

Get wise to using electric scooters and wheelchairs



A Highway Code for users

Why should we have a Highway Code for electric scooters and wheelchairs

The idea comes from watching some of the silly things people do on such vehicles, and some equally silly things I have done myself, while using my own scooter.

When I had my first driving lesson the instructor said to me "When in charge of a car you are in charge of a potentially lethal weapon". To claim a scooter or wheelchair falls in the same category would be a bit dramatic, but it is still possible to do considerable damage to yourself or others.

Which Highway Code category do wheelchair/scooter drivers come into?

The categories of road users in the Highway Code are pedestrians, cyclists, motor cyclists and motorists. As a wheelchair/scooter user you don't really fit any of these categories. You may however partly fit any of them.

Road or footpath?

Some wheelchairs/scooters can only be driven safely on the road. This does not always make it **safe** to do so. To drive safely on the road it is advisable to have a vehicle capable of doing 6/8 miles an hour, equipped with headlights, rear lights, flashing indicators and a horn. Even with all this you may not use dual carriageways unless you also have an additional flashing beacon light and you are not permitted to use bus lanes or cycle tracks.

Under NO circumstances is it permissible for scooters or wheelchairs to be driven on motorways.

General points to consider before buying your vehicle

Make sure you are able and fit to use it safely.

It is usually possible to get advice through your local Social Services or Occupational Health Service. You need to be able to:

- **See** well enough to be safe.
- Adequately control your vehicle and do all the possible manoeuvres, such as reversing, climbing and descending kerbs and turning safely.
- Cross busy roads. This is not as easy on a scooter/wheelchair as on foot.
- Know the rules of safety and consideration for yourself and other people.

It is important to arrange for your local Occupational Therapist Department or any reputable dealer to assess and advise you. This true even if you have driven a car previously, as it is very different from driving a scooter/wheelchair. If in doubt as to whom to ask, call the BHTA on 020 7702 2141.

Insurance

At present there is no overall legal obligation about insurance, though some finance companies insist on it. Nevertheless it is a very good idea to make sure you are covered for fire and theft, accidental and malicious damage, and **Third Party Damages** – just in case.

Comfort and Safety

Make sure your vehicle is the right one for you. Get advice when choosing and watch for things like seat and handle positions and height. It is important you are comfortable and in full control of your vehicle. The reasons for choosing three or four wheeled vehicles are varied and depend on many factors such as your weight, size and height, weight of chair for lifting and quality of your roads. You need to be extremely careful when ascending and descending kerbs and when turning, as if this is not done carefully and properly the scooter will tip.

Range

The manufacturer's literature will tell you the range of your vehicle **but remember** this is a guide only. Generally they tell you the range if driven on the level on a smooth surface and when the batteries are **new**. Few people would want to drive round a smooth car park for 20-25 miles! Rough surfaces, hills, gradients, cold weather, kerbs and carrying a load of shopping will all reduce the distance you can do without charging your batteries. Recharge your batteries according to the manufacturers' instructions.

Do not be too ambitious where distance is concerned.

Consider joining the AA or a similar organisation

The AA has a special membership package for wheelchair/scooter users. They will not try to do road side repairs, but will get you and your vehicle home.

Consider investing in a mobile phone

Some service providers will provide a special low rate for occasional users who need the phone for possible emergencies. (I once sat, broken down, in a busy subway, with people passing all around me, for nearly an hour before someone was willing to go and phone the AA for me! Had I had a mobile phone it would have been much easier).

Speed limits

On the footpath the limit is 4mph (6.4kph) whatever the capacity of your vehicle. On the road it is 8mph (12.6kph). If driving a Class 3 vehicle on the pavement it must be switched to 4mph mode.

Carrying loads

Do not overload. It may make the vehicle unstable and reduce its range. Place heavy loads inboard – in the middle – not behind the back wheel which can lighten the steering or can cause the front end to lift off the road on a bump, and not at the front which might make steering heavy.

Watch your brakes

Never try to drive, or even sit on your vehicle while it is in "free wheel". The electronic brake will be out of action and the vehicle could run away with you.

Maintenance

Do get your vehicle serviced regularly according to manufacturers' advice.

Tyres

Keep tyres at the pressure recommended by the manufacturer. They will last longer and be safer. Replace when they become worn.

Lights

Check bulbs regularly and replace when needed, use your lights frequently, at dusk onwards, on a dull or rainy day.

Sensible guidelines for safety

When using the footpath – Just because you are on a footpath or pedestrian precinct does not make you a pedestrian. If you are on a motorised vehicle you are no longer a pedestrian.

Remember pedestrians always have right of way!

Many people on foot will be kind and helpful to drivers of a wheelchair/scooter. But not everyone!

In a crowded precinct or market area, or footpath, it is your responsibility to ensure you do not run into anyone or do any harm with your vehicle. While many people will make way for you, you cannot expect everyone to do so. Some will appear to not even realise you are there. They will climb round and even over your vehicle rather than allow you room to move.

Do not yield to the temptation to ram them!

When climbing or descending kerbs – Always approach at right angles, with your front wheels straight on the kerb. In some power chairs it is necessary to descend high kerbs backwards.

Do not try to climb or descend kerbs higher than the manufacturer recommends. Move carefully, to avoid traumatic bumps – to yourself or your vehicle.

Watch out for

Children – They may well run in front of you without warning. You may only be moving very slowly, but you could still injure a child.

Elderly People – They may be unable to quickly move aside to let you pass. Give way to them.

Disabled people on foot – Give them space and time.

Other motorised vehicle users – You may be doing all the right things. This does not guarantee they will do likewise.

When you need help

You may need to ask people to open doors for you. I have found that most people are willing to help, if asked politely. Don't struggle to do the impossible or even the very difficult things when there are people around who would help if asked.

Driving inside shops and buildings

This is where you have the advantage over car users! Not many supermarkets would welcome a car driving round their store. But bigger shops and even some quite small ones are accessible to wheelchairs and scooters.

Once inside the store it is **your responsibility** to drive safely and not damage the fittings, the stock, or hurt other shoppers or store workers. You may need to ask for help. Again in most cases people are willing if asked properly. Don't risk pulling down a whole display to reach the top shelf. Ask for help.

Speed in shops and buildings – Reduce it!

It is a good idea to set the speed control to a lower level to avoid any accident. Be especially careful if you need to reverse, that your way is clear of shop fittings and people. Three wheeled scooters with their manoeuvrability and lightness of steering are more suited to shopping.

On the road

Remember you are not driving a car, but a very small and slow vehicle, which is therefore more vulnerable.

If it is possible, use the footpath. It is wise to avoid using roads, particularly busy ones.

When driving your vehicle on the road

Remember although this is legal for all vehicles it is not always safe or sensible to do so. You are responsible for your own safety and that of other road users. The normal rules of the road apply – but modified.

You must observe the law about:

- Driving on the left side of the road. Never drive against the traffic.
- One way streets – Never drive against the traffic.
- Giving way where cars would give way (details in the Highway Code).
- Obeying traffic lights and all other road signals and instructions.
- Giving way to pedestrians on crossings.

But always remember your vehicle is not a car and is small and vulnerable.

If you need to turn right across traffic, try to get on to the footpath before the turn and then use a safe pedestrian crossing or traffic light control crossing. Only try to turn right if you are completely sure it is safe to do so. Do not rely on your mirror. It may give a false impression of distance. Always give clear indication of intention to turn left or right.

Remember – The car you can see when you look behind may appear a long way away, but it is almost certainly moving faster than you are – often deceptively so. It could well be upon you before you complete your manoeuvre. And it may not be able to stop in time.

When passing a parked vehicle – take great care you are not moving into the path of a faster moving vehicle coming behind you, or towards you. **Always signal** your intention to pull out.

In the event of a difficult or dangerous situation –

Use your hazard lights – But do not drive with them on unnecessarily.

BHTA would like to extend our thanks to the author of this booklet, Miss Godfree, whose initiative made it possible for this literature to be produced.

The BHTA represent almost 500 companies, all of whom commit to the BHTA Code of Practice, the only one in this industry to be approved by The Chartered Trading Standards Institute. BHTA member companies operate to higher standards of customer protection than the law requires.

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