

Light-weight/'lite' minibuses and when it is appropriate to use them

Summary

If driving a minibus and you only hold a B category driving licence, there is a strict list of conditions that must be met, including maximum weight limits which mean that these drivers cannot drive larger, heavier minibuses.

As a way to combat this, some manufacturers sell light weight or 'lite' minibuses which have a lower Maximum Authorised Mass (MAM) or Gross Vehicle Weight (GVW) which enables a minibus to be driven by a category B licence holder, where all other requirements are met and therefore these are appealing to a number of organisations. **However, the weight restrictions for these vehicles apply to all drivers, regardless of licence category, and must be adhered to.**

However, these vehicles are not without their difficulties and may not always be suitable. It can also pose a problem when organisations purchase accessible light minibuses but do not understand the weight allowances and intended distribution.

There may still be some instances where the use of such vehicles is helpful but is dependent on who the passengers are and the number of passengers being transported.

In this fact sheet we look at why light-weight or 'lite' minibuses have become popular, the advantages and disadvantages of them, the difficulties surrounding accessible light-weight minibuses and when it might be appropriate to use them.

What is a minibus?

Minibuses are passenger-carrying vehicles which can carry between 9 and 16 passengers, plus the driver. This includes any passengers travelling in their wheelchairs.

If a vehicle has been constructed to carry between 9 and 16 passengers, all rules around driver and operator licensing must be adhered to, even if a number of seats have been 'permanently' removed from the vehicle and you only transport a maximum of 8 passengers.

Who is licensed to drive a minibus?

This is covered in more detail in factsheet 1 'Driver Licensing for minibuses'. However, drivers need to hold a D/D1, D1 (101) or D1 79 (NFHR) in order to drive a minibus in the UK. Any drivers who have passed their car driving test from 1 January 1997 onwards (and

some who passed their test before this date) will only have a D/D1 licence if they have passed an additional driving test. This does limit the potential pool of minibus drivers.

There are instances where drivers with a B category licence (the category to drive a car) **can** drive a minibus in the UK only but only when **all** of the following conditions are met:

- The driver is 21 years of age or older
- The driver is under the age of 70*
- The driver has held a full car driving licence for at least 2 years
- The driver is driving for a not for profit organisation
- The driver is driving as a volunteer
- The Maximum Authorised Mass (MAM) of the vehicle does not exceed 3,500kg or 4,250kg if it is accessible**
- The driver is not towing a trailer

This does limit the vehicles that drivers who hold a B cat. licence can drive as it excludes all heavier vehicles.

*Drivers can still drive a minibus on a B cat. licence once they reach 70 but only if they undertake a PCV medical, as drivers who hold a D/D1 cat. licence do at 70 to retain this entitlement

**If the minibus is electric or hydrogen powered, the Maximum Authorised Mass increases to 4,250kg or 5,000kg if it is accessible but all other criteria must still be met. Where the above figures are used throughout the rest of this factsheet, the additional weight for electric or hydrogen powered vehicles applies.

The rise of the light-weight or 'lite' minibus

As a way to combat the issue of B cat. licence holders only being able to drive minibuses with a MAM of 3,500kg (or 4,250kg if accessible)** , some manufacturers produce and sell light-weight or 'lite' minibuses which are capped at 3,500kg MAM so that they can be driven by anyone with either a D/D1 or B category licence, making them far more appealing to not for profit organisations.

However, there are some disadvantages to these vehicles:

- In order to keep the MAM at or below 3,500kg (or 4,250kg for accessible minibuses), it often means that the payload is reduced, i.e. the weight available for all passengers, driver, luggage, equipment and fuel. As a consequence of this, these vehicles are at greater risk of overloading, particularly if they can carry 15-16 passengers. These weight restrictions must be adhered to by all drivers and overloading is a risk regardless of the licence category you hold. If the vehicle is stopped and found to be overloaded, the **driver** could be prosecuted and the vehicle impounded.

How to calculate:

- In order to calculate the payload of the vehicle, you will need to find out the unladen weight (this is the weight of the vehicle without any passengers, luggage,

driver and as little fuel as possible). You can take your minibus to a public weighbridge to find out the unladen weight. This then needs to be deducted from the MAM. An example has been provided for a Peugeot Boxer Lite below:

MAM of 3,500kg – 2,180kg (unladen weight) = 1,320kg payload

1,320kg ÷ 18 (16 passengers including luggage + 1 driver + 1 passenger equivalent for fuel) = 73.33kg (the minimum payload required by Construction and Use regulations is 65kg per passenger which is not very much and includes any baggage they may have; in 2022 the average weight of an adult female in the UK was 73kg and the average male was 86kg)

Issues relating to 'accessible' light-weight minibuses

For those driving an 'accessible' minibus on a B category licence, the MAM is increased to 4,250kg. This additional weight allowance (over and above 3,500kg for a standard minibus) is specifically allocated to cover the additional weight of the accessible equipment such as passenger lift/ramp, over the shoulder tracking (known as the 'cant rail'), wheelchair tie down equipment etc. The Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) Regulations 1999 states that drivers with a B category licence:

"...may drive, on behalf of a non-commercial body for social purposes but not for hire or reward, a vehicle... ..which... ..has a maximum authorised mass –

- i. not exceeding 3.5 tonnes, **excluding any part of that weight which is attributable to specialised equipment intended for the carriage of disabled passengers**, and
- ii. not exceeding 4.25 tonnes otherwise."

- The first issue is that some organisations are not fully aware of or do not fully understand the above and see the additional weight as an increase of payload so purchase accessible minibuses without needing to use accessible equipment, thinking that they have a greater payload. **This is not the case.** While B category licence holders can legally drive an accessible minibus with an MAM of up to 4,250kg, it is helpful to remember that the base weight of the vehicle (i.e. before accessible equipment has been fitted) cannot exceed 3,500kg. In order to calculate the payload, you will need to first deduct 750kg (it is almost impossible to calculate the exact weight of all accessible equipment so it is easiest to use the 'full' 750kg for this calculation) from the plated MAM and then find the unladen weight to deduct that.
- The second issue is that some manufacturers advertise what they claim to be 'accessible' minibuses to make them more appealing to organisations. The definition of what 'accessible' means in this context remains, as yet, untested in a court of law. However, it is generally recognised that accessible means where the minibus is adapted to carry passengers in wheelchairs **by the permanent fitment of a ramp or passenger lift.** Detachable single track ramps, for example, are not considered fit for purpose and should there be an incident, this could become a test case. It is also likely that the driver could be prosecuted for driving the vehicle without the appropriate licence (as the MAM of the vehicle is almost certainly likely to exceed 3,500kg) and therefore driving without valid insurance. In some cases, this 'accessible' equipment may even be unfit for purpose and pose risks should it be used.

When light-weight minibuses may be suitable

There are some notable disadvantages to these vehicles, which have been highlighted above, regarding overloading and misconceptions around what the weight limits allow you to do.

However, there are undoubtedly advantages to light-weight minibuses as they allow drivers who hold a B category driving licence to drive a minibus in the UK and with the pool of drivers who hold a D1 licence getting smaller and smaller, these vehicles seem increasingly more appealing to organisations, particularly if it means individuals can drive them without having to complete expensive training and undergo an additional test to obtain the relevant category driving licence. Some organisations also find that these vehicles are preferable to use when driving in particularly rural areas, such as down narrow country lanes, as they tend to be smaller.

One scenario where organisations may still choose to use these vehicles would be when transporting younger and lighter passengers (such as primary aged children). This is because the reduced payload will not be such an issue if the passengers being transported are lighter and there is less risk of overloading, even when full. However, drivers and the organisation will need to ensure everyone is familiar with the rules regarding child car seats and seat belts. Further information on this topic can be found in factsheet 7 'Transporting children safely by minibus'. There is also a need to ensure that the driver does not fall foul of the conditions of driving on a B category licence, especially where the driver is a paid member of staff.

The second scenario is when the minibus is not fully loaded, for example where seats have to be removed to transport passengers who travel in wheelchairs; where smaller groups travel or where the number of passengers transported together is capped below the maximum capacity. It is still important to do the calculations to ensure that the minibus is not overloaded. Where seats are being removed and then put back in, this should only be done by someone who is fit and has received training to do this as if they are not fitted back in the vehicle correctly, this could cause injury to passengers in the event of an incident.

Where drivers have not undergone training to complete an additional driving test for driving a larger vehicle (such as a minibus), completing MiDAS training is strongly recommended, regardless of the type of licence the driver holds. Further information about MiDAS can be found at: [Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme \(MiDAS\) | Transport and roads | Hampshire County Council](#)

For further information on driver licensing issues please contact:

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