



# COVID-19

## UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 26<sup>th</sup> March 2021



### Grounded? Restoring international travel has become much harder.

Travel is supposed to broaden the mind. It is certainly stretching a lot of intellects inside Whitehall and elsewhere at the moment. In most respects the “roadmap” set out by the Prime Minister on February 22nd is in very reasonable condition. The vaccination drive has, despite some setbacks and a spat with the EU, met or exceeded expectations. What is more, the participation rate in the programme, the initial evidence as to the extent to which both the vaccines currently in the field in the UK prevent serious illness with the risk of hospital admission and death, and the impact on limiting the transmission of the virus to others courtesy of vaccination, are all better than was anticipated a month or so ago. There are still a stubborn number of new cases in the system (around 5-6,000 a day) but the demand on the NHS is nothing like that which existed in January. The return of schoolchildren to their classrooms will undoubtedly have put some upward pressure on the fabled R number, but for the moment this does not seem to have been seismic and in any case the imminent arrival of the Easter school holidays will provide a respite. Fingers crossed, the tentative timetable published in the roadmap looks largely likely to be hit.

International travel is, nonetheless, the conspicuous exception to this otherwise rather encouraging outlook. It was always destined to be the most challenging and complicated component with memories of the surge which occurred after the summer holidays last

September a compelling argument for caution. Yet the reality is that the difficulties here have accumulated since February 22nd and are the major post-lockdown policy dilemma.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- In a number of crucial regards, factors which are central to the restoration of international travel, especially between the UK and continental Europe, are in a notably less advantageous position than would have been thought six weeks ago.
- It is unlikely that these adverse factors will have started to resolve themselves by the time that the Global Travel Taskforce, created by the UK Government, is due to report on April 12th. Of necessity, that publication is now much more likely to be akin to a framework document as to how overseas travel might be resumed rather than a detailed blueprint as to when and where it will really be restarted.
- The Government is likely to explore a “traffic light” structure for designating the COVID safety of individual countries, but there are difficulties with this approach and there will probably be strong resistance to it from leading scientific advisers.
- In practice, therefore, ministers are likely to spend the period between April 12th and May 17th, the current earliest date when overseas travel might come back on a sizeable scale, studying a range of options for how to do this. One plausible scenario would see a comparatively small number of individuals who have been fully vaccinated allowed to visit a relatively short list of countries and with some additional impositions (such as testing and self-isolation on their return if there is a positive test outcome), while the earliest date for mass travel may be deferred (probably to June 21st) as the results of any partial easing are being digested.
- The critical element in all this is the assessment of the advance of the Brazilian and South African mutations in continental Europe. If they become entrenched as a significant minority of cases then ministers will not want to take what could be a very substantial risk in allowing for accidental importation of these cases. A highly restrictive strategy would be adopted swiftly and it is a credible worst-case scenario that “normal” international travel would not occur until early 2022.
- Although ministers would be profoundly reluctant (bar a serious mutation scare) to introduce an outright ban against summer holidays abroad, there is clearly an ongoing effort to manage expectations downwards and to “nudge” those who have not been fully vaccinated (which means all families with children) in the

direction of a “staycation” in 2021 with the incentive of a total return to foreign holidays in 2022 once UK society is fully vaccinated (and then revaccinated). This would involve a sizeable redistribution of expenditure between foreign and domestic leisure activities with a potential spurt to Q3 economic growth. It might also be a source of tension between those free to travel and others in society.

### **Flying backwards.**

At the time that the UK Government set out its roadmap on February 22nd, the sections relating to international travel rested implicitly on three very reasonable assumptions.

These were that:

- The imposition of various forms of curfew and restrictions in continental Europe in the aftermath of Christmas would lead to a reduction in cases and a convergence with the UK where a more forceful lockdown was needed to deal with a far higher set of cases.
- The initial advantage that the UK had in terms of its vaccination rate (by the simple fact of having started first, if nothing else) would in time be eroded as the EU mobilised its own vaccination drive at scale. Participation rates between the UK and the EU as a whole would not be that dissimilar even if some countries proved to be more vaccine hesitant.
- Substantial diplomatic progress would be made on reaching a clear outcome on what (if any) method of “vaccine passport” would be mutually acceptable, a broad agreement on how to categorise regions and countries by their COVID-secure status and what sort of testing might be required before a trip, during one and again upon return from abroad.

The blunt truth is that on all these fronts the situation today is much more awkward than it was entirely rational to have anticipated six weeks ago.

The mutual reduction in new cases simply has not occurred. In the UK, the number has collapsed from 60,000 new cases to around a tenth of that figure (although that fall has all but stopped and may well edge upwards in the coming weeks). The pressure in much of continental Europe (particularly, but not exclusively, central and eastern Europe) has been in the opposite direction. This is partly because the variant initially identified in Kent has succeeded in imposing itself as a dominant strain in much of Europe bringing

with it a substantially higher prospect of virus transmission (and perhaps extra mortality) but also because a number of countries (such as France) sought to avoid a lockdown by means of a curfew or (like Germany) started with a “lockdown lite” and then attempted to ease those restrictions. This has proved about as effective as the regional tier method was in England between September and November and during December last year. It has not slammed contact points down to the low levels needed to achieve virus suppression.

What is more disturbing is the tentative evidence that the Brazilian and South African variants of the virus may have established a numerically significant base in parts of the continent. This does not make it inevitable that they will spread further but it should be a matter of considerable concern. Despite much criticism of the test and trace system in the UK, the country’s dominance of genomic sequencing, has appeared (so far) to have contained the small outbreaks of these variants here with some success. Others within Europe are less well placed to anticipate where such cases are and to close them down.

All of this would matter less if the vaccination drive in the EU had proceeded at the pace that had been expected. This would, as is being witnessed in the UK, have broken the link between rising cases, rising hospital admissions and rising deaths. In time it would also have acted to reverse the increase in new cases too due to a lower transmission rate. As matters have developed, and in very acrimonious circumstances, the “vaccine gap” (the difference between the percentage of adults receiving a first injection in the UK and in the European Union) has not narrowed in recent weeks, it has become wider. This is being compounded by an emerging “participation gap” with astonishingly high take-up rates in the UK but much more vaccine scepticism seen elsewhere (notably France).

Finally, coherent international co-ordination around travel requirements is not where it was hoped it would be in mid-February. There has been some progress on the issue of mutual acceptance of the validity of Apps and other data to demonstrate that a person has received both doses of the the vaccine offered to them but (a) that is the relatively straightforward element and (b) it begs the question of how to deal with the very large number of adults (and almost all children) who will not be fully vaccinated by July and August this year. In most other respects, uncertainty is the order of the day. There are some countries (usually in southern Europe) who want to roll out the welcome mat to tourists, while there are others (mainly in northern Europe) who are far from keen at the

idea of their citizens taking up that invitation. There appears to be no consensus as to what sort of testing should be asked of the unvaccinated (and possibly, to be careful, even the vaccinated) if they are allowed to travel, no consistent stance on quarantine on arrival and departure and no single agreed list of “safe”, “semi-safe” and “unsafe” places. These are not, to put it mildly, ideal circumstances in which to seek to restore tourism.

### **A redundant Global Travel Taskforce?**

All of which has made life for the Global Travel Taskforce which is working with and offering recommendations to the Government much more taxing. It had hoped that it would be able to produce a substantial blueprint when it reported publicly on April 12th (although the PM has stated that he will “say something” about travel a week earlier) which would then allow ministers not long after that to confirm the conditions under which international travel would be resumed on the earliest date signalled of May 17th.

It is looking increasingly unlikely that such a comprehensive strategy can be established. At best (and it is worth having), this will be a framework document which postulates how international travel could soon be re-established in the right circumstances. But as April 12th is less than three weeks away, ministers will not know with any certainty by then if the tougher restrictions being imposed in much of Europe have had a profound impact on new cases, whether the Brazilian and South African strains of the virus in Europe are isolated incidents or something more troublesome, whether the vaccine drive in the EU is making up for lost time and if public acceptance of vaccination there is improving or whether a consistent continent-wide stance on testing and other factors is likely to be established or whether it will be a patchwork quilt. The probable response of the Prime Minister to the taskforce may be: “thank you very much indeed, we will think about it.”

One work stream which will be especially vexed is the notion of a “traffic light” list for distinguishing between countries. This has proved contentious enough as the means of deciding which of those people coming in to the UK are compelled to pay up to stay in hotels and are monitored until their quarantine is over, while others are allowed to self-isolate at a private address with (in practice) considerably less supervision of them. There are manifest defects in this structure but the numbers arriving in the UK from all sources, and especially “red list” countries, has been small enough not to undermine the system.

Whether a traffic light formula could deal with millions of people moving about Europe is, to understate the matter considerably, not a notion of which very senior scientific advisers are yet convinced. The potential flaws in it are sizeable. The initial identification of the “red” countries is comparatively obvious but the borderline between “amber” and “green” is much more ambiguous. What do you do with countries which are basically “green” but have “red” hotspots? Without intense international agreement as to how to make such distinctions (which may prove to be impossible allowing for their divergent economic interests in tourism) there are potential pitfalls to navigate. Suppose, as an illustration, that the UK considers Spain to be “green” under the right conditions but that France should be “red” and travel to it discouraged by extensive testing and compulsory self-isolation. If Spain is unwilling to seal its borders with France, then despite it being a generally safe place for UK visitors there is the risk they will encounter French infections (as many people will not have been vaccinated and some will not benefit from a vaccine). The possibility of “back door” mutant virus transmissions clearly cannot be discounted.

#### **What are the Government’s options?**

As noted earlier ministers are unlikely to make a proclamation in early April that travel will resume on May 17th and set out the terms under which it will happen. They would be entirely at liberty to assert that they needed more data both from within the UK and continental Europe and that they required more time in which to make a decision. The airlines and the travel industry would protest at volume but would have to live with it.

Ministers cannot, however, wait forever. It is not credible to declare on May 16th that everything is now fine for May 17th, subject to certain stipulations. The travel sector has to be able to prepare for what it will be permitted to do when. There is a strong case for a policy position, even if with provisional elements, by very early May at the latest.

There are a number of options which are possible once that moment has been reached.

The first is that the extra two to three weeks of data both at home and abroad could be reassuring. Case numbers might be heading south across continental Europe, vaccines could be flowing at a far faster rate and collaboration on policy may be much improved. It is highly likely that even in the most optimal of conditions unvaccinated people who wish to depart from the EU will be subject to testing on their departure and on return.

Positive results would result in self-isolation unless a further PCR test reversed this. Subject to these requirements, the summer holiday season would look like 2020 did.

The second is that a more cautious approach might be taken. Ministers could adopt the view that the least risky approach may be to allow those who have been fully vaccinated to travel to a designated list of safe countries with testing to occur on their return home.

There are a number of reasons besides the critical factor of vaccination itself why this might appeal as a form of controlled experiment. Those who have been vaccinated early in the UK will predominantly be in the older age categories. The character of their travels abroad is different to that of younger people. They are more likely to stay either in their own holiday property, to rent a villa or to choose to be in a boutique hotel. All of these are considerably more COVID-secure than booking a room in a large hotel designed with mass tourism in mind and where travellers from multiple nations are likely to mingle. The social patterns of such travellers are also distinctive. If they attend restaurants it will be earlier in the evening, usually seated outside, followed by a trip back to their residence. It is unlikely to involve closely packed bars, nightclubs or partying into the early morning. On their return to the UK, they are likely to obey orders to self-isolate not least because if they are retired the economic costs of quarantining themselves would be negligible.

So, it is entirely possible that much as everything else in lifting the lockdown has been phased, a return to international travel comes in stages too. A select (and the safest) band would be allowed to travel under specific circumstances from May 17th but the bulk of the population would be told that a later date – June 21st is a contender and the law passed by Parliament yesterday allows ministers a fall-back on travel until June 30th – would become the new earliest day for travel with the matter revisited in early June. By that time even more data would be available and even more UK vaccines injected.

As of today, this would appear an attractive policy compromise to ministers which senior scientific advisers could probably accept. If the evidence is more disturbing, though, then an April/early May call could be made that the earliest date for travel would be pushed back to June 21st for all segments of the UK population. The absolutely decisive factor would be overwhelming information that the percentage of virus cases of the Brazilian and South African variations was surging across much of continental Europe while still at

low levels in the UK. There is no way that ministers would risk a spike in such cases, hitting the vaccinated and unvaccinated alike in August and September in advance of what is likely to be a “booster” vaccination drive with vaccines adapted to deal with these new threats, which probably could not occur until October at the earliest and then take months to complete in its entirety. The drawbridge would come up and the chances of mass leisure travel until that vaccination effort was over (early 2022) would be slim.

### **Staycation by stealth?**

If ministers and officials were to be utterly candid as to what they would prefer to have happen with travel this summer it would be as follows. They would want the smallest number of unvaccinated citizens leaving the country as possible. They would, however, prefer not to achieve this through a blanket ban (although a surge in mutated cases in Europe would end all such distaste for an outright prohibition) and would hope that by what is a form of “nudge” strategy, expectations of foreign travel would be lowered and personal unease about leaving the UK while not fully vaccinated raised, so that millions of individuals and families will decide against leisure travel to Europe this summer. The consolation prize would be that “normal service” would be restored from 2022 onwards.

Evidence of such a nudge approach is everywhere. Matt Hancock has been talking up “a Great British Summer” for months now. The standard ministerial argument is that it is “too early” to make an overseas travel booking (even though in almost all instances this year such a reservation would be fully refundable by the holiday company). Scientists on the various SAGE sub-committees are almost falling over themselves to find a media slot to talk down the prospect of foreign holidays. It is a de facto staycation by stealth drive.

If so, and assuming (which is logical) that the number of overseas holidays is strikingly lower this year than last, then this will have considerable significance for where money is spent this summer with a redistribution between foreign and domestic leisure activities. There will be winners and losers from all this and the losers may need bailouts to survive. It may be unofficial but “stay here, drink beer” might be the new “eat out to help out”. It will certainly affect the UK economy in Q3. There could also be social tensions and unrest between a younger generation that has, in effect, been grounded and a vaccinated older

population which would be afforded rather more liberty. As in so many other respects, the full shockwaves of this most extraordinary public health crisis are yet to materialise.

**Tim Hames**

Senior Adviser

Strategic Communications

Tim.Hames@FTIConsulting.com



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