

27/09/2024

NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi  
44 Bowen Street  
Thorndon  
Wellington 6141

## **Submission on the Medical Aspects of Fitness to Drive**

Tēnā koutou katoa

Age Concern New Zealand (ACNZ) welcomes the opportunity to submit comments on the Medical Aspects of Fitness to Drive consultation. We are pleased that the review is taking place and recognise that much has changed in the ten years since the guide for health practitioners was last reviewed.

As a trusted charity working in local communities throughout Aotearoa New Zealand to support older people, their friends and whānau, we have a vital interest in the safety of drivers and other road users. Age Concern New Zealand's vision is "*Every older person feels connected, has positive choices and can age well.*"

Age Concerns have a long history of providing theory-based refreshers for older drivers. Since 2019, we have provided 862 refresher courses for drivers over 60 through our national contract with the NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi. Prior to 2019 we delivered similar courses based on material developed by the NZ Transport Agency but without a national contract.

We acknowledge the important role that driving plays in the lives of many New Zealanders allowing them to lead independent lives and stay connected with people, services, places and activities they enjoy and need.

As you know, there are a growing number of people aged 65 years and older in Aotearoa New Zealand. Within ten years the over 65 population is expected to reach 1.2 million, with the over 85 age group being the fastest growing. Over 65s are also increasingly diverse with Māori, Pasifika and Asian older populations growing at a faster rate than European/Pakeha seniors.

Our growing and increasingly diverse older population has implications for health professionals assessing peoples medical fitness to drive. These implications include English as a second language and disabilities, some of which a person may have had all their lives while other disabilities may come on as a person ages.

Many of the participants at our driving refresher courses are seniors approaching 75 years of age or older who want to prepare themselves for the medical check required to renew their license.

We respect the skilled knowledge that clinical professionals have brought to the review and the changes they have recommended. We do not have any comment to make in respect to clinical matters.

Age Concern New Zealand's recommendations focus on the renewal process and assessing a person's fitness to drive. Our comments are based on our skill and experience providing safer driving refreshers for seniors across the country over many years.

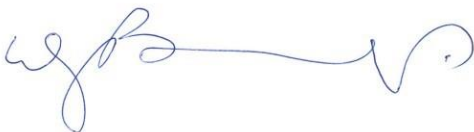
***Our primary recommendation for your consideration are:***

- 1. The medical assessment process must be transparent and clearly explained to older drivers, so they know what to expect.** We support drivers receiving a renewal letter describing the process, however we would like to see various accessible forms of communication used that will meet the needs of all populations groups, including resources in other languages, oral as well as written material, and contact details for who you can talk with if you need help. An interpreter may be needed in some instances for the older driver to have the ability to successfully undergo the medical check.
- 2. Greater consistency of carrying out the medical check is required.** We hear of considerable variation in the way the medical checks are carried out. This would appear to advantage or disadvantage some seniors, and we would like to see greater consistency. We are aware some of the medical conditions and the medication people are taking will influence the choices made by a GP, but if this is the reason for the different approaches, then it should be explained clearly to the older person.
- 3. Sufficient advance notification is required, including the recommendation to book in early to see their doctor.** Currently it can take several weeks to get an appointment with your GP. It would be useful to advise drivers to book a medical appointment and to tell the medical centre what it is for as soon as possible after they receive their renewal letter. If people find themselves unable to go through the process in time, they find themselves unable to drive once their licence expires. Any person, including an older person, may be at a disadvantage seeing a doctor they are unfamiliar with for a process they are already nervous about. It may be useful to signal early to a person that they are approaching the age 75 plus licensing requirements and later follow up again to remind them.

4. **The costs associated with renewing your licence when approaching 75 years of age or older must be made clear and be more affordable.** A GP appointment for the medical check is likely to be longer than a typical 15 minute appointment making the cost of the visit a potential barrier. If the senior driver needs to go for a road driving test this is a further personal expense. A visit to an occupational therapist, if required, can cost a minimum of \$500 and very likely more. We also understand that there can be a considerable wait time to get an appointment with an occupational therapist and that there is not always a therapist available in a person's local area, necessitating travel to another town. These costs are huge barriers for older people whose only income is New Zealand Superannuation.
  
5. **The GP needs to explain the process well to an older person and make it clear that some of the questions may appear irrelevant to the person's ability to drive.** We have heard of people who have failed the medical check because they thought some of the questions were not relevant whereas if they had clearly understood that the check was designed to assess various aspects of their fitness to drive safely, they would have responded differently at the time.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide our submission on the Medical Aspects of Fitness to Drive, we look forward to hearing the outcome of the review.

Nāku noa, nā,



Karen Billings-Jensen  
Chief Executive  
Age Concern New Zealand