

Report 12/2019: Near miss with a track worker, near Gatwick Airport station, 2 December 2018

On publication of RAIB's report concerning the near miss with a track worker, near Gatwick Airport station, 2 December 2018, Simon French, chief inspector of rail accidents, said:

“Once again the RAIB has to report on an alarming near-miss between a train and a track worker. We have seen far too many of these incidents in recent years, and the recent tragic accidents at Stoats Nest Junction, just a few miles from Gatwick, and at Margam, which is still under investigation, are a stark reminder of how terrible the consequences of mixing trains and people can be.

“When engineering work takes place on and around lines electrified on the conductor rail system, it is important that the conductor rails are isolated and earthed, to protect everyone from electrical hazards. Straps between the conductor rail and the running rail are the usual means of achieving this, although it's good to see that remote isolation devices are now being introduced at some locations. Placing and removing these straps is an important task, which can expose people to great risk if it is not planned and carried out to a high standard. In this case the plan called for some straps to be fitted on tracks outside the area protected by the possession arrangements, even though there was an alternative site available, where the straps could have been placed within the possession. The information about the alternative site was not available to the planners who needed it, and they did not identify the need for additional protection from trains when the straps were to be applied. We are recommending that Network Rail improves its processes so that all planners get the right information at the right time.

“The staff who were given the defective plans did not challenge them. Having managed to place the straps without incident, they went out to remove them the next day, knowing that the straps were attached to lines outside the possession, but believing that no trains would pass by while they were doing their work. It was considered OK to take a risk to get the job done, and no-one felt able to challenge this.

“We have previously recommended, in two recent reports, that Network Rail should improve the leadership skills of team leaders and supervisors. Work is being done to address this, but railway industry staff at all levels must understand the importance of good leadership: getting people to do the right thing, at the right time, all the time.”