

Blue lights and siren: PANIC

All drivers need to know how to behave when they hear an emergency vehicle approaching. Gerry Buckley rounds up the general advice and rules

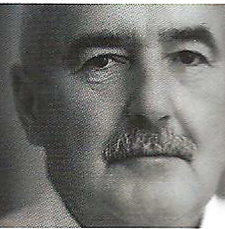
There is no feeling like the one you get when you hear blaring sirens and look in your mirror to see flashing blue lights closing in behind you. The initial panic can make most drivers erratic, even though in the majority of cases the emergency vehicle just wants to pass safely to the scene of an urgent call.

Gardaí, Fire Service and Ambulance Service are all permitted to use blue lights and sirens when reacting to an emergency situation and are allowed listed exemptions under the Road Traffic Act. (Section 27 RTA 2004). If an emergency vehicle, ambulance, fire engine or garda patrol car is coming towards you or behind you, and is using blue lights and sirens you must safely pull over and if necessary stop (safely) to allow it to pass (safely). Most drivers are not taught how to respond to emergency vehicles. Drivers must remain calm, behave legally and move out of the way as soon as it is safe.

Emergency personnel risk their lives every day and night to help those in greatest need. They must not be held up by inconsiderate drivers. Emergency calls come at all times of the day and night and it being vital that intervention by emergency personnel is crucial to the survival and prevention of loss of life. This necessitates rapid response driving by the emergency services.

The challenge for the average motorist is overcoming the surprise and inappropriate action

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when faced with the 'onslaught' of an emergency vehicle with lights and sirens requesting right of way. This can be nerve-wrecking to both new and experienced drivers alike. When the sirens or lights raise the attention levels, there are a few simple things that can make everything run smoothly.

Don't Panic; easily said but not always easy to do. Don't stop in your tracks. The simplest way of avoiding panic is to be aware of what is happening early, and start your planning. Assess the situation and decide on the best course of action

Keep your head:

- Do not suddenly stop in your tracks
- Remain calm
- Slow down
- Indicate your intention of pulling over in a safe wide section of road if possible
- Do not proceed past a red light
- Wait for the emergency vehicle to pass fully, before carefully rejoining the flow of traffic.
- Do not alter your course or speed until you know where the emergency vehicle is coming from and going to
- Do not stop opposite an obstruction making the road narrower.
- Do not move off again until you are certain there are no more emergency vehicles.
- Be very aware and careful of following vehicles moving off and using this as a chance to overtake
- Keep your head

immediately, start working on your driving plan before you become a hazard for the emergency vehicle. The emergency vehicle driver should be trained to plan their route early and look into the far distance, planning their intention with anticipation of the closest vehicles yielding right of way.

Such planning by an emergency vehicle driver should include how to safely – and expeditiously – pass other vehicles.

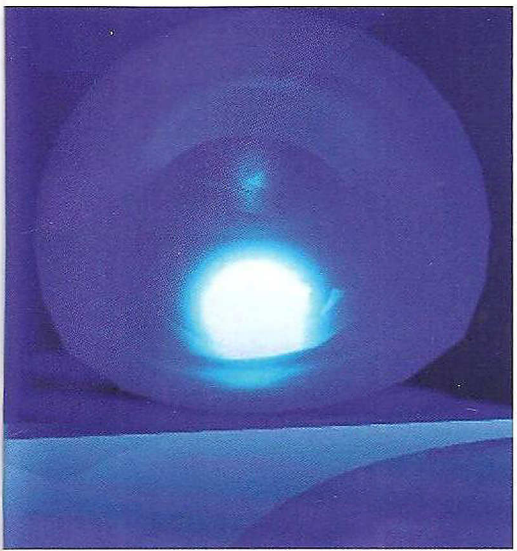
If a driver panics and stops their vehicle in its tracks, it forces the emergency vehicle to slow down, thus losing the momentum of the planned route – this can be especially difficult for ambulances.

Ambulances have extra requirements beyond the driver; a paramedic colleague may be in the back desperately trying to keep a patient alive on his way to the casualty department of the nearest hospital. When carrying patients, paramedics also need to adjust their driving to the mini-emergency theatre they have in the back. Sometimes that may mean their movement does not correspond to prevailing traffic conditions. Ambulances and fire brigades need considerably more room to manoeuvre than a car; all drivers need to make sure they give it to them. Never delay to give way or wait until they are right behind you to pull over. An ambulance driver is out there with lights and sirens blaring on the way to help someone who's having the worst day of their life.

You may hear the sirens before you see the emergency vehicle approaching, and though advances in sirens do help you to work out their direction of travel and where the vehicle is approaching from, in built up areas this is not always possible. Keep looking around, checking your mirrors frequently.

Take note of other drivers and see how they are reacting; if they are slowing down or changing their driving plans, pulling over, ahead and behind you.

The easiest thing to do is to pull in to the side of the road and stop. There are situations where this might not be feasible, if there is no room for the emergency vehicle to pass, continue safely to the nearest and earliest location where you can pull over without causing an obstruction. Avoid pulling over opposite other obstructions as this will make



the road narrower for the emergency vehicle.

If you are in a position to be overtaken, simply slowing down and moving over may be enough to allow the emergency vehicle safe passage, but be very careful, they are governed by safety procedures and the safest vehicle to pass is one which is not moving.

At junctions or intersections do not just proceed through if there are lights and sirens coming your way. It is both courtesy and correct road law to give right of way to the emergency services.

Emergency vehicles must slow or stop at junctions to check for crossflow of traffic, but this does not mean other road users can cross or go against a red light. If a driver is stopped at a red light and an emergency vehicle has no room to pass, the vehicle must not proceed onto junction past the red light. Emergency vehicle personnel should switch off their sirens in such instances and wait until traffic flow moves or lights return to green.

Another common problem for emergency vehicle drivers is when the public drivers appear not to even see or hear them coming, despite lights and sirens blazing, all with flashing headlights and high visibility markings.

Another irritation, especially for ambulance drivers, is when a private vehicle slips in behind the ambulance and tries to keep pace with the emergency vehicle. This is highly dangerous because other road users will not suspect a second vehicle travelling fast - which may lead to a collision. It is also a road traffic offence.

There also may be more than one emergency vehicle coming, so listening for different siren tones is advisable. Turn off your car radio so that you can be more attentive to what is happening. After the emergency vehicle has passed be extremely cautious before moving back out onto the flow of traffic. Other vehicles are also moving back out and if proper observation skills are not adhered by, collisions may occur. ■

Gerry Buckley is a retired Garda Driving Instructor from the Garda College, Templemore and qualified as a Class 1 Police Driving Instructor at the Scottish Police College.