

TRANSCRIPT

ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into motorcycle safety

Wangaratta — 29 November 2011

Members

Mr A. Elsbury

Mr T. Languiller

Mr J. Perera

Mr M. Thompson

Mr B. Tilley

Chair: Mr M. Thompson

Deputy Chair: Mr T. Languiller

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Witnesses

Ms M. Townsend, engineer, Rural City of Wangaratta, and member of RoadSafe North East,

Mr R. Allen, public officer, RoadSafe North East,

Sergeant D. Wittingslow, traffic management unit, Victoria Police, and member of RoadSafe North East,
and

Mr G Talbot, Ride Smart, and member of RoadSafe North East.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearing of the Road Safety Committee's inquiry into motorcycle safety in Wangaratta. As a committee we have received over 72 written submissions since releasing the terms of reference. The purpose of the hearings is to obtain further evidence from selected witnesses covering the terms of reference. We thank you for attending. You are reminded that anything you say will be published in the transcript and is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the hearing, anything you say or publish outside this room is not so protected. Hansard reporters will be recording today's proceedings and will provide a proof version of the transcript so that any typographical errors can be corrected. To commence the first segment of the afternoon proceedings, we have with us representatives from the Rural City of Wangaratta and RoadSafe North East. I understand you have prepared a submission which I invite you to speak briefly to, following which we will have a number of questions that we will put forward.

I think Mr Talbot may be contributing to Movember. He has a few days to go; he is on his last days. One of our committee colleagues, Mr Elsbury, is also a Movember aspirate.

Mr ALLEN — Thank you very much for having us here. I have been elected as spokesperson to represent the group. Each of the four members here is part of RoadSafe North East.

The CHAIR — Can you give us your name and correspondence address?

Mr ALLEN — I am Robert Allen and I am the public officer with RoadSafe North East. My address is <address confidential>. The other members of the group are Mary Townsend, who is from the Rural City of Wangaratta as part of our RoadSafe council. George Talbot is from Ride Smart, which a local motorcycle training group, and he is also part of our RoadSafe group.

The CHAIR — What is your postal address, George?

Mr TALBOT — It is <address confidential>.

The CHAIR — And Mary, what is yours?

Ms TOWNSEND — <address confidential>.

Mr ALLEN — Darren Wittingslow is the sergeant with the TMU based in Benalla.

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — The police station at Benalla should find me. The postcode is 3672.

Overheads shown.

Mr ALLEN — It is probably relevant to outline the fact that we have some funding through the alliance through VicRoads under the new community road safety projects. One of our projects will be motorcycles. We have been funded for the financial year for 12 months to do a motorcycle program and part of the information that we will give you today results from that project that we are about six months into. Hopefully that will be a three-year project.

We have broken today's presentation into basically a couple of areas. We will outline quickly why we think motorcycle crashes are happening locally and what the issues are. We will look at the stats — what is reported and what is not reported. There is a bit of a hole there, where we have found great difficulty in getting relevant data.

The elements we have looked at with our program are rider-driver behaviour, the physical environment, and the vehicle. We think a lot of work has been done on the physical environment, with road safety improvements, and the vehicles. In our group we think probably the greatest change can be made in rider behaviour, as per the photo here.

This data is information we gained from VicRoads through the municipal facts sheets and it was what we based our submission on to VicRoads and the alliance to get some funding to do road safety for motorcyclists in our area. We have had 28 motorcyclists killed in the five-year period to 2010; 987 crashes; and 497 serious injuries. This is the data that has put us on the track we are on: 26 of them were males, and 18 of those killed were males over 40, so a trend is starting to develop there. Fifteen of those crashes where someone was killed involved hitting oncoming vehicles, which meant there was a rider error or something happened on curves and so forth

that put the motorbike into the path of the oncoming vehicle. They were some of the trends that we looked at through our stats.

In the issues that we are following up with our program, speed, on both bends and straight roads, appears to be an issue. Male riders over 40 feature in a lot of the stats. Most of the crashes happen in a recreational sense. They were not riders commuting; they were recreational riders. Given the information that we have from local golf courses in the north-east region, it appears that motorcycling and/or cycling on bikes with lycra is a bit like the new golf. There are a lot of people not playing golf; membership is down, particularly within that 40-plus age group. It appears a lot of motorists are now turning to motorcycles as older returning riders, so it is riding a Harley in nice black gear and leathers and all that sort of stuff at the weekend.

Rider ego, in that the males who are involved in those crashes tend to want to test their bikes, and rider error through fatigue and impairment appear to be major issues, particularly in this region, where you have areas like the Great Alpine Road, the Wangaratta-Whitfield Road, the Eildon-Jamieson Road now that it has been opened and the Tawonga Gap Road. They appear to be the recreational areas where a lot of the motorcyclists like to meet of a weekend. Instead of having a game of golf they head off on their motorbikes and do a bit of a tour and have a coffee at Mansfield, ride across to the Whitfield pub and have lunch — and get all the windy, curvy bits. They are some of the issues that we have identified through our data.

The police have been very good in giving us some data. Obviously a lot of the police material cannot be passed on to a third party. We have used some of the information to highlight some of the areas where we see. With the areas in red, as you go through there without going through every one of them, rider error seems to be the key thing that sticks out with a lot of those stats that the police keep: 90 per cent male; the age group tends to an older age group, 35 to 40-plus. Once again, the same sort of trend: collisions, running off the road, recreational riders, older riders, and also being involved in a collision with another vehicle.

The CHAIR — Robert, you nominated a number of recreational ride routes and you have also defined the number of accidents, with a particular profile of rider. Have you correlated the accidents with the particular routes as well?

Mr ALLEN — Yes. There appear to be certain hot spots on those routes that we have looked at, and Darren will back me up there on where they are happening; it is the Wangaratta-Whitfield Road in particular.

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — Yes, and the Great Alpine Road.

Mr ALLEN — And the Great Alpine Road. That is where a number of the crashes that were in our data did happen.

The next lot is also off-road or unpaved gravel surfaces. There appear to be a lot of crashes happening on those off-roads. Off-road is very much underreported. This information indicates that just under half of our motorcycle crashes for 2005–10 occurred on unpaved or gravel roads, resulting in a serious injury. So the road surface is very important there. Once again, the unpaved gravel roads stats highlight rider error, collision with other vehicles, males and the older age group, resulting from particularly rider error. Once again to us that is indicating rider error appears to be a problem.

Ms TOWNSEND — The age group is a little bit lower in the unpaved gravel road area than in the paved area.

Mr ALLEN — Some of the motorcycle issues in rural zones that need to be addressed are cornering and braking, which again appear to relate to the ability of the rider and mistakes by the rider, lack of visibility and also the attitude. That particularly once again goes back to that male ego in a group of males over 40 out on a ride together, all trying to keep up. The last rider is sometimes under pressure to keep up with the group. There are various levels of skills amongst the group. We have had instances that have been reported where one motorcyclist missed a corner and has gone over the edge and the next bloke has followed him. There are some instances of that happening. Some of the other stuff there is generic, where we know about the vulnerability of motorcyclists; they do not get second chances and so forth. That highlights that driver error is causing a lot of problems.

There are some other issues particularly relevant to rural zones. Fatigue is one, particularly on days like today when it is windy. People get tired on motorbikes travelling long distances around the area. People can drive from Shepparton right through to Tawonga for a weekend to get from the flat roads to the more enjoyable windy roads, so they can quite often be long days.

High speeds is another. I suppose it is just becoming more of an issue where people in those sorts of groups start to plan their rides a little bit better where they will stop for lunch and work out before they go some planning, trip routes, meeting points and so forth, rather than just heading off and seeing where they go.

That is a good little photo that Mary came up with. I am not sure where she got that from. We have just drawn the analogy with some of the other cultural changes that have been successful, such as SunSmart, smoking, alcohol use et cetera. We believe these programs have been proven successful, so there is a chance to change the cultural attitudes of motorcyclists. We have listed there that education, attitudes, awareness, planning and skills need to be addressed in our road safety programs. Once again, it is the attitude and education side rather than the road or vehicle improvements.

We need to look more closely at the stats. As I said earlier, we find it hard to get good stats. As a RoadSafe group, we are always looking to VicRoads, the TAC and the police to get a wide range of stats, but there does not seem to be any one group that is correlating all of that information.

Another issue is changes to culture, or how to ride safely. We did actually apply to VicRoads for some funding to rider training. We were knocked back on that as part of our submission. We were told to keep away from rider training and focus on other areas. Rider training is an issue; in particular education on how to ride correctly. George has been a big help as part of our group as a motorcycle trainer to give us information about the issues that drivers have. We think to reduce the risks some education, changing attitudes, more awareness, planning and skills would be of big assistance, and what we would like better assistance with, in particular, is the stats side of things — better analysis. We have spent a lot of time going through data as a group, and we do not have that expertise to work out trends and so forth. If that information had been provided to us in the first place, we could have gone on with what we do best, and that is implementing programs to influence — —

The CHAIR — Can you just expand on that? What data are you referring to? What data would you like to access and be able to interpret better?

Ms TOWNSEND — I believe there are a number of formats of data out there. I do not know them because I have not spent as much energy as we would need to to get it all together, but I guess what we are really hoping is that somebody who is more familiar with the available data will draw it into some sort of conclusive form where we can then develop trends, align those with what the issues are and get some closer links so we can actually work on things that we know have direct meaning with the data that we have got available.

Mr ALLEN — So that is the key element that we would like assistance with — data. We know that there is a lot of underreporting of motorcycle crashes in particular, so I think we need better communication with some of those groups. The TAC has some data we can get hold of, the police has some data we can get hold of and then we are not allowed to use all of that information, and in particular off-road reporting of motorcycle crashes appears to be an area that needs to be looked at. So that has been rushed through a little bit, I know, but — —

The CHAIR — That is very helpful, thank you. We have some questions that we would now like to put to you.

Mr LANGUILLER — Thank you for your submission and thank you for coming. Can you speak in relation to very specific safety programs that you might be aware of that are being conducted in this region?

Mr TALBOT — Just to come to that question, what we have just seen there is a lot of information. That is reality. It is quite negative. To me I get a little bit frustrated because the majority of what you saw there was rider error. Training and specific programs, to come back to your question, they are available right across Victoria, and when we hear the words ‘motorcycle training’ we are hearing a lot about the physical aspects of controlling a motorcycle, and that is only half of it. The rider error that we saw there is attitudinal error. It is the entrance speed into a corner — if I can talk real. It is understanding the vanishing point; it is understanding the camber of the road; it is understanding the road surface. Robbie mentioned peer group pressure, about a rider following another rider off the side of the road. All of these things are trainable. All of these things in behaviour

are trainable. When you ask about specific programs, and I guess I wear two hats here, but it is what we train our riders to do.

The other thing that is happening there — a trend to me that comes out quite clearly — is the older riders, of over 40 years of age. I do not think it is a secret to anyone that maybe once you start to reach that time of life, kids leaving home, maybe the mortgage paid off, and you did have a licence back in the 1970s or maybe the 1980s and training was not available. It certainly was not taken up the way it is today. These people are coming back into the riding scene and feel that they do not need as much training. They rode a motorcycle many years ago, and to me there is starting to be a fairly obvious trend there. It is the positioning of yourself on the road. I get a little bit frustrated when I hear how people have always got excuses for why they have come off the bike. When you break it down, with 99 per cent of those excuses, there could be something, given the chance again, that could have been trained to control that better.

Coming back your direct question: here in Wangaratta, I have been riding these mountains for over 30 years, and we can fix a lot of the problems, but the word 'training', as Robbie said, once we hear that word, sometimes people shy away from it, but it is frustrating with the number of motorcyclists that I ride with, the amount of problems. The statistics, certainly with the unpaved road side of things as they are, but just looking at our statistics from 2010 — which as we all know was very high; 49 of us lost lives — there is one common denominator: 19 of those 49 were in over 100-kilometre-an-hour zones. They were single vehicle, they were curves. Let's have a look at it. It is road surface. It is exceeding our abilities. So much of this can be trained into a rider. There is room for fun and room for safety to be improved.

Mr LANGUILLER — Just on the subject, in your submission you talked about speed. Is it speed or inappropriate speed? Can you comment on that?

Mr TALBOT — Excellent point. It is inappropriate speed. Should I say it could be a combination of both, and I guess my colleague here, Darren, could talk more on that side, but when we are talking about our more dangerous roads for motorcycling and where the accidents are occurring, it is not necessarily 100-kilometre-per-hour situations. It is very hard to come up with that conclusion. Yes, it is the appropriate speed for the appropriate road conditions and the environment that you are in.

This side of Omeo, you will hear motorcyclists talking about a specific off-camber road. We train motorcyclists that it is their responsibility to identify that. It is their responsibility to enter a corner, yes, as you say, at an appropriate speed. Sometimes, when you put an engine into a motorcycle, and you push those boundaries and you have got peer pressure to keep up with mates, that is where it can come undone big time.

If I could give a quick analogy — I am not sure I am allowed to do this — three weeks ago I rode up to Mount Hotham and I had two very experienced motorcyclists with me. Coming into one corner — and I am the first one to admit it after 30 years of riding — I came in a little bit quick. I pushed a boundary and luckily I stayed on my side of the road. I happened to look into the mirror once I straightened up, and I saw my two colleagues — very experienced riders. Both of them took the same line I did. We stopped and had a coffee up at the top of Mount Hotham, and they said to me, 'George, what happened on that corner?'. I said, 'My mind — my concentration — went off for a moment, and I pushed a little bit hard'. They said, 'You have ridden these mountains for 30 years. We followed you, mate', and they did exactly the same thing. One of the things we train is to ride your own road, ride your own corner. We talk about focus points and we talk about peripheral vision. Even though there is a rider in front of you, you need to be looking ahead of that. That rider is in your peripheral vision, and you are riding your corner at your line and your speed. This is the sort of thing we can do off the road and then transfer those skills onto the road. It is a combination of motorcycle control skills combined with the mental attitude that goes with it.

While I just have a chance to say this, there are two things why people are running off corners. One is the lack of understanding of countersteering on a motorcycle. I am not sure whether you gentlemen ride motorcycles, but the front wheel of a motorcycle — it wants to stand up. It does not want to lie over, and I hear so many results of accidents where a motorcyclist has said to me, 'George, the bike was halfway through the corner, and I don't know what happened. It stood up, and I went straight across the road'. I tell them that of course the motorcycle will stand up. It is like a 20-cent piece rolled across a table. It wants to stay upright until you make it go down, and if you are going to make it go down to go around a corner — you cannot do that until you have

learnt correct head and eye direction appropriate to what you can steer the bike through. Then we come into cambers. Then we come into identifying all the other factors — the road surface.

Our statistics — and I have some in front of me — talk to rider error, but to me, there is a lot of good news out there, and we can save lives. These are some of the things that need to come together. It is not one thing, it is not a separate thing — it is a combination. Sorry, I have talked too long.

The CHAIR — That is all right. We are just mindful of our time as well.

Mr TILLEY — Before you go a little bit more on training, I like the language that is coming through your submission, particularly getting it transferred into the owner-operator on the road. Training providers, firstly the RoadSafe Alliance, which was formerly known as RoadSafe North East — is that right?

Mr ALLEN — Yes, it is still RoadSafe North East.

Mr TILLEY — RoadSafe North East is not an RTO or accredited provider. We have just had representations like George's. Speaking to the point, do you think that all accredited providers provide the same training outcomes? In view of other training providers, are they providing the same sort of standard and the same sort of training outcomes that your organisation is?

Mr TALBOT — That is an excellent point. That is actually a VicRoads issue — or VicRoads are looking at that at the moment. One of the things on the table — and I am actually in Melbourne on Friday as part of the reference group — is that they are looking at making training uniform across all of us as accredited providers, but it is not the case at the moment. It is a very relevant point that you are making, because from memory I think we have about 30 Victorian accredited motorcycle providers. Although the information is documented on what they deliver, it is on record with VicRoads that, no, there is not enough uniformity in that, but they are looking at perhaps coming down that road.

Mr TILLEY — I am interested also — you mentioned, Rob, that you made an application to VicRoads for some rider training.

Mr ALLEN — Refresher training for returning riders.

Mr TILLEY — Can you give us some detail as to what your intention is there? What would be delivered?

Mr ALLEN — In the past the RoadSafe group — I am going back probably 6 to 8 years ago — used to run days at Winton Motor Raceway with, I think, HART. I do not know what it stands for.

Mr TALBOT — Honda accredited rider training, I think.

Mr ALLEN — Yes, something or other like that. There were opportunities with returning riders, or any experienced riders, to go along and have some instruction on the motor racetrack. That was our intention — to try to go down that track. The information we get back from talking to people like George and cyclists — some of the returning cyclists have had a motorcycle licence for 20 years but never used it, so all of a sudden they are in their 50s or whatever and have enough money to buy a Harley or whatever, so away they go without any training. One of our intentions was to do some refresher training, maybe at Winton, using an accredited training provider.

Mr TILLEY — What sort of amounts were you asking for, and how many people do you think you might have been able to reach for the north-east?

Mr ALLEN — In our initial bid we put in \$10 000 to cover probably three or four or five — maybe \$2000 or \$3000 to run a day. I know from the response, Darren, that we had last time, 100-plus riders turned up.

Mr TALBOT — I was actually one of them.

Mr ALLEN — And George was one of them. We are talking 6 to 8 or 10 years ago. As far as we know there is nothing happening in our area in that regard, but the VicRoads approach was that as a RoadSafe group we should be looking at driver training.

Mr TILLEY — I just want to change to a different subject. A particularly keen interest of mine is north-east Victoria — thousands of kilometres of unsealed surfaces off-road, and we know that under the legislation it is no different whether it is sealed or unsealed. Without stating the bleeding obvious, in your contribution you said that it is underreported — 50 per cent of crashes are reported off-road. It involves recreational and returning riders. Can you expand a little bit more on that and what some of the issues associated with off-road riding in this area are that you think need to be addressed?

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — Collisions on unpaved and gravel roads have been a major driver to our road trauma in the north east for many years now. I think, from memory, certainly in the Benalla-Mansfield area, which is a little bit south of here but certainly in the same demographic as we are talking about up in the Wangaratta area and the high plains, about 65 to 70 per cent of all the serious injury accidents up there are off-road motorcycles. Police, as an enforcement agency and an educational agency, I guess, really had no way of getting up there to be able to do any proactive work or any of that sort of work.

What we have actually done out of Benalla is that I have started a Benalla off-road motorcycle project, where I approached Suzuki Australia. They have provided motorcycles. I approached TAC, and they provided funding to get police members trained, and I approached DSE because most of the collisions are happening in their land, and they provided funding for uniforms for police members and a trailer. In all, from a three-year project, about \$100 000 worth of sponsorship was obtained.

We have had that up and running for two and a half years now, and we are experiencing — I know that is great, and it depends where you are taking from and that sort of stuff — but we are experiencing roughly about a 25 per cent reduction in our off-road motorcycle accidents. It is not just the road trauma we are having a great effect on; it is also the assistance that we can provide in searches for people when they are lost in the summer and winter. Also, during total fire ban days we can get motorcycles out into the bush where the campers are to advise them not to light fires and that sort of stuff, so they have a really good multifaceted role that they can play up in the high country where traditionally police have not been able to get to. We also work in partnership with DSE and Parks Victoria on motorcycles. That is what we have operating at the moment in the Benalla area.

Wangaratta are currently going through negotiations to get — I think they are with Honda Australia — a similar sort of arrangement that I have put in place in my patch, to combat the situation up in Bright and Myrtleford and all that sort of stuff. So there are some really positive things happening, and the full support of Victoria Police has come about as well, so it has been really good — a multi-agency approach to a problem that affects so many people.

Mr TILLEY — So your organisation as a whole is backing these initiatives?

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — Yes, look, they are. I guess they really do not have much choice in the matter, if I can say that, because we get belted around the ears about our serious injury crash rates from a whole different level of government and other organisations, and we need to be able to get in there and do something about it. That is what we have done.

Mr TILLEY — Just going into it in a little bit more depth, how many motorcycles do you have available to you under your scheme and how many available trained riders to go out and perform training?

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — I have got two motorcycles — and they were up in the Strathbogie over the weekend — and five qualified riders, with the expectation that one more will get trained. The initial project was to have two motorcycles and six riders.

Mr TILLEY — And with your commitment to other parts of your patrol areas and things like that, how many hours have you been able to put in to achieve that — I think you said — something like a 25 per cent reduction?

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — We signed an MOU with the DSE that we patrol, I think it was — I would say: don't quote me, but I know you are going to do that —

Mr ELSBURY — We certainly will, that is what we are here for, I am sorry to say.

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — Our MOU with DSE was somewhere between 50 and 80 days a year when we would say, ‘Yes, we will be up there in the hills, either with you or without you, doing what we need to do’, and that has worked really well. We have an ongoing commitment with Suzuki Australia to provide motorcycles indefinitely.

Mr TILLEY — You are certainly to be commended for it, and we have taken evidence from DSE and other areas expressing a view; it has been a bit ad hoc, but certainly you should be commended for the work so far.

Mr TALBOT — I just make one comment there. With the work that people like Darren are doing, because you need a legal licence or learner’s permit to ride a motorcycle in a national park, and the extra work that these guys are doing, we have seen an increase of 127 per cent, I believe, in five years of recreational registrations, and I personally see people coming to me saying, ‘I need to get a learner’s permit to be legal to ride up in the bush’. When they come to providers like us, then we are probably getting about 70 per cent who are undergoing training as well. It really works together, and most of our training is generally on-road or targeting on-road, but for something like emergency braking and the rest of it, it goes with it. I just want to add that.

Mr TILLEY — On that, what with government training and off-road experience, as a trainer, you see some of the skills balance and the method of operation. Are any of those skills from off-road transferred to on-road skills?

Mr TALBOT — Very much so. People can practise braking regularly; they can practise cornering techniques and eyesight. The real problem is when we panic, when adrenaline runs through the body. In the bush it is when that Nissan Patrol comes around the corner, or that rut, or whatever. Part of what we train for is how you are going to react in an accident. We do that pretty much for on the road, but getting it wrong at that most critical point, that is transferable to whatever the case, so, yes, very much so.

Mr LANGUILLER — I think you are doing a terrific job, and I say so in the context that evidence given to this committee in other areas have shown not to be as successful as you have been in terms of the programs that Darren was talking about particularly, in getting the bikes, getting the actual people to be trained and so on. Just a clarification if I may: you named some of the agencies that are actually funding you, but I do not think you mentioned VicRoads, did you?

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — No, VicRoads do not fund us.

Mr LANGUILLER — They do not fund you? Why not?

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — I am not going to quote VicRoads policy, but the conversation I have had with VicRoads is that anything that does not happen on a paved road, they really do not want to know about.

Mr LANGUILLER — It is an important point you make, and if I can just read into the record to follow it through, in relation to roads, the Road Safety Act 1986 says:

road means—

- (a) an area that is open to or used by the public and is developed for, or has as one of its main uses, the driving or riding of motor vehicles ...

I do not see any definition in the act that talks about paved or unpaved or any definition of a type. I suggest to you that in my judgement, VicRoads is responsible and should probably be helping you. That is my view.

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — Yes, I could not agree with you more there, but I have had conversations and been in meetings with them where my angst in relation to their not really wanting to know about anything that happens other than on paved roads has been quite apparent over many years.

Mr LANGUILLER — Thank you.

Mr TILLEY — I want to go back; we have heard evidence particularly from representatives of Victoria Police in Geelong and Ballarat in relation to areas of responsibility, patrol areas and those sorts of things. In your experience in this area in regard to the numbers that are committed to road safety, particularly to highway patrol or the traffic management unit, have they changed at all in the last decade?

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — I can speak from experience, having been at the Benalla highway patrol now for 21 years and the officer-in-charge for the last 10. We used to have a sergeant and 11 members; we went down to a sergeant and 8. Then after a lot of report writing, bantering and not taking no for an answer, kicking down doors and all that sort of stuff, we got one more member. We are a sergeant and nine. I point out, though, that the members who ride the motorcycles — in off-road motorcycling you obviously need specific skills and abilities to be able to get through the four-week course. It is not only highway patrol members who work the bikes. I have got three members from Mansfield general duties, one sergeant from Benalla uniforms and one of my members also rides; that is the make-up of the five.

Mr PERERA — Thank you very much for your presentation. My question is about protective gear. What is the best way to encourage people who ride to use protective gear?

Mr ALLEN — I would say education. There is a school up this way, Tallangatta Secondary College, which is very proactive in anything to do with any road safety or any program. They had a number of their students, particularly in years 10 and 11, that is 16 or 17-year-old kids, who were missing school through broken arms, injuries from falling off farm bikes and riding trail bikes at weekends and so forth. They have implemented a program at the school where they have purchased bikes, and they run kids through rider skills. A key component of that is protective clothing. George is going up there shortly to talk to them about their training program. I would see a particular way of addressing that issue, being through education of young riders and drivers.

That program was a schools program. It has identified that a lot of the kids are unlicensed, but they are potential road users and will be learner drivers. We have an excellent program through our graduated learner driver program for car drivers, but the school is doing a lot of work and showing some benefits in regard to those kids being future road users. So I would see education — we did apply for funding to the VicRoads alliance to investigate that program, but we did not get the funding to do that. We were told not to look at young riders and driver training and education.

Mr PERERA — Do you think protective gear should be made mandatory?

Mr TALBOT — Could step in on that one for a second. There is a discussion paper happening at the moment where basically through the Motorcycle Safety Foundation they are looking at making protective gear mandatory. The first thing they are looking at is taking away the riders we see in shorts and singlets, especially coming into this time of year. That is being looked at at the moment; it is being discussed, but I am not sure what the outcome will be. High visibility will be part of that.

Mr PERERA — Any other views?

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — Yes, I would like to say something. A few years ago now I was involved with a research project with VicRoads and MUARC in relation to identifying and looking at motorcycle accidents where people received serious injuries. As part of that project it was identified very clearly that if the people who were involved in the accident had been wearing not only protective clothing but the correct and up-to-date protective clothing their injuries would have been significantly less. There was no doubt about that at all as part of the findings of the motorcycle crashes that we looked at. Therefore it follows that perhaps something that should be looked at Australia wide is getting an Australian standard for motorcycle apparel from the neck down — because we know helmets do — and making it a mandatory requirement for motorcycle riders. It is something that should be looked at.

Mr PERERA — Basically what you are suggesting is that all protective gear should have an Australian standard; is that correct?

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — Yes. If you want to have the right and the luxury of being able to ride a motorcycle and potentially end up in hospital, which costs the community hundreds of thousands of dollars every year, then you need to sign up and make sure that you give yourself the best available opportunity to survive when the accident happens. Given that recreational motorcycling, particularly out in the bush, is inherently a dangerous recreational pursuit and people are only out there to have fun, enjoy themselves and push themselves to the limit, it is going to go pear shaped. We have to accept that. If they have on the correct protective equipment, it is going to lessen their chances of being seriously injured.

Ms TOWNSEND — I want to put some balance into the query about VicRoads by saying the RoadSafe Alliance is indirectly supported through VicRoads by state government funding. I am not quite sure of the details of that. Maybe you need to be in touch with VicRoads to see what the percentages are and how that works. Whilst they may not be funding certain roads, they do have a support structure with us.

Mr TILLEY — I want to go back to Tallangatta Secondary College with their driver program. Was it Vern Hilditch who started that?

Mr ALLEN — Geoff Lowcock was the principal at the time.

Mr TILLEY — And who has responsibility for it at the moment?

Mr ALLEN — There is a teacher there called Duncan Livingstone, who is the key component. He spoke at our RoadSafe conference in Wangaratta recently. The program is showing great benefit in that they are teaching the kids not how to ride on roads but the basic safety requirements for their BMX-type off-road bikes, and wearing the correct gear is something that they have really implemented. They have reduced the number of kids who are suffering injuries, such as broken arms and legs or whatever, and missing school. That was their intention: to stop the kids from missing school. Initially we were told as a group by VicRoads not to look at that because it was encouraging young people to ride motorbikes and we do not want to encourage young people to ride motorbikes.

The CHAIR — Sorry, what was it that you do not wish to encourage?

Mr ALLEN — VicRoads said we do not want to encourage young people to ride motorbikes, whereas we thought it was a great piece of educational harm minimisation. We know they are going to ride motorbikes. You only have to drive around and see the number of trailers and utes that are heading up to the bush every weekend. Darren can evidence that. If they wear the correct equipment, they reduce their risk of injury.

Mr ELSBURY — I have a couple of questions. The first one is probably directed to George, and it has to do with training. I am interested in what you think would be a reasonable amount of minimum training for someone to go from complete beginner to learner and then from learner to P-plater?

Mr TALBOT — I am going to go backwards on that one, if I can, and answer learner to P-plates first. It is something that in my involvement with VicRoads and other bodies I have looked at. When you take into consideration an off-road rider who still requires a learner permit, the increasing number of scooter riders who may be commuting around the town and all the other riders, it is a hard figure to arrive at. However, I did a licence course before I came here today, and I would love to see people arrive on the day to get their licence with 50 hours. You would have to find the middle ground, considering all the classes that I have just mentioned, and there are others.

I get nervous when someone walks through my door and says, 'George, I'm here for a licence today'. I ask them, 'How much riding have you been doing?', and I hear comments like, 'It's been too wet', or, 'I couldn't afford the bike, so I really have not done any riding since I got my learner permit'. I have to ask that person to ride towards a set of electronic lights — I am not sure if you are familiar with the test — make a decision and then transfer reflexes and decision making onto the motorcycle. When I am testing them I am concerned about those people falling off in front of me, and it does happen. So someone walking through my door and presenting me with a logbook that says they have done at least 50 hours of riding has to be an improvement. I realise there are issues with the policing of it and everything else, but it has to be a step in the right direction. It does need to be looked at from a lot of different angles with the different rider groups.

The other question or part of the question was what they need to have before they go for a learner permit. If I can explain our set-up at the moment, we offer a 2-hour introductory course for someone who has never sat on a motorcycle. I will only have two people at a time. That is what my individual company does. Two hours is long enough, because I used to do it for 3 hours, and in the third hour people were going backwards. They were fatigued and losing concentration.

The answer to your question is very much an individual one. I have very rarely had anyone who has never ridden a bike before who has done a 2-hour session and my recommendation has been to come back and do a day-long learner course, which results in a learner permit at the end. I have had some people who I have had

come back four or five times for five 2-hour sessions before I thought they were ready. It is not just their bike control skills; sometimes it is their nerves or their ability to make decisions. It is very much an individual thing, and that is what I base it on. I say to my students when they start, 'You are paying me for my honesty, and I have to sleep at night. I want you out on a bike when you're ready'. It is an individual thing.

We get a lot of people in our area who may have grown up on a farm, and they have ridden a farm bike to help Dad round up the sheep. They are not fully up on their skill levels, but they are at a level where I feel they are ready to move on to that stage. I would not be able to put a figure or a time on that because it is an individual thing.

Mr ELSBURY — Considering the location of accident hotspots, have VicRoads or the local government looked at or undertaken infrastructure upgrades, and if so, what are they?

Mr TALBOT — From my knowledge, I am not sure. Darren may be able to answer this question or Mary.

Ms TOWNSEND — We have done a small trial project with VicRoads over the last couple of months. We have a couple of hot spots. One is on the Mansfield-Whitfield Road. It is a hairpin bend, and it is probably about a third of the way along from Whitfield towards Mansfield. We also have another hot spot on a fairly tight bend going up Wangandary Road, which is a local council road as distinct from a VicRoads road like the Mansfield-Whitfield Road.

The trial we have done, which we are yet to prove to be successful or otherwise, is to put up some unconventional signage with a series approach. I think it has 'High-risk motorcycle area', 'Slow down' and 'Stay on your side', and there are some visibility and slippery bike symbols. They are very large signs in bright colours. Initially we were told 'Unconventional signage; we don't want to go there', so we said we would trial it on our local road for which we do not have to get the same approval.

We are yet to do a follow-up survey to determine whether there has been any impact on rider awareness and rider behaviour as a result of installing those signs, but ultimately we would like to install those signs at some of our hot spots. We are not changing the alignment; we are not changing anything other than the awareness and the attitude of the person riding. In a lot of places, without significant funding, our roads do not lend themselves to taking out the hairpin bend. Rural councils and even VicRoads have to justify with numbers and figures. You do not actually want to wait for the crashes to happen before you implement those changes.

That is one of the difficulties we have with our statistics. If there are gaps or there is an increase in registrations, we are not necessarily going to have a reduction in our figures. If we are doing some educational training, say, the accidents may be falling off but the numbers could still be increasing. It is very difficult to prove over time that the education and training-style process is working, which is why we are saying to look retrospectively at other ways we have achieved these things with smoking and alcohol. We know it is a proven method of behavioural change, but it is very difficult with our statistics at the moment.

Mr LANGUILLER — If I may come back to the issue of training, in earlier submissions our committee heard from motorcycle clubs that there might be a role for them to play in terms of mentoring and perhaps assisting in training returning riders and so on. Do you think there is a role for motorcycle clubs? Can they help in any way? Would there be a new role that we can find in a more institutional sense, a more structured sense, than there is at the moment?

Mr TALBOT — Personally I have had a little bit to do with the Ulysses group that you may be aware of, specifically up around Bright and their area. I was asked to go there and talk about training. The result was I implemented a small course for those riders. I believe there is a role. I believe the mentoring aspect is absolutely huge, because it is a lot of fun to ride in a group with other people. I think there is an in to start to implement. To summarise, there is very much so, if it is done correctly. Everybody likes to ride in a group. There are fantastic names like Ulysses. When you are going to put people together with such a good organisation, let us make the most of that and bring them on board. Yes.

Mr ELSBURY — Just as a sort of sealer of the inquiry, what specific outcomes would you like to see from this committee's inquiry? What is your list to the motorcycle Santa?

Ms TOWNSEND — The last page — if I could answer this partially, and I am sure others have probably got some things to add — mentions getting better support for cultural change. In particular we are essentially a volunteer group. I know I am paid in my role at Rural City as an engineer, and I go to these meetings through the committee; however, there are other members along here who do it either within their work or outside their work, and we have a number of volunteer members as well. We have limited resources even in my role to focus on this alone, in which case I believe we need some assistance in providing, like I said, better analysis of the statistics.

I think that needs a lot more work, because I believe if we do our statistics correctly and we look at what is there and what is not there, we will be able to make a better and more balanced decision about what the real issues are and link those clearly with what the real issues are. The real issues are coming from people like George and Darren, who know what is happening out there. We need to harness that information properly before we resource the direction we are going to go. We have got volunteer people who are willing to implement that, but they still need administrative support. Their interest is in implementing it; it is not really in running an administrative role. I guess we will get the best energy out of the community if we implement it in a way where we are using the people's positive energy in the most positive way.

Sgt WITTINGSLOW — In short, when you look at the stats that have been presented today, with on-road motorcycling 50 per cent of all accidents are due to rider error; 90 per cent of off-road are rider error. It gets back to training, I think — training people and education. That is where it gets back to. Certainly a bit of a passion of mine is also the apparel and some sort of Australian standard for making apparel mandatory for people.

Ms TOWNSEND — To put some balance to Darren's comment, we are talking about rider error. I think rider error is a combination of attitude and skills. We talked a lot about training, but I think one of the barriers we are going to struggle with and will probably always struggle with is attitude, particularly if you look at the gravel or unpaved roads. In that sector it was a slightly younger group that was having the issues. I think the attitude changed there, and I know that a lot of motorcyclists are very independent sorts of personalities, and they need to be. Like George said, that is part of what helps them survive; they have got to not ride like the guy in front. But at the same time they could also be independent in that they possibly do not want to hear everybody else's version of how to ride. I think to reach that group may be difficult, and that is something where we probably need some assistance in understanding how to reach that group as well. I think that attitude is going to be a big factor in how people ride, because that is where the egos come in — and the other factors in rider error. It is definitely a combination of the two, I think.

Mr ALLEN — One of the challenges that we face as a community road safety council is involving the community. It is one of the things that is put on us to have better local government involvement. The process we are going through at the moment, particularly with motorcycles as the key focus is that there are a lot of things happening and a lot of people doing things, but it is very disjointed. I would personally like to see some group, organisation, body or whatever to be in charge of motorcycle safety, and they pull all our groups in to work towards the one aim. At the moment it is thrown out to us. VicRoads has said to us, 'You tell us the problems; you tell us the answers', and we are spending a lot of our time as community not-for-profit people going through data and analysing, whereas I think the value of the community road safety council is involving the local community and changing attitudes. I think more direction and more someone in an overall big picture looking at the problem. We have mentioned SunSmart, alcohol and smoking. All those quit programs seem to be governed by one body, and then everyone works with them, but at the moment I do not think that is happening particularly with motorcycling safety.

The CHAIR — Thanks for that comment, Mr Allen. You raise an interesting point in relation to community education. I am sometimes intrigued at a local government function every now and again — in my case I might have a municipality that represents 90 000 or 120 000 people, and they might have municipal activity that gets 200 on deck at some considerable expense. There is not always necessarily a full engagement with the wider community. Some of those activities might be an Australia Day-related function, and there is not the wider support of it; and likewise with road safety councils, which are well thought through and well constituted. They can have a good local government representative and some bike education programs and other activities, but they can sometimes meet in isolation, and their messaging can take a while to get out to the wider community as opposed to being planted more strongly within a community so there is wider ownership.

It is a good point that you make and one that we can reflect upon so the thoughts about driving forward are not advanced by a small group of keen-minded citizens, but rather how there can be this much wider and stronger outreach. Perhaps we have our friends in the press who do a good job as they report on matters, but how that messaging strikes home in a more far-reaching way I think represents a challenge that we confront.

There was the good evidence we received earlier in the day from Mr Sunderland, who drove the point home. His message to us was in relation to education, and how that becomes more widespread is something that we will be deliberating upon. In the absence of any other comments from my colleagues, we thank you for giving of your time. You will get a copy of the transcript and will be able to amend the typos as appropriate and get it back to us. Should you have any thoughts along the way through, based upon your insight and expertise, we would be happy to take them on board as well. If there are any unaddressed matters relating to the riding routes in the north-east that you feel we should comment on specifically — any hot spots on the curves that you have been concerned about for a period of time that have not been responded to — we would be happy to receive that further information even to the point of potentially making some specific recommendations. Thank you for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.