



Driving Standards

This information includes the use of audible and visual warnings

Due to the ever increasing demands from the public for emergency assistance, frequently ambulance crews will be responding to emergency calls using both their visual and audible warning devices. It is a legal requirement for the responding emergency vehicle to provide the public with the maximum protection by affording them exposure to all warning equipment that is fitted to the vehicle.

What happens when an ambulance response vehicle is travelling under emergency conditions?

Visual and audible warning devices are activated during an emergency response only.

Vehicles can be mobilised from North West Ambulance Service (NWAS) stations and hospitals, they may also be activated whilst travelling to a location or from a locally agreed strategic standby point.

The use of visual and audible warning devices is to protect road users, pedestrians and our staff. All NWAS staff who drive emergency vehicles are expected to have a sound knowledge of the Highway Code and Road Traffic Law and in particular the law that relates to emergency response driving. They should always drive in a manner that demonstrates to other road users their skill and knowledge of good driving standards.

Do visual and audible warnings have to be activated on all emergencies?

Emergency warning equipment must be activated for the duration of the journey except between the hours of 23:00 and 07:00, when activation is at the driver's discretion. If there is any reasonable expectation of the presence of others, either seen or not seen, who would benefit from the exposure to the warning given by sirens, then audible emergency warning equipment will be utilised.

Why are sirens necessary?

As part of its role, NWAS staff have a duty to provide the maximum protection to all other road users and pedestrians. When ambulances are being driven at speeds exceeding recognised limits during a response to an emergency 999 call, audible warning equipment is used not only to protect our staff, but also other road users and pedestrians.

An exception to this is on the approach to a vehicular obstruction where progress is temporarily hindered, i.e. road junction temporarily blocked by stationary vehicles, or in the presence of animals e.g. horses whereby the use of the equipment is not proportionate to the potential danger it may cause in disturbing the animals. This is further justified by the need to significantly reduce road speeds in this situation. In these circumstances, audible equipment will be turned off with emergency lighting remaining active. Once passage can be resumed or the hazard has passed, the audible warnings will be reactivated.

The Trust's legal position

The NWSA's Trust's legal position with regards to emergency driving is that for the drivers of ambulance vehicles to claim their legal road traffic law exemptions, emergency warning equipment, both audible and visual, must be activated for the duration of the journey, except when progress is temporarily hindered. Once passage can be resumed, the audible warnings will be re-activated.

Road traffic law exemptions do not just apply to warning other road users when driving in excess of the recognised speed limits, but also include the negotiation of hazards within the road configuration such as traffic signals, round-a-bouts, corners, bends, road narrowing etc. Ambulances are permitted to pass on the wrong side of keep left/right signs, if progress is likely to be hindered, and no danger is caused to other vehicles.

All NWSA staff have no legal exemption to drive in any other way than safely.

What training do emergency response staff receive?

All emergency response staff who are expected to claim legal exemptions, whilst undertaking emergency response driving activities, must successfully complete a three week advanced (BTEC) accredited road craft course which includes emergency response driving. In addition, staff who operate the Rapid Response Vehicles (cars) have to successfully complete a further two day programme in emergency response driving in a 'B' category (car) course.
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Are the driving skills of emergency response staff re-assessed?

Driving skills are re-assessed in compliance with the imminent enactment of Section 29 of the Road Safety Act, which is every 3-5 years. In addition to this, all emergency response staff are re-assessed if they are absent from work for over a 6 month period or involved in certain categories of road traffic collision. They are also referred by their managers if concerns are raised about their driving standards.

Why are ambulance sirens so loud?

The purpose of using emergency warning equipment is to provide sufficient warning to all other road users and pedestrians.

Siren units on NWSA ambulance vehicles comply with European approved standards (E marked) and are compliant with current legislation.

Why was the ambulance abandoned and causing an obstruction?

Where possible our staff try and park in a suitable location to avoid obstruction. Sometimes however it is necessary for them to park in close vicinity to a property to allow access and egress to the vehicle.

From time to time, it may be necessary to use a stretcher to transport a patient and at these times, the vehicle will need a four meter clearance to use the lift or ramp on the vehicle for stretcher access.