

EXPANDING OUR SCHOOL BUS TRANSPORT SYSTEM



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Introduction

Sinn Féin recognise the school transport system as a vital public service and in Government we would reform and expand the system, to benefit thousands of additional families.

We have engaged with parents and students from across the State about the current system, alongside relevant stakeholders such as Bus Éireann and, based on their feedback, we are now bringing forward constructive suggestions for reform and expansion of the scheme.

Our plans would provide thousands more families with a convenient and safe method of transport for their children to school, while also helping to lower our carbon emissions and help reduce school traffic congestion.

Figures from the CSO show that at primary level, only 10.4% of students now take the bus to school, almost half the 19% that was recorded in 1986.

On the other hand, the number of students travelling by private car has surged from 24% in 1986, to 59.8% in 2016.

During almost the same period, between 1990 and 2019 road transport emissions rose by 142.6%.¹

If we are to meet our 2030 and 2050 climate targets, we must reverse this trend and get more students walking, cycling and travelling to school on public transport.

The school transport scheme can play a central role in this.

More seats, additional routes, better quality buses, efficient planning of stops and times and the easing of qualifying criteria, have all been cited as areas that need improvement and ones that would make the system more attractive to more people

In budget 2022, Sinn Féin would like to see increased investment in the school transport scheme by €17m which could deliver approximately 17,000 additional seats and would task the Department with planning for the delivery of these additional seats in advance of September 2022.

The financial burden on families was also cited as a key problem by parents and guardians. In Government, Sinn Féin would abolish school transport fees, putting hundreds of euro back in the pockets of parents each year.

We want a system that works for students, parents, drivers, contractors, and schools and in Government we will work with all stakeholders to achieve this goal.



1 <https://www.epa.ie/our-services/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/ghg/transport/>



Existing School Bus Transport System

The purpose of the school transport system is to provide transportation to and from school for children who reside over a certain distance away from their nearest school.

The system is operated by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education.

In the current school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported daily to primary and post-primary schools throughout the state.

In the 2020/2021 school year, €224.7 million in funding was provided for the school transport system.

Currently, children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2kms at primary level and 4.8kms at post-primary level and are attending their nearest school as determined by the Department of Education & Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language of education.

The service is only provided where there are at least 10 eligible pupils in a distinct locality that can be economically serviced by a bus route.

Where no service is available for an eligible child, or where a child lives more than 3.2km from the designated pick-up point, a remote area grant is available. In 2020, 1,600 families availed of this, with grants totalling €700,000.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only. Concessionary transport is subject to a number of terms and conditions, including the availability of spare seats on an existing service.

The cost of a ticket at primary level is €100 per year for each eligible child and €350 per pupil at post-primary level. The cost is capped per family at €220 at primary level and €650 at secondary level.

Bus Éireann is responsible for the planning and timetabling of school transport routes. Routes are planned and updated over the summer months ahead of a school year based on the locations of children who are eligible for school transport.

Bus Éireann deliver an excellent service each year and we want to provide them with the tools and funding to expand this important scheme even further.





Benefits of the School Transport Scheme

CLIMATE ACTION

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the transport sector in this State accounted for 20.4% of our total emissions in 2019.² Of this, road transport made up 95% of our total transport emissions. Between 1990 and 2019, road transport emissions rose by 142.6%.

The recently passed Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 has legislated for a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030 and set a National Climate Objective of achieving a climate-neutral economy by no later than 2050.

Every sector of our economy and society will have to play its part to meet these challenging targets and we believe reforming and expanding the School Transport Scheme is one aspect of our public transport system that can make a significant contribution to this objective.

The *Report on reducing emissions in the transport sector by 51% by 2030*³, from the Joint Committee on Climate Action in June 2021, “notes school transport as one important area for modal shift... and recommends a review of how public school transport might be strengthened.”

In their Sustainability Strategy, Bus Éireann highlight the current scheme, which caters for 114,000 students daily, results in 35,000 less car journeys per day.⁴

In the first year of our expanded scheme, 40,250 car journeys could be eliminated each day, aiding our ambition to significantly reduce road transport emissions over the next decade.

In addition to reducing the number of unnecessary journeys, this approach can also instil the habit of using public transport from an early age.



Image: BusConnects

More people on buses, means less cars, congestion and pollution on our roads

² <https://www.epa.ie/our-services/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/ghg/transport/>

³ https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_environment_and_climate_action/reports/2021/2021-06-03_report-on-reducing-emissions-in-the-transport-sector-by-51-by-2030_en.pdf

⁴ <https://buseireann.ie/pdf/1621430203-Sustainability.pdf>



WORK-FAMILY BALANCE



Many working parents find it difficult to juggle school drop-off and collection times with work commitments. This makes the School Transport Scheme both attractive and essential for many working parents.

It provides a safe and reliable route to and from school for their children, helping them to balance work-life commitments.

Some families who depend on concessionary tickets find it difficult to plan from one year to the next, due to the unpredictable nature of the current system.

One year their child might have a seat, the following they may not, posing challenges from year-to-year trying to balance their own work commitments.

Introducing new routes, reviewing criteria for eligibility and providing more spaces on existing runs could help provide more families with this convenient method of transport for their children.

SCHOOL TRAFFIC CONGESTION

The Road Safety Authority have cited school traffic congestion as a particularly serious road safety problem.⁵

Many schools do not have adequate parking facilities for hundreds of private cars arriving twice daily. This often results in double parking or parking on yellow lines at drop-off and collection times.

Combined with passing traffic, this can result in children weaving in and out of parked and moving cars at the school gate, with smaller children and those with mobility issues such as wheelchair users particularly vulnerable.

One notable result obtained from our survey of parents/guardians, (full details below), was of those who currently drive their child to school as they cannot get a seat on the school bus, a majority only had one child in the car. This highlights the inefficiency of the existing set-up for many parents.

The number of private cars and traffic congestion outside schools could be considerably reduced by accommodating more students on school bus transport, both at primary and secondary level.



5 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/traffic-congestion-outside-schools-poses-incredibly-dangerous-risks-to-children-1.4000345>



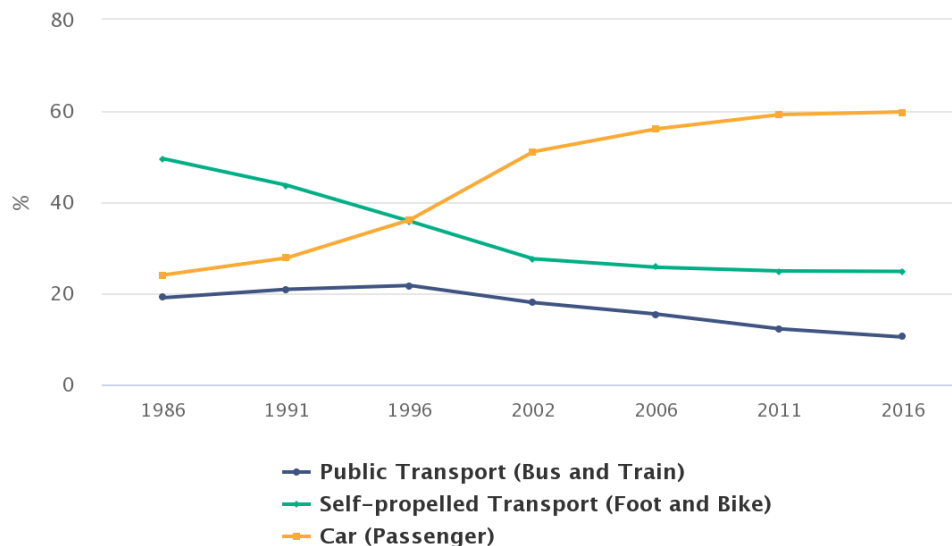
CSO – Student Travel Patterns

PRIMARY SCHOOL

The modes of travel for primary school students have seen a dramatic change over the past thirty years.

- ▶ In 1986, 19% of students took public transport to school. This had almost halved to just 10.4% by 2016.
- ▶ In 1986, 24% of students travelled to primary school by car. By 2016, this had surged to 59.8%.
- ▶ In 1986, 49.5% of primary level students travelled to school by foot or bike. This fell to 24.8% by 2016.

Figure 5.1 Modes of travel for primary students, 1986 – 2016



Source: CSO Ireland

There is a clear urban-rural split in these figures. The 2016 figures show that in Galway County (73.1%), Roscommon (72.7%), Kerry (70.8%) and Mayo (70.2%) more than seven in ten children travelled to school by car.

At the other end of the scale, only 36% of Dublin City children were driven to school, and less than half of children in Fingal and South Dublin.

POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL

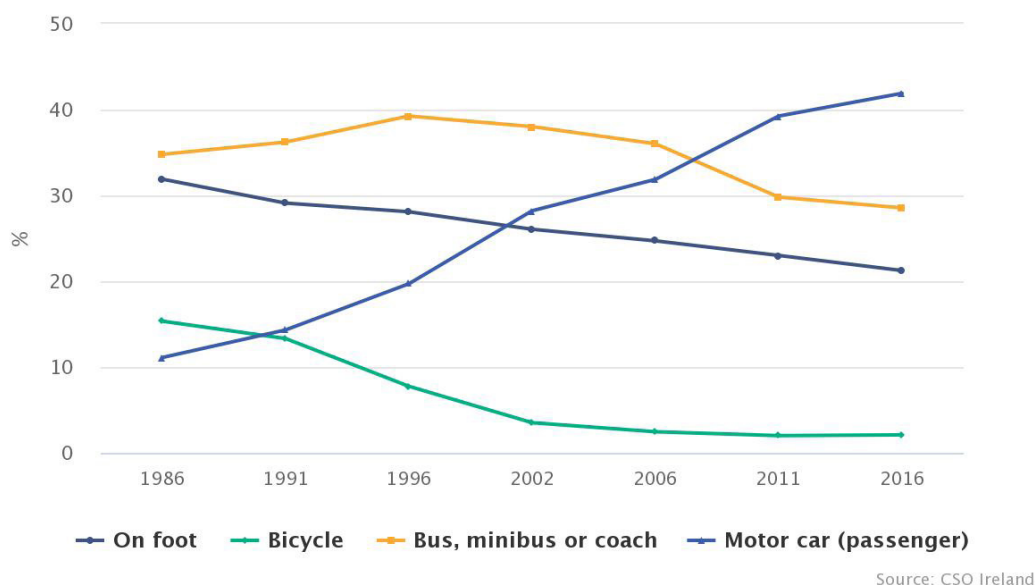
A similar shift in the method of transport over the past thirty years can also be observed in the post-primary sector.

- ▶ In 1986, 34.8% of post-primary students travelled to school by bus. By 2016 this had fallen to 28.5%.
- ▶ 31.9% of secondary students walked to school in 1986. 21.1% by 2016.



- Cycling collapsed as a method of transport to secondary school over the past thirty years, dropping from 15.3% in 1986 to 2.1% in 2016.
- In the same period, car transport to post-primary has surged, rising from 11.1% to 41.9%.

Figure 5.5 Modes of transport for secondary students, 1986–2016



In a dozen counties, over half of students travelled by car (driver and passenger) in 2016, the top three being Sligo (55.4%), Waterford city and county (54.7%) and Cork county (54.3%).

Almost 3 in 10 secondary students used the bus. Areas where bus use was highest were Cavan (46.6%), Donegal (45%) and Longford (41.4%).

There is a distinct urban-rural split in both the primary and post-primary figures when it comes to car use, reflecting the dispersed nature of rural communities. An expanded school bus transport system would be of particular benefit in these areas.

The collapse of cycling as a method of transport, particularly in the post-primary sector, is of concern.

We are committed to investing in cycling and walking infrastructure, to make active travel safer and more attractive for students and staff travelling to and from school.

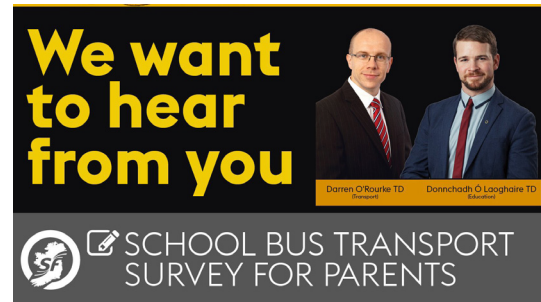
The benefits for health are obvious and active travel can also decrease emissions and reduce traffic congestion and air pollution.



Sinn Féin School Bus Transport Survey

In June 2021, Sinn Féin launched an online survey to get the views of parents and guardians on the existing school bus transport system.

The feedback from hundreds of respondents highlighted numerous issues that need to be addressed in the current system and shows a clear appetite for expanding the school transport scheme.



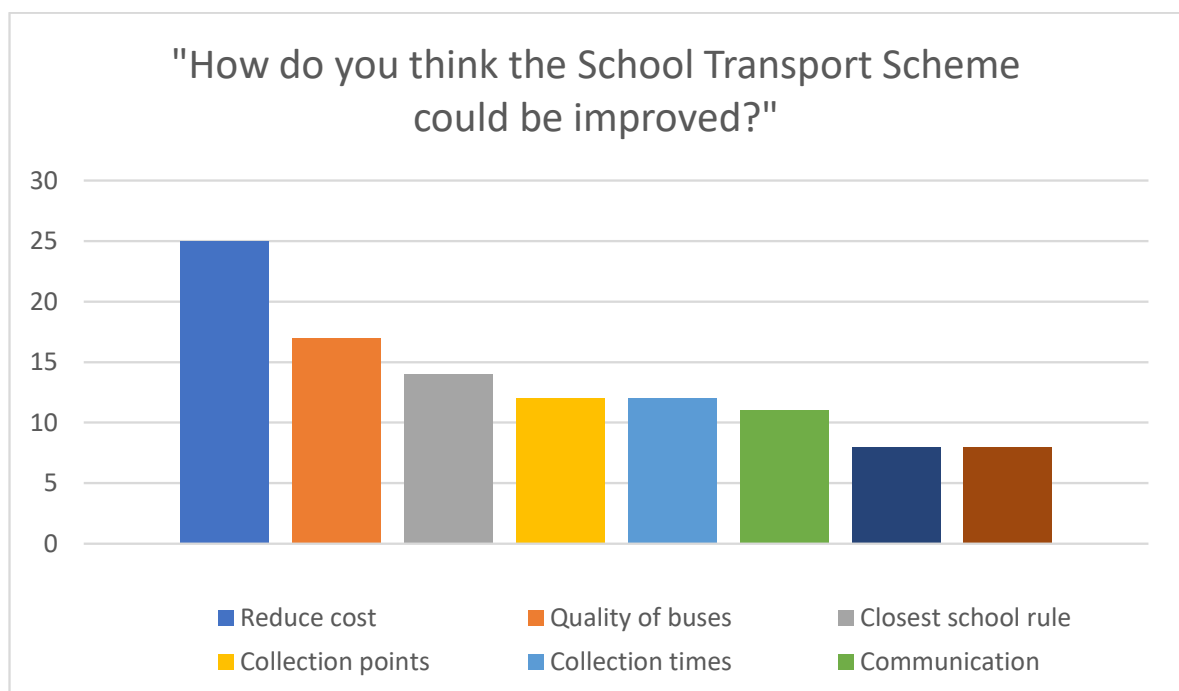
When asked what they would like to see improved about the current system, the number one issue identified by parents/guardians was **cost**. Many highlighted the high cost of the system to families, while others said the service received did not warrant the price asked.

The current payment rates for the system are;

- ▶ At primary level, there is a charge of €100 per year for each eligible child, with a maximum of €220 for each family who only uses the primary school transport scheme. For families who also have eligible children using the post-primary transport scheme, a maximum of €650 per family per year will be charged.
- ▶ At post-primary level, there is a single annual charge of €350 per pupil. The maximum amount for a family is €650 per year.



Sinn Féin are proposing to eliminate the cost of school transport to families, removing this financial burden and putting hundreds of euro back in the pockets of families each year. We would begin this process with a 20% reduction in budget 2022.





The need for **better quality buses** was the second most frequent issue highlighted. Some parents mentioned mould on buses, leaking windows, a hole in the floor, a door falling off while driving and buses breaking down. This is unacceptable and needs addressing.

The School Transport fleet is made up of state-owned buses and buses owned and operated by private contractors. Bus Éireann is directly responsible for 14% of routes while 86% of routes are run by private contractors under contract to Bus Éireann for the provision of services.

Figures we have received from the Department of Education show 84% of school buses owned by Bus Éireann are 15 or more years old.⁶

While 258 buses have been transferred from road passenger services to the school transport scheme over the last decade, only 20 new school buses have been purchased in the last ten years.⁷ This is something we will address.

Sinn Féin are proposing capital expenditure of €5 million in the next year to purchase 20 new large school buses at a cost of €250,000 each.⁸ This is an investment in safety, lower carbon technology and quality for our students.

Year	No. of School Buses
2001	57
2002	28
2003	27
2004	67
2005	28
2006	70
2007	32
2009	2
2016	20
Grand Total	331



6 PQ [37858/21]

7 PQ [38135/21]

8 PQ [40052/21]



The **closest school rule** was the third most frequent response received. Many parents/guardians highlight that they cannot avail of the scheme or are reliant on unpredictable concessionary tickets due to their choice of school for their child.

This is due to an existing rule where a child must be attending their nearest school as determined by the Department of Education & Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language of education. Therefore, where a child attends their second nearest school, they are not automatically eligible for the School Transport Scheme and must rely on the chance of getting a concessionary ticket.

The unpredictable nature of these concessionary tickets from year to year, or when only one child from a family get a seat and others didn't, was mentioned frequently.

Parents highlighted that they send their child to a certain school for a number of reasons personal to them, and they should not be punished for this by exclusion from the current scheme.



Collection points problems and **collection times** were both highlighted equally as needing improvement. Some highlighted the fact they had to travel a considerable distance to get to and from the school bus collection point while others cited the desire for a door-to-door service.

On collection times, parents/guardians said pick up times were very unhelpful and left their children at school unreasonably early.

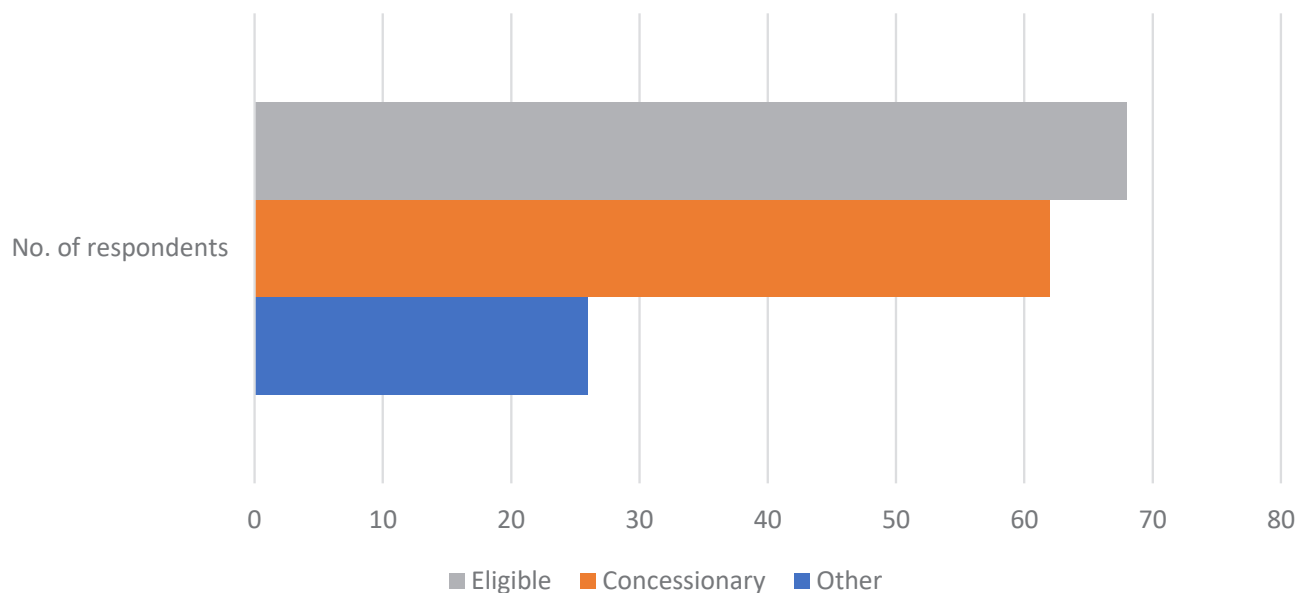
Better **communication** was then cited as an area in need of work. Unsatisfactory and difficult interaction with the service was cited repeatedly and the lack of communication about delays and bus breakdowns was suggested as an area for improvement.

Not enough seats or **no routes in rural areas** due to an insufficient number of children was next. This seemed particularly acute in rural areas, where the requirement of ten children in an area to warrant a route could not be met for most families.

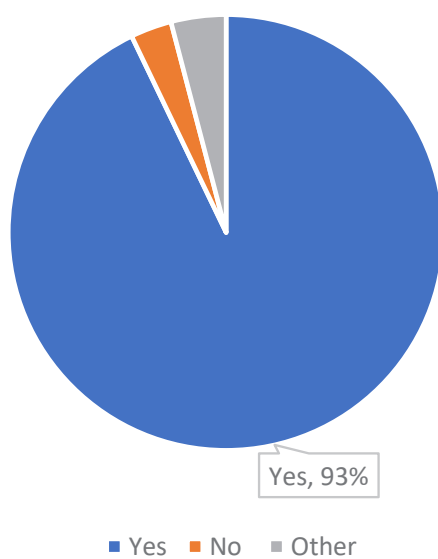
Other issues highlighted include **living too close** to the school to qualify, a lack of **Covid-19 precautions** and **anti-social behaviour** on buses and at drop-off/collection points.



"For those using the School Transport Scheme, is your ticket eligible, concessionary or other?"



"If public school bus transport was available to serve your school route and was affordable, would you use it?"





Current Government plans

The Minister for Education recently confirmed in the Dáil that she has commenced a review of the School Transport Scheme.⁹ We welcome this review as we believe the existing scheme needs increased investment, reform and expansion.

The Minister also confirmed that she plans to provide 1,800 eligible places for post-primary students on the scheme this year. We believe this doesn't go anywhere near enough to address the demand from parents and students.

Information we have received from the Department of Education show in the 2020/2021 school year, 89,330 eligible applications were received, but only 72,581 eligible tickets were issued, a shortfall of 16,749¹⁰.

Similarly, 37,229 concessionary ticket applications were received, while just 27,649 were issued, leaving a deficit of 9,580.

As a result, 26,329 children were left without a seat on the School Transport Scheme in the last school year, highlighting a significant shortfall in the supply needed to meet the demand for this important service. This chimes with the experience of many families who miss out on using this scheme each year.

The Minister's current plans are wholly inadequate to meet the interest in the School Transport Scheme.

In budget 2022, Sinn Féin would like to see increased investment in the school transport scheme by €17m which could deliver approximately 17,000 additional seats and would task the Department with planning for the delivery of these additional seats in advance of September 2022.

⁹ <https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2021-07-01a.7&s>

¹⁰ PQ [37053/21]



Recommendations

1. Increase investment in the school transport scheme by €17 million which could deliver approximately 17,000 additional seats. Task the Department with planning for the delivery of these additional seats in advance of September 2022.
2. Eliminate fees on the scheme at primary and post-primary level at a cost of €13.8 million, beginning with a 20% reduction in Budget 2022.
3. Invest €5 million for the purchase of 20 new large school buses in the next year.
4. Work with private bus operators to support the essential service and routes they provide outside the School Transport Scheme.
5. Review the existing eligibility criteria for the School Transport Scheme, including the nearest school rule and the requirement of at least 10 children in a locality to warrant a service.
6. Work with Bus Éireann to address the collection time and collection point concerns raised by parents.
7. Improve communication and the application process.





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