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Rt Hon Meg Hillier MP
Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts
House of Commons
London
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December 2020

Dear Meg,

Follow-up from Public Accounts Committee hearing on 3 December 2020

Following the evidence session on 3 December, I welcome the opportunity to provide the committee with further detail on Covid funding for zoos, the England Peatland Strategy, and government monitoring of cycling, walking and driving.

Covid funding for zoos

You asked me to provide an update on the zoos Covid fund and how much of this fund has been paid out. The objective of the Zoo Animals Fund (ZAF) is to provide for operators who, due to a coronavirus-related drop in income, are experiencing severe financial difficulties and need support in caring for their animal collections between now and the start of the next season (April 2021). This includes providing for essential animal keeping costs and maintenance, as well as funding to support activities relating to downsizing or closure such as rehoming.

The ZAF opened for applications on 3 August. The deadline for applications to the fund was recently extended to 29 January and provides support up until 31 March 2021, at which time it is expected that the sector will be self-reliant.

As of 8 December, we have received 43 applications and made 17 awards, totalling £1,392,013. One claim has been rejected on the grounds that the applicant did not hold a zoo licence and was therefore ineligible to apply for the scheme. The remaining applications not awarded or rejected are still under assessment.

Zoos are able to apply for grants of up to £730,000. Payments begin when a zoo has 12 weeks or less of financial reserves remaining after their income has been taken into account. However, they can apply ahead of this point to help with business planning.

Claims are submitted online and detailed guidance is provided to support the application process. As well as having access to the Zoo Animals Fund, zoos are able to apply for a range of business support schemes including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, VAT deferral, Business Rates Relief, the Business Interruption Loan schemes and the option to reclaim the costs of Statutory Sick Pay.

England Peatland Strategy

I promised to provide a written update on the progress of the publication of the England Peat Strategy. Work on the Strategy is well underway; however I cannot be more specific on timings at this time.

The Strategy will deliver a new ambitious framework for peat recovery in England. It will set out a holistic plan for the management, protection and restoration of our upland and lowland peatlands so that they deliver benefits for climate and nature. It will include more details of the Nature for Climate Fund which will help to restore 35,000ha of peatland by 2025, as well as plans to phase out horticultural peat and burning on blanket bog.

Government monitoring of cycling, walking and driving

I promised to would write to update you on work Defra and Department for Transport have been carrying out to monitor cycling, walking and driving.

The NO2 emissions reductions between observed 23 March and 31 May 2020 during the Covid-19 period relate directly to reduced transport activity and government has taken a range of actions to try to lock-in some of these benefits over the longer term, capitalising on recent increases in active travel. For example:

- DfT has announced £2 billion of investment in cycling and walking over 5 years, including:
- allocating Local Authorities a share of £225 million this year to create pop up and permanent cycle lanes and reallocate road space;
- amending laws to reduce red tape and get these schemes up and running quickly;
- investing £2.5 million to provide cycle parking spaces at 30 railway stations across England;
- a pilot voucher scheme to help people get their old bikes repaired.

This sits alongside wider actions to drive the transition to low emission vehicles, recognising that encouraging more people to choose green alternatives will contribute to a healthier environment with cleaner air.

The Department for Transport have advised that Cycling and walking levels are measured for the purposes of the statutory Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy through the National Travel Survey (NTS). A walking or cycling stage in the NTS is one where someone walks or cycles as part of an overall trip.

Cycle usage is highly dependent on the weather and the comparator day in 2020. In 2019, people in England cycled an estimated total of 964 million stages, an increase of 17% since 2013 (the CWIS baseline).

During the first national lockdown period earlier in the year we saw increases of around 100% on weekdays, and 200% at weekends compared to usage in early March prior to the lockdown. On average, over September-November – weekday usage has been similar to pre-Covid levels.

In 2019, 41% of all children (aged 5-16) in England usually walked to school. 47% of primary school children (aged 5-10) usually walked to school. 34% of secondary school children (aged 11-16) usually walked to school.

In 2019 people in England made an average of 332 walking stages which is a 11% increase since 2015 (following a reweighting of the metric following a methodological change in 2016 to improve the way the data was collected through the National Travel Survey).

Yours sincerely,



Tamara Finkelstein
Permanent Secretary
DEFRA