

Supplemental Aer Lingus Opening Statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications Committee – 22nd June 2021

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to engage - once again - with the Transport and Communications committee.

I will assume you have read the Aer Lingus opening statement which was originally due to be delivered on 2nd June. On this basis I won't read that statement but everything in it still stands.

I would however like to briefly supplement it to highlight some specific issues that need to be addressed urgently.

Stobart

Stobart Air informed Aer Lingus on 11th June that they were ceasing to trade with immediate effect resulting in the cancellation of all Aer Lingus Regional flights operated by Stobart Air. Stobart attributed this decision to the continuing impact of the pandemic which has resulted in almost no flying since March 2020.

Aer Lingus stepped in immediately to operate six routes until at least the end of August and arranged for BA City Flyer to operate four of the routes. The provision of this replacement schedule has ensured that all impacted customers due to travel in the immediate term were offered alternative travel arrangements.

Aer Lingus also confirmed that we are ready to operate the Dublin / Kerry route, subject to an appropriate PSO arrangement being put in place and that we are actively exploring options that would enable the provision of a Dublin / Donegal service.

Aer Lingus and other key stakeholders in the aviation sector have consistently warned that Ireland's 15-month long implementation of the most restrictive travel policies in Europe without sector specific supports being provided, represented a critical risk to aviation jobs and to connectivity. The collapse of Stobart Air is another unfortunate example of that risk materialising.

United Kingdom and United States

It is very disappointing that the first policy decision post the collapse of Stobart Air was to actually increase travel restrictions from the very market that Stobart Air primarily served. Extending the timing of the testing-out of quarantine from 5 to 10 days for unvaccinated arrivals from the UK

between now and 19th July adds further uncertainty and any reduction of risk is marginal. This was done without any corresponding provision of supports to the sector.

In terms of the plans beyond July 19th, when it comes to the United Kingdom and the United States, there is no logical rationale for additional restrictions being applied to travellers arriving from these countries over and above those applied for travellers arriving from within the EU.

The Government announcement on 28th May, applies additional restrictions to unvaccinated arrivals from both the UK and the US (whether adult or children), requiring them to self-quarantine for 14 days, with a post arrival PCR 'test-out' after 5 days.

Given the strong progress on the rollout of the vaccination programmes in both the UK and the US, the arrangements on arrival into Ireland should be equivalent to travellers arriving from EU countries.

Antigen-Testing

I am aware that this committee recently held a detailed debate on the issue of antigen testing. Recently both France and Spain have announced that they will utilise antigen testing as part of their risk mitigation tools. Both countries have confirmed that they will accept antigen testing as part of their pre-departure testing standards. Ireland remains an outlier in respect of its failure to use of this public health screening tool. Antigen testing is now widely accepted as a pre-departure testing standard across the European Union and in the US and UK.

Anti-family restrictions

On the wider issue of families, the recent Government announcement contains a significant anomaly for those traveling from non-EU markets like the UK and US. As it stands, children between 7 and 18 who are currently not eligible for vaccination but who are travelling with vaccinated parents are expected to self-quarantine for 14 days, with a post arrival PCR 'test-out' after 5 days.

This creates a perverse situation whereby an Irish family, with vaccinated parents, visiting relations in the UK for example, would on arrival back home into Ireland be required to ensure their children between 7 and 18 self-quarantine in the family home.

Similarly, a family considering travel to Ireland on vacation from key inbound markets like the US or the UK will simply choose an alternative destination as Ireland's policy if left unchanged will be clearly seen as anti-family.

On 31st May, the European Commission outlined the principle of preserving family unity stating that:

“To ensure family unity, minors travelling with parents should be exempted from quarantine when the parents do not need to undergo quarantine, for example due to vaccination”

We see no reason why this principle should not be applied to the UK and US.

Left unchanged, the anomaly contained within the Government’s announcement will have a severe impact on demand for travel to and from both the UK and US.

Provision of data to ECDC and CDC

On 9th June, the US State Department announced significant changes to travel advisories for nearly 60 countries moving them from level 4 (*“do not travel”*) to level 3 (*“reconsider travel”*). The advice level for a significant number of European countries was improved from level 4 to level 3 including Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Poland. The UK was already at level 3.

Despite Ireland’s improved epidemiological situation, Ireland was not moved to level 3 travel advisory by the US State Department and the advice for US citizens in relation to Ireland remains *“do not travel”*.

We understand that this was due to the failure by Ireland to provide the required data to the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the US State Department.

Similarly, the most recent traffic light system map published by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control indicates that ‘no data’ is available for Ireland.

Ireland’s progress to date is therefore being misrepresented and people will be far less inclined to book future travel to Ireland as a result.

Conclusion

In summary, the possible positive momentum that could have been generated by the Government’s announcement on 28th May is being eroded by five key issues:

1. The failure to adopt the Antigen testing standard as an approved standard of testing
2. Anti-family policies requiring quarantine of children when travelling with vaccinated parents from the UK and US
3. The introduction of onerous restrictions for unvaccinated UK arrivals between now and 19th July
4. The application of additional restrictions for travellers arriving from the UK and US over and above those applied to those arriving from within the EU.

5. The failure to provide epidemiological data reporting to ECDC and US CDC

While Aer Lingus welcomed the easing of travel restrictions announced by Government on 28th May, the impact of the erosion that I have outlined means that the Government announcement is proving to be 'too little, too late'.

The continued uncertainty creates confusion for prospective inbound and outbound passengers.

The support of this committee in ensuring the restoration of our international connectivity is critical. We need to send the message internationally that Ireland is both '*open for business*' and '*family friendly*' for those that are vaccinated or appropriately tested or recovered, and we need to do it urgently.

We request that the committee supports our calls that these issues are urgently addressed by Government.

Ends/