SAFETY CAN BE A HARD MESSAGE TO SELL

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Abstract

From 2006 to 2008, the Monash University Accident Research Centre, in conjunction with the Office of Road Safety and Department of Main Roads in Western Australia, attempted to gain the support of a Local Government Area in W.A. to implement a demonstration trial of lower speed limits, based on a new Harm Reduction approach. Attempts to gain the support made over these three years included enlisting the support of the local traffic authorities, road safety community councils, the Western Australian Local Government Association and the officers of the regions approached. In spite of all efforts, no representative city or shire council in Western Australia agreed to implement the trial. This report outlines the experiences of the three years from the perspectives of both the research team and the Office of Road Safety, and recommends some future steps for overcoming community and political barriers in developing safer speeds on Australian roads.

Keywords

Lower speed limits; crash reduction; community and political support.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In 2005, MUARC was commissioned by Austroads to undertake a research program aimed at establishing a new approach to the setting of speed limits in Australasia. The program set out to develop, trial, and evaluate a new system for setting speed limits based on Harm reduction principles and consisted of three phases:

- **Phase 1** – a feasibility study of the philosophy and approach to setting safer speed limits;
- **Phase 2** - development of a model for setting speed limits based on Harm minimisation; and
- **Phase 3** – setting up and evaluating a demonstration trial of speed limits based on Harm minimisation in at least one jurisdiction in Australia or New Zealand.

The first two phases of the research program have been completed and reports have subsequently been prepared. The third phase of the research program, to undertake a demonstration trial of speed limits, has not been completed.

A number of Australian safety authorities expressed interest in having the trial in their region. In particular, the West Australian Office of Road Safety (ORS), in conjunction with Main Roads Western Australia (MRWA), offered to trial the urban speed limits based on Harm minimisation and agreed to provide supplementary funding and other research support.

1.2 Summary of the proposed trial in an urban area, Western Australia

The objectives of the proposed trial were to:

- determine the community’s acceptance of lowered urban speed limits;
- monitor compliance with the new speed limits under various enforcement conditions; and
- assess possible changes in crash numbers before, during and after the trial.
Key aspects of the proposed field trial were to include:

- the trial would run for at least 12-18 months;
- the default and/or posted speed limits in urban areas would be:
  - shopping strips, other areas of heavy pedestrian activity – 40 km/h;
  - school zones, play ground zones and residential streets – 40 km/h;
  - other undivided streets and roads – 50 km/h;
  - divided urban roads – 60 km/h;
- advisory signage would be installed at the entry of the trial area and at key reminder locations, as well as providing regulatory speed limit signage;
- community awareness of the revised speed limits applying in the trial area would be achieved through advertising, using local media outlets (eg press, radio, television); and
- enforcement of the revised speed limits would be negotiated with the Western Australia Police.

Key partners in the proposed trial were:

- the Western Australian Road Safety Council, which gave overall support;
- the State government agencies, ORS and MRWA, which would be responsible for all data collection and implementation tasks, including funding for speed regulatory and advisory signage, community advertising/promotion of the revised limits, the monitoring of travel speeds and community surveys;
- one or more Local Government agencies, which would host the trial and provide input regarding an agreed road hierarchy and the speed limits to be applied in the respective areas. Local Governments would not be required to contribute funds for implementation or evaluation tasks; and
- MUARC, which would be responsible for all analysis and evaluation tasks.

This paper outlines the steps taken to set up the trial and the subsequent experiences and lessons.

2 METHOD AND RESULTS

2.1 The First Steps

Initial meetings were held with ORS and MRWA, their peak state-wide advisory body, the Western Australian Road Safety Council, and the Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA), to outline the proposed trial and to agree on a strategy aimed at gaining approval for the trial in a particular region.

Meetings were also organised with Regional Road Safety Groups in potential demonstration and control sites - in Albany, Bunbury, Busselton and Geraldton in the first instances. MUARC representatives, accompanied by members of the ORS, MRWA and WALGA, conducted these meetings. Considerable support was subsequently received at RRSG level in each region: police representatives, in particular, expressed their strong support for the trial and offered appropriate assistance if required.

2.2 Shire of Albany

The Shire of Albany was first considered as a host area for the trial. However negotiations were discontinued as their demographics were not representative of urban Western Australia generally.

2.3 Shire of Bunbury

The Shire of Bunbury was the next choice for the location of the trial, given particularly its suitable demographics. In addition, the region’s boundaries made it relatively easy to contain the trial within an easily defined area. The Shires of Busselton and Geraldton were selected as suitable control areas.

Discussions with Bunbury Shire officers were generally supportive. However it emerged that three neighbouring shires with urban areas (Dardunup, Harvey and Capel) would also need to participate before Bunbury gave its final approval.
Following presentations to the three neighbouring Councils, two approved the proposed trial while the third declined to participate. This reluctance was attributed in part to a local reporter who after attending the council meeting subsequently wrote a negative story in the local paper. Given the failure to gain the support of all three neighbouring Shires, the Shire of Bunbury decided not to participate in the trial.

2.4 Speed Forum

Following the lack of success in the Bunbury region and in conjunction with ORS and MRWA, it was decided to host a Speed Forum in Perth and to invite all metropolitan Councils to attend. The hope was that at least one Council would agree to the trial. A decision was also taken to extend the argument for lower speeds to include an emphasis on the environmental and amenity benefits, as well safety benefits.

The Forum was held in Perth in March 2007 and around 30 delegates attended the meeting. ORS subsequently reported that it received a number of expressions of interest in hosting the trial and several of these regions were analysed especially in terms of demographics. The Cities of Melville and Fremantle and the Town of East Fremantle were approached to conduct the trial in their collective region.

2.5 Melville /Fremantle/East Fremantle

Discussions were then held with officers from the Cities of Melville and Fremantle and the Town of East Fremantle. Fremantle declined to participate, as it had recently introduced a number of lower speed limits and was reluctant to extend the exercise. The City of Melville and the Town of East Fremantle however were prepared to consider conducting the trial.

A series of meetings were held between the project team and senior members of the two Councils to work through the trial’s details. Given the previous experience with the Bunbury approach, a strategic plan was developed - a major component being to educate the local media regarding the objectives and benefits of the trial. This plan was put to each Council for approval.

While there was considerable support expressed at Council level, some members of the Melville Council had concerns about community acceptance of the trial. Consequently, a telephone survey of local residents was commissioned by ORS to gauge community reaction. The results showed less than 50% clear support initially, although this was expected to rise with time. When these results were presented to Council, it decided against participating for fear of any backlash. While the East Fremantle Shire continued to support the trial, its low residency numbers were judged inadequate to justify further activities at this time.

2.6 No trial!

Regardless of all efforts, the study team was unable to initiate a trial of lower urban speed limits in Western Australia. As the funding for MUARC’s involvement was stopped by Austroads in the light of these experiences\(^1\), no further efforts have been attempted through this research program to identify a region willing to undertake the trial.

3 DISCUSSION

3.1 Lesson Learned – the Need for Top-Level Support

Gaining the support of the key road safety groups and organisations is an essential first step in ensuring subsequent support from a local region. Without this support (and especially the offer of funding support from MRWA to meet the implementation expenses), it was unlikely that any LGA would even have considered introducing a trial.

3.2 Lesson Learned – the Importance of Local Media

\(^1\) This is not meant to be a criticism of the funding body as the funds available for Phase 3 were generously reserved for over 3 years while attempts were made to find a region prepared to participate in the trial.
The failure to gain the approval of Councils was arguably, at least partly attributable to the failure to enlist the support of local media – and in at least one instance, negative press coverage appeared as a critical determinant. However the solution to this, given the possibility of criticism is not readily apparent:

- on the one hand, approaching the media as an initial (or early) step is preferable to news of the trial leaking out in an uncontrolled fashion;
- on the other hand, a media release before approaching Council representatives could well be viewed as discourteous to those representatives and liable to prompt opposition.

3.3 Lesson Learned – ‘Let Them Come to Us’

Holding the Speed Forum attended by Council officers and/or Councillors was considered to be a proactive strategy for gaining support. Bringing representatives to a central meeting saved considerable effort in identifying and recruiting a Council willing to enter negotiations – and arguably, meant that Councils represented at the Forum would have at least some interest in reduced speeds.

However, subsequent experience shows that interest by the officials of a particular City or Shire Council does not ultimately translate into gaining the support of the elected representatives. There was often a clear gulf between the staff and Council members regarding the proposed trial.

3.4 Lesson Learned – It Is Not All About Safety

In spite of widespread support at State and Council-officer level for the trial, all attempts ultimately failed at the level of full Council meetings. It was clear that there was insufficient political will from elected leaders who were influenced by considerations additional to the possible safety benefits.

3.5 Where to from here?

Speeding is still clearly a major road safety issue in Australia. Despite the fact that Australia has some of the highest speed limits in the world, especially urban speed limits, there is a perceived community resistance to lower speed limits – a perception which was possibly responsible for much of the subsequent political resistance. To determine the accuracy of this perception, a major study is required using a representative sample of community members from different parts of Australia.

MUARC is currently involved in an extensive survey of community attitudes to speeding, speed limits, crash risk and impact on the environment and local amenity, conducted in four Australian states. The survey aims to identify relevant concerns among Australians about these issues, their attitudes to speeding and the strength of their beliefs. It is hoped that these data will help clarify likely community reaction to lower speed limits and other speed-related issues, so that future initiatives to reduce the incidence of speeding and road crashes can be developed and implemented.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several conclusions and recommendations can be gleaned from the experiences gained through the several attempts to introduce a trial of lower speed limits based on Harm minimisation principles:

- Gaining the support of road safety agencies and community groups is clearly a necessary first step before introducing a trial of reduced speed limits;
- The attitudes of some members of Local Government were not based on road safety grounds. There was substantial concern with the perceived implications for mobility, travel speeds and the electoral impact, with less concern about possible benefits for safety, the environment and local amenity;
- For many, the association between speed and crash frequency or severity of outcome was not well understood. Specifically, the evaluated and demonstrable benefits of the recently reduced 50km/h urban default limits were frequently either not known or incorrectly perceived;
- At local government level, there was often a dichotomy of opinion between council officers and the councillors. This reflects differences in motives and priorities which need to be understood and addressed in any attempt to implement such a trial in future;
• Councillors resistant to the trial commonly pointed to their perceptions of likely public opposition to reduced limits, no perceived safety benefits and a reluctance to return to the ‘days of the red flag’. The now widely disputed 85th percentile speed concept for determining speed limits was raised as the appropriate basis for determining speed limits by some councillors and needs to be addressed;

• The role of the media in any future trial is critical. Ensuring that they and the community generally are informed and involved in the development and introduction of any attempt to introduce lower speed limits is crucial;

• An accurate understanding of community concerns about lowering speed limits and identifying opportunities for new innovative countermeasures that are acceptable, is fundamental for gaining community acceptance.

These findings are especially important for gaining public support for adopting a Safe System approach to road safety, as recently adopted by the Western Australian State Government, and for meeting theirs and others proposed strategic road safety targets.