Driving for Better Business

AN AWARD-WINNING FREE PROGRAMME FROM national highways

Reducing the risk of vehicle-caused wildfires

A briefing for van and truck drivers and their employers

Why this matters

Hot exhausts, catalytic converters and brakes can set fire to dry grass, gorse and heathland. A vehicle does not need to catch fire itself. Parking or driving over dry ground can be enough to start one, and the fire may not show itself until hours later.

Advice for drivers

Where you park and stop

- Do not park on dry grass, heather or verges, even for a short stop. The underside of your vehicle can be over 400°C.
- Choose hard standing where you can. If you must pull off-road, check the ground first.
- Move on quickly and raise the alarm if you smell burning or see smoke near where you have stopped.

Vehicle checks

- Report any exhaust leaks, loose heat shields or fault warnings straight away. A damaged exhaust throws heat and sparks in unexpected places.
- Check for a build-up of dry grass, leaves or straw around the exhaust, catalytic converter and DPF (diesel particulate filter). This can smoulder and catch light later, even after you have driven away.
- Check tyre pressures before every journey. A soft tyre flexes more, builds up heat and can fail or shed rubber onto dry ground.
- Treat any tyre running hot to the touch as a fault, not a curiosity. Report it and get it checked before the next trip.
- Report any pulling to one side, a burning smell or a wheel that feels hot after a short drive. This can mean a brake is binding and dragging constantly, even without hard braking.
- Do not ignore a handbrake that feels stiff to release. Get it looked at the same day.
- Report flickering lights, a smell of burning plastic or anything that trips a fuse repeatedly. These are early warning signs, not minor annoyances.
- Watch for signs of overheating brakes, especially on long descents. Dragging brakes or a stuck calliper get hot enough to ignite dry vegetation.

Behaviour

- Never throw cigarettes, matches or other burning material from the cab.
- Never throw bottles, cans or any glass from the cab. Broken glass can act like a lens and focus sunlight onto dry grass or leaves, starting a fire hours later with nobody nearby. The same applies to other curved reflective litter, such as foil or some plastics.
- Take all rubbish with you and bin it properly. This is a simple rule that is easy to brief and easy to check.

- Do not carry out DPF regeneration (“burn-off”) near dry vegetation. It deliberately raises exhaust temperature.

If you see a fire

- Call 999 immediately, even if it looks small. Heathland fires spread fast.
- Give a clear location. What3words or the nearest junction number works well.
- Move your vehicle to safety, but do not put yourself at risk trying to fight the fire.

Advice for employers

Policy and planning

- Add wildfire risk to your route risk assessment during dry spells and official fire-severity warnings.
- Avoid routing through or parking in known high-risk areas, such as heathland, moorland or forestry, when conditions are dry, if there is a reasonable alternative.
- Build “high fire risk” days into your daily briefing process, the same way you would flag ice or fog.

Maintenance

- Keep exhaust systems, heat shields and DPF systems on a strict inspection schedule. A defect here is a fire risk, not just a compliance issue.
- Add tyre pressure monitoring and brake inspection to the same strict schedule.
- Set a clear standard for reporting and fixing electrical faults, including aftermarket wiring for roof lights, tail lifts and tracking units. Poor installation is a common cause of vehicle electrical fires.
- Fit and maintain spark arrestors on off-road plant and vehicles where relevant.

Training

- Cover this in toolbox talks during spring and summer, when fire risk is highest.
- Make sure drivers know where to check current wildfire risk. The Met Office and Fire and Rescue Services publish alerts.
- Make sure drivers know what “don’t park here” looks like in practice, not just in policy.

Equipment

- Carry a suitable fire extinguisher and make sure drivers know how to use it but train them that their own safety comes first.

Developed with support from National Fire Chiefs Council.