

Stranded train fiasco lands First with fine

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Train operator First Capital Connect has been fined £75,000 and ordered to pay costs of £27,718 after pleading guilty to a charge under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

The Office of Rail Regulation brought the prosecution in response to the handling of a train breakdown which took place on 26 May 2011 between St Pancras International and Kentish Town stations in north London.

During the incident, caused by a branch becoming lodged in part of a train pantograph and which resulted in the train losing power, approximately 700 passengers were stranded on a crowded rush hour service without ventilation or working toilets. The passenger information system failed and train crew were unaware of how to use an auxiliary system that would have allowed communication with passengers. Passengers called National Rail Enquiries for updates and throughout the three hour period were repeatedly informed a rescue train would be arriving in 10 minutes.

The length of the delay and on-board conditions prompted passengers to open train doors using emergency releases and some decided to leave the train. Opened doors further delayed the train rescue effort and eventually the driver chose to override the system preventing the train from moving with doors open. At least two sets of doors were open when the train was finally moved to Kentish Town station.

According to the Office of Rail Regulation First Capital Connect failed to act on relevant guidance developed after previous incidents of stranded trains. Ian Prosser, the regulator's Director of Safety, said: "ORR's investigation into First Capital Connects' response to a broken down train in North London highlighted that passengers were treated with a distinct lack of care as the company committed a catalogue of errors.

"The company left hundreds of passengers trapped on a train for three hours with no air conditioning, toilets or communication system. The company's response significantly increased the risk of passengers independently leaving the train on to the tracks, when the safest place for them was to stay on board until told otherwise."

The charge brought against the train operator related to the company's failure to properly manage the risks associated with a full broken down train which was stranded between stations for an extended period of time.

David Statham, First Capital Connect Managing Director, said: "The safety of our passengers is our top priority and we deeply regret what happened back in May 2011... We will reflect on the comments made by the judge in court today and ensure they are incorporated in our ongoing process of learning from this incident. We would like to apologise once again to all those affected."

Since the incident First Capital Connect has taken steps to improve management of similar situations, including training staff, developing new methods of communication, sending more staff to assist with incidents and ensuring trains carry door ventilation kits.

The train operator says the success of this new approach was demonstrated when five trains were evacuated within 90 minutes in difficult circumstances when overhead power lines came down at Radlett in February 2013. And it said on Sunday (15 September) a crowded train was stranded near Kentish Town - again because of foliage in the overhead power equipment - and this was rescued by another train in 63 minutes.

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