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1. **Aim**

The aim of these guidelines is to ensure Special Needs Transport (SNT) services are provided for eligible students in a fair, consistent, safe, timely and efficient manner.

2. **Purpose**

These guidelines provide clear advice to students, parents/carers/guardians and schools on the SNT eligibility criteria as well as the rights and responsibilities associated with the SNT service. These guidelines provide the criteria against which student eligibility for SNT is determined.

3. **Context**

The SNT program provides transport assistance for eligible students with disability who are residents of the ACT and who attend ACT public schools. The Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate (Transport Canberra) works closely with the Education Directorate to manage this program.

Parents/carers/guardians are responsible for transportation of their children to and from school each day. SNT assists parents, rather than removes their responsibility for school transport. When applying for these services parents must demonstrate reasons for their inability to transport their child. For some students, however, their disability means they cannot be transported to school by family or friends or travel independently on public transport.

The Education Directorate provides a range of enrolment options for students with disability including support for students with disability in a mainstream school, specialist schools and a variety of small group programs. Transport is generally not provided for students attending a school in their priority enrolment area. It is expected these students will be transported to school by their parent/carer/guardian. Where students meet disability criteria for placement in a small group setting or specialist school, and this setting is the closest available setting to their priority enrolment area, they may be eligible for transport assistance.

It is the responsibility of parents/carers/guardians and/or the school to arrange transport for excursions, therapy and other school based activities such as work experience.
Transport and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

Specialist school transport has been identified as a funding responsibility for the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA). The transition to the NDIS is a complex task. Jurisdictions and the NDIA are working to determine how specialist school transport could be provided under the NDIS. While this work is occurring, states and territories will continue to provide specialist school transport. In the ACT, this is the Special Needs Transport (SNT) program. This means SNT will continue to be provided in the same way it has been in the previous school years. However it may mean a change in the way student eligibility for SNT is assessed in future years and eligibility will be dependent on a reasonable and necessary decision. Parents and schools will be provided with further updates as planning for the transition of SNT to the NDIS progresses.


4. Eligibility

Students applying for SNT must be registered NDIS participants. The following exceptions may apply and will be considered on a case by case basis:

- students who are not eligible for the NDIS because they do not meet Australian residency requirements
- students already accessing the SNT program who are Australian residents but have not been found eligible for the NDIS and meet all the other eligibility criteria.

Students must also meet the Directorate’s criteria for access to transport as specified below.

Transport is generally not provided for students attending the school in their priority enrolment area. It is expected these students will be transported to school by parents/carers/guardians. Transport may be provided if the student has a physical disability requiring use of a wheelchair, walking frame or other mobility aids resulting in the need for specialist transport, and is unable to be transported to school by their parent/carer/guardian.

Where students have been offered a place in a small group program situated outside their priority enrolment area, they may be eligible for transport if:

1. they have been assessed as in need of transport; and
2. the placement is the closest available setting in relation to the student’s residential address
3. the student fits into one of the three categories below -
   • the student is enrolled in a specialist school or learning support unit situated in a high school or primary school setting, or
   • the student has a disability affecting mobility requiring the use of a wheelchair, callipers, walking frame or similar specialist transport support, or
   • the student is enrolled in a primary school learning support centre.

Transport for students attending a college Learning Support Unit will be considered on a case by case basis and if approved will be reviewed each semester. Evidence of progress toward travel training may be requested. Transport to respite care is not available for college students.

Assessment of need

Assessment of a student's need is based on:
   • the parents or caregivers demonstrated inability to provide or arrange transport, either fully or in part; and
   • the student’s inability to use public transport with reasonable safety; and
   • the availability of public transport which does not involve multiple bus changes (three or more each trip) and or excessive travelling time (more than 75 minutes each trip); and
   • the lack of potential for independent mobility in the short or long term.

5. Assessment and Application process

An application for SNT is made by completing the SNT application form, available electronically on the Transport Canberra website (https://www.transport.act.gov.au/about-us/accessible-travel/special-needs-transport-for-students) or from schools or the SNT Coordinator on 6205 3555. Only completed forms (with all questions answered) will be processed for approval.

Each application is assessed against the above eligibility criteria to ensure equity of access. Students already accessing SNT must reapply each year and have their eligibility reassessed. This process will occur between October and November each year to facilitate planning of bus routes for the following year. Late applications cannot be guaranteed transport and applications may be placed in a waiting list.

Parents/carers/guardians will be sent written notification of the outcome of their SNT applications and the SNT Coordinator will organise appropriate transport for the student to and from school. The SNT Coordinator will advise parents/carers/guardians of the transport arrangements and any conditions on this arrangement, such as, the duration and ongoing review process.
6. Review of application

A review of a decision denying transport is available. If transport is not approved, the parents/carers/guardians will be advised in writing. An outline of the reason/s the student was not found eligible will be provided. Parents/carers/guardians seeking a review can provide additional information to support their application for review. The review is conducted by the Director, Public Transport Operations or delegate. All requests for reviews can be emailed to specialneedstransport@act.gov.au.

7. Variations to transport arrangements (permanent and temporary)

Parents/carers/guardians must provide timely advice to the SNT Coordinator in relation to changes to transport arrangements for a student. This includes changes to:

- student residential address; and/or
- educational setting; and/or
- after school care arrangements; and/or
- attendance patterns; and/or
- residential care arrangement at Respite such Ricky Stuart House or Emma Ruby House.

The SNT Coordinator must be provided with at least two weeks notice for permanent variations and at least one week notice for temporary variations.

Approval will be given if there is space on the appropriate bus and the adjustment can be managed within the existing special needs bus routes, or, where students are already transported by taxi, if there is no additional cost incurred to Transport Canberra. If the change in circumstances results in the student accessing a different bus and there is not a space on the bus, students may be placed on a waitlist. If the student is no longer attending the closest appropriate school, the parents/carers/guardians will have the responsibility of arranging transport.

The SNT Coordinator also considers distance travelled and travel time. If the variation is approved, the SNT Coordinator liaises with the service provider to finalise the arrangements. Ad hoc variations are not possible.

In the case of a family emergency, the SNT Coordinator may be contacted with changes to transport at short notice. These variations will be considered on a case by case basis.

In the case of a student not attending school on any given day due to illness etc the parent/carer/guardian must notify the provider as soon as possible. Keirs can be contacted on 6247 8707 or contact Transport Canberra on 6205 3555. If the student is transported by taxi, changes must go through the SNT Coordinator on 6205 3555.
8. Maximum travelling times and distances

Every effort is made to keep trip times to a minimum and bus routes are planned to ensure students are not in transit for any longer than 75 minutes.

9. Roles and responsibilities

The safe transportation of students with disability is the joint responsibility of parents/carers/guardians, the school, the transport providers and Transport Canberra. The SNT program requires all parties to work in partnership to ensure the student’s needs immediately prior to travel, during travel and return home are met.

Transport Canberra

- Assessing and approving SNT applications in consultation with the Education Directorate, based on eligibility criteria including placement in the closest appropriate setting.
- Monitoring the quality of service provision.
- Managing the budgetary processes including authorisation of payments to the service providers.
- Managing transport related critical incidents.
- Liaising with transport providers and facilitating advice on specific student’s complex behaviours and transport requirements.

Education Directorate

- Advising families of availability of placement in specialist programs (Learning Support Units, Learning Support Units Autism, Learning Support Centres), with priority given to schools in the student’s priority enrolment areas.

Parent/Carers/Guardians

- Reviewing the ACT SNT Eligibility Guidelines before applying for the SNT program.
- Lodging the SNT application before the specified closing date.
- Providing a copy of the student’s Known Medical Condition Response Plan if the student has a known medical condition, such as, epilepsy, asthma or diabetes.
- Providing accurate and up to date information in the SNT application form and providing additional information as requested in a timely manner.
- Providing advice, support and guidance to the SNT Coordinator in relation to specific seating
arrangements, safety and health care needs of the student (this includes supporting alternative means of travel to and from school if behaviour, health or safety needs indicate it is unsafe for the student to use SNT services or if the student’s use of the service would jeopardise safety of others).

- Informing the SNT Coordinator of any personal items the student will require during their transportation for their safety (such as a booster seat or harness) prior to the commencement of the service. An Occupational Therapist assessment must be provided to support the use of any safety equipment required for transport.

- Informing the SNT Coordinator of any items the student may require for their travel support (such as phone, video games, toys, iPads). It is the parents/carers/guardians responsibility to provide these items and it is expected any valuable items such as iPads, phones etc are included on the parent’s household contents insurance. While the bus staff will take all due care of these items they will not be held responsible for any damage that occurs immediately prior to travel, during travel and while exiting the transport. Students will be allowed to handle these items during transit if considered safe and appropriate by the transport provider.

- Ensuring a nominated responsible adult is present at the agreed arrival/departure times (a 5 minute allowance on times must be adopted). In order to ensure all students spend no more time in transit than necessary, drivers are advised to wait no longer than 5 minutes and will contact student’s identified emergency contact if a nominated responsible adult is not present to collect the student.

- Notifying the SNT Coordinator of any changes of circumstances likely to affect the student’s entitlement to or ongoing need for transport assistance.
- Escorting the student to and from the vehicle (including students using wheelchairs).
- Reporting incidents to SNT Coordinator.
- Where students are accessing transport via taxi, the parent/carer/guardian is responsible for assisting the student into the taxi for departure to school and collecting them from the taxi upon arrival home.

Students

- Behaving in a manner that ensures the comfort and safety of themselves and all people travelling with them, with consideration being given to a student’s age, individual needs, disability and developmental level.
- When appropriate, reporting any incidents to the SNT Coordinator or school staff.

SNT Coordinator and Manager

- Providing information about SNT guidelines to families and assisting families to complete their SNT application.
- Processing SNT applications.
• Liaising with families regarding long-term changes to their service provision, such as change of school, education setting, change of home address, reduction or increase of trips required.
• Assisting SNT management to reassess travel support needs of students currently accessing SNT.
• Updating the SNT database.
• Informing and consulting with providers on travel variations in response to requests from families.
• Liaising with transport providers in relation to equipment required by the student during transportation, such as car seats, booster seats, seat belt locks etc.
• Supporting families to resolve operational issues with providers by liaising with service provider managers.
• Liaising with parents/carers/guardians, schools, transport providers and external support agencies around the management of behavioural issues of students on the bus.
• Receiving, documenting and managing incidents and/or complaints and, when required, escalating incidents and/or complaints to the Director of Public Transport Operations.

Transport providers

• Ensuring there is an attendant on every bus.
• Ensuring drivers and attendants have up to date information on student’s transport requirements and personal information and they comply with the service requirements in relation to delivering students into the care of a nominated responsible adult.
• Provision of Disability Awareness Training for drivers and carers.
• Ensuring at least one member of the bus staff has a current first aid certificate.
• Ensure all drivers and carers have a current Working with Vulnerable People registration.
• Ensuring the driver and/or attendant has a dedicated working mobile phone.
• Informing the SNT Coordinator if there has been an incident and completing the appropriate incident form.
• Informing the SNT Coordinator if the service will be more than 20 minutes late.
• Assisting Transport Canberra staff to resolve issues between the providers or issues raised by parents about the SNT service or SNT coordination centre.

Drivers and attendants

• Ensuring the safety of students throughout the journey, checking all seat belts and restraints are fastened correctly, the aisles are clear and dangerous items are inaccessible.
• Providing assistance on and off the bus as required.
• Informing the receiving adult if any student has been distressed and requires special assistance, or if there has been an incident during the journey.
• Informing the SNT Coordinator immediately of any behaviour that jeopardises the safety and wellbeing of those on the bus.
• Maintaining a courteous, respectful and caring relationship with students and families.
• Ensuring students are delivered into the care of a nominated responsible adult.
• Reporting any incidents to the SNT Coordinator.

Schools

• Assisting families to access SNT services and directing them to the SNT coordination centre and/or providing copies of the current SNT application and SNT guidelines and other attachments.
• Assisting with the smooth operation of the service by ensuring there is supervision at transport drop-off and pick-up times and helping students on and off the buses.
• Having students ready and in a designated area at pick up times.
• Providing suitable areas for the buses/taxis to drop off and pick up.
• Reporting any incidents to the SNT Coordinator.

10. Monitoring

The SNT Program is monitored by Transport Canberra in relation to the:
  • continuing eligibility of students, particularly in regard to parental capacity to meet transport responsibilities
  • changing transport needs of students
  • availability of transport services
  • the quality of service and total cost of the scheme.

This process may result in changes to transport arrangements at any time during the year. Parents/carers/guardians and schools will be given one weeks written notice if a change of bus is required.

11. Reporting Incidents

All incidents (events that involve student behaviour and safety concerns, injuries to students or staff, potential injury or traffic accidents) must be reported to the SNT Coordinator. Parents/carers/guardians, drivers, attendants and schools are all responsible for reporting incidents as soon as possible. Some incidents may be resolved by the SNT Coordinator. Some incidents may require a more detailed investigation process conducted by Transport Canberra, or in some cases, a particular transport provider.

Transport Canberra is committed to ensuring SNT is a safe environment for all students and staff. In some cases after an incident involving unsafe student behaviour, withdrawal of SNT may be required.
Parents/carers/guardians will firstly be notified of these incidents by phone and then in writing. Transport Canberra will work alongside the student, their family, transport staff, the school and in some instances external support agencies in order to resolve the issues.

12. Suggestions and complaints

Families are encouraged to provide feedback at any time. To provide feedback, contact the SNT Coordinator on 6205 3555 or email specialneedstransport@act.gov.au. Transport Canberra takes all complaints seriously and will take all reasonable steps to investigate them. Complainants should receive a response to a feedback or complaint within 10 working days. Transport Canberra is committed to addressing complaints it receives from parents, carers, guardians, students and members of the community about SNT in a courteous, efficient, fair and prompt manner.

Complaints provided face-to-face to bus or school staff or anonymously will not be considered to be a formal complaint and will not be actioned. Parents, carers, guardians, students and members of the public are advised to use one of the methods identified above in order to ensure their complaint is actioned.

To assist with the complaint resolution, complaints, including allegations of misconduct involving operators, drivers, assistants or students, should include the following details:

- name and contact details of the complainant;
- nature of complaint;
- names individuals directly involved;
- time and date of incident; and
- how the complainant wishes the complaint to be resolved.

If complainants are dissatisfied with the response to their complaint, complaints can be made to an external review agency such as the ACT Ombudsman, Human Rights Commission or the Privacy Commissioner.

The ACT Ombudsman investigates complaints from people who believe they have been treated unfairly or unreasonably by an ACT Government directorate or agency, phone (02) 6276 0111 or complaints hotline, phone: 1300 362 072.

The Human Rights Commission assists in the resolution of complaints, including those relating to services for children and young people, phone (02) 6205 2222.
The Privacy Commissioner provides protection for personal information that is handled by federal and ACT Government agencies, phone 1300 363 992.

13. Information Management

The day to day operation of the SNT requires student’s personal information, including details of their disability, to be shared and discussed with the transport providers. All ACT Government Directorate officers, including consultants and contractors, are obliged to adhere to the principles of the Information Privacy Act 2014 for example, information collected about a student and/or their family will only be used for the purpose of ensuring the safe transportation of the student.

It is essential the student’s personal information remains accurate therefore, parents/carers/guardians are encouraged to contact the SNT Coordinator on 6205 3555 or email specialneedstransport@act.gov.au if they wish to amend the information being held.

Parents/carers/guardians will be asked to indicate their consent to the sharing of their child’s personal information at the time of applying for access to the SNT Scheme. Children of parents who do not wish to consent to the sharing of personal information will be unable to access the SNT Scheme.

14. Records Management

All ACT Government Directorate officers, including consultants and contractors, are obliged to create, keep, protect, preserve, store and dispose of its records in accordance with the legislative requirements of the Territory Records Act 2002, the Territory Records Office Standards and the Australian Standard on Records Management AS ISO 15489 (the Standards). The SNT coordinator will maintain appropriate file notes to ensure all relevant information is recorded and accessible to relevant parties.