

Assessing the Road

A large aspect of safe positive driving is the ability to assess the road and its conditions at any point, and to continually reassess while driving. This assessment information feeds into the choices we make about how we drive, with regard to speed, gear selection and road positioning. Broadly speaking you should assess the road on 4 criteria:

1. Visibility – how far can I see and how much of the road is clearly visible?
2. Space – how much space is available for me and other traffic on the road?
3. Traffic conditions – is it rush hour or are the roads clear?
4. Other hazards – cyclists? Pedestrian crossings? Busy junctions?

VISIBILITY

How far ahead you can see is always going to be a key factor in determining what is an appropriate speed to drive at. Your guiding principle should always be **COULD I STOP WITHIN THE DISTANCE THAT I CAN SEE AHEAD?** As well as this, do you have a clear view across the width of the road and along the sides? Consider what dangers could be hidden by parked cars? What could be hidden in the shadows as you drive through wooded areas? Have your eyes adapted fully to twilight?

Remember, less visibility = less speed. Slow down in good time and consider a suitable gear selection.

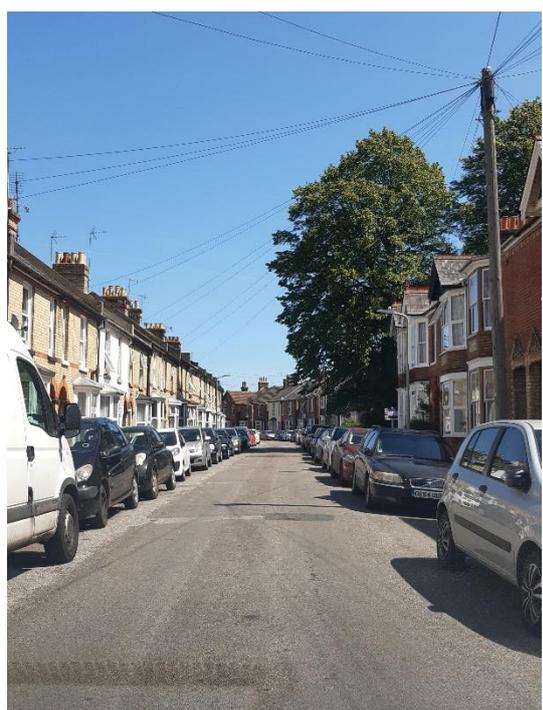
Have a look at the following pictures with this in mind and think about how what you can see would affect your decisions about appropriate speed. Can you rate the visibility as good/medium/poor?





SPACE

Always consider how much space is available to you and other road users as you attempt to pass each other. If there is clearly plenty of room do you need to slow down (having taken account of other factors)? Is there available space but with reduced clearance, requiring a reduction in speed? Is there only room for one vehicle at a time? If so how will you adjust your speed and prepare for holding back if necessary. Remember, manufacturers are making their vehicles bigger (particularly SUV's!) but the space on the roads isn't changing. Get used to assessing the space in terms of good/medium/poor.



TRAFFIC CONDITIONS

Potentially this is the easiest to judge in terms of heavy/medium/light. Heavy traffic in an urban environment will almost inevitably result in reduced speed as vehicles edge along in queues but don't allow yourself to switch off – keep your separation distance (tyres and tarmac!) and be alert to all the other hazards that may be coming up around you, particularly cyclists and moped riders. Remember too that heavy traffic conditions are not confined to towns, as anyone who has been to Devon and Cornwall at the height of summer will tell you.

As traffic eases up towards medium or light flow be prepared to reassess the situation and adapt your driving accordingly.

OTHER HAZARDS

On top of visibility, space and traffic your eyes should always be scanning backwards and forwards along the road, to the left and right and into your mirrors to spot potential hazards that could pose a risk and possibly require you to adapt your driving. For instance, cyclists, vehicles emerging at junctions, oncoming vehicles moving onto your side of the road, schoolchildren exiting at a bus stop, a police car coming up behind you.

In this first picture visibility is good, the road looks clear with a national speed limit sign – is there any reason why you wouldn't be accelerating at this point?



In this picture, as you scan the road ahead what potential hazards can you see?



It takes time and practice to improve how efficiently and accurately you assess any road situation. If you get into the habit of continually 'scoring' any road based on the criteria above you will find that you become much better at selecting appropriate speeds and gears and minimising the risks to both yourself and other road users.