

# Safety Advice



## Skills fade and annual capability conversations

Issued to: **Network Rail line managers and safety professionals**  
Ref: NRA21-01  
04/01/2021  
Location: National  
Contact: [Vincent van der Hoeven](#)  
Head of Route Quality Health Safety & Environment - Kent Route



### Overview

Working on the track in a line blockage with additional protection is much safer than using lookouts. Work which has previously been done using unassisted lookouts must move to safer, protected methods of working. But there can be risks while changing long-established practices.

As teams adapt to safer systems of work, several recent incidents in Southern Region have highlighted skills fade among COSSs who are less familiar with setting up line blockages. In one example a COSS qualified for five years had only set up two or three line blockages.

Cyclical work and Safe Work Packs (SWPs) are a particular concern. Some recent examples involved SWPs that had not been updated to the new safe system for the work. In some cases the SWP did not contain the information required to safely do the work. Habit and familiarity overrode the required briefing and led to misunderstanding

### Immediate action required

- COSSs and line managers should use the Annual Capability Conversation to highlight any re-training requirements to refresh faded skills.
- Changes in cyclical safe systems of work must get particular focus from planners, responsible managers, persons in charge, COSSs and signallers.
- There is no excuse for shortcuts in briefings. Check every time that the SWP is right and that you understand it.
- Positive conversations should be held with all COSSs about skills fade, and a mentor appointed to undertake three or more of the line blockage activities.
- Safety hours/briefings with COSSs and teams should be used to:
  - brief how their work is changing to be done in line blockages and possessions;
  - discuss the different types of line blockage and how they are taken;
  - discuss the types of additional protection available for line blockages; and
  - emphasise the importance of safety critical communications.
- Routes should target Level 1 assurance to check COSSs have the full range of knowledge required.

In recent years, COSSs employed by Network Rail have not had formal retraining but had their competence renewed in Annual Capability Conversations with their manager.

From 2021, all COSSs will have to be retrained every two years. But until that change happens, it is critical for line managers to check COSSs are competent in all aspects of their role.

Part of our group  
of Safety Bulletins

Safety  
Alert

Safety  
Bulletin

Safety  
Advice

Shared  
Learning

This message was sent to [andrea.delamothe@networkrail.co.uk](mailto:andrea.delamothe@networkrail.co.uk).

This email is for Network Rail employees only. If you are not a Network Rail employee, you can unsubscribe by emailing [SafetyCommunications@networkrail.co.uk](mailto:SafetyCommunications@networkrail.co.uk).