

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.