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NETWORK RAIL has told a magistrates' court that it is pleading guilty to three health and safety offences, following the deaths of two teenage girls on Elsenham level crossing in Essex just over six years ago.

The company has already apologised to the parents of Olivia Bazlinton, 14, and Charlotte Thompson, 13, who died when they crossed the line in the path

of a fast train travelling from Birmingham to Stansted.

Another train had already triggered the lights and alarms at the crossing, but the warnings continued after it had passed by. However, the two girls opened the unlocked wicket gate alongside the barriers and started to walk across the tracks.

A controversy surrounds the history of safety enforcement at the crossing, where a woman was killed in 1989.

A Railtrack manager warned in 2001 that the crossing was dangerous, and the following year, after a risk assessment had been carried out, Railtrack was advised that 'consideration should be given' to linking the wicket gates with the crossing interlocking, so that the gates could not be opened when a train was approaching.

In February last year, after various documents including the 2002 risk assessment had come light, the ORR said it would be reopening the investigation, and this resumed inquiry has led to the prosecution of Network Rail.

Network Rail chief executive David Higgins said: "Last year I apologised in person to the families of Olivia and Charlotte. Today, Network Rail repeats that apology. In this tragic case, Network Rail accepts that it was responsible for failings, and therefore we have pleaded guilty."

The company is due to be sentenced at Chelmsford Crown Court on 15 March.

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