

Scientific advice on restricting flights from specific countries

The Home Office would like to ask SAGE the following questions:

- Is there any reason the previous SAGE advice on borders should be updated given that we have now moved from containment to delay?
- Is the advice likely to change as the pandemic progresses both within the UK and worldwide?
- Does the information below represent an accurate scientific picture of where we stand?

Background

1. The SAGE previously advised that restricting travel to the UK would have little impact on the COVID-19 epidemic in the UK and would not be a useful measure in containing the outbreak.
2. The situation has changed since that advice was issued, with the UK moving to the delay phase of its response. However, the initial view from SPI-M is that given the current widescale transmission of COVID-19 within the UK, measures to stop imported cases would have negligible impact. This might change if the UK were to successfully contain the epidemic.

Flights from 'hotspots'

3. Italy, Spain, France, Germany and Iran need to be considered (on the basis that these countries are 'hotspots').
4. If a decision were taken to stop flights from particular countries, consideration would need to be given to criteria for which countries to stop flights from. A key criterion would likely be assessment of where on the epidemic curve each country is and the total numbers of passengers arriving. We would appreciate SAGE's advice on whether restrictions either broadly or specifically would now be sensible.
5. To aid decision-making, we have looked at the numbers of flights and passengers predicted from each of those countries over the coming two weeks (see Annex A). We present a forward look of current flights scheduled to fly to the UK by originating country. There are notable fluctuations in the data as airlines and governments respond to COVID-19: subsequent daily refreshes of this data reflect very different plans by the airlines. Estimates of passenger numbers rely heavily on assumptions and are subject to increasing uncertainty the further away the date of the flight: Annex B has data on flights and passengers from the last four days.

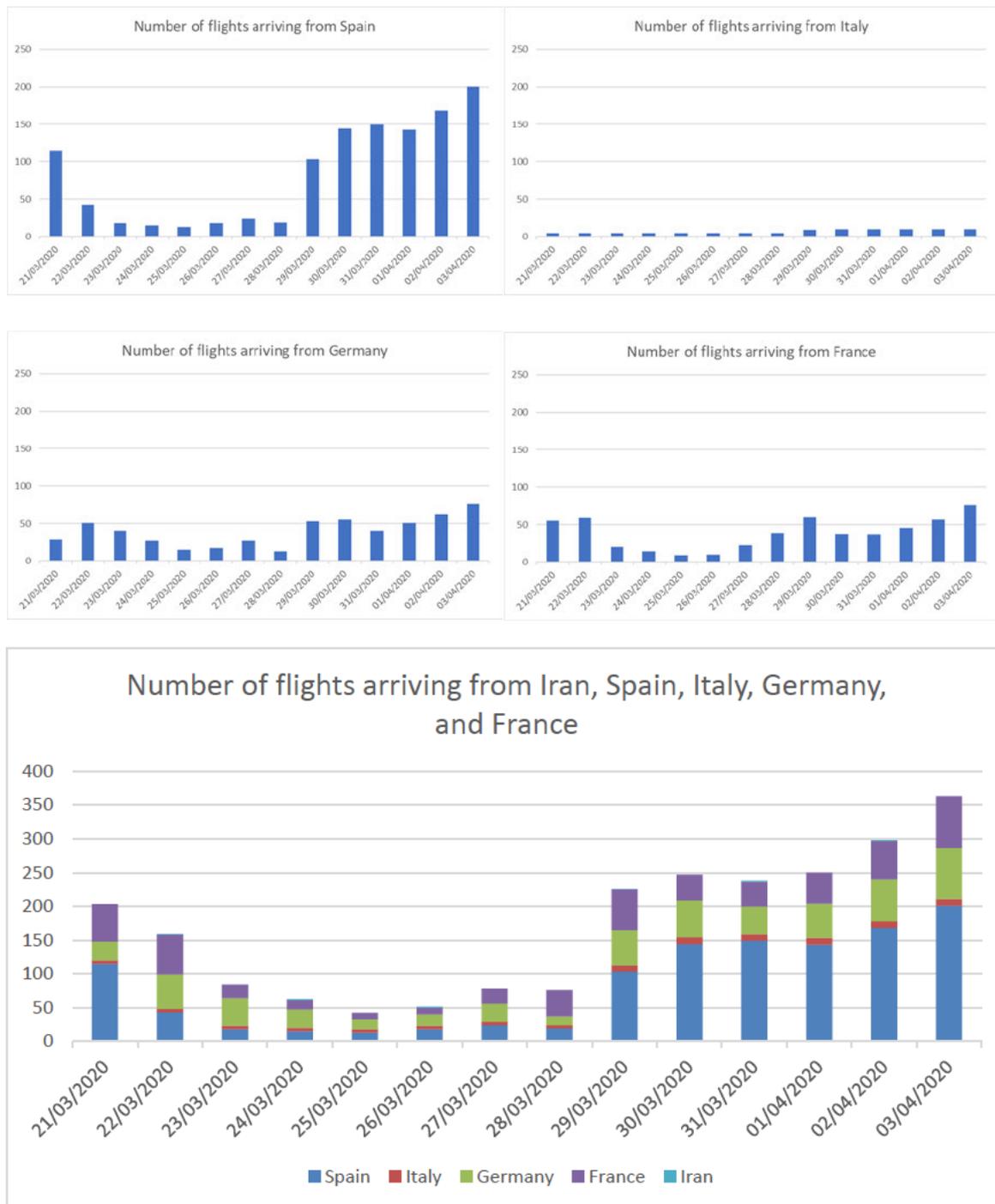
6. A key question is the number of COVID-19 cases that are likely to be imported via these flights. Given the inherent uncertainty in worldwide reporting figures, and the recognition that testing figures will only give a small fraction of the actual endemic cases, it is almost impossible to give figures with any certainty. However, we believe we can form some general conclusions.
7. For Italy, France and Germany, the numbers of passengers arriving are low and we can have confidence that these countries are at a roughly similar stage of the epidemic to the UK (recognising that Italy, at least, is two to four weeks ahead). Thus, for these countries the impact of stopping flights would be very low.
8. Spain is also likely to be at a similar stage of the epidemic, but the Annexes show that the number of passengers arriving is far higher than for Italy, France and Germany. If passengers continue to arrive from Spain in such high numbers, this makes flights from Spain, relatively speaking, a higher risk.
9. There is even lower confidence in the reported figures from Iran than from the European countries considered here. If Iran is considerably further ahead in the epidemic curve than the UK, this would make flights from Iran a higher risk, even despite the extremely low numbers of passengers.
10. It is important to note that preventing flights from these countries will not necessarily stop all imported cases from these countries: people could still travel to the UK *via* other countries, and *via* routes other than flights. It is also clear that the disease is not associated with particular nationalities, and therefore restrictions on a specific nationalities would prove ineffective.
11. In addition, the risk to Border Force officers could be generally stated in similar terms to those above. There is undoubtedly some risk that Border Force officials may encounter infected individuals during the course of their work. Stopping flights would reduce that risk, but in light of the low numbers of cases expected, and the widespread transmission in the UK posing a risk outside of work, the effect is expected to be low.
12. Any decision to stop flights from certain countries would have to be kept under ongoing review. As situations change, some countries would need to come off any list and others added.

Annex A – predicted numbers of flights and passengers over the coming two weeks

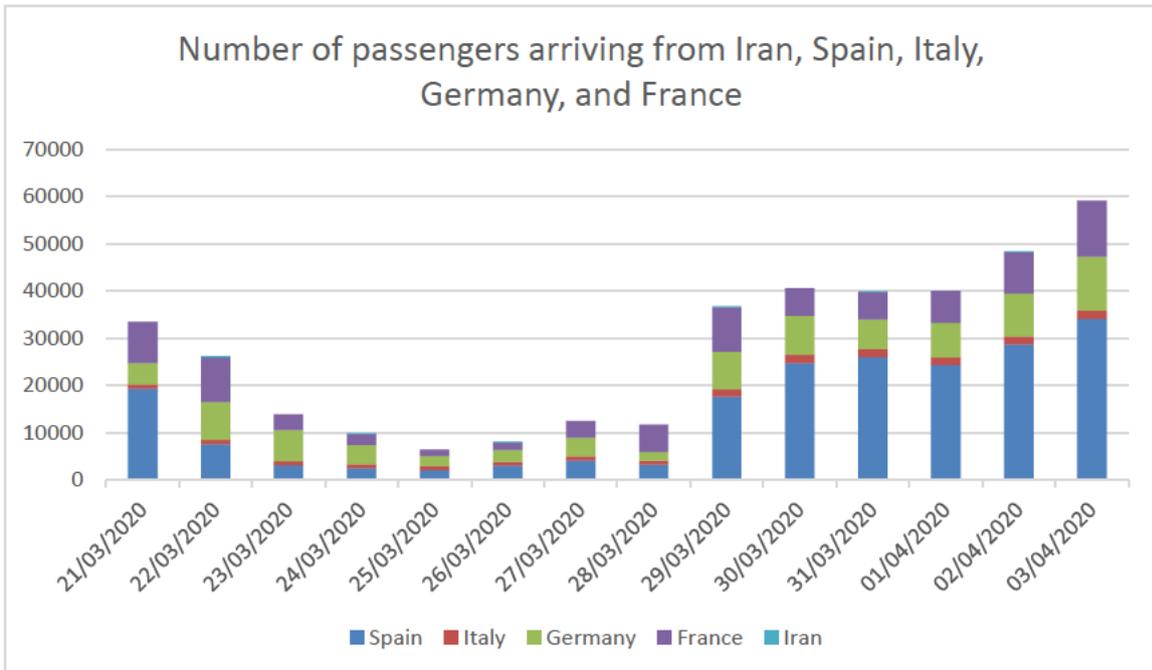
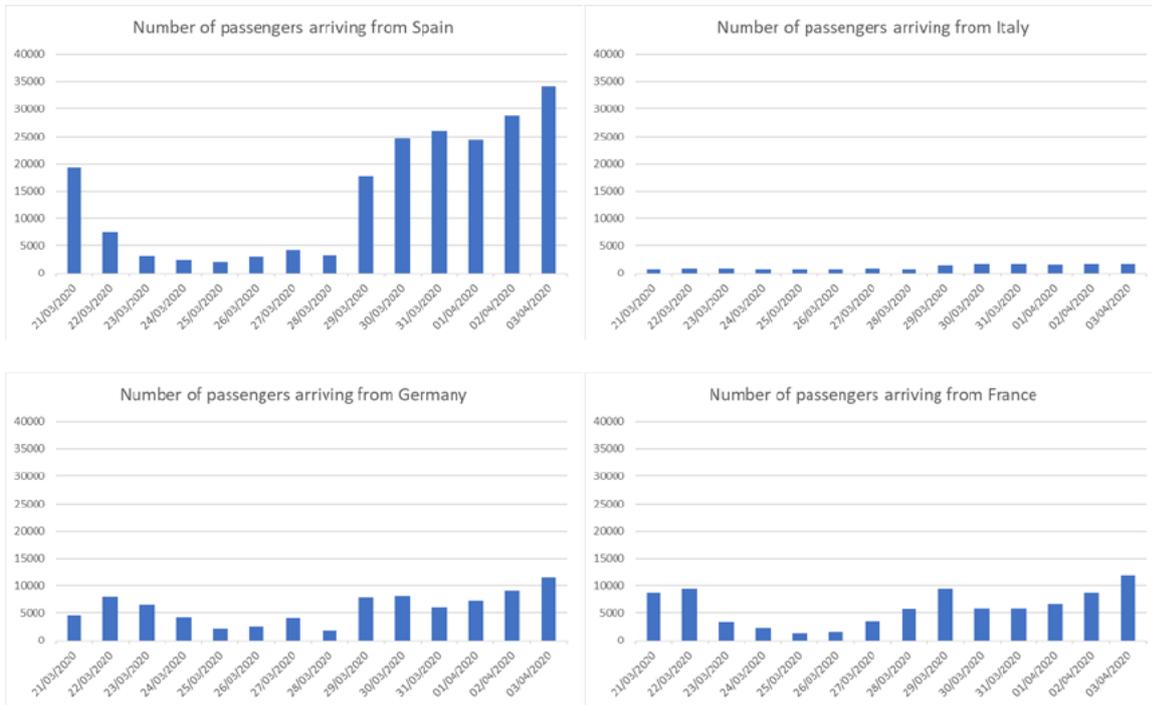
The step change in predicted flight numbers (and consequently passenger numbers) that occurs at 29 March may well be associated with how far in advance airlines are planning and therefore may not represent a really anticipated increase in flights and passengers.

Over the next two weeks, there are six flights from Iran, with approximately 200 passengers expected per flight.

Flights



Passengers



Annex B – data on flights and passengers over the previous four days

These data are from the Border Force National Control Centre. Numbers for Sunday are provisional.

UK Totals	Thursday		Friday		Saturday		Sunday	
	Flights	Pax	Flights	Pax	Flights	Pax	Flights	Pax
Italy	6	137	7	82	5	89	5	457
Spain	135	15560	152	17604	71	7555	25	2000
Iran	1	131	0	0	0	0	1	127
Germany	61	1295	56	842	18	448	20	1857+
France	41	1216	47	1134	35	1314	21	1454+