

Heathrow airport to fast-track vaccinated passengers

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London's Heathrow airport said Wednesday it plans to offer fast-track lanes for fully vaccinated arriving passengers, as the UK government winds down its pandemic curbs.

The government is expected to announce on Thursday that travellers coming to England from "amber" countries—the middle ranking for COVID-19 incidence, covering most of Europe—will no longer have to quarantine.

In advance, Heathrow said it was launching a pilot plan for passengers coming from selected destinations to enter an immigration fast track on arrival, after showing proof they have received both doses of a coronavirus vaccine.

The trial will initially cover passengers flying in on designated flights from Athens, Los Angeles, Montego Bay in Jamaica, and New York.

"This pilot will allow us to show that pre-departure and arrival checks of vaccination status can be carried out safely at check-in, so that fully vaccinated passengers can avoid quarantine from July 19," Heathrow chief executive John Holland-Kaye said.

July 19 is the government's target date for lifting most pandemic restrictions in England, although many scientists are worried about the plan as infection rates soar from the more contagious Delta variant.

The variant first emerged in India and spread in Britain while Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrestled with a decision over banning travel from the country ahead of his own planned trip to New Delhi in April.

'Johnson variant'

In the end, the Indian government called off the trip, and opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer on Wednesday said the Delta strain should now be called "the Johnson variant".

Addressing the prime minister in parliament, Starmer said Johnson was

being "reckless" in planning to lift virtually all restrictions on July 19, including a requirement to wear face masks in enclosed spaces.

The government, however, says a successful mass vaccination programme has weakened the link connecting infections to hospitalisations and deaths.

More than 86 percent of adults in the UK have received at least one jab, and 64 percent are fully vaccinated, according to official data.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid on Tuesday said people in England who have been double-jabbed—as well as under-18s—will no longer have to self-isolate if they have been in contact with someone who tests positive for COVID-19.

But the easing will only apply from August 16, almost a month after other controls are due to have ended.

The UK's other nations—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—set their own health policy and are moving more slowly.

Javid conceded that daily infection rates in Britain—which has one of Europe's worst death tolls from COVID-19—were set to treble to 100,000 in the weeks ahead due to the Delta variant.

That is likely to translate into millions of people who have been in contact with an infected person being told to self-isolate until August 16, which Starmer said meant "carnage" for businesses losing staff.

Johnson insisted "we will continue with a balanced and reasonable approach", as he accused the Labour leader of vacillating over when to start moving back to normality.

"We inoculate while they're invertebrate," the prime minister told MPs.

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