

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

---

## AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS LÍONRAÍ CUMARSÁIDE

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

---

*Dé Céadaoin, 5 Bealtaine 2021*

*Wednesday, 5 May 2021*

---

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

---

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,	Ned O'Sullivan.
James O'Connor,	
Darren O'Rourke,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú,	
Duncan Smith.	

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

## **Report of the Covid-19 Rapid Testing Group: Discussion with Science Foundation Ireland**

**Chairman:** I welcome Professor Mark Ferguson, director general, Science Foundation Ireland, and thank him for coming. We appreciate him taking the time as this is a very important issue. The purpose of the first part of today's meeting is consideration of the report of the Covid-19 rapid testing group, of which Professor Ferguson is chair. This is related to the resumption of our aviation hearings, which we believe are critical in terms of the reopening not only of the aviation sector but also Ireland Inc., tourism and business. On behalf of the committee, I reiterate our welcome to Professor Mark Ferguson, director general of Science Foundation Ireland, chief scientific adviser to the Government and chair of the Covid-19 rapid testing group, whose report we will deal with today. We are grateful that he was able to attend at such short notice.

This first part of our meeting will last one hour. We will then suspend before recommencing with our second set of witnesses from the Irish Travel Agents Association for the second hour.

All witnesses are 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 to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if witnesses' statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that witnesses comply with any such direction.

For witnesses attending remotely from 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 proceedings as a witness physically present does. Witnesses participating in this committee session from a jurisdiction outside the State are advised that they should also be mindful of their 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 Houses 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 where Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House or the Convention Centre Dublin, in order to participate in public meetings. With regret, I will not permit a member to participate where they do not adhere to this constitutional requirement to be physically within the precincts. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will, reluctantly, be asked to leave the meeting. In this regard, I ask any members participating via Microsoft Teams to confirm that they are on the grounds of the Leinster House campus prior to making their contributions to the meeting.

I ask Professor Ferguson to make his opening statement.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for inviting me. I was asked to chair a group of experts to advise the Minister for Health on rapid testing. Our report has been published and is available to the committee. It has a number of recommendations and there is also a body of evidence and references within the report.

By way of an opening statement, I will just say that this is a very important and rapidly moving field. Many new tests are being developed, with 1,000 or more under development,

and many tests are being approved by regulatory authorities around the world. Many countries have adopted rapid testing as part of their strategy and the evidence base for rapid testing is also developing very rapidly.

Probably the most efficient thing is for me to turn this over to questions from the members and I will do my best to answer those.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Joe Carey.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I thank Professor Ferguson for appearing before the committee. I read the report and I am very encouraged by its findings and recommendations. If we look to other jurisdictions, we see that Ireland is behind the curve. I strongly believe we need to embrace this as a way to reopen our economy and society and to keep it open. That is the main point. If we look across to the UK, we can see that households there can apply for two test kits a week and millions of these test kits have been brought into the UK. We need to do the same in Ireland. Professor Ferguson has recommended that we move at pace on this. I strongly endorse that recommendation and call on the Government to do just that, and to make arrangements to put these recommendations into place.

Obviously, there is movement in terms of rolling out pilots here and the Minister, Deputy Harris, has moved on this in the higher education sector. I see a real opportunity for Shannon Airport as a distribution and logistical hub for the delivery of test kits and their distribution across the country. The UK used Bournemouth Airport to do that and I think Shannon is very well placed to play a leading role in the distribution of these kits.

What is the difference between antigen testing and LAMP testing? I see there are differences between them in the report so Professor Ferguson might explain that.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** I will do my best to explain the differences. A rapid antigen test detects a protein on the virus and it works where, in the test kit, there is an antibody that binds to that protein, and that is then linked to some sort of marker, whether it is a fluorescent marker or a gold marker, and it reads out as a little line. In simple terms, it is a lateral flow antigen test and it is predominantly detecting the presence of live virus or proteins that are in the intact virus. That is the basis of most pregnancy tests so, for many years, people have been able to walk into a chemist shop and buy a pregnancy test, which is a lateral flow test that works in that way. What is great about this is it does not require a laboratory or any special equipment. It is a kit which anybody can use on their own or under supervision. By contrast, LAMP testing requires a laboratory, but unlike PCR, it does not require very sophisticated equipment or chemicals. It only requires an oven. For LAMP testing, one mixes the reagents and then tests the sample and it reads out, but this has to be done in a laboratory. It is slightly more accurate than a lateral flow antigen test and it might be suitable, for example, for a large company with, say, 2,000 employees or for those with access to a basic laboratory facility. LAMP testing is being used in some of the universities, such as Trinity College Dublin, for testing students. It is faster than PCR and slightly more accurate than lateral flow antigen testing, but in simple terms, it requires a dedicated person and a laboratory.

Our report focuses on the lateral flow antigen testing because ultimately, as rightly stated by the Deputy, people can do the test themselves. People can be trained to do it at home and, where a test is positive, the person would not go to work, but would have a confirmatory PCR test from the HSE. That is very much the strategy that the UK and other countries such as Austria, are pursuing. In the United States, there are big programmes under way as well and other countries

such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and so on are empowering their citizens to take ownership of their health and test themselves and, if they test positive, to go for a confirmatory PCR test. These tests are not quite as accurate as PCR. The false positive rate is approximately 1 in 1,000, which means that from every 1,000 tests carried out there will be a positive that is actually a negative. The order of accuracy in regard to the negative results, in other words where the test reads negative but a person is actually positive, is between 50% to 80%.

A really important point made in the report is that validated tests only should be used, a list of which are available on the EU Joint Research Centre website. Those are tests that have been validated by at least one member state and in use by at least more two member states and they meet certain minimum specificities. There are certain commercial tests that do not work nearly as well as I have articulated. They should not be used. People should use only those tests on the validated list.

**Chairman:** I thank Professor Ferguson. I have a lengthy list of members who wish to ask questions and they will have an allocated time of, roughly, three to four minutes each. I am conscious of time and the need for the committee to get maximum information today so I will move on now to Deputy O'Rourke.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I thank Professor Ferguson the report. I will be brief. Professor Ferguson mentioned that things are moving rapidly. I refer to the reports from HIQA of 21 October, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, of 19 November and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, of 16 December. It would appear that the technology might be moving but policy and Government response is static. I would welcome Professor Ferguson's opinion on the delay in moving on antigen testing and if he believes now is the time to act and to do so immediately. I am interested in hearing his perspective on how this technology could be used in the aviation sector. Is it an option for airline and airport workers in the first instance?

Recommendation B1.9(b)(ii) deals with programmes of repeated rapid testing of essential workers who travel into the country. I ask Professor Ferguson to focus on the following question. Is that a realistic possibility, complementary to PCR or in addition to PCR? There are a lot of people travelling into this country who are subject to a pre-departure PCR test within 72 hours and no post-arrival PCR test. Does Professor Ferguson believe there is need for a pre-departure antigen test and post-arrival serial antigen testing that might meet the same quality standard? In other words, antigen versus PCR serial testing versus one-off testing.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** I thank the Deputy. The answer is "Yes, we should act immediately." In regard to the Deputy's other question, in the United Kingdom the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, SAGE, group produced a paper, which is available on the *gov.uk* website at SAGE minutes, in which it modelled the effects of serial testing of travellers coming into the country and showed that that was as effective as quarantine. What does this mean? It means that when a traveller comes into a country, he or she is issued with a barcoded rapid antigen test. The barcoding is unique and there will be a record of to whom, say, ten tests are given. Those individuals test themselves daily, take a photograph of the barcode and the test result and then upload it to an IT system, which records that a person has done a test and it is negative. That person can then go about his or her business. If a person does not turn in a test - a person might forget to do it or deliberately not do it - he or she is issued with an automated reminder to do it. If the person repeatedly does not do the test, as the IT system has recorded when that person entered the country, as well as his or her telephone number, contact details and so on, somebody will pay him or her a visit to find out what is going on. That was modelled for SAGE and shown

to be as effective in isolating infectious individuals as quarantine, either at home or in a hotel situation. It is my understanding that the UK is now piloting that at present.

Our recommendation was about essential workers coming into the country. These would be people coming in to fix a piece of equipment, to carry out a specific operation on a patient or to treat somebody. It would also include people coming here to attend a funeral. These are all situations in which it would be difficult to quarantine people because they have to act immediately. We are suggesting that in those situations, serial rapid testing could be used but tests would need to be barcoded and an IT system is required as well. This could then be used in the longer term. This is contained in the body of the report, not the recommendations. In the longer term, when more people are vaccinated in, maybe, a few months' time, this might be something for a number of people coming into the country. Consideration could be given to giving it to everybody on an aeroplane. The most important thing to remember is that numbers become important. If most people do it, we are far better off than having a small number of people doing something else.

**Chairman:** I thank Professor Ferguson. I ask members to follow on with questions. This is about extracting the maximum amount of information from the research carried out by Professor Ferguson. The next speaker is Senator Dooley.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** I thank Professor Ferguson for his comprehensive report. On the wider use of antigen testing, I have been contacted by individuals who believe there is an opportunity to carry out antigen testing within the hotel experience. There is concern that some people will be hesitant to visit hotels when they open next month owing to the mixing that takes place within a hotel environment. Based on Professor Ferguson's experience and understanding of antigen testing, does he see a role for it in the hotel environment? Could it form part of a building of confidence in people to visit hotels and participate in activities that happen in that environment? In light of Professor Ferguson's experience around testing and the quality and improvement of antigen tests generally, does he believe we can get to a point pretty quickly at which we can dispense with mandatory quarantine? Does he believe that, as a result of using antigen testing as a component of our overall testing system in conjunction with the roll-out of the vaccine in other countries and the existing PCR testing, we could get to a point at which mandatory hotel quarantine would not be required, because it greatly inhibits us in getting the aviation sector back on track?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** I thank the Senator very much. In answer to his question, yes, I do believe rapid testing will be very important in instilling confidence in people who may wish to go to hotels, restaurants and so on. It may very well be the case that the owners of hotels or restaurants will do this voluntarily. Speaking personally, I would feel a lot more confident about going to a hotel or restaurant if I knew that everyone there had been rapidly tested or tested previously. It is not perfect. There will be some mistakes but it is an awful lot better than doing nothing. It is important in restoring confidence. I am not sure I would make it mandatory but there is a role there for business owners.

In terms of mandatory hotel quarantine, this situation will become really interesting as travel begins to open up. It is really important that we do these pilots soon and quickly. The report talked about moving at pace. If we start with the essential workers, we can find out what compliance is like, what the IT systems are like and how easy it is to do. We would then be in a very good position to think about whether this could be rolled out more widely and whether we could potentially dispense with mandatory quarantine, as the Senator mentioned. Variants are going to become very important. They come from other countries but also develop in our

own country. They generate spontaneously. Therefore, widespread testing both of visitors and the indigenous population is important to keep a handle on those variants.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** How confident is Professor Ferguson that the existing tests will be sensitive to the variants? How quickly can the sensitivity of the kits be changed? Obviously, a great deal has been learned over recent months, but how quickly can testing be adapted to identify the variants that now exist?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** The existing tests detect all variants but they do not distinguish between them. The reason for this is that the antibodies are detected at what is called the nucleocapsid of the virus. This is the bit that does not change much. The good news is that the test will tell one whether the virus is present, but it will not tell one if it is a variant. The strategy would be for those who tested positive on an antigen test to take a confirmatory PCR test, from which the virus would be sequenced, allowing us to know what variant, if any, was present. The trick behind the testing is twofold. First, it will allow an awful lot of people to be screened very quickly and cheaply. Second, it will allow those who test positive to be isolated very quickly. That is the most important thing if this system is to substitute for hotel quarantine. One gets the result within approximately 30 minutes. People who test positive should isolate until they get a confirmatory PCR, after which they may need to continue to isolate. Rapid isolation is the trick. That will allow this system to be substituted for quarantine. Of course, compliance will be important. That is why I really believe that we need to do these pilots at scale so we can get the data, see what they look like and see if this could be deployed more widely.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** I will ask a final question if I may.

**Chairman:** We have to move on. The Senator has had nearly six minutes. I will allow him in at the end.

**Senator Timmy Dooley:** Are all antigen tests the same? Is there a standard?

**Chairman:** I ask Professor Ferguson to give us a “Yes” or “No” answer as I am conscious of other members.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** No, they are not. The best ones are on the Joint Research Centre list.

**Chairman:** Following on from that, how long would it take to get a pilot scheme up and running? Has Professor Ferguson had interaction with the Government about setting up such a pilot scheme? If there was a pilot scheme up and running and the barcode system was in place, coupled with the vaccination programme now under way nationwide, including here, and with the digital green pass now being considered by the European Commission, how quickly could antigen testing become the standard test for pre and post-departure testing of those travelling into and out of Ireland?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** The testing pilots of which I am aware are in the further and higher education sector and in the universities. The Minister, Deputy Harris, is moving. I am well aware of those schemes. I am also aware of developments taking place with employers in the general employment sector.

**Chairman:** My question is-----

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** I am not aware of anything in the aviation sector in Ireland.



I know a little about the pilots going on in the UK but I do not know of anything like that in Ireland.

**Chairman:** How quickly could a pilot be set up and the results concluded?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** It could be done very quickly. The obvious thing to do is to learn from the experience of the UK. There may be other countries doing such pilots as well.

**Chairman:** Could it be done in a month?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** I would think so, yes.

**Chairman:** Has Professor Ferguson had interaction with the Government regarding the recommendations in his report? I refer specifically to interaction with the Department of Transport in respect of aviation. The vaccination programme is very much under way in different countries. How does that feed into the professor's thinking around pre and post-departure antigen testing for air travel, linked with quarantine, so that we can get the aviation sector back up and running in a way that is safe for people's health?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** No, I have not had any interaction with the Department of Transport in this regard, although I would be very happy to help if the Department is interested.

**Chairman:** We will follow up with the Department and ask it to interact with Professor Ferguson immediately with regard to a pilot scheme for antigen testing in the aviation sector. We can do it in the essential worker space, as Professor Ferguson recommended in his report. Will he comment on the vaccination programme that is under way and the digital green pass being proposed by the European Commission? How does he believe these matters will feed into antigen testing becoming the benchmark test for air travel? Obviously, positive antigen tests would have to be followed up with a PCR test. That is a given. Will Professor Ferguson make his final comments in that area?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** Let me speak specifically about testing and then about antigen testing. I believe that, if an individual had been vaccinated, had taken a pre-departure PCR or antigen test, had a follow-on test on arrival followed by serial testing either every day or every two days-----

**Chairman:** Professor Ferguson is referring to antigen testing.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** Yes. What I have described would be a pretty good sign that such a person was relatively safe. What do I mean by that? The antigen test determines whether one is infectious and may pass on the virus. One is much less likely to pass on the virus if one is vaccinated. If one is in the category of those who may pass on the virus despite being vaccinated, which is rare, that should be picked up with an antigen test. When those two things are combined, it is fairly safe to say that most infectious people would be caught and that it would be a satisfactory regime. I emphasise that no regime is perfect. There will always be one or two things, even with PCR testing, that allow people to slip through. That is not the game we are in. We are in a numbers game. It is a matter of trying to prevent most people passing on the virus and trying to allow them to be safe. The combination of vaccination and rapid testing will allow that to be done. If this was to be combined with people wearing masks on aeroplanes, I would feel very confident.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I thank Professor Ferguson. This engagement is informa-

tive and necessary. I agree that we need a pilot scheme as soon as possible so that this can be brought into operation in respect of aviation. Professor Ferguson spoke about how PCR testing is more accurate. This issue can be dealt with by having more rapid antigen testing. How many such tests are needed to make up for this deficiency? What is the false positive rate? Is it one in 1,000? What would be necessary? Does Professor Ferguson have any indication of the cost of those better quality tests? Obviously, the system would be a lot less costly if mandatory hotel quarantining and so on were to be dispensed with.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** I will explain the difference between the two tests in some detail at the end but, in simple terms, one can increase the accuracy of a rapid antigen test in the following ways. The first is training. There are many videos on YouTube but, in my opinion, the best ones come from the National Health Service, NHS, in the UK. They teach people how to take the sample because that is where there is quite a lot of inaccuracy. It is about training people on how to take the sample, by self-training and so on. As regards the accuracy of the test itself, as I said, the Joint Research Centre in the EU has a list of very good tests. The accuracy with which the result is read is a simple matter. For some tests it is necessary to wait 30 minutes. If one tries to read them after five minutes one might not get the right result. Again, that is about training. That is the first thing.

In terms of deploying tests, serial testing really improves accuracy. In the workplace, we recommend testing every two to three days. It is better to test every day, which is why we recommend that a test is done every day for people coming in on an aeroplane. That is an antigen test.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** For how many days would the test be done?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** That is a good question. It would be for the ten days that are currently done in quarantine. It would be the same length of time but instead of being in quarantine there would just be a test every day. Clearly, if people tested positive, they would isolate. If they tested negative, they could continue around their business.

If there is a positive or a negative test and a need to be sure, just immediately do another test. The first thing is, if a test is positive and someone thinks, “I am not really positive”, do another test and if that is positive, one can be pretty sure the person is positive. He or she can go for a confirmatory PCR. These are very straightforward matters.

The cost of tests varies. The UK procurement document, which is a public document, states that each individual barcoded test must cost less than £5. The UK is paying less than £5 but how much less I do not know. It may be £3; I do not know. In normal pricing, the tests cost somewhere between €5 to €9. It would depend on how many are bought and how they are bought and so on, but the cost is of that order. The cost is very low by comparison with PCR, mandatory quarantining or anything like that. They are relatively cheap.

**Chairman:** I ask Deputy Ó Murchú for his concluding remarks.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We are looking at something that could be €50 or €60, which would obviously make up for the deficiency in antigen testing because it will be done very often. It would give us a roadmap with which we could operate. We need to look into this and a pilot needs to be set up as soon as possible regarding aviation. That is just it.

**Chairman:** We now move to the Fine Gael slot. Deputy Crowe has three to four minutes.



**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I have not joined the Chairman's party but I presume he is speaking of a Fianna Fáil slot.

**Chairman:** What did I say?

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** The Chairman said Fine Gael. We are in coalition of course.

**Chairman:** I am obviously moving ahead of the trend. I apologise; it was a Freudian slip.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** The Tánaiste is often mistaken for the Taoiseach so I suppose it all balances out. I thank Professor Ferguson for joining us this afternoon. There are a number of very compelling benefits and arguments to rapid antigen testing. First, the cost factor. It is approximately €5 per antigen test versus a huge variance of anywhere from €30 in North Macedonia, to approximately €150 in Dublin Airport at the moment, for a PCR test. There is a huge price variance. The speed at which results come back is also an issue. All of that has to be juxtaposed with the accuracy of the testing that is coming back.

Over the last number of weeks, I have looked in depth at the digital green certificate. When this was first mooted, many people expected it would absolutely nail down that PCR tests were the only method of certification. When the technical specification was issued last week, lo and behold, it mentioned certification of antigen testing. It paves the way in the months ahead, as aviation gets back to some normality, that it will not always be just PCR testing. There is some space in the room for rapid antigen testing and that needs to be looked at.

I come to Professor Ferguson with a proposal to see what he would think of it. Perhaps our committee could then take action on it. There is obviously a space here at the moment, with five or six lead-in weeks before the digital green certificate is operational throughout the EU. Right now, each member state is working pretty much off its own rules, for better or worse. A logical way of trialling this could be to pick one route in and out of Ireland with very few passengers, maybe a dozen or two dozen, where it is known who is on the aeroplane. To entice passengers, they would not have to get a PCR test; they would be antigen tested and we will see how that would go. The route could be Heathrow to Dublin as we unfortunately do not have Shannon routes at the moment, but it would be an in and out service. That could be trialled over these few weeks until we have a European-wide regime. What does Professor Ferguson think of that as a pathway to getting some normality back to aviation without breaking the bank for the passenger?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** That is a very good idea. The Deputy's suggestion of doing it on an Ireland-UK route is particularly helpful, because as I said previously, the UK is piloting these things and has got the IT systems in place. If an airline on that route is picked, such as CityJet, Ryanair, Aer Lingus or whatever, this system could be used as a substitute for home self-quarantining, for example. The data would need to be collected, it would need to be seen that people did the test, reported the results and information was received on how many people did that and so on. The Deputy's idea is a very good one. If that was done, there are quite a lot of businesspeople travelling at the present time, and others who, I suspect, would volunteer to participate, particularly if they did not have to home isolate but would be allowed to go about their business. This is unless, of course, there was a positive test, in which case it would be necessary to isolate and get a confirmatory PCR. The Deputy's idea is a good one.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I formally propose, out of today's meeting, that this proposal go forward to the Departments of Health and Transport on a trial basis for the next few weeks. I

watched a Sky News report the other night in which people were filmed coming in and out of a disco in Manchester, which was trialled using a sample of the population. We are talking about sampling, potentially, people going to concerts, matches, etc. Why not look specifically at, and this is probably one of the best ways to test it, a flight that has a very low carry load, maybe ten or 12 passengers, in and out of Ireland to the UK. Let the HSE trial this and monitor its efficacy. This could very well be a pathway forward for Ireland, using the building blocks of the digital green certificate. I formally propose that, out of today's committee meeting, if there is no dissent, this become a recommendation now, not next month.

**Chairman:** We already agreed to write to the Department of Transport to ask that it engages with Professor Ferguson to set up a pilot scheme. The Deputy has put forward the construct of what that pilot scheme should look like. We will include that in the recommendation. Other matters may come up in the course of the meeting. We have already taken a decision today. We will write to the Department immediately, asking it to set up a pilot scheme. Clearly, the construct of looking at a particular flight over and back to the UK where, as Professor Ferguson said, it already has the structures in place, absolutely needs to be done immediately. We have Professor Ferguson before us today and there has been no interaction with the Department of Transport on a report that is groundbreaking but very straightforward. The report is now a month old. This testing should have been going on for the last number of weeks. We still have sufficient time so, certainly, the construct around such a pilot scheme should be included in our recommendation.

We will move on to the Green Party slot. Deputy Matthews has four minutes.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I want to go back to what Professor Ferguson said at the outset about the SAGE report and the testing being carried out in the UK. Is the UK carrying out that testing at the moment and could we learn from any mistakes, or what it is doing at the moment, rather than proceeding straightaway to a pilot? Is that a more effective way of assessing whether serial testing would work? Is Professor Ferguson aware of a pilot scheme operating in the UK, and has been operating for some time, which would allow us to make an assessment on that? Can we get a report on that or would it be for the committee to follow that line of inquiry, to learn from any mistakes being made in the UK? I thank Professor Ferguson.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** It is necessary to do both. One can definitely learn from the experience of other people and what they will say about matters I have already told the committee about, such as serial testing. It is also necessary to do the pilot because the logistics and IT system need to be in place, as well as the people within the Health Service Executive or on the ground in whatever airport is chosen in Ireland and so on. There are two parts to it. The logistics part needs to be done and there is a need to learn from other people.

I am not certain about what I am about to say, but as far as I know the UK has commenced those studies. I am aware of the modelling work done for SAGE and have read the report, which is in the public domain. My understanding is that the UK pilots have just started so this would be a very opportune moment to take part in those, for example, in the way suggested by the previous Deputy in the context of a UK-to-Ireland flight. That is the answer. It involves logistics and learning.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** The committee should try to pursue the matter of the authorities here working in tandem with their UK counterparts. I do not imagine things would be that different, logistically or behaviourally.

**Chairman:** When we write to the Department, we will implicitly ask it to link up with the UK. It should be an integrated approach between ourselves and the UK. There are benefits in terms of the North-South angle. It is a collaborative process. We will include that in our request to the Department of Transport.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I do not have much to add and nor to I have questions beyond those that have been asked already. What Professor Ferguson has delivered in terms of his 50-plus page report is something this country had needed for a number of months. It is a rigorous and strong academic paper on the advantages of rapid mass antigen testing. Professor Ferguson is chief scientific adviser to the Government of Ireland and the Government needs to take this on board. Our aviation industry needs a pathway out of where it is at the moment. It needed action months ago. The initial report on aviation recovery was published last summer. We have always been behind the eight ball on this. We were told that antigen testing was not the gold standard. Unfortunately, PCR testing was the enemy of the good for so long in terms of Government policy but Professor Ferguson has set out in detail how this can be ameliorated and managed and why there are such advantages to antigen testing.

I thank Professor Ferguson for his report, which needs to be taken on board. I commend the Chairman on the urgency with which he has set out how the committee will deal with this matter. Deputy Cathal Crowe's suggestion is very good. I support it and am glad it will be included.

A few airports, such as those in Rome and Istanbul, have used antigen testing. Representatives from Rome Airport appeared before the committee a number of months ago. Did Professor Ferguson look at any further evidence of how their testing has continued over the past number of months, particularly through the winter wave, or did that fall outside the scope of his report? I again thank him. I cannot emphasise how important this is for our aviation industry.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** Unfortunately, we did not look in any more detail at those airports. This is something that someone else could do but we did not do it.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I have nothing more to add other than to heap further plaudits on the report and give a boost to how much we need to implement this recommendation.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** I have been raising the necessity of rapid antigen testing at a political level since last January. To be honest, I have been baffled by the sluggish response from the HSE and NPHET. It is very regrettable that such a valuable tool in our battle against Covid has not been advanced. Hopefully, the work of the committee today can help to facilitate matters in that regard.

Can Professor Ferguson confirm whether an antigen test detects both symptomatic and asymptomatic carriers? My position on this is very simple. The test is easy to perform, generates rapid results and is relatively cheap. It should be used in the construction industry, the hospitality and retail sectors and schools. I am aware that a pilot project is under way in the context of construction. Many private companies are using antigen testing very effectively. Such testing is widely accepted across Europe. It is advanced in the UK, Germany, France and Italy. All across Europe, huge orders are being placed with companies manufacturing antigen tests. My concern is that we will end up like we did with PPE at the start of the pandemic and manufacturing capacity will be full by the time we make a decision.

I am not happy about the delays in respect of this matter. I raised it with the Tánaiste and

Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment last week. As part of his response, he stated that the Government endorsed Professor Ferguson's report and that there were differences of opinion between scientists and public health doctors. Could Professor Ferguson explain what these differences are and whether we can overcome them? The political will to roll out antigen testing is there but there is resistance within NPHET and at senior level in the medical profession to this being deployed.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** Antigen testing does detect symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals. It is really useful in mass testing for asymptomatic individuals because if someone feels perfectly well, he or she may not be motivated to roll up for a test so that is really part of the advantage.

I cannot really tell the Deputy why people are resistant. He would need to speak to those individuals but if we look at the data, we need to understand that a PCR test and an antigen test are about different things. Since this is a transport committee, people often talk about the PCR test as being the Rolls Royce test. According to this analogy, if one cannot have a Rolls Royce, one should not have any car but that is nonsense. If I wanted to travel through Africa, I would not use a Rolls Royce, I would choose a Land Rover. If I wanted to be green and save the planet, I would choose an electric car not a Rolls Royce that burns so much petrol per gallon. What that tells us is that it depends on the question one is asking. An antigen test basically detects infectious people. It detects an individual who has a viral load and is likely to have live virus and transmit it to other people. This is what we want to do. We want to remove those infectious people from the workforce, the aeroplane or general society and get them to isolate until they are not infectious. One then stops the spread of the virus. A PCR test detects the nucleic acid of a virus and that tells a person when he or she has a very small amount of virus that is not infectious, tells him or her when he or she is infectious and tells him or her when he or she is post-infectious - in other words, he or she is way over having had the symptoms but still has some traces of the nucleic acid. These tests are detecting different things. An antigen test will not tell a person whether he or she has ever had Covid or whether he or she is over the virus, it just tells someone whether he or she is infectious at that stage. The mentality that equates a PCR test with an antigen test is unhelpful. They are detecting different things.

By definition, any self-administered test is less accurate than a professional test but there is plenty of precedent for this. A woman can walk into a chemist shop, buy a pregnancy test and carry out that test and when she goes to the doctor, the doctor carries out another one so this is known. As already stated, training is very important. There are plenty of good videos. Taking the sample is very easy to do. Reading the test is very important and that can be aided with a photograph. Selecting the right commercial test kit is also important. Of course, no test is infallible. There are about one in 1,000 false positives with an antigen test while there are false negatives as well and people need to be educated about that. They need to be told that the test is not perfect but that is true of almost any test. We just need to think about the different contexts of the test.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I thank Professor Ferguson for being here today. The scientific dogs in the street have been screaming about antigen testing for some time. Noted broadcasters have been screaming about it. We have raised it in this committee and I have raised it in the Seanad. There has been antigen testing throughout Europe for several months. There has to be a gate blocker; there must be somebody here who is preventing this moving forward. We appear to be constantly behind the curve on matters such as antigen testing. Has Professor Ferguson encountered resistance to the committee as it tried to progress this study?

I fully support the option put forward by Deputy Cathal Crowe. However, given the Schengen travel area throughout Europe, there will clearly be an integrated travel scheme in Europe. The Minister for Defence spoke yesterday about a mobile phone app whereby I would be able to bring it to the airport, show it to a card reader and it would declare I had taken my test and am free to travel. Is Professor Ferguson aware of how far advanced we are in the development of that app?

That is all I have to say. I thank Professor Ferguson for his time. My colleagues have had many questions for him.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** Indeed, there are people who worry about the accuracy of a rapid-flow antigen test. I guess it is the difference between a diagnostic for an individual patient and a screening device for the population. A screening device for the population has to be easy to use, cheap, very straightforward and have a good degree of accuracy. In my opinion, one in 1,000 is an acceptable level for a false test. In the opinion of some other people, it is not. They would want it to be one in 100,000 or whatever. That is just a matter of opinion. I think much of the worry is about the accuracy of the test. Another worry is people misunderstanding the test, so they believe if they get a negative test they can go crazy. This is what is called a risk transfer type of argument. The same argument was made about condoms, seat belts and so forth, that people were going to misbehave. That is not the way to look at it.

I view antigen testing in the context in which we are discussing it as a health and safety measure. If one wears a bicycle helmet, does one ride the bicycle more dangerously than if one did not wear the helmet? I do not think so. It is the same type of argument here. The people who are worried about testing worry partly about the accuracy *per se* and they worry about the potential behavioural changes that may occur after that. My personal view is that the public are very well educated. They know the challenges of Covid-19, and it is a terrible disease. They are aware of the problems of severe lockdown and restriction of economic and social activity. I believe that one should explain to people that this is a screening tool, a way of trying to increase the safety of the population and, as a Deputy said earlier, to give people confidence to go back onto an aeroplane or to go to a restaurant, hotel or to work. Yes, there will be some cases where it is inaccurate and one may be one of the unfortunate people who get an inaccurate test but, by and large, it is much better than doing nothing and much better than having a complete lockdown. Most people will understand that. I have a great deal more faith in human nature, that most people will not misbehave and that they will do the test and comply. We cannot devise a system for a very small number of people who are obviously not going to work it the way we would want. The vast number of people would, because they are keen to get back to their lives.

That is clearly an opinion, and there are different opinions. I have tried to summarise what I see as the opinion in this area. I must say that the tests are getting more accurate and the weight of evidence behind using them is becoming ever more compelling.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I have a final brief question. The issue of pilot testing arose here this morning. Pilot testing has taken place in most European countries and in the UK at this stage. Can we not just bite the bullet now and go for it? Pilot testing will only delay us even further.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** Yes, we should move very quickly. The only reason that I would recommend pilots at scale and at pace, which is what is in the report, is in order to get the logistics right. That is all.



**Chairman:** It runs in parallel with establishing a system to operate it.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** Yes, exactly.

**Chairman:** Senator Buttimer has four minutes.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Professor Ferguson for attending the meeting. Professor Ferguson is the chief scientific officer for the Government. His report was published in April, but it was submitted on 19 March. What has been his engagement with the Government since then?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** I have had fairly extensive engagement across the higher and further education sector with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, and officials of that Department and I have been involved in discussions about extensive pilots which are under way or are planned.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** That is just in education. Is that correct?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** It is in higher and further education.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Has NPHET, the chief medical officer and Dr. Glynn engaged with Professor Ferguson? Has there been interaction with the Minister for Transport and the Minister of State with responsibility for aviation?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** In the case of transport and aviation, no. In terms of NPHET and Dr. Glynn, yes, they have read the report and I have talked to them about it. I have also had interaction with the commercial sector, the Tánaiste, IBEC and commercial employers and companies.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** What has been the view of NPHET and the Government regarding a pilot, which we all support?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** My understanding is that the Government has endorsed the report. It is up to individual Departments to roll out parts of that report. Clearly, I have made recommendations and I am very happy to help or engage in any way I can be helpful. It is down to the individual Departments to roll out any recommendations.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Should Professor Ferguson be involved in putting together a pilot? Who should be involved in putting that pilot together, be it in respect of a flight, a sporting event or a nightclub, as in the case of the UK? Has Professor Ferguson or the Government had any engagement with the NHS regarding the pilot scheme?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** In terms of a pilot scheme, one would want to have engagement with the relevant actors. In aviation one would want the airline company, the airport staff and the HSE involved. If anybody wishes to ask me or any other member of the expert group - remember I only chaired that group - about the knowledge, we would be very willing to help. Incidentally, we did recommend setting up an expert group for the knowledge.

As regards the NHS, I had very extensive interaction with colleagues there, as did the expert group, in the context of taking evidence and learning from their experience of the widespread rolling out of rapid antigen testing. We have certainly done that in terms of gathering the evidence and support for the report.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Hopefully, we will set up the EU digital green certificate or green passport. Would Professor Ferguson be of the view that Ireland should have a pilot in place before we do that? Is he supportive of the EU passport?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** Yes, I am supportive of putting a pilot in place immediately. The report said we should carry out pilots at scale and as quickly as possible. As I explained previously, that is mostly related to logistics. It is a little related to learning, but it is also about logistics and getting the right people involved. I am fully supportive of that. In addition, I am fully supportive of some form of digital passport that could incorporate the vaccination status and testing. That has been tried in Israel and in a number of other places. It is going to be a way of understanding how to engage safely in activities that people want for the sustainable reopening of the economy and society.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Professor Ferguson for his contribution and for his work.

**Chairman:** Professor Ferguson, if the Government were to ask you to head such a pilot programme, particularly in the context of aviation, for example, is it a position you would be willing to take? You recommended in your report that an expert group be established. If the Government approached you to lead such a group in a pilot programme, would you be willing to undertake that task?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** That would not be appropriate. I would be very happy to help in any way possible, and I am sure any member of the expert group would be capable of doing that. I have the job of running Science Foundation Ireland, and it is important for the people involved either in aviation or in the hotel business for the HSE and the Department of Health to be involved. I am not shirking a responsibility. I am simply saying there are not enough hours in the day, and it is not my job. However, I am very happy to help or advise in any way that could assist the setting up of such a pilot.

**Chairman:** Professor Ferguson's report on the aviation sector is great work. It has been idle for too long, for the last month. I note that on page 47 he makes a specific recommendation about a test to release, to reduce harms from unnecessary quarantine, for example of asymptomatic contacts, critical workers and international travellers. It is a recommendation. We will write to the Department of Transport, which is the principal Department for aviation, and we will also write to NPHE, the Department of Health, the Minister for Health, the Department of the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste to raise the urgency to set up such a pilot programme with immediate effect. It is a pilot and roll-out since ultimately they would happen in parallel to get the logistics in place.

What reaction did Professor Ferguson get from Dr. Holohan and Dr. Glynn and what is NPHE's view on the report? He did not get a chance to answer that direct question. He might elaborate on it.

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** As far as I am aware, the report has not been officially discussed at NPHE, although I have discussed it, especially with Dr. Glynn, before Dr. Holohan returned to work. They see it as complementary. Their view is also that it is up to line Departments other than the Department of Health to implement some of the recommendations. One can see a flavour of that in the recommendations in the report. The Department of Health is focused on rolling out the vaccination programme while looking at hospitals, general practitioners and so on. It is for other the Departments, including Education, Transport and Enterprise, Trade and Employment, to take the lead and to involve the HSE where appropriate. The HSE is involved

in the confirmatory PCR test. One of the interesting things about our recommendations is that one can do the antigen test and then, if one tests positive, the confirmatory PCR test is not just about a confirmation of the test but bringing a person within the governance of the HSE, since he or she is now within that system. If one makes that link, that is how one will get the Department of Health on board. It becomes involved at that point.

**Chairman:** In summary, any pilot programme, with the Department of Transport as the principal Department, will involve NPHET, the Department of Health and the HSE. We thank Professor Ferguson for coming in at short notice. This has been a most informative session and he has given of his valuable time. We will write to the Department of Transport and the Minister. We will also write to the various other bodies that we named, including the Department of Health, the Minister for Health, NPHET, the HSE and the Department of the Taoiseach, which is co-ordinating all matters regarding Covid. We want to see a pilot programme established with immediate effect which would look at specific routes *vis-à-vis* the UK and work with the UK on its pilot scheme so that when the green certificate is up and running we, as a country, are not left on the runway but are flying with the other countries.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Is the SAGE material that Professor Ferguson spoke about earlier all available online? I know there are a number of papers. If it is not, we would need that extra information and also the detail about the IT systems etc. If we could get that as a committee, that would be brilliant, or do we need to go and seek that?

**Professor Mark Ferguson:** It is online and I will send the reference to the clerk.

**Chairman:** Professor Ferguson works with our committee in any way necessary. We see him as a valuable asset in dealing with Covid and reopening the aviation sector and the economy. I thank him.

*Sitting suspended at 1.34 p.m. and resumed at 1.41 p.m.*

### **Challenges Facing Travel Agents and the Aviation Sector: Discussion**

**Chairman:** The purpose of the second part to our meeting is to discuss the challenges facing travel agents and the aviation sector. On behalf of the committee, I welcome to the meeting Mr. Pat Dawson, CEO, and Mr. Paul Hackett, board member, of the Irish Travel Agents Association. I thank the witnesses for attending the meeting at such short notice.

All witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if witnesses' statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that witnesses comply with any such direction.

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 Houses 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 where Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House or the Convention Centre Dublin, in order to participate in public meetings. I will not permit a member to participate

where he or she is not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will, reluctantly, be asked to leave the meeting. In this regard, I ask members participating via Microsoft Teams to confirm their presence on the grounds of the Leinster House campus prior to making their contributions to the meeting.

We have 45 minutes for this discussion and I want to allow as many questions as possible. Mr. Hackett submitted a very good statement, which members will have read. I ask him to summarise in order that we can move to questions as quickly as possible.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** I start with some good news. The airline refund process, specifically with regard to Ryanair, has improved. It is not complete and is not working for everybody but compared with where we were when we first addressed this committee in October 2020, the position is much improved. We attribute that in no small part to the coverage the matter received when raised at this committee. For this reason, we thank the Chairman and members for the committee's assistance in helping to resolve this issue.

The travel industry, airports and airlines need clarity as to when we can restart trading with the safe reopening of international travel for our corporate and leisure markets. Hotels in Ireland need to know if they can accept international visitors in 2021. It is important to remember that 75% of income in the hospitality sector comes from the international market. Until such time as full restart plans are announced, we are very keen to support the regional airports of Cork, Shannon and Knock. We call on the Government to be generous in its support for all Irish airports and to support the pillar airlines on which we in Ireland rely. We have heard that Cork airport will be closed for ten weeks from September. To close a key regional airport just when international travel is restarting is not good.

The European Commission launched the digital green certificate on 17 March, almost two months ago. The European Parliament last week voted to approve the certificates and recommended that they be renamed "EU Covid19 certificates". This will be law in June and must be implemented by all member states within six to eight weeks. This is a regulation. It is not a pick-and-mix option, as mentioned by the Minister for Health on RTÉ news last week. It is mass harmonisation legislation, the objective of which is to have travel within the EU reopened safely with all EU member states adopting the certificates. The Government must do this and, in so doing, it must revoke the advice against nonessential international travel.

As referenced earlier this week, on Monday, 3 May, we also need to open up to travel within and outside of the EU. The UK and United States are core markets for Ireland's corporate and leisure travel. The European Commission has announced a plan for Schengen member states to allow travel by fully vaccinated people and we urge the Government to adopt this proposal.

As matters stand, it is illegal to travel to a port or airport for nonessential travel. Those who do so face a fine of €2,000 per person. There are 35 different statutory instruments, implemented since January this year, that control and limit international travel. We need a plan and commitment to unwind these statutory instruments once the vaccination roll-out hits the level of 82% by the end of June, as is the current target. On "The Week in Politics" programme last week, the Taoiseach stated we are an interconnected global island and we cannot seal off the island forever. Taking all of this into account, as well as the improving position in our hospitals, the overall levels of Covid and the positivity around the vaccine roll-out, Ireland needs to implement the EU Covid19 certificates in full and without delay, open up to international visitors and allow Irish citizens the right to travel, at least within the EU to begin with.

We note our concern about the cost of PCR testing. At approximately €100 per person, PCR test costs are too high, antifamily and a cost deterrent for international travel. We are surprised the Government has not adopted the recommendations of Professor Mark Ferguson's report on antigen testing and we note the irony that the HSE is using antigen testing in some facilities.

One important consideration around continued travel restrictions in the Republic is that international travel will recommence from Northern Ireland's airports some time between mid-May and mid-June. We have already seen Ryanair open a new base in Belfast City Airport adding ten new routes. Moving assets from the Republic of Ireland is very easy to do for both Aer Lingus and Ryanair. Both airlines have been forced to do so given there is no plan to open Ireland for international travel.

Bookings for international travel are still around 85% down and there will be no recovery until consumer confidence returns. No other sector has had little or no income since March 2020. Irish hotels had some income last summer but travel agents had none. A reduction in income of between 85% and 95% effectively amounts to minus income as our cost base, even with massive reductions, is still substantial. We have met Ministers in the Department of Transport, members of all political parties and countless Deputies and Senators, all of whom have been understanding and sympathetic to our plight, but what pocket do we put that into? Sympathy and understanding are not something we can pass on to our landlords, IT providers, insurance companies and the staff we must retain.

There is a delay of between six and nine months between booking and travel, which means our sector must work for between six and nine months before we count the income generated from advance bookings. So long as there is no income, the travel industry needs to see ongoing support from the Government. We are getting the wage subsidy and the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS. The CRSS needs to be repurposed and linked to guidance on international travel. We hope to see extensions of support beyond 30 June. The travel industry needs to see supports continue until we no longer meet the qualifying criteria. The support is needed now ahead of the restart to financially rebuild in order to reduce our dependency on the State. Without ongoing and targeted sector-specific supports, there will be more failures in our industry. There is no need for that to happen. Customers have full protection because all travel agents are licensed and bonded, so additional support will prevent company failures.

Before I finish, we need to bring a matter to the committee's attention. As a result of Covid19 and the impact on the travel industry, some merchant service providers are taking a very hard line and demanding substantial cash deposits from travel agents. This is a direct challenge to the bonding and licensing arrangements the Government has in place for travel agents. Some of the companies involved are associated with our partially State-owned banks. This is a very serious issue for the sector and the Government must address it given that it has poured millions into supporting the sector during the pandemic, only to have the very future of the sector put at risk by these staggering demands for cash security. I thank the Chairman.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Hackett. We will now move to questions.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I welcome Mr. Dawson and Mr. Hackett to the meeting. The final paragraph of Mr. Hackett's contribution mentions a very worrying development about merchant service providers. What is happening with merchant service providers? I would be concerned if a bullyboy attitude is being taken towards our travel agents. I hope that will not be tolerated.



**Mr. Paul Hackett:** I will explain. The merchant service providers are the companies that facilitate merchant retailers, including travel agents like us, to accept credit cards. It is the technical piece whereby we accept the card from the consumer. We are bonded and licensed by the Commission for Aviation Regulation and therefore there is zero risk. There has been some exposure to the merchant service providers for travel that is outside the bonding and licensing arrangement. People who book accommodation only or flight only directly with an airline are not covered under the bonding and protection. However, our sector is fully protected. The merchant service people are effectively requesting a double bonding mechanism whereby we provide them with additional cash security over and above the bonding that we are providing through the Commission for Aviation Regulation.

This is a cash drain. There simply is no risk attachable to what they are talking about. It is really important for the Commission for Aviation Regulation, the Department of Transport and the Department of Finance - because some of these entities are regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland - to look at and get transparency from these companies as to where they assess the risk. We have asked them to quantify this risk and show us where they have been left out of pocket. We do not believe it exists within the bonded sector.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Have they replied to that request from the Irish Travel Agents Association? Is this a new development? If it is a new development the committee should take action.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** This has happened intermittently. This is the third time I have seen it with my business. The first time was when we were starting up, which was understandable. The second time they approached us, we explained the bonding mechanism. The commission was involved and all parties were happy about the risk element being controlled. We see this as a reaction to what has happened with Covid whereby chargebacks have effectively landed on their desks but not from within the licensed and bonded travel agent sector. We are saying that we are unique. The Commission for Aviation Regulation licenses us. The bond is in place for our turnover. There is no risk to the merchant service providers. This is double bonding.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** It is a very worrying development that an industry that has been hardest hit is getting demands from a merchant service provider in a very unfair manner. I propose that the committee should take action in support of the travel agents. I thank Mr. Hackett for his contribution.

**Chairman:** In that regard, Mr. Hackett might give us the specific details of whom we should follow up with. We very much take onboard Senator Buttimer's proposal. We want to support the industry.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** I will do so.

**Chairman:** Sinn Féin has agreed to facilitate Deputy Cathal Crowe who needs to go to another meeting.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank Deputies Ó Murchú and O'Rourke for kindly obliging. I welcome the witnesses. We have heard from representatives of the aviation sector and others in the tourism industry of the need for a lead-in period. The opening statement indicates that there is usually a six- to nine-month period from the time of booking to the time of travelling. Has the lead-in period for summer 2021 already passed by? We are all anticipating some form of resumption. We hope there will be a fairly buoyant domestic tourism market. Representatives

of the Irish Travel Agents Association are heavily dependent on international tourism and we all expect a return to international travel in the mid-summer period.

The big concern is that consumers are fickle. At the moment people are clambering over each other to get bookings in west Clare, Westport, Killarney and all over Ireland. However, as soon as it is possible for them to fly to Gran Canaria and other such places, I expect we will see a shift in demand. I am concerned that as Irish consumers move from west of Ireland hotel breaks to international travel, it may create a vacuum. Will we see a return of the North American travellers to fill that vacuum? How are the witnesses strategising for the shoulder season beyond the summer? What lead-in period do they need? Has some of that already passed them by? Other than what they have already mentioned, what supports should the Government and this committee be championing on their behalf?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** Effectively nobody is making bookings for summer 2021 at the moment. There is a small improvement in trading, but from being 95% down to being 85% down is not much to brag about. Consumers need confidence and that will come from the vaccine roll-out and the implementation of the digital green certificates. Until that is clear, we will not see consumers booking. Consumers have had so many lost opportunities and cancellations on holidays last year and earlier this year that with the vaccination piece now in sight, they are waiting until they have clarity on that.

As regards the internal market, naturally if we open within the EU, I am sure that Irish hotels and the Irish hospitality sector will dearly welcome internal traffic from other EU states into Ireland. That should be in place. Regarding our booking period, that is the lag-time between when people pay a deposit and when they travel. We do not count the profit until they travel. Having had practically zero trading for nine months, we are looking at another six to nine months of very low levels of trading before we can return to breakeven, let alone profitability.

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** On several occasions we have spoken to people in Aer Lingus, as a large carrier to and from this country. They tell us it will take two to three months to get 40% or 50% of their fleet in the air. It is not just a switch-on-the-oven situation and away we go. Airlines need to know what will be happening in two or three months' time. If we are slow in getting moving, everybody will be affected, both inbound and outbound., including the airports.

As the Deputy said, home holidays are the thing at the moment. Travel agents are looking at September bookings. We had a nightmare getting refunds and making changes for people. We have advised all our customers to make sure their booking is refundable or changeable. Last year we had the discussion about ghost flights, which was the biggest scandal in the industry in Ireland where aeroplanes flew empty and airlines kept the people's money. Thousands of families were affected by this. We are very much aware of the risk of that recurring. We do not need that uncertainly and the customers do not need it.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the witnesses. I ask them to excuse me as I need to go to another meeting. I am more than happy to engage with them after the meeting also. I thank the Chairman and Sinn Féin for facilitating me.

**Chairman:** We now move to the facilitators. Deputy O'Rourke has three to four minutes.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I think Mr. Dawson and Mr. Hackett. There has been news in recent weeks of big companies in the sector closing down. I was sorry to see that and I extend my solidarity to all the companies they work with.

What opportunities do travel agents envisage with the implementation of the digital green certificate? What do prospective customers want to see from that programme? I ask the witnesses to touch on the opportunity that antigen testing might provide. In the past hour we had a very good meeting with Professor Ferguson.

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** The digital certificate must be uniform and it must be rolled out everywhere at the same time. We do not want to see Ireland again being an outlier. We have been outliers in respect of international travel. Of course, we take the health situation into consideration. However, we want to avoid using traffic lights which may change, leaving people stuck away on holidays, without insurance and what not. It must be uniform.

We see flags with some Government statements regarding the six- or eight-week parameter that is now supposed to happen. We get the sense that Ireland might stretch this out to 12 or 14 weeks. Now is the time to get ready. It is a big task to get ready. This flag has been raised for many months. It may have been announced by the EU only a couple of days ago and agreed with it. We need action as soon as possible. We do not want the Government deviating and being an outlier. As Mr. Hackett said, it is not a pick and mix. One is either in or out and we fear Ireland may be dodging this and trying to put back inbound and outbound travel, which the country cannot afford.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** Our concern is that we are aware that this currently sits with the Department of Health, which has a lot on its plate. There will be technical requirements in order to put this digital certificate in place for all EU countries within the envisaged timeframe. Without casting aspersions on the ability of the Department, our concern rests with the fact that this is another job it has to do. Could that lead to an inadvertent delay? On the requirement relating to the technical piece, where is the Government up to in that regard? This is the clearest, most straightforward proposal in terms of fully vaccinated people, those who have recovered from Covid or individuals who have had PCR testing. It is a clear path that makes harmonisation and simplicity of travel within the EU straightforward and something that is possible for the aviation and airline sectors and the travel industry to adopt. It needs to happen and we need to know when it will happen. When it happens, confidence will follow. Consumers have heard about it but they are hearing mixed messages and they are not sure when it will come into effect. We also have all our advice against international travel, so that has to be wound down to coincide with the digital certificates. We are on a pathway. This is a very different year to 2020 in terms of the vaccination roll-out being in place across Europe.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I think the Chair will agree there is much that mirrors the first hour in terms of the window of opportunity for preparation and making sure that preparation happens.

**Chairman:** Yes. I will follow up with Mr. Hackett. First, in terms of travel agents in Ireland, is it just outgoing traffic his organisation deals with or does it deal with people coming in as well?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** The ITAA deals mainly with outbound traffic and some domestic traffic. Quite a number of us offered domestic holidays last year through our shops and retail websites. Inbound is looked after by a different organisation, namely, the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation, ITIC.

**Chairman:** ITIC is Irish-based as well?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** Absolutely. Eoghan O'Mara Walsh and Ruth Andrews have, I think, addressed different parts of the committee at different times.

**Chairman:** Clearly, the ITAA has done quite a bit of research into the process by which the digital green pass comes into operation, particularly from the Irish side. Will Mr. Hackett give his view on who will ultimately make the decision here as to whether Ireland adopts the digital green certificate in the generic model that is coming from Europe? Mr. Hackett referred to the Department of Health. Where does it sit in respect of the Departments of Transport, the Taoiseach and Justice? It is clear that Mr. Hackett has looked at this in depth so I ask for his perspective. We will follow up on that. I do not know if Mr. Hackett had an opportunity to listen to Professor Ferguson's presentation in the first session.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** Unfortunately not.

**Chairman:** We are looking at writing to get a pilot programme up and running, particularly in respect of antigen testing, which would link into the digital green pass coming on stream in a European context. The pilot programme would maybe have an air travel route to the UK, which would enable the logistics to be set up to have an operation in place when the digital green pass is introduced. What does Mr. Hackett believe is the mechanism to get this signed off at domestic level? It is a hard question but a key one.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** Our understanding is that the digital green cards sit with the Department of Health. It is also our understanding that the Department of the Taoiseach has oversight of this area. There has been reference to the e-commerce piece being involved with one of the Ministers of State. That is where it stands. Where we need the certainty is-----

**Chairman:** Does the Department of Transport have a role in this?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** It will have a role. It is the line Department that all the airports, airlines and the travel sector engage with. It should be closely involved. This should be something in respect of which the Department can bring its intelligence to play.

**Chairman:** In terms of the process by which the digital green certificate is being examined at Government level, is the heavy lifting being done by the Department of Health?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** That is our understanding.

**Chairman:** I cut Mr. Hackett off at the pass there. Will he conclude what he was saying on the key point for him?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** There are some key points in terms of communication. I do not think the communication from different spokespeople has been clear on this. This is an EU regulation. It is not an opt-in, opt-out clause. It is not pick and mix. These digital green certificates have been approved by the European Commission and were passed last week by the European Parliament. They are clear as to what they do and their objective is to have mass harmonisation in Europe subject to the public health guidance around vaccination, recovery from Covid and PCR testing. This is not something we should be afraid of; it is our certificate to freedom in terms of inbound and outbound travel in this country. The key points are around the clarity of communication, clarity on when this will be implemented and for consumers to know when this will happen and what it means. Is it-----

**Chairman:** As far as Mr. Hackett is concerned, it has legal status in a European context-----

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** Yes.

**Chairman:** -----which all the individual countries have signed up to. What-----

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** As a regulation, there is no option for Ireland to veto this or opt out.

**Chairman:** What flexibility do the Government and the authorities here have in respect of the implementation of the digital green certificate? Is there any?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** Our understanding is that there is a time lag between when it is passed in Europe and when it is implemented here. Our other concern rests with the technical ability to deliver this in our country.

**Chairman:** What is Mr. Hackett's understanding in terms of the timescale that must be implemented?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** Six weeks is our understanding.

**Chairman:** From what date?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** The start of June or mid-June. There is talk that 8 June is when it will be passed because there is still quite a bit of work to be done.

**Chairman:** Will Mr. Hackett elaborate on his concerns regarding the technical capability to roll it out? We are still six weeks from the middle of June. Is there time to overcome that?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** We are a very technically creative island, with some of the best tech companies operating in our economy. We should engage with these companies to ensure that we have the technical ability to do it. We cannot have various bits of paper. This will be a QR code-type scenario. We need it to be fast, efficient and really robust so the public health authorities are confident in how it is being implemented. There is quite an amount of work to be done. That needs to be happening and hopefully it is happening behind the scenes.

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** Our worry is there is nobody taking ownership of this. Everyone is involved but nobody is involved. We need to know who is carrying this ball to get the job done. That is why we are concerned. We do not know who the go-to Minister or other person in the Government is.

**Chairman:** Does Mr. Dawson believe the Department of Health is the reluctant carrier of the ball at the moment?

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** On form, yes, I think it is. This is something we should be proud of. We should see it as good news, just as the vaccination is good news. We know from dealing with this situation over the past 12 months that there are brakes being put on this somewhere. We do not know who to go to. I think the Chairman probably spots that, as well.

**Chairman:** Does Mr. Hackett have concluding comments before we move to the next speaker?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** No.

**Chairman:** We will follow up on the matters raised at our two sessions. We will write to various people in order to get a sense of clarity and to get a pilot programme up and running in order that there will be action. We see the key gateway in getting a roll-out and the digital green



certificate up and running. We need a pilot programme and antigen testing, and these need to be linked to a timeframe in the context of the roll-out. Six weeks from the middle of June brings us up to the end of July. That is too late.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** That is way too late. You are right, Chairman.

**Chairman:** It is too late. There is urgency and we want to work proactively with all Departments to get a pilot programme up and running, with the ultimate objective of getting the digital green certificate functioning at a European level that is safe from a public health perspective and provides public safety for all passengers and the Irish public as well.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I thank Mr. Dawson and Mr. Hackett. In fairness, they have been very comprehensive in setting out what they require. What Professor Ferguson spoke about and the possibility of a pilot programme could provide us with a roadmap for aviation, combined with the digital green certificate but there is a necessity for us to follow up to ensure that we have the capacity at both levels. There is no point in us being willing to do something and then not being able to deliver on it. We have had IT issues before. I accept what has been said, that it is unacceptable in such a technically proficient State as this.

I have heard anecdotally that the Ryanair refund situation has improved. What are the issues that still remain? Is it just the numbers or do we still have an issue with group refunds? I accept what has been said about double bonding and banks. That is something we have to follow up.

The witnesses have asked that the CRSS would be repurposed and connected to travel guidance. That makes sense. What other sector-specific ask do the witnesses have? I know that is still a particular issue with a number of travel agents to whom I have spoken, who are very glad that the witnesses are here today, but they need something that is industry-specific to ensure that we get to the other end of this pandemic.

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** We are grateful for the supports we have seen so far for salaries and wages. They have been very helpful. It should be remembered that we only qualified at level 5 for the CRSS. It might have been 40% of last year. When non-essential retail reopens, that is when we are supposed to fall out of the CRSS. As I said to the Department at a meeting that we had a couple of weeks ago, there is no doubt that without the CRSS 50 travel agencies would have failed. There is no question about that. That was a saviour and if it is not reinstated or kept going until the end of the year we will have similar collapses to that of JWT last week.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The witnesses have won the argument in this committee, so it is a matter of what other requirements they have. We probably need some detail in that regard that we can chase up because we are probably in the final discussions on what supports will be offered into the future for all sectors. Travel agents need to be considered as part of that conversation.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** What we could do is share with the committee the documentation that we presented to the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and to the Department of Transport. We are also in discussions with them again this week on the possibility of some additional cash flow funding which will overcome that time lag between bookings and profitability and the industry returning because, as Mr. Dawson says, the supports have prevented collapse. While the collapse last week was very unfortunate, considering this sector has had no income it is a sign of its resilience and strength to have so few collapses, but that is contingent on the supports continuing.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I appreciate that. Could I get a quick response to the question on where we are with the outstanding refunds from Ryanair and whether there is still a problem with group bookings?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** This came from the conflict that exists between two pieces of EU legislation, Regulation (EC) No 261/2004 and the package travel directive, PTD. The numbers are really the issue and the time delay in getting this sorted out. Some agents are still having issues with Ryanair but for the most part Ryanair has processes in place. That is not ideal in terms of how it works for the travel industry, but Ryanair has processes in place and, for the most part, they are working. It is an ongoing process and it has improved no end since October. It is still far from ideal, but we are getting there, and consumers are getting their refunds, albeit more slowly.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Go raibh maith agat, Mr. Hackett.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** I confirm that I am in the Leinster House complex. I thank Mr. Dawson and Mr. Hackett for their presentation to the committee. I have an observation to make on what has been going on here in recent months that has very much damaged the entire industry - travel agents, international travel, aviation and all of the jobs in tourism that stem from that. I refer to the attitude taken by some to international travel. Something I hear from a lot of people working in tourism in Ireland is that they are very worried about the current level of public confidence in international travel. That is something I have spoken about in this committee previously and it is an issue that the Oireachtas as a whole needs to address. Thankfully, we are heading for a situation whereby at the end of June 80% of the Irish population are expected to receive either their first dose or to be fully vaccinated. That should very much put us on a springboard to allow people to start international travel for inbound travellers into Ireland, which is obviously fantastic for hotels in this country, and for travel in general but also to allow Irish citizens to travel abroad.

The witnesses have identified two very significant issues in their contributions today and I wish to pick up on them. One is the fact that Ireland was part of the common travel area with the United Kingdom, in the sense that we had an existing arrangement prior to Brexit and that we are not part of the Schengen Agreement, which is ploughing ahead with its own plans for international travel. I want to utilise my time in the committee today to say, as a Fianna Fáil Deputy and its spokesperson on transport, how important it is that we would follow suit with the Schengen plan and work with the countries in the Schengen area to allow Irish travellers to go to the United States once we have reached a satisfactory level of vaccination of the population. We are getting there very quickly. There is no doubt that we are making progress. We all know it was difficult and slow to start but, thankfully, it is now progressing. Reopening the US-Ireland travel channel is incredibly important for the travel industry. To put it into perspective, I spoke to one hotelier yesterday who told me that 65% of his bookings in a luxury 5 star hotel on the west coast comprised travellers coming into Ireland from the United States, and 75% of his revenue was as a result of bookings from the United States. That just shows the level of importance it has for the economy. If we want people coming in, we need to let people go out as well, which is important. I know a lot of people give out that it is money exiting the economy, but travel agents in Ireland are doing well out of it and domestic airlines do well from international travel and business as well as people working in Irish airports. That must all be stated.

The Chairman asked a question earlier about where the calls need to go. It is obvious that NPHET must be involved. From my reading of the situation, NPHET is the one causing the difficulties for the witnesses. In fairness, I think at a ministerial level many of the Departments

want to see travel open up again. I heard off the record from many different Ministers and people working in Departments that they want to see antigen testing being put in place and they want to see movement in that regard following on from the academic reports that have been done, but the issue seems to be NPHET. That is my reading of the situation. To do some justice to everybody who has come before the committee, perhaps it is time for us to look for NPHET to come before the committee again. It obliged us before and it is high time that we would bring it back again. I will ask one question and finish up then.

**Chairman:** We have made the decision to invite NPHET.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** That is great. How important is United States travel to travel agents in Ireland?

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** It is absolutely huge. The business section of our business is worth €500 million a year and the vast majority of that involves long-haul travel to the United States. I see Aer Lingus has pulled some routes from the United States already. US visitors do at least one if not two years planning in advance so this summer is now a write-off for American visitors. What we do now will affect next year for tourists. We must be seen to move and get our act together quickly to get tourists back because Americans can go to plenty of other countries. They do not necessarily need connections in Ireland but many of them come here to see this green country, and Irish and American people get on well together. The problem is that this season is lost and we must now work on the next season. In terms of inbound and outbound tourism, not alone do we send many hundreds of thousands of people on city breaks to San Francisco, Florida, New York and Las Vegas, etc., but there have also been increased flights out of Ireland over the last number of years with American carriers and Aer Lingus. There has been growth but we will lose it because everyone is running after the business so we must not be left behind. Mr. Hackett would like to add to my comments.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** Deputy O'Connor is correct. The Schengen proposal that was announced on Monday is the way for us to open up to the UK and the US, which is vital. Whenever we speak, even though the ITAA is involved in outbound activity, we would always be focused as well on our inbound counterparts and the domestic travel industry, which is hugely important in this country.

As the Deputy quite rightly said, 75% of the income for the hotel and hospitality business in Ireland comes from the international market. One cannot have outbound without inbound. The ITAA and ITIC work in hand in glove. We support the airlines because the airlines and the airports need traffic both ways. No route is going to be a single directional route and traffic must go both ways in order for it to be viable so our connectivity is critically important. It was great to hear An Taoiseach the other day recognise that we are a global connected island. We have got to get back to that.

As the Deputy quite rightly said, international travel has been very unfairly demonised when other things are still sorely missing such as the community transmission numbers, and test and trace stack up to that. A lot of the time international travel has been a very convenient distraction and that is where the demonisation has come from. We have proposals on the table for the digital green certificate, and the Schengen area for the UK and the US. Our proposals need to be acted on.

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** We also need to extend. The world is not built around Dublin as I know and we all know. The airports like Shannon Airport need to be heavily assisted with transatlan-

tic travel as there is no travel there at the moment. Cork and Knock airports also really need big assistance. Dublin Airport is doing a wonderful job and had 32 million passengers so its recovery will be quicker.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Mr. Dawson, I think, raised the important point that we need to look at the digital green certificate in a more positive way.

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** Yes.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** We must be supportive of the certificate and safe travel without compromising anyone's support of strong public health policy. They are both things that are worthy of support. The digital green certificate is needed for the aviation sector, and that is unequivocal. I have one question because time is our enemy. Page 2 of the ITAA statement reads: "There are 35 different Statutory Instruments, implemented since January 2021". Why so many?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** That is a very good question. Over 200 statutory instruments have been enacted this year alone and, as we all know, they do not require a vote. If anything, it is evidence as to how controlled and limited international travel is now. We are where we are and we must move on. What we need is a plan to have these unwound. We need a date on which it will no longer be illegal to travel to an airport or port and no longer subject to a €2,000 fine now that we have inter-county travel resuming next week. The reality is they have all been enacted under the Health Acts. Unfortunately, I have a page with the list, which I could share with the committee, and it does not make for pleasant reading. Ireland is an outlier due to how we have managed international travel. We are hearing that again because we had the French ambassador on the radio this morning and the Italian ambassador was on the radio last week. We are losing friends in Europe and beyond over the list.

**Chairman:** The list may not make good reading but it is vital reading and I ask Mr. Hackett to send his list to the committee.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** The list is on a Government website, *statutoryinstruments.ie*.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** As it is 2.25 p.m. I will leave it there in the interests of allowing other members to speak. I thank the witnesses. It is depressing how often we see each other and I think they understand why I have said that.

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** We do.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** I will be brief because most of the territory has been covered. I welcome our guests and thank them for their interesting and informative contributions. We have had them here on a number of occasions. I hope they will agree that the committee has listened and supported their case. I am very much in favour of reopening the economy. To do so we must reopen airports and allow our people to travel out and others to come in.

I raised the issue of a digital green certificate with the Taoiseach some months ago. At that stage, the Government had set its face against a digital green certificate. I firmly believe that there should be a vaccination dividend and if somebody is fully vaccinated he or she should be allowed the freedom to move around. The analogy I would draw is that somebody who refuses to take a vaccination damages our prospects of recovering from the pandemic. Therefore, the people who are fully vaccinated should be able to travel in a safe way. We, as a country, were reluctant and hesitant about using a digital green certificate. The only reason Ireland is in it is

because we were forced into it by the EU. I fear that the Irish Government will drag its heels when it comes to implementation. I ask the witnesses to forward to us the statements they issued to the Government and the Department of Transport on this matter so that we can be aware of what we need to push. I certainly will push for advancing the digital green certificate, in line with other European Union countries, as quickly as possible.

We certainly must be cognisant of the Schengen Agreement and be on a level playing pitch. There is no doubt that inward traffic is required to reboot the industry and, in particular, get the people who work at our airports back into meaningful employment and start to rebuild so much that we have lost over the last two years.

**Chairman:** Do Mr. Hackett and Mr. Dawson view the digital green certificate pass as the single most important element to getting the aviation industry, and by extension the economy, reopened in Ireland?

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** I do. It is the only show in town and it will get us across the line. It is going to save the 400,000 jobs, both inbound and outbound, at the airports. I refer to our pilots and to all of the people who work around the different airports. The certificate is the only thing that is going to get us out of this mess and that is why it is nearly but not quite as urgent as vaccination. We cannot play ducks and drakes with the certificate. We must get somebody in the Government to take charge of the certificate and we need this committee to push for it, and check where we are. A couple of weeks have elapsed and there are another six or eight weeks so how long does this thing take? We have the technology in this country so let them get it done quickly.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I thank the gentlemen for their presentations this morning. My heart goes out to the members of the ITAA. We have seen one of the biggest travel agents go and it was synonymous with Irish travel for many years. Having lost a business many years ago, I can say that it was my fault. For those who are going out of business in the travel industry at the moment, it is not their fault and the situation is most unfortunate.

There is one theme that is the elephant in the room. The Department of Health is running everything and the master of the witnesses' organisation is the Department of Transport. I am concerned that the Department of Health has too many tentacles and that one cannot keep all the balls in the air without dropping some. So, I am interested in hearing what the witnesses have to say about the matter.

Yesterday, at the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, the Minister for Foreign Affairs was very positive in his support for trying to get the economy back running as normal as possible. With that in mind, I note the witnesses constantly referenced the IT sector. Are they aware of the development of a mobile app that will allow people to present their phone at the airport to show that they have been vaccinated or had the virus or both, or have not been vaccinated, as the case may be, in order to facilitate travel? We have to get people back in the air. There are airline pilots who are desperately trying to keep their licence up to date. There are travel agents struggling to keep their business going. I learned today that there will be a sort of six to nine month lag before the small few travel agents that will still be in business will start to see profits coming back in.

Do the witnesses see the same elephant in the room that I see? I ask them to also address the mobile app. Those are the two issues of concern to me.



**Mr. Paul Hackett:** If I may deal with the issue of the mobile app first, I have heard that IBM and Salesforce have been tasked with developing the technology to implement the digital green certificates. However, as Mr. Dawson stated, it is unclear who is the project manager of this issue and that is what we need to have. I agree with the Senator. The focus of the Department of Health at the moment must be, quite rightly, on the vaccine roll-out. The hospital numbers seem to be under control and case numbers are where they are but, in broad terms, the vaccine roll-out is its absolute focus.

**Chairman:** Who contracted IBM and Salesforce to develop that app? Is the contract with the Department of Health? Did Mr. Hackett hear of the app anecdotally?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** I heard on the RTÉ news this week that the contract is in place or being signed. It would be great to know that this is in hand, there is a timeline, the app will be delivered according to that particular timeline and it will be a QR code. It is not for us as an association to dictate which Departments are best placed to implement tasks but-----

**Chairman:** We will follow up on that.

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** -----as business people - CEOs or whatever - none of us can run our businesses on our own. One has a board, a senior management team and a great complement of staff. One needs to spread the load, get the work done and meet the guidelines and deadlines that are in place.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** If I may interject, one of the things that concerns me is that this green certificate we are speaking about will require a database which will underpin the data flowing into it. I have a niece in Galway who has been called eight times to be vaccinated. She is a front-line worker and is actually fully vaccinated. This week she got an eighth phone call inviting her to come in to be vaccinated. If that is the current state of knowledge among those who manage the vaccination process, I do not see how this green certificate can work under any circumstances.

**Chairman:** We will think a little more optimistically than that. I note the Senator's reservations. I invite Mr. Hackett and Mr. Dawson to offer concluding remarks, maybe in a positive light, in terms of what should be done now. I believe the capacity is there and we have a time-frame but it needs to get under way immediately. In summary, what are their principal asks of the committee and the Government in terms of the digital green certificate being developed?

**Mr. Paul Hackett:** We are optimistic. That is an amazing thing to say as a representative of a business and an industry that has gone 14 months with zero trading. However, we are in a different place now. The vaccine roll-out is happening and the numbers are moving. We are not unduly critical of the Department of Health in that regard. We have the digital green certificate, which is this EU-wide result that will open airports, put pilots back in the air and get airport staff back working. The hospitality sector, including hotel staff, restaurants, cafés and bars, are relying on it.

We have to think of Ireland as a global interconnected island. We have amazing connectivity and an amazing hospitality industry. We have to get back our welcome to outside visitors and get them in. The digital green certificate has to be seen as something that is respectful of public health and is the solution in that regard. It is not a passport; it is a certificate. It covers one's vaccination status. If one has not been vaccinated, one needs a PCR test. If one does not wish to do that and has recovered from Covid, that is it. It is very fair. It is not some demonised

additional passport or control mechanism; it is a route to freedom in terms of international travel into and out of this island to restore us to some sort of economic sensibility.

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** The Irish Travel Agents Association will speak to the Department of Transport tomorrow. We will enlighten it further regarding where we are at with the digital certificate and the urgency the committee has put on the matter. We recognise from the contributions of all the members that the committee needs urgency on this issue. It needs to happen tomorrow. With the support of the committee and all the people of this country, we will get back flying, but we need fast help from the Government.

**Chairman:** In summary, I ask Mr. Hackett to send information to the committee on the credit card companies with which there are difficulties, as well as the ITAA's correspondence with various Departments. The committee will be following up with the Department of Transport and other Departments, including the Department of Health, to fast forward the roll-out of a pilot programme and the piece around antigen testing to feed in with the digital green certificate and get it up and running as quickly as possible. If there is a six-month delay or time lag such that it is not implemented until 1 August, we all agree that would be too late.

Does Senator Buttimer wish to come back in briefly?

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** As regards the merchant service providers, how widespread is the issue?

**Mr. Pat Dawson:** It is widespread. The Senator would not believe the way these companies act. They have no manners as such. I know of small travel agencies that were told that unless they sent €40,000 or €30,000 to the merchant service provider within two weeks, they would be cut off. These companies have no manners or ethics whatsoever and they will shut businesses down. It is a widespread issue but it comes out of the blue. It is not flagged in advance. The companies just say this is the rule and that the businesses can take it or leave it. They do not care who they close down. The Central Bank and the other agencies that regulate these companies really need to get involved. I hope the committee will be able to assist in that regard.

**Chairman:** The committee will follow up on the specific proposal made by Senator Buttimer but in order to do so we need details of exactly which merchant service providers are causing an issue. It may be the case that some of them are operating in a very fair way. There is no doubt that it is not a homogenous group. Is the Senator happy for us to conclude on that point?

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Yes. I thank the Chairman.

**Chairman:** I thank the witnesses for attending and engaging with the committee at such short notice. The meeting is now adjourned. The next meeting of the joint committee will be a private virtual meeting at 4 p.m. on Tuesday, 11 May. I thank all present. We will all work together in an optimistic way.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.38 p.m. until 4 p.m. on Tuesday, 11 May 2021.