

A FAIRER
SCHOOL
TRANSPORT
SYSTEM:
FLEXIBLE
WORKABLE
AFFORDABLE



**A FAIRER
SCHOOL
TRANSPORT SYSTEM:
FLEXIBLE, WORKABLE, AFFORDABLE**



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL TRANSPORT CHANGES	3
CUTS TO FUNDING	3
IMPACT ON STUDENTS	3
CASE STUDIES	4
EXTRACTS FROM CORRESPONDENCE RECEIVED	5
PROPOSALS FOR A MORE FLEXIBLE SCHOOL TRANSPORT SYSTEM	6
1. AMENDMENTS TO THE SCHEME	6
2. ADMINISTRATION OF THE SCHEME	8
3. REDUCED COSTS FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN	8

INTRODUCTION

Sinn Féin believes that the school transport scheme is a critical service, facilitating pupils in accessing their education. It is particularly important for rural communities, who rely heavily on the service. There have been a number of issues and concerns raised in respect of recent changes to the school transport scheme by parents in recent years. Policy changes introduced by the Fianna Fáil Government and implemented by Fine Gael and Labour has resulted in huge changes in the service for families and communities.

Sinn Féin believes that by implementing the following actions and measures, the current School Transport system will be made more Flexible, Workable and Affordable for students and parents:

Amendments to the scheme:

- » Address the need for certainty for students and their families in securing transport by providing supports to current concessionary ticket holders for the duration of their education
- » Address the need for Children to maintain their Identity and Social Links to their local area by providing for a derogation from the nearest school rule where this can be justified as a result of established community or social links
- » Address the need for increased efficiency in delivery of services by allowing students who live on or near existing bus routes to be allowed travel on those routes where there is capacity

Administration of the Scheme:

- » Eliminate the “lottery” system for concessionary students and establish clear guidelines in determining how concessionary seats are distributed when necessary.

Reduce Costs for Parents and Children

- » Include additional investment of €13 million to provide for the €2 million medical card waiver and the €10.8 million required at current figures to provide free school transport to all eligible children.
- » Provide an additional €6 million to reduce school transport charges for concessionary ticket holders.



OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL TRANSPORT CHANGES

Changes in eligibility Criteria and Increased Charges

There have been a number of changes to the School Transport scheme introduced on foot of a Value for Money Review of the Scheme undertaken in 2011. Charges for eligible children on primary school routes were introduced in the 2011/2012 school year and currently stand at €100 per pupil with a family maximum of €220 for eligible primary school pupils. The closed school rule for primary school pupils was abolished and children who did not meet the distance criteria of 3.2 km away from the nearest school or who do not attend their nearest school must apply for concessionary school transport at the same cost as eligible children, although they are not counted for the retention or establishment of a service. Eligible children who are medical card holders are exempt from charges.

For secondary school pupils, the traditional catchment area boundary system as a means of determining eligibility for school transport was abolished for all new entrants to post primary school education from the 2012/13 school year. Eligibility for the post primary school transport scheme is determined by reference to the distance they reside from their nearest post primary education centre having regard to ethos and language. The annual charge for post primary school transport increased to €350 per pupil subject to a maximum of €650 per family. Eligible children who are medical card holders are exempt from this charge. Pupils who are ineligible under the terms of the scheme may apply for concessionary transport and must pay the annual charge and their numbers currently do not count in relation to the establishment or retention of a school transport service.

CUTS TO FUNDING

Between 2008 and 2014 expenditure on the School Transport Scheme reduced from €185.725 million to €172.2 million. This reduction is partly attributed to the policy changes outlined above and implemented in 2011 and 2012 school years and derived from the recommendations contained in the Value for Money Review of the Scheme.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Since 2011 there has been a significant increase in the number of students availing of school transport on a concessionary basis. In 2011 the total number of concessionary students was 4854 or just 4.7% of the total and this has jumped to 18,688 students in 2014/15, which represents 18.2% of the total number of students availing of school transport. Given the significant jump, it would appear that there is a correlation between the growing number of students availing of concessionary transport and the policy changes introduced in 2011 and 2012.

Due to the nature of the school transport scheme, students on concessionary seats are vulnerable as changes in the number of eligible pupils on a route may mean that seats on routes with growing numbers of eligible students may no longer remain available on a concessionary basis. Given the growing student population and consequently the growing number of eligible pupils, it is increasingly likely that seats for concessionary students will become vulnerable in future years.

This trend has played out in recent years as growing numbers of students have been refused school transport, despite the fact that they had availed of the service in recent years. In particular, 2016 saw a significant number of students refused school transport as bus routes exceeded their capacity.

This has a huge impact on parents and students alike as demonstrated by the case studies outlined below:

Case Study 1:

HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS

Families in Urris, Inishowen, Co Donegal have been denied school transport to Carndonagh Secondary Schools as schools in Buncrana are closer as the crow flies, however this requires children to travel over a route known as Mamore Gap, which would be considered unsafe to travel on in poor weather and in the winter months.

Case Study 2:

CHILDREN PREVIOUSLY IN RECEIPT OF SCHOOL TRANSPORT BUT REFUSED DUE TO CAPACITY ISSUES

This was by far the greatest number of complaints received by us in relation to the school transport system this year. The worst examples are in Rhodes, Co Offaly where almost 20 children are affected; the route to Carrigtwohill in Co Cork and routes in Sligo – Maugherow National School and Coola post primary. In some cases eligible children were refused school transport due to late payments and in other cases children were refused as the bus service was full due to increasing demand for the service. In some cases, such as the service to Carrigtwohill and Killinagh National School, Blacklion, Co Cavan, it appears that the bus service was downsized despite the fact that pupils who previously availed of the service were refused.

Case Study 3:

DISREGARD OF DEVELOPED SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY LINKS DUE TO NEAREST SCHOOL RULE

This was another prominent feature of correspondence received by our office. In particular, parents were concerned about separating siblings from each other – in a number of cases siblings of children with special needs or children who had special needs could not avail of suitable school transport services, despite the fact that these services ran right past the front door and were already being availed of by the family for siblings.

In Rhodes, Co Offaly a number of children who had previously availed of school transport to secondary schools in Edenderry were advised to attend their nearest school in Ropchfordsbridge in order to avail of school transport. This advice ignores the fact that the students were well settled in at their school, which they had been attending for years. Furthermore, the fact is that the school in question was in a different county, away from friends and the established community of the students in question.

EXTRACTS FROM CORRESPONDENCE RECEIVED:

“ It appears since this time 4 years ago regardless of when we pay for our tickets....we all seem to go into a lottery to see who gets the concessionary seats and have to wait till the last minute to see who's the unlucky ones. This is an unacceptable situation and causing a stressful summer every summer waiting to see if he gets seats or not and then having to make alternative arrangements at the last minute and deal with upset children when most of us are working parents this makes for a lot of undue stress. ”

“ I have two girls going to St Aloysius college Carrigtwohill. The bus is passing my door. They have been getting the bus this past number of years but this year I have been told the bus is full and there is no seats available for them. The reason being because they are only entitled to concessionary tickets which are limited.....I have spoken to Bus Eireann regarding this and they told me it was the luck of the draw. This is a huge inconvenience as my husband and I are both working and will find it next to impossible to be transporting our kids to and from school. ”

“ I wouldn't normally contact a TD or anyone about issues and have not done so in the past. But I have a sixteen year old girl on the verge of a breakdown with worry over the fact she cannot get to school....has attended St Alys Carrigtwohill for the last three years, she is a very happy child, works hard and made friends in the school but her world has come crashing down and I feel helpless.....The suggestion is to send my daughter to Youghal School and break her heart. I will not do it to her. ”

PROPOSALS FOR A MORE FLEXIBLE SCHOOL TRANSPORT SYSTEM

Sinn Féin believes that there are a number of key considerations that the Minister and the Department must take into account in order to adequately address the issues surrounding the School Transport system. This section lays out the key factors we believe must be central to the review; namely amendments to the scheme, addressing the administration of the scheme and investing adequate funds in order to ensure that the scheme is fit for purpose.

1. Amendments to the scheme

Sinn Féin recommends that the Department considers amendments to the scheme to facilitate the following priorities where possible:

The need for certainty for students and their families

Students who avail of concessionary transport for a period of one year or more should be supported in so far as possible to continue their education without disruption. In cases where the route has exceeded its current capacity to the extent that students currently availing of school transport cannot be accommodated, we would encourage the Department to consider increasing the capacity of routes where there is sufficient demand or alternatively providing additional vehicles to continue routes where it is evident that there is sufficient demand to support the routes in question.

In cases where there is insufficient demand to justify expansion of the service to accommodate those who have availed of the service in the past, the Department should consider extending the Remote Area Grant to these students in order to assist parents in meeting the costs of school transport. These supports should only extend in cases where the student has availed of school transport for a year or more and the student's place of residence or school has not changed.

ESTIMATED COST OF PROPOSAL: €7 million based on figures provided in the Department's Review on Concessionary Charges and Rules Element of the School Transport Scheme

The need for Children to maintain their Identity and Social Links

The Department should recognise that the nearest school rule does not reflect the reality in rural communities where students often attend school based on the traditional catchment area. We recommend that the Department considers introducing a derogation from the nearest school rule in cases where the student is attending from a traditional feeder school or where a significant proportion of the students classmates have progressed to or a school which his/her sibling attends .

The Department should also consider introducing a practice that no child should be expected to leave their county to attend school for the purposes of availing of school transport unless there is an established tradition in place locally that children from the area attend school in the neighbouring county.

This does not extend to a requirement that the Department should be obligated to create new routes unless there is clear and sufficient demand but that students who live on or near an existing route and are attending the same school as their classmates and neighbours, should be accommodated within the scheme.

ESTIMATED COST OF PROPOSAL: €4 million – the total number of new applications for concessionary transport in 2017 is 4,667. Providing a grant of €900 per family results in costs of just over €4 million. It is not assumed that all of these applicants will satisfy the above criteria therefore the actual cost would be lower.



Efficiency

We are aware of a number of situations whereby students have been refused school transport for a bus run that goes straight past the door while a new route is designed to facilitate the student in attending their nearest school. Similarly, there are situations whereby the nearest school necessitates travel on a route that is unsafe in poor weather and ultimately may be more costly to provide the service due to maintenance, capacity and safety issues. It would be much more practical and possibly more cost effective in some cases to provide flexibility in these instances.

We recommend that the Department put in place a clear practice that students who are currently residing on or near a bus route may avail of that bus route and a requirement that the route that the student travels on must be considered to be of a reasonable standard of safety if it is to be considered for the purposes of school transport.

ESTIMATED COST OF PROPOSAL: not anticipated to have a cost as only applies to services already in operation – may result in savings if family contributes towards the service.

2. Administration of the Scheme

The current system whereby students and their families are notified of school transport availability in August is a cause of huge stress to many families and this will likely increase given the growing demand for the service and the higher numbers of students availing of school transport on a concessionary basis.

The fact is, as it stands, many parents and students simply do not know if they will have a seat on the school bus for the coming term and much of the preparations for the student returning to school will have been made before the family is notified of the arrangements. This situation is unacceptable and the department should consider putting in place arrangements that will allow families to be notified well in advance of the start of school term.

Many families will know years in advance of the school that their child will be attending and, given the increasing student population, there is a greater need to plan ahead, plotting the demand for the service in advance. Greater planning may also allow the department to advise parents if there is a likelihood that a child's seat will be threatened over the period of a child's attendance at school and will allow parents to make informed choices and plan for their child's education.

The current practice of a "lottery", whereby concessionary students are selected at random for bus seats when a service has reached capacity simply cannot continue, especially as the number of students availing of concessionary transport increases. Greater planning and reasonable amendments to the School Transport Scheme will address the need for such a system, however, there is a clear need for guidelines to be established in determining how concessionary seats are distributed when necessary.

ESTIMATED COST OF PROPOSAL: negligible as mainly administrative

3. Reduced Costs for Parents and Children

Sinn Féin is also calling for additional funding in the school transport scheme in order to reduce the costs for parents. As an initial first measure, we would ensure that all children on medical cards would be able to avail of free school transport and we would provide additional funding for the reduction of school transport charges. An additional investment of €13 million would provide for the €2 million medical card waiver and the €10.8 million required at current figures to provide free school transport to all eligible children. Sinn Féin would provide an additional €6 million to reduce school transport charges for concessionary ticket holders.





KATHLEEN FUNCHION TD

LEINSTER HOUSE OFFICE

Kildare Street, Dublin 1. 01 618 3567

kathleen.funchion@oireachtas.ie



CONSTITUENCY OFFICES

Suit 11, Third Floor, Lower New St, Kilkenny. 059 913 8023

Dublin St, Carlow. 059 913 8023

Working with Sinn Féin TD for Carlow/Kilkenny - Kathleen Funchion TD

COUNCILOR
Sean Tyrrell



KILKENNY CITY WEST

087 185 4290

sf.sean32@gmail.com

COUNCILOR
David Kennedy



KILKENNY CITY WEST

087 366 0205

davidkensf@gmail.com

COUNCILOR
Jim Deane



CARLOW

085 760 5241

jdeane@carlow.ie

COUNCILOR
John Cassin



CARLOW

086 876 4588

jcassin@carlow.ie

COUNCILOR
Andy Gladney



MUINEBHEAG

086 319 3058

agladney@carlow.ie