

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS CUMARSÁID

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

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*Dé Céadaoin, 14 Iúil 2021*

*Wednesday, 14 July 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Joe Carey,	Jerry Buttimer,
Cathal Crowe,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Michael Lowry,	Timmy Dooley,
Steven Matthews,	Gerry Horkan.
Darren O'Rourke,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú.	

Teachta / Deputy Kieran O'Donnell sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** Apologies have been received from Deputy Duncan Smith. Following the private meeting of the committee yesterday, there is a matter arising which I would like to discuss with the committee in private session.

*The joint committee went into private session at 12.33 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.35 p.m.*

### **Implementation of the EU Digital Covid Certificate: Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform**

**Chairman:** We are dealing with Ireland's implementation of the EU digital Covid certificate, following on from our meeting yesterday with the officials responsible at an executive level for the roll-out. We are now dealing with the political side with the Minister of State responsible for the area, Deputy Ossian Smyth. On behalf of the committee I welcome the Minister of State and Mr. Barry Lowry, Government chief information officer at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

All witnesses are again reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity and they are directed to discontinue their remarks, it is imperative that they comply with any such direction. For witnesses attending remotely outside of the Leinster House campus, there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege and, as such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceeding as witnesses physically present do. Witnesses participating in this committee session from a jurisdiction outside of the State are advised that they should also be mindful of domestic law and how it may apply to the evidence they give.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I remind members of the constitutional requirement that members must be physically present within the confines of the place in which the Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House and-or the Convention Centre Dublin, to participate in public meetings. Reluctantly, I will not permit a member to participate if he or she is not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside of the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting. In this regard, I would ask any member participating via Teams, prior to making his or her contribution to the meeting, to confirm he or she is on the grounds of the Leinster House campus or the convention centre campus.

For anyone watching this meeting online or Oireachtas Members or witnesses accessing this meeting remotely online, only I, as Chair, and the necessary staff essential to the running of the committee are physically present in the committee room. Due to these unprecedented circumstances, a large number of people are attending the meeting remotely. I ask for everyone's forbearance should any technical issues arise.

I now call the Minister of State to make his opening statement.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth):** I thank the Chairman and committee members for the invitation to meet them today to discuss Ireland's implementation of the EU digital Covid certificate. I am joined by Mr. Barry Lowry, the Government chief information officer. He also attended the meeting yesterday.

As the committee knows, I am a Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and my various responsibilities include eGovernment. It is on this basis that I recently agreed to take on responsibility for the issue of the EU digital Covid certificate. I am aware the committee had a long and detailed session yesterday with various senior officials and is now developing a good understanding of the extent and scale of the technical and logistical challenge we faced in this programme. Therefore, I will try to use my opening remarks to develop, where possible, what Ms Liz Canavan said yesterday.

As the committee is aware, the EU digital Covid certificate regulation entered into application on 1 July 2021. It was developed to facilitate the safe free movement of citizens in the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is proof, in digital or paper format, that a person has either been vaccinated against Covid-19, received a negative test result recently before travel or recovered from Covid-19. The recovery certificate is valid for 180 days from the time a person tested positive for Covid. Providing a certificate for each of these episodes has required a slightly different process, which I will explain later.

While the digital Covid certificate is not a travel document or a passport, it will help people to travel safely within the EU and EEA during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is not a prerequisite to travel. You do not have to have a digital Covid certificate to travel within the EU. The EU digital Covid certificate, DCC, programme in Ireland has been developed by a senior cross-departmental group chaired by the Taoiseach's Department. I congratulate that group and its staff on the success achieved to date. My Department, through the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, OGCIO, is responsible for the technical component of EU DCC production.

The European Commission has built a gateway through which all certificate signatures can be verified across the EU. Each member state is responsible for, first, maintaining connectivity to the gateway and, second, ensuring the gateway holds the correct QR code key for each country, which means it has been signed with what is called a private key that each country owns. This is required to enable one country to verify the digital Covid certificates produced by other member states. Third, each member state is responsible for ensuring it updates its trust lists frequently. This is an important part of the process. A trust list allows one country to verify the QR code of another and to verify that code in the context of the admittance rules for the country of destination. For example, someone travelling from Ireland on a certificate based on an antigen test would fail if the country of destination did not accept antigen tests as being sufficient. Ireland currently only accepts PCR tests for admission with regard to quarantine rules. The EU recommendation is to download the trust list every six hours, which Ireland does. We then ensure the verifier app, which the committee heard about yesterday, refreshes every time it is opened. This creates the capability to verify another member state's certificates. In Ireland, we do this through our verifier app, which is already in operation.

This all means we have one of the most robust implementations of the digital Covid certificate across Europe. On 30 June, Ireland connected to the EU digital Covid certificates gateway.

This was a milestone, as I have explained, in helping ensure that, first, the digital Covid certificates issued in Ireland are recognised by authorities in other EU member states and, second, 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.

The session yesterday gave a sense of the wider programme. I will focus on the technical solution. This involves several bodies working together, and I thank them all for their commitment and hard work to date. First, I will talk about vaccination certificates. The HSE produces a batch of files of data for processing. In line with GDPR, each file contains only the data required for certificate production. A batch file can be either for email or print and post. This is done by examining the email field in the record. If that field is set to null, we know the certificate is to be posted. The second step is that each record in the batch is converted into a certificate by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer and its partner organisation. A series of validation processes are completed and, once everything is checked, the batch is sent either to Revenue for print and post or to the OGCIO cloud email server. The final step is the certificate is issued by Revenue for next day post or the cloud email server for imminent delivery.

For recovery certificates, the first step of the process is different. It is a pull instead of push process. It is done on request rather than by a pre-emptive sending of the recovery certificates. The reason for this is that when the HSE was informed of a positive Covid case, it collected information for the purpose of track and trace, not for production of a future recovery certificate. Consequently, where an individual has been tested as positive by the HSE within 180 days and is reliant on recovery rather than vaccination for the digital Covid certificate, he or she can contact the helpline, which will verify the caller's ID and collect the remaining required information, including valid email address. From then on, the steps for issuing recovery certificates are the same as for vaccination certificates.

If you are not vaccinated and have not recovered from Covid, the last option is to get tested shortly before the journey and show you are negative, unlike the recovery certificate, which says the holder is positive. This process is different as we use, and will continue to use, private testing for the purpose of safe travel. In other words, the Government is not the data controller. What is different now is the State's obligation under the regulation to produce a certificate for a negative test. Technically speaking, we use a similar approach to that with the HSE. We use an application programming interface, API, to receive the data from the private tester and then return a certificate for each test to the tester for issuance to the customer. It is essential the tester accepts responsibility for ID verification, correct testing, accurate data input and the security and data management of its end of the process.

Consequently, 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. The detailed instructions for how this will work were posted on *gov.ie* last Friday. 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 it by email to an address given on *gov.ie*, *digitalcovidcerts.business@per.gov.ie*. The first engagements with responders are already beginning to happen.

As was mentioned yesterday, it is hoped an upgraded version of the Covid tracker app will be available next week. This will not be necessary to use the digital Covid certificate; it is

simply to allow people to upload their certificate, whether paper or PDF, to a wallet on their phone if that is their preference rather than carrying it around on a sheet of paper. The Covid tracker app serves as a pandemic response tool and provides a number of functions, including exposure notification, information platform and the check-in function. These are independent of each other. I repeat what was said yesterday: it will be possible for people to disable these 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 governance has been the subject of ongoing engagement with the Data Protection Commission to ensure the process is fully compliant with GDPR regulations. The HSE and the Department of Health are the joint data controllers, the OGCIO is a data processor, and Revenue is a subprocessor. The requisite data controller and data processing agreements are in place for any data transfers in respect of the generation of vaccination-related certificates. All other requisite processor and subprocessor agreements will be in place prior to any transfer of data.

I hope this statement helps to build upon the information provided by Liz Canavan and the senior officials' group yesterday. I reiterate that the primary focus throughout the planning and delivery of this programme has been to fulfil our EU obligations in a robust and effective way, including operability by 1 July in the 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 19 July. In doing so, we have had to be mindful of developing the certificate in a way which provides the greatest assurance, in line with data protection, as regards sensitive personal information.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I confirm I am in Leinster House. I thank the Minister of State for being here. Credit is due to him and his team because recent weeks have been dogged by almost daily speculation that this would not happen. Today, 1 million digital Covid certificates are on their way out to people by post or email. Well done.

I will put a number of questions. The first is on the batching of files. Whether you have been to the local GP, pharmacy or mass vaccination centre, will the Minister of State clarify how batching works? Is it at the end of each day the files are referred on or a couple of days later? People are now looking at that kind of detail as they prepare to book holidays or fly. They want to know they have gone out in a batch. What turnaround time would apply to each batch upon arrival at the Department?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The question is whether the batching of files, particularly from pharmacies and GPs, happens at the end of each day. Initially, we are sending out all of the files for all the people who are vaccinated. In other words, we are sending out everything from the history of everybody who has been vaccinated since the start of the year - the entire programme. From the middle of this week onwards, we will be collecting the new people who have been vaccinated from the day before and we will be sending that out as a daily job. In terms of how long it is going to take, I will double-check with Mr. Lowry, the chief information officer. We have two processes. Under one process we take a huge section of all the people who have ever been vaccinated, divide that into slices in order that we can take the data a chunk at a time and send it out. We are coming to the end of that process. We then move towards a daily update whereby each day we take a batch of data. I will ask Mr. Lowry to confirm how long it actually takes after that. For example, if a person is vaccinated next Monday, how long would he say it is going to take before we can send him or her an email or letter?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** I thank the Deputy for the question. We are reliant, first of all, on the



GP or the pharmacist because he or she must upload the data. Both have electronic provisions in place with the HSE so they can upload the data. Once it is uploaded, the HSE transfers it from the existing COVAX system over to what it call the data lake. The HSE carries out a data quality check on it and it is from there it creates the batch. We have not gone through the end-to-end business-as-usual process, as we call it, because we have totally focused on the backlog but we are hoping in the same the day the HSE can collate that data and produce a batch file. If that batch file is produced overnight then, depending on whether it is email or post, it will be out within either one to two working days or three to four working days.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The way pharmacists and GPs are paid for vaccination is on a per-person or per-dose basis. Those payments are made after they have submitted the data so there is an incentive for the health professional to send in their data as soon as possible.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I have a few other questions. When this was first being designed there was just the international travel dimension to it but now it very much looks like it will also have a purpose here on the domestic front. Specifically with regard to restaurants, bars, etc., the Minister of State's referred to the verifier app and that each gateway will hold a correct QR code key for each country. Not every European country will have a digital certificate operating on a dual-capacity basis. People who work in airports typically handle very sensitive data from passports to immigration control documents. What level of training will be supplied to people in a local bar or restaurant, beyond holding a verifier app and beeping a QR code? I note data will not be retained but will the Minister of State give any assurances that sensitive data that typically will be present in the realm of an airport will not necessarily appear on screen down in your local pub when you are ordering your pint and starter? What level of training will there be? What assurances can the Minister of State give the public that what we will have in a local pub or restaurant is quite a separate thing from what we would typically have in an airport? I would like the Minister of State to deal with that, if he does not mind.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I will start by describing the information that is on the certificate. Many members will have received theirs already and will see it just contains one's first and last name, one's date of birth and the dose of vaccine one has received and the dates on which they were received. There is not any information beyond that; that is the extent of the information.

My role in this, technically, was to be responsible for ensuring the certificates got issued, that is, that they got printed or electronically generated with barcodes. The intention was that they would be used for international travel. A new decision came out of Cabinet on Monday that we would use them for another purpose, namely, entry for indoor dining in restaurants and pubs. How that is going to work in practice is being worked out this week between the hospitality sector, Fáilte Ireland and the Ministers involved, which, I guess, are those with responsibility for tourism and enterprise. I do not think they have asked us for assistance with that. They are planning to use the certificates because they have been sent out, whether they are in electronic form on a phone or in paper form. At this stage, I do not know what they are going to do because I am not involved in that project. I guess it is a tourism and hospitality question and something the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, or the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, might be better placed to answer questions about.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the Minister of State. I appreciate that he does not have the answer to that today, but it is essential because beyond serving up a pint and packets of peanuts and getting dinners on tables, people who run pubs and restaurants need to know this is pretty much bombproof and simple to practice. They need an awful lot there. They are now gearing

up for reopening which everyone really welcomes but this just a layer of anxiety they should not have in the coming days.

How much has all this cost? I ask because this is something that has been scrambled and put together very quickly, though very successfully. The Minister of State mentioned partner organisations in his presentation so I am wondering how much has this cost to date. I am sure there will be ongoing operational costs. On a final point, I raise the wait time in airports. We have seen in the UK there have been considerable delays in the London airports in particular. Yesterday we had departmental officials before us, including Mr. Lowry. I was concerned because, if I understood them correctly, a person will be asked to present his or her Covid certificate at the departure gate. By then, a person will have gone through baggage drop-off, check-in, passport or border control, duty free and probably had a cup of coffee. The person has gone all the way through the concourse of the airport but he or she is only showing this all-important certificate literally before he or she goes through the doorway to get aboard the plane. I am wondering about wait times. Has the Minister of State factored them in? Is the point of departure the best place to read it or should it nearly be kerbside? Kerbside check-in was introduced in the US years ago. It is very efficient. Just before you enter the concourse, you prove you are safe to fly in one of the three ways, namely, by being vaccinated, recovered or tested. It would be better to do it early on in that process. The Minister of State might clarify that and also go through the costings to date and the projected ongoing costing for the implementations of this.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I will talk about the cost first. The project is split between different Departments. The Department of Justice is in charge of the immigration desks in the airports, the Department of Transport runs the ports and the airports, the Department of Health is producing the vaccination data and the Department of Foreign Affairs has an interest in any kind of foreign travel. Then there is the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, at which I am based, which is actually generating and issuing the certificates. Between them, the Departments I have listed would have costs. It is all co-ordinated by the Department of An Taoiseach, under the officials who appeared before the committee yesterday. I do not have costs from all those Departments. I think it is a very good question-----

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Has the Minister of State the costings for the Department at which he is based?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** We had to redirect staff because much of our work was done internally but we also subcontracted a partner organisation to help us with this. Does Mr. Lowry have any estimate of the costs for our Department on this?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** Yes. Obviously, the process has not been completed, but we think the cost will ultimately run to approximately €500,000 for the Department. The EU has promised it has promised it will make a donation to countries for national costs. The biggest cost will run to the Revenue because it has had a team on since last Friday and it was also involved in the preparation. Revenue staff are working extra hours because they have a huge workload regardless of this need. They will be sending out something approaching 1 million letters and that is before we get into a steady state. That is 1 million letters for next-day delivery and the labour cost of that to the State will be substantial. This is an EU regulation so as the Minister of State said in his opening remarks, we have no choice but to apply it as efficiently as we can. Where we did not have email addresses for people, we simply had to post the certificates to them.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** If he can do so, will Minister of State reply to my remarks regarding the point at which people will be asked to produce this for verification?

**Chairman:** Will the Minister of State refer briefly or provide a written response about people being checked when they are getting on planes? Is he, as Deputy Cathal Crowe inquired, looking at alternatives to get people through quicker, such as doing it at the kerbside?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The European Commission has advised that we check as early as possible in the process. Ideally, it would be at the point where a person gets the electronic passenger locator form or at online check-in. The worst case would be where everybody is being checked at the destination country and lines are building up at immigration. The intention is that everybody will be checked pre-departure but there will only be spot checks at the immigration desk at the destination airport. Those are the two lines of checks. In the same way that the carriers check passports or visas because passengers leave, since they do not want to bring passengers to a destination where they are not accepted, they will also check Covid status. With that in mind, the agency has been working with the carriers and ferry companies and has been on site with them in the past weeks to work out a practical way for this to work. The Chairman has invited me to give a written description of this and I am happy to submit that.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the Minister of State. What he said is logical and sensible. However, it is at odds with what we were told yesterday, that this would be at departure gates. What the Minister of State has just said and the Commission has recommended makes sense. To think that you could spend an hour and a half weaving your way through an airport without being asked to present this digital certificate until you are at the departure gate is-----

**Chairman:** I thank the Deputy. His point is well made. What percentage of the cost will come back from Europe?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The European Commission offered €100 million for European countries. I am not sure how that will be divided. If it was divided based on population, we would get €1 million. It is not a substantial amount.

**Chairman:** It is not significant.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I expect that the postage cost alone will come to €1 million. You do not sniff at €1 million but that is likely to be the amount received.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I thank the Minister of State for coming today. We had a productive meeting yesterday with good engagement. We got a lot of information. I compliment the Minister of State for the role that he has played in this and for coming before our committee today. Yesterday, officials explained that they expected maybe 1% of the emails would bounce back. A significant volume has been produced at this stage. Have any particular difficulties been encountered up to now? Were there any glitches? Is it on track? Does the Minister of State think targets will be reached this week?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I thank Deputy Carey for his kind words. I just got the latest information before the committee meeting. We have sent 984,000 emails so far. Of those, 7,500 have bounced, which is a rate of 0.76%. When there is a database of emails and more than 99% are delivering, that is an incredibly high-quality set of data. That is probably because most people who put in an email did it through the portal where they had to confirm their email and click on the link. When you write down an email on a form, it is not quite as good. We have good quality email data and I am happy with that bounce rate. It means that 7,500 people will presumably contact the call centre looking for this to be reissued. We will facilitate them. Did Deputy Carey have another question that I missed?



**Deputy Joe Carey:** No. Does the Minister of State believe that the Department is on track to have all these certificates either via post or email over the coming days?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Yes. We have sent 984,000 emails out of a total of about 1 million. So far, we have posted out 350,000 letters. We had approximately 900,000 of those to send. I will defer to Mr. Lowry in case he has any more up-to-date information than I have. We are ahead of schedule on the emails and are sending them faster than we expected. How about the letters? Does Mr. Lowry expect that we will have them all out by the end of the week?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** Revenue is still working on producing between 50,000 and 70,000 a day. We are into the fifth day of processing. It reckons that by the end of today, there will be 350,000. It will try to maintain the current progress and to ramp it up over the weekend so that we can get at least 90% of the certificates posted and most of them received in households by next Monday. As Liz Canavan said yesterday, there might be a backlog that goes into Tuesday and Wednesday, but everything will be done to try to minimise that as much as possible. There is always a risk, with this degree of processing, of machine failure. There was a power cut on Sunday. These things do happen. That is why we are being slightly cautious with the figures that we announce because all of this is dependent on a fair wind and what we know the machines and teams are capable of all being achievable, with no other incidents that affect it.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** People will be getting letters from Revenue and should not be worried when they see a letter from Revenue. They should open it. I thank the Revenue Commissioners for agreeing to do this and helping us out. They are skilled organisationally and with IT. They are capable of sending out millions of tax refunds or demands, and do so all the time. They have the skills in this area and I thank them.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I have a last question about the application itself. For people who would not be digitally minded, can it be made easier for the public to use it and upload from the certificate that people get in the post? Will the Minister of State describe how someone would upload that? Will it be made easier? What would the Minister of State advise? Will a video be posted online to show people what to do?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I will describe it now. We were not planning to put up a video but if the Deputy thinks it would help, we can definitely look into it. There will be a simple email with a PDF file attached. You can print that out or if you have a smartphone, you can click on it and the barcode will come up which can be used in the airport. If you receive a letter instead of an email because we do not have your email address, then you will receive a sheet of paper which can be scanned in an airport in the same way as a boarding pass is scanned. If you need to go to the airport with your boarding pass, you can either bring it on your phone or on a piece of paper. I would always bring the paper as well, in my bag, in case my phone ran out of battery, was not working or went blank at the desk. It makes sense to keep it. I stated earlier that the Covid tracker application is being updated next week to give it the capability of storing one of these digital Covid certificates on your phone. I think that more than 1 million people have downloaded the application. They will be able to put this into the application and always have it handy even if they do not have the sheet of paper. If it is being used for other domestic purposes, that could make sense as well.

We will watch what comes into the call centre. The common problems that come into the call centre will feed back into the next roll-out to make sure that those problems do not arise. If people are confused by something, or if they need more information, we will put that into the next version.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I thank the Minister of State.

**Chairman:** I got my own digital Covid-19 certificate by email this morning. I printed it off. It is pretty straightforward; it gives your name, the name of your vaccine, and the date on which you were given your second dose. If you were given the Janssen vaccine, it gives the date of your first dose. It is straightforward and it is good. We will now move to the Sinn Féin slot. Deputy Darren O'Rourke has seven minutes.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I thank the Minister of State for his presentation, following yesterday's. This has been helpful. I have a couple of questions about private testing facilities that conduct polymerase chain reaction, PCR, testing and antigen testing. Is the Minister of State satisfied that there is sufficient engagement with those facilities? Does he think that all of the private testing providers will engage with and adopt this system? Has the uptake been slow or fast?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** To go over this again, I will answer Deputy O'Rourke's question directly. A number of labs have engaged with us. So far, 25 different testing services have contacted us to seek permission to issue digital Covid certificates. Three of those have been accepted in full so far. Seven are partially accepted. That is the progress so far with those labs and testing services. A person will go to his or her testing service for a PCR or antigen test. The service will verify the person's identity, which is an important part of its job. The service has to carry out the test with a trained professional. It has to comply with the standard operating procedure, SOP, that was written by the Department of Health to satisfy the Government that it meets the technical and medical standards required. As well as this, it have to satisfy the Government that it will not, for example, issue certificates with the wrong name on them, and so on. At that point, it will be empowered to connect to our servers. It can issue a generated QR code for each person, as he or she receives his or her negative test. It can then issue the digital Covid certificate to the recipient. The rules of the digital Covid certificate scheme say the PCR test must be carried out within 72 hours of arrival at the destination. The testing services will, therefore, only be useful three days before 19 July 2021. For an antigen test, the test must be 48 hours before arrival. It will, therefore, only be this weekend that the testing services will issue the first digital Covid certificates. Over the previous months, we have tested a number of pilot testing services to make sure that they can generate these digital Covid certificates, and that all is working. I am, therefore, confident that there will be no problem.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** That is good to hear. I would raise a few points on that. We should get as close to the 25 testing centres, which is as close as we can to 100% capacity. People should be aware that if they avail of a private testing facility that does not engage with the DCC scheme, that may have implications. People do not necessarily have to have a DCC certificate to travel; they can still travel with the paper form, or with a form that indicates that they have had a negative appropriate test. That would be important for people to know, given the tight timeframes and turnarounds.

A huge amount of work has been done on the call centre. I commend everyone involved. However, issues will arise nonetheless. Many people who do not intend to travel will get digital Covid certificates. Some others who intend to travel will not get their digital Covid certificates. It is the nature of these things.

The call centre will be live on Monday. What sort of contact does the Minister of State expect? What sort of modelling has he been doing on contacting? Is it adequately resourced? How many people will be manning the phones?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I thank the Deputy for the questions. To answer the question about the call centre, this week we have been running an emergency call centre. The contact number is on the cover letter or email that a person gets upon receipt of their digital Covid certificate. That is for emergency problems, rather than asking to be pushed up the list, or for general questions. The call centre is being run by Revenue and the Department of Social Protection. I am told that they have been getting 4,000 calls a day. They have 25 to 30 agents manning the phones. Next Monday, the number of agents will increase significantly. Next Monday, the call centre will deal with regular issues, such as reissuing of lost certificates, or other similar problems. That will be a larger service. Mr. Barry Lowry might say something about this. The call centre service is being provided by the Department of Health. It was decided that the Department of Health would run the service because it is closest to the vaccination data and understands it best. That is why the Department of Health is the Department that is running it. Does Mr. Lowry know anything beyond what will happen on Monday? I understand that it will be upgraded and that there will be more staff to carry out more functions by Monday. Is that correct?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** That is correct. It is difficult to guesstimate the volume of traffic for any call centre. As the Minister of State said, we have been using data from the first day. On the first day, we got 4,000 calls. Interestingly enough, a large proportion of those stopped after they listened through the interactive voice response, IVR. It is our hope that is because the IVR gave them the information they wanted, rather than that they got fed up waiting. The service has ramped up again today. We plan that next week the call centre will operate in the region of 60 to 80 staff. We have built a scale up procedure if we need it.

Many of these things grow in intelligence as they go along. To date, a spreadsheet has been sent round to everybody who plays a part in this. It contains as many questions as people could think of. They have been answered and scripted. Obviously, there will be questions that nobody has thought of. In those cases, they will be dealt with and then scripted. We are looking at how we can create extra processes. For example, if a person changed his or her email address, but it is clear from the data it is he or she who has called the centre, we can automatically issue that digital Covid certificate. In other cases, there will be substantial changes. In these cases, it has to go through the proper resolver team to quality check the data. This will make sure that we are giving the certificate the person who actually had the vaccination.

**Chairman:** Just to clarify, are the staff in the call centre from the Department of Social Protection or the Department of Health?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** They are from two Departments. They are from Revenue and the Department of Social Protection. The service is being provided by the Department of Health-----

**Chairman:** It is being overseen by the Department of Health, but being staffed by the Department of Social Protection and Revenue-----

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Exactly. It is run by the Department of Health, but the staff have come from the Department of Social Protection and Revenue for this week.

**Chairman:** Of the 4,000 calls, does the Minister of State know how many of those actually got through to the 25 to 30 people? I know that is being ramped up threefold to 60 to 90 people on Monday. How many of those physically got through to speak to an operator?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Some 1,200 people continued to speak to an operator, rather than give up at the IVR stage.

**Chairman:** Does the Minister of State know how long they were waiting?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I am not sure that I have those stats.

**Chairman:** So really, only one third of the people ended up speaking to personnel who were there. Is that a question that people were satisfied with the information? It is a relatively low through-put to get through. It is something that the Minister of State will probably have to look into. There will be teething problems.

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** I want to add for the record and for clarity that when the phone call centre is in operation next week, the bulk of those staff will be private sector workers. The Revenue and the Department of Social Protection have only provided staff for the emergency call centre for this week.

**Chairman:** Mr. Lowry might elaborate on that. Has that gone out to public tender?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** We are using a third party to provide the call centre staff.

**Chairman:** Who is that?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** The third party that is leading the call centre is Accenture.

**Chairman:** Has that gone out for public procurement?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** It went through the tender process.

**Chairman:** When was Accenture appointed?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** It has been working on this project for three to four weeks because we had to design the call centre as well so we had people involved in that.

**Chairman:** What is the value of that contract?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** I am not sure. It is a Department of Health contract.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I thank the Minister of State for being here and for his commitment. It is refreshing to have a Minister of State coming into a committee and answering questions. I thank him for his work on that.

The earliest point of engagement is critical. If it gets to the departure gate, that will lead to mayhem. I ask that this would be given huge consideration.

What is the plan to engage with the people whose emails have bounced back? I know it is a small percentage of the overall number but it is still a number of people who will not be able to avail of the EU DCC.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I take the Senator's point that the earliest point that we engage to get the EU DCC for a passenger the better. I will bear that in mind. That point was made by Deputy Cathal Crowe.

The next question was on what we will do about the fewer than 1% of people whose emails have bounced. Our next alternative would be to write to them. If we treat those people as if

they had a null email, sending them a letter is probably the right approach and that would require a new batch. Is that what Mr. Lowry would think as well? The alternative is that we just let them call and issue the certificates as requested. Has Mr. Lowry decided a tactical approach to that yet or is he waiting for me to tell him what to do?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** We are planning that and I thank the Senator for his question. There are two groups that we need to trap. One is those whose emails did not get through and the other is those who did not receive letters as they possibly had a wrong address. We have a process to capture both groups. The emails are easy and we know straight away what those are but Revenue is collating the letters that were sent back and they will be returned to the Department of Health. They will possibly be scanned and returned as well as being physically returned. Depending on what those final numbers are, we are trying to work out the most efficient process for dealing with the people concerned. That might well be that the service desk phones them back but we have not initially designed that system to do outward calls. It is more to deal with inward calls. As the Minister of State said, it might be that if we have robust addresses for the ones that were emailed, we will write to them. We will review every case. A team is being set up to do the review and it will make sure that people are not left without a EU DCC.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** In that vein, I mention some of the people whose names are misprinted or misspelled as Gaeilge. We have had a number of issues this morning with people coming to us around this matter. Can Mr. Lowry give clarity and certainty to people around the spelling of their names, including the séimhiú, apostrophe or síneadh fada, that they will not be discommoded in any way?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** We tested the EU DCC with names with síntí fada, apostrophes and everything we could think of that might break the system and it worked. I am happy that it is working. However, the data we are supplied with comes from a variety of sources, including from different medical professionals, hospitals, GPs and pharmacies. Sometimes those systems mangle the words so if we are sent data from a system that has changed an “i” into a Greek character, that is what we receive and it is hard for us to correct it after the fact. I am satisfied that our system is not doing that but it is possible that an upstream system is. Does that help to explain? I am sorry to anyone who received a certificate with a damaged name in it.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** To be fair, I got my EU DCC yesterday, which is a huge relief. The Minister of State said in his statement that the EU DCC will hopefully be available on the Covid tracker app next week. Is there an outcome from that which is not desirable? For example, if it is not available next week, what is the import of it not being available? I have a sense from talking to people that in some cases they have a fear of the Covid tracker app. I know that is completely irrational but some people have that fear. I ask that the Minister of State to make it as easy as possible for people to be able to store the EU DCC. I thank the Minister of State again for his work and I commend Mr. Lowry as well for all that is being done.

I know the Minister of State says that indoor dining is not his bailiwick, Department or area of responsibility but it is important that we develop a pathway for citizens to make it user friendly and not to continue to have a quagmire of bureaucracy. Let us make it simple for people. A one-stop-shop approach is the way we should go to make the indoor dining and travel experiences as pleasurable as possible with the minimum of fuss. I thank the Minister of State for all his work.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The aim of any IT project is to make it delightful for the user. That is the final goal. A lot of people were delighted when they received their EU DCCs. It is



a milestone. They got this thing that states that they are fully vaccinated and that gave them a feeling that they were moving on to the next stage.

On the Covid tracker app, we never wanted to force people or make people download it. A lot of people downloaded it but one does not have to use it for the EU DCC. It is just that so many people have it, we thought it would be a handy place to store it. We are not thinking of new users but of the existing user base. If one does not have it, one can still keep the EU DCC on one's phone or on paper.

On making indoor dining as simple and user friendly as possible, we have not been asked to assist with it but if we are then I am happy to help. Maybe Mr. Lowry has been asked about it so we will come to him in a second.

Lastly, I will go back to the Senator's original question about using the EU DCC with a carrier or ferry company at the earliest point. I have been passed a note by a colleague who tells me that he checked in with Aer Lingus and that he was chosen to test a system where Aer Lingus verifies one's EU DCC as part of a digital check-in. Aer Lingus seems to be close to having that system working. That is a positive step as well.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** The Minister of State might talk to Mr. Wilson and Mr. O'Leary as well so.

**Chairman:** Mr. Lowry might come back to Senator Buttimer on indoor dining.

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** I cannot add much more to that. We are aware that a number of potential technical solutions are being looked at to see how they can help with indoor dining but as far as I am aware, as of this afternoon no final choice of a system has been made. It is still under development.

**Chairman:** I will go to Senator Dooley. I inadvertently went to Senator Buttimer ahead of Senator Dooley.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** It is no problem whatsoever that a good man like Senator Buttimer went before me. I thank the Minister of State for the clarity he has provided. I agree with others that he has a good handle on what can be a complex matter if it is not addressed quickly.

I mention the scenario where somebody's name appears incorrectly based on his or her own mistake; a case in point being my own. I am known as Timmy but my passport has my name given at birth as Timothy. It has caused me difficulties in the past on occasion with checking in online for a boarding pass. I assume that is something that can be resolved over the phone, if necessary, in due course.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I am not so sure it is something that we can easily resolve. We have talked through all the different problems that might occur and one of them is where a person's name is different on his or her passport from the name that he or she usually goes on and whether the person can change his or her name. Any type of name change in a system is a security risk because a person may telephone to change a name from a person who is vaccinated to the caller's own name because he or she is not vaccinated. It is a security risk. I would ask Mr. Lowry. It is confusing to have Deputy Lowry and Mr. Lowry on the same meeting. I will ask Mr. Lowry whether it is envisaged that we will allow name changes over the phone or whether there will be any way to change your name over the phone if you have been vaccinated in a different name from the name on your passport.

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** I thank the Minister of State and thank Senator Dooley for his question. There are two different types of call that can come in regarding a change to a certificate. The first is that there is something relatively minor or, indeed, an error. It could well be that the name was recorded incorrectly, for example, at point of vaccination. That can be fixed by the call centre. For example, if you have changed your email since it was sent out, that can be relatively easily fixed. If it is something that is more pertaining to your health record and you want a change to your health record so that it matches your passport record, there will be a HSE resolver team and it will take those and will work its way through them. Once they have work their way through them, they will simply put them in the overnight batch with the new vaccinations.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** Okay. The answer to that is, for the moment, maybe. On the next one, there is quite a number of Irish citizens who either work or reside in the UK, or temporarily worked or resided in the UK, and would have been vaccinated there. Obviously, the UK is outside the European Union now. I do not know what their role is in terms of providing information around the digital Covid certificate. Do we have any capacity to take information from citizens who were vaccinated in the UK and upload them into our system and provide them, as EU citizens, with a digital Covid certificate?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** It is a good question. Within the regulations from the EU, it states that a country can issue vaccination certificates to a resident who was vaccinated in another country if we recognise that country's vaccination system. In the initial roll-out of these vaccination certificates, we are merely sending them to everybody who got vaccinated by the HSE in Ireland. However, we are looking at doing this for people who were vaccinated outside of Ireland. We are looking at that for the next version. I would say as well that if you were vaccinated in the UK, including Northern Ireland, you can travel to Ireland on that vaccination certificate. If you have your NHS proof of vaccination which looks like the card that you get in Ireland that is filled in with pen, you can use that as your proof of vaccination when you travel to Ireland. I suppose the significant aspect is that you do not have to isolate on coming to Ireland anymore. It really was not possible for family reunions with children who were living in Britain to come to Ireland easily whereas now it is. That is the answer. You can travel on your NHS documents at present. We are not issuing digital Covid certificates yet for UK or Irish citizens living in Britain but we will look to do it in the future.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** I welcome that. On the management or maintenance of the certificate, there is a number of apps out there currently which allow you to scan the code, either from your screen or from your printout, and it will upload it into the wallet app on your iPhone. I have put the link to that app up on Facebook and on Twitter.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** That is very helpful. I used one last night to put it into my wallet. We are looking at that as well.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** That is great. I note Ryanair has a function. The Minister of State mentioned that Aer Lingus was looking at doing something. I note that Ryanair currently has a function which allows you to upload the image of your clear PCR test, as it is up until now, that allows you to travel. Anything the Minister of State can do with airlines to encourage them to do that would be helpful. That is it. I thank the Minister of State and Mr. Lowry.

**Chairman:** I now move to Deputy Michael Lowry. Deputy Ó Murchú has allowed Deputy Lowry to come in ahead of him.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** I will be brief. I thank Deputy Ó Murchú.

Yesterday we had a positive meeting and today is similar. I compliment the Minister of State for his assured and competent handling of this issue and also all of the departmental staff who have been involved in it.

Most of the questions have been asked and we have got clarity on all of the issues that spring to mind. The only question I have relates to the private testing facilities. The Minister of State mentioned that there are 25 services which have made an application to be considered, that three are accepted in full and four are partially accepted. As previous speakers said, it is important that we have to the greatest extent possible service providers available to give the public choice and also to ensure that we do not incur delays. Has the Minister of State an estimate of the breakdown of those 25 between PCR and antigen testing providers, and what is the Minister of State's view on antigen testing? We as a committee have for months been struggling to get clarity on antigen testing and to get acceptance from National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, to get a clear statement. What is the Minister of State's position on antigen testing and is antigen testing part of this service and effort at present?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I thank Deputy Lowry for his question. To clarify, we have three that have been accepted in full and a further seven that are partially accepted so far. The Deputy asked how many of those are issuing antigen tests. I would presume all of them, but I will check that with Mr. Lowry in case he knows. It is a process that is being managed by the Department of Health because it is a clinical process. It is a process of evaluating whether the State is satisfied that this testing service is competent to carry out the tests and is trustworthy. That is a clinical question. It is an organisational question for the Department of Health rather than my assessment.

In terms of antigen tests, most countries in Europe will accept an antigen test for entry. If you want to travel on an antigen test, you can get a digital Covid certificate that states in the 48 hours before you arrive you have passed your antigen test. The way to tell which countries accept which tests is to go to the Reopen EU website, that is the European Commission's official website for checking what are the rules in place today for each destination country. In sourcing your destination, you say are coming from Ireland and you are going to, for example, Germany, and it will give you all the details about, for example, what tests are accepted and what age the children can be who do not have to be tested, etc. There are slight differences in the rules in each country. It is a burden to have to check that but it is something that has to be done. It states on the digital Covid certificate to check that website before you go.

I do not have an opinion about antigen tests. I would defer to Professor Mary Horgan, who is in charge of the antigen group and who worked on the Ferguson report, and what she has said in public. Professor Horgan says that antigen tests are a useful tool in addition to PCR tests. I suppose every test has its place and has its clinical suitability. I do not really have an opinion on that.

Does Mr. Lowry know whether all of these testing services are for antigen tests as well as PCR tests?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** In response to Deputy Lowry, I do not know the answer as to who the specific three are yet. I can find that out later. What I know is that we tested the system, as the Minister of State said, with five different laboratories and all of them did antigen and PCR. We are very interested in doing both. I strongly suspect that the three or five labs are probably the

three to five that did the testing and that they probably all offer antigen tests. We could confirm that if the Deputy wishes.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** I would appreciate if that could be confirmed.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The Irish language question was dealt with. I remember during first year at college getting exam results to Ruaram S Murchs. I would have much preferred if they had got the address wrong. Once those issues could be clarified for the likes of us who have names of a certain type, it would obviously make life somewhat simpler.

I add my voice to what has been said about kerbside check-in in the context of aviation. It would make life so much easier.

I have a question on the call centre. We get that it is up and running at the minute but it is for emergency purposes for people who are flying imminently. There was confusion on this yesterday. Will the Minister of State clarify the point for those looking for a digital Covid certificate on the basis of having recovered from Covid? Do they telephone the number and be dealt with from that point on or do they have to wait until next Monday? Obviously, there is a difficulty there for anyone who has already prepared for flights and so on. Perhaps the Minister of State could answer that first.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Deputy Ó Murchú's question is about obtaining a recovery certificate and how you get it. The answer is that you need to contact the call centre. The call centre this week is not capable of issuing the recovery certificates and will not be able to do that until Monday. Even then it will take it up to five days to deliver the certificate. That is the answer at the moment.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** So there will be a difficulty if someone is expecting a digital Covid certificate for flying.

I will move on to the issue of the verifier app. We were told yesterday, I believe it was by Maeve Brett from the Department of Justice, that airlines are the only show in town that will be operating this in the near future and that there may be difficulties in trying to operate such an app for inside dining. Forgetting the rights and wrongs of the system the Government is talking about, operationally it is difficult to see how the system can actually operate unless the verifier app is given to people who are operating in the hospitality scenario. Otherwise, there is no proper verification process. I do not think I am wrong on this, or am I?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Deputy Ó Murchú is asking about the verifier app on a phone that can scan a QR code and then come up with the information. The information that shows on screen is the same as the printed information on the sheet of paper. There are no extra data there. They are all encoded in the QR code. The Department of Justice developed this app for its immigration staff, and I believe it is the same app that is used by the carriers where they choose to use it. It is an Android app. It is not available in an app store and it must be directly loaded on to a phone, or side loaded for use. In that sense it would have to be put into an app store if it was to be used generally for everybody in hospitality and the hospitality sector, which makes it a bit different. It works on the Android operating system and not on the iPhone system, so you would probably want something that worked on both. Many other countries have produced their own scanning apps with different levels of success. Not all of them are 100% compliant with the rules. I noticed, for example, that the Luxembourg Government app, *covid-check.lu*, has an app that can scan a person's code. If he or she wants to put the app on a phone

and scan a QR code, they can. That is an option also.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The Minister of State not see any difficulty with this verifier app once the due diligence is done, that it would basically be offered to the hospitality sector from the point of it carrying out whatever verification needs to be carried out.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I will answer that and then I am going to pass over to Mr. Lowry. I understand there are problems using the verifier app. The first is that it only works on the Android operating system, the second is that it is not available in an app store and needs to be side loaded, and the third is that it may not be compliant. It may store data such as sensitive passport data, because it is developed by the Department of Justice, that are not suitable for distributing to the public or to people in hospitality. There are three hurdles that would have to be overcome.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I imagine we would need it to be simplified.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Yes, exactly. We would need a simplified version. But even producing a simplified version and getting it approved in an app store takes a bit of time. I will defer now to Mr. Lowry in case he has any more information on that.

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** We can create a version of the verified app that could be used on a more commercial basis. Obviously, the one we are using currently for flying is very much designed that way and to recognise QR codes from various countries. There is a very strict process of update because a lot of those countries can change their private keys, and making sure people can get updates is very important.

I have not been involved in the discussion with the hospitality sector. It will have views about what works logistically for it. We take the views of the stakeholders to try to develop the path that works best for all concerned.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The Minister of State also spoke about an outside organisation and subcontracting work out. Was that related to some of the technical Bills or was the Minister of State talking about Accenture in the context of the call centre?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** We have had assistance from NearForm, a Tramore-based company that developed the Covid tracker app. Perhaps Mr. Lowry would again scope out the extent of its involvement. I believe a lot of the work was done in-house by the HSE and by our own Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, but we did get assistance from NearForm.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Did it deal with the verifier app and the Covid tracker app?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** Yes, it did. NearForm has a worldwide reputation for its skills in developing phone apps. It was involved in developing the verifier app. It also made the changes to allow us to add the certificate to the Covid tracker app. It helped us with some of the capability of putting forward the certificates for email or print to post.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Okay. On the private testing facilities, my understanding of the way it works is that they have access to the application programming interface. They do their piece of work and they can access the system. Who actually issues it? Earlier it was said the company would issue the digital Covid certificate. Is it the case that it does not come centrally from the Department but comes directly from that private testing company, which gives the Department the QR codes that the Department can then upload?



**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The Deputy is exactly right. It is different from the issue of recovery certificates and vaccination certificates, which are centrally done by my Department. Instead, we are allowing the testing service to print or email out a certificate on our behalf, but it needs to connect into our server to generate the QR code. We must check its security infrastructure, clinical capability and staffing level, and we must carry out a number of other checks before the testing service is authorised to do that. This is covered in regulations that were issued by the Minister for Health.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I would like further clarity on what was said earlier. There are people who may have been vaccinated in the North or in Britain but who want an Irish digital Covid certificate. I believe it was Mr. Muiris O'Connor who said this would likely be done about a fortnight after 19 July. Is that the general timeline we are talking about?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Mr. O'Connor has not told me that yet. I have to admit I did not watch all of yesterday's session, but if he says he is looking at a fortnight, then I----

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I am from the Border area and I have been contacted by many people who fall into that bracket. It is something we need to sort as soon as possible. I was reasonably happy when I knew there was a plan to do it and a fortnight is doable in terms of the timeline.

I beg forgiveness for raising this next matter because there is an element of cheek to it. I have spoken to the Minister of State about the National Cyber Security Centre review that has been carried out. The Government has upped the numbers for the National Cyber Security Centre, which tells us that the audit found it was not fit for purpose and needed to be strengthened. I ask the Minister of State to give us a quick rundown on that. I accept there are certain aspects he will not be able to go into. Would it be possible for us to have a private briefing on it?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** As far as I am aware, this committee covers cybersecurity so I am happy to answer a side question on this matter. A capacity review was carried out, completed and returned to me. The result of that was that I brought a memorandum to Cabinet to increase the budget and staffing for the National Cyber Security Centre over the coming five years, including the hiring of 20 additional staff within the next 18 months and creating a new position of director of the National Cyber Security Centre at a grade of deputy secretary. I am very happy to give the committee a private briefing on what was included in that capacity review. It did not find that the National Cyber Security Centre was not fit for purpose. It found that we should be hiring more people in the coming years and it compared us with other cybersecurity centres around the world, which was interesting to see, but it was really looking at what are we going to need in the future to keep pace with the increasing threats. I would be delighted to come back and give a full rundown to the committee, or talk to the Deputy or any other member who wants to ask me about this directly. It would probably make more sense for me to come back to the committee in private session.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I appreciate that. I thank the Minister of State for all the information he has brought to the table, particularly when it is combined with what we heard at yesterday's session. I again apologise for going off on a side topic.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** That is no problem at all.

**Chairman:** Senator Horkan will speak in Senator Craughwell's slot.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** I thank Senator Craughwell for facilitating me. I also thank the

Minister of State. He and I were on Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council together a few years ago and we know each other well. He is excellent and is the right fit for this brief, being so up to speed with IT and so on. I got my digital certificate yesterday morning in the middle of our previous meeting, which was great because I could at least keep people in the loop and let them know that they are being sent out. The Chairman has his printed off and everything ready to go. It is fantastic that within a week of it being talked about, it has happened.

There was some talk yesterday because the Republic of Ireland is printed on the certificate as opposed to Ireland. I already asked the Minister of State about this and that was apparently just a mistake. Is there a way to fix that? I am not asking for a million letters to be posted at a cost of €1 million but perhaps if people want a new certificate they could ask for one or maybe the emails could be reissued with Ireland on them. Would that be too difficult to do logistically? I hope we can do it.

I hope the airlines will be proactive because they usually are when it comes to IT. It is good to hear that they are looking for the information at the time of booking or check-in online in order to speed everything up. I am quite happy to use technology and to have it in a wallet on my phone, but batteries die, screens crack and things go wrong. I suggest that everybody print their certificate off and have it in their back pocket or wherever, safely with their passport, as well as using the digital version. I ask the Minister of State to comment on the issue of the name of the State being the Republic of Ireland on the certificates rather than Ireland.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The name of the State is Ireland, or Éire in our first language, and that is what it says in the Constitution, although the Republic of Ireland Act 1948 states in the description of the State that it is the Republic of Ireland. This is a mistake that got through proofreading. I had seen it before so I must take my share of the blame as well. We are going to change it for the next version. We are not planning to reissue Covid certificates to people and are certainly not going to reprint 1 million Covid certificates with Ireland on them rather than the Republic of Ireland. However, I take the Senator's point. Deputy Ó Cuív spoke publicly about this yesterday as well. It is an important thing that we need to get right. Did the Senator have another question?

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** I asked about the airlines. Has the Minister of State been talking to them? We have heard that Aer Lingus is involved. Can the State or the Government, through the Dublin Airport Authority, the Shannon Group or other airports, be proactive? We should front-load this process and bring it back to the earliest possible point so that people are not being told at the airport that whatever they have is not sufficient. As much data should be captured in advance and as early as possible to speed it up because airports get congested at the best of times, so they are going to be more congested coming out of a pandemic. I hope we will be proactive when dealing with all the airlines we use for international flights into and out of Dublin, Shannon, Cork and Knock.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I assure the Senator that we are proactively engaging with the airlines. When I say "we", I mean that staff from the HSE have been out at the airports over the past weeks working with the carriers and discussing this with them. Every country has implemented this process in a slightly different way but the earlier the certificate is checked, the better. Aer Lingus is already running a test pilot scheme wherein a subset of its passengers can upload the digital Covid certificate online. Ryanair allows PCR tests to be uploaded at the online check-in stage as well. I would hope the major carriers will all move towards allowing things to be uploaded at the earliest stage they can be. The whole point of the scheme is to reopen travel safely and efficiently because at the moment the airport has a very low number of

passengers that is a fraction of what it normally has. The fear was that if we started up transport again, there would be so many queues where everybody took out a different format of document to prove that they were vaccinated or tested and it would take a long time to validate them. The idea of the QR code is that it can be quickly scanned and it goes red or green. There will only be spot-checks at immigration. We do not want unsafe crowds developing in the airports so that is part of the reason as well. It is all focused on efficiency. The Senator is right that the only way to do this is by engaging directly with the carriers, the ferry companies and the people running the ports and airports. That has been happening.

**Senator Gerry Horkan:** I had to check my certificate yesterday because I was not sure if I had put down Gerry or Gerald, which is the name on my passport. Thankfully, it was the same as my passport name. If somebody does have a different name, but the date of birth on the digital certificate and the passport are the same, the surname is the same and the first name is very similar, I hope the airlines will not try to charge a name-change fee. They should be understanding if the person's surname and date of birth match and the first name is quite similar, such as Timmy versus Timothy, Gerry versus Gerald or Joe versus Joseph. I hope those certificates will all be processed and not rejected at any stage.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I take the Senator's point and I will ask the HSE to make that point to the carriers and ferry companies as well.

**Chairman:** I commend the Minister of State and his colleagues and staff on the huge amount of work they have done in a short period. There are a number of matters I want to clarify. We had a meeting with Liz Canavan and her colleagues yesterday, at which Mr. Lowry was also present. The common travel area came up at that meeting. We have a lot of interconnection with the UK. Our understanding is that from 19 July, people from the UK who are fully vaccinated can fly here without any quarantine and children under the age of six are exempt. However, those between the ages of seven and 18, either from here or the UK, would not be vaccinated. What will the position be with regard to them? It is a policy decision for the Government. Will the Minister of State provide clarification in that regard? He will understand the issues from a human dimension. If parents who are fully vaccinated are coming in from the UK with teenage children, those children will not be able to dine indoors and so on. Will the Minister of State provide some clarification?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Certainly. As the Chair stated, the current position is that those under seven years of age do not need to be vaccinated or tested to come in but that people above that age have to quarantine for a period of time after coming in from the UK. This period is so long that it makes matters difficult for those making short journeys. There is a big change coming with regard to travel between Great Britain and Ireland on Monday. Vaccinated people and those who are unvaccinated but who have been tested will not have to isolate.

**Chairman:** Will the Minister of State repeat that? He referred to people who are vaccinated and another group.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** People who are vaccinated and those who have a negative PCR test will not have to isolate when they arrive in Ireland regardless of whether they are adults or children. This is the big change. As I understand it, and I am repeating health advice here rather than giving it first hand, the-----

**Chairman:** Will the Minister of State hold on for a second? The system went down while he was answering that question. Will he go through it again? I know I am asking for the third

time but it is a critical matter. What is the position in respect of people flying from the UK to Ireland from Monday next, 19 July?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** If you are flying from the UK to Ireland on 19 July and you are vaccinated or have a negative PCR test, you do not have to isolate when you arrive.

**Chairman:** That applies to all age groups.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** It applies to all age groups.

**Chairman:** Anyone flying in from the UK, regardless of age, who is either vaccinated or has a negative result from a PCR test taken within the 72 hours prior to arrival in Ireland is not required to quarantine in any form.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Exactly.

**Chairman:** I take it that this is the first the public will have heard of this. Am I correct in that?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I do not think so. I am not a public health expert but that is what the rules will be from Monday.

**Chairman:** From 19 July, anyone flying-----

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Actually, it is not the first people will have heard of it. It is on the *gov.ie* website.

**Chairman:** Anyone flying from the UK from next Monday, 19 July, who is vaccinated or who is not vaccinated but who has a negative PCR test can fly to Ireland. What rules will apply to the cohort who are not vaccinated and who have a negative PCR test in respect of indoor dining because those we are talking about are, in many cases, welcome tourists who are coming to Ireland?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** That has not been decided yet. As I have said, indoor dining rules are not my area. I am not on the relevant committees and have not been asked to contribute. These rules have not been decided, unlike the digital Covid certificate system, which, along with all of the associated rules, has been 100% decided. As I understand it, there are still negotiations ongoing. There were negotiations between the hospitality sector and Government yesterday. The legislation is to go before the Dáil today and before the Seanad on Friday and is, therefore, still subject to amendment. I do not know what the rules will be. I understand that the intention is for those coming from another country to be treated in the same way as Irish people, in other words, for people who have proof of vaccination or recovery to be allowed enter restaurants. I understand that is the intention. I do not believe people will be treated differently if they have come from the UK, the United States or anywhere else.

**Chairman:** What rules will apply to people coming from countries such as the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, from which many people visit, from 19 July?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** From 19 July, if your country is not on the red list and you therefore do not have to undertake mandatory hotel quarantine, your position is the same as that of people coming from the UK. You can come in if you are vaccinated or hold a negative PCR test and you do not have to isolate. They are the major changes from Monday.

**Chairman:** Absolute clarity is now key. We got a sense that things were not finalised from the official, Ms Canavan, yesterday. She said that the issue of the cohort aged between 7 and 17 had to be decided upon by Government. The Minister of State is now stating that anyone flying from the UK or other non-designated countries outside of the EU from 19 July can come into Ireland without any form of quarantine as long as they are vaccinated or have a negative PCR test. We then need the next leg, that of indoor dining. On that point, people who were vaccinated in other countries may have received the Chinese vaccine or the Russian vaccine, Sputnik V. What view will the Irish authorities take of, for example, people flying from a non-designated country who have received the Sputnik V vaccine, which does not come under the EU digital green certificate? What view will Ireland take on that and on other vaccines, such as the Chinese vaccine?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** My understanding is that Ireland is going to recognise any vaccine that has been approved by the EMA. The regulations give the option to issue vaccination certificates to people who were vaccinated outside of Ireland with EMA-approved vaccines.

**Chairman:** The EMA is the European Medicines Agency.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** It is the European Medicines Agency, yes.

**Chairman:** I will move on and seek clarification with regard to the GPs. The Minister of State was on the radio yesterday and dealt with this issue but, to be absolutely clear, am I correct in saying that GPs have no role in the digital Covid certificate?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** They have no role in the digital Covid certificate other than that, in many cases, they vaccinated people and sent on the data.

**Chairman:** I accept that but they have no administrative role with regard to the Covid certificate. Anyone who has recovered from Covid within the last 180 days should get on to the call centre, which will arrange for a Covid certificate to issue to that person. The GP is not involved.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** That is correct.

**Chairman:** I know this is slightly outside the Minister of State's zone but, to continue logically with this flow, will the GPs have any role with regard to the Covid pass for indoor dining?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I do not know. As I have said, it has not been decided yet. It has not been agreed or legislated for. If the Chairman has questions on indoor dining rules, he should ask the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, or the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, who have responsibility for enterprise and tourism and who are looking after that area. I do not know their intentions and the legislation is subject to change this week. I would say that there will be clarity by the end of the week because we have to get the legislation through by Friday.

**Chairman:** Particularly when we are bringing in tourists and restarting indoor dining, it is very important that we now have a structured approach, which the digital Covid certificate provides. We have absolute clarity. People within the EU now know that they can travel freely within the EU with a digital Covid certificate issued to those who are vaccinated, who have recovered in the previous 180 days, six months, or who have a negative PCR test. We know that people outside of this area, including in our common travel area with the UK, who are located in non-designated countries will be able to come to Ireland freely without having to quarantine if they have been vaccinated - and the Minister of State has said that we will accept all vaccines



approved by the EMA - or if they are unvaccinated but hold a negative result from a PCR test taken within 72 hours prior to arrival in Ireland. That is absolute. We now need that to flow to indoor dining. Is it the Minister of State's understanding that the digital Covid certificate will form a central part of the Covid pass for indoor dining?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** My understanding is that it is proposed that the digital Covid certificate will be one of the ways in which people can access indoor dining but that other alternatives will also be available. I believe that attempts will also be made to ensure that equivalent documentation held by tourists from other countries such as the UK or the United States will also be accepted as proof that it is safe to let them in.

**Chairman:** If you have equivalent documentation issued by your own country, you will also be able to dine indoors here. Would it be fair to go so far as to say that people who can dine indoors in their own country will be able to dine indoors in Ireland?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I do not think it would be safe to say that. I am not the authority on this.

**Chairman:** No, but you are giving-----

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I am trying to help the Chair. I really think-----

**Chairman:** I take the clarification. That was a bit of due diligence on my part, as distinct from putting forward a point. The freephone number is 1800 851 504. Will that continue to be the freephone number from next Monday? Am I correct in saying that there will be no change?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** That is a good question. I will ask Mr. Lowry whether the number is likely to change.

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** No, the number will be the one given out yesterday.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The number was sent to 2 million people, so it would be pretty hard to change it at this stage.

**Chairman:** I want to do some work on the call centre. For the first week of its operation, officials from Revenue and the Department of Social Protection have effectively put an emergency call centre in place. Am I correct in saying that?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** Yes, the Chair is correct. We decided to build a call centre from next Monday, 19 July. It became clear that because we are moving faster with the certificate issue there would be queries. We built a temporary call centre so that we could provide support for people who had areas of concern. This was broadly aimed at providing reassurance and advice on when certificates would be issued and so on. It was not set up to deal with very specific inquiries because the call centre will not have access to the data to enable the staff to do that.

**Chairman:** Accenture was awarded the contract to run the call centre. Is that correct?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** Yes, that is correct.

**Chairman:** How long ago was the contract awarded?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** About three weeks ago. It was not my Department that awarded it; it was the Department of Health. I think it was around that time.

**Chairman:** Is Mr. Lowry satisfied that it is up to speed and will hit the ground running next Monday in terms of being able to deal with queries?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** I have been involved in a lot of workshops with the staff. They are very competent and have been excellent so far.

**Chairman:** How many staff will be recruited under the contract?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** It involves a scale up capability.

**Chairman:** Up to what level?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** I do not think there is a ceiling on it. It is very difficult because there are various ways in which one can estimate the number of calls one is expecting. One way of doing that might be calls per certificates issued. Another might be calls per expected number of travellers and so on. We have tried to factor all of those things into the estimation. We came up with a low number of, I believe, 60 and a high number of 70. I can clarify that if I have given the Chair the wrong figures. The contract allows a scale up beyond that if the demand requires it.

**Chairman:** How long is the contract for?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** It is for the period of the certificate issue. It would be for several months; it is not a long-term contract. We have not let the contract. I have not seen the detail of it.

**Chairman:** Where will the call centre be based? Will it be based in Ireland?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** Eventually, it will be based in Ireland. I believe that initially Accenture will use call centre agents from the UK.

**Chairman:** Will the call centre be operated from the UK or Ireland?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** It will be operated from Ireland, but some of the agents might be based in the UK.

**Chairman:** How many of the agents will be based in the UK?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** I do not have the answer to that. I am sorry.

**Chairman:** As a committee, we will follow up on that. Have offices been leased in Ireland for the call centre?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** The call centre will work electronically. All of the staff will not necessarily be congregated in one place.

**Chairman:** Okay. There were 4,000 calls in one day, 1,200 of which were answered. That means that only one in three of those who called spoke to an operator. We do not know the full circumstances behind that. It seems a relatively low level of throughput, given the level of callers who stayed on the line. That was with 25 to 35 staff. Have 60 to 90 or 60 to 70 staff been recruited for the call centre?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** The estimate is for 60 to 90.

**Chairman:** I would have thought the figure would be at the upper end of 90. There will be

a lot of calls initially. It is something we as a committee will take up with the Department of Health. The way the digital Covid certificate has been rolled out has been very efficient, but the call centre will be a huge element of the end service. Will the Department of Health have oversight of that?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** Yes.

**Chairman:** Okay. Why was it decided to subcontract the service to a private operator? Why was it not done by Departments?

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** As I understand it, it was due to the amount of resources and the level of staff training that might be required. We are in a situation where the Government has been giving a lot of support to people through Revenue and the Department of Social Protection. They have been two of our busiest Departments over the past several months. They have obviously tried to be as helpful as possible, but I do not think there is long-term sustainability in that solution.

**Chairman:** The digital Covid certificate I have received is self-explanatory. It is well laid out and includes the *reopen.europa.eu/en* address. It is highly effective. I thought there would be a one-stop-shop where people could see all of the various aspects of the certificate. I have no doubt it is something that will happen as the certificate is rolled out. Will people be able to visit a one-stop-shop to read about all aspects of the digital Covid certificate?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** It is important that we make everything as clear as possible. There is a page about the digital Covid certificate on *gov.ie*. There is another page that tells people how to register at a testing service. There is a lot of detail to this and it is challenging for anybody to get his or her head around. The clearer that we can be with our communications the better. If the Chair thinks I am missing anything-----

**Chairman:** No, I do not think that. It is an observation. The process has been simplified. Effectively, the entire house has been painted. I would like there to be nice handles on the doors as well. A lovely job has been done; it just needs the finishing touch.

We will bring the Minister of State and Mr. Lowry back in to discuss the NCSC and the report. Will the report on the capacity review be published, even if it is redacted? We welcome that the Minister of State increased the salary to €184,000. When does he anticipate he will have a director in place? We spoke about the NCSC not being on a statutory basis. When does the Minister of State expect to bring legislation forward to put it on a statutory basis? We will have him back before the committee to discuss that in more detail.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I will publish the report in a redacted form. I will publish as much of it as I can, with the goal of transparency

**Chairman:** When will that be?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I will consult the relevant people about how much I can publish. I think I can publish a lot of it. I am also willing to come before the committee to discuss any of the contents and answer questions.

**Chairman:** We will probably have a meeting in public session on the more substantive areas. When does the Minister of State anticipate he will publish the redacted report?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Later in the summer. I have been looking at it. The Chair also

asked about legislation to put the NCSC on a statutory footing. I hope to introduce that in the autumn. Does the Minister of State have an idea of the cost of the cyberattack on the HSE?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Paul Reid has made a number of estimates which have increased since the attack. He named a figure of €100 million for what was required to remedy what was done. Paul Reid or the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, are the right people to give detail about that. I would not know any more than that about it. It was a devastating attack that ended up costing much more than the ransom that was demanded.

**Chairman:** I ask that in a context in which the budget has gone up to €5.1 million, which we welcome. The number of staff is going up to 70. We would like to support the NCSC to get more funding. The consequences of cyberattacks are enormous. We will discuss that in session with the Minister of State at the start of the term in September.

I thank the Minister of State for the work he has done. Any questions put today are in the public interest. The witnesses have done a considerable body of work. Our job as a committee comprising public representatives is to carry out due diligence in areas and provide further information. The Minister of State has been effective in the role, along with Mr. Lowry and others.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** Earlier, the Chair asked me about the rules for entry from the UK, US and other countries that will apply from Monday. Those rules relate to isolation, the age of the person entering, whether they are vaccinated and whether they have a negative PCR test. I gave my view of what I think it is but that is subject to an exact Government statement. The Chair asked if I was saying this as a member of the Government. I am not. I am giving my understanding or interpretation of the rules. I am happy to find out exactly what those rules are. I see the Chair needs clarity on them but I do not think what I have said is the Government position and I do not want it to be taken as gospel. I do not want anyone to rely on it. I want to come back and-----

**Chairman:** We have had an honest discussion and this is important. We accept the Minister of State's bona fides. We can come back on that matter but it was important that we discussed it.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I thank the Minister of State for the breadth of his answers. I want to raise a couple of questions about the practicalities of the digital Covid certificate and the verifier app. Let us say a person lands up at Dublin Airport who has not been vaccinated but has got a negative PCR or antigen test, a digital Covid certificate and a QR code. The QR code is read by the verifier app and the app confirms that it is an antigen or PCR test and the name and details of the person. Does it connect with the place the person is intending to travel to see if he or she is compliant with requirements there? Is it only the QR code a person needs? Is all the information embedded in that?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** All the information in the QR code is the same as that printed on the page and there is no extra information in the code. All the information needed is in the QR code. Most people who show their phone will have the QR code and no other information visible. The Deputy asked if the person validating it pre-departure will be able to check whether, for example, an antigen test is valid in the destination country and whether that business rule is being applied.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Exactly.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I have an opinion on that but I will ask Mr. Lowry to say what he

thinks.

**Mr. Barry Lowry:** The process for the verifier app has two functions. One is to prove that what is in the QR code is the same as what is in the certificate so that if somebody tried to forge it, it would be impossible. The other is to try to provide a level of assurance that the proof the person is travelling on is appropriate for the country he or she is heading for. If it all works correctly - and the signs are it will - if I was travelling to Belgium, for example, and using an antigen test and Belgium did not accept that test, they will know at the airport and be able to tell me that I may well have to quarantine when I go to Belgium. That is the way the EU hopes it will work. It has what they call business rules and identity rules. Countries might change their rules at any time, which is why the Minister of State said in his opening statement that every six hours we will download new information from the EU server. That will be updated to the apps on phones and we will know what the current rules are.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** That is the technical system to check remotely whether one's test is suitable. In practical terms, the message is that people need to check, go to the reopen EU website and see what the destination rules are, how old a child can be to travel there without a PCR test and is an antigen test acceptable. People need to do that, rather than arrive at the airport and have their certificate refused in advance. Does that make sense?

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** For sure. I appreciate that.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** People should also arrive earlier at the airport than they normally would, because there is more stuff to check, and they should fill in their electronic passenger locator form.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** There is a level of sophistication with the technology, which is important. If there is a suggestion that we use the DCC for indoor dining or hospitality here, there is a potential issue with operating on the QR code. The code could say a person is antigen-test negative from three weeks ago. It would not be a forgery. It would be legitimate, but without the appropriate tool to read the QR code it may be something else. I flag it as an issue if the Government intends to go down that road. The level of sophistication in the DCC in aviation would need to be considered in the roll-out to indoor dining and hospitality.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I follow on from what Deputy O'Rourke said. The printed version will say if the holder is vaccinated or unvaccinated. Along with the QR code, it will say if he or she is tested for antigen or PCR. Will it? I refer to the email that goes out or whatever.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** It specifies the test name and there is a list of test types authorised by the EU. There are many types of antigen test, for example.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** That makes complete sense but we are back to the point Deputy O'Rourke made. With regard to hospitality, the only way this will be operational and avoid forgery is if there is fit-for-purpose verifier app, even with whatever changes need to be made to remove other information provided to airlines. That piece of work will need to be done or it is another point where the plan is ready to fail.

Go raibh maith agaibh. I appreciate the witnesses' contributions. We could almost give Mr. Lowry a position on the committee at this stage and the Minister of State was really forthcoming. It was really worth teasing out these questions. I really appreciate the Minister of State giving us his time.



**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I am not sure Mr. Lowry would want to be on the committee.

**Chairman:** I was going to put it more diplomatically but I have no doubt that Mr. Lowry is quite happy with his own role.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** There may be constitutional issues but we will not worry about them.

**Chairman:** I take on board the points the Minister of State has made. We just want to contribute to the improvement of what is already a good system in respect of the digital Covid certificate, which is clearly being considered for use as a Covid pass. How do we ensure due diligence in that respect and that its use with regard to indoor dining will be foolproof? These are aspects to be considered. We look forward to further engagement with the Minister of State on this particular matter but also in respect of the National Cyber Security Centre. We thank the Minister of State and Mr. Lowry for their attendance.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I thank the Chair very much. I wish to be clear that the current rules with regard to travel from the UK and the US are such that, while vaccinated people do not have to isolate, those with a negative PCR test do. Until any change to that rule is officially published on *gov.ie*, it is still the rule. I just want to be really clear on that.

**Chairman:** We are aware of the current rules. We were looking at linking it in with the changes to come on 19 July, following up on issues that arose yesterday in our meeting with Ms Canavan and seeking clarity. We welcome the Minister of State's clarity. We hope that there will be a formal announcement soon so that there will be certainty in respect of travel between Ireland and the UK and elsewhere.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I thank the Chair.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Does the Minister of State want that to be recorded as his view?

**Chairman:** Is it the Minister of State's personal view or the view of the Government?

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** My personal view is no different from that of the Government. I do not wish to diverge from the Government's view. I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for inviting me to clarify that point.

**Chairman:** We look forward to 19 July. The Minister of State has given us a flavour of the aspects being considered on which decisions are being made.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.32 p.m. *sine die*.