

GREEN PAPER ON YOUNG DRIVERS

Introduction

Young drivers account for around 20% of road deaths, even though they comprise only 7% of full licence holders¹ and drive less mileage than other drivers.²

In 2013, 131 young drivers (aged 17 – 24 years) were killed and 1,159 were seriously injured. Young drivers pose a serious risk to other road users, as well as to themselves. Of the 337 people killed in crashes involving young car drivers in 2013, 131 were young drivers, 59 were their passengers and 147 were other road users.³

Many changes over the last few decades have sought to reduce young driver risk, including the Theory and Hazard Perception Tests, extending the Practical Driving Test, a new learning to drive syllabus, New Drivers Act and Pass Plus. However, young drivers continue to face and create a high and disproportionate risk; one in five crash within their first six months of driving.⁴ They have a higher crash risk than other drivers, their crashes are more likely to be severe,^{4,5,6} and they make more, and more expensive, insurance claims.^{7,8}

We need a more radical approach. No single measure will be effective on its own; a comprehensive package of complementary measures is needed. A Government Green Paper⁹ to explore options for improving the safety of newly-qualified drivers was expected in 2013, but was not published because the Government was “*wrestling with how to make things safer, while not unduly restricting the freedom of our young people.*”¹⁰ We agree that this is a difficult balance to achieve, and that driving is an important part of education and employment for many people. However, these issues are not insurmountable, and we also need to consider the freedom of all road users to travel as safely as possible.

Therefore, the signatories to this letter urge all political parties to include a commitment in their General Election Manifestos to publish a Green Paper on Young Drivers. This would enable a well-informed debate on this important issue, and help us all come to a consensus on the range of options for achieving a step change in reducing crashes and casualties involving young drivers. While we do not seek to be prescriptive about the content of such a Green Paper, our recommendations for the options to be considered are summarised below.

Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL)

The measure with the strongest evidence of effectiveness is Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL). This provides phased driving experience for new drivers in their first year or two of driving, which is when they are most at risk. It reduces their exposure to situations that are most dangerous for them, while allowing them to build up their driving experience.

Many countries have GDL schemes, which often impose requirements for the initial learning period, a post-test period of restricted driving before full, unsupervised, driving privileges. Typical restrictions are:

- Minimum learning period and minimum supervised practice
- Restrictions on night-time driving (unless there’s an experienced driver in the vehicle)
- Restrictions on carrying young passengers (unless there’s an experienced driver in the vehicle)
- Lower drink drive limit.

Research^{11,12} has found that fatal collisions among young drivers reduced by 9% to 60%, and overall casualties by 5% to 32% in countries that introduced GDL schemes.

It has been estimated that a GDL system in Great Britain would result in 81 to 114 fewer deaths and 538 to 872 fewer serious injuries annually (depending on the extent of night-time and passenger restrictions applied).¹³

An analysis of the potential safety impact that GDL could have on regions across England, Scotland and Wales concluded that in an average year, it could save 4,478 casualties, including 433 deaths and serious injuries and deliver social and economic benefits valued at £200.1 million. This analysis included only 17 to 19 year old drivers; a GDL system that applied to all novice drivers would, therefore, result, in even greater casualty and cost savings.¹⁴

Other research¹² has suggested that GDL would decrease crashes, casualties and fatalities involving 17 – 19 year old drivers in Britain by 20% to 40%.

In addition to the lives saved and injuries prevented, these studies indicate that the economic benefits of Graduated Driver Licensing are hundreds of millions of pounds. These savings would make a major contribution to reducing the burden of accidental injuries on the NHS.

There are concerns about unintended consequences for young people, such as reducing access to education and employment, and enforcement difficulties. However, the extent to which a GDL scheme is likely to restrict such access, if at all, is not clear since only about 30% of 17-20 year olds hold a full car driving licence).¹⁵ In any case, these concerns are not insurmountable, and there is considerable enthusiasm in the road safety community to address them.¹⁶ If necessary, exemptions could be included to allow young drivers to access education and employment, although such exemptions are being phased out in other countries that have introduced them in their GDL schemes because the risk is still high.

A recent survey¹⁷ indicates that GDL would secure majority public support. It found that 68% of the British public support its introduction, with only 15% opposed. Unsurprisingly, young people themselves were less keen to see GDL implemented. A GDL scheme in Northern Ireland is already progressing through the legislature, with a view to implementation in 2016, although it is less strict than most GDL schemes.

P Plates

Although there is little evidence that P plates are effective, many GDL options would be more enforceable if the Police were easily able to identify vehicles driven by novice drivers.

Telematics

Telematics technology is increasing rapidly in the UK, initially through retro-fitted black boxes, but now also through smartphone apps or a dongle plugged into a vehicle's On-Board Diagnostics (OBD) port. It has potential to improve driving standards and reduce crash and casualty rates among young drivers.

International studies¹⁸ suggest that telematics can significantly reduce risky driving, especially among the most risk-prone young drivers. Research and case studies by insurance companies in Britain also indicate that this technology can significantly improve driving behaviour.^{19,20} The Department for Transport has commissioned research to calculate its likely effect in reducing novice driver crashes, casualties and insurance claims.²¹

It is still relatively early days in the use of this technology, and there are knowledge gaps. Young drivers are more likely to improve when they (and their parents) receive feedback about their driving from the telematics. However we need to identify the most effective nature of this feedback (content, style, level of detail, frequency) and the best ways to encourage drivers and parents to regularly view it, understand what it means and use it to improve the driver's behaviour and reduce their risk. Technical and logistical issues, such as data security, data portability and shared vehicles also need to be addressed.

Telematics can play an important part in reducing young driver crashes, but it is not the whole solution; the technology does not assess presence of passengers or their behaviour or consider alcohol consumption, and current users are a self-selected group and may be significantly different from those who do not use telematics.

Pre-Driver Education

Attitudes to driving form well before a person can start learning to drive, so it is sensible to attempt to influence those attitudes at an early stage. However more robust evaluations of pre-driver education interventions are needed as most conclude there is little evidence that they improve knowledge and attitudes, let alone reduce crash rates, and some may actually increase harm. Schemes that include practical off-road driving (although attractive to young people) need further investigation as they may be counter-productive by helping young people to reach Driving Test readiness with fewer lessons and less practice when they become learner drivers.^{22,13} This would mean they get less experience during their learning period, when research shows the more supervised driving while learning the better. Further research and evaluation in this area will help to ensure that interventions bring real benefits and avoid unintended consequences.

Minimum Learning Period

A minimum learning period of one year would encourage learners to gain more driving experience during their learning period. As most learners take many months to pass their Test, this would not impose much additional burden on learner drivers.

A mandatory Learner Driver Logbook (in printed, online, Apps, CD, formats) in which the learner records how much and what type of driving they have undertaken, would ensure the learning period is used effectively. It would act as a record of driving experience, help structure the learning to reflect the learning to drive syllabus, allow learners to measure their progress and ensure that they gain experience in a wide range of situations. It could encourage lessons and practice in adverse weather and in the dark so learners gain experience in these situations. And, it could act as a 'Test-readiness' tool.

The learning period should include (where possible) both professional lessons with private practice with a parent or friend. Good communication between the learner, the learner's parents and the ADI is also important. More should be done to encourage and make it easier for learners to take private practice to support their professional lessons. Parents need more guidance on helping their children as they learn to drive, and to understand that the example they themselves set as drivers is a significant influence on their children's driving attitudes and behaviour.

Learner drivers are not a high risk while they are under supervision: the risk increases when they can drive unsupervised after passing their Test. Cheaper insurance for learner drivers who are under supervision would make private practice more affordable for families. This would help learners to gain more experience in relative safety, and so reduce the risk once they have gained their licence and can drive unsupervised.

The Test

The Practical Driving Test has been improved in recent years, but it can be improved further still to better prepare learners to drive unsupervised. For example, expanding the independent driving section should make the Test a better reflection of real driving, more emphasis should be put on test candidates' awareness of vulnerable road users, and manoeuvres, such as the three-point turn and reversing, could be tested separately (perhaps by ADIs before the Test) to allow more time to assess general driving during the Test.

Post-Test

Few drivers (let alone novice drivers) take any further training or assessment once they have passed their Driving Test. The current avenues to post-test training are:

- Being offered a course as an alternative to a fixed penalty
- Being ordered to take a course as part of a sentence
- Being required to take a course by an employer
- Voluntarily choosing to take further training (eg, Pass Plus, refresher or Advanced)

But, there is little incentive for drivers to voluntarily take post-test training. A range of options and types of courses is needed, from immediate post-test training to full advanced driver training. At-work driver training is likely to remain one of the main avenues of providing post-test training, and so further development (including more use of the Goals for Driver Education) of driver training interventions, including 'young drivers at work' interventions, and possibly a specific qualification for those who drive for work, would be useful.

In general, more research into, and robust evaluations of, the Driving Test and post-test driver training measures, is needed to ensure that future changes are based on evidence of their effectiveness.

Conclusion

In 2013, 337 people were killed in crashes involving young car drivers, 19% of all road deaths. Of these, 131 were young drivers, 59 were their passengers and 147 were other road users.

Many changes over the last few decades have sought to reduce young driver risk, but they continue to face and create a higher, and more severe, crash risk than other drivers, and they make more, and more expensive, insurance claims than other drivers.

A more radical approach is needed, involving a comprehensive package of complementary measures.

Therefore, the signatories to this letter urge all political parties to include a commitment in their General Election Manifestos to publish a Green Paper to explore the potential options for achieving a step change in reducing crashes and casualties involving young drivers. Our recommendations for the range of options to be considered for inclusion in the Green Paper include.

- Introducing Graduated Driver Licensing
- Developing and widening the use of telematics, if ongoing research shows they are effective at reducing crashes and casualties
- Improving the learning to drive regime, including a minimum learning period, mandatory logbook and help for parents (and others) who act as supervising drivers
- Introducing improvements to the Driving Test
- Providing incentives for drivers to take evaluated and effective post-test driver education and training.

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