



HOUSE OF COMMONS

# Transport Committee

## Oral evidence: Coronavirus: transport network pressures over Christmas, HC 1076

Wednesday 16 December 2020

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

Questions 1-56

Witness

**I:** Sir Peter Hendy CBE, Secretary of State's Adviser on Christmas travel preparedness.



## Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Peter Hendy CBE.

Q1 **Chair:** This is the Transport Select Committee's one-off evidence session with the Government's new Christmas transport adviser to ensure that everyone can get home for Christmas. Can I ask our sole witness to introduce himself?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Good morning, everybody. My name is Sir Peter Hendy. I am normally the chair of Network Rail, but, in addition, I have been asked by the Secretary of State for Transport to co-ordinate the Christmas travel arrangements this year, in the light of the special circumstances surrounding coronavirus.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much for joining us. We know that this is a busy time, gearing up for Christmas travel. The Department for Transport described you as being appointed as a "Christmas travel tsar". Can you set out briefly what your role will be and how you are currently working it out?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** This is not the first such role that I have been asked to do by the Secretary of State. You will remember that way back in the late spring, after the country shut down in the first lockdown, I was asked to review the arrangements for starting up higher levels of service, first for the railway industry and subsequently for local transport, which I did. I then did the same with the second increase in levels of service. I had a similar role during the return to school in September. All of those roles, like this one, gave me the obligation and the ability to look over all the arrangements in the relevant transport modes, to attend Department for Transport senior officials meetings, which monitor what they are doing, and to recommend directly to the Secretary of State additional actions that need to be taken in order that what is done is successful.

This role is much the same. It is a bit increased, because travel over the Christmas period involves not only public transport modes—rail, bus and local transport—but roads, ferries and airlines. It is the same thing; I have been going to Department for Transport officials meetings every morning. I have attended several meetings with the Secretary of State and his senior team. I have talked directly to a number of transport providers. As you realise, I have been around for a long time, so I know who most of them are. When necessary, I can cut through levels of organisations. I have been able to commission a bit of work now and again to delve more deeply into some subjects and, indeed, to recommend some remedies to the Secretary of State, when I think they would help to resolve any problems that might otherwise arise.

Q3 **Chair:** You touched on the fact that, in these exceptional circumstances, the public are allowed to travel across the four nations only between 23 December and 27 December. Is it your understanding that that is still the plan in all the four nations, including Scotland?



**Sir Peter Hendy:** It is, as far as I know, speaking just after 10 o'clock on 16 December. I know that there was some discussion yesterday, but the view I am taking is that the Government's advice, and the four Governments' advice, to their citizens about staying healthy and safe is their advice. Our job in the transport sector is to make travel available for those who wish to use it. I think the advice currently still enables people to travel, and the transport industry should therefore prepare as much as it can for them to do so.

Q4 **Chair:** What is your message for the travelling public this Christmas? Should they be concerned? Should they indeed even travel?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I was trying to think of a catchy line, but I think that one ought to say, "Be careful." One ought to say, "Stay local," because the tone of the message from Government is to stay local, if you can. The most important part of the message is to book public transport early.

**Chair:** Greg Smith will delve deeper into your role.

Q5 **Greg Smith:** Good morning, Sir Peter. I want to focus on the five-day travel window. First, I want to probe your view on whether it is long enough. The Committee has heard evidence that extending it a bit either way would build in flexibility, to ensure that we do not overload the roads and railways and cause more harm than good. Forgetting the five-day window as it has been set, what do you think would be the ideal window to spread the load of travel more evenly at Christmas time?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I look at it from a transport perspective. I think the five days were set because of the Government's overriding interest in health protection. I do not think it is for me or the transport industry to challenge what the Government have decided to do as a consequence of advice from their medical advisers. I take it as read that that is the window that is allowed, in what are increasingly some pretty heavy lockdown circumstances across Britain. What I am doing is making sure that the industry and the transport system are able to cope as best they can in those circumstances.

Q6 **Greg Smith:** I fully appreciate that it is not your role to push back on Government; it is your role to make it happen. Given that we are locked into these five days, do you foresee that, because it is inevitable that people will want to make personal decisions to see one or two other households for Christmas and will want to go and see relatives they may not have seen since March or earlier, sticking within the five days will lead to some train and bus services having more people on them than even commuter routes do today? Because we are squeezing it into that window, it will lead to a level of overcrowding, or certainly a circumstance in which social distancing cannot be achieved.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** The very general answer to that is no. I think that the circumstances are these. There is a proportion of the population that is self-isolating and another proportion that is shielding. The latest market research, which I saw today, suggests that 76% of people are not



intending to travel and that, of those who are, 80% are planning to travel by car. We can get into individual modes later, but quite a lot of that car travel will be on Christmas day. As a consequence, we are quite well placed for public transport modes to operate entirely within social distancing rules, as far as long-distance travel is concerned, because we can reserve it. For urban transport, the situation is not likely to be very different from what it has been in the past few months, when, in my observation at least, there has been widespread adherence to social distancing rules, for the very practical reason that people do not want to contract this dreadful disease.

We can get into what I am doing to make sure that my confidence is justified, and I am very happy to talk to you about that, but I do not envisage terrible scenes at train stations, bus stations or elsewhere of people breaking social distancing rules. I can talk to you about the precautions that are being taken to make sure that that is not the case. The most important thing we have to ensure is that, when people are travelling, they are able to travel safely and confidently without breaking the rules, which would further transmit this terrible disease.

**Q7** **Greg Smith:** That is very reassuring. I appreciate that it is a bit of a “how long is a piece of string” question, because we do not know in practical terms how many people will seek to travel. From the market research you spoke of, is there some modelling of the sorts of loads that the rail network, the road network and coach companies expect to see over those five days, or is it just one of those questions that is impossible to answer?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I am not sure about modelling. You do not want my personal views on elements of transport modelling. What I have been looking at substantially is booking levels across long-distance travel, in particular, where people generally book seats. In the last few days, I have been looking at the rate of increase in bookings. I am able to tell you, certainly on rail services, which are fairly heavily constrained—we will come back to coaches in a minute—that the rate of increase in bookings is diminishing. We all strongly suspect that that is because people have made their plans in the light of the Government’s advice. If you are travelling long distance, you will make your plans early, because you know that there is limited capacity. That is okay.

The arrangements on public transport for making sure that it is Covid secure, which involve much more limited capacity than normal on trains, buses and coaches, are not changing, so all of the capacity limitations against which I am watching the numbers are Covid-safe capacities. Indeed, there is a bit of margin, because most booking systems assume that people are travelling separately and will therefore separate themselves from one another. In reality, there will be some family groups, who do not need to socially distance as a group of four, so there is a margin. I have seen some rather idle media commentary to the contrary, but we are not assuming any capacities on public transport



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modes that would exceed the Covid-safe capacities that have already been established.

Although you do not want me to quote a load of numbers, and I do not want to shuffle through all the stuff in my office to do so, I can tell you precisely the number of Covid-safe seats that are available on Avanti West Coast to Glasgow, how they are being allocated and tell you this morning, by train, how many people have booked them and what is left. That is what you would expect me to do.

Spoiling some of the modal stuff that I know you want to get on to, I can tell you that watching it over the past few days and looking at demand has enabled Avanti to schedule some extra trains. When the Chair asked me what my advice was, I said, "The most important thing is to book early." That is the most important thing, because it enables us to see what demand there is. We are not excluding people turning up without bookings, certainly not on Avanti West Coast. Avanti is making some arrangements for that. That is a riskier thing to do, in circumstances where everybody knows, and has known since March, that capacity is limited.

**Q8** **Greg Smith:** That is interesting. This is the last question from me, because colleagues want to come in on the individual transport modes. You have pretty good data on pre-bookings. Is it the case that, within the five-day window, those bookings are concentrated in one or two days—Christmas eve, the 28th or the 27th—or are they evenly spread? If we are to keep within the five-day window, is there a need potentially to offer incentives, on ticket pricing or something else, to try to spread the load into the 23rd or the 24th, rather than the 25th or the 27th?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** It will not surprise you that some elements of Christmas behaviour are the same every year, regardless of the Government's five-day advice. Christmas day, in particular, is a day when people make local journeys. There is not much public transport, and there hasn't been for many years, so the journeys they make are by car. Of course, you do not want to make a long journey and arrive later than Christmas eve, because you are not going to start being sociable and having fun in the way people expect to do at Christmas. The 23rd would always have been the busiest day, and indeed it is. Those of us who have travelled on the 24th know that public transport services tail off in the late afternoon and early evening. If you travel after lunch, there is virtually nobody on them. I was on the last train from Penzance to Bath one Christmas eve, and it was me and the guard most of the way from Penzance to Bristol. We have a bit of capacity there.

On the other side of Christmas, Boxing day will be very subdued this year, because the three biggest generators of travel on Boxing day are retail, sporting events and air travel. Retail is curtailed, and so is people's desire for it, because of the restrictions. Many sporting events, if they go ahead, will have no audience at all, unlike local football derbies most



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years. For air travel, people go to airports, and there is not half so much of that, for obvious reasons. Boxing day will be quite subdued.

The 27th, of course, is the day when people will go back. Bookings are quite heavy. Indeed, I have put a lot of effort into both monitoring bookings and at least attempting to ensure that what public transport operators say they will run they are actually able to run. I am not limiting it to that. I am also looking at bookings before and after the period. We are seeing some increased bookings before the 23rd and on the 28th. I cannot judge, and neither can the operators, what people are doing to make those bookings, but we are watching that carefully, to make sure that we are not inadvertently spreading people outside the five-day window and crowding them in before and after that period.

**Greg Smith:** Thank you. That is incredibly helpful.

Q9 **Lilian Greenwood:** Advance bookings are brilliant, if all the services run, but, if you have a cancellation, potentially you then somehow have to move a lot of people on to different services. Obviously, we hope there are no cancellations, but can you tell me about the contingency when that occurs?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** On railway services, I am looking particularly at Avanti West Coast. You will know that engineering works are closing King's Cross south of Peterborough. It is GTR and was publicised well in advance. Avanti has been able to put on some extra trains, some of which are in the booking system and some of which are not. On West Coast, 30% of capacity is not reservable, so when you get to the bookings limit, there is still some space left. In addition, as I said earlier, there will in fact be a bit more space, because on every train there will undoubtedly be some family groups who will not need to socially distance. That will do a great deal.

The reason for booking early is that all the transport companies, in whatever mode, will obviously make a strong attempt to run everything they have, but on the way out they can spread it into the late afternoon and early evening of the 23rd, and if anything goes wrong on the 24th they still have a bit of capacity in the afternoon. I am monitoring the 27th very closely, because it is a Sunday and that is the day when everybody will go back.

There is another relief. It is not like people going to work. If you are going to work, you have to arrive at the time when your employer expects you. I am not travelling this Christmas, as I am following the advice, but if you are travelling at Christmas, you are not desperate to arrive on the minute. That is certainly true in my family. You expect a safe journey, particularly this year, and if that involves a bit of delay due to the sorts of things that happen on public transport networks, I think that people are sensible and will accept it. I hope that at some stage we will get on to the relief to the rail network afforded by the coach network. That is one of the safety valves.



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**Q10 Lilian Greenwood:** That is fine. The only point I would add is about passengers who need assistance and disabled passengers. Disruption particularly affects them. You mentioned coach travel; there have been issues in the past about rail replacement services not being accessible.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I am also monitoring staffing levels at stations. As you would expect, given that I am chair of Network Rail, I have ensured, with Andrew Haines, my chief executive, that, where there are engineering works and rail replacement services, they are properly staffed, with enough vehicles, for precisely that reason.

**Chair:** We will delve into the various transport modes where you have responsibility for ensuring smooth operation over Christmas. We will start with pressures on the rail network.

**Q11 Chris Loder:** In the interests of transparency to the Committee, I note that I worked for the railway before the election in December, as you may know, Sir Peter.

The Government are encouraging passengers to book tickets in advance. Why is that so important? Do you foresee particular difficulties or problems as one of the reasons why the Government have mandated that?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** It is really important, because it is much harder to cope with unexpected flows of people. It is a very reasonable request of the British public, because people plan their Christmases. I do not know of many people who spontaneously decide to travel long distances at the drop of a hat at Christmas. You would prefer to be invited, I guess. I expect that you would prefer even more that the people you are going to see—other members of your family, probably—have enough food and accommodation for you when you arrive. I do not think that it is an unreasonable expectation to book ahead.

Not this week, but at the beginning of last week, after the Government made their announcement, a lot of bookings started to materialise, as you would expect. We have been able to see those as they have materialised. That has enabled Avanti West Coast, for example, to put on some extra trains, some of which are now in the reservation schedules and one or two of which currently are not, in order to cope with demand. The British public are really sensible. They do not spontaneously decide in their millions to go to the other end of the country to visit relatives. Just telling us, as far in advance as is possible, what they intend to do is a reasonable request. All the evidence is that they are abiding by it.

**Q12 Chris Loder:** Some of the largest train operators do not have reservable seats on their services. Can you tell us what proportion of trains operating on the network are reservable?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I do not have that number to hand. As I am sure you could, I can talk to you about the routes that are reservable, principally the east and west coast. As I said, West Coast is mostly reservable, but



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with some proportion of seats left unreserved. On the east coast, LNER for some time has been—

Q13 **Chris Loder:** I will come back to some of those modes in just a moment. Would you mind writing to us to outline exactly the proportion of trains that are reservable on the network?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Of course.

Q14 **Chris Loder:** Thank you. When it comes to booking limits on trains that are reservable, what proportion of seats are reservable and what proportion are kept for those who happen to turn up at short notice?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Specifically on West Coast, it is 30%. LNER books the lot but has a few spare. For GWR, I would have to rifle through my papers, but I think it is also of that order.

Q15 **Chris Loder:** Just so that I am clear, when you say 30%, is that 30% of each train or 30% of overall capacity?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Of each train.

Q16 **Chris Loder:** Am I right in saying that on Christmas day and Boxing day this year there are no trains or very few trains operating, as per normal?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Yes. There are none on Christmas day and very few on Boxing day.

Q17 **Chris Loder:** Some of the London terminals have seen demand reduce considerably over recent months. Waterloo, for example, reports roughly 25% to 30% of passenger throughput. With the regular decrease in demand, through normal circumstances, we have seen recently, do you expect that a considerable increase in demand may occur over the Christmas period?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Yes, there will be an increase, but it will not be massive, simply because the trains cannot accommodate it. Bookings during the day on the 23rd at Euston, for example, are towards the upper limit of the 70% that is reservable for some trains. That will make the station appear busier than it has been in recent months, but it will not be half as busy as it is normally.

At Waterloo, I am not expecting to see anything like the numbers of people we would have got pre-Covid. You probably know that better than I do. Waterloo is normally packed with people. All the indications are that people are profoundly sensible, even when you do not reserve seats. My occasional journeys from Richmond to Waterloo demonstrate to me that people are very sensible in not piling on to crowded trains but waiting for the next one, and in not sitting close together when they should not.

Q18 **Chris Loder:** I mentioned earlier that some of the largest operators do not have reservable seats. Can you tell us whether you are recommending to the Secretary of State that all operators should have reservable capacity on their trains?



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**Sir Peter Hendy:** I am not, because it would be far too great a burden to institute at this time. It would have been even three or four weeks ago.

Q19 **Chris Loder:** On certain routes, where it may be relevant, are you looking at that level of detail, to recommend to Government, or indeed to operators, that those routes are made reservable?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** No. What I am interested in with regard to unreservable routes is that the basic train service is good enough, and runs well enough, to accommodate the people who present themselves, without breaching social distancing rules.

Q20 **Chris Loder:** Can you tell us what percentage of ticket bookings for the Christmas period have taken place at this point, compared with this time last year?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** We are comparing it with last year, but it is quite hard to see good comparisons as the total level of service offering is so limited because of Covid. What I can tell you, which is a great relief to me—

Q21 **Chris Loder:** I beg your pardon. May I interrupt you? My understanding is that timetabled services are very similar, if not the same. Therefore, capacity is the same. Given that static component of this discussion, all I am trying to understand is whether the demand appears to be lower or higher compared with last year.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** The aggregate demand is lower. In fact, even though the timetable is the same, the capacity of the trains is lower, because you cannot get as many people on them. There are some quite full trains, particularly on the west coast main line on the 23rd. What I am comfortable about is that the rate of increase of bookings, if you see what I am talking about, has slowed materially since the start of last weekend. That is a relief, because, if the rate of increase of bookings had carried on in the same way, we would have got to the stage where some of the trains were full to Covid standards. I think that demonstrates that people are taking the advice to book early.

Q22 **Chris Loder:** A bit earlier, you very kindly offered to send us some information. If you would be so kind as to ask the operators for that percentage and to share it with us, it would be much appreciated.

**Chair:** We will stay on rail. We want to look at capacity on the network and contingency measures. We have touched on this a little, but I will ask Simon Jupp to drill in further.

Q23 **Simon Jupp:** Sir Peter, thank you very much for your time this morning. I want to pick up something you said earlier that caught my interest, which is that the rate of increase in booking has diminished since last weekend. Is that fuelled potentially by uncertainty over whether the restrictions currently in place over Christmas will be altered?



**Sir Peter Hendy:** I wouldn't think so. I might have missed it, but I think that debate has only been going on in the last 24 or 36 hours. I think it represents the fact that most people have decided what to do. From what I read in the media this morning, it looks as if the Government are keeping the same rules in place because they recognise that most people have decided what to do. It is not my place to say whether or not they should change, but that seems to me a pretty sensible interpretation.

Q24 **Simon Jupp:** Understood. It has been whispered about and talked about, particularly in various parts of the tabloid press, for at least a couple of days, but I take your point.

As we have previously touched on, Christmas is normally quite a busy time for some railway services, and you mentioned the west coast main line in particular, but social distancing and those challenges, aside from bubbles, will reduce capacity, as you said, and cause quite significant issues in some places. Are you confident that you have enough services running across the network on all lines to cope? I feel that quite a lot of people will not have decided yet what they will be doing.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** It is a good question. One of the reasons I keep banging on about booking early is that that enables us to know what is happening. The most important thing is that very early on in the process the Secretary of State was persuaded to seek additional funding to ramp up coach services considerably to meet any additional demand. I am delighted that he did that and that the Treasury found the money.

As you all know, the railway is a very efficient mover of large numbers of people, but it has limitations in crewing, rolling stock and line capacity. I think a good insurance policy is to enable scheduled coach operators—National Express, Megabus and others—to ramp up their services so that they are able to absorb demand that the railways simply could not cope with.

Chris will probably tell you this if I don't; I am a grubby-handed bus operator, not a rail operator, although I am getting used to it. The coach industry is very flexible. The National Express network has been running at only a tenth of normal capacity, although they increased that to 20% for December. Their problem is that, if you socially distance people on coaches, it makes greater operation of their network uneconomic; they lose money on every coach. The money announced last Saturday, which is up to £3 million for coach services to meet additional demand, is being put into networks that are very flexible. If railway bookings become full, we can tell them the likely additional demand. They have assured us that they are flexible enough to be able to cope with it. That is a very good insurance policy against any demand that the railway cannot normally absorb.

Q25 **Simon Jupp:** There is no excuse for grubby hands when hand sanitiser is freely available, even on public transport.

On the coaches and the extra investment the Government have put in,



how quickly can that be put in place? What we do not want is a situation where, for example, people have not planned ahead and booked tickets, and are waiting in large numbers on platforms, or around train stations, because the coach alternative is not quick enough to get them there, and the capacity is not around or is not nimble enough to cope.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** That is the importance of the message about booking ahead. I am not envisaging large piles of coaches surrounding major stations in the United Kingdom on Christmas Eve. What we have done is make facility available so that, if train services get to a capacity where you simply cannot get any more people on safely, they can be directed to National Express, Megabus or other operators and told, "If you want to go to Bristol at the time you are asking, we're not able to sell you a ticket. We will probably be able to put you on a later or earlier train, but if you want to go at this particular time, go to National Express, book a ticket." They are sufficiently flexible to be able to ramp up their services.

I was asked earlier by Lilian about what slack there is in the system. I think that, if you turn up at a major station on Christmas eve morning and find that the train you want is full, the railway will get you back because by mid-afternoon the trains are almost empty. If you are planning travel in advance, and we know that trains will be full at the times you are travelling, there will be an alternative, which is to go directly to National Express, Megabus or one of the other operators and book a ticket, and they will be able to cope with you.

Q26 **Simon Jupp:** One of the other challenges about changing the mode of transport is the accessibility of it. How will you ensure that all contingency coaches are wheelchair-friendly, for example, to make sure that if someone has a disability they are not stranded at the train station?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** The entire National Express network of scheduled services is PSVAR-accessible and so is Megabus. That is absolutely right. I am not expecting them to be running coaches under this arrangement that are not accessible to people with disabilities.

Q27 **Sam Tarry:** Good morning, Sir Peter. I want to focus on the deteriorating situation with Covid, what impact it might have and what contingency plans and discussions might be under way with the Government at the moment. Yesterday, we had 18,450 cases and 506 deaths. One of the things a number of scientists are most concerned about is the spread from areas that are now well above the R rate in terms of the severity of the virus—for example, parts of London—to Liverpool and a number of other places across the country where the virus could almost be reseeded.

Are there discussions going on, or are there contingency plans if the Government have to act more swiftly than they are saying publicly to limit internal travel in the UK—shutting down parts of the rail system and limiting internal travel by car, for example? How would you deal with that? Are there plans under way if things are headed in such an extreme



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direction that those more drastic measures would need to be taken? If it was not as drastic as that, are there plans in place if you just have to limit travel within certain regions of the country?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** So far during the pandemic, the Government have instructed businesses, and strongly advised and told people what to do and what not to do. I think it is not the right thing to limit the capacity of the transport system. Indeed, there is a rather good second world war precedent. On August bank holiday 1944, vast numbers of people turned up at Paddington station to go to the west country. Great Western Railway had been instructed by the Government not to run extra trains because it was during the war. The public order situation got so bad that Sir James Milne, general manager of the Great Western Railway, had to threaten to ring up the Prime Minister to get Ministry of War Transport to allow him to run more trains, which indeed they did because people wanted to go.

All of that is a long-winded way of saying that I think it is for the Government to decide to tell people what to do, if they need to stop them travelling to various parts of the country. I do not think it would be a good idea to restrict transport capacity. As for travelling by car, short of the police blocking roads, there is no way of stopping it. My current understanding is that the situation has been reviewed and the five-day travel window is being left intact.

The terrible onslaught of this virus does not leave transport staff unscathed. We are constantly monitoring the availability of the tremendous railway and public transport families to run the networks. Currently, we are seeing evidence in particular parts of the country that operators may not be able to run the services they are committed to. It is not that they do not want to; they do not have enough staff because people have either got Covid or are self-isolating. In particular, the Committee will probably want me to talk about the situation for railway staff on the Great Western Railway both at Plymouth and Penzance since it is current news. They have run a very good service this year, so it is not a reflection of some long-term staffing issue, but in the last 36 hours a lot of driving staff have either tested positive for Covid or are self-isolating and awaiting the results of tests.

GWR is not currently anticipating being able to run the service it thought it would. In consequence, if not now but certainly later this morning, if you try to book an advance ticket to the west of England I hope its website will tell you to go to National Express, because currently it does not want to take any more advance bookings. That is really unfortunate, but it is not a consequence of Government instruction; it is a consequence of the transport industry not having unlimited supplies of people. The coach contingency arrangements that I referred to earlier are just the sort of thing to help people out in those circumstances. You can still get to the west of England; there will be some trains, but they are right not to book people on trains they do not think they will have drivers



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for. There may well be more National Express and Megabus coaches to the west of England as a consequence.

**Chair:** Sir Peter, thank you for giving us that extra information. It demonstrates how wise it was for you to push for the contingency for bus to cover rail services that cannot be met.

Q28 **Chris Loder:** Further to the point raised by my colleague Simon Jupp a moment ago about the accessibility of bus services for the travelling public, a couple of years ago thetrainline.com facilitated the booking of bus services on its portal for rail service bookings. I wondered whether there was a similar initiative over Christmas, or whether train operators, or the Rail Delivery Group, have looked to build that functionality into their websites as an opportunity, should it be required in the circumstances.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** The arrangement for additional National Express coaches was only concluded when the press release was issued last Saturday morning. We all thought that, while that was a good idea generally, it was far too complex. People look for simplicity in these circumstances. If you cannot book an advance ticket to Penzance on the Great Western website this morning, I think it would be too complex to start fiddling about to transfer you. A much simpler message is, "We don't have any advance tickets. Go to the National Express website because they are still selling them and they will take you to Cornwall instead."

Q29 **Chris Loder:** My point was that thetrainline.com had built in that functionality, so that it showed the capacity available on coaches. It was a very clear and straightforward way of doing it. Plans may be afoot—I don't know. If they are, it would be good to understand them.

You have just mentioned Great Western Railway. Could you tell us in the highest possible terms what percentage of services you expect to be affected and what routes would be affected?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** They are trying to manage a really dynamic situation at Plymouth and Penzance. I spoke to the managing director this morning. Currently, only 25% of the driver establishment at Plymouth appears to be available over Christmas. He has not yet concluded quite what to do, because there are some techniques he can use to make sure that the staff who are available are, subject to their traction and route knowledge, put on the trains people most want to use. He will be looking to deploy them in the best way, but I completely agree with him that, in the circumstances, selling advance tickets with such a large proportion of driving staff unavailable would be the wrong thing to do. While they sort out how many people they have and what they might run, the best thing to do is to swing over to the coach services people who have not booked already, in order that they can be certain when to go.

Q30 **Chris Loder:** If I understand correctly, some days are outside the working week for drivers on the Great Western network. Are you telling



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us that the trade unions are holding Great Western Railway to ransom because they are not able, or not willing, to operate the railway on a Sunday?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** No, I am not; I am telling you that quite a large proportion of the driving staff at Plymouth and Penzance either have Covid or are self-isolating waiting for a test result. Clearly, in both train crew depots and among the surrounding people running the service, there is an outbreak of some sort.

I am not saying that at all. What I am saying is that I am sure the remaining staff who are fit to work will do the best they can. I do not think that a six-day rostering system for a seven-day railway is a very good thing in the 2020s, but that is a different issue. I am reflecting what is currently a really difficult position because of actual illness and actual isolation.

**Chair:** We are now going to look at engineering work on the railway, so the ball is back in your court, Chris.

Q31 **Chris Loder:** Sir Peter, could you tell us in the highest possible terms where the main and most disruptive engineering works in the rail network across the country will be over the Christmas period?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I can tell you some of them. Probably, the highest profile one is King's Cross where the station is closed. We were originally going to close it earlier on Christmas eve, but Andrew Haines's colleagues in Network Rail have reconfigured the works to start only after the last train has gone. That work is replacing a sewer, which, unbelievably, goes underneath all the approach lines to the station, between the platforms and the tunnel, and has been there for the past 150 years. The only way of replacing it is to close the line. Further up the east coast at Werrington, there is a dive-under, which is a big piece of concrete that is going to be pushed into position over Christmas. Those two things are causing major disruption on the east coast main line.

There are some engineering works at Euston. Originally, we were not going to open the station until midday on the 27th, but we are now opening it earlier. There are some significant works on the great eastern main line that involve people going via bus or coach from west of Ipswich to Newbury Park, but I do not see that as so disruptive. Both the Crossrail works and the replacement of the overhead wires on the great eastern have meant that that arrangement has been used for many Sundays over the last two years, so I think people will be quite familiar with it. In the territory nearer your constituency, the line between Basingstoke and Salisbury is closed, but there is a diversion through Winchester, Eastleigh and round to Romsey. Around the place, in each of the regions and devolved Administrations, there are a number of works, but I think those are the most disruptive.

Q32 **Chris Loder:** The closing of major London stations like King's Cross and



maybe others is considerably disruptive. Could you deal with two points? First, what steps have been taken by the operators and Network Rail to facilitate alternatives—for example, whether services in and out of King's Cross could be diverted to St Pancras or somewhere like that? Secondly, to what extent have the travelling public been informed of these major disruptive closures?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Let's take King's Cross as a particular example. The information about the closure of King's Cross was around in the middle of November, so it has had widespread publicity and no tickets have been sold for trains that will not go there. The principal diversionary effort for King's Cross is Euston for long-distance Anglo-Scottish traffic, which is why I am so concerned to watch bookings on Avanti West Coast. Nearer in, the GTR service south of Peterborough will be running to Finsbury Park and then through the tunnels. In our view, it has been widely publicised and there is enough alternative information for people to know how to get to where they are going.

My colleague Andrew Haines at Network Rail runs a complete review, which some of the board members attend—he did it two or three weeks ago—of all the arrangements, not only those to ensure the work is handed back on time but the diversionary arrangements. Train companies describe what their alternative services look like, with particular reference, where it is needed, on enough replacement bus services.

Q33 **Chris Loder:** There are some engineering works that vary before and after Christmas. In some places, there are engineering works after Christmas but not before, and vice versa. Has that been taken into consideration in the decisions? The opportunity for surprise, for passengers to travel out and find, once they are there, that they are not able to come back the same way, is probably quite considerable in some parts of the network. Has that been considered, and what specific mitigations have been put in place to avoid any difficulties, particularly on the return journey?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** The whole parcel of engineering works was determined weeks and weeks ago, and then the five-day window was overlaid on it. Apart from a very thorough review, at the particular request of the Secretary of State, of whether or not we could alter any of them, which resulted in alterations of timings at both King's Cross and Euston and one or two being persuaded, it is all exactly the same. If you are affected by work that is going on after Christmas and not before, you will not have got the wrong information; you will have got the right information, because it was all programmed weeks and weeks ago.

The Committee will know that it takes a huge amount of programming to get all those works organised together. We are very reluctant to change it once it has happened, although we are capable of it, as we have shown at Euston and King's Cross, but that is in order that people can be well informed and are not surprised by very late changes.



Q34 **Chris Loder:** We are in a very unusual situation, aren't we? The rest of December, and probably January, will be extremely quiet, but we are really concerned about the pressures over Christmas. Could you tell us whether Network Rail has given full consideration to just lifting the plan for engineering works and moving it back by two weeks, basically doing engineering works two weeks later when we expect the network to be much quieter and it will not cause so much disruption?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Absolutely. The first question the Secretary of State asked us was whether or not some wholesale movement of the bigger works would be possible. You might know in particular, but I hope the Committee in general will understand that some of these things are so large that significant amounts of money have already been spent on complex technical equipment and getting together people with the particular skills needed to use it. Our engineering work programme continues. We are succeeding in getting more work done as a result of the innovative staffing changes that had to be put into effect because of Covid. It would not be simple to move them because, first, it would cost a lot of money and, secondly, they would supplant other works.

I hope you all realise that we do not take any of those decisions lightly, but we need to get on and do some of this stuff. For example, the work at King's Cross is in pursuit of greater capacity on the east coast main line. It is a good idea to get as much of that done as possible before normal life resumes, because, when it does, we would like the east coast main line to have more capacity and run better. We have been through every one of them. If Andrew Haines were here, he would tell you that he ran a Star Chamber inquisition to test whether any of them could be moved, but the answer was that by the time we got the five-day window many of them were very largely set in stone, and it would have cost us tens of millions of pounds to shift some of them simply because everything had been booked, and all the staff and contractors had been employed.

Q35 **Chris Loder:** Do you know whether it has been possible to move any engineering works during the Christmas period to a less congested or less busy time?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I would have to write to you. I think one or two of them have, but we concentrated most of our effort on seeing what we could do about the major ones. The consequence of that was to close King's Cross later on Christmas eve and open Euston earlier on the 27th.

Q36 **Karl McCartney:** Rail engineering works, as we have heard are ongoing; you have a dual hat. Specifically, and perhaps parochially, because I represent the beautiful city of Lincoln, I want to ask you about the east coast upgrades that are taking place and will continue over Christmas, and were perhaps brought forward over Christmas. You used the technical term "dive-under". It is a pretty impressive feat of engineering and will help capacity on the east coast line, but particularly on that line what are the impacts of that work not just over Christmas but ongoing



into early spring?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I do not know whether dive-under is a technical term. It is a bridge that takes one pair of lines over the other rather than trains actually crossing the east coast main line. Frankly, for your constituents, and for us on the railway, we are pretty keen to put that in, because it is a key piece for giving extra capacity on the east coast main line. As I said, the works at King's Cross are absolutely necessary in order to put two extra lines into King's Cross from the north through the tunnel, which has been empty for about 30 years, both of which will result in increased capacity on the east coast main line.

The other major piece of work, which I am sure you are aware of, is the introduction of digital signalling on the east coast main line. I am not sure of the extent to which works at Christmas are concerned with that, but for your constituents, and many others on the eastern side of Britain, all of those things are highly desirable. The east coast main line is full of trains and people in normal circumstances, and when we get over this terrible pandemic we want it to come back with more reliability, more capacity and less disruption.

Q37 **Karl McCartney:** Perhaps it will not surprise you to know that I have met some of your less senior colleagues at Network Rail and am aware that Lincoln will lose its direct services. A lot of them are run with hybrids and, given the works that are to take place, unfortunately there will be no electrification available, so those units will be moved and run on the busier LNER routes. I fought to get direct trains to and from Lincoln, and I want to see them back in place as soon as possible.

I think the other works on both the west coast and east coast main lines were moved before the Christmas window was talked about. A lot of works were moved forward. I do not know what proportion were moved forward. I understand why they were not subsequently moved again, but what assurances have you received that the consequences of moving these works will be minimal for commuters or travellers?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Tell me if this is the answer to the question that I think you are asking. It is never perfect whenever you do them, but the particular use of the Christmas window is that the 48 hours of Christmas day and Boxing day give you enough time to do some really big stuff. If you look at the dive-under at Werrington, you will see that shifting a concrete structure weighing several thousand tonnes is classed as pretty big stuff, just like the sewer works at King's Cross. We have tested whether or not they need to be done at all, and when they should be done. We are still pretty clear that this is the best time to do them. Even in Covid circumstances, when the railway gets back to normal, subject to whatever tiers everybody is in in January, a lot of people will want to travel to work in a reliable way. I do not think we have a better answer, to be honest.

Q38 **Karl McCartney:** There is no doubt those works need to be done,



probably sooner rather than later, and thanks to you, your team and all the people who will be working over the Christmas period. On a lighter note, I admire some of your signs in the background. Is that a very short sign next to Dovey Junction or a very long sign from a very small station in Wales?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** It is a very long sign; it is Llandrindod Wells, but without removing a great pile of current papers and books about transport I cannot reveal any more of the secrets of my office. I have some very fine locomotive nameplates above the mantelpiece.

**Chair:** We would need a giant screen to fit that in. The last section on rail relates to the staffing of trains and stations. You have touched on it, but Sam Tarry will delve further.

Q39 **Sam Tarry:** During the pandemic, rail workers have worked tirelessly to maintain vital transport lines. They have been a ray of hope as people have been able to travel around the country, often going above and beyond. Many of those staff, like any other workers, will want to spend time at home and have time off over the Christmas period.

Thinking about capacity issues, what assurances have you received from the industry that there will be sufficient numbers of staff on trains, and particularly at stations? Given your comments earlier, if there is a glut of passengers for any reason at stations at different times, the ability to manage social distancing could be quite challenging. Is that something you can comment on, Sir Peter?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Thank you. This is a good opportunity for me to say that we are hugely appreciative of the enormous efforts everybody in the railway and transport industries have made to keep things moving during the pandemic. Andrew and I, and the rest of the people in rail, bus, maritime and aviation, are in awe of the efforts people have put in to keep working in some very challenging circumstances. I think back to my time at Transport for London. Interestingly, although staff on the underground were regarded as being militant, when the weather got bad, attendance went up because people wanted to make sure that the transport systems ran well. One of the things to emerge from the whole of the pandemic is the enormous effort individuals at every level have made to keep transport services going. That will be true over Christmas, too.

In respect of major station staffing, last night I had a granular report about the numbers of people on major stations in order that we are able to manage social distancing. We have some experience of that, because the Secretary of State asked, particularly in the upticks of service in May, June and July and September, for major stations in the network to be properly staffed. We did so. We got several thousand extra people out. We also have a lot of British Transport police. Before and after Christmas, there will be 2,710 British Transport police officers rostered across the three key dates, together with all the people who are normally employed.



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I am looking at 1,400 Network Rail staff on each day on 23, 24 and 27 December, compared with a normal complement of under half of that. A lot of people will not be doing their normal job. They will be wearing magenta tabards, like the one on the back of my chair, helping people, as well as helping to maintain social distancing where necessary.

I am particularly concerned about train staff capacity on the 27th because, as we discussed previously, a number of companies have agreements where Sunday working is voluntary. I got one of the rail industry professionals to review independently the train companies' ability to staff the services they have promised on the 27th and compare it with their performance when the day after Boxing day was last on a Sunday, which was in 2015, so that we can identify how it looks and speak directly to their management and local management about their confidence in staffing the services they supply. That work is under way.

In line with the enormous efforts individuals have made on the railway system since Covid started, I hope that enough people will volunteer for those trains because they are so necessary to get people home in the windows that the Government have determined.

**Sam Tarry:** Thank you very much, Sir Peter. You have actually answered my second question, which was specifically about Sunday working. Thank you for recognising the bravery and heroism of so many transport staff on the frontline.

Q40 **Lilian Greenwood:** What you said, Peter, about the numbers of staff who have been available to help people is welcome. We all know that sometimes, if things do not go as people plan when making a journey, they occasionally get upset or angry, and having plenty of staff there might avoid some of the potential problems.

Because travel is very different this Christmas, I would have thought we would not have problems with behaviour on trains, but we know that sometimes in the run-up to Christmas people are tempted to take alcohol on to trains, and that sometimes leads to inappropriate behaviour and is potentially dangerous for social distancing. Can I ask about staffing on trains and any work you have done with the British Transport police to ensure that there aren't any of the difficulties we sometimes see when people are drinking on trains?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** The reason I mentioned the 2,710 BTP officers is that we want the right behaviour. You know as well as I do that the presence of a uniformed police officer is very often enough in itself to constrain people, particularly if they have had a bit to drink. Trains will be staffed in the normal way. Those of you who have travelled on trains in recent months know that there are plenty of staff; sometimes there are a lot more staff than passengers. I admire the gentle way in which many on-board train staff deal with people who have consumed too much alcohol, but in finality the police are available if no amount of gentle persuasion makes people behave normally.



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The reassurance point is very well taken. One of the reasons for the magenta tabards, like the one on my chair behind me, which we first instituted at the Olympics, is that many people are rather worried by people in yellow and orange high-vis jackets on stations; they think they are there to deal with some problem. We want people to feel able to ask for guidance, if they need it, and get help if they are unfamiliar with things. We know that a lot of people travelling at Christmas will be unfamiliar with where they are going.

I am very optimistic that, particularly at the bigger stations, you will see a lot of people there just to help travellers in these difficult circumstances and give them some confidence. We know that a lot of people are very worried about public transport. They misinterpreted the message to stay at home as meaning that public transport was not safe. Public transport is safe if you abide by social distancing. The operators and Network Rail itself have made massive efforts to keep everything clean and make sure that people are safe. We want the human presence to be reassuring. I prefer the BTP to be there just to show that they could be used, but I would also quite like it if travellers over Christmas recognised that one of the great difficulties of social distancing is when people lose their inhibitions, and that is not helpful for the safety of all of us.

**Q41 Lilian Greenwood:** Is there further comms strategy about putting out the BTP text number? Sometimes, if people feel uncertain on a train, particularly if it is quite empty and they are anxious about someone's behaviour, it is very reassuring to know that they can text if they have concerns and get straight through to the BTP.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Since it will be reported, I will mention the number; it is 61016. You text directly to the BTP if you see anything happening that should not be happening or if you feel uncomfortable. I think it works really well. As Andrew and I and others go around, we listen to the messages that are being put out. My only worry about those messages is that you put out so many messages about feeling safe and what to do in Covid circumstances that sometimes people begin to feel quite worried about why they are all there, but on every one of my recent journeys on a train I have heard the message about 61016. As you say, it is a really useful way for people to be able to tell them immediately what is going on.

The on-train staff are very good. On every one of my recent journeys on South Western Railway, the guard has told me where he or she is and where they will be on the platform at every station. You want that, especially at Christmas when a lot of people who are unfamiliar with it might be using the system. You are right to raise it. We are very well minded to make sure that people, wherever they are going, can feel comfortable and that there are people they feel they can talk to.

**Q42 Chris Loder:** Earlier, you mentioned Sunday 27 December and the review you were commissioning or undertaking to ensure the staffing capability of the network. When will you know the outcome of that



review, and would you be willing to share it with the Committee?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** It is continuing. I was about to say “ongoing”, but that is a terrible word. I have already had one output and have sent people back to talk to the train companies in some detail. I am expecting another, and I shall be at it right up to Christmas eve. As you know, for some of the companies the staffing is quite late on; one of GWR’s problems is that you can give notice for your Sunday rest day as late as Thursday afternoon, which is really not helpful for running a good service.

All I can say is that the managements of the companies know perfectly well what their staffing agreements are, so I am expecting them to work as hard as everybody else to ensure that the services they are being paid to run on the 27th actually run. The last and most up-to-date response I get will probably be on the 23rd or 24th. It is more likely that I will be able to tell the Committee the results after Christmas, but I already know what they ran on 27 December 2015, so we are comparing their current staffing predictions with that. I am sorry that is not a particularly good answer, but it is a dynamic piece of work.

Q43 **Chris Loder:** If you happen to find yourself in need of a train guard over Christmas, I would be very happy to refresh my competencies. I am always very happy to help when needed.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Don’t write that off as a humorous remark.

**Chris Loder:** I remain available to help you.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** We know where you live.

Q44 **Chair:** We’ll be on that train causing trouble, if indeed that occurs. A headline in one of the papers on Sunday was drawn to my attention. It said, “Most of British Rail network will be shut on Boxing Day adding pressure to chaotic December 27th when millions will travel to beat Christmas Covid bubble deadline.” Is that a rather scare headline that does not link particularly well, considering Boxing day and the 27th?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Apart from the Covid bit, I have been reading that every year for the 40-odd years I have been in the transport industry. “Christmas chaos” rolls off the tongue nicely and just about fits on the front of a tabloid newspaper.

There has been no substantive train service on Christmas day and Boxing day for many, many years, but the reality of this particular Boxing day is that the retail offer, from all the research we can garner, looks to be fairly limited because of what the Government have put in; sporting events, at least in tier 3 places, will have no audiences at all; and air travel will be massively restricted because of the limit to where you can go. The rest of it is very largely local travel. If you think about the travel window and abide by the rules, as I am sure most of you do, and see only two other family bubbles or groupings, very many people will go into



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the permitted arrangements on the 23rd and 24th and stay there until the 27th, because they cannot legitimately do anything else.

I am not really worried about Christmas day and Boxing day, and my suspicion is that most other people aren't either. The weather, hopefully, will be nice and we can all go out for a walk after Christmas dinner; we're not going to be able to go and see anybody else, particularly if we already have the two other family groupings wherever we are.

**Chair:** Let us move on to road traffic. As you said, it is expected that 80% of the travelling public over Christmas will be driving, so it's not just Chris Rea who will be driving home for Christmas. After that terrible pun, Greg will lead us through this section.

Q45 **Greg Smith:** That was a terrible pun, Chair—extra mince pies for you to buy later.

We have heard from the Government that 778 miles of roadworks on motorways and A roads have already been cleared, which is music to the ears of every motorist who normally gets very angry at Christmas when stuck in traffic jams, roadworks and continuous long-rolling 50 mph zones with speed cameras. There are another 288 miles to be removed. Are we on track to get those additional roadworks out of the way before the five-day period begins next week?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Yes, we are. It is being monitored on a daily basis. Highways England and the principal highway authorities have been working very hard to do that. Where the works are still there and nobody is working, the speed limit will be increased in some cases, so 50 will go up to 60. You cannot take the cones away, but if there is nobody working, you can run a bit faster.

Colleagues in Highways England and the Department have worked hard in recognising the need for that. The Department has written to every highway authority in the country to ask the same question, and all but a few have replied with the same endeavours, because everybody realises that the period is very limited and people want their travel to be as seamless as possible.

Q46 **Greg Smith:** With major roadworks removed wherever possible, where do you think the pinch points in the UK's motorway network will still be, to help people plan their journeys at Christmas?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** It is more likely to be time than places. Separately from any of that, I have been in touch, through contacts I first built up during the Olympics, with freight and logistics companies and the Institute of Couriers, who very kindly asked around for me. It is quite clear that the majority of commercial transport will cease on the 23rd and not come back until after the 27th. I spoke to Keith Williams, who as some of you know is now the executive chair of Royal Mail. He did the rail review. I asked him how much of the Royal Mail fleet would be on the roads after Christmas. The answer was almost nothing after the postal



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delivery early on the 24th until the 28th. That gives you a clue to the volumes that will not be there as a consequence of freight and logistics largely ceasing.

Other heavy users—aggregates, the building trade and the construction industry—stop for a fortnight, so the roads will be much clearer of the normal heavy vehicle traffic. It is more to do with time. If I were driving on the 23rd, I would be inclined to set off early or late, rather than in the middle of the day, because you realise that people with small kids might not be able to set off at 6 or 7 o'clock in the morning. With the availability of satnavs, TomTom and so forth, systems can work out for you what is happening on the road network on a dynamic basis. That will help many people get to where they are going more comfortably than would otherwise be the case.

It is still true that people set off on leisure journeys with less pressure on the time it takes to get to the other end. Of course, highway operators and road safety people will want me to say, which I entirely endorse, that people should not be rushing about, especially not with their family in their car; they should be driving safely and should be prepared for a bit of delay if they set off at a busy time because everybody else is doing that too.

**Q47** **Greg Smith:** I fully appreciate that, and I very much appreciate the points you make about having young children in the car. What I am trying to get at is that, even with all of those roadworks gone, there will still be some areas where it is impossible to stand down roadworks, because of the point they have reached in resurfacing, or whatever is being done. Are there some particular motorways—off the top of my head, the M1 always seems pretty bad—where it will still be difficult over this period, so that people can already start to plan, if they are going from the south-east maybe to the midlands or Manchester, to go up the M40 and M6 instead?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** It is pretty tough at this distance to produce a list of what you might describe as the worst ones. Everybody's journey will differ, particularly if you are going by car. The Highways England website has lists in written form and a map of where and when the remaining works will be, so by inspection people can choose a route that will avoid those if they want. Some of the works are particularly large. If you have been on the M4 at the London end recently, you will have seen that they are doing the smart motorway scheme. You cannot clear that lot off because there is so much of it, but there are still three lanes.

I am not equipped to read off a list of the worst places. Indeed if I did, it would just lead to people after the event asking why I did not mention X. The Highways England website is well constructed; it has maps of the trunk road network in Britain and the works that will remain, and it is a good way of planning travel in advance. On the day, your satnav, TomTom and other systems that have dynamic traffic information will not only tell you how to avoid roadworks; the best of them will reroute you,



on the journey, to avoid delays that have occurred. Having myself just bought a smart new satnav, I can tell you that it is dynamic, and it will reroute you even during quite a short journey.

**Q48** **Greg Smith:** Thank you for that. I hope you enjoy your satnav.

Obviously, we hope there are no major incidents on the roads over Christmas and that they run freely and safely for the entire period. However, if there is a significant incident, do we have full capacity in Highways England traffic patrols? At a time when lots of people want time off and want to be with their families and at home, do we have full capacity to deal quickly with incidents, get debris off the road and make people safe, so that we can get roads reopened as soon as possible? I am sure I am not alone in saying there is nothing more frustrating when one, two or even three lanes on a motorway are shut for a very long period of time, and it is not clear why it is taking that long, especially at Christmas when people will be anxious to get to where they are going. We need to ensure the capacity is there to clear up any incidents.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** That is a really good point, and thank you for asking me. We have been checking on the availability of Highways England traffic officers in particular. Subject to the general caveat about people either catching this terrible virus or having to self-isolate because they might have been near somebody who has it, currently I am assured that the Highways England traffic officer cadre is available, as you would expect, during the holiday and poised to do exactly what you say, knowing that holiday traffic is particularly important to people. They have thought their way around that too, and we all hope that the onset of the particularly virulent new strain of virus does nothing to affect their staff availability; indeed, we hope that is the case across the transport industry in general.

**Chair:** Sir Peter, as we are right on the 90 minutes that you have given us, we will ask brief questions now, and you are welcome to give us brief answers, so that we get you back to your Christmas job.

**Q49** **Lilian Greenwood:** Following up Greg's questions about the major road network, Peter, what discussions have you had with motorway service station operators about how they are going to manage the increased footfall while maintaining social distancing?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I have asked that question, in particular about their confidence about availability of toilet facilities. They tell us that they are not expecting anything out of the ordinary, compared with a normal Christmas, and they believe that their facilities are sufficient. I asked that question deliberately because I wondered about it, but I am told that they are expecting nothing out of the order of a normal Christmas holiday and that they can cope.

**Chair:** Thank you Lilian. That is a great example of brevity. We will move on to local roads.



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**Q50 Robert Largan:** Following on from what Greg said earlier when we talked about roadworks, Sir Peter, you said that Ministers have written to all local authorities requesting that they lift as many roadworks as possible on local roads. What has the response been from local authorities, and are you confident that the vast majority of those roadworks will be removed in time for Christmas?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I have some confidence, if only because, outwith the trunk road network, it is quite expensive to pay people to work over Christmas, and most local authorities are not in a position to fund work on bank holidays that they could get done during the week. That may not be an ideal answer for people who have significant highway works normally

I do not know currently of anybody who has refused to do it. Between now and Christmas, one of the jobs I have not yet done is to drag through the detail of the responses from the 100 and something local transport authorities. I am reasonably confident, because I cannot see why they would want to pursue works at Christmas that they could get done normally, bearing in mind their financial situation.

**Q51 Robert Largan:** That is very helpful. Are you confident that the current roadworks that they are trying to finish in time for Christmas will be performed properly and adequately and not rushed, so that we do not have poorly carried out works that mean further disruptions and costs down the line?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** You would like to think so. The Highways England works are not being finished more quickly; they are ceasing for Christmas in order to start afterwards. I cannot imagine why they would want to do works in a bad way in order to finish them off quickly, because we all know that, inevitably, badly done street works normally open themselves up. You will know that the principal offenders on badly done street works are not highway authorities; they are telecoms companies and utilities. Having spent 10 years running TfL, trying to curtail the excessive nature of both taking road space out and the bad works being done by utilities, I do not have a huge amount of confidence about them, but a good highway authority will be right on their back, to stop them doing a bad job and having to come back and re-fix it.

**Robert Largan:** Let's hope so. Sir Peter, thank you very much.

**Chair:** The last section is on domestic air travel.

**Q52 Simon Jupp:** As you will be well aware, Sir Peter, the aviation sector has really struggled this year due to the pandemic. Do you anticipate any capacity problems on domestic flights across the United Kingdom, particularly between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and parts of rural Scotland?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** That is a really good question. We have been monitoring seat availability on flights to the Republic and Northern



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Ireland. I am waiting for some more numbers today, but when we last looked, there were considerable numbers of vacant seats still available. More recently, I have asked the same question about the Scottish services that you just asked. The operators tell us that they are capable of coping with the demand that they are expecting, which is good news.

We are also in touch with Heathrow airport. Heathrow, interestingly, is expecting its maximum patronage this weekend and on 3 January. People are not prohibited from travelling abroad by air. I am aware of the measures that they propose to put in place this weekend, which may involve making sure that people socially distance by not having too many people in terminals. I am also aware that they have been in touch with public transport providers to make sure that the requisite amount of public transport is available for people using airports.

**Q53** **Simon Jupp:** You mentioned earlier the staffing issues hitting some of our train companies, including GWR. With the high-profile changes to employment in the aviation sector in the last year, are you confident that there is enough staffing capacity among airlines and airports, particularly regional airports, to be able to cope?

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I am. What has happened to them has been, and still is, very serious, but they tell us that they feel very confident about dealing with the numbers that they expect over Christmas. Looking at their position and looking at the number of people they have previously had on furlough and people who have not been needed for work, I cannot see any reason why they would not cope.

**Q54** **Chair:** Peter, as a last word on the subject and on your role as a whole, I will pick out a juicy media quote from this morning: "Fears of giant traffic jams and Covid carriages on trains." That sounds quite far removed from the detailed plans that you have in place.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** As you get older, you get used to that stuff. I am a veteran of the Olympics. For six or seven months before the Olympics, we were told that the transport was going to be a complete disaster, nobody would ever get where they wanted to go, and people would be enormously disappointed; yet, when it came to it, with a bit of decent preparation and people playing their proper part, the news story evaporated within 48 hours. This is much the same. Those headlines at Christmas have always been there. The possibility of traffic jams due to accidents is always there, as we were just talking about. The worry about whether or not there is enough train staff, bearing in mind Covid infections, is there.

All I can tell you is that, wherever I have been in the transport industry since I started doing this job, I have met people who are absolutely busting a gut to try to make sure that we get you to wherever you are going for Christmas somehow, if you decide to go. The money for the coach supplement is an elegant demonstration of the Government's desire to help us do that. We will all work really hard. We might have to



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ask for a bit of tolerance if there are traffic jams due to accidents, and we might have to ask for a bit of tolerance if staffing gets particularly bad because of Covid. I do not think anybody in those industries is not trying as hard as they can to do the best job they can, and I would be very surprised if that headline came to fruition.

**Q55 Chair:** I want to give you the last word. You had a view on traffic commissioners that I believe may be different from one of our previous witnesses. I want to give you the chance to come to their defence.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** I did. It is very nice of you to ask me. I am speaking to you not particularly as the chair of Network Rail—because we hold some HGV operators’ licences—but as somebody who has been in the road transport industry for all my working life. I was very dismayed to see the previous chief executive of the DVSA tell you that the traffic commissioners were anachronistic. They are nothing of the sort. They are a really elegant and quite cheap way of regulating industries that could have a profound effect on public safety. I am very supportive of them, and the trade associations are too.

As chair of Network Rail, I particularly welcome people acting on the fitness of both operators and drivers to hold vocational licences. For example, I have drawn their attention to high vehicles that hit railway bridges that can have fatal consequences both for the occupants of the vehicle and for the railway. The senior traffic commissioner paid a lot of attention to what I said and changed his guidance about how those cases are dealt with.

When I was the transport commissioner in London, appeals against the revocation of taxi drivers’ licences by legislation had to be sent to stipendiary magistrates. We found the magistrates far too lenient because they did not understand the import of the behavioural offences caused by taxi drivers. In my view, they were unduly swayed by the personal positions of the drivers, rather than considering the much higher levels of behaviour needed from a vocational driver driving vulnerable people around. I tried, in my time, through the work of the Law Commission, to get the traffic commissioner to be the final arbiter of metropolitan taxi driver licensing. The traffic commissioners know exactly what they are doing and are the right people to do it, and it is a fairly cheap methodology for getting the right answer for public safety. Thank you for the opportunity to say so.

**Q56 Chair:** That is on the record now, and I am sure they will be grateful to hear it. We always welcome differing views and opinions, and we have had just that.

Sir Peter, that concludes the session. Thank you for giving us all of your insights about the role, and about what is likely to happen during the five days when transport is permitted over Christmas. We wish you and all those involved in that the very best. We very much hope it will be a smooth journey for all concerned and that all working within it will keep



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safe as well. Thank you again.

**Sir Peter Hendy:** Thank you very much. I will do my best, as everybody else will too, I am sure.

**Chair:** Thank you.