

ACRS Submission on Developing a new Towards Zero Road Safety Action Plan 2024-2028



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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
ACRS response to the Discussion Paper	3
a) General comments	3
b) Recommended additions	4
Conclusion and Recommendations	6
References.....	6

Introduction

The Australasian College of Road Safety is the region's peak membership association for road safety with a vision of eliminating death and serious injury on the road. Our members include experts from all areas of road safety including policy makers, health and transport professionals, academics, community organisations, researchers, federal, state and local government agencies, private companies and members of the public. The purpose of the College is to support our members in their efforts to eliminate serious road trauma through knowledge sharing, professional development, networking and advocacy. Our objectives include the promotion of road safety as a critical organisational objective within government, business and the community; the promotion and advocacy of policies and practices that support harm elimination; the improvement of relative safety outcomes for vulnerable demographic and user groups within the community; the promotion of post-crash policies and practices; and the promotion of a collegiate climate amongst all those with responsibilities for and working in road safety.

The College believes that we should prevent all fatal and serious injuries on our roads; the road traffic system must be made safe for all road users; system designers should aim to prevent human error and mitigate its consequences; life and health are not exchangeable for other benefits in society; and that all College policy positions must be evidence based.

The College welcomes the discussion paper on developing a new NT Towards Zero Road Safety Action Plan 2024-28. With road trauma rates in the NT continuing to be 3 times the national rate, this issue must remain a high priority.

ACRS response to the Discussion Paper

a) General comments

The continued adoption of Vision Zero as being central to the overall direction of the action on road trauma in the NT is strongly supported. This approach emphasises that deaths and serious injuries are preventable, and that the system must be designed to acknowledge human frailties and allow for people to make mistakes. The alignment with the National Road Safety Strategy, with the social model and safe system approach, is also supported.

The College has recently published a policy position statement on a systems thinking approach to road safety, which recognises that:

- The road traffic system is a complex interaction of many interrelated components involving many participants in different situations;
- Many road user errors and crashes are created by the interactions between road system components;
- The design and operation of a safe road traffic system must respond to the capacities as well as the limitations and vulnerabilities of the human user; and
- Understanding the causes of road traffic crashes and injuries requires understanding interactions within the broader road traffic system and other aspects of society.

Different participants (organisations and individuals) in the road system have different levels of authority, responsibility, and power to influence road safety. They should apply systems thinking in developing countermeasures which reflect their control and influence within the road traffic system(1).

b) Recommended additions

Capacity and capability building for practitioners

With the NT's 17 local councils responsible for thousands of kilometres of local roads, road safety is an important issue for local government. But with over 100 different services provided by local governments, capacity and capability around road safety requires support. The National Road Safety Action Plan 2022-25 includes measures for supporting local government which could provide a guide to NT actions in this area. For example, Network Safety Plans provide a crucial pathway to targeted investment in infrastructure improvements. Support for local councils to develop these Plans will be required.

Appropriate speed setting

The issue of excess and inappropriate speeds in the NT is recognised in the consultation paper. However, the focus is mainly on compliance. The College supports the suggested new actions related to reviewing speed limits, and give due consideration to whether appropriate speed limits have been set. The nature and function of roads and speed limits must be consistent, with roads designed to explain the safe and appropriate speed to road users and make the safe speed in that location more obvious and intuitive to drivers. Road users must know the speed limit and also understand why this limit is applied(2). Long stretches of high-speed roads are problematic for road safety, because if a crash occurs, impact speeds will invariably result in the most serious casualty outcomes. For example, for head on crashes, the risk of fatality increases substantially after 70 km/hr. Treatments to reduce this likelihood and risk such as separation of traffic heading in different directions is required to safely support higher speeds.

Role of all levels of government

Road safety strategy, policy and planning needs to apply systems thinking by ensuring the accountability of governments and government agencies in governing and managing road safety performance. Different participants within the road system hold different levels of authority, responsibility, and power over the safety of the system. They can set societal expectations, regulate the safety of the roads and vehicles and users/operators, and oversee the delivery of system-wide safety activity and investment. Authority, responsibility, and power flow through government agencies (including local government), industry groups and delivery mechanisms, combining to influence and control the system that is actually used by individuals. The College recommends that the NT Action Plan reference the role of all levels of government (Federal, Territory and Local), in addressing road safety.

Collaborative program design

The consultation paper notes vulnerable road users such as pedestrians, Aboriginal people, novice drivers, motorcyclists, and cyclists as a priority area. The College recommends specific mention of collaborative program design to ensure communities are engaged in the design and implementation of any programs, initiatives, or infrastructure upgrades.

Factors influencing road safety

The discussion paper acknowledges some linkages between road safety and broader societal issues such as alcohol misuse. This could be further explored in the Action Plan in terms of translation into proposed actions. Climate change should be addressed, noting the potential for road users and infrastructure to be exposed to more frequent and severe weather events. Climate change and road safety have interconnected causes, impacts and policy solutions. Extreme weather events can cause road crashes, divert spending into infrastructure maintenance rather than safety improvements, and discourage the use of more sustainable and safer mobility options such as public transport(3). Road network resilience should be factored into road safety actions, such as the temporary loss of a critical road link (e.g. after a flood event) diverting traffic onto less safe roads or isolating communities.

Barriers to access for driver training, licencing and safer vehicles

While the discussion paper notes achievements in programs to increase access to driver training and licencing, however this area could be strengthened with further actions. Barriers to access are a particular concern, and combined with extreme transport disadvantage, especially in remote communities, contribute to disproportionate incarceration levels. The Aboriginal Justice Agreement is referenced in the discussion paper, and specific linkages of actions to that Agreement should be made.

In addition, the discussion paper acknowledges that crashes in more remote areas of the Territory involve older vehicles without advanced safety systems. There is diminished access to services such as mechanics providing vehicle maintenance in lower socio-economic communities in rural and remote areas. This means vehicles are often older, less safe and not regularly maintained, and more likely to be unregistered. The Round Table suggestion of new technologies being considered for new vehicles such as seatbelt locks and alcohol ignition interlocks as well as an older vehicle buy-back scheme is recommended.

Post-crash emergency response

Access to post-crash emergency care should be a focus. The remoteness of communities that are over-represented in crashes also impacts health outcomes. The long distances required to travel for medical help in event of a crash, and the much longer response times for emergency services compared with urban areas should be considered. Access to heli-medical response should be considered, with first responders having suitable levels of authority to assess patient condition at a crash and request emergency transport options that minimise journey time to high level trauma facilities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The College welcomes the discussion paper on developing a new Road Safety Action Plan in the Northern Territory. The Action Plan should include actions for supporting local councils, appropriate speed settings, responsibilities of all levels of government, collaborative program design, broader factors influencing road safety, barriers to access for driver training and licencing and post-crash emergency response.

The College appreciates the opportunity to comment on this discussion paper, and contribute to improved road safety in the NT. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further information.



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References

1. Australasian College of Road Safety. ACRS Policy Position Statement: A new systems thinking approach to road safety. <https://acrs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/A-new-systems-thinking-approach-to-road-safety-FINAL.pdf>: ACRS; 2023.
2. Australasian College of Road Safety. ACRS Policy Position Statement: Speed Management. <https://acrs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/ACRS-Speed-Management-PPS-2023.pdf>: ACRS; 2023.
3. Australasian College of Road Safety. ACRS Policy Position Statement: Climate Change and Road Safety. <https://acrs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/ACRS-Climate-Change-PPS-2023.pdf>: ACRS; 2023.