



REFORMING AND EXPANDING OUR SCHOOL TRANSPORT SYSTEM

- ✓ 100,000 new school bus places
 - ✓ A €250 million investment
- New bus places for:**
- ✓ Primary school children living 1km from school
 - ✓ Secondary school children living 2km from school

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Executive Summary

Sinn Féin has a plan to expand school transport and deliver an additional 100,000 school bus places. Under our plan more students, including those who live nearer to schools, would be able to get a guaranteed place on a school bus. This would be good for students, for parents and for reducing traffic congestion.

Specifically, Sinn Féin in government would:

- Provide an additional 100,000 pupils with transport services.
- Commit to an additional investment of over €250 million to build capacity within the school transport system.
- Expand the eligibility criteria for mainstream school transport and increase capacity within the system.
- Commit to providing the investment needed to cater to the projected increase in demand for SEN transport services.
- Not increase the cost of school transport for families throughout the course of our plan.
- Incrementally reduce the distance criteria for primary students from 3.2km to 1km for primary school students and from 4.8km to 2km for post-primary students.
- Remove the nearest school criteria so that pupils are not locked out of school transport for attending other schools that better meet their needs but are not their closest school.

Introduction

In government, Sinn Féin would reform and expand the system to provide an additional 100,000 pupils with transport services and deliver lasting changes in our transport system.

We would provide more families with a convenient, safe and affordable method of transport for their children to school, while also helping to lower our emissions and to reduce traffic congestion. With the necessary investment and approach, we can build capacity in the school transport system to deliver more seats and additional routes for more pupils.

Our plan to reform and expand the school transport system is informed by the data and projections under the review of the school transport scheme published earlier this year. The information contained in the review enables the implementation of reforms and the expansion of capacity to be gradually and coherently rolled-out. Our plan would deliver lasting change to the school transport system and deliver more certainty for families.

The current school transport system is plagued with under capacity and uncertainty. Each year, families face school transport chaos and confusion over government's failure to plan, with many pupils left to know they have no place on a school bus weeks or even days before being back in school. This must change.

Our proposals would see the phased expansion of eligibility in terms of distance and nearest schools criteria so that more pupils would qualify for school transport services, including those who currently fall short of meeting requirements and rely on the annual uncertainty of concessionary tickets. This will ensure fairer access to the school transport scheme. We would reform and expand the school transport system while maintaining current payment rates to ensure affordability for families.

We are also committed to providing the investment needed to cater for the projected need for school transport services by children with Special Educational Needs.

Sinn Féin would reform and expand the school transport system in a way that is affordable, fair, and sustainable, and ensure that the system works.

Existing School Transport System

The existing school transport scheme is an essential public service relied on by families each year to get pupils to and from school. Sinn Féin would provide the necessary investment to ensure the school transport system can deliver a greater level of service.

In 2024, 161,600 pupils were provided with school transport services at an estimated cost of €440 million.¹ There are two main schemes under the school transport system, including the scheme for mainstream pupils in primary and post-primary schools and the scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs. In 2024, 135,000 primary and post primary pupils, 19,800 pupils with special educational needs, and 6,800 Ukrainian pupils were provided with school transport services.²

The operation of school transport services and the eligibility criteria applied vary across the different schemes, discussed below.

School Transport Scheme for Mainstream Pupils

The mainstream scheme provides school transport for mainstream pupils in primary and post-primary schools.

This scheme provides transportation to and from school for children who reside over a certain distance away from their nearest school.

Currently, children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2km at primary level and 4.8km at post-primary level and are attending their nearest school, 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.

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 availability of spare seats for concessionary tickets varies each school year. This leaves many pupils who had in the previous year held concessionary passes to find out they no longer have access to school transport just before term time. This reflects a broken system that fails to plan for and provide the investment necessary to keep up with demand.

Following successive calls from Sinn Féin, the price of school transport was reduced in recent years. For the current school year, the charge is €50 per primary pupil, €75 per post-primary pupil with a family cap of €125. Previously, the fees were set at €100 per primary child, €350 per post-primary child with a family cap of €650. Maintaining these prices is key

1 Dáil Éireann Debate, School Transport - PQ 27139/24 (25th June 2024).

2 Dáil Éireann Debate, School Transport - PQ 27139/24 (25th June 2024).

to ensuring school transport is a viable and beneficial option for families. Affordability should be complemented by changes in eligibility criteria and the necessary investment to meet demand so that those who want to avail of school transport can do so.

The rigidity of the current eligibility criteria and variability of concessionary tickets each school year have created repeated chaos within the school transport system. The publication of the school transport review and the projections it includes must be used to remove unfair exclusions, forward-plan, and give certainty to families.

School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs

The Special Educational Needs (SEN) school transport scheme provides free transport services for children with SEN in attending mainstream schools, special classes / schools or units.

This scheme provides transport services for children with a diagnosed disability and / or special educational need, who, because of the nature of their disability, may not be in a position to avail of a school bus service which would be time-tabled to pick up other children along the route of service. This dedicated scheme generally operates on a door-to-door basis.

Pupils with Special Educational needs are eligible for school transport if they are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class / special school or a unit, that is or can be resourced, to meet the child's special educational needs under Department of Education criteria. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers.

A Special Transport Grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements may be provided to families of eligible children in certain situations such as where Bus Éireann is not in a position to provide a transport service or where a child's age, behavioural difficulties or medical needs are such as to make the provision of a transport service impracticable.

School Transport Scheme Review

In 2021 the Department initiated a review of the school transport scheme. The review was established to examine the effectiveness of the scheme, to reassess its objectives and

to examine options for reform. After several years and many delays, the outcomes of the review were published earlier this year.

The review outlined various options for reforming the school transport scheme, including eligibility criteria in terms of distance and the nearest school criteria, demand, administration fees and integration of SEN pupils into mainstream services.

The review examined five options for reforming the school transport scheme.

This included various options to reform the distance criteria. The options ranged from reducing the minimum distance to 1km for both primary and post-primary students to maintaining the existing distance criteria of 3.2km for primary and 4.8km for post-primary students with the introduction of a new maximum 30km distance criteria.

Different options for the nearest school criteria were also assessed. This included the abolition of the nearest school criteria, the extension of the criteria to grant eligibility for those attending the next nearest school and the maintenance of the existing criteria that limits eligibility only to those attending the nearest school.

Other options included different ticket fee rates and different options for increasing the number of pupils with special education needs onto mainstream school transport services.

The review ultimately recommended option 1, which would reduce the minimum distance criteria for primary students to 1km and for post-primary students to 2km; remove the nearest school criteria; retain the existing ticket costs and aim to integrate 20% of SEN pupils into mainstream services. This was viewed as having the highest benefit-to-cost ratio and as being the optimal fit for meeting our national climate obligations, for improving transport infrastructure and supporting rural communities.

While Sinn Féin agrees with several of the proposals under this option, our plan differs on a number of grounds as discussed below. While committed to expanding the school transport scheme, we would do so in a way that is fair and that works.

Sinn Féin's Plan to Reform and Expand the School Transport System

In government, Sinn Féin would reform and expand the system to provide an additional 100,000 pupils with transport services. We are committed to implementing lasting changes

to the system through an additional investment of over €250 million to build capacity within the school transport system.

Our proposals would gradually expand the eligibility criteria for mainstream school transport and increase capacity within the system. We are also committed to providing the investment needed to cater for the projected increase in demand for SEN transport services.

We are committed to expanding the school transport scheme while maintaining the existing costs for families. We would not increase the cost of school transport for families throughout the course of our plan – the current fees for this school year would be maintained. Affordability of school transport is essential to mitigate the financial burden of school costs for families as well as to ensure school transport is a feasible and beneficial option.

Mainstream Services

Our plan to reform and expand the school transport system is informed by the data and projections under the review of the school transport scheme published earlier this year. This includes phased reforms to distance and the nearest school criteria. Together, the implementation of these proposals would see around 100,000 additional pupils on mainstream services and transform the school transport system to a fairer, more sustainable system that works for families.

Sinn Féin would, in government, incrementally reduce the distance criteria for primary students from 3.2km to 1km for primary school students and from 4.8km to 2km for post-primary students, as recommended in the school transport review. This represents a sizable shift in eligibility to the scheme, benefitting thousands of pupils.

We would remove the nearest school criteria so that pupils are not locked out of school transport for attending other schools that better meet their needs but are not their closest school. Where pupils would otherwise qualify for school transport and the demand exists for additional services, this should be facilitated where feasible. This flexible and common-sense approach would avoid arbitrary exclusions and ensure that families can exercise choice without losing eligibility to school transport.

Under the current system, where a child attends their second nearest school, they are automatically non-eligible for the school transport scheme and must rely on the chance of getting a concessionary ticket. We would remove this unfair aspect of the system in such instances and ensure that pupils who would otherwise qualify for school transport services are entitled to them.

By reforming the distance and nearest school criteria, eligibility for school transport services would be extended to many pupils currently reliant on concessionary tickets. The school transport review estimated that 64% of primary pupils and 75% of post-primary pupils reliant on concessionary tickets either fall short of the minimum distance criteria or despite meeting the distance criteria, attend their second nearest school. The expansion of eligibility on these grounds would give these families more certainty and avoid the annual chaos caused.

Special Educational Needs Services

Sinn Féin are committed to providing the investment needed to cater to the projected demand for Special Educational Needs Services (SEN) transport services in government.

The school transport review recommended that the number of SEN pupils integrated on to mainstream services should be increased out to 2030. The review's recommendations and the associated costs assume an increased rate of uptake by SEN pupils to mainstream services rising from 5% to 20%. These targets were largely based on SEN pupils in special classes/ mainstream schools opting for mainstream services. The review noted that integration on to mainstream services could be facilitated as more special classes become available locally. Given the higher cost of SEN transport services relative to mainstream services, the outcomes of the review estimated cost savings within the wider school transport scheme by increasing the rate of integration.

While Sinn Féin support the integration of SEN pupils on to mainstream services where this is appropriate and the preference of families involved, we are cognisant that this would require sizable shifts in the mainstream services provided and would be dependent on parental choice. We believe that the assumption that integrating 20%

of SEN pupils into mainstream school transport services is too high. Therefore, the targets and costs under our plan therefore do not assume this rate of uptake, recognising the uncertainties involved.

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