

Families accuse Network Rail of cover-up



Charlotte Thompson, 13, (left) and Olivia Bazlinton, 14, who were killed by a train in Elsenham, Essex Handout

Philip Pank Transport Correspondent
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Network Rail put financial considerations above public safety, suppressed information about fatal accidents and may have conspired to cover up its failings, the families of children killed or maimed at level crossings claim today.

The harrowing testimony of parents and grandparents comes in evidence submitted to Parliament as part of an inquiry, which was called after an investigation by *The Times* into level crossing deaths.

The families claim that they were treated with indifference and incompetence and were cheated during investigations into the deaths of their children. Their evidence catalogues warnings from safety experts which they say could have saved lives if acted on.

Written submissions have been handed to the Commons Transport Committee, which on Monday will hear from four families whose lives have been affected by level crossing collisions.

The parents of a teenage girl killed at Elsenham level crossing in Essex, the grandfather of a boy who suffered serious head injuries at a level crossing in Suffolk and a man whose wife and grandson were killed at a crossing in Nottinghamshire are among those to appear next week.

The families describe years of failure on the part of Network Rail to improve safety on the crossings where their children were hit. They highlight three fatal incidents where warnings from safety professionals went unheeded.

Tina Hughes and Chris Bazlinton have given evidence of how Olivia, their 14-year-old daughter, was killed after stepping hand-in-hand with her best friend, Charlotte Thompson, 13, into the path of an express train while on a Christmas shopping trip in 2005.

They highlight a warning from the level crossing standards manager four-and-a-half years before Olivia died, stating that “the risk of disaster is real” because of the design of the crossing. They also refer to a risk assessment document in 2002 which recommended that consideration be given to locking the pedestrian gates when trains approach. Neither document was acted on or supplied to the coroner investigating the girls’ deaths or to government inspectors. The parents both refer to reports in this newspaper revealing the existence of the documents.

Mr Bazlinton said: “If it was not a cover-up or conspiracy of silence, the facts suggest massive incompetence and failure by officials to discover the background to what happened.”

Ms Hughes said: “This tragedy revealed incompetence and lack of processes around level crossing management which were hidden by Network Rail through withholding and suppression of information.” Network Rail pleaded guilty to health and safety

breaches leading to the death of Olivia and Charlotte and was fined £1 million. Evidence from Richard Wright, whose grandson, James How, suffered severe head injuries after being flung from Mr Wright's car when it was hit by a train on the family farm, describes a fruitless ten-year battle with Network Rail to get basic safety equipment fitted at the crossing. "I want to share with the committee just how incompetent and indifferent NR has been in dealing with my request to install a telephone at the crossing," he said. He claimed that safety was "being compromised for financial reasons".

The committee will hear from Laurence Hoggart, whose wife Jean, 57, and grandson Michael Dawson, 7, were killed at Bayles and Wylies crossing, Nottingham, in 2008. Mr Hoggart said that the crossing should have been closed, but last year Lindsey Inger, 13, was killed there.

The inquiry will hear from Peter Rayner, a retired British Rail safety expert, who warned in 2011 that "if action is not taken soon to improve the present situation another fatality will take place sooner rather than later".

Network Rail denied that financial considerations took precedence, or that it suppressed information. It dismissed allegations of a cover-up.

A spokesman said: "Nothing we can say or do will lessen the pain felt by the families of those killed or injured at level crossings but we have promised them that we are committed to making our railway as safe as possible and that remains our focus.

"There is always more we can do to make level crossings safer still and we will never be complacent when it comes to public safety."

Its evidence to the inquiry states: "Level crossings are one of the major risks of a catastrophic derailment and would not be countenanced if the railway were being built new today." It has closed 700 crossings since 2009 and has reduced the risk to users by 25 per cent under a £130 million programme. However, the budget is being cut to £65 million for the next five years.

Louise Ellman, chairwoman of the committee, highlighted *The Times* coverage of level crossing safety since 2011. "I praise the efforts of *The Times* in bringing this issue to prominence through its work focussing attention on this subject," she said.

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Michael Daventry

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douglas harkess

1 hour ago

When it comes down to basics, in each case the barrier was closed. In bypassing that barrier, for whatever reason, lays the responsibility on the shoulders of those persons involved. None were so young that they would not be aware of a stop barrier. As in the case reported recently of the cyclist who nearly met death through his or her own impatience, they had chosen to act by taking the law into their own hands.

There must be an acceptance of responsibility here, and it does not lie with the train companies.

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Gerald Blezard

2 hours ago

If any one was to care to look at Google maps at the Elsenham crossing in question. are we to assume that the footbridge is a recent addition? Or that the barriers are and the lights are also?

It does not look like it .

anybody know where you can get a picture of it at the time in question?

Recommend Reply

Parkes

7 hours ago

" Safety compromised for financial reasons" shock horror. When has it not been so? We have a hidden tax in the UK, an incompetence tax, we all have to pay so much more for everything because there are so many idiots out there who prefer to blame someone or something around them rather than their own incompetence resulting in additional rules for almost everything as well as having to pay through the nose for the added burden for companies of putting in place safety for fools.

1 Recommend Reply

Jacque Hughes

8 hours ago

Found it. Not going to be a good day for level crossings and cycling safety!!!

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Alan Dow

8 hours ago

If we tried to apply the same level of H&S to our roads as we expect of our railways then the road system would come to a halt. We would be required to provide fences for each road, crossing points with gates, spend hundreds of hours investigating each death.

Perhaps we need to realise that it is not possible to remove all risk and that accidents will still happen. Individuals will still be careless and deaths will still happen - but at some point there is very little we can do about it.

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Jacque Hughes

8 hours ago

I learned to cross the railway at Suggitts Lane in Cleethorpes when I could barely crawl, and there were a few more lines than the current single one as well. Why do I now have to wait in excess of three minutes at Oldends Lane in Stonehouse every time a train comes through?

Now where is that video of the cyclist that wanted so dearly to extricate themselves from a few days ago!

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Graham

10 hours ago

It's funny in other parts of the world they manage to live with Railways, even in safety conscious Sweden they don't need to fence off their railways as they seem to have the ability to avoid being squashed by passing locomotives.

I recall in Thailand being allowed to walk across an active railway bridge, a British couple were concerned about the safety of doing this, I note the German, New Zealand and Japanese in the rest of the party were not. But as the guide reassured them, "It is ok, if a train comes you will hear it and not stand in its way"

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John black

7 hours ago

@Graham I have to agree with you... We have gone far too far in the wrong direction. Common sense has fallen out of one of the unlocked windws.

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Robert Holmes

10 hours ago

On average seven people are killed every day in traffic accidents. Clearly, all cars should limited to 10 mph, trains also

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Uvegotissoos

14 hours ago

As far as I'm aware, there are no locked barriers before crossing roads, so logically why would it necessary to lock rail crossings? The same principle applies - look both ways, before crossing either rail or road.

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Aaron Turner

8 hours ago

@Uvegotissoos Not the same. Trains are much faster and can be on you in seconds, even when they seem a long way away. There should be no level crossings, period.

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C J Delmege

15 hours ago

I just think of that very recent video of a cyclist just failing to be flattened at a level crossing. Part of the problem maybe the inordinate time the manned crossings in particular remain closed. People get lulled into complacency.

4 [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)



Gerald Blezard

16 hours ago

Unless the children were blind or in any other way incapacitated or of an age that they were too young to understand . That they chose to ignore the barriers the flashing lights the other cars stopped and the written warnings and instructions .Pray tell how was it the railway companies fault?

This applies also to drivers.

and unless there is some VERY exceptional other factor any accidents other than a breakdown of a vehicle or malice can only be attributed I would have thought to the drivers or pedestrians.

**Ian Burgess**

8 hours ago

Yes, how people cannot hear an approaching train beats me.

Recommend Reply

**Zoe Robinson**

7 hours ago

@Gerald Blezard Many rail crossings have neither lights or barriers, and some that do have barriers have to be manually closed, still no lights.

This article is obviously petitioning a crossing like this, and inferring that National Rail should fund ALL level crossings to have barriers and lights/alarms.

And **@Ian Burgess** they may have been able to hear it, but on a windy day, how long before the train passes you do you hear it coming? How much time is there to get out of the way?

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**Gerald Blezard**

6 hours ago

@Zoe Robinson @Gerald Blezard @Ian Burgess

Let us suppose we are not talking about those crossings that are still closed by the signal box or station master?

They would have to be few and far between and not the 'many' as you suppose for the simple reason of the heavy traffic population in most if not all of the country.

Now if there was not any lights .I do not believe there are any with no barrier.

Now if its a manual barrier then its a country side crossing with very few trains?

How is it then that children allowed to go out alone or cross the road alone would not have been taught to beware of crossing a railway line carelessly as well? barrier OR NOT .

Crossings if ever are not put just after a bend but on a straight part of the track both sides. Time enough to see a train if your paying attention but perhaps possible to misjudge its speed . So do you not err on the side of caution? and teach your children so?

Cars or people or cyclists who take a chance do so at their own risk of the consequences even as you do crossing a motor way by foot or a very busy road other than a crossing.

Given the risk the more care then should be taken. Not withstanding the grief and the loss by parents and loved ones. any judgement is not or should not be measured or influenced by the measure of their grief .But by the measurement of the facts .

I agree you might not be able to hear it .But that is why you have eyes and if it is foggy even more care should be taken .But I would argue if it is foggy you would hear

Personally id like to see where the crossings you mentioned are and their context not just the crossing themselves .

Otherwise its just conjecture and any comment or argument on a conjecture people will or can find fault with.

Recommend Reply

Livelyre

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