Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications

8 December 2021

Implementing the new Covid testing rules for incoming travel into Ireland

Opening Statement by Fintan Towey Assistant Secretary (DG Civil Aviation)
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Check against delivery

Introduction

I would like to thank you Cathaoirleach and the members of the Joint Committee for the opportunity to come before you to discuss the new Covid-19 testing rules that have been implemented for international travel into in Ireland. I am joined by my colleague, Phil O'Flaherty, who works with me on Covid international travel planning. I know that This Committee has dedicated considerable time to examining and raising key issues for the aviation and maritime sectors in the difficult period since the start of the pandemic and I welcome the opportunity to assist with its further deliberations.

We all share a desire to reach a point where international travel can take place without specific Covid-19 measures. The aviation and maritime industries need to plan and build towards a stable and sustainable recovery. There is, of course significant direct employment in those sectors but, more importantly, they are critical enablers of economic growth in other parts of the economy. The impact of Covid on those

industries, and on the travel industry and domestic tourism industry has been catastrophic and unprecedented.

The maritime sector is essential to the continued movement of good in and out of the country, accounting for 90% of Ireland's international trade in volume terms. The sector suffered reductions in freight traffic of up to 40% and passenger reductions of over 95% during the initial weeks and months of the pandemic. Passenger figures for 2020 showed a decrease of over 70% compared to 2019. While the opening of international travel on July 19th saw an improvement in maritime passenger volumes, they still remain around 40% below pre-pandemic levels.

Globally aviation is experiencing the most challenging crisis in its history. The general reduction in passenger numbers has severely impacted air connectivity. In Ireland passenger numbers were down 80% in 2020, and 90% for the period March to December. Air connectivity is vital for an island economy. The negative impact on aviation has significantly increased the cost of air freight for the export sector, with significant increases in the cost of doing business.

Many analysts are predicting that it will take several years to return to 2019 levels of activity. Public health travel restrictions and the

introduction of mandatory quarantine meant that between January and June 2021 passenger levels were down approximately 80% on all corridors.

Re-opening of travel

Government agreed a range of measures that took effect from 19 July and allowed the resumption of non-essential international travel. Central to this was the substantial work undertaken to introduce the enhanced Passenger Locator Form and the EU Digital Covid Certificate. Under these arrangements, we saw a welcome recovery in passenger numbers. Throughput at the state airports in mid-September was up nearly 200% compared to the week pre-19 July.

However, with the winter season and a known period of decrease in passenger numbers, the airports did see a fall again and are still only operating at between 50% and 60% of pre-pandemic levels.

Much of the recovery in passenger numbers was driven by our successful vaccination programme and those of our European neighbours. In the early stages of that recovery, it was noted by our colleagues in the Department of Health that approximately 90% of incoming passengers completing the electronic passenger locator form were fully vaccinated.

Introduction of additional testing

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 situation in Ireland and across Europe remains uncertain and of concern, with added uncertainty due to the potential impact of the omicron variant. Across Europe we have seen the imposition of additional protective measures. Some of these are targeted at travel from certain locations, but others have been applied more broadly.

From Sunday 5th December all persons arriving into Ireland from overseas who have been vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19 are also now required to have a "negative/not detected" test result. The test result must be from a professionally administered antigen test taken no more than 48 hours before arrival or a RT-PCR test taken no more than 72 hours before arrival. Unvaccinated passengers continue to require a PCR test. The previous exemptions to testing for international transport workers, and air and maritime crew have been maintained, which is important in the context of the European Union's 'Green Lanes' initiative and to ensure no additional blockages in the supply chain.

The Department of Transport engaged immediately with air and sea carriers as the announcement was made. We informed the carriers of the additional requirements to carry out pre-boarding checks for compliance. The Regulations signed by the Minister for Health provide

that the carriers are obliged to ensure that all passengers have completed an Electronic Passenger Locator Form and, unless exempt, have the required negative/not detected test result.

We will continue to engage with carriers to understand any issues arising for them and their passengers. We will also monitor the impact on the ports, airports and the supply chain. It is vital that the facilitation of passenger and freight traffic is kept as streamlined as possible while ensuring compliance with the new Government travel requirements. For maritime carriers, freight must remain free flowing in the busy Christmas season and with the commencement of customs checks into the UK market on January 1st, 2022.

We will engage with our colleagues in other Government Departments on any issues arising. We also look forward to the review of arrangements at the end of the initial two-week period.

Ends