

Submission on Supported School Transport and Transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme

Recommendation:

1. Provide 3 options for families
 - Option 1 – Provide supported school transport in the form of school buses for which students with disabilities are automatically eligible. Offer flexible designated transport zones, individualised pick up/drop off points and abolish the minimal 4.8km distance which is currently required to be eligible for supported school transport
 - Option 2 – Give families the choice to manage the funding for supported school transport themselves, (either self managing their child's NDIS plan or through a NDIS Plan manager)
 - Option 3 – A combination of the above on a per trip basis. For example, a student could use a school bus 5 mornings and 3 afternoons per week. The family would then organise the supported school transport 2 afternoons per week. This may be a suitable option if their child was going to an afterschool activity/therapy session as opposed to directly home.
2. Families should be asked at their NDIS planning meeting what option they would like in their plan
3. Families should have the option to change the options with their LAC or NDIS Planner if circumstances change throughout the school year without going through a review process or lodging a change of circumstance form
4. If using option 1, put on a larger number of smaller buses and keep time travelled on buses to a minimum
5. Do not assess students to see if they “qualify” for supported school transport. Every student who attends a special school or special development school should be given automatic access to student supported transport no matter where they live or what method of supported transport they choose to take to and from school
6. Leave out the option of a transport brokers, they don't know the children, may cause safety concerns and are just add another layer of complication to the NDIS

Introduction

Syndromes Without A Name (SWAN) Australia provides support and information to families caring for a child with an undiagnosed or rare genetic condition. Many of SWAN children also have disabilities and attend either a special school or special development school.

SWAN is a national organisation and we represent the views of a number of our members across Australia including remote and rural areas in this response to this consultation paper. From carrying out consultation with our members and a special schools Principals representative, it has become apparent that a national approach is very much needed as we move into a system where school transport is managed by the NDIS. We have responded to the consultation questions outlined in the Supported School Transport and the NDIS Discussion Paper.

Consultation questions

1. What works well with the current supported school transport service?

The current transport system works well and is reliable, running strictly to a set time table. It assists children with disabilities travel to and from school with their peers for socialisation and builds independent travel skills away from their parents/carers. It is a set routine which works well for many children. It is a good available option if students attend a special school or special development school.

All students are marked on and off the bus and teachers and bus supervisors provide quality care and security for students. The new school electronic student manifest devices outlined in the revised Students with Disabilities Transport Program policy and procedures are an added measure of safety and accountability for students.

By providing student transport it allows the majority of parent's time to then get other children to mainstream schools. For some families it allows parents/cares to get to work as the child gets picked up early and is on the bus for a long period of time, allowing families to have a longer working day.

2. What could be improved?

Designated transport zones need to be improved. They need to be made more flexible. For example, just because one special school or special developmental school is in your designated transport zone, it doesn't mean that school is the most suitable for your child to attend. Too often, parents/carers are influenced by designated transport zones when selecting a school for logistic reasons (they may not have access to a car) instead of selecting the school most suitable based on a child's needs. Families should have the option to access a school bus even if it means driving their child to a designated transport stop, if they live outside the designated transport zone for the school they wish their child to attend.

The minimum distance of 4.8km from school to qualify for supported transport should be abolished. This discriminates students from accessing the school bus and also puts added pressures on families when they care for other children and have to get them to and from school.

For some rural families, they have no choice but to drive their child, sometimes 20 minutes or more to a designated bus stop so they can access a school bus as the bus doesn't come into their town. If school buses are to operate they need to be accessible to all students. For this to happen, more buses of smaller sizes may need to be used instead of bigger buses which are often only half full of students.

The introduction of Super Stops for many families has not been a good measure for families who were previously been picked up outside their house. It can be difficult at times to get students to walk to a Super Stop, particularly if they have behaviour concerns. There is also the safety factor of waiting with unpredictable children on a main road with lots of traffic.

Parents have little choice and control of where the student pick up points are. When we asked a Principals transport delegate, about choice of stops, they said the bus company told them the route and they had very little say in the matter of where the bus should stop. Families need to be involved in these discussions.

Some students are allocated set seats they need to sit in each time they travel on the school bus, others are not. This works for some students but not for everyone. A conversation with seating arrangements needs to be have with the student's family and this may not happen.

Not all bus companies will accommodate car seats, buckle guards or harnesses in their buses. Sometimes despite the parents' wishes to have their child safely secured in a seat the bus company doesn't agree so it doesn't happen. Buses need to be able to listen to family's safety concerns, after all parents/carers know their child better than anyone.

There is an inconsistent approach to bus stops. Some students get picked up from their house, others don't. Sometime there are logistic reasons such as traffic concerns but other times it is random. There needs to be more flexibility depending on the students' needs and capabilities.

School buses don't wait more than 3 minutes. Students with disabilities may require a nappy change just prior to leaving for the school bus. This can mean that the student misses the bus and disrupts the family's routine as the family then needs to drive the student to school.

Behavioural problems on bus are not always dealt with on the bus. Some students can disrupt other students particularly if they are vocal and this can be unsettling.

Bus routes can be long for some students because of the number of students and the distances they live from each other and the school. Some students don't mind this but for others, it makes for a very long tiring day. There are no provision for bathroom stops along the way.

3. Should current arrangements remain?

SWAN families would like to see school bus transport remain but become more flexible with the designated transport zones pick up/drop off points and do not wish to keep the rule that families need to live a minimal distance of 4.8km from their school to access supported school transport. The option to use more smaller buses for shorter distances so students are not on the bus for lengthy periods of time should also be considered.

It should be noted that not everyone who attends a special school is eligible for the NDIS so these students should still have an option to take the school bus if so desired.

We believe the NDIS should offer parents the choice to “opt in” to the school bus transport but also have the option to seek out alternative methods of transport for their child as the school bus is not the desired mode of transport for everyone. The NDIS is about “choice and control” so participants should not be locked into a “one size fits all” model.

4. What elements of choice and control are most valuable to families in accessing supported school transport?

Families want to be able to choose how their child gets to school. SWAN families value reliability, safety and flexibility. Every child is different, and we need to respect that not one mode or method of transport will suit them. Parents don't appreciate being told they do not qualify for supported school transport to their child's school if they live outside the designated transport zone.

A choice in transport would allow an NDIS participant the option of being dropped off at a social activity on the way home to school or an afterschool care program. Flexibility is a key value for our members when it relates to supported school transport. This is especially important for SWAN families who have children at different schools.

5. What are the benefits to families/carers of directly organising supported school transport? What are the challenges? What are the risks?

Benefits

Choice and control – families can choose the system most practical and suitable for their child and the family's needs. It provides opportunities for families to choose the mode of transport they want for their child. Families can select a service that meets their child's needs. For example, they may prefer shorter distance travel which is less tiring for their child and a more personalised service picking up directly from their home.

The closest school which falls in the designated school transport zone may not be the best fit for a child. By giving choice and control to families and letting families choose how they spend their child's school transport money in their plans is a good thing. NDIS participants can choose other services, so why should methods of supported school transport be any different.

Families directly organising their own supported school transport gives greater flexibility. You are not locked into the same route or method of transport every day. For example, as a child gets older, you might want to start to introduce using public transport one day

per week in a supported way and have a support worker accompany the child to school. You then have the option to choose a different method of transport the remainder of the week.

Challenges & Risks

Not everyone has time to negotiate or the capability to organise their own transport for their child. Families see the school bus works well and their child is happy on it so why change the current system and routine.

Not everyone is capable of sourcing their own transport, it might be like therapy assistance and support workers, where demand outstrips supply especially in rural areas.

Not everyone sees the importance of abiding by safe guards and standards. For example, ensuring transport providers have working with children checks, insurance, police checks, first aid etc. Service providers may not be skilled to manage students with challenging behaviour.

Trusting and getting to know the person driving students to school may be a problem if drivers change frequently. Continuity of staff should be considered. There is also a risk that the selected transport provider might cancel their service at short notice or not run to the agreed timetable. Students may get stranded without a method of transport for the day.

NDIS participants in rural areas may have difficulties finding transport providers. For example, there are limited wheelchair accessible taxis in some rural towns. There also a lack of support workers who could accompany students on their journey. Parking at the school could be an option with more people electing to use other methods of transport such as Ubers. Accountability of students and their safety may be an issue as more transport vehicles enter the streets around the school. It also might be a logistic problem and cause traffic chaos for schools with limited parking. There is also the safety concern for students, who is responsible for delivering them into the school grounds safely.

Parents do not want to be fighting for transport allowances in their child's NDIS plan every year. The question should just be asked in your child's NDIS meeting a) do you want to access the school bus or b) do you want to be funded to find your own method of transport or c) a combination of both. It should not be assessed every year and just a given that students with disabilities at special schools and special development schools should have access to supported school transport.

The definition of "reasonable and necessary" needs to be consistent and transparent when providing supported school transport in NDIS Plans. It will be a challenge to ensure everyone's (including LAC's and Planners) interpretation of it is the same.

6. For providers (or potential providers), what are the opportunities in having families/carers directly organise supported school transport? What new costs might be involved in the potential model? What are the risks for providers?

Opportunities

Supported school transport will allow for more providers to enter the market. An open market can be competitive and could drive price down and lead to an increased quality and level of service.

Families know their child better than schools so they are the best people to liaise with in regards to their child's needs.

Costs

Because transport providers do not know what the market will demand, costs could blow out, forcing them out of business

Risks

An open market of transport may mean transport providers may not be trained and confident in managing difficult behaviours. These behaviours could cause safety and students may be distracting for drivers.

Communication may be an issue, particularly if a student is nonverbal. A student may become distressed unbeknown to the driver.

NDIS participants may cancel their service at short notice, leaving transport providers wearing the cost. e.g. a forgotten appointment. If transport providers are bus companies, they may have lots of vacancies on their school buses as NDIS participants choose private methods of transport in their plans. They will need to adapt to market demands.

Current transport providers may lose business and might become insolvent as a result of decreased demand for their services.

7. What level of flexibility would families be looking for in their supported school transport arrangements?

Families would like school transport to be flexible and be able to transport their child to other venues other than home e.g. a therapy appointment, an afterschool social program or even a parents/carers work place. The current bus system is inflexible and follows a set route.

Families would like the option to have some input into pick up and drop off points for their child and not have the bus company dictate to them where the stop will be and what time pick ups and drop offs are.

Families would like to be able to choose the right mode of transport for their child on any given day and use it appropriately to meet their child's needs. Some days a school bus route might suit them but other times a more individualised approach to student transport is needed. If a door to door service is the best approach, then families should have the

option for that service. If it is more appropriate for a support worker to accompany a child to school as they are familiar with the child's needs, then families should have the flexibility to choose that option.

Families do not want to select special schools and special development schools based on designated transport zones as the school may not be the best fit for their child. If the NDIS is serious about "choice and control" then families should be able to consider all education options and transport options based on their child's needs.

Families should be able to choose who they want their child to travel with. Some student's behaviour, may not be aggressive but may still be disturbing to other students, e.g. making particular noises. Again, it comes back to being able to be flexible and having choice and control options for your child.

Flexibility may mean that a child is dropped off at parent/carers work place which may suit the family better. Bus pick ups and drop offs should not be restricted to the bus stop closest to the family home that a bus company decides on without any consultation with the family. For families in rural areas this may mean the difference between driving into a different town to wait for a student at a bus stop.

Families should have the right to select the transport method they desire but also have the option to change if it doesn't work out.

8. How could a transport broker help you manage supported school transport?

A transport broker would be involved with negotiating the most suitable transport arrangements based on a participant needs. They would liaise between school and the NDIS participants families. However, they are not in the right position to negotiate the best route and pick up and drop off times for the NDIS participant as they are not familiar with the school, the transport provider, the NDIS participant or their family.

9. What are the benefits for families/carers of using a transport broker? What are the risks?

Benefits

The benefits would be if the school acted as a transport broker that they know the students and families involved and would be in a position to work with them to best meet their transport needs.

Risks

We believe the introduction of a transport broker just adds another layer of complication to the NDIS which doesn't need to be created. The role of a transport broker, if using a school bus would probably be best fitted to a delegate from the school who knows the child, however this will create additional work for them. If the family uses other methods of supported transport, the role would best be performed by a support coordinator or the family if they are self managing the participants plan. Parents/Carers who self manage their child's NDIS plan should have the skills and capability of negotiating transport

options for their child but already have enough to do. If a self-managing participant does not have the skills or time to negotiate transport they should be able to request a set number of hours for a support coordinator to fulfil that role, but support coordination is rarely funded in plans where the participant or their family self-manage the plan. If a participant uses a Plan manager, a person should be allocated funding in their plan for support coordinator to manage the transport component and this may not happen. The funding may vary for NDIS participants depending on a Planners and LAC's interpretation of "reasonable and necessary".

The risk with using a transport broker is they do not know the child or the family very well and may not understand their needs. A transport broker would be a new job and it takes time to build up contacts and trust within the industry.

10. If you are an NDIS provider (or potential provider), what opportunities are there in this potential new service type? What are the risks? How would potential conflicts of interest be mitigated? What costs need to be factored in?

We don't believe transport brokers are a good option for supported school transport and we are not an NDIS provider or potential provider wanting to move into this area of business.

11. Should there be any restrictions over which services can be provided by the transport broker role?

We don't believe transport brokers are a good option for supported school transport and we are not an NDIS provider or potential provider wanting to move into this area of business.

12. What are the options if no transport broker exists?

Families or schools would negotiate the best transport options for families as they know the student best.

13. What systems need to be in place to make sure that children are safe when travelling to and from school?

Good communication between families and schools. If medical circumstances change, schools and supported transport providers need to be informed. There needs to be quality safeguards put in place to ensure the safety of all students. If we continue with school buses as is, there are quality assurances already in place. If school bus companies become registered NDIS transport providers, the quality and safety requirements are also already in place.

If NDIS participants families are negotiating their own transport providers, the duty of care lies within the family as it does when employing therapy assistance or other service providers. Some families will ensure high standards are met, others will not, which can lead to an increased safety risk for children.

14. What responsibilities should transport brokers and transport providers have to keep children safe? What should be the responsibilities of parents and schools?

Transport providers have the responsibility to keep students safe at all times, this means getting them safely in and out of their mode of transport and delivering them safely to their destination. This will be difficult if many transport providers enter the market, particularly for schools. Who should be responsible for student's safety if multiple transport providers arrive at school at the same time? It could get very chaotic at schools and students might abscond, causing safety concerns for their wellbeing. School and parents have a responsibility to keep students safe at all times. Parents and schools have a duty to communicate with each other about students transport needs.

15. What other mechanisms are needed to keep children safe?

Safe guards need to be put in place to ensure children's safety, if a families are managing their own supported school transport, the duty of care onus is upon them. If families are utilising school buses, the onus should lie with the bus company and the school once they arrive.

16. What factors will the NDIA need to consider in understanding the costs of the potential model?

It could be calculated on a per km formula. The further the student is from the school, the more funding they will be required to have in their plan.

17. What information do providers need to be able to understand the operating costs of the potential model?

They need to ascertain how much it will cost per student using their particular mode of transport, be it a school bus or private vehicle a support worker is using. They will also need to factor their over heads into the equation and calculate that into the cost per km per student formula. This would have to be an estimate because until other transport support providers enter the market, they will not know the true cost.

18. What are the benefits to families of managing provider payments themselves? What support would be helpful in managing this?

Families who self manage their child's NDIS plan would pay supported transport providers just like they pay other service providers under the NDIS. It would allow self managed participants and plan managed participants more flexibility and choice than families using NDIS providers because the NDIS is managing their plan and they are limited to using registered NDIS service providers. There would be no additional supports needed if someone is self managing their child's NDIS plan because NDIS would presume they are skilled at sourcing their own supports for their child's needs. For example, writing service agreements, taking out relevant insurance, carrying out your own safety checks and duty of care when employing people or using services, paying invoices, keeping records and claiming the expense back from the NDIS.

19. For current providers (and potential providers), what changes would providers need to make to move from block funding to individual funding? What are the costs involved? What are the opportunities? What are the risks?

Current providers would probably need to upgrade their record keeping system and be audited under the NDIS guidelines to ensure they are abiding by the quality and safety standards.

Like any business, transport providers are responsible for managing their business and with that comes responsibilities such as playing work cover, superannuation, employee wages, insurance etc. The NDIS should be no different to dealing with other customers.

For potential providers, it is about entering an open market and trying to capitalise on it as much as you can just like any other business when they enter an open market. Provide a good quality product and a good price and service providers can grow their business in an open market.

20. What would the impact be on schools, local community or local governments regarding the logistics and management of potential increased traffic during busy times?

Many schools mainstream or special schools/special development schools have limited parking. Increased traffic flow may cause congestion with multiple methods of transport dropping off students, however, if a flexible bus system was in place and it was more accessible to people i.e. had flexible zoning, more students might access the school bus.

Schools could consider having different starting time for different year levels. For example, prep – grade 6 start at 9am and finish at 3 and year 7 to year 12 start at 8.45 and finish at 2.45. This would ease some congestion.

Families who choose to negotiate their own supported transport needs may consider carpooling.

Many parents still prefer to drive their children to school themselves. Perhaps schools could put shorter time limit parking signs up e.g. 5 minutes parking signs around their school. A drop off zone (which might be a room/area just near the drop off point) where a teachers could take students into school could also be an option.

21. How does the potential model improve on the current arrangements for supported school transport?

The proposed model of student transport gives participants more choice and control on how students get to and from school.

22. Do you have any other feedback about the potential model for supported school transport in the NDIS?

To summarise:

Current school bus transport

Pros

- Reliable
- Routine and predictable
- Familiar
- System generally works
- NDIS plan dates vary, the school terms stay the same
- Limited safety risk
- Systems in place to return students to school if nobody meets the school bus – duty of care for students
- Bus supervisors are trained in basic first aid
- Schools use reputable bus companies

Cons

- Zones inflexible, cannot use bus for a special school which is outside the designated bus zone
- Don't qualify for the school bus service if you live within 4.8km of the school
- A lot of work for school Principals or their representatives
- No control for families as to where the bus picks their child up from and drops them off e.g. will not drop students off at an afterschool social group or afterschool care program
- No flexibility of stops e.g. super stops don't suit everyone, particularly children who go to special development schools
- Very little time capacity to wait for students who are running late
- Not all bus companies will happily accommodate car seats, buckle guards or harnesses
- School Principals or their representatives on call from the start of the bus journey in the morning until the end of the bus journey in the afternoon. This can be quite time consuming with some of staff spending on average one hour per week to solve transport issues
- Puts limitations on parents/carers going back to work as they have to leave work early to meet school buses

Transport brokers

Pros

- Could just be a service provided by support coordinators or schools

Cons

- Do not know the child like the school does or family does so they may not act in the child's best interests
- Concerns about student's safety
- Added layer of complexity to the NDIS

Engaging directly with transport providers

Pros

- Flexible
- Enables choice and control
- Families are not limited to choosing the closest school if they can receive funding in their child's NDIS plan to use on transport to suit their child's needs
- Could cause an influx of vehicles outside schools at peak times

Cons

- Time consuming for families to manage their child's transport
- Family may not have the skills to negotiate transport for their child
- Safety of students is a risk with no safe guards put in place - not everyone who elects to self manage their child's supported school transport will take responsibility for ensuing safety mechanisms are put in place e.g. working with children's check, police check, insurance etc

23. What other options could be explored?

It would be useful to run a piloted program of the proposed changes for a period of time so different options can be trialled and evaluated by participants, transport providers and schools.

Other Comments

- NDIS plans do not coincide with school year
- The discussion paper does not focus on students with disabilities accessing transport to get to a main stream school.
- The "Easy Read" version of the Supported School Transport and the NDIS Discussion Paper was very long. There are many parents with intellectual disabilities and language barriers who have children with disabilities. They may have been put off reading the discussion paper by its sheer length. The discussion paper and consultation process need to be made accessible to everyone if you value consultation with the community that school transport

effects. Perhaps consultation sessions aimed at parents with intellectual disabilities should have been offered to involve that target audience more.

- Short lead time on submission and 2 weeks of submission consultation/writing time fell in school holidays when parents/carers are busy with children