Driving at night

Night driving presents unique challenges drivers, the limit of vision is dictated by the performance of your headlamps, your windscreen and your eyesight. This handout covers legislation and some practicalities regarding driving at night.

This handout touches on:

- Legislation
- Practicalities of lighting
- Practicalities of driving at night
- Limit point analysis

Legislation

The Road Traffic Act 1988 and the Road Vehicle Lighting Regulations 1989 confer on vehicle users certain responsibilities when driving at night.

Obligatory lights must be displayed during the hours of darkness on all mechanically propelled vehicles. In areas with a speed limit above 30mph dipped headlamps must be used.

Practicalities of lighting

It must be remembered that vehicle lighting is designed to ensure the vehicle is seen as well as to ensure the driver can see. With this in mind, care should be taken when parking at night with lights switched on, to ensure road users are not left confused as to whether the vehicle is actually parked, or appears to be in the opposite carriageway.

Ensure all lights are kept clean and visible. In certain weather or driving conditions, they may require regular cleaning to ensure they remain efficient.

Automatic light functions on modern vehicles will respond to darkness, but may not operate in wet weather or other situations where visibility is severely reduced. Be prepared to switch on the headlamps manually if circumstances dictate.

Whilst it is dark and raining, visibility will be further affected by dazzle from on-coming vehicles, in these circumstances it is important to keep all windows and exterior mirrors as clean as possible.
Include spectacles in this if worn.

When dazzled by headlamps from the rear of your vehicle it is important to know how the rear view mirror dips.

Practicalities of driving at night

The overriding principle of safe driving is that you must be able to stop in the distance you can see to be clear on your own side of the road. In areas of extreme darkness the limit of your vision is restricted to the limit of your headlamp beam.

In these circumstances your speed must be adjusted accordingly. It may be that your vision is extended by use of the headlamps on the vehicle in front. Use the information beyond them to good effect, but do not rely on them as a guide to a safe speed.

Limit point analysis

Negotiating bends using the limit point requires adjustment when driving in the dark. Some lateral information that may have been available during the day, will not be visible at night.

The photo opposite shows a typical bend viewed in ideal daylight conditions.

Now study the same view taken at night and see how much detail is lost: depth of vision, colour and distance are all more difficult for the human eye to register in the dark.

Dipped headlamps rather than main beam may assist in locating the nearside of the road in a bend.

If you become dazzled by on coming traffic, look down and to the left to try to locate the edge of the road and slow down until you can see again.

The way the human eyes work means that in very dimly lit conditions, the peripheral vision is more sensitive to light than the central portion of your vision.

Bear this in mind on unlit rural roads.

You can aid your night vision by keeping interior and ambient lighting to an absolute minimum.

For information, the human eye takes around twenty minutes to become fully adapted to darkness. Any bright lighting, including mobile phone screen, dashboard lights or sat nav will diminish your night vision.

Make full use of the dimmer control on instrument panel lighting and be prepared to change your satellite navigation system to night mode if this is not an automatic function.