



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Transport Committee

Oral evidence: Coronavirus: implications for transport, HC 268

Tuesday 7 April 2020

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Huw Merriman (Chair); Ruth Cadbury; Lilian Greenwood; Simon Jupp; Robert Langan; Chris Loder; Karl McCartney; Grahame Morris; Gavin Newlands; Greg Smith; Sam Tarry.

Questions 1-47

Witnesses

I: Chris Heaton-Harris MP, Minister of State, and Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Transport.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Chris Heaton-Harris MP and Baroness Vere of Norbiton.

Q1 **Chair:** This is a new format for Select Committees, and I am very grateful for the co-operation of Members, officials and the Ministers.

The way in which the meeting will work is that we will ask for an introduction from the Ministers, who will give us an overview of the departmental situation right now. I will then invite Committee members to go through the transport sectors and to quiz the Ministers on them. We will cover buses with Lilian Greenwood and Chris Loder; aviation with Simon Jupp and Gavin Newlands; passenger rail with Grahame Morris and Sam Tarry; freight and supply chains with Karl McCartney and Robert Langan; and the impact on other departmental priorities with Mr Greg Smith and Ruth Cadbury.

The meeting is being broadcast live. The reason I am sitting in Westminster and the other Committee members and the Ministers are elsewhere is that a broadcasting requirement is for the Chair to be in Parliament, to cover anything needed on the technical front. I am joined by the Clerk, who is self-distanced away from me. However, we value transparency, which is why we are keen to run with this Committee meeting during recess.

Will the Ministers, starting with the Baroness, introduce themselves, and then Minister Heaton-Harris go straight into an overview of the situation at the Department for Transport?

Baroness Vere: I am Baroness Vere. I am the Minister with responsibility for roads, buses and places. My portfolio covers, from a roads perspective, the roads themselves, obviously, and everything on the roads, including domestic freight and haulage, and private vehicles. Buses is fairly self-explanatory, and places includes our relationship with devolved combined authorities.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am Chris Heaton-Harris, a Minister of State in the Department for Transport. I cover rail, but not HS2—I think I am happy about that, actually.

I will start, if I may, by giving the Secretary of State's apologies. He is at a cross-departmental ministerial impact group meeting. I am not sure if they are using Zoom or another method, but I know that they are meeting imminently. If I or Baroness Vere cannot answer any of the questions that your members have, we will obviously write to you directly. I think we are across most of what is likely to be covered but, just in case, I give that caveat. Thank you for having us at today's meeting.

The Department and the transport sector continue to play a critical role in the fight against coronavirus. I take the opportunity to thank everyone working in the transport sector for their continued efforts and work to delay the spread of the virus; to keep transport networks open for those



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who cannot work from home, including a lot of our frontline workers; and to ensure that critical goods such as foods and medicines get to the places they are needed. Key workers across the transport sector are helping other key workers to get to where they need to be safely and ensuring that our supply chains stay fluid.

I also thank the public for taking heed of the advice that has been given, for staying at home and for not travelling in vast numbers. I have some up-to-date stats, which I would like to share, if that is okay, Chair. UK air traffic is down 92% on the equivalent day in 2019. Domestic rail passenger journeys are down 95%, Network Rail stations' daily footfall is down 94% compared with the equivalent week in 2019, and Eurostar journeys are down 99% compared with similar days in 2019. On the roads, overall traffic volumes are down 71%, with strategic road network traffic down 83%, compared with the first week of February this year. On buses and coaches, excluding London, bus passengers are down 88% and bus services are down 54% compared with normal business. I also have the Transport for London figures, based on same-day figures last year: the tube is down 94% and bus 80%; the Transport for London road network is down 63%; and the total of individuals travelling is down 88%. The public are very much taking heed of the messages given, leaving our transport networks open to key workers and freight movements.

I draw your attention to a number of announcements that the Government have made since the Secretary of State spoke to you last week. They include a partnership with the airlines to fly back more tourists stranded abroad, additional support for bus operators to protect vital routes, temporary changes to the certificate of professional competence requirements to keep goods moving up and down the country, and new contracts on the rail for Southeastern and Great Western to ensure vital train services can continue to connect the south of England and Wales during this outbreak.

We have further priorities on our networks, obviously. We want to keep the whole transport system working. We have ensured that there are still services in place for essential travel, so that those who cannot work from home, including frontline workers such as our NHS staff, can travel to and from work. We have temporarily relaxed drivers' hours rules to support our supply chains, including for drivers delivering to supermarkets and people's homes, so that we help keep shelves stocked and make sure the supermarkets can complete more home deliveries, which is especially important for vulnerable people at this time.

We are using the opportunity of reduced rail timetables to move more freight across the rail network, to help keep the country supplied with goods. We have committed funding worth almost £400 million to protect bus services for people who need to make essential journeys—for example, to get to work or buy food or medicine—and to ensure they can do so while following the social distancing guidelines.

We are focused on keeping supply chains moving in these challenging times, thanks to our marine and haulage freight workers here and in other



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countries. As of today, freight is currently moving effectively across borders into the United Kingdom, and we are working to continue the flow of critical freight for the whole of the UK, including the vital GB-Northern Ireland routes. We are continuing to monitor all these situations extremely closely. Obviously, staff welfare is vital, and we will be—and are—working closely with employers to ensure that the safety of staff is protected at all times. We are particularly saddened to have heard about the deaths of bus drivers in London. These tragic losses emphasise how much we owe to everybody participating in keeping essential services functioning.

I have a couple of updates on things you asked the Secretary of State last week. On the repatriation of British nationals, we have moved forward at pace through a clear rescue and repatriation plan, and DFT officials continue to support the Foreign Office. We are also providing continued support on strategic engagement with the sector. The challenge will remain on securing agreement from host states facilitating the movements of British nationals in-country to enable them to catch flights, and also managing public expectations.

The Foreign Office, working with us, has agreed a partnership with airlines to fly home stranded British travellers. Where commercial flights can operate, airlines will allow passengers to change tickets at little to no cost, including between operators now. Where commercial flights are not an option, we have dedicated £75 million to charter special flights. On behalf of the Government, I would like to thank the airlines and their staff for their assistance in that effort, in addition to thanking cruise operators and their staff for all they are doing. It is of vital importance that passengers returning to the UK then follow the Public Health England advice to stay at home.

A number of questions were asked about supporting companies and other organisations in distress. Firms can now draw on the unprecedented package of measures announced by the Chancellor, including schemes to raise capital, flexibilities with tax bills, and financial support for employees. We have suspended normal rail franchise agreements and transferred all revenue and cost risk to the Government for a limited period—initially six months—so that operators can continue to run services day to day for a small pre-determined management fee.

As I said earlier, we have committed to spend £400 million to protect bus services for people who need to make essential journeys, and Baroness Vere is all over the detail of that for your questions. We are also working to make sure that employers across the maritime sector can access the measures outlined by the Treasury to support our economy. We are continuing to work closely with the aviation sector and are willing to consider the situation of individual firms, as long as all other Government schemes have been explored and commercial options exhausted, including raising capital from existing investors.

As I mentioned, a number of people working across the transport sector have, sadly, been taken from us as a result of COVID-19. Our thoughts are with their families, friends and fellow workers. They were playing their



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part in the national effort to fight this virus and doing their job—a vital job—in keeping our transport network going. Indeed, all our transport workers do a vital job in keeping essential journeys going, and we are committed to keeping them safe.

We must ensure that we are guided by wider Government advice at all times. Government guidance is clear that work that absolutely cannot be done from home should continue, and that includes much of our sector. The transport network is only for use by those who are unable to work from home—we want only people who absolutely cannot work from home to be using it. That is a straightforward statement: if you can work from home, please do. Stay home, protect the NHS and save lives.

Obviously, we encourage all transport sector employees to check the Public Health England guidance on the use of personal protective equipment, and we are working with the sector and the trade unions, who I thank very much for their co-operation in this respect, to identify areas where there is a risk of short supply. My officials are working with key industry stakeholders to understand better the measures organisations are putting in place to protect their staff and further need for PPE going forward.

We are working closely with the sector on resilience planning to ensure that the operation of vital services can continue in the event that staff absences increase. This includes looking at cross-modal opportunities to help keep the sector moving.

In summary—thank you for indulging me, Chair—we are continuing to co-ordinate the transport response to COVID-19. I pay tribute to our friends in the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive, who are working with us. Together, we have jointly published an action plan setting out a collective approach to the ongoing outbreak of COVID-19. The Secretary of State and all Ministers in the Department have been working with senior officials to ensure that the Department, its arm's length bodies and agencies are ready to support the wider Government sector and the public as we tackle the coronavirus. We have taken action to ensure that we are able to tackle the virus while continuing to provide essential services to the public, including those in outlying areas of the country, by keeping lifeline services and key supply routes and supply chains open. But the overall message is, if you can, stay home, protect our NHS and save lives.

Q2 Chair: Minister Heaton-Harris, thank you for the overview. We thank you and Baroness Vere for being here. We have just over 40 minutes left of the session and lots of questions, so may I ask you to keep answers succinct? That would be appreciated.

Minister Heaton-Harris, you talked about the heroic work that public transport workers are doing on the frontline. Is enough being done to give them the PPE they need to do their work safely? Is the Government message about self-isolating really keeping people off the transport network in sufficient numbers? You mentioned the numbers, but is that



sufficient?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I would like to think it is sufficient. Obviously, we want to keep key workers' ability to move around as fluid as possible, and for them to be able to travel on public transport with appropriate social distancing measures. I have been in contact with individual managing directors of the train operating companies. I was talking to the East Midlands franchise train operator today, for example, and was told their busiest train yesterday had seven carriages and 36 people on it. It is vital to keep services open. When I was talking to a Transport for London colleague last week, he told me that in Milan, where the lockdown is much more serious and there are significant fines for individuals who are out without permission, the metro has been operating with between 25% and 33% of its usual passenger capacity, because there are so many key workers who do need to get to where they are going. So yes, I think people are taking heed.

Q3 **Chair:** What about PPE?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We have been working with the relevant organisations in rail and across all other sectors. For example, in my sector we have regular calls with Network Rail, the Rail Delivery Group, individual train operating companies and the unions. I do not think that my Department has ever had such a good relationship with the RMT, ASLEF and the TSSA, and I thank them for that because at this time we do need to be standing shoulder to shoulder. We are working together; we have an agreement that we jointly signed and launched last weekend, and we are working together to ensure that PPE is in the right place at the right time.

Fortunately, lots of the workers in the rail sector do not come into close contact with members of the public. But for those who do, we have insisted not only that the Public Health England standards have to be obeyed, but that there should be proper PPE available, based on what PHE is asking for. We have also asked that common sense apply. For example, if there is a surge of passengers, we do not want people to be getting in the way of them. Common sense has been applied across the rail network and, indeed, across the transport network since this crisis has evolved.

Chair: Thank you. We will now go to each section in five-minute chunks. The first is buses, and I will be handing over to Lilian Greenwood and to Chris Loder, who we cannot see but can hear.

Q4 **Lilian Greenwood:** Thank you for that update, Minister. Before I ask the key question that I want to ask on buses, I just want to know, is it clear what personal protective equipment bus drivers should be issued with? I am not sure that operators were clear that they had good guidance from the Government that was based on scientific advice—for example, on whether drivers should be wearing masks or visors. Has the Department issued any clear guidance to bus operators on what PPE is appropriate?



Chris Heaton-Harris: On buses, I will hand over to Baroness Vere, if that's okay?

Baroness Vere: Good morning Lilian, and thank you for your question. This is a really important issue. I speak to the trade associations for buses and to bus operators probably every other day, and what has to be absolutely followed—and is being followed—is the PHE guidance. Of course that is important for every single employer and every single operator, but it is also important to adjust the PHE guidance according to employee activity. As you pointed out, actions for a bus driver may not be the same as actions for a mechanic. I am aware that the PHE guidance is going to be refreshed very shortly. We are working with the trade associations to ensure that operators understand exactly what they should be doing.

You mentioned face masks. It is the view at the moment that there is little evidence of widespread benefit to using face masks outside clinical and care settings. You may ask why on earth this would be. Well, it is because face masks have to be worn correctly, changed frequently and disposed of safely, and sometimes they can cause additional risks when people do not know how to use them properly. Research also shows that there is a decrease in compliance when they are widely used in the community, so we—or PHE—are not recommending the use of face masks at the moment.

When it comes to buses, the things that bus operators can be doing, and are doing, include ensuring that there is hand sanitiser around, that there are appropriate adjustments in signage, that any contact time with a bus driver is minimised, and that people are using contactless payments. There are lots of things that can be done, and of course we are working with the bus operators to ensure that they are being done.

Q5 Lilian Greenwood: Can I turn to the financial support package that was announced last week? I know that it said that companies have to maintain a service sufficient to meet much reduced demand and to allow sufficient space between passengers. I understand that the Department has given guidance that you expect 40% to 50% of normal, non-school level services to operate. Who is going to decide the necessary levels of service—the local authority, the bus operators or the Department? And how will service levels be monitored?

Baroness Vere: What we have asked the bus operators to do as a condition of getting this funding is to work very closely with local authorities in order to establish which services will be most essential, because it is clear to me that some routes—particularly those serving hospitals—will be needed much more than others. What operators have also been doing, which is working quite well, is putting out messages to key workers saying, "Which routes do you really need? Which ones should we keep supported?" We have said that we would like to keep around 50% of bus services, but that does not necessarily mean that all bus services will remain at 50% of their previous levels. Adjustments will happen. The operators will work with the local authorities and make sure that appropriate services are being provided.



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Q6 Lilian Greenwood: Are you monitoring centrally what levels are being provided and dealing with any concerns that are raised by either the operator or the local authority?

Baroness Vere: Absolutely. I have asked for feedback from both local authorities and bus operators. Again, as part of getting this package of financial support, we have asked all the operators to provide us with extremely detailed information on passenger numbers, usage and frequencies, so that we can see exactly which services are being provided. That also helps us to make sure that the money is getting to the places where we need it most.

Q7 Lilian Greenwood: How confident are you that the £167 million for revenue support is enough, and will you be flexible if it turns out that it is not enough? Will you have to go back to Treasury?

Baroness Vere: We have obviously just started this process, but we are confident that it is enough, and the reason we are confident is that we came up with the number of just under £14 million per week in very close consultation with the bus operators themselves by looking at their cost base and the decrease in revenues. So we are confident that it will be enough.

Q8 Lilian Greenwood: Finally, are you working on a similar or equivalent support package for trams and light rail systems? I appreciate that there are only seven systems across the UK, but obviously where they do operate, they are incredibly important. The revenue risk may well sit with the operator, and the local transport authority or local authority does not have the funds to support them in continuing to provide services. What is the plan for trams and light rail?

Baroness Vere: You have raised a really important point. Over the past week or so, I have had a number of calls with the metro Mayors specifically about light rail. As you rightly point out, light rail is not like buses, in that each system is run slightly differently, and the revenue risk falls in a different way. At the moment, officials are working at great speed, looking at each of the light rail systems individually, getting data back from the systems and working with the metro Mayors and their people to try to understand how we can support light rail going forward.

Lilian Greenwood: Thank you very much.

Q9 Chris Loder: Baroness Vere, thank you for your time today. I would also like to thank you and your ministerial colleagues for the work you have done. At the last Select Committee meeting, I asked the Secretary of State for help on behalf of the bus industry, and I am very pleased to see that that has happened. Further to the comments made by my colleague Lilian, I would like to ask you to give a little bit more clarity about the level of service that we can expect for the amount of money that bus operators have been given. We are already starting to see feedback about the fact that a number of routes—quite critical routes—are still not running, and there is no intention at the moment for some of them to run. I think it would be worth while for us to at least understand how we



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can properly feed that back to you and to know how these operators will be held to account if they are not delivering exactly what is expected of them.

Baroness Vere: Thank you very much, Chris, for your kind words about the work that we have done so far. It is a really important point. We do need feedback if routes are not running that are absolutely needed. I would say that the first point of call would be the local authority, because they will be the ones who will have a direct relationship with the bus operator, so will be able to understand whether that service can or should run. As I said, it is very much a collaborative process between the bus operator and the local authority. I am not aware so far that there are significant concerns, but I am always very happy to hear about them.

Q10 **Chris Loder:** That is kind of you; thank you. Maybe I will share some of that feedback with you a little later.

My second question relates to the use of concessionary bus passes. A little while ago the Secretary of State wrote to the Association of Local Bus Company Managers, saying that he would be grateful for flexibility regarding those passes. I just wondered whether the Government will indeed reimburse the costs that could be borne by the bus operators, or whether you see those costs being covered as a result of the agreement you have just made alongside the financial support package.

Baroness Vere: Actually, I see a concessionary bus package in the first financial package that we got for the bus sector. That included—as I am sure you will recall—continuing to pay BSOG, and asking local authorities to continue their payments for concessionary fares, for tendered services and for home-to-school transport. In return, we said that there should be no limit on concessionary fares, and also that we expect first-class customer communications from the bus operators, so that they are absolutely clear which services are running. Again, we think that that is working particularly well and that concessionary fares have been extended.

Q11 **Chris Loder:** Finally, after this meeting, might your officials be able to share with us a briefing note explicitly stating exactly what the expectations of the bus operators are—just so that we can have a full understanding? That would be appreciated. Thank you.

Baroness Vere: I will happily arrange that.

Chair: We will now move on to aviation. May I just appeal to the Members working in teams of two to stick to five minutes? You were indulged a bit longer on buses because of that package, but let us stick to five minutes. We turn to aviation, with Simon Jupp and Gavin Newlands.

Q12 **Simon Jupp:** I have a question for Chris Heaton-Harris—I realise that this is not usually your particular bag or part of your ministerial portfolio. Two weeks ago, the Secretary of State told the Committee that the taxpayer should not shoulder the burden for shareholders and troubled airlines. How will the Department judge whether airlines requesting a bail-out have exhausted every other option?



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Chris Heaton-Harris: Thank you for your question. Essentially, we work with the Treasury on that, and the companies do share a huge amount of their financial information. I know this through the train operating companies that we have been dealing with as well. It is a very commercially sensitive area, but we do ask for a huge amount of information from these companies—those that might be asking—and then it is a bespoke package that would be designed if required.

Q13 **Simon Jupp:** Do you know how many airlines are currently in discussions with the Department about being bailed out?

Chris Heaton-Harris: No, I don't.

Q14 **Simon Jupp:** What conditions will the Department enforce on any bail-out? Could it, for example, include a Government stake in the airline, take into account the retention of staff and potentially keep in mind the smaller airlines providing connectivity to particularly remote regions of the UK?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I guess I can only echo the Secretary of State's words from two weeks ago on this—we do not rule anything out. We want to ensure that the sector thrives after we get through this virus. At the moment, we know the importance of maintaining a very competitive aviation sector. We will do what we can to ensure that, and we do not take anything off the table.

Q15 **Simon Jupp:** So you could not rule out a Government stake in, for example, an airline that is currently failing?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I haven't. It is not my area, but, as the Secretary of State said, everything is on the table.

Q16 **Simon Jupp:** Finally from me, airport ground handlers have warned that they face collapse in weeks without additional help from the Government. What are you doing to ensure that they can continue operating, and what discussions has the Department had with these companies?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We are in quite significant dialogue with these companies at this point in time. It is commercially sensitive, but I can guarantee you that we are in a very, very detailed dialogue.

Q17 **Gavin Newlands:** Can I dig a bit deeper into that support for businesses, employees and the public? This question is for Minister Heaton-Harris. It should be noted that the Scottish Government have announced a full rates relief package for all aviation-related industries, including ground handling, baggage handlers and so on, so the UK Government could and should follow suit in that regard. Could you give us a bit more detail on the potential support available to regional airlines such as Loganair, who are bombing cash at the moment providing vital links to highland and island communities in Scotland, versus airlines who have grounded their fleet and furloughed the vast majority of their staff?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Essentially, I cannot comment—I am sure you would not expect me to—on the commercial and financial matters of



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individual private firms, because of the commercial sensitivity that surrounds them, but the terms of any bespoke support would be structured to protect the taxpayer's interest. The Government would look at factors such as whether businesses made a material contribution to economic activity in the United Kingdom, the importance of maintaining a thriving and competitive aviation sector in the UK to deliver connectivity, and the equitable and fair treatment of businesses across the whole sector. They are the big, framework bits, and there are all the very complicated commercial negotiations and information that you would expect the Treasury to want to receive.

- Q18 **Gavin Newlands:** Thanks for that, but are the Treasury and the DFT considering full rates relief for aviation businesses in the rest of the UK, as Scotland has already done?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I honestly don't know the answer to that question. I will have to write back.

- Q19 **Gavin Newlands:** I would appreciate that.

In terms of support for staff, the Flybe staff were obviously dealt a horrendous blow at the start of March with the company's collapse. The job retention scheme would allow for those employees to be furloughed by the administrators, EY, but they have refused to do so. Can the Government liaise with EY and ensure that these workers at least see some decent income over the next few months?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am quite sure there is that liaison going on. If it is not, I will double-check and provoke it. I am pretty sure discussions on this subject are already happening.

- Q20 **Gavin Newlands:** Okay. If we can get confirmation of that, that would be great. Thanks for that.

Lastly from me, on supporting citizens more generally, despite what you said at the start, there has been fairly widespread dismay about the lack of—or at least the speed of—any support for stranded citizens from the FCO. Can you explain why there was such a lag in the UK Government response to this, as compared to other Governments in the UK, and why has the CAA not been utilised in the same way that they were during the Thomas Cook repatriation?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I do not think there has been a lag. This is an amazingly complex repatriation of tens if not hundreds of thousands of people by the end of it. We have to deal with all sorts of ongoing situations that change on a rapid basis, which is where the Foreign Office's expertise comes in, with individual liaison within country with their Governments. The Department stands ready to do pretty much anything it is asked to do by the Foreign Office to facilitate the repatriation of people back from each individual country. The negotiations that happen between us and any given country where we have nationals wanting to return are done by the FCO. I know, as one of my good friends is the FCO Minister with some responsibilities in this area, that it is unbelievably complicated and done on an almost case-by-case basis. It is the complication and the number.



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Chair: Thank you. We now move to succinct questions and answers on passenger rail. The questions will be asked by Grahame Morris and Sam Tarry.

- Q21 **Grahame Morris:** Good morning, Ministers. I direct my question to the Rail Minister, Chris Heaton-Harris. I wish to thank him for his opening remarks and to acknowledge the sacrifices and, indeed, the enormous efforts that transport workers have made. Sadly, a number of them have died having contracted the virus. May I take issue with the Minister on one particular statement where he suggested that, fortunately, many transport workers do not come into contact with members of the public? Just on the safety of transport workers, particularly those involved in engineering works on the railways, we know that, every Easter—and this Easter is no different—there is an enormous amount of scheduled engineering works. On those occasions, potentially thousands of workers come together in concentrated workshops. My question is this: have the Government assured themselves that any engineering works that will be carried out on the railways this Easter and, indeed, at any other time, are absolutely essential, and, if they are not, is there any possibility that they could be cancelled? There is a big debate going on more generally about what constitutes essential work. If that work has to go ahead, can the Minister give an assurance that every effort will be made to ensure that the staff involved are adequately protected?

Chris Heaton-Harris: If I may, I will take the last point first. Yes, I can absolutely give that assurance. I have been on numerous telephone calls with Network Rail about the planned engineering works. Unfortunately, some will be cancelled because, as you said, Grahame, some contractors have levels of sickness that are too high and some contractors cannot guarantee that their workers can work with the appropriate social distancing, so we will have a much reduced Easter engineering piece of work. Where we can work safely within the PHE guidelines and where contractors and workers are comfortable with that, then that work will take place. As I have said, a number of quite big pieces of engineering work programmes for Easter have already fallen away.

- Q22 **Grahame Morris:** Thanks for that, Minister. On that same point about ensuring safety and following the PHE guidelines, at the last session the Secretary of State said that he did not expect ticket barrier or office staff to be working at the moment, and he told the Committee that he was going to look into that issue. I just wondered whether you'd had a chance to do that, and also whether you had come to any conclusion. As you mentioned earlier, given that the Government have taken over the franchising operations and the risks involved, is there any financial consideration now that would influence the Government's decision making?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The finances do not actually influence our decision making—they certainly haven't yet. On our gateline staff, yes, we do want to maintain a decent number of gateline staff, because there are all sorts of other issues involving accessibility of our railway and, indeed, a tiny bit of revenue protection, I suppose. Again, this is where the PHE guidance



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comes in, because gateline staff have all been asked to work with the appropriate guidance on social distancing—2 metres apart and whatever. They are there to assist passengers who might need help, but they are also being asked to use, and are using, common sense in various situations to ensure a proper flow of passengers, so passengers themselves are able to maintain safe social distancing as well. Those staff are quite a vital part of ensuring safety for all, especially passengers, on our railway, so they will continue to work where they can, using appropriate social distancing.

Q23 Sam Tarry: Minister, can I pick up on that point made by my colleague? One thing that concerned me this week was that there are TOCs that have been asking ticket office and gateline staff to work. In fact, it was alarming—I wonder if you can confirm this—to hear c2c say that it was compelled by the DFT to reopen ticket offices. It has been confirmed today that two booking office clerks on the GTR franchise have died from coronavirus. As my colleague said, with a 98% drop in ticket sales since last year, it does not seem necessary to have the revenue protection procedures in place as well as barrier staff and people in the ticket offices. Surely the railway could function with more of a skeleton staff, to keep those staff safer.

Chris Heaton-Harris: We are trying to deliver a resilient railway network using the staff we have available at any one time who are not self-isolating or absent through illness. However, there are places where the only place you can buy a ticket is a ticket office because there are no ticket machines available. I do not know the exact case on the c2c network. We would like to see ticket offices staffed where possible and appropriate, where proper social distancing can take place and where the appropriate protections and guidance offered by Public Health England are taken up, because we want key workers to be able to buy tickets on the network. So yes, we are asking companies to keep ticket offices open where appropriate, with social distancing and the other measures that PHE has asked to be enforced.

Q24 Sam Tarry: Thank you, Minister. I have another question on a different tack. The award of the Southeastern and GWR franchises happened in the past couple of weeks. It seemed odd to me that, although a six-month emergency measures agreement was put into effect only a week earlier, you went ahead and directly awarded these two long-term contracts in this emergency situation, particularly given the fact that Northern had been taken over by the operator of last resort earlier in the year. Can you shed some light on the thinking in the Department behind the decision to go ahead and directly award both those franchises, particularly on a long-term basis, when there is not a lot of time to scrutinise that during this period?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Thanks for the question. First, the original contracts were coming to an end on 1 April, so something had to be done by then. Secondly, Great Western Rail had just delivered one of the bigger timetable changes back in December very successfully and has a whole host of new rolling stock coming in. Southeastern went through a



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bad patch a couple of years ago with the May 2018 timetable changes. It is now delivering a resilient and, in some cases, very good service that people wanted and has plans for rolling stock and capacity increases on its route. We are trying to look beyond the six months of the emergency measures agreements to a resilient rail service for all passengers when we come back to whatever the new normal is after COVID-19. Something had to be done by 1 April. The operator of last resort would have been available as an option to me, but the balance we came to was that these operators had done a good job in recent months and years, so we awarded the contracts that you mentioned.

Chair: We move to freight and supply chains. Can I ask Karl McCartney to kick us off, followed by Robert Langan?

Q25 **Karl McCartney:** Hi, Chris and Baroness Vere. My first question is on road haulage. I am sure you are meeting with the Road Haulage Association, and you might remember Dick and Elisabeth Denby and their son Peter of Denby Transport. They are quite worried about the margins they operate on—1% or 2%. They are probably down to 50% of their lorries being on the road, so they have an awful lot of kit that is not being utilised. This is probably a general point but they are finding that the things that have been put in place are not easy to access, so lots of smaller haulage firms will find it quite difficult if this goes on for much longer. What is going to happen for them? What you are pushing for for them?

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is a question for Baroness Vere, but obviously I know the company you are talking about very well and I promise you that we do understand the situation of the industry. But it is Baroness Vere's portfolio, so if you don't mind, I will hand over to her.

Baroness Vere: Thank you very much, Karl, for the question, which is a really important one. I speak to the Road Haulage Association and the FTA probably every other day to understand from them the impact on UK hauliers, the impact on the supply chain and on our ability to get goods into shops. The haulage sector has suffered a significant loss in revenues—we are well aware of that. Compounding that has been a pressure on working capital. Some companies who use hauliers have been extending their payment terms—obviously, we are looking to try to reverse that where we can—but also, on the cost side, some suppliers to the haulage sector are demanding payment sooner.

We are thinking about what we can do for the sector. As you will appreciate, it is incredibly complex. Although we talk about the haulage sector, it is actually, in reality, a huge number of sub-sectors all serving different markets, carrying different goods and using different vehicles in different environments. My officials are working very hard, looking at the sort of support that might be offered if it is the case that haulage companies cannot access the support that is already being provided by the Treasury. So, it is a work in progress and we are well aware of the issue.

Q26 **Karl McCartney:** Thank you for that. My second question, very quickly,



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sort of covers the same issue for garages, which I raised with the Secretary of State when I spoke to him a couple of weeks ago. They are in the same situation, perhaps, as many other companies. The forum that was set up very quickly got over 2,000 garages. They are trying to access what the Government have put in place but are finding banks very, very difficult to deal with to access either loans or grants for them to carry on trading.

My point to the Secretary of State was that I personally think that the decision to stop garages doing MOTs was the wrong one, because that is their bread and butter—their baseline of income. I am sure most garages would have been happy to go and pick up people's cars and deliver them back when they had had their MOT. I realise there might be other reasons why you made that decision, but garages are still expected to work and to operate and if you take away the base amount of work they do each week—it's not all MOTs, obviously—that is a certain amount of their income that they are not seeing and will not be seeing for the next six months.

Baroness Vere: I do accept your point that the decision to suspend MOTs will have impacted on garages very significantly. The decision was made to improve social distancing. We just felt that we do not want people to be making unnecessary journeys, and certainly if we could prevent people from making short trips to go and get their MOT done, then that would be beneficial. It is the case that garages can remain open. I know that a number are open because private and commercial vehicles must always be kept in a roadworthy situation, so there is some work out there for them. I do take your point that their revenues will have fallen significantly. If there are specific reasons why they cannot access the support being offered by the Treasury, please let me know. Certainly, for those mechanics who might be self-employed, there is now self-employed support available to them.

Karl McCartney: Thank you for that. I am conscious of the time. I have finished.

Q27 **Robert Largan:** Obviously, keeping supply chains operating is essential for us to get food to supermarkets and to get PPE out to key workers and NHS staff. I want to ask the Minister: first, how confident are you that supply chains will continue to function properly, and secondly, what contingencies is the Department looking at if staff levels in the supply chains fall below a critical level due to illness?

Baroness Vere: That is a really good question. Of course, we are looking at the status of supply chains on a daily basis at the moment, to make sure that there is resilience within the supply chain. Interestingly, the amount of staff sickness within the haulage sector is relatively low compared with other sectors, which has been fairly positive to date. Certainly, because the amount of volume being moved has decreased quite significantly, there is spare capacity within the sector, both from a vehicle perspective and from a qualified driver perspective, which can be used to support the resilience of the supply chain as a whole.



Q28 Robert Largan: Following up on that, my second question relates specifically to truck drivers. There is a lot of concern. There have been reports about truck drivers who are delivering to the regional depots of supermarkets having to wait in waiting rooms while their vehicles are being unloaded. Truck drivers are also having problems when driving on motorways with not enough service stations being open, so they are not able even to do basic things like go to the toilet. What is the Department looking at in relation to those aspects for truck drivers?

Baroness Vere: We have been working on that for a couple of weeks, and it is the case that some of the RDCs—regional distribution centres—were not employing social distancing measures as they should have been. This has now been changed. We have had a huge amount of feedback from the RHA and the FTA where drivers have been telling us about specific facilities where things should be improved. I wrote to the UK Warehousing Association, which covers all the warehousing operators, to advise them that drivers should have access to facilities for personal hygiene reasons. In terms of the motorway service areas, at the moment every single motorway service area remains open. At some stage, a few of them did shut their showering facilities. We then wrote to them advising that they should open them again, and they have done that. Obviously, the volumes through these motorway service areas have decreased significantly, but we have a good relationship with the operators and we are encouraging them to stay open to support our haulage industry.

Robert Largan: Great. That is it from me for now. Thank you.

Chair: We now move to the impact of all this on your other departmental priorities.

Q29 Greg Smith: Can I add my thanks to the Ministers for the incredible effort that the whole Department—indeed, the whole Government—has delivered in response to this crisis? I want to touch particularly on other projects of the Department that are happening right now, and the impact on them. In particular, I want to ask about works that are going on on projects by private companies in the name of the Government. Two key examples would be HS2 and East West Rail. There have been reports across the media, and I have had a lot of reports from within my constituency, of where construction works—enabling works—are carrying on at the moment, and the Government guidance around social distancing is not being followed. A lot of people are scared, because a lot of the works are happening in villages, where construction workers are coming from all over the country to do quite specialist jobs and going into village stores and shops that people rely upon. I appreciate that HS2 is not in either of your portfolios, but can I ask the Ministers what steps the Department is taking to ensure that contractors working on Government-led projects are following the Government guidance?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Thank you for the question. As you know, your constituency is not too far away from mine, so I very much know of these issues. They were raised in the last Prime Minister's Question Time, and, following that, quite explicit instruction and guidance has been given to all



contractors working on all Government projects. Obviously, in these big construction projects where work is able to continue, we would like it to continue. But—this will be a recurring theme through everything that I have said and everything I will say—we want businesses, companies and individuals to take the appropriate advice that has been given by Public Health England, and to ensure that they are socially distancing. We have been unbelievably forceful and emphatic in telling that to all who are working for HS2 or any arm's length body that we might have any influence over. Construction is allowed to continue, but under those very, very strict guidelines.

- Q30 Greg Smith:** Can I come back on that briefly, because I am aware of the time? I very much welcome that assurance, and I must say that the HS2 Minister, Andrew Stephenson, has been incredibly responsive when I have raised these issues with him. It does worry me that, day on day, I continue to get reports about HS2 workers, in particular—I have seen that this is also happening in Warwickshire, so it really is not just a constituency matter that I am raising—continuing to not social distance. There are photographs floating around of HS2 contractors being very close to one another in Warwickshire; it looked like there were about 100 of them altogether in one field at one point. Can I please urge Ministers to really bear down on all those contractors, who are risking lives in the way they are allowing these works to continue?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will absolutely take that away. I will speak to Andrew after this and make sure that, if it is going on, it ceases to go on.

Greg Smith: Thank you.

- Q31 Ruth Cadbury:** I am not sure which Minister this question should go to, but it is about Transport for London's funding during this crisis. Obviously, its funding, like that of all public transport operators and mode operators, has collapsed. I know that the Government have provided support for bus and train companies, but TfL is looking for a comfort letter because otherwise, it is saying, public transport even now, during this crisis, is at risk, not to mention its long-term plan, so do we know whether that will be forthcoming?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I can take this if that's okay. Thanks for the question. Yes, we are talking to Transport for London, as you would expect. We want Transport for London to deliver a very successful service for our key workers, and we are talking to it about this very matter. It is in hand.

Ruth Cadbury: It is in hand? I hope so. Thank you.

Chair: Do you have any other questions on this subject, Ruth?

- Q32 Ruth Cadbury:** On this subject, the other point is that we would like to see some encouragement for cycling; it makes logical sense in urban areas to encourage cycling in particular. Some cycle companies, like Brompton, have made their services free to essential workers. There is a suggestion about temporary road space—segregating space temporarily



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on some roads to create safe spaces for cycling. Is that being considered in the Department at the moment?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As you know, I am fortunate to have the cycling responsibilities in the Department. I am very keen that when people take their one exercise a day, if they can—cycling is a very good way of getting good exercise in a relatively short period of time. I have seen reports, both online and elsewhere, where local authorities have been considering exactly the proposals that you raise. I cannot say we have encouraged that from the centre, but we are absolutely encouraging—if you can make your one exercise a day a not too long, sensible and socially distanced cycle ride, we would encourage that.

Q33 **Ruth Cadbury:** And it does give an opportunity of transport for essential workers who may not normally need to cycle.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Absolutely. I am sure members of the Committee will have seen the email from Brompton cycles today about their £400,000 target; they are raising money online at this point in time to try to get to £400,000 to provide free bicycles to NHS workers. I think they had raised £114,000 by this morning.

We want to encourage this as much as we possibly can.

Q34 **Chair:** I hope that Ministers might be able to indulge us for a further 10 minutes so that we can go round the virtual room. Is that okay? I will take that as a yes.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes—we are not going anywhere.

Chair: I will invite every member to ask anything else they wish and rather than play “Blankety Blank”, which is very tempting, with the screen, we will go in reverse alphabetical order. That means I start with Sam.

Q35 **Sam Tarry:** I am just thinking about ROSCOs during the health emergency. Over the last few years, train operating companies have devoted about 17% of their spending to servicing rolling stock leases, compared with 13% six years ago. If the Government are picking up the tab for train operating companies, does that now include paying for the cost of leasing trains from the ROSCOs, or have the ROSCOs agreed to waive those charges or profits during this period?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Currently, we are picking up the tab.

Sam Tarry: Thank you, Minister.

Q36 **Greg Smith:** I want to ask a brief follow-up question on the road haulage point that Karl McCartney brought up earlier. I very much welcome Baroness Vere’s commitments to looking for solutions for this complex industry. I have spoken to a number of road haulage companies in my constituency that are on the smaller end of the scale as companies go. They want to be part of the solution, but they do not wish necessarily to furlough all their staff because they want to win contracts to distribute food, medicines or whatever it might be around the country. They are finding that the bigger companies are swallowing all those contracts up



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and, at the same time, they are having to pay road tax on all their vehicles, which is not exactly cheap for a HGV. One of the suggestions that has come through to me is that, on top of the excellent measures of extending driving hours and halting some of the tests on vehicles, could there also be, in conjunction with the Treasury, some sort of relief on those HGVs' road fund licence to give them that little extra bit of breathing space?

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is one for Baroness Vere.

Baroness Vere: Thank you very much for the question. That has been proposed by a range of people. Looking at the HGV levy and at rates on depots—there are all sorts of things we could look at. Rest assured that we are looking at them at some speed.

Q37 **Gavin Newlands:** I have a question for Baroness Vere about bus drivers and the inflexibility of the otherwise excellent job retention scheme. There will be bus drivers across the country currently working a two or three day week for 40% to 60% of their income and putting themselves at risk dealing with the public. Sadly, we have heard about bus drivers passing as a result of coronavirus. Obviously, colleagues from the same firm or across other industries are rightly sitting at home, earning 80% of their income. Surely that is an imbalance we must try to address. If bus drivers are out there, face to face with the public, putting themselves at risk, they also deserve to get 80% of their salary at the very least.

Baroness Vere: Sorry, I was not quite clear there. Why are they getting 60% of their salary?

Q38 **Gavin Newlands:** There are a lot of bus companies where the drivers are working a two or three day week and therefore earning only a percentage of their income because the patronage in some areas is down to 10% of the normal rate. Other people, who are not working, are earning 80% of their income.

Baroness Vere: That is a really good point. Although patronage has plummeted, as we have said before, we are trying to keep some of the services up. I suggest that that is a question for the bus operator because it is about how companies do their rostering and how they decide who to furlough and when.

Q39 **Grahame Morris:** We have not really touched on the maritime sector, but seafarers are rightly identified as key workers. We know about their vital role in roll-on roll-off ferries for freight, offshore supply vessels and so on. My understanding is that no decision has yet been made about whether seafarers—I am particularly thinking of those who have been working on cruise ships—are eligible for the 80% of furloughed wages for displaced workers under the coronavirus job retention scheme. Do the Government support protecting UK seafarers by making sure that the scheme also applies to them?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Grahame, I have not heard about that issue, but obviously it is not my portfolio. In all the briefing I read on maritime for



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this, that was not mentioned, so if you don't mind, if I can take that away and come back to you as quickly as possible, I am happy to do that.

Grahame Morris: Thank you.

Q40 **Karl McCartney:** I am conscious of time, but have either of the Ministers got any key messages that they would like to take this opportunity to tell us about?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, I have got one. We talked about freight earlier, but that is not just about roads. There is a huge amount of work going on. In central Government, there is a COVID-19 critical freight taskforce. There is a huge job of work going on to ensure that critical freight paths remain open. That obviously includes airlines, the freight operating companies on our trains and a whole host of other things. I just really wanted to say thank you to all those people working in that sector, who are maintaining critical freight paths and keeping them open. I think we are being very, very well-served by the transport sector at the moment. I just wanted to put my thanks down.

Chair: Can I move on to Chris Loder? I am conscious of time.

Q41 **Chris Loder:** Thank you, Huw. I have a final question about aviation, so I am not quite sure who could pick this one up. Specifically, I have become increasingly concerned with the number of passengers who are stranded abroad, where the commercial airline cancelled their flights before the borders were closed, where other flights are advertised and where those passengers then paid a considerable amount of money for those fares. The flight was then cancelled again, and we still have a situation where constituents are stuck abroad.

I appreciate that the FCO is doing all that it possibly can to repatriate those people now. However, I am somewhat concerned that the airlines may have dispensed of their responsibility only for the Government to pick up the bill, and I wondered if one of the Ministers has any comment about that.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Everyone on the Committee, as constituency MPs, will have a whole host of these sorts of cases, so each of us is completely aware of this situation. I have a similar case to the one you described, actually, but only one. In most cases, the airlines have been trying to do their bit to move passengers on to other flights. And as I mentioned at the beginning, there is now this cross-ticketing and other things that are available.

However, we as a Government will do our bit to try to get our citizens back and repatriated as quickly as possible. And if there are any practices that are maybe not worthy of the situation, we will come back to them, without a shadow of a doubt, to investigate them later. But our priority is getting our citizens home.

Q42 **Chris Loder:** May I finally ask, Minister, that in the discussions with airlines to get them to help us to bring our passengers home, as part of that agreement those constituents—of all of us—who have paid



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thousands and thousands of pounds for tickets where they have not been able to travel and are struggling to get the money back, you could make that representation to those airlines to make sure that they can get that money back?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, of course.

Chris Loder: Thank you.

Chair: I have three minutes and I still have to get through Robert, Lilian, Simon and Ruth. So, if you don't have questions, please feel free to say so. Robert.

Q43 **Robert Largan:** Thanks, Chair. Very quickly, obviously the Department is right to focus on the immediate crisis, but in the longer term we want to check that we will not let things slip, such as strategic road investment and things such as the Mottram bypass. There are also the ongoing new station fund bids that are happening, such as the bid for a new train station at Gamesley. I just wanted to get the Minister's views on that long-term stuff. Is that going to be impacted, particularly the new station fund, or will the big processes continue?

Baroness Vere: I am particularly going to cover, if I may, the investment in roads. Obviously, I am in contact with Highways England. RIS2 was published with the Budget. So, I just want to reassure you that Highways England is continuing to do work where it can on enhancements and, as a proportion of this, it will continue with maintenance.

Q44 **Simon Jupp:** Very briefly, some safety rules have been relaxed: MOT extensions; relaxation of drivers' hours; and things like that. Are we confident that these plans will not impact and actually add to some of the woes that the NHS is currently feeling from the many thousands of road collisions we currently face, or could face?

Baroness Vere: That is a really important point. When we make these decisions, road safety is at the top of our mind, to make sure that cars are still roadworthy and people are driving as they should.

Interestingly, although traffic was down around about 50%, I believe that on the SRN incidents were down about 80%. So it does seem to me that we are not seeing a decrease in road safety. I would just like to say that we are very conscious that we have to reverse these things at some stage, but that we do not create chaos coming back out of this. So, with everything that we have been doing with these changes, we have been very aware that we will have to put things back in turn, and we need to make sure we do it sensibly.

Q45 **Lilian Greenwood:** I have a question for Minister Heaton-Harris. I have had reports of disabled passengers, including those who are key workers, facing issues with accessibility and assistance on the rail network. For example, a pharmacy worker who is a wheelchair user tells me that train staff repeatedly refused to provide a ramp and that station staff said they had been advised not to help disabled passengers due to social distancing. Are you aware of this? Can you confirm that train operators



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should continue to provide passenger assistance for essential travel? What are you doing to ensure that there is clear advice for all train staff about providing assistance, safely, during the current emergency?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have heard similar stories to the ones you just detailed. We have given very detailed guidance and yes, they should be being helped. We have given very clear guidance from the centre, and will continue to do so, and that should then go out through the train operating companies to the individual staff members.

Q46 **Ruth Cadbury:** Is any other work going on on any other policy issues—such as adapting and delivering the stakeholder engagement process on the transport decarbonisation plan—during the lockdown, or are timetables going to have to slip?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We are still trying to continue. Obviously, a number of people and officials in our Department are now focused on the COVID-19 response, but we are still trying to deliver on decarbonisation, on restoring our railways and in a whole host of other areas, including the roads programme, as Baroness Vere detailed. Currently, the new stations fund is still open for bids, which are to be in for June, and we will assess them appropriately at that time. We are trying to do as much as we possibly can to keep things moving.

Q47 **Chair:** Minister Heaton-Harris, are you willing to look again at rail compensation, particularly for season ticket holders? Some would like to be able to extend their season ticket rather than apply for compensation, and some are getting charged £10 admin fees, which I do not believe TfL is doing.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Probably the former but possibly not the latter, if I was to be quite honest with you.

Chair: That might be some consolation.

Thank you very much, Baroness Vere and Chris Heaton-Harris, for your time and for being so open and candid. We all wish you and your team at the Department for Transport the best.

I thank the Members for their contributions and time, and also the Clerks' team and all the broadcasting team who are here—who are self-distancing very well, I might add. Thank you, everybody. We look forward to catching up and doing more scrutiny with the Department and Ministers very soon.