

***National Journalism  
Awards 2018***

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# Scoop of the Year

# Zak Garner-Purkis

 **Construction  
News**

**CN investigates: AWPR safety allegations cast shadow over £745m bypass**

<https://www.constructionnews.co.uk/best-practice/health-and-safety/cn-investigates-awpr-safety-allegations-cast-shadow-over-745m-bypass/10031549.article>

One of the hardest subjects for a journalist in construction to investigate is safety.

As well as battling a culture of fear, suspicion and secrecy, you must guard against potential exaggerations and half-truths.

The stakes are high, as allegations of poor safety standards concern potentially life-threatening failings.

These pressures are magnified on a high-profile project such as the Scottish Government's £745m Aberdeen bypass, which involved three of the industry's biggest companies.

The project was one of main factors behind Carillion's collapse, with costs rocketing due to years of delays.

Against this backdrop, *CN's* Zak Garner-Purkis exposed life-threatening safety flaws that had led to major incidents on the project.

So significant were the findings that Scotland's first minister Nicola Sturgeon was forced to respond in parliament.

The story required months of searching for contacts and developing trust. In addition to powerful first-hand accounts, Zak convinced sources to provide internal documents suggesting that the number of life-threatening accidents was higher than the officially released figures.

This was done while Transport Scotland took a combative approach to *CN's* reporting, sending internal memos warning people not to speak to the media.

As well as responding in Holyrood, Ms Sturgeon summoned Transport Scotland to meetings to discuss Zak's article and directed them to produce a report for local MSP Lewis Macdonald.

Scottish Labour demanded a government investigation into *CN's* findings, with its leader Richard Leonard calling for a probe "as a matter of urgency".

The impact locally was also significant, with the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* running Zak's story on its front page.

The article has been read 1,688 times in just under four months and received praise from various industry figures.

It has also built trust with new sources who felt able share evidence of health and safety problems, supporting further articles and investigations.

First Minister's Questions 7 June 2018 ([https://youtu.be/Yx\\_Gu3cGyAQ](https://youtu.be/Yx_Gu3cGyAQ)) – 23:00 for Nicola Sturgeon answering questions on my investigation

*The Press and Journal*: <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/aberdeen/1492334/awpr-inquiry-demanded-amid-claims-that-accidents-were-more-frequent-than-reported/>

**The Press and Journal** NORTH-EAST  
UK REGIONAL DAILY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR Thursday, June 7, 2018 £1.10

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**JURASSIC WORLD: FALLEN KINGDOM COMES ROARING IN** REVIEW INSIDE YOUR WEEKEND

# Accidents 'worse than admitted' on AWPR work sites

**BY CALVIN ROSS**

ACCIDENTS on the Aberdeen bypass project may have been far more frequent than transport chiefs have admitted, it was claimed last night.

Leaked documents appeared to show that there were 20 incidents in the first year of work - despite Transport Scotland having previously said there were 20.

Scottish Labour leader Richard Leonard demanded an urgent probe into the safety claims, as well as reports that staff had been working 70-hour weeks and that some had quit amid fear of ending up "with blood on the floor".

The internal safety records were obtained and published by trade publication Construction News but Transport Scotland insisted last night that the presentation of the figures was "misleading". A spokesman for the Scottish Government agency said: "Construction News has published a series of claims relating to 2015 which are not only unsubstantiated but appear to have been written without a fundamental understanding of a complex infrastructure project."



## Rust risk to Aberdeen's iconic bells

Story, Page 5

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pressreader

Stories which this one helped to write:

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<https://www.constructionnews.co.uk/10032733.article>

Aberdeen bypass: 15 hour-a-day job adverts uncovered:

<https://www.constructionnews.co.uk/10033016.article>

Spurs stadium: Long shifts and bonuses offered as deadline looms:

<https://www.constructionnews.co.uk/best-practice/health-and-safety/spurs-stadium-long-shifts-and-bonuses-offered-as-deadline-looms/10033729.article>

Spurs stadium: Mace writes to supply chain MDs over working hours:

<https://www.constructionnews.co.uk/best-practice/health-and-safety/spurs-stadium-mace-writes-to-supply-chain-mds-over-working-hours/10034038.article>

HEALTH & SAFETY

# CN investigates: AWRP safety allegations cast shadow over £745m bypass

6 JUNE, 2018 | BY ZAK GARNER-PURKIS



1 COMMENT  

- > Early problems
- > Differences in safety data
- > Speed over safety?
- > Overstretched and overworked

The troubled £745m Aberdeen bypass has been hit by repeated delays and the loss this year of JV partner Carillion. Lurking beneath these problems, *CN* has now seen damning internal reports and heard allegations of shocking safety standards that have prompted calls for a government investigation.

"It's a miracle no one has been killed on that job."

This is the accusation that comes from a source with in-depth knowledge of safety on the £745m Aberdeen bypass, which is now closing in on completion after three tumultuous years.

Plagued by delays, the project is now recovering from the shockwaves of losing JV partner Carillion, leaving Balfour Beatty and Galliford Try to finish the work under the Aberdeen Roads JV.

However, as the scheme strives to meet its latest completion deadline, a fresh controversy is emerging. *CN* has uncovered statistics that shed new light on the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route's safety record and spoken to workers who claim low standards compelled them to quit the project.

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"I decided it was either going to damage my professional career or my professional integrity because of the number of accidents and incidents that were happening," another source alleged to *CN*.

"I thought there was the possibility that we were going to end up with blood on the floor."

So how had this flagship project, which required years of detailed planning and political lobbying to get off the ground, become dogged by such serious allegations?

## Early problems

Even before there were boots on the ground, the 58 km Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (AWPR) was hit with delays and cost overruns.

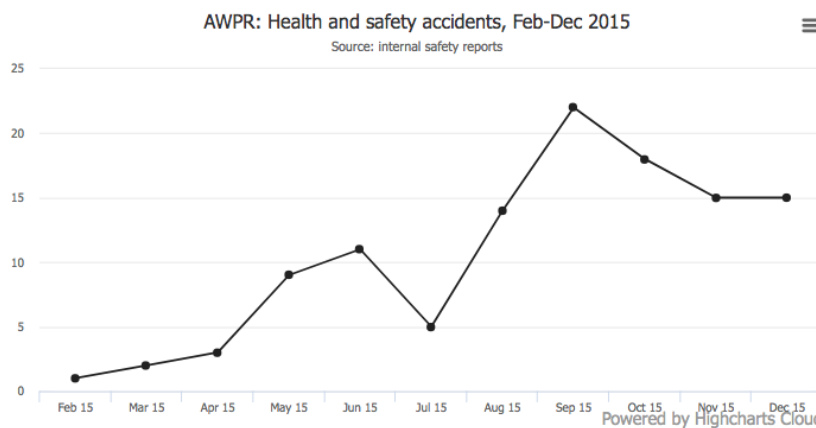
Despite getting the green light in 2009, it took five years and a [Supreme Court verdict](#) before a Balfour Beatty, Carillion and Galliford Try joint venture was [named as the successful bidder](#), seeing off a host of rival tier one consortiums in the process.

However, the start of work on site was further delayed by compensation claims from farmers who suffered damage to their land, and pollution concerns over run-off into the River Dee.

The project finally commenced work in February 2015. Now, [internal safety reports acquired by \*CN\*](#) (which can be viewed [here](#)) have laid bare the extent of health and safety incidents during the first year of the project.

These reports show that the average number of accidents per month between February and July 2015 was 5.2. However, this then rocketed to a monthly average of 16.8 between August and December of that year – a rise of 225 per cent.

Of the 115 incidents recorded in the project's internal documents during its first 11 months, more than half (58) were deemed 'High Potential' (HiPo) incidents, meaning they were events which had the potential to result in a fatality.



The most common types of onsite incident on the AWPR during 2015 were service strikes – when machinery hits electrical cables, telephone wires or water pipes – which accounted for a third of the total (39) incidents in those first 11 months.

Another frequent occurrence was the overturning of construction vehicles, with 27 such incidents recorded during 2015.

The report shows a number of instances when work was carried out close to oil pipelines owned by Shell and BP without the petrol giants' knowledge or consent. In one instance, a subcontractor carried out work just 12 m from the pipeline itself.

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Traffic collisions are also detailed in the reports, including a crash between a Carillion van and a parked police car, and another between a crane and bulldozer.



When *CN* presented these figures to the project client Transport Scotland, it said it did “not recognise the way in which [the] figures had been interpreted or presented” and declined to offer an alternative interpretation.

*CN* submitted a freedom of information request for updated data for all years of the project, but Transport Scotland said it could not provide these figures.

## Differences in safety data

Prior to *CN*'s investigation, the only publicly available accident figures for the AWPR were those disclosed by the main contractors' JV following an FOI request and published in March 2018 by Transport Scotland.

According to the disclosure, there were a total 195 accidents on Aberdeen bypass in the three years from February 2015 to March 2018, with 23 in 2015, 88 in 2016 and 84 in 2017.

The 23 accidents reported by Transport Scotland for 2015 are 92 fewer than recorded in the internal safety reports obtained by *CN*.

It appears that Transport Scotland's FOI publication does not include the High Potential category among its classifications. In the internal safety reports, 58 incidents were recorded under the High Potential classification for 2015.

It is unclear at this stage whether Transport Scotland's definitions differ in any way from those of the internal reports obtained by *CN*. Transport Scotland declined a request by *CN* to explain the definitions in more detail.

When *CN* presented this data and the interpretation to multiple sources on the project, they questioned the number of near-misses recorded.

They also alleged that Transport Scotland's FOI response had been selective to avoid the inclusion of a number of serious incidents that occurred over the course of the project.

This allegation was refuted by Transport Scotland, a spokesperson for whom said: “The context in which this information has been presented is inaccurate and includes assumptions that are not based on fact.”

## Speed over safety?

As the AWPR moved through its first year on site and then the second, mounting issues caused by exceptionally bad weather and challenging site conditions began to emerge.

**“The priority was on the pace of production. It was the speed of the job was being done that was causing the problems”**

Former AWPR worker

Completion dates on the scheme have been pushed back several times, leading to a number of political figures in Scotland weighing in with criticisms on the lack of progress.

After the Scottish Government revealed a delay to the Balmedie-Tipperty section of the project in late 2016, Conservative MSP Peter Chapman took aim at

the JV, suggesting that “the management of the construction must be called into question”.

The collapse of Carillion earlier this year was followed by further delays to work, as well as £60m-£80m in financial writedowns from the project’s remaining JV partners.

Numerous workers from the AWPR project alleged to *CN* that progress was put before safety on the project. “The priority was on the pace of production,” one source claimed. “It was the speed of the job was being done that was causing the problems.”

## Overstretched and overworked

Another allegation that *CN* heard repeatedly over the course of the investigation was that safe working conditions were put in jeopardy because supervisors were required to oversee many workers over vast distances.

**“It was all about doing as many hours as you could and getting the job done as quickly as you could. We were under intense pressure”**

Former AWPR manager

“I had up to 90 men in the section I was working in,” one project supervisor alleged to *CN*. “All the project managers were interested in was go, go, go.”

*CN* has obtained evidence showing staff on the Aberdeen bypass were repeatedly worked more than 70 hours a week, and some workers managing busy sites for periods of more than 13 hours at a time.

“I was doing 16-18-hour days,” one AWPR manager, who has since left the project, said. “It was all about doing as many hours as you could and getting the job done as quickly as you could. We were under intense pressure.”

The source said they had resigned from the job due to the pressure they were under, having been forced to take three months off work due to stress.





Scottish Labour leader Richard Leonard has called for the Scottish Government to investigate health and safety on the Aberdeen bypass as a result of the new information.

He said: "This is supposed to be a flagship project for the Scottish Government – and so should be founded on a gold standard of health and safety as well as the terms and conditions of workers on the project."

When *CN* put these allegations to Transport Scotland, a spokesperson said that although responsibility for health and safety lay with the contractor, it had been working with it to enhance standards across the site.

A spokesperson said: "Over the past year, the contractor has reported steady improvements through various reporting mechanisms and we will continue to work with them as the construction of this project nears completion."

Balfour Beatty and Galliford Try were unable to comment directly due to the partnering nature of the project.

As completion of this flagship scheme looms, attention will turn to what might have gone wrong on the AWPR to prompt such serious health and safety allegations – and whether there are lessons to learn for the major infrastructure projects of the future.

*You can view the full internal safety documents acquired by CN below*