HOUSE OF COMMONS

Transport Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Secretary of State for Transport, HC 346

Wednesday 12 November 2025

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ruth Cadbury (Chair); Steff Aquarone; Dr Scott Arthur; Mrs Elsie Blundell; Jacob Collier; Olly Glover; Alex Mayer; Baggy Shanker; Rebecca Smith; Laurence Turner.

Questions 154–233

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Heidi Alexander MP, Secretary of State for Transport; Jo Shanmugalingam, Permanent Secretary, Department for Transport.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Heidi Alexander and Jo Shanmugalingam.

Q154 **Chair:** Welcome to this morning's evidence session of the Transport Select Committee. We are very much looking forward to questioning the Secretary of State for Transport on a range of topical issues across every mode of transport and some additional issues. This is the latest of our roughly six-monthly series of regular catch-ups with the Secretary of State. Could I ask you both to introduce yourselves?

Heidi Alexander: I am Heidi Alexander and I am the Secretary of State for Transport.

Jo Shanmugalingam: I am Jo Shanmugalingam, the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Transport.

Q155 **Chair:** Welcome. The Government have now been in office for 16 months. How would you assess the state of progress in your Department? What has not progressed as planned? Could I also ask you to keep your answers fairly brief? We hope to cover by 11.30 am all the issues that I think you will want to discuss anyway.

Heidi Alexander: Good morning, everyone. Thanks ever so much for having me back. I think the last time I was here was in April, so it is good to have this regular catch-up. You asked me how I would assess the state of progress in my Department, with this Government having been in office for 16 months now. I think we are doing a good job and making sustained progress.

I would like to say thank you to not only everyone in my team, but the transport workers who have responded to a number of significant challenges and events, not least in recent weeks. It would be remiss of me not to say thank you to the train crew at LNER, the GTR station staff and the first responders in the British Transport Police and Cambridgeshire Police, for their response to the attack on that train in Huntingdon a couple of days ago. Had it not been for them, the incident could have been a lot worse. Thankfully, incidents such as that are very rare.

As I say, we are making good progress in keeping people moving. On the rail network, we have seen a 7% increase in passenger journeys. In the first quarter of this year, 451 million passenger journeys were made on the railways, which is significantly up on the same period the year before. In bus services, we saw satisfaction with bus journeys going up from 80% to 83%. We are investing a record amount in local highways maintenance to make sure that we have better quality roads in our towns and cities. Some £1.6 billion has gone in, which is a £500 million increase.

The spending review has enabled us to lay the foundations of investing in the infrastructure required to support the delivery of new homes and to support the economy. Supporting economic growth is the No. 1 mission of my Department, while also making the transport system cleaner and greener. I highlight the progress we are making on the transition to electric vehicles, with latest data showing that one in four new vehicles sold in October were electric vehicles, and of course we have the electric car grant.

Very quickly, to touch on the things that have perhaps not gone as we might have liked, I would still like to see greater improvement in rail performance. While we have stabilised the situation when it comes to cancellations, we need to provide good value for money for the taxpayer and the people who pay a lot for rail journeys and need a service that they can rely on, so I would like to see greater improvement there.

In the summer, I made the announcement about HS2, where Mark Wild, the new chief executive, is doing a full reset of the programme to calculate a new delivery schedule and new cost ranges. We need to grip that project, given what the Stewart review and the report that we published said about the problems to date there.

Finally, I would also have liked to see more rapid improvement in driving test wait times and the backlog that we are dealing with there. You might want to come to that later in the session.

Q156 **Chair:** We will come on to that. Certainly my constituents and I can attest to the issues around cancellation of trains, and while bus satisfaction may be going up among those people who have a bus service, of course we have concerns about the lack of bus services in many parts of England. My colleagues will come on to these points during the rest of the session.

In June we had the spending review, the infrastructure strategy and the industrial strategy. How are these now shaping the work of your Department?

Heidi Alexander: It was a specific decision of the Government to publish the spending review, the industrial strategy and the infrastructure strategy around the same time, so that we could make sure that they were aligned and could provide long-term certainty about the investment pipeline, for example, to lever in private sector investment.

To answer your question in the simplest way, the industrial strategy highlights a number of key sectors for the future of the economy. Advanced manufacturing is one of them; life sciences and financial professional services are others. We have to make sure that our transport system supports those key sectors of the economy. We need to do that through investment, but also by making sure that our regulation, which needs to be proportionate and future-focused, supports those areas. We are supporting the transition to electric vehicles through the zero-emission vehicles mandate, where we have given clarity to the sector that no new cars powered solely by diesel or petrol will be sold post 2035.

We are also making sure that, in areas of advanced manufacturing, things such as transport for city regions funding support areas of potential growth. The money that we have given to the North East Combined Authority will enable the extension of the metro in Tyne and Wear to Washington, which is an important area for advanced manufacturing. Our investment in East West Rail to support the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor has huge potential in terms of the expansion of life sciences. Linking our brilliant universities in Oxford and Cambridge is also critical.

Given the importance of financial services and professional services to the national economy and their predominance in cities such as London, the £2.2 billion funding settlement to Transport for London for capital investment is really important as well. It was a specific decision of the Government to align all those strategies together.

Q157 **Chair:** There is a lot of concern in the EV sector among both manufacturers and charging infrastructure providers that some of the signals from the Treasury are not quite aligned to the transition to decarbonisation. What conversations have you had with the Treasury on that?

Heidi Alexander: The Chancellor and the Treasury are very aware of the potential electric vehicles offer in terms of jobs of the future. We are investing in battery giga plants, for example, and supporting developments down in Somerset around that. We also moved very swiftly in the summer, when we had some volatility around international tariffs, to support companies such as Jaguar Land Rover.

It is really important that we get the balance right in all this and support our industrial footprint and those jobs of the future, as well as enabling the transition to electric vehicles. The ZEV mandate is the single largest policy lever that the Government have at their disposal to help us reach our 2050 net zero target. I know that we are working very closely with the Treasury on all that at the moment.

Q158 **Chair:** When is there going to be an announcement about Northern Powerhouse Rail?

Heidi Alexander: I hope to be able to say more on that in the next couple of months. We are fully committed to ensuring that the great cities of the north of England have better rail connectivity, but we want to get it right. Following the publication of the James Stewart review, it makes sense for us to take our time and make sure that investment decisions are the correct ones.

We need to have an overall package of investment, if you like, because we need to be clear about the economic objectives that we are seeking to realise through investment. I also want to make sure that it is balanced east and west of the Pennines, because there is huge opportunity in cities such as Liverpool and Manchester, but equally in Yorkshire. The Yorkshire mayors, for example, Tracy Brabin, Oliver Coppard and David Skaith, have come together to say, "We think that we can unlock real productivity improvements if you invest in the rail infrastructure east of the Pennines as well as west of the Pennines." We are working through the detail of all that.

Q159 **Olly Glover:** In the recent government reshuffle, it ended up, as we understand it, that one of your ministerial team is now shared with the Whips Office. Therefore, if our maths is correct, that has been a net reduction in the number of full-time Ministers working for the Department. How do you feel that that is going to affect the Department's operations?

Heidi Alexander: I am really lucky to have an excellent team. You are right to say that Lilian Greenwood, who had been the Future of Roads Minister, is now spending some of her time as the transport Whip. I have reorganised the portfolios of the Ministers to make sure that individuals have the right workload. Lilian will be taking on the role of Local Transport Minister. Simon Lightwood is the Roads and Buses Minister, and responsibility for the motoring agencies, for example, falls within that. Keir Mather, who is an excellent new addition to our team, is taking on an aviation, maritime and decarbonisation brief. I think that that is a sensible way of organising the ministerial portfolios.

I should say a big thank you to Mike Kane, who was a superb Aviation Minister as well. We keep Lord Peter Hendy as the Rail Minister. He has taken on some responsibilities around light rail, for example, that Simon previously had. I am confident that we have a really good team. We work very closely together. There is obviously a lot of overlap between our different portfolios and we have an ambitious agenda. It is true to say that they have stretching portfolios, but we have the right team in place.

Q160 **Olly Glover:** Following the spending review, the Resolution Foundation calculated that real-terms per-person investment by the Department for Transport will be 4.1% lower in 2029-30 than it was in 2023-24. Given your ambitions that you outlined in your opening remarks, how are you going to do what you need with less money?

Heidi Alexander: There are two really important things to remember when it comes to investment in transport over the next three to four years, both in the day-to-day spending, so the resource spending that we have, and the capital spending. Jo might like to pick up on some of the detail of it.

Broadly speaking, when you look at capital investment, the scale of spending on HS2 is very significant at the moment and much larger than our spending in other areas. We are in a period of spending big on this programme because we are at the point where we have a huge amount of civil construction work happening. Over the spending review period, our spending on HS2 will come down. If you exclude the capital spending on HS2 from the figures, we are seeing an increase in capital expenditure over the spending review period.

Similarly on the day-to-day operational costs within transport, the rail network took some time to recover after the covid pandemic. People had started to work at home and were not spending as much time in the office. That has really started to recover and pick up in the last couple of years, hence those figures that I talked about at the beginning of the meeting.

We need to reduce the amount of rail subsidy going on day-to-day spending. We spend over £10 billion a year on infrastructure. That is taxpayers' money that goes into Network Rail to maintain the infrastructure, the signalling, et cetera. At the moment, we are also spending about £2 billion of taxpayers' money on subsidising the day-to-day running of the trains. We need to bring that down. If you exclude the rail subsidy, you also see—Jo might be able to help me out with some of the figures—what that then looks like in terms of our other priorities. It is quite a complex picture.

Jo Shanmugalingam: On the capital side, HS2 is currently 33% of our capital portfolio. By the end of this SR period, it comes down to 24%, because, as the Secretary of State said, we have got through that peak civil engineering period. We are spending £7.1 billion this financial year on HS2; that comes down to £5.5 billion by 2039-40. Similarly on the RDEL side, so the operations, if you take out the rail services, where a decision has been taken by the Government, our RDEL goes from £5.5 billion in 2023-24 to £6.5 billion in 2028-29, which is a 0.9% annual average real-terms growth over the period.

Q161 **Olly Glover:** Can we explore what you said about reducing subsidy to the railways and tackling those costs? What is the Department's plan for doing that? How much are you going to look at increasing fare revenue compared with just cutting costs? If I can offer an opinion, it feels that the focus since the pandemic has been on short-term decisions to cut costs, rather than some creative or commercial flair to increase either the volume or the yield of fares. What is the plan to do that?

Heidi Alexander: The quickest and easiest way to explain this is that we need to get more bums on seats. We need to increase the number of people who are using the railways. The less we are paying as a country to move half-empty bits of steel around the rail network, the better value for money we will be getting, so there is an ambition to continue to grow passenger numbers.

In terms of reducing the operating subsidy, there are opportunities associated with rail reform. We have been clear that the management fees that we pay to the train operating companies annually are up to £150 million. There is obviously a saving when you are not paying that management fee. We also need to crack down on things such as fare evasion, because people not paying to use the rail network is not a victimless crime. It means less investment in train services, so that is really important.

We have a situation at the moment in the way that the rail network is structured where train operating companies have employed hundreds of staff to work out who is to blame for delays. They do that because they can receive financial compensation if it can be proved that it is a Network Rail fault. I want to get to the point where we do not have hundreds of people employed in a blame factory, but we have hundreds of people who are working out how to prevent problems happening in the first place. There are opportunities in setting up Great British Railways and bringing the 14 train operating companies into that organisation to drive efficiency, reduce duplication in some parts and provide better value for money for the taxpayer as well as the farepayer.

Olly Glover: There are lots of things I could follow up but I do not want to hog the time.

Q162 **Steff Aquarone:** This Committee is very interested in its scrutiny function in understanding the structure and operations of the Department, what it is trying to achieve and how it is configured to do that. Can I ask a couple of quick plain English questions? What is an outcome delivery plan?

Heidi Alexander: Jo, you might want to pick this one up. I can tell you what outcomes we are trying to achieve.

Steff Aquarone: We have got that. I am more interested in what the plan means.

Jo Shanmugalingam: An outcome delivery plan is organised across Government to make sure that we are clear what the Government are asking us to deliver, who is responsible ministerially and as officials, and what the metrics or outcomes are that we are demonstrating progress against. A decision has been taken this year not to publish those across Government, but we are working on the long-term outcome delivery plans to reflect our spending review settlements and the legislative programme for the rest of the period. We understand that those will be published next year. It is a cross-government decision about how the Government want to approach business planning and the information that they provide.

Q163 **Steff Aquarone:** It is more about what you can do for the Government and which of the Government's objectives transport takes on. It is less about how your spending priorities are aligned to your objectives. Is that a fair description?

Heidi Alexander: No, we need to make sure that our spending priorities map clearly against the outcomes that we are trying to achieve. First and foremost among those is making sure that we are supporting growth in the economy. The second one is that we create a cleaner, greener, safer and healthier transport system. We also want to make sure, as I said at the beginning of the session, that people can move around safely and reliably and that we have an inclusive transport network that is there for everyone.

That shaped our approach to the spending review negotiations, in terms of the priorities that we had as a Department. That also maps on to how we determine our own business planning within the Department for Transport about where we are spending money and on what.

Q164 **Steff Aquarone:** Who should we be asking, and what should we be asking, as a Committee, if we want to understand how the Department is organising itself in respect of those objectives that you have just stated?

Jo Shanmugalingam: We are very happy to answer your questions. To your previous question there is no difference in our objectives as a Department and the Government's objectives. You see the Government's five missions in the outcomes the Secretary of State has set out, on health, safety and obviously the economy. We in transport have a huge part to play in all of those. I am happy to provide any further information you would like.

Steff Aquarone: It all feels a bit high level, if you do not mind me saying. Since March, we have been asking, in different ways, for something to show us where that is translated into practical actions, such as a business plan, rather than big objectives.

Q165 **Chair:** Could I be more specific? The main estimate memorandum for 2025 does not include the information about the link between spend and objectives. We have been told that the Department has an outcome delivery plan, but it has not been published. As we are a scrutiny Committee of Government, are we going to be able to see these documents?

Heidi Alexander: A decision was taken by the Cabinet Office this year about not making the outcome delivery plan available publicly. We are working on a longer-term outcome delivery plan. As Jo said in her answer, pending discussions across Government with the Cabinet Office, the current thinking is that that longer-term plan would be published in the early part of next year.

Jo Shanmugalingam: We can certainly look at what further information we can provide you with to help you understand.

Q166 **Steff Aquarone:** Let me restate the question then: what steps have you taken to ensure alignment between your Department's spending and its priorities?

Heidi Alexander: As I said, that informed all our discussions at the spending review. Through the spending review, we secured a package that enables us to grow the economy, be that the more than £25 billion that we are spending on HS2 in capital, or the £15.6 billion that we are spending on transport for city regions to unlock productivity in those key city region areas. It has informed our approach to road and rail investment and the planned upgrades that I announced there.

More broadly, Jo and I and the finance officials at the Department will have regular discussions to make sure that our budget planning in-year is tracking against the priorities that I have set clearly and openly. I have talked to you about them today. If there is specific information that members of the Committee want, please let us know and we would be happy to provide information to you on particular areas.

Jo Shanmugalingam: It is obviously not just the spending that the Secretary of State and ministerial team look at in terms of our priorities. It is our legislative agenda and the convening power of Government. For instance, Lillian Greenwood was in Manchester, I think three weeks ago now, hosting a safer transport conference, given the importance of that and particularly to support the Government's work on violence against women and girls. It is everything that we do that we look at, against the outcomes the Secretary of State has set for us.

Q167 **Chair:** I think that Members of Parliament want to see metrics against which growth, greener and healthier transport or improving transport for people can be measured. I do not know whether modal shift is one of your objectives. You just talked about rail fares and getting more bums on seats. For instance, taking a family of four or five on a trip to see friends 50 to 100 or so miles away is far cheaper by car than by train. That is just one example that would have a big impact in other respects, such as the growth imbalance within the country. We would really like to see the metrics against which you are targeting your spend and other Government spend. Transport is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Heidi Alexander: I understand the point you are making, Chair. When we publish the integrated national transport strategy next year, that will give you a clearer sense of direction on some of the issues that you are raising.

Q168 **Steff Aquarone:** To move on to the next question, it is sort of halfway. What you said makes sense: you bid for money from the Treasury to do the stuff that you wanted, and that allowed you to announce some big rail and road upgrade projects. In the not-too-distant future are some fairly big vulnerabilities in the operating model. I will put it in those terms, or maybe slightly different terms if you are talking specifically within transport.

You have some fairly powerful objectives around reducing the value of subsidy, which we have already heard about. You have some efficiency objectives around shaping the staffing team. If the money starts to run out because those things are not happening as quickly as you might think, the flex might be, "Make more redundancies. Reduce the headcount further." We do not know whether that makes perfect sense, because it is taking longer and there is less resource required, or if that is breaking the parts of the business plan that actually need those people and that expertise to stay in place.

That is why we are so keen to see, for want of a better word, what the actual business plan looks like. We get that you have used the objectives to pitch for money. The investor, the Treasury, has come in and said, "Yes, have this money," and that has allowed you to announce some stuff. What is the month-on-month performance actually looking like? Do you have the visibility to be able to make those flexes in the right places?

Heidi Alexander: Jo might want to say something particularly about the approach that we are taking within the DFT corporately to some of the points you raised there about staffing levels. One thing to remember when it comes to the work of the Department for Transport is that you have Network Rail and National Highways, which are both very large arm's-length bodies that employ thousands and thousands of people and, on a day-to-day basis, spend a very significant proportion of the Department's budget. We think that centrally we need to cut costs, in terms of the central staffing. I think that, when I was at the Committee earlier this year, I talked about the voluntary redundancy programme that we were running. Nearly 260 people have left the organisation as a result of that.

It is really important that we maintain our focus on improving the performance of the transport system overall. I will always seek to retain the relevant expertise in order to do that. We have really big priorities around infrastructure investment, rail reform and decarbonisation. Making sure that we have the right people in the right jobs is key for us, because that is the way that we are going to improve the overall performance of the transport network.

Jo Shanmugalingam: To add to that, our core pay bill in the Department is about £300 million. That is about 3% of our total resource budget. That compares to £3.5 billion for National Highways and Network Rail in terms of their operation and maintenance of the road and rail systems. Our affordable workforce budget for this year is 3,400 full-time equivalent. I am confident that we are going to come in at that. We have a stable settlement for the spending review to enable us to plan and resource the Department to meet the Secretary of State's objectives.

Q169 **Steff Aquarone:** Let me be clear: I am not advocating a reduction in core staffing costs for the sake of it. I am interested in what the business plan is. How do those high-level objectives translate into team-based objectives? Are those teams held to account based on the right measures, given those objectives? There should not be anyone in the building who does not have an answer to those questions. That is not prescribing how big it should be, but, if it is optimised to that extent, just cutting it means that you are sacrificing the ability to deliver in the future, hence why we are so interested in what that business plan, that operating model and those double-click next-level objectives look like.

You have talked about the infrastructure plan next year. There must be an internal working business plan at the moment that we could request to see even if, as you said, the Cabinet Office has removed the publication objective or aspiration of the outcome delivery plan, now we know what that means. What is it that you are working to and can we see it, for instance?

Jo Shanmugalingam: Let us take away the question of what further information we can provide for you. Our spending review means that we have the big decisions made for the rest of the spending review period. There will be some detailed decisions for the Secretary of State and ministerial team to take on what we spend. Then we will be reviewing, between now and the start of the next financial year, where we deploy staff within the Department to make sure they are aligned to deliver those objectives, as you say.

Chair: We are going to now move on to picking up some of the issues we have been working on in the last year.

Q170 **Laurence Turner:** Good morning. The Department's response to our report on accessibility and disability access, *Access Denied*, committed to approaching the Law Commission with a view to carrying out a review of the relevant legislation. That is very welcome from our perspective. The Department's response was that there would be a series of steps, most likely including consultation. Are you able to give us an update today on the progress of that work and what that phasing will look like?

Heidi Alexander: Thank you for that question. I would like to thank the Committee for your work on accessibility, because it is a big priority for my Department to create a much more inclusive transport network. You are right to say that we indicated that we want to work with the Law Commission on a review. If you think about all the different layers of legislation that have built up in this area over the years, you have the public sector equality duty and the Equality Act and so on; it all overlaps, so we think that it is right for the Law Commission to do this review.

We are working with the commission on the scope and the parameters of that review at the moment and hope that we might be able to agree all that by the very early part of next year, so that the work can start in the spring. You will be aware, given the previous work of the Law Commission on things such as taxi and private hire, that some of this work can take quite a long time. We are exploring whether there is any opportunity to work in a phased way with the Law Commission. I hope that we will be in a position to say more on that early next year.

What I do not want to do, though, is just wait for the Law Commission review. You will have seen, for example, the rail accessibility road map that we published last week. You might be aware that we are working on an accessibility charter. We have to get on now and drive improvements before we get the product back from the Law Commission review, but that work is under way.

Q171 **Laurence Turner:** Other colleagues may come back on the point that you just made. You mentioned the taxis and private hire licensing review. That review took three years to be completed. A draft Bill was published in 2014. We did not see any progress on that work in the decade that followed. Other examples of slow progress include the report that the Law Commission published on level crossings, which is a very important area of law. As a Committee, we are still dealing with exactly these same issues 10 years on. What assurances can you give us that putting this issue of disability access to the Law Commission does not become a cause of further delay?

Chair: I would add to that list the default pavement parking ban, which was an issue for our predecessor Committee as well.

Heidi Alexander: I maintain that the Law Commission is the right body to do this work. As I said, we are looking at whether we can do something in a phased way. As well though, it is about political will and making parliamentary time available when you get a Law Commission report back. For whatever reason, I do not think that that political will was there on taxi and private hire in the last Government. We are looking very carefully at Baroness Casey's review into the child grooming gangs. She made some specific recommendations about legislating in this space with regard to taxi and private hire. We have committed to doing that, looking at national standards for example, as soon as parliamentary time allows. Where there is a will, there can often be found a way.

As I say, I do not want to not say or do anything for two years while the Law Commission is looking into this. That is why Peter Hendy committed, as part of the debates on the public ownership Act with regard to rail, to doing the rail accessibility road map. There are some real tangible changes that could be made quite quickly, for example changes to eligibility for the disabled persons railcard from the spring of next year, bringing into scope non-visible as well as visible disabilities and making sure that we improve the information about lifts and escalators at stations, so that people can access that information online and in stations. We have welcome points there for people so that they can get that information. We are rolling out the audiovisual information on the bus network as well, which should be complete by October of next year.

It is right, for the medium to longer term, to get the Law Commission to do that work. It is also right to have ambition and urgency around improvements and changes that we can make in the coming months and years, before that work reports back.

Jo Shanmugalingam: We are also really pleased that the aviation industry is now taking forward the work that Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson led on accessibility in aviation and the work she developed with industry to improve the service that people receive.

Chair: Scott, would you like to pick up on some of those points?

Q172 **Dr Arthur:** To follow up on what Laurence said, I recently met representatives of Transport for All. They spoke about how, quite often, rather than their rights being respected, they find that they are having to fight for their rights. Realistically, is an accessibility charter, or even an accessibility road map, going to change that? Are these not just bits of paper, or perhaps pages on a website, that people never look at? People want real differences to be made to the transport network around them as they use it and want to access it. Are these things really going to make a difference?

Heidi Alexander: I was quite struck when reviewing some of the evidence that was given to your Committee by transport operators about the complexity of the landscape when it comes to the requirements that they have to fulfil on accessibility. Bringing together in one place, in the accessibility charter, some very clear information will not just give greater clarity for users of the transport network, but it means that transport operators will no longer have the excuse, "I am unclear about what these myriad requirements mean for me, running the service that I do."

We are working very closely with the disabled community, as well as operators and regulators, on the accessibility charter, in order to make sure that this is a meaningful piece of work. I go back to the point I made earlier. If you look at rail, for example, in publishing that road map, there are concrete things that this Government will be changing in the coming years. The eligibility for the disabled persons railcard is changing next year, for example, which will have a tangible impact upon disabled people's use of the transport network.

Q173 **Dr Arthur:** With a railcard, they still have to be able to access the network. You can have the best railcard in the world. It is about being able to actually get on the train, which is not always easy.

You referenced our report again. That report asked for regulators' powers to be reviewed and enhanced and, where operators are unclear about what their obligations are, for regulators to take enforcement action against them swiftly. In your response, you were a little reluctant to do that. There is lots in transport that is controversial, but making the network more accessible is completely uncontroversial. What is the pushback on this?

Heidi Alexander: I do not think that there is pushback. I do not see enforcement as being the long-term solution to the problem. I want all transport operators to be complying with the law and meeting their responsibilities.

Q174 **Dr Arthur:** That is in an ideal world. In an ideal world we do not need police to enforce the law either, do we? We live in the world we live in.

Heidi Alexander: We need operators to have a higher level of ambition and to make sure that they are clearly complying with the law as it is set out. On enforcement in particular, if you take the example of rail, the

ORR has taken enforcement action recently. In the summer, it issued enforcement action against Northern, the train operating company there. It had to have an improvement plan because it clearly was not performing in the way that people needed to be able to access the network.

I have written to all the arm's-length bodies and regulators, and made it abundantly clear that accessibility is a top priority for this Government. Yes, there could be more enforcement, and there are examples of enforcement action being taken. We also need to look at where some exemptions are in place for operators. For example, there are some exemptions that are due to end in the summer next year around things such as rail replacement bus services. We need to look at whether we can move quickly to get rid of some of those exemptions as well.

Q175 **Chair:** The problem with the enforcement action that is being taken is that it is in the context of a legal system where the onus is on the disabled person, or people, to have suffered repeated disbenefit in their travel. One of the core points of our report was that point: that it was disabled people themselves who were feeling that they had to be responsible for changing things. The current system, and some of what you are saying, is not quite the same as a regulator taking enforcement action when services fail to meet legal obligations. Is that going to be part of the plan?

Heidi Alexander: I appreciate the point you are making about the onus often being on the user and the disabled person to take action. In the Railways Bill, you will have seen that we are proposing a strengthened passenger watchdog, which will be able to act as that consumer champion, and very much so on the issue of accessibility. We are introducing new duties in the Railways Bill as well on Great British Railways about the focus on accessibility.

That watchdog will be able to monitor compliance on the railways. It will be able to engage with the rail operators where it sees issues and to request improvement plans. If it sees that there are failings, the watchdog will be able to refer to the ORR for enforcement action. That is part of the thinking behind this strengthened passenger watchdog that we have included in the Railways Bill.

Chair: We will look forward to seeing that and I am sure our colleagues on the Women and Equalities Committee will be doing so as well.

Q176 **Laurence Turner:** Secretary of State, you mentioned the rail accessibility road map earlier, which contained a commitment to reform the access for all programme. It said that this would be as part of the establishment of Great British Railways. Can you tell us more about what reforms you envisage? What is going wrong at the moment? Is the funding going to be available to sustain a programme of what is, by its nature, sometimes difficult and costly work?

Heidi Alexander: We secured £280 million through the spending review to fund the access for all programme at stations across the country. You may recall that the previous Government, just before the election, announced 50 schemes that they were going to take forward for some initial scoping and early design work. Network Rail has been working on those 50 schemes. In the next couple of months I hope to be in a position to set out which of those schemes we can fund to construction and which we can fund more design work on to get to a mature state so that they can be taken forward.

The mistake of previous Governments, if I may say it like this, is that they announced a list and then did the design work, as opposed to doing the design work, working out how much it would cost and then prioritising the greatest benefits that could be unlocked by determining which stations you were going to do. We are taking a slightly different approach here, where we are doing the design work and working out where there might be low-cost interventions that might provide, for example, improved access to a particular platform. It might not be the whole solution but would be welcomed by people in the local area.

We are trying to be pragmatic and practical about how to use the funding that we have available to yield the best results for the largest number of people. Would I like to do more? Yes, of course, to make the railway accessible to everyone, be that people with disabilities or people travelling with heavy suitcases, prams, buggies or pushchairs. We need a rail network that can be there for everyone. The announcement that we will be making will give some certainty about the projects we can take forward, but that will not be the end of the story, given the number of stations on the network that I know are not accessible to people at the moment.

Q177 **Laurence Turner:** It is interesting to hear that we might be transitioning to an approach that has a longer design phase before projects are introduced. Another issue with access for all has been the end of one control period and the start of another, which is an issue in common with other parts of the rail capital programme. Last May, Network Rail’s board said that there had been lack of traction on the access for all programme, which had significantly underperformed in CP6, now creating challenges in the transition to control period 7. How do we make access for all into a truly rolling programme, not tied to the need to get money out the door at the end of one control period or electoral cycle, then leading to a period of sparsity in the next?

Heidi Alexander: It is about having a pipeline of schemes and being clear about prioritisation within that pipeline of schemes. Sometimes that will mean having difficult conversations with some colleagues in Parliament or some communities, who all want to see improvements to their station. I know how long it can take to get these schemes into construction and how much money, frankly, can be wasted if you do not do the planning properly to start off with as well. Having that pipeline is the really important thing.

Chair: We are now moving on to our street works report.

Q178 **Jacob Collier:** We were disappointed by how many of the recommendations for reducing street works disruption were rejected. It has been a particular issue in my constituency, particularly in Burton. Do you believe that at the moment we are getting the right balance between facilitating the need for these essential works and reducing the disruption to the travelling public?

Heidi Alexander: Getting the balance right between reducing disruption and enabling essential works is a perennial problem, is it not? We are taking action as a Government, in that we are increasing fines for works that are overrunning. That can be up to £10,000 now for works that are running into weekends. The new fine level will come into force at the start of January next year.

We are also rolling out new lane rental schemes. I think that there are five lane rental schemes across the country at the moment. We received five further applications in April, of which two have been approved, in Oxfordshire and Enfield, and another 12 applications came in in September, I believe.

We will continue to work with local authorities, which are often in the driving seat on this, to make sure that we can get as much forward planning as possible done. Incentivising some of the utility companies to work with one another, so that the road is only being dug up once as opposed to multiple times, is often one of the overlooked benefits of lane rental schemes. We have to tackle this issue because it is imperative that we can get the infrastructure completed, but we also need to make sure that people can go about their daily lives.

Q179 **Jacob Collier:** On the point about utility companies, you rejected a recommendation that would have required them to co-ordinate more closely with local authorities. I believe you said that it was up to local authorities to voluntarily set up these schemes themselves. We know that, without those requirements in place, some utility companies would not follow it and would not engage with the local authorities. This is something that, in evidence, local authorities have asked for, including my own. Is it a case where you do not trust local authorities with what is best for their area?

Heidi Alexander: We are looking at how we devolve decision making on lane rental schemes to mayoral strategic areas. There is a question about the appropriate geography over which lane rental schemes could operate. I hope to be saying more about that devolution of decision making on lane rental schemes in due course.

Jo Shanmugalingam: The co-ordination code of practice and the Street Manager system encourages and enables this, but we absolutely accept that it is used in different ways in different parts of the country. It is on us to work with local authorities to share the best practice about how they can use those tools with utility companies to get to the same effect.

Q180 **Jacob Collier:** You mentioned the work around earlier sharing of utility connections, particularly with new housing development. You committed to work with MHCLG on this in the report, so can you give us an update on the work around that, please?

Heidi Alexander: It is my understanding that those discussions have started between officials in DFT and MHCLG about earlier sharing of information about utility connections. It is at quite an early stage still, so I would be very happy to share more information about that, as that progresses, with the Committee.

Q181 **Alex Mayer:** Our buses report asked your Department to consider adopting an ambition for local transport authorities to provide a minimum level of public transport connectivity based on settlement types. You rejected that recommendation, saying that it would be very challenging. What is your evidence that it would be very challenging?

Heidi Alexander: It would be very challenging because local areas have very differing economies. You will see local areas with very differing levels of car ownership, different demographics and different needs. In a period when we have good but finite funding for the buses, i.e. we are spending nearly £1 billion this year on supporting bus services across the country, I am slightly worried that, if you were to set national standards, no matter how much you flex them, depending upon the local area, you could see a situation where you ultimately have to stop running services in some areas where there is a huge need for them and put services into areas to meet a target, but where demand would not be as great. Generally, I do not believe in setting targets where you end up missing the point. That would be my real concern.

The bus network is really important to some of our urban economies and low-income households that do not have a car or access to a car; it is also important for the towns and villages around some of those urban centres that those bus networks are operating. If we had unlimited funding, we might be having a slightly different conversation. In the context of a finite amount of money to be spending on the bus network over this spending review, we are better equipping local authorities with the powers to shape the network in the way that our Bus Services Act now allows them to do, through identifying those socially necessary routes.

We are also working with local authorities, as you will know, on a number of bus franchising pilots, including in rural areas. I want to use this period to work closely with local authorities to learn what works best, but I do not think that it can be a one-size-fits-all approach.

Q182 **Alex Mayer:** I do not think that our recommendation called for that. Is it your view that a national ambition is always going to be incompatible with local decision making?

Heidi Alexander: We share an ambition, which is to see improved public transport connectivity across the country. We probably differ slightly on the best means by which to get there. We agree on the end and that is why I mentioned the bus franchising pilots that we are running in York and North Yorkshire, Cheshire West and Chester, and three slightly more rural areas: Cumbria, Cornwall and Hertfordshire. We are working alongside those local authorities to enable them to explore how they can take advantage of the powers that they now have available to them through the Bus Services Act.

We are also investing in upskilling capability and capacity within local authorities through a dedicated £7 million fund, but also through the local transport grant. We have the Bus Centre of Excellence as well, which is a resource available to local authorities to make sure that they are learning from other local authorities that have already gone through similar processes and challenges.

The approach that we took in the Bus Services Act was to say that local authorities need to do what is right for their area and their population. Some of the time, that might be franchising. Some of the time, it might be enhanced partnerships. I really believe in giving local authorities the tools to work with bus operators in their area to best deliver on the routes that the buses are running, the timetables that they are running on and the fares that are set. We have continued the £3 bus fare cap for a period, but we also know that some local authorities will supplement that fare scheme with more generous offers.

Q183 **Alex Mayer:** In the Government's response, it talks a lot about funding mechanisms. You have talked about franchising. A lot of us welcome the new powers in the Bus Services (No.2) Bill. It is possibly an Act now.

Heidi Alexander: It is an Act.

Q184 **Alex Mayer:** That is fantastic. In your response, it says that you want to see a better standard of public transport right across the country. It is just that there does not seem to be much of a description as to what that would mean for a passenger. Does that mean frequency, reliability or accessibility? Do the Government have targets or ambitions for those kinds of things?

Heidi Alexander: All those things that you talk about are important to passengers. My first point, when we were going through the spending review process and in my discussions with Treasury colleagues, was to get the right balance between protecting vital bus services and having access to bus routes that people need in order to access employment or education. The fare level, so the affordability, is important. It is important to remember that the £3 bus fare cap applies to about one in five journeys, because some single journeys are actually less than that and other users will find a better value for money offer if they are buying a weekly or monthly travel ticket. For me, affordability is an important issue.

Then there is the availability of the bus network and making sure that we protect those socially important services. Then there is, of course, the question about frequency and reliability. If you have only one bus an hour and then it does not turn up, it is a very long time to wait until the next one comes along. My broad prioritisation is what I have just set out to you.

Jo Shanmugalingam: To support local authorities and help see the transparency of performance, we are putting in place consistent indicators of bus performance across England. We are expecting all local transport authorities to participate in the Transport Focus your bus journey survey. We are putting in place clear outcomes for local authorities and building a data portal so that local authority performance is more transparent. You might be aware that we have also made available to all local authorities our new connectivity tool, so they can assess the connectivity of different parts of their community but also then assess the potential impact of making changes to bus and other services if they do so.

Q185 **Rebecca Smith:** I am sorry I was late. I was at a FirstPort meeting, which I am sure we all appreciate is just as important. To build on what Alex has said, particularly around ambition and reality, if you are not one of those pilots, not in a franchising position and not a local authority that is yet able to take the benefit of the new buses Bill—I sat on the Bill Committee for that, so I have seen it in detail—what reassurances can we provide passengers around the country that things are going to improve, and when?

For example, my county is not one of the pilots, yet we have at least three bus services locally at the moment that are not reliable. They are not turning up and are impacting children getting to school or college and people getting to work. My constituents watching this today are going to want to know what you can do to improve that and what the timescale is for that ambition becoming a reality.

Heidi Alexander: I want us as a Department to give certainty to local authorities about the funding that they will have available to them to support bus operators in their local area. This has often been done on a year-by-year basis, so it is very difficult to plan. It is very difficult for bus operators to think about their commercial realities, as well as for local authorities to think about what the most important priorities are for their residents. I do hope in the not-too-distant future to set out a longer-term funding settlement for local authorities so that there can be better planning around this.

Having sat on the Bus Services Act, you will also know that there are improved consultation requirements and engagement requirements for bus operators that are thinking of making changes to socially necessary services. I know that some of the time these things happen out of the blue for people who rely upon buses; there is a note that goes up on a Facebook group or at a bus stop, and it comes as a surprise to people. There needs to be a process in which people can make their voices heard.

The Bus Services Act is an important step forward on that, but this is the start of a journey. I am not pretending that we can turn back the problems that have built up over a number of decades in a very short space of time, but by starting with the pilots in a range of different types of area, we can then see what works. We can then come back and have more clarity around the way forward in the coming years. It is step by step. Our Bus Services Act and the £1 billion of funding that we are putting in helps us unlock that.

Chair: We would concur with that, but there is a wider question for the whole of Government about addressing the access needs for the 40% of people in this country, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, who have virtually no bus service, and the implication that has in terms of growth, productivity and so on. That links to Steff's earlier questions, but I will leave that there.

Q186 **Steff Aquarone:** It is great to hear about the possibility of a longer-term settlement for local transport authorities, because I was also on the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill Committee, and the painful absence of a money motion was felt. That is encouraging.

On the issue of long-term sustainability of operators, you will know that the Department did not warm to our recommendation of setting clearer priorities for bus fares. Obviously, wanting to see the bus fare cap extended is one thing, but the practical reality of administering it for operators is another. A well-regarded operator in my constituency whose work with the local council has been cited in this Committee several times has written to me explaining some of the challenges of the current reimbursement scheme. The generated extra passenger factor in the reimbursement calculations has proven inaccurate. No one can predict the future, but the reality is that has meant a shortfall in available cash. Overall, the scheme's reimbursement issues are limiting investment, and threatening withdrawal of operators from it. The question is not whether you are going to extend the bus fare cap, but how confident you are that the cap strikes the right balance between affordability for passengers and financial stability for operators.

Heidi Alexander: It has been striking the right balance, because affordability is important to people. It obviously costs a significant amount of money for Government to reimburse operators for the difference between the £3 cap and what they would normally have been charging.

I do hear what you are saying about the concerns of some operators about how this has worked in detail, and how it might work in detail over the next year. My officials are in very close contact with the bus operators to understand the sector costs, and to make sure that we fully appreciate what their perspectives are. I hope we will confirm funding allocations in the coming weeks.

Q187 **Steff Aquarone:** Is that a commitment to a longer-term strategic plan for fare policy, or is that just the amount of money that is available?

Heidi Alexander: My comments are in relation to the way in which the DFT will be reimbursing the bus operating companies.

Q188 **Steff Aquarone:** Thank you. That is very helpful. I will badger your departmental colleagues to listen to my constituency operators' experiences in more detail. Is this a missed opportunity to plan for what comes next with fare caps overall?

Heidi Alexander: I do not think it is. We are thinking about the longer term. We will bring stakeholders together over the next year or so to discuss what the long-term arrangements might look like.

I go back to the point I was making earlier: in a world where there are finite resources, there is always going to be a trade-off between supporting socially necessary services and making sure that routes are running, and even the potential introduction of new routes to new centres of employment, and then any fares policy that you have in place, because the vast majority of fares on buses, as you will know, are set commercially by the operators. We need to get the balance right between protecting and enhancing the network and ensuring affordability for bus users.

Q189 **Laurence Turner:** It is a short supplementary question on a topical issue relating to buses. It was reported over the weekend that Norwegian authorities have found that buses produced by the China-based manufacturer Yutong could be remotely stopped or rendered inoperable. The Department—or a spokesperson—said, "We are looking into the case and working closely with the UK's National Cyber Security Centre to understand the technical basis for the actions taken by the Norwegian and Danish authorities." Is there anything more that you can tell us today about the Department's role in that investigation and its likely timescale? Given the potential implications of remote deactivation for all sorts of transport modes, can you commit to keeping this Committee informed about its findings?

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to keep this Committee informed. This obviously is news that has emerged in Norway over the last couple of days, and my officials are looking at this case. We do take national security issues with the utmost seriousness. We are working with the intelligence community, as you said, to make sure that we fully understand and mitigate the risks.

Just for context, there are approximately 30,000 buses in England, of which about 8% are electric. Of those 5,000 electric buses, just over 600 are manufactured by Yutong. When it comes to modern vehicles, it is a fact of life that a lot of them have a lot of software in to support safer driving, to improve diagnostics, and a whole range of other things. Using that software remotely is often an effective and efficient way of working with those vehicles. I do not want to jump to any conclusions, but I can undertake to keep the Committee updated on this issue.

Q190 **Baggy Shanker:** Driving tests are an issue that affects my constituents, and constituents everywhere. Back in December we heard about the seven-point plan, 450 new examiners who are going to be recruited, a review of the booking process, cracking down on bots and resellers, and the Ready to Pass campaign. All of this would drive the lead time down to seven weeks. It is November 2025. We said we would do that by December 2025. It is not going to be met. What has gone wrong? More importantly, what we are doing about it?

Heidi Alexander: This is a really important issue, and it is a big priority for me, the Minister Simon Lightwood and the whole of the Department. We did say initially that we were looking to reduce the wait time to seven weeks by the end of this year, but you will recall that, when I came in front of your Committee for the first time in April, I was open about the fact that at that point we did not think that December this year was going to be met, and we were looking at summer 2026.

I will give you some of the good news first, although it is heavily caveated. I will come on to why it is heavily caveated. Last year the DVSA did conduct a record number of tests—1.96 million—in the year 2024-25, and it delivered an extra 42,000 tests between June and September this year compared to the same period in 2024. We are conducting more tests.

We have also recruited more new driving examiners. We have recruited 316 new driving examiners, but, as I have previously said to this Committee, we also need to retain more of our driving examiners. That is a net increase of over 40 driving examiners, but we do need to see more progress there. We are giving driving examiners an extraordinary retention payment next year of £5,000, to be split between a payment in March and a payment in September. Anecdotally, we hear that this has led to some driving examiners delaying their point of retirement.

I need to be honest with all Committee members. I cannot sit here today and tell you that I am going to meet the summer 2026 deadline either. Demand is still very high, and the approaches that the DVSA has taken so far have not been up to meeting this level of demand. I do just want to announce three new measures that we are going to be taking, and use this opportunity to set out to you what they are.

We are going to be limiting the number of times that a driver can move or swap a test, and we will limit the area that they can move a test to once they have booked it. We are also going to be introducing a legislative change, which will mean that only the driver themselves can book a test, to try to stop people being exploited by these bots that are operating online.

We have also engaged with the Defence School of Transport, which will be giving us a number of its driving examiners to supplement the driving examiners we already have. We will be using some of those Ministry of Defence resources, which is good for the Ministry, because its driving examiners need to keep up their skills, but it gives us some extra capacity as well.

The Committee may also be aware that we are looking to new leadership in the DVSA. The chief executive of the DVSA, Loveday Ryder, informed her staff yesterday that she is going to be moving on. I would like to thank Loveday for seeing the organisation through a very challenging period during covid, but we will be looking to the new leadership as well to really get a grip on the issue of driving test wait times, because it will be the top priority for the organisation.

Q191 **Baggy Shanker:** If we are not meeting the seven-week target in the summer, when do we expect to meet it?

Heidi Alexander: I am not in a position to give you a date sat here today. What I can tell you is that I will be working with the new leadership of the DVSA to make sure that we leave no stone unturned in how we might address this issue.

We have those three new measures that I have announced today, in terms of bringing in the Ministry of Defence driving examiners, restricting the person who can book the driving test to just the driver, and then limiting the number of swaps. We need to look at what the impact of that is. Some of that will be in place as of next year, because there need to be changes to the DVSA systems. We will also need to legislate for one of those changes. I can undertake to keeping the Committee updated, but what I am not prepared to do is give you a date today that I cannot stand by. I am sorry about that.

Chair: I guess that is an announcement you have just made. That is interesting, because that answers some of our concerns and the concerns of our constituents.

Q192 **Jacob Collier:** I really welcome that announcement, particularly on only the learner being able to book, because we have seen cases, as reported in *The Guardian*, that people have been paying £850 for a test. Is it your view that these measures that you have announced today are going to make a significant difference in stopping scams, and actually bringing down the costs of people paying for driving tests?

Heidi Alexander: Yes. We have seen a period of time where you have third parties booking up these slots for driving tests and then selling them on at hugely inflated prices, such as you have just described. We do need to take action on this. We consulted on it over the summer. It does require secondary legislation. We hope to be able to complete that in the spring.

It has just been adding insult to injury, to be honest, because people are having to wait a long time for the test, and, if they are availing themselves of these bots, some people are having to fork out a huge amount of money as well. That feels totally wrong on both levels. That is why we are taking the action that we have announced today.

Jo Shanmugalingam: We will publish details on gov.uk in the weeks ahead, setting out the timeline for the two particular measures on changes to the booking system and the secondary legislation. We will share that with the Committee when it is available.

Q193 **Alex Mayer:** The cost of a practical driving test has not increased very much in recent years, whereas it used to in the past. I was looking at the figures when I was—very slowly—learning to drive. Between 1998 and 2004—when I was failing my test all the time—it increased by 25%, yet it has not gone up since March 2009. When you last came to the Committee, you expressed astonishment at the number of fees and charges that have not been increased at all in the last 14 or 15 years. The NAO has found that some date back to the early 1990s. What steps are you taking to ensure that costs are being fully recovered by your Department?

Heidi Alexander: Subsequent to the spending review, all the executive agencies that are charging fees have been reviewing their fee structures, because essentially I would like to move towards cost recovery. We need to think about the impact upon the end user of these services in terms of the costs that they will then be confronted with. I am not going to be making any announcements about any particular fees at your Committee today. I am sorry to disappoint, if anyone was wanting that.

What I would say as a point of principle, though, is that I have asked the executive agencies to be clear about how they can make the delivery of their services more efficient, because when you are talking about cost recovery, if you can bring the cost of providing the service down, then that is better for everyone. It gives better value for money for the person who is paying the fee, and it also means that the public sector is operating in a more effective and efficient way. We have made some good progress on that with things such as the DVLA, and the number of online applications for things such as the 10-year renewal of the driving licence photo card.

The executive agencies have been doing this review. A lot of the fees are set out in legislation, so it is quite a complex and lengthy process for making any changes. Having done this review, if there is a need to adjust any of the fees going forward, then we will have to make sure that we are complying with statutory requirements and appropriately consulting before we implement any changes. That is the work that has happened since I was last here in April.

Q194 **Alex Mayer:** Do you think that the cost recovery model is the right one for today, or do you think that perhaps these fees and charges could be used as a demand management tool?

Heidi Alexander: The guiding principle for me is around cost recovery. When you think about driving test wait times, for example, it would not be right to whack up the cost of a driving licence in order to somehow manage the problem that we have with capacity in the system to deliver driving tests at the moment. The guiding principle really is about cost recovery, but I go back to what I said earlier, which is about making the delivery of those services more efficient as well, so that we minimise any additional costs that we would be passing on to the end user.

Jo Shanmugalingam: We of course operate within the terms of managing public money, which sets the Government's position overall, and the contract with Parliament on what costs we can recover for particular public services.

Q195 **Steff Aquarone:** Just on one of those specific price points in particular, I accept the point you have made about not making an announcement about them, but when the outgoing chief executive of the DVSA was before us we put the case that the driving test was essentially too cheap to cancel. It is not worth cancelling it, because in some cases it was cheaper than a driving lesson. Would you accept that the average learner will probably accept a test fee that is at least comparable to the cost of doing an hour's driving lesson?

Heidi Alexander: You are right to highlight the fact that driving lessons can be very close to the test fee. As part of the review that I have talked about, we will be looking at what an appropriate level is. It is a fair comment to make. We will be taking that into consideration in the round when we take decisions about fees going forward.

Q196 **Baggy Shanker:** I am sure you recall your October statement on Heathrow word for word, when you said, "Britain wants to fly, and this Government will act to meet public aspirations." Is that our aviation strategy, in a nutshell?

Heidi Alexander: It is only partly our aviation strategy, because we should be on the right side of public aspirations when it comes to flying. If you look at demand in our airports this summer, a number of airports have had record summers, while we face huge challenges around climate change and fundamentally about the next generation. I would not want to be the Secretary of State who takes away the rights or the ability of young people to fly, visit other parts of the world and experience new things. It is a great joy in life.

We are also an island nation, so the aviation sector is always going to be really important in order to make sure that we are connected to other parts of the world. That is why I have approved planning applications to expand Gatwick and Luton, and why we have invited proposals for a third runway at Heathrow.

That is only part of the picture, because in order to grow aviation, we need to green aviation. Reducing the carbon intensity of planes that are in the sky is a prerequisite for growing the aviation sector. That is why we moved very quickly to introduce the SAF—sustainable aviation fuels—mandate in January of this year, requiring 2% of fuel that is used in jet engines to come from sustainable sources, ratcheting up over time. It is why we are taking the revenue certainty mechanism Bill through Parliament, so that we can provide a guaranteed strike price to investors who are looking at investing in domestic production of sustainable aviation fuel here.

It is also why we are making progress on airspace modernisation with establishing the UK Airspace Design Service, because, if we can reduce the amount of time for which planes are in the sky, that will make those flights cleaner and greener. It is why we are also investing in the future of aerospace and looking at how we can make planes more aerodynamic. For example, I was at Airbus last week in Filton, in Bristol. Its assessment of the extent to which it can make its planes more fuel efficient as a result of design changes is absolutely breathtaking. We need to make sure that we are progressing on all of those, in order to be able to meet public aspirations about wanting to fly.

Q197 **Baggy Shanker:** I have a little further probing on SAF. The revenue certainty mechanism is welcomed. The more ambitious SAF mandate is really good, ratcheting up to 10% by 2030 and then 40% by 2040. If we cannot scale up SAF as much as we need, what is our plan B?

Heidi Alexander: I set out a number of measures there for decarbonising aviation, of which SAF is one. Investing in the fuels of the future and the technologies of the future is absolutely key. SAF is a key part of that, but it is not a silver bullet. We are investing. We have invested £63 million in the advanced fuels fund to support demonstrator projects across the UK this year, and we will continue to invest over the spending review.

Decarbonising aviation is also about airspace modernisation. It is also about better designed planes to make them fuel efficient. If we think about what the Climate Change Committee has said about demand management, all of the things that we have in place at the moment—whether that is SAF, more efficient operations and technologies, or carbon pricing and removals—will have an indirect impact upon cost, and thereby may have an impact upon demand. What they have not said is that you have to move straight to demand management. We can make progress with the new fuels and new technologies. That is where I see huge opportunity.

Q198 **Chair:** On Gatwick in your DCO decision, and on Heathrow in terms of what you said in the Chamber, you have basically said that neither expansion at Gatwick or Heathrow can go ahead unless there is significant rail infrastructure; otherwise, the M25 will grind to a halt—and that this country has finally realised that predict and provide by expanding the M25 is not going to solve congestion, so there is a corollary there. Have you asked the Treasury for more money for the rail infrastructure? I do not think either of the airports is offering to fund it.

Heidi Alexander: Chair, with the greatest of respect, as you and I are friends, you are slightly putting words into my mouth to say that I said that the second runway at Gatwick could only be brought into use if there was significant new rail infrastructure; nor have I said that there has to be publicly funded rail infrastructure to support an expanded Heathrow. An expanded Heathrow will be a privately financed infrastructure project, and it will be for them to set out any transport improvements that are required as part of the DCO process. We are obviously going through the review of the airport's national policy statement, which will be the framework against which any future planning application will be judged. Surface access—how people get to and from the airport—will be a key consideration of that.

What I have said on Gatwick in relation to rail access is that there are things using the existing rail infrastructure that it would be possible to do in future, such as more frequent services and longer trains. We have not yet seen demand on the Brighton main line return to the pre-covid level. There have also been recent improvements to the station at Gatwick. We need to make sure that we have capacity going down to Gatwick so that the people who want to use public transport to get there—I hope that will be an increasing number of people—have the ability to do so in a comfortable, affordable, reliable and frequent way.

Q199 **Dr Arthur:** The Chair has raised a really important point. A few times on this issue you have said that people aspire to fly, it is a right, and you are not going to take that right away from them. There are lots of people in the country who are on low incomes, and they are not going to be able to fly, or not in the short term, at least. They must aspire to have a better bus service, better footpaths, et cetera—those absolute basic issues. Are you committing to not spending any public money on Heathrow, realising that meeting those aspirations of a lot of people on really low incomes to be connected to work, education and healthcare is much more important for the Government, if we are talking about aspirations?

Heidi Alexander: If you look at what I have prioritised as the Secretary of State in the less than a year I have been in the job, you will see that my priorities are about improving the public transport system for individuals across the country. That is why we secured the extension of the £3 bus fare cap. It is why we are spending £1 billion on supporting bus services across the country. It is why, in terms of our legislative programme, we have taken forward legislation on buses and on rail reform. The daily journeys that people do to get to work, to get their kids to school, to be able to see friends and family and live their lives are my priority as the Transport Secretary.

Expansion of airports are private investments. We have been clear that any improvement to the public transport network that is required to unlock, for example, a third runway at Heathrow must be privately financed.

Q200 **Rebecca Smith:** Given the postponement of the maritime net zero framework at the International Maritime Organisation, what are the Government’s next steps in leading international maritime decarbonisation?

Heidi Alexander: I am very disappointed that the adoption of the IMO net zero framework has been delayed, because we played a very important role in developing that over a number of years. We remain committed to working with other international partners, whether that is at the IMO, through COP30, which has obviously happened recently, or in other multilateral forums.

We are going to have to assess what the delay in that international framework means for our own maritime decarbonisation strategy that we published earlier this year. We have also committed to expand the UK emissions trading scheme, and to bring domestic maritime emissions into scope from the summer of next year. We are working towards linking the UK ETS and the EU ETS, as well, with negotiations to start later this year.

Q201 **Rebecca Smith:** What work has been done on securing green shipping corridors?

Heidi Alexander: Ultimately, we need to move to a place where all maritime routes are going to be green shipping corridors, because that will mean that we have a global network of decarbonised shipping at that point. It is a big challenge for the maritime sector. We are investing £448 million through our UK SHORE programme to fund research and development in the area of decarbonising maritime. There are a number of green shipping corridors where some essentially exploratory studies are being done about specific routes. Jo, I do not know whether you have the detail of those.

Jo Shanmugalingam: Yes, we provided over £1 million for three feasibility studies: Dover and Calais/Dunkirk, Aberdeen and Bergen, and Tyne and Rotterdam, and an additional £1.5 million for the international green corridor fund, looking bilaterally at projects with Ireland and the Netherlands.

Heidi Alexander: It is early days, but we are doing some important exploratory work.

Q202 **Rebecca Smith:** Just briefly, you mentioned the maritime strategy in your first answer. I have a question here about the maritime strategy. I am just checking we are talking about the same one. Is a new maritime strategy on the way, or are you sticking with Maritime 2050?

Heidi Alexander: We are going to progress work on a new maritime strategy. In the last couple of months, I have been persuaded that this is an important piece of work to do. We had a very successful London

International Shipping Week a couple of weeks ago. There have been quite a lot of changes since the last maritime strategy, so we will be working on a new strategy.

Rebecca Smith: We might help as individual MPs in terms of connecting people, because there is a huge amount going on—particularly down in the south-west, if I may say so—on decarbonising maritime. If we can help in any way to give you some pointers, or at least introduce you to some people doing some stuff, we would be happy to do that.

Chair: We now have a few questions on rail. We will have some sessions on the Railways Bill, so if you could keep your answers brief then we will have a chance to get on to questions that I think you may want to answer, Secretary of State.

Q203 **Baggy Shanker:** Shadow Great British Railways was launched about a year ago with a senior team of people, ahead of GBR proper. GBR proper is now obviously a step closer with the Railways Bill that came out last week. What do you see as the main achievement to date of shadow GBR?

Heidi Alexander: I would like to thank Laura Shoaf, who has chaired shadow Great British Railways over the last year. Essentially, she has been working on and convening a forum in which the leadership of Network Rail, DFTO and parts of the DFT can come together to make sure that we are making progress in advance of GBR being set up, because we cannot wait to bring about improvements and we cannot wait to start shaping the culture of this new organisation. We cannot wait until the legislation has passed, Royal Assent has been given and the organisation has been set up.

We have made some real progress on providing integrated leadership in certain parts of the country. We have the alliance set up in the south-east of England now, which means that there is one person who is in charge of running both the train operations and the track. That is also going to be set up formally—I think next week—in South Western. We will also be doing that in the Greater Anglia area, which brings in C2C, which is the other train operating company that has come into public ownership.

That is so we can get more joined-up decision making between the people who are running the infrastructure and the signalling, and then the people who are running the trains. Laura has helped drive some of that process. She has also made sure that we are aligned on our performance targets. We all know that we are trying to drive reliability, getting trains turning up in stations within three minutes of the time that they are due to be there, and reducing cancellations. She has really helped us with that piece around driving integration in advance of GBR being set up.

Q204 **Baggy Shanker:** If I may, Chair, I will just put on record that Laura is an absolutely brilliant appointment; it is a very small team, but the enthusiasm and the pace she has been working at has been absolutely fantastic. You touched on integration and things, but you set Laura five priorities. Are those priorities still the same, or do they need to be tweaked?

Heidi Alexander: Yes, so they are essentially the same. They are about improving integration and driving out duplication; about shared standards, which I talked about, and those key performance metrics; and about working with us on fares and ticketing reform. We have the digital pay-as-you-go trial that is operating in the east midlands at the moment, where people can sign up to be part of the trial on their phone. You then do not even have to tap in and out; it will monitor your use of the public transport network. We have the long-distance fare trials on LNER.

Laura has also been working with part of Network Rail called GBRX, which is particularly looking at how we better use innovation and artificial intelligence to drive efficiencies in the rail network. I have also been asking her to start to think about how we can use GBR to maximise its overall social and environmental good. I know she has been talking to you about the new HQ that we will have in Derby, but she has also been looking at how we might do apprenticeships slightly differently across the industry, so that we can train up the next generation of railwaymen and women. In that way, we can create a new organisation that is going to have passengers at its heart, not be focused on profit and shareholders, and we can do some of that work in advance of GBR being established post the legislation. Yes, she is broadly still working on the same things for us.

Q205 **Baggy Shanker:** Finally, when we had Laura at this Committee in January she spoke about having a delivery plan and making that available publicly. What is the progress on that plan? Will we be able to see it?

Heidi Alexander: When Laura came in front of your Committee in January, I had been in the job for about four or five weeks, so we have established a slightly different way of working. I did not require her to produce a delivery plan. She regularly updates me on the work that she is doing. I have regular meetings with all the leaders from the rail industry, and Laura is part of that. We agreed that she would also help focus on communicating some of the positive things that she has been working on and involved in, for example those new digital pay-as-you-go trials and the rollout of pay-as-you-go more broadly. There is not a delivery plan as such, because we adapted our way of working.

Q206 **Jacob Collier:** More than half of passenger rail operators are now in public ownership, but not the one that serves my constituency just yet. We have rail operators, such as Greater Anglia, that consistently perform highly. How is your Department ensuring that that good practice from those private rail operators will continue and be replicated under public ownership?

Heidi Alexander: You are completely right to highlight that the three train operating companies that we have brought into public hands under our new legislation have different levels of performance. Greater Anglia is one of the top-performing train operating companies anywhere in the country. South Western is a massive organisation. To be honest, it had a challenging couple of months in the summer, with some signalling problems. The very dry summer also caused some problems on that network. We have also brought C2C in, which is going to be part of this Greater Anglia alliance.

When I went to Norwich for the launch of Greater Anglia coming in, I met fantastic staff there who are providing remote advice via ticket-vending machines, not only to Greater Anglia passengers, but also to East Midlands Trains users who are struggling to use a ticket machine. They literally press a button. They have staff in Greater Anglia who can then remotely access the ticket machine and sort it all out. When I see that type of customer service, I think, "If Greater Anglia and East Midlands Trains are doing it, why can't we have that on Great Western? Why can't we have it on Southeastern as well?"

It might also be where people have a really good industrial relations team, because, if we can create a stable industrial relations environment, that means that people will actually trust the train service. They know it is going to be there. It means that our staff are being treated with respect. How do we capture the good things that organisations such as Greater Anglia are doing and then translate that across the board before GBR is set up?

We now have a performance director in the DFT Operator, which is the holding company for the train operating companies that are being transferred in. I really see the role of DFTO as critical in driving up standards across those seven train operating companies that are already in public ownership. Of course, we have announced another four that will come across next year as well.

Q207 **Jacob Collier:** Just in terms of DFTO, obviously we have picked up that about 200 to 300 DFT staff have been transferred over. Could you give us an update on how they are adapting to it as part of this public ownership programme?

Heidi Alexander: I might ask Jo to pick up on the detail of that. Just to give you the high-level reason for it, we want to make sure that we have all the people who are going to be key to driving performance in one organisation, and to reduce the number of organisations that will be involved in transferring staff into the new Great British Railways when it sets up. There is a process under way, but Jo might want to say more.

Jo Shanmugalingam: We are in the process of that transfer at the moment. We have been working with our departmental trade unions over the summer, but launched the formal TUPE consultation last week. There are 220 members of our staff whose functions are in scope of the move, which we hope to complete by the end of the financial year to support this transition to Great British Railways, as the Secretary of State said.

Q208 **Rebecca Smith:** Obviously you have public ownership on one side, which is a big part of the Railways Bill going forward, but we have also seen some really significant private investment in rail in recent months—for example, the £500 million that came from FirstGroup, which I believe you and the Prime Minister both celebrated at Hitachi's Newton Aycliffe factory last year. How do we reassure private investors that there is still a place for them in the delivery of the public railway service that is coming with GBR?

Heidi Alexander: Open access operators account for quite a small number of actual passenger journeys each year. It is less than 1% overall, and about 7% of intercity services. We will be honouring the track access rights that those open access operators have. I was at Newton Aycliffe at the Hitachi plant, looking at the new trains that were being manufactured there. That contract runs through until 2037. Those rights remain. In a reformed railway, the proposal is that track access decisions would be taken by GBR, with an appeal route for anyone who is dissatisfied about a track access decision to the ORR. There is a robust appeals function, as well.

For me, there is still a role for open access operators. They might be willing to take on a greater level of risk than the public sector operator in opening up a new market, but equally I want GBR to be saying, "If there is demand for a service, and if it can be accommodated on the network, given the actual capacity on the infrastructure, then GBR could be looking at some of this as well." We will set out an access and usage policy that will be consulted upon. We will have a fair process going forward, to make sure that we can get the right blend of publicly operated and open access-operated services.

Q209 **Olly Glover:** Secretary of State, everyone is hoping that people living on the east side of the country in London and Edinburgh are going to get an early Christmas present, with next month's introduction of the largest timetable change on the east coast main line for a very long time. There is quite a lot of disquiet in the industry about readiness for it. People travelling between London and Leeds will find it interesting that InterCity 225 sets are being reduced from eight to seven coaches in order to accommodate the schedules. How do you feel it is going to go?

Heidi Alexander: You are right to say that this is a really important moment for the east coast main line. The production of this timetable has been a number of years in the making, but it is important to unlock new services, and to provide additional seats and additional capacity. The way in which we have decided to approach this is with a soft launch in December. It will come in on 14 December, but that will not be the full panoply of services at that point. There will be a ramping up over time, in order to give the operators some leeway in case there is disruption.

We have had a very rigorous process leading up to this point in order to learn the lessons of the debacle that happened in 2018 under the previous Government. There is an independently chaired taskforce that reviewed the latest assessments about whether the new timetable is fit for purpose. That happened in October, and the Rail Minister was briefed shortly after that.

We will have extra staff deployed on board and in stations as well to help passengers. We have advanced analytics and AI available in the control rooms, which I hope should enable a faster response in the event of disruption.

As of today, I am confident that we can introduce this successfully in this phased way. I suspect there will be some unplanned events; there often are, when you do a big timetable change. There may be a period of adjustment in which some disruption may happen, but we are working very hard to minimise any disruption for customers. We do want to unlock the benefits that this new timetable could have.

Q210 **Olly Glover:** You are quite right to raise the spectre of May 2018. It comes at an interesting time. I mean the term "veteran" in the most complimentary sense, but in Sir Andrew Haines and Robin Gisby, we have two of the industry's veterans either having retired or about to retire. Do you feel that the loss of such experienced veteran figures could undermine the ability to deal with any issues that come as a result of the new timetable?

Heidi Alexander: I do not think so. We have a very experienced individual in Jeremy Westlake, who has been appointed as the new Network Rail chief executive. He obviously has a long history in Network Rail himself. I am also confident that, with LNER and the leadership of David Horne, we have some stable and experienced leaders in the train operating companies that are going to be affected. We have really strong leadership in TransPennine Express.

I would just like to take this opportunity to thank Robin and Sir Andrew for the work that they have done for the industry during the time that they have served. They have provided a lot of wise counsel to me as well. I am confident in the individuals who are replacing them that we have people of calibre and experience, who will be able to make the judgments that are always necessary when you are bringing in something new and you are making changes such as this.

Chair: This Committee would also like to extend our appreciation of the work that Sir Andrew and Robin have done for the rail industry. It is also good to hear your confidence in the leadership moving forward.

Q211 **Laurence Turner:** We have heard from a number of witnesses that there are improvements and efficiencies to be had from integrating track and train. There is perhaps a bit of a question mark over what integration actually means. The Department's consultation published in February spoke about a single organisation with a single cohesive strategy. Elsewhere, the Department has said that operators must meet rigorous bespoke standards to earn the right to be called Great British Railways. The first perhaps implies an integrated approach. On the second, there is a reading of it that we might be talking about quite autonomous business units, which perhaps fall under common branding, but operate with a high degree of operational initiative. Which version is closer to your thinking?

Heidi Alexander: Great British Railways will be a single guiding mind for the industry. When we talk about train operating companies having to earn the right to be branded as GBR, this does not mean that those train operating companies will not be part of Great British Railways. They very much will be. All 14 of the train operating companies, the Department for Transport Operator as the holding company, the Rail Delivery Group, some of the staff we are looking to TUPE over into DFTO, and Network Rail will be part of one organisation with one leadership.

What we have talked about in terms of train operating companies earning the right to be branded as GBR is that the travelling public want to see improvements in their experience of the rail network. Given that we do not have Great British Railways set up as yet, given that Great British Railways will not be set up until 2027, post the legislation going through, and given that we have train operating companies coming into public ownership at the rate of one every three months at the moment, I want to see improvements in the passenger experience before the livery on the side of the trains is changed. I want people to associate Great British Railways with high-quality passenger services and improved experience to what they have today. Those will be bespoke arrangements.

If you think about South Western, for example, while it has had some performance issues over the last couple of months, it has made a lot of progress in rolling out the new Arterio train fleet. When SWR came into public ownership, there were only six of those trains that were out on the network. These are brand new trains that give passengers a far superior experience. SWR now has 26 of those trains out into operation, with more to come.

We are not going to be spending a huge amount of money on immediately rebranding trains. I do not think that is what the travelling public want, but in order to have that livery attached to the trains, the regional unit needs to demonstrate an improved passenger experience for people.

Q212 **Laurence Turner:** Thinking about the destination as well as the journey, in 10 years’ time, once we are past that implementation period, do you foresee, for example, West Midlands Rail existing as a unit within Great British Railways, or could it be an approach that is more similar to the old split that used to exist between regional railways, intercity and freight?

Heidi Alexander: A lot of work needs to happen on the actual design of Great British Railways. We have been focused on getting the legislation right for the Railways Bill and the wider regulatory landscape in which GBR will function. That has really been my focus over the last couple of months. My focus over the next year—in addition to, I hope, getting the legislation through Parliament—will move into the design of Great British Railways.

The integration of the management of track and train in regional areas is going to drive the performance improvements that people on the network will see. There are some functions that Great British Railways will need to carry out at a more systemic level, but the precise design of Great British Railways is going to be the subject of a lot of work over the coming months. We will be doing that in parallel with our efforts to take the legislation through Parliament and give me, as the Secretary of State, the power to set up Great British Railways, and to make sure that we have the overall regulatory landscape functioning in the way that is needed for this new organisation, GBR.

Q213 **Laurence Turner:** Finally, you mentioned liveries. The InterCity livery and brand has been successfully exported around the world, but, in perhaps a very British fashion, we no longer use it in this country, where it was created. Do you think that that could make a return?

Heidi Alexander: Laurence, you are tempting me down a route that I have not actually gone down myself yet. I probably need another conversation with you to update my knowledge of train liveries.

Chair: We have our purpose in life.

Jo Shanmugalingam: You may have seen the new railway clock, which the Rail Minister unveiled as part of Railway 200, which very much recognises the heritage and the future.

Q214 **Rebecca Smith:** Thinking about the recent landslip in Cumbria, we know that back in July the ORR said that risks to future asset reliability, including from constrained funding, need to be carefully managed. We have seen that, although the area was being maintained in line with industry standards, something is obviously not quite going right.

Secretary of State, you and I have come across from each other before on the Dawlish piece, where, again, you have reassured me that rail standards are being followed, but what has happened in Cumbria calls into question whether those standards are adequate, and whether the money is adequate to ensure that we do not see more and more of these, given climate change, which has come up many times this morning already. Are you confident that Network Rail has the resources to safely maintain the railway network during this control period?

Heidi Alexander: Yes. These incidents are thankfully rare, but you are also right to highlight that we can never be complacent about this. There is a very thorough monitoring regime in place that uses remote sensors and even helicopters to do technical assessments to monitor slope stability. You will know that that monitoring is in place with respect to the Dawlish area as well.

We are spending more money in control period 7 on activities to address improving resilience connected to weather and climate change. Climate change adaptation is the phrase that I am searching for. In control period 7 we are spending £2.6 billion, which is significantly more than we were spending in control period 6. It is right that Network Rail is doing that, because it is very alive to the challenges that changing weather patterns have for the rail network.

Q215 **Rebecca Smith:** It would be really interesting to see that broken down into what that actually looks like, because one of the challenges we face, particularly with transport things, is that we get these enormous figures of money quoted. To actually know what that looks like on the ground, so to speak, is quite difficult. I will leave that with you.

Just pushing on this further, when I asked you specifically about Dawlish a few months ago, you referred to a survey that is being done. I suppose this also links to Cumbria and what you have just described as taking place. We get told that surveys are happening, but we do not necessarily see the results of them. It was also "survey" singular rather than plural. Again, this is always potentially something that you can write to the Committee about. When you say that you are doing surveys, is that just to stick your finger in the air in a test every two years, or is it very well monitored with that money being spent to really process and check that what you are saying is being tested for is taking place? We have to trust that what you are saying is what you are saying. You are right that they do happen very infrequently. Specifically around Dawlish, something happens every 10 years or so on average, and we are heading into just post 10 years.

In terms of passenger reassurance, making sure that the money is being spent in the right way and understanding what is being found in detail would be welcome. It may be that that is too detailed to answer now, but I need to push you on what you mean by surveys, because it does not reassure me necessarily, particularly having seen what has happened in Cumbria.

Heidi Alexander: I am very happy to provide that information to the Committee, and I will undertake to write to you specifically about the recent work with respect to the south-west rail resilience programme. We have spoken before, and there has been considerable money spent. The advice that I have been given is that we now need to do this monitoring, but I will get the detail provided to you individually on that project and a more general note, Chair, for the Committee.

Jo Shanmugalingam: Network Rail is now effectively using AI to bring that data, so that it can move to predict and prevent, and to target its maintenance. I think that I am also right in saying that it has a new agreement with the Met Office about sharing some of its advanced climate data and analysis to, again, target where it does the preventive work.

Q216 **Olly Glover:** Secretary of State, you will be aware that, more than a year ago, the infrastructure was completed and ready between Bicester and Bletchley for the proposed introduction of a half-hourly Oxford to Milton Keynes passenger service. Admittedly, that line is being used for freight and charters from time to time, but it really is dragging on, is it not? It almost resembles some sort of "Yes, Minister" sketch, with a nice shiny railway and two new stations, but not a single passenger train. What has gone wrong? When are we going to see passenger trains introduced between Oxford, Bicester, Bletchley and Milton Keynes?

Heidi Alexander: We made the announcement in March that Chiltern Railways was going to be the operator. Since then, it has been getting its drivers trained up. It has trained 44 train drivers now, and there has been a new facility created at Bletchley.

My understanding is that the operating agreements required for the start of passenger services are not yet in place. I know that officials in the Department are working closely with Chiltern on that, because we want to make progress as soon as possible.

Q217 **Olly Glover:** Can I just push you a bit further on that? Even that is interesting, that Chiltern was appointed the operator in March. Why did it take until after the railway was commissioned to decide who was going to operate it and get all of that in place? I am sorry if I am sounding flippant, but presumably it did not just suddenly come as an enormous surprise that Network Rail or the contractors, whoever they are, woke up one morning and said, "It is all here and ready. The signalling is fully commissioned." I will declare that I worked for East West Rail five or six years ago and, even then, it was being debated who should operate. Why does it all seem to have been left not just until the last minute but even until after the railway opened to be deciding these things?

Heidi Alexander: All I can say is that, within months of me setting foot in the Department, we took a decision and an operator was appointed. I do not know whether Jo wants to comment on what happened prior to that. There was a decision to take, because there were various operators that could have undertaken phase 1 of the service between Oxford and Milton Keynes. There would need to be a thorough process gone through to understand exactly the benefits of bringing that operator in, the connection it provides to other services in the area, and the way in which you can provide an integrated service, but that decision making possibly predated me being in post.

Chair: One would hope that there are lessons learned from that. I am going back to the topic of our Committee trying to be helpful to the Department.

Q218 **Alex Mayer:** We are always very grateful for the prompt and detailed responses that we get to our reports, but we have noticed that the nuance of what we are suggesting in our recommendations is sometimes perhaps overlooked, and we get some answers that are at a bit of a tangent. Maybe I could give you two examples.

In our street works report, we suggested changing the definition of "urgent works", and we were told in the reply that there was no misuse under the existing definitions, which we agreed with, but that was not really the point that we were making. We were suggesting that those definitions could be changed.

Likewise, in our buses report, we suggested mandating local transport authorities to publish transparent methodologies for which services qualify as socially necessary. We were suggesting that each transport authority would produce its own methodology, and the response that we got was that it would be very difficult to have a standardised approach nationwide, which was not really the point that we were trying to make.

How can we work together to achieve a better outcome for us both?

Heidi Alexander: If that has been the case, and we have slightly misinterpreted or misconstrued recommendations, we need to find a way of my officials working with the Committee clerks to understand exactly what the Committee is driving at.

With regard to your second example as well, there is a question there about whether legislation would have been required in order to do that. I cannot remember the exact timing of the reports and where we were with the Bus Services Act, but the fundamental point here is that we need to get officials in the DFT working collaboratively with Committee clerks to make sure that, when we are giving answers to you and responding to the very good work that your Committee does, we make it as meaningful as possible. Let me take that away and we will make sure that that is addressed going forward.

Q219 **Alex Mayer:** Can I just press on our bus recommendation? It was recommendation 7, which is the one that I was just talking about, in terms of mandating local transport authorities to publish the transparent methodology. I was a bit confused, to be honest, as to why that was completely rejected, given that we had already had a letter sent to the Chair and me from Simon Lightwood confirming that local authorities were going to be asked in guidance to publish a description of the methodology. Maybe we are disagreeing over the word "mandate", but I would have thought that the recommendation could have been partially accepted, given that the Department has already seemingly agreed to do that through guidance.

Heidi Alexander: I would like to look into the detail of that, because I do not have the paperwork on that particular recommendation and our response in front of me. Jo is trying to find it for me rapidly, but it might be better if I write back to the Committee on that particular issue.

Chair: Thank you very much, Secretary of State. Let us move on to progress checks on some of the key work of the Department.

Q220 **Jacob Collier:** The third road investment strategy is due to be published in March. I hope that the A5500 is part of that, but I am not expecting the announcement today. The draft RIS3 emphasises a greater focus on maintenance while also committing to enhancement schemes. Given the increasing cost of maintenance, is the message to those of us and our constituents who are still waiting for schemes that we need to wait until 2031?

Heidi Alexander: What we are trying to do through RIS3 is get the balance right. We want to progress significant enhancements, some of which we set out in the announcement that I made in July after the spending review. Whether it is the M54-M6 link road, the A38 Derby junction scheme—I can see that Baggy has left—or the A66 trans-Pennine route, these are big enhancement projects that have been talked about for a very long time. We are now in a position where we have funding, the planning permissions are in place, and we can take those schemes forward.

You will be aware that we are also progressing work on the lower Thames crossing, which is a very significant investment, to try to improve the resilience of a key freight network between the south-east of England and the midlands and north.

We have to be responsible custodians of the nation’s assets when it comes to roads, because we have a lot of motorways that were built in the 1970s. Fifty years on, we need to make sure that we are maintaining that infrastructure sensibly. Otherwise, the costs will build up over the longer term and we will see more disruption, because the network will not be performing as it should.

We are also investing in a structures fund in order to deal with this issue of ageing assets where a local authority does not have the ability itself to cover the full costs of repair. An example of these roads is called Galley Hill Road, in Kent, which is on the top of a cliff. Basically, it is just shut. We are a 21st century country, and we cannot allow that sort of situation to perpetuate. In the structures fund, we have allocated £1 billion, and we will be saying more about the way in which that fund will work.

It will also be used to pay for the road schemes that we take through as a result of the review of the MRN LLM process, where we are looking at which schemes we are going to take forward there. There is quite a lot of activity in the roads space, but getting that balance right between enhancements and maintenance is key.

Q221 **Mrs Blundell:** We are looking forward to seeing the new integrated national transport strategy, and we have been led to expect a strategy that is quite all-encompassing. What are the domestic transport challenges or policy choices faced by your Department that will remain outside the scope of that strategy?

Heidi Alexander: It will be broad, and it will be ambitious. I look forward to coming back and talking to the Committee more about that. As for the things that it will not cover, this is a strategy for domestic transport, so it is not going to cover international travel. It will not cover technical matters such as decisions about how transport is fuelled. It will not duplicate the work that has already been done through the publication of other strategies that have already come out or are due to come out.

To give you some examples, we are working on a new freight plan, which will focus on freight. Because we are working on a new road safety strategy, it will not cover road safety issues in detail. We have also had the infrastructure strategy that was published in the summer, so this is not going to be a pipeline of investment projects, because that has already been done. We were talking about the roads investment strategy as well.

It is going to be focused on what it says on the tin, really, which is how we integrate the transport network and improve people's experience of it, so that it makes everyday journeys easier and simpler, and we can get to a point where we are unlocking the benefits of the transport system in terms of the economy, jobs for people, and building homes. That is really going to be the way in which the strategy is put together.

Q222 **Mrs Blundell:** Will PHVs and taxis be covered? They fill the gaps in the public transport network in some parts of the country, so I just wondered whether they would be covered at all in this strategy.

Heidi Alexander: I am confident that there will be some reference to private hire within the strategy.

Jo Shanmugalingam: This is not just a public transport strategy. It is about how people use transport in their local communities, be that driving, private hire and taxis, or public transport.

Chair: An issue that we discovered was that there was a complete policy vacuum, which was car share, carpooling and lift sharing, which, in other nations, is an integral part of modal shift, although it is not, in itself, public transport.

Q223 **Olly Glover:** Constituencies such as mine, which is Didcot and Wantage in Oxfordshire, have seen some of the largest housing growth in the country. A consistent source of frustration for constituents is the fact that health, transport and large-scale leisure, et cetera, do not keep up with that. It has also been highlighted as an issue by the New Towns Taskforce, which has stressed the importance of early delivery of public transport services and active travel infrastructure.

What role are you and the Department playing in ensuring that that becomes a reality? If we get this sort of stuff right, it should help to perhaps contain some of the opposition to new housing, if people have more faith in the planning system that delivers that stuff alongside housing.

Heidi Alexander: I agree, and that is why I am working very closely with ministerial colleagues in MHCLG on this issue. I know that my officials are very plugged in with their counterparts in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. We saw the report that was published a couple of months ago now, which announced three frontrunners, if you like, for new towns, those being Tempsford, Leeds South Bank and Crews Hill. On each of those frontrunner new towns, we already have quite a developed and credible transport plan in place.

Earlier this year, the Chancellor announced the acceleration of a new station at Tempsford on the east coast main line. That will be at the intersection of the east coast main line with East West Rail, so that work is proceeding.

In Leeds South Bank, a number of the schemes that we announced post the spending review to unlock capacity in and to the south of Leeds station are key. We have also put a significant amount of money into the West Yorkshire combined authority area under the transport for city regions funding stream, which will unlock mass transit in that part of Leeds, and we are working very closely with Mayor Tracy Brabin on her plans there. She is also working on bus franchising. In Leeds, for example, you could see a combination of mainline rail being improved, mass transit, and a better bus network. Those are the sorts of things that people want to be reassured about if that part of Leeds is going to have significantly more homes.

At Crews Hill, which is in Enfield, one of the things that the Mayor of London has written to me about in the last couple of months is whether we could devolve part of the Great Northern network, which runs through Crews Hill, to the mayor, so that it is part of the London Overground network. We are exploring whether that might be possible, but, if you build a new town on the outskirts of London that has the TfL roundel outside the London Overground roundel, that gives you that real sense of being part of London.

On each of those three, there are, as I say, quite developed plans. That has fed through into the process of why those three have been chosen as frontrunners.

Beyond that, as I said earlier, I was in Bristol last week, or the week before. A new station is being built in Filton for the Brabazon development there. I am really keen that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past, where we build new homes but do not think about the public transport provision that is there.

Q224 **Chair:** Will that be in at the beginning and subsidised until full ridership gets up, so that you are not building in car dependency for particularly the early occupiers of a new development?

Heidi Alexander: A huge amount of detail needs to be worked through on all the proposals for new towns, but, from my perspective, that is best practice and what should be happening. Clearly, there is a huge amount of work to do in order to bring these sites and these schemes forward, but we will stay in very close contact with our colleagues in other Departments to ensure that appropriate transport planning happens at the point at which it should.

Q225 **Alex Mayer:** Transport did really well in the Government's first King's Speech, and you have been very busy with lots of legislation. As a Committee, though, we think that there are some outstanding issues, notably pavement parking, as well as micro-mobility, which I know you have said you are keen to legislate on when time permits. How are you actively seeking slots for the next legislative programme, and what is top of your wish list?

Heidi Alexander: You are right to say that we have had a very busy legislative programme with the public ownership Bill, the SAF Bill, the buses Act and the Railways Bill. I was really pleased to get the Railways Bill published last week.

Given ongoing conversations across Government and in advance of the next King's Speech, it would not be appropriate for me to give you at this stage my wish list for specific bits of legislation. What I can say to you is that I will be prioritising legislation that supports growth and that supports the safe and secure operation of the transport network. We touched upon the issues around Baroness Casey's review into child grooming, and we are exploring how we can deal with that issue at the earliest opportunity.

On pavement parking, I want to get a response to the consultation published soon, because I realise that this has been dragging on for years and I am keen to explore how decisions around pavement parking could be made at a local level. Giving local areas powers to regulate pavement parking would promote growth and help us deliver safer streets. I hope that that is helpful in a broad sense, even if I cannot give you a specific prioritised list.

Q226 **Dr Arthur:** I was at the Transport Planning Society meeting on Monday, and the session was ably chaired by our Chair today. Somebody mentioned a pavement parking ban, and the audience made a strange noise. It was a mixture of frustration and hope. I felt quite warmed by this noise, because I felt that I was in a room with fellow believers. I understand that letters from the Department to people asking about pavement parking have moved from the consultation responses being published as soon as possible to "imminently." The five-year anniversary of the consultation closing is on 22 November, so do you have anything in your diary for 22 November in terms of a big event or a big announcement that you might be making? I am just hoping. I am fishing for hope here.

Heidi Alexander: I cannot give you dates, and I suspect that that noise that you heard emanating from the audience might be similar to the noise that emanates from my office every now and again, which is a mixture of hope and frustration. I am serious about getting this consultation response published. Lilian Greenwood is leading on this issue for us, and has continued to do so subsequent to the ministerial changes, and so I do hope that we might be in a place in the not-too-distant future to be able to say something on this.

Q227 **Dr Arthur:** Fundamentally, as you hinted, it is just about empowering local authorities to make that decision for themselves. Is there any resistance to doing this in Government?

Heidi Alexander: Recent conversations have progressed well.

Chair: I can imagine the challenges between devolution to individual authorities and the impact of that, and the confusion for motorists in terms of knowing which area they are in and, therefore, what the policy is in that particular area.

Dr Arthur: Of course, Chair, the highway code says that you should not park on the pavement, so motorists should not be confused.

Chair: That is a very good point, Scott.

Q228 **Mrs Blundell:** On the subjects of legislation that supports growth and outstanding items, can you speak to the status of the High Speed Rail (Crewe—Manchester) Bill, please? It was reintroduced by your predecessor to provide powers to construct other rail lines in northern England, but we are still waiting on Bill Committee formation. I just wondered whether you had any comments on that, please.

Heidi Alexander: It was announced in the King's Speech, and we need to take a decision about whether we are standing up that Bill. I do not know whether you were here in the first part of the session when we talked about Northern Powerhouse Rail more generally. We are committed to Northern Powerhouse Rail, but we are taking our time to get this right.

Following the publication of the James Stewart review in the summer, this is potentially a very big piece of infrastructure investment. It is really important that we look at the opportunities in Liverpool and Manchester, as well as east of the Pennines in places such as Leeds, York and Sheffield. I hope to be able to say more on that in the coming months, but I am aware of how absolutely critical it is that we improve connectivity between the towns and cities of the north of England.

Q229 **Dr Arthur:** I hope that this is just a yes or no answer. There is a challenge. Last week, Heidi, you published the third cycling and walking strategy 2035 consultation. The previous Government committed to 50% of all local journeys being undertaken on foot, wheeling or cycling. That strategy is to 2035, but there were no real targets in it. Are we still committed to that target, which was, by 2030, for 50% of local journeys in urban areas to be done by walking and cycling? Is that still a commitment?

Heidi Alexander: We need to be honest about the previous Government. They took £230 million out of cycling and walking, and there was no way that they were ever going to get to that target for 2030. I really want to get to a point in the next 10 years where everyone feels that walking, cycling, scooting and wheeling to school is a safe and decent choice for them, and everyone is keen to swap out some of those short car journeys that we make for a bit more of being out in nature and getting exercise. I am not rushing to reinstate that 2030 target, because I am focused on what we are going to do in the next 10 years.

Q230 **Dr Arthur:** So there will be no targets in terms of how we grow walking and cycling. It is really important in order to drive key decision makers to have targets.

Heidi Alexander: It is, and I am really keen that we work with local authorities so that we get progress in individual local authority areas. It is going to be different in different places. We have ambition in this area. That is why we have put over £600 million into walking and cycling over the spending review. That is in addition to the £300 million that we will have spent over the last two years. What we really want to see is a change in people's habits and enabling more people to walk and cycle by making it an attractive choice and making people feel safe and confident in doing so.

Dr Arthur: It is not about choice.

Q231 **Mrs Blundell:** This is the final question, but it is an important one. As you have already mentioned, we are expecting to see a new road safety strategy soon. Can you give us an indication of what we will see in that strategy and how it will help to eliminate deaths and serious injuries on our roads?

Heidi Alexander: We will be taking a safe systems approach to the road safety strategy. It will include targeted measures to support the most vulnerable road users, be that older or younger drivers. We are keen to see innovation as a key theme in the road safety strategy, looking at vehicle technology, better enforcement and better use of data.

I am also considering potential changes to motoring offences, many of which have not been updated since the Road Traffic Act back in 1998. I know that a lot of MPs have been campaigning on the part of bereaved families. I want to look very carefully at some of those proposals that individual MPs have brought forward on behalf of their constituents as well.

I will be wanting to consult on the main policy areas that are included in the strategy, and it would be really good to have input from this Committee as part of that process as well.

Chair: Thank you very much. That brings us to the end of our session today. I would like to thank you very much, Secretary of State, and Jo as well, for coming to give evidence today. Please feel free to write to us with anything that you have not been able to cover in your answers at this meeting. That concludes today’s meeting.