

Report 19/2016: Two signal passed at danger incidents

On publication of RAIB's report concerning SPAD incidents at Reading Westbury Line Junction and Ruscombe Junction, Simon French, Chief Inspector of Rail Accidents, said:

“One of the roles of the Rail Accident Investigation Branch is to identify areas where existing defences against accidents are still vulnerable. This investigation highlights one such area, the contribution of fatigue to human error. Although human errors are a fact of everyday life, they are of particular concern when made by train drivers since they can result in signals passed at danger, or other dangerous occurrences.

“Whilst recognising the efforts that are already being made by the freight operating companies to address this difficult issue, this investigation has revealed that there is more that can be done to identify the types of duty that are more likely to cause dangerous levels of fatigue, and the members of staff who are at particular risk. Although there are mathematical models that can be used to help managers identify high risk turns of duty, the best intelligence is likely to be gained from those who actually do the work. To be really effective a fatigue management system needs to draw on the experience of drivers and should be informed by a constructive dialogue between staff and managers on the ways that fatigue can best be managed, whilst also meeting the needs of the business. Such a collaborative approach will deliver the best results if it is based on trust, openness and a recognition that all human beings have the same basic need to be rested if they are to perform at their best. An admission of tiredness should not be seen as a weakness - it may be the unavoidable consequence of the work and home demands placed on a driver.

“This report has highlighted the ‘real-world’ experience of freight train drivers. By necessity, many freight trains must operate at night and many drivers are required to work long and irregular shifts, often during night hours. This means that drivers must accommodate their sleep, home responsibilities, social life and commuting in the hours that remain – and this can be a challenge. For this reason I urge freight operating companies, their employees and trade unions to work together to find practical ways of reducing fatigue at work.

“Good fatigue management requires the employer and the employee to recognise their respective responsibilities. For drivers, there is an obligation to ensure that they are sufficiently rested before taking duty, and for employers, the need to reduce fatigue-induced risk so far as reasonably practicable.

“I hope that the RAIB's recommendations and learning points will make a positive contribution to the improvement of fatigue management in the rail freight sector. They are intended to promote good practice in areas such as diagramming, rostering, napping, the use of mathematical models, methods of gathering feedback from safety critical workers on fatigue-inducing shift patterns and screening for sleep disorders. Although some of these topics are similar to those that featured in our recommendations following a previous fatigue related incident at Shap in 2010, our findings suggest that there is more to be done. None of these actions are easy, and we recognise that fatigue at work will never be entirely prevented. However, I am encouraged by the importance attached to this issue by freight operating companies

and the regulator alike and I am hopeful of continued progress in this area of railway risk.”

Newsdate: 29 September 2016