



Transport Committee

Oral evidence: [Transport's winter resilience](#), HC 681

Monday 28 October 2013

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 28 October 2013.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Dana Skelley
- [Graham Dalton](#)
- [Robert Goodwill MP](#)

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mrs Louise Ellman (Chair); Sarah Champion; Jim Dobbin; Karen Lumley; Karl McCartney; Mr Adrian Sanders

Questions 1-61

Witnesses: **Dana Skelley**, Director of Roads, Transport for London, representing the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport, and **Graham Dalton**, Chief Executive, Highways Agency, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Transport Select Committee. I hope you will agree it is appropriate timing to deal with winter resilience, although today, because of the weather problems, we are without some of our witnesses and members. Could you please give us your name and organisation?

Dana Skelley: I am Dana Skelley, director of asset management at Transport for London, and I am here representing ADEPT.

Graham Dalton: I am Graham Dalton, chief executive of the Highways Agency.

Q2 Chair: Mr Dalton, could you tell us how the Highways Agency prepared for today's storm?

Graham Dalton: I thought there might be a topical question. The relationship with the Met Office is No. 1. The Met Office provide our weather forecasting during the winter months. In the winter months we have a Met Office forecaster embedded, located in our national operations centre in Birmingham. It started with the first forecasts that the Met Office were giving us in the middle of last week. As we got towards the end of last week, certainly by Friday morning when we had the full amber warning, and we knew there would be high winds and probably heavy rainfall as well, which is equally problematic on the network, we stepped up a couple of levels in our crisis management framework. We have got a now fairly well-rehearsed framework, which sets up regional alerts, national alerts and national crisis, depending on the severity of what has to be done and co-ordinated. On Friday we stepped up to a national alert, which gets us into a drumbeat of regular co-ordination meetings with other authorities—police and local authorities at regional level—co-ordinating nationally and reporting to the Department for Transport and the Government as well.

We went through the weekend ensuring that our maintenance contractors were equipped, on standby and had people around. We deployed standby recovery vehicles; ensured that we had plant and equipment available, should it be needed; and then prepared for the storm to come. There was a final round of phone calls yesterday evening at about seven or eight o'clock ready for the storm to come, which we handled this morning.

Q3 Chair: Up to now, what is your assessment of the accuracy of the information you have, and the effectiveness of the means you organised to deal with the problems?

Graham Dalton: The forecasting was good; it tends to be. The winds might have been fractionally lower than they could have been, so it was good forecasting and it was timely. We had a very good warning of this one, which was appreciated, and that definitely helped. One does not always get quite so much advance notice, so forecasting was good and the data we had set us up fairly well.

On the whole, the response was reasonably good. The western half of the country was hit and the storm came through in the quieter hours of the night. That helped. On the eastern side, we had a few more incidents this morning with travel, when the country was getting back to work, but our response, I hope, was reasonable. We certainly kept most of the network open and running throughout. We probably had no more incidents than we would normally get on a busy Monday morning. There were just some slightly different reasons.

Q4 Chair: How quickly were local authorities able to remove fallen trees and other obstructions?

Graham Dalton: I cannot really speak for local authorities. My personal experience driving in bits of Surrey trying to get to work this morning was that there were certainly people out doing some stuff. My contractors on the strategic road network were geared up and ready to go. I cannot really speak for local authorities.

Q5 Chair: Were they able to do their work effectively and quickly enough?

Graham Dalton: My people?

Chair: Yes.

Graham Dalton: Yes, on the whole. We have a habit of investigating after an event or incident such as this—weather such as this—to find out what performance was like at a level of detail. We will be doing that over the next few days, but on the whole I think my contractors stepped up to the mark.

Q6 Karl McCartney: You mentioned that you had quite a lot of warning of this particular storm. I do not want to sound like a geography anorak, or a weather anorak, but certain types of weather out in the Atlantic, with jet streams colliding and so on—not typical incidents—caused this to happen. Are you aware that we are going to have more storms like this coming up to the winter of 2013-14, or do you think this was a one-off?

Graham Dalton: I have been in this job long enough to say that we take it as it comes. It was a good, accurate weather forecast this weekend, and we were able to take decisions progressively as it went through to see whether it was materialising as initially forecast. It is tougher when it is snow, which I suspect we will talk about a bit later, because there can be a huge difference where snow is dropped a few miles apart, and even the forecasters have some trouble with that.

Q7 Karl McCartney: Obviously, you dealt quite well with what happened over the last 24 hours, but, if that happened two or three times before Christmas, how might it affect your organisation's response?

Graham Dalton: I would like to think positively. The advantage is that we have a good plan, but having a plan is no good unless you get to rehearse it. And do you know what? We have just had a big beginning-of-winter rehearsal; we had a full rehearsal with a lot of people engaged right through the weekend, and that can have done no harm. But a lot of factors have to work together. It depends on the time of day, whether it is a weekday, peak morning or evening, and the type of weather we are talking about—wind or snow. There is nothing fundamental that I am going to go back to my agency and change as a result of this weekend. There will be a few bits we want to tweak and polish, but nothing that we fundamentally want to change.

Q8 Karl McCartney: You mentioned that you planned well, and it seems that all agencies did. Do all agencies get together? Will you get together with the rail companies and have a big wash-up later this week to decide what information was good and what was not?

Graham Dalton: Across transport, probably not with the rail companies specifically. We compare notes with them; and certainly we will do so with some local authorities because that is where the more critical interface is. It tends to be at a more annual level or after a particularly severe one. This weekend was tough, but we took it in our stride.

Q9 Karl McCartney: The reason I asked about rail transport is that I got here today because I drove instead of catching the train, which I would normally do. Anybody trying to get to London from the east coast drove. That obviously affects how many people are using your roads at a time when perhaps you would not want that.

Graham Dalton: Yes, it does, although we were trying to manage the numbers beforehand—that was why we had the strong wind warnings—working particularly with the big freight companies about timing their traffic and taking the peak off the road. It is

half-term, which helps. Having a lot less traffic forecast this morning means one can absorb some of that displaced journey. I suspect you would have been one of relatively few making that sort of journey.

Q10 Chair: Ms Skelley, I would like you to tell us what you did in preparing for today in London, and how you see it at the moment. Then I am going to bring in other members who might want to question either of you. Can you tell us what preparations you made in London?

Dana Skelley: Similarly, we have tried and tested plans for dealing with severe weather, and are very much in touch with the forecasters. We also work very closely in partnership with a whole host of other agencies and partners, including the London boroughs, represented particularly through LFEPA—the London Fire and Emergency Planning Association; and all the other transport providers, including rail particularly, because in the case of London Overground they are travelling on Network Rail tracks. There is an important debate between the transport operating companies and the rail companies about what might be happening in terms of dealing with fallen trees, particularly on the tracks. Those decisions were made in conjunction with all of our underground, rail and DLR services across London, including the tram.

We had a whole host of preparation conference calls across all the agencies, including the London resilience team, which got involved from Friday and over the weekend. All across London, authorities were geared up to provide additional resources on standby for flooding, in terms of ensuring that pumping stations were working and there was equipment on standby to clean out gullies and unblock drains, and particularly tree surgeons and tree removal companies to deal with fallen trees and the clean-up operation. That is across the whole transport network, not only roads but rail and underground as well, because a large chunk of the underground is outside.

Through the night we have a single London streets co-ordination centre where the bus operating control centres are also housed. There is very strong communication between the bus, highways and contracting teams in terms of responding—patrolling the network, seeing the network through cameras, and reports that come from individual bus services. In the early morning peak, pretty much all the bus services were running routes, although some had to be diverted to go around roads where there were fallen trees. But it was very dynamic; we were very keen to make sure through radio and all other media that people kept in touch with Twitter and our website, because we were updating information all the time about what was open, what was moving and what was available in terms of services.

Q11 Sarah Champion: Ms Skelley, we are all aware of the cuts that local authorities are facing. How concerned are you that these cuts are going to impact on your ability to provide a good service and winter resilience on roads?

Dana Skelley: I have got more than one hat on here, so it is quite difficult to answer that. We provided a written response in terms of our readiness in London. London is a special case because of the density of people and movement, and the huge economic need to keep it moving, which is one of our key drivers. Over the previous severe winters we have worked very hard and constructively, including practising being ready for events and having full days in our EO workshops, where we include all the London boroughs and other stakeholders and partners, to make sure that we are all geared up to be joined up to

deal with it in terms of messaging, and, for example, that gritting routes are joined up and do not end in one place and then a section of road in between is not gritted.

In London there has been a lot of work. One of the ways we are working to make that even more efficient, to help us all—Transport for London, and all the other authorities—to provide a more efficient service is through our London highways alliance contract arrangements, whereby there is a joined-up service between Transport for London and as many boroughs as want to collaborate with us. There are huge efficiencies available in the storage of salt and optimising gritting runs. We are in the early days of that, only six months into the new arrangements, but there are huge opportunities for London and the London boroughs to be even more efficient in the provision of these services going forward, by collaborating and getting the most out of the outlay on the fleet and the depots and the big costly commercial outlays that take place.

London has been in a good position, particularly with communication to the outside world and across the boundaries of local authorities, and indeed the mutual aid that takes place across London. We have got ourselves into a very strong position in having a lot of salt stocked throughout the country for resilience purposes, but a couple of years ago that was not the case. Some authorities potentially had lower stocks than others and there were difficulties with deliveries. We set up a well-established mutual aid arrangement across London, where we prioritised the deliveries of salt to areas that needed it most.

Q12 Chair: Are you able to say anything about outside London? We were expecting Councillor Box from the Local Government Association. I realise that you are not in the same position, but from your position in ADEPT can you say anything on Ms Champion's question about funding?

Dana Skelley: ADEPT is an association with members, at director and assistant director level, of highway services and other services across the whole country. In particular, counties are represented through ADEPT, although other authorities are too. Through its engineering committee, ADEPT do a lot of work to ensure that dissemination of best practice takes place across local authorities; in particular, the publication of the Quarmby review, which has now been embedded in the national code of practice, *Well-maintained Highways*. That is the code which all local authorities up and down the country would be expected, through both peer pressure and legal precedents, to be working towards. However, a number of the suggestions and requirements in the new section of the *Well-maintained Highways* code require that authorities gear up with their fleet and kit, which they may not be able to do immediately in terms of the decisions they are having to make about revenue expenditure. It is, nevertheless, acknowledged in the code that local decision making must take place in terms of the other pressures on those budgets.

Q13 Sarah Champion: It sounds as though the infrastructure is in place, but if we had a sustained period of very heavy snow, say for three weeks, do you think you have the reserves to be able to deal with it on the ground, or could we be in trouble again?

Dana Skelley: The salt stock reserves are certainly there across the country. One can never say, but certainly in terms of—

Q14 Sarah Champion: But in terms of paying contractors for a sustained period, for example, have you got the reserves?

Dana Skelley: Certainly, in terms of the contractors. An important point in the decision making over a sustained period going forward is bringing in factors other than just providing that resilient service across the whole network, in particular partnering arrangements with local schools, in terms of communications and local decision making, and partnering with farms, for example, where snow plough equipment can be put on the front of farm vehicles so they can play a part in this.

One of the things ADEPT representatives are keen to do is engage a wider community in providing the winter service. For example, a few years ago there were great liability fears about getting local people to clear snow from the footway outside premises or residential buildings. One of the pieces of work the Quarmby review was able to do was to lift that fear.

Q15 Chair: That was never meant as an alternative to clearing the roads.

Dana Skelley: It was not an alternative.

Q16 Chair: Are you in a position to make any assessment about the situation outside London in relation to these areas? You might well not be in a position to do that.

Dana Skelley: I am sharing with you the message that members of ADEPT at the last engineering committee asked me to share with you, which is that the state of readiness across the whole country is probably mixed; it is not at a consistent level, and local decisions will be made about the level of service provision in terms of the points I have just been making. The country is resilient in terms of the stock levels available and the contracting arrangements in place, but local decisions will be made over a sustained period, perhaps involving other community partners in assisting over that period.

Q17 Karen Lumley: I want to ask about today. Do you have any idea of the percentage of trains and buses affected today, and how people were able to get to work?

Dana Skelley: As I said, every single bus route was running in London today. The problems with buses were caused by routes having to deviate, mostly to respond to debris on the road network. The underground section of the tube network was running pretty well today; the areas affected were the parts of the tube network that are overground, where debris and, in some cases, power failures caused the network to be suspended. The overground was not running this morning and is partially running this evening, but I cannot answer for the number of trips made and what percentage was catered for today.

Q18 Karen Lumley: Do you have any idea of how long it will take to get 100% service back?

Dana Skelley: I cannot tell you about the train-operating side of things, but as far as we are aware there is a full bus service operating now, and all the roads are open in London—the Transport for London roads.

Q19 Karen Lumley: Mr Dalton, what level of consultation did you have with local authorities over the weekend as to how to arrive at a joined-up plan?

Graham Dalton: There is not much planning. By the time we got into the weekend it was a matter of delivering the operation. It tends to be on a county basis, with local resilience forums, or similar. It varies between counties. It was more in the south and south-west, where the storm was expected to be greatest. I have six regional control centres around the country, and all of those have direct contact through conference calls at prescribed times and drumbeats. Who takes the lead, whether it is the local authority, the police or ourselves, depends on the nature of the crisis—this weekend it is wind—so it is done through those conference calls at a standing time, and all the responders dial in on that.

Q20 Jim Dobbin: How difficult is it to convince the public that when there is a severe weather warning they should pay attention to it and, as far as possible, not commute? For example, I travelled from Cardiff today and it took me an hour longer than it would normally have taken. When I set off, I was not sure whether or not the Severn bridge was open. How do you get that message out to the public, because it is quite an important aspect of your work and of their working lives?

Graham Dalton: Wind is a slightly different case from snow, not because of what is expected to happen but because everyone knows that it is going to be over quite fast. If there had been a heavy snowfall this morning, we would now be saying that it is cold and we do not know whether it will be here for 24 hours, a week and a half or three weeks—that is how tolerance goes. My journey was disrupted this morning. I ended up driving most of the way to London and then got on a train. On the whole, given a good warning, people adjust, so they were prepared. People woke up this morning and, on the whole, did not blindly go off to the station or get in the car without checking by listening to local radio or looking at television, so that is good. The more awareness there is and the more alerts go out, great.

News broadcasts and television news are really helpful. We use social media to the extent we can. It is a pretty small impact. Our big variable message signs—the big variable electronic signs on the motorway—were carrying messages from last Friday, warning of high winds expected. All those different things help to get people alert. They then make their own decisions. Some will have got up this morning and thought, “It doesn’t look bad; I’ll go,” and some would have got up and said, “I’ll make different arrangements,” or “I’ll wait and see.” It is getting the messages out. People still make their own decisions.

Jim Dobbin: The first thing I saw was my regional Whip.

Q21 Chair: What about in London, Ms Skelley?

Dana Skelley: Similarly, it is absolutely vital for us to get the messages out in every way we can: Twitter, website and radio interviews. That is absolutely right. People will make their own decisions. I agree that a storm like the one we had today is over quite quickly, and people will respond slightly differently when you have a more sustained issue.

Q22 Mr Sanders: The problems today affected people who drive or use trains and buses. They also affected pedestrians and cyclists. Sometimes the infrastructure that cyclists and pedestrians use is forgotten in the clearing of debris. Obviously, the priority is to get the roads and railways open. A lot of countries use volunteers to keep even the main highways

free of debris. Is any thought put into maybe local authorities mobilising volunteers to clear debris from pavements and side roads for cyclists and pedestrians?

Dana Skelley: We certainly see frontages playing a part in tidying up debris caused by Pallas fencing, or that is their responsibility anyway; local owners of properties do so. We have not formally set up any arrangements in London, as far as I am aware, for local authorities to seek the assistance of volunteers for that specific activity.

Q23 Mr Sanders: Is any account taken of the needs of pedestrians and cyclists in the severe weather plans?

Dana Skelley: Yes. It is equal. We talk about opening roads, but that is opening the service to people who use the road network, and that includes pedestrians and cyclists. Indeed, the clean-up operation today was just as much about footways and cycle tracks as about the carriageway.

Q24 Chair: Mr Dalton, how do you go about identifying vulnerable locations?

Graham Dalton: Some of it by experience; for some, you can be pretty sure you will know where they will go. This weekend it was high winds, so it would be exposed bridges across estuaries: Severn, Orwell and the QE2 bridge at Dartford. There are known likely snow spots; some are more exposed than others. The M62 across the Pennines is particularly vulnerable. There are places with slopes and long gradients. A favourite of ours is just west of Exeter: Haldon Hill on the A38 has a long upward incline. For a number of years, it has had locally intense snowfall, and once one truck is stuck there everything else gets stuck behind and we cannot get snow ploughs through. From experience, we have worked out response plans. We tend to know where those are and we pre-position more intensive treatment: snow ploughs and gritters. In the last two or three winters, if we have known that an intensive snowfall is coming, we have pre-deployed and put recovery trucks on site beforehand. We have a recovery contract, similar to the way the police do, so if we know intense snowfall is coming, we will get trucks put out so they can go in promptly to get stuck vehicles moved. Much of it comes from experience and a little bit of looking at the characteristics of the network that are more exposed to particular types of weather—for example, if it is rainfall, areas with known poor drainage or a tendency to flood. Very flat areas can be a problem.

Karl McCartney: Like Lincolnshire.

Graham Dalton: I haven't got many roads in Lincolnshire.

Q25 Chair: In identifying vulnerable areas, are you going to make any changes this year as a consequence of the things you learned last time?

Graham Dalton: I do not think we have come up with differences in vulnerable areas. After our experience last winter, we made adjustments to our crisis management plan; we have made adjustments and changes in some of our control rooms as to how we monitor and escalate incidents. Brian Smith had just about finished the RAC report, published in the spring, when it snowed again in March, and we had problems on the A23 and down the A27 on the south coast. There are things about the monitoring of those that we would do differently this year from last year—for example, different reporting regimes and working relationships with local police forces—just to make sure it is more integrated.

Q26 Chair: Are those things that you have been working on during the year?

Graham Dalton: Yes.

Q27 Chair: Are there additional places or different places that you are identifying?

Graham Dalton: I do not think we have come up with any different locations this year. Generally, the places where we had problems last year were ones that we prepared for. There were others where we were prepared and did not get a problem, but that does not mean we will not get it next winter. I think we have the locations reasonably well covered, but with snow in particular you do not quite know where it will come, and, if it falls very fast, you have a problem. We had a problem on the M6 one Friday night-Saturday morning in February just before the thaw came. That did not have the characteristics of a problem area, but the snowfall was very intense. Ironically, we had a lot of resources deployed on the M62, where we were expecting a very bad night. The M62 got away relatively lightly and the M6 came to a halt, so there is an element of judgment and an element of luck as well.

Q28 Chair: You both mentioned salt in an earlier answer. Are you aware of any particular problems this year, or are you satisfied with the system for getting salt from the strategic salt pile? Are there adequate arrangements for storing it? Are there any issues to do with salt that you expect a problem with? Ms Skelley, is there anything you would like to tell us about that?

Dana Skelley: I think we are in a very strong position in terms of the provision and distribution of salt, and in the understanding of availability and resilience for stocks of salt.

Q29 Chair: The LGA told us that “salt doesn’t work in conditions colder than minus 10.”

Graham Dalton: It is certainly less effective. I have various technical people working for me, and it is not quite as black and white as it might be. If it is colder than minus 10, we do not stop putting it down. You might mix it with other stuff and grit as well to get traction, but we certainly keep putting it down. Salt does work with traffic, with tyres working it into the snow and generally getting a bit of heat in there—warming it up. If it gets really cold, salt is less effective, but if the temperatures get that cold it tends to be with a drier atmosphere as well, so there is less likely to be dew, and dew freezing and sudden rain coming in, which can be a problem. They are harder conditions to work in, but I would not say it stops altogether.

Q30 Chair: Are there any problems with salt theft?

Graham Dalton: I haven’t noticed any.

Chair: Ms Skelley, are you aware of any problems with people stealing salt?

Dana Skelley: We have a London strategic salt stock of 27,000 tonnes at Dagenham, and we have that monitored by CCTV just in case, but we have no experience of any stealing of salt.

Q31 Chair: What about working relationships between the Highways Agency and local authorities, or in London within the different boroughs? Are there any particular problems? Are there any arrangements that you are going to change from last year?

Dana Skelley: Operationally, we have very strong relationships with the Highways Agency and local boroughs. They are tried and tested, and the arrangements are tested again and again for readiness. Localised events take place that require us on a daily or weekly basis to be in close communication, and it works well.

Graham Dalton: On the whole, it is satisfactory. There are an awful lot of local authorities. Some are very small, and winter maintenance—winter service—is just one of the things they have to deal with; some are very large. Whether it is a satisfactory or good working relationship, or a really productive one, comes down to personalities. In many areas, there is close co-operation between my contractors, who are controlling plant, machinery, equipment, people and resources, and the local authority, and when you are in severe weather that is where it really matters. That is where mutual aid comes in as well, if either of us has a problem. The working relationship and mutual support is not just about the provision of salt; it might be the treatment of a piece of road. If a local authority has one or two spreaders out of action and they need some help, we will go and help them. That is what it is about. When public bodies are operating under pressure, they tend to co-operate at working level pretty well.

Q32 Chair: Ms Skelley, how well do local authorities work with bus and train operators in developing emergency services and informing people about them? Have you had any experience of that either within London or in your ADEPT role?

Dana Skelley: I have not had any experience of that outside London, but certainly in London it is a key part of our planning—working very closely with buses. Surface transport, where I work, is the part of Transport for London that manages bus services and the road network. As I said, London Overground is a train-operating company that runs alongside Network Rail train-operating companies. That is very tried and tested, particularly as a result of the Olympics, where we prepared very well to work together. The legacy from the Olympics is a continuation of that strong working relationship.

Q33 Karl McCartney: It's good to hear that things are planned well for snowfall and so on, but a few times in the past, certainly in London and on the M25, when snow falls quicker than you can get salt on the road and get it cleared, there are problems. Thousands upon thousands of people cannot get home because the traffic grinds to a halt. You then cannot get salt on to the roads; the snow stays where it is; and people end up being in their cars for eight hours overnight. You get people pulling across the bridges to get away from the M25. Do you think that will happen again? Is there anything you can do to mitigate that or stop it?

Graham Dalton: I can tell you what we do to try to mitigate it—to protect against it: first, weather forecasting; then preparedness of plant, equipment and machinery; and then really good monitoring and management. The bit where we have been investing quite heavily is not just having cameras and equipment to monitor traffic flow, but monitoring it quite intensively and responding very quickly when things seem to be slowing down.

I cannot give an undertaking that it is not going to happen again, because a number of things can come together. If there is heavy snow in a morning rush hour, people tend to be at home and at least a reasonable proportion will decide not to travel, or will defer a journey to get to work. In an evening rush hour—in the case we had in March—especially if there is little or no forecast, they are all at work; they see snow start to come down and everyone leaves at the same time. Immediately you have more intense traffic and more congestion than you would have on a normal good day anyway, so that slows things down. If you have heavy snow coming at the same time, it is very difficult.

We keep putting the messages out, asking people to defer their journeys. If there is bad weather coming, we ask them to think. We do not want to cry wolf too often, because we do not want to advise people not to travel and then find nothing really happens, or it does not snow, because next time they will not listen, so there is a judgment about trying to pitch it right.

Q34 Karl McCartney: That is all well and good, but are there any extra steps you can take? I am thinking back to 1995 when it happened on the southern sections of the M25. I know 1995 is a long time ago and well before your time.

Graham Dalton: Fortunately, it was well before my time.

Karl McCartney: Lessons have not been learned since then, because once the traffic starts building up and slowing down, it does not matter how many gritters you get out there; they will not get any grit or salt on the road because vehicles are in the way.

Graham Dalton: My mother and father-in-law were stuck on the M25 three years ago, so I got some very personal and direct feedback.

Q35 Karl McCartney: It is happening quite regularly. Are you going to stop traffic going on to the M25 so that you can get your lorries on there? Do you work with the police to do that? Is that something you might do?

Graham Dalton: The main thing is working with hauliers. We need traffic on the motorway, because just putting down salt does not help in itself; you need actual vehicles, so we need traffic running.

Q36 Karl McCartney: You need moving traffic.

Graham Dalton: That's right. We need moving traffic. We work with hauliers. Heavy goods vehicles are not the problem, but they are the most vulnerable, because they operate closer to the limits of the laws of physics. They are the ones that can lose traction first. We are working closely with the Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association, with briefings and alerts that go out to their members. Just taking a good proportion of those off the road helps. On drivers' preparedness, we run the winter campaign for drivers to be prepared. Occasionally, there is the odd truck driver who takes it upon themselves to try to pass another one that is already stuck, so it comes down to driver standards a bit. We have to keep working at it. We just keep going at it.

Q37 Chair: How do you monitor the effectiveness of your communication campaigns? Do you rely on social media too much?

Graham Dalton: No, we don't; we probably do not use it enough, to be honest. We are relative novices in the world of Twitter and Facebook and items such as that. We have piloted it over a couple of years, and it seems to help. I think radio and broadcasting are the most powerful means, and then getting confidence that what we say is an accurate prediction or a justified response. If we are asking someone not to travel or to delay their journey, it needs to be in a way that we are trusted.

Q38 Jim Dobbin: Mr Dalton, you mentioned the M62. It goes right through the middle of my constituency. The boast at the time it was built was that it would never close, but it probably closes every year at some stage. Why is that? I mention it because you said that you had prepared to do something up there.

Graham Dalton: It is a vulnerable route because of its height, and it is on the western side. You can get very heavy snowfall quite rapidly. It has relatively steep gradients. It is exposed, so you can get high winds. In some snow conditions you can get drifting, and it is not a very pleasant place to be stranded if you are up there.

Jim Dobbin: Especially if you are the constituency MP, I'm sure you would agree.

Graham Dalton: I would of course agree.

Q39 Chair: Is there anything else you want to say, Mr Dalton?

Graham Dalton: I have a team of people, my suppliers, who prepare hard and prepare long. We take it very seriously, and we do all we can to keep the country moving on the strategic road network. We cannot guarantee to get it right every time. We need the help of road users as well, to go out prepared with vehicles that are ready.

Q40 Jim Dobbin: The M62 is an important link between east and west—between Hull and the port of Liverpool.

Graham Dalton: It is vital. There are three routes across the Pennines. On the A66 at the top, we have snow gates; there are times when the snowfall is such that you plan to close it, and there is the Woodhead pass further down. The M62 is the one we put a lot of resource on to keep it open, for that very reason; west Yorkshire to the Manchester conurbation—the north-west conurbation—is a vital economic route.

Q41 Chair: No doubt there will be more occasions when we can test all these things.

Graham Dalton: I look forward to doing it in October and not March.

Chair: In the meantime, thank you both very much. Ms Skelley, thank you for trying to answer perhaps beyond the area you thought you would be dealing with.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Robert Goodwill MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Transport, gave evidence.

Q42 Chair: Good afternoon, Minister. It is a pleasure to see you here. You were a long-standing member of the Transport Select Committee some time ago, and it is good to see you here as a Minister. You have come on a very appropriate day, and we look forward to hearing your answers. Do you want to make a statement first?

Mr Goodwill: If I may. You will be very pleased to know, Madam Chairman, that I am not going to read out the long statement my officials wrote for me. Could I first put on the record the condolences of the Department for the three fatalities yesterday and today due to the storms?

When I arrived at the Department almost the first question I asked was, “Do we have enough grit?” The answer to that question was yes. That is probably the most important question that you will be interested in today.

Since 2010, the transport sector’s ability to manage severe winter weather has significantly improved, following implementation of the recommendations arising from previous reviews, including those undertaken by this Committee. That means that, as we head into the 2014 winter season, this country is much better prepared than was the case in 2008-09 and 2009-10.

Following the storm overnight, I have been very impressed by the resilience that the transport network has shown, particularly given the large numbers of trees that have fallen on railway lines and the surface water flooding across the country. It has been a very good learning experience for me to see how all the agencies work together when we have this type of weather problem. After every severe period of weather we carry out a thorough internal review to learn lessons and explore cost-effective ways further to enhance winter resilience, and we will certainly do that after this weekend’s problems.

My Department continues to work closely with all key transport operators to ensure they are well prepared for each winter season so that in the event of an extreme weather disruption to the transport network, it is minimised. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the Department for Transport welcomes this inquiry by the Transport Select Committee and, as always, will give serious consideration to any recommendations that may emerge.

Having been in the job for only three weeks is no excuse for not knowing the answers to all your questions, but it may be that I do not know the answers to all your questions, so I will certainly make sure my officials fill you in where there are gaps in my knowledge.

Q43 Chair: We will test that, Minister. What has the Met Office told the Government to expect in terms of weather this winter? Can you share that information with us?

Mr Goodwill: I always treat long-term weather forecasts with a degree of reservation. We had the barbecue summer, and we have often had severe winters predicted. I think the job of the Department is to plan for the worst and hope for the best. Therefore, whatever the Met Office says, we should make sure we are ready for severe winter weather. On other extreme weather situations like the one we had last night and this morning, which was well predicted, weather forecasting is getting better, but the further ahead you look the less accurate it is. While we have very good weather forecasting, once it gets more than a couple of weeks ahead I would certainly not use that as an excuse to lower the level of salt stocks, for example.

Q44 Chair: This morning a number of train companies cancelled their services and a significant number of flights were cancelled in anticipation of bad weather. Do you think that

putting in emergency timetables in anticipation of bad weather is the right approach and is something that should be done in future?

Mr Goodwill: You may have seen me on the media this morning countering some claims that we were irresponsible in cancelling services. I think, as it turned out, Network Rail made absolutely the right decision. I was on a conference call with the Secretary of State and officials from Network Rail last night when the decision was made to suspend services this morning until we knew all the lines were clear. That meant we could put trains without passengers through those lines once daybreak arrived and ensure that, where there were trees on the line, they could be dealt with. We have encountered 200 trees on the line, and four of the trains put down the lines encountered trees. One in Devon was rendered immobile because of that problem. I think that was the right decision to make. Once the lines can be cleared, services can run as normal. Not to do that would have meant sending very busy services, with passengers both standing and sitting, down lines where they could have been prevented from continuing. We would then have seen large numbers of people stuck on trains, possibly three or four trains all backed up, and that would have presented particular problems, not least if the emergency services had to be called for a health emergency on one of those services. I believe that Network Rail made the right decision in not resuming services until they knew the lines were clear.

The situation north of London was better; they got them cleared much more quickly, but south of London there were severe problems, with large numbers of trees. I believe that was the right decision. I hope that I have managed to justify that not only to your Committee but also to the media this morning.

Q45 Chair: Does that mean you were consulted on that decision?

Mr Goodwill: Yes, there was a conference call with the Secretary of State. We were told what the decision had been, and we agreed with it.

Q46 Karen Lumley: Can you tell us how many trains were cancelled today? Do you have any idea as of now when they will get back to normal?

Mr Goodwill: All the commuter trains on the lines affected were cancelled. It was a west-to-east situation. The situation in Wales improved; the situation with Virgin and some of the services into north London stations improved, but we still have problems on some of the services south of London. In one case a tree fell on to a signal, which will take a little longer to sort out.

The advice I have from Network Rail is that we should have a pretty good service tomorrow morning, but there may still be some disruption and changes to timetables. It has taken longer than we expected. We did anticipate lots of trees coming down, because they are about 80% in leaf at the moment; similarly with the great storm of 1987, which was in the middle of October as well. We have not had a major storm of this sort for about five years, so we expected a lot of trees to come down, but it has caused major disruption and things will be restored to normal service in the course of tomorrow.

Q47 Karl McCartney: Unfortunately, last Monday some of us were on an East Coast Main Line train coming to London which brought down overhead lines about 10 minutes out, to the north of Peterborough station. It was unexpected. Once people got to

Peterborough, East Coast laid on coaches so they could get to their destination. This morning, trains were coming down the East Coast line that were due to go all the way to London, and although the extent of the damage was not known at that point in time, they were being terminated at Peterborough, but no coaches were laid on by East Coast. Do you think that was the right decision?

Mr Goodwill: I know that the overhead lines on the East Coast Main Line are a regular cause of problems, having travelled on that line for a number of years, coming to Westminster. I have had a degree of argument with officials. The advice I had from engineers at Imperial College, who use this as a case study in how not to cut corners, was that when those lines were put up they were maybe not as robustly engineered as they might have been. There are issues with the overhead lines on the East Coast Main Line. When a train travelling at 125 mph brings down the line, several kilometres of line come down and there are all sorts of problems, particularly as the electric trains cannot go on some of the available detours and East Coast have to use the diesel trains they have at their disposal.

I do not think it is acceptable to decant people at Peterborough and not put them on buses, but I am not sure what logistical problems were facing East Coast at that point. It may be that coaches had already been chartered for other emergency work, but, given that it is the school holidays and maybe some buses were available that otherwise would be used for schools, it is not acceptable. I will certainly raise with East Coast why those buses were not there. Whether it was because they got very short notice of the termination of the service at Peterborough, or whatever the situation was, it is not acceptable to the travelling public to find a service terminated and no reasonable bus service for them to take.

Karl McCartney: The passengers and I will be much obliged to you for doing that.

Q48 Mr Sanders: Turning to aviation, on the television this morning I heard you talking about how Heathrow operates at 98% capacity. This has been known for some time. Should not Heathrow declare the level of capacity that it can cope with in winter conditions, enabling the Department perhaps to look at sharing out some of the flights to Gatwick and Stansted?

Mr Goodwill: I suspect that would be an operational matter for Heathrow themselves. However, for the vast majority of the time, Heathrow copes with its very high level of take-off and landing. When one is questioning why a couple of centimetres of snow closes down Heathrow, whereas airports in Scandinavia can continue to operate, the problem is that you cannot land and take off at the same time as you are running snow ploughs on the runways. Therefore, when one closes a runway to clear the snow it means flights are delayed.

In addition, if you have bad visibility, with either fog or falling snow, the time between landings has to be extended from three to six miles, which also reduces the capacity of the airport. Basically, the message is that Heathrow is running at capacity and anything that disrupts that in any way causes delays, diversions and flight cancellations; but that is a fact of life at Heathrow, and operators who use Heathrow are well aware of it. There are other airports they could choose to use, but Heathrow, given its hub status, is for many operators the preferred airport for them to use.

Q49 Mr Sanders: Given that we know that these conditions are going to occur and how close to absolute capacity it is running, and the inevitable delays that will come from the

weather, should not the DFT be encouraging the redistribution of flights from Heathrow to Gatwick, Stansted and elsewhere?

Mr Goodwill: That does happen in emergency situations, but I suspect that Heathrow themselves would resist any attempts to reduce the number of take-offs and landings at the airport. For the vast majority of the time, Heathrow copes. These weather situations are unusual; some winters are worse than others, but when I visit Heathrow, which I intend to do, and when I speak to the CAA—because there are safety issues as well in connection with the capacity of airports—I will be keen to raise those points. This may be something that the Davies commission report will touch on, in terms of the reliability of Heathrow as an airport, given that the slightest problem throws Heathrow into a degree of chaos.

Mr Sanders: It might be worth speaking to Gatwick and Stansted as well of course, because I think we know the answer you are going to get from Heathrow.

Q50 Jim Dobbin: In the previous Q and A, we had a discussion about commuters, and how the Highways Agency could best get the message about severe weather warnings out to commuters. Do you think Government Departments play a high enough role in getting out the message about travelling when there is severe weather?

Mr Goodwill: In the case of passenger services, people would tend to go to the airline, the rail company or even, in the case of coach travel, National Express to get the most up-to-date information. We certainly issue general advice; in fact, last night the advice was to consider carefully before travelling. We did not put out a red alert and say that people should not travel at all; and during the course of the morning we gave advice to motorists about being aware of the possible problems of surface water or fallen trees.

We issue general advice to motorists at the start of the winter about making sure their cars are prepared; that possibly they have a shovel in the boot if they are in an area where there are grit heaps at the side of the road; and certainly that they carry warm clothing and make sure their mobile phones are charged up. We issue that general information.

In the main, people using passenger services will go to the operator with whom they are travelling. General advice is available via our website and the Highways Agency, and we distribute that. We also believe that the motoring organisations, such as the AA and RAC, have an important role to play, because many people would see them as their first port of call.

Q51 Chair: The Department has done an analysis of the costs and benefits of a range of different approaches to address winter resilience. Can you tell us anything about the results of that work, and which measures it has been decided are more cost-effective than others?

Mr Goodwill: The advice I have had, for example in terms of gritting, is to have a strategic reserve in stock so that we can call on that if it is needed. The plan is to work together with local authorities, as well as the Highways Agency, to make sure we have sufficient salt available. There is always a judgment to be taken as to the level of contingency that needs to be built in, but in my view we should err on the side of caution. The experience of 2009-10 is not one that we would wish to repeat. In terms of grit, I can assure the Committee that in 2009-10, we had about 750,000 tonnes of salt in stock; we now have three times that amount. In terms of vehicles we can call upon, in 2003 there were 2,545 gritters; this year we have half as many again, so we have a much better contingency built

in. That is based on experience of severe weather, and also on the need to make sure we have a “resilience” approach, and that would apply to the rail network as well as the roads.

Q52 Chair: We would be interested in other aspects of the cost-benefit analysis work that has been undertaken. Could you send us further information on that, perhaps in other areas, as well as salt?

Mr Goodwill: I would be delighted to do that, and give you a comprehensive picture of how it has been calculated.

Chair: We want to look at which things have been considered.

Mr Goodwill: I suspect that is not something I have been briefed on in any detail as yet, given the urgency of the current winter situation.

Q53 Chair: We accept that, but we would like to know a little more. I would like to ask you a little more about aviation and airlines. Could you tell us whether airlines will be liable for future claims under EU261 rules for cancellations made under a HADACAB determination?

Mr Goodwill: My advice is that airlines do have a liability under EU legislation to pay compensation. The get-out that it is an act of God does not apply. There can be no excuse of severe weather or other problems, so passengers can be assured that that safeguard is in place to give them adequate compensation.

Q54 Chair: In previous reports this Committee has produced, there has been a lot of concern about passenger welfare, whether it is information for passengers about what is happening or support for them if they are delayed at an airport. What can the Government do to improve that situation, particularly in relation to airlines?

Mr Goodwill: We certainly had some very bad problems between 18 and 21 January 2013. Severe weather caused a very big problem in terms of runway snow clearance and the de-icing of planes. The Met Office forecast at the time was 5 cm of snowfall. The group of Heathrow stakeholders, known as HADACAB, met on 17 January to look at the forecast and decided not to pre-cancel flights for the following day. We do not know exactly why that was, but we suspect it was due to a mix of commercial pressures and the fact that HADACAB members used different weather forecast providers. In hindsight, it did not appear to be the best decision, and some disruption followed on Friday 18 January because of the need to suspend operations on each runway in turn to allow snow clearance and anti and de-icing operations. Because of that, a number of long-haul flights were cancelled at short notice, and approximately 3,800 passengers from those flights had to be disembarked at terminal 5. However, a shortage of available stand capacity caused some lengthy delays in returning aircraft to stands, meaning that in some cases passengers had to remain on board aircraft.

British Airways in that situation offered hotels and other welfare to disembarked passengers, and Heathrow’s operator provided facilities at the terminal 5 Sofitel hotel for passengers who did not wish to spend another night at the terminal. However, some passengers chose not to take up the offers of overnight hotel accommodation, preferring instead to remain in the terminal so they could be first in the queue, so to speak, when flight

operations resumed. Images of those passengers were the ones featured in the numerous media articles about problems at the airport. We do not want to see that sort of problem occur again. Some of it was down to the way weather forecasts were being read. I will certainly raise with Heathrow airport and the CAA how commercial considerations may sometimes outweigh or have a bearing greater than they should on some of the decisions about operations at airports. It certainly does not bode well for the travelling public when large numbers of people are stuck at terminals because flights are scheduled when forecasts have given more indication that they might have to be cancelled in advance. Following the storm last night, we issued advice to people to check that their flights were going to be cancelled before they left for the airport, because large numbers of people gridlocked at the airport is certainly not in anyone's interest.

Q55 Chair: The CAA will have a new regulation available next year that is intended to improve the airport's obligations to look after passengers and provide a better experience. Are you convinced that that new regulation will be effective? It does not come into effect until next year. The CAA will be able to do that. Is that something you will be pursuing as well?

Mr Goodwill: I am yet to have my first meeting with the CAA. Generally, the Aviation Minister would meet them four times a year, so I will certainly explore that with them. I apologise for not having the details of that particular situation to hand. It is important that the travelling public know what their rights are if their flight is delayed or cancelled. When I was at the European Council in Luxembourg two weeks ago, compensation for delayed flights and cancellations was on the agenda. I know that we are working with our European colleagues to try to see a way forward in that particular area.

Q56 Chair: Many local authorities have faced severe cuts in their funding, and there is a problem with maintenance of roads, in particular potholes. Do you think these problems are going to get in the way of local authorities being able to deal with winter conditions?

Mr Goodwill: We have provided local authorities with additional funding; I am sure that my officials will give you those figures. It was also front-loaded this year. I think it was £250 million, the majority of which was for this year and the remainder next year. That was specifically to address the issue of potholes, which not only cause potential hazards on the road but also result in claims against local authorities for repairs to car wheels and tyres, so we were aware of that and we did make additional resources available. We also have a wider budget to help local authorities with routine maintenance work and ensuring that carriageways are repaired and replaced. That, I believe, was the help that they needed. When they raised the issue of potholes, the Government did respond and we made additional funds available.

It is interesting that, despite the fact that local authorities are under a degree of pressure, they have not cut their salt stocks. We have regular updates from them, and we are pleased that they have maintained stocks at levels that we believe are safe and sustainable for any potential bad weather we face over the winter period.

Q57 Chair: What discussions have you had with Network Rail about their information to passengers, and also about their investment in rail, particularly the third rail system in Kent?

Mr Goodwill: I am particularly pleased that we have addressed some of the issues in terms of Network Rail. The Government supported investment to deal with the problems of a severe winter, in particular specialist clearing trains and heating for the third rail. The Government have supported this investment in the short term by an additional £100 million of funding, and Network Rail contributed £52 million of that. The Government provided an additional £100 million winter resilience funding to Network Rail in the Chancellor's autumn statement in 2011. Network Rail has used this on a number of precautionary measures, which provided benefits from the winter of 2012-13 onwards. All the funding will be spent by March 2014. Much of that is on the heating system for the third rail, as well as the specialist clearing trains that have been deployed. In Kent, where they tend to get worse weather, the heating of the rails has been particularly beneficial.

In terms of communication with passengers, the Highways Agency and the Department use all the modern methods, with Twitter and other new media. Often, the rail-operating companies themselves will have very good information on their websites. At stations, information is now much better than it used to be, although when things start to go wrong one can never have enough information. It is often down to the hapless staff at the station to fend off questions, when they do not really know what is happening because of severe weather or other disruption.

Q58 Chair: What about access to ports? What have you done to make sure that that is improved, looking at coming winter conditions?

Mr Goodwill: There have been problems in the past with bad weather, not only in terms of access to the ports but snow causing problems in the ports themselves, particularly container ports. In some cases, local authorities have not prioritised the roads connecting ports to the main network, in the same way as maybe they would prioritise other important locations, such as schools and hospitals. We are working with some local authorities to try to improve that. We had a problem—I think it was at Felixstowe—where snow was blowing between containers in the stacks, and we enlisted the help of the local authorities to clean the paths so the large container-handling vehicles could get in. That was a positive move in terms of local authority co-operation.

There is an outstanding issue with the coastguard station at Spurn Point, which we are working on, where there is an eight or 10-mile single-track road. It is important that the coastguards who operate there can get there to do their job and manage navigation and shipping. We are trying to see a way forward with East Yorkshire council to do that. One alternative that has been suggested is that we should enlist another local contractor to do that for us, maybe even a local farmer who could fit a plough to a tractor. That was one specific instance where there were failings, and the personnel at the coastguard station at Spurn Point had difficulty accessing that important facility.

Q59 Chair: Who should be responsible for improving cross-modal transport information? Should the Government be more involved in that, or is it a private sector matter? People are often very concerned when they cannot get the information they need.

Mr Goodwill: I should like to think that the operators themselves would have an interest in providing a better service to their passengers by giving them advice on cross-modal transport. One good example of that would be York station, where there is no longer a direct rail link to Whitby, and they put Yorkshire Coastliner coach connections to Whitby

on their board, but that is an unusual situation. I think there is more work to be done in giving better information to passengers, and that is something I would be keen to work on with the operators. Primarily, it is something the operators should be looking at and co-operating on, because it works both ways. The rail company and the bus company will benefit, in the same way as one would be looking at better connections to London Underground services as well. I hope we can make progress on that, but primarily it is something the operators themselves should be keen to embrace, and I will be keen to ask them what more they can do in that respect.

Q60 Chair: What do you see as your biggest challenges in relation to winter resilience in transport?

Mr Goodwill: Probably No. 1 on the list would be Heathrow airport because of the problems that I explained. The other issue is how better to communicate to the travelling public when they should stay at home and when they should try to make the journey. We do not want people turning up at stations where there are no trains, or at airports where there are no planes. We should also look at knock-on effects; for example, if you have heavy snow, it may be that train drivers cannot get from where they live to the station to operate the services. We often find it is not a straightforward problem. Yes, we can keep the railway lines clear with our snow-clearing machines and heated third rails, but, if the train driver cannot get out at the end of his lane because the local authority has not gritted the road, that is a problem. The challenge is to have everything joined up. After the disruption this weekend, having been on a conference call with the Environment Agency, the Highways Agency, other agencies and the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, I felt there was a degree of joined-up government.

As we have gone through this difficult period, while I am sure there will be lessons to learn, I was very impressed by the way things tended to dovetail together. One example outside the transport sphere is that the energy companies brought engineers from Scotland to be available to repair overhead lines. Given the right weather forecasts, that is the sort of thing we can prepare for. I hope we can learn lessons from this particular situation. We have certainly learned the lessons from 2009-10, when we did not have sufficient grit and gritters, and the travelling public were very much inconvenienced. I am confident that we are in a much better position than we were then. With our feedback system, where local authorities give us up-to-date information on their salt stocks and their degree of preparedness, I think we are in a better position than we have been for many years.

Q61 Chair: And for today? Do you feel you are in a position to give any verdict on how today's transport problems have been addressed?

Mr Goodwill: The big criticism I got earlier this morning, doing the milk round of the media, was that Network Rail had cancelled early morning services. I am sure that was the right decision to make; otherwise, we would have been seeing stories of trains full of passengers stranded behind fallen trees. We may even have seen situations where trains were derailed having hit fallen trees, so I think that decision was the right one.

While it is very unfortunate and sad that there have been fatalities, in the main caused by falling trees, we have not seen the degree of disruption to the road network that might have been expected. The Highways Agency, possibly because of the nature of the roads they

manage, have managed to keep things flowing, and a number of local buses in London, for example, have continued to operate.

We will certainly be having a look—“post-mortem” is the wrong word—at how things went, and getting reports back from various agencies to see what we could do better in future. The information given to the travelling public is never good enough; we need to look at how we can better advise people. In these days of the internet, when the vast majority of people have access to it, I will be keen to discover how we communicated with the public and whether we had a situation where people started off on journeys that actually turned out to be impossible.

Chair: Thank you very much, Minister, for coming to answer our questions. I am sure we will be seeing you again.