

Shared Learning



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Unauthorised Access to a Substation

Issued to: Network Rail line managers, safety professionals and accredited contractors.

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Location: Sandown, Isle of Wight

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Overview

On the morning of 8 May 2024 at 08:47am, four contractors arrived at a substation a day earlier than scheduled for a project upgrade involving lineside telecoms equipment. Their intention was to leave equipment and materials in the telecoms room for the following day's work. However, upon arriving, they discovered that the door to the telecoms room was locked, and they did not have the key.

One of the contractors, an apprentice, possessed a key to the adjacent substation and used it to gain access, intending to locate the key to the telecoms room. However, they did not follow the correct procedure of contacting the Electrical Control Room Operator (ECO) to request access. The substation door being opened triggered a remote alarm, which alerted the ECO, who subsequently informed the signaller. The signaller took appropriate action to caution passing trains and contacted the local on-call team.

The contractors were unable to find the key to the telecoms room, which was stored in a cupboard inside the substation. In the end, they decided to leave their equipment within the substation. As they exited, two contractors were observed close to the line by a passing train driver, who sounded the train horn. Neither contractor raised their arm to acknowledge the passing train.

Underlying causes

The contractors attended site a day earlier than planned and without discussing this with the construction manager that they had been due to meet at site the following day.

- Safety signage regarding electrical hazards was not acknowledged by the contractors.
- The apprentice was in possession of a key for substation access and used it to access the substation.
- The apprentice, although trained to Level C (NR/L2/ELP/CTM018) for accessing substations, lacked experience.
- The team proceeded to access the substation despite this not being specified in their Safe Work Pack (SWP) and without following the required process for accessing substations, which the apprentice should have been aware of from their training.
- The SWP did not contain specific information on how to access the telecoms room, nor did it address the associated electrical hazards.
- The planner was not provided with sufficient information about the location and access procedures, leading to the omission of key details in the SWP and the assignment of an individual who was not suitably competent to access the substation.

Key message

- **Effective planning and communication:** Sharing the right information during the planning stage is critical for developing an effective SWP and ensuring the correct individuals with the right competencies are assigned to tasks.
- **Deviations from plans:** Late changes to plans, even those that seem minor or low risk, can lead to adverse consequences if not properly communicated.
- **Access to authorised locations:** Always ensure you are authorised to access any location. If you are in doubt, contact the signaller, ECO, or the Responsible Manager for clarification.
- **Safety signage:** Always follow the warnings and instructions on safety signs. These are there to protect you.
- **Acknowledging passing trains:** When working near the track, always acknowledge passing trains by raising your arm to ensure the train driver can see your presence.