

Winter Driving Procedure



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Introduction

Driving in winter can be hazardous. Before the winter months arrive organisations need to prepare their vehicles and remind their drivers of policies and procedures they are expected to follow. This advice leaflet will give an overview of some of the preparations that organisations need to make along with some guidance for drivers to ensure everyone stays safe during the winter.

Being ready

The vehicle

It is vital that vehicles are serviced regularly all through the year, but a pre-winter check is an ideal way to ensure that vehicles are in good working order before driving conditions become more difficult in winter. Essential checks should include:

- Replacing or topping up of the anti-freeze in the radiator.
- Replace the vehicle batteries if they are not reliable. The increased use of heater, air conditioning, windscreen wipers and lights will serve to drain batteries quicker.
- Making sure all lights are clean and the bulbs are in working order.
- Ensuring windscreens are clean, the screen-wash is topped up (including an antifreeze additive) and the wiper blades are not worn.
- Ensuring all tyres are in good condition, are at the correct pressure and have at least 3mm of tread (rather more than the 1mm legal minimum).

Ensuring the vehicle is properly stocked – de-icer, scraper, snow shovel, old sack or rug to put under the wheels if stuck in snow, and map or sat nav in case of unplanned diversions, etc. These items must be kept properly secured so as not to cause a hazard to driver or passengers.

- Ensuring all vehicles are provided with an instruction sheet explaining what to do in an emergency which includes break down and out of office contact numbers, emergency numbers for passengers, insurance contact number, and local police contact details etc.
- Ensuring all drivers carry a fully charged mobile phone (which must not be used whilst driving even hands free) for use in emergencies.
- Ensuring the driver is prepared in case of an emergency, including being stranded out in the cold. The driver should have available:
 - Reflective jacket
 - Gloves – fingerless gloves help keep hands warm and allow freedom of movement
 - Hand warmers
 - Extra shoes and socks
 - Long johns
 - Flask of hot drink
 - Waterproof clothing
 - Sun glasses to guard against low winter sun.

Salt and de-icers are corrosive and so can cause damage to vehicle bodywork. Organisations should consider purchasing a power washer and introducing procedures to ensure that vehicles are properly cleaned externally to remove the build-up of salt and dirt, especially the undercarriage of the vehicle which is most at risk of corrosion. When cleaning the vehicle make sure that drains in rocker panels and at the bottom of the doors are not plugged with dirt and debris and ensure that water is not going to run off and then freeze making yards and pathways dangerous.

If possible consider applying a coat of wax which will help to protect the paint work.

Examine the mud flaps and splash guards to ensure these are secure as they help to prevent mud, snow, ice and salt from building up on the undercarriage and in wheel wells. They will also help protect paint on the lower bodywork.

Drivers and Passenger Assistants

Winter driving can provide a real challenge to drivers. What with snow, ice, fog and heavy rain it is enough to make some drivers throw their hands up in defeat. This doesn't have to be the case, some knowledge of how to prepare for winter driving and a few safety tips can make the experience much more bearable and a driver far more capable.

Train to deal with adverse weather. There is no substitute for preparing drivers with hands-on winter driving lessons, but it isn't always practicable to do so for all drivers.

The Highway Code includes useful guidance, including those things a driver must do when driving in adverse weather conditions. There are on-line versions of the Highway Code for both Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Full links are given at the end of this document. The Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme (MiDAS) also includes some guidance on driving in severe weather.

Make sure that drivers and passenger assistants know when they should or shouldn't attempt to get to the depot, what to do if they are out and bad weather arrives, and what to do if they have an accident.

Office and bookings staff

Booking staff need to be aware of when they have to advise passengers 'if it snows we may have to cancel'. It is also recommended that the organisation has contingency plans in place for the following circumstances:

- If drivers can't get to work
- If weather is too bad to run services
- Is it possible to reduce / combine trips to reduce the risk of having multiple vehicles out?
- If passengers change routine (does not follow regular booking pattern) contact them to check if they are well. This contact will ensure vulnerable, isolated passengers are monitored during cold weather. If they are unwell they may need assistance or a volunteer to help with groceries, to collect medicine etc.
- Consider what trips are essential and which could be postponed e.g. social vs medical for example.

Watch the weather and road conditions

Organisations need to be aware of the changing weather conditions. The Met Office Website, www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/uk, provides excellent information. The weather map can be searched by a region, such as Northern Ireland and then by location, such as Larne, and even provides a postcode search.

Know what routes are priorities for clearance in snow and which will be left untouched.

Winter Conditions

During the winter transport operations will likely be able to continue as normal most of the time, however, there are a few things that are worth considering.

Ensure lights and heaters etc. are switched off before starting the engine. This will help to reduce strain on the battery.

Heat the vehicle and de-mist windows and mirrors

Condensation occurs when the inside of the windows are at a different temperature to the outside of the windows. The interior of the vehicle heats up when people are inside, breathing warm air out and when the heating is on. To remove condensation quickly, if the vehicle has 'air con' then drivers should run the air conditioner for a few minutes and turn off the air circulation option. The air conditioner, whether it is set to cold or hot will help to dry out the inside of the vehicle. Drivers should point dash air vents towards passenger and driver's door windows to help keep clear and give them a clear view of wing mirrors.

If the vehicle lacks 'air con', drivers should set the heating as high and warm as possible to clear the windscreen quickly. Opening the windows can help if the moisture is taking too long to clear from the glass, but the heating must be on.

Warming the vehicle is also beneficial for the passengers. Give the heater time to create a warmer environment for your customers. Be aware of running heating too long though when there are a number of passengers on board. Being too hot can make passengers feel uncomfortable and/or unwell. A driver in an overly warm vehicle may also begin to feel drowsy. Using a passenger lift and opening doors allows heat to escape. Be aware of other passengers comfort and ensure doors are only open when needed.

Drivers and passenger assistants need warm clothing suitable for working both within the vehicle and outside. Consideration should also be given to emergency situations where the vehicle heating may fail or the driver has to wait with a stranded vehicle.

Warm clothing, a hot drink and keeping moving are good ways to fight the cold in these circumstances. Passengers should be reminded at the time of booking to wrap up warm.

Damp clothing can create condensation. Ensure ventilation is used to keep windows and mirrors free from fog.

Wet floors / lift platforms

Carry a cloth or mop to dry flooring, steps and passenger lift to reduce the risk of slips and falls in the vehicle.

Dark mornings / nights and low sun

Ensure drivers are properly equipped with high visibility clothing.

Low dazzling sun can also be a problem. Sun glasses can help, but they must be removed when it goes darker. Any scratches and smears on the windscreen will enhance the glare from the low sun.

Additional points for Adverse Winter Conditions

Vulnerable passengers need to be considered by all staff and volunteers during a cold snap. There is a higher risk of slips and falls, therefore care must be taken to avoid mishaps.

Community Transport (CT) is all about the community and the people we serve to assist. By considering the needs of passengers CT makes a difference and continues to be the caring and dedicated service passengers appreciate.

Drivers must drive defensively, being aware of what is happening around the vehicle, planning their actions, anticipating what other drivers are going to do as well as controlling their own vehicle. By being aware of what other road users are doing will allow your drivers to plan what they are going to do. This will allow them to ensure they do not have to brake late, accelerate harshly or have to stop and start unnecessarily. This is especially important in bad weather conditions as a sudden stop may cause their vehicle to slide and the driver may lose control.

Allow longer for journeys. Slower and steady, leaving a good gap to the vehicle in front is better than risking not being able to stop and skidding.

Heavy rain

Heavy rain can reduce visibility and substantially increase stopping distances. The driver should slow down and increase the distance to the vehicle in front. In an extremely heavy downpour it may be advisable to pull over, if it is safe to do so and wait until the cloud burst passes. If the vehicle breaks down in heavy rain the driver shouldn't leave the engine exposed while waiting for assistance because the electrics will get soaked making it difficult to start again.

Floods and standing water

Drivers should only proceed through water if they know it's not too deep for the vehicle, allowing on-coming traffic to go through first. Driving slowly and steadily will avoid creating a bow wave and will reduce the risk of causing damage to the vehicle.

Consideration also needs to be given to any pedestrians or cyclists. Driving through standing water at speed can cause tyres to lose proper contact with the road – 'aquaplaning'. If this happens the driver needs to take their foot off the accelerator to slow down. Braking and steering needs to be very gentle due to loss of control.

Brakes must always be tested at the earliest safe opportunity after driving through water by gently pressing down on the brake pedal. If not fully effective, the driver should continue to brake gently while driving slowly to dry them out.

Snow and ice

While it would be advisable to avoid driving in snowy or icy conditions, if a party of passengers have already been dropped off, they will expect to be collected even if it is snowing.

The Highway Code states that drivers must be able to see out of the vehicle, so they must clear all snow and ice from windows. Ensuring they have ice scrapers and de-icer will assist them to do this, though scrapers should be used with care to avoid getting scratches on the windscreen. Snow must be cleared from lights, and number plates must be clearly visible and legible. It is also advisable to remove all the snow from the rest of the vehicle to prevent it falling off once moving either down the windscreen or into the path of other road users.

Before boarding the vehicle the driver needs to knock ice and snow from their shoes, or change into a snow free pair. This will ensure that ice is not brought into the vehicle and reduces the chances of shoes slipping off pedals whilst driving.

Windscreen wipers need to be switched off before turning the engine off. In frosty weather the blades can stick to the windscreen which can damage motor and blades when the engine is next turned on.

Coordinators and drivers should plan routes to favour major roads more likely to have been gritted and drivers need to be aware that they should not ignore road closed signs.

It is better to drive in a way that avoids skidding rather than hope to control one.

Drivers should take the following into account:

- Gentle manoeuvres are vital to safe driving in snow and ice.
- Allow lots of extra space to the vehicle in front.
- When going uphill it is important to avoid having to stop, so waiting until it is clear or leaving plenty of space to the vehicle in front can help maintaining a steady constant speed.
- Before going downhill reduce speed to avoid using the brakes as much as possible.
- Where braking is required they need to be applied very gently and in plenty of time.
- Steering should be done gently.

If the vehicle does skid the driver should remain calm and ease off the brake and/or accelerator and steer in the direction of the skid, i.e. if the rear of the vehicle skids to the right, steer to the right. Passengers may need to be reassured as some may be shaken by the incident.

If the vehicle becomes stuck the driver should straighten out the wheels and clear snow from around them. An old sack or rug placed in front of the driving wheels can help to

give the tyres some grip. Once moving again the driver needs to keep going steadily until the vehicle reaches firmer ground.

Drivers and passenger assistants need to be careful and assist passengers to board and alight the vehicle. Icy or wet conditions will increase the risk of slips and falls.

Vehicles need to be parked so passengers are not stepping onto icy ground. Refer to MiDAS for advice on passenger boarding and alighting. If there is a high risk of slips and falls the driver and passenger assistant need to work together to transfer the passenger between home/destination and vehicle. Other passengers disembarking or waiting to be collected should be asked to wait for assistance. If a passenger does slip and fall, drivers and passenger assistants need to follow MiDAS and PATS (Passenger Assistant Training Scheme) guidance on assisting passengers. The office should have emergency contact details for all passengers and can inform family or friends if they are going to be delayed.

If stranded, as far as possible, the driver needs to ensure the vehicle doesn't cause an obstruction.

Fog

Drivers must use dipped headlights when visibility is seriously reduced. Front and rear fog lights should also be used, but they must be switched off when visibility improves as they dazzle other road users and can obscure brake lights.

Fog can make the road wet and slippery. Plenty of space needs to be left between vehicles, and drivers should remember that fog might be patchy, giving clear driving one minute and very poor visibility the next.

Where visibility is severely impaired, drivers should switch off distracting noise such as radios and ask passengers for quiet whilst keeping a window open especially at junctions to listen as well as look for on-coming traffic.

In poor visibility, including fog and falling snow, following the lights of the vehicle in front can cause the driver to get too close.

Strong wind

Strong wind makes driving more difficult and can cause even small vehicles to be blown off course, especially on fast and exposed roads. It also adds additional stress and is tiring for the driver.

Summary

Winter driving can bring with it additional risks, but taking sensible precautions can go a long way to ensuring that journeys remain as safe as possible.

Other Reading

Links

The Highways Agency has useful advice on driving in severe weather at <http://www.highways.gov.uk/knowledge/19654.aspx>

The Highway Code for GB can be found on line at <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/TravelAndTransport/Highwaycode/index.htm>

The Highway Code for Northern Ireland can be found on line at <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/motoring/thehighway-code-index-page.htm>

How to drive safely in extreme weather guidance from Direct.gov can be found at http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/TravelAndTransport/Usingmotorwaysandroads/Breakdownsdrivingconditions/DG_185021

The Met Office - www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/uk

Information about MiDAS and PATs can be found on the CTA web site at www.ctauk.org.

The AA - http://www.theaa.com/motoring_advice/seasonal/winter_motoring.html

Institute of Advanced Motorists have a downloadable winter driving guide at <http://www.drivingadvice.org.uk/free-winter-driving-guide/>.