



House of Commons
Transport Committee

**Safe return of
international travel?**

Seventh Report of Session 2019–21

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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Transport Committee

The Transport Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Transport and its associated public bodies.

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Publication

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Nick Beech (Committee Clerk), Estelle Currie (Senior Media Officer), Matt Eaton (Committee Specialist), Rosalind KennyBirch (Committee Specialist), Lewis Pickett (Committee Specialist), Robi Quigley (Second Clerk), Damith Rajakaruna (Committee Operations Manager) and Mandy Sullivan (Committee Operations Officer).

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Safe return of international travel?

Aviation and tourism sectors

1. Aviation and tourism are key sectors of the UK economy. The UK aviation sector has an estimated value of more than £28 billion.¹ It directly employs some 230,000 people.² Aviation is an important contributor to the Exchequer. For example, air passenger duty raised £3.6 billion in 2019–20.³ The air transport sector alone contributed £5.47 billion to the UK economy in 2019, with the entire aviation industry contributing £21.89 billion.^{4, 5} Turning to the tourism sector, overseas residents made 40.9 million visits to the UK and spent £28.4 billion in 2019.⁶ Overseas residents travelling to the UK most frequently cited holidays as the reason for their trip, followed by visits to friends or relatives and business trips.⁷ Overall, the travel and tourism industries contributed 6.7% of all gross value added in the UK in 2018.⁸

2. While protecting public health is a key policy priority for the Government, the aviation and tourism sectors will suffer significant economic detriment if they experience another summer without international travel. That might include up to 500,000 UK jobs that rely on the aviation and tourism industries.⁹ Comparing EUROCONTROL member states, the UK has been one of the hardest hit by the pandemic, losing more than 1 million flights in 2020 compared with 2019.¹⁰ Even in August 2020, when lockdown restrictions were at their loosest in the past year, accommodation and travel agency businesses experienced a decline in turnover, reaching just 74.4% of their pre-pandemic levels.¹¹

3. Without a competitive aviation sector, the UK's international connectivity will be limited and its international influence consequently circumscribed. The Global Britain concept is predicated on a functional, competitive UK aviation sector. Aviation is a key strategic sector for the UK as an island nation, facilitating its connectivity to the world.

4. UK residents have sacrificed a great deal to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. Many people have been denied the freedom to visit relatives who live overseas. Many more richly deserve a holiday. However, the UK domestic tourism industry may not have sufficient capacity to provide holidays for everyone in the UK this summer.¹² UK residents made 93.1 million overseas visits in 2019.¹³ If travel restarts with limited international options, the UK tourism industry may struggle to meet pent-up demand for holidays.

1 Includes both passenger and freight air transport. Office for National Statistics, [Annual Business Survey 2018](#), 15 May 2020

2 Office for National Statistics, [Business Register and Employment Survey: 2019](#), via NOMIS database

3 HM Revenue & Customs, [UK Air Passenger Duty Statistics](#) (March 2020)

4 Office for National Statistics, [GDP output approach – low-level aggregates](#), 31 March 2021, series KK65, KK7P

5 Office for National Statistics, [Annual Business Survey: non-financial business economy](#), 15 May 2020

6 Office for National Statistics, [Travel trends: 2019](#) (May 2020)

7 Ibid.

8 Office for National Statistics, [Coronavirus and the impact on the UK travel and tourism industry](#) (February 2021)

9 Airlines UK, [Air Travel Restrictions in 2021 - Country by Country Analysis](#) (March 2021)

10 EUROCONTROL is the European Organisation for the Safety of Air Navigation. EUROCONTROL, [COVID-19 Impact on EUROCONTROL Member States - United Kingdom](#) (October 2020)

11 Pre-pandemic levels are defined as February 2020 turnover levels. 74.4% was the highest level reached after February 2020. This level was reached in August 2020. Office for National Statistics, [Coronavirus and the impact on the UK travel and tourism industry](#) (February 2021)

12 [Q50](#) [Mr Tanzer]

13 Office for National Statistics, [Travel trends: 2019](#) (May 2020)

Global Travel Taskforce Report

5. The Government convened the Global Travel Taskforce to provide “recommendations aimed at facilitating a return to international travel as soon as possible while still managing the risk from imported cases and variants of concern”.¹⁴ The Global Travel Taskforce Report was published on 9 April 2021.¹⁵ It described a range of broad, aspirational recommendations on facilitating international travel, managing risk to public health, maintaining border readiness, providing customers with certainty and establishing a health certification system. The Report set out a framework, but it did not populate that framework with the detail required to underpin the restart of international travel. Heathrow Airport highlighted the lack of implementable actions corresponding to the recommendations in the Report.¹⁶ We also note the lack of time-limited actions to drive progress on implementing recommendations.

6. Industry representatives described engagement with the Taskforce as “perfunctory”.¹⁷ The Chief Executive of the Association of British Travel Agents [ABTA] commented: “I do not feel particular ownership of the conclusions of the Report as a member of the taskforce”.¹⁸ The General Secretary of the British Airline Pilots Association [BALPA] explained that BALPA was “pretty disappointed with the level of engagement, let alone ... whether we were listened to or not”.¹⁹ However, the Minister told us that the Report provided clarity and is a “very clear framework for international travel”.²⁰ ²¹ We note that stakeholder witnesses did not share the Minister’s confidence.²²

7. The aviation and tourism sectors hoped that the Report would provide them with the clarity and confidence to plan, to invest and to recover from the coronavirus pandemic.²³ Potential travellers hoped to see a firm list of destination countries to allow them to plan and to spend on aviation and tourism.²⁴ Instead, the Global Travel Taskforce Report set out a series of general recommendations and aspirations. We note that the Minister declined our invitation to subject this topic to further parliamentary scrutiny by committing to making a statement to Parliament.²⁵

“Traffic light” system

8. The Global Travel Taskforce introduced a three-tier “traffic light” system to indicate how safe a country is for travel. This system will be implemented from 17 May at the earliest. Countries are grouped into “green”, “amber” or “red” categories based on whether they are classified as low-risk, moderate-risk or high-risk countries. The percentage of a country’s population that has been vaccinated, the rate of infection and community transmission, access to reliable scientific data and genomic sequencing and, in particular, the prevalence of variants of concern are “likely” to be key factors in assessing how a

14 Global Travel Taskforce, ‘[Terms of Reference](#)’, accessed on 08 April 2021

15 Department of Transport, [Report of the Global Travel Taskforce](#) April 2021

16 [Q8](#) [Mr Garton]

17 [Q18](#) [Mr Strutton]

18 [Q7](#) [Mr Tanzer]

19 [Q18](#) [Mr Strutton]

20 [Q76](#) [Minister Courts]

21 *Ibid.*

22 [Q3](#) [Mr Tanzer], [Q4](#) [Mr McNamara], [Q5](#) [Mr Strutton], [Q8](#) [Mr Garton]

23 [Q4](#) [Mr McNamara]

24 [Q50](#) [Mr Tanzer]

25 [Qq73-74](#) [Minister Courts]

country will be classified in this system.²⁶ A “Green Watchlist” will also be introduced, to “support travellers as they book travel to help identify the countries risk of moving from green to amber”.²⁷ The Taskforce has not indicated which countries will be categorised as “green”, “amber” or “red”, or how much notice will be given to the public if a country is to be moved to another category.

Testing

9. The price of testing is a barrier to restarting international travel. People who are desperate to see their families and to provide care for elderly relatives abroad may have to postpone their plans because they cannot afford to pay for tests, which is inequitable and unsustainable. The Global Travel Taskforce Report stated that the Taskforce will work with the travel industry and private testing providers ahead of international travel reopening to explore how the cost of travel can be reduced for the UK public while ensuring that travel is as safe as possible, including through the examination of “cheaper tests being used when holidaymakers return home, as well as whether the government would be able to provide pre-departure tests”.²⁸

10. Polymerase chain reaction [PCR] tests, at £99 per test in the UK, are unaffordable for people on average wages, especially when one considers the price of PCR-testing an extended family.²⁹ A PCR test costs €86 in Italy and has been capped at €60 in the region of Lazio.^{30 31} Greece has also capped PCR testing at €60.³² The International Air Transport Association [IATA] estimated that the cost of PCR testing is 50% to 80% lower in other countries.³³ Expensive PCR tests may not be required for every trip abroad. The Chief Executive of ABTA told us that requiring PCR testing for people returning from “green list” countries is akin to using “a sledgehammer to crack a nut”.³⁴ Countries with low levels of infection and high vaccination rates may be sufficiently safe to justify the use of cheaper and faster antigen tests. We note that hauliers arriving in the UK from outside the common travel area are subject to lateral flow tests.³⁵

11. The UK has spent £5.7 billion on developing testing capacity for coronavirus and is expected to spend more than £20 billion on the total programme.^{36 37} In addition, the NHS has extensive testing capabilities. Given the scale of expenditure of public funds on enhancing testing capacity, there may be a case for some of that enhanced capacity being reallocated to support the restart of international travel.

26 Department of Transport, [Report of the Global Travel Taskforce](#) April 2021

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

29 IATA, [Assessment of the effectiveness of rapid testing for SARS-CoV-2](#) (March 2021)

30 Which? [‘How much does a Covid-19 test cost to travel to France, Greece, Spain, Italy and the US?’](#), accessed 08 April 2021

31 Il Direttore Regionale Lazio, [Modalità di erogazione test antigenici laboratori privati e variazione procedura per test molecolari di conferma](#) (November 2020)

32 Hellenic Parliament, [Υπουργική Απόφαση Αριθμ.130022](#) (December 2020)

33 [Q30](#) [Mr McNamara]

34 [Q24](#) [Mr Tanzer]

35 [“Bespoke testing regime unveiled for exempt international arrivals”](#), The Department of Health and Social Care press release, 30 March 2021

36 Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 18 January 2021, HC (2021–22) 932, [Q107](#) [Mr Williams]

37 *Ibid.*

Health certification for travel

12. The Report did not deliver the Department's promise to introduce a travel certification scheme.³⁸ Instead, the Report recommended that the Government "continue close co-ordination with industry to ensure third-party apps can be integrated with a national digital certification system that is interoperable, safe and secure" and "explore the feasibility of bilateral pilots for testing initiatives such as digital solutions on particular routes, or with other countries".³⁹ The Taskforce also recommended that the Government maintain its leadership role with international institutions such as the International Civil Aviation Organization to work on this issue.⁴⁰ Bilateral recognition of health certification is critical to ensuring the efficient and safe movement of passengers across UK borders.

13. The UK has provided 48% of its population with at least one dose of a vaccine, compared with 17% in Germany and France.⁴¹ That level of vaccination offers a competitive advantage for inbound tourism, because the UK will be a relatively safe country for international tourists to visit. It also makes the prospect of travelling abroad much safer for those planning trips for business or to visit family. We agree with the Minister that we "do not want to go backwards" once international travel begins to reopen.⁴² By manoeuvring within the red lines of public health policy, however, the Government can still capitalise on the UK's world-leading "vaccine dividend" by taking immediate, practical steps to facilitate the safe restart of international travel on 17 May.

Border readiness

14. The Global Travel Taskforce Report stated that "lengthy checks at the border are creating excess queues, posing a risk to social distancing, passenger welfare and the overall border experience".⁴³ The Report recommended the establishment of a joint Government-industry working group to ensure border readiness and the full integration of the passenger locator form (PLF) with e-gates.⁴⁴

15. Heathrow Airport told us that waits at border control are "well in excess of two hours and up to six".⁴⁵ With passenger numbers likely to increase as international travel reopens, it is imperative that waiting times and queues be reduced to facilitate social distancing in airports and to allow the efficient movement of passengers. Interoperability can reduce waiting times. We welcome the Taskforce's commitment to improving passenger locator forms so that they are fully integrated with e-gates.⁴⁶ However, Government must introduce further measures to speed up border processing times. Such measures include increasing staffing numbers and requiring paperwork for entry to be processed before arrival.⁴⁷

38 HC Deb, 11 March 2021, [col 988](#)

39 Department of Transport, [Report of the Global Travel Taskforce](#) April 2021

40 Ibid.

41 University of Oxford - Our World in Data '[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Vaccinations - Statistics and Research - Our World in Data](#)', correct when accessed on 15 April 2021

42 [Q63](#) [Minister Courts]

43 Department of Transport, [Report of the Global Travel Taskforce](#) April 2021

44 Ibid.

45 [Q31](#) [Mr Garton]

46 Department of Transport, [Report of the Global Travel Taskforce](#) April 2021

47 [Letter from the Chair to Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on Brexit border preparedness](#), 17 December 2020

16. The Taskforce's support for a national digital health certification system is also welcome.⁴⁸ Implementing one common digital health application for travel will reduce the resources needed to make e-gates compatible with numerous applications, therefore allowing border processing to operate more efficiently. Speeding up queues will make it easier to maintain safe, socially distant ports of entry.

17. **We recognise the profound challenges to public health generated by the coronavirus pandemic. However, the challenge for the Government is balancing threats to public health against risks to the economy. Bearing in mind the urgent, existential threat to the UK aviation and travel sectors posed by the coronavirus pandemic, the Global Travel Taskforce Report failed to strike that balance, because it included insufficient detail to allow businesses to prepare for, and travellers to engage in, the planned safe restart of international travel on 17 May.**

18. *To allow the aviation and tourism sectors to prepare for restart and recovery and to accommodate the public's desire to travel for business, study, families and holidays, the Government must:*

- a) *populate the traffic-light framework with destination countries by 1 May 2021 at the latest and announce that classification of destination countries in a statement to Parliament;*
- b) *explain the criteria and mechanism by which countries will move between risk categories by 1 May 2021 at the latest;*
- c) *facilitate an affordable testing regime that supports public health and safe travel for everyone by maximising the role of antigen tests and ensuring the provision of affordable polymerase chain reaction tests, where required; and*
- d) *act immediately to reduce waiting times and queues at the UK border, including working bilaterally with partner countries to agree mutual recognition of travel health certification, deploying more staff at the border, processing passenger locator forms before passengers arrive in the UK and establishing an efficient system based on a single digital app to process health certification submitted in a range of languages.*

Conclusions and recommendations

1. We recognise the profound challenges to public health generated by the coronavirus pandemic. However, the challenge for the Government is balancing threats to public health against risks to the economy. Bearing in mind the urgent, existential threat to the UK aviation and travel sectors posed by the coronavirus pandemic, the Global Travel Taskforce Report failed to strike that balance, because it included insufficient detail to allow businesses to prepare for, and travellers to engage in, the planned safe restart of international travel on 17 May. (Paragraph 17)
2. *To allow the aviation and tourism sectors to prepare for restart and recovery and to accommodate the public's desire to travel for business, study, families and holidays, the Government must:*
 - a) *populate the traffic-light framework with destination countries by 1 May 2021 at the latest and announce that classification of destination countries in a statement to Parliament;*
 - b) *explain the criteria and mechanism by which countries will move between risk categories by 1 May 2021 at the latest;*
 - c) *facilitate an affordable testing regime that supports public health and safe travel for everyone by maximising the role of antigen tests and ensuring the provision of affordable polymerase chain reaction tests, where required; and*
 - d) *act immediately to reduce waiting times and queues at the UK border, including working bilaterally with partner countries to agree mutual recognition of travel health certification, deploying more staff at the border, processing passenger locator forms before passengers arrive in the UK and establishing an efficient system based on a single digital app to process health certification submitted in a range of languages.* (Paragraph 18)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 20 April 2021

Members present:

Huw Merriman, in the Chair

Lilian Greenwood	Grahame Morris
Simon Jupp	Gavin Newlands
Chris Loder	Greg Smith
Karl McCartney	

Draft Report (*Safe return of international travel?*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 18 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Seventh Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till tomorrow at 9.30 am]

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Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 14 April 2021

Brian Strutton, General Secretary, British Airline Pilots Association; **Simon McNamara**, UK & Ireland Country Manager, International Air Transport Association; **Mark Tanzer**, Chief Executive, Association of British Travel Agents; and **Chris Garton**, Chief Solutions Officer, Heathrow Airport

[Q1-61](#)

Robert Courts MP, Minister for Aviation, Maritime and Security, Department for Transport

[Q62-111](#)

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List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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2nd	The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the aviation sector	HC 268
3rd	E-scooters: pavement nuisance or transport innovation?	HC 255
4th	Road safety: young and novice drivers	HC 169
5th	The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the aviation sector: Interim report	HC 1257
6th	Trains fit for the future?	HC 876
1st Special Report	Pavement parking: Government Response to the Committee's Thirteenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 158
2nd Special Report	The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the aviation sector: Government and Civil Aviation Authority Responses to the Committee's Second Report	HC 745
3rd Special Report	E-scooters: pavement nuisance or transport innovation?: Government Response to Committee's Third Report of Session 2019–21	HC 1085

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