

# THE DAILY HAZARD

## Unsafe underground

A Railway Inspectorate (RI) report on London Underground Ltd's safety case for privatisation due to be published in March 2001 has been delayed without any explanation. The preliminary report published last December was damning and sources inside the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) have indicated that there are still hundreds of problems to be solved.

The Railway Inspectorate (RI), part of the HSE, prepared the report in anticipation of the advent of the Public Private Partnership (PPP). The RI found that:

- LUL and the infrastructure companies' health and safety management systems were not being fully implemented
- The health and safety management systems were too complex, in terms of structure, layout and style, for people to understand and for them to work effectively
- The risk control systems for major hazards and top event risks were not easily defined
- The boundary of control between LUL, the infrastructure companies and their contractors was not clear
- Auditing was not sufficiently focused on the total health and safety management system
- Not all of the commitments made in LUL's safety case were being achieved.

In simple terms, the management hadn't got a grip on safety.

The RI identified violence to staff as one of the key safety issues on the Underground and noted that assaults had risen significantly in the past few years. In 1998/9 there were five major injuries and 140 minor injuries arising from assault. However, by 1998 only 9 per



PHOTO: MICK HOLDER/LHC

One of many protests against the privatisation of London's underground.

cent of staff had received training in avoiding assaults.

The RI investigated the knowledge and commitment of directors and senior managers and concluded that the majority displayed commendable qualities. But this was not true in all cases and the RI quotes examples of what it describes as 'astonishing' ignorance.

There were many criticisms of LUL's failure to consult and co-operate with safety representatives. The RI commented: 'Overall, there were more examples of poor practice than there were good ones.' It was reported that both employee representatives and management expressed concerns about the difficulties in being released for health and safety related union duties. Safety reps complained that 'generally implementation occurs without consultation,' consultation generally taking place when things were cast in stone or were just about to be agreed.

The RI discovered that the transition to PPP would involve

the loss of the Systems Integrity Section, which monitors the work of contractors, and the Rail Asbestos Control Unit. There is no indication how these functions are going to be discharged under the new regime. The RI also found many examples of communication failures in the present management set-up, e.g. accident reports going astray and key people not being informed of their responsibilities.

The report goes on to detail many other instances of slack or non-existent management. While everyone concerned promises to do better in future, which the RI accepts at face value, it is hard to believe that this could occur under the proposed fragmentation.

The Government, however, was perfectly satisfied. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) commented: 'The re-organisation (in preparation for PPP) met the stringent requirement of the RI and further work is being carried out to ensure that the maximum safety

benefits are gained from the opportunities presented by the PPP.' But the RI itself was much less sanguine: 'a significant hurdle would have to be "jumped" by LUL and (the new companies) before the final version of the safety case could be accepted.'

The final report from the RI was due to be issued in late March but its appearance has been delayed without any explanation being made public. Many of the problems to be solved affect passengers as well as LUL staff including cracked elevators and evacuation and derailment procedures. As the RI's ultimate approval is a statutory requirement before PPP can go ahead, the Government faces delay on this front also before it can proceed with its plans.

Despite antagonising the public, the rail unions, the mayor Ken Livingstone and the transport supremo Bob Kiley, and alienating the Railway Inspectorate the government persists on the PPP path.

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# Edmonton residents protest at dangerous demolition

Residents on and near the Barbot Estate in Edmonton, N.9 are protesting against plans to demolish four huge tower blocks. They fear that they will be exposed to clouds of asbestos-containing dust if current demolition plans go ahead unchanged. They were particularly alarmed by a proposal to bring a concrete crusher on site, which they argue will make the dust emissions much worse than removal of concrete slabs intact.

More than 450 residents have signed a petition strongly objecting to a concrete crusher being brought onto the site. They have taken their story to the local media and gained wide coverage of their concerns. They have also tried to enlist the support of their MP

and other local politicians without obtaining the backing they would like. And there is talk of direct action to prevent the concrete crusher being brought in.

The estate and the tower blocks were constructed by the London Borough of Enfield in the 1960s. The Council subsequently passed ownership of the property on to Green Horizons Housing who have appointed Laing Partnership Housing as the main contractor for the works currently being contemplated. The contract for the demolition work is out to tender at the moment. Demolition of the first of the tower blocks, Lancelot House, was due to start in April and run through to 2002. The start of the work has now been put back to July.

Discussions have been going on for over a year in an attempt to allay the concerns of residents who have, however, become increasingly suspicious about what is in store for them. Galatia Gregoire, who lives in a Habinteg Housing Association property only yards from Lancelot House, says: 'I'm fed up with being given limited and biased information. Apparently we'll have to keep our windows sealed while the demolition is going on. I don't know if I'll be able to let my children go into the garden. Our lives are going to be blighted by noise and dust for nearly two years. And that is without a concrete crusher.'

There is asbestos within the tower block as artex ceilings and wall cladding. There is a suggestion, which residents

have so far not been able to pin down, that the concrete shell of the building contains anything up to 0.8 per cent asbestos. If that were the case, it would be out of the question to use a concrete crusher on site.

Residents have been promised sight of the asbestos removal and demolition method statements before work commences. At that moment they will have to decide whether their safety concerns have been met and whether they can agree to the work going ahead. But even then they will have to monitor it closely to ensure that the precautions are being carried out as intended.

It now appears that the threat of a concrete crusher on site has been lifted, at least for the first phase of the demolition.

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## Voluntary sector - stressed and unsafe

The previous *Daily Hazard* (No. 69) highlighted the huge problem of work-related stress in the voluntary sector. The London Hazards Centre Voluntary Sector Training Project (VST) found modern day employment practices in the sector contributed to a whole range of health and safety problems.

Voluntary sector stress is unlikely to go away with NHS and local authority social service departments offloading more work to community organisations through service agreements and partnership initiatives. These competitive short-term funding arrangements build in job insecurity for individual workers.

It is part of the growing tendency for vital areas of care to be provided by low paid, untrained, casual, agency and freelance staff and even for some services to be provided by unpaid volunteers. If this were not enough, some precautions which have evolved over the years in the public sector do not even exist on paper in parts of the voluntary sector.

Take an issue like home visits. Some organisations in London send their workers and

volunteers out on home visits with very minimal amounts of preparation and no written policies in connection with the obvious risk of assault, violence and even of abduction; and have not put into place basic procedures to ensure:

- The initial assessment of a client's needs are carried out in pairs, and preferably by at least one highly experienced care worker. That for some clients visits are always carried out in pairs and high workloads are not used to put individual workers or volunteers at risk.
- That as much information as possible is obtained from the referring agency.
- That double diary systems, contact procedures, provision of mobile phones, personal alarms, and log-off procedures are set up.
- That risks from the location of the home are identified before a visit. Asking such questions as: Is it in a badly lit, isolated area, with known high levels of street crime, and poor car parking facilities?
- That workers must have training to raise awareness about issues of personal

safety. For example in connection with their absolute right to leave an appointment if feeling unsafe or threatened.

- That on issues such as pets, assessments take place before home visits, to get agreement that violent dogs are locked away, and that workers and clients are matched up so that those with allergies are kept away from homes with pets.

The VST sessions on lone working have led to some extremely lively debates, especially when workers realise their organisations could do a lot more to protect them.

However, many organisations also fall down on a lot of basics. An inspection of a relatively large local branch of a national mental health charity, with three offices, 40 staff and a host of volunteers, found the following:

'Trailing wires, the photocopier and laser printer right next to a desk, high shelves, paper everywhere, shredded paper to be disposed, an electric fire left on in one of the empty counselling rooms... The fire exit in the roof had mounds

of paper and archives stacked underneath, the fire assembly point was in a yard which seemed like a death trap. The only way the people could get out was to climb a four foot wall to the next door shop.'

At another organisation providing support for a variety of activities for elderly people, we found:

'... an electric heater placed on a table right next to a washing up sink as the pantry had no heating. A large dustbin placed next to the Fire Exit leading out from the kitchen. A room 1m x 2m used as an office shared by all. Noise from the users. High shelves. Difficult clients. Storage of large amounts of unwanted furniture. Lack of natural lighting. A trailing wire while workmen carried out work.'

Thanks to our intervention this organisation is now in the process of drafting a health and safety policy and have introduced a good control measure for lone working i.e. asking the caretaker to remain there when anyone is working late, and organising taxis in advance.

# CALL CENTRES

Sometimes referred to as the modern equivalent of the industrial revolution's 'dark satanic mills', many call centres aren't dark and don't look very menacing. But there are a whole range of occupational health and safety issues that need addressing in them to ensure the safety and health of those working there.

It is estimated that 1–1.7% of Britain's workforce currently work in a call centre. The TUC call centre hotline recently dealt with nearly 400 calls in one week, with callers complaining about bullying, impossible sales targets, not getting wages on time and hostility to unions.

A lot of the issues that arise have been addressed in previous Daily Hazard Factsheets (call the Centre for details). Here we highlight those issues not covered before.

## What's a call centre?

Call centres are where workers sit at computer terminals answering telephone calls about their employers business. They can be small or massive in size. They can be found in the public, private and privatised sector. Staff work their way through computer programmes to answer the callers questions, take orders, record details etc.

## Pace of work

One of the biggest problems reported by call centre workers is the pace of work. Many, if not most, require workers to meet targeted numbers of calls, sometimes with absolutely no space between each call. Some centres have a screen showing the rate of calls being processed; can identify slower workers to their colleagues; have computer programmes which push for more work to be done by displaying messages on individual workers screens.

A forced pace of work can lead to stress, repetitive strain injuries, and other ill-health. Employers are legally required to provide a 'safe system of work' so if the work makes people ill, it is unsafe and unions or staff reps should negotiate a safer pace of work.

Because of the repetitive and monotonous nature of the work, people have complained of 'repetitive brain injury' or 'zombification'.

## Voice loss

Call centre workers' voices are under great pressure because of the nature of

their work. Conditions affecting the voice (dysphonia) can be short or long term, some permanent. Workers should report all cases of discomfort or loss to the voice. Employers should provide liquid so staff can 'wet their whistle' while working and the job should be designed so there are rest periods for the voice as well as other body parts (eg. arms to avoid RSI risk).

## Angry customers

Call centre staff are likely to have to endure customer complaints about the failures of their employer's systems, be it service delivery, poor quality goods, wrong goods etc. Clients can become very agitated when things go wrong and dealing with this constantly can be a stressor for the worker, who is after all not responsible. The TUC recommends employers recognise this as a problem and set systems in place so harassed staff can remove themselves from calls until they have been able to recuperate.

## Sight disorders

Computer operators have reported such symptoms as soreness or dryness of the eyes, blurred vision, light sensitivity and headaches from working long hours in front of a VDU screen, referred to as computer vision syndrome. This requires the employer to provide regular eye tests, frequent breaks away from the screen, additional lighting where needed etc.

## Rest and toilet breaks

Where workers are having to sit in one position all day at work, sometimes for many hours, they must be allowed breaks away from their workstation. Natural breaks like going to the toilet, refreshment or lunch breaks help but may not be enough.

Some employers in this industry have resorted to bullying tactics over length of time for toilet breaks, all with the aim of keeping up productivity. Hazards magazine recently reported the range of ill-health conditions that can develop if people are not allowed to go to the toilet when they need to. The government's advisory body HELA recommends call centre staff get breaks often and that they are not too short (see references below). All breaks should be negotiated and taken by employees.

## Headsets

To enable workers to operate a computer and listen and talk to the callers at the same time, centre

workers wear headsets. These come in all shapes and sizes but could be for both or just one ear and may sit outside the ear resting on the outer ear or plug into the actual ear hole itself. These present three main problems, suitability and comfort, noise levels and hygiene.

## Suitable headsets

Whatever choice of headset is made they must be comfortable to wear over a working day, be light weight, they must be adjustable to fit the different sized heads and ears of those at work, must not restrain the movement of worker etc.

## Noisy headsets

Some headsets may not have adjustable volume controls and are set at high volume levels. In some workplaces the general office background noise levels can be very high and the volume for the headsets will be adjusted louder still.

This is a problem as the levels of noise going into the ear from the headsets can be higher than the first or second action level in the Control of Noise at Work Regulations. Therefore their continued use is likely to damage hearing over a period of time and is a breach of these regulations. It is known that industry standard headphones can and do breach the regulations. To avoid this employers should tackle the general noise levels in the office by using screens, booths etc. Employers should then require the manufacturers of headsets to provide them with noise level details of their headsets, and employers should choose accordingly.

Another noise phenomenon in headsets is 'acoustic shock', where the wearer is exposed to short but very loud bursts of noise which can temporarily or permanently damage the wearer's hearing. It is also reported as being very painful to receive. The CWU has over 80 compensation cases pending and BT has already paid out £93,000 to one worker.

To prevent this occurring checks must be made on the system used before installation and regularly during use to ensure these peaks are not being broadcast. Workers should report all incidents in the accident book to ensure a true picture of the problem at the workplace is recorded and the statistics should be made available to safety reps and workers.

Noise limiters can be put on the system to deal with both the above problems. However, they must not be easy for the worker to disable, as in noisy offices there may be a need to

go over safe limits. Again, tackle the noise at source and reduce office noise so the system does not have to be disabled.

## Unhygienic headsets

Some employers operate a pool of headsets where workers put them in a box at the end of the day and pick any one out of there when they return to work. This is to be discouraged as there is a serious risk of ear infections being passed around a workplace. Some ear infections can lead to serious hearing disorders.

A better system is for each worker to be provided with their own headset by the employer and somewhere to keep it in out of work hours. Even using this system, employers should ensure they have a system in place to keep the headsets clean and healthy with regular maintenance and replacement where necessary.

## References

*Hazards* magazine. This excellent publication has produced many articles on call centres, voice loss, computer vision syndrome etc. It is now supported by the TUC and recommended by them to all Safety Reps. See [www.hazards.org](http://www.hazards.org) or e-mail [sub@hazards.org](mailto:sub@hazards.org) or call 01142 67 8936.

A lot of unions, including CWU, Unison, GMB and MSF have put out good information about call centres. Check with your union. The TUC has information on its web site at [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

The main government advice is contained in the HELA advice document 'Initial advice regarding call centre working practices' number LAC 94 published 1999. Available free from your local HSE office.

'Occupational voice loss. A negotiators guide. BiFU.' Unifi, tel: 020 8946 9151.

## TRAINING COURSES AT LHC

The Centre provides training on a range of health and safety issues including risk assessment, COSHH, asbestos, VDU work, stress etc. Our current in-house courses are:

- **3rd Sept. 2001**  
*Introduction to workplace safety and risk assessment*
- **4th Sept. 2001**  
*VDU hazards and DSE assessments*
- **11th Sept. 2001**  
*Tackling workplace stress*

All of these are offered here at the Centre for just £40.00 per person. We can also train on a topic of your choice at your workplace. Call us for details.

## 12TH NATIONAL HAZARDS CONFERENCE

*Hazards 2001*  
**Revitalising Safety Reps**  
**22 – 24 June 2001**  
**Manchester**

Contact:  
Greater Manchester Hazards Centre  
Tel: 0161 953 4017



## WE HAVE MOVED TO

**Hampstead Town Hall Centre**  
**213 Haverstock Hill**  
**London NW3 4QP**  
**Tel: 020 7794 5999**  
**Fax: 020 7794 4702**  
**Email: mail@lhc.org.uk**  
**Website: www.lhc.org.uk**

*Registered Charity No: 293677*



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by London Boroughs Grants



member

## Worker's Memorial Day London 2001



PHOTOS: MICK HOLDER/LHC



*The 28th April has now been well established as a global day to remember those killed, disabled, injured and made unwell by work. In London, RMT member Sarah Friday led a march through Clapham to the site of the 1988 rail crash memorial where she laid a wreath to remember those killed and to remind us to fight for the living. Sarah was supported in this by Marion Carmichael (pictured) of the Safe Trains Action Group (STAG) whose daughter was killed in the crash, Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Council, RMT, Construction Safety Campaign and others.*



## NEW STAFF AT THE CENTRE

We have three new staff at the Centre. **Margaret Sharkey** is working with the Voluntary Sector Training Project, **Paul Okidi** is our new finance/admin worker and **Helen Lynn** is our new advice worker.

## BOOKLET REVIEW

### Asbestos Facts

Asbestos Facts by Nancy Tait is a 'must have' for all advice workers, safety reps and trade union officers who are involved with this deadly dust. In addition to information about the early use of asbestos and some important dates when evidence emerged of disease, it gives an extremely clear guide to the obstacle course involved in making both DSS and civil claims. The many illustrations tell much of the story: pictures of diseased lungs, electron micrographs of fibres, early use, damaged asbestos in buildings and machinery. Also of workers using air-line respirators and full protective gear in 1978.

The section on DSS benefits explains key aspects of the process. It supplements official forms by important pieces of extra

information. There are checklists, question and answers for DIYers and homeowners. It urges self-employed workers to apply if they were exposed to asbestos as an apprentice because DSS should count this as paid employment. It explains the workings of the new Community Legal Service Fund. It has four pages aimed at bereaved relatives explaining exactly why the post mortem is so vital and hoping it will ease the pain and bitterness many feel. This short pamphlet really does reflect thirty years experience.

Asbestos Facts is available in priced packs of 10. Single copy free. Send an AA4 self addressed envelope and postage for 150 grams to: OEDA, PO Box 26, EN1 2NT.

OEDA website: [www.oeda.demon.co.uk](http://www.oeda.demon.co.uk)