

**Submission
No 38**

SUPPORT FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL LEARNER DRIVERS

Organisation: Police Citizens Youth Club NSW

Date Received: 24 May 2021

14 May 2021

CEO202100186

The Hon. Louis Amato, MLC
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr Amato,

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety, in relation to the inquiry into support for rural and regional learner drivers.

Who we are

Police Citizens Youth Club NSW Ltd (PCYC NSW) is a Company Limited by Guarantee. The Company is a public benevolent institution and registered charity. PCYC NSW is incorporated under the Australian Charities Not-for-Profit Commission Act 2012. PCYC NSW was established in 1937.

PCYC NSW has been empowering young people for more than 80 years. Statewide, the organisation is now supported by approximately 87,000 members throughout a network of 66 clubs. As has been the case throughout our history, it is the young people, staff, Police, and volunteers who continue to drive the PCYC philosophy of positive youth engagement that started in 1937.

Importantly, PCYC NSW operates in many regional towns and cities. More than half of our club sites are located outside the major metropolitan areas of Greater Sydney, the Central Coast, Newcastle, and the Illawarra. Many of these clubs operate in parts of NSW experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, an issue compounded by the impacts of drought and natural disasters in recent years.

PCYC NSW and Driver Education

PCYC NSW has been a leader in driver education for many years. Successful statewide initiatives including the Traffic Offenders Intervention Program (TOIP) and Learner Driver Mentor Programs (LDMP) exist today thanks to the efforts of PCYC club staff and NSW Police Officers. PCYC NSW has been delivering the NSW Safer Drivers Course for Learner Drivers since 2013, with around 8000 learners per year successfully completing the program. We are also contracted providers of the NSW Government's Driver Licensing Access Program (DLAP), supporting disadvantaged young people obtain a licence.

Rural and Regional Learner Drivers

PCYC NSW is pleased the Staysafe Committee is examining the challenges faced by learner drivers in our rural and regional communities. We welcome the fact that the Committee recognises that there may be ways to offer better support to young people living outside metropolitan areas as they work towards obtaining a drivers licence. In relation to the published Terms of Reference, we make the following observations and comments:

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

Learner drivers in rural and regional communities can struggle to get the required training and/or experience for several reasons:

1. Access to a suitable vehicle to drive under supervision
2. Availability of a suitable supervising driver
3. The burden of using a vehicle for drives often deemed 'non-essential' on family budgets

Points 1 and 2 can be addressed to some extent through properly resourced Learner Driver Mentor Programs (LDMP). These programs supply a vehicle, and match participants to volunteer supervisors. This arrangement allows learners to accumulate some of their required 120 logbook hours. Most LDMP's charge a nominal fee to cover outgoings such as fuel and other running costs. It is important to note that the Driving Instructors Act 1992 prohibits any payment being made to the volunteer mentors.

Whilst there are some excellent LDMP's in selected locations across NSW, they are not everywhere and therefore not accessible to all learner drivers in rural and regional communities.

Point 3 is more likely to be an issue in times of widespread economic hardship. Droughts, fires, flood events, the COVID-19 pandemic, and more recently rodent plagues have placed considerable pressure on the economies of rural and regional communities. Large parts of NSW have experienced all of these events in the past two years. The Committee may consider recommending special fuel subsidies or other cost-reduction mechanisms for families with learner drivers living in the household, as a way to encourage more supervised hours of driving.

b) Options for rural and regional learners to access driver training opportunities

The two main driver training options for learner drivers in NSW are driving lessons with a licensed driving instructor, and the Safer Drivers Course for Learner Drivers (SDC). Market forces ensure that learners in metropolitan areas can easily access both of these options.

There are very few driving instructors operating in smaller rural, regional, and remote communities. For those areas that do have a commercial operator, the cost of lessons can be a barrier to accessing these services. The NSW Driver Licensing Access Program (DLAP) is a welcome initiative in this space. With further collaboration between DLAP providers and regionally based driving instructors, the scheme offers a sustainable pathway to obtaining a licence for learner drivers in disadvantaged parts of NSW.

The Safer Drivers Course, overseen by Transport for NSW, is an excellent program based on best practice standards. PCYC NSW are one of the largest providers of the program in NSW, and the only provider delivering the program across large portions of the state. Importantly, TfNSW has introduced a subsidy for disadvantaged learner drivers. This subsidy covers the \$140 cost of the program. PCYC has helped over 500 learners access the subsidy and complete the course since the subsidy was introduced several years ago.

Unfortunately, under the current provider agreement the course can only be delivered to a group of at least 6 participants. TfNSW insist that courses with fewer than 6 enrolments must be cancelled. Whilst this is an acceptable requirement in metropolitan markets with large population catchments, it makes it challenging to run the program in small rural and regional communities. PCYC NSW has regrettably had to cancel numerous courses scheduled in rural and regional areas, where 5 or less participants had been registered. As any subsequent courses in a community may be some months away, the most common outcome is that the course fee is refunded, and the learner continues to work on logging their hours. Whilst these learners do ultimately obtain their Provisional licence, they

miss out on the excellent course material and the experience of driving with a qualified coach/instructor.

PCYC NSW would welcome a revision of the 'minimum numbers' rule for courses scheduled in rural, regional and remote communities. This may also require a slight revision to the curriculum and standard delivery model, as the course is designed to run with a group of between 6 and 12 participants. A modified version of the course would still offer significant benefits, to both the learner and the community. Learners would obtain the 20 logbook hours offered to participants, thereby reducing the cost burden on families, and ensuring this cohort can access the same privileges offered to their metropolitan peers. Communities stand to benefit through improved road safety outcomes, as participants would be accessing a detailed curriculum developed to address the specific behaviours that lead to novice driver crashes.

c) *Support for rural and regional learner drivers in other jurisdictions*

Learner drivers in Queensland, Victoria and the ACT are able to drive under supervision at the posted speed limit. This differs in NSW, where learners (and P1/P2 licence holders) are restricted to lower limits – 90km/h for learners and P1 drivers, and 100km/h for P2 drivers.

These lower speed limits create a speed differential between the learner driver and other road users. On roads with 110km/h limits such as the Newell Highway, this speed differential can lead to potentially dangerous situations. Frustrated road users may attempt to overtake a learner in an unsafe manner, and learners may be pressured into an error that could result in a crash.

The speed differential can also lead to a parent or carer opting to drive the vehicle themselves, rather than allowing the learner driver to spend time behind the wheel. Given the distances involved in travelling between towns in rural and regional areas, the lower limit can lead to longer travel times. Allowing learners to drive at the posted speed limit, as they are permitted to do in other jurisdictions, may encourage families to get their learners to spend more time behind the wheel.

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

PCYC NSW would welcome the use of any suitable technology in the learning process, provided that technology has been proven to offer a beneficial road safety outcome. Through the Centre for Road Safety, NSW has a strong track record of thoroughly assessing and evaluating any initiatives that claim to improve crash rates and reduce road trauma. As such, we expect that any simulator or other technology would only be endorsed after detailed, peer-reviewed academic studies were completed, and a positive outcome reached.

The other challenge facing authorities in this area is defining what constitutes a 'driving simulator'. At one end of the spectrum are the large, multi-million dollar driving simulators built using real motor vehicle componentry, running complex software, linked to hydraulic rams to create a detailed virtual driving experience. At the lower end, there are simple gaming-style set-ups using basic monitors and generic programming. The market would need clarity on what technology is deemed acceptable, and what is not fit-for-purpose.

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

In recent years, driver testing in a number of rural and regional communities across NSW has been withdrawn, or the number of test slots available per month in these has been reduced. This impacts the ability of a learner driver to readily access a driving test in their local community or forces them to travel to a larger centre to attempt the test. Further, a documented shortage of testing officers has caused delays in many rural and regional communities. PCYC Safer Drivers Course coordinators and coaches advise, anecdotally, that wait times of several months are being reported by SDC participants in some regional locations.

On behalf of PCYC NSW, I thank the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety for holding this inquiry. Our extensive network of clubs, staff and volunteers are dedicated to improving the lives of young people. Obtaining a drivers licence is an incredibly empowering experience for a young person. A licence is a great enabler, and a proven step towards meaningful employment and opportunity. To this end, if PCYC NSW can assist the inquiry further, we stand ready to do so.

Yours in empowering young people,

Dominic Teakle
Chief Executive Officer

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