



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Summary of the Review of the School Transport Scheme



January 2024

Introduction and Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the work, support and engagement throughout this review of both the high level Steering Group, chaired by Aoife Conduit, Assistant Secretary with responsibility for School Transport and the Technical Working Group chaired by Shirley Kearney, Principal Officer of the School Transport Section.

We are grateful for the work conducted by the Technical Working Group, which comprised of representatives from the Department of Education – Laura Leonard from School Transport Section, Martin McLoughlin from Special Education Section, Gavin Murphy from Central Policy Unit, Tom Whelan from Finance Section and Deirdre Cullen and Violeta Maloney from Statistics Section. The Group also included Mary McGrath and Helen Walsh from the National Council for Special Education and Miriam Flynn from Bus Éireann.

We would also like to thank members of the high level Steering Group for their engagement and their input into this project. The Steering Group comprised of representatives from the Department’s management board with responsibility for Special Education and Central Policy Finance, with thanks to Martina Mannion and Gavan O’Leary respectively. The Group also included senior management representatives from other organisations, with thanks to Teresa Griffin and John Kearney from the National Council for Special Education, Stephen Kent from Bus Éireann, Tim Gaston and Dominic Hannigan from the National Transport Authority, John Boylan and Garret Doocey from the Department of Transport, Jasmina Behan and Georgina Hughes-Elders from the Department of Public Expenditure NDP delivery and Reform* and Niall O’Cleirigh from, the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications.

We are grateful for the work of the secretariat to the high level Steering Group, comprising Shirley Kearney and Laura Leonard of School Transport Section.

Finally we wish to acknowledge the support, engagement and the work conducted by Brian O’Connell and Eoin Monaghan from Indecon International Consultants.

**from February 2021 to June 2023*

Overview of the Review

The Review of the School Transport Scheme was conducted in three phases, with Phase 1 looking at the specific circumstances which obtained in 2019-21 including the impact of Covid 19 to an extent. Phase 2 examined the overall objectives of the School Transport Scheme and its alignment with Government policy. Phase 3 scoped out a detailed proposal on how best to amend and develop the Scheme to serve the future needs of students, their families and of society itself. The work under Phase 3 was completed by the Technical Working Group in June 2023 and approved by the Steering Group; in October 2023.

Phase 1 of the Review

Phase 1 of the Review of School Transport was completed in June 2021. It focused initially on the eligibility criteria for students on mainstream school transport. In particular, it examined the requirement since 2012 that eligible students should attend their nearest available school. The review found that 2012 eligibility rules had never been rigidly enforced. This contributed to some anomalies and to increasing numbers of children availing of school transport on a concessionary basis annually. This was found to be more significant at post-primary level, linked to the reality that a large number of students fulfilled the distance requirements but chose to attend the next-nearest school to them. This made students technically ineligible, and therefore dependent on annual concessions to avail of the Scheme.ⁱ

Although the number of students who were ultimately unsuccessful in getting a concessionary ticket was relatively small, this annual difficulty continued to cause unease among parents, linking to political lobbying and other forms of pressure on the time and resources of School Transport Section and *Bus Éireann*. The review also looked at value for money and the overall effectiveness of the current Scheme. It sought to identify trends and cost drivers, how it supported children with special educational needs (SEN) as well as its general sustainability and alignment with the Programme for Government and climate action policies. A key finding was that the main cost driver since 2012 has increasingly involved supporting students with special needs, with costs of the SEN Scheme doubling during the eight years up to 2019.ⁱⁱ

The Phase 1 review then considered three options:

Option 1 was to implement the 2012 changes rigidly and thus cater for eligible students only. This would have accommodated 84,842 students but would have impacted negatively on 18,115 concessionary students and displaced over 6,000 eligible students by reducing services. The negative impact on families facing social disadvantage added to the likely increase in car journeys and administrative challenges made this option undesirable as an overall solution.

Option 2 considered maintaining the Scheme in line with custom and practice from 2012 to 2019. While 107,115 students would be accommodated, some 2,289 concessionary students would not, including 1,767 who currently had seats. Thus, there would be continued pressure for concessions for such students, along with the danger of causing significant financial difficulties for those not ultimately accommodated.

Option 3 proposed to maintain the Scheme 'as is' but with temporary alleviation measures on post-primary services, similar to those in 2019. A total of 108,777 mainstream students would be accommodated, as would 1,882 concessionary post-primary students who otherwise would not have been accommodated. Savings would be below what Option 2 anticipated and pressure on resources would remain but all eligible students who applied and paid on time

would be accommodated, as would post-primary students who met the temporary alleviation criteria.

Knowing that further phases of the review should not be complicated or undermined by decisions arising from Phase 1, the Technical Working Group recommended continuing with Option 3 for September 2021. This option catered for the highest number of eligible students and provided transport to meet expected demand. It also supported commitments in the Programme for Government to promote sustainable transport, reduce traffic congestion at schools and in towns, and support communities when alternative public transport was not available.ⁱⁱⁱ

Phase 2 of the Review

The Phase 2 review was completed by December 2022. It included a clarification of the Scheme's original objectives and how these applied both to mainstream students and those with special educational needs. This phase of the review of the Scheme also examined how it aligned with the Public Spending Code, school planning policies and the overarching priorities in the Programme for Government. Three case studies were undertaken to help gauge the current and possible future positions of rural areas, as they would be impacted by proposed changes to the Scheme.^{iv} Obviously, value for money and long-term cost sustainability of the Scheme came into focus but so too did a major effort to glean feedback from the Scheme's various stakeholders.^v Comparisons with school transport schemes in other jurisdictions were also drawn in an effort to contextualise and benchmark what Ireland provides.

The Technical Working Group clarified the objectives of the School Transport Scheme. **Facilitating access to education for those children who live considerable distances from schools** remains a priority. Lack of public transport, safe walking or cycling routes, streetlighting or footpaths in many areas make this imperative.

The Working Group identified continued **support for children with special needs** as another priority objective. Many children attending special schools or settings would not be able to do so without the Scheme. In addition to the factors cited in the previous paragraph, family feedback showed that the availability of transport enabled parents of children with special needs to bring other children to school or deal with other commitments.

The review has highlighted other objectives which need to be considered in the assessment of what the Scheme should aim to achieve. These included supporting all children's **constitutional right to education, best use of school building capacity** and, in a wider context, **enabling parents to be part of the labour market** or to more readily work away from where their children are schooled, if necessary.

Considerable time was spent in Phase 2 on **ensuring that the Transport Scheme aligned with government policy** across a range of fields. A seminal point which emerged in this section was that the School Transport Scheme is not merely an education initiative. Its support

for access to education, in turn, supports investment in human capital, increases productivity, promotes social mobility, helps reduce inequality and benefits the overall economy. The Scheme was found to align with and support Government policy in several ways:

- reducing greenhouse gases and supporting active travel journeys (Climate Action Plan)
- strengthening rural communities, sustainable mobility and access to education (NDP, Project Ireland 2040, Our Rural Future)
- supporting the Safe Routes to School Programme where feasible
- helping to integrate school and public transport (Bus Connects/Connecting Ireland)
- supporting every child's constitutional right to education
- supporting inclusive education (An Inclusive Education for and Inclusive Society)
- helping to remove cars and congestion from school environs (Road Safety Strategy)
- providing value for money to parents and to the Exchequer

Arising from the clarifications of the Scheme's objectives and its general compliance with government policy, a number of possibilities for its future operation were identified, including:

- reducing or removing distance eligibility criteria, not to the extent so as to discourage walking/cycling but encouraging more families to use school transport.
- reassessing ticket charging options, and possibly restructuring charges to link *pro rata* to whether students attend their nearest school or opt for more distant schools
- providing transport where there is a minimum number regardless of eligibility but with perhaps restructured ticket charges as referred to above.
- initiatives to encourage more use of the primary Scheme, possibly including expansion of bus escorts to support smaller children and reduced ticket tariffs
- possibly linking to bus escort expansion as above, staff training and adaptation of vehicles to support the integration and inclusion of students with special needs with their peers in mainstream services where feasible
- building synergies between school transport and public transport, and a more coordinated approach with other government departments wherever possible

In essence, it was agreed that Phase 3 of the review would examine these options, while also bearing in mind the need to balance climate action benefits and other positives for rural life and for parents against Scheme costs, economic benefits, fiscal sustainability and the administrative capacity of the Scheme itself.

Phase 3 of the Review

Under Phase 3, a five-pronged Programme Logic Model of evaluation was used to ensure systemic cohesion alongside identifying what supports were needed to maintain and improve

efficiency of the Scheme. This work focused on **Inputs** (the Scheme's resources); **Activities** or actions undertaken and leading to **Outputs** (what the Scheme produces). It also examined **Outcomes** for the targeted beneficiaries and fundamental or unintended **Impacts** in local and wider society.^{vi} In summary, this evaluation identified numerous beneficial outcomes of the Scheme, including priorities identified under Phase 2. These included facilitating access to education, supporting working parents and families who live in rural Ireland, aligning with Government policy and providing safe and reliable school transport.

The Technical Working Group considered many specific issues including the rate of grant payments, employment of school bus escorts, the application timeline and process, the potential for technological improvements and how to best support active travel and integration with public transport. In addition, a cost-benefit-analysis (CBA) of future options for the operation of the Scheme was undertaken by Indecon International Consultants on behalf of the Department of Education.^{vii} The research noted the incremental rise in use of the Scheme by students with special educational needs, an increasing swing towards concessionary post-primary students using the Scheme and greater dependence on the Scheme in counties with higher levels of rural deprivation, according to *Pobal* indices.^{viii}

The CBA cross checked its findings with potential financial benefits to the Department and the economic benefits to society and discussed a total of six options. These options ranged from effectively leaving the Scheme as it currently stands to using a completely demand-driven scheme removing the nearest school criteria and offering free tickets. Neither of these extremes was deemed justifiable. There were four options (numbered 1 to 4) in between these poles, all looking at demand, distance criteria, inclusivity of SEN students and varying levels of fees. Within these four numbered options, Option 1 provided lowest financial savings for the Department and lowest student/family fees, lower eligibility distances and the removal of nearest-school criteria. At the other end, Option 4 provided highest financial savings for the Department but also highest student/family costs and lowest overall economic benefit.^{ix} There was less obvious difference between these options when the issue of inclusion was considered, though it bears pointing out that Options 1 and 4 presented inclusion possibilities of 20%. Inclusion levels under other options ranged from 5% to 15%.

In essence, Option 1 proposed reducing distance criteria to 1km for primary students and 2km for post-primary students, and the removal of 'nearest school' criteria completely. It proposed ticket administration fees of €50 (primary) and €75 (post-primary), with a cap of €125 per family. At the other end of the scale, Option 4 would increase the annual ticket charge to €200 (primary) and €400 (post-primary) with a family cap of €700. This option also proposed a minimum fee of €50 for SEN Transport and Medical Card holders.

Ultimately, the analysis came to the view that Option 1 was the best fit to ensure that the Scheme met the various objectives for it which had been identified in Phase 2, including the societal and governmental commitments to climate action, better transport infrastructure and protecting and supporting rural communities. While Option 4 incurred lowest net financial cost to the Department, Option 1 was deemed to have the highest 'benefit-to-cost ratio' and the

highest net benefit in over the period to 2040, including the optimum means of helping reach national climate action targets.. The cost under Option 1 in Net Present Value (NPV) terms is estimated to be €7.053bn over the 20 year period of the CBA, or an estimated annual average cost in NPV terms of €352.65m. This total is made up of an estimated cost of €3.9bn in NPV terms for the operation of the mainstream School Transport Scheme and €3.1bn in NPV terms for the operation of the SEN element of the scheme. This constitutes an average annual cost over the 20 year period of €196m in NPV terms for the mainstream scheme and €157m in NPV terms for the SEN scheme.

Analysis of the option, in line with Department of Public Expenditure and Reform guidelines, has demonstrated that Option 1 can be considered fiscally sustainable.

Before looking in some detail at the overall recommendations arising from Phase 3, it should be pointed out that the general approach being recommended was again cross-checked with international practice, in so far as was practicable. The chapter entitled 'School Transport: an International View' helped to reinforce some key drivers arising from Phase 3: Ireland has the lowest percentage of the population living in urban areas of the countries surveyed, making a strong case for the provision of a public-school transport service to facilitate and support rural communities. That said, the general cost of transport when compared to the relative wealth of countries surveyed suggests that transport in Ireland is not unduly expensive and the Scheme's financial costs are thus a good investment in ensuring that it meets its objectives and aligns with overall Government policy.^x

Shaping a Revised School Transport Scheme

Moving beyond the interim measures agreed in Phase 1 and taking on board the various objectives for the Scheme identified in Phase 2, ultimately the CBA and other work done in Phase 3 resulted in the following draft blueprint for the future of the School Transport Scheme.

Improved Eligibility Criteria

Taking the Option 1 model as its base in updating eligibility criteria, the Phase 3 review recommends that distance criteria on the mainstream schemes should be reduced in stages though not so far as to disincentivise students from walking or cycling. The distance would be set at 2km for both primary and post-primary in 2024/25, and then to 1km for primary and 2km for post-primary respectively for 2025/26. This will not apply in urban centres which have public transport services available for students attending school.

No changes are currently recommended to the existing distance criteria for students with special needs. A working group, including the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), will identify ongoing improvements from 2023.

Similarly, no changes are recommended to the criteria under which students' choice of schools is linked to their preferred language of instruction or school ethos, although clarification of how ethos is defined at primary and post-primary levels is still required for 2024/5. Currently, a child may bypass a nearer denominational primary school to attend a multi-denominational school and vice versa, whereas a post-primary student may only bypass a nearer school (denominational or not) to attend a minority religion school.^{xi}

Scheme users who are currently classed as 'concessionary' will in future be deemed 'not eligible', in order to avoid any confusion or undue expectation. They will be allocated 'spare seats' once all eligible students have been accommodated.

Eligibility will no longer be judged by nearest school criteria, which will be eliminated.

All existing routes will be maintained, even where there are less than ten students using a route. For new routes to be established, however, a minimum of ten students will be required and a working group will examine the feasibility of transferring existing routes with under ten students to public transport. Published schemes will need to be rewritten to reflect any such changes before the 2024/25 school year.

In the interests of promoting inclusivity and a target of 20% of children with special needs being enabled to use mainstream services, steps will be taken to support children with special educational needs whose parents wish for them to travel on available mainstream services. A working group with representatives from School Transport and Special Education Sections, the NCSE and *Bus Éireann* will be formed in 2023 to facilitate ongoing improvements.

There will continue to be an annual ticket charge for Scheme users, identified as €50 per primary pupil, €75 per post-primary student, with an overall family cap of €125. The amount of this charge will be reviewed in 2025 when more data is available from eTicketing systems.

Students with full medical cards or with special educational needs will continue to be exempt from this charge, to also be reviewed when more data is available by 2025. Children in exceptionally challenging circumstances (e.g. homelessness) will continue to be supported as at present.

Overcoming Operational Challenges

No change has been recommended to the Remote Area Grant but an increase is proposed to the Special Transport Grant.^{xii}

The application process needs to be streamlined and simplified through technological improvements, moving to a one-step process for applications and payment between February and late April in the academic year before the year for which transport is required. The payment date needs to be brought forward to allow *Bus Éireann* adequate time to plan services, allocate eTickets and communicate with parents.

The facility for allowing payment details or medical card details to be entered on the family portal should remain open until early June, after which the portal will close for a three-week period for administration purposes.

The position remains that applications for transport for children with special educational needs will be encouraged by the end of April but will continue to be accepted on a year-round basis. Applications to the SEN Scheme should move online by the 2024/25 school year.

School Transport Section will continue to examine pay and conditions of bus escorts and how they might contribute to improved and more inclusive services.

Up to date electronic mapping technology should be in place by 2025/26 for measuring eligibility distance accurately and transparently. School Transport Section and *Bus Éireann* will continue this and other work related to effecting technological improvements from 2023.

Other work currently underway both within School Transport Section and with *Bus Éireann* will continue to co-operate on other technological improvements, aimed at improving Scheme efficiency, transparency and customer service. A Working Group should be established to support this work from 2023.

Towards Better Integration

School Transport Section will continue to engage with Government departments to promote and co-ordinate active travel initiatives and policies by the end of 2023.

A Working Group will be established in 2023, involving School Transport Section, the Department of Transport and the National Transport Authority and other bodies to enhance potential integration of school and public transport services under the Connecting Ireland project.

ⁱ See: Review of the School Transport Scheme: Phase 1 Report of the Technical Working Group (2021) Pages 4-5.

ⁱⁱ For data analysis leading to these findings, see Phase 1 Report of the Technical Working Group (2021) Pages 6 and Tables 4.1 and 4.2, Page 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ See analysis of the three options, Phase 1 Report of the Technical Working Group (2021), Pages 13-22, with a summary provided in Table 9.1, Pages 22-3.

^{iv} The exemplars came from Counties Wexford, Waterford and Clare and are detailed in **Review of the School Transport Scheme: Draft Phase 2 Report of the Technical Working Group** (2022) between Pages 19 and 23.

^v Included in **Draft Phase 2 Report APPENDIX 1** Analysis of the stakeholder engagement process, Page 76 onwards.

^{vi} For details of the Programme Logic Model, see Chapter 2 of **Review of the School Transport Scheme: Phase 3 Report of the Technical Working Group** (2022), and for a tabular representation, see specifically Page 12.

^{vii} See Chapter 3 of **Phase 3 Report of the Technical Working Group** (2023).

^{viii} Charts detailing the trends referred to here are to be found in **Phase 3 Report of the Technical Working Group** (2023), Pages 17-19.

^{ix} For profiles of the total of six options presented, see **Phase 3 Report of the Technical Working Group** (2023), Pages 21-2. Tables showing the anticipated costs and savings under the various options are provided on Pages 23-24. The options are also examined in Chapter 4, dealing with eligibility criteria, where they are summarised on Pages 31-32 and presented in tabular form on Pages 33-4.

^x The relative costs of transport are shown on a table in Chapter 7 of **Phase 3 Report of the Technical Working Group** (2023), Page 80. See more detailed examples from England, USA and Australia in tables on Pages 82-85.

^{xi} As explained in **Phase 3 Report of the Technical Working Group** (2023), Pages 42-3.

^{xii} Details of the proposed changes are provided in **Phase 3 Report of the Technical Working Group** (2023), Page 90.