

**Submission  
No 34**

## **SUPPORT FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL LEARNER DRIVERS**

**Organisation:** Cessnock City Council

**Date Received:** 14 May 2021



14 May 2021

The Hon Lou Amato MLC  
Committee Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety  
Parliament of New South Wales  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Our Ref: DOC2021/063669

Dear Mr Amato,

**Cessnock City Council - Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety - Inquiry into support for rural and regional learner drivers.**

Cessnock City Council welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety inquiry into support for rural and regional learner drivers.

The Local Government Area of Cessnock (Cessnock City) covers approximately 1,950 square kilometres within the Hunter Valley of New South Wales, approximately 120 kilometres north of Sydney and 40 kilometres west of Newcastle.

The city is bounded by Maitland City to the north, the Cities of Newcastle and Lake Macquarie to the east, Central Coast to the south and Singleton to the west.

Within Cessnock City's local government area boundaries are the traditional lands of the Wonnarua People, the Awabakal People and the Darkinjung People. European settlement since the 1820's saw the establishment of pastoral lands, the coal mining industry, the viticulture industry and, more recently, tourism. Light and secondary industry were a feature of the City's recent economic development.

Social infrastructure across the City now includes two hospitals, two TAFE campuses, community health services, a range of childcare options, aged care and other community support services. Each of the City's towns and villages are linked by large expanses of natural vegetation.

Community research conducted during 2016 identified the following priorities for residents and their families:

- Employment opportunities;
- Maintenance of roads;
- Health services;
- Safety;

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- Community facilities; and
- Public transport.

(Community-Strategic-Plan-\_-Cessnock-2027-\_-Adopted-21-06-2017)

In the 5 years 2015-2019, learner drivers were controllers in 1% of serious crashes in the Cessnock Local Government Area. Provisional P1 drivers were controllers in 7% of crashes, Provisional P2 drivers were controllers in 10% and unauthorised controllers (unlicensed / cancelled / suspended / disqualified) 5%.

### **Challenges faced by learner drivers in rural and regional areas**

The Cessnock City Estimated Resident Population for 2020 is 61,256 with the 2016 Census reporting 3,454 residents in the age group 15 to 19 years.

Only 1% of residents in the Cessnock LGA use public transport for travel to work, with private motor vehicles being the primary mode of transport, as driver or passenger at 77.4%.

Cessnock City's SEIFA - Index of Socio-Economic Disadvantage score in the 2016 Census is 925, with 21.6% of total households classified as low income. In the December quarter 2020 the unemployment rate in Cessnock City was 7.7% which is higher than the Regional NSW rate of 5.9%.

The absence of a drivers licence can be a major barrier to employment in rural and regional areas where it is often a requirement to travel greater distances for employment opportunities, with limited public transport options available.

Economic disadvantage can be a barrier to engaging professional driving lessons, which generally start at \$65 per one-hour lesson in this area. Access to the Safer Drivers Course to provide tailored education for young people to become safe drivers can also be prohibitive at a cost of \$140 for the course, should they not meet the eligibility for fee exemption or secure one of the 1000 free places on offer for young learner drivers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Further, the restrictive public transport access in rural / regional areas can also adversely affect a young person's ability to attend such a course.

Young drivers are also disadvantaged if they do not have an adult in their life who can fulfill the role of supervising driver due to a variety of reasons such as, but not limited to, access to a suitable car, or possession of a current unrestricted driver licence.

Limited diversity of driving environments in more remote rural / regional areas can also inhibit the capacity of young people to meet the requirements of the learning goals contained in the Learner Driver Log Book. Whilst this is not an issue for this area, in more remote regional areas young drivers may be limited in gaining vital experience such as driving in higher traffic volumes and use of multi-lane roadways, or in urban city environments, due to the vast distances from such road environments.

Pleasingly, in some rural and regional areas local service and community groups provide support to young drivers by offering a variety of mentor driver programs. Some of the obstacles for mentor driver programs include a lack of appropriately credentialed volunteers with the necessary skills to adequately supervise and actively instruct a learner driver, together with the necessary administrative requirements, which can complicate access to the system.

Being a learner driver supervisor is not simply a matter of occupying a seat alongside a learner – it requires the skills of communication to give over instructions, planning practice, a comprehensive understanding of the road rules, and the ability to complete the requirements of the logbook.

Skill assessment ability and a willingness to volunteer, often using a person's own vehicle, together with the necessary mutual availability of the learner and supervisor, can also be barriers to volunteering as a supervisor in mentor driver programs. These programs often require recurrent sources of funding, whether from Government grants or local area fundraising.

### **Options and support for learner drivers to access driver training opportunities in the Cessnock Local Government Area**

Kurri Kurri Community Services was successful in obtaining \$30,000 funding under the NSW Community Road Safety Grants program to support young drivers. The Cessnock Driving Success program is open to all L-platers aged 16 to 21 across the Cessnock local government area and will provide minimum of 10 hours of driving lessons with trained volunteers, plus free access to the PCYC Safer Drivers Course.

Cessnock City Council was successful in obtaining \$100,000 in grant funding through Round 7 of the NSW Government's Resources for Regions Program. The Cessnock Disadvantaged Youth Driver Training Program is an initiative of Council, collaborating with the Hunter Region Employment Facilitator and Youth Express to deliver professional driver training and mentoring for disadvantaged local youth, where the lack of a driver's licence is a barrier to employment. The program is to be delivered up until June 2022 and aims to provide assistance as a pathway for young, disadvantaged youth to achieve a driver's license to break down the barrier to gain employment. This program is capped at 1,500 driver training hours.

Cessnock Local Government Area has a single service provider for the NSW Government Driver Licensing Access Program to provide assistance to eligible young people get a learner licence, gain on road driving experience, progress to a provisional licence or regain a licence.

Cessnock City Council's Road Safety Officer presents two 'Helping Learner Drivers Become Safe Drivers' workshops each year to provide support to parents and carers of young people learning to drive. As a Transport for NSW endorsed program, Council receives funding under the Local Government Road Safety Program to deliver these workshops.

In addition, there are privately operated Driver Training providers servicing the towns and suburbs that make up the Cessnock Local Government Area, together with a Service NSW office located in Cessnock.

### **Driver simulators and other technology to assist rural and regional learners**

Driver simulators are an artificial imitation of a road environment. They cannot truly replicate on-road conditions, including the need to process what is going on around the drive, the feel of the car on the road and the sensory aspects of driving, distractions in the vehicles (passengers, music etc), the need to make instant decisions and react appropriately.

High tech can also mean high cost, so whilst the use of driver simulators may augment on-road driving practice, access to simulators may be cost prohibitive, or the number of learners wishing to gain experience using a simulator may also exceed availability.

Unlike real-road conditions, depending on the attitude of the individual young person, the use of a driver simulator may be trivialised, as merely a game, with no true consequences.

It is acknowledged that simulators may have a legitimate role in supplementing driver education, particularly in areas where certain road experience is unattainable, such as regional young drivers' exposure to city driving environments; however, simulators are not a substitute for actual on road driving experience.

**Changes to driver training and testing in NSW since Staysafe's report into driver education, training and road safety.**

Statistics reveal that since the introduction of the Graduated Licensing Scheme in 2001, young driver fatalities have halved in NSW. This laudable achievement is also attributable to refinements to the scheme in 2017, together with the introduction of the Safer Drivers Course.

Significant improvements in roads and vehicle safety standards have also contributed to this wonderful result. Whilst Cessnock City Council does not have the data needed to accurately quantify the impact of these changes on young driver safety in our LGA, it is safe to say that there are young adults enjoying life in our communities today, whom may never have survived their teenage years, but for these innovations and the Graduated Licensing Scheme.

**Other related matters**

Access to modern vehicles equipped with the technology to minimize injury to passengers in the event of a road crash is a key strategy in the Safer Vehicles quadrant of the Safe Systems Approach to road safety.

In rural and remote areas there may be long distances travelled by novice drivers on high speed roads of varying standards. Increasing the number of Australasian New Car Assessment program (ANCAP) five star rated vehicles on our roads and reducing the number of vehicles with an age greater than 15 years may assist increase road safety for young drivers, together with continued funding to road authorities to improve the standard of rural and regional roads.

As stated in the National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020, a key challenge for road safety is to 'protect young road users, particularly novice drivers'. Local Government is ideally placed to implement local strategies and Cessnock City Council looks forward to progressing any initiatives that may flow from the recommendations of this inquiry.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to Council's Road Safety Officer.

Yours sincerely,

Lotta Jackson  
General Manager