

P&O Ferries: staff redundancies and suspension of services

With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the developing issue with P&O Ferries.

Earlier today (17 March 2022), P&O announced their decision to make around 800 seafarers redundant on several routes across the UK.

Let me say right off the bat: the way that these workers were informed was completely unacceptable. I will say more on this in a moment or 2.

While this is fundamentally a commercial decision for the company, I wanted to come to the House today to inform members about our latest understanding of the situation and what is now being done.

In taking this decision to make seafarers redundant, P&O have also today informed us that they will be suspending services, for approximately a week to 10 days while they locate new crew. These affected routes are:

- Dover to Calais
- Larne to Cairnryan
- Dublin to Liverpool
- Hull to Rotterdam

I know members across this House will share my concern over the loss of these routes. I should stress that they are only temporary and that alternative provision will be provided by other operators, to whom I am extremely grateful.

Passengers will still be able to travel to and from the UK, including across the Channel, with freight coming in and out of the country.

I understand that DFDS is stepping in to provide alternative services for passengers with valid tickets and I would like to thank DFDS for their swift action.

However, I must warn travellers that they should expect some disruption over the coming days.

I have asked my officials to liaise with the Kent Resilience Forum and Cabinet Office to closely manage traffic in Kent over the coming days while P&O works to restore services.

Today, the Dover TAP has been activated, although as members will know this is not all that uncommon. There is some queuing on Jubilee Way, although the Port of Dover expect this to reduce over the afternoon.

I have also asked officials to remain in close contact with other resilience forums around the country, as well as the devolved administrations, in

managing this issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we of course have long planned contingencies for this sort of situation, particularly around the Channel, and I do not expect the supply of critical goods and services to be impacted as a result of this decision by P&O, although queues on the way to Dover are more likely to occur at times.

Modelling suggests that we have sufficient capacity to handle the temporary loss of these P&O ferries.

Let me turn now to the issue of the seafarers themselves, Mr Speaker.

These are hardworking, dedicated staff who have given years in service to P&O. The way they have been treated today is wholly unacceptable and my thoughts are first and foremost with them.

Reports of workers being given zero notice and escorted off their ships with immediate effect while being told cheaper alternatives would take up their roles shows the insensitive nature by which P&O approached this issue – a point I made clear when I spoke to the management at P&O earlier this afternoon.

As I told Peter Hebblethwaite, I am extremely concerned and frankly angry at the way workers have been treated today by P&O.

As a matter of urgency, I have asked my Department to liaise closely with counterparts in the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that workers are being signposted to the most relevant support and I am intending to call the trade unions immediately after this statement to discuss the situation with them.

Mr Deputy Speaker, there can be no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the finances of many travel companies including P&O. But while their finances is a matter for them and them alone to take, I would have expected far better for the workers involved.

We will continue to engage closely over the coming days and I commend this statement to the House.

Change of Development Attaché of Montserrat: Alba Smerglia-Heimpold

Press release

Alba Smerglia-Heimpold has been appointed as the new permanent Development Attaché in the Governor's Office.



Alba Smerglia-Heimpold has been appointed as the new permanent Development Attaché in the Governor's Office. She takes over the role from Peter Reid who has been in the post for 12 months. Alba's focus in her role will be supporting the Government of Montserrat to propel the island forward in terms of inclusive and sustainable development. She will be starting her 4-year post on Montserrat in March 2022.

Alba has a background in Development Economics and International Development and is accredited to the FCD0 cadre of specialists in political economy and politics. Prior to joining the Governor's Office in Montserrat, Alba was First Secretary Development in the British High Commission in Islamabad, where she has led high profile work on open and inclusive societies and development work to strengthen local resilience to climate change. She has been involved in the UK Government response to the Afghanistan crisis and led reporting on the global impacts of Covid-19 on democratic governance.

Alba held various other positions in the FCD0, including Deputy Team Leader (Governance, Open Societies and Anti-Corruption Department), Senior Research and Evidence Manager in the Research and Evidence Directorate and Internal Audit.

Prior to joining the Civil Service, Alba was a university researcher in Glasgow, specialising in public sector reform, public financial management, and inclusive economic growth. Alba is fluent in Italian and Spanish and in her free time loves hiking, cooking and reading.

She is married to Konrad Heimpold (former Senior Auditor at PwC) who will be accompanying her to Montserrat. She is looking forward to starting her role in Montserrat, learning from local people about Montserrat's culture, heritage and traditions.

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Quinquennial Review 2020

Focus on the National Insurance Fund

The Government Actuary has published his [Quinquennial Review \(QR\) on the National Insurance Fund](#) (NIF) for Great Britain.

This is carried out every 5 years by the Government Actuary's Department (GAD). It looks at the long-term relationship between benefit payments (mainly state pensions) and contribution income (mainly national insurance contributions) and projects these for each year to 2086.

Projected fund balance

The QR, which provides information to MPs, shows the current balance in the NIF is projected to grow until peaking at a little over £100 billion in 2032. The NIF is then projected to run down to exhaustion by 2044.

If these projections materialise, HM Treasury grants to the NIF will be needed from 2040. The QR also projects that by 2058 the grants needed will be larger than the current maximum permitted under legislation.

Breakeven contribution rate

The breakeven contribution rate is a measure of the level of national insurance contributions needed each year such that benefit payments match contribution income.

The current national insurance contributions system provides contributions of around 22% of pay which is close to the current breakeven contribution rate. By 2086 the breakeven contribution rate is projected to be 33.6%.

Demographic change and other drivers

The main reason for this rising breakeven contribution rate and the projection of Fund exhaustion is the projected rise in the ratio of pensioners to working age people. Currently this is around 27% but is projected to rise to around 43% by 2086 causing benefit costs to increase relative to contribution income.

The projections assume Triple Lock applies indefinitely and increases to State Pension age are in line with the 2017 State Pension age review.

The Triple Lock contributes to benefit costs increasing relative to contribution income and is the next most significant factor after demographic change. Increases in State Pension age have a modest effect in reducing benefit expenditure relative to contribution income.

GAD's processes

This QR has been produced using a project management framework that incorporates both our annual [Up-rating report](#) and this QR as a single project.

This has led to delivery of this QR in our contemporary and accessible reporting style both efficiently and quickly.

Senior Consulting Actuary Chris Morley commented: "GAD's annual Up-rating reports are a key part of the annual Up-rating process but necessarily focus on the short term. This review complements that analysis to give readers a more complete picture."

[New plans to level up Blackpool unveiled](#)

- New funding and beefed-up measures to improve housing standards and drive out unscrupulous landlords
- Blackpool selected as one of 20 areas in England primed for King's Cross-style levelling up regeneration and investment
- Plans will see derelict areas transformed and more good quality homes

Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove has today (17 March 2022) unveiled new measures to help improve the lives of people in Blackpool by turning the tide on deprivation in one of the UK's most iconic seaside towns.

Blackpool, which has 8 of the 10 most deprived neighbourhoods in England, will now receive support to deliver a root and branch transformation of the town.

The package includes a crackdown on rogue landlords by scaling up the local enforcement team to deliver more action on those not meeting current standards and a transformative King's Cross style regeneration programme to create beautiful new homes and turbocharge tourism in the area.

The plans have been developed by government, local leaders, businesses and community groups who are working together to tackle the entrenched inequalities that have held the town back, as part of a new strategic partnership.

Levelling Up Secretary Rt Hon Michael Gove MP said:

For too long great British towns like Blackpool have been held back by deeply entrenched problems that impact the everyday lives of

local families – and we are working to put that right.

Our levelling up plan will help transform this proud coastal town and deliver real change for thousands of families across Blackpool.

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP said:

We are working to protect vulnerable people in Blackpool and beyond, and to ensure that everyone has somewhere safe they can call home, which is why this announcement sets out the government's clear intention to stop the small minority of poor landlords who don't do enough for tenants.

I'm particularly pleased that Blackpool will be benefiting from this vital investment as we continue to level up, and proud we are one of the town's biggest employers.

Cllr Lynn Williams, Leader of Blackpool Council, said:

We are very pleased that the government is putting Blackpool at the forefront of its Levelling Up agenda.

Locally, we have developed a unique partnership with business and the voluntary sector. Our ask of government was to work with this partnership to help deliver a step change that will transform the lives of our residents and our communities.

As a local authority, we have already achieved a great deal and demonstrated that we can deliver real and lasting change if we have the required funding and support from central government.

We are hugely encouraged that Ministers have recognised that potential and our ability to deliver, and are willing to commit to a long-term partnership that will support the regeneration of this wonderful town. We look forward to starting that journey together in the weeks and months ahead.

Christine Hodgson CBE, Chair of Blackpool Pride of Place Partnership:

I am so pleased to see the government's commitment to Levelling Up, and really grateful that Blackpool has been chosen as the exemplar.

Business in the Community's commitment to Blackpool five years ago led to the creation of Blackpool Pride of Place, a partnership across business, voluntary and public sectors.

From this work, we saw at first-hand the slum housing conditions in the centre. Through collaboration, we have made a lot of good

progress on Blackpool's opportunities and challenges but we believe the only way to tackle the town's entrenched social challenges is now to work together with national government.

Tackling rogue landlords

Longstanding neglect by some local landlords has led to Blackpool experiencing some of the worst housing conditions in the country, with at least 1 in 3 properties classified as 'non-decent'.

An expanded local enforcement team will take tough action against those not meeting existing standards and measure landlords against future national standards. This beefed-up inspection regime will tackle exploitation in the local private rented sector and supported housing market driving up housing quality and protecting the most vulnerable.

Alongside this enforcement drive, Homes England will join forces with Blackpool Council, using additional funding of £650,000 to explore regeneration opportunities to improve Blackpool's housing stock and quality of place.

And there's support for residents in supported housing as well with a portion of a further £20 million, over 3 years, to improve standards of support and drive out unscrupulous providers.

A plan to regenerate Blackpool

In a further boost, Blackpool has also today been named as one of 20 areas in England to receive a King's Cross style transformation through an ambitious regeneration programme.

These plans for regeneration will build on Blackpool's strengths, helping to create more vibrant spaces for the whole community.

Homes England will work at pace with local leaders on the ground to find exciting new opportunities for regeneration, delivering new homes and jobs for the community.

And the area will have access to the £1.5 billion Brownfield Fund, to kickstart regeneration of unused land and build new homes and communities.

This builds on plans to relocate 3,000 Work and Pension jobs to the town centre by 2024, and other significant government investment in Blackpool including a £39.5 million Town Deal to improve skills and training in the town and £4.5 million to transform the iconic Blackpool illuminations.

The plans unveiled today underline the government's commitment to work with local leaders, the private sector and communities to level up opportunity and prosperity across the country.

Further information

Supported Housing Improvement Programme will provide £20 million. This fund will be shared between four areas which participated in the supported housing pilots, Blackpool, Birmingham, Blackburn with Darwen and Hull, with the rest open to bids from other local authorities in May. This programme will be vital to drive up quality in the sector in some of the worst affected areas immediately, while government develops and implements a package of measures that will tackle poor quality and poor value for money in supported housing and improve outcomes for individuals, while preserving good quality provision run by responsible providers.

[UNAMA will support the rights of all Afghans: explanation of vote](#)

Thank you Madam President, and can I start by thanking Norway for their hard work as penholder on this text.

Today, the Council spoke with one voice in support of a robust UN Mission in Afghanistan:

- to lead and coordinate urgent humanitarian efforts
- to support the rights of all Afghans, including women and girls
- and to hold the Taliban account on its commitments

It's disappointing that one Council member decided to abstain, just when UNAMA's work is more important than ever.

Over 20 million Afghan people need urgent assistance. For our part, the UK has doubled aid for Afghanistan this financial year to \$370 million. And on 31 March, the UK, Qatar, Germany and OCHA will co-host a pledging conference to raise funds for the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan. We encourage Member States to respond generously.

Today's adoption ensures UNAMA will continue to play a key role in coordinating the UN's response as it scales up across the board.

Beyond the humanitarian crisis, we are particularly concerned by reports of reprisals against former government officials, as well as attacks and intimidation against minority groups and civil society.

We are also concerned about detentions and enforced disappearances in breach of international norms. And although there has been a reduction in civilian casualties, the Taliban need to demonstrate that extremist groups are no longer able to flourish in the country.

Let me be clear – the Taliban have a choice.

The international community has made its expectations clear. We will base our approach on the actions the Taliban now take.

UNAMA will play a key role in supporting the rights of all Afghans, promoting an inclusive society in which women and girls participate fully. We are watching closely to see if the Taliban meets its commitments that girls return to secondary school at the end of March.

And in closing, I'd like to pay tribute to Special Representative Lyons and her team, and reaffirm the UK's solidarity with the Afghan people.

Thank you.