

## PRACTICAL DRIVING ASSESSMENTS — AVAILABILITY

### *Grievance*

**MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Leader of the Opposition)** [9.12 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Transport. I grieve on behalf of learner drivers who cannot get a practical driving assessment booking in the metropolitan area this year. The frustration and bitter disappointment of these learners and their parents is real. They spend countless hours online trying to book a driver's test or searching for a cancellation, to no avail. Those with slow internet face obvious disadvantage. This is a matter I have raised in previous years, in budget estimates and question time.

There is no doubt that getting a driver's licence is a milestone event for a teenager and a step towards greater independence. These would-be drivers are desperate to go to work and to study; still they endure the agonising experience of logging into the DoT Direct website and hitting refresh in the hope they can book a driving test, months down the track if they are lucky. I remind the minister that the worker shortages in Western Australia are very real. Employers are desperate for staff. Not everyone is able to make public transport work for them to get to work and study. It is a matter that inhibits productivity.

I want to highlight several cases raised with my office and in the news that illustrate the impact of the backlog of driving tests. I refer to the PerthNow story "Perth Mum forced to fly daughter to Esperance for driving test" of 8 March 2023. Perth mum Narelle tried for a month to book a test for her daughter, only to find there were no bookings in the metropolitan area for the remainder of the year. She searched for a cancellation and then gave up looking for a metro test. She explored options in Esperance, South Hedland, Tom Price and Broome. She was all set to fly her daughter to Esperance, but I understand that she has now secured a metro test.

Seven news ran a story yesterday about a Mindarie teen who, after months of trying to secure a Perth test, travelled to Geraldton for her PDA—an 830-kilometre round trip. Another Perth teen drove with her mum to Bunbury seven times to sit a test. Each test cost \$126. There was another case in which a mum drove with her daughter to Kojonup, a seven-hour return journey, only to fail that particular test.

A Yanchep resident contacted my office in frustration, as he has been unable to book a test for his wife. According to my notes, his email states —

I have an expensive 70km drive to work. I am the only breadwinner in a family of five, and the cost of living has us surviving hand-to-mouth. My wife wants to work, and this is something we need, to survive at this time. But in order to work, she needs to pass her driver's licence. In order to pass her driver's licence, she needs to be able to book a test. There are no available bookings at all, ever, for any testing centre, on the DoT website.

It continues —

I called DoT and after waiting forty five minutes to speak with someone, they let me know that "it's because of Covid 19". This is a staggering admission that DoT is not handling things well; not handling things at all. Covid 19 has ceased to be a problem. DoT have dropped the ball and are now doing nothing to facilitate the people of Western Australia being able to get their driver's licence. He says one obvious consequence of this failure is that people will drive without their licence. This is an obvious risk to safety and could well end in the individual being banned from driving in the future.

Yet another family contacted me from Hovea in the Shire of Mundaring. According to my notes, their email states —

'we were astonished to find that there are no available Metro or regional bookings for out to one year beyond our daughter's eligibility date. This is farcical and completely unacceptable. We live on the outskirts of the city where public transport is limited. The ability to drive, in our circumstances is not a luxury but rather a necessity. 'My daughter started looking for a test booking in January but has been unable to secure any bookings in Midland, Northam, Toodyay, York, Cannington or Kelmscott. In mid February when I looked on the booking system, there was nothing available looking out to six months in any centres'.

In a WAtoday story on 18 December 2022, a Department of Transport spokesperson said that learner drivers should be "prepared for a long wait". I repeat that: "be prepared for a long wait". This comes on the back of DOT recruiting 17 additional assessors last year, with an additional seven due to start this year. The article quotes a driving instructor saying there are "no spaces available until at least 2024". The desperate lack of driving tests sees some driving instructors cashing in on the situation and onselling tests. Driving instructors, or perhaps bots, are making block bookings and then onselling those tests. A recent ad on social media quoted \$25 per slot.

Alternative arrangements may involve the learner driver taking a minimum of three lessons with the instructor to access the test slot. Last September, I raised with the minister a concerning situation of a Perth mum who had tried to book a test for her daughter for 4 November, being her daughter's seventeenth birthday. She could not get a driving test at Cannington, Midland or Kelmscott until the last week of March 2023. She then found an ad on Facebook

marketplace offering PDA tests for \$50. When she contacted the driving school, she was offered a test on 4 November at her preferred testing location. The proviso was she would have to rent the car for the test at a total cost of \$200. The driving instructor was pushy and wanted her to send her daughter's learner's permit through immediately.

In March 2022, DOT announced a driving instructor learner's permit audit via Driving Instructor Bulletin 04/2022. The audit was to stamp out driving instructors making multiple PDA bookings. A threat was issued to driving instructors that they would be removed from the online booking system if suspected of making multiple bookings. Audits commenced in March 2022 and were to take place every six months.

Speaking on 6PR two weeks ago, Iain Cameron, the Department of Transport's managing director, said the PDA booking system had capacity, but it was being locked up unfairly with bots searching the system and grabbing available tests. He said that 300 to 400 tests are released daily, but the system is not working. He said the department had seen 100 or so tests disappear in 27 seconds. Mr Cameron said driving instructors see a business opportunity and make multiple online bookings and sell those test slots.

Minister, the department acknowledged the problem of multiple and speculative booking of practical driving assessments 12 months ago and introduced the audit. Clearly, the audit has not been effective. I call on the minister to immediately address this raft of issues preventing many learner drivers from booking a test, getting their licence and heading their own way to get to work and to explore our state.

**MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan — Minister for Transport)** [9.18 am]: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the grievance. Fortuitously, I have a press conference later today to announce changes to our PDA system to address many of the issues that have been raised over the past year. Just for some background, we did have COVID, which, of course, impacted the ability to service people wanting to get their driver's licence. We are emerging from a time when, in some instances, it was the assessors who were not available, and there were also cancellations because people had COVID or were not able to get to their test.

Over the past couple of years, we have been trying to manage the effects of COVID. I have gone through all the historical data and information to look at whether anything extraordinary has happened around the number of tests released each day compared with demand. Nothing has really changed over the past three to four years in relation to demand or availability. We release around 300 tests every day. Some people are happy to sit their test in either the southern suburbs or the northern suburbs, so they grab a test and manage the system well, but it is clear that something is happening to the system that sucks up that capacity, as the Leader of the Opposition mentioned and our unit has identified. Bots have started to sweep up all the available tests, so we are going to improve the system to reduce the ability for that technology to do that. The booking system in Western Australia allows driving instructors to book a range of tests and swap the names of their clients linked to those tests. WA is the only state that has that system. It was put in place to service that industry, but it appears to be also causing a problem, and I will be making further announcements about that. Those are the two main issues that have been identified.

Cancellations are also an issue. The COVID pandemic caused cancellation issues for the assessors, but that is starting to be addressed. Five to seven per cent of test bookings are cancelled or no-shows and that also impacts test availability.

Another point of note has been the fluctuation in tests in the regions. For example, people have been unable to sit tests in Bunbury. We have moved another assessor there and that seems to have rectified the problem. I have also instructed the department to make sure that if a regional person wants to sit a test in their home town, they get preference. I do not want people missing out on sitting a test in their town because tests have been taken up by people coming from other places. The Esperance example, as outlined by the member, has been rectified. I understand that that person got their licence at one of the metropolitan testing centres.

I completely understand that in many instances people need a driver's licence to access employment opportunities. That is why in regional WA we are rolling out the driving access and equity program that targets regional Western Australians, particularly those in remote areas. That program has already seen some success with people who would never have normally got their driver's licence. We have already helped over 100 people to get their driver's licence in the Pilbara and Kimberley, and we are rolling out that program in the midwest, Gascoyne and goldfields. These people have no ability to get supervised driving lessons or access to vehicles. That issue also extends to some parts of the metropolitan area in which people find it hard to obtain the supervised hours required to sit their driving test.

As I said, I acknowledge the issue with tests disappearing. Each day 300 to 450 practical driving assessment appointments are released. About 300 of those tests are for C-class licences. We continue to make spots available, but they do not seem to exist by the end of the day. We understand the issues and I will be making further announcements on what we will be doing to make it easier to get a driver's licence in WA.

The other issue is with people failing their test. People sometimes turn up to their test with perhaps not the confidence or the experience required to pass, so we continue to see a significant failure rate, but on checking the data, we see that has been consistent for a long time. I know that sitting a driving test is sometimes quite daunting. People get nervous and sometimes they make errors that they probably would not make in an ordinary situation. I think that

all of us have experienced that. I have, personally—maybe!—as have our friends and family. My niece could not work out how to use the demister and then failed her test.

**Ms S.F. McGurk:** I sped.

**Ms R. SAFFIOTI:** The member sped. On my first driving test, the assessor had to use her brakes, so that was not good, and that happened when I was getting out of the car park. That happened a long time ago. I could not even get out of the car park! Yes, it is a tough process and it always has been. As I said, my niece went out on a rainy and misty day and could not work out how to clean the windscreen and failed instantly. She has since got her licence and all things are good. There are lots of different examples.

Sitting a test is a tough process, and it needs to be a tough process, but we are doing all we can to ensure that Western Australians get access to driving tests.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Thank you, minister. I do believe that assessor intervention during a test is an automatic fail.

**Ms R. Saffioti:** Yes, it is, but they still got me to go out for the next half an hour anyway!

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Thank you, minister.