

Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand

Submission to the
Ministry of Transport
on the *Safer Journeys*
discussion document

30 September 2009



Safer Journeys - Submission from the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Safer Journeys discussion document.

As you are aware, the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand (ALAC) is a Crown entity established under the Alcohol Advisory Council Act 1976. Our primary objective is the *“encouragement and promotion of moderation in the use of liquor, the reduction and discouragement of the misuse of liquor, and the minimisation of the personal, social and economic harm resulting from the misuse of liquor”*.

Our statutory functions include making *“recommendations to the Government, Departments of State, authorities in the fields of health, education, social welfare, and industry and any other public or private bodies”*. We are also charged with encouraging and promoting research and information *“relating to any problem that is or may be associated with or consequent on the misuse of liquor”*.

We are therefore well placed to comment and advise on the proposed Safer Journeys strategy particularly as it relates to alcohol use and drink driving issues in New Zealand.

The evidence, as outlined in your discussion document and in ALAC’s policy position on the blood alcohol concentration limit, is that driver alcohol and drug impairment is inflicting a very high and concerning cost on our society. Drinking alcohol, even in small amounts, impairs our actions and judgement. When we drink, we make decisions we wouldn’t normally make, and we’re unable to respond to situations as quickly as we’d like. We therefore agree with the “high concern” priority area that you have identified for “Reducing alcohol/drug impaired driving” within the Safer Journeys strategy.

ALAC works to minimise harms that result from alcohol misuse, and fatal and serious injury road crashes is one of these harms. By working to reduce alcohol-related road crashes, ALAC is intending to also reduce the incidence of other alcohol harms such as violence, crime and poor health.

ALAC strongly believes that the legal blood alcohol concentration limit (BAC) for driving in New Zealand should be lowered from 80mg/100ml for adult drivers down to 50mg/100ml, and the under-20 year old BAC lowered to zero for all under-20 year olds, regardless of licence status.

Drinking alcohol increases a person’s chances of being involved in a car crash. New Zealand’s legal BAC limits are high by international standards, and best practice overseas is for a legal BAC limit of 50mg/100ml for adults and a zero BAC for young people. A legal BAC of 80mg/100ml sends a message that it is okay to drink and drive, even at relatively low levels of drinking. However we know that the risk of harm occurring, particularly when driving, starts at low levels. There is clear evidence of an increase in risk as blood alcohol levels increase, and the effect is much more pronounced in young drivers.

So whilst those drink drivers with very high BAC levels (in excess of 80mg/100ml) do create the most harm, having a BAC of between 50mg/100ml and 80mg/100ml also carries high risk of harm when compared to

someone who has a zero BAC. Not only will a lower legal BAC reduce the number of alcohol related road crashes occurring for drivers with a BAC of between 50mg and 80mg/100ml, research has shown that it will reduce road crashes for drivers at the full range of BAC levels. Research indicates that there have been significant decreases in the number of fatal collisions, serious collisions and single-vehicle collisions in those overseas countries with a 50mg/100mL BAC limit compared with number of these types of collisions occurring when the BAC limit in these jurisdictions was 80mg/100mL as it is currently in New Zealand.

Not only will a lowered legal BAC limit reduce alcohol related road crashes, but it will also send a message about the other harms associated with excessive drinking. It is likely to reduce the incidence of heavy drinking and to moderate our drinking patterns. There is strong overseas evidence that zero tolerance laws among 18 to 20 year olds reduces heavy per occasion consumption drinking (five or more drinks at one sitting) by males by about 13 percent.

ALAC also supports introducing infringement penalties for offences between the old BAC levels and the proposed new BAC levels, so as not to impose an additional workload cost on courts.

In addition, ALAC supports a move towards mandatory alcohol interlocks for drink driving recidivists, as these offenders clearly need treatment and support to overcome their drinking issues. ALAC would also support mandatory alcohol interlocks as an option for first-time offenders, who are also likely to be recidivists who have not been apprehended before, but equally require support to overcome their drinking issues. We note that other jurisdictions (including Victoria in Australia) have successfully implemented interlock programmes, and that these have proven to be effective in preventing drink driving, particularly when provided in association with treatment and education.

ALAC does not support maintaining the legal BAC at 80mg/100ml and increasing the severity of penalties. This option ignores the international body of evidence and research. It fails to provide New Zealand with a regulatory environment consistent with international best practice. It does not provide New Zealanders with the legislative framework to support the increasing demand for a safer and healthier drinking culture. Likewise, whilst ALAC supports the proposal to “inform New Zealanders about the impact of alcohol on driving”, this must occur in association with a lowered legal BAC of 50mg/100ml. Education as an initiative will only work with the support of a legal framework to reinforce it.

Finally, we would like to congratulate the Ministry of Transport for continuing to contribute to the growing evidence in the alcohol sector. ALAC looks forward to working with you further in the near future, and would be pleased to lend its advice and support.