

Rail regulator calls for better planning of engineering works to reduce impact on passengers

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An Office of Rail and Road (ORR) review commissioned into how Network Rail (NR) plans for and delivers engineering works has found that while there have been some recent improvements, further work is required to minimise disruption to passengers and ensure public money is spent appropriately.

The review into possession efficiency - when Network Rail closes sections of the railway for works - looked at how planned engineering works benefitted rail users, funders and passengers.

The findings show a lot of changes to access plans, including cancellations and inconsistent processes being adopted across all Network Rail regions in managing 'late changes' to possession. These often occur after revised timetables have been made available to passengers.

There is also a lack of understanding of the Network Code, access costs and impact of disruption.

Opportunities to minimise compensation paid to train operators were also missed by NR Regions at the

planning stage.

ORR is working with Network Rail to discuss how NR can act on the review's findings and ORR will monitor progress every 3 months, with a further full review in September 2022. The regulator will also undertake 'deep dives' into four key areas:

'Late changes' approach across Network Rail regions

- ORR will look at the rationale behind the 'late changes' approach, which has become the norm in some regions such as Eastern (Anglia route) and Scotland. ORR will assess consequential effects such as increased costs through compensation payments to train operators and disruptions to passengers.

Integrated planning

- The regulator has asked Network Rail to demonstrate better planning of engineering works, greater benefits in overall engineering costs and better deliverability of engineering works, given available access and availability of resources.

Contingency planning

- While Network Rail has already taken steps to improve contingency planning following the launch of Project SPEED in early 2021, improved data and monitoring is now needed that will ultimately support the development of a 'future track access' system as discussed in the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail.

Governance and monitoring

- National and regional improvement initiatives relating to possession planning and delivery are underway, however, there is a lack of defined accountability. ORR wants to see Network Rail's centre function take the lead in managing possession efficiency improvements, to evaluate and compare regional performance, and to share best practice across network.

John Larkinson, Chief Executive, ORR said: "Improved planning, monitoring and delivery of possessions is essential in not only reducing disruption to passengers but also in reducing costs.

"Network Rail has responded positively to the review and we have seen progress on a number of initiatives designed to address possession inefficiencies. It is important now that when these prove successful that they are consistently shared and applied across all of the regions.

"By the end of 2021, we want to see a clear and time-bound plan with milestones for delivering on our recommendations, and we will closely monitor and track Network Rail's progress."

Photo credit: Office of Rail and Road