

RAIB Bulletin 02/2011

Near miss incident at Seaburn station platform 29 November 2010

Description of incident

- 1 At approximately 20:30 hrs on 29 November 2010 a station cleaner (cleaner A), using a shovel to clear snow from the down platform at Seaburn station, was nearly struck by a non-stopping train.

Sequence of events

- 2 Cleaner A and a colleague were working along the platform facing the direction of approaching trains. The method of work used by cleaner A was to clear a strip from the edge of the platform by shovelling snow on to the running line and then standing at the cleared edge, to shovel snow from the adjacent area behind towards the back of the platform.
- 3 Neither worker was wearing their company issued high visibility clothing.



Figure 1: Cleaner A working close to platform edge 2.5 s before arrival of train (Image courtesy of DB Regio Tyne and Wear Limited)



Figure 2: Cleaner A taking evasive action on approach of train (Image courtesy of DB Regio Tyne and Wear Limited)

- 4 When cleaner A was standing close to the edge of the platform, a train travelled through the station at a speed of around 60 mph (97 km/h). He saw the train when it was approximately one second's running time away and quickly moved from the platform edge.

- 5 The train driver was unaware of the near miss.
- 6 The RAIB was notified and conducted a preliminary examination of the incident.

Findings of the RAIB

Background

- 7 DB Regio Tyne and Wear Limited (DBTW) operates Metro trains and stations on the Tyne and Wear Metro system under a concession which was let by the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive, known as Nexus, in April 2010. DBTW took over a contract with a cleaning contractor for the cleaning of stations and station platforms, including snow clearing.
- 8 Seaburn station is on a section of shared running line used by both Tyne and Wear Metro and mainline train operators, but only Metro trains stop at Seaburn station. The station is not normally staffed.
- 9 DBTW has a Metro Rule Book which incorporates relevant parts of the (main line) Railway Group Standard GE/RT8000 Rule Book, including the definition of when work on a station platform is considered to be 'on or near the line'. The Metro Rule Book states that a person working within 1.25 m of a platform edge is only treated as being 'on or near the line' if they are carrying out engineering or technical work; this is consistent with section 6 of module G1 of GE/RT8000. This definition is significant because of the requirements for personal track safety (PTS)¹ training and particular protection arrangements that are required by both rule books for work which is 'on or near the line'. These arrangements would include the provision of a controller of site safety (COSS) and the setting up of a safe system of work.
- 10 Nexus is a member of the Association of Train Operating Companies' (ATOC) Operations Scheme and therefore has access to guidance issued by ATOC to its members. The ATOC Good Practice Guide 'Winter arrangements for stations' (ATOC/GPG019) issued in July 2010, contains relevant information on keeping stations free of snow. The Guide does not define the rules that should be applied to snow clearing activities that are close to the platform edge, leaving this decision to be made by station operators.

Events leading to incident

- 11 The two cleaners who were clearing snow at Seaburn station worked for the cleaning contractor and had also worked for previous holders of the cleaning contract. Cleaner A had been in his job for about 4½ years, normally carrying out routine cleaning duties on stations. He had received mandatory safety training for station cleaners from Nexus in May 2006 which permitted him to work on Metro stations. There are no records of whether the training covered working at the platform edge when clearing snow. There was also no requirement for the training to be refreshed.

¹ PTS is the minimum training and certification required by Network Rail and other infrastructure managers to work 'on or near the line'. Persons must undergo a medical and a drug and alcohol test before attending a 'personal track safety' course and being assessed as competent.

- 12 At the time of the incident, neither DBTW nor the cleaning contractor had undertaken a risk assessment, or generated a written safe system of work for clearing snow on station platforms. The contractor had a general combined risk assessment and safe work procedure which identified the precautions for activities 'on or near the line', site protection arrangements and the wearing of high visibility clothing. This had not, however, been applied in this instance.
- 13 On 29 November 2010 the cleaners had reported for the afternoon shift at their company's booking on point at the Regent Centre Metro station, which started at 14.30 hrs. A shift supervisor briefed them on their duties, which were to clear snow from station platforms in the shared running section of the Metro. They were not given any instructions on the method of work to be used or the safety precautions to be followed.
- 14 Some time later, the operatives arrived at Seaburn station and began work.
- 15 A few seconds before the arrival of the incident train, a Metro train had departed the up platform which may have masked the sound of the approaching train.
- 16 There was no announcement of the non-stopping train over the station passenger announcement system. At stations on the shared running section a recorded message to warn waiting passengers of an imminent train arrival is automatically triggered by the train occupying a track circuit on the approach to the station. The passenger announcement equipment, however, can only announce to one platform at a time, so if two trains arrive close together, as occurred here, the first to hit the trigger point has priority for announcements. The second train will not be announced.
- 17 Seaburn station is approached on the down line by a long straight section of track, with visibility from the approximate working position of the operatives for about 950 m. The headlight of a train travelling at 60 mph (97 km/h) would have been visible for about 35 s. For a train driver, however, visibility of the down platform is obscured by a bridge abutment immediately before the start of the platform and in the dark it would have been difficult to pick out persons not wearing high visibility clothing. [For trains approaching Seaburn station on the up line the shortest sighting distance from the start of the up platform is approximately 272 m, giving a sighting time of 10 secs for a train travelling at 60 mph (97 km/h).]

Action taken after the incident

- 18 Cleaner A had attempted to contact DBTW's control centre immediately after the incident but reportedly found the telephone at the station to be out of order. He reported the incident at the end of his shift.
- 19 After the incident DBTW carried out a risk assessment of the snow clearing task which formed the basis of a new method statement issued by their cleaning contractor. This method statement required staff to remain at least 1.25 m from the platform edge, to work facing the direction of traffic, to look up frequently and check the public information display for approaching trains, and to go to a place of safety 2 m from the platform edge until the train had departed. The method statement was briefed out to all cleaning staff and further refresher training was planned.

- 20 A number of companies responsible for the control of stations (station operators) told the RAIB that there is a need for greater clarity on how the Rule Book should be applied when station staff are carrying out work activities close to the platform edge. While at least one station operator had reportedly defined snow clearing as work 'on or near the line' and employed protection arrangements complying with the Rule Book, the prevailing view was that snow clearing could not be regarded as 'engineering or technical work'. This uncertainty has led to different approaches being adopted. For example, one operator did not apply the Rule Book provisions to snow clearing but instead had safe systems of work derived from an assessment of the specific risk factors at each station, such as working adjacent to high speed lines with non-stopping trains and bi-directional traffic. In another case, the station operator had delegated responsibility for providing safe systems of work to contractors but stipulated the use of PTS qualified staff in snow clearing gangs.
- 21 There was also uncertainty about whether it was permissible to deposit snow from the platform edge on to the running line. While shovelling snow over the edge of the platform was generally prohibited by station operators, at least one operator had reportedly obtained dispensation from Network Rail to do this, subject to certain conditions.
- 22 ATOC, recognising that there are inconsistent approaches to snow clearing, has reviewed its guidance to members. This review was based on the principle that all such activities should be subject to a risk assessment process to identify appropriate safeguarding measures. The measures adopted are intended to take into account factors such as the speed of trains, sighting times, equipment used and the competence of those involved. The improved guidance was published in May 2011.

Conclusions

- 23 The immediate cause of this incident was that the method of work adopted for clearing snow was not safe. Underlying this were failures of management to put in place a system of work to control the risks, to train and instruct workers in how to clear snow safely, to adequately supervise their work and to ensure that appropriate personal protective equipment was worn.
- 24 The working arrangements applied by station operators when instructing staff to clear snow are inconsistent. ATOC guidance did not clarify whether this activity is defined as being 'on or near the line'.
- 25 The RAIB has decided not to conduct a full investigation. This is because:
- a. the Office of Rail Regulation has indicated that it is addressing issues relating to the management of contractors by DBTW; and
 - b. ATOC has redrafted its good practice guide to clarify the guidance on the control of risks associated with winter weather at stations. The Rail Standards and Safety Board is also to consider adding a reference to the ATOC good practice guide in a forthcoming Railway Group Standard guidance note on preparing for operating in winter.

26 In light of the actions already taken or ongoing, the RAIB does not believe that a further investigation would lead to the identification of any formal recommendations. However, the RAIB does believe that there are some valuable learning points to be disseminated to other station operators.

Learning points

27 The learning points from this incident are:

- There is a need for station operators to review (or if necessary, prepare) their winter weather plans for their stations to ensure that the risks from clearing snow from the edge of station platforms are adequately controlled. Such reviews should take into account factors such as reduced sighting times, non-stopping trains, and other risks such as bi-directional working and maximum line speeds.
- Station operators should be aware of the revised ATOC Good Practice Guide, 'Winter arrangements for stations', when preparing their own guidance on managing safety during snow clearing of platforms.
- Where station operators rely on contractors to clear snow from station platforms, they need to ensure that the contractors have site specific risk assessments and safe methods of work in place and have effective arrangements for training and briefing their employees so that the work is carried out safely at all times.
- The need for station operators to review the training provided to contractors, such as cleaners, who routinely work on station platforms, to ensure that the risks associated with working close to platform edges are well understood.
- The need for station operators to review and reinforce communication arrangements for the prompt reporting of accidents and incidents by contractors working on their stations.

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