

# Stepping Up SPAD FOCUS

Guidance



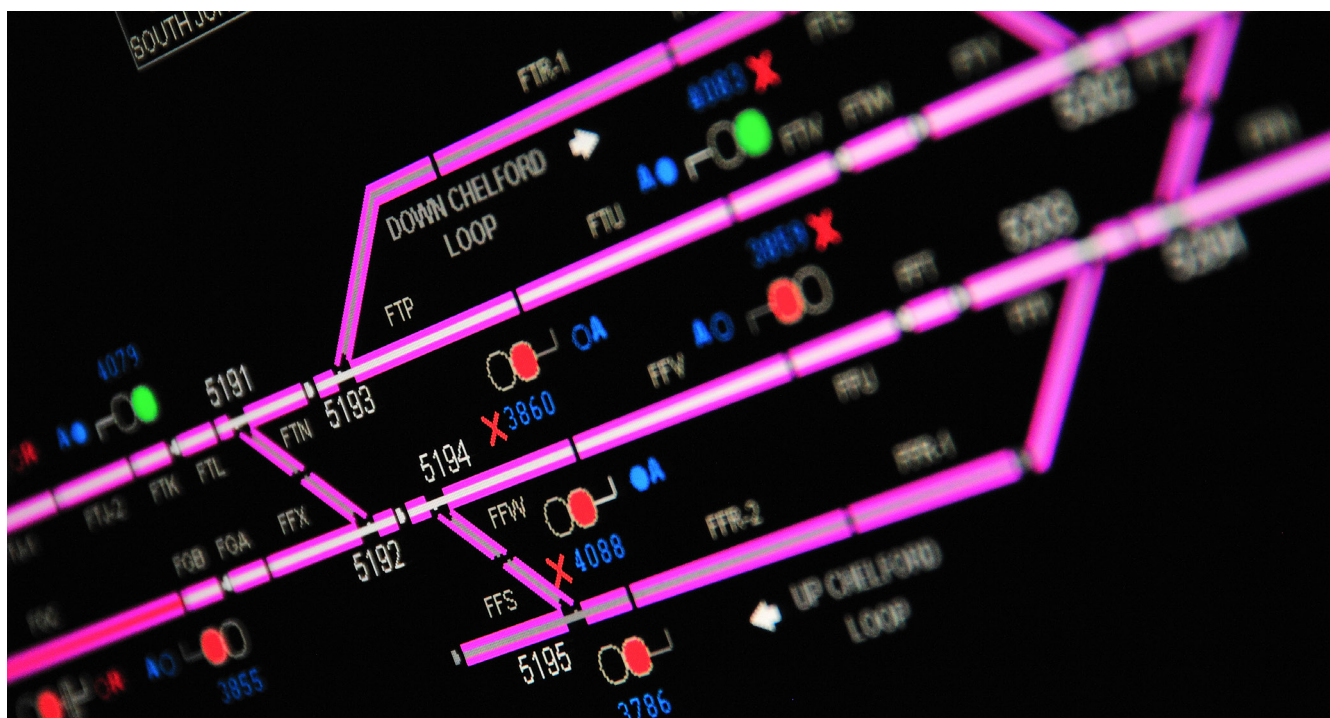
**IT'S BACK TO BUSINESS  
BE PREPARED  
STAY ALERT**

# IT HAS BEEN A TOUGH YEAR FOR EVERYONE

The railway has been a very different place over the last year, and as we move out of the Covid pandemic, many things may not be returning to normal. This will pose risks for drivers on all parts of the network. Humans are creatures of habit, and as a driver it's likely that your training and experience have encouraged this – but things are about to change and this guidance highlights potential risks and strategies to help manage these.

- Stopping patterns, train formations, expected signalling sequences, train schedules, and timetables may all be different.
- Your work patterns over the last year will have been different. It's proven that thinking tasks such as route knowledge and sticking to rules are more prone to skills fade.
- Normal concentration tasks have not been as regular usual. A large proportion of SPADs occur during the first and last 5 miles of a journey.
- We have all had plenty of distractions in recent times. Between 50 - 75 % of all SPADs have been influenced by distraction, whether it's something on your mind inside or outside of work, or maybe some long-awaited holidays around the corner.
- 2020-21 has left many of us isolated, feeling burnt out or stressed. This can impact on short-term memory capacity, the ability to concentrate, and your decision-making skills. The return to more normal train services will increase workloads and distractions.
- Remember, it's OK not to be OK. Anxiety is not a weakness. Tell someone and seek help from your line manager before it impacts on your role.

While this guidance and the associated posters refer to SPADs, the topics raised here can equally apply to other operational incidents such as station overruns, fails to call or wrong routes being taken.



## All change please - Kick the habit

It doesn't take long to build a habit, research has shown this can take as little as 18 days<sup>1</sup>, and we've all been operating in a different way for much longer than this. Habits then impact on our behaviours at work. With the return to service, the operating railways is about to change, so now is a good time to think about what habits you may have built up. These habits could include scenarios you've got used to in the past few months like:

- stopping patterns
- stock formations
- signal sequences
- route features such as vegetation.

When we return to a busier service it can be easy to make assumptions about what we'll see, and what we're driving, but this can easily create a SPAD trap.

### So, what can I do?

Breaking a habit is all about being aware of your own state of mind while at work. Before you start your journey, think about where you have formed habits. These are likely to be in locations where you can unintentionally switch into 'autopilot', areas where there are less obvious risks. Research has shown that SPADs are less common at signals you expect to be red and happen more often at signals that are normally clear. These are the ones that catch drivers out. To manage this you can use NTS strategies such as Risk Triggered Commentary to help maintain your situational awareness and stop you falling into autopilot, when you feel you are at risk of falling into previous habits.

In terms of changes to stopping patterns, you can use strategies such as making time for extra checks so you don't get caught out, such as double checking your schedule card, or making up your schedule card with an obvious sign to remind you about an unusual or different stop to the ones you have been making recently. You can find other NTS ideas on our **website**.

You can also find out more about how to manage SPAD's at times of change here:

**<https://www.rssb.co.uk/what-we-do/Key-Industry-Topics/SPAD-Good-Practice-Guide/Managing-Operational-and-Engineering-Change/Managing-SPADs-during-operational-and-engineering-change>**



1. How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. 2009. Lally et al.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ejsp.674>



## If you don't use it, you lose it

### Practice makes perfect

Some of us will have used our driving skills less recently. If you don't carry out a task frequently then it can become difficult to remember or use and this is termed 'skills fade'. How well trained and practised these tasks are and how frequently we use them will all affect how quickly they fade. In general, 'thinking' tasks (such as your route or rules knowledge) are more prone to skills fade than physical tasks (such as the physical actions of driving a train).

Also, 'thinking' skills that you also use less frequently, such as Emergency Special Working emergency procedures, are at even higher risk of skills fade'. The danger with skills fade is whether you can recall the skill or knowledge efficiently and effectively when you need to. Now is a good time to reflect on your range of skills and knowledge and think about whether any of these could have faded. Do you need to get help to refresh them before you are back in the cab?

### So, what can I do?

Interventions here are all about you reflecting honestly on which skills you may need to refresh, then asking for help or support from your line manager. Remember you are not a railway robot and it is natural to forget things, especially when we have all been in a state of stress for a long period of time. So it is OK to ask for help. This help may include:

- consider the need for refresher training before you return
- discuss with your manager if you feel a lack of confidence in some skills
- discussing certain scenarios, skills or rules with a colleague.

It's better to ask for help before you need it. If you want to know more about skills fade, you can look here:

- RED 48, 1 minute 30 seconds in: <https://www.rssb.co.uk/safety-and-health/learning-from-experience/red-programmes/red-48-clear-communication>
- Right Track – Issue 21, pages 3-5: <https://www.rssb.co.uk/-/media/Project/RSSB/RssbWebsite/Documents/Affiliate/Affiliate-content/Improving-Safety-and-Health/right-track-issue-21.pdf>

## Beware the first and final 5 - SPAD's matter, start to finish

All parts of a driver's turn are not equal when it comes to SPADs. Research found that over 50 % of SPADs occur in first or last 5 miles of a journey (or the first and last 10 % of the journey depending on which research you reference). Either way, the start and end of your journey is particularly vulnerable to this risk. At the start of the journey this could be due to factors such as rushing to start work if you've been delayed or a break cut short, still thinking about distracting thoughts from your break or home, busy platforms or infrastructure or annoyance from a handover. At the end of your journey again this can be due to distractions of passengers on the platform, busier infrastructure, or thinking about your next turn, what you need to do at home or interesting activities after work. Whatever the reason, you need to be particularly alert and focussed on the task at the beginning and end of your journey.

## So, what can I do?

This is all about using NTS such as maintaining concentration, managing distractions, using a systematic approach to checking or managing workload. So any NTS training you've had may have helped you to develop some skills you could use here. This may include strategies such as:

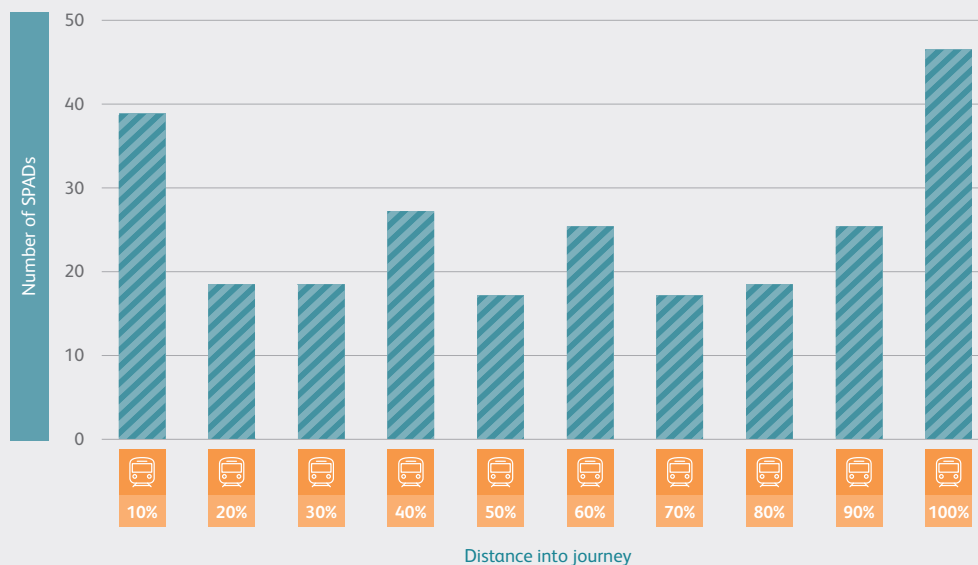
- using tools to maintain concentration at the start and finish of each journey
- use of NTS tools such as Short Journey
- concept to help maintain focus
- using Risk Triggered Commentary to help maintain focus and manage risks
- being aware of potential internal and external distractions and have a plan to manage these.

You can find out more here:

<https://www.rssb.co.uk/what-we-do/key-industry-topics/Data-Insights/SPAD-Data-Insights>

Trains are more likely to **SPAD** towards the start or the end of their journey.

Count of SPAD incidents by percentage into journey (2017-2019)



## Stressed out? Burned out? It's been a tough year for everyone

2020 and (so far) 2021 have been years like no others. The stress has been different for each of us (home-schooling, caring responsibilities, sickness, loneliness, loss of family or friends, high workload, increased anxiety) and we each have different tolerances and abilities to cope with stress. Stress has been shown to impact on the skills we need to drive safely, such as our short-term memory capacity, the ability to concentrate and to make good decisions. The return to service (and for some a return to the driving cab after a period of absence) will bring an increased workload with the distractions of more passengers and services. You will need to consider how stress may have affected you, or is still affecting you.

### So, what can I do?

It is hard to look at someone and know how stressed they are. So, it is important that you honestly reflect on this yourself and if you feel that some aspect of your role is at risk due to stress, that you discuss this with someone. We are not robots and it's OK not to be OK, but you do need to tell someone and get some help. This may be someone at work (your line manager or a colleague you trust) or you can look outside your organisation and get in touch with your Employee Assistance Programme if you feel like you are reaching the limit of your ability to cope. You can also consider some NTS strategies to help you cope with specific scenarios or operational contexts that you find stressful.

You can find out more:

- Cutting SPAD risk from home: <https://www.rssb.co.uk/what-we-do/key-industry-topics/spad-good-practice-guide/how-drivers-can-manage-spad-risk/cut-your-spad-risk-from-home>
- RED 52: mental health: <https://www.rssb.co.uk/safety-and-health/learning-from-experience/red-programmes/red-52-mental-health>



## What was my last signal? Inside Out

Given the nature of the driving task, distractions are always a potential risk. This can be because you are in a period of low workload (cognitive underload) — so it is easier to become distracted by thoughts or by what's outside (or inside) your cab. Or it may be that there is something new or interesting on the lineside which takes your attention and distracts you from the driving task.

Research has shown that between 50 - 75 % of SPADs have distraction as a cause and as we return to service, new distractions may be more prevalent. These can be internal — thinking about stress caused by the pandemic, bereavements, or a feeling of low morale. Or they can be external, such as increased passenger numbers, different services, new stock, or platform changes.

### So, what can I do?

The opposite of being distracted is being able to maintain focus and concentration in the moment and on the task. This needs you to be aware of what being distracted feels like (drifting gaze, paying attention to non-work thoughts in your head) or what can trigger being distracted such as being in low workload. You need to have distraction plans ready in your head to manage these, which could include:

- use Risk Triggered Commentary to help stay focussed on the task
- a strategy to be able to park thoughts by making a note of them to help you maintain concentration
- talk to your line manager or EAP scheme if you need help with an issue which is distracting you.

For more information, have a look here;

- Staying in the 'zone': <https://www.rssb.co.uk/what-we-do/key-industry-topics/spad-good-practice-guide/how-drivers-can-manage-spad-risk/staying-in-the-zone>
- The underload toolbox: <https://www.rssb.co.uk/safety-and-health/improving-safety-health-and-wellbeing/understanding-human-factors/the-underload-toolbox>



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