

Press release: Safety warning following seven gritter crashes in North West

Motorway drivers are being urged to take extra care around gritters this winter following seven collisions in the North West.

Highways England has issued the warning after 36 of its vehicles were struck on motorways and major A roads across the country last winter.

Gritter driver Garry White was spreading salt on the M57 near junction 6 at Kirkby in March this year when his vehicle was struck from behind by a Ford Focus travelling at high speed. The car was written off and the back of the gritter also received extensive damage, requiring repairs.

Garry, 43 from Runcorn, suffered minor injuries and was off work for several days following the collision. He said:

The psychological impact was quite bad to be honest and I didn't want to get back in a wagon for a few weeks after it happened. Experience prevails, and you push on and you get back in, but both me and the car driver were lucky not to have sustained much worse injuries.

I'd ask drivers to give us as wide a birth as possible this winter and to stay behind us until we've finished our treatment if they can as it's much safer. Usually you'll find a gritter will only be doing a few motorway junctions before pulling off anyway.

Gritters have flashing amber beacons, are 2.5 metres wide and are bright orange but causes of collisions have included drivers misjudging the amount of space needed to overtake them or driving too close to them when they are spreading salt.

The vehicles, which each weigh up to 26 tonnes, usually travel at 40mph in the middle lane to ensure the right amount of salt is spread to all lanes.

The back of a gritter is the most vulnerable area as it is where the salt spreading equipment is located. If it is struck then it can mean the gritter has to be taken off the road to be repaired, which is costly and could affect critical services in extreme weather conditions.

Andrew Olive, Highways England's North West severe weather manager, said:

The vast majority of drivers support our gritter drivers by leaving a sensible distance and only passing when it's safe to do so, but

we do have occasions when people misjudge the situation and end up colliding with one of our vehicles.

The driver of the Ford Focus was lucky not to be more seriously injured in the incident on the M57 earlier this year, and gritter drivers like Garry should be able to do their job without having to worry about whether other vehicles might strike them.

Our gritter drivers perform a vital role to keep motorways and major A roads moving during the winter so I'd urge drivers to take extra care when travelling near them.

During severe winter weather drivers are urged to follow this advice:

- In snow and ice: Drivers should stick to the main roads where they can and only travel if necessary. Drivers are also encouraged to make sure they have a winter kit in their vehicle, including an ice scraper and de-icer, warm clothes and blankets and sunglasses to cope with the low winter sun.
- In high winds: Drivers should slow down and avoid using exposed sections of road if possible. Lorries, caravans and motorbikes are at particular risk.
- In heavy rain: Drivers should keep well back from the vehicle in front, gradually ease off the accelerator if the steering becomes unresponsive, and slow down if the rain and spray from vehicles makes it difficult to see and be seen.
- In fog: Drivers should switch on their fog lights and not use lights on full beam as the fog will reflect the light back. If drivers really cannot see, they should consider stopping until it is safe to continue.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.