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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 29 April 2021

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Orders, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

[NB: [V] denotes a Member participating virtually.]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

International Travel: Covid-19

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to prepare for the safe reopening of international travel as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [914899]

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the safe operation of international travel as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [914923]

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to prepare for the safe reopening of international travel as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [914929]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The global travel taskforce report clearly sets out how, when the time is right, we will be able to restart international travel, without putting our hard-won progress against the virus at risk. We will confirm by early May whether non-essential international travel can resume from 17 May.

Dr Davies [V]: Comprehensive covid testing will be critical for the safe reopening of wider international travel. We already know that countries with very low rates of covid infection will be placed on a green list. Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether there are plans to allow individuals travelling from those countries at least to meet baseline testing requirements using lateral flow devices rather than the costly Polymerase chain reaction tests?

Grant Shapps: I know my hon. Friend will agree that it is very important to ensure that, whatever we do, we keep the British people safe. It is a question very much for the scientists to let us know whether PCR or lateral flow tests would be the appropriate test for a day, too. However, it is the case that I am very anxious to get the cost of those tests down. I can bring some good news to the House: there are now test providers providing tests for £60 and, indeed, one now for £44.90.

Mr Sharma [V]: Constituents have come to me raising the issue of queues at airports. There are long waits, no food and drinks, and nowhere to sit, in some cases for five hours. There is totally inadequate social distancing, and arrivals from safe destinations and from red list countries are forced into the same queues all mixed together. Heathrow Airport has been clear that Border Force is the problem. What conversations has the Secretary of State had with his counterpart in the Home Office about fixing this fiasco?

Grant Shapps: I should remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that people should not be travelling right now. In fact, they cannot travel right now without a very exceptional reason indeed, because people have to stay at home—stay domestically. However, it is the case that Border Force is checking every single person who enters the country to make sure that they have completed the pre-departure test and the locator form to say where they will be. I am afraid that, at the moment, that inevitably creates some queues. As we move towards the unlocking of international travel, we will be addressing this issue not least through beginning to automate the e-gates with the pre-departure form.

Julian Sturdy [V]: My right hon. Friend will be aware that Leeds-based Jet2 has recently announced the cancellation of all flights until 23 June, citing continued uncertainty about Government restrictions. With the wider travel industry braced for many European holiday destinations being off limits for some time, will the Secretary of State commit to publishing detailed assessments of the categorisation of specific countries in the traffic light system so that the industry bodies can see whether there is an immediate prospect of improvements? Furthermore, will he take into account the economic value of certain European destinations to the UK travel industry?

Grant Shapps: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we will be having the Joint Biosecurity Centre look at four principal factors: the level of coronavirus in any given country; the number of vaccines that has been dispensed in that country; the concern over any particular variants; and the quality of the data. Those are the facts and figures that it will be looking at. None the less, I do share his concerns about when a country jumps from one category to another, and we saw that last year. We are taking a couple of different steps to try to help with that. One is to have a green watch list where we are able to flag up, perhaps a couple of weeks in advance, to say that we are looking at a variation of interest, which could turn into a variation of concern, in order to help provide a bit more forward guidance this year.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Minister Mike Kane.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) is bang on the money today. Border Force is operating an onerous, manual, assurance check on inbound passengers' covid compliance despite there being very low incidence of non-compliance and robust pre-departure checks by carriers, causing huge queues in our immigration halls. The Secretary of State likes his taskforces. Where is the one to alleviate these bottlenecks before our skies reopen on 17 May?

Grant Shapps: I am somewhat confused. The hon. Gentleman's colleague, the shadow Transport Secretary—the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon)—wants 100% mandatory quarantine for those coming from all countries everywhere in the world, which surely could only lead to even more problems and delays at airports. So which is it to be: 100% quarantine and therefore much longer queues, or a practical and rational approach that has red list countries but also recognises that there are people who can quarantine at home? As I mentioned to the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), we are working with Border Force on electronic gates, but it is not quite as straightforward as the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) makes out, not least because it requires both hardware and software in order to make those e-gates.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I very much hope that in 18 days' time people in this country will be able to enjoy international travel once again. Could I just press the Secretary of State with regard to the need for a PCR test for those coming in from green list countries? Currently, those coming in from amber countries take the lateral flow test, yet those who come back from green countries will have to have a more expensive PCR test. I recognise the need to detect mutant strains, so may I suggest that we require green country travellers to take a lateral flow test and, if they are positive, then take a PCR test so that we could detect the strain? That may be a good balance to strike.

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his Select Committee for the excellent work that they do on this subject and many others. Of course, like him, I look to the scientists to provide the evidence as to what should be the appropriate level of testing at any stage. Just to reassure him, while we will most likely need to start off with PCR tests, I have incorporated three separate checkpoints during this process, the first of which is on 28 June, when we will look at the rules guiding this in order to make them as low as they can possibly be while at the same time making sure that we maintain the hard-won gains of the British people in this lockdown.

Rural Transport Connections

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve transport connections in rural areas. [914900]

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve transport connections in rural areas. [914908]

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve transport connections in rural areas. [914927]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Through schemes such as the Beeching reversal fund and the national bus strategy, we are determined to ensure that rural areas have the transport links they need to grow and prosper.

Sally-Ann Hart [V]: Beautiful Hastings and Rye has an extensive rural area and low population density, making practical and affordable public transport difficult to provide. However, accessible and affordable transport is a lifeline for many rural residents. Transport for the South East has highlighted the need for integrated transport approaches with better integrated transport hubs to achieve efficient provision of transport services, including integrated timetables, ticketing and fares, among other measures. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to facilitate innovation and new services in rural transport?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We have established the rural mobility fund worth £20 million to trial more demand-responsive services, and we have awarded funding to 17 pilot projects already. We have also published a call for evidence for the future of transport rural strategy that sought views on how rural communities can benefit best from transport innovation.

David Johnston: My constituency has lots of the challenges that one would associate with a predominantly rural area, but No. 1 on my list is trying to reopen Grove station, which, in a recent survey, 98% of people supported. We have submitted our bid to the Restoring Your Railway fund. Will my hon. Friend provide an update on when we will hear—hopefully good—news?

Andrew Stephenson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his continued advocacy on behalf of his constituency, as I know this is an issue that he has raised repeatedly with Ministers. The Department has received the bid for development funding. Decisions will be made by our expert panel following an initial review carried out by the Department for Transport and Network Rail. We expect to announce outcomes in the summer.

Robert Largan [V]: After five years, Andy Burnham is finally getting on with franchising bus services in Greater Manchester, and this is a step that I broadly welcome. However, there are many towns, like Glossop, Hadfield and New Mills, that are just outside Greater Manchester and rely heavily on cross-border bus services. Does the Minister agree that the Mayor of Greater Manchester and Derbyshire County Council need to work closely together to ensure that my constituents are not forgotten in any changes to bus services, and that we should take this opportunity to improve local bus routes, including delivering a badly needed direct bus from Glossop and Hadfield to Tameside General Hospital?

Mr Speaker: I am sure the same will apply to Lancashire.

Andrew Stephenson: Indeed, Mr Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for being such a great champion of active travel across his constituency of High Peak. Of course, it is for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to determine the geographical area of the franchising scheme. Local transport authorities may also join together to produce joint plans and should seek to do so where local economies and travel-to-work areas overlap significantly. He makes a strong case, and I certainly hope that the local authorities in question will listen to him.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Minister Sam Tarry.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Recent research by the Campaign to Protect Rural England has found that the past decade of Government cuts has seen the loss of 134 million miles of bus coverage, leading to the creation of so-called transport deserts. There needs to be proper funding for bus manufacturers—such as Mellor in Rochdale, which I recently spoke to—that produce the vehicles that serve rural towns and villages. Mellor produces state-of-the-art low emission vehicles that are used in many rural areas, but unfortunately it is a victim of the big bus bias and is being excluded from the Government’s “bus back better” strategy for producing vehicles at a 23-passenger capacity or less.

At the same time, by the Government’s own figures, the rural mobility fund totals just £19.4 million, a sixth of the £120 million ZEBRA—zero emission bus regional areas—funding for zero emission vehicles. What assurances will the Minister give that significant investment will be offered to ensure that such companies have greater support to deliver the vehicles that green our industries and ensure that our rural communities are genuinely connected?

Andrew Stephenson: There can be no greater champion of buses than the Prime Minister, who has committed us to bus back better following the pandemic. The House will be aware that he announced £5 billion in funding for buses, cycling and walking, of which £3 billion is allocated to buses. The roll-out of 4,000 zero emission buses is crucial. We are keen to work with all manufacturers, large and small, to ensure that we get the best technology available, the best value for taxpayers and the best service for passengers.

Network Rail: Staff Levels, Working Arrangements and Employment Conditions

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of Network Rail on (a) future staff levels, (b) working arrangements and (c) employment conditions. [914901]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): As sole shareholder, the Secretary of State has regular discussions with the chair and chief executive officer of Network Rail, as do I. Obviously those discussions sometimes cover matters such as the structure and operation of that organisation.

Grahame Morris [V]: I thank Network Rail for contacting me yesterday, but may I point out that the trade unions are alarmed to hear of its recent proposals, which could involve the loss of thousands of rail jobs and a halving of the frequency of safety-critical planned maintenance work? We certainly do not want any return to the cost-cutting and safety failures under Railtrack. Can the Minister assure the House that safety will not be compromised and that any changes will be agreed with the trade unions and the regulator, which play such a vital role in protecting safety on our railways?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes.

Motorcycle and Moped Training Centres

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): What steps he has taken to support motorcycle and moped training centres (a) during and (b) between covid-19 lockdowns. [914902]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): The Government have made financial support available through the self-employment income support scheme grant, which is set at 80% of three months’ average trading profits. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has provided trainers with guidance on operating safely and on testing restart dates.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My constituent was not self-employed. She worked supporting vaccine research during the pandemic, but with poor public transport connections and limited income, her only option was using a moped to get to work. Sadly, the Government’s failure to sufficiently extend the validity period of compulsory basic training certification during lockdown until test centres could safely reopen has resulted in her being forced to leave her job. What will the Minister do to support essential workers such as my constituent who have suffered because of the closure of training centres and the lack of extensions to their certificates?

Rachel Maclean: I completely agree that our frontline workers have played a vital role in the response to the pandemic—our thanks go to all of them. The hon. Lady will know that it is important that learners have the right skills to drive, because safety on the road is just as important during a lockdown as at any other time. It is vital that up-to-date road safety knowledge is there at the critical point when people drive and supervise for the first time. She will also know that motorcycle training resumed on 29 March, with testing restarting on 12 April in England and Wales. We got that testing up and running, which was possible because it is easier to maintain a covid-safe working environment for motorcyclists than for in-vehicle training and testing.

Road Condition: England

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the condition of England’s roads. [914903]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): In addition to investing £1.7 billion in 2021-22 in local roads, plus an unprecedented £27 billion in the strategic road network through to 2025, we are working towards the creation of a common data standard for the monitoring of road condition. That will aim to drive innovation and flexibility in monitoring local roads, enabling authorities to target defects in their networks more quickly.

Jo Gideon: Fifty of my constituents in Boatman Drive, Etruria, have been unable to access the road to their homes for over a year due to a large sinkhole that has forced Stoke-on-Trent City Council to close the road to all vehicles, including emergency services. Many of the residents have been in contact with me. One, Mr Madadi, was offered a fantastic new employment opportunity but could not accept the offer as it required relocation, and his home could not be sold because of the sinkhole. Will the Minister meet me to help resolve this issue, which I am sure she will agree has been going on for far too long?

Rachel Maclean: I commend my hon. Friend for raising that concern in the House and standing up for her constituents. I fully understand that this is a long-

running issue involving several parties, including the water utility company and the housing developer. I completely share her and her constituents' frustration. I would be delighted to ask my noble Friend the roads Minister, who deals with this, to meet her; she has already undertaken to do so.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I do not know whether the Minister has recently visited Tory-controlled Derbyshire, but I have, and the roads are in a shocking state. Plugging potholes and patching up roads in a piecemeal fashion simply does not work. What we need is a proper road maintenance programme, yet the Government have slashed funding by £375 million and are ploughing £27 billion into road expansion during a climate emergency. Does the Minister not think that it would be better for motorists, cyclists and the planet if we focused on fixing what we have got?

Rachel Maclean: I am delighted that the hon. Lady enjoyed her visit to Derbyshire—long may it continue to be Conservative-controlled. She is wrong to say that we are not investing in local roads. The Government announced £1.7 billion for maintenance and upgrades to tackle potholes, relieve congestion and boost connectivity.

I would like to address this allegation head-on. It is incorrect to say that we are spending £27 billion on road building or that 4,000 miles of new roads are planned. We are actually investing £27 billion in the operation, maintenance and renewal of England's strategic road network to secure safer and more reliable journeys that have less impact on adjacent communities and places.

Cycling and Walking

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage the uptake of cycling and walking. [914904]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): My Department is investing an unprecedented £2 billion in active travel over the course of this Parliament, which is the biggest ever boost for cycling and walking.

Dr Hudson [V]: In Cumbria, we are spoilt for choice when it comes to walking and cycling routes, such as the Hadrian's wall trail, coast to coast and countless Wainwrights. As well as those activities being hugely important for physical and mental health, many businesses in my constituency depend on tourism, and encouraging visitors will assist the recovery of those businesses. Does my hon. Friend agree that now is a great time to enjoy the beautiful Cumbrian countryside by walking and cycling and that longer-term projects such as reopening Gilsland railway station will improve the accessibility and connectivity of our region, which will make these activities easier to enjoy?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, I do encourage people to cycle and walk in Cumbria. I welcome the bid for funding from Gilsland station and visited it only last Thursday to see what it looks like for myself. We will announce in due course whether the bid has been successful, but if successful, the money will unlock funding for a strategic outline business case that could see a fantastic development of a station that has huge potential for tourism and other things.

Rail Passenger Numbers

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase passenger numbers on the rail network. [914905]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): We are working with the rail industry to develop a number of recovery initiatives focused on restoring passenger confidence in travelling by rail.

Tony Lloyd [V]: Any steps to encourage people post covid to regard rail travel as safe have to be welcomed, but would the Minister recognise that the very poor quality of the train service between Rochdale and Manchester, for example, a major community route—poor-quality trains, unreliable service—is a handicap both to commuters and to the economic development of the town of Rochdale? What is going to be done about that in the short term? We need the Government to act.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Actually a huge amount is being done while there are fewer passengers on our network. When passengers return to travelling, hopefully, as they previously did between Rochdale and Manchester, I would like to think that they will not find a Pacer train being used, because they have been replaced by a new fleet, and that they will find these trains in spotless condition, because they are unbelievably clean. We are also working, and there has been a big consultation, as he will know, to sort out some of the very big structural problems that we have with, for example, the Castlefield corridor and the timetabling of trains through it. We are trying to have short, medium and long-term solutions to this very thorny problem, which will guarantee much better service in the long run.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Government's approach to recovering our railways is chaotic. They have introduced inflation-busting rail fares while freezing fuel duty. They talk about the green agenda, yet fail to commit to a rolling programme of electrification. They talk about levelling up, but have put into doubt dozens of key rail infrastructure projects. They have brought franchises back into public ownership just to pay risk-free profits to private companies, and where are the flexible season tickets for cash-strapped passengers? All hidden, no doubt, in the long-promised Williams review, which never seems to arrive. So my question to the Minister is simple: does not the British public deserve much better than this?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I do not recognise the picture that the hon. Gentleman has painted. We have electrified way more miles of rail than any previous Labour Government. The Government have stood behind the railways. A huge amount of money is going into our rail system at this point in time; nearly £12 billion over the course of the last year—money that would not have been able to be spent under a Labour Administration, because the economy would have been in tatters and we would have been in a very different place.

Cruises: Covid-19 Travel Advice

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the (a) Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and (b) devolved Administrations on the global travel taskforce and restarting cruises as covid-19 restrictions are eased. [914906]

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with (a) the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and (b) representatives of the cruise industry on amending the covid-19 travel advice on cruises. [914918]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): The Department for Transport engages regularly with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the devolved Administrations and the cruise industry on the global travel taskforce and cruise restart. Travel advice is the responsibility of the FCDO.

Ronnie Cowan [V]: My constituency of Inverclyde hosts over 80 visits from international cruise ships each year. They make a valued contribution to the local economy and, when the time is right, we look forward to welcoming them back. However, with health to the fore, can the Minister tell me how the travel regime operates under the traffic light system with countries that have emerging variants of concern, or a prevalent spread of variants, and in what ways will the Government seek to react in good time to prevent transmission?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member is right to draw attention to the huge economic importance of the cruise industry to constituencies such as Inverclyde. My Department continues to work closely with the FCDO and with the Department of Health and Social Care. A covid-19 framework drawn up by the cruise industry informs health protocols on board those ships. That has been recognised as good practice by the UN's International Maritime Organisation. We will see a safe restart of international cruises in accordance with those protocols.

Caroline Nokes [V]: The cruise industry is a significant employer in the Southampton area, but British travellers are still advised by the FCDO against cruising, even as advice on flying is set to be relaxed along with eased restrictions. Approval has been given for domestic cruising, but please can my hon. Friend work with colleagues across Government to make sure that international travel advice for cruising is aligned with that for aviation?

Robert Courts: My right hon. Friend is quite right. A home port call is estimated to generate approximately £2.95 million in today's money, which underlines the critical importance of cruises for employment in Southampton and other ports. The restart of domestic cruises has indeed been confirmed, and the global travel taskforce advises that international cruises will restart alongside the wider restart in international travel. I am committed to working with colleagues at the FCDO and across Government to see a safe restart of international cruises as soon as possible, in line with the GTT.

Highland Bus Services: Net Zero Target

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on increasing bus services in the highlands to help achieve the UK's net zero target. [914907]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Responsibility for bus services is a devolved matter. My Department engages with the devolved Administrations, including in Scotland, on issues with bus services all the time.

Jamie Stone [V]: I live near an Asda store. Many of the people who work there, who are friends of mine, would like to use the local bus services to get to work, but the timetables do not work. Equally, I have people living in Caithness who are disabled, who would like to use the buses to Inverness more, but the disabled facilities are not what they should be. I have made representations to the Scottish Government and to the bus company, Stagecoach, but to no avail. I realise, of course, that transport is devolved, but what advice can the Secretary of State offer me to try to sort this wretched problem out?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that this is a devolved matter, but there are Barnett consequential, so there is quite a lot of money coming through, particularly from the "Bus Back Better" plan. He is also right to be concerned, as I have been, about the level of bus services and threatened cuts across Scotland, including by First Bus in Glasgow and Stagecoach in Stirling. I encourage him to work hard to highlight these issues and remind the Scottish Government that they have a lot of money for buses coming through as a result of Barnett consequential.

Access to Airports: North of England

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to airports in the north of England. [914910]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): The Government recognise that good access to airports is essential and are happy to work with airports, transport bodies and local authorities to bring improvements where needed.

Kevin Hollinrake: Vital plans to expand Leeds Bradford airport have been delayed due to planning matters. I realise that my hon. Friend cannot comment on planning matters, but does he agree that expansion of airports in Yorkshire, which is very under-served in airport capacity, is vital to the economy and to leisure opportunities for people in Yorkshire?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend is right that I am unable to comment on the specific planning case at Leeds Bradford airport so as not to prejudice any consideration of that proposal. This Government have been clear that they are supportive of airports' making best use of their existing runways, and they fully understand and value the critical connecting role of regional aviation.

Transport Decarbonisation

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent steps his Department has taken to help facilitate transport decarbonisation in line with the Government's commitments to (a) the Paris agreement and (b) COP26. [914911]

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What recent steps his Department has taken to help facilitate transport decarbonisation in line with the Government's commitments to (a) the Paris agreement and (b) COP26. [914912]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The transport decarbonisation plan will set out transport contributions to net zero, and we continue to work with our international partners ahead of COP26.

Drew Hendry [V]: Promoting and investing in cycling and active travel is essential if we are to reduce car journeys. The Scottish Government already spend over £15 per person, compared with just over £7 in England—more than twice as much. The SNP has pledged to increase that investment to over 10% of the transport capital budget. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is the sort of ambition required to drive real change, and will his Government commit to replicating it in England?

Grant Shapps: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me an opportunity to talk about our active travel plans. With £2 billion-worth of spending, the Barnett consequential from that will no doubt give him something to boast about in the future—but invented in Downing Street and, I hope, delivered in Scotland.

Douglas Chapman [V]: Shipping is a significant contributor to carbon emissions and pollution around the world. We all know that change is coming, but investment and incentives are required now, so what support will the Secretary of State's Department provide to those in our maritime and shipping sectors as part of the Government's commitment to moving towards net zero shipping?

Grant Shapps: That is absolutely right. The shipping industry is one of the harder to decarbonise areas of the economy. However, technologies such as hydrogen have a big part to play, so this Government are putting a lot of research and development investment behind hydrogen in particular with a view to shipping. We have just announced the Teesside hydrogen hub, the country's first, to help develop more of those technologies, and the hon. Gentleman will not be disappointed by our ambition through our transport decarbonisation plan.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As we have heard, the Government are finally, finally inching forward with a fraction of their 4,000 green bus plan, but in Scotland orders have already been placed for the equivalent of 2,720 battery electric buses, with many more to come. At the Transport Committee, Baroness Vere called this investment "brilliant". Graham Vidler of the Confederation of Passenger Transport also welcomed it, plus the £5 billion equivalent on bus infrastructure, and called the Scottish Government's commitment to reducing car journeys by 20% by decade's end a

"big, bold and ambitious target that we would like to see matched in the UK Government's decarbonisation plan".

Will you match it, Secretary of State?

Grant Shapps: Once again, I am very pleased that the Barnett consequentials ensure that money is available to spend in Scotland. We should welcome the fact that

£3 billion is going to buses. The hon. Gentleman mentions the £120 million we have announced for zero-emission buses in 2021-22, which will give many hundreds of buses a start on the production line. We are on target to deliver all 4,000 that we have promised to start building in this Parliament.

Gavin Newlands: That is not what the industry says. The gap in ambition is simply startling. The SNP plans to have the majority of fossil fuel buses removed from service by 2023. This Government's plans represent just one tenth of the English fleet. When we consider that, along with commitments and action on rail decarbonisation with a nationalised ScotRail, increasing the active travel budget to 10% of transport capital, free bikes for children who cannot afford them, interest-free loans for electric cars and free bus travel for under-22s, does the Secretary of State agree that if Scots want that progressive and decarbonised future it has to be both votes SNP next Thursday?

Grant Shapps: Funnily enough, I do not agree. It is worth the hon. Gentleman's Scottish voters understanding that that money is available through the Barnett consequentials. If bus services were as good as is claimed, then it would not be the case that in Dundee bus users were being warned just last November to expect big changes to services, the worst since the 1950s, which would have negative impacts for older people and those dependent on bus services. I do not think it is quite as rosy as he likes to make it sound. This Government in Westminster are committed to decarbonising the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: Let's get beyond next Thursday. Then it will be easier for all of us. [Laughter.]

Greater London Boundary Charge

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Whether his Department plans to review the Greater London boundary charge proposed by the Mayor of London. [914915]

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Whether his Department plans to review the Greater London boundary charge proposed by the Mayor of London. [914928]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The Government do not support a boundary charge. The Mayor of London cannot expect non-Londoners to clean up his mismanagement of Transport for London finances.

David Simmonds [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is precisely not the fresh start that TfL or London as a whole needs to see? The cost of the Mayor's financial mismanagement should not be passed on to my constituents and other Londoners at precisely the time when we are trying to kickstart our economy after covid. Does he agree that this measure, if implemented, would be damaging particularly for high streets in outer London boroughs, and especially for the disabled and those who rely on their cars for personal reasons?

Grant Shapps: That is absolutely right. Let us be fair to the Mayor of London. No one could have predicted the coronavirus. This Government have generously backed

TfL with more than £3 billion of support so far, but it is because of the Mayor's mismanagement of that organisation, with years of being woefully unprepared, that he was not ready when this economic shock came. If London wants a real fresh start for TfL and does not want this boundary tax, it should consider voting for Shaun Bailey on 6 May.

Sir David Evennett [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the proposed charge is a result of the London Labour Mayor's poor financial management, and that this reckless charge would have severe detrimental effects on businesses, employees, families, shoppers and visitors in outer London boroughs like mine in Bexley?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the threat. I wonder whether everybody realises that the Mayor of London would like to introduce this border tax, so that non-Londoners end up having to pay for his financial mismanagement of London. It is not on. It is called taxation without representation and, as our American cousins used to point out, that is tyranny.

Leamside Line

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the full reopening of the Leamside line. [914916]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Leamside line is being assessed as part of Northern Powerhouse Rail and will be considered within the integrated rail plan.

Mrs Hodgson [V]: As the Minister said, the proposal to reopen the Leamside line in full is being considered as part of the integrated rail plan. We were told to expect an answer in March, then it was April, and now we are almost in May without any further news, so when can my constituents expect to find out if the Government intend to follow through on their promise to level up from Westminster to Wearside?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We certainly intend to follow through on our promises to the people in the north-east and Wearside, something that decades of Labour disinterest in that area have failed to deliver. Ahead of finalising the integrated rail plan, we are fully considering the evidence from all stakeholders; we have had an awful lot. I just remind the hon. Lady, who I know supports this scheme, that it was driven by local campaigners, at the start with a guy called Christopher Howarth, who was a Conservative campaigner. There was little interest from her party or its representatives before he got involved.

Rail Infrastructure: South-west Wales

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): What recent progress has been made on improvements to rail infrastructure in south-west Wales. [914917]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Significant improvements are being planned and delivered at pace and, on 6 May, the people of Wales

will be able to vote for a Welsh Conservative Government committed to working with us to deliver even further rail infrastructure improvements.

Jonathan Edwards [V]: I was disappointed to receive an answer from the Department to a written question indicating that the Labour Government of my country had not made any formal representations to the British Government regarding the proposed West Wales Parkway on the main line. However, while I fully support the project, we need to be far more ambitious. It could form part of a transformational metro system for the west of Wales, centred on Swansea city, by linking up the whole western coalfield valleys and beyond. Considering the manner in which High Speed 2 is shafting Wales, will the British Government compensate the communities that I represent so that a comprehensive public transport revolution can be delivered for south-west Wales?

Andrew Stephenson: As the hon. Gentleman will know, this Government are committed to delivering the West Wales Parkway station—indeed, it was in the 2019 Conservative manifesto. We continue to work with all local partners to deliver this. It is currently being progressed to outline business case stage using regional funding.

Rail Network: Accessibility

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve accessibility for people with physical and hidden disabilities who use the rail network. [914919]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): We are making stations more accessible and improving staff training and passenger assistance. The disabled persons railcard reduces fares, and better, accessible trains are coming into service.

Navendu Mishra [V]: Only 40% of railway stations in Greater Manchester have step-free access—that is 38 out of 93 stations. This is significantly lower than the north-west region as a whole, which is at 63%, and the national average at 61%. Mayor Andy Burnham has called for all railway stations in Greater Manchester to be fully accessible by 2025. According to the charity Leonard Cheshire, it would take just 1% to 3% of annual transport spending to make the rail network accessible by 2030, so what steps has the Minister taken to ensure that this will be a reality as soon as possible?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his interest in this. This Government are spending hundreds of millions of pounds on improving our network and continue to do so. Indeed, I met the chief executive of Network Rail yesterday to talk about how we can speed up the delivery of elements of our accessibility programme. I read the Leonard Cheshire report on this, and it was interesting, but I tend to think that it has underestimated the figures involved in improving our network to the level that it should be at by now.

Transport Decarbonisation Plan

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): What his timeframe is for publishing the transport decarbonisation plan. [914921]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): We are working to finalise our bold and ambitious plan to decarbonise transport, and we expect to publish it as soon as possible this spring.

Mick Whitley [V]: The Government's Brexit deal means that in order to avoid tariffs on electric vehicles, 55% of vehicle parts, including batteries, will need to be locally sourced by the end of 2026. Will the Government back Labour's call for investments in at least three battery gigafactories by 2025, and can they commit to building one of those factories on Merseyside?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that a gigafactory will play a critical role in decarbonising our transport sector. We have a world-beating automotive industry in this country, and at the election the Government committed £1 billion to back investment in a gigafactory in this country. Can I remind him that leaving the European Union has provided us with a lot of opportunities to set our own pathways to decarbonise transport? We will be setting out those plans in detail in the transport decarbonisation plan.

A1 Roundabouts

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What plans his Department has to phase out roundabouts on the A1. [914922]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): The Department aims to create more free-flowing journeys across the strategic road network, including the A1, through its road investments.

Sir Edward Leigh: The A1—the great north road—is a beautiful road linking Scotland and England, and I think that to honour the upcoming jubilee we should rename it the Queen's highway. Why not? But it is not an entirely safe road. I have spent hundreds of hours on it, and there are many fatalities on it. I cannot understand why all the roundabouts have been stripped away between Newark and the Black Cat roundabout, but going south from the Black Cat to the north circular there are still roundabouts. There are also many crossing points in Lincolnshire and other places. Will the Minister now commit to really upgrading the A1 to make it entirely safe by getting rid of all the traffic lights, roundabouts and crossing points? Let us make it a true Queen's highway.

Rachel Maclean: I fully agree with my right hon. Friend's suggestion for renaming that beautiful road, and I am sure that the Transport Secretary, who is listening carefully, will take that away and consider it. I am happy to say that we are investing significant sums in making the A1 safer and more reliable as a result of our near-£1 billion A428 improvement scheme, and there will be a major reconstruction of the Black Cat junction on the A1 so that north-south traffic will flow freely underneath it. There is potential for further enhancement along the A1, which will be considered in the light of Highways England's work to update its route strategies, starting this year, and I fully expect my right hon. Friend's journeys to be very pleasant indeed in the future.

Topical Questions

[914959] **Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I know that the House is interested in the updates with regard to travel returning internationally over the coming months, and I want to provide a quick update to say that, although polymerase chain reaction—PCR—tests may be required from the medical and scientific point of view, we have been working with private laboratories, pharmacies, supermarkets and other companies to encourage them to deliver on their logistical expertise, enter the market and drive down the costs. We have seen some success, because, as I mentioned earlier, the cost of a single PCR day-two test from one of the large providers on the Government link site has now come down to £60 and a new entrant at £44.90 is now enabling more people to access PCR tests as international travel returns.

Christian Matheson: I understand that work on the strategic outline business case for the redevelopment of Chester station, which has been submitted to the Department, has produced a highly positive cost-benefit ratio, and that it is also being proposed as a priority project for the DFT acceleration unit supported by Transport for the North, so can the Secretary of State confirm when Chester station will be included in the rail network enhancement programme and when further development funding will be allocated to take this project forward?

Grant Shapps: We are continuing to work closely with Cheshire West and Chester Council on its preparation of the strategic outline business case for enhancements at and around Chester station. Having received an initial strategic outline business case from the council last summer, DFT officials undertook to carry out a detailed review of the requested further information for the SOBC, and it is being considered for inclusion in RNEP, which is the—well, the hon. Gentleman knows what RNEP is, so I will not explain.

[914961] **Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con):** The active travel grant funding made available to local authorities such as mine was very welcome, but unfortunately the Labour-run council in Southampton has used this funding to halve road capacity on main arterial routes into the city. As lockdown has eased, this has caused congestion and made already poor air quality much worse. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the active travel funding provided to local authorities did not come with directions on how it should be used, and that the decision to implement any schemes, for good or ill, are the responsibility of the local authority?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Department for Transport has made it absolutely clear that local authorities must focus on scheme quality. They must demonstrate that they have carried out appropriate consultation, listened to local communities, and considered access for emergency vehicles and traffic impacts. We recognise that poorly designed, temporary cycling and walking schemes can have negative impacts, but we also recognise that they can be very positive when delivered in the right way.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: After much delay, the Transport Secretary has finally published Highways England's review into smart motorways. The stocktake has revealed that over the last five years 63 people lost their lives, which is a significant increase on the figure given just over a year ago—38. Victims' families and campaigners are crying out for common sense—and for action from the Secretary of State—recognising that the radar technology does not even capture broken down vehicles 35% of the time. As the legal challenges mount, will he publish the specific data comparing deaths on the hard shoulder of existing motorways with deaths on the lane that was previously a hard shoulder and is now used as a live running lane?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman and I, and the whole House, share similar concerns about the safety of our motorways. One of the first things I did as Secretary of State was to introduce the smart motorways stocktake. One factor we have to look at is the level of fatalities on both smart motorways and regular motorways. As I mentioned to the hon. Gentleman previously, from 2015 to 2019 there were 39 fatalities on smart motorways, but there were also 368 fatalities on regular motorways. It is very important that we look at all the questions he asked with regard to the data, which is why I have asked the Office of Rail and Road to analyse the data and provide reassurance that it can be trusted. When those figures are provided we can compare them to make sure we are producing the safest possible roads in the world.

Jim McMahon [V]: The victims' families will want to know that action will be taken on lives that are avoidably lost and I am afraid that answer will not satisfy those families at all.

Moving on to our regional economies, the Secretary of State knows how important our regional airports are in providing tens of thousands of important, well-paid, decent jobs in our regions. Will he make sure the Government do far more than the standard schemes on business rates and furlough support to make sure that our regional airports not only survive but can thrive in the future—or does he believe the market will decide their fate?

Grant Shapps: First, on smart motorways I understand that it is the hon. Gentleman's and Labour's policy to close all-running lanes, which would create more traffic. The current estimate is that it would create 25% more traffic on other roads; that in itself would, we think, produce about 25 more fatalities per year. So I urge the hon. Gentleman to follow the work of the Office of Rail and Road to make sure that we do not create more fatalities, rather than fewer.

With regard to regional airports, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to support them. We have put £7 billion into protecting and supporting our aviation sector. I am slightly mystified, however, because if I understand it correctly, the hon. Gentleman's current policy is to quarantine all traffic so that nobody could quarantine at home, which would do further damage to our regional airports.

[914962] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): I am delighted that North Devon is soon to become home to the first rural e-scooter trial. However, what steps is the

Department taking to inform the public that e-scooters, already seen in so many public spaces, are not legally permitted unless part of the trial?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for her support for this innovative form of transport technology. Trials of rental e-scooters began last July and have been a huge success: over 2 million trips have been taken and 5 million km ridden—the equivalent of six times to the moon and back. But the Department has written to all major retailers of e-scooters in the UK to ask them to make it clear to customers that it is illegal to use e-scooters on public roads. Retailers make this clear online and in their stores, and motoring offences will apply to the private use of e-scooters. The local police are fully engaged and have enforcement powers, and they are expected to use them.

[914960] **Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab) [V]: Given that the national infrastructure bank will be based in Leeds, would it not be highly symbolic to start building phase 2b of the eastern leg of HS2 from Leeds southwards? The Secretary of State was quoted recently as saying that he is looking at bringing forward the start date. Would he consider that idea?

Grant Shapps: I actually agree with the right hon. Gentleman; it probably would have been sensible to start the entire project from the north to the south in the first place, but having looked at this in great detail, not least through the Oakervee review, I also know that chopping and changing those plans partway through is the most expensive possible outcome and does not work out. None the less, we are committed to ensuring that the integrated rail plan answers all these questions, and his point has been clearly heard.

[914965] **Dr Dan Poulter** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State will be aware that almost 50% of UK container freight goes through Felixstowe port, and he will be aware of the importance of improving rail links from that port to the midlands and the north. Can I get his reassurance that the Felixstowe to Nuneaton freight rail link is a priority for this Government and will be delivered on time?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of freight links in our country. Since 2009, more than £200 million has been invested in capacity on the Felixstowe to Nuneaton freight corridor. Through the rail network enhancements pipeline, Network Rail is developing business cases for enhancements at Ely, Hockley and between Ely and Soham to provide additional capacity on this key freight corridor.

[914963] **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: Constituents of mine who had travelled for essential medical treatment for their disabled children were required to quarantine at Heathrow in a hotel room that was completely inadequate for their needs. What consideration is being given to the needs of disabled people and those with medical needs in the hotel quarantine scheme?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to stand up for her constituents, particularly those who may have special circumstances. There is a process in

place for special circumstances to be considered. I would be interested to understand why in the case of her constituent, from her question, it does not look like that was effective. We would be very happy to investigate that particular case, although I understand that would of course be retrospective.

Mr Speaker: It is great to see the hon. Member back: I call Tracey Crouch.

[914967] **Tracey Crouch** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Representing a constituency in a county that has a large number of commuters to London, the future of flexible rail ticketing is an issue to which many are paying close attention. With the reality of more people enjoying hybrid working arrangements in the future, we need to ensure that is reflected in the structure of rail tickets. Therefore, can the Secretary of State confirm when the Department will be in a position to set out what rail ticketing will look like for passengers in my constituency and across the south-east, and provide an assurance that the new fares will offer genuine flexibility where it is needed?

Grant Shapps: May I say on behalf of everybody how fantastic it is to see my hon. Friend back in the House in her rightful place? She is absolutely right about the changes in how people will commute going forward, because the world has of course changed. I am sure that people will come back to the railway, but perhaps in a more flexible way, and I can reassure her that we will be setting out more details of our view about how ticketing should work, not least through the Williams-Shapps review.

[914964] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: Last week, the Government's sixth carbon budget included aviation emissions for the first time—a welcome step. Can the Secretary of State explain how the Government think they can hit their net zero target without updating the airports national policy statement? Will he finally commit to scrapping Tory plans for a third runway at Heathrow, if he is serious about tackling the climate emergency?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady will know that the whole House voted for the Heathrow plans, as she stated, but we will shortly be bringing forward our transport decarbonisation plans, which will discuss in full and in detail our ambitious plans to decarbonise the entire transport sector, including the aviation sector. She is right to say that we have increased our ambition on this front, and we are the only major leading nation that will set out such an ambitious set of plans to decarbonise the entire sector.

[914968] **Katherine Fletcher** (South Ribble) (Con) [V]: Hello from Lancashire, Mr Speaker. In South Ribble, there is quite a lot of interest in the Government's recently announced £3 billion national bus strategy. Speaking to residents, many improvement suggestions have already been received. Joanne, for example, wants a west-east bus between Tarleton, the Hooles, Longton and getting into Leyland. Can my right hon. Friend share how he plans to ensure that the communities' voices are heard during the planning of this strategy so that their needs are in the mix, and it is not just the ideas from the men in grey suits and the established industry?

Mr Speaker: Enjoy your travel in Lancashire when you do.

Rachel Maclean: I note your remark, Mr Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for her point. I am not a man in a grey suit, so I can reassure her fully, and I thank her for the massively constructive way she has engaged with the national bus strategy since its launch. The way she has stood up for her constituents is absolutely exemplary, and I know from the discussions that she and I have had how important that is. By October, local transport authorities are expected to provide bus service improvement plans, which should be developed in collaboration with local people to ensure that they genuinely reflect the area's needs.

Mr Speaker: Staying in Lancashire, I call Rosie Cooper. Come on, Rosie.

[914966] **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab) [V]: Many of my constituents are concerned that each of the three rail timetabling options put forward by the Manchester recovery taskforce means reduced connectivity between West Lancs and Manchester. Will the Secretary of State assure my constituents that they are not the poor relations of the larger northern cities, and will he intervene to ensure that the supposed levelling-up of services in the north does not leave areas such as West Lancs behind?

Grant Shapps: Yes, that is absolutely right. I have been working with Transport for the North and many others in consultation to sort out that fundamental problem, which is the bottleneck around the Castlefield corridor in and out of Manchester, which impacts on the entire northern rail service and beyond. The hon. Lady is absolutely right; we will be taking all those representations into account, and very carefully. Indeed, the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), would gladly meet her to discuss it further.

[914970] **Mrs Natalie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): When direct all-day high-speed services to Martin Mill, Deal and Sandwich were suspended, I received written assurances that they would be fully restored after lockdown. Can my hon. Friend confirm that it remains the intention to fully restore the high-speed services to Deal, Sandwich and the villages as soon as possible?

Rachel Maclean: Morning and evening peak services to Martin Mill, Kingsdown, Deal and Sandwich are currently operating. Passenger volumes are continually monitored, and all-day service provision will be reviewed in the light of passenger demand as lockdown restrictions are eased.

[914969] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State will know that the consultation on Manchester's rail services is considering the removal of the direct link between Sheffield and Manchester airport. Our chamber of commerce is deeply concerned about the damage that axing this service would do to local business and jobs, and our two world-class universities believe that it threatens international student recruitment, which brings more than £200 million into the local economy. Does he recognise those concerns, and will he meet me and other local Members to discuss the issue?

Grant Shapps: Yes, I absolutely recognise the concerns. As I mentioned a moment ago, there is a problem with congestion on rail services around Manchester, which needs to be resolved. I am working with all the local partners in order to do that. I have set up a special meeting of the Northern Transport Acceleration Council after the elections, in order to work with the Manchester recovery taskforce and resolve exactly that issue.

[914971] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab) [V]: Between January and June last year, the Minister of State told the House three times that his Department would shortly publish its research on the level of funding needed to meet the target of doubling cycling and increasing walking by 2025. Will he now publish that missing research, or is he breaking his promise because he knows it confirms that the funding allocated falls woefully short of what is needed?

Grant Shapps: Given that we have £2 billion of funding for walking and cycling—the biggest sum ever invested in active travel, as far as we can work out—the idea that there is a lack of investment is, of course, entirely untrue. The hon. Lady will have noticed that last year the coronavirus occupied almost everything we were doing, but it did not prevent us issuing a new cycling strategy, published by the Prime Minister and backed by me. We will be saying a lot more about that, and I welcome the hon. Lady's enthusiasm.

[914975] **Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary environment group, I am incredibly supportive of the Government's ambition to phase out diesel trains across the entire UK network by 2040. East West Rail is soon to build a railway line in my constituency, due for completion in 2030, but it is not being built as an electrified line, and my constituents are very worried that they might end up with a new diesel railway line. Will my right hon. Friend, or my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean)—I am not sure who is answering—work with me and the Treasury to make sure that East West Rail is aligned with the Government's ambition to phase out diesel trains?

Grant Shapps: I will answer my hon. Friend. East West Rail, the company behind the new line, is aiming to deliver an entirely zero-carbon railway. It will be considering conventional and emerging technology solutions for powering trains, which could be part-electric and part-hydrogen or battery in the future, for example, so that services that operate along the whole length of the route are zero carbon.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Your mask.

Jim Shannon: Sometimes I forget that I am wearing the mask, Mr Speaker, but I thank you very much for calling me.

Airlines have had a difficult past 12 months. Belfast City airport, Belfast International airport and Londonderry airport are important Northern Ireland regional airports. Can the Minister confirm the Government's support for them, which I know has been there, and that every effort will be taken to ensure that they can and will be part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland's strategy for the future?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the importance of those links with our Northern Ireland airports. I made sure that we put public service obligations in place during the height of the crisis last year, and we will always look to do everything we can to make sure that connectivity across our great Union continues to exist.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Cutting-edge maritime projects such as the Holyhead hydrogen hub and the proposed Anglesey freeport in my constituency will move forward this Government's renewable agenda. To take full advantage of these opportunities, excellent transport infrastructure is needed across north Wales. Will the Minister confirm that he will support necessary improvements to the A55, as highlighted in Sir Peter Hendy's Union connectivity review?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is a brilliant champion of connectivity for her constituency, and as a result, my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary was in north Wales early this week, discussing plans to upgrade the A55 with the Welsh Conservative candidate standing in May's election. We look forward to the final Union connectivity review recommendations ahead of the spending review, in which we will consider funding plans for delivering improved UK-wide connectivity. However, I must say to the hon. Lady that the fastest way for her constituents to secure upgrades to the A55 is to vote for a Welsh Conservative Government, who have pledged to end Labour's neglect of north Wales.

Mr Speaker: That brings me on to my final point, which is just to say that I will be pleased when next Thursday is out of the way, but I remind Members who are going into other constituencies, other than for a private, personal visit, to please ensure that they notify the MP. That goes to all sides, because I am getting letters of complaint. Please, I do not need any more letters of complaint: just abide by good practice.

Point of Order

10.38 am

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As a further letter of complaint, I want to raise with you the problem of Government Departments not meeting the guidelines for named day questions. To put it in context, this Government spend more money on polling and focus groups than any Government in history. There may be good reason for that, but for the past year, they have adamantly resisted all freedom of information requests about that subject. I put in five named day questions on specific elements of it. Not one of them was answered on time; indeed, not one of them has been answered yet. This is not unusual: other Departments also resist answering named day questions, and this is an instrument that is critical for holding Governments to account. This was the Cabinet Office, but other Departments do the same. Mr Speaker, May I ask you to get the House authorities to speak to the Government about meeting these guidelines, so that our attempts to hold them to account are more effective?

Mr Speaker: I totally agree with everything that the right hon. Gentleman has said. It is not acceptable. Unfortunately we do not have business questions today, because I know that the Leader of the House, like both of us, is also concerned that questions need to be answered. We have a procedure and a process that Secretaries of State and Ministers have to take seriously. It is totally unacceptable. We are elected by our constituents, our constituents expect a service, and that service is being denied by Minister's Departments. It is not acceptable. We will continue to take it up, but I also say to Secretaries of State that I would not like to cross the right hon. Gentleman, because I know that this will not be the end of it. I am sure that he is already on to the Procedure Committee to let it know of his dissatisfaction. However, I am also dissatisfied. The message needs to go to the heart of Government: take MPs seriously from all sides. They deserve the service; so do their constituents. It is not acceptable; let us keep in touch on it.

I am suspending the sitting. Shortly before it resumes, I shall call for the Division bells to be sounded.

10.40 am

Sitting suspended.

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS

2.27 pm

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Lady Usher of the Black Rod.

The Speaker, with the House, went up to hear Her Majesty's Commission; on their return, the Speaker sat in the Clerk's place at the Table.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that the House has been to the House of Peers where a Commission under the Great Seal was read, authorising the Royal Assent to the following Acts and Measures:

Trade Act 2021
 Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021
 Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021
 Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Act 2021
 Forensic Science Regulator Act 2021
 British Library Board (Power to Borrow) Act 2021
 Education and Training (Welfare of Children) Act 2021
 Domestic Abuse Act 2021
 Prisons (Substance Testing) Act 2021
 Botulinum Toxin and Cosmetic Fillers (Children) Act 2021
 Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Act 2021
 Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021
 Financial Services Act 2021
 Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021
 Fire Safety Act 2021
 National Security and Investment Act 2021
 Diocesan Boards of Education Measure 2021
 Cathedrals Measure 2021

Her Majesty's Most Gracious Speech

Mr Speaker: I have further to acquaint the House that the Lord Privy Seal, one of the Lords Commissioners, delivered Her Majesty's Most Gracious Speech to both Houses of Parliament, in pursuance of Her Majesty's Command. For greater accuracy I have obtained a copy, and also directed that the terms of the Speech be printed in the *Journal* of this House. Copies are being made available in the Vote Office.

The Speech was as follows:

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

In the midst of a global pandemic, my Government's legislative programme responded to the needs of the United Kingdom, making sure that public services and businesses had the support they needed. In addition, it progressed domestic reforms to strengthen the union; increase productivity and protect citizens; and delivered the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

My Government acted to protect the health and safety of the nation. Legislation was passed to ensure the NHS could continue to provide care for all those in need of it and that essential public services, such as the courts and prisons, could continue.

My Government took action to support jobs, businesses and livelihoods, with over £350 billion of financial support, helping to protect over 11 million jobs. To support businesses, my Government provided affordable loans, business rates relief and modernised insolvency laws. To facilitate businesses operating under social distancing restrictions, laws were passed to increase flexibilities in planning and licensing decisions. My Government took action to support the industries most heavily affected by the pandemic, including tourism, culture and leisure and took steps to repair the public finances once economic recovery is secure.

My Government protected the most vulnerable by supporting those who were shielding during the pandemic, placing rough sleepers in emergency accommodation and increasing funding for essential public services.

My Government worked with the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure all citizens across the United Kingdom shared in the benefits of scientific advances in testing, medicines and vaccines, as well as benefiting from the logistical expertise of our gallant Armed Forces.

My Government built one of Europe's largest testing regimes, supporting an evidence-based roadmap to ease restrictions and making it safe to visit loved ones, including in care homes, at the earliest opportunity.

My Government supported research by British scientists to develop one of the world's most effective vaccines. Following the first deployment of a clinically authorised covid-19 vaccine anywhere in the world, my Government embarked on one of the fastest vaccination programmes. My Ministers led international efforts to ensure fair and equitable access to vaccines for every country in the world.

Legislation was passed to ensure the United Kingdom's smooth exit from the European Union and the end of the transition period. A comprehensive Trade and Cooperation Agreement was negotiated with the European Union, alongside continuity trade agreements with 67 countries.

Legislation passed in this session will make the most of the opportunities that being an independent nation brings for the entire United Kingdom. A points-based immigration

system was introduced, ending free movement whilst enabling the United Kingdom to welcome skilled workers from across the world. Hundreds of powers were returned to the devolved governments following the end of the transition period. Laws were enacted to enable the funding of projects which further the prosperity of all parts of the United Kingdom through shared economic growth, enhanced infrastructure and common cultural values. Legislation was passed to ensure the union continues to provide an effective market for businesses, regardless of where in the United Kingdom they buy from or sell to.

My Government pursued an extensive programme of domestic reform. Alongside increased investment in schools and putting more police on the streets, my Government prioritised the safety and health of the nation whilst pursuing economic growth and increasing opportunity across the whole United Kingdom.

My Ministers further supported the NHS by enshrining in law for the first time a multi-year funding settlement. Legislation was passed to ensure faster and safer access for patients to innovative medicines.

My Government prioritised investment in infrastructure and world-leading scientific research and skills. To unleash productivity and improve daily life for communities across the country, my Ministers brought forward proposals to transform rail, road, bus and aviation infrastructure and modernise the planning system. Legislation was passed to accelerate the delivery of gigabit capable broadband.

Legislation was passed to ensure the United Kingdom's financial services sector remains open and internationally competitive. Pension laws were reformed to make it easier for people to save for later life.

The security of the nation and its citizens remains of the highest importance to my Government. New powers to protect the United Kingdom from emerging economic and cyber threats were introduced. New legislation passed in this session will ensure the security services have the powers they need to keep citizens safe.

To tackle violence against women and girls, landmark laws were passed to address domestic abuse, including recognising coercive control and non-fatal strangulation for the crimes that they are. New measures were introduced to increase prison sentences for the most serious crimes, including terrorism, and to support victims and their families.

To keep residents safe in their homes, steps were taken to apply building safety regulations to communal areas and establish a new regulator to keep buildings safe.

My Ministers have pursued policies to protect the environment for future generations, including by improving the sustainability of agricultural and fishing practices. Proposals were published to reform the energy sector and deliver net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. My Government prioritised creating green jobs, including plans to quadruple offshore wind generation. My Ministers continued to lead the global effort against climate change, making preparations to host the COP26 Summit in Glasgow. Funding was increased for developing countries to respond to the impacts of climate change.

Legislation was passed to ensure that Parliamentary boundaries are equally sized and up to date. Draft legislation was published to repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

My Ministers announced plans to invest over £24 billion in our gallant Armed Forces over the next four years. Legislation to strengthen the Armed Forces Covenant was introduced into Parliament. Measures to tackle vexatious claims made against veterans were passed into law.

[Mr Speaker]

My Government published a comprehensive review of its defence, foreign and national security policies and continued to promote freedom of speech, human rights and the rule of law. A new sanctions regime targeted human rights violators and abusers, including those responsible for human rights violations in Xinjiang. A new visa will enable eligible citizens of Hong Kong to live, work and make their home in the United Kingdom.

My Government worked closely with international partners to tackle the global challenges presented by the pandemic, including by delivering over 300 aid programmes and supporting girls at risk of being excluded from education. Additional funding was announced to prevent famine for over seven million vulnerable people.

Members of the House of Commons

I thank you for the provisions which you have made for the work and dignity of the Crown and for the public services.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.

PROROGATION

Mr Speaker: The Commission was also for proroguing this present Parliament, and the Lord President said:

“My Lords and Members of the House of Commons:

By virtue of Her Majesty's Commission which has now been read, we do, in Her Majesty's name, and in obedience to Her Majesty's Commands, prorogue this Parliament to Tuesday the eleventh day of this May to be then here holden, and this Parliament is accordingly prorogued to Tuesday the eleventh day of May.”

End of the First Session (opened on 17 December 2019) of the Fifty-Eighth Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the Seventieth Year of the Reign of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second.

Written Statement

Thursday 29 April 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Covid-19 Update

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): As part of “The covid-19 response - Spring 2021” publication, the Government committed to exploring whether and how covid-status certification might be used to reopen our economy, reduce restrictions on social contact and improve safety.

The subsequent “Roadmap Reviews: Update” publication of 5 April set out that the Government believe that covid-status certification could have an important role to play, both domestically and internationally, as a temporary measure.

The Government recognise the significant public and parliamentary interest in the question of covid-status certification. That is why the Government are conducting an extensive review seeking a wide range of input and insight. The review has conducted in-depth discussions with clinical, ethical, equalities and privacy specialists, faith and disability groups, and businesses and business representative organisations. I have personally led six roundtables so far, with representatives from businesses and business groups, including with the hospitality, entertainment, and live music and entertainment sectors, as well as parliamentarians, policy specialists, and clinicians. I am planning further roundtables, including one with sports organisations.

The review has also involved bilateral engagement with countries that have successfully implemented a domestic covid-status certification system, including Denmark and Israel. Last week, I visited Israel to see the operation of their “green pass” system at first hand. As well as meeting with the Health Minister and the senior officials responsible for the design and development of the green pass, I held discussions with a range of venue operators, including stadium, nightclub and concert organisers, to understand more about the experience of businesses in operating this system.

The Government issued a public call for evidence on 15 March 2021, which generated 52,450 responses. These replies represented a wide range of viewpoints in both support and in opposition of certification, from a broad range of respondents, including members of the public, sports organisations, large and small businesses representing a range of industries, civil society and voluntary groups, privacy, equalities and ethics specialists, and clinicians.

The Government can trial covid-status certification in certain settings, including large events, as part of the events research programme, alongside trials of a range of other safety measures. The Government will continue to work closely with sectors on its approach. The Government have set out that we believe that there are some settings, such as essential public services, public transport and essential shops, where covid-status certification should never be required, in order to ensure access for all. The Government will continue to explore the equity and ethical concerns about any form of covid-status certification.

The Prime Minister has made clear that covid-status certification will not be required in any settings at step 2 and 3 of the road map. The Government have committed to setting out the conclusions of the review ahead of step 4.

[HCWS947]

Petition

Thursday 29 April 2021

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Preserving Piles Coppice Wood

The petition of residents of the constituency of Coventry South,

Declares that Piles Coppice Wood is a valuable remnant of ancient woodland that is home to rare and beautiful wildlife and vegetation; and notes residents' fear that Warwickshire Wildlife Trust's plans would damage the woodland.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to preserve this ancient woodland and protect our natural environment.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Zarah Sultana, *Official Report*, 17 December 2020; Vol. 686, c. 494.]

[P002641]

Observations from the Minister of State (Minister for Pacific and the Environment), (Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park):

I would like to thank the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) and the petitioners for bringing to my attention the management of the ancient woodland Piles Coppice Wood in Warwickshire.

The Government support the preservation of Piles Coppice Wood by reducing the risk of its decline through careful management. The Forestry Commission is already engaging with Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and will provide advice and support on their management, including any necessary tree felling within this valuable woodland.

Active woodland management is essential for the preservation of ancient woodland, conserving and enhancing biodiversity and increasing the resilience of the woodland by improving its structure and species diversity. The Government support well planned woodland management to improve the condition and resilience of woodlands in line with the UK Forestry Standard, which sets out the Government's approach to sustainable forestry and woodland management, including standards and requirements, regulations and monitoring, and reporting.

Our native and ancient woodlands are subject to a wide range of pressures, and many are slowly declining. This is exacerbated by the lack of management due to declining economic viability. Our ancient woodlands are one of our oldest land uses and most diverse ecosystems. They have often taken hundreds if not thousands of years to develop, and are irreplaceable. These woodlands have been managed for centuries and the wildlife communities that survive within them have developed

in tune with these historic management regimes. We need approaches that sustain the best features of the woodland, and are adapted to current and future needs.

Active management maximises the benefits we get from woodland and prevents their long-term decline, for example due to pests and diseases. More active management could help them make a bigger contribution to our quality of life and our carbon balance, whilst at the same time protecting and enhancing the environment and our heritage. If we leave native woodland unmanaged, the amount of carbon being stored by English forests will decline because of the over mature age structure that is created. This can be reversed in time by regenerating the woodland and by enhanced woodland creation.

Ancient woodlands are of great importance for wildlife, cultural, economic and historic value. The Government are committed to ensuring ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees are adequately protected and managed to provide a wide range of social, environmental and economic benefits to society. The Forestry Commission provides a range of support to woodland managers to improve the condition and resilience of their woodlands to stem the slow decline.

The Government have also strengthened the protection of ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the supporting National Planning Practice Guidance. The NPPF now recognises ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees as irreplaceable habitats and aligns the planning system more closely with DEFRA's 25-year environment plan, which aims to leave the environment in a better state for future generations.

The Government have long recognised public concern over tree felling and any impacts on woodlands, including ancient woodlands. The Forestry Commission is responsible for the licensing of sustainable tree felling across England. In respect of ancient trees, its decisions are underpinned by the Keepers of Time (2005), a statement that sets out the Government policy on ancient and native woodland, and the UK Forestry Standard, which sets out our approach to sustainable forestry. The Forestry Commission works hard to ensure that illegal felling is discouraged and illegally felled woodland is restocked, taking appropriate enforcement action when necessary. We are taking further measures through the Environment Bill to give the Forestry Commission more powers to tackle illegal tree felling, further strengthening the protection of all wooded landscapes, including ancient trees.

We are aiming to publish a new England Tree Strategy in Spring. This will set out plans and policies to increase tree planting, as well as protecting and improving existing woodlands, including ancient woodland. This includes plans for deployment of the £640 million Nature for Climate Fund. In advance of that we launched a £80 million Green Recovery Challenge Fund, the first round of which is supporting a £3.86 million project by the Woodland Trust and National Trust to undertake vital ancient woodland restoration through active management across 600 hectares of their estates.

I thank the hon. Member once again for taking the time to raise this important issue.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 29 April 2021

DEFENCE

Carrier Strike Group Development

The following is an extract from the oral statement on Carrier Strike Group Development on Monday 26 April 2021.

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman put a series of questions to me. On the steel, I am happy to write to him with details of each individual class of ship. As he knows, we are committed to building the Type 26 in the United Kingdom; it is under construction on the Clyde. In Rosyth, work is ongoing to build the facility needed to build the Type 31s **and the subsequent Type 32s**. He also knows that I recently recategorised the future Fleet Solid Support ship as a warship. I intend to make sure that, if not entirely, there is a considerable degree of

UK build in that process, subject to tender. I have to be cautious about the contract, because the competition is to begin soon—very soon.

[Official Report, 26 April 2021, Vol. 693, c. 72.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace):

An error has been identified in my response to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman put a series of questions to me. On the steel, I am happy to write to him with details of each individual class of ship. As he knows, we are committed to building the Type 26 in the United Kingdom; it is under construction on the Clyde. In Rosyth, work is ongoing to build the facility needed to build the Type 31s. He also knows that I recently recategorised the future Fleet Solid Support ship as a warship. I intend to make sure that, if not entirely, there is a considerable degree of UK build in that process, subject to tender. I have to be cautious about the contract, because the competition is to begin soon—very soon.

ORAL ANSWERS

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PETITION

Thursday 29 April 2021

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Preserving Piles Coppice Wood	1P

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 29 April 2021

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**not later than
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