

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

OPENING STATEMENT

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DEPARTMENT OF THE TAOISEACH

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

I am joined by my colleagues:

Muiris O'Connor from the Department of Health;

Damien McCallion from the Health Service Executive;

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

Maeve Brett from the Department of Justice;

Phil O'Flaherty from the Department of Transport; and

Barbara Jones from the Department of Foreign Affairs.

INTRODUCTION

I am the Chair of an ad hoc sub-group of Senior Officials Group on COVID-19. The group was established 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.

BACKGROUND

The EU Digital COVID Certificate Regulation entered into application on 01 July 2021. It was developed to facilitate safe free movement of citizens in the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic. The European Commission has built a gateway through which, all certificate signatures can be verified across the EU.

On 29th June, Ireland joined the EU Digital COVID Certificates gateway. This means that (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 9th July, Ireland published its travel rules, one of only four countries to do so at that stage.

APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of the EU Digital Covid Certificate cuts across a number of Government departments and agencies. The challenge, as you know, is that many of the relevant Departments and agencies are involved in related COVID-19 projects, policy and legislative developments which connect with the implementation of the Certificate. The role of the Group 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 good 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 being taken 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 proposed lifting of restrictions on non-essential travel on the 19th 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.

A group involving the relevant Departments and Agencies, many represented today have been meeting regularly in plenary session to deliver on the project since the end of May when the Government agreed the group's establishment.

GENERATION OF VACCINATION AND RECOVERY DIGITAL COVID-19 CERTIFICATES

In light of significant 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 is enabling 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).

Where there is insufficient contact information to send out a certificate, a call centre will be available from 19th July through which a vaccine certificate can be requested, once a person's identity and eligibility have been verified.

As regards persons who are "recovered" from COVID-19, Recovery certificates will also be available upon request through the call centre, subject to verifiable evidence of recovery from a prior infection within the previous 180 days.

An upgraded version of the COVID Tracker App will be available shortly. This will allow 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 QUALITY

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.

That work is very well advanced and as regards 1.9 million vaccinated persons, this data is now available to allow for the generation of these certificates on a “push” basis.

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. Work on data relating to persons who have recovered from COVID-19 is continuing apace. Given the quality of this data and the relatively smaller numbers involved, it has been decided to provide recovery certifications on a “pull” basis – that is on request.

This will enable us to complete missing data fields, authenticate identity and ensure address and email for issuing of the certificate are accurate and up-to-date.

GENERATION OF CERTIFICATES BASED ON NEGATIVE (NOT DETECTED) TESTS

Digital COVID-19_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).

An information notice to prospective test providers on accessing the digital service required to generate a Digital COVID Certificate was published last week.

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

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.

RELATED INITIATIVES

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.

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 yesterday (12th 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 currently under development, 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 within 72 hours of arrival or will be denied boarding/embarking.

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.

Currently children aged 6 and under do not need to take a RT-PCR test prior to travelling to Ireland. The age limit is currently being reviewed.

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 will conduct 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](https://www.dfa.travel) and both webpages will be kept up to date with all the latest information.

A Digital COVID Certificate Call Centre is being established to take calls, provide support and resolve queries for citizens who have been vaccinated and received certificates. It will also resolve issues for those citizens who require a certificate but have not yet received one or are requesting recovery certificates (having recovered from COVID).

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

An interim emergency line will be operational from today (13th July). We are prioritising queries for people who are travelling in the very

near future and have received their certificate and may have queries on that certificate. A fully capable centre will be available from Monday 19th July.

This line will be focused on dealing with urgent queries only over the coming days so we are requesting that only those with an urgent query contact the centre this week i.e. those travelling in July. The service will be significantly ramped up between now and the 19th July when a full call centre service will be available. Meanwhile travellers can access the most up-to-date information through gov.ie/travel or dfa/travel.

DATA PROTECTION

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 in place for any data transfers in respect of the generation of vaccination related certificate. All other requisite processor and sub-processor agreements will be in place prior to any transfer of data.

PROGRESS AS OF 13TH JULY

CERTIFICATE GENERATION AND DELIVERY

160,000 paper vaccination certificates were posted yesterday, due to arrive in homes today. Approximately 1 million emails will issue

between yesterday and tomorrow. Altogether, it is anticipated that over 1.8 million certificates will have been delivered by 19th July. An emergency helpline opened this morning for those who have an urgent query on their certificate.

The certificates are generated based on available information. There may be circumstances where information needs to be updated on certificates and this can be done through the call centre.

PRIVATE TEST PROVIDERS

A small number of private operators have already signed up to provide DCCs and further information on relevant providers will be provided in due course.

PASSENGER LOCATION FORM

Work is continuing on making the necessary enhancements to the ePLF for the 19th July. The Department of Transport has been engaging with carriers on their role as part of the verification process and to update them more generally on progress on the implementation of the EU DCC and enhanced ePLF.

In summary progress is continuing apace with regard to implementation of the EU Digital Covid Certificate. While the challenges involved should not be underestimated, from the technological developments that were required to be stood up at pace, complex data governance arrangements and scaling up of all

operational matters throughout the end-to-end solution, we are on track for the system to be operational for the reopening of non-essential travel on 19th July. I would like to thank all involved for their work to date.