SUPPORTING NEW DRIVERS

*A **Driving Change Diversity** report*



Improving access to driver licensing, employment and transport careers in New Zealand

Ia Ara Aotearoa Transporting NEW ZEALAND

Teletrac Navman

FOREWORD

New Zealand's freight industry is essential to the nation's economy, but attracting, developing, and retaining the next generation of skilled drivers remains a growing challenge. As freight demand increases, improving access to driver licensing and creating clear career pathways has never been more important.

At Teletrac Navman, we see how technology, training, and industry collaboration can enhance safety, productivity, and workforce capability. This report highlights practical opportunities to remove barriers to licence attainment and support future transport professionals. We are proud to support this initiative and the actions needed to build a stronger, safer, and more sustainable transport workforce for New Zealand's future.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than one million New Zealanders aged 16 and over do not hold a full Class 1 driver's licence, including almost half a million who have no driver licence at all.

This can restrict people's mobility and access to employment. It is also particularly important for our road freight transport sector, which employs around 33,000 truck drivers. The sector will need to grow its workforce to support an increasing freight task and future export growth.

To do this, New Zealand needs a driver licensing system that enables skilled and capable people to gain the licences they need, without facing unnecessary barriers.

An inequitable system

Imagine growing up in a family where few, if any, of the adults around you have their full licence and a clean, safe driving record. Or maybe there's just nobody available or suitable to be a driving tutor.

Perhaps there is no access to a suitable vehicle – one with a WOF, registration, and insurance that covers drivers under 25 years of age. Coupled with these issues, imagine you live somewhere rural, or poorly connected by public transportation.

On top of it all, money is tight, and private driving lessons are not at all cheap – on average, upwards of $75 per hour.

This describes the reality for many young Kiwis, as affordability and accessibility continue to prevent them from entering or continuing the licensing process.

Some choose to drive unlicenced or breach their licence conditions, exposing them to legal risk. In 2025 alone, almost 70,000 licence-related court proceedings were lodged.

By investing in driver education and licensing, the Government will substantially benefit by reducing unemployment and steering young people away from the justice system.

WHY DRIVER LICENSING SUPPORT MATTERS

Holding a Class 1 driver's licence grants people greater access to education and training, employment opportunities, independence and community participation, and serves as a potential pathway into road freight and other transport careers.

So it's no surprise that a third of New Zealanders say mobility and independence are the most important benefits of having a driver's licence and being able to drive, according to a survey from Research NZ.

Did you know? Unaccompanied learner drivers represented 44% of Graduated Driver Licence System breaches in 2025.

The penalty for this offence is a $100 fine and 35 demerit points.

When it comes to barriers, four problems are more frequently identified as the '**most significant problem**' by Kiwis, namely:

1. Professional driving instructor costs
2. The cost of the tests and licence itself
3. Anxiety about sitting the tests
4. Access to a car to practice

While the above views on problems appear to be relatively universal, there are some notable, albeit minor differences, such as:

- Access to a car to practice is more frequently identified as a problem by younger respondents aged 18-34 (73% of these respondents identified this as the 'most' or 'one of many significant problems' compared with 52% of respondents, 55+).
- Younger respondents also more frequently identify anxiety about sitting the tests as a problem (71% of these respondents identified this as the 'most' or 'one of many significant problems' compared with 64% of respondents 55+).
- Female respondents also more frequently identify anxiety about sitting the tests as a problem (72% of these respondents identified this as the 'most' or 'one of many significant problems' compared with 63% of males).

About **70%** of jobs require at least a Restricted driver's licence, and this figure may be even higher for entry-level jobs.



Overall, the evidence suggests that while New Zealanders recognise the significant personal and employment benefits of holding a driver's licence, cost, vehicle access and test-related anxiety remain major barriers to uptake.

A practical policy response would be to expand targeted driver licensing support programmes that reduce these barriers through subsidised or free training and testing, access to supervised practice vehicles, and tailored mentoring, particularly for young people and other disadvantaged groups.

What's already working

Targeted financial assistance for low-income applicants, alongside mobile or community-based licensing services in rural and high-deprivation areas are delivering good results and should be boosted.

Budget 2022 allocated $86.486 million over four years to a Driver Licence Support Initiative overseen by NZTA and MSD, with the goal of supporting 64,000 learners to get their Class 1 licence. The initiative is set to continue from 2027 onwards and assist approximately 20,000 people per year.

Several other initiatives have recently demonstrated that when practical barriers are removed, licence attainment rates improve significantly.

The Howard League's driver programme for young offenders delivers $3.26 of measurable social return on investment (SROI) for every $1 spent. Similarly, ImpactLab reports that Drive My Life - Taraiwa Mataora and Blue Light's Youth Driver Navigator Programme delivered SROIs of $5.10 and $7.20 respectively.

Support type	How it works
Ministry of Social Development's Driver Licence Support Programme	Driver licensing support through contracted providers, including mentoring, lessons, literacy support, test fees and access to vehicles for testing. Targeted at people facing barriers to gaining a licence, including many receiving income assistance, with eligibility determined by MSD.
NZTA's Community Driver Mentor Programme	A community-led initiative that supports disadvantaged people typically aged 16-24 to get their Restricted or Full licence through a range of local providers, including the Salvation Army.
Howard League for Penal Reform	Provides literacy support, learner licence preparation, driving lessons, test fees, ID assistance and access to vehicles for people in the justice system, including prisoners and former offenders.
Blue Light Youth Driver Navigator Programme	Especially designed for disadvantaged youths without a suitable vehicle or tutor, Blue Light provides administrative support to help people through the testing process, pick-ups and drop-offs, GPS and camera-equipped vehicles to practice in, defensive driving courses and more.

Some of the different nationwide free Class 1 licensing and practical training programmes.

GAINING A CLASS 2-5 LICENCE

Full heavy vehicle licences can be attained either by sitting practical tests or through the vastly more common route: NZQA-approved course providers like TR Driver Training, Safety 'n Action, or other local trainers. In 2025, 88% of Class 2-5 licences were obtained this way.

Approved courses allow drivers to bypass the practical tests and some of the waiting periods that apply under the standard licensing process, making them a much faster route.

Class and vehicle type	Requirement to get learner licence	Requirement to get a full licence	
		Standard Practical Test Pathway	Approved Course Pathway (Fastest)
Class 2: Medium Rigid Trucks (6,001kg to 18,000kg)	Hold a full Class 1 (car) licence for at least 6 months, then pass the Class 2 theory test.	Hold the Class 2 learner licence for 6 months (reduced to 3 months if you are aged 25 or over). Pass the NZTA practical test.	Complete an NZQA-approved course. Bypass the 6-month wait and the practical test.
Class 4: Heavy Rigid Trucks (Over 18,000kg)	Hold a full Class 2 licence. (No separate theory test required if moving from Class 2).	Hold the Class 2 full licence for 6 months (reduced to 3 months if aged 25 or over). Pass the NZTA practical test.	
Class 5: Heavy Combination (Over 25,000kg)	Hold a full Class 4 licence for 6 months (or 3 months if aged 25+), then pass the Class 5 theory test.	Hold the Class 5 learner licence for 6 months (reduced to 3 months if aged 25 or over). Pass the NZTA practical test.	

This table reflects the standard heavy vehicle licensing system, excluding the 2026 licence-class exemptions for certain heavier zero-emission vehicles.

Class 3 covers medium combination vehicles (truck and trailer up to 25,000kg gross combined weight). Very few people get their Class 3, as it's not compulsory to get it before moving to Class 4 or Class 5. However, it's important to note that Class 4 holders cannot drive Class 3 combinations while Class 5 holders can.

Training and testing costs vary between providers, locations, and vehicle types. As a general guide, **drivers can expect to spend approximately $500-$850 per step using the standard practical-test pathway, or $1,100-$1,700 per step using the approved-course pathway**. Some employers choose to fully or partially fund these costs as part of staff training and workforce development.



BECOMING A TRUCK DRIVER - ZIVANA'S STORY

Zivana grew up around trucks, riding along on jobs with her father from an early age.

"I've been around the industry my whole life with my dad. I started off in trucks in my car seat as a baby."

Later, in high school, she found that career evenings didn't explain the breadth of transport roles beyond driving. She was familiar with trucking, but the logistics side wasn't something that she knew much about, and it seemed that transport or trades were often presented as options for students who weren't academically capable. Meanwhile, university was treated as the expected route for people who want a career.

Nevertheless, when she entered her first role at the age of 18, she realised a transport career could take her places. And not just in the cab!

"I still remember the first day I got to jump in a tiny little wee class 2 [truck] and take it for a drive... **it was such a cool feeling for me.**" She applied lessons she'd learned from her dad, namely, to take it slow and always put safety first.

This affinity for driving then developed into a career where no two days are the same: from fleet management, to logistics, and her favourite - actually being behind the wheel. The sheer variety of different tasks is one of the most appealing aspects of the job for Zivana. **"I never know what I'm up for when I get to work each day."**

She says that in road transport, there's so many different roles to get stuck into.
"If one sort of thing is not your cup of tea, there'll be some other avenue you can go down."

Through the approved course pathway, Zivana worked her way from a car licence to a full Class 5 in less than two years. With support from friends, family, employers, and industry trainers, she practiced with other experienced drivers wherever possible.

During the licensing process, the waiting was one of the hardest parts.

"Once I had a Class 2 full, I had to wait six months before I could go on to getting my learners in the next class. You can skip Class 3, so Class 4 was the next one."



“The waiting game of the six months always killed me. I was always like, oh, **I'm just itching to get to that next one!**”

Zivana also attained two MITO micro credentials in their Commercial Road Transport programme - *Heavy Combination Vehicle Loading Fundamentals* and *Mass and Dimensions*. She said the mix of practical and theoretical learning helped build her knowledge and confidence, and the flexible format meant she could learn at her own pace around the demands of day-to-day life.

As a young woman in a traditionally male-dominated industry, she has sometimes encountered assumptions about her experience and abilities. But being different has also been a source of pride. She recalled a hot summer’s day, driving an S770 Scania towing a container with the window down and hearing, **“There’s a girl driving that truck!”** from amazed schoolchildren outside. She said experiences like that show how important that representation is for girls who might have reservations about the industry and whether they have a place in it.

A great workplace culture with supportive managers, trainers and colleagues has helped her challenge those assumptions, continue developing her skills, and take on new challenges. “When you know you've got people around you that support you, trust you, back you, it gives you that confidence to believe in it yourself.”

Zivana would like to see more young people exposed to transport careers through school programmes, work experience placements, ride-alongs and industry events. She says many students are still unaware of all the aspects of the job that make it so rewarding, and she wants that to change.

“There's a lot of things I love about it, but I think for me, definitely getting to be in trucks has got me hooked. **I just love it.** Every time I jump in, it's still just as cool as the first day.”





POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Road freight needs the next generation of drivers coming through. Our 2026 National Road Freight Industry Survey found that 31% of participating freight businesses expect up to a quarter of their drivers to retire within the next five years.

More than one million New Zealanders aged 16 and over do not hold a full driver licence. For road freight, that represents a major workforce barrier: a Class 1 licence is the first step on the pathway to becoming a heavy vehicle driver. We want to see easier access to driver licensing and clear pathways from school into transport careers. Building that pipeline now is essential to meeting our future workforce needs.

To improve licence uptake and workforce participation, the Government should:

1. Endow MSD with **a five-year, $5 million fund to subsidise Class 2 and higher licence training** for commercial road freight operators who wish to upskill their employees. At an annual investment of $1 million, we estimate the programme could help generate an estimated 2,000-3,000 additional heavy vehicle drivers, representing a small, targeted intervention with the potential for substantial workforce and economic benefits.

2. Increase **targeted financial support for low-income applicants** by doubling annual funding from $20 million to $40 million, with training and testing services delivered through community providers and MSD. This increase takes into account that up to 90,000 people still struggle to access or progress through the system every year.

3. **Support a school-based driver licensing pathway** by enabling secondary schools to connect students with **free** accredited driver training, licensing, and employment providers.

4. **Increase funding for mobile and community-based licensing services**, particularly in rural and high-deprivation areas to $20 million per year.

5. Partner with insurers to enable **telematics data** to be used in assessing younger heavy-vehicle drivers, supporting **lower premiums and excesses** for drivers who demonstrate safe driving.

Transporting New Zealand will continue working with members to promote the industry, support the employment of younger drivers, and help ensure that road freight is recognised as a sector where people can build long, skilled, and rewarding careers.

*Transporting New Zealand thanks **Teletrac Navman** for supporting this instalment of the Driving Change Diversity programme and to the Driving Change Network for providing their research and expertise.*
For a full list of sources used to inform this report, please scan this QR code.