



Department for Transport

Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair of the Petitions Committee

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From the Secretary of State
The Rt. Hon. Grant Shapps

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Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your letter of 30 March following the evidence sessions held in the Petitions Committee, and the additional questions from members of the public. I appreciate that people are anxious and are keen to understand how we are responding to the crisis. I have therefore addressed each of the questions raised in turn.

Will trains, buses and flights continue to operate? For how long?

We have asked transport providers to continue to provide appropriate levels of bus and train services during the outbreak to ensure that people who rely on those services are able to make the essential journeys they need. The government is also working with airports and airlines to ensure that vital services continue to operate, so that supplies can move into and around the country, key workers can move around as necessary, and British nationals are able to return to the UK from overseas.

The government and the UK rail industry have agreed a plan that will see a gradual reduction in train services across the country to reflect lower passenger demand and higher staff absence, while keeping vital services running. In most areas a new reduced timetables was introduced on Monday 23 March.

You will be aware that when the new reduced services were introduced some crowding was seen on some National Rail and LU services. For national rail services we have worked with operators to extend or run additional services where possible. With regard LU services TfL have introduced more trains on some lines and introduced other measures to reduce the levels of crowding initially seen. We are in regular daily dialogue with TfL to ensure they are doing all that they can to ensure that social distancing advice can be adhered to.

We expect that further phased reductions in National Rail timetables are likely to be necessary in the coming weeks as rail staff absence levels increase. We will do this in a planned and managed way so that key workers such as doctors and nurses who do need to access transport know what services are available and that we limit any unnecessary crowding.

What is being done to ensure deep cleaning of public transport, and make sure public transport is safe to use for people who have to travel to work or travel to buy essential goods?

In order to help tackle the spread of Covid-19, Public Health England issued detailed transport sector specific guidance, including general precautions for staff and the assessment of arrivals into the UK.

Bus operators are working hard to contain the spread of the outbreak by carrying out extensive cleaning and hygiene regimes, helping to keep the public safe during these challenging times.

The rail industry is ensuring staff remain abreast of the latest health advice and are promoting best practice to the travelling public at stations and online. In addition, bus operators and the rail industry are taking steps to keep public spaces clean including ensuring that hand rails and ticket machine screens on trains and at stations are being cleaned intensively.

What support is available to people whose holidays and flights have been cancelled as a result of the outbreak, and bring people who have been stranded abroad home?

Travellers whose holidays and flights have been cancelled as a result of the outbreak should speak to their tour operator, airline, transport or accommodation provider and insurance company (as applicable) to discuss the options available to them.

FCO has advised against all non-essential travel worldwide until at least 15 April, and has also advised all UK residents currently overseas who wish to return to the UK to do so immediately via commercial routes wherever possible.

On 30 March, the Foreign Secretary announced a new partnership between the Government and airlines to fly stranded British travellers home, with up to £75 million in government funding pledged. The Government continues to charter flights from key countries to the UK, for example, we have now repatriated 900 British Nationals from Peru. We are continuing to work closely with FCO on this key priority.

If flights are stopped, will there be sufficient notice to allow international students to fly home if they want to?

As a result of Covid-19, the global situation is changing very rapidly, with flights being cancelled and travel restrictions being imposed at an unprecedented rate across the globe.

Foreign nationals currently in the UK should be prepared for these global restrictions to be introduced at short notice, and this may affect how long they need to stay in the UK. In response to restrictions on social contact, many colleges and universities have closed their campuses and switched to a distance learning model, so it is for international students to determine whether they wish to return home.

The Home Office announced on 24 March that foreign nationals who are lawfully in the UK and cannot return home due to the COVID-19 pandemic will be able to extend their visas. The extension will apply to anyone whose visa expired after the 24 January 2020 and who cannot leave the country because of travel restrictions or self-isolation. This will last until 31 May but will be kept under regular review in case further extensions are needed. Individuals will need to proactively inform the Home Office by email that they are staying in the UK.

My Department and the transport sector have a critical role to play in the fight against coronavirus. We are all working to delay the spread of the virus and keep transport networks open for key workers and critical goods.

I hope you will find this response helpful. Thank you for the work you are doing as committee chair to share your correspondents' views with me and other ministers. I am happy to continue our dialogue as the situation progresses.

Yours ever

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Grant Shapps', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT