

WEEKLY BRIEFING

30 July 2021



COVID-19 UPDATE

The UK has seen a drop in the number of COVID-19 cases by 37.1% in the last seven days. The number of new infections by date reported has fallen for five days in a row for the first time since February. It is also the first time since the start of the pandemic that a sustained drop in cases has not coincided with a national lockdown. "The data at present is looking good for at least the summer," said Professor Paul Hunter from the University of East Anglia. Experts have explained the drop could be as a result of school closures, the end of the Euros football tournament and the hot weather meaning more people are socialising outdoors.

Virologist Dr David Matthews from the University of Bristol also insists that Britain is close to herd immunity. According to ONS figures, nearly 92% of UK adults have COVID-19 antibodies, either from being infected by the virus or from taking the vaccine. Public Health England epidemiologist Dr Meaghan Kall has said data indicates that those aged 24 and over are "very close to herd immunity". A total of 88.4% of the adult population have had their first jab and a further 71.4% have had both doses.

Since 19 July, England has removed most COVID-19 restrictions. There are now no limits on how many people can meet and face coverings are no longer required by law. Scotland also moved to level zero on 19 July, which means people can meet in groups of up to eight people from up to four households indoors and up to 15 people from up to 15 households can meet outdoors - whether in a private garden or public place. Guidance is expected on allowing fully vaccinated people to avoid self-isolation after close contact with positive cases. The government is also considering removing the self-isolation requirement for school pupils.

In Wales, the Welsh government said all laws on the number of people who can meet will end on 7 August but First Minister Mark Drakeford warned against "a free for all." Nightclubs would be able to reopen, but face masks will still be required in most indoor public places except in pubs, restaurants and schools. Some rules will

change on Saturday 31 July, meaning six people can meet in private homes and holiday homes. Despite the plan to ease many rules, people will be asked to continue working from home wherever possible.

In Ireland, Taoiseach Micheal Martin has confirmed that the Government is looking at its plans for the next stage of reopening. Chief medical officer (CMO) Dr Tony Holohan said this week: "We have to continue to drive up vaccination rates as high as possible. The higher we go the better the protection we have and the sooner we'll be able to ease more of the economic and social restrictions that still remain in place." Also this week, the CMO said: "We will advise the Government in the coming days as to what we think, in respect to vaccinations, among other things, an appropriate and let's say achievable target will be for us to get to. We're optimistic in this country and we, as public health officials, are optimistic about how high that target can be because we think we can get to a higher target than many other countries may be able to get to." Professor Paul Moynagh, a Professor of Immunology at Maynooth University, says the situation with COVID-19 will soon enter an "endemic phase".

ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL UPDATE

IMF upgrades UK economic forecast

The UK economy will grow faster than expected this year as it recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said. In a new assessment, the IMF said the world is increasingly split into two blocs. Among the forecast revisions for this year, the largest upgrade is for the UK to 7%. Britain is also now predicted to have the joint fastest growth of the G7 countries, together with the U.S., although that follows a contraction last year that was the deepest in that group. The UK's chancellor, Rishi Sunak, welcomed what he called "the positive signs that the economy is rebounding faster than previously expected".

TRAVEL AND TOURISM UPDATE

England, Scotland and Wales ease restrictions for fully vaccinated arrivals from the EU and the U.S.

People who have been fully vaccinated in the EU or U.S. will not need to isolate when coming to England, Scotland and Wales from an amber list country. The change will come into force at 04:00 BST on Monday 2 August. Currently, only people who received their vaccinations in the UK can avoid quarantine when arriving from amber list countries, with the exception of France (where quarantine cannot be avoided due to a variant of concern). The UK government said the rule change

would help to reunite family and friends whose loved ones live abroad. Transport secretary Grant Shapps said it would apply to people who have been fully vaccinated with a jab approved by the EU or the U.S., with the final dose at least 14 whole days before arrival. Travellers will still need to take either a lateral flow or PCR test pre-departure and a PCR test on the second day after they arrive. Under-18s will be exempt from isolation, and some will not have to test, depending on their age.

Foreign secretary hints at green and amber list expansion

Foreign secretary Dominic Raab has hinted at further expansion of the UK government's green and amber lists for travel. Raab told Sky News on 29 July he was "increasingly confident" more countries would be added to the lists. His comments come after the UK government on Wednesday confirmed it would ease quarantine for fully vaccinated arrivals from the U.S. and Europe. Raab said the move could potentially open up more countries for holidays, but declined to comment on which countries' statuses might change. The next three-weekly review of the UK government's traffic light categories is due next week. Wednesday's announcement on the mechanics of the UK's travel rules came days in advance of the second formal "checkpoint" baked into the proposals to restart international travel set out by the Global Travel Taskforce in April. Raab also revealed that since the announcement on Wednesday afternoon, he had already been contacted by several of his international counterparts. "Overnight, foreign ministers [have] messaged me saying we've noticed this announcement - what can we do to do this on a reciprocal basis," Raab said. He added it would be vital, however, that there were the necessary levels of "security and assurance" with regards to vaccination schemes in those countries to which the UK will reopen.

WTTC research indicates increased bookings to amber list destinations

New research from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC)'s knowledge partner ForwardKeys, has revealed which destinations UK travellers are booking flight tickets to, with many destinations on the UK government's amber list seeing increases. The highest week-on-week percentage increases in tickets booked were to Germany, which were up by 113%; to Croatia up by 69%; Sweden by 68%; Portugal by 65% and Albania, up by 64%. The data shows airline tickets booked for international trips out of the UK increased by an average of 24% in the week to 13 July, compared to the previous week. Weekly flight tickets for future travel from the UK to traditional destinations have exceeded pre-pandemic levels, with Greece the most popular destination, up 211% compared to 2019. The Bahamas follows closely, with tickets up 161% on pre-pandemic levels. Croatia has also reached pre-pandemic weekly ticketing levels in the last week (107%) while tickets for travel to Spain, which reached 88% of 2019 levels, are fast increasing.

Foreign office lifts advice against international cruising

The Foreign Office (FCDO) has lifted its advice against international cruising to tie in with the ending of the UK government's ban on 2 August. Transport secretary Grant Shapps announced the end to the longstanding ban on international ocean cruises from England on 28 July. The FCDO's advice "against cruise ship travel at this time" had been in place since July 2020, but has now also been amended. This will allow international cruising from the UK to restart from next month. "Although operators have taken steps to improve infection control, cruise ships continue to experience COVID-19 outbreaks, affecting passengers and seafarers," said the FCDO in its updated advice.

"Green" aviation fuel firms given £15 million to build UK plants

Eight companies have been shortlisted to share £15 million in government funding to support development of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) production plants in the UK. Proposals include plants aiming to produce SAF from carbon dioxide captured from the atmosphere, which is then blended with hydrogen from water. Others will concentrate on alcohol derived from wastes, including flue gases from industry and from everyday household and commercial black bag rubbish. The government's ambition is for up to 10% SAF usage by 2030 and up to 75% SAF by 2050, "generating potential savings of up to 23 megatons of CO2 per year in 2050, equivalent to half a million return flights to Tenerife," the Department for Transport said.

AIRLINE UPDATE

Etihad - Etihad will roll out IATA's digital Travel Pass on seven of its routes out of Abu Dhabi after several months of trials. The IATA Travel Pass has been designed to serve as a standardised solution for passengers to store, validate and access their travel documents, including any COVID-19 travel documentation. The Gulf carrier will soon allow passengers travelling between Abu Dhabi and Bangkok, Barcelona, Geneva, Madrid, Milan, New York and Singapore to use the app. Etihad said the move was part of its drive to "implement digital solutions to simplify the travel experience in the wake of the pandemic".

Jet2 - Jet2.com and Jet2holidays have launched a new feature allowing travellers to upload documents to the airline and tour operator's mobile apps. The new functionality means customers can save COVID-19-related files, such as overseas country entry forms and negative test results, to their phones. It also offers holidaymakers access to safe travel information and travel requirements for the destination they are travelling to and allows them to travel paper-free.

Elsewhere, Jet2.com and Jet2holidays have added more flights and holidays to the green list destinations of Madeira and Malta in September and October. The sister brands are adding more flights to Madeira from Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds Bradford airports in September and October, while Jet2.com will also add more capacity to Malta in September from Manchester and Stansted airports. Steve Heapy, chief executive of Jet2.com and Jet2holidays, said: "Madeira and Malta are seeing very strong demand, thanks to a combination of their green list status and the fact they are fantastic destinations for holidaymakers to enjoy. It is clear that autumn breaks are in demand this year, so we have responded to that trend by giving customers and independent travel agents even more choice in September and October."

JetBlue - JetBlue has pared back its planned Heathrow-New York frequencies due to the continued restrictions on travel between the UK and U.S. The New York-based airline will start flights from London Heathrow to New York JFK on 12 August as planned. Initial services will be daily throughout next month as scheduled, but these will reduce to four times a week in September. Departures from Heathrow will then be on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. October schedules show a return to daily flights from Heathrow, while JetBlue's current timetable also confirms the 29 September launch of daily services from London Gatwick.

United Airlines - United Airlines is expanding its transatlantic network to London as the UK removes quarantine restrictions on fully vaccinated U.S. and EU arrivals. The carrier will run up to 40 flights a week between the U.S. and Heathrow from August, including a second daily service from Washington, D.C. and a daily service from Houston. Additional London services are due to resume in the coming months, as well as a new non-stop route from Boston.

Virgin Atlantic - Virgin Atlantic has reportedly seen a 250% increase in bookings for flights from New York to London amid the removal of quarantine restrictions for fully vaccinated U.S. travellers arriving in the UK. Flight bookings are up "more than 100% week on week", according to Virgin's chief commercial officer Juha Jarvinen. "The news that self-isolation for fully vaccinated U.S. citizens arriving into the UK will be removed from 2 August has increased consumer confidence, allowing our customers to finally plan a much-needed reunion with family, friends and business colleagues," he added. Jarvinen urged the UK government to move the U.S. onto its green list for overseas travel, and for the Biden administration to allow UK travellers to enter the country without restriction.

Wizz Air - Wizz Air is hopeful of operating at full capacity during the summer peak and is aiming to take advantage of this ahead of another potentially difficult winter. Chief executive Jozsef Varadi said the budget carrier expected to operate at

around 90% of 2019 capacity in July, and 100% in August. However, he cautioned against making any firm predictions for winter owing to an operations environment dependent on “unpredictable government decision-making”. However, Varadi said Wizz did see “encouraging recovery patterns” in passenger air travel, with Q1 passenger carryings eventually amounting to nearly three million passengers, flown on an average load factor of 63.6%.

TOUR OPERATOR UPDATE

Not Just Travel - Not Just Travel has unveiled plans to become more green by working more closely with a selected group of suppliers and introducing a carbon offset scheme. The franchise partnership, part of Hays Independence Group, detailed both schemes at a virtual conference. Co-founder Steve Witt introduced the new Key Trade Partner programme that will see NJT working closer with 30-plus brands. Consultants will be given extra training and marketing help by these suppliers.

Kuoni - Kuoni has added 13 new properties to its Indian Ocean collection as it seeks to strengthen its position as the go-to Indian Ocean specialist. The additions include six new resorts in the Maldives, four in Mauritius, two in the Seychelles and one in Sri Lanka. The Maldives, followed by Mauritius, Sri Lanka and the Seychelles, currently top Kuoni’s list of best selling destinations for 2022 based on forward sales, and make up more than half of the operator’s advance bookings. Average spend for 2022 Indian Ocean holidays, meanwhile, is up 15%. Other trends include strong honeymoon business, demand for child-free resorts, more ultra-luxury demand, and more demand for special interest trips, such as diving.

TUI - TUI has restarted flights and holidays to Croatia, Palma and Crete this week. Croatia was added to the UK’s green watchlist on 19 July, although it has since introduced a pre-arrival negative test requirement for all UK arrivals, including those fully vaccinated against COVID-19. TUI is currently operating to several green light destinations, including Madeira, Porto Santo, Malta, Gibraltar, Iceland and Jersey, as well as Antigua and Barbados.

SOCIAL AND DIGITAL UPDATE

Instagram expands Reels to 60 seconds

Given that TikTok enables clips of up to three minutes, and YouTube Shorts can be 60 seconds in length, it was only a matter of time before Instagram followed suit. The social media app already enables longer video uploads for IGTV, but this expansion for Reels will give more users the capacity to create longer clips and

re-purpose posts that they're already uploading to TikTok and YouTube Shorts. Instagram is also experimenting with a new, TikTok-like display format for Explore, which merges content into a single format. This could help boost discoverability in the app, and provide more video inventory for its algorithms, while also further streamlining the user experience.

MICE UPDATE

Live event numbers on the rise

A recent survey by etc.venues indicates that 72% of event planners will hold their next face-to-face event in 2021. More than a third (39%) will hold in-person events in Q3 this year and 33% said they have bookings for in-person events for Q4. When asked about the value of live events, 82% of respondents said they value them more now than before the pandemic. Respondents also foresee virtual and hybrid event formats becoming less common as we move out of the pandemic. Compared to seven months ago when 73% of respondents said hybrid events would continue to become more common than face-to-face events, now just 68% believe this will be the case. While the frequency of virtual events looks to be declining, the virtual element is likely to have a long-term role alongside events as 57% of respondents expect to run a mix of virtual and hybrid events as well as live events in future.

LIGHTER NOTE

The 'real life' SpongeBob SquarePants and Patrick Star! Marine scientists spot a yellow sponge and pink sea star deep under the Atlantic waves that look just like the cartoon characters. See it [here](#).