



serco  
INSTITUTE

# Public Opinion & Vaccine Passports in the UK

Discussion paper

February 2021



We are a think tank working to help governments develop the next generation of public service solutions for citizens. We do this through developing research and insight on public services internationally and through trialling innovation in service design.

[www.sercoinstitute.com](http://www.sercoinstitute.com) | [info@sercoinstitute.com](mailto:info@sercoinstitute.com) | [@SercoInstitute](https://twitter.com/SercoInstitute)

# CONTENTS

## Introduction

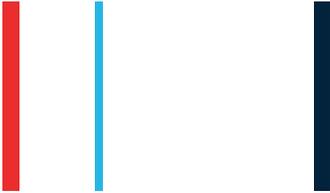
Overview	4
The Global Context	6

## Key Findings

International Travel	7
Hospitality Venues	10
Sports and Cultural Events	11
Working in Offices	13
Non-essential Retail	15
Social Gatherings	17
Places of Worship	19

## Conclusion

Is public opinion enough?	21
---------------------------	----



# INTRODUCTION

## Overview

Are vaccine passports the next big policy tool in the response to Covid-19? Could they offer a way of balancing the two central issues of the pandemic – ensuring public health concerns are addressed, whilst allowing the economy to keep going? Now large-scale vaccine rollouts have started, there is talk in public policy circles, the media, and beyond, that vaccine passports are the next step in returning to normality. However, there is little consensus about to whom they should apply and what freedoms they should enable, or indeed whether they should exist at all. In part, this is because there is scant understanding of the UK public's view.

To facilitate understanding in this regard, the Serco Institute commissioned a UK poll – carried out by *Survation* – into peoples' views of vaccine passports. The 1,003-person survey – which has been weighted to give an accurate reflection of the UK population – asked:

*“With the appropriate protections and exceptions for people who are precluded from taking the vaccine due to medical conditions, to what extent would you support or oppose the use of vaccine passports for the following:*

- *International travel;*
- *Entering hospitality venues;*
- *Sporting/cultural events;*
- *Working in offices;*
- *Non-essential retail;*
- *Social gatherings;*
- *places of worship”.*

Respondents were asked to rank their support or opposition for vaccine passports in each of the above settings in the following way<sup>1</sup>:

- *Strongly support*
- *Somewhat support*
- *Neither support nor oppose*
- *Somewhat oppose*
- *Strongly oppose*
- *Don't know*

---

<sup>1</sup> Net support and net opposition is calculated by aggregating those who indicated that they 'strongly' and 'somewhat' support or oppose.

We asked about different settings to ensure the findings are of maximum interest to policymakers, business, and citizens. Each setting faces a different operating environment, with different implications, and with those differences come varying policy considerations. Obtaining data for each setting allows us to understand the acceptance threshold for different settings. Generally, there is public support for the introduction of vaccine passports to facilitate a return to all of the settings asked about, with strongest support for international travel at 66%, and the lowest for places of worship at 50%. Active opposition ranged from 24% for non-essential retail, to 16% for international travel.

Support is relatively consistent across most demographic indicators. Older age groups tend to be more in favour of vaccine passports than younger groups – perhaps motivated by the fact that older people are more susceptible to Covid-19, as well as being more likely to be vaccinated sooner.

Across the four nations of the UK, people in Northern Ireland and Wales tend to be more supportive of the introduction of vaccine passports than people in England and Scotland.

In terms of the political divide, 2019 Conservative voters are marginally more supportive of vaccine passports than Labour voters, although this difference is typically quite small. There also seems to be a consensus between Leave and Remain voters, with both groups indicating relatively similar levels of support for vaccine passports.

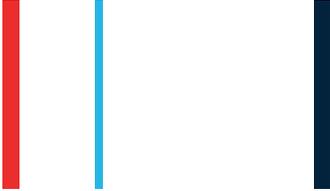
Public opinion, therefore, supports the introduction of vaccine passports in a range of settings. As noted, the number of people who support their use in international travel outweighs the number who oppose them by over four-to-one. But of course, public opinion is not the only consideration when deciding on policy. Legal, ethical and practical issues could all stand in the way of effective implementation. Our research does not extend to an in-depth exploration of each of these issues as they relate to vaccine passports, but instead raises a series of key questions relating to these potential barriers to delivery that policy-makers will need to consider.

The introduction of vaccine passports elicits strong feelings amongst advocates and opponents alike. This discussion paper does not seek to advocate either way. Our objective is to provide data and analysis to help inform the debate.

---

Between 2-5 February, Survation polled 1,003 people aged 18+ living in the United Kingdom. Data were weighted to the profile of all people in the United Kingdom aged 18+, according to Office for National Statistics data. Data were weighted by age, sex, region, household income, education level, 2019 general election vote and 2016 EU referendum vote.

Due to rounding, percentages may not always appear to add up to 100%. Also, due to rounding, not all disaggregated data will appear to equal their aggregated amounts. This practice is standard across UK opinion polls.



## The Global Context

As the vaccine rollout has increased, so too has talk of vaccine passports. Initially, they were discussed sporadically and in conceptual terms, but have since become a regular feature of the daily press and, in some countries, are now a tangible policy goal. While the idea of vaccine passports is controversial, there is no denying the idea is gaining momentum.

Denmark is leading the way, with the primary function of “corona passports” for business travel purposes and, according to acting Finance Minister Morten Bodsov, the “gradual reopening of Denmark”<sup>2</sup>. Residents can already print off a government certificate proving their inoculation. Of more significance is the planned release of a smart phone app that people can show at passport checks proving inoculation<sup>3</sup>. Denmark’s Scandinavian neighbour, Sweden, is also committed to a digital vaccine passport or “certificate” which is expected by June<sup>4</sup>. In addition to the EU itself, a raft of other European countries have also mooted their interest in vaccine passports, including Spain, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, and Estonia<sup>5</sup>.

Until recently, vaccine passports in the United States were the preserve of the private sector; some of the country’s largest tech firms and healthcare organizations have established the Vaccine Credential Initiative, with the aim of creating a digital vaccine passport specifically for smart phones. Now, the idea has caught the interest of the new administration. On his full first day in office, President Biden revealed his 200-page national pandemic strategy with seven goals aimed at ending the Covid-19 pandemic. On page 181 of the report is a directive for multiple government agencies to work together to “assess the feasibility” of linking Covid-19 vaccinations to international electronic certificates<sup>6</sup>.

The UK Government, however, is more cautious. On 7th February, Vaccine Minister Nadhim Zahawi MP stated that the UK had “no plans” to introduce vaccine passports<sup>7</sup>. However, he said there is nothing to stop private individuals obtaining a certificate from their GP to enable international travel. That said, recent comments from the Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps MP, and the Prime Minister, suggest that there could be more substantive Government involvement in the development of vaccine passports, at least when it comes to international travel.

---

<sup>2</sup> [Denmark, Sweden to issue digital vaccine ‘passports’ – France 24](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Denmark reveals concrete plans for a digital ‘Covid passport’ in world first - The Times](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Denmark, Sweden to issue digital vaccine ‘passports’ – France 24](#)

<sup>5</sup> [These European Countries Are Launching Vaccine Passports - forbes.com](#)

<sup>6</sup> [These European Countries Are Launching Vaccine Passports - forbes.com](#)

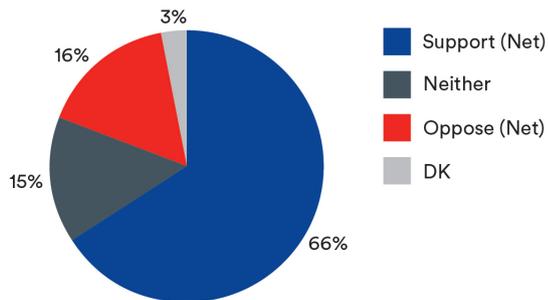
<sup>7</sup> [Covid: Minister rules out vaccine passports in UK - BBC News](#)

# KEY FINDINGS

## International Travel

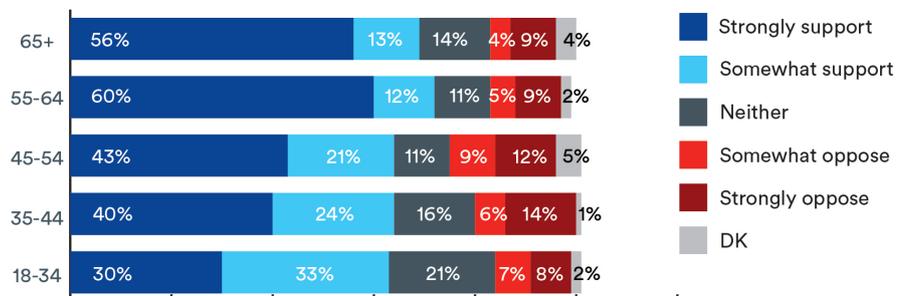
Ever since foreign holiday travel really opened-up in the 1970s, travelling abroad for a summer holiday has become part of the UK’s national psyche. Old habits die hard according to our survey, which shows enthusiasm for vaccine passports to enable international travel. Moreover, vaccine certifications are already in use for international travel for other diseases – for example UK travellers are able to receive yellow-fever vaccination certificates which are required for entry to some countries. Perhaps it is unsurprising therefore that 66% of people support vaccine passports for the purpose of foreign travel, with just 16% opposed – a ratio of over four-to-one in favour of their introduction.

Overview - International Travel



There are interesting variations according to age. ‘Strong’ support tends to increase markedly with age, with just 30% of 18-34 year olds responding in this way (a further 33% saying they ‘somewhat supported’ their introduction) compared to 60% of 55-64 year olds (with a further 12% saying they ‘somewhat support’ them).

Age Groups - International Travel

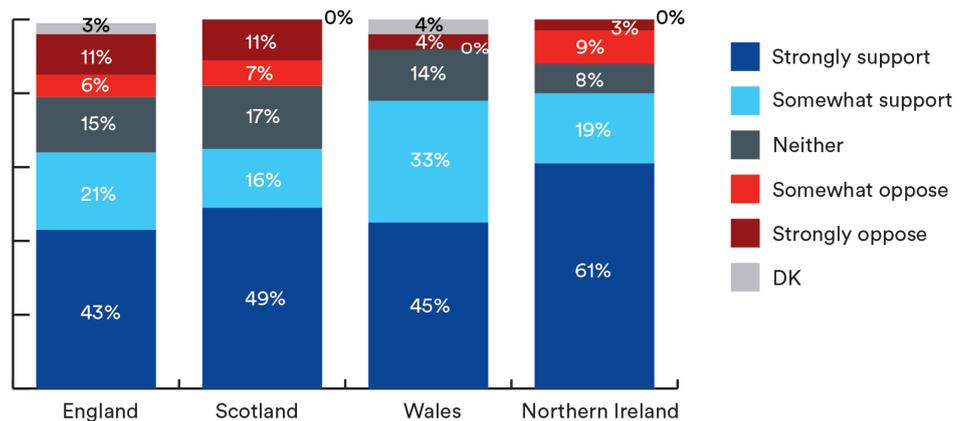


The increased support amongst those aged 55 plus could have two causes. As we know, the older you are, the more Covid-19 poses risk to your health and therefore any measure to decrease risk would be particularly beneficial to these groups. The second reason could be explained by the fact that these groups are also likely to be the first to be vaccinated.

Furthermore, the financial means and lifestyle expectations of older groups may motivate their appetite for the introduction of any measures that will allow international travel sooner.

Support for vaccine passports as an enabler for international travel varies markedly according to each constituent country of the UK. General support in Northern Ireland and Wales is 80% and 78% respectively, a significantly higher figure than in England and Scotland, both at 65% support. Northern Ireland is an outlier in its 'strongly support' figure of 61%, some 18% higher than respondents in England.

### UK Nations - International Travel



### Key questions

For an international vaccine passport system to work you will need a secure, interoperable and agreed format. In other words, countries will need to agree what they will use to recognise a person as vaccinated. Could there be an agreed digital vaccine passport system, for example? If so, what technologies could be used to ensure that this system is secure?

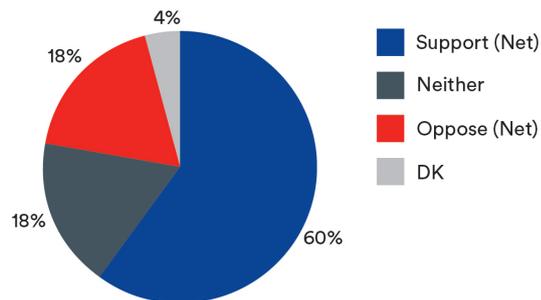
Questions will also be raised as to what vaccine countries recognise. If a country chooses to bring in a vaccine passporting system, will they only recognise vaccines which their own regulators have approved, or will they choose to expand the range of acceptable vaccines for those with passports to a wider set of jobs?

Will they choose to expand the range of acceptable vaccines for those with passports to a wider set of jobs?

## Hospitality venues

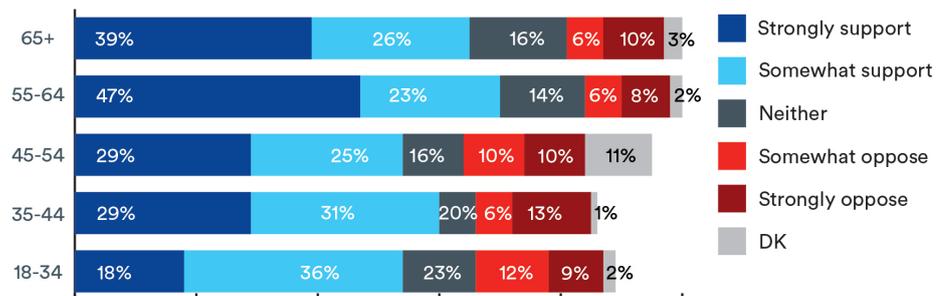
Hospitality has taken a huge hit due to the pandemic. It is estimated that a fifth of the entire workforce in the sector lost their jobs in 2020 alone<sup>8</sup>. Some 6,000 pubs and casual dining venues were lost in the same year<sup>9</sup>. Perhaps some light relief for the sector can be found in the poll, which suggests that citizens of the UK are keen to arrest this decline. 60% of those polled support vaccine passports if it enables a return to pubs, restaurants, and cafes.

### Overview - Hospitality Venues



There are significant variances according to age. Just 53% of 18-34 year olds support vaccine passports if they enable entry into hospitality venues, which is notably lower than 70% for 55-64 year olds, 64% for 65 plus, 60% for 35-44 year olds, and 54% for 45-45 year olds.

### Age Groups - Hospitality Venues

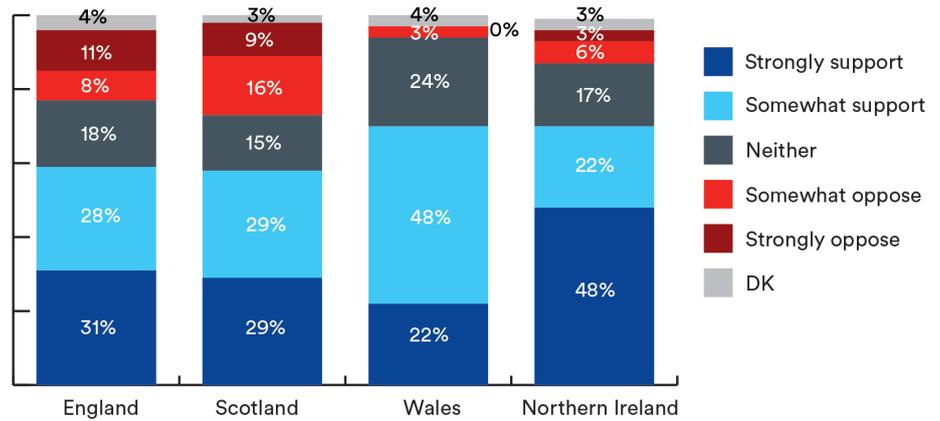


Responses can loosely be divided into two groups. Scotland and England's support – and strength of support – are very closely aligned with the overall ratings of 57% and 59%. Support in Wales and Northern and Ireland is notably higher at 70% in each. This discussion paper makes no assumptions as to the eating and drinking habits of each country.

<sup>8</sup> Covid: 'A fifth' of hospitality sector jobs lost in 2020 - BBC News

<sup>9</sup> Great Britain lost almost 6,000 licensed premises in 2020 - The Guardian

## UK Nations - Hospitality Venues



### Key questions

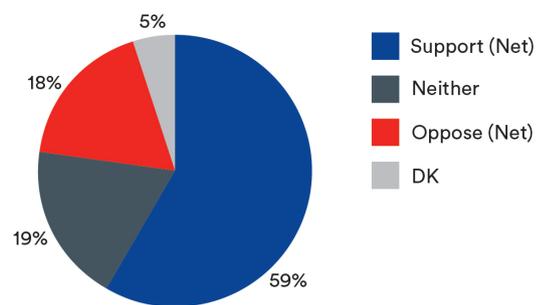
On the face of it, vaccine passports could be a shot in the arm for the hospitality sector. However, there are questions of implementation and resource. Might appetite amongst pub, restaurant, and café owners be dimmed having already spent significant sums during the preceding year to make premises 'Covid-secure'? Would the costs associated with vaccine passports, such as technology and additional staff training put them off? Or, if vaccine passports were at the discretion of hospitality owners, would any bother enforcing them if that immediately cancels out a meaningful proportion of their potential clientele, i.e. those without the passports, who in the first instance might be younger people?

## Sport and cultural events

Testing ‘passports’ have already been touted as a possible measure to allow spectators into sporting grounds and cultural venues. It isn’t a great leap, therefore, to imagine that vaccine passports could play a role in ensuring Covid-secure crowds at sporting and cultural events.

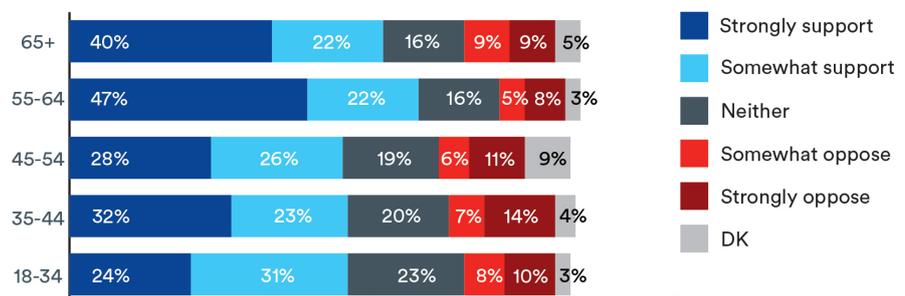
59% of people agree that a vaccine passport system should be used to allow entry to sporting and cultural events. Only 18% are opposed to their use in this setting, 19% neither support nor oppose and the remaining 5% said they did not know.

Overview - Sports and Cultural Events



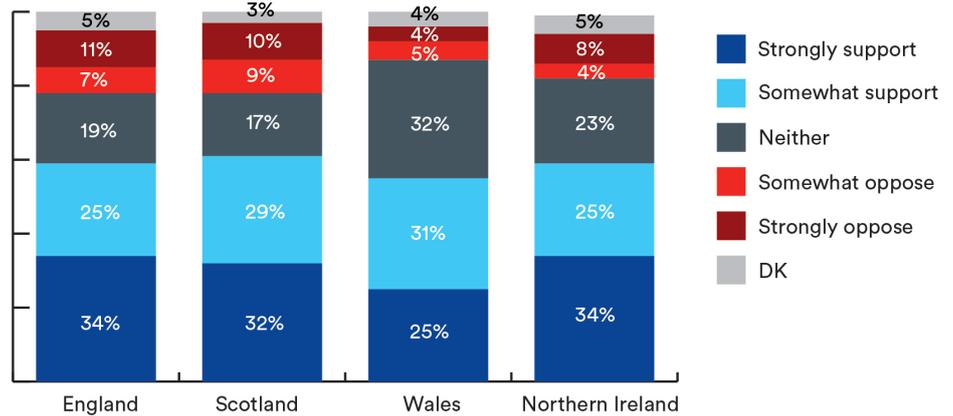
Consistent with findings relating to other settings, older age groups tend to be more supportive (and less resistant) to their use than younger age groups. The most supportive being 55-64 year olds (69%), followed by those 65 years or older (61%). Again, this may well be due to the fact that older age groups are more susceptible to serious symptoms from Covid-19, as well as being more likely to be vaccinated sooner.

Age Groups - Sports and Cultural Events



When broken down by most other demographic characteristics support is relatively stable, ranging between the mid-to-high 50s to low 60s. For example, across the four UK nations, support is lowest in Wales, where 55% supported the use of vaccine passports to allow access to sporting and cultural events, 58% of people in England supported the proposal, 59% in Northern Ireland and 61% in Scotland.

### UK Nations - Sports and Cultural Events



### Key questions

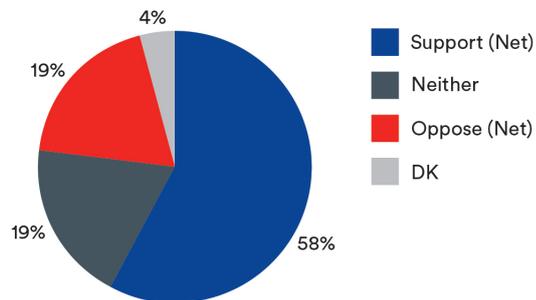
Theatres, museums and sports venues have suffered significantly as a result of Covid-19. Even when they were able to open, social distancing led to a reduced capacity, in turn depressing revenues. The use of negative test results to allow spectators into some sports and cultural events has already been floated, so surely the use of a similar system for vaccines is not much of a stretch?

Perhaps a system whereby proof of either – a negative test, or a vaccine – could be used to allow access to events?

## Working in offices

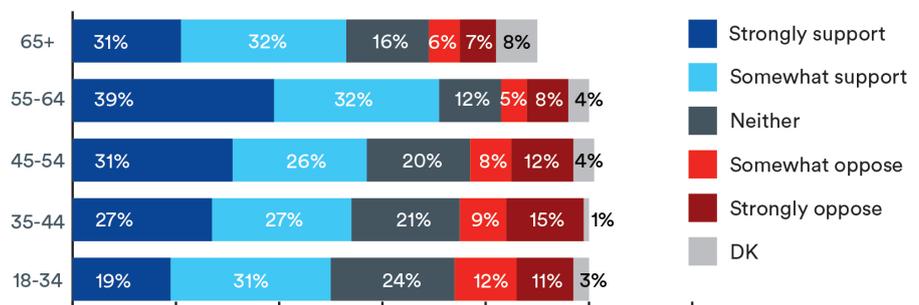
Over the course of the pandemic, much has been made of the potential changes to working life; in particular, whether it sounds the death knell for office-based work following the transition to home working. However, there are numerous reports detailing how home working can strain family relations and affect productivity due to the added pressure of home schooling. Some major businesses have emphasised the importance of offices to enable the learning and development of younger employees.

Overview - Working in Offices



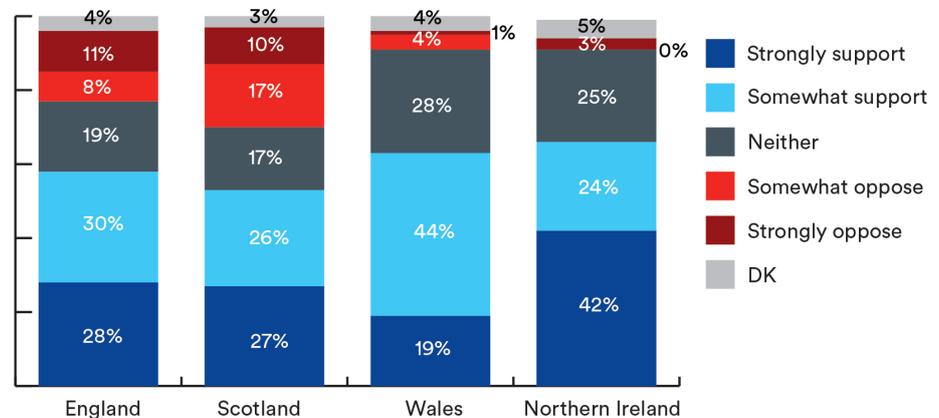
Overall, 58% of respondents support the use of vaccine passports to enable a return to office life. Perhaps predictably, support increases with age; 50% for 18-34 year olds, 54% for 35-44 year olds, 56% for 45-55 year olds, 71% for 55-64 year olds, and 63% for those 65 and older. Alongside the consistent trend throughout the research that the older you are the more supportive of vaccine passports you are likely to be, the obvious conclusion is that younger people are more naturally orientated to the technological working practices central to home working.

Age Groups - Working in Offices



There are, once again, some notable differences between countries. Overall, Northern Ireland and Wales responded with the highest levels of support, with figures of 66% and 63% respectively. However, in terms of strength of support there are marked differences between the two. Northern Irish respondents showed ‘strong support’ to the tune 42%, whereas only 19% of Welsh respondents did so. Scotland and England reported overall support at 53% and 58%, with similar levels of conviction. Of the four nations, Scotland was much more actively opposed to vaccine passports as an enabler of a return to office work, with 27% of respondents actively opposed. This compared to 19% for England, 5% for Wales, and just 3% for Northern Ireland.

### UK Nations - Working in Offices



### Key questions

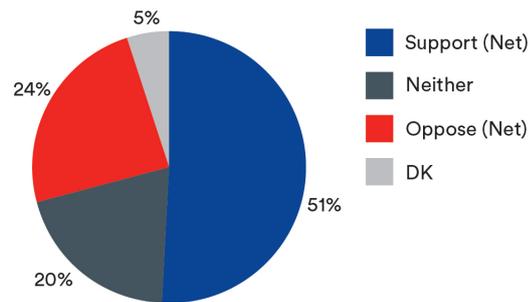
The use of vaccine passports to enable a return to office life poses some major questions for businesses. One of these revolves around ‘equity’. Would vaccine passports create two-tiers of employees divided between those that can obtain them and those who cannot? Would the latter group feel that their career prospects are stunted because they do not have a vaccine passport? There are also practical questions regarding implementation. Who would businesses partner with to introduce vaccine passports for their employees? What additional infrastructure would be required at office entrances to vet vaccine passports? All of these questions raise the issue of financing. How much would vaccine passports cost for an employer or would the cost be passed onto employees?

## Non-essential retail

Much like hospitality venues, non-essential retail has faced a mixed set of restrictions over the past 11-months, making operations difficult. Social distancing measures have reduced potential capacity when retailers have been able to open and various national and local ‘lockdowns’ have forced them to close for significant periods of time. Furthermore, online shopping has long been a pressure on high-street retail and the pandemic may have shifted consumer habits further towards digital sellers.

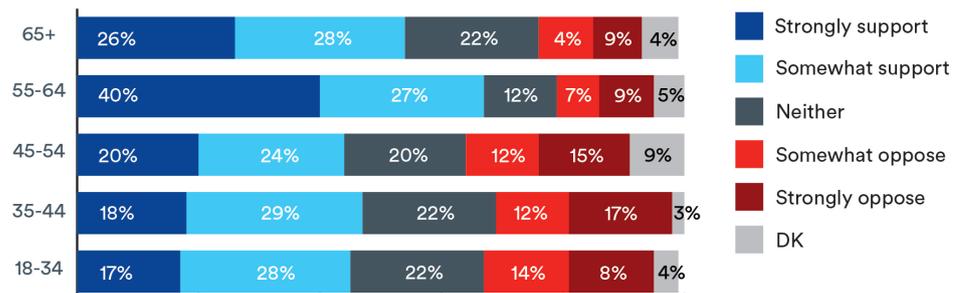
Vaccine passports could therefore be considered burdensome to an already under-pressure sector. This is perhaps one of the driving factors behind the view of 24% of people against their introduction for non-essential retail. That said, a majority of people – 51% – are still in favour of their introduction and a further 20% said that they neither support nor oppose their introduction.

### Overview - Non-Essential Retail



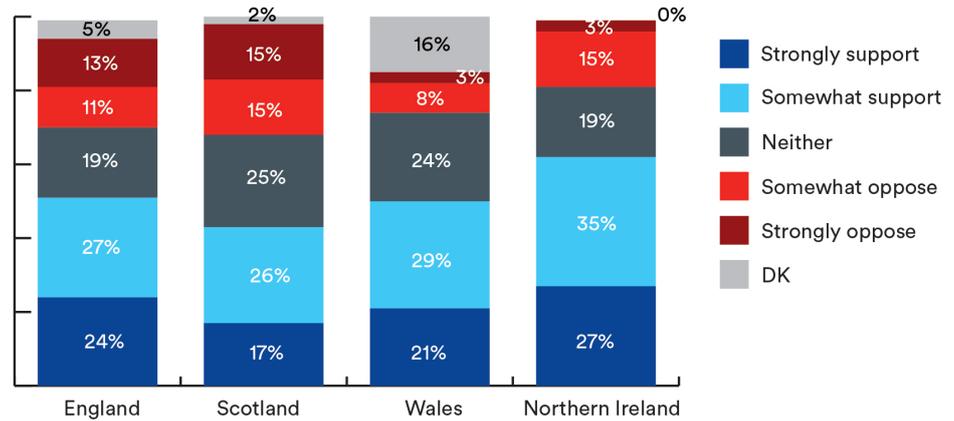
As with other settings, 55-64 year olds were most keen on the introduction of vaccine passports in non-essential retail, with 40% of them ‘strongly supporting’ and a further 27% ‘somewhat supporting’ their implementation. The second most supportive age group was 65+, with a net support score of 55%. As groups at a higher-risk from Covid-19, this level of support is understandable. These two age groups also had the lowest net opposition to the use of vaccine passports in non-essential retail.

### Age Groups - Non-Essential Retail



Respondents in Scotland showed the highest level of opposition – with 31% of people saying they were against vaccine passports being used in non-essential retail – as well as the lowest level of support at 43%. Support was highest in Northern Ireland at 63%, with support hovering around the 50% mark in both England (50%) and Wales (52%).

### UK Nations - Non-essential Retail



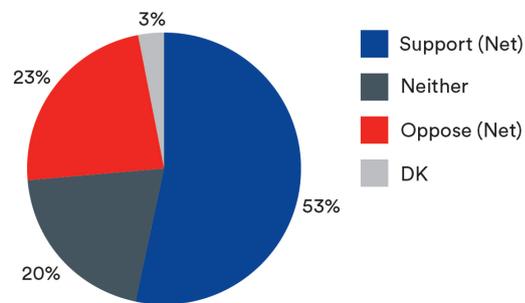
### Key questions

The practicalities of people using vaccine passports to enter non-essential retail raises a range of questions – from potentially increasing burdens and costs for shops to questions about inequity for consumers. However, retailers’ experience of enforcing mask-wearing may set them up well to deal with a requirement to manage a vaccine passport system.

## Social gatherings

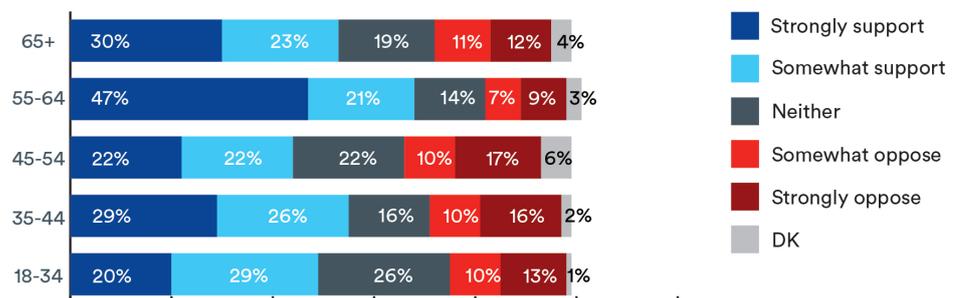
Support for vaccine passports to allow social gatherings is only 53%, with 23% actively opposed. On first look, it seems that citizens of the UK are not quite as keen to see each other as some may have assumed. Could it be, however, that this is not the case? Perhaps respondents feel that seeing friends and family is such a core tenet of life that they should not need a vaccine passport to do so? Perhaps the notion of obtaining a passport implies too much effort to do something so 'normal'; why bother when one can engage in social gatherings without going through the rigmarole of obtaining a vaccine passport? In contrast, getting a vaccine passport to go aboard might be considered worth the effort for some sun, sea and sand.

### Overview - Social Gatherings



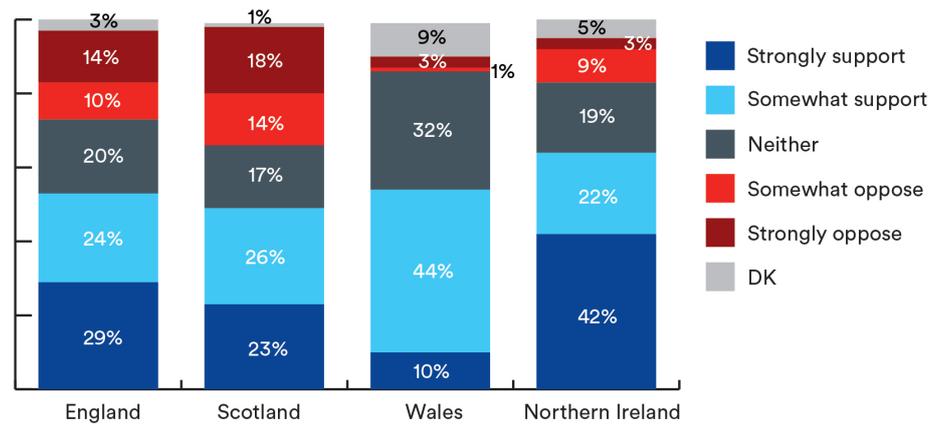
There are notable differences regarding age. Just 44% of 45-54 year-olds support a vaccine passport for the purpose of social gatherings. This compares with 49% for 18-34 year-olds, 55% for 35-44 year-olds, 68% for 55-64 year olds, and 53% for those older than 65.

### Age Groups - Social Gatherings



From a UK nations perspective, 53% of English respondents support vaccine passports to facilitate social gatherings, with 50% for Scots, 54% for Welsh, and a significantly higher 64% amongst the Northern Irish. Although overall levels of support are similar for three of the countries, there are marked divergences with regard of the strength of support. Again, Northern Ireland is an outlier with 42% in strong support compared to only 10% for Wales; England and Scotland come in a 29% and 23% respectively.

### UK Nations - Social Gatherings



### Key questions

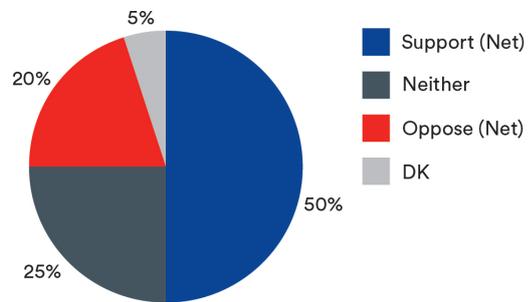
Perhaps the most obvious question when it comes to vaccine passports and social gatherings relates to enforcement. In private functions, outside of hospitality, how and who would enforce the requirement for vaccine passports?

Would – like during the current national lockdowns – we expect the police and the general public to ensure that social gatherings are not taking place in people’s homes without the proper vaccine passports?

## Places of worship

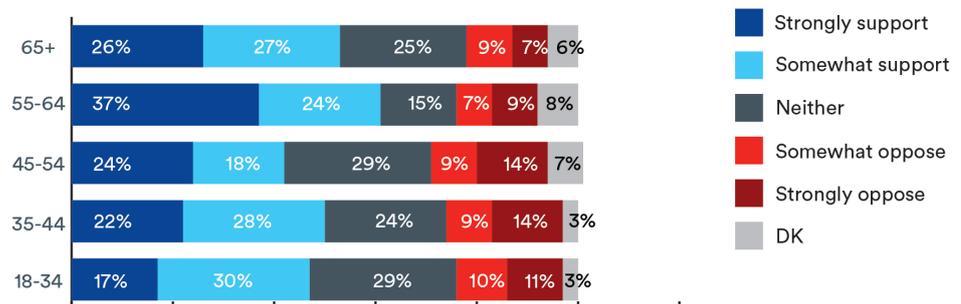
50% of people support a ‘vaccine passport’ to be required to enter a place of worship, a fifth of people oppose their use and a quarter neither support nor oppose. This is despite places of worship being open in England throughout the current lockdown. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have all sought to close places of worship – other than for funerals and, in certain circumstances, weddings. Of all the settings asked about, places of worship generated the highest number of ‘neither support nor oppose’ responses. This is potentially borne of the fact that places of worship are the setting attended least frequently of those asked about.

Overview - Places of Worship



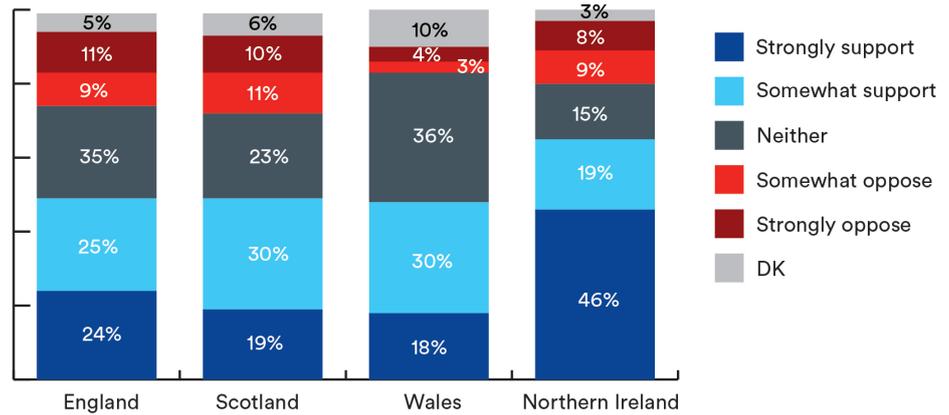
As is broadly consistent throughout the survey, those aged 45-55 showed the least enthusiasm for the introduction of vaccine passports in places of worship – with a net support level of 41%. It is arguably unsurprising therefore that this age group, as well as the 35-44 age cohort, indicated the highest level of opposition to their introduction with net opposition hitting 23%.

Age Groups - Places of Worship



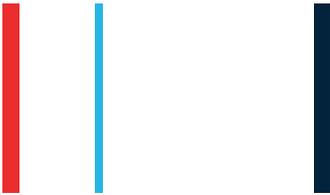
Across the four nations the strongest support for their introduction comes from Northern Ireland, where 46% ‘strongly support’ and a further 19% of people ‘somewhat support’ vaccine passports being used in places of worship. In the other three UK nations support (both those who ‘somewhat support’ and ‘strongly support’) sits at around 50% - England 50%; Scotland 49%; and Wales 47%.

### UK Nations - Places of Worship



### Key questions

Places of worship have faced some of the least stringent restrictions of the settings this survey asked about. In England, for example, the introduction of vaccine passports for places of worship would mark an increase in restrictions from the current lockdown measures. Would this be acceptable to worshipers?



## CONCLUSION

### Is public opinion enough?

Although the poll shows clear public support for vaccine passports, the reality is more complex. Yes, the majority of people in the UK appear well disposed to vaccine passports as an enabler of pre-pandemic freedoms. However, would the reality of obtaining a passport and the rigamarole of showing it at multiple venues, often on a daily basis, dampen this enthusiasm?

Requiring individuals to obtain a GP note to prove vaccination – as has currently been floated by Ministers – seems like an inefficient solution, that adds burden to healthcare workers already under strain. A Government-backed vaccine passport system would seem like the most secure, efficient and logical way of administering a ‘proof-of-vaccination’ scheme. That said, Government-backed vaccine passports could be perceived as sneaking forced vaccination ‘through the back-door’ if Ministers were to legislate to require them for access to particular settings.

To avoid the potential pitfalls that come with direct involvement, it may be that the Government simply sanctions and facilitates the use of vaccine passports on a broad level, but uptake is at the discretion of businesses and citizens. This would not only create a more efficient process for citizens (and minimise the involvement of frontline healthcare staff), it may also be a more secure way of people being able to prove their vaccine status than a GP note, or a series of systems created by individual operators.

The Government will of course look at the viability of vaccine passports on a setting-by-setting basis. One option might be to enforce the use of vaccine passports for events of a certain size, where mass-outbreaks are more of a risk. For example, any event with over 20,000 people in attendance.

Furthermore, the use of vaccine passports by other countries – and the requirement of them by other nations for entry – may well force the UK Government’s hand on the issue, at least when it comes to international travel.

Fundamentally, many of the technical and logistical issues can likely be overcome. With public appetite clearly in favour of their use – at least in the abstract – there is a solid case to be made for their introduction. It is also worth reiterating that there is consistency in

terms of support (and lack of opposition) across the political spectrum, with Conservative voters typically more in favour of vaccine passports in most settings than Labour voters. However, the ethical questions regarding their use are far from settled and Government resources are already spread across so many fronts in the fight against the pandemic. Therefore, it is likely to come down to the capacity and values of the Government and whether they see vaccine passports as a priority and morally acceptable.

