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Fit to tow?

Towing on motorways and major A-roads requires the upmost care and attention - without which congestion and additional delays can follow. Here the Highways Agency talks about how towing incidents can affect its network and what it is doing to reduce their likelihood

When embarking on a long journey, it can be tempting to throw all the luggage in the back of the car and get on the road as soon as possible.

But taking the same unmeasured approach when towing vehicles, such as caravans, trailers or horseboxes, has the potential to cause serious disruption on England's motorways and major A-roads.

The Highways Agency says incidents involving towed vehicles can often take longer to clear from the network, resulting in more traffic management measures and greater delays to journeys for other road users.

As part of its fit to tow campaign, it is urging all drivers to make essential safety and maintenance checks before setting out on journeys involving towed vehicles.

Unlike most operators, the Agency operates an open network, accommodating every vehicle that wants to use its roads. This inevitably means it is vulnerable to disruption when vehicles break down, crash or lose their loads.

Congestion on the network is estimated to cost the economy around £3 billion a year - so it is a priority for the Agency to respond to incidents as soon as possible and deploy resources to get vehicles and debris cleared.

However some incidents involving towed vehicles can provide a particular challenge.

"An incident involving a caravan for example does tend to take longer to clear because of the amount of debris involved," Roselynn Drew, an operations manager from the Agency's north west region, says.

"If one overturns, it can leave debris, like fibre-glass or plastic, scattered across all lanes."

"But the biggest problem we have is that drivers very often do not have breakdown cover and caravans or trailers that have remained dormant for a number of months, without checks, are taken on to the roads and motorways and end up with an issue."

"Drivers are often unsure of how to rectify the situation themselves and remain on the hard shoulder for a longer period of time than perhaps other vehicles would, which can become an issue for us."

In 2013 there were 5,480 incidents involving trailers and caravans on the Agency's network of motorways and A-roads, the majority of them breakdowns. Over 4,000 of these - almost 75 per cent of all incidents - happened between April and September.

Deploying resources

Horsebox incidents in particular can require the Agency to deploy extra resources and often demand additional lane closures to enable the safe removal of the animals and the vehicles. This inevitably leads to delays for other road users.

"Incidents concerning horseboxes or trailers with livestock can become complicated," Roselynn adds.

"In the interests of safety for all we will often close the carriageways in both directions because there is a possibility that an animal may run loose and could easily jump over the central reserve and onto the opposite carriageway."

"To carry out the closures in both directions we will also require additional resources preventing those traffic officers from attending other incidents on the network during this time."

"Indeed, due to the nature of the incident, it could be that the officers have to remain at the scene for a number of hours before it is safely cleared."

The Agency is working closely with the British Horse Society, the Caravan Club and the Camping and Caravanning Club to promote safety messages to their memberships. In fact, the Agency has two memorandum of understandings

with the caravan clubs and meets them twice a year to review areas of common interest – as well as ensuring they have the most up to date safety information.

The Agency also advises drivers to plan their journeys effectively and this has been emphasised through the clubs' magazines and websites. The planning information provided includes the real-time updates available through the Highways Agency's website, providing information on traffic conditions and any traffic incidents on the strategic road network.

Historically, the Agency's traffic officers have assisted the police in providing advice at motorway service stations covering safety checks on trailers and caravans – and the clubs will be travelling with some of the officers this summer to collect live footage of towing on the network.

Service delivery manager at the Agency, Andy Withington, says: ***"This spring and summer many people will be hitching up their caravans and trailers for the first time since autumn so we're asking them to take time to ensure they are fit to tow before going on the road."***

"Although high speed incidents involving towing can be serious, the majority of problems we encounter are breakdowns which can be avoided with routine checks and maintenance."

"It is also vital that drivers plan their journeys before setting off and while on their trip pay attention to overhead signs and listen to local radio stations which provide warnings of any disruption along the route they are taking." ➔

How to be 'fit to tow'

Paperwork

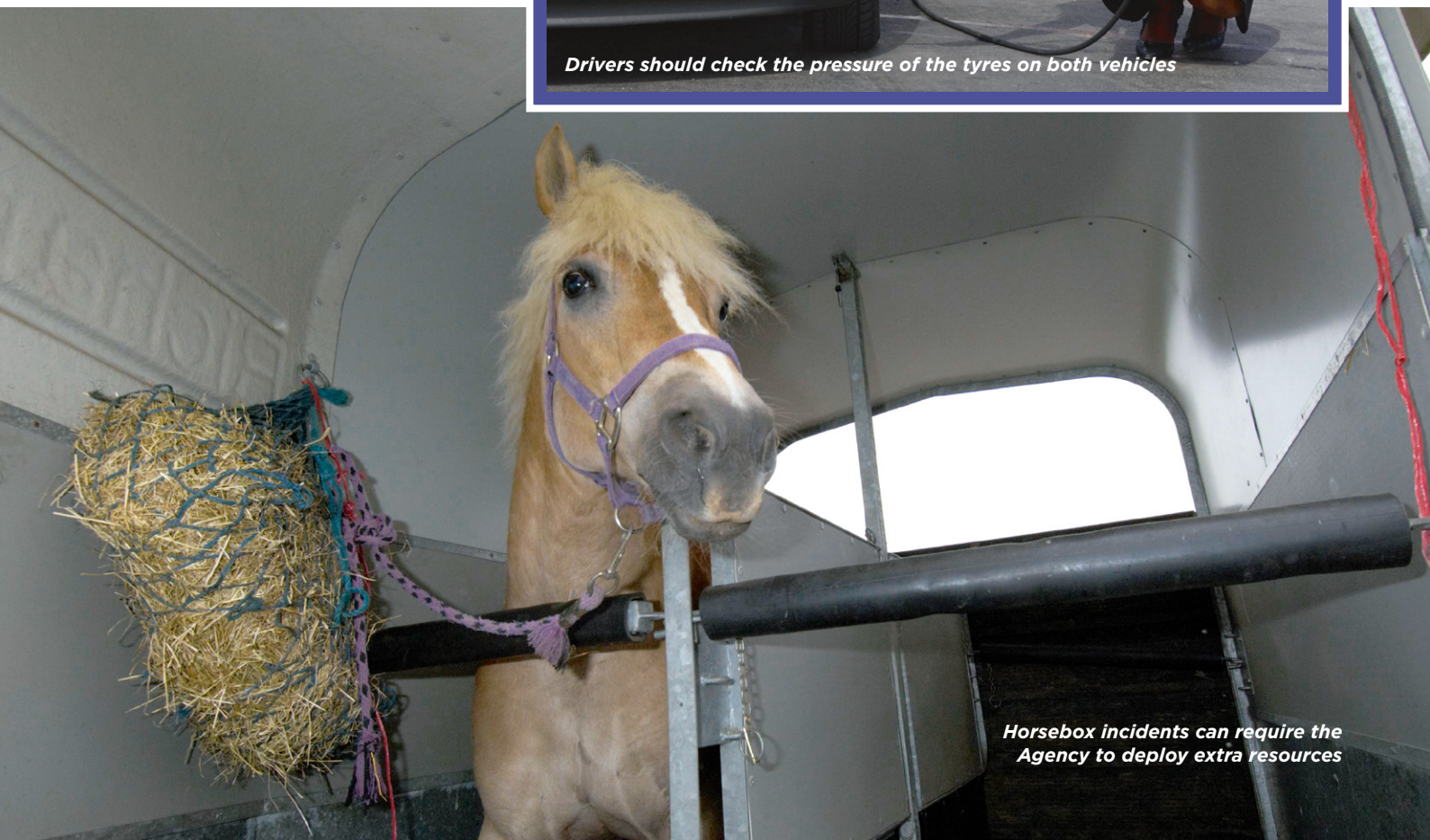
- ➔ Drivers should ensure they have the right breakdown/recovery cover and are insured for what they are towing
- ➔ The right driving licence is essential: A basic category B licence (post 1997) allows you to drive a vehicle of up to 3.5 tonnes and tow a trailer of up to 750kg. This varies from a normal category B licence where more than 750kg can be towed provided the gross weight of the trailer does not exceed the unladen weight of the towing vehicle. The maximum combination weight should not exceed 3.5 tonnes.

Maintenance and safety

- ➔ A final maintenance check should be made before setting off
- ➔ Attention should be paid to the condition and pressure of the tyres on both vehicles
- ➔ The vehicle and load should be secure and the weight evenly distributed
- ➔ Drivers should be aware of how towing affects the vehicle's performance, particularly braking distances
- ➔ Extended mirrors should be used to ensure clear visibility of the trailer and other vehicles on the road
- ➔ Drivers should be aware of the correct speed limits for different roads and adhere to them
- ➔ Drivers towing boats should take care to keep the hubs of their trailers out of cold water as this can stop the grease working and lead to failed bearings.



Drivers should check the pressure of the tyres on both vehicles



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