

National Disability Insurance Scheme – transport of children with disabilities to and from school



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Purpose of this document:

This paper has been prepared by BusVic to inform the National Disability Insurance Authority (NDIA) of how the use of contracted bus services can provide the NDIA with a sensible, safe transport solution that represents value for money balancing:

- Control and choice for clients
- Financial sustainability
- Cost effectiveness
- Responsiveness to client needs
- Flexibility.

BusVic is the umbrella industry group for the Victorian bus industry. BusVic and its members have been fundamental participants in the delivery of transport support for Victorian families with children with disabilities for many decades.

BusVic believes the NDIA should be provided with our learnings to assist in their decision-making in the rollout of the NDIS.

Executive Summary:

The transport needs of families with children with disabilities to access special education are logistically complex to deliver:

- The nature of many disabilities mean these students need special support to access transport and travel
- Specialist schools are, for most children, not in their neighbourhood – distance is an issue which cannot be ignored
- Many households with children with disabilities face multiple challenges in organising travel for other members of that household as a result of the special transport needs of the child with the disability.

As a result families with children with disabilities require transport support which is:

- Safe and comfortable
- Reliable
- Responsive to their child's needs and the needs of their household.

The NDIA is responsible for funding transport support to these families and requires a solution which:

- Assists control and choice for clients
- Is affordable and financially sustainable
- Provides quality transport support.

Schools and State education departments recognise these challenging and complex needs and issues and have developed and delivered effective cost effective transport solutions using specialist bus transport contracted from local private operators.

The need for supervised travel, modified vehicles and meeting individual needs means transport using buses is the only viable transport solution which:

- can provide some choice and control for the NDIA's clients
- is affordable and financially sustainable
- provides safety, reliability and responds to needs.

These arrangements work successfully because:

- Families, specialist schools, bus operators and state education departments work together to plan, manage and deliver the transport support – all play a significant role. The success could not be achieved without this partnership and all are committed to the students' safety, comfort and needs. *It is through this arrangement that families have choice and control about how the transport support is delivered*
- Each student's and their family's situation are different and these differences are recognised and addressed
- Local knowledge is valued – hence the focus on all working together

- Long term contracting arrangements with private bus operators provide an environment which encourages investment in suitable buses and staff as well as allowing long term relationships and partnerships to be established and flourish.

Traditional market approaches with many providers being available for consumers to choose from are not financially viable in student transport given the complexities and need for long term capital, human and relationship investment.

BusVic strongly recommends that the NDIA maintain and build upon the current transport support arrangements in place for students attending specialist schools. Our discussions with parents and specialist schools and their representative groups indicate strong support for this recommendation.

Part One – Transporting students with disabilities to specialist schools is logistically complex but the needs are clear

For many students in Australia their disability creates challenges to access an appropriate education setting. Across Australia parents of children with a disability can choose for their child to attend a specialist education setting or a mainstream school. This part of this paper discusses the challenges students face in accessing specialist education settings.

The challenges essentially fall into three groups:

1. The impact of the disability and the need for specialist transport support

Students attending specialist schools have a range of disabilities varying from profound physical and intellectual disabilities to autism, mild intellectual and mild physical disabilities. The transport response required to support each child can vary dramatically with the nature of the disability.

Some examples demonstrate the challenges this creates:

- Students confined to wheelchairs require access to transport which can safely load and unload the student on and off the vehicle and transport the student whilst the student remains in the wheelchair.
- Students whose disability creates medical and behavioural issues need trained adult supervision whilst travelling. This supervision cannot be the driver of the vehicle given they must focus on safe driving.

So for many students with disabilities, public and other transport services are not viable options to travel to and from school. Specialist support must be provided if the students are to engage successfully in education.

2. The family household situation.

Families with children with disabilities face complex challenges in managing and operating their households.

Parents must juggle their time caring for all children in the household in an environment where the child (or in some cases children) with the disability requires significant additional support and care. Discussions with families indicate that before and after school times are often the most stressful for these households.

Households must get all children ready for school and then get the children to school. This is difficult when the children do not attend the same schools (eg the child with the disability attends the local specialist school, a sibling attends primary school and another sibling attends secondary college)

However this situation is made more difficult when for example:

- The nature of the disability means the child with the disability requires considerable assistance to be woken, toileted, fed, dressed and readied to travel to school
- The family does not have a vehicle modified to easily transport the student with the disability

- There is more than one person in the household with a disability or with special needs or the family is a single parent family (which research indicates is more prevalent in households with children with disabilities)
- The children attend different schools which are located in opposite directions from the household.

So for many families with children with disabilities, the management of their household is complex and stressful. Transport support should be intended to reduce this stress (or at the very least not add to it).

3. The relatively long distances needed to be travelled from home to the 'local' specialist school:

Specialist schools are by their very nature 'specialist'.

In Victoria, for example, there are a number of specialist school sub-systems within the specialist school system – particularly in metropolitan Melbourne. In Melbourne there are four specialist schools which cater exclusively for students with profound physical disabilities and five specialist schools which cater for students with autism.

In rural Victoria the specialist school system mainly comprises multi-modal schools which cater for students with a range of different disabilities.

In both situations (ie metropolitan Melbourne and rural Victoria), specialist schools are not 'local neighbourhood' schools for the vast majority of students.

The distances can either be long in terms of kilometres travelled (particularly for students residing in rural Victoria and the urban fringe) or time travelled (for students residing in metropolitan Melbourne where travel to and from school coincides with peak hour traffic).

This adds to the complexity of and the need for specialist dedicated transport support for these families.

The need for transport programs that are safe, reliable and responsive:

Bringing these three factors together (the disability, the household and the distance) demonstrates that these students and their families need transport support which is:

- Safe - the students' disabilities must be managed during transport
- Reliable - families with children with disabilities face considerable stress. Transport support should not add to this stress
- Responsive - the disabilities create special needs for transport between home and school. Transport options must be able to respond to these quickly and with flexibility

These needs add to the logistical complexity of providing transport support for these group of students.

In summary the transport needs are complex. In part 3 of this paper we discuss how to address this complexity with a solution that provides both choice and control for families and value for money for the NDIA.

Part Two - The NDIA's transport responsibilities and needs

BusVic understands that the NDIA responsibilities are to fund the cost of travelling to and from school for students with disabilities when these students cannot be transported to school by family or friends or travel independently on public or school transport.

In addition we understand that the NDIA is keen that the NDIS:

- provides choice and control for NDIA clients over the nature of the supports funded and the provider of those supports
- is financially sustainable for the NDIA in the long term.

We also understand that the NDIA's business model is to:

- agree with clients the supports necessary for them to achieve their life goals and to provide funding to those clients to purchase directly those supports from providers
- accredit and register providers of supports to ensure NDIS clients can choose their provider
- set prices for each type of support that is available to clients
- not to enter into direct service delivery contracts with providers - the 'contract' is between the client and the provider.

Clearly this model works well for the provision of supports where:

- the support does not have to be delivered to all clients at the same time and in the same location (which means multiple providers can be viable), or
- where it needs to be delivered to all clients at the same time and in the same location, and can be delivered in group situations, or
- investment in staff and equipment to provide the support can be accommodated through a preparedness by the NDIA to pay high prices.

It is apparent to BusVic that there will be some situations where arrangements for the provision for some supports however will be difficult to completely meet this model. These situations are, like student transport support, where:

- support needs to be delivered to all students at the same time (ie before and after school)
- clients are not in the same location (ie the students start their journey to school from home)
- investment in staff and equipment (eg modified buses) means economies of scale are the only way to achieve value for money and encourage investment.

Given this, BusVic recommends that the NDIA look to innovative solutions that can deliver the right support at value for money costs yet still provides their clients with some choice and control over how they access the support and how it is delivered.

Part Three - Contracted bus services - a solution that provides effective transport, choice and control and value for money

The challenges the NDIA faces in implementing transport support arrangements for students travelling to and from specialist schools are not new.

All State and Territory education systems have faced this challenge for some decades. Attachment one to this paper provides an overview of how each education system currently supports students with disabilities to attend school. All arrangements feature:

- transport services (mainly bus) contracted from private bus operators
- students need to meet certain eligibility criteria to be able to access these services
- families, schools, education systems and bus operators work together to ensure the service meets family's needs.
- value for money is achieved through balancing the number of students travelling on each bus with students' individual needs and circumstances
- arrangements are for the long term recognising that many students require transport for most of their thirteen years at school and the need for contract certainty for bus operators (because of the long term investment necessary in vehicles and staff).

The Victorian Students with Disabilities Transport Program is an excellent example of how these arrangements can deliver and meet the needs of the NDIA and its clients.

In Victoria the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development contracts around 400 bus services for students attending its 78 specialist schools.

- **Control and choice** for families in this program is delivered by the partnership arrangements the Department uses to plan and manage the services.

Families work with the specialist school, the bus operator and the Department to plan travel arrangements to best meet each student's and family's needs. These can include pick up/drop off times and points; seating arrangements on the bus; medical and behaviour management plans whilst travelling; choice and performance of bus drivers and bus supervisors (every bus has a trained adult who travels on the bus to supervise the students whilst boarding, unboarding and travelling and also liaises with parents and schools); and bus loading/unloading arrangements.

Generally most families report they are satisfied with the quality of the service provided under these arrangements.¹

These partnership arrangements are critical to quality transport support being provided:

- they mean service decisions are made locally where the actual service is delivered by the people involved
- local knowledge and input and individual needs are captured and acted upon

¹ In 2012, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission released its report: *Held back: the experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian schools*. Whilst the report highlighted some parental concerns with some of the Department's policy settings for the program (particularly the maximum travel time being two hours), the report does acknowledge that around 75 per cent of families are satisfied with the services being provided.

- accountability for delivering and improving services is constant and direct
- the Department can retain control where needed to ensure quality and cost control.
- **Value for money** in the delivery of any program is paramount. Transport support does not need to be an exception to this rule. The Victorian program delivers value for money for Victoria's taxpayers. Annual travel costs per student vary from an average of \$2,500 (for students who are mobile and where large (57 seat) buses can be used) to \$25,000 (for situations where all students are confined to wheelchairs, must be picked up from home and hence only 5-6 students can be transported on that service).

Essentially all of these students are not able to utilise public transport to travel to their specialist school (either because their disability prevents them using available public transport or public transport is not available).

For most students utilising the school bus transport program, travel to school walking or in the family car is also generally not possible. Around 10,000 students attend specialist schools in Victoria with about 7,000 of these receiving support under the bus program. It is reasonable to assume that the 3,000 students who do not use the bus program do so because their families are able to walk or drive them to school. As such the 7,000 students who do use the program do so because it is either not appropriate or not possible for their families to walk or drive them to school even with the offer of financial support under the Department's Conveyance Allowance Program.

Other transport options are clearly cost prohibitive or cannot be delivered with appropriate travel supervision (for example taxi services).

Part Four - The bus industry is well placed and has the experience to deliver transport support

The intention of this paper is to demonstrate to the NDIA that the best arrangements to deliver transport support to students with disabilities to attend specialist schools is via state-based contracted bus partnerships.

Equally important is that the bus industry is well placed and has the experience to work with the NDIA, families, specialist schools and State education systems to successfully lead and deliver these transport support arrangements.

Clearly the bus industry has successfully delivered these arrangements for many decades. Some key drivers of this success are:

- *Trans-generational Investment*

For many decades, significant capital investment has been made by private operators in order to deliver on their contracted obligations. Many of these businesses are substantially geared as a result of signing 10 year contracts with the Victorian State Government most recently in 2011, but for 10 years terms over the last couple of decades. This includes land for depots, buses (most of which have incurred additional cost associated with modifications needed to satisfy the individual's needs), training and education of drivers and supervisors, planners and maintenance personnel.

If Government decided that this current regime was to change, new providers would be hard placed to build the capacity of their businesses to deliver these services within the delivery timeframe.

- *Specialised Skill Set*

In Victoria, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has built up long term relationships with its providers over the last few decades. These contract providers and Government have developed a significant degree of trust over the decades and are viewed by Government as being reliable, efficient and safe.

The Department has also presided over the fostering of the relationship of the Family/School Principal/DEECD/Operator which ensures children are conveyed to and from school in a cost effective and demand responsive manner.

This arrangement cannot be replicated at a federal level, because the social capital that has emerged over the years resides at the local level; the drivers, the supervisors, the principals and the school co-ordinators have developed a reciprocity, trust and network with the children and their families.

- *Regulatory Governance*

In our view, the Government Agency best placed to regulate and manage transport support for students with disabilities to attend specialist schools is the Agency that is closest to where

the services are delivered because the local, embedded Agency and operator(s) understand the nuances of the area and of the circumstances of the children and their family.

For example, if there was a requirement for a child, or children, to be conveyed from Alexandria to Seymour each day, how would a Federal Government department based in a few central locations approach ensuring transport services in an area meet the special and unique set of operating needs of that area?

State and Territory based agencies can provide that local knowledge and oversight.

- *Transitional Issues*

Students with disabilities face many life challenges. Feedback from families is that their children, particularly those with some form of intellectual disability, struggle with changes to their daily routines. A change to the daily routine can have major negative repercussions of the health and wellbeing of the child, not to mention the on-time running of the bus service. We are aware of voluminous cases where operators need to be attentive to the child's needs in order for that child to get on the bus each morning and afternoon.

Unfortunately, some students don't handle changes i.e. a different bus, a different bus driver, the bus stops at a different location, the bus comes at a different time; change no doubt adversely impacts some children because they don't cope well with change. Preservation of the current arrangements is therefore in the best interests of the children.

- *Accreditation*

In each State and Territory, governments have established robust and effective transport support programs and transport safety arrangements.

Traditionally federal government agencies do not directly procure services for the community on behalf of the community. Federal government agencies fund agencies at other levels of government or the not-for-profit sector to do this. Certainly we understand that this is a central tenant of the NDIS operating model.

The arrangements recommended in this paper by us are consistent with this long-standing effective approach.

Part Five - Conclusion

The transport of children with disabilities to and from specialist schools has not been an ongoing function of the Commonwealth, and we don't believe it should be. It is more appropriate for that function to be managed by the State agency closest to the locality in which the services are being provided because of the value associated with understanding the nuances of each local environment.

In short, the Commonwealth should provide the funding for the services to the State Government who can continue to ensure that the services provided meet all both State and Federal requirements and the needs of these students and their families as laid out above. In our view, the most efficient use of the Federal Governments' scarce resources is to allow those currently providing efficient and effective services to continue to do so.

Attachment one

Attachment One: How is the conveying of special children to and from schools currently approached across Australia?

All States and Territories across Australia approach the transport of students with disabilities to and from school slightly differently. Despite this there are some common factors which are key to the successful delivery of this support:

- organised by the State or Territory education system
- eligibility criteria manage family expectations and contain costs
- partnerships with family input and feedback are critical to planning, delivery and management
- long term contractual arrangements with private operators enable operators to invest in equipment and staff.

The following table sets out how it is done in each State and Territory listed, and what are some of the most obvious issues associated with that approach.

| State | Method | No. of Children | Annual Cost |
|-------|--|-----------------|-------------|
| VIC | <p>Responsible Agency: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Program: Students with Disabilities Transport Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can receive support to attend their local specialist school if meet eligibility criteria. • Virtually all students transported by bus • Long term contracts (ten years) • Families and specialist schools work with bus operators and department to plan and deliver services | 7,100 | \$55M |
| NSW | <p>Responsible Agency: Department of Education and Communities' Program: Assisted School Travel Program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can receive support to attend their local school if meet eligibility criteria • Long term contracts (ten years) • Many different contracted Service Providers (Taxi operators/taxis; private people/'people movers' or vans; community transport operators/'people movers' or vans; and bus operators/small buses) • Families and specialist schools work with bus operators and department to plan and deliver services. • Special Ed. transport providers do not have to be accredited and no driver authority is required | Over 10,500 | \$80M |

| State | Method | No. of Children | Annual Cost |
|-------|--|--|-------------|
| QLD | <p>Responsible Agency: Department of Transport and Main Roads' Program: Students With Disability Program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can receive support to attend their local school if meet eligibility criteria • Long term contracts (ten years) • Mainly buses but some taxis • Families and specialist schools work with bus operators and department to plan and deliver services. | 5,400 | \$34M |
| WA | <p>Responsible Agency: Public Transport Authority of WA Program: School Bus Program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can receive support to attend their local school if meet eligibility criteria • Evergreen contracts • 127 buses (23 with wheelchairs) • Families and specialist schools work with bus operators and department to plan and deliver services. • 45,000 trips per year | 2000 students | \$4.4M |
| TAS | <p>Responsible Agency: Department of Infrastructure, Energy & Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can receive support to attend their local school if meet eligibility criteria • Long term contracts (ten years) • All buses • Buses used in city areas not in regional areas for these types of services. | ?? | \$2-3 M |
| SA | <p>Responsible Agency: Department for Education and Child Development</p> <p>The Department has 3 main contract categories:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 12 seats or less Panel of providers (includes anything from a taxi to a mini bus); 2. 13 seats or more unmodified buses; and 3. 13 seats or more wheelchair modified buses 4. Many taxis are also used | 1,450 Cat 1. 400 runs daily Cat 2. 13 runs daily Cat 3. 17 runs daily | \$9M |