

Why Vans Require a Different Driving Training Approach

Within most mixed fleets in the Essential Services sector, panel vans form the backbone of daily operations. However, the majority of drivers operating them will have passed their driving test in a vehicle that offers full, all-round visibility and a clear rearward view through a back window.

Standard panel vans are fundamentally different. With no rear seats and often no rear side windows, rear visibility is severely restricted or, in many cases, non-existent. As a result, drivers must rely much more heavily on wing mirrors, correct observation techniques, and where fitted, technology such as reversing cameras, parking sensors, and blind-spot monitoring systems.

Consequently, many drivers transitioning from passenger cars into larger, less visually transparent vehicles require additional guidance and structured training. Without this support, the change in vehicle type can increase the risk of low-speed collisions and reversing incidents.

Driving a van is not simply a matter of operating a larger version of a car. There are important differences, not just as mentioned in visibility, but vehicle weight, dimensions, and load behaviour, all of which affect how the vehicle responds on the road. These factors become more critical in busy urban environments, where tight streets, frequent stops, and vulnerable road users demand greater awareness and precision.

Understanding Size, Weight and Stopping Distances

Even an empty panel van is substantially heavier than a typical passenger vehicle, and once loaded, braking distances



increase considerably.

This has immediate implications in everyday driving. Tailgating becomes significantly more hazardous, particularly in urban traffic where sudden stops are common. Maintaining a greater following distance is not simply good practice, it is essential for maintaining control and avoiding rear-end collisions, which remain one of the most common incident types in van fleets.

Acceleration and cornering characteristics also change under load. A van carrying tools, equipment or goods will respond more slowly to throttle inputs and require more time to settle through bends. Drivers who fail to adjust their expectations often find themselves braking later and harder than is ideal for both safety and fuel efficiency.

Spatial Awareness and Vehicle Dimensions

Unlike cars, vans demand a heightened level of spatial awareness. High rooflines, longer wheelbases and extended rear overhangs all increase risk when navigating tight streets, car parks and work sites.

Height restrictions are a particular risk area, especially when entering car parks or commercial sites. While signage is generally clear, drivers under time pressure may misjudge clearances, leading to avoidable and often costly incidents. Turning circles are also wider than many drivers expect, meaning multi-

point turns and careful positioning are frequently required in confined environments.

Mirror usage is therefore critical. Blind spots are larger and more numerous, particularly along the nearside and directly behind the vehicle. Regular mirror checks, combined with correct adjustment before setting off, are essential habits that should be embedded within any fleet training programme.

Loading, Balance and Vehicle Stability

How a van is loaded has a direct impact on how it drives. Uneven or poorly secured loads can shift during acceleration, braking or cornering, altering the vehicle's centre of gravity and increasing the risk of instability.

Heavier items should always be placed low and as far forward as practical, with lighter items secured on top. This helps maintain balance and reduces the likelihood of load movement affecting handling. Loading should always be carried out with care, and many modern fleet vehicles are now equipped with purpose-built racking systems designed to prevent movement and secure equipment during transit.

Bulkheads and load restraint systems are not simply compliance features, they are critical safety systems. They prevent cargo from entering the cab in the event

of sudden braking or a collision and help maintain predictable vehicle behaviour under load. Regular inspection of securing equipment should form part of a driver's daily vehicle checks.

Reversing and Low-Speed Manoeuvring

A significant proportion of van incidents occur at low speeds, particularly during reversing manoeuvres in depots, construction sites and residential areas.

Even with modern reversing sensors and 360-degree camera systems, these aids should be treated as support tools rather than substitutes for observation.

Where possible, reversing should be planned rather than improvised. Taking time to assess the space before moving can significantly reduce the risk of collisions with pedestrians, vehicles or fixed objects.

It is also important that all low-impact collisions are reported to the fleet manager and properly recorded, however minor the damage may appear. While these incidents may seem insignificant in isolation, they can provide valuable insight when reviewed collectively.

Patterns such as repeated kerb strikes, low-speed scrapes or reversing impacts can indicate that a driver may benefit from additional training or targeted support. Accurate reporting and consistent recording therefore play a key role in identifying risk early, improving driver standards and preventing more serious incidents.

Urban Pressure and Time Constraints

Van drivers often operate under tight schedules, particularly in service and delivery roles. This can create pressure to take risks, including parking in unsuitable locations or completing rushed manoeuvres.

From a fleet safety perspective, this is a key concern. Many incidents are not caused

by a lack of skill, but by behavioural adaptation to time pressure.

Training that reflects operational reality, while reinforcing safe driving standards, is typically more effective than purely theoretical instruction.

Fuel Efficiency and Driving Style

Driving style has a clear and measurable impact on van fuel consumption. Harsh acceleration, high engine speeds and excessive idling all increase operating costs over time. By contrast, smooth throttle inputs, early gear changes and anticipation of traffic flow can significantly improve efficiency without reducing productivity.

For electric vans, these principles translate into energy management. Regenerative braking, steady speed control and effective route planning all contribute to maximising range, particularly in stop-start urban conditions.

The Fleet Perspective

From a fleet management standpoint, van-specific driver training is one of the most effective ways to reduce incident rates and improve operational consistency. Light commercial vehicles are often among the most heavily used assets in a fleet, yet they are frequently the least formally trained for.

Investing in structured van driver training supports not only safety outcomes, but also improved vehicle care, reduced downtime and better fuel efficiency. In many cases, it also enhances driver confidence, particularly for those new to larger vehicles.

Ultimately, safe and efficient van driving is about adaptation. Understanding how size, weight and load affect vehicle behaviour allows drivers to operate with greater awareness and control. For fleets, that translates into fewer incidents, lower costs and more reliable day-to-day operations. ●



"Reversing isn't routine — it's one of the highest-risk manoeuvres for any van driver."

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