

Sustainable Travel Policy

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1. Introduction and values

- 1.1. Travel is essential for large research-intensive Universities with global footprints like Queen Mary University of London ('Queen Mary', 'the University'). We need to travel in order to deliver our world class teaching and research and, in particular, our successful transnational education partnerships. However, in a world where increased virtual collaboration is enabled, we need to minimise the environmental impact, including carbon emissions, from travel to demonstrate that we are travelling responsibly.
- 1.2. We also need to be mindful of the fact that we are a registered charity, and University spending is funded by our students' tuition fees, grant funders, and public funding and, therefore, need to demonstrate that we are approaching travel responsibly from a value for money perspective.
- 1.3. There is also a social argument of climate justice and fairness. Flights are taken by a minority of the world population; in the UK, 70% of flights are taken by 15% of the population ([New Economics Foundation & Possible, 2021](#)), with long-haul return flights emitting the same as many people do in a year - e.g. a return flight from London to Mexico City in economy class emits circa 3.6 tonnes of CO₂e (conversion factors from UK Government GHG Conversion Factors for Company Reporting 2024), similar to the annual emissions of an average person from Mexico, Romania or Portugal (tCO₂e per capita from [Our World in data](#), 2024).
- 1.4. Business travel is responsible for a significant proportion of the University's carbon emissions. In recent years, carbon emissions from travel have been higher than emissions from either electricity or gas consumption from all our UK Campuses.
- 1.5. The University's Sustainability Action Statement sets an objective to develop a Sustainable Travel Policy (STP). Grant funders are increasingly placing restrictions and expectations on universities for sustainable business travel, including restricting funded travel to essential travel and only funding economy class flights. We expect these funder requirements to increase going forward. Sustainable travel is one of the 6 priority areas of the Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice, to which we are a signatory.
- 1.6. The Travel Decision Tree available in the Appendix is designed to support travellers making informed and responsible, climate-conscious decisions.
- 1.7. The University Expenses Policy is a linked policy and should be read alongside this policy where travel-related expenses are being claimed.

2. Purpose

- 2.1. The policy focuses on reducing the environmental impact of University-related travel by promoting climate conscious, efficient, and responsible travel choices among staff, students, and visitors.

3. Legislative context

- 3.1. This policy supports the University's commitment to sustainability and carbon reduction targets and our alignment with national targets such as those set out in the UK Government net zero legislation Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019.
- 3.2. It should be read alongside internal University policies, including the Expenses and the Reasonable Adjustments Policies.

4. Terms and definitions

- 4.1. Business travel – travel necessary for meeting the University's needs and paid for or reimbursed by the University or grant funders. This includes attending meetings or conferences, work elsewhere (e.g. Malta or China Campus), research fieldwork, fieldwork trips with students, placements, etc.
- 4.2. Climate conscious – means having an awareness of how human activities affect the Earth's climate and taking pro-active steps to minimise negative impacts.
- 4.3. Carbon emissions – refers to the release of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions and other greenhouse gases (methane, nitrous oxide) into the atmosphere. Emissions from aviation also have indirect (non-CO₂ emissions e.g. water vapour, contrails, NO_x) climate change effects. Carbon emissions are normally measured in tonnes of CO₂e (tCO₂e).
- 4.4. Carbon Offsetting - is the mechanism used to compensate for carbon emissions produced by an organisation by purchasing carbon credits, which will be used to invest in projects that remove or reduce/avoid an equivalent amount of carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases from the atmosphere.
- 4.5. Key Travel - is our current approved travel management company. Further details are available at [Travel - Procurement](#).
- 4.6. "must" and "will" indicates specify requirements or obligations;
"should" indicates a recommendation;
"may" indicates discretionary actions;
"can" indicates a possibility or a capability.

5. Scope

- 5.1. This policy focuses on business travel emissions only, rather than commuting, and intends to inform staff, students and other travellers travelling on University business about the carbon emissions associated with different types of travel, as well as on how

to minimise them.

- 5.2. This policy covers all travel taken on university business regardless of the payment method or funding source.

6. Sustainable Travel principles

6.1. Travel must be essential

Queen Mary staff, students and visitors will only travel when it is essential and justified. Virtual collaboration must be prioritised, where possible.

6.2. Lower-carbon travel must be prioritised

When travel is essential, travellers must prioritise the travel modes/class with the lowest possible carbon emissions (subject to risk assessments as applicable), as follows:

- Travel by train or coach if journeys can be made within 5 hours, even if it is more expensive¹
- 6.3. Fly economy class by default if alternatives to air travel are not available, unless there is a clear justification/exception for a higher class of travel (see exceptions section), in line with the expenses policy and for the carbon reduction benefit.
- First-class flights are not permitted under any circumstances.

6.4. Responsibility for making the right decisions

All travellers must take responsibility for making climate-conscious and value for money decisions regarding the need for travel and type/class of travel.

6.5. Equity and wellbeing

Exemptions can include disability, long-term health issues, and caring needs, or going straight from a flight to teaching, and must be approved by the Head of School/Institute or PS Director (see Exceptions section for more detail).

6.6. Funder requirements

Where travel is paid for by grant funders that specify additional travel requirements, these must be adhered to. It is the responsibility of staff using grants to understand and comply with their funder's travel requirements.

¹ It is expected that savings from less travel and business class air travel will offset any higher cost resulting from rail travel.

7. Roles and responsibilities

- 7.1. Travellers/staff members – must follow the sustainable travel principles and policy details outlined in this policy. Additionally, they must understand and follow any applicable requirements defined by grant funders.
- 7.2. Approvers (Heads of School/Institute and PS Directors) – accountable for reviewing and approving exception requests submitted by staff, or challenging unnecessary or high-carbon travel choices.
- 7.3. Risk assessments – travellers are responsible for ensuring risk assessments are completed if required. Managers are responsible for reviewing and approving risk assessments.

8. Considering travel needs

- 8.1. Anyone travelling on University business must follow the climate-conscious travel steps outlined in this section 8.
- 8.2. Travel decision-making steps:

1. Avoid travel

Assess if the journey is essential and justified. Use the travel decision tree (see Appendix) and additional guidance on [SharePoint](#) to help with this assessment. How is it expected to benefit your work, the University, or society more broadly? Is an online alternative available?

2. Reduce travel needs and maximise benefits

Minimise the number of trips you book and, where possible, the number of travellers. Make the most of your journey, if possible.

- Number of travellers - If travel is essential, decide on the minimum number of travellers required. Could a colleague represent you or vice-versa?
- Number of trips - Consider if you can maximise the value of each journey by combining tasks or consolidating locations to visit on a single trip. Can you extend your stay to minimise the number of journeys, especially if it requires air travel? Or can you re-arrange meetings and other work activities to merge trips?

3. Travel mode

You must use low carbon travel modes for short journeys where this is possible.

- Low carbon modes - If the journey is essential, are low-carbon transport options available? Travellers must use the train or coach if that journey can be completed within 5 hours from London terminals (or other central terminals)

closer to your location). Consider these points:

- Cost/ overall travel time: Trains often take people straight into the centre of towns and cities, removing or reducing the need for onward travel compared to airports. Also, passengers do not need to arrive 2-3 hours in advance.
- Capacity for work: Staff can often work whilst travelling on trains, including taking calls – make sure you follow the IT policies [IS01 Information Security and Acceptable Use Policy](#) regarding sensitive information in this case.
- UK rail and most of European rail are available to book via the Key Travel online booking portal, and they can support many other countries worldwide with the offline team. All coach bookings are done offline.
- You can sometimes get group discounts on train bookings.

4. Air travel – Travel class

Economy class is the default class of travel when flying.

- Class of flight – you must choose economy class to minimise carbon emissions and cost unless you have an approved exception.

Carbon emissions from a business class flight are nearly 3x times higher than economy, because of larger space used on the plane per passenger.

- If circumstances warrant flying other than economy class, the exception must be approved in writing by the Head of School/Institute or PS Director (see section 9 for more detail). If an exception could apply, consider travelling the day before to avoid flying business class.
- First class flights are never permitted.

5. Air travel – Travel route

Fly direct where possible. Direct flights frequently have a lower carbon footprint than connecting flights. This is because up to 25% of emissions occur during take-off and landing.

6. Air travel - Accountability

If flying is the only option, does the trip justify the high carbon emissions of flying? If not, you may want to reconsider and not travel in this instance.

9. Exceptions

9.1. Travellers with disabilities or some long-term health conditions with impact on the individual's ability to travel (including if assistance is required whilst travelling) can request reasonable adjustments to the mode of travel or class of travel. Before requesting exceptions, please note:

- Travellers can get support from Key Travel to request assistance at train stations for passengers with disabilities or mobility issues. UK stations offer assistance,

other countries will need to be checked on a case-by-case basis. Please email our dedicated reservations team qmul@keytravel.com, who will be able to support.

- Travellers can also get support from Key Travel to request assistance at airports.
- We encourage travellers/their managers to have an early conversation about access needs, travel and reasonable adjustments before they need to book travel. The agreement of reasonable adjustments follows a process and may take time. A Tailored Adjustment Plan available from the Disability Inclusion in the Workplace Hub can be used to discuss and record reasonable adjustments.

- 9.2. Whilst the Reasonable Adjustments framework is specifically for disabled people, the University will also consider requests from travellers with caring responsibilities or other personal circumstances. For instance, Parents and Carers might be allowed to travel at alternate times that work alongside their caring responsibilities.
- 9.3. Personal safety concerns identified in an approved risk assessment may be considered a valid reason to depart from lower carbon options set out in this policy. Please refer to the Expenses Policy for more details.
- 9.4. Where there is a demanding work schedule e.g. a short time between a long-haul flight and the commencement of University duties, staff can fly a higher class than economy. In this case, short haul connecting flights would be expected to be economy class.
- 9.5. Any flight, other than economy class, or any adjustments to travel mode, require prior written approval by the Head of School/Institute or PS Director.
- 9.6. Heads of School/Institute or PS Directors will consider these exception requests in line with the Reasonable Adjustments Policy, where applicable. Depending on the reason for the request, permission to travel in business class may be granted on a fixed term or one-off basis.

10. Carbon Offsetting

- 10.1. Queen Mary has decided not to offset carbon emissions, including those resulting from business travel. Our current focus is on reducing absolute emissions.
- 10.2. Staff travelling under Wellcome Trust grants are required to offset emissions from travel associated with those grants. Please consult our internal guidance document [EMS-G-01 Travel Carbon Offsetting Guidance \(Wellcome Trust\)](#) and the Wellcome [Environmental sustainability funding policy](#) webpage for additional information.

11. Associated information

- 11.1. A [SharePoint](#) page with additional sustainable travel guidance is available and will

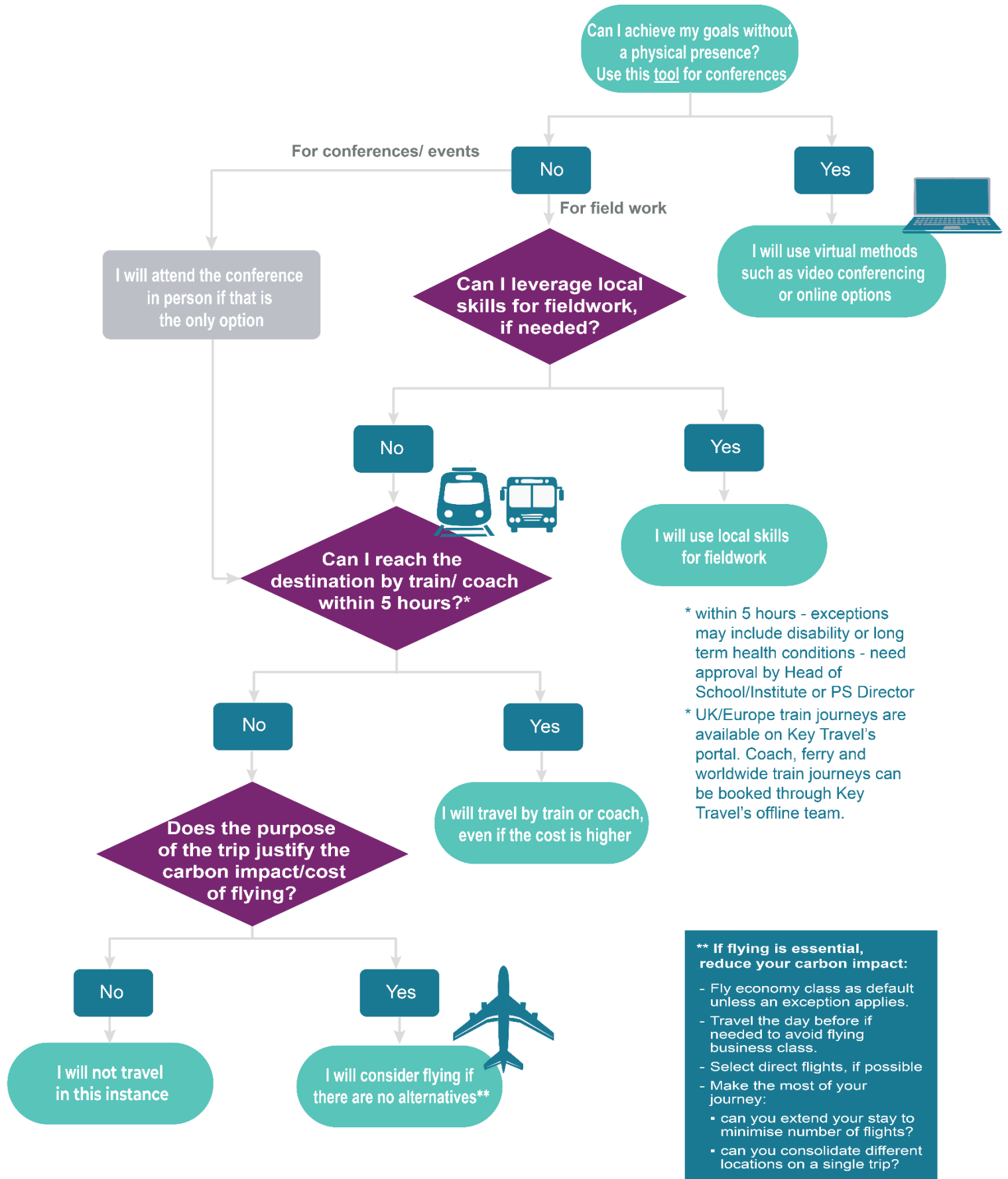
continue to be further developed.

- 11.2. For other information regarding commuting, including how to leave your bike in secure storage or how to access the cycle to work scheme, please visit our [website](#) or [SharePoint](#) page.

12. Review

- 12.1. This policy will be reviewed at least every three years.
- 12.2. Minor updates to this policy that do not affect the rules, principles or intent of this policy may be approved by the Chair of the Sustainability Committee on behalf of the Senior Executive Team (SET).

Appendix – Travel decision tree



Policy information and document control

Policy title	EMS-POL-03 v1 Sustainable Travel Policy
Version number	1
Related policies and procedures	Expenses Policy Reasonable Adjustments for Staff Policy EMS-G-01 Travel Carbon Offsetting Guidance (Wellcome Trust) Business Travel SharePoint page Disability Inclusion in the Workplace Hub - Home
Superseded policies	None
Approval level	Senior Executive Team
Approval date	7 th July 2026
Effective date	1 st September 2026
Next review due	3 years from approval
Policy owner	Sara Tomé, Head of Environmental Sustainability
Policy contact	Sara Tomé, Head of Environmental Sustainability or Sustainability mailbox sustainability@qmul.ac.uk

Version control

Version	Date	Reason for updates/Summary of key changes
1	07/07/2026	New policy, first release.