



Transport Select Committee

Oral evidence: Operation Stack, HC 496

14 October 2015

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 14 October 2015.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Mrs Louise Ellman (Chair), Robert Flello, Mary Glindon, Karl McCartney, Mark Menzies, Huw Merriman, Will Quince, Iain Stewart, Graham Stringer

Questions 1-89

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Natalie Chapman**, Head of Policy, Freight Transport Association, **Peter Cullum**, Head of International Affairs, Road Haulage Association, and **Tim Waggott**, Chief Executive Officer, Port of Dover, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Transport Select Committee. Mr Flello has an interest to declare.

Robert Flello: Yes. I have a member of staff funded by the RHA.

Chair: Would the witnesses give their names and positions for our records?

Tim Waggott: I am Tim Waggott, chief executive officer of the Port of Dover.

Natalie Chapman: I am Natalie Chapman. I am head of policy for the London and the south-east for the Freight Transport Association.

Peter Cullum: I am Peter Cullum from the Road Haulage Association. I am head of international affairs.

Q2 Chair: How does Operation Stack affect the haulage industry?

Natalie Chapman: It has had a huge impact, particularly this summer, because of the scale and duration of Stack. We have seen it in place on odd occasions for many years, but we have never seen the scale and duration that we had this summer and it has had a huge impact on our industry. It has had impacts on the drivers caught in the queue and also for goods that they are carrying. At its worst, vehicles were queueing for over 24 hours, so there were some products that did not make it to market because they went off in the queue. There were others that arrived so late that there were late penalties. There were particular issues around things like express courier deliveries that are very time-sensitive. Again, they did not make it to market in time.

Of course there is the impact on drivers who were caught in the queue. At the end of the day, it is a queue and they are moving. There are some portaloos along the roadside but there is not a lot in the way of facilities. Closing the M20 southbound for about 28 days in June and July, and on some occasions northbound as well, had huge impacts on local businesses. We heard from local hauliers who were nothing to do with the queue and who were not necessarily sending vehicles across the channel but yet were caught up. It had a big impact on their vehicles getting to site and their staff getting to work. It also impacted other local businesses.

Q3 Chair: Is it possible to separate the impact of Operation Stack from the disruption for the cross-channel services themselves? Is that distinction possible?

Tim Waggott: The first point to make from my perspective is that of course the port of Dover was not shut throughout the entire period of Operation Stack. You can separate the fact that we kept running through to Dunkirk throughout the entirety of the period. The situation started when we were faced with industrial action in Calais, and that quickly moved towards creating a problem at the Eurotunnel terminal as well, as striking ferry workers entered the terminal at Coquelles. Therefore the disruption in terms of the haulage community depends on where goods are heading to and from.

There are certain nodes that are open for a period of time and you can still get goods to market through one route, but ultimately the loss of capacity with Operation Stack means that everybody gets caught up in the particular predicament, because they cannot get to market or to the ports that are the gateways to Europe. Therefore the important part that we need to look at is how we maintain resilience for those trade flows. That is the single biggest important economic activity that we undertake through the route.

Q4 Chair: How wide is the impact?

Peter Cullum: It is nationwide. The key point to remember is that Stack is a symptom of something that has happened elsewhere, whether it be a storm in the channel, a tunnel fire or, as was the case this summer, industrial action. Those who are further away will already be looking at alternatives, literally as soon as the word gets out that there is a problem and they make a judgment. The bigger operators will have access to warehousing and partners in other parts of Europe where they may be able to use alternative trade flows. If they are importers they may be looking for extra warehousing, but it is terribly inefficient and requires day-by-day management. As has been said, the issue is that, if the product is time-sensitive, it has all sorts of implications up and down the trade chain. Everybody, from Northern Ireland to the north of Scotland, was making adjustments as soon as Stack was called, as they do all the time. As soon as it is called, they start looking for alternatives.

Q5 Chair: Do you think Operation Stack can be improved, or should an entirely different approach be taken?

Peter Cullum: The people I have spoken to are always looking at alternatives. Therefore this particular incident was perhaps a wake-up call. The recession reduced the incidence of Stack and reduced its severity. What was significant this time was the rate at which traffic built up and the fact, as has been said, that Stack 3 was invoked for the first time, certainly in the last 10 years. With Stack, we had been planning in the order of 3,000 or 3,500 trucks maximum. We got up to nearly 7,000, literally overnight. That means to say that

everybody is looking at alternatives for the short, the medium and the long term, but to say that Stack is not part of that process would be unwise. From our perspective there needs to be a longer-term solution for Stack. If you look at the growth predictions, some time before 2030, trade flows, if they carry on as they are going, will be 50% bigger than they are now.

Q6 Robert Ffello: There are a couple of things I want to come back on, if I may. First of all, there is the issue around the costs and implications for businesses. Do you have any sense of what the impact would be in terms of the cost of the additional fuel for lorries crawling forward at slow speeds, and also the environmental damage it would do?

Natalie Chapman: It is very difficult to quantify the costs. We have done some number-crunching, and we have come up with a figure of about £750,000 a day. That is just the cost to the UK lorries that are physically in Stack. That is only about 15% of the lorries in Stack, because the vast majority are foreign registered. It also does not include the vehicles that are caught up in the diversion routes of Stack that are nothing to do with the queue. It does not include consequential losses.

Most of the time while the vehicles are in Stack they are stationary, but of course it is a queue and the queue does move forward. That is part of the problem for drivers in the queue, because it causes havoc with the drivers' hours rules. They are probably not stationary long enough to take their statutory breaks, so we need to find a better solution that can accommodate that as well. That is the figure that we have come up with. There are probably wider knock-on effects to the wider UK economy. It is quite difficult to quantify, because how far do you go with the consequential losses?

Q7 Robert Ffello: But it is almost certainly in excess of £1 million a day.

Natalie Chapman: Easily, yes.

Q8 Robert Ffello: Mr Waggott, I want to pick up on something you said as well in terms of maintaining resilience. It sounds to me as if there is no resilience, so in terms of maintaining resilience that has already gone out of the window. As a supplementary to that, could you remind the Committee how long Operation Stack in its various forms has been going? I think it was introduced as a temporary measure some time ago.

Tim Waggott: Operation Stack in one form or another has been around since as far back as the '90s. We have seen an unprecedented level of activity over recent months just because of circumstances. As Mr Cullum said, we had a situation which was very unusual and caused significant delay.

Picking up your point, resilience is all about keeping the trade route open. My analogy, as a bit of a cricketer, would be that you are setting a field for a bad bowler if you are thinking about what the contingency measure is. That is actually a symptom rather than the cause of the problem. The cause of the problem is that the major trade route was not open, so our efforts in terms of fluidity and free-flowing networks to enable the economy to function are actually keeping France open, in three words. From our perspective that means we have to look at investment in resilience and look at what we are doing in terms of the key routes that feed the port of Dover and Eurotunnel.

In terms of the amount of trade that they handle, the growth through Dover in 2014 was more than the next biggest ro-ro port in the land does in a year. That is just the growth through Dover, and that is the scale of the issue. I think resilience is all about feeding those routes, keeping the trade routes open and thinking about reducing existing bottlenecks such as the Dartford crossing and progressing quickly towards a third Thames crossing. Feed the routes and ensure they stay open, rather than saying that the contingency plan needs to be in place. It was lawless activity that put us in need of that contingency plan. Peter mentioned the weather; very few experiences in my eight and a half years at Dover have led to weather closing the port of Dover or the port of Calais.

Peter Cullum: To give an example, in 2005 we had at the same time a fire in the channel tunnel, storms in the channel itself and there was an industrial dispute in Calais. It did not have the same effect as this July or August.

Q9 Chair: Mr Waggott, are the concerns you have just expressed recognised by Government, as far as you are aware?

Tim Waggott: I think the concerns are recognised. The experiences of this summer in terms of the partnership working that has been undertaken and the way in which whole partners have started to work together to find what the solutions might be means that, yes, we are being recognised. I think people are starting to understand better than they have done in the past the importance of this trade route to the UK economy.

At the end of the day, this is about communities. It is all about the community of Dover. It is about the community of Kent and our partners there. It is about the communities elsewhere in the UK where people are actually relying on this trade route for jobs. Say we are building gear boxes in the midlands to go out to other production lines where they are manufacturing cars, in Germany maybe. If they cannot get to market, how long are we going to keep those contracts? How long will it be before they are lost to Poland, Latvia or somewhere else? For me, that is what is important in all of this debate: that we recognise the importance to UK plc of this trade route.

Q10 Chair: It is a national concern.

Tim Waggott: It is a national and not a local issue—absolutely.

Q11 Karl McCartney: I want to pick up on that point, because it is a very salient point for us in government and those involved in Parliament to listen to what you have to say about companies—not just in the UK, but right across Europe—that are being affected. **We do not want Stack to be a permanent proposition but it looks like it is going to be for now. This is really for the port of Dover, but the other panellists might also like to answer. What is the solution that is more long term? Is a solution taking away some of the freight that arrives in this country or leaves this country, or extending the lines? It is a different gauge but anything can be engineered. We need to look at where we put the freight, because at the moment all those people in that part of Kent, going right the way back along the M20 and the M2, are going to be affected every time this happens. From what you said, Mr Cullum, it is not going to be every five or 10 years; it could happen every time there is an incident, given that the amount of freight is going to increase over the coming years.**

Natalie Chapman: First and foremost, as Tim mentioned, we have to keep the wheels of industry turning. We have to keep this route open. This is a contingency for when,

inevitably, things happen and things go wrong. Certainly, the biggest issue this summer was about the industrial dispute that took place with MyFerryLink workers. We have more industrial action taking place today. As far as I am aware, Operation Stack is not in place today, but it is having an impact on that trade route today because of a different group of workers taking industrial action. We need to look at solving the problems at source. Clearly, if it is weather-related there is probably a limited amount that we can do, but industrial action by French workers is something that must get resolved.

When we look at having Operation Stack in place, it will happen because there is a lack of resilience in the network. We are seeing month-on-month increases in freight flows through both the port of Dover and Eurotunnel, because the UK economy is improving and we are buying more and exporting more, which is great. We have to keep that open, but it does mean that we have a lack of resilience. In the longer term, first and foremost, we need to keep the M20 open. Completely closing it is just unacceptable. We have to keep it open; it is a key part of our strategic road network. Ideally, if we could find some kind of off-carriageway solution, to give drivers some welfare facilities and allow them to sit for long enough to take their breaks so that they are not constantly moving forward, that would be helpful. We also need to make sure that any solution allows fluidity, so as soon as there is capacity available either at the port or at Eurotunnel we need to make sure that we are releasing those lorries.

Q12 Karl McCartney: I am going to interrupt you there. That is a very large sticking plaster. You are still going to be parking a load of lorries somewhere in Kent rather than dealing with the problem that is not going to go away in five or 20 years.

Natalie Chapman: It does not necessarily have to be in Kent. What we know is that we have a day-to-day lack of overnight lorry parking facilities in Kent, but also elsewhere in the UK. A potential solution could be linking up a network of lorry parks. If we make more lorry parks available, that will help deal with the day-to-day problems that we have but also provide a solution for Stack. A lot of people have asked me why it is, when Stack is in place, that all the lorries still head for Kent. The answer is that in order to get across the channel you have to be in the queue, and to be in the queue you have to be in Kent.

Q13 Karl McCartney: My question is hinting at maybe looking north of the Thames and having a huge lorry park where they could get on the tracks and go straight to Eurotunnel. Is that not an option you would look at?

Natalie Chapman: Potentially.

Peter Cullum: Can I try to put it in a different way? It depends what you are trying to do. One of the key factors is that you must be close to the ports to be able to call them forward. The major inefficiency is if the carriers across the channel are not full. Therefore they have to be accessible to that. Ideally, they have to be off-road. They have to be able to be managed by the controlling authority properly to avoid non-compliance and you have to provide decent facilities for the drivers, because, as Natalie said, the shunting forward was solved by allowing the drivers to work harder and rest less. That is not sensible. Therefore an off-road solution is, for us, a sensible way to go. It is not either/or because there are pluses and minuses to both. The difficulty with having a family of truck parks is calling them forward, bearing in mind that the further back they are, the more they will be used for traffic for other purposes than Stack. It is not a bad idea, but I think you have to look at it objectively and look at the pluses and minuses.

Tim Waggott: I want to pick up one point in terms of substitutable capacity. The amount of through rail freight that currently goes through Eurotunnel is about 1.2 million tonnes a year. That is exactly the same as used to go through a train ferry through Dover. Dover currently handles about 26 million tonnes of ro-ro freight a year. There is not the substitutable capacity anywhere in the land to handle the total volume that goes through Dover and Eurotunnel. It is a total of 4 million lorries a year. Outbound that is 10,000 lorries a day. Ten thousand lorries a day would stretch nose to tail from Dover, all the way round the M25 and up the M11 to Stansted airport. That is the scale of what we are dealing with.

Freight volumes are currently above 2014 levels. Freight volumes through Dover and Eurotunnel have grown by over 20% over the last two years as the economy recovers. You cannot bring on-stream capacity to take road to rail or other port facilities in time to deal with that level of activity. It is just simply impossible in terms of the planning horizon and the delivery on the ground.

Q14 Karl McCartney: It is quite a pessimistic view.

Tim Waggott: I'm sorry. The point I am rehashing with you is that the system, when it remains open, is a production line which works really efficiently. We had this huge hiatus through the summer, yet within 10 days we were back to normal. We were operating at record volumes, above the level of 2014. P&O, one of our operators, have just released their busiest quarter since 2003, despite the issues of the summer.

Q15 Chair: You are saying that recovery can be quite fast.

Tim Waggott: Recovery is very quick. It is about keeping that trade route open.

Q16 Karl McCartney: But in your own evidence you said that the examples this summer have harmed our economy. Say that it happens twice next year and three times the year after, where are the companies going to go—

Tim Waggott: The onus has to be on Government to keep our principal trade routes with our principal trading partner, which is Europe, open.

Q17 Iain Stewart: My questions follow from the comments you have just made. When the tunnel or port of Dover is constricted for whatever reason, do we make enough use of other cross-channel routes from Harwich, Newhaven and Portsmouth? How efficient are the arrangements for redirecting traffic in the short term to those other ports?

Tim Waggott: I am a port operator, not a logistics company. Broadly speaking, the capacity does not exist. You have to compare and contrast. Those other ports where there are ro-ro facilities, because of the distance between the UK and the continent, operate one or two sailings a day; probably at peak time when it is linked to tourists. There may be three or four. Even through the winter and the current situation, with two ships off the route as they are being re-badged as DFDS—the former MFL vessels—Dover is still operating between 50 and 60 sailings a day. At peak that is going to be back to between 60 and 70 sailings a day, all of which uplift 100 freight vehicles.

Peter Cullum: To give you an idea of just pure numbers, the maximum efficiency for Dover/Calais is 16 crossings. The next ferry route further west has six, and that is purely

because of transit time. We have an unusual shaped coast and it just so happens that for the last 8,000 years Dover/Calais has been the closest place to Europe, and it always will be as far as we are concerned.

Q18 Iain Stewart: I understand the reasons why the Dover/Calais route is the preferred one, but as a short-term solution when there is—

Peter Cullum: You are trying to put 80% of the demand into 20% of the capacity.

Q19 Iain Stewart: I accept that, but my question is whether there is any way of redirecting some of the ships to alternative ports and then redirecting traffic to them.

Peter Cullum: Alternative routes were found but they were found at less frequency. One or two routes used the Republic of Ireland, but again it was one or two sailings a week. It helped one or two people, but if it was going to help everybody, nobody would have gone down to Kent. I think that is a physical demonstration of what is needed.

Q20 Iain Stewart: I accept that there is not the capacity to take off all the blocked traffic that is coming through, but do we make enough use of what is available? Are there alternative arrangements?

Tim Waggott: With respect, the ships do not exist either to go to the other routes.

Q21 Iain Stewart: But I am talking about the crossings that are already there. It will not be the complete solution. My question is whether we make enough use of what is there.

Tim Waggott: Absolutely. What happens is that logistics providers that have time-sensitive goods and must get those goods to market pick other routes. They fill the capacity of those other routes. P&O have a North sea service. The growth on that through this period of time was 170%, but that equates to 17,000 lorries. That is two days of Dover traffic and that is through an entire quarter. The ships are specific to that route. They have been specifically designed for that route to mix tourist and freight traffic on the same ships to maximise the yield, to enable the economy to function and to provide the service at a price the haulage community is prepared to pay. That goes to the nth degree in terms of the economics of what we pay on the high street for our goods and services. That is why this trade route and keeping it open is of such paramount importance to the UK economy.

Q22 Huw Merriman: I will try not to build too much on Mr Stewart's questions, but I do not think we have quite got there, in the sense that you have described that there is so much traffic coming into one concentrated point. There are always things that can go wrong, so you always need a contingency. Ms Chapman and Mr Cullum, are you pushing towards having ports that can also scale up so that they can meet this type of contingency?

Peter Cullum: The key words are "scale up". Ships cannot scale up. It takes x years to build a ship and it takes x months to order it. Then you have to run it at a profit. The point about trucks is that you can turn them off or turn them on very quickly. They are infinitely flexible. That is where they provide a competitive edge. Scaling up means, therefore, could you scale up the channel tunnel? It would take a while. Yes, you could, but the timescales involved would be that much longer.

Q23 Huw Merriman: I am sorry to interrupt you, but are you saying that you could not get the same freight out of Harwich as you could out of Dover?

Peter Cullum: Right now, no—absolutely not.

Q24 Huw Merriman: Why, faced with a huge queue in Operation Stack on that motorway, wouldn't your members go off to Harwich?

Peter Cullum: For one very good reason: we are not talking about one truck fleet. What a lot of people do not understand is that there are at least four or five. Let me give you some examples. There are those who are foreign operators. Nearly 90% of all cross-channel commercial traffic is foreign registered. Why do they want to leave the UK? Either because they have a load back into Europe or because they want to get out as fast as possible because they are empty and they want to get another job back in France, Germany or wherever it is.

Then you have supermarkets, big importers, who are running, essentially, a shuttle service between their major depots in Europe, particularly in Germany, and back into the UK. Amazon or one of the express parcel carriers has one of those big centres. It only has one centre in Europe. It goes in there and then it goes out to the UK, as indeed it goes everywhere else. You have a whole range of truck fleet dynamics. If you say to them the answer is Harwich, some of them will say, "Yes, that is great; where is the ship? I'm ready and I'll go." Others will say, "No, I don't want to do that because I can't afford the extra money it costs and all I want to do is get home."

Q25 Huw Merriman: Ms Chapman, you mentioned that you had not seen anything like this year—I won't say a one-off—but if you work on the basis that this could occur again, surely you will need to think in a more expansive manner; or maybe you do not and you think this is a one-off in the way that we perhaps deal with severe bouts of snow. I will move on from that particular point and ask more about a solution.

Chair: I think Mr Waggott wanted to say something.

Huw Merriman: I can recognise that Mr Waggott—the port of Dover—is not going to look at other ports around the country as a solution.

Tim Waggott: Could I say, Mr Merriman, what we have done in terms of creating additional capacity within the port? We are already nearly at the end of producing an additional 220 freight spaces within the port. Our western docks revival gives us the opportunity over time to create another 300 within the port. That is actually two hours of arrival in traffic at peak. It can deal with the normal demand. What it cannot deal with, again, and what none of us can deal with, and nowhere in the UK can deal with, is our principal trading partners' gate being closed. That is the reality of the situation that we face.

Q26 Huw Merriman: I recognise that, so perhaps I can move on. Let us take your premise that it needs to be in this particular part of Kent. Therefore one of the solutions raised is Manston, yet reading through the brief I see that most authorities do not believe that Manston would work, because if you are going to end up with a park then the operators will

just park on the M20 as they do at the moment. First, should they even be allowed to have that choice? Secondly, why doesn't Manston work?

Natalie Chapman: Manston is only a short-term measure—very short term, we hope. It is far from ideal. I suppose it is the best of a bad bunch of options; the alternative is that we completely close the M20 and that simply cannot happen again. We cannot allow that to happen. Manston is not ideal and I am sure that some of the other witnesses will explain their concerns about Manston as well.

Highways England were tasked with looking at the potential for contraflow on the M20 to see if we could at least keep that partly open, but it was felt that that was not safe enough. Other options had been worked through before Manston was finally announced, in the absence of anything else. No, it is not ideal, and certainly I do not think it is something we should be relying on in the long term. In the long term we need to try to solve the causes of Operation Stack—looking at better resilience and better capacity, but also solving the issues around industrial disputes in France that impact on one of our most important trade routes into the UK.

Peter Cullum: The facility as it stands is actually quite reasonable, given that we were not talking about good facilities in the first place. It has space and it has facilities for drivers. All being well, it would allow people to rest properly instead of being shunted. That is good. However, the difficulty is access to and from it, bearing in mind that it is that much further away from the port of Dover. They want to fill the ferries to capacity, and we would support that. That is what Eurotunnel say and we agree with them.

The other thing is that we will not use it unless we are really getting desperate again. It is a stage 3 option. There is the transit from the roads to the airfield, bearing in mind that the Kent residents who experience it will be new to this. It will not happen in the summer time in broad daylight as happened this year. It will happen in winter in the dark when there is horizontal rain. Therefore will the local community be able to adjust to that? I certainly hope so because all the planning is based on that assumption. That will require command and control from the Kent police and the local authorities themselves. Manston itself as a facility is okay, given that we were not starting from a very high base, but in terms of a permanent solution, Natalie is absolutely right—we have to think of something more sensible.

Q27 Chair: Is there any alternative to Operation Stack itself? Should the Government be supporting local authorities, port authorities and the tunnel authorities in alternative works? Is that a physical possibility?

Peter Cullum: If you take our priorities, Chair—close to the ports for access, close for command and control and close to fill up the ferries—at the moment the answer is that the M20 option is the best. For stages 1 and 2, that is what it is being used for right now. It is not a good solution; of course, it's not. We need something off the road. Where that will be is a matter for higher authorities to develop, but it has to fulfil the requirements. It has to be close; it has to be good for command and control; and it has to provide good driver facilities. If it does not do that, we are no better off.

Q28 Will Quince: I want to check on that point. Are you in favour of lorry parks on the M20 or not?

Peter Cullum: On or off?

Q29 Will Quince: Immediately off the M20.

Peter Cullum: All we are saying is that if you want to free up the M20—we wouldn't disagree with that, of course—what is the alternative? The alternative is something that fulfils our requirements: close to the ferries to ensure efficient use of the ferries, which means it has to be off-road. Where will it be? Other people are looking at that right now.

Q30 Will Quince: What I hear are relatively mixed messages coming from the ports about whether we want lorry parks immediately off the M20, or whether we should just be investing in the A2 and the A256. Are you serious about saying that we want lorry parks?

Peter Cullum: We are looking at it from a different perspective. For a start, we don't control the logistics agenda; our customers do. The supermarkets, manufacturers and so on want just-in-time. We all run on just-in-time now. Nobody has the option to be late on delivery. If you are late on delivery you don't get paid. It is as simple as that, or pretty much. Therefore we want to be close to our point of departure. As Mr Waggott said, that means they want to make maximum use of the ferry capacity. That means we have to be close. The further away we are, the greater the time lags and the greater the slippages in command and control. It a logistics exercise.

Q31 Will Quince: In terms of the port, are you in favour of lorry parks just off the M20 or do you think other options are better?

Tim Waggott: We need to buy ourselves some time. The challenge is where are we and what problem are we trying to solve? Are we trying to solve the one-off instance that we have actually had this summer, where we had Operation Stack phases 3 and 4 in place for the first time? Operation Stack phases 1 and 2, which use the coast-bound carriageway of the M20, is not the bit that causes enormous gridlock, as we saw this summer.

You are quite right that we have suggested that there is an opportunity to use areas of the A256 and the A2, in addition to the work that we have done in partnership with Highways England and the DFT over the last 12 months to keep the town of Dover clear of traffic and stop it being gridlocked by holding traffic on the A20. By making use of existing carriageways and potentially investing in and improving those roads, they can increase network fluidity for the long term, potentially, and also provide close to the port, to echo the words of the haulage community, facilities that are nearer to the point of departure.

If you take it from the perspective of all of us when we go travelling, when we check in we want to be as near as we can to our point of departure before we stop. That makes us feel better about where we have gone. The logic, however, is that if we feel, once we have done all the data processing, that an off-road lorry park, as a contingency measure, is good economic value, it needs to be on the M20 and it needs to be west of Eurotunnel so that both Eurotunnel and port traffic can be taken offline there.

Q32 Will Quince: It is interesting to hear you say that. Certainly around the A2 and the A256, you will be well aware of the knock-on effect that that will have on the communities that currently use those roads. I have had concerns for some time about the port's—and indeed Eurotunnel's—reluctance to push for lorry parks off the M20. Is that because you are worried about being asked to contribute towards that?

Tim Waggott: That is market intervention; that solution is an issue for Government. It is the port's traffic and Eurotunnel's traffic, yes; but it is the nation's traffic. If the port were asked to contribute, the price for the port ticket would go up, and the price for goods and services goes up. It is not a substitute for keeping the trade route open, maintaining network fluidity and ensuring that people have better journeys in place. I repeat: our principal trading partner for the UK is Europe. The value of trade that goes through the port of Dover is £100 billion in terms of its downstream impact. We cannot look at that blindly. We were back to normal after 10 days. If we build a mega lorry park of 4,000 units it is not going to be busy very often.

Q33 Will Quince: The A2 and the A256 are by a long way probably the cheaper options. Can I have an assurance from you that you will be driving not the cheapest options but the best options all round for everybody?

Tim Waggott: Our view is that we will drive the best options for our customers, and particularly for our ferry operator partners, because we do not want to be in a position where we are left with a release rate of one lorry a minute from a facility, which is 60 lorries an hour, when we have uplift capacity of 300 an hour.

Natalie Chapman: The key to that is going to be the design of any off-road facility, to make sure that, while drivers can stop and take their breaks and have access to facilities, the minute there is capacity available we can release those vehicles as quickly as possible. The worst crime during Operation Stack is to see trains or ferries leaving half empty. We need to make sure that they are full to capacity, so that we can release those vehicles, get them going and keep the supply chain running.

Q34 Karl McCartney: Mr Cullum, do you live in Kent?

Peter Cullum: I have, but not at the moment.

Q35 Karl McCartney: Yes, I have and I do not at the moment, but I am pretty sure that the residents of Kent are not very happy when things like Operation Stack take place. From what you are saying, you are very happy for that to take place for the foreseeable future.

Peter Cullum: No.

Q36 Karl McCartney: Your hauliers are not looking to move their road freight from the port of Dover. I understand why the port of Dover—

Peter Cullum: Can I just answer that question?

Q37 Karl McCartney: No; let me finish. I understand why the port of Dover want to be a bit protectionist about it and make sure that they have full capacity. All I am trying to get from you three, and have asked you, is what are the other solutions, looking away from using the M20 and impacting on people in Kent, to ensure that we can move our road freight as quickly as possible over or under the channel?

Peter Cullum: We know that various agencies who could looked for alternatives, but they were booked up, as was said, within hours. In terms of the Kent issue, as I said, we do not control the agenda at all; it is our customers. They work on just-in-time delivery. We do

not want to stay in Kent any more than we have to, not because we don't like Kent, but simply because we are not going there. If we are going there we want to get access to Maidstone and Ashford, just like everybody else. We do not actually want to stay there. We know it causes bad blood. It has for years and yet nothing has been done.

We have been living with Operation Stack, as is, until July this year for the last 15 or 20 years. We do not want to do that. The Kent residents do not want it. What surprises us is that we have not had an alternative, other than the M20. I said right at the beginning that if we have to stay in Kent we do not want to be on the main roads either. We would like to be off-road because then our drivers can have proper facilities, they can be properly controlled and compliance can improve. At the moment, as we understand it, there is a problem with illegal parking. We would not want that to happen.

Q38 Karl McCartney: We have to look for a wider solution. I come back to Ms Chapman. You seemed to be very happy with what happens at the moment, with the M20 being used, but we surely have to look wider than that. You cannot realistically believe that this Government or anyone in this country are going to stop the French closing their side of the tunnel through industrial action. You cannot believe that; therefore, what happened in the summer is going to happen again. With the freight percentages going up over the next five, 10, 15 or 20 years it is only going to get worse. If you are going to start closing the M25 and the M11 up to Stansted—if you are going to have 60,000 or 70,000 or however many lorries stuck—we have to look for a different solution. I am not knocking what has been done—all the services worked together, and I commend them for what they have done—but you will start to get overwhelmed.

Natalie Chapman: Yes. We have seen some natural shift of freight flows during Stack, as Peter just said. We need to make sure that in particular time-sensitive products get to market. They have naturally just found some other routes. There are issues about whether those other routes have enough capacity when we need them during Stack, but also whether there is spare capacity at other times.

There is also the cost. Dover/Calais and the Eurotunnel route is popular because it is the shortest sea crossing and it is therefore the cheapest. Of course, anything that adds to the cost of transporting goods adds to the cost of everything that we buy in the shops, which stokes inflation. The cost is really key, especially when you understand that transport operators are working on very tight margins. It is about 52 pence per mile to operate an HGV, so sending them on very large detours very quickly adds up and adds to the transport costs as well. That is something we need to bear in mind. It does not mean we should not be looking at other routes, but being realistic that is why—

Karl McCartney: Our next two panels are going to have different answers from those you have given because they represent the people of Kent.

Q39 Robert Flello: I want to develop this a little bit more. If you could put your wish list to Government about what the solution is—if I could ask each of you in turn—what would be on that wish list? What would you like to see done to resolve this once and for all, hopefully?

Natalie Chapman: First of all, to look at the root causes and see if anything can be done about solving those root causes, particularly the industrial action undertaken by French

workers. It is not going to be an easy thing to solve and we are realistic about that, but something has to be done because we need to keep these vehicles moving. We need to keep the fluidity of the supply chain. First and foremost, we need to look at the root causes.

Bearing in mind that we will probably have Stack at some point, we need to look at a better solution. It has to be a solution that enables vehicles to be released very quickly when capacity is available, but also allows drivers to have proper facilities. We need to think about the residents of Kent and the businesses based there. We have members based in Kent who are not necessarily involved in cross-channel traffic but are hugely affected when Operation Stack is put into place.

Q40 Robert Ffello: Your answer has drifted away from a wish list into problems.

Natalie Chapman: I am sorry. Keeping the M20 open is on our wish list. Anything that is an off-carriageway solution but allows the fluidity to keep the M20 open and keep Kent open for business as well is really important.

Q41 Chair: Is that generally agreed by the panel?

Robert Ffello: Do your colleagues agree with that?

Peter Cullum: Yes. Keep the roads open, because Kent needs to function. That means an off-road solution. Even if we were to have other capacity, Kent would still be part of that solution and I do not think that should be forgotten.

Q42 Chair: Mr Waggott, very briefly; just a sentence or two.

Tim Waggott: Keep France open. Operation Stack is a symptom—not the cause—of the problem. Deal with the cause of the problem. Government must think about bifurcation of the routes down to Dover and Eurotunnel ultimately; and the third Thames crossing with the associated road improvements. It is a key freight corridor. We must deliver it effectively.

Chair: Thank you. On that note we will end this panel and move on to the next. Thank you all very much.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Paul Carter CBE**, Leader, Kent County Council, **Assistant Chief Constable Jo Shiner**, Kent Police, and **David Brewer**, Network Delivery and Development Director, Highways England, gave evidence.

Q43 Chair: Welcome to the Transport Committee. Would you give your names and positions for our records?

David Brewer: I am David Brewer from Highways England. I am the director of network development and delivery.

Assistant Chief Constable Shiner: I am Assistant Chief Constable Jo Shiner of Kent Police.

Paul Carter: I am Paul Carter, leader of Kent County Council.

Q44 Chair: Could you explain to us how it is decided whether to activate Operation Stack?

Assistant Chief Constable Shiner: I am very happy to take that question. The tactical commander who is responsible for the county at the time will, through information and intelligence, and by looking at what the road network looks like, liaise with partners such as Highways England. If we believe that the lorries are building up and that there is a threat to public safety, we will have those conversations. There will be a tipping point, at which there will be an agreement for us to invoke the Civil Contingencies Act, which will then enable us to run the strategic co-ordinating group and invoke Stack.

Q45 Chair: What alternatives do you consider?

Assistant Chief Constable Shiner: We try to do everything we possibly can to keep the networks running fluidly without instigating Stack because, of course, it is very resource intensive, and in particular because of the disruption to Kent that we have already heard about from the first panel. We will do all sorts of other things, including obviously liaising with the port, Eurotunnel, Highways England and other contingencies, but sometimes that point does come as we saw this summer and on other occasions when we have to run Stack.

Q46 Chair: How do you communicate with hauliers that the decision is going to be taken?

Assistant Chief Constable Shiner: We have a very well-practised communication network. A strategic co-ordinating group is chaired, normally by the police but also with a gold commander from Highways England. Kent County Council and other agencies all sit on that, including some of the haulier associations as well. We have really clear communications with all the stakeholders who are involved or impacted upon during Stack to try to minimise any disruption that we possibly can to the community and make sure that we get the road network back to normal as quickly as we possibly can.

Q47 Chair: Mr Brewer, can you explain to us a little more about how you are involved in this and how information is communicated?

David Brewer: To add to what Jo said about the way the decision gets made in the first place, there is a very well-established group where operational teams are together on the ground sharing information and taking a joint view about the right time to do that. It takes about two hours from the decision being made to the first phase of Stack being in place. As we move to each subsequent phase it takes a further two hours to mobilise those. The decisions have to be made in real time but predicting when we believe we are going to get to a point when the road network is going to be clogged up if we do not implement Stack.

One of the things we have improved over the summer, having had more practice than we would have liked in running this operation, is getting better information flows. In order to judge whether you are going to reach that tipping point for whether you need Stack or not, you need to understand what capacity is available at the port, what capacity they have in their own car parks and how quickly traffic is joining the queue. We have invested in quite a lot of additional traffic flow monitoring so that people can make that decision based on the best possible information. That has definitely given us a situation where at the margins we will need to call Stack slightly less often because, with better information, you can be a bit less conservative about the prediction of when it is going to be needed.

Paul Carter: I would add—the experts will correct me if I am wrong—that at peak times it does not take much to look at having to instigate Operation Stack. I would be interested to know how many times we have nearly had to call Stack. I know that over the last 20 years Operation Stack has been put into operation about 45 times—more than twice every year. I have been leader of Kent County Council for 10 years and the number of conversations I have had with roads Ministers in the last 10 years when Operation Stack has been called has been pretty high. It is about how brittle the system is, and when the peak flow rates midweek are going with HGV movements it is teetering on the edge many times. As I say, with literally a couple of hours of disruption on the Eurotunnel or problems with one or two ferries docking because of bad weather, you get into that situation very rapidly.

Q48 Chair: Do you feel the consultation about whether to bring Operation Stack into effect is adequate?

Paul Carter: Necessity dictates when that is, and I think those decisions are made very intelligently and sensibly. I have no problem with that.

Q49 Mary Glendon: With regard to communication, how does Operation Stack, and whether it comes into operation at all, affect local people and local businesses who are trying to live their everyday lives and get around the place they live? It must have serious effects. Do you mitigate that? How are people helped?

Paul Carter: It is absolutely massive. It has to be seen to be believed. Normally, journey times on the M20 to Folkestone from Maidstone—where Operation Stack usually starts, with a junction closure down to Ashford—will be about 40 minutes. On several occasions at the height of Operation Stack in the summer, I had to go to meetings in Folkestone and it took me two hours 20 minutes to get down there and two hours 30 minutes to get back. I had driven to Middlesbrough in a shorter time two days prior to that. That is happening to regular commuters who may live in Folkestone and work in Maidstone, or vice versa, and commercial travellers. It is absolute misery, not just in that corridor, but because everybody is ducking and diving and trying to find a route or a cut-through to get to where they need to be. It is literally from the whole of Maidstone down to the coastal strip and all the way across to east Kent. Misery!

David Brewer: Could I go back to one of the earlier questions? It was about what was done first in order to try to prevent Stack being needed. We have recently introduced something called Operation Tap, which is a series of traffic light controls just at the end of the M20 on the entrance to the port. That is a measure which is trying to control flows before the situation escalates out of hand, and it gives us a little bit of extra resilience on the road network.

In terms of your question about the impact, we absolutely acknowledge that when Stack is in place the implications for traffic on all the other routes in the area are very significant. Going back to statements made earlier, Operation Stack is not the cause; it is a mitigation. In situations where there are more lorries trying to leave Kent than there is capacity for them, we have to find somewhere to park up to 7,000 lorries. What we are trying to do with Stack is to contain those lorries in one place so that, as far as possible, we can keep other routes free. If we have tourists trying to get to Dover, they can travel down the M2 route and, as far as possible, we keep those trucks off local roads. There is no question: the implications for local people are very significant when it is in place, but we genuinely believe that the alternatives—not controlling the traffic flows and allowing the lorries to go just where they will—would be much more significant.

Paul Carter: The impact on Kent businesses is phenomenal. The Kent tourism industry has been decimated this summer; 50% of those who were consulted said that their turnover dropped in the period of Operation Stack, and that is continuing. There has been about a 20% drop in turnover during that period with cancellations in hotels, various events that were organised and wedding venues. The whole thing is totally and utterly miserable, and we have to find a way of keeping the Queen's highway open in Kent when Operation Stack is necessitated due to disruption either on the ferries or in the tunnel. It is an absolute must-do. My belief is that it is a national issue that should be paid for through central Government.

Q50 Robert Ffello: I have two questions. First, has any work been done on holding traffic further back? Has that been looked at? For example, on the M1 and M40 routes, saying, "Operation Stack is in place. There are service stations on those major routes in", and then holding traffic further back once you know that there may be a problem, just to create a little bit of capacity further down the line. Is that something that has been looked at?

David Brewer: We have used language like "flow" and "fluidity" a lot this morning. It is a really great analogy: trying to control traffic movements is like trying to control the movement of water. We can only encourage. Upstream of the Kent area we do very wide area signage so that truck drivers who are on their approach know that Stack is in place. We would certainly encourage them to stop well away from that location. The fact of life is that they are controlled by operations based overseas; 85% of people who get caught in Stack are overseas freight drivers. They are told by their overseas controllers, "You get in the queue so that you are as close to the front as possible." It is almost impossible to incentivise those people to stop further upstream.

Stack is a fairly intuitive process for the freight drivers, so they will tend to follow it, but even with that fairly intuitive process in place, and with the truck drivers knowing full well that they will not be permitted to enter the tunnel, or Dover unless they have a ticket that says they have been through Stack, we were still experiencing at its worst something like 30% non-compliance. Drivers chose to go around the outside and were then turned away at the gate to join the queue at the back. You get very odd behaviours, and it is really difficult to persuade people to act further out.

Q51 Robert Ffello: That is very helpful. You have pulled together three of the supplementary questions that I was going to ask but which are now no longer relevant. In

terms of the M20 itself and the main routes in, would you say, Councillor Carter, that the solution is a wider carriageway? What would you say in terms of the solution?

Paul Carter: We have to be able to keep the M20 operating in both directions, even if it is down to a single carriageway and a 30 mph speed limit, which we have failed to do on most occasions throughout the summer for various health and safety issues, risk and so on. We have been grappling with this for a long period of time and I have always said that we must have capacity to get at least 4,000-plus of those lorries off the M20 if we are to have any hope of keeping the road network open in Kent.

Of course, each Operation Stack varies, because the flow may be impeded or it may be totally stopped. The duration that lorries wait to get on a ferry or train can vary from four, five or six hours' delay to, at the height of Operation Stack in the summer, 36 hours. When you have lorry drivers held by the side of a road for 36 hours, it is unacceptable. You have to have the 4,000 spaces where you can provide the proper and appropriate facilities to support that number of drivers who are held up for that length of time. Four or five hours sitting on the hard shoulder of a motorway is acceptable, with the toilets we have put in and this, that and the other, but any longer than that and you have to have a movement and flow rate to allow people to progress off the carriageway into the lorry park where they can have the appropriate facilities, and then be marshalled into either the ferry or the tunnel.

It is important to look at cross-ticketing when Operation Stack is called. There have been claims that many ferries leave half full or half empty, whichever way you want to look at it, coming out of the port of Dover because they have a ticket on the Eurotunnel and they cannot transfer it on to the ferry or vice versa. If police could direct to either ferry or train and sort the invoicing or cross-ticketing out afterwards, with modern technology, I do not think that is too much to ask. That could help maximise the flow rates from what is available at a particular given time.

Q52 Mark Menzies: We have three people before us who live and breathe Operation Stack. I would like to understand from a public policy point of view what more we can do to help. For example, Kent County Council in their report suggested the potential construction of lorry parks close to the coast. We have heard about some of the work that has gone on in terms of traffic flow and traffic management systems. Looking at things like that, what is the solution and what is the price tag?

Paul Carter: I am sorry to hog the debate. I genuinely believe that this country needs a series of lorry parks across the country. I was in Stoke-on-Trent to do an interview on the radio when I was coming back from the Conservative party conference, and every lay-by around Stoke-on-Trent was full of lorries with no facilities. You drive all the way across mainland Europe and eastern Europe, and every motorway network has sensibly placed lorry parks all over the place, so that when their tachographs run out they have somewhere to go that is not just the nearest lay-by on a country road off a junction. We need to plan for that, and that would help the issue.

If you are going to hold lorries out of Kent, and if you have that network of co-ordinated lorry parks used as a permanent arrangement for the HGV industry, that would be a good thing. But, as I said, I believe that somewhere around junction 11, upstream of the Eurotunnel and Dover, we must build a facility that has the capacity for 4,000 lorries. In my view, over-inflated costs are being bandied around on what that would cost. Highways

England will tell us that the hard shoulder needs strengthening if you are going to park lorries for a short period of time on the coned-off section. I understand all of that, but I believe that we ought to be able to sort this problem out for about £150 million maximum.

Q53 Mark Menzies: Is there a specific site that Kent County Council have identified that would be suitable?

Paul Carter: There are sites that Highways England are looking at. David can answer that question, but they want to remain a fairly closed shop at the moment until they have decided which their preferred option is, because it sets hares running. I have my preferred option, but for political reasons I am not going to disclose my belief. There are two or three sites in that vicinity that I believe would be ideally suited, without having to build additional junctions off the motorway, which could be put into operation. Planning and environmental issues, AONB and all that stuff, is significant but there are sites outside of the AONB that would make it simpler and easier. We need to find a solution at pace.

David Brewer: It is really important, following the sort of line that Tim took earlier, to be clear about the problem we are trying to solve. There are two quite distinct issues. One is how you invest in the future to keep the production line working effectively. The other is the level of resilience and contingency, and how you deal with things when that production line goes down.

Concentrating on how you deal with things when the production line goes down, the simple fact of life is that you very quickly build up very large numbers of lorries which you need to store somewhere. You need to store them in a way which has the minimum disruption for other people. I think it is self-evident that the most cost-effective and efficient way to store those vehicles is to store them off the road carriageway. It is much cheaper to build a bit of concrete than it is to build a bit of road. My personal view is that there is a very strong argument for an off-carriageway storage solution for lorries as part of a wider programme of making the whole of the transport network in that area resilient.

As Councillor Carter said, we are looking in detail at a number of sites. There was a European Gateway review committee, chaired by Kent County Council, which started with something like 100-plus sites and whittled them down. We are now at a place where, since the summer, we have identified three or four sites that we think are adequate to resolve the transport issues. We need to work through a process on the construction issues, the environmental issues and the planning issues necessary to identify which is the best of those sites. We have to go through a proper consultation process.

Q54 Mark Menzies: This question is largely aimed at the Assistant Chief Constable. This puts huge pressure on the police at a time of constrained police budgets and the world in which we live. Do you get any additional financial support from the centre in order to help you facilitate Operation Stack? Supplementary to that, is there some additional mechanism that we need to look at putting in place so that, in relation to the administration of Stack, the burden and decision making does not fall squarely on police shoulders? Maybe the Department for Transport could create an organisation to help facilitate the operation of Stack and the traffic flows around Stack.

Assistant Chief Constable Shiner: First of all, we are very grateful for the partnership working arrangements that we enjoy in Kent. If we did not enjoy those, Operation Stack

would have a far greater impact than it already does on the communities. It cost Kent Police £1.3 million purely for the summer Stack alone. Of course, while our officers are doing that, they are not doing other things. We are currently trying to reclaim that money from Government, and I am hoping that we will be able to do so.

Q55 Mark Menzies: There is no formal automatic trigger in place.

Assistant Chief Constable Shiner: There are various formulae we need to go through. We are currently trying to reclaim that money.

Q56 Chair: How much are you trying to reclaim?

Assistant Chief Constable Shiner: We would of course like to reclaim all of the £1.3 million because of the extraordinary circumstances this summer. That will be subject to some negotiation, I suggest, around that figure, but it was unprecedented. We have the opportunity to call in mutual aid from other police forces when we need to do so, but it is important that we have some very constructive dialogue with David and his team about how Highways England and other agencies can continue to help more in terms of the running of Operation Stack.

Q57 Chair: Mr Brewer, is the work you are doing on looking at lorry parks in addition to the current Operation Stack, instead of it or an adjustment to it?

David Brewer: Yes. Operation Stack has been properly described as an emergency contingency measure, which was never designed as a long-term solution. It was invented to deal with short-term weather disruption. It is the best way we have, with the facilities available to us at the moment, of mitigating the consequences, but it does not provide a proper long-term solution to the resilience issue.

At the moment, we are working with Kent and others to identify potential sites for an off-network lorry park. We are also looking at what other investments could be made in the road network in order to improve resilience. Some of that will be stuff along our own network, so some of it will be capability on the M20. There will potentially be issues around the A2 and A256 on the Kent-owned network. The very long-term solution to this encompasses a series of measures in that part of the world. Some of them will take longer to bring about than others. We will be advising Government about what we believe are the most deliverable and the most effective solutions to the problem. Government will then determine at what pace to go forward with a wider public consultation and to review whether those will go forward.

Q58 Chair: When will you be submitting those proposals?

David Brewer: In the normal course of events, to get to a point when we were ready to go to public consultation, we would have done a lot more work than we have done currently. We would have done a lot more detailed investigation of the specific site conditions. We would have done ecological surveys, and our designs would be further advanced. In a normal world, these would probably have taken a year to get to the point where we were ready for consultation. I believe that within a matter of weeks we will have sufficient information to put before DfT and say, "This is where we believe we are at and this is what we believe are the most credible options." We are weeks away from tabling that with Government.

Q59 Huw Merriman: In the previous panel Ms Chapman touched on the fact that perhaps the M20 could have been kept open with a contraflow. I would be keen to get your views on that. **Secondly, I think it is fair to say that Councillor Carter touched on your risk assessments. Do you think you have the balance right between keeping the wheels in motion and your risk assessments?**

David Brewer: The contraflow issue was obviously very visible and very widely debated. We have engaged really well with people around the operational solutions, but I do not think we engaged terribly effectively around what that contraflow solution would have meant, so we did not really get good general consensus about the issues around it.

The factors we were considering around a contraflow were, first, if you want to put something in place which you can put on and take off very quickly, it would need to be traffic cones. We decided, and the police agreed, that that was not an acceptable way, especially when you have large numbers of lorry drivers parked up right next to the live carriageway and you cannot control their behaviour. There was a very real public safety issue around that. We could have put in place something that created a permanent fixed barrier to separate some of the carriageways. That would mean putting something in place permanently or semi-permanently over the summer. It could not have gone on and off; it would have taken two days to put the thing in place. If Stack was in operation for three days of the week, that permanent solution would have been in place seven days of the week. The permanent solution would have restricted London-bound traffic on the M20 to a single lane, and that single lane could possibly have been running on the hard shoulder. There is a very real risk that it could collapse because it is not strong enough to routinely carry that volume of traffic.

The other issue we were considering was that, if we took capacity out of the M20 to try and keep the contraflow running, it would have meant filling up each of the phases of Stack with less vehicles. We would have had to have implemented phases 3, 4 and potentially 5. Nobody really knows what phase 5 would look like. We would have had to implement those other escalations more frequently. There is a balance around the disruption that would have been caused. Northbound capacity reductions would potentially have led to congestion back to the junction 10 roundabout, where the William Harvey hospital is, so that was another consideration.

Fundamentally, sitting at the heart of the issue around contraflow is how you sort 3,500 vehicles an hour and separate them to persuade the trucks to go into one lane and the cars to come off at a junction and come back down and get into another lane. The real safety concern, and we never got to an answer which we felt was deliverable, was how to sort those vehicles. If you have to persuade 400 trucks an hour and 3,100 cars an hour to behave in a certain way, and it takes 20 seconds of conversation with a truck driver to tell them where they are going, you simply do not have the ability to sort those people out. You are putting police officers on the ground to try to direct the traffic.

Q60 Huw Merriman: That brings me to my next point. Now that you have the benefit of experience and hindsight, if this occurred again, do you think there are more imaginative proposals that you could put in place which would mean that you were not so focused on the assessments?

David Brewer: We have looked since the event, and we looked during the event, and we still feel that we made the right choice around the contraflow. Most of our partners who have operational responsibility agree with that. Clearly we had a big part to play in

bringing on the Manston solution, which was an additional level of contingency. With the benefit of hindsight we were probably in the right place, but we did not engage enough people effectively about that decision-making process.

Q61 Karl McCartney: I am going to come back to both Mr Brewer and Councillor Carter, but Ms Shiner might want to answer this question. Councillor Carter mentioned that £150 million would solve the issue. It would solve the issue of Operation Stack commendably. What I tried with the previous panel and I am going to ask you—it comes back to Mr Brewer, who mentioned it but never answered his own question—is in a Utopia where, instead of £150 million you had £150 billion, what would you do differently that would mitigate against Operation Stack having to happen?

Paul Carter: First of all, I believe you can deliver a park somewhere in the vicinity of junction 11 for £40 million or £50 million. If the hard shoulders need strengthening, the hard shoulders need strengthening. The work that was done in holding lorries on the hill down into Dover held another 400 lorries. I believe the A256 has potential to hold more lorries, so you have additional capacity that you can bring into being as and when necessary, accepting that every call for Operation Stack is different, because of that flow rate and whatever is impeding the normal flow through both the tunnel and Dover. That is an issue. We have been working on this for 10 years. We have always said that this is a national issue and it needs to be paid for through the Treasury.

Q62 Karl McCartney: You are assuming—we had this repeated by both your panel and the previous panel—that there are quite a lot of lorries that do not want to stop in Kent but just want to get over to France. Why do they have to come into Kent? Have you spoken to Eurotunnel? Would they like to see them get on to the freight line?

Paul Carter: Because it is the most efficient and effective way of getting goods to market when it works properly. It is the exception when Operation Stack is called. It is the shortest ferry link.

Q63 Karl McCartney: Do you think they need to come into Kent though? Do you believe that all those lorries need to come into Kent?

Paul Carter: I do, because it is a question of time management. It is the way that industry works. I gather that Rolls-Royce was seriously impeded by the many parts to manufacture Rolls-Royces being held up in Operation Stack. The production line had to be delayed while they waited for the goods to arrive. Most of the big manufacturing plants have just-in-time delivery of the components they need to manufacture their product.

Q64 Karl McCartney: But there is no negative impact if they get on to the rail lines out of Kent, and not in Kent?

Paul Carter: We have done quite a lot of work on rail capacity. If you really made the existing rail capacity hum and sing, with modal shift off road on to rail, you might improve things by 4% or 5%, but the growth of freight coming into and out of Dover is going to far outstrip that 4% or 5% in a couple of years. I am not saying it is not worth trying to get the benefits of a bigger modal shift, but without rebuilding railway lines it ain't going to happen big time.

Q65 Karl McCartney: Indeed, but if you worked on rebuilding and made the gauges right to run from Kent through to the north of the Thames, you would have an opportunity to have your freight parked up somewhere else other than at Kent.

David Brewer: I am not qualified to talk about global logistics and ferry and port operations, but I can share with you a few titbits I picked up about what was going on around me when we were dealing with Stack. I know that during the period of Stack DFT officials looked at all the other possible routes to Europe, and very quickly concluded that all the capacity was being used up. Where there was current available freight capacity, it filled very quickly during that period of time. It was not that we were failing to direct stuff out to distant capacity. There is a wider question around whether you could build extra port capacity somewhere else. It comes down to a pure market view of whether port and ferry operators can justify opening alternative routes, and that is something I really have no knowledge about.

Paul Carter: We have Ramsgate port, where I would love to see ferries coming in and out; they could go from Ramsgate to Ostend. When the French get difficult, you could have another port of entry through another country, which would be quite useful. There are plans being discussed at the moment on the potential of opening Ramsgate port again. It is owned by Thanet District Council, which is topical today. It is an up-and-ready port with limited capacity, I accept, but it would build resilience off the Thanet Way in Ramsgate.

Q66 Chair: You suggested—more than suggested; you made an arrangement with Manston airport at an undisclosed figure for what you described as a contingency use. How is that going to work? The police have already told the Home Affairs Committee that the police cannot direct freight to Manston airport, so how is it going to work? Mr Brewer, were you responsible for this arrangement?

David Brewer: Yes. The arrangement in terms of leasing the facility was made between the Department for Transport and the owners of Manston airport. I am not sighted on the details of what the actual commercial arrangements are for the use of Manston. What happened in terms of putting that solution up was that there was a very clear appetite to find something that would reduce the pressure on the M20 to try to alleviate some of the issues, particularly after we had to instigate the third stage of Stack. That was particularly disruptive for traffic, because you start impacting the northbound carriageway as well as the southbound carriageway.

It is fair to say that Highways England led the process of exploring what other options could be made available in the very short term. There is a process for civil contingencies, where key stakeholders are pulled together. Over the period of a single weekend we had a regular run of calls that involved Kent County Council, all of the local districts, the health authorities, the police and the emergency services—all those groups of people trying to work it through. If we were going to find some temporary lorry facilities somewhere in the county, and we also considered wider than the county, where would be the most suitable place we could bring on-stream quickly? The Manston solution was identified as being the best available. That decision was signed off by something called the strategic co-ordination group, at which all those bodies are represented. All those bodies agreed that that solution was the best available solution.

However, as Peter identified earlier this morning, there are very real issues around how the routes to and from Manston to Dover would be able to cope with the volume of freight that would need to move across them. The decision of that combined group was that we would effectively identify Manston as a solution and progressively build up the flow rates of traffic into Manston. We would not, on day one, switch 300 lorries an hour straight into Manston and divert them at source. We knew that we would have to test in real-life conditions the capacity of the routes from Manston to Dover. By the time Manston was brought into place, there were improvements in the situation in Calais. The load factors on the ferries during the August period reduced and we have not needed to call Stack since then, so we have not had the opportunity to really stress-test the capacity of those routes.

Q67 Chair: This is a commercial arrangement. We do not know how much it has cost, and you are suggesting that you have not actually assessed under real-life conditions how effective it could be. We have been told that the police say they cannot direct freight traffic there. We have heard from P&O Ferries and Dover District Council that some drivers will not take the diversion to Manston. Are these not factors that should have been considered before you went ahead with this financial arrangement?

David Brewer: I think they were. Everybody involved in the decision was really clear about what the issues were. It was a very complex situation. The views of P&O were known and included in that consideration. The point we would make around that is that Manston certainly could not cope with all the demand that is currently being pushed through Stack. What Manston ought to be able to do is release a proportion of that. If we can take a proportion of that out, the principal benefit that we ought to be able to determine is that, in situations where we would otherwise have needed to move to phase 3 of Stack, we can contain it within phases 1 and 2.

Q68 Chair: But you have not used it yet, have you?

David Brewer: We have not used it yet. In terms of the balance of impact, we have heard from others today just how significant the consequences are of each escalating stage of Stack. There is a cost associated with this contingency. That cost has been invested at risk. It was a decision made by Government to invest that money at risk in something we knew needed stress-testing before we understood its full effectiveness. In balancing that, they were considering a very real and very substantial and known series of consequences on the one hand with—

Q69 Chair: How long is the arrangement with Manston for?

David Brewer: The lease is between DFT and Manston. I am not involved in the detail of that.

Q70 Chair: You don't know what the commitment is.

David Brewer: No. We were responsible for setting up the facility. We cleared the vegetation. We put the white lines out. We arranged the signage. We agreed the diversion routes to and from Manston. We worked with Kent County Council to understand how we would direct traffic to and from, and we worked with the police and others to figure out how we would manage that operation. That was our contribution to the process. The agreement about actually securing the site was done directly between DFT and the owners.

Q71 Robert Flello: Further to your point, Eurotunnel also do not want lorry parks and that sort of operation to be put in place; they want better connectivity. We are talking about spending over £1 million of police funds to try to enforce Operation Stack, and the costs surrounding it. Earlier, we heard that over £1 million a day is lost to the British economy in direct costs, never mind the lost opportunity costs and the knock-on effects. I am guessing, Councillor Carter, that the people of Kent really do not want lorries tooting up and down, because they are not really adding anything to the economy of Kent; they are just going up and down the motorway at a cost.

Why is there not a push, whether from Highways England or other sources, to stop this? At the moment, the only reason these lorries are going through Kent is that that is where the terminal is to get to Eurotunnel, unless of course they are using the ferry. Why is there not a push to move that terminal from where it is on the coast to perhaps north of London where, I am guessing, a very large proportion of the traffic is coming to? In the longer term, that will resolve issues around capacity and problems within Kent? Why is there not a push to that? Why is all this money being spent on airfields, Operation Stack and all these things, rather than biting the bullet and saying that the terminal is in the wrong place and needs to be further north?

Paul Carter: Because the crossing is so long. They work on just-in-time, and time is money. The cost-benefit analysis of Dover outstrips anything else. If you look at the length of passage from somewhere on the east coast to Holland or Belgium, or wherever, it is many hours.

Q72 Robert Flello: But my point is that if you are putting your lorry on to the train north of London and the train is then going through the channel tunnel—

Paul Carter: It is back to the capacity of the rail network. Most of the tunnels that were built for High Speed 1 can't take containers on the back of freight trains, because they were not designed for that. That is a big obstacle.

Q73 Robert Flello: It is a cost, but so is a cost of £1 million-plus of police resources and the cost to the Kent economy.

Paul Carter: But £150 million invested now in a solution and fast, because we have to strike while the iron is hot—

Q74 Robert Flello: But it is not a solution.

Paul Carter: I believe there is a political will to find a solution and invest in that solution, but you are absolutely right that Kent has all the disbenefits of an international route corridor coming through it with no advantages to it at all. It is a thorough inconvenience to the Kent economy and we genuinely believe that that investment is much needed. We urged the Department for Transport to introduce the charging of foreign lorries coming into this country on the basis that they do not pay any road fund duty, or duty on the diesel. That is now delivering about £30 million of revenue every year to the Exchequer. We would like a bit of that invested back into the Kent highways network to take away the massive disadvantages that being part of an international route corridor present.

Q75 Robert Ffello: But surely, Councillor Carter, it is only going to get worse if there is the predicted trend of a 50% increase in freight, even with temporary but very expensive alternative measures that have not been tested and looked at, and there are no enforcement powers. Surely that is money potentially wasted, whereas the real solution—yes, it is a more expensive one—gets the issue dealt with properly.

Paul Carter: But it is not massive sums of money. I do not know what the agreement is with the owners of Manston airport on the rent that the Government are paying them, but it is modest sums. I am not as pessimistic about the Manston solution as others. I genuinely believe it will be good to see it tried and tested. If additional policing is put in through reciprocal arrangements with Essex Police, and there is a real will to keep the M20 and the Queen's highway open in both directions, I believe that that is doable. It will involve additional manpower resource, but we have to have somewhere that takes them off the Queen's highway in times of necessity and keeps the road network operating, although slower and restricted. One carriageway coastbound is absolute misery, as I described earlier.

Q76 Chair: Ms Shiner, can the Manston solution work in practice, given that the police have already made statements that they cannot direct freight traffic?

Assistant Chief Constable Shiner: The Manston option has not been tested; it cannot be tested until the criteria are there. It is quite a serious step to actually invoke the Civil Contingencies Act, with all the risks around doing that. It cannot be fully stress-tested until those conditions are there. Yes, we do have concerns, which we have articulated throughout, about the Manston option. Having said that, as a number of people have said today, it is the best of a number of bad options, to be frank.

Q77 Chair: Councillor Carter, do you think it can work despite what the police are saying?

Paul Carter: The only solution is to build a permanent relief park for Operation Stack. I think we are all in agreement with that. Whether it is the least worst option—

Q78 Chair: But do you think the Manston solution can work? That is the question.

Paul Carter: For the Dover-bound traffic, properly policed and with the proper mechanism for releasing it from Manston to the port of Dover with the right police supervision, it could make a massive difference and would potentially allow us to keep the M20 open in both directions by directing the ferry traffic to Dover via that route. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, and we have not yet tried it.

Q79 Chair: We have heard from the police that there is an issue there. Finally, Mr Brewer, on the proposals that you are about to submit, what is the earliest time that the changes could be implemented?

David Brewer: There are things we have already done. They are relatively small scale, such as improving traffic counting and the operational management capability. The earliest that we are looking at being able to get any off-network parking is autumn next year. That is the earliest date. It depends on a lot of other things falling into place. As I

said, this is something which would normally take several years to get through a planning process and get permission. We do not have any agreed funding in place at the moment to implement it, and it is not up to us to decide whether that funding will be provided or not. From a technical perspective the earliest would be autumn, and that will depend on getting everything through as quickly as possible.

Q80 Chair: The earliest for what would be autumn?

David Brewer: For any form of off-network parking.

Q81 Chair: It is a leap in the dark.

David Brewer: Yes. I am being really honest. We would normally commit to timescales having done a lot more work on exactly what the site is, and the construction options and the road consequences. We are not in that position yet. We are being as open as we can be about the best case scenario, but we really do not have confidence in that delivery date for all those good reasons.

Chair: Thank you very much all of you.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Paul Watkins**, Leader, Dover District Council, and **Jennifer Hollingsbee**, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Communities, Shepway District Council, gave evidence.

Q82 Chair: Welcome to the Transport Select Committee. Would you give your names and positions, please?

Paul Watkins: I am Paul Watkins, the leader of Dover District Council.

Jennifer Hollingsbee: I am Jennifer Hollingsbee, district councillor for Shepway and a cabinet member for communities. I am a resident very close to junction 11, in the village of Sellindge, so I am hoping to give you some real examples of the problems.

Q83 Chair: Thank you. Could you tell us about the impact of Operation Stack on local communities in Dover and Shepway?

Paul Watkins: From the point of view of Dover, when Operation Stack is in place Dover tends to be free, because the traffic is upstream. The town runs normally and in a sense, apart from the loss of traffic and trade, it is a pleasure, because the normal activity of traffic through Dover is logjam, logjam, logjam. What we see between Dover and Folkestone on a daily basis is what you see when Operation Stack is in action. There is a traffic management and operational issue as far as Dover is concerned on a daily basis that affects the community. It certainly affects the traffic in and out of Dover, but we recognise that it is the major Dover economic factor.

One of the pluses of Operation Stack coming in is that part of that situation has been addressed by the TAP—the transport access protocol—that has been introduced. We now

have a situation where traffic can be held on the outskirts of Dover. There are traffic lights installed and speed limits between Dover and Folkestone now. They are not very good, but if we are going to see this enacted permanently, we have been promised variable speed signs and the opportunity to see this managed properly. That is invariably going to be organised with the port of Dover, who will call up the traffic or put TAP into place as necessary. That is the plus—a recognition that Dover has this on a daily basis, whereas the rest of Kent gets it very infrequently.

Q84 Chair: Councillor Hollingsbee, what can you tell us about the impact on local communities?

Jennifer Hollingsbee: As a starting point, I believe that in Sellindge we suffer Operation Stack virtually every day. That is because the lorry drivers who are in Operation Stack when it is on have found short routes through the village and know exactly where to go, so they do that all the time now. When junctions 10 to 11 are closed, obviously all the traffic passes through the village—all the traffic plus local freight traffic. We have a primary school on that road. Children cannot get into the primary school. We have a doctor's surgery that serves the area. People cannot get to the doctor's surgery. My road is Swan Lane. I cannot get out of my road on to the A20. There is a snarl-up the whole time. People want to go to the toilet. Even residents along the road, because cars have stopped waiting for the traffic lights to change, have been out and allowed people to go in and use their facilities. That is some of the impact.

Local schools have coach trips for students. Some of them have not been able to go. Westenhanger Castle is very near junction 11. It had to cancel a number of weddings. The person who actually owns Westenhanger Castle was in tears and the bride was in tears because people were not able to get there. In Shepway as a whole, 15,000 people a day travel out of Shepway. They are held up by Operation Stack. They cannot get to their offices. Some of the shops are not able to open. We have 11,000 people coming into Shepway and it is the same kind of thing. The movement of traffic is absolutely gridlocked.

Junction 11 is very close to me. I use it virtually every day. When Operation Stack is on, especially when the junction from 10 to 11 is closed, all the traffic is taken off at junction 11, and the freight traffic to the port and to Eurotunnel is directed down the slip road. The other traffic has to go round the roundabout and it then joins the A20. The police are at the slip road and they have to do exactly what somebody said earlier. They talk to the driver and ask them where they are going. On a number of occasions, I have actually got out of my car at that point to ask what has happened. There was one time when the police closed the slip road, and nobody knew where to go. I asked what was happening and I was told that Highways had just instructed that the slip road be closed, because so many lorries avoiding Operation Stack were trying to go down there. Of course, all the lorries who are avoiding Operation Stack then have to find somewhere to park overnight. They are all in the villages, and in my village in particular. I would like to leave some photos of the rubbish that is left around and all the other things that go with overnight lorry parking where there are no facilities. They are at bus stops and anywhere where a lorry can park. They are on the verges. It is something that my residents should not have to put up with.

Q85 Chair: It has a big impact. What would be the impact of re-routing to Manston?

Paul Watkins: From Dover district's point of view that would be horrendous. What I did not mention in the first part of my answer to you was the lack of resilience on the A2/M2 when the traffic is switched from the M20/A20 on to the M2/A2, the non-completion of a dual carriageway through to the port of Dover and the effects of the logjamming on Brenley Corner.

If you are going to go to Manston, there are un-dualled parts of the A256 that run between Sandwich and Eastry that will log-jam. When you come off the A256 at the junction going down towards the port of Dover, there is narrowing. The roundabouts into the port of Dover are already at capacity and that will affect the town of Deal, because we will not be able to come across from the A258, so you have the A256 and the A258 affected by this.

There is an economic factor. At Sandwich, we have the most successful enterprise zone in the country—the Discovery Park on the old Pfizer site. If you are going to have the traffic there affecting the 2,400 staff getting in and out of work, because you have lorries blocking it, we are going to have great difficulties. It is just getting the growth that was necessary after the debacle of the Pfizer withdrawal from the site. We think that will have a particularly adverse effect.

There are also policing issues. A number of junctions are going to be affected by this, to stop rat-running through the local villages. They need to be policed effectively either by Highways England or the Kent Police. There are great concerns over this. The other factor is the effect on ferries. We have been told that the release of the lorries from Manston to come through to the port of Dover is going to be one a minute; so 60 lorries an hour into the port. Those ferries take 300 vehicles, and they are going out less than 20% full because they cannot be filled. There is a consequential effect from that on the local economy. Even the existing system takes more volume of traffic when Stack is on than this solution would. We have great concerns for the local economy about filling those ferries in a timely fashion. The consequences of that are that you are probably going to have more lorries stacking at Manston than necessary because you cannot get the volume through to the ferries to deal with that.

The other consequence is to do with Eurotunnel traffic; no one has identified the separation method yet. We have been told that you can still have Dover traffic on the M20/A20 and also coming in on the Manston side, so you will get convergence on both sides. The consequences of that are quite horrendous.

Q86 Robert Ffello: It sounds like a dreadful time for local residents. I have two questions. First, is there any benefit, in any sense at all, to the local community of having the traffic? Are the local bed and breakfasts used? Is there any economic benefit to the people in that part of Kent?

Paul Watkins: Absolutely. The employment base surrounding the port of Dover is 22,000. Someone said that Stack does not do anything for the economy of Kent—well, it sure does because 22,000 people are employed in and around the port of Dover who would not be employed otherwise. What we are talking about is a Kent problem. You are not going back across the channel, because the port of Calais is expanding and there is major growth. The traffic is going to keep coming, because that is the route of choice. It is on the trans-European network. That is the fact; you just can't switch it off. You have a programme called the Connect Europe programme, where the EU is putting more money into the port of Dover. They have got £43 million, just allocated, to do their expansion. It is not a case of what happens down here; it is the case of what is coming and will continue coming.

Paul Carter is quite right when he says that it is no good talking about other ports, because the traffic does not want to go to other ports. It wants the speed and efficiency that Dover provides.

Jennifer Hollingsbee: From our point of view, I see no benefit; in fact, it is completely the opposite. Just outside Sellindge there are two lorry parks set up without planning permission. It is acting as a magnet to bring more and more lorries into our area on a daily basis. I had somebody phone me up yesterday or the day before saying that the vibration was affecting their house, and it has got worse over the years. The primary school has glass shattering with the vibration of lorries. There is no benefit to us. It is a cost to the whole of Shepway and obviously to all of Kent, as has been reported previously.

Q87 Robert Fello: What do you think is the answer to the problem?

Jennifer Hollingsbee: First of all, I totally agree with everybody in terms of keeping the M20 open. That would obviously take a lot of the traffic. Close down illegal lorry parking and move it on. I do not know whether they have been signed off, but recently Shepway got powers of enforcement to move lorries on. We are waiting on KCC and maybe Paul Carter can tell me whether they have signed that off, but that is a measure we are hoping to use. Obviously we have to consider where they might move to. Are we just going to move the problem on, and are they just going to go and park somewhere else?

Paul Watkins: It is really a threefold issue. It is the M20/A20; it is the A2/M2; and it is also the third Thames crossing. The third Thames crossing now needs to come into play, but you would need a comprehensive review of how the routes from the third Thames crossing are to be addressed. It cannot be addressed in isolation. You just cannot talk about the crossing; you need to see the consequential effects downstream of any of the routes that are taken. Both routes are going to be the M20/A20 or M2/A2, and the M2/A2 is the one that is more likely to have severe effects. It is Brenley Corner and the dualling of the A2 from Lydden through to Dover. Looking at the 299, which is where the trucks will go through to Manston if that solution is put into place, there are some serious considerations. If you are looking at the third Thames crossing, and we are talking to adjacent LEPs about its routeing and so on so that we get a comprehensive review—the south-east LEP and the Kent federated model of this—when you build it you ought to make sure that you are putting lorry parks in at strategically the right places.

Q88 Chair: What should be looked at in relation to large lorry parks?

Paul Watkins: Obviously, part of the solution is holding things locally off the M20. That has been identified. The routes on the A2 have been discarded to date for lorry parks, because of considerations around the environment and accessibility. Upstream across in Essex, where you are probably going to put a third Thames crossing, coming down from the M11 and so on, if the road improvements are going to be done properly from there and you are going to get the proper join-up, you ought seriously to consider putting lorry parks on that side of the Thames as well as in the Kent area.

Jennifer Hollingsbee: At junction 11 we have Stop 24, which is quite successful at the moment. It has parking for about 130 lorries, and Shepway have just given it planning permission to increase that by 60, but there is an opportunity for further expansion there. Obviously it is operated by private enterprise at the moment. There may be some

opportunity for private enterprise to be involved as well, which will also contribute to our overnight lorry parking and help with that. That would be our wish.

Q89 Mark Menzies: I have a quick question. With the leader of Kent County Council, we touched on the proposed large-scale construction of a lorry park. What impact would it have from a district council point of view if there was one single large site constructed close to the M20?

Paul Watkins: We think that is part of the solution. It is not the whole solution but it is part of the solution. Upstream of Eurotunnel and the port of Dover is probably the ideal solution. The sites are well known. As you say, people don't want to talk them politically at the moment but there are solutions that could be identified. The problem about lorry parks is that it is all right using them in an emergency scenario, but are they viable in a non-emergency situation? As identified by the freight operators, the majority of these lorries are European and the majority of European lorry drivers do not have the money to afford to go to these sites, if they are chargeable sites. You have to be realistic about how they are operated.

Jennifer Hollingsbee: We have to have in place the mechanisms for moving lorries on. If they won't pay, we have to have a system whereby we enforce that. We want them off our roads and verges. We want them out of our bus stops. We don't want them in our villages. There has to be a mechanism for that. Obviously, local residents would not want a huge lorry park, but on the other hand it is probably the lesser of two evils. If the lorries came straight off at junction 11, or whatever junction it might be, and went straight into a lorry park, as they do at Stop 24, that takes pressure away from local communities. We would not want it. Who wants a lorry park quite near them? Nobody would want it, but it is something we would have to consider.

The local residents in Shepway have become used to Stop 24 being a place where lorries park. When I speak to people they say, "Why don't these lorries go to Stop 24?" Stop 24 tell me that they turn lorries away every night because they are full, so obviously from that point they find somewhere else they can park. I think I mentioned earlier that we have two illegal lorry parks set up in our village without planning permission, and that is where they go. That is why lorry parks without planning permission are setting up. They are probably the people who are benefiting from Operation Stack and the increase in freight. It is certainly not the district.

Paul Watkins: We have commercial lorry parks in and around Dover, but they don't fill because the drivers won't pay to use them. Be realistic about what is suggested in terms of the commercial viability of lorry parks. Could I add something on off-road parking by lorries, which is predominant throughout Kent? Paul Carter identified it up in Stoke as well. In and around our area, it is not just at evenings and nights now; it is during the day as well. That is part of the consequence of what is happening on the outskirts of Calais. Certainly some of the lorry drivers don't stop on that side of the channel now because of the problems associated with migrants over there. They are now coming over and stopping on this side during the day in those lay-bys and slip roads, causing more difficulties and traffic dangers for local traffic and for local communities.

Chair: Thank you both very much for coming to answer our questions.

