



Transport Committee

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

Monday 11 November 2013

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 11 November 2013.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Derek Provan, Director Airside Operations, Heathrow Airport](#)
- [Andy Lord, Director of Operations, British Airways](#)
- [James Colman, Director of Corporate Affairs, Gatwick Airport](#)
- [Chris Burchell, Chairman, National Task Force](#)
- [Councillor Mike Haines, Deputy Chair of the LGA Economy and Transport Board, Local Government Association](#)

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Members present: Mrs Louise Ellman (Chair), Sarah Champion, Jim Fitzpatrick, Jason McCartney, Mr Adrian Sanders and Graham Stringer

Questions 62-156

Witnesses: **Derek Provan**, Director Airside Operations, Heathrow Airport, **Andy Lord**, Director of Operations, British Airways, **James Colman**, Director of Corporate Affairs, Gatwick Airport, and **Simon Buck**, Chief Executive, British Air Transport Association, gave evidence.

Q62 Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Transport Select Committee. Could I have your names and organisations, please?

Derek Provan: I am Derek Provan, director of airside operations, Heathrow airport.

Andy Lord: I am Andy Lord, director of operations, British Airways.

James Colman: I am James Colman, corporate affairs director, Gatwick airport.

Simon Buck: My name is Simon Buck, chief executive of the British Air Transport Association.

Q63 Chair: You were unable to come last time we scheduled this meeting because of the bad weather—I think you were dealing with it. What is your verdict on how the aviation sector dealt with the storm on 28 October?

Derek Provan: From Heathrow's perspective, I think we made the right decision in how we managed the capacity at the airport on the day. We went about it in the correct manner by ensuring that both the airport and airlines worked together to make the decision on the requirement for a schedule reduction on the day. I think that has been recognised by the airlines and airport community since the storms on that day.

Q64 Chair: Would you say that, in retrospect, you were well prepared for it?

Derek Provan: We were well prepared for the capacity reduction on the day. We had been monitoring the weather front for a number of days, and it was pretty clear to us that we were going to realise disruption to the schedule based on the surety of the weather forecast that we had.

Q65 Chair: What about Gatwick? Did you feel you were well prepared, looking back at what happened?

James Colman: Yes. A bit like Heathrow, we saw the storm coming and so had a lot of time to work with our airport community partners to produce the right plans and contingencies needed on the day. As it was, we flew over 700 flights that day. We only cancelled three outbound flights; three inbound flights were cancelled because of issues at the other end.

Q66 Chair: Were they cancelled on the day, or before?

James Colman: They were cancelled on the day. The decision was made on the day to cancel three out of the 700-plus that we flew that day.

Q67 Chair: Did you cancel any flights before the day?

James Colman: No.

Q68 Chair: Mr Lord, what is your view about the adequacy of the arrangements?

Andy Lord: Our view is that it went very well. It was an extreme storm. The accuracy of the forecast from the Met Office was very good and helpful to all parties. From the perspective of British Airways, I concur with Mr Provan about the actions taken in advance. The capacity reduction was appropriate for Heathrow. British Airways complied with that. We did not cancel anything on the day as a result of the weather at Heathrow, and we also flew 100% of our schedule at Gatwick and minimised the disruption to our customers. We also reaccommodated and rerouted all the customers on the affected flights that were cancelled on Sunday, the day before the storm.

Q69 Chair: Mr Buck, do you have any views different from the ones we have heard?

Simon Buck: No. I have very little to add to that, other than it shows that, by working together, airline and airport partners can do what they can to minimise the impact on the travelling public in any unpredictable situation. All situations such as these are different, and it is difficult to predict exactly how something will pan out, but by working together it is possible to minimise the disruption.

Q70 Chair: The general approach at Heathrow was about cancellations in anticipation of the bad weather. Do you think that is the likely method to deal with bad weather in the future? If you think that was successful, is it something you would do again?

Derek Provan: Yes. Due to the capacity constraints at Heathrow, any disruption will have a material effect on the operation. The only mitigation we have in place is to ensure that we reduce capacity at the airport through the schedule. The process we went through two weeks ago is a trial process that we are operating through this winter, in line with the CAA, to allow us to get full agreement with the airport community and proactively manage the capacity at the airport during such disruption.

Q71 Chair: If the weather had not turned out to be as bad, do you think there would have been angry passengers?

Derek Provan: We had monitored the weather for a three-day period; we were monitoring it by the hour. At Heathrow, we have a met office on site—24/7, 365 days a year—so we are continually getting real-time information about the weather to allow us to understand the required capacity, and in that particular event we were very confident in the met forecast.

Q72 Chair: At Gatwick, would you do anything differently next time after the experience of the last storm?

James Colman: I do not think so. Where there is a difference of approach between Heathrow and ourselves—it is understandable from Heathrow's perspective—it is that we always go into these events wanting to try and deliver the full schedule of flights, doing it safely and securely, but our attitude is that we will run the full schedule. We have a bit of a bulldog spirit about what we want to achieve. As Simon pointed out, we work closely with our airline partners and airlines to be able to do that.

Q73 Sarah Champion: Mr Provan, you said that you have limited capacity. I am aware that you are scheduling at 99% capacity. Does that mean that the stakes are getting really high and the likelihood of cancellations has increased and is higher than it need be?

Derek Provan: As we operate at 99%, any event that will have a material effect on the schedule means that proactive cancellations would be the most effective way to mitigate disruption at Heathrow airport.

Q74 Sarah Champion: In terms of passenger satisfaction, would it be better to have a bit more leeway and look at, say, 95%?

Derek Provan: As we said, today the airport is operating at 99% capacity.

Q75 Sarah Champion: You would not look at having any reduction in capacity to allow for things like storms coming or unavoidable accidents happening.

Derek Provan: The 99% capacity represents the desire for airlines to operate from Heathrow. That is what drives the capacity for us at Heathrow.

Q76 Sarah Champion: Can I ask both you and Mr Colman whether there is any potential for discussions to look at diverting some flights to Gatwick in winter months when we are much more likely to have cancellations?

Derek Provan: From a Heathrow perspective, we look to reduce some of the schedule in the winter months to ensure that we create some slack in the system during that time. That is already built into the Heathrow schedule for the coming winter. It is the first time we have taken this approach, which again is based on learning from last year.

Q77 Sarah Champion: Do you have a percentage at which you will be running through the winter months?

Derek Provan: I would need to send that information to you afterwards.

James Colman: At one level, where flights are flown to and from is up to the airlines rather than the airports. I cannot talk specifically on behalf of airlines, but from our perspective earlier this year we wrote to the Secretary of State on this exact point. Our view is that, as you look forward another 10 or 15 years, in terms of the capacity debate, there will be no significant capacity added in that time until another runway, hopefully, is built. What do we need to do in the intervening time to make sure that, when there are normal winter conditions, we do not have a situation at Heathrow? Is there an opportunity, especially if there are shared airlines between airports, to move flights between them to allow passengers the possibility to fly out when they have chosen to, rather than their flights being delayed or cancelled at the last minute? We have not had any significant joy in progressing that so far, but it is still something on which Gatwick is willing to have discussions with the airlines.

Q78 Sarah Champion: Where are the blocks in having that discussion?

James Colman: It is a new way of thinking. We have to make a choice. Do we accept the status quo? Heathrow is in the position it is in, not because it is doing anything incorrectly; it is just a matter of fact about its situation. It is not a criticism of Heathrow at all, but we know this is going to be the situation for at least the next 10 to 15 years. We either accept the status quo that—this is going to happen every winter—or do something differently. Our view is that we are very happy to look at how we might be able to do things differently. All the executive team last winter were working in the terminals. We were meeting passengers who had been moved from the Heathrow flights down to Gatwick. They were asking, “Why couldn’t we have flown here to start with? Why couldn’t we have flown out on the day we wanted to?” That stimulated a lot of our thinking at Gatwick earlier this year about whether it is right that this is the situation for the next decade.

Q79 Sarah Champion: Mr Lord, why could that not happen? Why could you not fly more out of Gatwick in winter months?

Andy Lord: There are two or three factors. Gatwick is the most congested single-runway airport in the world; Heathrow is the most congested dual-runway airport in the world, so both are operating near to capacity. From a British Airways perspective, we operate at

both airports. We have a very different business model at both. The majority of our customers flying out of Gatwick originate or terminate at that airport, whereas at Heathrow about 50% of our traffic is transferring connectivity and that airport is a large hub for us. Moving specific flights to Gatwick would create a problem for a large proportion of our customers, who would still need to get to Heathrow to connect with their onward services. Every flight arriving at Heathrow has a group of customers who connect into a whole variation of other departures. We are open to looking at the feasibility of it, but the reality is somewhat different. In the past we have rescheduled flights on occasions into other airports when that has been the case.

While Heathrow is operating at 99% capacity, the number of occasions on which we have to cancel because of weather-type events is relatively low, so the economic impact of artificially constraining capacity at Heathrow, both on our business and UK plc, would be pretty significant. I do not think a reduction at Heathrow could necessarily be made up by an increase at Gatwick.

Q80 Mr Sanders: From a passenger's point of view, is it not better to be able to travel on the day you want to, and as close as possible to where you want to get to, than not to travel at all? Is that not what collectively you ought to be ensuring can happen in adverse weather conditions?

Andy Lord: From a British Airways perspective, that is absolutely what we aim to do. If you take the example of storm St Jude, the flights that we cancelled we actioned on the Sunday and were due to operate on the Monday. The vast majority of customers booked on those services travelled on the same day. We reaccommodated and rebooked them on to services on the same day—obviously not necessarily at the same time. Our priority is to get customers to their destination as quickly as possible and as soon as their scheduled time of departure, but the reality is that, if we had not taken the proactive decision to cancel—because of the ongoing air traffic restrictions in place, given the strength of the wind, and the impact on the arrival and departure rate at the airport—there would have been far more cancellations and a far greater number of customers disrupted. Short-term proactive action in advance of the day is definitely the right way to deal with it to ensure minimum disruption to customers.

Q81 Mr Sanders: The situation is slightly different when there is snow from when you have high winds, is it not?

Andy Lord: It varies according to the nature of the storm, to be honest. If the snow is significant, as it was on 18 January this year, a decision to cancel the day before would have led to less disruption on that day. The decision to cancel proactively and reduce capacity can apply to any circumstances where there is severe weather or any other form of capacity restriction.

Q82 Mr Sanders: Is it more difficult to predict snow than wind, or is it equally accurate nowadays?

Andy Lord: From the conversations I had with the Met Office, snow is more difficult to predict than wind where they are better equipped to give us a more accurate picture. Snow is more of a challenge in the same way as fog is as well, but I would have to defer to the Met Office as the experts.

Q83 Jim Fitzpatrick: You will remember that during the course of the Civil Aviation Bill there were lots of discussions about welfare arrangements—the lack of ability by passengers to work out whether it was the responsibility of the airports or airlines, and foreign airlines that might not necessarily have staff within different airports. New arrangements were being worked out. Can you each make a comment about whether the new arrangements have been put in place and tested? Are you confident that they are working, or will work, when they have to be tested in anger?

Derek Provan: From the airport's perspective, under their licence to operate at the airport, airlines now have an airline passenger welfare protocol, which effectively is designed so that the airlines will use best endeavours to provide all information and care for passengers who are disrupted. As an airport, we have also ensured that we have 850 reservists available whenever there is any disruption at the airport to assist other airlines at the terminal at the time and work with them to provide accommodation and welfare off-airport. Our aim is to get our passengers away safely as best we can and, if we cannot, to provide as much welfare as possible away from the terminal buildings and as much information as we can at the terminal buildings.

Andy Lord: From British Airways' perspective, we have invested £18 million this year alone in our disruption capability, which covers not just winter operations but disruption management. In totality, it covers our command and control organisation, our colleagues, investment in new equipment and, most importantly, customer welfare and service. There are a number of streams within that, ranging from communication and information to our customers in advance of and during any disruption, as well as the provision of additional resource on the day—again, using reservists from our head office and additional resource from our front-line colleagues, and new technology for rebooking and reaccommodating customers. We have now equipped a large proportion of our front-line customer service staff with tablet technology that can rebook there and then, rather than customers having to stand at a traditional ticket desk. We have also reviewed our hotel accommodation booking process so that we can introduce a one-stop shop for customers who are unable to travel on the same day, as well as working with Heathrow and Gatwick airports on the provision of hotel accommodation and transport to and from them, in the event that that is needed.

James Colman: From Gatwick's perspective, passenger welfare is a key part of our snow plan, which is pre-agreed with our airlines and airport partners on site. It covers everything from having ready on site 4,000 blankets and 600 mattresses, all the way through to baby food and cots, if the worst happens. Our restaurants stay open longer if there is a situation on site. There is free wifi throughout the period of the crisis so that people can rebook on the British Airways site, if they need to. A key part of this is also about passenger communication. One matter we have learned over the years is that giving passengers accurate and timely information is a key thing for them to make decisions. We have invested heavily, as part of our command and control system, to make sure that passengers get timely and relevant information so that they can make decisions about what happens next in terms of whether they stay, rebook locally or regroup back at home. Similar to Heathrow, in terms of the airlines being ready and waiting in their responsibilities to passengers, we are comfortable with that at the moment. The CAA have been working with us closely over the last few months to ensure that information relevant to them in terms of passenger rights is available.

Q84 Chair: Can all of you guarantee that there will not be closed information desks and unanswered helplines if there is further bad weather this year? That was the situation last year.

Andy Lord: I cannot guarantee that there will be 100% manning of all desks in every airport terminal, because it will depend on the nature of the event and the time at which it occurs, but from British Airways' perspective we have got considerably more resource than we have had previously, and the nature of the proposition we will now be offering will not require people to queue up at desks. On occasions there will be desks that do not have people at them, but we will be providing sufficient capability to reaccommodate, rebook and service those customers who are disrupted.

James Colman: From Gatwick's perspective, I can guarantee that our social media and website will be manned 24/7, as it is today. We do not have a part-time Twitter service; it operates 24/7 as it is, including our website. I cannot guarantee that every help desk will be manned, because the majority of the time our volunteer staff are in the terminals walking the floors, talking to passengers and engaging them face to face. It is a balance between having particular sites where people might be located and going out to talk to them, but I can guarantee our commitment to making sure that our passengers get timely and relevant information.

Simon Buck: The British Air Transport Association represent nine passenger-carrying airlines, all of whom serve Heathrow, Gatwick or other airports around the country. We have been working very closely with the Civil Aviation Authority in an attempt to get an updated passenger rights leaflet to make sure that people are fully up to speed with their rights and whom to speak to during times of major disruption or delay. We hope that will be helpful for passengers, but it is absolutely right that passengers need to have the right information at the right time, and that is what we strive very hard to do.

Q85 Chair: Can Heathrow provide that guarantee?

Derek Provan: Likewise, we can guarantee that our dedicated communications team will provide all information in a timely way to our passengers who are disrupted. We can guarantee that our reservist team of 850 will be in terminal buildings assisting our airlines rebook passengers and find alternative accommodation, keeping them as comfortable as possible at that time. We will ensure that, like British Airways, our staff also have iPads that allow them to do rebooking there and then.

Q86 Chair: But can you guarantee that the information will be there, even if you cannot meet all people's needs?

Derek Provan: Yes. We will have teams in the terminal who will be able to provide our passengers with the most up-to-date information that we can.

Q87 Sarah Champion: Mr Colman, it is great to hear that you have Twitter and all the social media. If you are an older person, or an adult with learning disabilities, that is not going to be of much use to you. You are looking for someone who can help. Can you explain how you have been working, maybe with disability action groups, to make sure your provision will help people who have additional needs?

James Colman: Of course. We have a segment of passengers called PRM passengers—passengers with restricted mobility—the vast majority of whom we hope will pre-register with the airlines before coming so that we can give them a dedicated service. Part of the work we have been doing is ensuring that that particular set of passengers, who perhaps are a bit more vulnerable than others and are not so tech-savvy, is given particular help, guidance and support at times of disruption. That is part of our snow plan and what we do when there is disruption in any case. The challenge arises when passengers with restricted mobility do not register and seek them out, which is why it is incredibly important to have, like Heathrow, a volunteer force that engages with passengers and offers that level of help and support, with timely information to do so.

Q88 Jason McCartney: Mr Provan, you mentioned the winter months. Can I clarify which months you mean by “the winter months? Coming from and representing a Yorkshire constituency, we had incredibly heavy snowfall in April of this year. Which months do you mean?

Derek Provan: November through April, 22 weeks.

Jason McCartney: To the end of April as well?

Derek Provan: Yes.

Q89 Jason McCartney: Mr Buck, my next question is probably for you. We have heard from British Airways about a new management disruption plan, in which they are investing a lot of money. I am particularly interested in the low-cost airlines. My constituents travel from Leeds Bradford airport with Jet2, and Monarch and Jet2 from Manchester airport. What funds and investment are low-cost airlines making in their winter resilience plans? I am thinking particularly about Manchester and Leeds Bradford airports.

Simon Buck: I would draw attention to the fact that resilience is not just a winter issue. We see resilience as being a daily issue that airlines have to manage, be it to do with air traffic control, strikes, technical problems and a whole range of things.

To answer the specific question you ask about low-cost airlines, I take as an example easyJet. I do not know whether or not they count as a low-cost airline these days, but they have improved their system so that all their ground crew have access to the latest information and improved tools available to their ground crew to get better customer expectations. Many low-cost airlines focus specifically on individual airports to see what measures they can take to ensure customers have the information they need, and participate in the group we are chairing within BATA to ensure that we produce a passenger rights information leaflet, for example, which is available to all customers in the event of things going wrong that would give people absolute chapter and verse about what they need to do, what rights they have, whom to speak to and how they can be helped.

Q90 Jason McCartney: I am particularly interested to explore this, because people going on holidays and vacations will be using low-cost airlines. I am concerned that the burden is falling on the more established airlines to provide things like a wifi service, which customers of low-cost airlines might be able to access and maybe then go and see British Airways staff. Could other members of the panel, starting with Mr Colman, tell us about the balance and

contribution that low-cost airlines are making to winter resilience, particularly at your airport?

James Colman: I do not draw a distinction between low-cost airlines and the full service carriers at Heathrow. It is one airline community and everything we do specifically around the snow plan is agreed across the AOC, which is the overarching committee of all the airlines. Each airport will have it. There is not a low-cost option to snow disruption; disruption is disruption, whether it is a low-cost or full-service carrier. The facilities at the airport, be it free wifi, all the volunteering and the customer service element of it, are equal whether you are easyJet or Emirates. One of the successes at Gatwick over the last few years is the fact that we have brought together all the airlines and their ground-handling partners to ensure consistency of approach. That consistency and co-ordinated approach is crucial, whether you are one airline or another. As an example, easyJet have been testing remote de-icing at our airport over the last few weeks and have been very innovative in how they approach it there. Their success is about turn-around time and on-time departure because of the way their model works. This feature of airport life is absolutely critical to them. They would not see it as sub-optimal and not part of what they should do because they are perceived as a low-cost carrier.

Q91 Jason McCartney: Mr Lord, I have read that you are investing £18 million. Do you think the other airlines are stepping up to the plate?

Andy Lord: To be honest, I can't really comment on what the other airlines are doing.

Jason McCartney: Oh, go on; that is what you are here for.

Andy Lord: What I can say is what British Airways are doing. Where we differentiate is in our welfare and provision for our customers prior to, during and post disruption. We have a different business model and focus on how we look after our customers. Our track record is good in that vein. EasyJet are a very good, capable airline, and I know from the engagement we have had through the AOC at Gatwick that they are also taking this extremely seriously. I think that is the only comment regarding other airlines that it would be appropriate for me to make. From British Airways' perspective, our priorities are about our customers and making sure that our operation at the airports we fly to, including Leeds and Manchester, is successful and that we provide the services that our customers expect.

Jason McCartney: You have just restarted the shuttle service between Leeds Bradford and Heathrow.

Q92 Graham Stringer: What percentage of the planes coming into Heathrow and Gatwick can land effectively in zero visibility? How many of them have that kit?

Andy Lord: From British Airways' perspective, 100%.

Q93 Graham Stringer: But you are not 100% of the planes landing at Heathrow and Gatwick. Is it true for all the planes that land?

James Colman: I would have to find out the exact information. What would probably be true is that the kit on the charter airlines during the summer, which fly only during the summer, may well be different from the ones which have year-round services. I would have to get the exact number, but the vast majority of our planes will be fully equipped to

land in all weathers within the safety margins, but there may well be a difference in summer, and I can supply those details to you afterwards.

Derek Provan: The same goes for Heathrow. There may be the occasional aircraft that does not have such capability, but every aircraft landing at Heathrow would be expected to have that capability.

Q94 Graham Stringer: What proportion of the disruption at Heathrow and Gatwick is caused by weather elsewhere on the globe and not here, because planes cannot take off in north America or wherever?

Derek Provan: I do not have percentage figures just now, but we do experience disruption at Heathrow due to weather in en route destinations and sectors.

Andy Lord: I can provide the Committee afterwards with information about the disruption that British Airways incur due to weather at other airports. From memory, during the severe winter weather in January, both Paris and Frankfurt had more disruption than Heathrow and Gatwick. They had almost double the amount of cancellations compared with Heathrow, because they were also badly affected by the winter weather. One critical thing to remember is that we are in a part of the northern hemisphere where all airports suffer from bad weather. At capacity-constrained airports, whether it is Heathrow, Paris or Frankfurt, they all suffer, and the base carriers at those airports would take the larger percentage of the pain.

James Colman: At Gatwick, in January 100% of cancellations were due to issues elsewhere. Gatwick had no cancellations due to operational reasons at the airport itself. All the cancellations happened because aircraft could not leave the airport of origination, so we had a good winter last year because of that.

Q95 Graham Stringer: I do not expect you to have the figures with you, but I—and I suspect the Committee—would be interested to know whether that is a bigger cause of disruption than weather in the United Kingdom.

Andy Lord: From British Airways' perspective, I would need to check the figures for you, but by default—

Q96 Graham Stringer: It would be interesting to know whether the closing down of the eastern seaboard of the United States affects us more than snow or fog here.

Andy Lord: In terms of major incidents, an event on the eastern seaboard would have a disproportionate effect, because the US has a policy of literally closing down for a period of time. It did that for hurricane Sandy, if you recall, round about this time last year. It does it for big snow storms as well. It will literally close the airports and the FAA will mandate it as well, so the airlines have to respond accordingly.

As to general weather disruption, as a result BA at Heathrow get a greater impact across the UK, simply because of the volume of traffic and infrastructure and capacity constraints that we have, but it is similar to what Lufthansa would have at Frankfurt and Air France would have in Paris. They have even more infrastructure, so I would argue that we are better at dealing with it in a constrained environment than they are.

The other matter to bear in mind is the air traffic restriction. Even though 100% of our fleet can land in zero visibility, increased spacing between aircraft on arrival and departure is required, so that, therefore, reduces capacity. So in thick fog conditions there is capacity reduction as well.

Simon Buck: In answer to Mr Stringer's specific question, it is probably pertinent to recall that, between 18 and 21 January, 27% of flights were cancelled at Heathrow, but about 40% of flights were cancelled at Paris. There was significant disruption in Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Zurich and elsewhere, so inevitably there will be some disruption caused at UK airports when there are closures and cancellations elsewhere in Europe.

Q97 Jim Fitzpatrick: Mr Provan, you mentioned that there were 850 reservists—it is also in the written evidence, but forgive me if I did not read it. From where are they drawn? Are they off-duty staff? I know that some come from contractors. It is a very specific number. Do you have a formula to calculate how many reservists you need for each airport? How did you arrive at that figure? Was there a call for volunteers and that was how many came forward, or did you think that was how many you needed to have enough to deal with any contingency?

Derek Provan: Rather than 850 exactly, it is over 850, so we give ourselves room for movement. About a third of that number are our corporate staff who come from the offices to assist, and the rest are third-party contractors we bring in to assist.

Q98 Jim Fitzpatrick: Do they all receive some kind of basic familiarisation and training so that they know what they are doing?

Derek Provan: Year-round they are trained. They are given information. As discussed earlier, we have leaflets on EU261 about passenger rights. Our own staff have iPads to provide up-to-date information. At the start of every shift they are taken in and briefed on the issues at that time, and all of them have either mobile phones or Entel radios so that there is continuous communication throughout the day.

Q99 Jim Fitzpatrick: The term “reservist” was coined by somebody somewhere.

Derek Provan: “Volunteer reservist” seems to be the name.

James Colman: We do not quite call ourselves “reservists”, but we have bears, foxes, leopards and yetis—this is in our evidence—who are drawn from our corporate staff. We have 230 staff trained on the runway kits—we have 107 bits of runway kit, including 12 runway sweepers. They go through training over the summer, as well as on the airside and access side of things. These are our staff. We feel it is important, because it gives us direct control over them, and they are compensated for becoming a yeti or polar bear.

Q100 Chair: You have a title for them. They are not reservists, are they?

James Colman: We do. We call them bears, foxes, leopards and yetis rather than reservists.

Chair: Right; we are discovering some new things today.

Andy Lord: For completeness, from British Airways' perspective, we also draw on colleagues from across the business in our head office. Ours are called the customer response team.

Q101 Chair: Mr Provan, do you have something to add to that?

Derek Provan: For clarity, the reservists discussed are only for the terminal buildings. That does not include the airside teams.

Q102 Chair: Do you have yetis as well?

Derek Provan: We have no yetis on the airside, no.

Q103 Chair: Is the Heathrow demand and capacity balancing group—HADACAB—functioning effectively?

Derek Provan: We have not deployed HADACAB since the snow earlier this year. However, we have created a new protocol that is on trial with the CAA, which is looking at times when we do not have severe disruption of over 24 hours but some form of disruption, like we did two weeks ago in the storm. We deployed that for the first time two weeks ago in those conditions, and, as we discussed earlier, the process worked very well.

Q104 Chair: Mr Lord, do you agree with that?

Andy Lord: I support that. In the past HADACAB has not worked, and that is driven largely by the fact that the airport is unable to mandate it in the same way other airports in Europe can. For example, in Paris the DGCA will mandate capacity reductions. If airports do not comply, they take action against the airlines appropriately. The trial that became a reality during the storm worked very well. There are always things in it that can be fine-tuned. Mr Provan and the team are working with the airline community to see how we can fine-tune that and make sure it is 100% effective going forward. It is absolutely the way forward at a capacity-constrained airport to ensure that we take proactive decisions to give the best possible information to our customers.

Q105 Chair: The Minister told us that airlines have a liability under EU legislation to pay compensation, but that an act of God does not apply. Mr Lord, how confident are you that airlines would not be liable for future claims for cancellations made under a HADACAB declaration?

Andy Lord: We have been in discussions with the CAA, along with our colleagues from Heathrow and the industry. The CAA are looking favourably at that at the moment; otherwise, potentially it could drive the wrong business behaviour. In the UK we are relatively confident that the CAA will take a view which means that, when we take proactive decisions of this nature, we will not be reliant on EU261 and it will be deemed an extraordinary circumstance. It will not negate the requirement on us to comply with our normal compensation and duty of care, which we absolutely do and exceed. The risk is around other EU member states. We would certainly ask for the Government's support in an event of this nature to call on other EU regulatory bodies to take the same view that the CAA appear to be taking.

Q106 Chair: To what extent does your winter resilience planning take account of other modes of transport—road and rail—and access to the airport? What kind of work do you do on those, Mr Provan?

Derek Provan: We work very closely with road and rail bodies before and during any event. Like most of our businesses, we operate gold, silver and bronze command and control. During those times we will be in constant contact with road and rail authorities to understand any impact that may have on the airport's operations.

Andy Lord: From an airline perspective, we do not have any direct involvement with surface transport. We rely on the airport operators and local government agencies to do that, but clearly it is critical that surface access is maintained during any weather disruption.

Q107 Chair: Mr Colman, what about Gatwick?

James Colman: At Gatwick, we have the gold, silver and bronze command situation. In reality, it means that key people from all the different parts of the airport partnership community, including surface access partners, are present at the right level to make decisions. We deploy our plans in consultation and collaboration with surface access partners, including Network Rail and Southern, and buses and taxis.

Q108 Chair: Mr Buck, what is your assessment of how much care is taken on access to airports?

Simon Buck: It is absolutely vital that when an airport declares it is open, it is possible for both passengers and those who work at the airport, or airlines that serve the airport, to reach the airport. It is no good whatsoever declaring a runway open when you cannot get in and out of the airport.

Q109 Chair: But are there sufficient arrangements made to enable that to happen, when it is possible?

Simon Buck: We believe it is absolutely vital that every airport should be working with Network Rail, the Highways Agency and the local authorities to ensure that access to vital transport infrastructure is included in winter resilience planning by the local authority or transport provider.

Q110 Chair: Does that happen?

Simon Buck: Sometimes.

Q111 Chair: How often—occasionally?

Simon Buck: It happens very well in the larger airports but at some of the smaller ones we do not have quite such a track record of success.

Q112 Chair: Next year there will be a new licence condition for regulated airports obliging them to strengthen their readiness for disruption. What difference do you think that will make to the work you are doing now?

Derek Provan: From Heathrow's perspective, any help and assistance we can get from the CAA that helps to reduce disruption to passengers is most welcome.

Q113 Chair: But it will be a condition of the licence that you have to do it; it is not assistance. What difference do you think it will make?

Derek Provan: I think it formalises the protocols that we would have in place. However, some fundamental questions still have to be addressed at this time, and our colleagues are currently working with the CAA to address them.

Q114 Chair: What are those questions?

Derek Provan: For the airport in particular, one of the requirements is for it to make contact with all passengers. However, we do not have the relationship with the passengers. That relationship is with the airlines through the booking system, so that makes the logistical issue of making contact with passengers very difficult. This is a conversation we are having currently with the CAA under the licence agreement.

Q115 Chair: Are there any other issues you are discussing with them?

Derek Provan: Not that I am aware of at this time.

Q116 Chair: Mr Colman, what about Gatwick?

James Colman: Heathrow and Gatwick are at one on this. Similarly, we are working directly with the CAA through the AOA and our trade associations to try to make sure the intent of the planned condition works in practice.

Q117 Chair: Are there any specific issues that you identify?

James Colman: The particular one that Derek highlighted is a matter of practicalities. That is the main one on which we are also focused at the moment through the AOA.

Q118 Chair: Mr Lord, do you have any observations on how the new regulation could make a difference or what difficulties there might be?

Andy Lord: My colleagues are involved in the consultation with the CAA. There is still a lot of work to be done between now and January when the first or final draft is due to be finalised. We would welcome anything that improves the resilience. As to communication with the customer, we need to be very clear about whose responsibility that is. We believe it is the airlines' responsibility, with support from the airport operators. We need to complete the work with the CAA over the coming months, but anything that improves resilience is going to be a positive.

Q119 Chair: Are there any areas you could identify for us where you think there might be a difficulty either about the issue itself or in determining whose responsibility it is to resolve it?

Andy Lord: I do not think there is anything specific, other than that we need to ensure that there is absolute clarity over whose responsibility it is to communicate with the passengers. From an airline's perspective, they are our passengers and customers, and it is absolutely our obligation to do that, with the support of the airport operators. If it was mandated for the airports to communicate directly, that would cause quite a deal of confusion.

Q120 Jim Fitzpatrick: Except that passengers will look to whoever they see in livery or uniform for assistance. There has to be very close co-operation at airport level so that, regardless of who the passenger asks, somebody will be able to point them in the right direction.

Andy Lord: I totally agree with that. We have great experience, from our working relationship with colleagues at Heathrow, Gatwick and elsewhere around the UK, of doing that, but ultimately it is the airline that makes the decision about what service operates or not, depending on the available capacity. We need to ensure that we give that information to the customers at the same time as we give it to our key service partners, so that the service partners who have colleagues in the terminal have the correct and most accurate information. So, if you approach me as a Heathrow colleague, or somebody in W H Smith, or whoever it may be, you have the most up-to-date information.

Q121 Jim Fitzpatrick: Or a reservist.

Andy Lord: Or a customer response team member.

Chair: Or the yetis—I like that one. Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming and answering our questions.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Chris Burchell**, Chairman, National Task Force, **Dave Ward**, Route Managing Director for London and South East, Network Rail, and **Chris Scoggins**, Chief Executive, National Rail Enquiries, gave evidence.

Q122 Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Transport Select Committee. Could we have your names and organisations, please?

Dave Ward: I am Dave Ward, route managing director, south east, Network Rail.

Chris Scoggins: I am Chris Scoggins, chief executive, National Rail Enquiries.

Chris Burchell: I am Chris Burchell, managing director of Southern, but here in my capacity as chairman of the National Task Force.

Q123 Chair: Do you think that the rail industry was justified in cancelling morning services in anticipation of the St Jude storm?

Dave Ward: I will answer on behalf of Network Rail as we made the decision. Whether we were justified in cancelling is a fair question. We had been advised, and had been since Wednesday of that week, that there was a probability or chance of a significant storm hitting the southern half of the UK. We deployed our normal industry process of emergency weather action conferences with train operators on all our routes. We got to about Saturday, when confidence in that storm developing—its track and the severity of the wind—meant that we had breached our standard industry mitigation. Our mitigation for wind in the industry is that, for anything with gusts of 60 to 80 mph, we apply to the network a speed restriction of 50 mph. Principally, that is to avoid any catastrophic collision with fallen debris. It was forecast that there was a strong possibility of gusts in

excess of 80 mph, particularly on the south coast and southern parts of the UK. We have a 90 mph threshold when we have to suspend services.

In discussion with a number of passenger train and freight train operators and the DFT during Saturday and Sunday, we called an industry conference for midday on Sunday, where we got an absolutely up-to-date forecast from our providers, Meteo, which confirmed that the first part of the storm would be significant rainfall throughout the southern half of the UK. The storm would develop and proceed on a north-easterly track from the south-west, through the southern counties and south coast, and gusts would be as they forecast. Indeed, they were saying it was quite probable that gusts would be in excess of 85 mph.

That took us into two territories. We had had a wet period and the ground was fairly sodden and heavy, and trees were still in full leaf. Those of us in the industry know that at that time the threshold for tree damage rises. Therefore, in these conditions, compared with conditions in the winter, tree damage occurs at lower wind speeds, but also the storm was going to be at its strongest during the hours of darkness, because it was forecast that the storm would hit land around midnight/Monday morning.

The industry was faced with its ultimate responsibility. What is our obligation to passengers and our own staff in terms of safety? For every train that becomes incapacitated by fallen trees and debris, we need staff to rescue it. Quite often, we have to use the emergency services to assist. Given that we had a forecast that was being confirmed by a number of forecasting agencies, including our own, we discussed what was the appropriate response to the beginning of services, particularly in the southern half of the UK. We came up with what we thought was an appropriate and fair operating instruction that in any area that had a forecast wind gust in excess of 75 mph we would not start up train services in the hours of darkness. In those areas where train services did not start up, such services would not commence until those routes—i.e. train tracks—had been proven to be operationally safe and free from tree debris. That was how we went into Sunday night/Monday. That decision was made at an industry conference at director level that I chaired and led. It was a unanimous decision by the operators and stakeholders, including the Department for Transport.

We did it at 12 o'clock on Sunday, so we had appropriate time in which to put out that message by television, social media, radio and websites—the guys can speak about how they did that—to give people enough time to make informed decisions about what their service provision would be at start-up on Monday.

Was it appropriate? The final tally of trees removed from the railway south of Peterborough—if you think of the Wash and across the Severn—was just short of 500. On Anglia routes, into Liverpool Street, which were forecast to have winds of 60 to 65 mph, we saw winds in excess of 90 mph, and 232 trees came down and obstructed the railway.

Q124 Chair: What was the cost of the damage caused by the storm?

Dave Ward: The cost of the damage is still being accounted for. Because it was two weeks ago, our priority has been restoration of both the immediate and some of the long-term train services. We will confirm the cost of that damage at some stage, but for infrastructure it is likely to be in the region of £10 million.

Q125 Chair: Mr Scoggins, how did you monitor that National Rail Enquiries were giving the correct information?

Chris Scoggins: We have a team who specifically monitor, correct and adjust the information going out on our channels 24/7, 365 days of the year.

Q126 Chair: What did they do on that particular day?

Chris Scoggins: We had in extra staff over the weekend and through the Monday and Tuesday to make sure we had enough people to cope.

Q127 Chair: Suppose I tell you, Mr Scoggins, that when I was setting out from Liverpool to come to this Committee for a session on bad weather, which did not have the same people we had planned, I telephoned National Rail Enquiries and was told that all the trains were running normally between Liverpool and London. I queried that and was given the same answer. I was surprised but pleased. I went to Liverpool Lime Street station to find that there were no trains running. Staff at the station were extremely helpful, and eventually I did get here; a train did come, but the information from National Rail Enquiries was wrong. Did you know? Was that happening in other cases? It cannot have been only me, can it?

Chris Scoggins: I imagine not. The information was changing throughout the Sunday and Monday morning, so it would depend on exactly when you phoned.

Q128 Chair: But anybody travelling needs to have information in advance. When people are thinking of embarking on a journey, they would not expect to be told that something was operating normally when it was not, would they?

Chris Scoggins: Of course not. All the time during a major incident like this we have a lot of people working to establish what trains are running and what the plans are for the next few hours. We also have people monitoring live phone calls in real time to ensure the quality of the answers being given. I am very sorry for the wrong information that you may have received. While I am sure it was not only you, overall, about 90% of our monitoring calls—I can tell you the precise number by correspondence later—showed that the correct information was being given, and we had customer satisfaction rates above the level we normally record for our calls. I am very sorry that that happened to you. If I am to look into the details, which I am happy to do, I would need to know when you phoned.

Q129 Chair: The point I am making is not simply about me. Wrong information was being given out and it must have been given to other people as well. It does not seem to be reflected in the figures you have got.

Chris Scoggins: As I am sure you appreciate, during a major incident like this, the timetable—what trains are running and what trains are being cancelled—is an evolving situation. We had messages on our call centre and website, as did all the train companies, informing customers that there were severe alterations to train services. Train companies in the south of England had suitable messages displayed on their sites saying there were no plans to run trains before nine o'clock and so on, and the detailed information in the timetable was being updated as fast as possible.

Q130 Mr Sanders: To me, telling people that there are no services on one line when there are services on an alternative line that some could take is not being fair to passengers; it is

one company not wishing to take on responsibility for another that has issued the tickets. That was a problem in the south-west. South West Trains were informing customers not to travel, yet First Great Western, to their credit, were accepting—but not advertising the fact—South West Trains ticket-holders travelling from the Exeter area to London. Should there not be better co-operation and more openness about the fact that one company will look out for another? It does happen. It is in the industry's PR interests for people to know this happens, but there seems to be a reticence to publicise it.

Chris Scoggins: We all have a very strong interest in getting as many people to their destinations by rail, according to their plans, as we possibly can. We like to run trains and have people buy tickets, travel on trains and have a good journey. Across the industry, one thing that has changed since the last hearing in 2010 is that a ticket acceptance procedure, where one train company will accept the tickets of a neighbouring train company to similar destinations, has been agreed by all parties. That has been in place for a couple of years. I cannot comment on that particular example, but I am happy to look into it. There is a policy in place whereby train companies have well-understood triggers. When a situation arises, staff in the station and on the train know what the position is operationally, and when the trigger is activated they will accept tickets from a neighbouring operator.

Q131 Mr Sanders: The staff at the station knew this; they were informing people at the station. Meanwhile, many other people, who had been told they could not travel, would have been able to do so had they gone to the station.

Chris Scoggins: Generally, in that situation we will advertise, on our website and on the websites of a large number of train companies that we feed, that ticket acceptance arrangements are in place between train company A and train company B for those routes. We were doing that on the day. I would have to look into precisely why that was not the case when you looked, but that is certainly the standard procedure.

Q132 Chair: It seems to be another instance where station staff are being very helpful and supportive, but other information sources are not working as they should.

Chris Scoggins: Absolutely.

Q133 Jim Fitzpatrick: There were reports in the media that there was an overreaction to conditions and too many cancellations. The media are always very good at using hindsight to point the finger at people. Mr Ward, you referred to the criteria that you used and the industry conference during which you consulted everybody. It seems you are very confident that you made the right decisions and everything went according to your contingency planning. Subsequent to cancellations and so on, you always have the difficulty that rolling stock is in the wrong place. Can you say a little about the recovery time? Were you happy that services were resumed as quickly as possible across the board, or in hindsight were there difficulties where you might have done better, or otherwise?

Chris Burchell: Perhaps I may start by answering for operators. As Mr Ward said, these circumstances, in which we pre-cancelled a vast number of services, are pretty unprecedented in recent times. From an operator perspective, had we not done that, the recovery of the network would have been considerably longer. Considering that almost

500 trees obstructed the network at different points, had we been operating trains, not only would it have been unsafe because of the risk of trains colliding with trees, or trees falling on to trains but, had they hit the trees, or been impacted by them, they would have been incapacitated. It would have taken considerable amounts of time to rescue them, and passengers would have been stuck on board those trains. So it was absolutely the right decision to cancel.

Having ensured that no trains were trapped on the network, Network Rail was able to focus on simply removing the trees and giving back the network. There is a two-stage process: you clear the tree and then you need to prove the route. Operators, freight companies and Network Rail themselves were working together to go through each line of route and run a first service to make sure the track was clear and safe to operate. As soon as that had been done, operators would operate trains. Generally speaking, for operators in the south of the country train services started to operate from about 10 or half-past 10 in the morning on some lines of route, and then each line would be reopened after that in sequential, prioritised order. If you consider the conditions, the number of trees and the disruption that could have ensued, I think that is a very creditable performance in restoring service.

Dave Ward: To add some context, take the area affected by the storm. Comparators are sometimes meaningless, but the last major storm event most of us can recall was in 1987. It took about six and a half days to restore most of the south-east railway network. The circumstances were different. If you look at where we were on Monday, on Brighton main line we were running trains at 10 o'clock on that morning, and the whole network was restored by half-past two. In the south-east, we were running trains from 10.30, and the whole network was restored by five o'clock in the evening. The same goes for Wessex and South West Trains routes—by Monday afternoon it was open for business. Anglia took the brunt of it. We had not only 232 trees down, but eight places where the overhead line system had been irreparably damaged and needed renewal, but we had the whole of the Anglia route open by Tuesday lunch time and 90% of it was open by tea time on Monday.

All that was due to two things. First, there was immense co-operation between industry partners. Chris talked about trains. Trains had my people on them. They had chainsaws and all the equipment to cut trees as we saw them. We also had freight operators; we had over 500 additional people, whom we had planned to have ready to restore the network. Secondly, we did not have to move and rescue people and trains. From both a safety and recovery point of view, I cannot over-emphasise how critical that was to our restoring the network to full operation on Tuesday morning. We had said on Sunday that, if we did this, we would aim to restore the network on Tuesday morning. By and large, with one exception in Anglia, we did that. We came up short in Anglia only because a tree fell down at 11 o'clock at night and brought down with it the overhead line just south of Ipswich. For the last two weeks, we have seen a number of trees damaged by the storm continue to cause marginal problems.

It is right for people to challenge what we did because, as Chris said, it was a fairly unique decision. I would argue that the circumstances were fairly unique, and sometimes we have to look at the quickest and safest path to restoring full reportable services. It is my belief that that was the case. If I was faced with the same decision in the same circumstances, I would probably tackle it in exactly the same way.

Q134 Graham Stringer: In a way, you have answered in your last comment one of the questions I was going to ask. Is there anything that you could have done better than you did this time?

Dave Ward: We can certainly learn from a number of things. Chris talked about some of the information. We looked at the forecast and put in restrictions. Severe as those restrictions were—there was a lot of empathy for the disruption that would cause to people’s journeys—they were appropriate given the forecast. The reality was that services that came into London from the north were disrupted to the south of Peterborough because of debris and overhead lines. We probably have to look at how far we take that restriction, because we ended up with three or four trains trapped to the north of the capital.

That is at the margin; it is about working through what time of year it is, what the risk factor is and how easy it is. To say to travellers from Liverpool or Manchester, “Your services are not running because of a storm in the south,” would have been a difficult message. We have to learn the messaging of it, but we also need to look at how we plan the restoration of services on Monday. It was good in most places; in some places we were struggling for information about the status of networks. That flows through to what information you can give to passengers, so the big lesson for us is: information.

Chris Burchell: Of course there are things we can always do better. One of the major changes since the Committee last reported on winter resilience is that we have put in place a culture of continuous improvement. We have made big improvements in the way we plan and prepare for severe weather. From the perspective of information, the Chair has highlighted some of the challenges that we face, but a number of positives have come out of the information this time around. Our network systems were put under extraordinary pressure; there was a record level of access to our web systems this time around.

In terms of bringing the incident to life for our passengers and customers, the use of Twitter and other social media was significantly up on this occasion. Across all the Twitter sites—there are train operator, Network Rail and National Rail Enquiries sites—we have just short of 1 million followers—which I think is the technical term. A lot of operators, Network Rail and NRE were using those things to put up pictures of the storm so passengers could see what we were facing and having to deal with. That brought the situation to life. It also allowed passengers to feel that they were having a direct dialogue with the operators as we were preparing and restoring the service. A lot of good things came out of that. To give a couple of examples, the number of followers of Greater Anglia, which was badly affected, and South Eastern went up by about 25% on the back of that day.

There are some lessons. For example, a number of operators declared that they would not be operating services before a certain time: nine or 10 o’clock. That was well broadcast. The use of the media was very good on Sunday to get that message out. Next day, we found that passengers in their thousands were accessing the information systems at exactly the same time the next morning to ask, “Are the services now running?” I do not think anyone intended to say that services would be back to normal by nine o’clock, but that was the message that had been received in a number of cases. That is an example of the language and messaging we use that perhaps we could think about again, as a piece of process.

Because it was such a big incident, we will review this as a matter of course. The National Task Force operators' group will review how we managed the storm from an operational perspective. One of the big culture changes since the last report is that we also review how well we delivered passenger information as an integral part of that operational review. That now happens across the country in our significant incident reviews. That will happen, and any particular lessons that we can learn from that will follow through into individual company action plans.

Chris Scoggins: Can I talk about other areas where we need to improve and learn lessons for the future? We have done a lot in the last three years to improve both the quality and accessibility of passenger information. On this occasion, looking at the National Rail Enquiries site alone, we received nearly double the volume of information requests than we had in our previous record day, which was only in January, so in the course of nine months we have seen a doubling of demand. None the less, we all agree that customers quite rightly want to know what they need to do to get to work before they go to bed the previous evening. In the last couple of years, we have put in a lot of work to make contingency timetables available by nine o'clock the evening before, and we were largely successful in that endeavour on this occasion.

Other areas where we have already invested, or are planning to invest further, include screens on the platforms and in the ticket halls of stations, which currently are fed by 66 different information systems around the country. They are being upgraded and will receive the same feed of information that we also feed to websites and so on, for consistency and accuracy.

Another gap that has been a problem in the past in terms of access to passenger information is "driver-only-operated trains". Usually, it has not been feasible for the driver to make the level of announcements customers would desire. The industry is upgrading the GSM-R radio network drivers on those trains use to enable companies' control rooms to make announcements directly on the train, without the driver being distracted from his key task of driving, to give passengers access to the best information.

Q135 Graham Stringer: Should you have cut down more vulnerable trees before the storm?

Dave Ward: We have about 3 million trees lineside and a large majority of them are not on our property but are close to the boundary. If they collapse, they could cause an obstruction. Cutting down trees is an emotive, difficult thing and at times is perceived as a very unfriendly action. We have a whole host of inspections. When we come across dangerous trees, or trees in distress and in danger of collapse, we cut them. When High Speed 1 was constructed, it was the first one to be free of vegetation, and it was designed to be able to withstand these types of wind force. It is an ongoing debate.

Chris operates a line between Tonbridge and Redhill where we found 36 trees down in a copse in one location. Clearly, we have to do something there and assess what is the best thing to do. This year has challenged us to look again at where we are at with this, but we cannot overestimate the scale of the task in terms of both numbers and what the rest of society expects of us in terms of being a good neighbour and looking after the environment.

Q136 Graham Stringer: I suppose the other way of asking the question is: can you identify vulnerable trees either for pruning severely or cutting down? Would you have been able to tell a week before the storm which were the most vulnerable trees?

Dave Ward: I am not an arborologist and am not qualified to say. I doubt it very much, given the severity of the winds. We have a fairly good and robust process for examining vegetation and trees and those that we think pose a danger and show obvious signs. The storm of Monday just raised the bar. If you plot where the 500 trees were, it was fairly random, and in some cases it was fairly predictable because of density of woodland. There is more work to do. In those areas affected this time which still have dense woodland, we should be working with neighbours or the Forestry Commission to see what the appropriate solution is.

Q137 Chair: The Office of Rail Regulation said it had to step up the pressure on Network Rail to be more proactive on the resilience of railway infrastructure. What do you think we need? What else are you going to do, apart from dealing with trees?

Dave Ward: I am sure that statement is made in the context of the control periods submissions that we did.

Chair: That is right.

Dave Ward: We have given our view of what is appropriate for the industry to spend over the next five years on what we call climate resilience. We have undertaken that by September next year, each part of our business—so, each of my colleagues—will have a climate resilience plan that is part of the determination. We have until February to respond to the final determination that we saw 10 days ago. We will be going through the minutiae of that to see whether it meets our aspirations in the areas in which we think we should be spending. We have just touched on one of them. Others would be around drainage and what we have already presented to the Committee about making the third rail more resilient in terms of climate and weather.

Q138 Chair: What are you going to do about the third rail? What about replacing it with an overhead AC supply? Will that ever happen?

Dave Ward: It is not for me to say it would happen. We have committed resources and concluded the study on what we think it would cost. It is not in the next control period submission. It would be up to the Government and the ORR to decide whether the billions of pounds that it would cost is a good use of public funds. It is simply for us to tell you how much we think it would cost and how long it would take.

Q139 Chair: But you need to prioritise what is needed, do you not? You have put conductor rail heating across the third rail network at locations where trains stop, because that seems most vulnerable. Are there plans to do any more of that?

Dave Ward: In terms of what we have submitted to the Committee and what we have done since we were last here in 2009 after the winter, we have fitted 104 kilometres of conductor rail heating at stations and vulnerable locations. There has been a whole new fleet of snow and ice treatment trains to make it much more resilient. Our focus has been on what we call the adverse days—the majority of days you would see in a typical

winter—and we have also focused on making sure we can clear the network back to operation on extreme days. A fair criticism in 2009 is that we did not have the whys and wherefores to clear high accumulations of snow, particularly when they were thick. We now have a capability that is far in excess of what was ever in the industry before.

We focused on the DC and its vulnerabilities during snow and ice. We are in a much better position now than we were in 2009. In January 2010, on a moderate snow day, Chris's train operator ran 67% of its published train service that day—so, one third were cancelled because they could not get out of the depot, start the journey or were disrupted. The punctuality of that 67% of service was about 33%. In January 2013, on a very comparable day with about two inches of snow across the Downs and Sussex coast, we ran 94% of the planned train service at 80% punctuality.

Q140 Chair: But what do you do to prioritise where the investment is going?

Dave Ward: We prioritise the 10 or 12 days in a typical winter, with moderate snowfall and harsh frost, to ensure that the railway is more resilient and able to cope with that. On the extreme days, the focus has been on our ability to restore the network.

Q141 Chair: What else do you think you could do to prevent passengers from being stranded if the services are disrupted, apart from cancelling them where you feel that is the right thing to do?

Dave Ward: Is that specifically about the third rail or generally?

Chair: More generally.

Dave Ward: The actions that we took on Monday were right at the heart of ensuring that passengers could complete their journeys safely and not be stranded and vulnerable. The actions we have taken on the third rail mean we have ensured that not only have we put in conductor rail heating but there has been an upgrade of the software on the trains and driver intervention. Chris can talk about it more widely. We have now ensured that trains operating on the third rail during snow and ice will not become incapacitated. They have the ability to move. I believe that was the biggest challenge we faced as an industry in the winters of 2009 and 2010. We need to make sure we continue that progress and start to move the bar of what “extreme” is on an adverse day, but there is a need for deep and long thought about what is the appropriate solution south of the river.

Q142 Chair: Mr Burchell, is there any one thing you would learn from the experience of the storm in dealing with the coming winter? Is there anything that you think should be changed on the rail or should be repeated?

Chris Burchell: The storm was very different from what we would normally expect as an extreme day. When we look ahead to winter, operators and Network Rail have been learning continuously over the last three years on our winter plans. There has been significant investment. We have worked together to prioritise where that investment should be. It is not just on the infrastructure; it is also on the trains and around stations, and it is about better equipping our people.

There are always lessons to learn. Our train plans, snow plans and contingency plans get refined every year. If I consider my own company, the snow plan that we are preparing for

this year is slightly different from last year on the basis of lessons learned. We will start a couple of services. There will be longer trains because we think there is a risk on a certain line of route, and certain types of unit will be put together so they run as longer trains to prevent them becoming stranded, because we think they are more at risk. This is a continuous learning process. What you find with operators and Network Rail now is a greater sense of collaboration and purpose, and we put our passengers and staff first.

Q143 Mr Sanders: What preparations do you make in advance of knowing there could be problems, or something going disastrously wrong, to help meet the needs of passengers who themselves could be stranded? I am referring to blankets, food, water and so on. Do you ensure that trains travelling at times of bad weather have extra supplies? In my experience, it is quite the reverse.

Chris Burchell: If we consider the newer trains that in the past have struggled to cope with wintery conditions for various reasons, which I will not go into now, some of the software changes that have been put into place for that fleet have had to be done in co-operation with Network Rail, because the software had been written around signalling equipment, power equipment and so on. But those software changes are quite innovative and are predominantly based to ensure that the train continues to have heat and light in as many of the circumstances that we can expect to face as possible. We may not be able to move the train particularly far, but we will at least be sure we can get heat and light, so we have taken very much a safety risk-based assessment first in our contingency plans. A number of operators will have light sticks; they may put foil blankets in their trains in case a train becomes incapacitated, but our first objective now is not to have trains stranded.

Dave Ward: That is very similar to the Chair's question. Our whole focus has been to ensure that when we come across extreme weather, our capability is to make sure that passengers and staff are in a safe environment. That environment may be one where—it is now very rare—the train is incapacitated. Previously, on the third-rail network in particular, they were incapacitated without heat, power and light. That is no longer the case. Those things are sacrosanct; we have designed the system to ensure they are always in place. We have taken a much more pragmatic approach to balance the risk, and the risk has to be about passenger safety and comfort, as opposed to disparate technical risks that at times worked against each other. We have done that only by working in a collaborative manner and ensuring we have a product we think means that we can operate in 99% of the conditions we find in this country, and that we can do it safely. We put delivery of that product ahead of punctuality and any cost implications at any time. It is about ensuring we can deliver a product so that people can get where they want to safely.

Chair: It is reassuring that there is 99% certainty. Let's hope it is not put to the test. I thank all of you very much for coming to answer our questions.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Councillor Mike Haines**, Deputy Chair of the LGA Economy and Transport Board, Local Government Association, gave evidence.

Q144 Chair: Good afternoon, Councillor Haines. Thank you for coming to the Transport Select Committee. Could you give us your name and in what capacity you appear?

Councillor Haines: I am Michael Haines, deputy chair of the Local Government Association's Economy and Transport Board. I am leader of the independent councillors of Teignbridge district council in south Devon, which is adjacent to your colleague.

Mr Sanders: I thought I recognised you.

Q145 Chair: We are pleased to see you here with no disruptions today.

Councillor Haines: I understand that my colleague Peter Box, the chair, could not get here on the day of the storm.

Q146 Chair: That is right. I do not think there were any trains running.

Councillor Haines: And he was not available today, so you have got me.

Q147 Chair: How well prepared were local authorities for the St Jude storm?

Councillor Haines: I start off with my own county, although I am not a member of that authority. I can use that as an example and extend it from there. I know that in Devon all the partners had teleconferencing and audio conferencing on Friday in advance of the event, and some on Saturday and Sunday. The whole thing was set up with gold command in Exeter and silver in Plymouth and Truro, so the neighbouring county was involved in that. They were live from late Sunday evening, responding to incidents that arose as the storm passed through, which was essentially during the night time hours in Devon. There were over 200 trees down, roads were blocked and so on, and there were people ready with the appropriate equipment to respond to incidents. Only one tree, which was a very large one somewhere in east Devon, seemed to take a particularly long time; otherwise, it was not causing closures for as long as that one. I think the response was good. My own authority as a district were not called upon for any particular interventions, but they were ready and used it in the end as a learning exercise because they did not have to respond on this occasion.

I have examples of other counties and unitary authorities across the country. In Norfolk, lots of people were available with chainsaws and whatever might be required to clear it, so they were working during the day; and highway rangers in Norfolk were diverted from their routine maintenance to deal with issues. Similarly, Medway mobilised highway contractors and waste and cleaning contractors to be available during the period when the storm came through. In Hampshire, accredited community safety officers were on hand to provide extra manpower if required. Wiltshire cleared more than 200 trees and branches, and there were crews with chainsaws there. I was talking to colleagues from East Sussex this morning at an event I was attending at Local Government House. Councillors were talking about all the equipment they had if people needed accommodation—blankets, refreshments and so on—so all of that was ready. The message is that councils were well prepared and responded as required, as one might expect and certainly as has been my experience in the past.

Q148 Chair: The Local Government Association have carried out a survey into winter preparedness. Can you tell us anything about what you found?

Councillor Haines: Not on the recent event.

Q149 Chair: Looking at the coming winter.

Councillor Haines: The final findings of that will not be available until the end of this month. We have not had all the responses in yet. We have had a sizeable number, and I can certainly give some indications of those, if you wish. Last year, a similar survey was itemised in our written response to the question. You have last year's, but as for this year, perhaps you can bear with us until the end of November. We will then have all of the respondents who are getting back to us.

Q150 Chair: What about improving resilience generally? Have the cutbacks in local government funding made this more difficult to achieve?

Councillor Haines: Inasmuch as all the salt stocks as they currently stand are at levels that would have dealt with the very bad winter of a few years ago, you might think that it has not, but, as time goes on and we get into next year and the year after, it will bite that much more, depending on the nature of the winters we have between now and then. If we have a mild winter this year, it will perhaps put it off for another year, but the problem is that it is getting gradually worse and worse. As I am sure you are aware, we are looking at cuts in grant to local government of 43% over the period of this Government, and that will make matters worse.

I can give another example from Devon, of which I am aware. I read an executive report from last month. The bad flooding events that occurred last year meant that Devon had to pay out about £12.2 million for repairs, landslip, roads and so on. Of that, they got £3.1 million from Bellwin. They used £3.6 million from their reserves, which have been put aside for emergency repairs of that nature, and they are looking at a shortfall of about £4.4 million, which they will have to try to fund over the next four or five years.

The message there is important. They have used the available money for that, so they do not have the reserve they had previously for these types of events. Other authorities will be in a similar situation. You have the diminishing amount of money we are getting from the Government, plus on average a 5.8% cut in council tax in real terms. The money is going down; often, the reserves have already been used up on recent events; and you are having to carry forward things to repair over the coming years.

In addition, because we have had to spend money on those items we are not able to spend it on things we would rather spend it on, such as investing in local business and getting the economy to improve again. That is the picture I would paint. Things are just going to get worse. The cuts are having, and will have, an effect, and we will be letting down our communities because we will not have the resources available to deal with these sorts of episodes as and when they occur in future.

Q151 Mr Sanders: Although my constituency is not covered by Devon county council, I was incredibly impressed by both the quality of the information being given to the media in advance of the storm and the response of the council, alongside Exeter city council, particularly in the Exeter area, to the debris that had to be cleared, and also the liaison between Devon and the neighbouring county of Cornwall. Does the LGA encourage that level of co-operation both because weather patterns do not recognise county or district

boundaries but also because of cost efficiencies? Does the LGA have a briefing note for different local authorities on this basis?

Councillor Haines: On the day of the storm, I was not in Devon but in Manchester, so I cannot share your view, although when driving up to Manchester I was impressed by the Highways Agency. They had storm warnings on all their screens, so we knew what we were getting away from.

As to co-operation between councils, the LGA does promote it. I was talking to a Cornwall county councillor colleague earlier today—if he is still there, I hope to see him at Local Government House when I get back after this event. There is co-operation; we do promote it, but it is local, isn't it? It will depend on local circumstances, and it is for local councils to decide how they should co-operate and who their partners are. In that case, Cornwall and Devon very much work together with the Highways Agency and the other emergency services, because there is a need to do so. We recognise that is the case. As to a specific document promoting that, I cannot think of one off the top of my head.

Q152 Chair: What about pedestrians? When we look at adverse weather we often focus on keeping main roads open and look at strategic highways. What about those who just need to get out of their own homes and walk down the street, and find they cannot because it is iced up or there is skidding?

Councillor Haines: There is a priority in terms of routes being cleared and the order in which you need to do it. Clearly, the main highways would be first. Interestingly, thinking of innovation, I have information that Brighton and Hove has a piece of kit that clears footpaths, so it is looking at pedestrian mobility. It would be useful to find out how successful that would be.

Q153 Chair: Is this something new?

Councillor Haines: I do not know whether the contraption itself is new, but it has been reported to me that it has what is called a Unimog vehicle, as it is termed. It is a new sit-on Unimog, which is used for clearing pavements. We will learn from that, and that can be spread to others.

In my own area, since the bad winter, parish councils in Devon have got their own snow wardens and schemes in place to make accessible areas that are not on the main routes, and that would include benefits for pedestrians as well. When I walked round my ward the day before yesterday, all the salt and grit bins were full, and bags had been delivered to one of my parishes around and about. That can be done locally. A report showed that 42% of the public surveyed indicated they would be prepared to help clear footpaths.

My mind goes back to 1963. I can remember piles of snow along the side of footpaths that were there for about six weeks, or whatever it was. People are happy to do it as well because they recognise that the council has a limited resource, and it is becoming even less as we go on. These days, there is concern about people helping to clear footpaths. I would be happy to do the one outside my house, but the concern is possible litigation if you do something and people slip where you have cleared. Some sort of guidance on that might be useful. There is a lot of will out there. Councils can do only so much. Parish councils and the public certainly can do more if they are reassured and encouraged to do so.

Q154 Jim Fitzpatrick: You have a great memory. In 1963, you could not have been long out of primary school at that point.

Councillor Haines: I was in primary school.

Q155 Jim Fitzpatrick: What you and Mr Sanders have said about the good performance during the course of the storm is all very reassuring. You made reference back to the bad winter and the criticism of local and central Government about salt stockpiles, which seems to have been addressed. Are there any lessons from the recent St Jude storm that need to be learned, because it sounds as though most of the arrangements were in place to deal with it adequately or at least satisfactorily? Can you say a little more about the volunteers? Are these just members of the public who are putting themselves forward to assist in the event of a very difficult experience with the weather?

Councillor Haines: As far as lessons learned from the recent event, I have not yet heard of any major things that did not get covered, but I will be speaking to the emergency planning officer of my own authority when I catch up with him. I do not think there are any major lessons learned on this occasion, but you could argue that we were fortunate in the nature of the storm, in that it did not turn out to be as severe as might have been the case, thinking about the ones in 1987 and 1990, but if there are lessons to be learned, they will be disseminated.

Q156 Jim Fitzpatrick: You mentioned that hundreds of trees came down. The equipment and staff must have been in place to deal with that; otherwise, we would have read in the press that it was not addressed.

Councillor Haines: Staff or contractors were available to clear things as and when they were reported, but inevitably there will be a time lag between the report coming in and people being able to get out and address it. Unless you have a contractor on every road, which would be far too expensive, there is perhaps a balance in resource terms.

As to the volunteers you are talking about, two parishes in my ward are in rural areas. People living in those areas on the parish councils and others, through the parish council, have taken on the responsibility in future, should it be required, to spread salt and grit in areas where it is needed, rather than just leaving it in the bins for any member of the public to do it on their own initiative. There are plans in place in rural parishes in my ward and, I am sure across Devon, and many other parts of the country now have similar schemes in place.

Chair: Thank you very much, Councillor Haines.