

Global Travel Taskforce checkpoint – CBI submission

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) welcomes the opportunity to help shape the Department for Transport's approach to international travel as the next checkpoint of the Global Travel Taskforce approaches. The CBI is the UK's leading business organisation, speaking for some 190,000 businesses that together employ around a third of the private sector workforce. With offices across the UK as well as world representation in Brussels, Washington D.C., Beijing, and Delhi, the CBI communicates the British business voice around the world.

International travel has been devastated by the pandemic, affecting both business and leisure passengers alike and crippling the aviation industry and its supply chain. To help the industry fly its way to recovery, it is vital that the Government's next review takes into account the progress that has been made in the vaccination rollout which has already allowed venues such as football stadiums, theatres, and nightclubs to reopen successfully, and host large crowds.

However, despite the world-beating vaccination programme, which now sees upwards of 80% of over-16s double vaccinated, the Government's policy towards international travel has remained characterised by an abundance of caution, which has held back from travel operators the opportunity to recover that has been seized by other sectors of the economy. Public health must, of course, be front of mind for any decisions, but the UK cannot be first on vaccines yet last on reopening international travel, which is an essential component of economic recovery.

Moreover, Europe has demonstrated a model of reopening travel and has experienced a much more rapid recovery in international travel volumes and passenger numbers.¹ It is now time to fundamentally overhaul the framework governing international travel, so that passengers who have been vaccinated can travel with ease abroad as they do in the UK, and businesses operating in the sector can begin to trade their way to recovery. Ministers must use this review to publicly reiterate that a return to pre-pandemic conditions is the ultimate goal, and in so doing encourage greater passenger confidence in the weeks ahead.

The Government should replace the existing traffic light mechanism (red/amber/green) with a two-tier system (restricted/unrestricted) that prioritises vaccination status as the key determinant of restrictions and testing requirements

The current system of red/amber/green countries continues to undermine passenger confidence and depress passenger numbers.

- Countries on the amber list remain under constant threat of being moved into the red, often with limited or no warning.
- The threat of a country moving from the green list to amber or from the amber to red is preventing passengers from travelling with confidence, despite low rates of COVID-19 being directly associated with air travel.²
- Equally, the red/amber/green list system is preventing airlines and travel operators from reacting to changing demand.
- The current system also fails to provide significant benefits for passengers that have been double-vaccinated, even when travelling to and from green list countries.

¹ <https://www.eurocontrol.int/sites/default/files/2021-09/covid19-eurocontrol-comprehensive-air-traffic-assessment-02092021.pdf>

² <https://www.iata.org/en/youandiata/travelers/health/low-risk-transmission/>

A restricted/unrestricted system would see countries placed into the unrestricted category by default, unless a variant of concern has been detected, or the UK Government has evidence to warrant greater restrictions. This will lead to a much more focused list of restricted countries which is truly risk-based.

- The Government should be encouraged, wherever possible, to share this evidence with businesses working in the international travel sector, as well as any methodologies used for calculating risk.
- Passengers who have received two doses of an approved vaccine would be able to travel to and from unrestricted countries without the need for PCR testing.
- Passengers who have received no vaccine or just one dose would still be subject to some testing requirements, but from countries without variants of concern and with high rates of vaccination uptake, these should be as unencumbering as possible, and lateral flow tests should be used as much as possible to eliminate the need, in many cases, for a PCR test.

Government action on the cost of testing is welcome, but a wholesale review of testing costs and requirements is urgently required

- The current testing regime is not fit for purpose, and represents a significant additional cost being placed on passengers without sufficient justification.
- While Government efforts on the cost of testing are welcome, cost is only one part of the equation.
- The CMA review of testing should proceed, and for as long as testing remains a requirement, the costs should be reviewed to ensure that they are not preventing passengers from being able to travel. For short haul journeys, the cost of testing is often prohibitive, in some cases exceeding flight and accommodation costs and making the prospect of travel impossible for many families.³
- As stated above, with the overhaul of the international travel framework, the need for PCR testing for passengers travelling to unrestricted countries should be removed.
- The Government should note that action on the cost of testing without an overhaul of the international travel framework will not be sufficient to enhance demand for travel, as it is the framework that is fundamentally holding the sector back from recovery.

Government should put in place measures to ensure the efficient and safe handling of arrivals

- The Government should use the opportunity of the GTT checkpoint to review the measures in place to mitigate queues at the border.
- Large queues and significant delays have become a common feature at many UK airports – and the need to safely and efficiently handle arrivals has never been greater.
- By simplifying the international travel system and the testing requirements for double-vaccinated passengers from unrestricted countries, checks at the border should prove easier.
- Demonstrating vaccination status via the NHSApp or via post is a relatively simple process for most UK-based residents, and the Government should use the GTT review to actively encourage UK residents to download the app or submit a request for postal verification of their vaccination status. This will generate greater confidence in the system and greater efficiencies at the border.
- Additionally, the Government should ensure that for as long as the Covid situation persists, UK Border Force is given additional resources at key sites to ensure that border checks can take place as efficiently as possible.

³ <https://www.futureofaviationgroup.org.uk/news/testing-costs-can-be-up-five-times-the-cost-of-a-flight>

Government should push strongly for greater reciprocity between countries with similar levels of vaccination

- In order to open international travel to its fullest extent, the Government must prioritise reciprocity with key travel markets, particularly the United States.
- This reciprocity comes both in the form of travel restrictions and vaccination status, and the Government must prioritise getting markets open again to UK passengers and ensuring recognition of NHS-certified vaccines abroad.
- This step is vital to ensuring that major airlines and travel operators are able to trade their way to recovery.