

Advice for Duty Holders on writing responses

The following section sets out some guidelines for the writing of responses to CIRAS reports. These can be categorised into three areas: Style, Safety Approach and Commitment.

Style

This refers to the way in which the report has been written. Though it might appear obvious, writing in clear, plain English is important. Poorer responses will tend to rely on legal or technical jargon and run the risk of alienating the reader who will not necessarily understand what it means.

There are inevitably occasions when a reporter will be unaware of the “big picture” and the operational risks and constraints in managing a company in the railway industry. Good responses will tend to be constructive in this regard, managing the expectations a reporter has. It is possible to ignore, even invalidate safety concerns when they are viewed as not posing a serious risk.

CIRAS recognises that the quality of information provided may often be impoverished. In the vast majority of cases, this is the consequence of protecting the reporter’s identity and is not an attempt to obfuscate the issue. In addition, many issues are of a systems nature and have implications for company processes - good responses tend to recognise this. Poorer responses may seek to hide behind the fact the information is of a limited nature.

Safety approach

A response can reveal a company’s apparent attitude towards safety, albeit it in written form. A key criterion here is an understanding the role management can play in reducing risk. In good responses, there is often some form of acknowledgement that local practices or procedures may differ from written ones – good paperwork alone does not ensure safe working conditions. Some responses may place excessive emphasis on written procedures, or the rulebook, and seek to blame individuals whilst ignoring management or system failings. A proactive approach to safety can be conveyed in print.

Commitment

Through written responses there is the opportunity to demonstrate commitment to safety. The desire to decrease risk where possible can be expressed in words as well as actions. A clear action plan with timescales conveys commitment to the reader and adds transparency to the whole process. At the opposite end of the spectrum, denying responsibility and expressing little intention of addressing the issue is a less favourable indicator. The time taken to respond in itself is indicative of commitment – generally, the speedier the resolution of the concern the better.

Response quality check assessment

	Positive indicators	Negative indicators
Style	Written in clear, plain English	Over reliant on use of legal or technical jargon
	Responds in a constructive style, manages expectations	Ignores, invalidates or belittles reporter concerns
	Best possible use made of limited information	Inertia, hides behind the fact a lack of detail is provided by CIRAS
Safety approach	Understands role played by management in reducing risk	Blames only individuals, ignores management or system failings
	Acknowledges local procedures may differ from written ones	Resorts to mere description of procedures or rulebook quotes
Commitment	Demonstrates desire to decrease risk, states how	Seeks to pass buck or deny responsibility
	Indicates a clear action plan (e.g. with timescales)	Expresses vague or little intention of addressing issue
	6 weeks or less to respond	More than 6 weeks to respond
Notes		