

# FIGHT OR FLIGHT

**Is the Scottish public sector fighting  
climate emissions by flying less?**

MAY 2024



**transform**  
scotland

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# 1

## WHAT WE DID



We have examined **whether the Scottish public sector is taking meaningful action to cut climate emissions by flying less**. Our purpose was to determine whether the Scottish Government's declaration of a climate emergency has translated into real changes in travel attitudes and behaviour. As transport is the single largest source of emissions in Scotland, and as air travel is the most climate-intensive form of transport, **tackling flying is essential if Scotland is to make significant progress on climate change**.

**Cutting back on flying is also a smarter way to travel**, as it provides the potential to save money, improve employee well-being and promote efficient working. Reducing frequent flying, while making the most of rail journeys and virtual collaboration, will benefit both the public sector and the planet.

We sent Freedom of Information requests to over 150 Scottish public bodies, including local authorities, NHS trusts, colleges and universities, police and fire services, and a wide range of organisations working in the environment, science, the arts, social care and other sectors. We asked for data on (1) the number of air and rail journeys made between Edinburgh/Glasgow and London and (2) their travel targets and policies. We also used emissions data from the annual public bodies' [climate change reports](#).

## 2

## RAIL NOW LEADS AIR

### Who flies the most

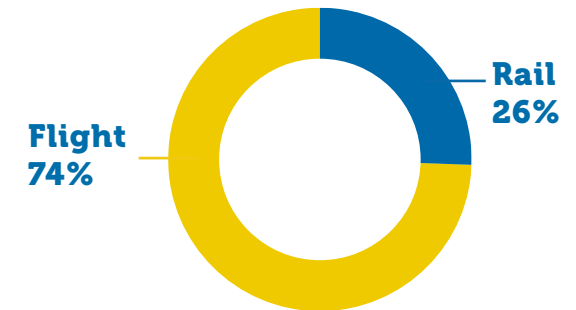
It is clear that some types of public body travel more than others. Out of the 50 public bodies which reported the highest levels of emissions from flying, almost half (23) were colleges and universities. By comparison, local government was under-represented among the top fliers, making up 17% of the total number of public bodies but only 8% of public bodies in the top 50 for reported emissions.

### Trips to London

Compared to ten years ago, **the public sector has made significant progress in cutting the number of domestic flights.** In 2013, we surveyed Scottish public bodies to find out how they were travelling to London. In 2013 they were overwhelmingly choosing air for travel between Edinburgh/Glasgow to London, with 74% of journeys made by air compared to 26% for rail. **By 2023, rail had overtaken flying to become the most common mode of travel for trips to London,** with air making up 48% of travel compared to 52% for rail.

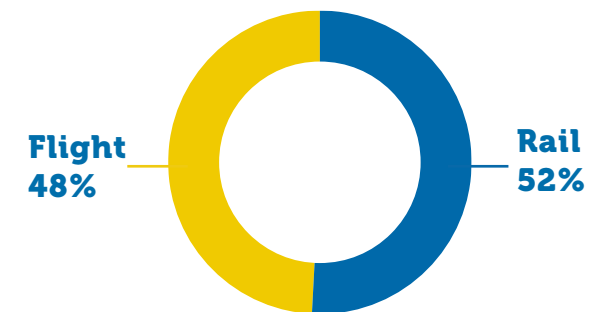
### 2013 TRAVEL TO LONDON:

modal share for flights and rail journeys for trips between Edinburgh/Glasgow and London



### 2023 TRAVEL TO LONDON:

modal share for flights and rail journeys for trips between Edinburgh/Glasgow and London



3

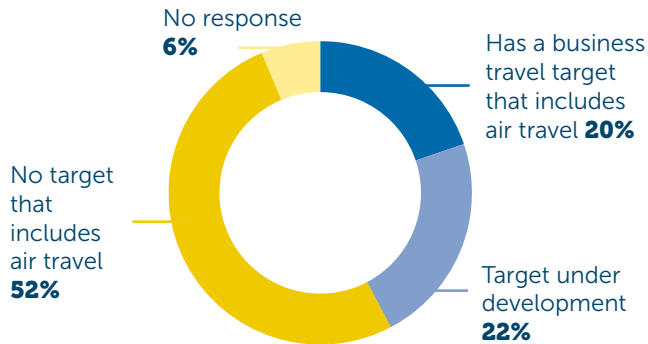
## MAJORITY STILL TAKING NO ACTION

Of the fifty public bodies reporting the highest levels of emissions from flying, **only one in five (20%) had a business travel emissions reduction target that included air travel.**

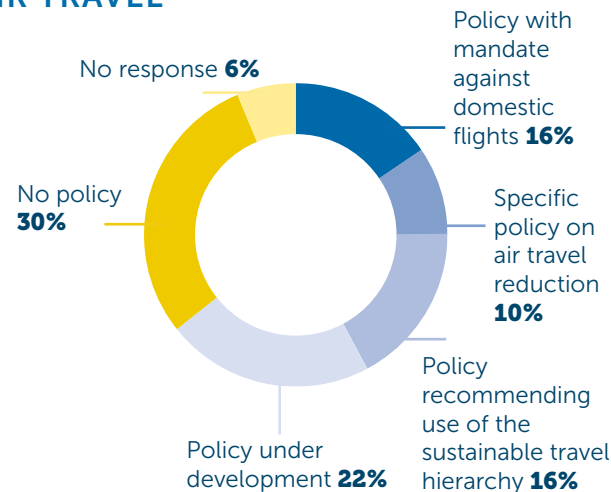
Among this same group of fifty public bodies, **only a quarter (26%) had a corporate policy which specifically singled out the need to reduce air travel.** A further 16% had a broad policy based on the sustainable travel hierarchy but which did not go into detail on flights.

More generally, the majority (80%) of public bodies reporting the highest levels of emissions from flying did at least either have or were in the process of developing some sort of broad corporate policy to reduce emissions from business travel. These included stand-alone sustainable travel plans, policies or guidance, travel & expenses policies, and organisational climate or net zero policies which encompassed travel. In all cases, implementation and enforcement (the procedure for booking and approving travel, for example) will be fundamental to determining whether a policy has any real impact on emissions.

### PUBLIC BODY TARGETS TO CUT EMISSIONS FROM AIR TRAVEL



### PUBLIC BODY POLICIES TO REDUCE AIR TRAVEL



### Top performers

Public bodies which performed particularly strongly on targets and policies to tackle flying included:

- Educational institutions - Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Glasgow Caledonian universities and Forth Valley College of Further and Higher Education
- Government - The City of Edinburgh Council and the Scottish Government
- Others - Historic Environment Scotland, the Moredun Institute and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

# 4

## RECOMMENDATIONS



Our research found that whilst there are **some examples of good practice** and **advances in modal shift from air to rail** for UK trips, **too few public bodies have meaningful targets or policies that specifically tackle flying**, the most carbon intensive-form of transport. We therefore recommend that:

1. **All public bodies should set an absolute emissions reduction target for air travel.** Public bodies should **cut emissions to 50% of pre-covid levels by 2030** at the latest - the level of reduction required to keep aviation within a 1.5°C-compatible pathway.
2. **All public bodies should establish a credible plan or policy to cut down on air travel emissions**, containing specific targets, actions, responsibilities and provisions for monitoring and evaluation. Measures could include setting emissions budgets, maximising virtual collaboration and incentivising rail travel. Public bodies should have effective procedures for signing-off travel and enforcing their policies.
3. **All public bodies should** measure and monitor emissions from business travel, and **ensure transparent reporting of their emissions.**
4. All public bodies should commit to using the train for UK trips. At a minimum, **public bodies should rule out air travel, other than in exceptional circumstances, for travel between the Scottish Central Belt and London.** We made this same recommendation a decade ago in 2013. While we are pleased to see that some public bodies have now adopted this policy, most are yet to do so.
5. **Public bodies should consider setting additional targets appropriate to their location and frequent trip destinations**, following the practice of other leading public bodies. For example, a ban on flying for trips under 5 or 6 hours in duration, or a mandate against all domestic flights in mainland UK.



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