

International Passenger Survey (IPS) VisitBritain Q&A

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Please note this document has been developed by VisitBritain with every care taken to ensure accuracy. Some of the answers give only a simplified explanation rather than a thorough analysed response. For more in-depth and precise explanations, please contact the Office for National Statistics (ONS) who run the IPS. Please note that the ONS do not bear any responsibility for some of the explanations reported here.

Key concepts

What is the difference between a visitor and a tourist?

A visitor is any person visiting a country other than in which he has his usual place of residence and in which he spends less than a year, for any reason other than following an occupation remunerated from within the country visited. A tourist is a visitor who spends at least a night in the country visited. (UNWTO definition)

Does the IPS count visits, visitors or tourists?

The International Passenger Survey (IPS) interviews visitors and reports on visits - both overnight and day visits. A visitor could visit a country more than once within the period of time therefore a single visitor may account for more than 1 visit. We would expect the number of visitors to be inferior or equal to the number of visits.

Do the spend figures include the cost of getting to the UK?

No, expenditure figures do not include the cost of getting to the UK. They only include all the money spent within the UK.

Key concepts

What does sample survey mean?

It isn't possible to interview every single person who visits the UK each year. Therefore, a sample survey is used to estimate inbound tourism to the UK. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) runs the International Passengers Survey (IPS). They ensure a robust sample of people is interviewed. A weighting is then applied to the information gathered from these interviewees in order to calculate the key data points that can be analysed from the IPS (visits, nights and spend).

The weighting calculations that the ONS uses are guided by comparisons from existing passenger traffic information from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), Department for Transport, Eurostar, EuroTunnel and a number of airports themselves. This ensures that estimates of inbound tourism are as realistic as possible. This process is extremely thorough – there are actually eight weighting stages applied to the interview data.

How many overseas visitors are interviewed each year?

The overall sample size of the IPS (overseas and UK residents coming in and out the UK) is about a quarter of a million, representing about 0.2% of travellers. About 30,000-35,000 overseas visitors were interviewed for IPS as they leave the UK. VisitBritain publishes sample sizes alongside our analysis.

Methodology

Are all IPS inbound tourism figures based on interviews with foreign nationals?

No, they are not. A British expat who lives abroad and comes to the UK is recorded as an overseas visitor. The UK inbound tourism statistics are based on overseas residents visiting the UK for any reason other than following an occupation remunerated from within the UK.

Are all ports and airports surveyed?

The IPS is based on face-to-face interviews with a sample of passengers travelling via the principal airports, sea routes and the Channel Tunnel. The ONS continually monitor passenger flows to ensure the IPS remains consistent, amended interviewer locations as necessary. More information may be available on the ONS website on current interview locations.

Methodology

Why can't we get the "real" information from immigration / landing cards or visas issued instead of relying on a sample survey?

In May 2019, the UK Border Agency discontinued landing cards. Data collected from these cards was confidential and not aimed to record tourism information. In addition, the landing cards were completed on day of arrival so no expenditure or town visited data could be collected from those.

The majority of visitors to the UK do not require a visa. Among those who do, not all who apply will definitely travel and applications are made before travel so again would supply no information on expenditure or towns visited. Those who travel could also make more than one visit on the same visa.

IPS generates the UK government's official statistics and is the one source of information consistent across all markets.

Are historic spend/expenditure data and year-on-year growth rates taking inflation into account?

No, spend/expenditure data and their year-on-year growth rates are calculated in nominal terms. They are unadjusted, and in fixed term for the prices of the year they refer to.

Revisions

Does the data get revised?

The IPS undergoes both planned and unplanned revisions. More information on the revisions is available from the ONS.

An example of an planned revision was made in 2020 when a new adjustment method was designed and applied to previously published data from 2009 to 2018. The revision came about when the ONS observed an imbalance in the numbers of individuals from certain nationalities arriving in the UK, compared to those departing the UK in the IPS data. To address this imbalance, a new adjustment method was developed by the ONS to update the weightings applied during survey processing.

IPS data from 2009 onwards has been adjusted using this method, and it will continue to apply to future data releases.

Unplanned revisions are generally to correct any mistakes.

What should I do after a revision?

Any analysis of 2009-2018 IPS data performed before May 2020 should be re-analysed on the new data and the impact explored.

Management of the IPS

Who decides which questions are included on the IPS?

The main components of the IPS are decided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to maintain consistency over time as the IPS is a continuous survey.

Its results are used by a number of Government Departments such as Home Office, Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, Department for Transport and VisitBritain (amongst others) who can submit and sponsor some extra questions.

The final decision is made by the ONS who ensures that the length of the questionnaire is not increased, as it would affect the response rate and the quality of the survey.

Timing of results

Why can we not use monthly IPS figures per country of origin, UK regions visited or purpose of visit?

The monthly data is a first estimate and it cannot give reliable results when broken down at this detailed level (the sample sizes are too small) because the survey sample is only designed to be balanced and representative over a full quarter. A single quarter is the minimum period over which most detailed analysis of the data can be made.

Why does it take so long for VisitBritain requested questions to produce IPS data?

VisitBritain submits a request for questions to the ONS in the first half of year each year. This enables the ONS to pilot and feedback to VisitBritain on any issues and propose solutions. In the summer months a pilot/testing of these potential new questions is run. By the end of the summer prior to the year in which they will be included, a final decision is made on which questions will be included in the IPS. VisitBritain receives the results in the annual data released by the ONS, usually around May of the following year.

Notes for interpreting UK level data

Why do the average expenditures published on your website not match the calculation ‘Spend/Visits’ or ‘Spend/Nights’ from the ONS?

When the ONS calculates the two spend averages (spend per day, spend per visit) the expenditure of nil night transit visitors and of visitors departing directly from the Channel Islands are excluded. VisitBritain includes these figures when calculating the averages we publish.

Why is the IPS data different to the data we get from other sources e.g. from the governments of countries where visitors come from?

Please be aware definitions and methodology of other surveys differ. For example some surveys would record day transit visitors, which the IPS does not. There will also be some differences how expenditure on package holiday is treated to exclude the cost of travelling to Britain, for example.

In addition, some surveys base their results on nationality rather than on country of residence. The IPS is the official government survey and in order to be consistent in our measure of UK inbound tourism, all the overseas VisitBritain offices adopt the IPS results as the official measure of their market.

Those travelling for Miscellaneous reasons

IPS identifies a long list of candidates for the category of Miscellaneous as a reason for visiting the UK. Study visitors are often reported by the ONS within miscellaneous because of their sample size – at monthly level for example. Other reasons include:

- Looking for work
- Au pair
- Shopping
- Join/accompany
- Medical treatment
- Overnight transit
- To look for a place to live
- Selling/buying a house (not for business)
- To get married, even if travelling on a package
- To bring a child to school
- To renew a visa, permit
- To fulfil conditions for retaining residence permit
- To take an examination
- Watching any event for pleasure (including a sporting event)
- Work experience
- To receive an honour
- To do research for own interest, not as part of profession/job
- To live in a religious community
- To take part in a competition – not amateur sports player/arts performer
- Voluntary work
- Working holiday (if both work/business and holiday are considered main reasons)
- Flight only trips
- Attending graduation

Business visitors

Business visitors are anyone travelling in a business or official capacity for purposes related to their work/profession or in some other official capacity. 'Business' implies a continuation of the respondent's normal/main occupation during this visit. The respondent will not become part of the labour force of the UK. Overseas Business visitors include:

- Self-employed and professional people who are going to work in the UK and will be paid a fee there for a specific project, but are not based there.
- Those with an official role, salaried or expenses only, at sports and cultural events, e.g. judge, manning stands, umpire.
- Anyone who is travelling as a representative of an organisation in their country of residence, even if unpaid, e.g. mayors, trade union delegates, peace group.
- Entertainers, writers, management/computer/architectural consultants, people performing in sports and arts in a professional capacity, and others who receive a fee for a particular task in the UK but are not full employees there.
- Anyone travelling on behalf of his own company or practice which is maintained in his home country during a visit abroad.
- Respondents receiving a salary from their employer in their country of residence while they study in the UK.
- Coach-drivers and couriers, taking groups on tour or going to pick up groups.
- Teachers travelling with school parties.
- Lorry drivers who are on duty.
- Respondents whose main reason for visit is to attend a trade fair or exhibition and those whose main reason is to attend a conference of large business meeting.

Study visitors

Why is the number of Study visitors very low but there is a large number of foreign students in the UK?

Overseas Study visitors stay less than one year in the UK. An overseas visitor who studies for their degree in the UK will stay in the country more than one year. Therefore they would not be included in the IPS as an overseas visitor but as a UK resident.

Why does the IPS not include those we might anyway target or consider as "tourists" like the long-term study visitors?

The IPS records these foreign students as UK residents as they stay in the UK more than a year and they won't appear as overseas visitors. This is in line with the international definition of a tourist.

Use of regional data

Why can we not compare regional data before and after 1999?

Prior to 01 April 1999 data on visitors to and from Republic of Ireland was provided by Irish CSO (Central Statistics Office). This was based on a self-completion questionnaire. Data provided on purpose of visit, quarter, mode (air/sea) but nothing on age, duration of stay or regions of UK visited.

Why do visits numbers for parts of the UK usually add to more than the totals?

Because some visitors stay in more than one place e.g. someone who spends a night in Cumbria counts as a visit to Cumbria. The same person may also spend a night in London, hence counted as a visit to London. But there has been only one visit to England even though the components add to two. Although visits cannot be summed across UK regions, the amount of spending and the number of nights can.

Use of regional data

How accurate is the Regional data?

The regional data has to be interpreted with lots of caution, as the IPS has never been designed to be able to produce highly accurate results at regional level. Whilst the survey gives good precision at the national level, regional breakdowns of the data will almost inevitably lead to less reliable results. We have to bear in mind that although the IPS matches accurately the overall volume of overseas visitors coming to the UK, the IPS does not give a precise picture of where these overseas visitors stayed during their stay in the UK. This is because some interviews are not done in a few regional airports. For example until 2005 no interviews were carried at Prestwick (stopped in 2016) and Liverpool airports, which may have resulted into less accurate estimates for Scotland and Northern England.

Why does the sum of all spend/expenditure in regions do not match the Total overseas residents' spend/expenditure in the UK overall?

Regional data only take into account overnight visits, not day trips or transit. As a consequence it does not take into account all spend by overseas visitors in the UK.