



## IRELAND'S **AUTISM** CHARITY

AsI Am,

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Blackrock,

Co. Dublin

### AsI Am Submission on the School Transport Scheme

Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2022

To Whom It May Concern

AsI Am is delighted to partake in the Department of Education's review on the current School Transport Scheme. The School Transport Scheme is a program that many members of the autism community avail of and therefore we welcome the opportunity to make comment on this review.

#### Who we are?

AsI Am is Ireland's National Autism Charity. We work towards creating a society in which every autistic person is empowered to reach their own personal potential and fully participate in society. We believe that by developing the capacity of the autism community and addressing the societal barriers to inclusion we can make Ireland the world's most autism-friendly country. AsI Am aims through our work to provide a one-stop-shop for the Autism community in Ireland. From providing the public and those with the condition a portal of information about Autism, to providing a platform for people affected by Autism to share their stories and views, to providing a strong voice for the concerns of the community.

## School Transport Scheme

It is acknowledged by AsIAM that the School Transport scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. Currently there are over 121,400 children across the educational sector who are availing of this scheme, including many autistic pupils. Through the work of our Community Support team, who engages with hundreds of families every month, on different issues which impact the rights of autistic people including accessing services, supports and information. A key issue in which we receive regular enquiries from families is around the issue of access to school transport, and this is a main reason we wish to make this submission to the Department of Education.

### Issues

There are many families within the autism community who reach out to our organisation in relation to the barriers they experience in accessing transport services for their autistic child. There is hardly a month that passes without a question appearing before the Minister for Education in relation to when a child will receive transport on the School Transport scheme. The perennial issues we receive into our office in relation to Access to Transport are:

- Issues with the sanctioning of transport hours from the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO). A child may be placed in a school by a parent/guardian that may not be sanctioned by the SENO and because of this, the SENO will not sanction transport provision for that school. This has a significant impact on families, it no longer becomes just a school transport issue, but also an issue of having an accessible place in a school in their local community.
- Time delays in processing the application. We have had parents contact our organisation in relation to applications not being processed in a timely manner and as a result a child may lose a place on a school bus.
- Transport being sanctioned for a student but no actual transport available to bring a child to his/her school place. No bus service or taxi service available.
- Voice of the parent can often be missing in the decision-making process. It is imperative that this changes. Where there is disagreement between the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and a parent the SENO must engage genuinely with the concerns of the parent/guardian. Where there has been refusal of an application parents/guardians must be provided with reasons and a rationale for the refusal, generic refusal letters should no longer be sent, reasons for refusal should be provided to parents/guardians.
- If a parent/guardian application has been refused, we would insist that a rationale be provided to said parent/guardian as to why their application for their child for transport provision has been refused.
- The sensory impact of travelling to school on the bus can vary, depending on the needs of each child, the vehicle used, and other pupils' attitude towards the child. This can increase any feelings of anxiety or overwhelm that an autistic child may have, and prolonged exposure can lead to distress, anxiety or an autistic child experiencing a meltdown or shutdown. Some may be sensitive to lights, for example

if they encounter strong overhead lights or lights coming off windows or reflective surfaces, or an aversion to certain colours the bus uses. Others may be sensitive to smells or tastes, and so may become anxious or distressed by intense foods or strong chemicals. Other autistic people may be sensitive to noises on the bus, which can include the noise of the engine, beeping doors, rattling windows, the horn or conversations other passengers have. Other autistic people may have sensory issues around people being close to them and may need a lot of personal space. They may also have issues with some of the fabrics used on bus seats,

- Engagement with the transport provision can often be an adversarial process, which at times can be an unpleasant or distressing experience for parents, this should not be the case.
- More diverse options for transport provision. Some of our members find school transport provision via a school bus to be inaccessible, more options for taxi services should be made available.
- There needs to be additional training for bus drivers on autism understanding and acceptance, so that drivers can support an autistic child if they feel anxious or distressed.
- Sensory packs should be provided on buses and coaches, so that autistic people can be supported on their school journey. Also, autistic children should be able to bring with them any supports they need (i.e., sunglasses, ear defenders, support toys, keeping the next seat empty if they need personal space).
- The 4.8km rule causes significant issues for parents, particularly for parents who have a more than one child with a disability. The blanket approach to the 4.8km rule needs to be more flexible, so that more families can be supported by the Scheme.

All these issues have a direct impact on the many families we represent. The provision of accessing appropriate transport should be made easier and the voice of the parent/guardian should be present throughout the process. We have had a parents contact us with anxiety, distress, and a sense of feeling overwhelmed in relation to school transport provision and this should not be the case.

We very much welcome the opportunity to make this submission and we look forward to further engaging with you in this process.

**The AsIAm Team**