

Report 01/2020: Serious operational irregularity at Balham, 20 April 2019

On publication of RAIB's report concerning the Serious operational irregularity at Balham, 20 April 2019, Simon French, Chief Inspector of Rail Accidents, said:

"Yet again we have investigated an incident in which a poor standard of communications played a crucial part. In this case, the way in which the key individuals talked to each other resulted in a misunderstanding. The consequences of the misunderstanding were that a very large item of yellow plant, a tamping machine, came out of an area where it had been working, onto a line where a passenger train had passed in the opposite direction only a short time before.

"The role of person in charge of a possession (PICOP) is an important one. The PICOP controls the movement of trains into, within and out of engineering possessions. There were ten trains working in the possession near Balham, and giving their drivers clear and correct instructions is a vital job. It is not something that should be done from a kitchen table, or while driving a car. PICOPs need to be given adequate facilities for their work, and should make proper use of them.

"Our investigation found a culture of poor communications among staff involved with engineering work. People were embarrassed to use the proper protocols when passing messages to colleagues. The aviation industry confronted this problem head-on many years ago, and now any pilot or air traffic controller who does not use the correct form of words and phrases would instantly stand out as less than competent. We found that, while train drivers and signallers have generally achieved a good standard of safety critical communications in recent years, the same cannot be said for engineering operations staff, even when talking to signallers. We are challenging the railway industry to come into line with aviation, and embed the same standards among its people.

"In this case several of the people involved did not challenge information or instructions which were confusing, inconsistent with what they had just been told by someone else, or contrary to rules. This is not the first time this has led to trouble, and the consequences can be disastrous. In the collision between two engineering trains in a possession at Logan in 2015, a locomotive and eighteen wagons were derailed and damaged. That accident also arose from a misunderstanding created by poor communications ([report 13/2016](#)), and we have investigated other collisions in possessions at Badminton ([report 30/2007](#)), Leigh on Sea ([report 24/2009](#)), Arley ([report 12/2013](#)) and Kitchen Hill ([bulletin B1/2014](#)).

"These are all areas in which the industry has previously made efforts to improve, but for whatever reason, lasting change has not happened. I hope that this time implementation of our recommendations will make a real difference."