

# Public attitudes to tackling aviation's climate change impacts

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## Executive summary

- Most people don't think the government is doing enough to tackle environmental damage caused by air travel.
- Half of us say we would be willing to reduce the amount we fly to protect the environment - but nearly a third would not.
- Frequent flyers are much less willing to reduce the amount they fly than others.
- Those who are concerned about climate change are more supportive of reducing air travel, both at a personal and a policy level.
- A large majority of people are unaware of how damaging air travel is for climate change - but those who are aware are much more supportive of reducing air travel.
- Most people believe a frequent flyer levy would be a fair way to tackle environmental damage from air travel.
- A frequent flyer levy is preferred over other policy options by a large margin.
- Full survey results at [tinyurl.com/yb9tbagb](https://tinyurl.com/yb9tbagb)

## Introduction

Air travel is one of the stickiest problems for climate change campaigners and policy makers alike. Unlike areas such as power generation, where alternative low-carbon technologies are rapidly becoming cost-competitive and can deliver almost equivalent standards of service without the environmental costs, air travel looks set to remain stubbornly carbon intensive for the foreseeable future. Technologies such as electric planes, synthetic fuels and new airframe designs certainly have the potential to help, but the modest gains available are being greatly outstripped by rapid growth in demand for flights.

2017 saw record numbers of air passengers at UK airports, both in terms of overseas visits by UK residents, and visits to the UK by overseas residents.

Globally, the International Air Transport Association foresees a doubling of passenger numbers over the next twenty years, growing at an average annual rate of 3.5%. Even in the UK, one of the most mature air travel markets in the world, the number of passengers using UK airports has increased by 15% over the past five years, while emissions from UK aviation grew by 1.2% in 2016 alone.

Technological and operational improvements cannot keep pace, meaning that in order to keep aircraft emissions within safe limits, deliberate policies to manage passenger demand below its unconstrained level will be necessary. But effective demand management through fiscal measures such as ticket taxes is politically very challenging due to the low price elasticity of demand for air travel - in other words, it takes large increases in ticket prices to bring about small decreases in demand for flights.

Policies to tackle climate change must have public consent in order to be successful, and this means they must be perceived to be fair. The levels of blanket ticket tax increases required to control aviation emissions within safe limits would risk pricing the poor out of the skies altogether, and are unlikely to be pursued by any politician seeking re-election. However, there is a way out of this dilemma: 70% of all flights by UK residents are taken by just 15% of the population, the frequent flyers. Half of UK residents don't fly at all in any given year, and most of the rest of us take just one or two flights. Replacing Air Passenger Duty (APD) with a Frequent Flyer Levy (FFL) would target the mostly wealthy 'problem passengers' to curtail flights, while protecting access to reasonable levels of air travel for everyone else. The FFL framework would allow all passengers at UK airports one tax free flight each year, with a rising levy on each additional flight thereafter.

In November 2018 we commissioned YouGov to poll 1,750 British adults to assess public attitudes to air travel and climate change, and explore the different factors that affect support for reducing air travel at both a personal and a policy level. This briefing note highlights some of our key findings.

## People want the government to do more about aviation emissions

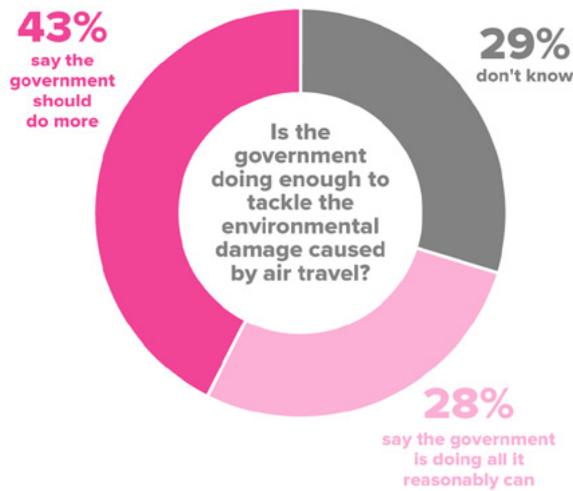


Fig.1 Is the government doing enough to tackle the environmental damage caused by air travel?

We found that when asked if the government is doing enough to tackle the environmental damage from air travel, more people say they don't know than say the government is doing enough. The most popular response to this question was that the government should do more.

## People are prepared to fly less themselves to protect the environment

Around half of respondents say they would be willing to reduce the amount they fly in order to protect the environment, against around 30% who would be unwilling to do so. The corresponding figures amongst those who say who say they are concerned about climate change are 61% willing / 24% unwilling - but this changes to 69%/21% if a modifier is added: "if you knew other people were also reducing the amount they fly". This implies that the more concerned the general population is about climate change, the more willing they may be to accept policies to curtail demand.

However, the group most willing to reduce the amount they fly are those who report taking no flights in the past year, while those who report having taken seven or more flights are the least willing, even in the context in which they know others are reducing flying (36% willing / 59% unwilling).

## Most people don't realise how environmentally damaging air travel is

The polling identified a striking, widespread lack of awareness about the level of damage air travel inflicts on the climate. When asked to select one or two actions from a list that would have the biggest impact on reducing an individual's carbon footprint, only 15% correctly identified taking one fewer transatlantic flight, whereas 37% correctly identified 'going car free' as effective. Tellingly, the most frequent flyers - those taking seven or more flights each year - ranked 'upgrade to energy efficient light bulbs' above reducing air travel. But a 2017 meta-study of the relative effectiveness of different personal actions to reduce carbon footprints found that taking one fewer transatlantic flight can reduce emissions by over eight times as much as changing light bulbs.<sup>1</sup>

Our survey found that support for policies to tackle the climate change impacts of air travel was much higher amongst people who were aware of

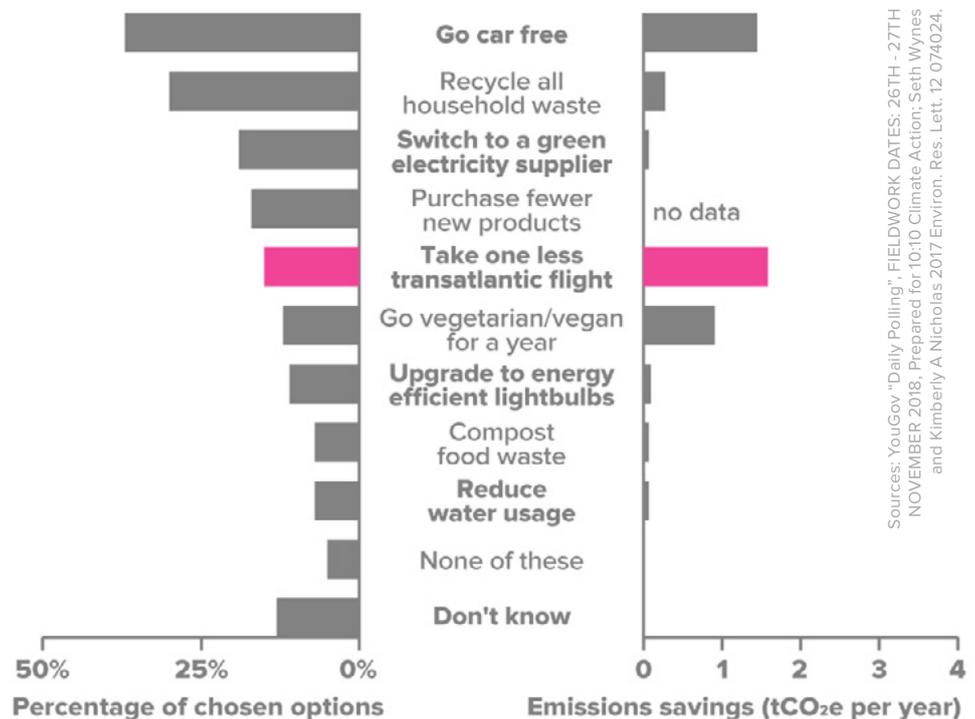
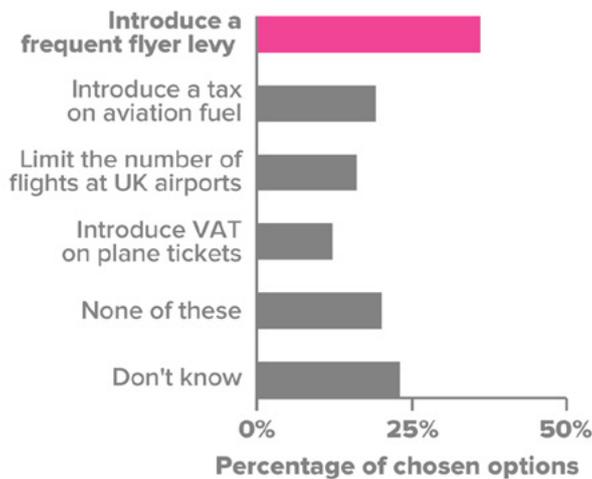


Fig.2 Which changes would make the biggest impact on reducing someone's carbon footprint in a year? (Participants asked to choose up to two options from list). Compared with actual emissions savings for each option.

the relatively extreme damage flights do to the environment, suggesting that awareness raising could be important to getting the public behind such policies.

## People prefer a Frequent Flyer Levy over other potential policy options – and over doing nothing

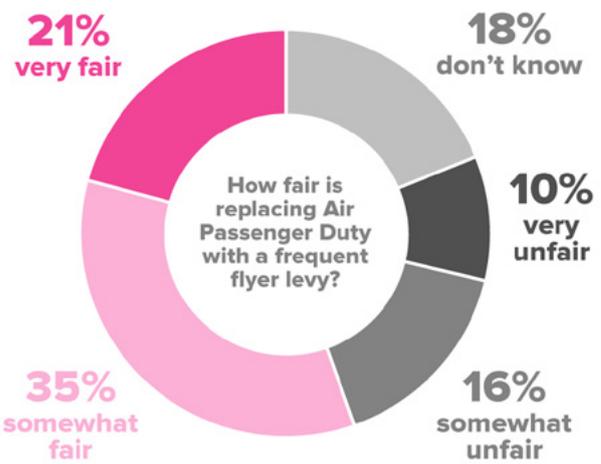


**Fig.3 Which policy changes would help tackle environmental damage caused by air travel? (Participants asked to choose up to two options from list)**

36% of respondents selected a Frequent Flyer Levy to replace Air Passenger Duty from a list of potential approaches to tackling the environmental impacts of air travel. This was the most popular choice by a large margin, comparing to just 19% for introducing a tax on aviation fuel, 16% for limiting the number of flights at UK airports through planning controls and 12% for introducing VAT on plane tickets. ‘None of these’ received 20% support whilst 23% were unsure (respondents were asked to select up to two options).

56% also agreed that a frequent flyer levy would be fair, while only 26% felt it would be unfair. This is an important finding as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has found that perceived fairness is the most important factor for securing public support for policies to tackle climate change.

Source: YouGov "Daily Polling", FIELDWORK DATES: 26TH - 27TH NOVEMBER 2018, Prepared for 10:10 Climate Action.



**Fig.4 How fair is replacing Air Passenger Duty with a frequent flyer levy?**

## Conclusion

The British public as a whole already fly more than the people of almost any other nation, yet around a fifth of us say we have never been on a plane. There are no credible assessments showing how it is possible to meet current UK climate goals without deliberate policies to limit air passenger demand to below its unconstrained level, and this will become an urgent imperative if the UK adopts a net-zero emissions target - as we believe it should.

So far however, the UK government has chosen to limit the policy responses it is prepared to consider to a commitment to negotiate a better global carbon offsetting scheme.<sup>2</sup> It is currently developing an aviation strategy that deliberately seeks to cater to all increases in demand for flights, envisaging large increases in air traffic and new runways and terminals at airports across the UK.

It is clear that politicians will need to be much braver than this if they actually intend to honor our national commitments on climate change. We believe that a Frequent Flyer Levy could be a smart, fair and politically deliverable way to maintain UK aviation emissions within safe limits over the coming decades, and deserves careful consideration by the government.

1. Seth Wynes and Kimberly A Nicholas (2017) Environ. Res. Lett. 12 074024
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/aviation-2050-the-future-of-uk-aviation>

Source: YouGov "Daily Polling", FIELDWORK DATES: 26TH - 27TH NOVEMBER 2018, Prepared for 10:10 Climate Action.



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