

Urgent safety advice 03/2018: Driver awareness of emergency speed restrictions

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1. Safety issue

Train drivers being unaware that they are approaching a section of track where an emergency speed restriction is in force because some train operators are not passing to their drivers the advice of emergency speed restrictions issued by Network Rail.

2. Safety advice

Train operating companies (TOCs) and freight operating companies (FOCs) are advised to review their practice in this area, and consider whether they are taking adequate steps to minimise the likelihood that a driver encountering an emergency speed restriction (ESR) may not respond correctly to the trackside signs.

Any train operators (passenger and freight) who have chosen not to follow ATOC (RDG) guidance relating to the notification of emergency speed restrictions should ensure that they have undertaken a suitable and sufficient risk assessment to justify the removal of a long established safety measure.

3. Issued to:

- LNER
- Rail Delivery Group (representing all train operating companies)
- All freight operating companies operating on Network Rail infrastructure

4. Background

At around 14:32 hrs on 19 October 2018, an LNER service from Aberdeen to London's King's Cross passed through an emergency speed restriction of 20 mph at approximately 120 mph (193 km/h), near Sandy, Bedfordshire.

The emergency speed restriction had been applied at around 13:50 hrs on the previous day because track maintenance staff had found a defect (a crack) in a crossing, part of a set of points. Marker boards and associated automatic warning system (AWS) magnets were in place to provide warning of the emergency speed restriction and denote where the restriction commenced and terminated. However, the driver of the train had not received any notification of the existence of the emergency speed restriction prior to the journey.

The RAIB's preliminary examination found that the requirement to issue information about ESRs to drivers was removed from the railway rule book in 2008. However, Network Rail's company procedures require it to issue advice of the restriction to TOCs and FOCs and all other relevant stakeholders. The ATOC (RDG) document 'Good Practice Guide – Control Centres: Business Process Manual' advises TOCs to have in place appropriate arrangements for advising drivers of emergency speed restrictions, before they operate over the affected route. Research by RSSB carried out in 2014 into the reasons why drivers exceed permanent, temporary and emergency speed limits found that around 10% of drivers surveyed were not receiving this advice.

Although ESRs are provided with an emergency indicator which includes flashing lights, and an associated AWS warning, it is still important that drivers are aware in advance that there is an ESR applying to the route their train will be taking. Suitable notification of drivers will alert of them of the need to look out for the start of the speed restriction, and informs them of the route to which the speed restriction applies, so reducing the chance of them missing the point at which they should start braking, or misreading the signs.