

TRANSPORT

Untangling the hidden costs of driving faster past schools

Authorities must raise local speed limits within three weeks but are juggling more speed, more haste and masterpieces of inflexible rule making



by **Tim Murphy**

4 hours ago



Public complaints about the legibility for drivers of new school zone speed signs prompted a review by Auckland Transport. Photo: Greater Auckland

A blanket increase in speed limits on local roads, including near schools outside peak hours, is set to have unintended costs for ratepayers and taxpayers.

A Government edict reversing speed limit reductions to 30km/h brought in by Labour says councils must lift speeds to 50km/h by July 1.

An exemption is possible if protection of schools and children was not used as a reason for lowering speeds when communities were consulted.

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While cities like Dunedin and Hamilton have been able to show they did not, in many instances, stipulate school safety when taking speeds down, Auckland has been caught by its own photos and words, and must cut limits in 1400 streets.

A briefing to Auckland Council's transport committee has heard of an epic bureaucratic tangle as officials move to alert motorists about continuing lower peak hour speeds – but simultaneously move to lift speeds outside peak hours by schools and on other roads this month.

Here are some of the knots from the Land Transport Rule: Setting of Speed Limits Rule 2024 that have left Auckland Transport and local boards with no option even if local communities want lower speeds retained:

- Auckland Council and Auckland Transport both opposed the Government's automatic raising of speeds back to 50 km/h but the rule came into force anyway
- Because AT had mentioned schools and children's safety, and included pictures of kids on bikes and walking in its original consultation material, it is barred from keeping the outside peak hours speed limit at 30km/h on roads around schools.
- It can, as roading authority, now weigh other safety factors on such roads and consult with the communities about re-lowering speeds to 40km/h (not 30), but it cannot rely on the costly consultation it conducted just months ago about putting speeds up. It must repeat the exercise.
- AT already estimated publicly the road and sign changes could cost it \$25m, which the Govt refused to subsidise
- Some of the signs near schools that have already appeared in outlining the higher speed limit, with written lists of the peak drop-off, pick-up 30km/h times, are too small and detailed to read. AT will now have to amend signs, and pay for up to 20 electronic installations to show accepted speeds, at further cost.
- And, most significantly, it now appears the increased road speeds might lead AT to review and increase its other safety measures for those roads – more road calming and engineering solutions that will require medium-term capital spending. This could lead to ... wait for it ... more use of road cones.
- That money for consultation and other safety solutions would have to come from ratepayers and taxpayers under agreed roading spends.

Councillors have been astounded by the inflexible parameters, risks to children and others' safety, and the potential extra costs of consultation and physical safety enhancements.

Gavin Scott, AT's general counsel, said the reversal rule required a simple factual assessment and Auckland's review found the 1400 roads with lowered limits needed to be lifted.

“Other councils have taken a different view. We’ve discussed this with NZ Transport Agency, the Ministry of Transport and Hamilton City.

“Why they are different is their factual assessment is different from us. They’ve formed a factual assessment that a school in the area was not a reason why speed went down to 30 km/h.”

Auckland’s consultation material had included photos of children on bikes, and AT general manager of safety Teresa Burnett concedes schools were at the heart of its consultation for cutting speeds.

Some of the new signs being erected to show the new speed times near schools were being reassessed after public complaints.

AT’s chief executive Dean Kimpton told councillors: “Some of them are not particular legible and we will change those, either streamlined or we will swap out the more detailed times.”

But there could be up to 20 sites where electronic signage would need to be installed to get over the problem. “It is relatively small but it’s irritating and we will fix it.”



Photo: Getty Images

Councillor Richard Hills asked what would happen if Auckland simply declined to run the risks to children and did not increase speeds on roads as demanded by the government rule. “Someone is [going to be] responsible for all these deaths and injuries.”

Kimpton told him that would be acting illegally under a valid rule change.

But he explained speed limits were just one factor AT used in assessing the safety of its roading system.

“We feel an obligation to keep people safe. We are looking at safety as a system. Speed is one element.

“One outcome of this law is that we have more safety infrastructure on our roads, we end up spending more on capital and innovations with our road system. That’s a realistic outcome.”

When the coalition Government had directed less funding for road safety last year, the Auckland Council had chosen to hold the “local share” despite Wellington’s share reducing.

“You have the option to maintain or grow your 100 percent share in safer system outcomes,” Kimpton said.

Councillor Chris Darby, who also serves as a director of Auckland Transport, said he had been asking if there was any “wriggle room in this – is there space to check for opportunity?”.

The simple mention of a school in consultation materials had meant such roads had to be adjusted. “Did we ask for a nuanced response?”

But Scott said the new rule forcing speeds up applied to those roads where schools were even listed as ‘a’ factor, not necessarily ‘the’ factor for the lowered speed regime.

Burnett said Auckland also took a wider area around schools than some roading authorities around the country, on the belief children cycled and walked to school from some distance away.

Auckland Transport will now assess which of the 1400 roads with raised speeds from July 1 might best be subject to new consultation for another lowering.

Kimpton said it did not want to take a blanket, local board, ward, or town centre approach but would seek to engage with communities in a targeted way.

Councillor Julie Fairey even raised the prospect of another of the central government’s bugbears, orange road cones, being deployed in greater numbers to some of the now higher speed roads to assist with traffic management.

Kimpton: “It could do. It’s a function of many other things, but that’s one.”

Darby said the speed increases appeared to be more favoured by former transport minister Simeon Brown than by his successor Chris Bishop, who had indicated if communities supported lower speeds they could be kept in place.

Yet the rule was not being changed. “Those advocating for doing it the Dunedin way or Hamilton way. All those stones have been unturned. It’s not the outcome I want but it’s following the law.

“The appropriate place to wave a banner is before the Government.”

Some roads that had been able to be exempted, Kimpton said, were where the land use adjoining those roads had changed. He had been to one, in the Howick ward, (coincidentally near Simeon Brown’s electorate) that had not had its speed raised back to 50km/h.

Councillor Shane Henderson condemned the rule change “imposed from above on us in local government from central government”.

Consultation with communities from last year could not be used to re-assess speeds now. “That goes straight into the bin. That’s hopeless. I don’t know what quite to tell west Auckland primary school communities that are saying ‘our kids are unsafe and we have to have lower speeds’, but I have to tell them they can’t do that.

“Communities are not going to get the lower speed limits that they want. They will contact all of us and say ‘can you put some pressure on?’ and we’ll have to say ‘Sorry, mate, can’t’.”

Bishop told Parliament last week the Government had taken a common-sense approach, supported by most New Zealanders, to bring in variable lower speed limits for critical school traffic hours and higher speeds beyond that.

“It’s not complicated. At 4am or 6am, you shouldn’t have to artificially have to reduce your speed.”

Local road authorities could set speed limits in accordance with the new rules, requiring them to consider safety impacts.

Asked by Green transport spokesperson Julie Anne Genter if he would take responsibility for any deaths resulting from the automatic lifting of local road speeds, Bishop said. “No. I think the balance we have struck is the right one.”



Andrew Riddell

2 hours ago

The minister responsible for making roads more unsafe has now been assigned to facilitating the privatisation of our underfunded (there have been real funding cuts in the last two budgets) public health system. Another triumph of ideological blindness over evidence-based policy.



Kirk Williams

2 hours ago

Evidence – it was touted as how decisions would be made but “I disagree” is the call when evidence goes against ideology.

Wait for death and injuries then let’s see the irony of Bishop’s “we have struck the right one”!

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