

Huw Merriman MP
Chair, Transport Select Committee
House of Commons
London
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Sir Peter Hendy CBE
Chair
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Dear Huw,

Thank you for inviting me to give evidence to the Transport Select Committee on 16 December to discuss the preparations all transport modes were making for the festive period.

In the event, of course, the Government's advice on households mixing at Christmas subsequently changed as the number of areas in tier 4 increased, and so travel of all kinds was significantly reduced across the festive period. However, I am confident that the preparations and monitoring put in place by transport operators and authorities mean we would have coped well had Christmas travel been at a higher level.

I want to record my gratitude to professionals across all areas of transport who worked with me to ensure there would be sufficient capacity, that additional, accessible and alternative routes were in place and that we'd minimised the impact of improvement works on road and rail. While it wasn't ultimately required on this occasion, we should take comfort and confidence that as a sector we can mobilise and plan to meet these challenges.

I promised to provide some further information during the session.

Christmas engineering works

I told the committee that I would clarify whether it was possible to rearrange engineering works that were scheduled to take place over Christmas. This was in relation to a possible increase in passenger demand as a result of Government proposals to temporarily relax Covid-19 restrictions.

As part of my evidence to the Committee, I outlined the importance of the £137m Christmas investment programme in improving the punctuality and reliability of the network for passengers and freight users. As I'm sure you can imagine, works of this scale are planned a long time in advance - up to two years in this case - and it is not possible to rearrange them at short notice without some serious knock-on effects including significant losses to the public purse.

As well as additional cost, there would be future disruption when the works are rescheduled either at a busier time of year or delayed until the following Christmas or beyond. Inevitably that delays the benefits these projects bring to passengers, freight users and local economies. There are also risks associated with changing the railway timetable with such little warning and the pressure that would place on train operating companies to make the necessary staffing arrangements.

Fortunately, because of the way the Christmas works were planned, we were able to provide a safe and reliable service to passengers travelling over Christmas, without making significant adjustments to the works programme - meaning we were able to avoid any of the issues above.

The majority of projects were undertaken and completed on Christmas Day or Boxing day, allowing a normal weekday service to run on 23 and 24 December, and for a largely regular service to resume on 27 December. As a result of this, in addition to the other measures around staffing, cleaning and coach provision that I outlined to you last month, we were able to accommodate passenger demand over the festive period in a Covid-secure way.

Reservable seating

I also wanted to follow up on the proportion of train operating companies that offer reservable seats when tickets are purchased in advance.

14 of 23 operators offer reservable tickets, and for the planned Christmas travel period, long-distance operators had planned reservation-only travel to manage demand and social distancing. It is also worth noting that the other operators who don't offer ticket reservations all run quota controls to avoid overcrowding.

Thank you too, for allowing me to make a brief statement regarding the Traffic Commissioners.

I hope that you find the information helpful. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Peter Hendy', is written over a light blue rectangular background.

Sir Peter Hendy CBE
Chair