

Policy paper
Roadmap Reviews
Update 5 April 2021

The Government's overriding goal is to protect the lives and livelihoods of citizens across Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England. The 'COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021' (the roadmap) set out how the Government would continue to protect and support citizens across the UK and provided a roadmap out of the restrictions in place across England.

The Government committed to taking a cautious approach to easing those restrictions, guided by data instead of dates, to avoid another surge in infections that could put unsustainable pressure on the NHS. The roadmap set out "no earlier than" dates for these steps, which are five weeks apart. This allows four weeks for the data to begin to reflect the impact of the previous step and a further week's notice to individuals and businesses before introducing the changes.

More than 31 million people have now been vaccinated in the UK, helping to break the link between rising cases and hospitalisations and deaths.

However, as set out in the roadmap, the success of the UK's vaccination programme does not provide universal protection. While it is certain that vaccines have at least some impact on transmission, the extent of this is still unknown. Even after two doses the vaccine will not be 100% effective and some people will not take up the offer of a vaccine. As a result, some measures may be required for a period after all adults have been offered a vaccine, in order to prevent a surge in hospitalisations which could put unsustainable pressure on the NHS.

In view of this, the Government established four programmes of work to consider different aspects of how we should handle COVID-19 from summer onwards. These reviews are looking at COVID-status certification, international travel, large events and social distancing.

While public health is devolved across the UK, it is essential that all four parts of the UK continue to work together to protect the health of our citizens, communities and economies. This is why on all four reviews the UK Government is working with the Scottish Government, Welsh Government, and Northern Ireland Executive, seeking a consistent approach wherever it is sensible and appropriate to do so, sharing learning and ensuring clear rules and guidance where there are differences.

1. The Roadmap Reviews

1.1 COVID-Status Certification Review

The Government committed to explore whether and how COVID-status certification might be used to reopen our economy, reduce restrictions on social contact and improve safety. COVID-status certification aims to provide reassurance that an individual is at reduced risk of transmission. This could allow some freedoms to be restored more safely, for example by allowing mass events to admit more participants, increased passenger numbers and reduced border restrictions for travellers, and social distancing rules to be relaxed.

Even without Government intervention, COVID-status certification is likely to become a feature of our lives until the threat from the pandemic recedes. Other countries are already developing their own certification systems, such as the “Green Pass” in Israel and the “digital green certificate” in the European Union. Negative tests are already required to enter the UK and many other countries and, as vaccination programmes roll out worldwide, countries have made clear they will soon require proof of vaccination in order to cross the border. Likewise, in the UK, businesses and other organisations are able to ask customers for proof of COVID-status in order to access their premises, as long as they are compliant with equalities legislation. The Government believes that introducing a ban on this would in most cases be an unjustified intrusion on how businesses choose to make their premises safe - although, as set out below, there may be exceptions where the Government needs to intervene to ensure equitable access to essential services. It is therefore right that the Government provides a means of easily demonstrating COVID-status, in order to ensure UK citizens and residents are not denied opportunities to travel or attend certain venues or events.

The COVID-Status Certification Review has so far gathered evidence from clinical and ethical experts, as well as businesses and their representative organisations. In addition, the public call for evidence has generated over 50,000 responses representing a wide range of opinions.

The Government believes that COVID-status certification could have an important role to play both domestically and internationally, as a temporary measure. Equally, the Government wants to be sure that the benefits of any such approach are fully interrogated in public debate and that the deliverability of COVID-status certification is rigorously tested, along with analysis of the potential economic impacts that COVID-status certification would have across different settings. We will continue to gather evidence on the extent to which COVID-status certification is an effective measure to control the epidemic and reduce hospitalisations and deaths.

The Government will continue to explore the equity and ethical concerns bound up with any form of COVID-status certification. Vaccination is not suitable for all citizens and there are other means of demonstrating a reduced risk of transmission. The Government believes that COVID-status certification could be acquired through vaccinations, testing or natural immunity. It is also important that there are appropriate exemptions for people for whom vaccination is not advised and repeat testing is difficult.

The Government believes that there are some settings (such as essential public services, public transport and essential shops) where COVID-status certification should never be required, in order to ensure access for all.

Equally, COVID-status certification could potentially play a role in settings such as theatres, nightclubs, and mass events such as festivals or sports events to help manage risks where large numbers of people are brought together in close proximity. The Government will begin to trial COVID-status certification in certain settings, including large events, through the Events Research Programme. The Government will continue to work closely with sectors on its approach.

It is possible that COVID-status certification could also play a role in reducing social distancing requirements in other settings which people tend to visit more frequently, for example in hospitality settings. However, the Government recognises this has significant implications for businesses and their customers, so this will be further considered in consultation with industry, as part of the review of social distancing rules and taking into account the equalities and other impacts. For now, businesses should continue to plan to reopen in a way that follows the latest COVID-Secure guidance, and certification will not be required for reopening as part of step 2 or step 3.

As set out above, certification has already become a feature of international travel, with the UK and many other countries requiring evidence of a negative test pre-departure as part of their border regimes. The Government expects such requirements to continue and is exploring ways of making certification of testing more digital and integrated - as well as considering the implications of vaccines and what certification may be required around them.

The requirements around international travel are necessarily high. In addition, the Government is considering what standards should be required for COVID-status certification for domestic settings. The Government expects that COVID-status certification could be demonstrated by: an up-to-date vaccine status; a negative lateral flow or PCR test taken at a test site on the same day or the day before their admission to a venue; or by proof of natural immunity, such as through a previous positive PCR for a time limit of 180 days from the date of the positive test and following completion of the self-isolation period. We will test approaches to COVID-status certification through the Events Research Programme.

The NHS is working on providing individuals with the means to demonstrate their COVID status through a digital and non-digital route, and is working with experts to put security and privacy at the core of this approach.

As we continue to explore and trial COVID-status certification, we will ensure appropriate Parliamentary scrutiny. The Government will present interim findings from the COVID-Status Certification Review to Parliament later this month.

1.2 Global Travel Taskforce

The Government wants to see a return to non-essential international travel as soon as possible, while still managing the risk from imported cases and variants of concern. The Government hopes people will be able to travel to and from the UK to take a summer holiday this year, but it is still too soon to know what is possible.

The roadmap said that any return to international travel without a reasonable excuse, for example for holidays, would be no earlier than 17 May. Given the state of the pandemic abroad, and the progress of vaccination programmes in other countries, we are not yet in a position to confirm that non-essential international travel can resume from that point. Taking into account the latest situation with variants and the evidence about the efficacy of vaccines against them, we will confirm in advance whether non-essential international travel can resume on 17 May, or whether we will need to wait longer before lifting the outbound travel restriction.

When non-essential international travel does return it will do so with a risk-based “traffic light” system. This will add to our current system a new green category with no isolation requirement on return to the UK - although pre-departure and post-arrival tests would still be needed. This new category will accommodate countries where we judge the risk to be lower, based for instance on vaccinations, infection rates, the prevalence of variants of concern, and their genomic sequencing capacity (or access to genomic sequencing). The Global Travel Taskforce will publish its report, setting out more details on this system, later this week.

It is too early to say which countries will be on the green list when non-essential international travel resumes. These decisions will be driven by the data and evidence nearer the time, which we cannot predict now. In advance of the resumption of non-essential international travel, we will set out our initial assessment of which countries will fall into which category. Thereafter countries will move between the red, amber and green lists depending on the data. For the moment, the Government advises people not to book summer holidays abroad until the picture is clearer.

The vaccination programme could offer a more stable route out of the need for such restrictions - provided we see sufficient efficacy against any variants of concern - which means the role of COVID-status certification is crucial to this work. The current intention is that, when non-essential international travel does resume, the NHS solution will facilitate international travel where certification is required, and we will look to establish arrangements with other countries and international organisations to establish mutual recognition of certificates.

1.3 Events Research Programme

The Government will use the Events Research Programme, overseen by an industry-led steering group co-chaired by Sir Nicholas Hytner and David Ross and working closely with national and local public health authorities, to explore different approaches to social distancing, ventilation, test-on-entry protocols and COVID-status certification. The Events Research Programme will carry out pilots in a series of venues to gather evidence on the transmission risks associated with different settings, and potential approaches to managing and mitigating transmission risks. The pilots will use the domestic COVID-status certification standards. Early pilots will focus on demonstrating COVID-status through testing alone, while later pilots will seek to incorporate data on vaccination and acquired immunity.

The Events Research Programme will examine the extent to which COVID-status certification would help towards the return of crowds to mass events and closed settings, from football matches to theatre performances, and the reopening of nightclubs.

The programme will be run across a range of venue and activity types, including the World Snooker Championship at the Crucible in Sheffield and the Circus nightclub in Liverpool, with the aim of admitting a crowd of up to 20,000 to Wembley for the FA Cup final on 15 May. A second phase of pilots will take place from the end of May. These implementation pilots will provide additional evidence for organisers and consumers on the logistical and practical considerations of reopening events safely. To ensure safety each event will only go ahead on the basis of robust national and local approvals.

The Events Research Programme's first phase of pilots includes:

- Hot Water Comedy Club, Liverpool (16 April)
- FA Cup Semi Final, Wembley Stadium (18 April)
- World Snooker Championship, Crucible Theatre, Sheffield (17 April - 3 May)
- Luna Cinema, Liverpool (23-25 April)
- Mass participation run, Hatfield House, Hatfield (24-25 April)
- Carabao Cup Final, Wembley Stadium (25 April)
- ACC Business Event, Liverpool (28 April)
- Circus Nightclub, Liverpool (30 April - 1 May)
- FA Cup Final, Wembley Stadium (15 May)

The Government has selected events based on settings that cover a range of criteria, including different audience capacities, outdoor and indoor venues and different layouts. In order that the results are widely applicable, we will test some settings and layouts more than once thereby increasing the evidence base. The pilot findings will be transferable across different sectors, maximising the output from a small number of studies. All events will be subject to national and local approvals. Further events may be announced in due course.

1.4 Social Distancing Review

The Social Distancing Review is exploring whether existing rules, designed to limit virus transmission, could be relaxed in different settings. This work is developing the safest approach to allow closer social contact between friends and family, safely enable greater capacity on transport, and reduce distance requirements within venues and workplaces.

The review is looking at key baseline measures, including how and when to safely lift or amend the 1m+ rule and related COVID-secure measures, as well as guidance on working from home. It is also looking at what guidance can be provided to enable individuals to take informed personal choices. The conclusion will depend on the latest data and evidence on the state of the pandemic and the impact of vaccine effectiveness, as the country progresses through the roadmap.

As set out above, the extent of any relaxation in social distancing measures is linked to the questions being explored by the COVID-Status Certification Review

- including whether COVID-status certification can enable changes to social distancing.

1.5 Conclusion

The four reviews are designed to provide further clarity on how we can restore our freedoms and unlock our economy and society, particularly from step 4. These are initial findings and we will continue to provide updates on the progress of the reviews as we move through the roadmap.