

Flights of fancy

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May 2021



Introduction

The UK became the first major economy to commit to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.¹ Combined with the United Nations climate change conference to be held in Glasgow this November, this suggests a clear desire by HM Government to reduce emissions, including through air travel.

Though some government departments – such as the Foreign Office or Ministry of Defence – will need to use flights regularly, many others are still flying unnecessarily. This note details such flights, before the covid-19 pandemic locked down the UK.

There has been a marked reduction in business and first class flights since 2007-8, when the TaxPayers' Alliance first investigated central government flight purchases.² However the Cabinet Office business travel policy principles still stipulate that “no public sector personnel should be travelling first class, irrespective of grade, entitlement or distance.”³ In future, all departments' travel policies should be updated to ensure that first class flights are prohibited for all officials and ministers.

Since March 2020, covid-19 has moved significant amounts of work online. It is therefore likely that in subsequent years, government travel by ministers and officials could be significantly reduced.

Key findings

- Government departments booked at least **271,507 domestic and international flights** over the 2019-20 financial year, costing a total of **£102,031,408**.
- The **Ministry of Defence**, which booked numerically the largest number of flights at a total of 237,815, included flights booked via the MOD travel contract (with civilian airlines), which incorporates and includes civilians, military, military families and contractors.
- The **Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** was the only Whitehall ministry to purchase first class flights, with two purchased for **£11,393**. This involved one flight on the 13 June 2019 to Tokyo at a cost of £4,538 and another on the 24 April 2019 to Montreal costing £6,854. Both flights departed from London Heathrow.
- The **Department for Transport** purchased **286 business class flights** at a cost of **£760,411** – the highest number of any department. This included domestic flights from London to locations such as Edinburgh and Glasgow.
- The **Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport** purchased **19 premium economy** flights – the highest number of any department – at a cost of **£27,503**. These included flights to destinations such as Sydney, Australia and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The department also spent a further **£86,144 on 27 business class flights**. This included £19,527 spent on four flights from London to Beijing, China and £16,218 on four flights from London to Bengaluru, India.
- The **Wales Office** booked **36 per cent** of their 33 flights in **business class** costing a total of **£46,034**. The remaining **64 per cent** of flights were purchased in **economy class** costing **£3,012**.
- The **Scotland Office** purchased 100 per cent of their 789 flights in **economy class**, costing **£89,750**.

¹ Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, *UK becomes first major economy to pass net zero emissions law*, 27 June 2019, www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-first-major-economy-to-pass-net-zero-emissions-law, (accessed 29 April 2021).

² TaxPayers' Alliance, *Government spends £18.5 million on flights in one year*, 6 February 2009.

³ National Audit Office, *Investigation into government travel expenditure*, 11 March 2015, p. 31.

Data tables

Table 1: total flights per department, 2019-20

Department	Number of flights	Cost of flights (£)
Ministry of Defence ^{4,5}	237,815	89,017,489
Home Office	14,669	5,077,149
Cabinet Office	Not provided	2,153,081
Department for Transport	2,233 ⁶	1,143,254
HM Treasury	472	743,175
Foreign and Commonwealth Office ⁷	615	679,328
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1,501	584,900
Northern Ireland Office	2,305	505,781
Department for Work and Pensions	4,212	466,046
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	867	348,353
Department for International Trade ⁸	111	338,295
Department for International Development	4,098	292,056
Department of Health and Social Care	1,025	193,646
Department for Education	289	140,311
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ⁹	68	128,508
Scotland Office	789	89,750
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government	366	69,211
Wales Office	33	49,046
Ministry of Justice ¹⁰	32	9,690
Attorney General's Office	7	2,339
Total	271,507	102,031,408

⁴ "The number of flights refers to 'sectors'. A sector equates to a single flight, so one return trip could have two sectors and a multi-leg trip could have even more."

⁵ "This includes flights booked via the MOD travel contract (with civilian airlines) and includes civilians, military, military families and contractors."

⁶ This relates to flights undertaken by the Department for Transport only. Number of flights derived from adding the list of return and single flights provided.

⁷ Data derived from government procurement card spending of more than £500.

⁸ Relates to ministers' and senior officials' travel costs. Where possible, accommodation and other associated travel costs have been deducted to only include flight costs.

⁹ Relates to ministers' and senior officials' travel costs. Where possible, accommodation and other associated travel costs have been deducted to only include flight costs.

¹⁰ Relates to ministers' and senior officials' travel costs. Where possible, accommodation and other associated travel costs have been deducted to only include flight costs.

Table 2: first class flights per department, 2019-20

Department	Number of flights	Cost of flights (£)
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	2	11,393
Total	2	11,393

Table 3: business class flights per department, 2019-20

Department	Number of flights	Cost of flights (£)
Department for Transport	286	760,411
Department for International Trade	37	161,297
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	51	132,528
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	27	86,144
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	13	53,265
Wales Office	12	46,034
Department for Education	3	9,236
Department of Health and Social Care	4	5,116
Ministry of Justice	1	2,036
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government	2	494
Total	436	1,256,561

Table 4: premium economy class flights per department, 2019-20

Department	Number of flights	Cost of flights (£)
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	19	27,503
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	5	12,874
Department of Health and Social Care	6	8,442
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	3	7,556
Department for International Trade	2	6,652
Department for Education	2	3,394
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government	1	1,808
Total	38	68,229

Table 5: economy class flights per department for financial year, 2019-20

Department	Number of flights	Cost of flights (£)
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1,443	428,106
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	819	234,706
Department of Health and Social Care	1,015	180,088
Department for Education	284	127,681
Scotland Office	789	89,750
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government	363	66,908
Department for International Trade	42	31,012
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	36	26,151
Ministry of Justice	29	7,295
Wales Office	21	3,012
Attorney General's Office	7	2,339
Total	4,848	1,197,048

Methodology

This research was conducted by contacting all 20 government departments through a freedom of information (FOI) request. The information requested was:

1. *The cost to the department on flights in the financial year 2019-20.*
2. *The total number of flights the department purchased in the financial year 2019-20.*
3. *If available, please include:*
 - i. *the name of the airline used*
 - ii. *the fare paid*
 - iii. *the class of ticket (e.g. economy, premium economy, business, first)*
 - iv. *the date of the flight*
 - v. *the port of departure*
 - vi. *the port of arrival*

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for International Trade, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Ministry of Justice were unable to provide data. For these departments publicly available sources were used. These included spending on a department's government procurement card (GPC) for values over £500, quarterly ministerial travel data and quarterly senior officials' travel data.

Of those departments contacted, all responded to the FOI request by 30 October 2020. Of these, eight departments provided the data requested (at least partially). These departments were the Attorney General's Office, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Wales Office, and the Department for Transport.

A further eight departments provided data pertaining solely to total number of flights and total costs. These were the Cabinet Office, the Department for International Development, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Northern Ireland Office, the Scotland Office, and HM Treasury.

The overall total figures are likely to be higher since a fifth of departments did not respond with adequate FOI data. These were the departments whose data had to be publicly sourced, listed above.

The FOI from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport erroneously classified a flight between Amsterdam and Munich as first class. This has instead been added to the total for business class flights taken by that department.

Where the class of travel has not been specified in the data provided, it is assumed that an economy class flight has been taken.

Tables 2 through 5 itemise only those flights where the class of travel has been listed by the department. This explains the discrepancy between the overall figure in the key findings and those in the tables.