

# Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Road Safety Inquiry.

## Introduction and Northern Territory Context

The Northern Territory Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Road Safety Inquiry.

Tragically, on average over the last ten years 37 people die and approximately 500 people are seriously injured each year on Northern Territory roads. On a per capita basis the Northern Territory has the highest road fatality rate of all the Australian jurisdictions. In 2019, the Northern Territory recorded 14.64 deaths per 100,000 population, which is over three times the national rate of 4.68 over the same period.

On average over the last ten years, approximately:

- 72 per cent of fatal crashes in the Northern Territory occurred in regional and remote areas,
- 43 per cent of fatalities involved alcohol,
- 33 per cent of fatalities involved people not wearing seatbelts,
- Aboriginal people represented 49 per cent of fatalities, and
- 19 per cent of fatalities were pedestrians, with Aboriginal people representing over 80 per cent of pedestrian fatalities.

Every fatal and serious road crash has an ongoing and devastating effect on families and the community.

The Northern Territory continues to address the most fundamental road safety issues such as drink driving, wearing a seatbelts and speeding. These are all areas where other jurisdictions have made significant progress, however, they remain a challenge in the Northern Territory, particularly in our regional and remote areas.

Alcohol is one of the largest contributing factors to crashes in the Northern Territory, with around 43 per cent of fatalities involving alcohol. However, misuse of alcohol is a far wider issue than just road safety. In March 2017, the Northern Territory Government commissioned the Alcohol Policies and Legislation Review to deliver a cohesive approach to alcohol harm reduction.

It was noted in the Review that the total social cost of alcohol in the Northern Territory was estimated to be \$642 million or \$4,197 per adult, compared with a national cost estimate of \$943 per adult.

While the financial costs associated with alcohol misuse are considerable, the social costs are much more serious, diverse and often hidden. In relation to road safety, often when alcohol is a contributing factor, speed and not wearing restraints will also be contributing factors in fatalities and serious injuries on our roads.

In response to the Review the Northern Territory Government released the Alcohol Harm Minimisation Action Plan. The Action Plan includes a suite of measures, including the re-establishment of the Liquor Commission, a re-write of the Liquor Act and the establishment of a floor price on alcohol. In relation to road safety, high range and repeat drink drivers are now included on the Northern Territory banned drinker register.

The Northern Territory faces many challenges in achieving better road safety outcomes and delivering a road network that is safe for all road users. Approximately three quarters of our 36,000 kilometres of roads are unsealed and our geography and extreme climate creates challenges for road users and managers.

People in remote areas of the Northern Territory are more likely to be driving older vehicles, over longer distances, on poorer quality roads. A lower infrastructure base, extreme climatic and geographic conditions, provide construction and maintenance challenges which impact on the cost to improve and maintain the road network. Some communities in the Northern Territory may not have road access for up to six months a year due to flooding and road damage in the wet season.

Our small population of about 244,000 people is widely dispersed across the Northern Territory from our main centres to very remote Aboriginal communities. This requires people living remotely to spend more time on our roads to access service centres.

Around 30 per cent of the Northern Territory's population are Aboriginal, and nearly 80 per cent of these live outside of the greater Darwin area. Tragically Aboriginal people are overrepresented in our road trauma and account for half of road deaths. The Northern Territory has the youngest median age of all Australian jurisdictions at 32 years. Nearly 60 per cent of the Aboriginal population is under 30.

Accessing public transport, vehicle registration and driver licensing is more challenging in remote areas. People living remotely find it harder to keep their vehicles well maintained as they do not have the same access to mechanical services which are provided in urban areas.

Regional and remote areas of Australia face greater challenges addressing road trauma than in higher density urban areas, and in many instances the road infrastructure in these areas is underdeveloped and requires significant ongoing investment.

## Northern Territory position on the Inquiry Terms of Reference

a. The effectiveness of existing road safety support services and programs, including opportunities to integrate Safe System principles into health, education, industry and transport policy.

The Northern Territory's road toll has reduced from an average of over 60 people per year in the decade ending 1995, to approximately 37 deaths per year over the last decade.

The Northern Territory has successfully implemented several key policy measures over the last decade which have assisted in reducing the road toll. Some of these measures include:

- significant investment in road and roadside infrastructure,
- increase in alcohol testing rates and introduction of drug testing,
- introduction of speed and red light cameras,
- removal of open speed limits,
- higher penalties for speed, drink/drug driving, non-wearing of seatbelts, and the introduction of a demerit point system,
- introduction of longer learner and provisional driving periods,
- introduction of child restraint legislation,
- improved driver licensing and education services, and
- an expansion of subsidized public transport, including support for remote community transport.

However, even with these initiatives and the recent advancements in new car technology, our fatality rate remains unacceptable and the highest in Australia.

As a result, Road Safety is one of the Northern Territory Government's highest priorities and the Northern Territory Government remains committed to reducing fatalities and serious injuries on our roads. To this end, the Northern Territory Towards Zero Road Safety Action Plan (Towards Zero) was launched on 23 March 2018 (<https://roadsafety.nt.gov.au/about>).

Towards Zero outlines priority actions which aim to improve road safety in the Northern Territory. The development of Towards Zero was led by the Northern Territory Road Safety Executive Group (RSEG). Membership of the RSEG includes:

- the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics,
- Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services,
- the Motor Accident Compensation Commission, and
- the Department of Treasury and Finance.

In addition to adopting a vision of zero deaths and serious injuries on our roads, Towards Zero adopts the Safe System approach to improving road safety, to create a safer road environment

for people and vehicles. Towards Zero guides improvements in road safety, and the vision aims to inspire ownership by all road users of the Northern Territory's road safety challenge.

Towards Zero provides real actions that have been developed through extensive community consultation to deliver a tailored approach which considers the Northern Territory context.

Towards Zero looks forward to create strategies which are innovative and appropriate for the Northern Territory context, while acknowledging that achieving the vision of zero fatalities requires generational change, and the benefits of some of the proposed reforms will only be realised in the longer term.

A number of Toward Zero actions are being delivered through collaboration across Northern Territory Government agencies including developing:

- Drink Driver education programs to increase accessibility and uptake,
- strategies to address the over representation of Aboriginal people incarcerated for traffic offences, and
- a repeat offender penalty regime.

All levels of government (including across portfolios), media, vehicle and technology manufacturers, business, community and individuals are encouraged to consider how they can contribute to taking a more active role in road safety.

In addition to Towards Zero, road safety is being addressed through the Road Policing Strategy 2019-2021, in which the Northern Territory Police have committed to eliminating impaired driving. Efforts will focus on raising public awareness, enhancing legislation and enforcement activities as well as exploring better technology.

The numbers of drivers being issued with drug driving infringements in the Northern Territory has tripled in the 2018-2019 financial year, showing an increased commitment to eliminating drug driving.

## **b. The impact of road trauma on the nation, including the importance of achieving zero deaths and serious injuries in remote and regional areas.**

The impact of road trauma is felt across the whole Northern Territory community. In addition to the impacts on families and the community, the financial cost of road trauma is significant. It is estimated that the cost of a single road fatality in the Northern Territory is in the order of \$2.8 million. Based on the 36 deaths in the Northern Territory in 2019, the financial cost was over \$100 million. Nationally, the cost is much higher given that there were 1,188 deaths in 2019.

The 2019 Austroads report 'National view on regional and remote road safety' notes that the fatality rate per capita is nearly five times greater in regional and remote areas than major cities, and is highest in very remote areas. The vast majority of land in the Northern Territory is considered remote or very remote. In addition, the Northern Territory does not have a large highly populated urban centre as all other jurisdictions do. This negatively impacts on our per capita fatality rate, which is more in line with the rate for remote and regional areas.

The Austroads report highlights a number of appropriate interventions, which the Northern Territory supports being considered and actioned through the Transport and Infrastructure Council (Council) and through the development of the next National Road Safety Strategy (National Strategy).

Some of these key recommendations include: ensuring that regional and remote issues are highlighted in all road safety strategies and action plans; increasing the coverage of low cost safety improvements through targeted investment; creating and expanding alternative transport options; and expanding community based licensing programs.

These actions, along with continued infrastructure investment more broadly, are considered appropriate to address road safety in regional and remote areas of the Northern Territory.

The Northern Territory continues to advocate for regional and remote transport issues to continue to be addressed through the Council, including through the ongoing National Remote and Regional Transport Strategy.

### **c. Possible establishment of a future Parliamentary Standing Committee on Road Safety and its functions.**

The importance of continuing to address Australia's road trauma has been reinforced through a number of streams of work undertaken by the Council, and the fact that the Council has established road safety as a standing item on the agenda of every meeting. These include the Inquiry into the National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020 (Inquiry), which included extensive research regarding the effectiveness of road safety interventions and the impacts of road trauma.

In response to the Inquiry recommendations, the National Office of Road Safety has now been established. A comprehensive review of the governance of Road Safety in Australia has also been completed, and Austroads has recently completed a comprehensive 'Survey of Australia and New Zealand Road Safety Practices'.

In November 2019, the Council agreed that all of these pieces of work will be considered and inform the development of the next National Strategy.

The Northern Territory supports the Council continuing to provide the strategic direction of Australia's road safety activities.

### **d. Measures to ensure state, territory and local government road infrastructure investment incorporates the Safe System principles.**

Toward Zero takes a holistic approach to road safety and adopts the safe system approach. Safe systems principles are considered when developing and assessing road safety projects and proposals in the Northern Territory. A key priority of Towards Zero is to complete a comprehensive safe system assessment of the Northern Territory road network.

The Australian Government has the opportunity to influence road safety outcomes through its role in investment in our road networks. Western Australia's recent proposal for a Rural Crash Reduction Program is supported. The proposal would take a national network wide approach to target sealing shoulders and the application of audible edge lines on remote roads, and proposed an 80/20 funding model with the Commonwealth.

Western Australian trials show that that the proposed \$100m per year (\$900m over nine years) could save up to 40 lives per year and the proposal has a positive benefit cost ratio. In the Northern Territory the majority of fatalities involve 'run off road' and 'overturn' vehicles crashes and such a program would have a significant impact on reducing trauma.

#### **e. Road trauma and incident data collection and coordination across Australia.**

The Northern Territory supports the collection of nationally consistent data, and supports further action being taken on this issue through the development of the next National Strategy.

The development of consistent national data has been a longstanding challenge for jurisdictions. While the reporting of fatalities across the nation is generally consistent, there is further work currently underway to ensure the consistent reporting of serious injuries.

#### **f. Recommending strategies, performance measures and targets for the next National Road Safety Strategy.**

The Northern Territory supports the development of key performance indicators, noting that these must consider jurisdictions ability to produce the required data and the vastly different factors impacting road safety outcomes across the jurisdictions.

While KPI's are considered important in measuring the effectiveness of actions, it should also be acknowledged that some initiatives underway in jurisdictions will see expected benefits in generational change and the effects will not be seen in the short term.

#### **g. Recommendations for the role of the newly established Office of Road Safety.**

The Northern Territory supports the establishment of the Office and welcomes the opportunity to work with the Office as it leads the development, implementation, and monitoring of the next National Strategy.

It is envisaged that the Office will also play an ongoing key role in the coordination of national road safety initiatives, and advocate for further Australian Government investment in road safety initiatives and infrastructure.

#### **h. Other measures to support the Australian Parliament's ongoing resolve to reduce incidents on our roads, with a focus on the recommendations from the Inquiry into the effectiveness of the National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020.**

Collaboration and commitment from all is required to achieve real road safety outcomes. All levels of government, along with all members of business and the community must take an active role to achieve our desired road safety outcomes.

The Northern Territory Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics looks forward to working in collaboration with all Australian jurisdictions to develop and implement real actions through the next National Strategy.