



COVID-19

UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 29th January 2021



Grounded. The restoration of international travel will be complicated.

The change in policy stance on international travel announced on Wednesday in the House of Commons, while not as sweeping as some had speculated, is, nevertheless, a significant step-change in policy and it is consistent with moves being made by many other countries in Europe and elsewhere to limit the amount of cross-border mobility to a minimum. It represents at least the fifth change in official approach by the UK in this area in the past twelve months. It may not be the last act of tightening restrictions.

It also comes at a moment when the UK's vaccination campaign is making impressive progress with the prospect of both the immediate target of offering the first injection to the top four priority groups constituting 14.7 million people by February 15 and then the objective of reaching the next five groups comprising 17.2 million people by the end of April appearing increasingly plausible to achieve in practice. Mass vaccination is a pre-condition to the restoration of international travel to anything like "normal" levels.

The process of transitioning to a post-vaccination global society is, however, far from a straightforward one. It has been made much more taxing by the emergence of a stronger strain of the virus in the UK and the discovery of different and potentially more difficult mutations in South Africa and Brazil, triggering the fear that other mutations may occur which pose a fundamental threat to the effectiveness of the current vaccination strategy.

Although a perhaps theoretical concern, this will be an argument for more caution in reintroducing international travel after this lockdown than was the case in Summer 2020. The overall task of restoring widespread international travel has become more complex.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The latest switch in the UK's approach to international travel is at least the fifth such shift in this policy sphere in the last 12 months. It may tighten further.
- It is a tacit recognition that the scientific view of international transmission as a factor in the broader issue of suppressing this wave of the virus has hardened.
- Although the measures announced on Wednesday have been attacked as being "half-baked", there are significant problems with either doing less or more than has been set out. This is a dilemma that is being faced by governments globally.
- Although mass vaccination will be a substantial step forward (at least in the developed world) towards easing restrictions on travel, there are a number of short-term obstacles even with vaccination which will take time to overcome. This may make securing a consistent and coherent approach a huge challenge.
- This may mean that countries insist on some continuation of requirements on testing, and in some circumstances quarantine, even after mass vaccination.
- Restoring the international travel network is thus destined to be one of the hardest questions for ministers and officials to address as the lockdown eases.

The policy shifts of the past year.

The travel industry has had to endure more changes in official policy than most sectors. In the very earliest weeks of the pandemic, travel bans involving, initially, just China, were considered, but the strong scientific advice to ministers was that this would not be effective in preventing the virus entering the UK and that they should stick with the stance of identifying and isolating individuals who had come in from affected areas of China. This was the norm in Europe then, except, ironically, Italy which did ban direct flights from China early but not early enough as the coronavirus had already entered it. The overall stance could thus be described as basically still "open skies". With the first lockdown, travel was strongly discouraged and those coming into the UK were expected to heed the "stay at home" message, but there was no separate means of enforcing this.

The collapse in overall international mobility meant that despite largely closed skies (because of the the much diminished demand for travel), the borders were still open. There was not, at this time, any obligation to undertake a virus test before flying.

By June, with the overall lockdown easing, policy shifted again towards travel corridors. This involved a divisions between countries considered “safe” due to relatively low case rates and those where the threat of imported transmission was thought more serious. In the first category there was no requirement to self-isolate on arrival or return to the UK, in the second camp there was a fourteen day quarantine obligation. The weaknesses in this strategy became clear within weeks as countries which had received UK tourists in large numbers, such as Spain, were moved out of their initial status at very short notice.

This structure continued for an extended period but with an ever larger number of countries falling into the compulsory quarantine section as time went on. The evidence that the self-isolation instruction was being obeyed to the letter became more fragile. The contraction in travel meant, though, that this was not deemed too disturbing.

A few weeks ago, policy was updated further in that those coming into England had to demonstrate that they had tested negative in a virus test within 72 hours of arrival and then enter quarantine for ten days at a pre-disclosed location of their choice after that. As many countries were also insisting on similar restrictions which involved added costs and considerable inconvenience, the majority of the winter holiday season had been choked off before the strictures of the third lockdown in England all but snuffed it out.

In this latest twist to the plot, concerns about the possibility of importation of the known mutant viruses from South Africa and Brazil has created, in a sense, a new if much more restrictive system of travel corridors. Those arriving from 33 designated countries which are at highest risk of harbouring the known mutant viruses now not only have to prove a negative test but will be met at airports, escorted to specific hotels and obliged to await a supervised form of quarantine (at their own expense) while the remainder of arrivals (not admittedly enormous in number) from elsewhere will continue to be expected to make their way to a pre-identified place and to quarantine themselves much as before.

The latest moves reflect a hardening of views about the risk of international transmission via travel particularly in the light of the discovery of new variations of the virus. With the

benefit of hindsight, ministers and officials would now concede privately that had a ban on travel been brought in across Europe very early on once there were real hints that the virus had escaped China then it would, at a minimum, have slowed the arrival of the virus and made the first wave of it more manageable. Again on reflection, many in Whitehall would also concede that the decision to make the summer holiday season possible last year led directly to a second wave of the virus which was much worse than anticipated. Finally, if the mutated virus that started to manifest itself in Kent in September had been better understood at the time it is likely that travel testing would have started sooner.

The latest policy position, which comes with the option of extending the number of “red list” nations subject to the most draconian quarantine demands, has been condemned as “half-baked” by the Opposition, others in the devolved administrations and a contingent in the scientific community. This is because it is impossible to know with any certainty which country might be the source of new mutations that could be so resistant to the vaccines available now that if they started spreading in the UK this would undermine the ongoing vaccination effort. The only sure means of keeping a mutant virus out is either an absolute bar on international travel of any form or, more realistically, emulating the likes of Australia and New Zealand and to have a totally blanket obligation to engage in expensive supervised secure quarantine until the risk of a mutant virus has expired.

While that might sound rational it has its own “half-baked” aspect to it. It is no easier to anticipate when the danger of a super-mutant virus developing has disappeared than it is to identify in advance which country it might be most likely to incubate in. The UK would either have to intend to impose any such obligation indefinitely (strangling international travel as it did) or, more probably, alight on an essentially arbitrary date when the rules would change again and, presumably, something akin to the old travel corridors came in. There is no ideal policy option that minimises the risk and points to an easy exit strategy.

Why mass vaccination alone, for the moment, is not enough to rescue travel.

A successful mass vaccination campaign will ultimately have a transformative impact on international travel. In the short-term, however, there are major complexities to face.

The first is whether countries choose to reopen their borders on the basis that individual travellers can prove that they themselves have been vaccinated (in which case a form of new personal certification that is universally recognised will be needed) or whether the overall vaccination rate in their country of origin will be thought sufficiently acceptable. Different governments and countries may come to varying conclusions on this matter.

The second is that even if vaccination was to be at close to 100 per cent among adults in a country (and there will, even in Europe, be considerable diversity in take-up rates), a proportion of people will eventually find that the vaccine is not effective on themselves and hence the risk of them exporting the virus into a foreign location or importing it on their return to the UK is still there. What level of risk will countries be ready to tolerate?

The third relates to whether recent concerns about mutations and super-mutations is sustained as scientific understanding about these new variations increases (as it will). This is of particular relevance to residents of the UK. It is not yet clear whether what is described in some places as “the English variety” of the virus is, or will be, unstoppable across much of Europe, or if it could be kept at bay in at least some countries if tough restrictions on travel to and from the UK are maintained. We may not be welcome.

The fourth is that it will take more time to appreciate whether vaccination not only provides personal protection against serious illness from the virus but reduces or eliminates the risk of asymptomatic transmission to others as well. If it does have a significant positive impact, then that will ease the path to restoring “normal” travel. If it does not, then ensuring a swift return to global mobility may become more awkward.

Finally, at the more practical level looking at summer holiday decisions this year, the varying speed of vaccination campaigns in Europe may influence booking decisions. If the supply issues surrounding certain vaccines within the EU prove to be enduring (which hopefully they will not) social distancing and curfew requirements may last longer in some European countries than they may prove to do in the UK. If it is easier, come July, to acquire a beer at 10pm in Brighton than it is in Barcelona then why not holiday here?

Conclusion – a tense few months for travel.

There is a more optimistic scenario for international travel out there. By April or May we are likely to be much better informed about virus mutations and their implications for the array of vaccines that are available than we are now. We should also be much more knowledgeable about the impact that vaccination has on transmission than today. The difficult start to the vaccination drive in much of Europe could ease with more supplies. Some complications in a co-ordinated approach are unavoidable but can be overcome.

Yet there is clearly the chance that the route back for international travel will be choppy and that 2021 will prove to be more of a year of transition than a decisive break from the very recent past. It may well be that local and regional travel returns before long-haul. Even citizens from countries with a high rate of vaccination (as the UK should be) may find that countries which they would like to visit will still demand negative virus tests if they are to be allowed entry and in more extreme cases continued quarantine demands. Some aspects of post-COVID life such as social distancing in bars and restaurants and the obligation to wear facemasks in public places could endure while vaccination phases in. The extent of these restrictions is not possible to estimate now (although the science that will drive the decisions will, as set out above, become more evident in months). The degree to which they act to deter leisure travel abroad this year is hard to predict. In the end, vaccination should prove to be decisive to the advantage of the travel sector. Before that point, international mobility is likely to prove one of the most challenging aspects of the global economy to take back fully to how it was functioning on January 29th, 2020.

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