

Bridge strikes

Bridge strikes stubbornly remain a significant issue within the logistics industry. In 2011/12 there were over 1500 bridge strikes, for 2021/22 that number remains at over 1800 per year, nearly 5 per day! Here we explore the common causes and ways to manage and prevent them from happening.

Requirements

The Construction and Use (C & U) Regulations require that vehicles over 3 metres tall must have an overall height cab notice displayed in feet and inches.

Additionally, if equipment on the vehicle can be raised above 3m, for example a tipper, a warning device is required to alert the driver if the equipment exceeds the vehicle's overall height.

It is the driver's responsibility to ensure that on every occasion before the driver commences their journey, the correct height must be displayed. However, it is an offence for the transport manager to cause or permit a vehicle to be used in breach of C and U regulations.

Consequences of bridge strikes

Bridge strikes can cause serious injury or death to your driver, other road users and/or bridge users (for example a train derailment). Additionally, there are potential traffic and/or train delays and damage to your company brand.

The loss of your vehicle or driver means you may lose business and suffer financial penalties such as increased insurance premiums or compensation claims.

Traffic commissioners view that most bridge strikes are avoidable, possibly caused by negligence or poor training. Incidents will result in the driver being called to a hearing with the possibility of a driving licence suspension. The operator and transport manager may also be considered culpable and called to a public inquiry.

Operators are liable:

- For damage to their vehicle, other vehicles, load and property.
- To prosecution, loss of company and/or transport manager good repute.
- To have operator licence curtailed, suspended or revoked.



Common causes of bridge strikes

The biggest causes of bridge strikes are:

- Drivers not knowing their vehicle height.
- Poor route planning.
- Drivers not understanding signs.

Knowing your overall height

The driver should know the overall height, **and width**, of their vehicle which should be checked each time before commencing a journey. The overall height should match that displayed in the cab; any over height warning device fitted should have the operation checked by the driver as part of their daily check.

Drivers should have appropriate training and equipment to do this, for example, a height measuring pole, and drivers should feel empowered to challenge any discrepancies.

Things that can affect the overall height are:

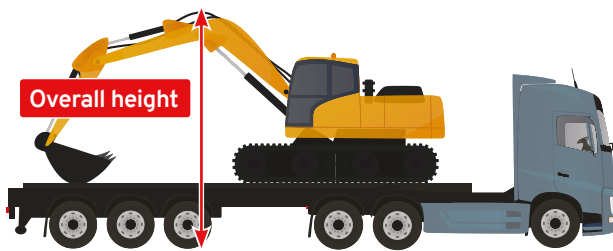
- The suspension: check it is set in the 'ride' position, that the vehicle appears 'level' and the wheel arch profile follows that of the tyre.
- Whether the vehicle/trailer is laden or unladen.
- The correct height measuring position: for example, a teardrop trailer's highest section is around a 1/3rd of the way down the trailer.

- Varying coupling heights: having the coupling height displayed on the tractor unit and trailer headboard is best practice to ensure compatibility.

Things that can affect the overall height **and** width are:

- Protruding loads: a disproportionate load where one part is higher (or wider) than the rest, e.g. a large excavator boom.
- Vehicle mounted equipment not correctly stowed, for example, a lorry loader.

Remember to stand back and observe the highest point, make it a conscious decision to check.



Route planning

The risk of bridge strike should be assessed using the correct vehicle width and height, heights exceeding 4.95m and widths exceeding 2.9m need special consideration.

Use up to date commercial vehicle route planning software, satellite navigation equipment or atlases which account for height restrictions. Plan routes in advance and factor in contingency plans to work around possible incidents and road closures to eliminate the risk of bridge strikes. Plan schedules providing sufficient flexibility to ensure drivers don't suffer excessive pressure or fatigue likely to induce errors.

Drivers must understand the route and stick to it, with no shortcuts, following routes designed for heavy goods vehicles and avoiding low bridges where appropriate. They must feel confident to stop and seek advice on an alternative route if an incident forces them off the planned route.

Bridge signs

Bridges less than 16' 6" (5.03m) will display height restriction signs in imperial and metric. There are two types:

- Round sign, order.
- Triangle sign, warning.

Drivers should be trained to recognise these signs and act on them, if the vehicle is higher than the dimensions indicated do not pass the sign.

Arched bridges have low and high sections. The highest area (normally the centre) is marked with the bridge height and a 3m wide channel, indicated by white goal posts. To pass safely a vehicle must:



- Slow down.
- Drive in line with the centre of the channel.
- Remain in the channel whilst under the bridge.

Drivers must maintain proper control at all times.

Striking a bridge

The Road Traffic Act requires any bridge strike causing damage to be reported; on striking a bridge the driver must:

- 1 For railway bridges, immediately report to the rail authority using the bridge id plate information.
- 2 Call 999 and report to the police.
- 3 Call their company and advise of the incident.
- 4 Keep the public away.

Operators should fully investigate the root cause to learn from the incident. Instigate any changes necessary and maintain ongoing monitoring to prevent strikes from reoccurring.

An operator's health and safety policy statement should include the management of bridge strike risks and training programmes should include the prevention of bridge strikes. All bridge strikes should be reported to the Office of the Traffic Commissioner.

Drivers must...

- Be trained, competent and equipped to assess their vehicle height and width. and recognise when this may change.
- Know their intended route and whom to contact for support should that route not be available.
- Know their signs, tune in and act on them.

References

The Road Traffic Act 1988

The Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986
Traffic Commissioners Statutory Document Number 6

www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevention-of-bridge-strikes-good-practice-guide

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