



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

Travel Advice review: FCO response to public consultation

20 December 2016

1. Context

The FCO's travel advice, published on GOV.UK is a long-established and well respected source of information, used by millions of Britons every year. Our aim is to provide objective, accurate and up to date information and advice to help British nationals make informed decisions about their safety and travel abroad. The previous Foreign Secretary initiated a review of our travel advice to assess whether changes in how we present travel advice might help us reflect the evolving threat from terrorism, whilst providing the clearest possible information and advice to the public. The current system works effectively, but given the evolving security context it was important to review it to ensure we continue to meet the needs of the British public. The last major reviews of travel advice were in 2004 and 2007.

2. Consultation remit

The review started from the premise that our key principles for providing travel advice will not change. We will continue to provide accurate, up to date and objective information and advice, with clear criteria for those locations where we advise against travel.

The aim of the public consultation was to make sure British travellers continue to have information that is readily accessible and easy to understand so they can make informed decisions whenever and wherever they travel. The consultation aimed to find out how travellers and business use the Travel Advice service, whether they find it useful and whether the way information is presented can be improved to make it more accessible.

The consultation looked at whether changes could be made to provide a greater level of detail and better understanding of the level of threat travellers face in any given country.

3. Summary of current Travel Advice system

The FCO's Travel Advice on GOV.UK provides objective, accurate and up-to-date information and advice on crime, health, threats from terrorism and local laws and customs in each country, as well as details on practical issues, like visa requirements and local currency. It includes assessments of threat, drawing on expert sources of information including intelligence, local knowledge, and experience of our staff at our missions overseas.

It also provides specific advice against travel where we assess that the risk to British nationals is unacceptably high. Where we advise against travel, we generally publish country maps to help communicate this advice. Ultimately, the decision on whether to travel to a specific country or area must always remain a personal one. The safety of British nationals is our overriding concern, and we advise against travel when we judge that the level of risk is unacceptably high.

There were more than 40 million individual page views on the online advice service in 2015. We made 2,200 updates to our travel advice in 2015.

You can find further information about [how we put our travel advice together](#). Our [Travel Advice](#) is available for 225 countries and territories.

4. Consultation

The public consultation ran from 21 March to 22 April 2016. We ran an online public survey, held meetings with stakeholders including the travel and insurance industries, encouraged written feedback and consulted with other government departments, including DFID and UKTI, and several other countries whose travel advice systems are comparable with our own.

4.1 Public survey

1009 members of the public responded to the online survey. Key findings:

- **Provision of advice:** 88% considered it was the government's responsibility to provide safety and security information.
- **Response to advice:** Over 90% followed the travel advice given all or most of the time.
- **Travel advice usage:** 89% of respondents accessed travel advice to inform a decision on whether it was safe to travel. 72% accessed it for advice on health and vaccinations. 67% used it for information on exit and entry requirements. These were the areas where most respondents believed government had a duty to inform its citizens.
- **Addition of a 4th tier:** We asked travellers if they would welcome the introduction of a 4-level advice system (currently used by Australia, Canada, France and the Netherlands) rather than the 3-level system we use currently. Introducing such a system would allow the UK to add a level between the current green and amber tiers, to indicate a country where we do not advise against travel but where extra caution and vigilance is recommended. Feedback on this suggestion was not overwhelmingly positive: 54% of public respondents considered that a 4-level system would be more helpful; 33% were neutral or didn't know; 13% thought it would be less helpful.
- **Terrorism threat levels:** We asked travellers if we should consider removing the 4 terrorism threat levels (high, general, underlying and low) and replacing with more narrative on the frequency and type of attacks. 73% of public respondents considered that replacing fixed terrorism threat levels with more information would be more useful. Respondents asked for information that gave an accurate gauge of the threat and described specific risks.

4.2 Industry consultation

36 travel organisations attended consultations in the FCO. Representatives of the insurance industry were consulted through meetings with their trade bodies. 30 companies and organisations responded by email. All email respondents welcomed the review. Key findings:

- **Provision of advice:** two-thirds of email respondents agreed that current travel advice was "authoritative", "accurate" and "invaluable".
- **Travel advice usage:** FCO travel advice was seen by industry as a useful and essential service which most businesses consulted actively promote to their customers. Many used it as a risk assessment tool. Industry said they were reliant

on government to inform on travel risks and that our travel advice continues to be regarded as an authoritative, impartial and measured source of information, particularly in situations where the media may have “hyped up” risks in their reporting.

- **Addition of a 4th tier:** The bulk of feedback from travel industry suggested they thought this would be confusing for customers, that it would have an impact on consumers’ willingness to travel, and that travel advice changes between booking and departure would create confusion for both suppliers and customers. The insurance industry generally was not concerned about the introduction of a 4th tier. Overall they thought it would be unlikely to affect premiums or decisions on cover. Other businesses and organisations who responded did not express any particular concerns about the introduction of a 4th tier.
- **More clarity in Travel Advice:** Generally, industry would like us to improve the clarity of the information we provide around risk, and add more narrative to explain the risk and travel advice definitions. Some requested more detail on timeframes for when travel advice is likely to change. More maps would also be welcomed.
- **Greater interface between industry and government:** Industry was positive about current engagement with the FCO and some expressed a desire for more consultation and information sharing in the future.

5. Proposed changes to Travel Advice

The useful responses to our consultation from both the public and industry have helped to inform the FCO’s decision to implement the following changes to its Travel Advice over the next year:

5.1 Design and layout

We will make design improvements to travel advice pages so that users can find more easily the information relevant to them and provide clearer signposting to other relevant information.

5.2 More terrorism narrative and removal of threat level descriptors

The threat from terrorism continues to evolve: it is more widespread, attacks are more frequent, less sophisticated and increasingly more difficult to predict or disrupt. We plan to remove the terrorism threat level descriptors currently used in travel advice, which the public consultation found too abstract, and which we know from other feedback have caused confusion. Instead we will describe the threat in terms of its predictability (whether attacks are likely), extent (targets and types of previous attacks), context (which groups are responsible, history of attacks, and what the host government advise about the terrorist threat – where such advice is offered) and, where possible details of the host government’s counter terrorism actions (eg where groups have been arrested).

6. Next steps

Many of these improvements are already underway, and will continue to be rolled out in the coming months. Other changes proposed during the consultation will be kept under review.

Our priority in the provision of travel advice and the rationale for making any future changes will remain focused on the safety of British nationals.