

Opening Statement

Minister Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for Climate Action, Communications Networks and Transport, appearance at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport

Wednesday 7 October 2020

Thank you Chairman and Committee Members,

I welcome the opportunity to come before this Committee today, in light of the impacts of the pandemic on aviation, to address developments in the future direction of international travel policy.

Aviation impacts to date

It is true to say that despite the decimation of the aviation industry through this pandemic, essential air connectivity has been maintained. The industry and the people who work within aviation have stepped-up to meet the challenge of providing air transport services in a way that protects workers and passengers. The preference is for aviation to continue to provide air travel services as they act responsibly in mitigating and managing the risks from COVID-19.

Highlighting the impact of the pandemic, the CSO data between Q2 2020 and 2019 shows that 10.3 million fewer passengers used Irish airports; and, there were 67,000 less flights. The risks to aviation are evident –. The damage to route connectivity and to the structural integrity of the

industry, will determine the future capability of aviation to return to normal when the time is right, and has wider implications for the future potential of our economy and citizens.

Evolution of Ireland's approach to international travel

At the start of this pandemic the Government was criticized for having no plan for aviation or for international travel. An aviation recovery task force was established to develop that plan, with some recommendations already delivered, for example, the protocol of safe air travel, and further work ongoing to deliver other recommendations. We have a direction now within the National Plan for Living with Covid-19 – the EU proposal for a ‘traffic light’ model for international travel..

Ireland has updated the ‘Green List’, a first step to aligning with the proposed EU approach. The Department of Foreign Affairs Travel Advice correspondingly advises ‘Normal Precautions’ concerning these countries. In line with the EU proposal changes to the Green list will be better communicated to the travelling public. Ireland’s National Plan for Living With COVID-19 makes a commitment to broadly support the European Commission proposal to promote a common approach to travel restrictions and movement that is, consistent with public health requirements; cognisant of public resources and capacity; and, takes into account any special arrangements that may be required for Common Travel Area.

EU ‘traffic light’ model

My Department is continuing to work with colleagues across-Government and public health authorities on the possible application of the model for Ireland, I can say that from my perspective as Minister for Transport, aviation is a global industry which requires States to collaborate and cooperate on matters of international travel. Every effort should be made to ensure that restrictions on free movement where necessitated have due regard to the benefit for public health and are based upon reasonable grounds and evidence.

However, while I emphasise that free movement as an important principle it is clear that if the epidemiological situation deteriorates significantly enough the prospect of another full blown lockdown is not inconceivable – and must be avoided.

COVID-19 Testing for international travel

Airport testing, if established, would be just one element in a multi-layered approach to prevention of the spread of COVID-19. It would complement the existing Covid-19 mitigating measures. These include, the air passenger travel protocols, including physical distancing, face coverings and sanitisation protocols; the passenger health declaration concerning symptoms and close contacts; and the passenger locator form for providing follow-up targeted information to arriving passengers..

The proposed European Commission approach, set out a preference for testing over restrictions, however, there are varying views across Member States concerning restrictions and testing options. The international travel approach to be adopted should be a risk management approach, balancing the risks to public health with the broader social and economic risks.

Ongoing Review of Aviation Supports

I would like to finish with some remarks concerning the ongoing review of aviation supports.

As a result of the impact of this pandemic on aviation, there will continue to be a risk of reduced capacity, less route choice and lower demand in the months ahead with or without intervention by State or at EU level - and this will be reflected in the airlines' Autumn/Winter schedules.

My Department is continuing to explore the options for aviation supports, working through these with colleagues in Government. This is unfortunately a matter of hard-choices about priorities - of keeping schools open, keeping hospital beds free for those that need them, keeping economies alive and protecting jobs.

I will ensure that the support mechanisms for the aviation sector will continue to be reviewed in context of the Government's plans. I will continue to work towards the commitment made in the aviation recovery task force report, so that aviation is well position for recovery to previous levels of success.

Thank you Chairman.