

Coronavirus: Transport Secretary speaks on passenger numbers and staffing shortages

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The Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has been questioned by the Transport Committee about the implications of coronavirus for transport.

He told the committee there had been nothing comparable to the current crisis in modern Government and that Ministers are being required to make decisions at an extremely fast rate.

Mr Shapps said that every transport sector had to adjust to the crisis. He said he was pleased with the performance of every structure in place.

When he spoke on Wednesday, London Underground usage had reduced by 91%, but that the number of freight trains had been increased and that rail freight workers had been designated as key workers.

Asked about staffing shortages in rail control centres, Mr Shapps said he had discussed this with Andrew Haines, Chief Executive of Network Rail. He said that in general, control room environments were sustaining well. Staff were turning up for work.

The Secretary of State said he had been informed about problems in one location, which were now resolved, and praised Network Rail in doing a great job in monitoring the situation.

He was asked by MP Sam Tarry about whether non-essential staff (such as ticket barrier staff) could be stood down to ensure the railway operated with skeleton staff.

He said that ticket sales had reduced by 98% compared to last year. Given the falls in revenue, he did not expect ticket barrier or office staff to be working at the moment, but he would look further into the issue.

There had already been an 84% reduction in footfall on passenger services compared to last year, before the recent measures were taken to reduce rail timetables. Rail operators would therefore be getting close to running a skeleton staffing service.

Sam Parry also asked about the Secretary of State's discussions with the Mayor of London about reinstating Underground services during rush hour.

Mr Shapps said he had been very careful not to enter a public political disagreement with the Mayor. He said Andy McDonald MP, the Shadow Secretary of State for Transport, had been helpful and offered constructive ideas.

Mr Shapps said services on the Underground had been reduced too much compared to the number of people who still needed to work. The problem was not solely construction workers needing to travel. He has spoken to the Mayor of London raising six different points to improve the situation, based on information available to the Department for Transport internally.

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