

**Submission
No 33**

SUPPORT FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL LEARNER DRIVERS

Organisation: Mid Western Regional Council

Date Received: 14 May 2021

Partially
Confidential

SUBMISSION TO
PARLIAMENTARY
COMMITTEE INQUIRY
INTO SUPPORT FOR
RURAL AND REGIONAL
LEARNER DRIVERS

Joint Standing Committee
on Road Safety
(Staysafe)

14 MAY 2021

MID-WESTERN REGIONAL COUNCIL
OPERATIONS

 TOWARDS 2030



Challenges for rural and regional learner drivers

Below is a summary of [REDACTED] observations that may be of interest to the Committee.

- **Licence conditions on learner drivers and P-platers**
 - NSW learner drivers and red p-plate holders are not permitted to exceed a speed of 90km/h. In a metro setting, this is a reasonable condition. In a rural environment, most roads outside of the town centres are 100km/h and a vehicle travelling below this limit can become a hazard for other road users. It is important for learner and novice drivers travelling in a 100km/h environment regularly to gain experience in controlling a vehicle in that environment. Learner and novice drivers should be permitted to travel at the posted speed limit, conditions permitting.
 - While it might be achievable to practice driving in wet, dark and foggy conditions as per the logbook requirements, it is not possible for regional learners to experience traffic lights, traffic congestion, merging lanes, multiple lane roundabouts etc without driving more than 100km to a larger town. The risk of driver fatigue increases with the time and distance away from home. I recommend providing incentives or subsidies on overnight accommodation to encourage a more robust learner experience of different traffic environments without the heightened risk of driver fatigue as well.
- **Truck and bus awareness**
 - It can be difficult for a regular driver to understand the gravity of blind spots and stopping distances associated with trucks and buses unless they have experienced it for themselves. Education to improve behaviours of all road users around trucks and other heavy vehicles is needed. Including content about truck awareness in the written licence test would be encouraged, better still would be a simulation of being behind the wheel of a truck and experiencing the blind spots first hand.
- **Isolation – what to do when things go wrong**
 - The limitations of mobile phone reception on regional roads can be a problem when things go wrong. Help can be difficult to reach and a long way away. This is also reflected in the crash survival rates on country roads with two thirds of NSW crash fatalities occurring in regional areas.

Learner and novice drivers should be taught:

- what to do if your car breaks down and your phone is out of reception
 - how to identify your location in a rural setting
 - what to do if you witness a crash
 - what to do if you're involved in a crash
 - what to do if you strike an animal (e.g. a kangaroo)
 - what to do if there is an obstruction on the road (fallen branch, dead animal, stray livestock etc.).
- **Defensive driving skills**
 - There are many factors on a regional road that can be sudden and unexpected, mainly animals or changed conditions of the road. Defensive driving skills would be invaluable to avoid an animal strike or losing control due to black ice but the facilities to teach those defensive skills are not available locally. Investment into bringing those facilities to regional areas would be welcomed.

- **Impact of loss of licence**

- Without a doubt, there should be a penalty for a learner or novice driver who does not comply with the conditions of their licence, but the impact of losing your licence on regional young people is significant. They can become physically isolated and dependant on others for day-to-day tasks. Regional communities such as ours have:
 - no public transport (outside of townships)
 - extremely limited taxis
 - work and study options potentially hundreds of kms from home
 - unsafe walking or cycling distances
 - unsafe pedestrian road conditions (outside of townships).

The dependence on car usage is complex and with the loss of mobility and connection comes other social and financial issues.

- There is also an unease in the knowledge that international licence holders do not receive the same penalties for driving offenses as Australian licence holders. They may receive a fine, but do not receive demerits and can continue to drive on the roads. The unfairness is palpable.

- **Access to vehicles with safety technology**

- It will be quite some time before young drivers in rural areas have access to the latest safety technology in their vehicles (auto emergency braking, fatigue detection etc). Young people tend to drive older cars - cost and availability being the leading factors of this. Increasing affordable supply of 5-star ANCAP rated vehicles in regional communities is required. These vehicles will also need to be suitable for the conditions, which may include environments where animal strikes, black ice or rough surfaces are probable.

- **Fatigue awareness**

- The rules are clear on blood alcohol limits for learner and novice drivers, but more needs to be done on educating road users about driver fatigue and its impacts on driving safely. Research into devising a measureable roadside test for fatigue would make a big difference.