department regarding the provision of updated guidelines and supports? Is she aware of the current position? Those guidelines should be given to schools.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** I thank all of our witnesses for being here today. School costs is a huge issue for parents, particularly families on limited incomes. That the Society of St. Vincent de Paul received 250 to 300 calls per day about it in the week before schools reopened shows what a huge issue it is.

It is ironic that the focus of our discussion today is finance. Ms Lynch is correct that the relationship between a family and a school should be educational rather than financial. As mentioned by some of my colleagues, the issue of a parent being afraid to engage with a school because he or she has a financial difficulty needs to be addressed. As a committee, we need to make strong recommendations on the cost of schoolbooks. As mentioned by the Chairman, this committee previously made recommendations in regard to uniforms.

While we have some information from the submissions provided today and from other work carried out in this area by various parties, we need additional information regarding the cost of books. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has indicated the need for a €20 million investment in primary education and another figure of €40 million was also mentioned. Is that an investment of €20 million for primary and of €20 million for post-primary? The submission from Barnardos also provides information on costs in respect of which we need clarity. It is important we have up-to-date statistics to assist us in making recommendations around funding in the context of the upcoming budget. As everybody here will be aware, there are many other issues on which attention is being focused in the context of funding and the upcoming budget. Education is so crucial that we must ensure it is not left to the side. The Barnardos submission also provides a graph showing that in the case of primary school costs, 8% of parents borrow to meet those costs. In the case of post-primary, it is 14%. These are very high percentages of families who are repaying borrowed money, particularly if they have borrowed from moneylenders. I

would welcome a comment on that issue.

Everybody who presented talked about and provided specific information on digital devices and their cost. Everybody has recommended that a study be undertaken of the benefits of digital devices educationally and socially and how we should go about weighing up the advantages versus disadvantages of them in terms of financial pressures. We live in a digital world and we have to embrace it. I would welcome comments from the witnesses on what we should be recommending in that regard. As I said, everybody has recommended a study or a review. It is important that such a study or review would not drag on for years because this is an issue for parents now. I would welcome as much information as possible on what we should be recommending in our report. Has there been any reduction in the use of non-reusable workbooks? This has always been an issue because once students write in a workbook, they cannot pass it on to a younger brother or sister. Over the years there have been recommendations on this and I am wondering if anyone knows if there has been a reduction in their use or a move away from that kind of cost to families.

**Chairman:** I should point out that Deputy Thomas Byrne asked me to apologise to the witnesses. He has a scheduled meeting with the INTO but is hoping to come back in before the end of this meeting.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I thank all the witnesses for their presentations. This issue does my head in. As can be guessed from my accent, I was born in London but in a working class community in London in 1970, I had free books. I also had a hot meal at school every day. That is two generations ago but here we are in 2019, discussing these issues. I agree with what the Chairman said earlier about this committee having previously made very progressive recommendations in this area. Regarding school books, the only surprise for me is that everyone has not asked for a free book scheme; surely that should be a fundamental ask. As the representatives from Barnardos pointed out, it would cost 0.02% of the education budget. I ask those who did not advocate a free book scheme to comment. Clearly the basis is there, through the rental scheme, to turn that into a book distribution scheme. Surely we should all be on the one page on that matter. It is a very reasonable ask that should have been granted many years ago.

Do the witnesses have any particular recommendations with regard to technology? As the parent of three teenagers, I am very conscious of the cost of laptops and tablets for school. I do not know how families can cope with funding them. I am also concerned about the use of such devices in schools because I have noticed that students are doing a lot less reading since tablets have been introduced in schools. That is a separate issue unrelated to costs.

I also have a question about transition year, which is really expensive. Again, I do not know how parents can fund it. Clearly the Department has not made any provision for funding transition year which means that a lot of children cannot go with their classmates on school trips or take part in education projects because their parents do not have the money. How can that be right?

I welcome the SVP's recommendation regarding an analysis of the cost of introducing a hot meal in schools and hope that this committee will support that. It is so important because children are going hungry across Ireland at the moment. We have dealt with the school uniform issue. I wish to raise one other matter which is like the elephant in the room. We know there are situations where parents are going to moneylenders and situations where children are not provided with the books they need at primary level. At the same, we subsidise private, fee-paying schools to the tune of €91 million per year. I am conscious that at least a couple of the

organisations represented here today have private schools as members so this may be slightly awkward. Nonetheless I must ask how we can justify a situation where parents are going to moneylenders and where children are not being provided with books while at the same time, the taxpayers of Ireland are subsidising private, fee-paying schools to the tune of €91 million. The counter-argument that comes back is that if we did not give the schools that money they would close and then all the children attending would go back into the State education system but that is not true. There is no evidence for that. There is no subsidy in Britain or France for fee-paying schools. What does it tell us about our society that while we have not prioritised children in terms of access to books, meals and proper supports in schools, we have consistently prioritised subsidising fee-paying schools in this country? I would welcome the comments of witnesses on that.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I will begin by agreeing with the final comments of Senator Gavan on the funding of private schools. There is no evidence to support the counter-argument. Furthermore, what is wrong with moving to a public school system? If the private schools did close their doors, maybe the whole school system would improve. Students would be able to push past some of the class and culture barriers and limitations in terms of social and cultural capital that exist now if all children were being schooled together in schools of their choice within their communities. I work on a lot of difficult issues but for some reason this is one that gets me quite upset, possibly because I have lived in both realities. I have known what it means not to be able to afford school and now I know the relief I feel, as a woman and as a mother, at being able to afford school. I want every mother and family to be able to share that feeling. It has been suggested there should be warnings about the high costs of moneylenders. We know about their high costs, but we use them anyway. I used them in the months of September and December to meet the costs associated with going back to school and Christmas. I remember paying €35 on every €100 I borrowed at the time. It is still ingrained in my head. I can still see the little book in which I used to mark off the weeks until I finished making my repayments. We know the cost of going to moneylenders, but the cost of not going to them can be higher. We have to measure that cost every time. The cost of not putting ourselves into an awful financial position can be measured in embarrassment and shame. I suggest the idea of the cost of not having the books on time, or not paying the voluntary contribution on time, ripples across every part of this conversation. What is the cost of not funding free books?

The cost of not funding technology in the classroom is massive. The digital divide is widening. If we do not have technology in the classroom as a result of inadequate funding, it will be clear at third level that the digital skills of the kids who can afford to pay for access, even if it is at home, will be far beyond those of the kids who cannot afford such access. There needs to be the technology equivalent of the free book scheme. We cannot shy away from the use of technology in the classroom. Some people are afraid of technology because they do not know how to deal with it or how to manage it. The problem is that we end up with young men from middle class and upper class backgrounds working in computer science. This aspect of the digital divide can manifest itself in how systems and algorithms are built. There can be gender and class bias in banking applications or anything else that is done online. If we cannot diversify the digital sector, another inequality will continue and we will not move along in this respect. This committee has agreed to have a debate on an EU initiative related to the digital divide. I hope such a conversation can be scheduled before Christmas in order that these matters can be teased out.

In recent years my battle has turned towards teachers and principals, while the battle of teachers and principals has turned towards families, even though the area of underfunding is

where the battle belongs. As long as we keep fighting one another, the underfunding will continue. We need to acknowledge that sometimes we have to let things fall. Schools, principals, boards of management and families are always trying to find the money to put a sticking plaster over the problems. They get money from somewhere other than capitation grants - for example, by raising funds, organising raffles and putting pressure on families - to keep the lights on and obtain art supplies. If everyone continues to hold everything together in this manner, why will schools be given additional funding? Perhaps we have to let things fall. If we do not threaten to do this, from where will the impetus for increased investment come? Nobody likes to think of schools striking and doors closing because everyone thinks children need to be learning in classrooms. The cost of not letting things fall means that schools will continue to be underfunded as they are.

We need to make progress from having a conversation every year about school costs and the shaming of families. We must consider what we are going to do beyond making recommendations and contributing to this committee. We have to change the financial relationship and put the burden where it belongs. I know that I am making statements, rather than asking questions. When the matters being assessed as part of the leaving certificate art curriculum are changed every year, there are resultant changes in requirements for art supplies. Many years have passed since the funding for art supplies for teachers was increased. I have been told by teachers that they are funding out of their own pockets what they need to get the children in their classrooms up to leaving certificate standard. The State is setting out what is required of pupils at leaving certificate level, but it is not providing increased funding for the resources and tools needed to complete art projects to the required standard.

I ask the delegates to respond to my comments, particularly my point that we may need to start thinking about the cost and impact of not doing something. Rather than continuing to shame one another, we need to change the narrative and conversation. We must look at how we can move on and achieve our goals.

**Chairman:** I thank the Senator. The stark reality is that in 2019 the amount of funding schools are getting through capitation grants is 14% less than it was ten years ago. Unfortunately, schools must look for a voluntary fee, which is not voluntary, to simply open the doors and turn on the lights. It is not the fault of the schools or the boards of management; the problem is the State is letting down schools, students and parents. In our most recent report on this issue we made very strong recommendations and hope to have some engagement in the Dáil and Seanad Chambers and the Minister on them. There was good engagement by all stakeholders, but it is depressing when we must listen yet again to all of the challenges families face in trying to ensure their children receive a good basic education, even before they can have aspirations of going on to third level.

I appreciate the challenges the month of August brings, which Mr. Rolston noted. The challenges continue on when the school term finishes and the school lists are given to parents. I listen to friends and colleagues with children, who are trying to balance the books in deciding what they are going to get from one week to the next, and see all of the planning that goes into it. It is so sad that 22% of parents turn to moneylenders. One recommendation we made in our report was that there be proper engagement between the Departments of Finance and Education and Skills to examine why parents do this. Senator Ruane has given it as it is, stating people pay €35 on top of every €100 borrowed and noting why it is needed. I completely agree with her because the alternative is worse. Every parent wants to do the best for his or her child and ensure they have equality of access. However, one of the submissions we received stated the

biggest inequality of all was in the equality we have. We think that by treating everybody the same he or she has equality, but that is not the case. We have to make sure every child from every family can go to school without putting added pressure on other elements of the household budget because that is what is happening.

I go back to some of the specific comments made. We asked the delegates to look at the issue of e-learning, in particular, because we are trying to examine and grapple with it. There is a relatively new phenomenon wherein some schools have introduced different tablets which they are asking parents to purchase, while also insisting that no books can be used. That is a big move. While there is a need for digital learning within schools, we have to figure out whether this is the best way forward. I appreciate that all of the delegates have addressed this issue in some way, but we need to have more engagement on complete digital learning versus book learning.

I refer to the book rental scheme. It was suggested by the ETBI that there be a leasing scheme for tablets also, but it was interesting to hear about the challenges regarding costs, delivery and the extra administrative burden such schemes put on schools, which must be recognised. There is also an issue with the differences between schools, as the scheme is sometimes administered by teachers and sometimes by parents. Barnardo's has suggested the Department update its guidelines and provide clarity on who should administer the textbook rental scheme. Would that take away from the school's autonomy? There need to be clear guidelines.

We must recognise the burdens placed on teachers. Mr. Mulconry made the point that teaching and leadership in education were suffering because of the extra administrative burden. The book rental scheme is a good one, and the committee recommended that an extra €20 million be invested in the next budget. That amount would support up to 100 schools in accessing the scheme and reducing the cost of books for children. However, we must consider the administrative side of it. It is time intensive and imposes a significant organisational burden. Including iPads would require administration too. A suggestion was made about spreading the cost through voluntary contributions throughout the year. While that is well meant, it would be a further administrative burden. The committee hopes that, if the capitation fee was increased to what it was ten years ago, there would be no need for such a voluntary contribution. This is a major problem and it is not going to go away any time soon. It is worsening every year. We listened to representatives from SUSI in our earlier session. That the grant has not changed since 2012 is causing problems at third level, but there are also significant problems at primary and post-primary levels that we must resolve.

I will invite the witnesses to respond. They have identified the same problems that we as a committee have. Consequently, there were not many actual questions and members instead commented on what the witnesses brought to our attention. I thank the witnesses for that, and I will ask them to respond briefly as I am conscious that it is after 1.30 p.m. Perhaps we will take them in reverse order, starting with Ms Stakem. If the witnesses wish to revert to us with further information, they can contact the clerk, who will submit it to us.

**Ms Marcella Stakem:** Deputy Martin mentioned how the Society of St. Vincent de Paul supported homeless families and families in direct provision with their school costs. Their living arrangements already create stress, but they must also face the same issues as the wider community in terms of school costs. It is a major issue. We also support lone parents, Travelers, people with disabilities and people who are unemployed in this regard. School costs cause significant stress and worry for families.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I am sorry for interrupting, but I was not asking for an oral report from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. I was just referring to the struggles it faces. The State needs to give more support.

**Ms Marcella Stakem:** Exactly.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Is that happening? I was not condemning the society. It can only be commended on the work it does.

**Ms Marcella Stakem:** I thank the Deputy, and that is why my second point was going to be about how we believed the Department of Education and Skills needed to take a more hands-on and proactive approach, not just for families living in direct provision or experiencing homelessness, but a wide range of families that are experiencing stress and worry about school costs. The Department needs to consider the adequacy of the capitation grant. We do not know exactly how much it costs for a child to receive an adequate education. In order that we can know how much is required, we want the Department to examine the matter in detail.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Stakem. I call Mr. Rolston.

**Mr. Paul Rolston:** I wrote down the words “core funding” and was very tempted just to state “core funding” in my opening remarks and leave it at that because if we listen to all the comments made here, fundamentally, what is wrong is core funding. We come into these chambers with the opportunity to engage and try to identify how we can address that. All we can do is identify the problem and help the members to put the pressure on in terms of what is required. The bottom line is core funding because parents are the people who are subsidising that and have done so since the introduction of what was supposed to be free education. It is an ongoing issue. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the credit unions and Barnardos do studies every year which find that the cost for parents of so-called free education is increasing. That is scandalous. We have a reputation of being one of the fastest growing economies in Europe yet at a level we are further back than where we were in 2010. That is scandalous. It will remain the National Parents Council Post Primary Ireland’s focus and demand that core funding is addressed and free education made available.

We also have to deal with the realities because parents have to fund their children’s education, and parents will do everything they can to do that. The stress and pressure they experience over a two-month period is outrageous. As the Chairman mentioned, more than one quarter of parents have to borrow to meet those costs in July and August and the stress that causes in terms of family holidays, and families generally, is crazy.

While we try to address this crazy problem that has been created in a so-called First World, economically progressive country, I ask that some sort of an investigation or examination be carried out as to the reason some parents who go to credit unions to try to get a loan for what we are supposed to be subsidising the State for cannot even get a hearing. They are facts. What should those parents do? The credit unions, which are community-based, will not even speak to them because they have not got the wherewithal to guarantee that they can repay the loans. That is scandalous.

Apart from fundamentally restating that core funding must be brought back to deliver free education, we would advocate that there has to be something that will assist parents to spread those costs in circumstances where they have to borrow. I suggest there are many different scenarios that can be explored, for instance, a somewhat supported loan or a part guarantee by the

State to allow people access the money it costs to educate their children. Those are the realities. Let us deal with the big picture but while we are trying to do that as quickly as possible, please support parents in their efforts to subsidise the education of their children.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Rolston. We looked at the area of core funding earlier. I absolutely support what he said and we, as a committee, support him. I will read into the record one of the recommendations we made arising from our last hearing. It was Recommendation 7 on back to school costs. It states that “the Minister for Education and Skills request that his Cabinet colleague, with responsibility for Credit Unions and other financial institutions, undertake a review of the lending criteria and processes with a view to eliminating the need for parents to resort to licensed moneylenders who, in some cases, can charge interest rates of 200% and a 100% equivalent in charges.” In that instance, the microcredit scheme, which only some credit union branches have rolled out, is excellent. It will provide for small loans of €500 to families that may not be eligible for other loans. I raised with the Minister in the Chamber the issue that every credit union should have that for parents. I call Ms Lynch.

**Ms Áine Lynch:** Regarding Deputy Ó Laoghaire’s question on the student and parent charter, as an organisation, we welcome the publishing of the Bill this week, which we sought for many years. It has potential to change some school culture as there will be more consultation and discussion, along with more work done in partnership with schools. The National Parents Council is concerned about a possible unintended consequence of the charter Bill in that it mentions voluntary contributions within its text. This is the first time voluntary contributions have been put in legislation. We have major concerns about that as it is accepting the fact that voluntary contributions occur. The language was intended to ensure transparency between the school receiving these contributions and those who paid them. The intentions are good but we are really concerned that, for the first time ever, something we are campaigning to eliminate is now mentioned in legislation. We hope that will be changed before the Bill becomes an Act of the Oireachtas.

There is the question of the capitation grant being restored to the levels of 2010 and 2011. We hope that will happen but it will not deal fully with capitation grants issues, as costs have risen since that time and voluntary contributions were requested even before that. With regard to restoring the grants to the level at a particular point, we should be very cautious about asking for something and believing it will address a problem when we are clear that it will not do so because the issue was not addressed in the first place.

In our submission we have tried to not separate the digital issue from the schoolbooks issue. They are linked. We speak about schoolbooks as if they are just needed. We know that at primary level there is one curriculum but if one goes into any school around the country, there are different books. Why is there so much discretion around schoolbooks within the school system when there is one curriculum? I note Senator Gavan’s reference to his accent. I have a similar accent and I also grew up with a free schoolbook system. There was much commonality in schoolbooks, the length of time they existed and the cost of those books across the system. We have moved on through many years and now we are in a different position. We do not need to keep saying what books the children need but rather what resources they need.

There is no other area of life where there is so much reliance on a book. I remember in the office 20 years ago we would have bought books but we never do so now. Generally we do not have reference books but we are still discussing who is paying for schoolbooks rather than what is needed for the best education of our children. Digital learning must come into that as digital learning is not just about e-books. We have heard cases where parents have been asked

to buy an iPad but when the child comes home from school, a picture of a page in a book has been taken by the camera on the iPad. That is not digital learning but is reflective of schools' constant battle to try to make it more affordable for parents. It is not really grappling with the matter of what resources children need in our current society. I caution against separating books and digital learning as the two issues are very much entwined. It is the reason we are not calling for free books across the board. We must first establish what we need before we can say that the State must spend €20 million on books. Is that what we want the State to spend its money on or should it be spent on something else?

Senator Ruane asked if we need to let the system fall. My gut would incline to answering "Yes" but which parent will decide to let it fall when his or her child is in it? That is the problem. Everybody thinks it needs to fall to get a reaction but there is the question of which generation will let its children suffer. No parent will allow that to happen to his or her child so these parents will pay for the lights and heating to be kept on, as well as all the other things. Their children are in the system.

**Mr. John Curtis:** I have been in this room on many occasions and I have never seen such unanimity. We all agree the system is underfunded. It is very difficult for us at a school level. A survey we did a number of years ago indicated that approximately 30% of funding in voluntary secondary schools comes from parents. That is unacceptable and it is very difficult at the start of the school year for parents to manage costs, whether they are voluntary contributions, books or something else. We are very cognisant of that and it is very frustrating for us as well. Schools are charities too and we engage with charities. We have a system with money coming in and going out. The only reason we ask for money is that we have been systemically underfunded over the years. As the Senator said, perhaps we have put up with it too much. I hope that following the deliberations and conversations here, there will be a concerted effort to look at the issue of funding. All our schools are underfunded. If the Department gives the schools the money, they will not ask as much of parents. It is as simple as that. We are governed and regulated as charities. At local level, people realise that schools will do their level best to look after the children in their care. We have spoken about the student and parent charter, the Bill for which was published yesterday. This reinforces the fact that there is significant engagement between parents, students and management in schools in dealing with some of the issues such as uniforms and the e-learning debate.

The e-learning debate is interesting. We all have to acknowledge that we are at the cusp of something here, but we are not quite sure where we are going with it. Some years ago, a lot of schools got tablets but this has slowed down a little since. Part of this due to the fact that one cannot buy e-books with the grant. This presents a problem. The devices are also expensive. In an ideal world, we would ask the Government to give extra funding to schools to just look at the issue of e-learning. Marvellous work has happened in schools through the digital strategy revolution over recent years. We started a process some ten or 12 years ago whereby every classroom was given a computer and a projector, and every school was given broadband. This has helped to revolutionise teaching. It has sowed the seeds for what has occurred at junior cycle. I believe that we need to build on that. Deputy O'Sullivan has made the key point that we need more study on this. Even other jurisdictions are not quite sure what the balance should be between books and e-books. We are all in a learning space in that regard. The professional development service for teachers, technology in education, does marvellous work in directing and helping us in schools. They need to engage in more in-service training for teachers because, ultimately, e-learning and digital learning will only work if teachers are equipped in that space. In recent years, we have been very caught up in junior cycle reform, and perhaps we also

need to look at e-learning strategies in the context of in-service training for teachers.

**Mr. Adrian Flynn:** Two of the core values of ETBI are community and equality. It starts with that engagement and with the school as the centre of the community. I contacted one of our schools in the past week regarding book rental. The school is in a disadvantaged and deprived area. They managed with the book grant, which provides €39 per student, but this only gets them as far as the junior cycle. I was informed by the school that only 7% of students had purchased books in fifth year. This impacts massively on the school, the classroom, the teacher, the learner and the home. Some of the provision in the school completion programme provides a fantastic model that we should look at and address. This goes back to my point about the cluster support in the community and that all partners in the communities have this as an item of their agenda, which is to understand their community.

On the book grant, a school that is growing or a new start-up school will only get the grant based on October returns from the previous year. If the school has 50 pupils enrolling in a year and has 100 pupils enrolling the following year, it will not be able to provide adequately. This needs to be addressed.

With regard to technology and educational purposes, one of the areas on which to focus is the learner. I refer back to the junior cycle and the IT skills and digital skills embedded in that, which will ultimately link to the future jobs we do not yet know of and for which we do not even have terms. These will be digital skills-based. We need to map this and join it up. It stems, essentially, from the learner leading the learning and the teacher being trained and properly equipped to scaffold the learning to allow the critical thinking and creativity that our future population will have.

With regard to the issue of moneylenders, I refer back to the community. Supports in schools, such as home-school liaison officers, pastoral care and the work of tutors and year heads to maintain a connection with parents, are important for us to focus on and invest resources in. If we empower those who have a direct connection with the families most in need, we can obtain the information we need to support them best.

**Mr. Seamus Mulconry:** Senator Ruane hit the nail on the head in the context of this debate. We invariably focus on the cost of schooling to parents or to schools, but the cost to society of failing to invest in schools is far greater. It costs a great deal to keep a person in a lifetime of poverty. In many cases, people are in poverty because they did not have the right foundation in their education. They may have learning difficulties, they may not be able to read or write, or they may not be as articulate as they could be. If we could solve those problems, we would unleash a great deal of talent, which would result in increased taxation and revenue for the State. We need to examine the cost of not investing.

The Constitution indicates that the State should provide for free primary education. That is in de Valera's Constitution. The constitution of the Free State, however, stated that every citizen had the right to a free primary education. Although the earlier version was written in the middle of the Civil War, the State at the time recognised the fundamental importance of investing in early education and the basics of reading and writing. If we fail to do that now, when we are a far wealthier society, it is a damning indictment of our political system and values as a society.

I turn to the use of ICT in education. My background is in the technology sector. There is no robust independent evidence that the use of technological devices in education provides measurably better learning outcomes, although there is also no evidence to the contrary. We

just do not know. We do know, however, that if people are taught to read and write and do arithmetic, they will thrive in life. Restoring the capitation grant will stabilise the system but will not deliver the kind of high-quality education we need. Nevertheless, if the overspend in the health service over two years was invested in primary schools, most of their problems would probably be solved. Primary schools are highly efficient. If they receive investment, there will be a measurable return. Fundraising and voluntary contributions are a most inefficient way of funding the primary system. It is not just a question of the pain involved; it is ridiculous that teachers spend their time trying to fundraise, particularly in light of the level of investment versus the return.

I stated earlier that if there is a problem, the principal of the school in question should be approached. Such a conversation is not painless for the principal. Nobody likes having such conversations and nobody should have to have them. We need to invest in the basics. The return from an investment in the basics will be considerable. The CPSMA sees dangerous signs of systematic stresses in the system. Highly-talented principals are retiring because of too much administration, too much funding, too much hassle and not enough time to focus on teaching and learning. More worryingly, we have started to see that people we would expect to apply for a position of principal are deciding it is just not worth the effort and pain. The system ultimately depends on the quality of the people in it. If we do not relieve them of some of the pressure, there will be a negative growth cycle. The system will start to degrade. It will not collapse overnight but it will start to degrade and when it does, it will be very hard to pull it back.

**Ms Naomi Feely:** I thank members for the comments and queries. I will briefly address a couple of clarifying questions but I invite members to approach me after the meeting if I do not cover everything. Deputy Ó Laoghaire asked about the cost of uniforms versus that of school books. Our survey found that uniforms tended to be the higher cost. I refer members to the analysis in that regard which I have provided in our briefing paper. There were 1,400 responses to our survey. Stepping away from that, I was blown away by the fact that parents are really annoyed about uniforms and the crested uniforms. That would have come post publication of the committee's report and I recognise that the committee dealt with that issue in its last report. It is still an issue. I wonder whether there are provisions and scope within the student and parent charter to deal with this issue in order that parents can be consulted and feed into the schools on these issues to bring that forward.

Second, there was an issue regarding guidelines. We had emphasised the need to send guidelines to secondary schools on establishing school book schemes. Our perspective was that it is clear that book schemes are taking off in primary schools. We can see that they are increasing from 50% to over 70% of primary schools while we still are seeing rates in secondary schools of approximately 40% to 44%. My colleague, Mr. Mulconry, noted earlier that as book schemes originated in primary schools, there may be an institutional or historical reason they are not taking off in secondary schools. The Department of Education and Skills, however, should be providing further guidance to encourage more book schemes at second level. We can see from the school cost data from Barnardos that the cost of schoolbooks is higher in secondary schools and as one progresses. I have provided data in our submission on the contribution to school book schemes and how that changes over the years.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan asked a question about workbooks and whether there was a decrease. I saw a number of comments in the survey this year requesting that workbooks be done away with. It was not something that stood out in my mind but I saw a number of such comments. Workbooks are possibly still being used but I do not have concrete data to which I can

point the Deputy.

On information technology, IT, everybody is coming to this from a similar perspective and we agree that we need to investigate it further. From a pedagogical point of view, we would ask how technology is being used. We can see in our survey data that parents are still spending a lot on books. As the expenditure has only fallen by €5 at primary level and by €20 at secondary level, they are still spending similar amounts. Are they using digital devices in conjunction with books? If so, what are the pedagogical impacts and outcomes of same? We would also like to know the socialisation impacts of that. We were struck by the fact that 13% of those at primary school level who were using such devices were in infant classes, which seems quite young. In taking this a step forward, we would be interested in finding out about the prevalence of the use of IT in schools. That might be an area to examine, although it is a big area to explore.

On the capitation fee, the Chairman made a good point on how one still must go in to turn on the lights etc. We might be getting that increase in the capitation fee back but it already has been sucked up with those cost of living increases such as the cost of fuel etc. Therefore, voluntary contributions are still being sought by schools from parents. We see in the survey data we have that pupils are being excluded. Diaries are being withdrawn from them and they are not given locker keys. We see evidence of that in our survey data.

An overarching point for ourselves as witnesses and for members is the issue of educational equality. This comes back to Deputy Ó Laoghaire's first point where he mentioned targeted payments. If we invested in our education system and provided enough funding, we would not need targeted payments because education would be free. We are saying strongly that we can make that first step by investing in books. Senator Ruane's point was one of the strongest. She asked what is the cost of not doing this. We say that education is an equaliser. All children should have an equal opportunity to thrive in school and this can be transformational for them. We recognise the underfunding of schools is the issue. We recognise there needs to be increased investment and that will have the knock-on effect on schools and parents as well.

If there are any other clarifying questions I am happy to answer them.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Feely and every one of the witnesses for giving us their time and for their valuable contributions. If there is any supplementary information that they want to send us, they should please do so.

As there is no other business this meeting of the joint committee is adjourned until 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 24 September 2019.

The joint committee adjourned at 2 p.m. until 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 24 September 2019.