

**Submission
No 25**

SUPPORT FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL LEARNER DRIVERS

Organisation: Upper Hunter Shire Council

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13 May 2021

The Hon. Lou Amato MLC
Committee Chair
Joint Standing Committee On Road Safety (Staysafe)
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Support for Rural and Regional Learners - Submission

Dear Mr Amato

On behalf of the Upper Hunter Shire Council, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your inquiry into support for rural and regional learner drivers. Please find below our submission, which has been developed in consultation with our Youth Service staff and Road Safety Officer.

Challenges faced by learner drivers in rural and regional areas to get the required training and experience to obtain a licence

In rural areas there is less availability of driving instructors, fewer Safer Driver Courses, and limited testing availability and frequency. In smaller regional towns like Murrurundi and Merriwa, learners need to travel out of town in order to get professional driving lessons (this includes access to the free Keys 2 Drive lesson). Currently in the Upper Hunter, there are no providers that offer the Safer Driver Course. The closest course offered is at Muswellbrook and may require two separate trips to complete module 1 and 2 of the course.

The only permanent Service NSW centre in our local government area is at Merriwa. While Service NSW Merriwa is able to deliver Driver Knowledge Tests and Hazard Perception Tests, the opening hours are 9am-4pm Monday to Friday. The latest time an applicant is able to begin a computer test is 3.30pm and this assumes that an applicant would need to arrive at the office 15 minutes prior to be established and set up in the system ready to start the test. Merriwa Central School (the local high school) finishes at 3.30pm, with students likely exiting the school up to 15 minutes following the final bell. Students need to take time off school to be able to undertake tests at the Merriwa Service NSW. The next nearest Service NSW centre is in the adjoining Muswellbrook LGA. Muswellbrook Service NSW is open until 5pm with the last testing opportunity at 4.30pm. Given a learner would need to arrive 15 minutes prior to be established in the system, and considering that Muswellbrook is a hour drive from Merriwa, this means a student would still need to take time off school to attend a test.

Merriwa Service NSW is allocated a testing officer, who travels from local centres at Singleton and Muswellbrook once a month to conduct driving tests at Merriwa. There needs to be at least 4 learners booked in for driving tests for the testing officer's travel to Merriwa to be considered viable. If there are less than 4 learners booked in the testing day will be cancelled. Testing officers are at times unavailable and it is not uncommon for testing days to be reduced to every second month.

All correspondence to:

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Travelling out of the shire to access tests, professional lessons or courses adds to the time and monetary cost of activities. Limited public transport means a further reliance on parents/other support people to be available to take young people for appointments outside the shire.

Young people in the Upper Hunter from low and single income families experience, in addition to difficulties accessing driver training, more significant challenges in accessing a vehicle (therefore making it extremely difficult to gain enough hours of driving time required to obtain a licence).

In rural areas there is limited infrastructure for learners to practise on. In Merriwa and Murrurundi for example, there is no traffic lights, no roundabouts, no double-laned roundabouts and limited kerb and gutter. There is also much less opportunity to practice in the context of higher density traffic. Learners experience the majority of driving practise on higher speed country roads.

Options for rural and regional learners to access driver training opportunities

As stated in point a), In rural areas there is less availability of driving instructors, fewer Safer Driver Courses, and limited testing availability and frequency.

Accessing a local driving instructor can be extremely difficult. There can be long wait times for local instructors, difficulties with accessing alternative driver trainers out of the area (lack of public transport, availability around school and work schedules). These issues are exacerbated by the demands of shift work/casual work of parents and young people within rural families.

Lessons can be expensive for families, particularly when remote NSW areas have been affected by bush fires, droughts and COVID. As mentioned, accessing the free Keys 2 Drive lesson can mean travelling to a nearby town for an available/accredited instructor.

The use of driver simulators and other technology to assist rural and regional learners

Exposure to driver simulators for learners in the Upper Hunter Shire areas has been limited so far. As a supplement to IRL driving experience, driver simulators could be a good adjunct to remote resources.

Changes to driver training and testing in New South Wales since Staysafe's 2017 report into driver education, training and road safety, and

While a change of order in taking the Hazard Perception Test is acknowledged, it is beyond the scope of the Upper Hunter Shire Council to analyse any quantifiable changes in road safety for local learner drivers since 2017.

Any other related matters.

Low socio economic families have limited opportunities for young people to experience city driving, freeways etc. This can in turn, influence their views on their place in society. They can feel that the big wide world is not for them, or that they are not capable of doing things other young people from urban areas do.

There is a need for programs directed specifically at young rural drivers, particularly males, who have been driving a long time and have an inflated view of their abilities. While enforcement has helped, the "bulletproof" feeling is a prevalent social trend among young rural males.

Yours sincerely

Greg McDonald
GENERAL MANAGER