

Baroness Vere
Under secretary of State
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
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6th May 2020

Dear Minister

We are writing to you in respect of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts on, and implications for, road safety in the UK.

We recognise that the whole government and the public sector have rightly had to focus on tackling this terrible disease. We have therefore delayed writing until now. This has also given us time to see how things have developed and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. As the Prime Minister is now talking about ways in which the lockdown could be eased, we feel the time is right to take stock and look to the future. We know from discussions with road safety staff in your department that they too are considering these matters. We hope that what we say here will be helpful.

In recent weeks, in order to accommodate essential travel and transport, various safety regulations have been eased. We refer particularly to the EU Directive on drivers' hours, MOT testing and medical examinations for PSV and HGV drivers. We would have preferred that these important safety measures had not been relaxed but we accepted the "force majeure". We hope that the case for continuing these relaxations is being continually monitored and that the safety measures will be reintroduced as soon as possible.

The lockdown and social distancing rules have considerably impacted road safety services. Police have been diverted from roads policing, safety camera partnerships activity (particularly mobile teams) has been cut back and their viability is under threat, local authority road safety staff have been redeployed, speed awareness and drink-drive rehabilitation courses have been stopped or replaced by online versions, the MIB out of hours police helpline has been suspended and all driver training activities suspended. We suspect that safety activities by DVSA and other agencies have also been impacted. We know too that many private companies and NGOs undertaking important safety-related work have had to scale back, furlough staff or make them redundant.

We are aware that RSGB, the government's THINK! team and others launched the "Take Extra Care" campaign; we also have given it support.

The impacts of the lockdown on transport and road safety are becoming more apparent, although more data is still required and we would urge the Government to make information on road casualties more widely available.

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Road traffic and congestion have reduced substantially – the main exception is probably in couriers, vans and home delivery services. Public transport use has fallen dramatically. By contrast, more people are walking and cycling for essential travel or their daily exercise, including some who have not cycled regularly in the past.

Information on driver behaviour is partial and somewhat anecdotal but some changes are clear. Police forces, including the Met and Essex, have reported increases in the percentage (and possibly the absolute numbers) of drivers exceeding speed limits by a margin of 15mph or more. The Met police have also highlighted an apparent increase in “extreme” speeding incidents. There is suspicion that other dangerous driving behaviours, such as drink and drug driving, have also increased among those still driving. These trends have been reported in other parts of the world also undergoing lockdowns.

With the increase in demand for home deliveries, it seems likely that these drivers and riders will be under even greater time pressures. Safety standards in this sector are already unsatisfactory. Gig workers in particular receive little training in road safety and minimal supervision from their employer.

Unfortunately, information on road traffic casualty numbers is not available – at least, not to us or the public. At the outset of the lockdown there was a general assumption that, as traffic levels fell, so too would casualties. We are less confident of this now, particularly regarding the most severe injuries. We know that the NPCC has requested regular data and that police forces using CRaSH are better able to provide it quickly than those forces still using the Stats19 reporting system. Apart from the desire to avoid road casualties, we assume that the government would want information about these cases because of the demands that they place on the emergency services and hospitals. The slow reporting of road casualties contrasts starkly with the daily public reporting of traffic levels, public transport use and Covid19 cases.

Looking ahead, we see opportunities for step-changes in transport and safety that would meet many of the government’s major policy objectives and win public support. On the other hand, there are substantial risks.

Probably the biggest concerns are in relation to the viability of public transport and a rapid increase in traffic levels and the subsequent impacts of these shifts. Most people have complied with the government’s instructions to travel only when necessary and this has been most apparent on public transport – at least, in percentage terms in London. However, if this continues after lockdown ends, and if people switch to cars for any length of time, the resultant worsening in traffic congestion, air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, traffic danger, public health and more will be a disaster for the economy, society and the environment. This would go against all the long-term policies of this government.

Continued financial support for public transport will be required, along with guidance to the public and operators on how it can be used with acceptable levels of risk. Otherwise, we face the decimation of public transport services.

Measures to avoid a surge in car use and road casualties are also needed – from the outset. Continuing to encourage home working, for those who can, and avoiding travel at peak times should help.

More specifically, on road safety, we urge a number of short-term measures:

1. Consistent coordinated communications to the public and to employers to
 - a. Remind them that safe driving is part of protecting the NHS;
 - b. Provide practical information to drivers on how they can help with ensuring that their vehicles are safe and how they might refresh their driving skills;
 - c. Emphasise the “fatal 4”, including the risks of driving when fatigued;

- d. Emphasise that safety rules and regulations, such as speed limits, yellow lines, tyres, insurance, etc all still apply and will be enforced;
 - e. Where safety regulations have been relaxed, make clear that this is only temporary and that employers should still try to comply as far as possible;
 - f. Make clear that pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists are legitimate road users who should be treated with care and courtesy.
2. Communications are only effective if backed by substantive measures. We would urge that
 - a. levels of roads policing activity, including safety camera partnerships, be restored;
 - b. safety-related work by government agencies, including DVSA and HSE, be stepped up;
 - c. the relaxations in safety regulations be reversed as quickly as possible.
 3. The increases in walking and cycling, and the Prime Minister’s statement at PMQs today that he sees active travel modes as particularly important as lockdown is eased, need to be consolidated and encouraged. City mayors and local authorities should be encouraged, with powers and resources, to improve conditions for pedestrians and cyclists so that people can continue with active travel in safety while maintaining social distancing. There have been a few examples in the UK so far, such as Brighton, but some cities in other countries have been much more ambitious.
 4. Employers have a major role to play in this. We have particular concerns about the courier sector. We would urge the government to engage with them and clarify their responsibilities, including to their gig workers. If employers have to make job cuts this will place additional workload/time pressure on those who survive. The option to deliver elements of CPC Training online has proved successful. This may this provide an opportunity to create specific and low-cost content to this particular sector.
 5. More comprehensive and accurate information on casualties should be gathered and shared. This would seem an opportune time to strengthen links with information from the ambulance services and hospitals. All police forces should be strongly encouraged to adopt CRaSH.

It is very clear that people want change, not simply a resumption of the “old” ways. As we emerge from lockdown and restore the economy, there are many positive opportunities to deliver objectives that the public and the government are seeking. The clean air, lower carbon emissions, reduced congestion, safer conditions for walking and cycling, booming wildlife, support for local business and a more caring, inclusive society – these are all changes that people value and want to retain. Behaviour change experts say the public is now predisposed to radical change but that the window for embedding change is no more than about 18 months. It will require strong leadership and investment by government.

We are keen to work with you in meeting these challenges in the weeks and months ahead.

Yours sincerely



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cc. Matt Rodda MP and Huw Merriman MP