

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

OPENING STATEMENT

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I would like to thank the Chairman and committee members for the invitation to meet with you today to discuss Ireland's roll out of the EU Digital Covid Certificate.

I am here this morning in my capacity as Chair of an ad hoc sub-group of Senior Officials Group on COVID-19. The Government agreed the group's establishment at the end of May to monitor and update Government on all operational risks associated with the implementation of the EU Digital Covid Certificate and the public health risks associated with easing of restrictions, in light of the progress of the disease and emergence of variants.

The group has been meeting regularly in plenary session to deliver on the project and I am joined today by a number of my colleagues on the group:

Muiris O'Connor and Derek Tierney from the Department of Health;

Damien McCallion from the Health Service Executive;

Barry Lowry from the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer;

Fintan Towey from the Department of Transport

David Gilbride from the Department of Justice;

BACKGROUND

As you know, the EU Digital COVID Certificate Regulation was developed to facilitate safe free movement of citizens in the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing proof that a person has been vaccinated against COVID-19, received a negative test result or recovered from COVID-19. The Regulation became directly applicable to member states on 1 July.

On 29 June, Ireland joined the EU Digital COVID Certificates gateway, built by the European Commission, meaning:

(A) Digital COVID Certificates issued in Ireland are recognised by authorities in other EU member states, and

(B) that Ireland can verify Digital COVID Certificates for travellers arriving from other EU member states and apply the public health rules associated with those Digital COVID Certificates.

On 1 July, “go live” day for the DCC service across Europe, as a pilot run, Ireland issued its initial DCCs including the necessary 'digital signature' attesting to the fact it was issued by the issuing authority

here in Ireland. On the same day we had a team working at our ports and airports verifying QR codes of travellers.

On 9 July, Ireland published its travel rules, one of only four countries to do so at that stage.

The EU Digital Covid Certificate is now fully operational and since Monday 19th July, the Government advisory on non-essential travel has been lifted. Passengers are encouraged to check the public health advice and restrictions in place in the destinations they are travelling to. Travel advice is available from dfa.ie/travel.

The public health measures in place for those arriving into Ireland will depend on their vaccination/recovery status and travel history over previous 14 days and may include PCR tests and mandatory quarantine. Further information is available on gov.ie/travel.

However, if you are not vaccinated, the public health advice remains to avoid high risk activities – this includes international travel.

APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION AND PROGRESS TO DATE

Implementation of the EU Digital Covid Certificate cuts across a number of Government departments and agencies, many of whom are involved in related COVID-19 projects, policy and legislative developments which connect with the implementation of the Certificate. The role of the Group I chair has been to:

- ✓ Develop a unified project co-ordinating respective efforts of colleagues around the system;
- ✓ Identify potential risks and gaps; and
- ✓ Progress mitigations and alternative solutions to identified gaps and risks.

Thanks to my colleagues right across the civil and public service we have made significant progress to date on implementing what is a very large and complex programme that has required delivery in very tight timelines, alongside many other projects which are being progressed simultaneously. On their behalf, I will give a brief overview of the approach adopted and progress to date across the various workstreams involved.

Our primary focus was to fulfil our EU Obligations in a robust and effective way, including operability by 1 July in context of EU compliance; and delivery of certificates to eligible members of the public in line with Government's lifting of restrictions on non-essential travel since Monday, 19 July.

In doing so, we had to be very mindful of developing the certificate in a way which provides the greatest assurance, in line with data protection, as regards sensitive personal information.

GENERATION OF VACCINATION AND RECOVERY DIGITAL COVID-19 CERTIFICATES

Considering the pressures on the Health Service Executive and particular ICT teams following the cyber-attack, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) has undertaken the certificate generation process on behalf of Government.

Digital COVID-19 Certificates for vaccination and recovery are being produced by the OGCIO using data provided by the HSE. Vaccination certificates are being "pushed out". This approach has enabled us to get certificates to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible.

In respect of vaccinated persons where a verified email address is available (mainly those who registered on the vaccine portal), the vaccine certificates are being sent out by email. Where no email address is available, vaccine certificates are being posted out to home addresses (mainly those vaccinated through GPs).

To date over 2.1 million vaccination certificates have been issued by email (1.15m) and post (952,000). As additional people become eligible for vaccination certificates, these will be issued automatically shortly thereafter, in approximately 5 working days after the second vaccination.

Where there is insufficient contact information to send out a certificate, a call centre is available through which a vaccine certificate

can be requested, once a person's identity and eligibility have been verified.

The certificates are generated based on available information. In terms of data to support certification this is the purview of the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive. The HSE has multiple data sources for vaccine and recovery data (e.g. vaccine portal, GPs, pharmacies, acute settings) and data quality is varied. Extensive data quality work has been undertaken to ensure sufficient and fully accurate information is available to support both generation and issuing of the certificate to an individual.

It was necessary to undertake extensive data validation on the vaccination data as many people did not always provide their full contact details, particularly prior to the public portal. In addition, efforts were made to minimise the number of people who have deceased who would receive the certificate.

There will be circumstances where information needs to be updated on certificates and this can be done through the call centre.

Significant work on data relating to persons who have recovered from COVID-19 has been undertaken. Given the quality of this data and the relatively smaller numbers involved, it has been decided to provide recovery certifications on a request basis. This will enable us to complete missing data fields, authenticate identify and ensure

address and email for issuing of the certificate are accurate and up-to-date.

Recovery certificates will also be available upon request through an online portal, which is intended to open this week, or through the call centre, subject to verifiable evidence of recovery from a prior infection within the previous 180 days.

The call centre began taking requests for recovery certificates from Monday, 19 July.

GENERATION OF CERTIFICATES BASED ON NEGATIVE (NOT DETECTED) TESTS

Digital COVID_Certificates for negative (not detected) tests will be provided through private operators who meet minimum entry requirements (e.g. use of EMA approved tests, ID verification process, use of medical professionals, data entry requirements).

To provide citizens with EU Digital COVID Test Certificates, COVID-19 testing providers of both NAAT, including RT-PCR, and rapid antigen will be provided with access to the EU Digital COVID Test Certificate service, operated by the OGCI0 within the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Access to this service will allow test providers to generate EU Digital Test Certificates for all negative or 'not detected' test results, in line with national and EU regulations.

Approved access to the EU Digital COVID Test Certificate service is contingent on test providers being compliant with the relevant national and EU regulations in respect to SARS-CoV-2 testing, associated public health measures, and the standards and obligations detailed in the standard operating procedure.

Prior to receiving access to the EU Digital COVID Test Certificate service for test certificate generation, providers are required to review and digitally sign the standard operating procedure and return by email to digitalcovidcerts.business@per.gov.ie

A small number of private operators have already signed up to provide DCCs and further information on relevant providers will be available shortly

COVID TRACKER APP

An upgraded version of the COVID Tracker App now allows people to upload their certificate (paper or pdf) to a wallet on their phone.

The COVID Tracker App serves as a pandemic response tool and currently carries a number of functions (exposure notification; information platform and the check-in function). These are independent of each other. It will be possible for people to disable those features and use the tracker solely as a digital wallet to store their Digital Covid Certificate on their phone, should they wish to do so.

DATA PROTECTION

It is worth emphasising that the issue of privacy has added to the complexity of the task and has been given paramount importance by everyone working on the project.

Data governance has been the subject of ongoing engagement with the Data Protection Commission to ensure the process is fully compliant with GDPR regulations. The requisite data controller and data processing agreements are all in place.

CERTIFICATES FOR PERSONS NOT VACCINATED IN IRELAND

The EU Regulation gives the option to issue vaccination certificates to persons vaccinated elsewhere, with EMA approved vaccines, upon receipt of appropriate proof.

The main development focus, at the moment, is on the delivery of the obligations of the EU Regulation with respect of persons who received a vaccination or a test in Ireland.

Arrangements for provision of vaccination certificates to persons not vaccinated in Ireland, including Irish passport holders vaccinated in Northern Ireland, will be considered once the initial roll-out is in place.

THIRD COUNTRY PASSENGERS

Discussions are ongoing between the European Commission and third countries with a view to facilitating interoperability/mutual recognition of certificates.

The first country to achieve an equivalency decision was Switzerland on 9 July.

PASSENGER JOURNEY

It should be noted that the EU Digital Covid Certificate is not a travel document and the possession of an EU Digital COVID Certificate will not be a precondition to exercise free movement rights. Therefore, travellers who do not have a Digital Covid Certificate can provide other verifiable forms of proof of vaccination, or a valid negative test.

You will be aware of media reports in respect of travellers who have travelled to EU countries without a Digital Covid Certificate. The Department of Foreign Affairs has been liaising with authorities in Malta, and has been in direct contact with a number of affected citizens.

Our understanding is that Malta has indicated that the Digital Covid Certificate is a requirement on the Re open EU webpage and they have indicated that they will not accept hand written certification.

But the situation underlines our advice to all travellers that it is essential that travellers familiarise themselves with the inbound rules and process requirements for their country of destination. A great deal of information is available on line and I would urge anyone who is travelling to check on the on-line resources before they finalise their plans.

PASSENGER LOCATOR FORM

Passengers entering Ireland must fill in a form before they arrive in Ireland - the COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form. Failure to do so is an offence.

The COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form is now an online form.

As of 12 July, Carriers are obliged to check for a completed ePLF form before allowing passengers to board/embark.

Through enhancements to the electronic Passenger Locator Form (ePLF), which are being finalised this week, travellers will be required to make a statutory declaration as to their travel status – that is vaccinated, recovered or in possession of a negative (not detected) test and form of proof. This determines what other public health advice, quarantine or testing measures will be applicable to the passenger – depending on what country they are arriving from.

Once operational, the enhanced ePLF receipt will identify those that have a certificate of an EMA approved vaccination or recovery or negative PCR test or who are otherwise exempt from the requirement to have a negative PCR test. For those travelling on a vaccine or recovery certificate, no further pre-departure checks are required by carriers.

Passengers travelling on a negative PCR test will be required to provide proof to the carrier of a negative PCR test taken not more than 72 hours prior to arrival or will be denied boarding/embarking.

The ePLF is not reliant on the Digital Covid Certificate but rather complements its use. The ePLF applies to all EU and non-EU passengers, with or without a DCC.

Passengers arriving from designated states who have pre-booked a place in mandatory hotel quarantine will be met at the aircraft and escorted separately from other passengers through the airport building for check in as required.

Children aged 11 and under do not need to take a RT-PCR test prior to travelling to Ireland. Children of any age, travelling with accompanying vaccinated or recovered adults will not be required to self-quarantine post arrival. However, where one accompanying adult needs to self-quarantine, then all children must also self-quarantine, unless vaccinated or recovered themselves.

VERIFICATION OF THE DIGITAL COVID CERTIFICATE

A verifier App has been developed to support checks of the Digital Covid Certificate which allows a mobile device (phone) to scan the QR code on the certificate in either paper or electronic form.

Border Management Unit and An Garda Síochána are conducting spot-checks of public health documentation, including the Digital Covid

Certificate, at ports of entry to the State for the purpose of ensuring the integrity of the enhanced public health travel regime.

The verifier App for checking the Digital Covid Certificate is available to the carriers, should they wish to avail of it.

PASSENGER INFORMATION

It is acknowledged that there is considerable complexity associated with travel at the moment given the impact of COVID-19 worldwide.

Part of the work of the group has been to provide a unified source of information for the public.

There is comprehensive information on both the Digital COVID Certificate and international travel in general on gov.ie/travel and www.dfa/travel and both webpages will be kept up to date with all the latest information.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of checking on these on-line resources if you can in preference to contacting the call centre this week.

CALL CENTRE

The contact centre has been created at exceptional pace to manage the required workflows and communications. This has required an incredible effort across multiple government agencies to put in place the people, processes and technology required.

An interim emergency line was put in place from 13th July in advance of the initial contact service going live on the 19th July given the level of public interest as soon as the first certificates began to issue.

We know there have been very long waiting times for many callers and the centre has not been able to meet the level of demand which involved over 40,000 in the last two days and over 34,000 calls yesterday alone. This far exceeds estimates of call centre demand based on an assessment of travel bookings and survey or insights data on travel intentions that Government or industry have access to.

It is also important to say, that unlike many industry call centres, these are complex queries, with over 150 scripts developed to assist agents answer queries. It is also the case that the rapid issuing of 2.1 million certificates in just over one week has inevitably “bunched” inquiries to the centre into these initial few days.

The centre ramped up to 55 agents between Monday & Tuesday, with a further 30 agents to be added during Wednesday. As agents become more familiar with the complexities of queries, we anticipate that number of calls handled will increase.

Following technical capacity issues on Monday, increased technical capacity was put in place from Tuesday morning through a second freephone number that will cater for a significantly higher number of calls. An increased number of agents are available to answer calls,

however, with call volumes at unprecedented levels, the call centre remains exceptionally busy. Further agents are also being added on a planned basis after training over the next two weeks.

The initial focus of the call centre has been to deal with urgent calls for people travelling in the next 10 days only. The call centre can only support queries in relation to Vaccination certificates and Recovery certificates.

Again, we have emphasised this in the communications but the centre is still getting calls from people with requests for certificates for PCR or antigen tests. These certificates are generated by 3rd party providers and details of how that system works is available on gov.ie/travel.

Current demand suggests that many people are calling that are not due to travel in the short term. These non-urgent calls are adding very significant wait times to all calls, and preventing many urgent calls from getting through. At the moment, we would again urge people to only call the contact centre if you are due to travel in the next 10 days.

Between Monday & Tuesday of this week, this initial call centre handled 2,826 calls. Many of these calls have had to deal with multiple requests so they are complex and take time – for example, requests for a full family.

Already 1,058 certificate details have been sent for re-generation – it is expected these will be reissued within 5 days. A further 731 queries have been sent to HSE requiring further investigation before a certificate can be issued.

The call centre will continue to evolve over the coming weeks with new services added to meet emerging concerns/demands from members of the public. A new online form to request Recovery certificates for eligible persons will be released this week.

We regret the delays some people are experiencing and are learning and continuing to improve the service each day.

In terms of anyone who did not receive their certificate yet – if you are not travelling in the short term we suggest that you wait a few more days as we are working hard to clear the final batches of certificates not yet issued which is due to incomplete data. Additionally, undelivered certificates, both by email and post, are being reviewed which may address some of the queries people may have. These are being proactively managed so that we can re-issue as quickly as possible.

We absolutely appreciate that any member of the public who has not yet received a certificate or has an error on the certificate that may need to be corrected may be anxious. However, we are satisfied that we will be in a position to resolve queries quickly and unless you need

your Certificate urgently we would encourage people to wait a few more days. The likelihood is that Certificates not yet issued will arrive and as the call centre further ramps up we will be a position to deal with all calls more quickly.

We will also continue to provide updated information through gov.ie/travel and dfa.ie.

CONCLUSION

In summary, significant work has been undertaken over recent weeks including the technological developments that were required to be stood up at pace, complex data governance arrangements and the scaling up of all operational matters throughout the end-to-end solution. However, the process will remain under on-going consideration with a view to further refining and enhancing over time.

In conclusion, I want to commend colleagues across the system for the extraordinary effort and collaboration which has allowed for the data collection, certificate generation and the issuing of over 2 million certificates from a standing start in just over 6 weeks. Again, I want to assure the public that every effort is being made to ensure that they can get certificates in good time to travel and no effort is being spared to resolve delayed certificates and any certificate errors as quickly as possible.

Thank you.