

Joint Committee on Transport and Communications

8 December 2021

I would like to thank the Joint Committee for the opportunity to speak on the new travel restrictions which require travellers to undergo pre-departure tests for travel to Ireland. I am Muiris O'Connor, Assistant Secretary in the Department of Health and I am joined by my colleague Keith Comiskey, who leads on Covid travel policy for our Department.

The Department of Health has been central in the wider and ongoing national response to Covid-19 and in managing the risk of importation of variant of concerns throughout the pandemic.

The Department has responded to both improving and disimproving epidemiological situations as appropriate to support international travel to the greatest extent possible while ensuring that the protection of public health is paramount.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the Minister for Health has introduced regulations to support the public health response in relation to international travel.

These Statutory Instruments cover the requirements for travel to Ireland during the pandemic and also the Passenger Locator Form and the EU Digital Covid Certificates, which remain key tools for our pandemic response.

These regulatory changes are undertaken in consultation with seven other Ministers, including the Minister for Transport, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Minister for Justice, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

Together, this cross Ministerial approach ensures the appropriate response across various sectors of society and the economy, in so far as possible, while protecting people against severe illness or death.

This effort seeks to limit and delay the importation of Covid and its variants, understanding that we are part of an increasingly interdependent global community. In particular, it aims to delay importation of concerning variants while non-pharmaceutical interventions are strengthened and, until further evidence emerges relating to its transmissibility and the impact it has on disease severity.

Not enough is currently known about the Omicron variant and the World Health Organisation has designated it as a variant of concern.

In order to protect Ireland's healthcare system and economy we urgently and proactively responded to the emergence of this new COVID-19 variant.

New requirements were urgently put in place for travel from several specified countries where the Omicron was circulating in the community. Since the 29th of November, any person who has been in a Scheduled State in the previous 14 days is not permitted to travel to Ireland, except under certain exemptions.

Those that do travel are required to have pre-departure testing; to home quarantine on arrival; and to undergo post-arrival testing. There are very limited exemptions to these requirements.

The scheduling of these specific countries was made in line with the EU emergency brake mechanism to ensure a consistent EU approach to public health in this instance.

As information on the new Omicron variant is currently limited, additional protection measures were considered prudent to protect the re-opening of the Irish economy and society.

On the 30th of November, the Government decided that all travellers into Ireland should be required to present a negative test result, regardless of immunity status.

All travellers to Ireland from overseas are now required to show a relevant test result – either a PCR or antigen test result upon arrival to Ireland, unless specifically exempted by regulation.

Travellers with proof of immunity have the option of taking an RT-PCR or a rapid antigen test and those without proof of immunity are required to take a RT-PCR test.

These new measures are intended to be temporary and will be kept under constant review.

It was initially envisaged to have this measure operational by the 3rd of December. However, given the significant change of this requirement for passengers, it was decided to extend the implementation of this requirement by two days to Sunday December 5th.

These measures are being introduced as part of a whole of Government Covid response. As more information becomes available about the effects of the Omicron variant we will continue to adapt. The Department of Health will continue to work across Government on the ongoing national response to Covid-19 and to manage the risk of importation of variant of concerns.