



August 31st 2020

Dear Member of the Oireachtas,

Schools are back and our children and their parents, indeed all of us, look forward to returning to our normal lives be it with restrictions. We must now live with this awful virus and not let it dictate to us. We can do this.

I am writing on behalf of 1,500 small to medium bus and coach operators who run a variety of services in every town and village in Ireland. They help to keep rural Ireland and its people coming and going to Shops, Post Offices, Social Services, Community Centres, Bingo and recreational outings, matches, funerals, weddings, birthday parties and for a drink! Most of these services are bespoke and operated at no cost to the State. One service not often referred to is the provision of schools transport directly contracted with schools and parents. These services run every day through the school year and are a vital cog in the overall schools transport network. They do not require Department of Education oversight. They do not require Bus Eireann oversight. They come free of any large management costs or Departments and state company resources. They operate within the rules and regulations set down by the National Transport Authority and The Road Safety Authority. They are subject to Public Service Vehicle safety sign off and the drivers must hold a current Driver CPC and be Garda vetted. They comply with all conditions required of professional bus and coach operators across the EU.

The opening of our schools has highlighted a number of difficulties in the provision of transport for the children under the present Covid-19 restrictions, with us for the foreseeable future, possibly 2 to 3 years. All of these can be resolved through recognising the alternative transport options presently operated by our members. FOTO has proffered on many occasions over the last three to six months, solutions and proposals to the relevant Ministers in Transport and Education – none of these have received the courtesy of a single response!

Private Bus and Coach Operators can provide the extra transport services now required if we are to follow health guidelines for distancing for second level students. We can do this immediately without the need for contracts or large management fees if Government is willing to recognise this alternative solution. The Federation of Transport Operators (FOTO) will coordinate these services and ensure the cooperation and support of each of these 1,500 operators. It will act as the central contact point for schools, parents and operators to ensure service consistency and back-up for the delivery of these services.

What do we need to do?

- Divert the recent supports to parents for the use of their private cars to the hiring of the extra buses and coaches directly from our 1,500 members to provide these services and used to bring the provision of these extra services to the same levels as those provided by Bus Eireann under their arrangement with the Department of Education to provide the general School Transport System. The majority of these services will be side by side operations and it will be a simple process to match payments for like services.
- Continue Covid-19 supports to all drivers in schools transport services



Reg No: 152032

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Reg No: 458014

- Allow drivers over 70 years of age, subject to medical certification for fitness to drive, to return to the driving of schools buses. They can presently drive to Brussels on other passenger services but cannot drive for 2 hours or so a day on schools transport! One of the main obstacles to providing extra buses at this time is the dearth of drivers suitably qualified. This cohort of driver is immediately available, with vast experience and are current holders of the EU Driver CPC. They will also mainly be recently Garda vetted.
- Extend the age of buses to 25 years subject to roadworthy certification. The present limit is 20 years and many vehicles will have “lost” a year due to the Covid-19 restrictions through 2020 and will have minimal wear and tear. We suggest that the age is extended to 25 years subject to a rigorous testing and maintenance programme which FOTO can monitor remotely through a telephone application.
- Pay a direct grant to private bus and coach operators returning to work, across all services mentioned above. The recent Covid-19 supports for schools transport were handed to and distributed by Bus Eireann to private operators on a 50/50 basis. Bus Eireann retained 48% of the supports for their 10% of the buses providing school transport services and 52% to the private operators who provide 90% of the vehicles! FOTO has referred this matter to its legal team for the possible abuse of a dominant position in how these funds were handed out and distributed.

FOTO undertakes to ensure compliance in all aspects of these services and conditions.

We must all work to work with Covid-19 and survive it. We can only do this by being flexible and innovative. We all recognise that the opening of our schools is pivotal to our future across many aspects of health, well-being, society and country in general. We are offering our unconditional support.

You will note we are not looking for contractual arrangements with the Department of Education or indeed any person or entity. This will allow for quick changes to arrangements where Covid-19 restrictions or the lifting of these dictate. We expect to find that the services we offer and the option of direct arrangements with schools and parents will provide a cost efficient, sustainable and flexible delivery of schools transport services in these uncertain times. Our solution gives the Irish Government a new option for the delivery of schools transport. Our 1,500 bus and coach operator members can provide this schools transport option.

Yours Sincerely

John Dunne
Director
FOTO/iBus plc.