

The Definitive Guide To Towing In The UK.



One thing that seems to cause more confusion than anything else in the camping and caravanning world is the issue of what we are legally allowed to tow, and what regulations we need to comply with, when we do. Our blog post, from September 2014; *Towing With A Car In The UK. What Are The Current Laws?* Received over 10,000 views, in the first week alone, confirming that this is, indeed, a topic that many people wish to clarify.

A lot of the confusion seems to arise from the use of so many different terms and classifications of the various 'weights' involved. To help explain this, without clogging up the main guide, we have included a glossary of these terms, and their meaning, as the end of the guide.

The Basics

Our LEGAL ability to tow, in any given situation will depend on two main factors:

1. Our own legal limits, based, primarily, on the date we passed our driving test, and;
2. The physical and legal capabilities of the towing vehicle, as stated by the manufacturer

These are the ONLY legal limits that determine what we can tow. Much is made of the guidelines quoted by the main camping organisations, based on a percentage of the towing vehicles kerb weight (more on that later). Whilst these may be sound advice, it is important to realise that these are just recommendations. In the majority of cases, you can legally tow more than this, but, with some vehicles, the legal limit is less, so it is always best to be clear on exactly what your car is allowed to tow.

(1) Driver Restrictions

The weight and nature of trailer you can tow, will, ultimately, depend on the date on which you first passed your driving test, as follows:

Licences Held Before 1 January 1997

If you passed your car test before 1 January 1997 you are generally entitled to drive a vehicle and trailer combination up to 8.25 tonnes MAM. (Maximum Authorised Mass).

This is the weight of a vehicle or trailer including the maximum load that can be carried safely when it's being used on the road.

You also have entitlement to drive a minibus with a trailer over 750 kg

Licences held from 1 January 1997

If you passed your driving test after 1 January 1997 and have an ordinary category B (car) licence, you can:

- drive a vehicle up to 3.5 tonnes (or 3,500 kg) MAM towing a trailer of up to 750 kg MAM
- tow a trailer over 750 kg MAM as long as the combined weight of the trailer and towing vehicle is no more than 3,500 kg

For anything heavier you need to take a category B+E driving test.

OK, very confusing, so what does that actually mean? The key thing here is the weight of the trailer. If the MAM of the trailer is less than 750 kg, then a combined MAM of 4,250 kg is permitted (3,500 kg vehicle, and 750 kg trailer). If the trailer exceeds 750 kg, then the combined MAM is reduced to 3,500 kg (in line with the maximum 'actual' weight allowed).

For example; if your vehicle has an MAM of 3,200 kg, and your trailer has an MAM of 600kg (total: 3,800 kg MAM) that IS legal, provided, of course, the actual, physical weight of the combination does not exceed 3,500 kg.

On the other hand, if your vehicle has an MAM of 3,000 kg, and your trailer has one of 800 kg, that is NOT legal, even though they have the same combined MAM. The distinction is that the MAM of the trailer is over 750 kg.

Licences issued from 19 January 2013

From 19 January 2013, drivers passing a category B (car and small vehicle) test can tow:

- small trailers weighing no more than 750 kg
- tow a trailer over 750 kg as long as the combined weight of the trailer and towing vehicle is no more than 3,500 kg Maximum Authorised Mass (MAM)

If you want to tow a trailer weighing more than 750 kg, when the combined weight of the towing vehicle and trailer is more than 3,500 kg, you'll have to pass a further test and get B+E entitlement on your licence.

You'll then be able to tow trailers up to 3,500 kg.

Still confused? Take a look at the Highways Agency 'Fit To Tow' video <https://youtu.be/Mx3F91eZgDE> It might make things a little clearer.

Larger trailer? Might be worth checking out the Fit To Tow - Larger Trailer video. <https://youtu.be/LmeV5s-5O-l>

Finally, do you have a caravan, and need to know the specifics? Yet another Highways Agency video might help; Fit To Tow – Caravans; <https://youtu.be/Px--bKUV6o>





If in any doubt, you can go to the Gov.uk web site, and check out one of their online tools.

The first of these can be found at; <https://www.gov.uk/towing-rules>

If you enter your basic details, it will tell you what you can legally tow.

To avoid any confusion, whatsoever, you can go to; <https://www.gov.uk/view-driving-licence>

If you enter your licence details, the site will tell you everything about your licence, including what you can legally tow, any endorsements, etc.

(2) Vehicle Restrictions

There seems to be even more confusion and misconception over the legal limits for a vehicle than there is over those for drivers. This is, in part, down to the fact that there is far less information available online. In an attempt to clarify this matter, we contacted both the DVLA and VOSA, neither of whom were able to help, and they advised us to contact the Department of Trade directly, which we did. The information below is based on the reply we received, 'straight from the horse's mouth'.

The key measure we need to be aware of, when calculating our vehicle's maximum legal capacity is that of Gross Train Weight (See glossary at the end of this guide). This is specified by the manufacturer, and represents the maximum allowed weight of the vehicle, plus trailer, plus load. Whatever the specified GTW is, that is the total allowed combined weight. The manufacturers will, often, also, specify a maximum towing weight, which is, of course, the GTW, minus the weight of the car itself. This is usually specified in the car's manual, or V5 document.

This legal limit pays no heed, whatsoever, to the kerb weight of the towing vehicle (which many consider to be the legal basis for vehicle towing weights). The main towing organisations, including the Caravan Club and Camping & Caravanning Club both specify 85% of kerb weight of the towing vehicle as the recommended maximum towing weight of any trailer or caravan especially for those who are new to / not entirely comfortable with, towing, however, many still believe that this is the maximum legal limit, which, of course, it isn't.

OK, so this can create a number of anomalies, and is, no doubt, one of the key reasons why there is so much confusion on this matter. Let us, by way of illustration, take a look at two completely different vehicles. The figures used are approximate, and for illustration purposes only.

Scenario 1: Land Rover Defender.

Kerb Weight:	2,000kg
Recommended Safe Limit (@85% of kerb weight)	1,700kg
Manufacturers' Specified Towing Limit (Braked)	3,500kg

In this scenario, we can, clearly, see that the actual legal towing limit, of 3,500kg is more than double the recommended safe figure. Whilst the 85% recommendation is there for a reason, and we would not question its validity for a second, it is important to remember that it has no basis in Law, whatsoever, and this explains why we will often see one Land Rover towing, for example, another, identical Land Rover, on a trailer, which, obviously, by definition, must exceed the 85% guideline.

Scenario 2: Honda Jazz 1.4CVT

Kerb Weight:	1,100kg
Recommended Safe Limit (@85% of kerb weight)	950kg
Manufacturers' Specified Towing Limit (Braked)	800kg

In this second scenario, we have the opposite, and far more serious situation. In this instance, we have the issue of the 85% rule giving us a figure that is actually over the legal limit. In this case, the unwary driver could apply the 85% rule, believing themselves to be legal, when, in fact, they are not.

Common Misconceptions

There are a number of misconceptions around both the license laws, and the vehicle weight laws. Some of the more common ones include;

- *If you passed your test after 1 January 1997, you need to take an additional test in order to be able to tow anything.* – Not true. Even if you passed your test after that date, you can still tow a vehicle up to a combined weight of 3,500kg (as above).
- *I cannot legally tow anything that weighs more than 85% of my car's kerb weight* – Again, not true. The 85% figure is purely a recommendation, and, whilst it is prudent to always keep it in mind, it may be a fraction of the actual legal limit.
- *I know that the 85% rule is just a guide. The legal limit is actually the kerb weight of the car.* – Yet another very common misconception. Kerb weight is not relevant to the car's legal ability to tow.
- *I always stick to the 85% rule, because that is what bodies like the Caravan club argue is safe, so, if I exceed that, and have an accident, I could be prosecuted for driving dangerously, even though I was under the manufacturers' limit.* – We're hearing this increasingly at the moment. At the risk of repeating ourselves, yet again, the kerb weight has no legal bearing. Provided you are within the manufacturers limit, have not loaded in a dangerous fashion, and are within the constraints of your own licence, you are not going to be prosecuted for dangerous driving. (This advice becomes somewhat less relevant if you were also eating a pizza and texting at the same time).

Obviously, it goes without saying, that, when determining what you are legally allowed to tow, you will always look at the minimum figure. In other words; it is no use towing a 3 ton trailer which is within your car's towing limit, if it is in excess of what you are allowed to tow on a post 1997 licence. As with all things, common sense is key here, and, if in doubt, it is always best to check, as the consequences of failing to tow within the law can be quite severe.

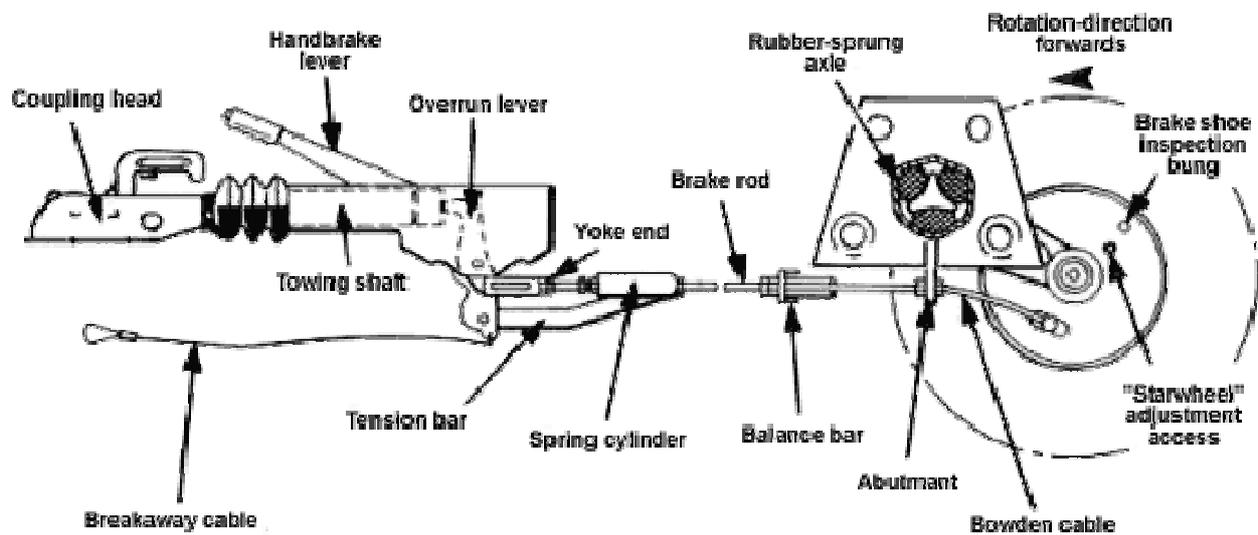
Other Towing Legislation

OK, so we've looked at what you and your car can actually tow, but there is plenty of other legislation in place to comply with, when towing, including;

Overrun Brakes

Any trailer weighing in excess of 750kg must be fitted with a satisfactory braking system. This comes in to play, either when the towing vehicle brakes sharply or if the trailer becomes disengaged from the tow hitch.

A full schematic of a typical trailer braking system is shown at the top of the next page.



The easiest way to tell if a trailer is braked is to look at the hitch itself. In between the coupling head and the towing shaft, there is a rubber concertina sheath, which flexes as the towing vehicle slows down or speeds up.

As the vehicle begins to slow, the inertia of the trailer keeps it coming forward. The sheath flexes, and the towing shaft is pushed backwards, where it engages the overrun lever, thereby applying the brakes. Likewise, if the trailer becomes separated from the tow bar, the car will pull on the breakaway cable, again, engaging the overrun lever, and braking the trailer.

If there is a rubber sheath, and breakaway cable, it means your trailer is braked, otherwise, it isn't.

Below a Gross Laden Weight of 750kg, there is no legal requirement for overrun brakes, though many trailer tents and small folding campers have them fitted, regardless. It goes without saying, of course, that any brakes fitted to a trailer / caravan must be in sound working order.

Trailer Width & Length

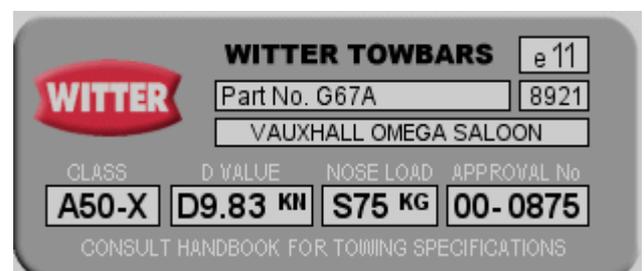
Most of us are aware of maximum weight limits, even if we're not 100% sure what they are. Many, however, are not aware of any legal limits on the external dimensions of the trailers and caravans they are towing. The maximum trailer width for any towing vehicle is 2.55 metres. The maximum length is 7 metres for a trailer towed by a vehicle weighing up to 3.5 tonnes (3,500 kg).

Tow Bar

If you get a tow bar for your car, it needs to be 'type approved'. This means it meets EU regulations and is designed for your car.

A type-approved tow bar will have a label with an approval number and details of the vehicles it's approved for.

If your car was first used before 1 August 1998, your tow bar doesn't need to be type-approved.



Towing Mirrors



You must have an adequate view of the road behind you. If your caravan or trailer is wider than the rear of the towing vehicle, you will need to fit suitable towing mirrors.

If you tow without proper towing mirrors you can be:

- prosecuted by the police
- given 3 points on your licence
- fined up to £1,000

Number Plate

You must display the same **number plate** as your towing car on the trailer. According to the legislation; if you tow more than one trailer, fix the number plate to the trailer at the back. (It's in the legislation, so, presumably, it must happen!!). Also, it's easy to forget, on a trailer or caravan, but the number plate must be illuminated at night

A Frames & Dollies

If you attach an A-frame to a car in order to tow it with a larger vehicle, the car plus A-frame counts as a trailer.

If you use a dolly to tow a broken-down vehicle, the dolly counts as a trailer.

In both cases the usual safety regulations for trailers apply.

You can find out more in the 'A' frames and dollies' fact sheet on the Gov.UK Website.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/408927/a-frames-and-dollies.pdf

Those are the key laws appertaining to the towing of trailers etc with a car. They will apply to most types of vehicle and trailer combinations, with one notable exception;

American trailers and caravans don't always meet European safety regulations.

If you want to use an American caravan or trailer in the UK or the EU, you must first check that it's legal.

Read more in the 'American caravan/trailer brakes and coupling up to 3500kg maximum laden weight' fact sheet.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/408947/american-caravan-and-trailer-brakes-coupling.pdf

You may also find the following DVLA guides useful:

INF30 - Requirements For Towing Trailers In Great Britain;

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/333088/INF30_020514.pdf

INS57P - Information On Driving Licences;

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/208103/ins57p.pdf

Glossary Of Weights

Unladen Weight

The unladen weight of any vehicle is the weight of the vehicle when it's not carrying any passengers, goods or other items.

It includes the body and all parts normally used with the vehicle or trailer when it's used on a road.

It doesn't include the weight of the fuel or, if it's an electric vehicle, the batteries.

Gross Laden Weight

Gross laden weight means the weight of a vehicle or trailer including the maximum load that can be carried safely when it is being used on the road.

It will be listed in the owner's manual and is normally shown on a plate or sticker fitted to the vehicle.

The plate or sticker may also show a gross train weight (see below).

Permissible Maximum Weight

This is simply another term for gross laden weight.

Maximum Authorised Mass

Also commonly known as MAM, this is the term most commonly used in towing legislation, it is, however, simply another term for gross laden weight.

Gross Train Weight

This is, simply, the total weight of the towing unit, plus trailer, plus load.

Gross Combination Weight

Another term for Gross Train weight

Kerb Weight

The usual definition of kerb weight is taken as a vehicle, in its ready to use condition, with all standard tools, spare wheel, oil and a full tank of fuel. Many manufacturers, however, are now adopting EC Directive 95/48/EC which defines kerb weight as; 'a car, in ready to drive condition, with the fuel tank 90% full, a driver on board, weighing 68kg and luggage of 7kg' (Slightly random allocation of weights, admittedly, but that is the current definition, for EC purposes).