

Report 04/2018: Freight train derailment at Lewisham, south-east London, 24 January 2017

On publication of RAIB's report concerning a freight train derailment at Lewisham, south-east London, Simon French, Chief Inspector of Rail Accidents said:

“Derailments of freight trains on the main line are not very common, but when they occur they have the potential to cause very serious consequences, as well as huge disruption to other services. The accident at Lewisham in January 2017 resulted in days of cancellations and delayed trains on some of the busiest commuter routes in the country. If there had been another train nearby when the accident happened, the subsequent collision could have been disastrous.

“This accident was particularly disappointing because it happened immediately after the renewal of the track at a complex junction, which had been done with the latest design of modular, pre-assembled switches and crossings. The designers of the new layout had not fully understood how this type of assembly could behave if the track bearers were not fully supported by the ballast. The track was poorly supported when it was handed back for traffic on the day before the derailment, because there had not been time for the machines to finish tamping the ballast, and manual consolidation work was ineffective. The effect of all these deficiencies was to create a situation in which, when it was handed over for traffic the track had, or very rapidly developed, geometry faults. These created the conditions for the wheels of a freight train with a slightly offset payload to climb over the head of the rail.

“RAIB has investigated this interaction between poor track geometry and unevenly loaded trains several times before. In reports on investigations published in 2009 and 2014 we have recommended action to deal with the problem. It is of concern to me that, although the railway industry has established a working group to examine these issues, it remains unclear how its findings will be translated into actions to mitigate the risk of freight train derailment.”

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