

**Submission
No 24**

SUPPORT FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL LEARNER DRIVERS

Organisation: Bellingen Shire Council and Nambucca Valley Council

Date Received: 14 May 2021

The Hon. Lou Amato MLC
Committee Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety (STAYSAFE)
Parliament of New South Wales
6 Macquarie Street, Sydney, NSW 2000 Australia

Dear Lou Amato

I am writing in response to the inquiry “support for rural and regional learner drivers” being conducted by the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety (Staysafe) for the Bellingen and Nambucca Local Government Areas (LGAs). Please accept this as a joint submission from Bellingen Shire Council and Nambucca Valley Council.

Both Bellingen and Nambucca LGAs are located on the Mid North Coast of NSW, halfway between Sydney and Brisbane and just south of Coffs Harbour. The region is renowned for its ecological diversity with State Forests and National Parks.

In the 2016 census, there were 12,668 people in the Bellingen LGA, with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people making up 3.5% of the population. For Nambucca Valley LGA, there were 19,212 people, with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people making up 7.6% of the population. For people in Bellingen and Nambucca, over 60% of people drive a car to work, whilst less than 1% use public transport. The Nambucca Valley LGA has been identified as an area of socio-economic disadvantage (2016 Socio-Economic Index of Disadvantage). The unemployment rate in the Nambucca LGA at this time was 9.4% compared to the average of 6.3% in NSW.

Limited public transport, large travel distances and higher levels of social disadvantage are some of the challenges faced by learner drivers in our rural communities.

Through my role as a Road Safety Officer for Bellingen Shire Council and Nambucca Valley Council I was further able to understand some of the challenges faced by learner drivers in our rural communities through engagement with community members and organisations. I have personally spoken to three different learner driver support agencies who provide their services throughout the Bellingen and Nambucca LGAs.

Below I have outlined the main challenges raised by the learner driver support organisations when supporting learner drivers:

Access:

- Lack of public transport and having to travel large distances made it difficult for learner drivers to access support services. Learner driver support organisations often required to pick students up from their residence, which requires extra time and resources. This reduces the number of learner drivers who can be supported.
- Students can often have limited or no access to phones and or credit which created communication difficulties between the organisation and the student.
- No access to a vehicle to complete training as family/carer may not have a vehicle or finances to register and or operate the vehicle.
- Access to adequate support as families/carers too busy to complete 120 hours required training with the student.
- Families may have a manual vehicle and the student wants to learn in an automatic.

- As two of the learner driver support organisations require volunteer instructors and community funding, there is a lack of available staff and vehicles to support the number of students requesting to complete the programs. The long wait time can mean that students move away from the area before completing the program.
- Community unaware of the learner driver support services available to them. Small volunteer organisations lack the funds and or staffing ability to promote the service.

Skills:

- Parents lack confidence and or don't have the skills to provide proper instruction. Students may have completed majority of the required hours with a parent or carer but still request training from learner driver support organisations as they have not yet been provided instruction on how to perform more complex tasks such as parking. This request often comes about as families/carers cannot afford the service of professional driving instructor schools.

Personal concerns

- Mental health issues including anxiety and depression prevented learner drivers from completing learner driver programs.
- Other health issues.
- Learning difficulties including language, literacy, and numeracy levels.
- Family care often takes precedence over completing the program. This often causes students to drop out or not complete the program.
- Relationship breakdowns between family members can stop learner drivers from receiving instruction opportunities at home.
- Parents can but will not take children on driving lessons.

From my discussions, a number of recommendations were made by these organisations to assist the needs of learner drivers:

Skills:

- Programs made available for parents/carers/supervisors of learner drivers to enhance their skills and confidence to better train learner drivers.

Personal assistance:

- Community development programs to support students and assist with mental health issues.
- Students who do not have access to communication devices are provided with a mobile phone allowing them to communicate with learner driver organisations in order to make appointments.
- More is to be done around the advertising of available services to learner drivers.
- Suitable jobseekers to be placed in volunteer learner driver instructor roles to support volunteer driving organisations.

- Encourage more volunteer staff to support learner driver programs.
- Provide students access to LLN training courses to assist students to pass learner driver test.

Thank you for taking the time to read this joint submission for Bellingen Shire Council and Nambucca Valley Council. Please don't hesitate to contact me should you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Benson
Road Safety Officer
Bellingen Shire Council and
Nambucca Valley Council

