



Department
for Transport

Rail Delivery Group

 National Rail



The Rail Industry's Implementation Plan for the Lowering of the Minimum Train Driver Age to 18

Summary - March 2026

Executive Summary

The rail industry is preparing for a legislative change that will lower the minimum age at which individuals can be licensed as domestic train drivers from 20 to 18, with the change scheduled to take effect on 30th June 2026. The purpose of this shift extends beyond eligibility: it is a strategic intervention designed to diversify the train driver workforce, mitigate emerging demographic risks, and expand access to a previously untapped pool of younger talent.

For many young people, the existing minimum age of 20 places the role out of reach for too long, often resulting in them pursuing alternative career paths before they are eligible to apply. Reducing the minimum age therefore supports long-term workforce sustainability by helping to prevent a future “retirement cliff edge” and addressing persistent recruitment gaps across some parts of the network.

A comprehensive hazard identification (HAZID) exercise concluded that the age change does *not* necessitate major alterations to existing safety or competency management systems. Current safeguards – psychometric testing, rigorous training, supervision frameworks, medical standards and fatigue management – remain appropriate for younger apprentice drivers, provided operators¹ update procedures to reflect the new age threshold and help staff clearly understand expectations around supporting younger recruits.

Implementation will take place through overlapping phases. Early work will be led by volunteer “pathfinder” operators, who are leading the way with the necessary safety management of change activities, sharing insights to inform the full implementation across the industry. Key “Day 1 must” mitigations include reviewing and, where necessary, updating selection procedures, safeguarding and wellbeing support mechanisms, as well as continuing to modernise training approaches to meet the needs of a younger and more diverse applicant population.

To reduce structural barriers for younger applicants, it is proposed that the minimum apprenticeship entry age be dropped to 17.5, supported by a proposed foundation apprenticeship that could allow candidates to begin employment earlier. Additional access routes will also be developed for 16-year-old school leavers to help retain potential talent during the period before they can formally start train driver training.

A sector wide communications strategy will promote the role both internally and externally, raising awareness among young people, educators, parents, and those unfamiliar with rail careers. In parallel, the industry is scoping a longitudinal study that will monitor the wellbeing, progression, competence, and retention of younger drivers

¹ ‘Operators’ in the context of this document refers to train and freight operating companies.

over time – ensuring that the new age threshold continues to be underpinned by robust evidence.

Overall, the implementation plan provides a structured, evidence-based and future focused approach that maintains strong safety frameworks while modernising recruitment, training, and managerial practices. By opening the profession to younger people, the sector is taking proactive steps to secure its long-term workforce resilience and better reflect the communities it serves.

Background

The rail industry is preparing for a significant regulatory shift following the Government's decision to lower the minimum age for qualified train drivers from 20 to 18. The lowered minimum age will raise the potential of being a train driver for a generation of hitherto untapped talent, for whom the current minimum age of 20 was so distant that other careers often took them away from the rail industry. Whilst there is a backlog of training in some operators – the causes of which the industry is addressing – other operators report that they are unable to source sufficient *suitable* candidates and are unable to fill all their training places. Removing the unnecessary restriction on the pool of applicants helps to mitigate this issue, as well as reducing the average age of train drivers (staving off a “retirement cliff edge”) and presenting an opportunity for young people to access the train driver role far earlier than is currently possible.

Legislation was laid during National Apprenticeship Week in February 2026, following research undertaken by the Rail Safety & Standards Board (RSSB)² which provided the evidence base that the minimum age could be lowered safely, as well as public consultation³. It is intended to come into force on 30th June 2026, subject to parliamentary approval.

This overview summarises the rail industry's implementation plan, which was devised by the Rail Delivery Group's Train Drivers Academy (TDA)⁴ scheme, working with industry at the request of the Department for Transport (DfT) and approved by them and the Office of Rail and Road (ORR).

Phase 0 (Discovery)

To begin preparations, the industry undertook a Hazard Identification (HAZID) exercise, bringing together expertise from recruitment, training, apprenticeships, and operational standards. The findings indicated that the lowering of the minimum age requires no fundamental alteration to existing safeguards or competency management systems. This was reinforced by ORR's stated regulatory position: that the lowering of the minimum age does not itself constitute a “substantial change” under ROGS⁵ nor an automatic “significant change” under CSM-REA⁶, because it affects licensing eligibility rather than the operation of trains. Each operator must nonetheless consider whether

² RSSB website: [Minimum age of train drivers](#)

³ [Lowering the minimum age requirement for train drivers from 20 to 18 - GOV.UK](#)

⁴ Train Drivers Academy is a scheme run by Rail Delivery Group. Its aim is to help its participants – train operators – to diversify the train driver population and ensure an effective pipeline of train drivers to address the changing needs of the rail industry, through optimising selection, recruitment, training and competence management.

⁵ [The Railways and Other Guided Transport Systems \(Safety\) Regulations 2006](#)

⁶ [Common Safety Method for Risk Evaluation & Assessment](#)

associated modifications to their own processes constitute a significant change within their safety management systems.

As well as updating written procedures to acknowledge the new minimum age, operators help staff understand the implications, benefits, and expectations associated with younger candidates entering the profession. The HAZID participants agreed that current controls – covering psychometric testing, training, supervision, medical standards, and fatigue management – are sufficient to support 18-year-old drivers, provided existing mitigations remain in place.

Although no major procedural overhauls are required, the change provides a useful catalyst for refreshing and optimising aspects of recruitment, training, and supervision. For instance, the industry recognises that younger applicants may require additional safeguarding considerations and potentially more structured pastoral support, particularly where recruits begin training before their 18th birthday. It has also been important to reflect on areas such as generational communication, instructor skillsets, and consistency of learner experience across different operators.

Phases 1 (Pre-Legislation Pathfinder Implementation) and 2 (Wider Post-Legislation Implementation)

Phases 1 and 2 overlap deliberately. Phase 1 involves early adopting “pathfinder” operators – CrossCountry, Chiltern Railways, DB Cargo, East Midlands Railway and Transport for Wales – who have volunteered to engage in management of change, initial recruitment planning, and practical testing of materials and processes. Their insights will be shared with the wider industry through structured working groups, guidance and resources. This phase also encompasses coordinated communications activity around the legislative changes.

Phase 2 introduces full scale implementation across all operators, informed by the learning derived from the pathfinders. It will include the incorporation of the lowered minimum age requirement into recruitment, training and operational processes. A key support mechanism for this wider rollout will be the TDA Recruitment Portal, which will act as the central point of information, articulating the benefits and realities of the role, the essential skills required and materials to help applicants prepare. Operators will also be offered a checklist and resources to support their management-of-change processes, benefitting from the pathfinders’ experience.

Phase 3 (Ongoing Support and Longitudinal Study)

Support for operators will not stop on reaching the 30th June implementation date. TDA will continue to facilitate lessons learned from implementation on an ongoing basis. A key component of the long-term approach is the establishment of a longitudinal study

to track the progression, competence, wellbeing and retention of younger drivers over an extended period. This will involve GDPR compliant data sharing and may draw on both internal research capability and external validation. Its findings will support continuous improvement and inform future standards.

“Day 1 musts” and ongoing optimisation

To support operators’ readiness for the implementation date, the industry has defined a set of “Day 1 musts”, which include:

- Aligning local standards and procedures with the lowered minimum age – with a checklist provided to underpin the necessary management of change within each operator’s safety management system
- Attracting candidates genuinely motivated by the job, aware of the relevant skills they need, and prepared for a role that involves long periods of low workload alongside the ability to react calmly and safely in high-workload situations, supported by strong professional knowledge
- Taking a progressive approach to line manager selection interviews for apprentice train driver candidates, adopting a ‘strengths based’ model
- Ensuring appropriate safeguarding policies are in place
- Refreshing communications material on generational differences and inclusive practice, to support managers in providing appropriate wellbeing support
- Verifying that existing drug and alcohol controls/education materials remain robust (as the industry does periodically for all train drivers, regardless of age)

These actions are largely practical adjustments to existing systems or extensions of work already underway. Beyond immediate readiness, the sector is pursuing a broader optimisation agenda. Working groups covering recruitment, apprenticeships, competence and operations standards are developing enhancements such as modernised sifting, psychometric testing and other elements of the selection process (through an extensive RSSB research project), blended learning approaches, improved instructor training, and more sophisticated use of immersive simulators to develop non-technical skills such as calmness under pressure.

Overcoming barriers to younger applicants

While lowering the minimum age by two years is a gamechanger in terms of mitigating the current tendency for potential younger train drivers to find themselves in another career before getting close to the minimum train driver age, it is acknowledged that 16-year-old school leavers may have to wait a significant time between application and starting their training.

Train driver training can only realistically commence at around 17 years 9 months due to limitations of Working Time Regulations on practical training, which begins in earnest around three months into most operators' initial driver training programmes. Employers have proposed the minimum age to commence the Level 3 Train Driver Apprenticeship be lowered to 17.5 years to reflect this restriction.

The long lead time between application and starting the role for younger school leavers, with the requirement to be in an approved form of education in the interim, may mean that some young people eventually pursue a path away from the driver role. The Train Drivers Academy and operators are working with Network Rail to explore the potential for a foundation apprenticeship in rail operations. This will enable younger candidates to undertake an apprenticeship which serves as a lead into the train driver apprenticeship. This may enable a young person to begin employment as young as 16.

The rail industry is also considering whether 'access courses' might be identified to bridge the gap between leaving school at 16 and commencing employment with an operator. These could be highlighted as useful in developing the essential skills needed to work towards an application for the train driver apprenticeship.

Communication strategy

Safety, operational readiness, and consistent communication underpin the project's approach through each stage of the implementation plan. A comprehensive communication strategy supports the project's delivery, ensuring stakeholders remain informed, aligned, and engaged. This includes clear channels, coordinated timing aligned to key milestones, and messaging tailored to differing levels of awareness and responsibility. Communication will span digital platforms, social media, formal guidance materials, open days, media activity, and ongoing direct engagement with stakeholders. The strategy is intentionally flexible so that it evolves as the project progresses and as stakeholder needs change.

Externally, communications focus on raising awareness among young people and those unfamiliar with rail careers. Key initiatives include use of the TDA Recruitment Portal as a central information hub; depot open days and education partnerships; structured media engagement; targeted social media campaigns on youth-focused platforms; a clear journey map explaining the route into driving; and targeted advertising across stations and trains. These efforts aim to inspire potential candidates and provide transparent information on becoming a train driver.

Internal communications promote industry readiness and consistency. Formal guidance will help operators make the necessary operational adjustments and support broader operator participation. Operators themselves play a pivotal role in local engagement, while DfT and the RDG project team oversee national messaging,

governance, and campaign alignment. This division of responsibility promotes coherence while enabling operators to tailor outreach to their contexts.

Conclusion

The rail industry's implementation plan is structured, pragmatic and evidence based. It retains the strength of existing safety and competence frameworks while introducing enhancements that will support younger recruits and make best use of modern training methods. With clear guidance, a strong communications strategy and a phased deployment model, the sector is positioned to adopt the new minimum age safely, consistently and with long term workforce benefits.

Effective and coordinated communication will also be central to the successful adoption of the lowered minimum age. A clear, consistent and well-timed communications approach helps maintain alignment across the industry, ensuring that stakeholders remain informed, engaged and confident throughout the implementation. This includes using structured channels and adaptable messaging to suit differing levels of awareness and responsibility, providing operators with the clarity they need to implement changes smoothly while supporting public understanding of the role and this exciting opportunity this policy offers to young people.