

Bus, plane... and horseback: How the Foreign Office helped a British traveller return home

- Nineteen year old traveller from Eastbourne headed for home on horseback after being stranded on a Patagonian ranch the size of the Isle of Wight after a lockdown was introduced.
- Foreign Office meticulously planned her epic journey using all means of transport available.

A British tourist found herself at the centre of an epic journey home by bus, plane, taxi and horseback after being stranded in an isolated ranch in Patagonia, a half day's horseback ride from the nearest road.

Annabel Symes, 19, from Eastbourne, was fulfilling the dream of a lifetime, working as a volunteer hosting tourists at the 100,000 acre Estancia Ranquilco.

The isolated horse and cattle ranch in Argentine Patagonia is located in the foothills of the Andes more than 1,000 miles from Buenos Aires.

Annabel was due to return home at the end of the summer season in early April but her flight home was cancelled when Argentina introduced swingeing travel restrictions to contain the spread of coronavirus.

Having received a call for help from Annabel, the Foreign Office organised a rescue plan involving a half-day's horseback ride to the nearest road, a nine-hour taxi journey to the nearest town and finally a 17-hour bus ride to Buenos Aires airport.

It was here that Annabel joined 200 other British travellers from every corner of Argentina on a flight home. British Embassy staff also had to negotiate travel permits with local authorities from the different regions so they could organise bus travel, book taxis and facilitate cross-country travelling.

Before undertaking her unusual journey, Annabel was growing increasingly anxious about her situation as winter began setting in.

In a region where temperatures plunge below zero, heavy snowfall would have made leaving the ranch impossible. To make matters worse, Annabel had only packed clothing for summer.

"Once I realised I was stranded, I registered with the British Embassy. Communication was made challenging as the estancia only had patchy internet

access via satellite which meant lots of cold WhatsApp conversations sitting on a tree stump in the middle of a field,” said Annabel.

Annabel and her partner, an American citizen, had to ride off the estancia to reach an outpost by the road in the dark, with mules carrying their bags – finding their way thanks to a full moon. From there, she took a taxi which was sprayed with disinfectant at each checkpoint along the way, where temperature checks were also in place.

Annabel finally arrived at Gatwick Airport on 8th May – five weeks and a national lockdown later than she had planned – where she was reunited with her parents, two sisters and border terrier dog Sidney.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said:

“We are delighted to have been able to help Annabel get back home.

“Since the start of the Coronavirus outbreak, the Foreign Office has been working with airlines and governments to keep vital routes open, helping more than 1.3 million travellers return to the UK on commercial flights.

“We also made £75 million available for special return flights, so far bringing home more than 33,000 people from countries without commercial options.”

One of more than 33,000 stranded British tourists brought home on 159 Foreign Office special return flights, Annabel has secured a place to study Natural Horsemanship at the University of Montana Western from September.

“Carolina and Beatriz at the Embassy really looked after me. They were so organised – coordinating hundreds of British nationals from all over Argentina’s provinces in really extreme circumstances,” Annabel added.

British Ambassador to Argentina, Mark Kent, said:

“The Foreign Office organised two special flights that allowed over 400 British travellers and their direct dependents to return home from Argentina. All domestic flights, buses and trains are suspended, so the Embassy had to arrange 8 special buses to pick up people from 31 cities and towns throughout the country, which is the 8th biggest in the world. The buses covered a total of over 7,000 miles.

“There were some epic journeys for people to get to Buenos Aires to make their flights. Annabel’s was a particularly long and arduous trip from an extremely remote part of Patagonia, and I pay tribute to her resilience and patience. I’m glad we were able to help her get back home safely.”

Further information

Government outlines conditions for elite athletes' return to competitive training

- Guidance permits close contact training when sport bodies, clubs and teams deem conditions right to do so, following consultation with athletes, coaches and support staff
- Follows guidance supporting initial return to training while maintaining social distancing – the first move towards a resumption of competitive sport behind closed doors

The Government has outlined the conditions for elite athletes and professional sportsmen and women to resume competitive training, in the latest move towards a resumption of live sport behind closed doors when medical experts advise that it is safe to do so.

[The 'stage two' guidance, published today \(25 May\) by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport \(DCMS\)](#), has been developed in close consultation with the Deputy Chief Medical Officers of England, Public Health England and medical representatives across Olympic, Paralympic and professional sports governing bodies.

The guidance makes clear that elite athletes can carry out organised, close contact training – such as close quarters coaching and team sports' tackling – so that players can get match fit, under carefully controlled medical conditions.

However sports bodies, clubs and teams will have a responsibility to decide, in consultation with athletes, coaches and support staff, when it is safe and appropriate to move to stage two training. They are expected to be fully briefed to ensure they have understood the specific risks and mitigations, training site protocols, and the importance of maintaining frequent personal hygiene measures. Athletes and staff should also be clear on their option to 'opt out' at any time.

All athletes, coaches and support staff must also adhere to the existing social distancing guidelines travelling to and from training, and keep time spent within a two metre distance during training to a minimum. Equipment sharing should be avoided, and communal areas, such as changing rooms, cafes, team rooms and recovery spaces, should remain closed where possible. Other restrictions applying to the general population must continue to be adhered to outside training.

Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston said:

This new guidance marks the latest phase of a carefully phased return to training process for elite athletes, designed to limit the risk of injury and protect the health and safety of all involved.

We are absolutely clear that individual sports must review whether they have the appropriate carefully controlled medical conditions in place before they can proceed, and secure the confidence of athletes, coaches and support staff.

Given the wide ranging input we have received from medical experts, we believe these pragmatic measures should provide further reassurance that a safe, competitive training environment can be delivered, as we work towards a restart of professional sport behind closed doors when it is safe to do so.

It follows [initial guidance published last week](#), outlining conditions for a return to individual performance training at official elite training venues while maintaining social distancing from teammates and other people outside their households. This includes safeguards such as the deep cleaning of facilities and the screening of athletes and staff for coronavirus symptoms before they can enter the training venue by an appropriately trained healthcare professional.

Additional guidance on stage three, the resumption of competitive sport behind closed doors, including the infrastructure and processes that will need to be in place to support this, will be published in due course.

The elite sport return to training guidance intends to minimise the risk to the elite sports community, while also minimising any pressure elite sport places on healthcare workers and the wider community during the resumption of training. Like all changes to current measures it will be kept under review in accordance with the Government's Covid alert system.

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The guidance follows the Government's publication of its [COVID-19 recovery strategy](#), as it takes forward the next phase of its response to the virus. This outlined that a return of elite sport will not happen before 1 June and will be dependent on whether the risk assessment posed by coronavirus allows the country to move onto the second step of the Government's recovery strategy.

In addition to guidance for elite athletes, DCMS has published [guidance for the general public on the phased return of outdoor sport and recreation](#).

PM press conference statement: 24 May 2020

Good afternoon.

I want to begin by answering the big question that people have been asking in the last 48 hours. And that is – is this Government asking you – the people, the public, to do one thing while senior people here in government do something else?

Have we been asking you to make sacrifices, to obey social distancing, to stay at home while some people have been basically flouting those rules and endangering lives?

And it is because I take this matter so seriously and frankly it is so serious that I can tell you today I have had extensive face to face conversations with Dominic Cummings and I have concluded that in travelling to find the right kind of childcare, at the moment when both he and his wife were about to be incapacitated by coronavirus. And when he had no alternative, I think he followed the instincts of every father and every parent. And I do not mark him down for that. And though there have been many other allegations about what happened when he was in self-isolation and thereafter, some of them palpably false.

I believe that in every respect he has acted responsibly, and legally, and with integrity, and with the overwhelming aim of stopping the spread of the virus and saving lives.

And I stress this fundamental aim, because it is thanks to this country's collective resolve in achieving that aim that we continue to make progress.

So let me give you today's figures:

- 3,458,905 tests for coronavirus have now been carried out in the UK, including 110,401 tests carried out yesterday
- 259,559 people have tested positive, that's an increase of 2,409 cases since yesterday – a smaller increase than we were seeing over the last few weeks
- 8,951 people are in hospital with COVID-19 in the UK, down 11% from 10,085 this time last week

And sadly, of those tested positive for coronavirus, across all settings, 36,793 have now died. That's an increase of 118 fatalities since yesterday.

And each of those fatalities represents a family in mourning, the grief of friends and relatives. And as we mourn them we resolve again to beat this virus and get our country back on its feet. We can and we will.

Two weeks ago I set out the Government's roadmap to begin easing the measures we put in place to control the spread of coronavirus.

I said that we would do so in a safe and controlled way, based on our assessment of progress against the five tests we set for adjusting the lockdown.

We're going to set out that assessment in detail in the coming days, but today I can confirm that I do believe we will be in a position to move to step 2 of our plan.

As part of Step 2, we set out plans for a phased reopening of schools.

Because the education of our children is crucial for their welfare, their health, for their long term future and for social justice

And so in line with the approach being taken by other countries, we want to start getting our children back in the classroom in a way that is manageable and as safe as possible.

So we said this would begin with early years settings and reception, Year 1 and Year 6 in primary schools.

Today I can announce that it is our intention to go ahead with that as planned on June 1st, a week on Monday.

We then intend, from June 15th, for secondary schools to provide some contact for Year 10 and Year 12 students to help them prepare for exams next year, with up to a quarter of these students in at any point.

By opening schools to more pupils in this limited way, we are taking a deliberately cautious approach.

And this comes after a constructive period of consultation with schools, teachers and unions, led by the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson.

I want to thank all the Education and childcare staff who have stepped up to the challenge and kept schools open throughout this crisis.

The Department for Education will engage with teaching unions, local authorities and school leaders in the coming days, giving them an opportunity to ask questions and probe the evidence behind our plans.

And the final decision will be taken as part of the formal review into lockdown measures which the law requires us to undertake by Thursday. We will of course continue to consider all the evidence (as we said we would do), and will continue to work hard with those bodies over the course of the coming week.

However, I think it is important for us to be clear about the Government's intentions now, so that teachers and parents can plan in earnest for schools to reopen a week on Monday.

Now I acknowledge that a 1 June opening may not be possible for all schools, but the Government will continue to support and work with the sector to ensure that any schools experiencing difficulties are able to open more

widely as soon as possible.

Detailed guidance has been published by the Department for Education on how schools can open in a way which is safe for children, teachers and parents.

While of course we recognise that full social distancing may not be possible, especially when teaching young children, our guidance sets out a range of protective measures to keep children and staff safe. This includes:

- reducing the size of classes and keeping children in small groups without mixing with others
- staggered break and lunch times, as well as drop offs and pick ups
- increasing the frequency of cleaning, reducing the used of shared items and utilising outdoor space

All children and staff, and their families, will have access to testing if they display symptoms. This will enable children and staff to get back to school if they test negative, and if they test positive we will take the appropriate reactive measures.

We will continue to work with the sector to support them to prepare for wider opening and ensure all children and young people can continue to receive the best care, education and training possible.

We will set out what moving to step 2 means for other areas, such as non-essential retail and more social contacts, over the course of the next week.

And let me stress once again: we are making good progress.

But that progress is conditional, provisional.

We must keep reducing the incidence of this disease.

We must keep that R down below 1.

And that means we must remember the basics.

Wash our hands, keep social distance, isolate if you have symptoms – and get a test.

We are beating this thing, but we will beat it all the faster if we stay alert, control the virus and save lives.

PM confirms schools, colleges and nurseries on track to begin phased

reopening

Schools, colleges and nurseries across England remain on track to open to more children from 1 June, the Prime Minister confirmed today (24 May 2020).

Primary schools will welcome back children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6, while nurseries and other early years providers will begin welcoming back children of all ages.

Secondary schools, sixth forms and colleges will also provide face-to-face contact for Year 10, Year 12 and equivalent 16-19 further education students to help them prepare for exams next year. It is expected this will begin from 15 June, with around a quarter of these secondary students in at any point.

The Prime Minister today praised teachers, childcare workers and support staff for the brilliant work they have been doing throughout the pandemic.

This includes providing remote education for those not in school, as well as continuing to provide face-to-face education for the children of priority groups, including vulnerable children and children of critical workers.

He also acknowledged that some schools may not be able to reopen immediately, and committed the government to continuing to work with the sector to ensure any schools experiencing difficulties are able to open as soon as possible.

In line with our roadmap setting out how the UK will adjust its response to the virus, our approach to schools remains a cautious, phased one. It is also broadly in line with other European countries.

We continue to consider all the evidence, as we said we would, and will continue to work with schools, teachers and unions over the coming week before making a final decision.

It also remains the case that schools will only reopen to more children if the government's five tests are met by Thursday 28 May.

In the coming days, the Prime Minister will set out the government's progress in meeting these five tests, which are:

1. Protect the NHS's ability to cope. We must be confident that we are able to provide sufficient critical care and specialist treatment right across the UK
2. See a sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rates from COVID-19 so we are confident that we have moved beyond the peak
3. Reliable data from SAGE showing that the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels across the board
4. Be confident that the range of operational challenges, including testing capacity and PPE, are in hand, with supply able to meet future demand
5. Be confident that any adjustments to the current measures will not risk a second peak of infections that overwhelms the NHS

Today's announcement comes after a constructive period of consultation with schools, teachers and unions, led by the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson.

Clear, detailed guidance has been published by the Department for Education on how schools can open in a way which is safe for children, teachers and parents.

While we recognise that full social distancing may not be possible, our guidance sets out a range of measures to protect children and staff. This includes:

- reducing the size of classes and keeping children in small groups without mixing with others
- staggered break and lunch times, as well as drop offs and pickups
- increasing the frequency of cleaning, reducing the used of shared items and utilising outdoor space

All children and staff, and their families, will also have access to testing if they display symptoms. This will enable children and staff to get back to school if they test negative, and if they test positive a test and trace approach can be taken.

Children will also be encouraged not to travel on public transport where possible, in line with the advice to the wider population.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

This has been a difficult time for the entire country. Education and childcare staff have stepped up to the challenge, making sure children and young people have continued to be supported throughout the past ten weeks.

Our priority is the education and welfare of all children and young people across the country. That is why we want to start a phased wider opening of nurseries, school and colleges is informed by the best possible scientific and medical advice.

We will continue to work with the sector to support them to prepare for wider opening and ensure all children and young people can continue to receive the best care, education and training possible.

[6000 new supported homes as part of](#)

Landmark commitment to end rough sleeping

- Thousands more homes to be made available for vulnerable rough sleepers
- Commitment is unprecedented and most ambitious of its kind with single biggest injection of specialist accommodation since the Rough Sleeping Initiative began;
- It will be backed by £433 million of government funding with 3,300 homes to be made available in next 12 months
- Dame Louise Casey highlights 'extraordinary opportunity' to end rough sleeping for good

Radical plans to provide thousands of long-term, safe homes for vulnerable rough sleepers taken off the streets during the pandemic have been unveiled today (24 May 2020) by Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick MP.

This ambitious commitment – the biggest of its kind since the government's Rough Sleeping Initiative began – will be backed by £160 million this year and will support many of the thousands of rough sleepers currently housed in emergency accommodation to move on to more sustainable, long-term housing.

By accelerating plans for the £381 million announced for rough sleeping services at Budget – now extended to £433 million – the funding will ensure that 6,000 new housing units will be put into the system, with 3,300 of these becoming available in the next 12 months. In addition to accelerating this capital spend for investment in housing stock, the government is also increasing the revenue support of the total programme by 37% to make sure that the rough sleepers have the support they need to stay off the streets for good.

Once in their new home, rough sleepers will be supported by specialist staff to access the help they need, such as support for mental health or substance abuse problems, so they can rebuild their lives, move towards training and work, and remain off the streets for good.

Thanks to the efforts of charities, local government and other partners, in just over two months, more than 90% of rough sleepers known to councils at the beginning of the pandemic have now been offered accommodation where they can remain safe and able to protect themselves during the crisis.

The plans are being pulled together by the Rough Sleeping Covid 19 Response Taskforce, led by Dame Louise Casey, bringing together local government, charities, faith groups, public sector partners and businesses in order to use the coronavirus crisis and current successful work so far in bringing 'everyone in' as a catalyst towards ending rough sleeping for good.

As part of this commitment, Homes England, in partnership with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has pledged to work hand-in-hand with leading housing associations and local authorities to fast-track thousands of units of longer-term accommodation for rough sleepers needed now.

Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick MP said:

We have offered accommodation to over 90% of known rough sleepers in order to help them stay safe during the pandemic. This has been possible because of an incredible effort by the government, councils and charities. Thousands of lives have been protected as a result of the shared commitment to protect the most vulnerable in our society throughout this national emergency and we continue to fund this vital project.

This government wants to end rough sleeping for good, and we now have a real opportunity to deliver on this moral mission. I'm backing this effort with £433 million to fast-track the longer-term and safe accommodation needed to ensure as few rough sleepers as possible return to the streets. This is an unprecedented commitment – the most ambitious of its kind and the single biggest injection of specialist accommodation since the rough sleepers initiative began.”

This will be completely transformative and changes the lives of thousands of rough sleepers for the better.

Dame Louise Casey said:

The goal is ambitious – together, we want to do everything possible to ensure that vulnerable people who were sleeping rough and have come inside during this pandemic – some for the first time in a very long time – do not go back to the streets.

The effort so far has been immense – councils, charities and health providers have all worked tirelessly to support some of the most vulnerable during these unprecedented times. I want to thank all of those who have already stepped up to support rough sleepers so far and those who are pledging accommodation and future support.

We know this safe harbour is just the start – we have here an extraordinary opportunity to end rough sleeping for good.

Nick Walkley, CEO Homes England said:

The steps taken to reduce homelessness have been one of the few silver linings in recent months. The opportunity to work with Dame Louise Casey to build on these recent successes and work towards ending rough sleeping for good is something everyone at Homes England is supportive of. We look forward to working closely with MHCLG and our partners to support the Taskforce.

Over the coming weeks, government will work in partnership with councils, local leaders and the property sector to ensure this new generation of housing for some of the most vulnerable in society is delivered as quickly as possible and in the most cost-effective way. Interim accommodation is also being committed by the YHA, the YMCA and some universities. The taskforce will continue to work with partners on this so that nobody has to go back to the streets.

Ministers have also announced a further £6 million for frontline homeless charities to directly support their important, vital work. In addition, the Department for Education will be providing more than £700,000 for councils to support care leavers at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping.

Last month the Communities Secretary appointed Dame Louise Casey to spearhead a specialist taskforce to lead the next phase of the government's support for rough sleepers during the pandemic. The taskforce will work hand-in-hand with councils, charities, faith groups and other partners across the country on plans to ensure rough sleepers can move into safe accommodation once the immediate crisis is over. The taskforce will also ensure the thousands of rough sleepers now in accommodation continue to receive the physical and mental health support they need over the coming weeks and months.

The £160 million is part of the £381 million announced at Budget for accommodation for rough sleepers over a four year period. We have brought a substantial proportion of the funding forwards into this year to meet local need given the changed circumstances brought about by Covid-19 and the opportunity this presents. Support funding will still be profiled over 4 years to ensure people get the long term support they need. The means overall funding increases to £433 million as a result of accelerating the programme.

As a result of this announcement, the devolved administrations will receive up to £18 million of additional capital funding in 2020 to 2021 through the Barnett formula. This means up to £9.2 million for the Scottish Government, up to £5.6 million for the Welsh Government and up to £3.1 million for the Northern Ireland Executive.