

Every employee and contractor working for Northern Powergrid, should go home at the end of each shift uninjured and in good health after a productive days work.

Inadequately applied handbrakes

In 2013 we issued a newsflash (2013-13) focusing on the death of a mother in Dewsbury who was crushed to death by a runaway van. This sad incident was considered particularly relevant to our activities given that Northern Powergrid had experienced 7 runaway vehicle incidents within the previous two years. The newsflash used this rare and tragic event to raise drivers' attention to the potential dangers and consequences of not properly applying handbrakes on unattended vehicles and, to encourage increased care and vigilance when parking and applying the handbrake.

Since the issue of newsflash 2013-13, Northern Powergrid staff had been involved in a further five runaway vehicle incidents by the end of 2014, all of which were found to be due to inadequate handbrake application. Already in 2015, we have had one confirmed runaway vehicle incident due to inadequate handbrake application, and another incident where a third party allegation of a runaway vehicle is being investigated. Fortunately in each of these incidents, no-one was injured and loss was limited to bent metal, however as can be seen in the Dewsbury incident, given slightly different circumstances the outcome could easily have been very much more serious and life changing.

By way of update on the Dewsbury fatality, the press reported on the 10th October 2014, that the driver of the van was jailed for 11 months and banned from driving for 12 months following the decision that the driver had negligently left his vehicle having only partially applied the handbrake leading to the van running away 43 minutes after it had been parked. The judge was reported to have made the following comment;

"The cause of this tragic accident was the negligent way you left your vehicle before getting out of it. You had engaged the handbrake only to the second notch out of a possible six, you had not engaged a gear, you had not turned your wheels towards the kerb as advised by the Highway Code when parking."... "Of course there is no way you intended what happened or foresaw what would happen but this was a serious error" [MailOnline, Oct 2014]



Drivers should note that when a vehicle is in use, its component parts heat up and expand. This includes the various parts that make up the braking system. When the vehicle is parked, those same parts cool down and contract. This is why it often takes several minutes for a vehicle to roll away after it has been parked with an inadequately applied handbrake. If you only rely on the handbrake to secure your vehicle, you are at risk of it rolling away if the handbrake fails or hasn't been applied fully. This is recognised in rule 252 of the Highway Code where drivers are encouraged to;

- **park close to the kerb and apply the handbrake firmly**
- **select a forward gear and turn the steering wheel away from the kerb when facing uphill**
- **select reverse gear and turn the steering wheel towards the kerb when facing downhill**
- **use 'park' if the car has an automatic gearbox.**

Facing uphill



Facing downhill



Rule 239 of the Highway Code stresses the mandatory requirement to apply the handbrake before leaving the vehicle. Importantly, this is a legal requirement so failure to 'effectively set' (i.e. fully apply) the handbrake is a criminal offence and as outlined above, this can lead to catastrophic consequences.

Please concentrate and remain vigilant at all times. Remember that the first and last few yards of any journey are likely to be the periods where your vulnerability to distraction and driver error is likely to be at its highest. This includes starting, stopping, parking and manoeuvring, so always operate with caution. If you are a passenger in a vehicle please help the driver by politely pointing out this good practice when required.

