



Prevention

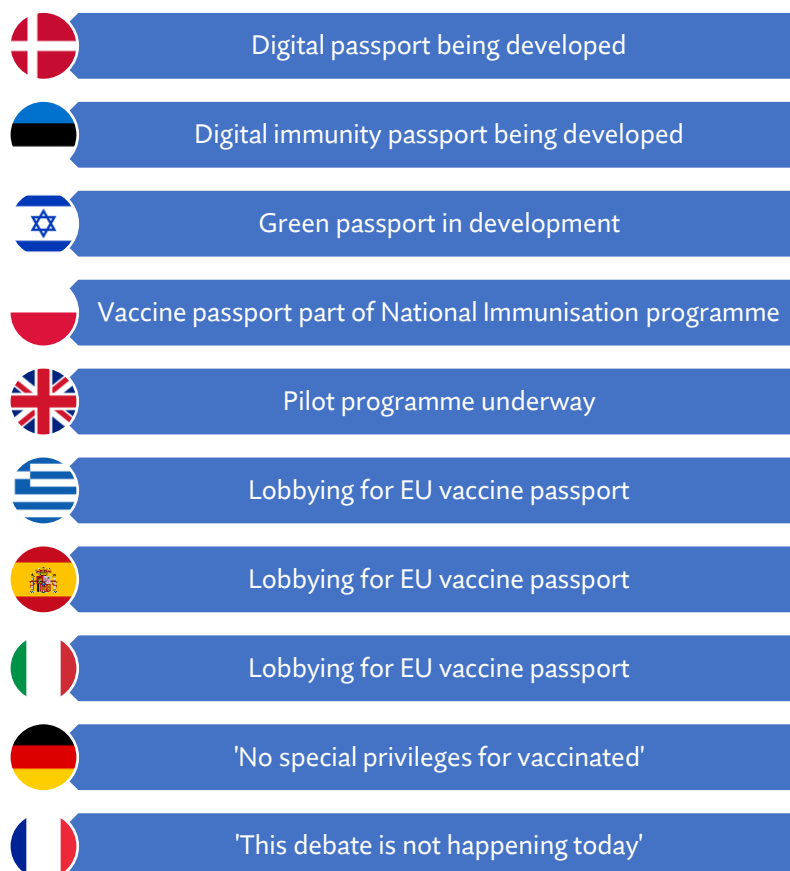
Vaccine passports: the document we all want? A rapid public policy review

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The speed of the vaccine discovery has been extraordinary. As jabs enter arms, attention is now turning to how restrictions could be eased. One suggested way to do this would be for a 'vaccine passport' to be issued to citizens who have been vaccinated enabling freer movement and travel. Already [Denmark](#) and Estonia have said that they are exploring such passports, whilst [Greece](#) and other tourism based economies have written to the EU calling for an EU wide system. The [Seychelles and Cyprus](#) have made a vaccination a requirement for skipping quarantine upon arrival.

However the idea is highly controversial. The [World Health Organisation](#) has said that countries should not introduce them. The UK Government has repeatedly stated that it has no plans to introduce them, whilst exploring [local pilots](#).

EU+UK+Israel sample of approaches to vaccine passport deployment (sourced at 24.01.21)



The case against

The first challenge with any such passport is a short term lack of evidence. We do not know whether people who have been vaccinated can still transmit the virus. So far, such evidence is only available on a small scale, though is [encouraging](#). As more people are vaccinated it will be possible to collect fuller data. Until then, a vaccine passport will have limited use as it will only set out an individual's immunity and not their wider impact on spreading the virus amongst the population.

The second challenge is one of vaccine effectiveness. With various new virus variants emerging it is unclear whether the vaccines that have been approved will continue to be effective in all cases. Thus a vaccine passport for one of the currently approved vaccines, could quickly become an ineffective marker of immunity. There are also uncertainties around the length of effectiveness of the vaccines being deployed.

Such a challenge could be 'fixed' if the vaccine passport was expanded and linked through to a persons recent testing data. This would broaden the scope of the passport to a 'immunity passport'. However there will inevitably be logistical and technical challenges in linking such systems for the individual in one place (though countries with more integrated citizen ID and digital systems will find this a lot easier). Surveillance society and 'big brother' critics have already expressed concerns that any such moves could create a centralised database that would put too much power regarding people's health history and travel movements in the hands of the state. The security of such a system is also an obvious concern.

The third challenge is an ethical one that sees the creation a two tier system of citizen (those vaccinated/those not). For countries, such as the UK with a nationalised health service founded on equity, releasing certain parts of the population back to normality, underpinned by a digital passport, would be a difficult political sell. Indeed, it could foster a larger rebellion amongst those groups in lesser risk profiles who seeing restrictions lifted for others, choose to ignore them for themselves, driving up infection rates at a time when they should be falling and coming under greater control. Critics have also argued that any such passport system would be detrimental to [health inequalities](#) with the most marginalised likely to be at the back of the queue to access such a tool.

Such impact will vary by country, the structure and underpinning of their healthcare system, their approach to the rollout of the vaccine and how any passport would work in practice. But there is no doubt that globally the vaccine programme is creating substantial ethical tensions, with the WHO calling the inequity of rollout between countries a '[moral failure](#).'

Vaccine passports and Anti-vaxx

Related to this is what impact such a passport would have on vaccine uptake which varies wildly around the world. Recent polling from [Ipsos Mori](#) found that countries where COVID-19 vaccination intent is highest are China (97%), Brazil (88%), Australia (88%), and India (87%). Those where it is lowest are Russia (54%), Poland (56%), Hungary (56%), and France (59%).

Would introducing a passport, which would become a condition of travel, returning to places of work and freer movement, drive uptake rates higher as people seek the badge of approval or be fuel to anti-vaxx groups and their conspiracy theories about big government control? Certainly

such passports would have a feeling of compulsion. Countries in Europe such as Italy have introduced compulsory vaccination programmes in the recent past, but the [EU Asset project](#) found no evidence of linking mandation to improved uptake. A recent row in the UK about the [actions of care homes staff](#) refusing the vaccine shows the difficulties of forcing people to take the jabs (UK care homes have been particularly badly hit by the pandemic). The role of a vaccine passport in supporting higher uptake rates therefore may not be clear cut and could indeed be counterproductive.

The case for

There are though public health arguments in favour of introducing such a vaccine passport at some stage.

The economies of many countries around the world have been severely impacted by the pandemic. Vaccinating entire populations will take months and the passports may help in opening up venues and travel in earlier and safer ways. The improved economic backdrop which passports may play a role in facilitating (subject to more data on the virus transmissibility of people injected) will have a positive impact on wider public health and in particular mental health where there will be severe and [long term Covid impacts](#). Restricting people's liberty when a tool exists to potentially safely exit some citizens from lockdowns, presents fundamental ethical, moral and political issues regarding the role of the state and the individual.

It is also not just in this paradigm that there are tensions. Certain industries and employers, such as airlines and travel operators, have indicated that they want to pursue a vaccine passport or certificate amongst staff and customers to restart and protect future operations. Many cite the existing regulations for travellers having to ensure a vaccination for other conditions (eg malaria, yellow fever) as a simple basis for rolling out Covid passports and certificates. The UK cruise company [Saga](#) has already announced that all travellers on its cruises will have to have had a Covid vaccine, two weeks before travel. Indeed for Governments currently most resistant to such passports, the danger is that the requirements and actions of other countries and global corporations force their hand.

Summary

Introducing vaccine passports poses substantial short term challenges to public policymakers grappling with the balance of controlling the virus and re-opening societies and economies. The need to understand transmissibility of the virus for those vaccinated, the emergence of new variants and the scale of the long term protection the approved vaccines provide present clear difficulties. The creation of two tiers of citizen that such a passport could facilitate is a political barrier.

However, with some countries building the infrastructure for such a passport and seeing it as a requirement of border entry, businesses actively promoting it, and as more evidence and data emerge on vaccine effectiveness; the move towards vaccine passports may well be unstoppable. The most important question on a global level is how any such passport can be introduced in a way that is ethical and secure when the vaccine rollout is so skewed towards the developed world.

Viewing vaccine passports as a quick way out of the current crisis is therefore wishful. However in the medium term the tool may end up filling more specific requirements, for example in

opening up travel and sports venues in a safe way and reducing the need for other Covid measures; for example quarantining and testing.

Vaccine passports are unlikely to expedite us from this Covid crisis, but they may help us in preventing future outbreaks.

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