

Report 02/2019: Self-detrainment of passengers onto lines that were still open to traffic and electrically live at Lewisham, south-east London, 2 March 2018

On publication of RAIB's report concerning the self-detrainment of passengers onto lines that were still open to traffic and electrically live at Lewisham, Simon French, Chief Inspector of the RAIB said:

"To be stuck on a train that is not moving can be an unpleasant experience. Add to this a crowded commuter service, limited information and no toilet facilities, and the result is a situation that none of us would want to be part of.

"Our investigation has focused on the circumstances which led some passengers to get out of the trains and walk along the tracks which were still open to traffic, in proximity to a live conductor rail. We have considered what could have been done to prevent a relatively minor event involving one train escalating to involve numerous other trains and thousands of passengers. Our investigation highlights the importance of decisive action in the early stages of an incident involving a stranded train.

"Our major cities are reliant on rail services to convey many millions of passengers on a daily basis, relieving pressure on road networks that are already congested. Achieving this herculean task requires a high frequency of train services and rolling stock that is capable of conveying large numbers of people. Generally, the rail network is able to meet this challenge. However, on such high density routes, serious delays can themselves be a safety issue because on-board conditions can deteriorate rapidly and frustration and discomfort can lead to people taking matters into their own hands, putting themselves at risk of being struck by a train or electrocution.

"Professionalism in railway operations includes the ability to anticipate how a situation may develop. Today, signallers and operations controllers oversee large areas of the rail network which means that they have the role of front-line managers for incidents like this. It is important that the training they are given equips them for this role. When conditions outside are challenging, and things are not going entirely smoothly, thinking in a more precautionary manner about the possible consequences of a particular move may pay dividends. In this case, bringing a train close up behind another that was having trouble moving forward blocked a set of junctions in a way that soon trapped eight trains. Furthermore, prompt application of existing emergency working procedures, which had been designed for just this situation, could have unjammed the railway and got trains on the move, and people safely on the way to their destinations.

"We are recommending that the railway industry takes action that will minimise the risk of trains becoming stranded in icy weather. However, since the effects of the British weather can never be entirely overcome, and given the range of other factors that can disrupt the operation of the railway system, our other recommendations relate to the need for better management of the consequences of a stranded train, so that the railway remains in control of events and people are not put at risk.

"As the railway continues to create signalling centres covering huge geographical areas, and embraces more and more digital technology, its ability to manage operating incidents in an efficient manner should be significantly enhanced. However, I fear that this opportunity will be lost unless the railway develops an overarching 'control and command' strategy. Such a strategy could define the ways in which system designers and railway system managers should jointly address the need for efficient incident management on the modern railway. It should include good practice and high level principles governing the design and subsequent operation of large control and command facilities, such as signalling centres and operational control rooms."