



House of Commons
Transport Committee

Safe return of international travel? Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2019–21

Fourth Special Report of Session
2021–22

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 29 June 2021*

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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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), Wafia Zia (Second Clerk), Damith Rajakaruna (Committee Operations Manager) and Mandy Sullivan (Committee Operations Officer)

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Fourth Special Report

On 22 April 2021, the Transport Committee published its Seventh Report of Session 2019–21, *Safe return of international travel?* (HC 1341). The Government's response was received on 23 June 2021 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Preface

The UK Government thanks the Transport Select Committee for its report on the safe return of international travel to and from the UK. International travel is vital. It connects families who have been kept apart, boosts businesses and underpins the UK economy. This is why it's absolutely essential that any steps we take now, continue to lay the groundwork for a sustainable return to travel that is able to weather the challenges we continue to face, despite the success of our vaccine programme, which have been brought home to us so clearly by recent surges in infections in many other countries.

In the UK, we have underway the most ambitious vaccination programme in history, which affords a unique opportunity to pursue a safe and gradual lifting of restrictions, both domestically and those regarding international travel. The work of the Global Travel Taskforce enabled UK Government to resume international travel using our new risk-based framework (the traffic light system) from 17 May.

The COVID-19 roadmap out of lockdown included a commitment to relaunching the Global Travel Taskforce (GTT), which had previously reported in November 2020, to consider a safe return of international travel. UK Government worked alongside industry and international partners to develop a risk-based framework that can facilitate the return of international travel while managing Variants of Concern. This forms part of the recent GTT report, published in April 2021.

The latest report clearly sets out how to safely restart international travel. Any steps are subject to continued success of the evolving epidemiological situation in accordance with the four tests in the roadmap out of lockdown. As such, UK Government has considered the evidence and took a cautious approach to lifting restrictions gradually from 17 May.

The Committee made four recommendations that would 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. Their specific recommendations will now be considered in detail.

Recommendation 1: 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. (Paragraph 18)

UK Government agrees that it is of utmost importance that both individuals and industry are given clarity and confidence to plan, invest and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Friday 7 May Government announced a cautious restart of international travel from 17 May. This is through lifting ‘stay in the UK regulation’ and the introduction of the traffic light system including a list of green, amber and red countries.

From 17 May, the Government lifted the ‘Stay in the UK’ restriction for people leaving England, but given that the virus is still spreading in many parts of the world, people should not be travelling to amber and red countries. Individuals should also check the relevant gov.uk page before considering travel.

Recommendation 2: Explain the criteria and mechanism by which countries will move between risk categories by 1 May 2021 at the latest. (Paragraph 18)

UK Government understands the importance that the criteria and the mechanism by which countries move between tiers be clear and transparent.

The risks posed by individual countries will be monitored and we will take into consideration a range of factors to inform whether a country is allocated red, amber or green. We have always been guided by the science and that remains the case. The allocation of countries into each category is reviewed every three weeks and will respond to emerging evidence. The Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) published their methodology supporting the allocation of countries to each list on Friday 7 May.

Measures and restrictions will be reviewed at checkpoint reviews no later than the 28 June, 31 July and 1 October to take account of the domestic and international health picture and to see whether these measures remain appropriate.

If there is evidence to suggest any risk as per the four tests¹ set out in the domestic roadmap out of lockdown, UK Government will not hesitate to act accordingly.

Recommendation 3: 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. (Paragraph 18)

The Government agrees with the aim of this recommendation. Testing remains an important tool in the Government’s wider measures to manage the risk of imported cases, permitting the monitoring of positive tests, ensuring that people home quarantine, and identifying variants of concern.

The UK Government recognises that the cost of these tests can be high and is working with the travel industry and private testing providers to further reduce the cost of testing, while ensuring travel is as safe as possible.

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-response-spring-2021/covid-19-response-spring-2021-summary>

The price of tests has reduced significantly over recent weeks, bringing the UK in line with other countries, and several providers are offering Day 2 tests for green arrivals for under £50. We hope that other providers follow suit and offer similarly competitive prices. The price of the NHS Test and Trace day 2 and day 8 testing bundle has been reduced from £210 to £170 to track the mid-point of the market.

While the government agrees with maximising the role of antigen tests, PCR testing is currently necessary to identify variants of concern. Around 70% of COVID-19 cases identified amongst international arrivals in England are found through day 2 testing. It also supports the UK in understanding the risk from countries that have limited or no genomic sequencing capability.

Recommendation 4: 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)

UK Government partially agrees with this recommendation. The absolute priority remains the need to protect our recovery from COVID-19 and safeguard our vaccination programme through preventing the importation of new variants of concern. It is vital, therefore, that time spent at the border is balanced alongside a safe and robust set of passenger requirements.

We have introduced a range of new measures for international travel that did not exist prior to COVID-19. The result of these requirements is additional time spent at the border to ensure compliance. We are actively taking steps to reduce queue times where practicable. A key part of this programme of work is the automation of the Passenger Locator Form (PLF) and upgrades to Border Crossing systems to check all passengers have completed their requirements without the need for manual checks. These will be in place by Autumn 2021, with major UK ports complete this Summer. This will support efforts to reduce queue times.

It is worth noting that passenger compliance is already very high thanks to the dedication of carriers who are ensuring nearly 100% compliance with all border health measures (negative test plus completed PLF) before passengers depart to the UK. In future the manual checks being performed by carriers will also be replaced by automated checks. We will review and reduce the multiple fines carriers are subject to as we automate the PLF whilst maintaining high assurance.

Government also recognises the importance of translating the Passenger Locator Form and other documentation into other languages and this will be progressed as soon as possible.

Government has also maintained a leadership role within various multilateral organisations including the ICAO, IMO and OECD as well as continuing to work with the G7, G20 and Five Eyes groups.