

Blue Lights - Don't panic!!



You're driving along, thinking of the shopping list, your day's plan or singing to the radio, when suddenly you're aware of sirens and blue lights. Maybe your heart rate rises? Maybe you suddenly are overcome with a sense of responsibility and awareness that you could be slowing up a potentially lifesaving response? As a blue light driver, I honestly couldn't tell you what is going through other drivers' minds!

I've had vehicles not notice and carry on eyes forwards, drivers who stop with no notice or consideration to other road users or hazards, some will dive left some will dive right and some will just pull out in front of you for no apparent reason. There are also some very good considerate drivers that really help with me making progress.

As a Fire Officer and Hazardous Materials Advisor, I respond to incidents across the old County of Avon and neighbouring services. I started my career as a Firefighter so have also sat in fire engines though never got to drive one! All emergency response drivers do an Emergency Response Driving (ERD) course and assessment. In the Fire Service this was three weeks (two, if you've driven fire engines). Car and Fire engine ERD are separate qualifications. The course is very intensive and starts with basic safe and correct driving and undoing all the bad habits we all pick up! My intensive course involved driving around Tesco car park to practice correct steering whilst the instructor sat on a deck chair eating his lunch!

The first thing I learnt was I was not a good driver! After a week of steering and mirrors, you start response driving. The aim is progress not speed! As response drivers we are exempt from certain rules such as:

- speed limits
- bus lanes
- red lights
- keep left signs



However, we are NOT allowed to:

- cross double white lines unless passing a cycle or road maintenance vehicle or a stationary vehicle.
- go the wrong way around a roundabout
- go against a one way / no entry.

The double white line one is so misunderstood. So often drivers will slow right down but keep moving not understanding why I am not passing, so if you find yourself in this position please keep moving until a safe place to pull over or stop is available.

So, what can you do as a responsible driver?

I would say number one is use your mirrors! A lot!



If you see a blue light behind, you should find a safe place where there is safe distance and view for a vehicle to pass and indicate and pull over. I always feel reassured to see the indicator on as it indicates the driver has seen me and has intentionally pulled over. What happens a lot, is a car pulls over or stops and the car driver behind hasn't used their mirrors and pulls out around them as I am overtaking.

We are also taught to drive on the offside, so be aware that a blue light may be heading for you on your side of the road. If it is safe to do so, indicate pull over and stop. Take note of what is happening on the other side of the road as often both sides will stop with no gap in between for me to pass. Also, all road users, please don't use headphones, with loud music! Scooters, bikes etc are a real hazard for us, especially when they are not aware of our presence. I have been stuck behind cars and vans because the driver has headphones on and didn't hear me.

Red lights - we treat red lights as a "give way", so we still have to check it is clear. Please be aware on a traffic control roundabout or junction, that when you are on a green light just a quick check that no emergency vehicle is coming through. If a line of traffic is at a red light we will hold back and turn off sirens and or lights. This is because we do not want to push people through red lights. You will still get prosecuted if you go through a red light even if it is to allow an emergency vehicle to pass. If there is space to move over and not go through the light that's great, but if not we will wait and then turn everything back on when the lights change so be ready for us to come through.

Bus lanes are also still enforceable, so please don't go into them. We can use them and in town that'll often be my "go-to" lane.

Speed limits are the same, so please don't break them. If there is not a safe place to stop or pull over, please just make steady safe progress until there is.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and if it prevents a ticket for you, I hope it's been worth it! Happy safe motoring!

Anna James

