

Report 12/2018: Collision at Frogna Farm User Worked Crossing, 23 October 2017

On publication of RAIB's report concerning the collision at Frogna Farm User Worked Crossing, Simon French, Chief Inspector of Rail Accidents said:

"This accident, which came very close to killing a motorist, has shown up some significant weaknesses in the way that some level crossings have been managed over many years. User worked level crossings, where the user is responsible for operating gates themselves, are usually on rural, private roads. They are a legacy of agreements between railway companies and landowners, made at the time the railways were built in the nineteenth century. Today's trains are more frequent and travel faster than the Victorian railway builders could ever dream of, and the risk to crossing users and people on trains at these level crossings is now one of the most significant that the railway has to manage.

"This type of crossing differs from public road crossings that many motorists are familiar with, in that the user is responsible for protecting themselves from being hit by a train while they cross. This is a concept which needs to be made very clear to the user, as the consequences of failing to understand it may be tragic. In this case, a green button labelled "press to operate crossing gates" created a belief that the gates would only open if it was safe. That was not the case, and the driver of the road vehicle was lucky to escape with his life. The signs that told him to telephone for permission before using the crossing were confusing and badly positioned. They included an unauthorised adaptation of a legally specified sign. This non-standard sign was created because the law has not kept up with technical developments, and there is no sign approved for use in connection with power operated gates. Fresh thinking is needed on how to tell an unfamiliar user what kind of crossing they have arrived at, what the hazards are, and what to do to be safe.

"The nineteenth-century approach to managing the use of private level crossings revolved round the concept of the authorised user, the person occupying the land or premises that the crossing gave access to. They were considered to be responsible for making sure that anyone who had a valid reason to visit them and needed to use the crossing was aware of how to cross safely. It's doubtful whether this concept was ever really effective, and in today's world of parcel deliveries by multiple couriers it just doesn't work. We are recommending that, when reviewing the way it manages these crossings, Network Rail looks hard at how crossing users get information from the railway about how to cross safely.

"However, I believe that the vital lesson from this investigation is how important it is that each user worked crossing is managed in a way that takes into account the context in which it is used, and the needs and expectations of the people who may encounter it in the course of their everyday business. It is time for a fresh approach to this problem, for the sake of crossing users, train passengers and railway staff, who are all at risk."

Newsdate: 23 August 2018