

# Traffic Note 41

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## Level crossings on out of service railway lines - guidelines

### Issue

When a railway line is unused, local residents may be in the habit of ignoring any warning signs. They are often unprepared for other drivers who slow down, or in the case of passenger service vehicles, actually stop at any level crossing on the unused railway line.

For locals the warning signs cease to have relevance and their impact when used at other level crossings is reduced. Drivers' behaviour at the unused crossing may be transferred to other sites.

As long as signs and railway tracks are in place there are legal obligations on road controlling authorities (RCA) and road users, particularly the drivers of some types of vehicles. Signs could perhaps be removed but some residual confusion on the part of road users might still persist as long as the tracks remain. The possibility of the line being reopened or some other reason may lead to a reluctance to remove or cover sections of the disused track across roads.

### Options

(a) *Do nothing*

In many cases traffic will be local only and very low volume. Even though risks at this type of site are extremely low, there could be implications arising from transferred behaviour patterns or a reduced perception in the value of the standard warning signs.

In other locations, the behaviour of non-local traffic could lead to risks for local traffic.

Taking no action seems to be the practice currently adopted and no crash problem attributed to it has been identified. However, taking no action is inconsistent with principles of sound traffic management.

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(b) *Exemption of sites*

This would effectively permit passenger service vehicles to cross the tracks without the legal obligation to stop. Such an option seems bureaucratic and likely to be ineffective. It does not overcome any of the issues raised in (a) above.

(c) *Formal identification the line is not in use*

Identification could be achieved by the removal of any signals, warning signs or markings and would largely overcome the issues described above. However, as long as the tracks remain across the roadway there would remain some potential for confusion. Installing a 'RAILWAY NOT IN USE' sign at the crossing point should overcome this and reinforce the status of the crossing.

Such a sign could be mounted on an existing pole, for example the Crossbuck (PW-14) sign poles. This would only be acceptable if all the existing signs and markings are removed (to avoid any potential confusion).

The Level Crossing Working Group (an LTSA-convened group comprising representatives of railway operators, Transit New Zealand and other RCAs as well as the road and rail safety sections of the LTSA) has been considering the issue. The Level Crossing Working Group has developed and recommends the following policy.

**Policy for out of service railway lines**

Where a railway line ceases to be used and the period of disuse is likely to be of sufficient duration the RCA should clarify the status of the railway level crossings to ensure appropriate and safe use by road users.

- The RCA should only proceed when they have received formal notification the line is out of use and is unlikely to be used for a specified period.
- All regulatory signs (i.e. Give Way, Stop and flashing light assemblies) relating to the crossing should be removed on all road approaches to the disused railway line and a 'RAILWAY NOT IN USE' sign erected at the former positions of the regulatory signs. In the case of flashing light assemblies the signal heads may be hooded or turned from view as an alternative to immediate removal. The 'RAILWAY NOT IN USE' signs, maintained by the RCA, should remain in place until the tracks have been sealed over or removed from the roadway or the line reopened.
- All permanent warning signs and markings relating to the crossing should be removed on all approaches to the disused railway line.
- The tracks at any crossing should not be sealed over without the explicit permission of the railway operator.
- Gates could be installed across the track to reaffirm the line is disused. Installation is subject to agreement between the rail operator and RCA. If installed the gates should be installed a sufficient distance from the level crossing to allow a rail service vehicle to stop clear of the roadway while the gate is opened or closed yet remain in clear view of drivers approaching the disused crossing.

- The RCA may not carry out any work within the railway corridor, including erection of the 'RAILWAY NOT IN USE' signs or any gate that is installed, without the permission of the railway operator.
- The former level crossing remains as railway corridor until the land on either side of the road is released from railway designation.
- If the railway operator intends reopening the line the RCA must be given advance notice (at least four weeks) and the 'RAILWAY NOT IN USE' sign must be removed and regulatory signs (depending on available sight distances) must be installed before the crossing is reopened to rail traffic. Note for this purpose the use of the line by hi-rail or similar vehicles used for inspection and any routine maintenance of the disused track or rail corridor does not constitute a reopened line.
- The installation of regulatory signs located within the railway corridor at any reopened level crossing remains the primary responsibility of the railway operator in conjunction with the RCA.
- Once notified the level crossing is to be reopened the RCA is responsible for the installation of standard permanent warning signs and markings outside the railway corridor.