

Checkpoint Review - Next steps for international travel rules

As we approach universal adult vaccine coverage in the UK, and the imminent ending of CJRS, it is time now for a step change in approach by Government to international travel. Since July, we have seen football stadiums packed to full capacity and nightclubs reopening with no restrictions. In contrast, the approach to international travel remains incredibly cautious, complex and costly. Families and business travellers, even fully vaccinated, remain at the mercy of a dysfunctional private testing regime and a traffic light system that lacks the most basic transparency.

Europe has shown the way to safely re-open travel and has seen a much faster recovery in international travel volumes and passenger numbers. The UK is being left behind despite its world-beating vaccination programme.

We must change course, towards a travel model that removes unnecessary complexity, cost and uncertainty for travelers, whilst retaining robust measures to guard against Variants of Concern (VoCs). If this doesn't happen, the UK aviation industry will lose its world-leading position and reputation.

A way forward

All UK adults have now been offered a Covid vaccine: 90% of over 16s have had at least one dose, and 80% of over 16s are fully vaccinated. This continues to improve week by week. There are no restrictions within the domestic economy, and international travel is a clear and unjustified outlier. Now must be the time to evolve the model for international travel to bring it into line with the UK's approach to domestic restrictions, and Ministers should publically reiterate at this review that a return to pre-pandemic conditions is the ultimate goal.

In short, we need a simplified system with a more balanced approach to risk; as has been taken with the domestic economy. This means:

- **Fully vaccinated travellers and anyone travelling from low-risk countries should now be able to travel without restrictions or testing; just like domestic UK travel.**
- **Greater certainty and predictability so that travellers and families are not constantly looking over their shoulders in case of rule changes, disruption or significant unexpected costs.**
- **VoCs kept at bay through a Red list, applicable only to the highest-risk countries.**

Why a change in approach?

UK airlines and airports have accepted tough measures because public health must come first.

However, our system makes no sense and is not justified by an assessment of risk. There is no evidence¹ that international travel from the significant majority of countries is currently presenting a specific public health risk to the UK, or is a vector for the introduction of dangerous variants:

- From 22nd July - 11th August, the ONS Infection Survey reported an infection rate of 1.36% of the population in England - higher than the positivity rate reported by travellers arriving from Amber destinations (1.3%) and Green destinations (0.7%).

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- Since 22nd July, zero very high priority VOCs/VUIs or High priority VOCs/VUIs e.g., Beta, Gamma have been picked up via the traveller testing regime.
- Only a minority of positive cases are actually being sequenced – as low as 5% of all positive cases in July – representing just 0.03% of tests from Green country arrivals.

In a recent paper² Sage advisors highlighted how ‘*maintaining long term border controls or reduced travel is likely to be expensive, and only delay rather than prevent importation*’ and that ‘*maintaining stringent restrictions on travel over the long-term carries significant economic and social costs which must be weighed against the benefits of reducing the frequency of importation*’.

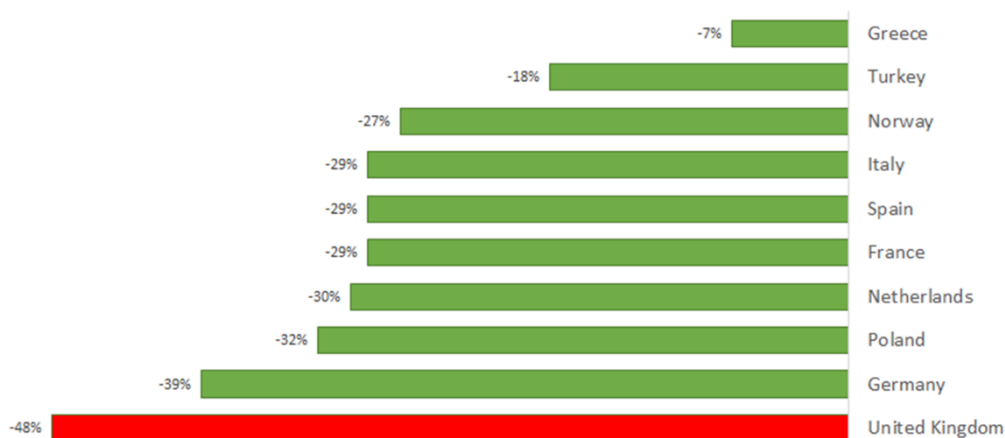
Today we are applying significantly more restrictive and costly measures to travel from locations with lower levels of Covid-19 than the UK. Families and business travellers, even fully vaccinated, remain at the mercy of a dysfunctional private testing regime, subject to investigation by the CMA. Data³ shows that the cost of testing of around £100 for vaccinated people can be as high as five times the cost of a return flight. The effect on demand of this is clearly significant.

However, it is not only the cost of testing. The testing regime is complex, burdensome and, particularly when it comes to mandatory pre-departure tests to return to the UK, is stopping people from travelling. There is no evidence that the testing regime is supporting customer confidence. By contrast, for fully vaccinated travellers across most of Europe, there are no tests and associated costs, putting those travellers and carriers at a major advantage and helping drive customer confidence.

The UK’s poor recovery is illustrated by the latest Eurocontrol data (below) showing how flights from the UK are consistently lagging behind competitors in Europe and by some margin the worst of all major markets. Overall, traffic levels across Europe in August were 71% 2019 levels – far ahead of the UK.

Daily Flight Comparison

1st September 2021 compared with equivalent day 2019
Source: EUROCONTROL



² [S1336 International Vaccination Potential impact on viral evolution and UK public health.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100000/S1336_International_Vaccination_Potential_impact_on_viral_evolution_and_UK_public_health.pdf)

³ <https://www.futureofaviationgroup.org.uk/news/testing-costs-can-be-up-five-times-the-cost-of-a-flight>, e.g., almost four times the cost of a flight from London Stansted to Madrid

The consequences of the UK system can be seen in furlough numbers – 58% of UK passenger air transport employees remain furloughed – the highest of any sector of the economy. From 1st October there will be no financial support for these employees. UK aviation has not had the restart that is required if we are to begin to meaningfully recover as economic support via the CJRS is wound down, and thousands of jobs remain at risk.

Summary

The UK is a clear outlier both in terms of the severity and associated costs of its restrictions on international travel, and speed of recovery compared to our European neighbours. It is now time for a step change in approach by Government to international travel. This can be done whilst protecting public health, and is necessary if the UK's aviation sector is going to be able to recover, securing jobs and UK connectivity over this winter and beyond.