

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

## COISTE SPEISIALTA UM FHREAGRA AR COVID-19

## SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON COVID-19 RESPONSE

*Dé hAoine, 24 Iúil 2020*

*Friday, 24 July 2020*

Tháinig an Coiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	
Richard Boyd Barrett, +	
Colm Burke,	
Jennifer Carroll MacNeill,	
Michael Collins,	
Cathal Crowe, *	
Alan Dillon, *	
Francis Noel Duffy, *	
Joe Flaherty, *	
John Lahart, *	
James Lawless, *	
Paul McAuliffe, *	
Catherine Murphy, *	
Louise O'Reilly,	
Darren O'Rourke, *	
Marc Ó Cathasaigh, *	
Ruairí Ó Murchú, *	
Matt Shanahan,	
Bríd Smith,	
Duncan Smith,	
Violet-Anne Wynne, *	

\* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputies Colm Brophy, Mary Butler, Matt Carthy, David Cullinane, Pearse Doherty, Stephen Donnelly, Norma Foley, John McGuinness, Róisín Shortall and Ossian Smyth.

+ In éagmais le haghaidh cuid den choiste / In the absence for part of the meeting of Deputy Bríd Smith.

Teachta / Deputy Michael McNamara sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

*The committee met in private session until 9.05 a.m.*

### **Business of Special Committee**

**Chairman:** Members will have received from the secretariat draft copies of the committee's report on nursing homes. The draft report will be discussed at a Teams meeting on Monday at 4 p.m. A first draft of our report on testing and tracing has also been circulated.

### **Covid-19: Impact on International Travel**

**Chairman:** I welcome our witnesses on the impact of Covid-19 on international travel in committee room 2. From the Irish Air Line Pilots Association, IALPA, we have Mr. Evan Cullen, president, and Captain Alan Brereton, vice-president; and from SIPTU we have Mr. Neil McGowan, aviation sector organiser, and Ms Karan O'Loughlin, aviation divisional organiser.

I advise the witnesses that by virtue of section 17(2)(1) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. If they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter and continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I ask Mr. Cullen to introduce his delegation and make a short comment outlining the key points of his submission to the committee, which has been circulated. I ask him to limit his introduction and comments to five minutes to allow time for questions and answers.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to meet the special committee. Matters have moved on considerably since we made our written submission in May. For this reason, we made a supplementary submission this morning. That submission was drafted with the knowledge of the stimulus plan announced yesterday. The package announced by the Government does nothing to address the concerns we have regarding the aviation industry in Ireland and the impact on workers in aviation in Ireland.

In our original written submission, we called for the Government to comply with and enact policies which were in line and consistent with the recommendations and guidance of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, EASA. That has not occurred. The Government has not adhered to the European guidelines and Ireland is an outlier with regard to its restrictions on travel and the imposition of the so-called green list. The green list is not aligned with EU health advice. The Government has put the Canary Islands in the same category as Spain on the green list. The Canary Islands are roughly the same distance from Spain as Scotland is from Iceland. There is no public health or scientific logic to the Canary Islands being lumped in with Spain.

Testing and contact tracing, which is the gold standard, is not in place at our airports but it should be. The nonsense relating to the travel ban is tested by Belfast. Belfast city and Bel-

fast International Airport have access to 59 countries, as opposed to Dublin having access to 15. Ireland is, in effect, closed for business. That said, we respect the Government's decision to undermine and take out the Irish aviation industry and we are now close to the point of no return. The damage that is being done to the industry is near irreparable. We have had one casualty so far. One airline has gone into examinership and has made redundant virtually all of its operational staff in Dublin. It has started rehiring staff in Denmark because Denmark has pro-employment legislation whereas we have pro-redundancy legislation. Airline operations have all but ceased. Thousands of highly skilled, high-paid people in the industry are looking at mortgage foreclosure in the new year. A loss of circa €8.9 billion of GDP is directly attributable to air transport, along with the loss of 8.8 million tourists, and the loss of cargo and connectivity with 140,000 employed in the sector, directly and indirectly.

Aer Lingus has laid off effectively half their staff and the rest are on half pay, much of which is subsidised by the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS. Ryanair has a headline of 20% pay cut but, in effect, the pay cuts are far more drastic than that. All of Stobart Air's employees are living on social welfare and CityJet, as I mentioned, have made redundant all its crews in Dublin and commenced recruitment in Denmark. We know that CityJet and Stobart Air applied for assistance from the Government. We have not seen the reply but we believe nothing has been offered by the Government.

Ireland is an outlier in terms of travel restrictions and in its refusal to give assistance to the industry aside from the TWSS, which every other country is doing. In my supplementary submission, I set out all of the assistance that European governments have given to airlines on top of the equivalent of the TWSS. It is important to note that €30 billion in state support has been granted to European airlines. Ireland has contributed zero of that €30 billion. In the UK, British Airways, BA, received a £300 million credit facility on top of the equivalent of TWSS. The UK Government has given both Ryanair and EasyJet a £600 million credit facility. Spain, the home of Iberia and Vueling, has given a €1 billion state-backed loan on the provision of no redundancies. The Netherlands has given €3 billion to KLM, France has given €7 billion to Air France while Germany has given Lufthansa €9 billion in assistance. Aer Lingus has not received a cent from the Government. While we have the most restrictive travel policy, we have also had the least generous response - if not zero generosity - from the Government to assist us in this crisis.

Aer Lingus is one of a number of airlines that is wholly owned by International Airlines Group, IAG, which is registered in Spain but headquartered in London. BA, Iberia and Vueling are others in the group but there are also smaller airlines in IAG. Most of these operate under the brand of LEVEL, but one is Anisec, which is LEVEL in Austria. That has filed for bankruptcy and we understand it is being liquidated. OpenSkies in France, a small airline operating under the LEVEL brand----

**Chairman:** We will hear from Aer Lingus next Tuesday, or at least we hope to, so I ask Mr. Cullen to make his concluding remarks.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** In short, it is our contention that as IAG retreats in the face of this crisis it is liquidating the smaller airlines in order to save its pillar airlines. Those are British Airways, BA, which the British Government will back and Iberia which the Spanish Government will absolutely back. Unfortunately Ireland does not back Aer Lingus with any assistance other than the temporary wage subsidy scheme, which every other western EU country has done. We are asking for the Government to step up to the plate and take off the handcuffs. Both of our hands are very firmly handcuffed and we have been thrown into the river because the Government

is telling people not to travel and at the same time it will not assist the very airlines that need travel in order to survive. This is absolutely an emergency. We believe things are almost at the point of no return and in the new year when this economy needs an airline industry to restart its connectivity and its economy there will not be one to bring back. To give one example, almost every pilot in Ireland has lost their pilot's licence.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Cullen for his opening remarks and his very stark warning.

I ask Mr. Neil McGowan from SIPTU to make his opening remarks. SIPTU's opening statement has been circulated to members. As such I request that Mr. McGowan introduce those who are here with him and confine his opening remarks to five minutes, to allow as much time as possible for questions and answers.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** I am joined by Ms Karan O'Loughlin who is the divisional organiser in SIPTU for the transport, energy, aviation and construction division.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented and crippling impact on the aviation sector and the workers who rely on the industry to earn a living. Flights and passenger numbers have collapsed and are between 90% to 99% down on what one would expect. Even with the assistance of the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, workers in aviation have suffered a cut in wages ranging from 20% to 70%. Hundreds of aviation workers are on temporary lay-off and are relying solely on State supports. The outlook for the aviation sector in the short to medium term is bleak. Any possibility of summer green shoots have failed to materialise and workers are now facing into a long winter. Despite a dramatic drop in earnings, workers in aviation continued to keep essential supply chains going through the darkest days of the pandemic. SIPTU members in the airlines, ground handlers and airport workers played a critical front-line role in keeping our airports open for essential deliveries of PPE and medical supplies.

In order to ensure Ireland has an aviation industry post-Covid-19 a number of actions need to be immediately taken by the Government. SIPTU recommends the extension of the TWSS for the aviation sector until summer 2021 to ensure that employment is maintained in the industry. The extension of the TWSS must be made conditional on several binding commitments from the employers. These include no worker being made redundant on a compulsory basis while the employer is benefiting from the TWSS. This omission was a fatal error on the part of Government when the scheme was introduced given that these companies were benefiting from State support to keep people employed. The purpose of the scheme was to maintain the link between the employee and the employer so that when we came out the far end of the pandemic we would have an industry to try to build upon. The fact that employers can and have made people redundant on a compulsory basis is simply unacceptable. We are also seeking a binding commitment from employers that while the employer is benefiting from the TWSS no worker will suffer a permanent reduction in any terms and conditions of employment unless by collective agreement. We also ask that workers, where they wish, can make contributions to pension schemes while on the TWSS. Currently, workers are unable to make the employee contribution to their pension schemes from the TWSS. The longer this goes on, the more we will be storing up a pension problem. Many aviation workers have suffered dramatic cuts in their pensions over the last decade and have moved from defined-benefit schemes into defined-contribution schemes.

SIPTU recommends that Shannon Airport be returned to the management of the DAA. The separation of Shannon Airport has not been a success and this was apparent prior to the Covid crisis. The Covid-19 crisis has brought into question the long-term viability of the airport.

Given its absolute importance to the region's economy, we believe it must be brought back into the management of the DAA. When one compares the experience of Cork Airport with that of Shannon Airport since separation, it is quite stark that last year Cork was the fastest-growing airport in the country while Shannon has failed to progress and its viability is seriously in question at the moment.

SIPTU also recommends the introduction of a rapid testing facility for all airport workers. By the very nature of their work, airport workers are brought into close contact with people from across the world as they enter and leave the country. It is essential that a rapid testing facility be introduced in all the airports but particularly so in Dublin Airport in the short term. It is a serious deficit. We are calling for a review of the non-State airport sector, namely the regional airports such as Kerry Airport, Knock Airport and Donegal Airport. If the State is to give State aid to those airports then it should take an ownership share in them.

SIPTU believes the public health advice that continues to restrict international travel must be followed. Where, however, there is a corresponding impact on employment then the level of payment of the wage subsidy scheme should be established to ensure that workers' net take home pay is at a level that allows them to meet their financial obligations.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. McGowan. I have been asking about testing for months now; I hope he will have more luck than I have had to date.

Our first speaker is Deputy Colm Burke for Fine Gael, who is taking ten minutes.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank those who have come in this morning to make presentations and thank them also for the work they have done in dealing with their members over the past four months. It has been a very challenging time. When one sees figures like the 90% reduction in flights in and out it is a huge hit for everyone.

What number of people are coming through Dublin Airport on a daily basis at present? If we were to set up a testing system what kind of numbers would we have to be able to process in a timely manner? Likewise with the other airports, I would like to have an idea of the numbers that are physically coming through.

The second issue I have on testing is whether it is really worth doing when one considers that the number of flights coming in from Belfast and from a very much increased number of destinations is far higher. There is no restriction on people coming south and rightly so but the fact is we have no control over what is coming through Belfast. As such I am wondering how the people looking for testing in airports here think that fits in with what is happening through Belfast?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** We understand the number of people going through Dublin Airport at the moment to be in the region of 30,000. We are operating at less than 10% of what would normally go through at the peak summer period.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** That is 30,000 people in what period?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I beg the Deputy's pardon, that is 30,000 people per month. We are at less than 10% of the normal traffic flow for this time of year, that is the reality. In 2019 Dublin Airport handled circa 30 million passengers and we are now operating at less than 10% of that.

On testing, we believe it should be introduced at the airports for both arriving and departing

travellers. On the basis of the scientific data we are satisfied that passenger-to-passenger does not occur. The ventilation systems on the aircraft are designed to deal with lots of viruses and diseases. The aircraft built by Boeing and Airbus are designed to be sold and operated all over the world where there are highly-transmissible and infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. Therefore the filters and air conditioning used are specifically designed to prevent passenger-to-passenger transmission. That is why we urgently need rigorous testing at the airports both for departure and arrival. Deputy Róisín Shortall asked an interesting parliamentary question about the level of follow-up on the passenger locator forms. Deputy Burke will recall the answer showed it is nonsense. There is very low follow-up and very low data exchange on these. In what few follow-ups there were - I believe calls were made in approximately 7% of cases - there were subsequently no replies to the follow-up calls.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** If Mr. Cullen is suggesting testing would take place in the airport there would obviously be a timeframe in which the test would take place and the results come back. What is the proposal regarding passengers who have come into the country and are awaiting results?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** There are tests that can be turned around in a number of hours and we do not see why passengers would not be asked to hold at the airport in various hotels until the results come back. We believe this is the only way to tackle this and reopen the economy and the aviation sector.

The other thing fundamental to all of this is why Ireland is an outlier in terms of its travel policy, restrictions on travel and refusal to assist the industry it is crippling with these restrictions.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** If Mr. Cullen is asking people to hold on in hotels, or whatever accommodation, while they are waiting on tests, on any one day, what kind of numbers would he be asking to stay back until they got the results?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I will have to revert to the Deputy on a precise figure on what they are handling today. However, the reality is that if we have proper corridors then there would be no testing for those people who come on the green corridors from countries with levels of infection either equivalent to or less than the current Irish figure.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Do we have any idea of the numbers who are coming in from countries that are not on the green corridor at the minute? What kind of numbers per day are coming in? I am trying to find out whether it is possible to set up testing in the numbers we are talking about. What kind of numbers are we talking about who are not coming in through the green corridor?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I do not have those precise figures for the Deputy.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Do we have the numbers, for instance-----

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I know Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, has those numbers.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** We have the numbers coming through Dublin Airport.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** On a given day, one could have up to 9,000 people travelling through Dublin Airport at the minute. Regarding how many of those are coming from countries on the green list or not on the green list, we would not have those figures. However, if one takes



Knock Airport as an example, on a given day, one could have anything up to 800 passengers using the airport and the majority of those passengers are flying on the UK routes.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I will move on to the issue regarding Aer Lingus. What daily loss is Aer Lingus suffering at present? Have we any idea what kind of loss?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** This is our estimate and not Aer Lingus's. We estimate the cash burn is in the region of €1.5 million per day.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** How long does Mr. Cullen think it can sustain?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** We believe it has lost anything up to €150 million since March and we do not believe it can sustain this for much longer. Other airlines are in a similar situation. Our estimates are that British Airways, BA, is burning in the region of £20 million per day. The difference with BA and Ryanair is that both have received significant assistance from the UK Government; Aer Lingus has received zero.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** How long does Mr. Cullen think Aer Lingus can carry that loss?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I do not believe it will last much longer. I do not think any organisation can afford to burn €1.5 million per day. No revenue is coming into Aer Lingus at the minute, yet they must pay for their aircraft and pay some of their staff.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** What total number of jobs are we talking about in the event the day came that-----

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** Aer Lingus directly employs approximately 4,500 people but the wider knock-on effects are enormous. I refer the Deputy to the report of the aviation recovery task force that was set up by the former Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. None of the key recommendation of that task force has been implemented by the Irish Government.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Regarding the airports themselves, what kind of numbers in total are employed in the airports directly by the airport authorities?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** Dublin Airport Authority employs 3,000 people in Dublin and Cork airports, Shannon Airport employs approximately 250 people, Knock Airport employs approximately 110 and then there is employment in Donegal, Kerry and Waterford airports.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I presume some of those people are on the Covid-19 payment plus the subsidy from the companies getting the subsidy from the Government.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** Every airport worker we represent that qualifies for the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, is on it at the minute, but equally we are certainly not aware of any State aid that has been given to the DAA or to any of the other airports in the country.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** If it was a situation that we were able to deal with this problem and a vaccine was identified in the morning, what is Mr. McGowan's estimate regarding the time-frame when we could get back up to a normal running of business? How long would it take for both the airports and the airlines to recover the losses they have now suffered?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** I think if we had a vaccine in the morning, the airports and the airlines could get back up to running at full capacity in a very short period, but that is dependent on employees still being maintained in the airlines, airports and third-party handlers. There is a

massive amount of employment in companies like Swissport International Limited, Menzies Aviation and Dnata that provide services to airports, and unless something dramatic happens and the State intervenes, we are looking at a tsunami of redundancies. The airlines, airports and third-party handlers will not have the capability to ramp up in the event a vaccine is developed and the demand for travel returns.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Belfast International Airport, which has flights coming in from a far larger number of destinations than Dublin, Cork, Shannon or any of the other airports. How would Mr. McGowan advise the Government on dealing with that challenge and how should we approach it from the point of view of the numbers coming in through Belfast who are free to travel throughout the Thirty-two Counties?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** We ask the Government to take seriously the recommendations of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, and ask for a co-ordinated response on based on what the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, EASA, and the ECDC are saying. If we had a co-ordinated approach across Europe, and Ireland was not the outlier in terms of restrictions and in its refusal to give assistance, we would be in a much better place than we are now.

With regard to getting the industry back, many pilots have now had their licences suspended. We are required, by law, to operate aircraft within fixed periods of time. Otherwise our licenses are suspended. One of the critical number of days one cannot fly is 90 days and an awful lot of pilots are now in that space. That means they require extra training of at least one day in the simulator and, perhaps, some training in the aircraft with no passengers. This all leads to a considerable amount of time and cost to get the aviation industry up and running again. One cannot switch it on and off like a light switch.

**Chairman:** If there is time at the end, Deputy Burke can come back in. I thank the Deputy and Mr. Cullen.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I thank the witnesses for coming in. The issue of international travel has probably been one of the most controversial issues I have dealt with as a public representative. Many different people have contacted me, some who work in the airline industry and are fearful for their jobs, others who have booked holidays and are looking at the financial impact of that on their households, and the third being people who are afraid of the virus coming to Ireland.

I will take the answers in reverse order. Will the witnesses address that issue of those who are afraid that increased international travel will result in Covid-19 spreading further in Ireland? The IALPA submission mentioned a figure of 2%, and the witnesses might expand on that in their response.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** The 2% comes from the International Air Transport Association, IATA. On the back of the final page of our submission we source and reference from where we get all of our data. We stand over that figure. There is no evidence of passenger to passenger transmission. I concede that it is possible that a person infected with the virus could bring it into the State but the science has proven that it is behaviour that leads to the transmission of the virus, not travel. We believe that with proper testing and tracing the industry can be sustained and properly policed. This needs to happen at the airports, with proper follow-up on the passenger locator information and so on.



**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** The Taoiseach confirmed that 134,000 people travelled through Dublin Airport in July. The 2% figure relates to those people who contracted Covid-19 connected to travel at the source. If one applies 2% to the 134,000 it would lead us to have had a much greater spike than we have had. Would Mr. Cullen accept that the 134,000 who travelled through Dublin Airport have not resulted in a significant increase in Covid-19 cases in Ireland?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I agree that travel is not contributing to anything that has happened in the last few weeks with regard to the virus. The position of the Irish Air Line Pilots' Association, IALPA, is based on that of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. We are not taking any other position. We want to adopt in full the guidelines and recommendations from the European Union Aviation Safety Agency and the European Centre for Prevention and Disease Control. On Flight Radar, which shows aviation activity across Europe, Ireland is an outlier in that the only aircraft in the Irish airspace are overflying Ireland. Ireland is closed yet there is aviation activity across Europe.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Is Mr. Cullen saying that in the European context Ireland has the most restrictive travel?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** Yes.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** In regard to those people who have booked holidays but are not able to or are reluctant to travel, the additional submission references the EU norms, specifically around the Canary Islands. I have been contacted this week by many people who believe the Canary Islands should be on the green list. I ask Mr. Cullen to speak to that point in the submission?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** We are very confused. It speaks to what we believe is a lack of understanding and indepth research into what the Government presented as a green list. The Canary Islands are thousands of miles from Spain. The performance rate there in terms of the virus is very different. They are as safe as, if not safer, than Ireland. We fail to understand why they did not make the green list. It points to a blunt instrument. It is a blunt Government policy rather than an informed nuanced and educated Government policy. That is the problem.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** My final question is for SIPTU. I am very aware of the lack of flights because most of them fly over the Dublin North West constituency. They also fly over many of the homes of people who work in Dublin Airport. I ask SIPTU to speak to us on the voluntary redundancy programme and if it has any fears that it may become compulsory.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** A DAA voluntary redundancy scheme was made available to the staff. People had to express an interest by 17 June. We believe that there has been sufficient interest in it for the DAA to achieve the reduction in numbers it is seeking. We are engaged in discussions with the DAA on facilitating the exit of those people who wish to exit the company.

On the other employers, we have a very real fear that compulsory redundancy is a likelihood in the short term. Aer Lingus has not engaged with us to date on the 30-day consultation period regarding redundancies despite having informed the Minister a number of weeks ago that it is seeking up to 500 redundancies, which includes approximately 270 in the area SIPTU represents. We have a serious concern around Swissport, which employs 800 people across Dublin, Cork and Shannon Airports. In the UK, it announced that 52% of its staff would be made redundant. There has been no announcement yet in regard to the Irish operations but that is a very real concern. That applies across the board with the third party handlers. There

has been very little real engagement with the trade unions. While some of them have indicated they are prepared to offer voluntary schemes, when those negotiations pan out it becomes very clear that the schemes that the companies are offering are not voluntary because they refer to statutory redundancy and there is no negotiation in regard to selection criteria, etc. Within the DAA we are in a space where we believe there is sufficient interest in the voluntary severance scheme but beyond the DAA the concerns around compulsory redundancy are very real.

**Chairman:** I thank Deputy McAuliffe. Before I call Deputy Darren O'Rourke, both previous speakers ran over time. I accept that they did not through no fault of their own. I cannot make time as I learned to my detriment this week and so that time will have to be taken from people further down the list if everybody is to get in.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I asked Chairman to indicate when I was approaching the five minutes.

**Chairman:** I will try to indicate when speakers have a minute remaining. I am not apportioning blame, I am just making the point that we have a finite amount of time. There are no clocks in the Seanad. Apparently, time is-----

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** We trust the Chairman to indicate when our time is up.

**Chairman:** As with Covid-19 people should responsibility for themselves too and set their clocks. Deputy Darren O'Rourke has ten minutes.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** It is 10.12 a.m. With the permission of the Chairman, I will take ten minutes.

**Chairman:** Yes, go ahead.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** On the prospective scale of job losses Mr. McGowan mentioned a tsunami. I ask him to give us a sense of the number of job losses that might be on the horizon if we stay on the current trajectory and with the current level of intervention from the Government.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** The DAA has indicated that it is seeking between 750 and 1,000 redundancies. Aer Lingus has indicated that it is seeking 500 redundancies. Tracking the announcements made in some of the companies where we are not recognised I believe that in Dublin Airport the current figure in terms of intended redundancies stands at around 2,500. It is important to note that we are in the early stages in this process. As I said in my opening statement we are heading into the winter which is traditionally a quieter time in the aviation industry. It is traditionally a time when the airport and airlines do not make money, even in normal times. This is compensated for by the busy summer months. However, this year that has not come to fruition. Any expectation that people had that the situation would improve dramatically in July and August has not happened.

In regard to the Dublin Airport campus, 2,500 redundancies is probably the thin edge of the wedge. I have already referenced Swissport which has indicated it is seeking to make 52% of its staff in the UK redundant. That would transfer into an additional 400 redundancies here. Shannon Airport is seeking an unspecified number of redundancies. There are other industries that are dependent on aviation, such as the aviation repair industry which is heavily based around Shannon Airport. The people who work in that area are currently working half time in the main. While the planes are not flying they will not to be maintained. The problems for that

industry are probably several months away. Unless we have direct intervention from the State in the form of the temporary wage subsidy scheme and in the form of assistance to the airports, the third party handlers and the airlines the figure of 2,500 to 3,000 will look very modest as we head into January and February of next year.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I thank Mr. McGowan. Moving to the issue of the health and safety of workers, the submissions outline the really important work that is being done in terms of bringing our people home and transporting essential goods. Is there any information of clusters of positive cases among airlines or people working in the aviation sector that might indicate they were at increased risk of exposure to Covid-19?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** We have crew who stay in US cities every night of the week. None of them has contracted the virus in the US. Crew members have been staying in hotels across the United States of America for a number of weeks now and I am not aware of any crew member testing positive as a result of their work activity in the United States.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** What about workers more generally in the aviation sector?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** There have been a number of confirmed cases in the airport in Dublin and I believe the totals are in single figures in Cork Airport. Thankfully, across the airport in Dublin, in general the infection rates have been quite low. The exception to this is the fire station in Dublin Airport where, at the very early stages in March and April of this year, there was a cluster. It resulted in serious strains being put on the operation because a number of people had to self-isolate as close contacts. At one point, 34 of the 100 firefighters were out, either diagnosed with Covid-19 or advised to self-isolate as a result of being a close contact. Our firefighters in Cork had to travel to Dublin to provide the minimum cover to keep the airport open. This was at the time flights were flying in from China with vital personal protective equipment, PPE.

In general, the infection rates among airport workers have, thankfully, been low but the fire station in Dublin Airport is one example of a cluster in the aviation industry.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Does Mr. McGowan have an exact figure on the positive cases at Dublin Airport?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** I do not have an exact figure. When we have asked the question of employers they have given the figures to us on a section-by-section basis in the airport. In the airport search unit it is less than 1% of the 800 people employed in that section. In the fire station in Dublin Airport there were certainly more than ten confirmed cases. At one point, more than 30 people were out, either with a diagnosis of Covid-19, or having been advised to self-isolate as a result of being a close contact. Unfortunately, some of our firefighter members in Dublin became seriously ill. They are, thankfully, on the road to recovery. That is the only example of a cluster. The other confirmed cases were spread across the various sections in the airport and have been in single figures, even in the larger areas.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** We wish them well in their recovery and thank them for all the important work they do.

On the challenge for the sector overall, I take the points made about Ireland being an outlier but it strikes me that there is a fundamental conflict between the wishes for public health when NPHET has been very clear in its requests here, and the interests of the aviation sector more generally around the issue of movement. It is clear that the single greatest tool we have in our fight against Covid-19 is quarantine and the restriction on movement. Aviation is the exact op-

posite of this, regardless of what might be said on the evidence base. It is a question of the lack of quality of our evidence base rather than it not existing. The virus is spread by the movement of people and the aviation sector and travel involves such movement. That challenge must be squared. The Government seems not to have persuaded people of the model it is proposing. I believe there is a lack of confidence among communities and even within Government. Given that we have the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, data, we have European Union Aviation Safety Agency, EASA, guidelines, will Mr. Cullen outline what model he would like to see implemented? Is it testing and tracing at airports with an all-Ireland approach? What would going through an airport look like? As far as I can see there is no mandatory wearing of masks in Dublin Airport, or it is certainly not implemented. Reference was made to the passenger locator form as being quite inadequate. I agree with Mr. Cullen there. What model would Mr. Cullen envisage that would give confidence to people in Ireland that the system is working here and that the people who come through the system and others are not being put at risk?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** We are in the risk management business. That is what we do for a living. All pilots are obliged to look after the safety of their passengers and crew. This is a legal obligation on us and it does not end with the physical incident or accident, it also involves the health of the passengers while entrusted into our care on the aircraft. We are in the risk business. In every airline and in every aviation industry there is a balance to a debate about the risk and what is done to mitigate that risk. I would say there is a lack of counterbalance in the information the Government is receiving at the moment. Notwithstanding that, the Government has taken a view and we accept it is entitled to take that view, but one cannot put us out of business by restricting our ability to do our business and then not assist us. My argument is quite simple: if the Government is going to impose the most restrictive regime on travel in western Europe it will also need to do the other things to make sure we still have an industry when this crisis passes. The point I make here today is that the Government is having its cake and eating it when it comes to the aviation industry. Ireland is an outlier, not only with regard to having most restrictions, we are also outliers in our failure to assist the industry.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I welcome our guests this morning. I largely agree with the witnesses' criticisms of the green list. It looks to me rather like a Euro championship qualifier group. I do not see much in terms of solid and worthwhile connectivity with countries such as San Marino and Monaco there. They certainly do not offer the quality connectivity on which we in the mid-west, and particularly Shannon Airport, are reliant. Ireland cannot be the outlier of Europe. The R-nought has now crept back into "acceptable" levels, and I welcome the announcement of this by the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, yesterday. I use inverted commas because it was at 1.8 last week and is now around 1.4. I am aware that in Britain this morning the rate is around 0.8 or 0.9. There is a country that has a lower R-nought rate than Ireland. This green list needs to be very fluid. It cannot be reviewed on a fortnightly basis, it has to be very fluid and we need more certainty so people can get in and out with quality connectivity.

I will now turn to the Aer Lingus temporary lay-off of staff. There was very little cognisance of seniority from what I could see. I have looked at a number of Aer Lingus contracts, which were redacted, and the contracts are to the company not to the Dublin station of Dublin Airport, or to Shannon Airport. If there were to be any temporary or permanent lay-offs then I believe they should have been on a last-in, first-out basis. That is how it works in most places of employment. Yet, some of the most senior staff of the organisation in Shannon Airport are those who are losing out most, while those who came in over recent months in Dublin Airport remain on. Perhaps the witnesses will speak about this from a SIPTU point of view.

On testing and contact tracing I would like to hear the views of IALPA on its experience, as its members are flying into a host of different countries. How is Ireland differing from other countries in what they have to offer on inbound and outbound screening right to the departure gates? Is there a difference between airlines also? Surely there are some PPE requirements and guidance offered on aeroplanes apart from the information on how the passenger must clip his or her life vest and how to wear the oxygen mask. Surely there is some guidance or is Ireland an outlier in this regard also? Will the witnesses answer that?

There is another huge issue we have not focused on. I believe that the whole focus has been on Dublin Airport recently. Some 130,000 passengers have arrived in Dublin Airport since the start of the month but only 8,600 passengers landed in Shannon Airport in May. That is a major disparity and everyone needs to be mindful of that, including the Government and those who speak for workers and the sector. We need to look at bringing Shannon Airport back under the remit of the Dublin Airport Authority.

I will bundle my final questions. I would like to hear more about the filtration system. I have seen people wear masks on aeroplanes in years gone by because they believed they would get a head cold while flying. Is that an old wives' tale? Perhaps the witnesses would comment on that.

Aer Lingus has a nice fleet of Airbus A320neo jets. I understand that at Dublin Airport, 40 fewer passengers than the allowable capacity board these aircraft because the runway does not allow for a fully-loaded A320neo jet to take off. Those are my few points. I ask the witnesses to comment on the reason we are outliers, the Shannon Airport versus Dublin Airport disparity, filtration systems and the A320neo jet issue.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** I will address the seniority issue regarding the temporary lay-offs in Shannon Airport. I believe the Deputy is referring to an agreement in place between Fórsa, as the union for cabin crew, and Aer Lingus. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on that. Regarding the SIPTU members laid off in the areas in which we engage in collective bargaining in Aer Lingus, the long-standing arrangement is that it is done on a section by section basis and that seniority is then the determining factor. The reality, however, is that Aer Lingus has not had operations out of Shannon since March. That needs to change quickly. I welcome the Deputy's support for our position on Shannon Airport returning to the remit of the DAA. If there is to be work for people in Shannon, there must be flights and connectivity to valuable routes. Despite all the predictions that the separation of Shannon Airport from the DAA would be an unqualified success, none of those predictions has come to fruition since the separation. I ask members to compare the experience of Shannon Airport with that of Cork Airport, which remained part of the DAA.

**Chairman:** I must allow other Deputies to ask questions. Deputies can choose how many questions they want to ask and how much time they want to leave for answers. I call Deputy Ó Cathasaigh of the Green Party.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I acknowledge and thank the expert witnesses for coming in and for the overview they have given to us. It is worth recognising that the aviation sector has been one of the sectors hardest hit by the crisis. We should also recognise the essential need for connectivity. Connectivity was maintained during the crisis and for that we owe a debt of gratitude to the aviation sector.

I will dig a little into the suggestion that staff undergo rapid daily testing. I would like an



overview of how many staff we are talking about, what kind of capacity would be required within the airports to perform these tests, how long it would take to put such a system in place and whether there is any information available on what it would cost the airports or the State to provide that type of testing facility. I would like some answers on those questions for a start.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** On any given day, there could be up to 2,000 people working in the airport. Not all those workers are in front-line roles, because many people work in areas such as management. To take the example of the airport search unit, there could be several hundred airport search unit officers on duty and the nature of their job means they have to come into very close contact with people. That is where we want to see the rapid testing system introduced.

We do not have costings but it is essential that such testing is put in place regardless of the cost because, ultimately, we are talking about the health and well-being of the staff who continued to work during the darkest days of the crisis to provide vital services to aviation. Employers in the sector were slow to introduce PPE, etc., as were employers across the economy. The question now is whether we afford not to introduce a rapid testing system, be it for staff or passengers, to try to assist with the opening of airports.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** That is fine. If we introduce rapid testing for staff, do we introduce that testing on a mandatory basis or how do we cope with that aspect? I ask that question because it is very unpleasant to get tested for Covid-19, as we know. If a member of staff decides that he or she does not wish to submit to testing, how would the witnesses suggest we deal with that situation?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** We believe it needs to be mandatory testing. I do not believe the staff will have any issue with rapid testing, because they are calling for it to be introduced. It will certainly be in the instances where people have been in close contact with confirmed cases and if the contact tracing system was in place and was adequate that would clearly identify the staff who had been in close contact with confirmed cases. We believe, therefore, that testing should be mandatory.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I thank Mr. McGowan. I have a question on the passenger-to-passenger infection rate. We are told that passenger-to-passenger infection does not occur. I would like to dig into the robustness of the scientific evidence on that issue. When we are talking about this aspect, are we talking about aeroplanes running at full capacity or is it in the context of reduced capacity to allow social distancing within a cabin?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** We outlined this in our original submission in May, but to give the Deputy a picture of how the process works when people exhale in the aircraft that exhaled air is immediately sucked to the floor. It is then taken out of the cabin and put through the high-efficiency particulate air, HEPA, filters, which are the same filters used in the operating theatres of hospitals. The air is then reintroduced into the cabin from the ceiling. That is the circulation cycle. The air does not go up and down the cabin; it immediately goes to the floor and out through the filters.

That is why it has been shown that wearing a mask in a properly-constructed aircraft, and all categories of commercial aircraft have been produced to that standard, is effective in eliminating passenger-to-passenger transmission. It is worth noting that the modern aircraft that use Irish airports are constructed and designed from day one with a view to carrying passengers in all parts of the planet, including in areas where there are highly infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, TB. These aircraft are deliberately designed to eliminate passenger-to-passenger



transmission.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** Are we talking about running aircraft at full capacity?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** Yes, it is aircraft operating at full capacity.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** Those are my questions.

**Chairman:** I thank Deputy Ó Cathasaigh. I call Deputy Duncan Smith from the Labour Party.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I acknowledge that both submissions today advocate and support the use of testing, with that from IALPA regarding people coming in and out of the country and that from SIPTU concerning workers. That is significant, it must be acknowledged and the Government and companies need to take cognisance of it. I thank the witnesses for their submissions in that regard.

I will ask Mr. McGowan two questions, and then, if he would leave some time, I would like to put a question to Mr. Cullen. On Tuesday, we are going to have a motion in the Dáil to amend planning regulations to allow for the provision of temporary structures for testing in our airports. Have the workers been consulted to any degree thus far on the provision of such a testing regime or facility in Dublin Airport, for example?

My second question, to Mr. McGowan, is to ask him to speak a little more about his experience of negotiations regarding a no-compulsory redundancy clause. I think that is crucial and his work on that issue needs as much support as possible.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** There has been no consultation with the workers or the workers' representatives in the airports regarding any temporary testing facility or changing regulations in that context. We have not heard anything in that regard. If that is something that is going to come to fruition, we will be eager to engage with it.

Regarding the negotiations concerning no compulsory redundancies, as I said earlier, I believe that the DAA has gone about this process in the correct way. Very early in the discussions between the unions and the company, compulsory redundancies were ruled out and a voluntary severance package was made available. We believe there is sufficient interest in that voluntary severance package for the company to achieve the reduction in numbers with which it wishes to move ahead. That has not been the experience in every other company. We have yet to engage with Aer Lingus, despite it having been several weeks since it wrote to the Minister informing the Department that it was seeking to make 500 people in the non-pilot grades redundant. There is a very real worry in Aer Lingus that compulsory redundancies are something we will face in the very short term. It has been a long-standing position of SIPTU that compulsory redundancies are simply unacceptable. It is a road we have never gone down before, but it is a real fear that we might be facing into that in the immediate future in Aer Lingus.

Equally, among the third-party handlers, while many of them have engaged with the unions, there has been little in the way of meaningful negotiations. Several such employers are seeking to take advantage of the pandemic. One particular employer at Dublin Airport, with which we have a long-standing collective agreement dating back to 1996, is seeking to alter the terms of that in respect of public holiday entitlements, annual leave entitlements and sick pay entitlements, which I find reprehensible given the time we are in. I will leave it there and allow time for Captain Cullen to comment.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I thank Mr. McGowan for mentioning the third-party support services, which have been as affected as every other element of the aviation sector.

Mr. Cullen pointed to a slide on the situation in IAG airlines. It is quite stark and it lets a question hang, which I would like to ask him to expand on. What does he think IAG is planning for Aer Lingus?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** It is our assessment that IAG will prioritise British Airways, BA, and the two Spanish airlines, Iberia and Vueling, over all other assets, including Aer Lingus. It is our view that IAG is quite capable of liquidating Aer Lingus for the sake of surviving and ensuring that BA, Iberia and Vueling survive. That is our view-----

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** It is pretty stark.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** Yes, but the reality is that the UK Government has not only supported BA, with a £300 million loan, but it has also supported Ryanair - an Irish airline - and EasyJet, to the tune of a £600 million loan. The Spanish Government has underwritten a loan to Iberia and Vueling to the tune of €1 billion, whereas the Irish Government has done nothing. Two Irish airlines, CityJet and Stobart Air, wrote to the Government requesting assistance. I have never seen the reply but, soon afterwards, CityJet went into examinership, while Stobart Air, according to public reports, has considered examinership and other options in the meantime.

Aer Lingus will be liquidated to save the pillar airlines of IAG because the governments of the two jurisdictions, in the UK and Spain, are backing up those airlines. The governments of all the western EU states are supporting their airlines. I have outlined a list of everything from France to Germany and Spain. Italy has nationalised Alitalia and Portugal has effectively nationalised TAP. The list is endless, and Ireland is the outlier, both in terms of the restrictive nature of travel and of the assistance.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** We are an island and we require our ports and airports to a greater degree than people on mainland Europe do. Mr. Cullen spoke about irreparable damage. Has there been any modelling to determine the point to which the company can survive? Is there a number in that regard?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** For example, Aer Lingus is currently in a closed period and, therefore, we do not have access to its accounts. We are relying on information we have from negotiations with it. We negotiated a comprehensive pay reduction of in excess of 50% for approximately the next 12 to 18 months with Aer Lingus and we had some access to its figures. There are many qualified people within IALPA with backgrounds in accountancy or actuary who have done an assessment. We believe that Aer Lingus will certainly not survive another two months of this. We have zero revenue and a cash burn in the region of €1.5 million a day. There is no organisation, as we understand it, that can survive that.

Other organisations within the IAG group have received significant state support. Even Irish airlines are receiving state support from the UK Government while the Irish Government does nothing.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I have limited time so I will ask a few questions. On IAG, Mr. Cullen stated that other governments are backing up their airlines. I do not dispute that. What evidence does he have to suggest that would be the difference in terms of the survival of Aer Lingus?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** The difference is that there are fixed costs associated with the airline, particularly for the leasing of aircraft. To get through a period of zero income while there is a fixed overhead on leases and so on, an airline needs cash and access to cash-----

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I understand that and I apologise if I appear to be rude but I have limited time. Mr. Cullen made a point to Deputy Duncan Smith about the support for British Airways-----

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** And Ryanair.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Yes. If, for example, the Government were to commit some support to Aer Lingus, what evidence is there to suggest that would make the difference for IAG continuing the support?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** The point is that there was no state support for Anisec in Austria and, to the best of our knowledge, there was no state support for Open Skies in Paris. Of those two airlines, one is in liquidation and the other has certainly stopped trading and is either up for sale or, if not, liquidation. The evidence is that if a state is not willing to back the local airline, IAG will not be willing to back it.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** It makes an awful lot of sense to test at airports, but my understanding is that would require a two-phase test. One test would be done on the first day and another would be done two days later. Has Mr. Cullen thought about that and how it might be handled?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** We are in the risk-management business. When managing risk, it is never a binary decision. What is done is a whole series of strategies and tactics are put in place to mitigate the risk. There is no such thing as a binary decision. The only binary decision is whether to get out of bed in the morning. If I do so, I run the risk of something happening to me, whether I go to work or to school, or whether I go flying or not. What has to be done is that one has to build into the system all the components that mitigate the risk. When we refer to testing, I am not saying that testing solves everything. Rather, it is part of an overall strategy and set of tactics to deal with and manage this issue. There is no silver bullet. What is happening, however, and this is a very cynical view, is that travel is being used as a bogeyman to justify a lack of investment in measures such as testing and contact tracing. That is what we believe is going on.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I thank our guests for their presentations. Mr. Cullen stated that travel is being used a bogeyman to justify the lack of investment in every other area to do with the virus. That is a pretty big claim and I would like to tease it out with him. He indicated that his work is all about safety and risk management. There is no doubt that air travel is one of the safest forms of transport. In the case of regions that have very high R-nought numbers, however, such as parts of the United States, would Mr. Cullen not agree that, irrespective of how safe it is when someone is travelling to such places, it makes it much more difficult for any government to manage the virus when people come into the country. If we are taking people from Texas into Ireland in large numbers, say, it makes it much more difficult for us as a state to manage the virus, not in terms of the actual travelling itself but in consequence of the arrival of people in numbers from such countries when we are trying to manage the virus here.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I absolutely agree with the Deputy. I am saying that there should be a green list that is informed, that is understood and that has expertise involved in it. The green list

Ireland has published is clearly uninformed. The evidence of that is overwhelming when one takes into consideration, for example, the Canary Islands. To suggest that the Canary Islands should, for the purposes of a national health strategy, be seen as part of Spain and the problems we saw in Madrid is nonsense. The Canary Islands are the same distance from Spain as Iceland is from Ireland. Who drew up this list and what was their logic in doing it? It was not based on science.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Somebody called it the Father Ted policy because of things like the inclusion of Monaco and other states which just do not make sense.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** The other problem we have is that when people like us, who are safety professionals, look at what came out about the Government decision on the green list, it really does challenge our confidence in the Government. It was a blunt instrument, it was uninformed and it needs to be rectified. We cannot have a situation where a sovereign government makes such blunt decisions.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I do not disagree with Mr. Cullen on that point. However, on the wider question of opening up travel, there are things we have to look at. The witnesses said in their submission that aviation was being treated as the bogeyman in all of this. There was mention of high-efficiency particulate air, HEPA, systems. We have workers in Bus Éireann, for instance, who are being put in grave danger because there is no proper air filtration system in their vehicles. They are looking for a HEPA system. Is such a system in operation in the airports? Is all aviation as safe as Mr. Cullen is describing when it comes to the aeroplanes and that aspect?

Another question I have is whether Mr. Cullen believes that flights should be going out full? At the moment, when one gets on a Dublin Bus vehicle or a Luas tram, there is a big gap between passengers. Why would somebody get on an aeroplane and sit three together in a row, with the whole craft full of those rows? Does that make sense?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I have no expertise whatsoever on air conditioning systems in buses. All I can tell the Deputy-----

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I am asking about the airports.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I do not believe Dublin Airport has a HEPA system but what it does have is space for social distancing. Going back to the aircraft, they are designed from day one to cater for highly infectious diseases and prevent passenger transmission thereof, not just for this virus but for many other deadly viruses. Any aircraft, when it comes off the production line, could end up on any part of the planet and, therefore, it has to be built to be able to survive anywhere and to deliver people safely to any part of the planet. That is why I am able to say with absolute confidence that when it comes to passenger-to-passenger transmission, if people are wearing masks and they obey the proper etiquette, they will be safe on the aircraft. I fully accept that there are parts of the planet to which there should be very restricted travel. The Deputy has named some of those places. I have to go back to the point that we should have a proper, informed and intelligent green list.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I have a final question for Mr. Cullen.

**Chairman:** I am afraid the Deputy has used up her time. She may come in again at the end if there is any time remaining.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I did not get a chance to ask the last question I had for Mr. Cullen.

**Chairman:** I am sorry but the Deputy has taken five minutes.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I did not take five minutes and my last question is a short one.

**Chairman:** The Deputy can come in at the end if there is any time. I have a duty to bring in everybody who wishes to speak.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** It is a very short question.

**Chairman:** I will happily bring the Deputy in at the end. The first two speakers went well over their time and, since then, I have been trying to keep to the times. I am sorry.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** It is okay for the first two speakers to go over but not for me to do so.

**Chairman:** I have asked people not to go over their time. We can spend a lot of time arguing over this or we can leave some time at the end to bring people back in. I want to treat everybody equally and give everybody a chance to speak. I am sorry that I cannot allow Deputy Smith back in at this point. Deputy Shanahan has five minutes and I will be holding him to it.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I thank the witnesses for their contributions. As part of the Regional Group in the Dáil, I have called in the past week for polymerase chain reaction, PCR, Covid testing at Dublin Airport, acknowledging that there are flights originating from countries which we should have little concern about because they have diseases levels lower than our own. We absolutely have economic imperatives to fly to other regions, but we have concerns in that regard, mainly in respect of the USA. My proposal is to provide, through both Government and private industry provision, for a 24-hour turnaround of Covid testing at the airport, which is the same as we are doing in our hospital laboratories. From there, we can, as Mr. Cullen suggests, work through the contact tracing. Does Mr. Cullen believe this to be a feasible proposition for dealing with the matter at hand?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I absolutely believe it is feasible and that if the Government had the will to do it, it could be done.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I am in agreement with Mr. Cullen and I think that we will arrive at that position. I would like to see it being progressed and I ask other Oireachtas Members to support it. It is the obvious and logical thing to do.

In regard to the cash burn that Mr. Cullen spoke about at Aer Lingus, we are aware that Ireland is probably the leading centre in the world for aircraft leasing. I imagine that one of the main operational costs on the airline's books at this time is the repayment of leases. I am sure a lot of that could be extended out, which would be the normal practice. Does Mr. Cullen know what portion of the €1.5 million per day which he says is being burned at Aer Lingus is made up of that component?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I would say it is most of it right now because salaries, fuel costs and so on have all been greatly reduced. To the best of my knowledge, not one aircraft lessor has written off any repayments. Airlines are getting forbearance; they are not getting forgiveness. Sooner or later, whatever deals have been done, the lessors will come knocking on the door.

That does not take away from the cash burn we are managing. All airlines are having to do it. What is unique about Aer Lingus and other Irish airlines is that there is no Government assistance for them, whereas the UK Government is assisting at least one Irish airline that we know of and other governments throughout Europe are doing the same for their airlines. The



USA has poured enormous amounts of cash into its airline industry because it does not want it to go down. The Irish Government, for reasons we do not understand, is excluding its aviation industry from support, including in the stimulus plan that was announced yesterday. None of the airlines where we have members will get one penny from the stimulus plan because there is a restriction of €1 million applying under the credit guarantee scheme. When we have airlines burning in excess of €1 million a day, that stimulus plan means nothing to them.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** There is a relaxation of state aid rules as part of the stimulus. I am sure the Government could do something to provide additional moneys to Aer Lingus. I would say that ideology is the problem in that such provision would be seen to be funding a private company. Ultimately, International Airlines Group, IAG, which is Aer Lingus's owner, is a private company. However, I accept that it is an imperative to have the capacity to fly aeroplanes into and out of Ireland.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** With respect to the Deputy, British Airways is the biggest component of IAG and it has received a £300 million state-guaranteed loan from the UK Government. Iberia is the other pillar airline of IAG and the two Spanish airlines have received a €1 billion government-backed loan on condition of there being no redundancies at the airlines. I have set out all these details in the submission provided to members. Lufthansa has received €9 billion, Air France has got €7 billion and KLM is in receipt of €3 billion. Alitalia has, in effect, been nationalised, as has TAP Air Portugal at a cost of more than €1 billion. The list goes on. The outlier, yet again, is Ireland.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** My time is up. I will conclude by saying that Mr. Cullen's organisation and others should try to lead on the issue of testing to get as many people as possible back into the air as quickly as possible and provide some footing to deal with the cash burn he described.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** As the witnesses know, there have been 3.5 million reported cases of Covid-19 infection in the USA, with 77,000 new cases confirmed today. I have been calling for rapid testing at our airports for nearly two months, a call which has gone unheeded by the Government. This can be done, and has been done, in various other countries throughout the world. The mandatory quarantine is not being enforced here. Visitors from high-risk countries are travelling freely around Ireland. This increases the likelihood of Covid-19 spreading and causing more devastation to our country and economy. Airports could remain open to visitors if we took certain measures. First, high-risk visitors should be tested before coming to Ireland. They should provide recent medical certificates showing they are free of Covid-19. Countries such as Austria and the Czech Republic are doing this. A traveller entering the United Arab Emirates must provide a negative Covid-19 test result, meaning no financial burden falls on that state.

Second, visitors who arrive without medical certificates should undergo mandatory testing at their own expense on arrival in Ireland. Some countries, such as Iceland, charge visitors a fee on arrival to cover tests. Many Irish people are scared to go to tourist areas in their own county this summer because they are worried that these areas are quickly becoming Covid-19 hotspots. Ensuring visitors are tested before arrival, or on arrival at their own expense, will help to protect Irish citizens without causing a significant burden on the State. Last Sunday I witnessed the strictness with which other countries apply their rules first-hand. I dealt with the case of a very ill young person whose parent had to fly to be at their bedside in America immediately. No matter how we tried, the parent could not fly out on Sunday as he had to be Covid-19 tested. He had to jump many more fences before he could be at his son's bedside. If that took place



here, up until now the traveller would get a pat on the back and be left to it. A traveller fills in a form and we wish them the best of luck. Rapid testing should be done in our airports to reopen Ireland. It is a simple no-brainer. We need tourism to reopen in a meaningful way in south-west Cork. I can see the devastation caused by that not happening.

I refer to two short emails from some of my constituents. These are just two of the hundreds I have received in recent weeks. One constituent notes that it is surely madness to permit American tourists to fly into Ireland without enforcing the 14-day isolation rule. If it cannot be strictly enforced, my constituent states that the Government owes it to Irish citizens to stop them from entering the country. We have sacrificed so much during the lockdown, and to waste it all through unsupervised tourism is totally reckless. Irish people can be fined or jailed for breaking the Covid-19 laws but there is no penalty for tourists who refuse to quarantine.

The second email expresses concern about reports of American tourists entering and travelling around Ireland without any restriction. The reports suggest that none of them is isolating. My correspondent writes that this is an insult to the people of this country who went into lockdown. Thousands lost their jobs, but they did it willingly to protect the citizens of this country. My constituent believes that allowing visitors from the most infected country in the world to arrive on our shores is an absolute disgrace and, more important, it puts our front-line workers in danger. The Government must step up to the mark and either ban American tourists or put more stringent measures in place.

What advice should I give to people who send me messages like this on an ongoing basis? What are Mr. Cullen's thoughts on these opinions?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I agree with an awful lot of what the Deputy said, but we must stick to the facts. According to the Minister for Health, four cases have come from the USA since 1 June. That is a fact people cannot get away from. We have no difficulty with testing people before they travel to Ireland. We have no difficulty with parts of the USA and Europe not being on the green list. However, a balance must be struck. There must be a counterbalance to this argument. Ireland has deviated from the recommendations of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency. We are interested in the reason for these deviations. It has never been explained to us. There seems to be a lack of balance in the entire debate. The sooner we have robust testing regimes, robust passenger location follow-up and a holistic plan of action, the better. Conversely, if the Government is determined to keep going the way it is going and refuses to tell us what has to happen before aviation is resumed, it needs to assist us before there is no aviation industry left.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank Mr. Cullen. I have been pushing for same-day rapid testing in our airports and ports for the past two months, to no avail. I have been told that testing is only 70% to 80% proof. That is better than 0% proof. Is there any way for that to happen?

**Chairman:** Perhaps a written reply could be provided to the Deputy. I need to move on to the next speaker.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I thank the witnesses for attending. One thing the pandemic has brought home to me is the number of airline staff, including cabin crew, pilots, maintenance workers, etc. among our constituents. At some stage we will have to combine an adult mentality with personal responsibility in this regard. I have been very taken by the figures and I thank the witnesses for the clarification. Could Mr. Cullen say how many airline staff have contracted the virus?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I cannot give the Deputy a definitive figure but I will say this. We have 1,200 members. We have not received one report of anybody contracting the virus at work. Members have suffered from the virus, but not one case has been work-related. That includes pilots who have been flying in the USA. As we speak, there are about 30 Aer Lingus staff in the USA every night. The number can be as high as 50 on some days. Not one of them has contracted the virus on their overnight stays in the USA. I will go back to my original point. Behaviour transmits the virus, not travel.

**Deputy John Lahart:** What about crew on other routes?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** All overnight activity has been restricted. There are three flights a day to Heathrow, but the crew does not leave the aircraft. No crew members contracted the virus when we were operating flights to Beijing to collect personal protective equipment, PPE. We are starting an operation to Seoul in South Korea. Again, six pilots will operate those flights to bring PPE to Ireland and-----

**Deputy John Lahart:** I do not want to go beyond my time. I thank Mr. Cullen for his response. Is it true that there is no evidence of any Aer Lingus crew members or any of the 1,200 staff Mr. Cullen represents contracting the virus as a consequence of flight?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** Not one Irish-based pilot among the staff of Ryanair, CityJet, Stobart Air or the search and rescue helicopter pilots of CHC Helicopter, has reported contracting the virus at work.

**Deputy John Lahart:** Is the same true for cabin crew?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I cannot speak for the cabin crew, but I would be aware if any Aer Lingus cabin crew contracted the virus in the USA. We would certainly be aware of that because the pilots would be obligated to issue reports and would be involved in the investigation. That has never happened.

**Deputy John Lahart:** What about on other routes, aside from the USA?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I am talking about the Aer Lingus pilots and cabin crew who stay in the USA overnight.

**Deputy John Lahart:** What about other routes, aside from the USA?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** They fly from the USA into Ireland.

**Deputy John Lahart:** Yes, but-----

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I see. I can get them, but I do not have figures to hand with regard to US crew who come to Ireland.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I am concerned about other flights. Those who are most exposed are cabin crew and pilots, because they are on the aircraft. Mr. Cullen is setting out the view that flying is extremely safe. If Mr. Cullen does not have those statistics, it would be helpful if that information could be forwarded to the committee. Perhaps Mr. Cullen could get the information on other airlines too.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I will endeavour to do so.

**Deputy John Lahart:** Mr. Cullen has spoken about Aer Lingus crew flying to the USA.

Given the fact that the same safety measures are taken across the board whether crews are flying to East Midlands Airport or Seoul and they fly on the same aircraft, would it be a safe general assumption that it is rare for cabin crew to contract the virus?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** It is very rare. That is our experience.

**Deputy John Lahart:** Does the same apply to passengers flying?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** That is absolutely right. We have checked it and are not aware of any passenger to passenger transmission in modern, pressurised, safe aircraft.

**Chairman:** I thank Deputy Lahart for staying within the five-minute time limit. The next speaker is Deputy O'Reilly from Sinn Féin, who I understand is going to take five minutes and will then pass over to Deputy Wynne.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** That is right. I thank our witnesses for coming in and for the evidence they have given. Dublin Airport is in my constituency and I have been inundated with emails from worried people and contacts from people working in the airport who are terrified for their jobs. They are deeply concerned. The airport is extremely important for north County Dublin as an employer and is a part of the fabric of our community. I am glad to hear that there has been engagement with the DAA but I am less happy to hear that the situation in Aer Lingus remains as challenging as it is. Given that we are an island nation, we need our airport more than countries that have the option of a landbridge.

We heard about a cluster of infection that previously occurred in the airport. Can Mr. McGowan advise the committee if there are concerns that there may be additional clusters, what particular steps have been taken and what level of engagement has there been with workers right across the airlines and the DAA with regard to measures that are necessary to ensure that their health and safety is protected?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** There was a cluster of infection in the fire station of the DAA and, thankfully, it has been brought under control. It is important to note that the fire service in the DAA does not only offer an expert aviation fire-fighting service but also runs a domestic ambulance that deals with the airport and a domestic fire tender. Those fire-fighters are not confined to the fire station under normal circumstances but are out and about around the airport, treating passengers, staff and so on who become ill.

There has been reasonably good engagement with the DAA on social distancing measures. The personal protective equipment, PPE, situation has certainly improved but we would like to see it improve further. I believe that the DAA was relatively slow, as were many employers, in issuing the PPE to staff members, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. I believe they were relatively slow in introducing some of the physical infrastructure needed to protect the staff, such as Perspex screens for the airport search unit officers and so on.

There are still serious concerns around the break room facilities in the airport. There is still a relatively large number of staff on duty at any given time and the break room facilities are often not adequate. That is something that we continue to push with management of the airlines, airports and third party handlers because we must ensure that those break facilities are sufficient and additional space needs to be made available, if required.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** My next question is for both witnesses but I will make one remark before I ask it. What people are saying when they contact me is that their jobs are under

threat, they are fearful for their livelihoods and, when they look across, they see construction continuing on the new runway. That is sending a mixed message to people. Sinn Féin will work to ensure that the jobs in question are saved. We have all now come to regret the decisions of successive Governments regarding the sell-off of Aer Lingus and the fact that we have no control there. Could our witnesses describe what morale is like among union membership at the moment?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** Morale among membership, whether within the DAA, Aer Lingus or anywhere else, is absolutely on the floor. People have no certainty heading into the winter. We have already described, in response to questions from other Deputies, the level of uncertainty that people are facing. That is why it is essential that the Government steps up to the plate and intervenes on a large scale.

The concern people have is that, week to week, they do not know what they are going to be earning. People are taking the three-month breaks on mortgage payments that are available but those who are in private rented accommodation have absolutely no certainty that they will be paid enough next week to meet their financial obligations. That is why the Government needs to step in and maintain employment in the industry so that, when we come out the far end of the pandemic, we have an aviation industry that can assist in rebuilding the economy and society post Covid-19.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** From the point of view of pilots, there have been compulsory redundancies in CityJet. So-called Irish airlines are using the Irish employment laws, redundancy practices, corporate tax system and temporary wage subsidy scheme to make Irish workers redundant so that they can employ people in other EU jurisdictions where there is a pro-employment and anti-redundancy policy.

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** I thank all our witnesses and speakers for an informative session. Our guests have painted a very stark picture for their industry. The message we need to take back to the Government is that this is an industry in crisis and in need of support and intervention. Our guests have documented the supports they have had in Europe. We are an island nation, depend on the aviation sector, and must stand shoulder to shoulder with our guests at the moment.

There is a conversation about aviation occurring at present. We have a green list of countries that has been much criticised but the general, unchanged message from the Government has been that people should not travel unless it is essential. That has engendered a conversation about travel in many homes across Ireland. I wish to ask a specific question which I will frame now and expand on the detail thereafter. My question is about people who have flights booked for August and right up until schools go back at the beginning of September. Other people had flights booked during June and July and did not receive refunds. Are our guests in a position to give us some indication of the value of those flights and the numbers of people who were affected?

As I said, conversations are under way in homes and fall into two distinct groups. There are families who worked assiduously for the past year and saved money for a holiday into which they put a lot of faith and expectation. They worked doubly hard and perhaps took on a part-time job to pay for the holiday. They may have faced illness or bereavement in their households. There may be children in those households who are in difficulty in school or with societal issues. Those families had invested hope and expectation in the holiday they booked. Those people had no choice. They felt obliged to take the flight with a heavy heart and sense

of shame that they were going abroad. They were unable to post pictures to social media or say that they had a nice time. They then had to self-isolate when they came home. Another group of people went through the same rigours of saving money for their holidays but were able to take the decision, in the interest of the national public health and for the welfare and well-being of their communities and neighbours, to not travel abroad. Those are the two cohorts of people about whom I am speaking.

We are building up to an expectation that our schools will return in September, which is important for child welfare and development. It is also very important for Ireland Inc. that our schools resume in September because we need to send a strong message to Europe and investors that we are open for business. We cannot countenance a situation where we are the last country in Europe that has not got its children back to school. For that reason, it is important that families should not feel pressurised to get on an aeroplane between now and the end of August.

I asked a parliamentary question of the Minister during the week and was left with reasonable hope from his reply that there may be consideration given to a refund scheme for the people affected. I am interested to know if our guests are able to offer any insight into the scale of what might be involved in that refund scheme. I would appreciate any detail on that matter.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I think the Deputy's question is best kept for the representatives of the airlines who I understand are coming in next week.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** That information is not available to the trade unions. I think the representatives of the airlines are the only people who can answer how many people have been affected and what the total cost of a refund scheme would be. Everybody has massive sympathy for people who have saved and put a considerable amount of their resources into a family holiday and now find themselves in the very difficult situation where it is not available to them. We would be broadly supportive of a refund scheme for people but, unfortunately, we do not have the information the Deputy has requested, nor have we access to it.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** I thank the witnesses for their contributions so far, for coming before the committee and for the information supplied, which I found very informative. I have some general questions on the impact of travel restrictions on the industry as a whole. I would particularly like to focus on Shannon Airport as it is in my constituency of Clare. My first question is for Ms O'Loughlin and Mr. McGowan. What has the engagement between the union and Shannon Group been like to date?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** I will try to put it politely. The engagement has been less than desirable. Management unilaterally made an announcement a number of weeks ago that it would introduce a voluntary severance scheme with career breaks and an offer of reduced working hours available to people. It also announced on the same day it was seeking a 20% pay cut until April 2023. That is completely unacceptable and will not be accepted by the trade unions. Protections are in place in the Payment of Wages Act and legislative protections were also introduced for Shannon Airport workers when the airport was separated. Shannon Airport needs to move back within management of the DAA. The project of Shannon Airport as a stand-alone entity has failed. I suggest it had proved to have failed prior to Covid and Covid has made the situation more acute.

In recent weeks, we have written to the Minister with responsibility for transport through the Irish Congress of Trade Unions seeking an urgent meeting to discuss the future of Shannon



Airport. Unfortunately we have not received a response. The interactions with Shannon Airport management to date have certainly been less than desirable.

**Ms Karan O'Loughlin:** We cannot at any stage underestimate or fail to describe the concern we have for the future of Shannon Airport. We believe it is essential for the region, not just for tourism but also for the connectivity required for the thousands of jobs there supported by industry. It is a matter of concern to me listening to the questions from the Deputies that it is only the Deputies from the region who seem to be inclined to ask questions about Shannon, when really there should be overall political will throughout the Government to understand the strategic importance of retaining the airport at Shannon.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** I absolutely agree with everything the witnesses have said. I have been at many meetings with Shannon Group management and the experience we have had has been similar. I thank Mr. McGowan for referring to the separation. That was going to be my next question and I do not need to address it now. I agree with Mr. McGowan and so would Sinn Féin. We never agreed with the separation in the first instance. The numbers prior to Covid-19 demonstrate it was in a decline and the separation had not worked. Have the witnesses received a response from Shannon Group on how it would receive Shannon Airport going back under the DAA?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** We informed the management of Shannon Group that we wanted to see the airport move back into the DAA and its response was that its duty as the management appointed by the current Shannon Group board is to try to pursue the best strategy as it sees it. It did not necessarily offer an opinion on it.

**Chairman:** I am conscious of not straying too far beyond our terms of reference, which is to look at the Covid response.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** I think Covid-----

**Chairman:** The longer-term failings of Shannon Airport or otherwise may or may not be part of this. Shannon Airport management will be here next week.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** That is fair enough.

**Chairman:** I trust the Deputy will probably join us for that.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** No problem. I will move on. My next question is to Mr. Cullen. During the pandemic we have heard of many lay offs of general airport staff. We do not feel there has been enough noise about the lay offs of pilots. Will Mr. Cullen outline the difficulties his members face, particularly in reference to the large amounts of debt due to loans they may have taken out to partake in flight school?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** The average cost for basic training of an airline pilot is approximately €100,000. The majority of pilots in Ireland self-fund by means of various schemes but largely they are backed by their parents who mortgage their homes. These pilots are now at the receiving end of lay-offs and redundancies throughout the business. On top of this, we have Ireland's unique facilitation of bogus self-employment of all workers in aviation throughout Europe. Ireland facilitates bogus self-employment of pilots and other aviation workers in order to provide cheap labour on what are, effectively, zero-hour contracts. This can only be done through Irish legislation and Irish corporate law. These people have been devastated by what has happened because when they do not fly they do not earn. These people are in particularly dire straits and



many of them are young pilots. There are plenty of official documents on this.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** To go back to the questions I asked earlier, reference was made to the need for a more co-ordinated approach between Belfast and the Irish Government. I referred to a number of destinations from where flights come to Belfast. Will the witnesses elaborate on what they believe should be a more co-ordinated approach? I am not clear on what exactly they feel is the best way forward in dealing with this issue. We have one set of rules to do with Dublin, Cork and Shannon and there is a totally different set of rules in Belfast. Who do the witnesses say should be responsible for this co-ordinated approach if it is not within the jurisdiction of the Government here to do it with regard to Belfast?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I agree with this but if the Irish Government were to adopt the guidelines from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, it would be somewhat closer and more sophisticated in its approach to this than it is at present. It would be closer to the Belfast position. There should be an all-Ireland approach. The European guidelines are excellent and they work. Countries throughout Europe are using the guidelines, implementing them and getting results from them. I suggest that this should be the all-Ireland approach. It certainly should be the Irish Government's approach. What we cannot understand-----

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Is Mr. Cullen suggesting there would be an increase in the level of flights coming in, in the same way as what operates in Belfast?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I suggest-----

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Is he saying that all of the destinations from where flights are identified as coming into Belfast should also be entitled to come into Dublin, Cork and Shannon?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I believe we should implement the guidelines from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in Dublin, Cork, Shannon and Knock. It is possible that Northern Ireland is not complying fully with them. I do not have details on that. What I do absolutely know is that the Irish Government is not complying with the European guidelines and there is serious evidence that it adopting a very blunt instrument in dealing with this rather than an informed, nuanced approach.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** The number coming into Belfast is far higher than what is coming into Dublin, Cork or Shannon. What I am asking Mr. Cullen is whether he is saying that flights from the destinations coming into Belfast should also be allowed to come into Dublin, Cork or Shannon.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** What I am saying is the flights that should be allowed to come into Dublin, Cork and Shannon should be consistent with the guidelines from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

**Chairman:** Just to let Deputy Colm Burke know, because I know he cannot see, that Deputies Dillon and Carroll MacNeill have come into the Chamber. How the party wishes to divvy up the time is a matter for the Deputies.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I will leave in my colleagues.

**Chairman:** Who wishes to speak next? There are six and a half minutes remaining. I do not know how the two Deputies wish to divvy up the time between them.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** It is great to have an opportunity to attend the committee. With regard to my constituency of Mayo, I want to raise the issue of Ireland West Airport Knock. On the current flights which have been halted in light of Covid, Knock Airport is a significant economic and tourism driver for the west and north west. Last year, it had more than 800,000 passengers. It is really motivated to hit the 1 million mark in the future. Flights from the UK would be Knock Airport's most frequent for both tourists and workers. When can we see those flights resuming? The task force on aviation report has been published. What is the pilot and the worker organisations' understanding of this?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** Operations in Knock Airport recommenced in July, in the earlier part of the month. That included several of the holiday destinations, as well as several of the flights to the UK. The information I received this week in conversation with some of our representatives there is that the holiday flights have been poorly performing but the UK routes are performing reasonably well.

Knock Airport was certainly on an upward trajectory. It had 875,000 passengers last year and was well on the way to that landmark of 1 million passengers. However, before we and other nations went into full lockdown, Flybe was one of the first casualties of the Covid crisis. Flybe was an important customer for Knock Airport. It provided several important routes that were well used out of Knock Airport into the regional airports in the United Kingdom. Flybe will need to be replaced. Ryanair is exclusively flying out of Knock Airport at the minute. Aer Lingus has a scheduled Gatwick route but the most recent information I received is that it is not due to come back until September at least. It is absolutely vital that this Gatwick route comes back because it provides critical connectivity to the west and north west into that key airport in the London area.

The Government will have to step in with regard to Knock Airport, as it will have to across the entire aviation industry. Some welcome funding of €1.2 million was announced this week for a security project for Knock Airport. As regards supporting the workers and ensuring current levels of employment are maintained, it is vital the temporary wage subsidy scheme is extended and amended for Knock Airport, as well as across the aviation industry.

Knock is going to need particular assistance from the Government in supporting its routes. It will have to attract new routes to replace those lost when Flybe went to the wall. It will need support to ensure the current routes are maintained, whether it is Ryanair or Aer Lingus. If Knock Airport is to get back to that position where it was beginning to flourish and grow, it will need additional support from the Government in attracting additional routes not scheduled for the airport previously.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** On consumer confidence and some months forward when, hopefully, travel is resumed at close to normal levels, what do the witnesses think is a realistic timeframe for the recovery of the business, once travel is opened up to a reasonable degree? When one thinks back to the post-9/11 period, the recovery was slow. Covid-19 has had a much greater impact on the aviation industry and airlines. Confidence after 9/11 came dripping slow. Where do the witnesses see the role of the airlines and their workers in building personal confidence in bringing families back on to aeroplanes and so forth? How do they see the industry getting back to normal levels?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** All those airlines which have given indications on this have stated it will be the summer of 2023 or 2024 before we see the levels of traffic we saw in 2019. The recovery from 9/11, however, was much quicker than many people believe. We thought at the time that

the new security measures introduced after 9/11 were a bigger deterrent to travel than the actual fear factor that came from the tragic events of 9/11. I agree, as does the pilot community across Europe in its analysis, that the airlines are correct that it could be as late as 2024 before we see traffic levels similar to 2019.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** Those are interesting points on security and adapting quickly to new ways of doing things. Similarly, we have adapted to all of the new measures but an aeroplane is a confined and close-contact space.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** We are in the risk management business. It is extraordinary how we see the Government deal with the risk management business, the binary approach, the lack of counterargument. In every airline there is a safety office. If the airline was run by the safety office, we would not get airborne. That is the nature of it. There has to be a counterbalance in the decision-making on risk management.

**Chairman:** I thank Deputies Dillon and Carroll MacNeill. There has been much pressure on time today. I am sorry I cannot make it.

There are five minutes left. I will split my time with Deputy Duncan Smith who wants to come back in. Do the witnesses think that Shannon Airport was treated differently from Dublin and Cork Airports by the airlines in terms of prioritising the limited connectivity that remained in the State in response to Covid?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** It is quite obvious that Aer Lingus made the decision early in the pandemic to cease operations in Shannon entirely. Whatever about Dublin Airport and the volumes of traffic and cargo that moves through it, one must compare the experience of Shannon Airport to Cork Airport where Aer Lingus has maintained the routes as best it could. Our operational people in Cork continue to work, although at 30% of the hours they normally would and at 30% of their normal earnings. There has been the wholesale temporary lay-off of staff employed by Aer Lingus in Shannon Airport.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** It is our view, although we disagree with the actions of Aer Lingus, that it made purely commercial decisions. There was no other motivation or ideology. It was a purely commercial decision. I am not saying we agree with it but that is what it did. The fallout is Shannon which is dreadful.

A wider debate will have to be had about runways. The difficulty is that when one improves the network in a country the size of Ireland, one ends up with the airports competing with one another more. That is a bigger debate which has to be had some time in the future.

**Chairman:** Does SIPTU agree with IALPA's assessment that Aer Lingus's decision to abandon Shannon was made on a purely commercial basis?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** All the decisions Aer Lingus made were based purely on commercial considerations. That was apparent in the way it has treated staff right across Dublin, Cork and Shannon Airports. It was across all grades too. Nobody has been left unscathed by this.

If Shannon Airport was in a position that it was growing at the rate that Cork Airport was growing, prior to Covid, those commercial decisions would have been a bit more difficult for the airline to make. The Shannon routes would have been in a position where they were more profitable and Aer Lingus would have been more inclined to take a punt on keeping them open for longer during the Covid crisis.

**Chairman:** Was there any difference in how Ryanair approached the various airports?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** No. Ryanair made purely commercial decisions. However, Ryanair received £600 million from the UK Government.

**Chairman:** Thank you, Mr. Cullen.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** That puts Ryanair in a different position from Aer Lingus.

**Chairman:** Does Mr. McGowan believe Ryanair differentiated in its approach to the airports?

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** I believe it was a purely commercial decision. That did result in-----

**Chairman:** I was asking if Mr. McGowan shared that assessment.

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** I would share the assessment.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I thank the Chair for letting me in again. I wanted to ask about the wage subsidy scheme which most of the airlines have been receiving from day one, yet they imposed pay cuts and job losses. There has been an advocacy to say that the State needs to step in and give more support. According to this submission, conditions are attached to state support given to Iberia, KLM and Air France such that those airlines cannot change workers' conditions, they have to protect jobs and they cannot create redundancies. I seek a comment on that. If the State were to give more support on top of the wage subsidy scheme, how would it attach similar restrictions to the employer to stop abuse of the worker?

**Mr. Neil McGowan:** We have included in our submission that the extension of the wage subsidy scheme absolutely must include binding commitments from employers that are availing of the scheme that there would be no compulsory redundancies or permanent reduction in employees' terms and conditions of employment. We believe that for the aviation industry, the rate of payment should be adjusted. Many workers in Aer Lingus who are working on 30% of their normal salary are receiving the wage subsidy only. People who have built their financial obligations around their pre-Covid earnings now find themselves in a situation where they are earning €700 a fortnight. People are trying to raise families and meet their obligations with that. I believe that where a company abuses the scheme by availing of the wage subsidy scheme and subsequently breaching any binding commitments that may be entered into regarding compulsory redundancies and so on, the company should be fined and Revenue should take back any support that has been given to those employers and pursue them in the courts for the same if necessary.

**Mr. Evan Cullen:** IALPA agrees with the SIPTU position on that. Our preference would be the German model. Angela Merkel and the German Government were willing to put €9 billion into Lufthansa, taking 20% of the airline and putting two people on its board. It is not a million miles from the French position. A halfway house is the Spanish Government, which said that €1 billion would be underwritten on the grounds that there would be no redundancies. What is happening in the industry now sharply shows how the Irish Government approaches workers, workers' rights and workers' security, and how it is different to what goes on across Europe.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Cullen and Deputy Smith. I have to get people out on time and we have to clean the Chamber for the next session. I thank the witnesses for answering our questions and all the Deputies who asked the questions.

*Sitting suspended at 11.40 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.*

### **Covid-19: Impact on Public Transport**

**Chairman:** I welcome the witnesses in committee room 2. We are examining the impact of Covid-19 on public transport provision and I welcome Mr. Dermot O’Leary, general secretary, and Mr. Thomas O’Connor, senior representative, from the National Bus and Rail Union, NBRU; Mr. Jim Waldron from the National Private Hire and Taxi Association; and Mr. Gerry Macken from the Taxi Alliance of Ireland.

I advise the witnesses that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. If they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I ask Mr. O’Leary to introduce his delegation and make some comments outlining the key points of his submission to the committee, which has been circulated. I ask him to limit his introduction and comments to five minutes to allow time for questions and answers.

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** We have provided two comprehensive submissions which, hopefully, members have read. I have a brief statement, as the Chairman asked. The NBRU, as the foremost front-line trade union, welcomes the opportunity to speak here today. I extend my condolences to all those who have been affected by this virus and to the families of the people who have lost their lives. The coronavirus has completely changed our world, as has been said many times. The reality of what passed as a so-called normal life in February 2020 has disappeared. As a society, we are now transforming into a new normal across many facets of how we go about our daily schedules.

Public transport, similar to other sectors, has changed dramatically from what it was previously. It should be noted and acknowledged that front-line transport workers have operated throughout the crisis in a manner that deserves the gratitude of all. Similar to all our front-line public service workers, they have been at the coalface, providing an essential service when many others disappeared. The valuable contribution from State-owned companies has acted as a beacon throughout the crisis. It is fortunate that workers’ representatives such as the NBRU and other representative colleagues have been highlighting the value of having State-owned companies for many years. The praise being heaped upon those same companies today should not allow for those who seek to undermine the companies to be let off the hook. Bus Éireann has a so-called commercial service with the most inappropriate name, Expressway. Like a myriad of other operators, it has continued to operate throughout the crisis, ferrying essential workers to their places of work. Many work in vital health services, others in essential retailer services, pharmacies, doctors’ surgeries and retail services. In large parts of Ireland, many towns, villages and far-flung communities would have been left isolated and cut off were it not for Bus Éireann.

The reality is that Bus Éireann, not least because of its public ownership, would have been



left isolated and cut off if it had done as others did and decided to step away from operating services. Bus Éireann has a social contract with its citizens. That should not be assumed as a given. The development of the motorway network and the increase in travel on interurban corridors created by these motorways springing up around the country brought an influx of mainly multinational companies to the market. One might think that if demand increases, supply needs to be increased too. However, we contend that the market is not there. It was saturated as a result of oversupply and this was done to drive Bus Éireann away from the commercial service that it is supposed to operate.

There are many other issues that I wish to cover and I hope the questions will allow me to do so. I will make two points. The recent debacle with face masks demonstrated clearly that input from front-line representatives such as the NBRU and other colleagues was severely lacking in the decision-making process. I do not know how much correspondence we wrote to relevant authorities, mainly the National Transport Authority but also the operating companies, seeking a place at the decision-making table where the face mask issue could have been dealt with much better than how it was ultimately dealt with. We have been calling for that since 1 May.

Capacity on public transport has reached 50%, up from 20%, and while public health advice will dictate the future of that, we cannot go back to the crushed loads that we had on buses and trains before the Covid crisis. I am heartened by one element in the programme for Government, namely, the commitment to establishing a stakeholders' forum at long last. Those people who shun us and treat us with disdain have nothing to be afraid of when it comes to the NBRU sitting at a table. We do not want to own public transport. We just want to influence and bring our expertise to bear. After all, without front-line transport staff, the transport system does not operate.

**Chairman:** I am trying to touch the bell so that people know when they have a minute left because there were some difficulties this morning. I ask Mr. Waldron to introduce his delegation and make some introductory comments outlining the key points of his submission, which has been circulated.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** We presented a joint submission on behalf of the National Private Hire and Taxi Association, the Irish Taxi Drivers' Federation, the Taxi Alliance of Ireland and Taxi Tománaí na hÉireann. While we are all independent groups and have previously had different priorities, we feel it is important that we unite today for drivers' welfare and present this submission. The small public service industry has been decimated and almost all who qualify for pandemic payments continue to need them. The groups' members are small public service vehicle licence-holders throughout Ireland, including in major cities and smaller towns and villages. The industry is made up of approximately 20,000 vehicles, 90% of them taxis, while the rest are hackneys and limousines. There are approximately 26,000 qualified drivers with small public service vehicle, SPSV, licences. We represent more than 13,000 of those drivers.

We welcome the opportunity to present directly to this committee as we believe the drivers operating in the industry are being overlooked and not sufficiently supported by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Transport Authority during this pandemic. The effects of the pandemic are unprecedented and the consequences for our industry are unknown. We will need ongoing direct support from the Government to ensure viability for 20,000 vehicles, licence-holders and their families, who depend on them driving a taxi to make a living while providing an integral part of the public transport service. Indirectly, many thousands depend on the SPSV industry. The industry is not only an integral part of the transport system, it is essential. It is the only door-to-door public transport serving airports, hospitals,



train stations, sports events, business communities, tourism and also those with special needs. We rely on each other for success. The SPSV fleet includes 2,700 wheelchair accessible vehicles. Our industry is facing many challenges, including financial and practical challenges. We have been a positive contributor to the overall economy and the only section of public transport to contribute financially to the NTA, with approximately €5 million per year on licences.

I will not go through the entire submission as there is not sufficient time and I will welcome questions, but I wish to outline some key headings. We believe the Government should immediately stop the issuing of new licences. Grants must be provided and we need step-down payments for drivers going back to work. The vehicle age limits of vehicles must be extended and a buy-back scheme must be introduced to allow transferability. The fare increase that was recommended in 2019 needs to be implemented and we need help to introduce cashless payments. We want to be considered for Government transport contracts. Grants to other business enterprises should include a section to be specifically designed for the SPSV industry. All future events should consider the appropriateness of how many taxis are required. Face masks and visors should be made mandatory for people getting into a taxi.

I will leave it at that. My colleagues and will answer any questions.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Waldron. Will Mr. Macken make some introductory comments? I ask him to limit them to five minutes so we have enough time for questions and answers.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** The Taxi Alliance of Ireland represents 22 groups throughout the country. I am here with the team from the National Private Hire and Taxi Association and the Irish Taxi Drivers Federation. Some of our main concerns include the advantage taken by companies particularly with regard to Dublin Airport through the Covid-19 pandemic. They say they are not going to deal with representatives and they have cut all negotiations. In essence, they are taking us from the rule books in respect of Dublin Airport, which is very concerning.

The NTA has not looked for guidelines from taxi representative groups. We have had very little correspondence from the taxi advisory committee. There has been no implementation for taxi drivers going back to work with regard to screens or otherwise. We have not been made a part of the mandatory wearing of face masks in public transport. The statutory instrument does not cover taxis, which is very poor in that regard. We will look for the NTA to provide stimulus throughout the country through HSE work, school transport and the rural link. We had very positive meetings with Ms Anne Graham, Mr. Hugh Creegan and Ms Margaret Malone on rural transport. They came back to us with a stimulus to activate rural transport with rural hackneys but we said that taxis are needed in that area as well.

Now is the time to bring taxis under the remit of the NTA because it seems that during the entire crisis we have been cannon fodder. The authority says we are front-line workers but has given us no remit for any guidelines in that regard. There was a very simple task that could have been done by the NTA if it had proper representation on the taxi advisory committee. The taxi advisory committee has not given us any indication as to what is happening. It has become like a secret society in respect of the taxi industry with one representative on it. There were poor actions by Mr. Shane Ross at the beginning of this pandemic relating to the industry. I think he only met taxi groups three or four times during his term. We ask the new Minister with responsibility for transport to take some time and listen to what the taxi representative groups have done and to start a new advisory group including those groups where they get proper information from proper individuals, not second-hand information coming from people outside the industry. No industry should have a majority of people from companies giving advice. Advice

should be coming from people on the ground. We ask for the disbandment of the current taxi advisory committee and the appointment of a new committee where the majority of taxi drivers' voices throughout the country can be heard.

I refer to the decimation in rural areas and towns across Ireland. They need stimulus. They rely on tourism for growth. There will be no tourism with current growth. Individuals will drive from their houses to hotels and use their own cars to do that. The stimulus for taxi drivers in that scenario is non-existent. There has to be a grant or some sort of system to allow taxi drivers to go back to work.

I welcome questions.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Macken.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** I thank the Chairman.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy McAuliffe, who I understand is taking ten minutes.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I thank the witnesses for being with us today. All the workers who contributed to the response to Covid-19 have been thanked. We should do that today. As trade union officials, they have represented the people at the front line of the pandemic early on. I will turn to public transport shortly but, by virtue of their self-employment, taxi drivers have been forgotten in the response to this pandemic. The new Government needs to get to grips with this. It needs to listen, first, to how the pandemic has impacted taxi drivers and, second, how that industry can respond. I welcome the presence of the witnesses today.

I wish to talk about the correspondence their organisations have had with the Government on face masks. Have they received any assurances that the situation may change? Perhaps Mr. Macken can answer that.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** We have had no assurances. We read the guidelines on the statutory instrument. It seemed to be very hurried and it was drafted in the context of public transport providers. The statutory instrument does not cover SPSVs or taxis. There have been no guidelines. The only guidelines we have on our own safety is refusing people entry to taxis where it might cause altercations. We want to stay as far away from the public as we can for our safety and theirs. The last thing we want is face-to-face altercations over the lack of a Government statutory instrument. Again, it is down to the advice that was given. If the proper people had been there, giving the proper advice, it would be a different matter. We could have gone into the Taxi Regulation Act 2013 to help create a statutory instrument and brought it forward from there. We would have had some legal standing on it. We have no legal standing in relation to mandatory wearing of face masks in taxis or any small public service vehicles, including limousines and hackneys, which is a total disgrace. The issue is a lack of correspondence with taxi representatives from the NTA and some Departments.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** On the broader issue with the NTA, has it provided any of the representative bodies for taxis with sample return to work protocols or any industry guidelines that they could in turn distribute to their membership?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** No, it has not. On screens, for example, we have a ridiculous situation where drivers are installing screens in their cars, going up for the suitability test and having to remove the screens to get the car passed, then driving away and reinstalling them. We have no guidelines other than very vague ones. They are telling drivers that screens can only be

installed by the manufacturers of the cars to the standard of the original installation of the car. It is not acceptable. Regarding masks, there has been no advice given. We have been advised that we can refuse people sitting in the front seat of the car and ask them to sit in the back, but that is the only advice we have. We feel let down by the NTA in this.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** The NTA has long had a dysfunctional relationship with the taxi drivers, and Covid has exposed that further. Regarding the financial impact on taxi drivers, the joint submission has called for a step-down social welfare payment to encourage drivers back to work without being financially impacted. Do the witnesses have any indication of what level or percentage of pre-Covid activity taxi drivers are back to?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** The only statistics that are available are from Dublin Airport. Dublin Airport is operating at 10% of the business prior to Covid. I suggest the statistic for taxi drivers is similar or worse. There is no night-time business. The night clubs are not operational. A total of 82% of drivers worked on a Friday, and 62% of them worked late in the evening on a Friday. That work is gone, basically, so that is a major problem. The number of people now working from home means they do not require a taxi to get to work. There is a huge drop-off. I cannot estimate a financial figure but I know most of the drivers who went on to the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, are still on it and they need it. The PUP is allowing them survive but it is not allowing them to pay the bills. The bills are backing up. The cars and the insurance still have to be paid for. Another problem with the NTA is it let us down on insurance. We still have to have full insurance in place. Drivers had a licence suspended for three months and now are told they have to have it back on the road in seven days and they have to replace their insurance. All of these bills are backing up. That is the effect it is having in terms of economics.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Mr. Waldron makes a valid point that, while for many PAYE workers, the €350 PUP might be enough to keep them ticking over, for someone in the taxi industry who is self-employed, that €350 should be going towards them being sustained but, in fact, they have to use it to cover some of the costs of their business.

I turn to the restart grant that is available for self-employed people. I understand that, as of yet, there is no process for taxi drivers to apply for the restart grant. There were some indications yesterday in the stimulus package that it would be done through the Intreo office. Has there been any engagement between the Tánaiste's Department and the witnesses' organisations as to how taxi drivers can apply for that grant?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** There has been no communication on restart grants. There is no doubt in my mind they will be needed. Every driver is facing an insurance bill of between €3,000 and €10,000. We have not worked now for four months so there is not much money left in the coffers to pay between €3,000 and €10,000 in insurance. We want to keep providing a very good service. Prior to Covid, 82% of people said they only had to wait less than ten minutes for a taxi. We want to keep that service. If we do not get the grants and supports we will be going back to the old days whereby people were waiting 40 minutes or an hour standing at a taxi rank. We do not want that; we want to continue to provide what is classed as one of the most professional taxi services in the world.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Mr. Waldron raised the issue of insurance, which I had hoped to address. I and many others with private insurance have received a rebate on our motor insurance policies. What has been the experience of how the insurance industry has dealt with taxi drivers?

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** Some insurance companies are allowing taxi drivers to transfer their insurance to a private and domestic policy but they have to take the stickers off their cars and send them back. They have to go through a massive rigmarole to avail of the service. Some insurance companies want clearer indications, which in a sense, the National Transport Authority has not provided. There was a very simple way for the National Transport Authority to achieve that at the outset of Covid-19. Most insurance companies and the National Transport Authority recommend the use of the driver check app. The NTA could have taken every driver off the driver check app. There are several reasons why some taxi drivers have stayed working. They could have remained on their taxi policy but stayed out of work, which would have made for a simpler process for coming back to work. It is down to the advice that was given. If we were there, we would have given this advice and it would have been a simpler process. The insurance companies could simply have gone on to the driver check app to make sure a driver was off it. Many drivers had to stay out working because they were already on the back to work scheme for social welfare purposes. There is a step-down process in that regard. Many pensioners are still out working who need an extra few bob to keep going. The majority of those taxi drivers who stayed out working were people on the back to work scheme for social welfare whereby they got 75%.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** It is very clear that the NTA needs to establish a Covid response unit for taxis. It needs to be done very quickly or else we will have a mass exodus of people whose cars are being repossessed and who will be forced to exit the industry.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** That is 100% correct. At the outset, we got political representation to ask Ms Anne Graham for a Covid committee or a roadmap for the taxi industry to get back to work but nothing has happened in that regard.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Macken.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I thank Mr. O'Leary, Mr. Waldron and Mr. Macken for their presentations. I also thank them for their work and that of the people they represent on the front line.

I have a question for Mr. O'Leary and Mr. Macken. In terms of the supports they believe are needed for the taxi industry, what is the scale of the subsidies that are needed? What form should they take? Should it be grants or loans? Reference was made to the continuation of the wage subsidy scheme.

What is the response of the witnesses to the July stimulus package that was announced yesterday? Does it adequately address the needs of the sector?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** We believe that there has to be a combination of all of these supports. Grants will definitely need to be provided. I do not see loans as the answer. Loans only put things on the long finger. It is very difficult for a driver to earn money at the moment. There is no opportunity to earn an income. We are already becoming liable for our car loans, as the three-month moratorium on the payment of loans is coming to an end and we do need support.

Drivers on the Covid payment are afraid to go to work, first, for health reasons but, second, because they feel they will immediately lose their income. Every driver sitting at home now wants to go to work and taxi drivers are thinking about how they can do so. If they go to work now, they must give up the Covid payment. That is a choice they must make. It is a choice no driver wants to make because taxi drivers do not know what is ahead of them. We suggest that

if a driver goes back to work that over a period he or she would get a step-down payment. That way, drivers can work towards getting an income and they are not afraid to go out. If that were the case, we would not be relying on the full €350 and it could be reduced gradually.

Grants definitely have to be paid. Several issues arise in terms of payments drivers have to make. Mr. Macken mentioned the DAA earlier. It charges €440 a year for a permit to operate at Dublin Airport. Approximately 1,500 taxis work out of Dublin Airport and the drivers have to pay the €440 upfront. A grant is necessary.

Leaving our figure aside, the National Transport Authority's fare review, which was carried out last year, stated that Dublin taxi drivers have a fixed cost of €11,433. They are not the running costs. We have to come up with €11,000 this year to pay for those fixed costs and we need supports, so the grants are necessary.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Out of interest, does Mr. Waldron know how many taxi drivers are over the age of 66 and, thereby, not eligible for the Covid payment? They may be in a more difficult position in terms of weighing up whether they should be back at work.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** I gather it is approximately 15% of the industry.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** It is 23%.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** I am sorry, 23% of the members of the industry are over the age of 66. I believe that 15% of them are over the age of 70. The drivers who should be cocooning are the ones that are probably out working more. They are the drivers who should be getting support because they have running costs. Their fixed costs have to be paid so how do they pay them if they have no income coming in? It is not right if they have to pay them out of their old age pensions.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I wish to ask about the experience of the witnesses in dealing with the NTA and the Department. We have a new Minister *in situ*. In terms of engagement, reference was made to some of the weaknesses of the taxi advisory committee. I am aware that a range of other issues have become significantly magnified as challenges in the sector, such as NCT tests, suitability tests, the buy-back scheme and the ten-year rule.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** It is a nine-year rule, but because of Covid, we urge that licences would be extended to 15 years. A precedent has already been set for wheelchair-accessible vehicles. There are Citroën Berlingos, Peugeot Partner Teepees and other vehicles in that category but the saloon car, which is subject to the nine-year rule, has far superior safety and comfort. We appeal to the NTA to extend the nine-year rule to 15 years given that for the foreseeable future taxi drivers will not be able to get finance for a new vehicle. The buy-back scheme might be the best opportunity for individuals who have medical problems or other issues that might not be deemed safe to come back into the industry until a vaccine is found, if that ever happens.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** On the buy-back scheme, I might point out one major reason we are suggesting it be introduced. We have talked about older drivers. Some such drivers now want to leave the industry but they have liabilities. They will have paid €6,400 for a licence they cannot use at the moment. We are suggesting this as a support basis for people who want to exit the industry. If transferability is allowed on a licence, it is also a way that drivers who are renting in the industry and paying vast sums every week to rent a licence can buy their own licence and be properly self-employed, rather than relying on someone else to provide them with a car. It would give opportunities to exit the industry for those who want to leave and opportunities for



people within the industry to have their own vehicle.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Mr. Macken and Mr. Waldron both mentioned challenges as they relate to the operation of taxis at Dublin Airport. Will they expand on that, outlining the current circumstances, how Covid has affected them, and what they believe needs to happen in that regard?

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** The statistics came from Dublin Airport last June, where there were 3,600-odd taxi drivers for the full month. Given that the DAA has stated there are 1,350 taxis, if each driver had to get a job in a month, how many days would he or she be waiting on one? The current waiting time for a taxi from Dublin Airport, where there are 30 or 40 taxis, is up to three or four hours, to facilitate a service there. There are long waits at Dublin Airport and the taxis are waiting for whatever the reason might be.

Advantage is being taken by Dublin Airport in respect of Covid-19. I have emailed the leaders of each of the political parties - I might have missed one but I think I got them all - about the ongoing discussions with the CEO of the DAA, Mr. Dalton Philips, because we have been totally ignored at Dublin Airport as a representative group. Mr. Phillips does not want to deal with us any more and he has emailed back all the leaders about the matter. I hope we will get political representation to respond to the arrogant way we are being treated at the airport. We will meet the leaders soon and, hopefully, if political persuasion can take place, we can put the case as to how taxis should operate at Dublin Airport. There are no guidelines at Dublin Airport. The taxi holding area has no facilities or instructions relating to Covid-19. There are no hand-washing facilities or soap in any of the toilets. The taxi industry is not being maintained and the canteens have been closed, so there are no facilities. I could go on and on about how we have been treated.

I hope that because all the political parties have been copied on the email, at some stage the DAA might get up and start doing something for the taxi industry. I thank the people who have already contributed to Dublin Airport, in particular the Deputy who has pushed matters forward. While some of the political parties are working, we are falling foul in respect of the matter. The only other statistic we have on the degree to which taxis are working is the former Minister, Shane Ross's, famous last words, to say 98% of taxis are not working-----

**Chairman:** I apologise but I wish to bring in another speaker. We have limited time slots because we cannot sit for longer than two hours.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I thank our guests for attending and for their submissions, in particular where they outlined the concerns about Dublin Airport. Earlier we heard concerns about the aviation industry in Dublin Airport, but it is really important that our guests in this session have set out the experience and difficulty they are having.

Coming away from the economics of the matter, I turn to the issue of protecting workers, whether bus workers or taxi drivers, through mask compliance. The taxi driver submission refers to compulsory mask-wearing in taxis as a form of public transport, like everywhere else. What has been the experience so far of mask compliance for drivers who are having to enforce it? We saw a difficult video on social media yesterday and that is just one video. What has been our guests' experience, as representative groups, so far?

**Mr. Dermot O'Leary:** I referred to face masks in my opening remarks. We have all been following the debate relating to Covid for quite a while, for obvious reasons. There was a bit of

a debacle, as I said earlier. The wearing of face masks on public transport was made mandatory and there was a great deal of publicity in that regard the week before last. Compliance, by and large, has been pretty high, although legislation was not designed for the vast majority but for those people who still refuse to wear face coverings. I know that the Deputy did not mean to stir up any negative emotions from me, but it is not the role of a bus driver to enforce compliance with the law-----

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** That is what I mean.

**Mr. Dermot O'Leary:** -----but, in fairness to our people, there are some people who do that.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** What I mean is that it is not their job. It is their job to drive the bus and to comply with all the regulations relative to that. We talked separately in the committee about how various forms of public transport differ greatly. If someone gets on the DART, there may be nobody there and the person will be well separated from the driver, who is in a different capsule. I am very conscious of bus drivers, given that even with the shielding that is there, it is a much more connected interaction. I know it is not the driver's job to enforce that, but he or she will also be much more connected to the passengers than on other forms of public transport.

**Mr. Dermot O'Leary:** They are, and the Deputy's analysis is quite correct. There is a relationship between the bus driver and the passenger that would be found on other modes. We always go to great lengths to explain to people, when we are talking about the bus industry in particular, that there is a community or family between the passenger and the driver.

To respond to the root of the question, there is compliance as high as 90%, we believe. That is anecdotal, and I presume the companies will come back with empirical evidence about that. It took a while but we got there. There is satisfaction, despite a few caveats and incidents, some of which have been on social media, as the Deputy noted. She did not ask this question, but one aspect that has been demonstrated quite clearly today already is the disparate groups, including us and our colleagues in the taxi industry, that do not have a central forum to discuss all the issues that concern them. One startling statistic I might cover later in the meeting is that there were 290 million journeys on public transport last year. That was with a full taxi service operating in addition. If a full taxi service is not operating, we cannot cater for 290 million, even if demand returns to normal levels, and it will not do so as quickly as that. Without a fully operating taxi industry, we certainly cannot envisage operating at that level again.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** No personal protective equipment, PPE, has been issued by the National Transport Authority, NTA, and no clear guidelines have been issued on screens or face masks. Drivers themselves have started to issue face masks. The Chinese embassy donated 500 boxes of face masks to the taxi groups. Where is the NTA? How can it defend the fact that a body such as the Chinese embassy is stepping in to help us out?

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** When was that?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** About three weeks ago or so, it donated them to the National Private Hire and Taxi Association.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** How many face masks?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** There were 500 boxes of 50 face masks each.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I did not know that and I thank Mr. Waldron for telling me. On contactless payment, I have observed, as other members may have, that the Leap card makes it more straightforward when getting on a bus, DART or Luas. In taxis, in my experience, I have noticed a much higher availability of contactless payment in taxis. Is that something our guests have been working with drivers on? How has it been going? Am I correct? Is that just anecdotal experience or something that has been observed more broadly?

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** There was a large increase in the number of people requiring credit card machines and some people have come more to the fore in this regard, building packages around the taxi industry. We worked strongly with Dublin Airport on this as well but we are now being ignored altogether. The biggest concern from a taxi perspective is that the National Transport Authority wants us to pay for everything while we get nothing back, which would not work in any industry. It is working now because there are no charges for the likes of Visa and Mastercard and drivers can facilitate a small charge with corporate commercial business cards and cards outside of Europe. This is a legal entitlement arising from direction of the National Transport Authority but the authority wants to take that away and leave us with no way of recouping the money. Nobody I know has a major issue with recouping a couple of cent for providing a service. It should continue this way.

The Deputy has noticed a bigger uptake because taxi representative groups have been part of ensuring driver safety is paramount and that contactless payment can be facilitated as much as possible through working with credit card companies. More of them are coming on board and trying to facilitate the taxi industry.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** With respect to costs, people have significantly reduced their use of cash in favour of contactless payment since the beginning of this pandemic out of concern about transmission. What is the cost of transitioning to contactless payments for a taxi driver? What is the cost of the unit and the ongoing cost or portion taken by the card companies?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** There are various costs associated with the machines. We have done some deals with companies providing the machines for free but the transactions cost between 2.7% and 4.8%. Every fare paid through a cash machine could mean a loss of approximately 4.8%. The point should have been included in last year's fare review that fares should be increased in order for us to go completely cashless. There is a set-up charge and transaction fee that drivers should not have to pay. The NTA must address this fairly quickly so all drivers can transfer. Drivers have transferred to a contactless system for their own health and welfare, as well as their customers' welfare, but they should not have to pay for it.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I respect Mr. Waldron's comments but there are many businesses that will have to transition to contactless payments that would not necessarily be reimbursed for it. I know people have been asking if taxis use contactless payments. It is a consumer-----

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** Can the Deputy tell me another business that cannot change its prices or fares? We are a regulated industry and taxis can only charge what is on the meter. It is programmed by the National Transport Authority. A shopkeeper or somebody in retail or other businesses can increase or decrease prices but we cannot do anything like that. We have had the same fare for over three years.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** That is a fair point but the witness would also accept

there is a measure of consumer choice in whether somebody uses a taxi or some other form of transport. Both points are relevant.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** Absolutely. We would love to be able to provide that service. It is why the taxi organisations have been to the fore in providing these machines without any help from the National Transport Authority by the way.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I understand. I thank the witnesses.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I had a question for Mr. O’Leary but it has already been answered. I thank him for his contribution on face masks in general. He was doing it from a position of protecting his workers, which was fantastic. He was an early and ferocious public voice for the provision of face masks and that transcended his workers and public transport users in general. It helped move us forward as a society in using face masks. I thank him for his early work in this regard.

I have some questions for Mr. Waldron and Mr. Macken. Will they speak to their views on how the NTA engages with the taxi service in general? I specifically refer to structures like the taxi advisory committee. What are the advantages and disadvantages in the context of the Covid-19 crisis? When we put questions to the former Minister, Shane Ross, a few weeks ago, the NTA put forward a view that there is nothing wrong and it has great engagement with the taxi industry. It implied representatives met all the time, there was a back-and-forth discussion and there were many plans and irons in the fire. Speaking with taxi drivers in my constituency and beyond, that does not seem to be the case.

Will Mr. Macken expand on his point replying to an earlier contributor with regard to Dublin Airport, permits and the issues being faced in that regard? He ran out of time so if he wants to continue on the point, I am interested in the answer.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** Dublin Airport initially sought the €440 upfront and that would have needed to be paid in the coming month. It has now given us a bit of leeway by pushing out the payment to September. Before that we would have had quarterly payments and forum meetings once per month in which we could put across our concerns. The previous landside standards manager, Mr. Anthony McGarry, dealt with us reasonably well in the taxi industry and there was always somebody at the end of the phone for any major incidents at Dublin Airport. That was until we saw the impact of Covid-19, when all interaction with the taxi representative groups was taken away. As I stated, I contacted Mr. Dalton Philips and there is a string of emails back and forth. He states that he started a workshop and that taxi drivers indicated they wanted to be contacted individually, which is totally not the case. The person who ran this, Margaret Cox, emphasised there should be more engagement with the taxi industry.

With regard to the NTA and the taxi advisory committee, the former Minister, Shane Ross, told our colleagues that he was not responsible for picking the taxi representatives. The NTA has no input into the taxi advisory committee at all. There is one representative from Tiománaí Tacsáí na hÉireann on it for the taxi industry. The remaining members are from dispatch operator companies, including Free Now, Lynk and the Galway representative for dispatch operators. The representative groups have very little input into this. There is very little input coming back from the taxi industry.

It beggars belief that there is a new taxi regulator. We sent an email to who we thought was the regulator only to find out, by accident, that there is a new one. That is the way we are be-

ing treated by the NTA. We are being told nothing and kept in the dark. We are being used as cannon fodder. There should have been major discussions. Ms Anne Graham has said there is great interaction, but that is within a committee. The taxi advisory committee has started a subcommittee to advise the main committee on Covid-19, which beggars belief.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** It is fair to say that the voice of the ordinary taxi driver is not being heard proportionately in any way on the taxi advisory committee.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** That is the case 110%. There is one person. The National Private Hire and Taxi Association and the Irish Taxi Drivers Federation are getting no information back from the taxi advisory committee. It is worse than a secret society. When the majority of groups were on it previously, information came back to the taxi industry. This situation would be ludicrous at any time, but particularly in the context of Covid-19.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I also thank them for their good work during the pandemic, when bus, rail and taxi services have been operating. They have provided an essential service and people have put themselves at risk. What is the up-to-date infection rate among taxi and bus operators? Is that known? It could have a bearing on any increase in capacity, particularly in bus services. I am referring to the 1 m and 2 m rule.

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** I will not eat into Deputy Murphy’s time too much, but I thank Deputy Duncan Smith for his kind remarks. To clarify, the NBRU’s call for face coverings was mainly done to restore confidence in public transport. Deputy Murphy’s question feeds into that. The infection rate is, thankfully, in single digits across bus and rail services. That is my understanding anyway, but I am sure someone else will say it is different.

As the Deputy knows, we covered capacity issues comprehensively in our submission. We are guided by public health advice by and large. I spoke to the Deputy some time ago. There are capacity issues across the greater Dublin area and large urban areas. We cannot go back to crush capacities. They are called “crush loadings” in the industry, where people are squeezed sardine-line onto trains and buses. There needs to be a debate about how we will manage people returning to public transport. There were 290 million passenger journeys in 2019. The infection rate is in the single digits, but we need to have a broader conversation about how we will manage public transport. That is the bus and train experience.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I wish to ask about the stakeholder forum. Will Mr. O’Leary elaborate on what dialogue or progress there has been, if any?

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** I was going to say there was a certain pleasure in that regard, but that is probably the wrong word. We have been strongly backing a stakeholders forum for a number of years. It has been resisted strenuously by the Department and the NTA. The programme for Government sets out clearly that the forum needs to be established. There have been no conversations to date with anyone about setting it up, but one suspects that the Department responsible - it is the Department of the Green Party’s leader - will move quickly. I hope it will. This afternoon’s engagement with both groups at this meeting has demonstrated the urgent need for a stakeholders forum where people who work in the industry - I have spoken to the Deputy and she knows about this - and the experts need to feed their expertise into decision making. This relates to the question on contactless payments. Drivers in Bus Éireann are still handling cash in the middle of a crisis because there is no contactless system. I constantly criticise the NTA, but I do not want to do that. I want to sit around the table and work towards



providing transport for all citizens. That is what we should be doing, not sitting in committee rooms knocking one another. I spend a lot of time doing that anyway. I would rather have a forum.

There has been no contact yet with the new Government, but let us hope. The programme for Government sets out clearly that the Government will move immediately to establish the forum.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Regarding taxis, useful points have been made during this debate drawing our attention to some of the measures that could be taken, for example, the nine-year rule and fixed charges. I have some concerns about the 15% over-70s and the risk in which they are placing themselves. That is the age range that is particularly problematic. What feedback are the witnesses getting from that cohort? Is it different from the feedback from others providing the service?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** From my most recent contact with one driver in that situation, he would prefer to get out of the industry altogether. He has a commitment, though, in that he purchased a car in the belief that the next two or three years would be good. He cannot get out of the industry. One of the suggestions we make in our submission is that there would be a buy-back scheme so that a driver could get out. The driver in question will effectively be forced out onto the street to pay the bill for the car.

That is my first thought on the Deputy's question, but she also asked about deaths and how they had affected the taxi industry. Some taxi drivers have died from Covid. Obviously, we pass on our sympathies to their families. We would not like this to happen again. We call on the NTA to meet its responsibility and start providing us with PPE equipment and giving us guidelines. It might sound ridiculous, but is the car supposed to be washed in a particular way? We do not know. The NTA is the expert and is supposed to give us guidance on this type of issue.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I thank Mr. Waldron.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I apologise in advance to Mr. O'Leary from the NBRU. My time is short and I specifically asked that the taxi drivers attend today, so I will fire most of my questions at them. They have been ignored. However, I will quickly put a question to Mr. O'Leary. The subsidies for public transport in Ireland were lower than almost anywhere else in Europe before Covid. For the public's benefit, will Mr. O'Leary say how low they were and how Covid has added dramatically to the case that we must have a substantial increase in them, given that public transport is now more essential than ever?

I will put the rest of my questions to the taxi drivers' representatives. It is obvious that taxi drivers have been ignored and are being treated with contempt by the NTA. Now, their industry has been decimated and there is no roadmap - pardon the pun - back for them in the current period. All of the associated elements - tourism, live entertainment and music, bars and so on - that would have given them the possibility of having some sort of sustainable income are on the floor as well. Will the witnesses state the case for why the income subsidy to allow people to return to work is so crucial? Do they agree that the failure to extend the pandemic payment to people aged over 66 years put the affected taxi drivers in a very dangerous position in terms of their health and that, even now, taxi drivers are caught in a terrible bind? If they return to work, they will lose their payments but they cannot earn a decent living in the current situation. If they remain on the pandemic payment, however, it will be cut and cut again. Indeed, it has already been cut. This puts them in a dilemma.

My next question is on the number of taxis. Before Covid, there were more taxis in Dublin than there were in New York. The idea that the NTA would continue to issue licences for new taxis when the industry is on the floor seems crazy. Perhaps the taxi drivers' representatives could elaborate on this. They might also comment on the appeal for the same large stimulus grants that are being given to some businesses to be given to taxi drivers as well to cover the €11,000 of annual fixed costs.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** All of the licences issued by the NTA related to wheelchair-accessible grants. Those individuals would have needed to have their vehicles on the road before getting a wheelchair-accessible grant. Unfortunately, they are now committed to an industry where there is nothing but they still have to go through with it. The grant is for three years and they have to take on the obligations associated with it. The National Transport Authority, NTA, should have considered the pandemic and looked at some way of returning from it. It is not only the old age pensioners who have had to return to work who have been affected by Covid-19 but people on back-to-work schemes as well. A significant amount of these are on the second tranche of payments. The back-to-work scheme runs for three years. They have no option to get out of it either. They have to subsidise their income as well.

There should be an immediate moratorium on the issuing of plates. We will have a majorly oversupplied industry if there is no tourism across the country. The NTA needs to look at work for drivers in other areas such as school transport and the rural transport system. There should be two or three stimulus packages including packages for those returning to work and for those who wish to get out of the industry, similar to those provided for small farmers.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** It is our understanding that the National Transport Authority is on the verge of launching an advertising campaign to recruit taxi drivers. It is very worrying that the authority is trying to recruit people into an industry that is on its knees. The NTA must assure us that it will not do so.

With regard to supports for drivers, the Deputy mentioned the situation in which drivers have been put. He is right; drivers have been put in a very delicate situation. They have to make a choice between their health and their finances. There is no support for people with mental health issues. The has created stress for people throughout Ireland. It has not just affected taxi drivers but, because I am talking about taxi drivers, what has the Government put in place to support them? It has not contacted any of the representative groups to offer any supports or guidelines with regard to mental health. This is one of the things that has been forgotten about.

Step-down payments must be brought in. There is no way a driver will step off a cliff and have no money. We need a step-down system in place so that drivers can go out to work honestly. Some drivers may think they have to go out and work while getting the Covid payment because they do not know where their futures lie. We want to be honest, upfront and forthright. We are looking for step-down payments so that drivers can gradually work their way back into the industry and gradually pay off the bills that have been accumulating, including the €11,433 the NTA estimates as fixed costs. We believe these costs are vastly underestimated. If we were to sit in a room with NTA representatives, we could show them that our costs are double that.

**Chairman:** If Deputy Boyd Barrett wishes to come back in at the end, I will be happy to allow him, or anyone else, do so. I will try to get through the list of speakers first. Deputy Shanahan has five minutes.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I would like to let Mr. Waldron know that I have great sympa-

thy for the taxi industry. I would agree with him that the industry has unfortunately, through regulation, been allowed to get too big to be fair to drivers. That is the real problem. We have a huge amount of capacity and now, during the downturn caused by Covid, many people are at risk. I support Mr. Waldron's call for step-down payments. One cannot ask people to give up a Government subsidy or support and go out to work. I took a taxi last night and the gentleman who drove me told me that he had three fares over the course of eight hours yesterday. That is the reality on the ground.

I will ask about modifications to cars. Is there a policy in this regard within the taxi industry? This man had quite a bit of perspex in his car and was fully shielded. Is that the policy for all taxis now?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** No. The problem is that there is no policy. A driver may take it upon himself to install a screen. The National Transport Authority does not consider any screen acceptable. Drivers who are going for a suitability test have to remove the screen for the taxi to be approved. The interior of the car is usually checked and a screen is considered illegal and would have to be removed. There is no policy. We want to work with the National Transport Authority and develop a policy and a road forward, if the Deputy will excuse the pun. That is what we want to do but the National Transport Authority has not engaged with us. As my colleague, Mr. Macken, has already stated, there is one representative of taxi drivers on the taxi advisory committee. This is not good enough. We are the people to whom the NTA needs to talk.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I agree with Mr. Waldron. I dare say he will not be the last witness from the private sector to speak about difficulties in engaging with the higher-ups in the public service and Civil Service. We highlighted that in a recent report.

I commend Mr. O'Leary of the National Bus and Rail Union on the work he has done. As a member of the Regional Group, I was out in front of even the NBRU in calling for masks to be mandated where social distancing was not possible. That has not been fully mandated but I believe we will end up going there. I will ask about the tourist coach industry. I understand some buses are fitted with high efficiency particulate air, HEPA, filters. I am told that other companies have been told they will have to fit these filters if they want to get back into business in the future. Is that the case?

**Mr. Thomas O'Connor:** The filters to which the Deputy refers are standard in the airline industry but they are not practical for coach services.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I understand they can be fitted to coaches. I know there is a cost associated with that but it is possible to fit them to the air conditioning systems of buses.

**Mr. Thomas O'Connor:** They can be fitted but the filters themselves are costly. It would require a specific investment in filters for coaches and buses.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** Has the NBRU looked at this issue or engaged with the Department with regard to using these as a solution in respect of any further public service obligation, PSO, services? The issue of transport for those returning to school has already been highlighted. There is a definite problem in respect of children with intellectual disabilities who may have to be brought to special schools in September. There are probably openings in that regard. Has anyone thought to sit down and cost this as a proposition for the Department to consider?

**Mr. Thomas O'Connor:** The worker representatives have raised this issue with the companies but it has not progressed beyond that stage.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I suggest Mr. O'Connor's group might want to look at that. I am not saying the NBRU is not being proactive but it would be good to engage with the Department on some initiatives to see if it can get support for them.

I will return to the taxi industry before I finish. Have the taxi groups organised themselves into any co-operatives through which they might be able to get greater traction with regard to bargaining?

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** In my opening statement I mentioned that I represent 22 groups from all over the country. All of the groups here have come together to make our voices heard. They represent other groups across the country as well. We have put our cases forward in solidarity. We had an awful lot more solidarity under the previous taxi advisory committee, on which four representative groups were represented. We now only have one representative among the 17 members of the committee. This is a very poor showing on the part of the previous Minister. I hope the new Minister will address this issue.

With regard to screens in vehicles, we have asked the National Transport Authority's engineers to go out to individuals who have fitted screens to take a look at them and see if they are suitable for the wider industry. The Road Safety Authority, RSA, has a different point of view with regard to how screens should be fitted from an engineering perspective. The NTA has done nothing with regard to screens apart from telling us that there are no safety screens available in Ireland or the UK which it deems suitable. One of the largest taxi fleets in Europe has been treated dismally in this regard. We are not getting feedback from the NTA. While the various groups are working together, it is pointless doing so if we do not have anybody's ear on the issue. For this reason, I ask the new Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ryan, or someone in his Department or in the National Transport Authority to engage with the various groups in the industry to get realistic information.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I am out of time but Mr. Macken's response is a telling indictment of the NTA's position in this process.

**Mr. Dermot O'Leary:** Can I respond to Deputy Shanahan's remarks on the NBRU not being proactive? I know they were not designed-----

**Chairman:** I must bring in other speakers. I will allow those who want to contribute at the end to make whatever points they wish. The next speaker is Deputy Lawless on behalf of Fianna Fáil.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their submissions. I will speak primarily to the NBRU submission. While I have an interest in taxis, I have a greater interest in public transport, specifically the rail and bus side of it.

I represent Kildare North, which is very much a commuter constituency. Pre-Covid, the bulk of the working population in north Kildare migrated into the greater Dublin area most mornings, returning again in the evening. I have been a commuter on public transport, primarily rail, for upwards of 20 years. I will make a couple of observations on that. The numbers using the system have started to increase again. The system was almost at breaking point pre-Covid. I discussed this in the past with Mr. O'Leary and others in the NBRU, as well as the NTA, Irish Rail and all the other stakeholders. We are dealing with the crisis as best we can around the table. It is important not to lose sight of the pressures on the system pre-Covid, for example, trains and buses running above capacity, a lack of park-and-ride facilities, parking and

other supporting services needed to make the transition to public transport *en masse*. Unfortunately, this transition has been somewhat arrested but I hope we will be in a post-Covid era in the not too distant future, whether that is in six, 12 or 18 months. We cannot let this slide as we could find ourselves back to capacity again very quickly. It is important that we do not let the ball drop on some of the initiatives and projects that were up and running to address some of the issues in public transport.

Earlier this week, the Minister, Deputy Ryan, announced EU funding for the Kildare route project to bring the DART to Maynooth and Hazelhatch. Without being parochial, as someone who lives one station further, I believe this should extend much further to stations such as Sallins and Newbridge, as well as Kilcock on the Sligo line, and perhaps even Enfield. If we were being pedantic, we would describe the Kildare route project as the Dublin route project because it stops at Hazelhatch, which is in County Dublin. While the pressure and focus are elsewhere, it is important that we do not forget these issues. We need to keep them boiling away in the background as best we can.

I spoke about capacity in normal times and my hope that we return to some kind of normalcy soon. I have continued to travel on public transport on most days during the pandemic. Last Thursday, when we had a late session in the convention centre, I ran to get a later train home at 8 p.m. or 8.30 p.m. Even at that off-peak hour, social distancing was almost impossible to enforce because the seats were almost full. While there were signs and stickers on the seats, it was not possible to observe social distancing because the train was beginning to fill up. That is already an issue and we are only at the early stages of people returning to work. I do not know how that will be managed. I note there was some reduction on timetables. Perhaps it is time to start ramping up services again as people start taking the train again. This has probably gone under the radar but it will become an issue very soon.

The return of schools has been the subject of considerable concern, coverage, speculation and analysis in the media, the Government and these Houses. We have heard a lot about schools, but what about the school buses? I am not sure how the school bus system will cope when the schools return. There is always pressure to get places on school buses in August. Much depends on capacity on particular routes and whether the school bus seats 48 or 60, the number of discretionary places and so on. In a social distancing era, what kind of challenges will that pose? It is something that has not been flagged or considered in the debate to date.

The next point I want to jump on to is one about which Mr. O'Leary had expressed concerns in the media a few weeks ago. I welcome the mandatory face coverings on public transport. That is important. It was a welcome decisive move made early in the new Government. It removed any awkwardness about it so that people, by and large, immediately began to don the face coverings. I saw not everyone on the Luas and train was doing it. There is voluntary compliance. I note Mr. O'Leary expressed concerns about drivers and inspectors being pressed into service, almost as policemen, trying to enforce that. How is that working out? I saw it on the Luas one day. Through no fault of the drivers, it was not working out well. They were doing their best. The Luas had to keep stopping and passengers were being ejected and maybe put in their place a little. The journey was slowed down and it became a little messy.

Jumping along to the details of Mr. O'Leary's submission, I might put all my points across and maybe they can respond in bulk. It might be the most efficient way. In the NBRU submission today, Mr. O'Leary talked about a 24-hour society as opposed to a 24-hour transport society, which many cities have. I often consider, especially when running for the last train home out of Heuston at 11.10 p.m., it would be great if there was another one an hour later but one



would probably want one an hour later again and so on. Perhaps that kind of 24-hour public transport clock is what we need to aspire to. The NBRU touched on that in its submissions and statements in the past. Perhaps there is an angle there in terms of the recovery.

Mr. O’Leary mentioned spreading the peak as well. Irish Rail often talked of this. The NBRU and Irish Rail both talked about this idea whereby, rather than everybody trying to jump on a train at 7.30 a.m. or 8 a.m. and jumping back on the same train at 5.30 p.m. to get home in the evening, and similarly for bus and Luas, people could begin to examine how they might have staggered or different work patterns. Perhaps Covid can teach us something there. Perhaps there are learnings or changes in work practices to be drawn from that. In terms of the 24-hour economy, probably the NBRU has something that would be of interest to say about that.

Finally, I noted the stakeholder forum. Deputy Catherine Murphy and others might have touched on that. There is one question I would ask. Mr. O’Leary has already explained his vision of how that might work but I would ask, will there be a role for local commuter groups? The Sallins and Naas Rail User Group is the one I am happy to be involved with. There is a Drogheda user group as well. There is probably a Navan user group etc. They would play a useful role in stakeholder engagement as the users of the service. They already input in different, and perhaps inconsistent, ways to the system. Mr. O’Leary might talk about how that might operate.

I will leave it there. I have put a few questions and there is a few minutes left for the witnesses to respond.

**Chairman:** There are a lot of questions to be answered in three minutes but I am sure the witnesses will do their best.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I have full confidence in them.

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** I thank Deputy Lawless for his remarks and also for his contribution in terms of his observations. I will try to answer the questions, with the last one first.

The stakeholders forum, as far as we are concerned in the NBRU, should include all those groups that have a role to play. It should not be owned by any one group. The policy decisions today, as we see it, are made by a group in which we have no role. Commuter groups should be involved along with other stakeholders. For example, we are here with our colleagues from the taxi industry.

In relation to the 24-hour economy, we observed in our research before we put in our submission that there was a 24-hour commission established in London on the issue of having an economy running right through the night, not only on the entertainment and bar industry which we are all familiar with but where cultural venues could be open and, indeed, the economy itself and retail units could be open. Of course, there is much stakeholder involvement in that as well and it would need to be discussed. The programme for Government mentions that. From that perspective, it is encouraging.

In relation to the enforcement issue that Deputy Lawless raised, I made the remark to Deputy Carroll MacNeill earlier that by and large people are complying with the face coverings. There is a small minority who are not. There is that issue that is still hanging out there. I should remind the Deputies that we have been calling for a dedicated Garda public transport division for quite some time now. We have support from the Garda representative bodies on that and they could have had a role here, had they been resourced properly.

In terms of the Deputy's observations on Irish Rail in getting the trains, we wrote to Irish Rail as recently as last week indicating that we have a problem representing workers on the train services with the capacity issue. I am at pains to point to my own people as much as anybody else that we will take public health advice on the social distance being reduced, but we will not have a situation where we compromise the health and safety of our members and, indeed, the travelling public. There is an issue in enforcement of capacity issues. I suppose, anecdotally, we have a situation where people are travelling in numbers, they all want to travel together and they are inclined to sit in between the carriages, and that is a problem. The issue relating to school buses will be very complex and will be predicated, we assume, on the decisions when they are made about the return to school. Bus Éireann carries approximately 117,000 children to school each day, which is 41 million journeys each year. Many of the operators that work for Bus Éireann are private indigenous interests, demonstrating clearly that while the unions might be described as anti-private, we do a lot of work with private coaches and they complement the publicly-owned companies.

**Mr. Thomas O'Connor:** I would like to come in on Deputy Lawless's point regarding schools. We are still awaiting public health advice on social distancing on school transport. It has not materialised yet. The issue with safety screens is a big one. Many of the school coaches may be smaller than normal public service vehicles and screens are needed to protect the drivers. That will require investment. If the social distancing rule stays at 1 m, 2 m or 50% capacity, it will present significant challenges to carry that number of children each day when the schools return in September.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank our guests. Taxi drivers are suffering. Many taxis operators in the constituency of Cork South-West and throughout the country have been in contact with me prior to this ten-minute packaging and other things that they feel are not steering their way. Taxi drivers are suffering extreme stress and anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic as they have seen their incomes wiped out. Nonetheless, they have to keep their cars taxed, insured and licensed. They are fearful of cancelling their insurance as they may find it difficult or impossible to get insurance again or a renewal could see their premiums inflate.

Many drivers are over 66 years of age, working full-time and paying income tax but, because of age discrimination, they were unable to avail of the Covid-19 payment. Significant numbers of drivers have been in the business for 40 years and having paid exorbitant fees for their taxi plates under the old system are still bearing this very significant financial burden.

Drivers have recurring costs. For example, a taxi licence costs €250 for five years plus €125 a year for the vehicle licensing. Should existing licences be given free to anyone over 66 in some compensation to these people who have paid into the system are being discriminated against at present? With their vehicles parked up, the licence fee is also very unfair.

Regarding the condition of a taxi, it has to be taken off the road in its tenth year. Drivers have to upgrade their cars in order to keep their licences active. In the current difficult business climate, cars are predominantly parked up. In these exceptional times, could the taxi age be increased from ten to 15 years to ease the financial burden?

Does the NTA have surplus moneys it collected from taxi drivers over the years? If so, could these funds be made available to support drivers making car upgrades? These grants are already available for wheelchair-accessible taxis. Taxi drivers need support now.

Is there anything in the stimulus package for taxi operators aged over 66 or for private bus

operators?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** I am not aware of anything in the stimulus package directed towards the taxi industry. Regarding the costs the Deputy mentioned, such as licences, the NCT and the suitability test, a very practical thing could be done to help taxi drivers. We have been calling for this for years. The car test and the suitability test are carried out in the same premises on two different occasions. We do not understand why they cannot all be done at the same time. Why do we have to drive away and come back two days later to do the second part of a test? That is a cost to drivers. As well as the monetary cost of the tests, it is also a cost in time and effort.

GAA and League of Ireland venues throughout the country are starting to open up this weekend. There is never provision for a taxi rank at these places. These are the opportunities that taxi drivers are seeking at the moment. The Government should set in place positions where taxi drivers can pick up an income. It has been repeatedly missed. We need to be part of the planning process when events, including Bloom in Phoenix Park and events at Croke Park, are being organised. Taxis need to be provided for as part of the planning permission.

I am sorry. I missed the first part of the Deputy's question because I got a bit distracted.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** Taxi ranks in Cork are facilitated by the Garda and the local authority much of the time. It is a good stepping stone for the taxi industry to acknowledge the good work by some communities in that regard. Throughout the rest of the country, nothing is done in that regard. Taxi drivers in Cork and elsewhere are affected by no tourists coming here for trips on cruise liners. That business has been decimated.

We were told that there was a contract for NCTs and suitability tests. With the two people, that could be facilitated.

Regarding subsidies and grants and facilitating older drivers to get out of the business, if a taxi driver is paying over €11,000 a year, it is very hard to get out after buying a new car or in the middle of it. The Deputy's suggestion of a 15-year age limit for vehicles is good. We have suggested it all along. That would be at no cost whatsoever. There is nothing for us in the stimulus package. The NTA or the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport should investigate it and make proposals for what can be given to taxi drivers. We need support. That is paramount at the moment.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** I thank the gentlemen for coming in to talk to us today. I acknowledge that, at a crucial time, those who operate buses, trains and taxis were the essential workers ferrying other essential workers to and from their jobs. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I thank them for their public service. The State depended on them and they were there for us.

I have read the submissions. I am sure our guests are aware that many of their co-workers across Europe lost their lives as a result of Covid-19. What do they need from us politicians to keep them safe? I thank Mr. O'Leary for his perseverance regarding the wearing of masks on public transport. The latter was one of the things I mentioned in my maiden speech to the Dáil. I was tearing my hair out over how long it took to happen. I thank him again for his perseverance because it is very important for the safety of not just bus and train workers, but of all people on their way to work.

I am concerned about capacity on busy routes. The Bus Éireann 115 route in north Kildare was already running over capacity before the pandemic. I was talking to the group in Kilcock last night. With not so many people back at work, it is manageable at the moment. However,

we will need further capacity on these routes. While every route suffers during rush hour, some routes need particular attention. Is enough being done in this regard, especially with more people on the move and with the numbers relating to Covid rising again?

In the context of train capacity, could Irish Rail limit the number of tickets being sold to customers so that it would be easier for those customers to adhere to social distancing requirements? In their submission, the witnesses suggest that they would like hand sanitiser to be used. It would be easy to enforce that on public transport with a hand sanitiser dispenser available when people are getting on and off a train. I spoke to the Minister, Shane Ross, about it. I agree that he was quite dismissive of many of the suggestions. I want to tease out the issue of school transport, which is on page 15 of the submission.

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** I thank the Deputy for her remarks on face coverings. If her question is what the committee can do, other speakers touched on the stakeholders’ forum. The committee’s report can insist that it be established immediately. Rather than having to go to the media, seemingly demanding its use on public transport, I could be doing it while sitting at a table with other stakeholders. I am well able to make the arguments in the media but the stakeholders’ forum is where the business should be done.

On capacity generally, the country is very good at planning in the middle of a boom and trying to implement during recessions and we fail all the time. This is an opportunity to do the opposite. Irish Rail is a case in point. It is only last autumn where “Prime Time” broadcast an exposé, as it were, where more than 40 train carriages known as 2700s were mothballed because the NTA paymasters said they were too expensive to refurbish. Had they been in service, they would have helped and would continue to help with capacity issues. There has been severe underinvestment in rail.

The 115 route in Kildare is also an issue of capacity. Two types of people know about this, day in, day out, namely, the bus drivers and the people who use the service, but it takes a long time for the information to get up to the decision makers. Forgive me for flogging a dead horse but the NTA looms large in every answer from the two bodies represented here today. I am at pains to point out that I would rather work with it than criticise it every time I open my mouth.

**Chairman:** If the Deputy wishes to come back at the end, she is welcome to do so.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** It has all been said about the necessity of the services. It is something that was very clear recently during the pandemic. We are talking about the future of public transport. I expect there is a fear that people have made a shift towards private cars. From a public transport perspective, including private bus service operators, of which there are many in my Louth constituency, will Mr. O’Leary outline what can be done to reassure the public of the safety of public transport while also dealing with capacity issues as a result of reduced services?

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** There are a lot of private coaches operating into Dublin from the Louth area. They compliment the State companies, by and large.

On restoring confidence in public transport, face coverings in one way. It is important that the new cleaning regime is kept going. Our submission notes the fear that people will move away from public transport to cars. Our submission referred to an Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service report commissioned by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in 2017 put the cost of congestion in the greater Dublin area alone at €358 million. We

cannot go back. The Covid crisis demonstrated what is possible when there are empty streets. To be fair to Owen Keegan in Dublin City Council, whom I am not a fan of and he knows that, there was a move towards pedestrian and cycleways during the crisis. Investment will have to be at the fore to bring in extra capacity in buses. Buses can be purchased much quicker than rail coaches. Capacity is what is required.

As I said to Deputy Lawless, we need to elongate the peak travel period. Some 46% of journeys are made at peak times, and that peak has to be elongated. We wrote to the previous Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, and other party leaders suggesting that school and college opening times and retail be staggered. We also made that point in our submission. That was partially done in the second phase when some retail units did not open until 10.30 a.m. That is the type of thinking that is needed. As I keep repeating, stakeholder involvement is vital. There is no point in dictating down the chain because that begets a reaction which is usually negative. What we hope to achieve today is the clear message that the stakeholder forum needs to be established immediately so that we can get down to restoring confidence in public transport and dealing with capacity issues, as well as elongating peak travel periods.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** There is much talk of stimulus at the moment. What is the NBRU's view on major rail projects such as the Navan rail line, the western rail corridor and the future of the DART underground?

**Mr. Dermot O'Leary:** No one will be surprised to hear that the NBRU would embrace those projects, all of which are referred to in one way or another in the programme for Government. When I read in a newspaper or see on my phone that there is to be a feasibility study, it drives me nuts. Many of these projects may not be economically feasible, if we are honest. I mentioned Bus Éireann fulfilling a social contract earlier. That social contract needs to be factored into any debate here. I imagine the Navan rail line would be economically viable. Navan is a large town. The line has been closed since 1947 and reopening it is a no-brainer. On the western rail corridor, stimulus is needed in areas in the west. We cannot continue to be so Dublin-centric as that will not work. The crisis and working from home have demonstrated that we need to spread the focus from Dublin and achieve the regional balance that we are sick of talking about. Every crisis brings an opportunity. We have opportunities here and we need to grasp them. I keep talking about investment but rail projects are fundamental to getting the regional balance in place.

**Chairman:** The Deputy's five minutes are up but he may come in again at the end.

I have a question on the introduction of the latest regulations. Regulations are often introduced before they are announced. They could take effect on Monday morning and are published on Monday afternoon at the earliest. Under the regulations on wearing a face mask on public transport, it was only an offence to refuse to co-operate if either an employee of a bus company or the NTA asked a person to wear a mask and he or she refused to do so. The Garda was not the first line of enforcement. Given the crucial role of employees of bus and other transport companies, what consultation was there with bus and rail workers in advance of the introduction of the regulations which made them primarily responsible?

**Mr. Dermot O'Leary:** There was no consultation with the front-line workers on this. The Chairman will not be surprised to hear me say this as it has been my response in nearly every answer.

**Chairman:** I understood there was no consultation with the union but was there any con-



sultation with workers in a separate way outside the union to see how this requirement might work in practice?

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** By and large, despite a few blips along the way, industrial relations interactions between the trade unions and the company have worked for generations. That is how we do our business and that approach has stood the test of time. There was no consultation with workers.

The legislation, which I know the Chairman has read, refers to “relevant persons”. It does not mention bus drivers, inspectors or train drivers, whereas it mentions the National Transport Authority. The NTA has a central role to play, yet it is not on the pitch. It is very good at sending mystery shoppers out on buses to observe driver behaviour and see if buses are clean and so on but it has not been very good at being proactive on this issue. It is mentioned in the legislation.

I would like to make one other point. There was an attempt last week to drive a wedge between the Garda representative bodies and the NBRU. That did not work because while consultation has been glaringly lacking in this area, there is no lack of consultation between the NBRU and the Garda representative bodies. We interact regularly, as proved last week when the Garda representatives issued a statement indicating that gardaí had no direct role in policing this legislation. That is also the position of the NBRU.

Legislation on fare collection was changed many years ago. Contrary to popular myth, it is not the responsibility of a bus driver to insist on a person paying a fare. That was done away when the two man operation became a one man operation. It was done to protect the safety of bus drivers and avoid conflict. Having fought long and hard on this issue for 30 years, we were not going to stand by and allow the reintroduction of confrontation with customers.

**Chairman:** We have all read the horrific story of a bus driver in Bayonne in the south of France being beaten to death for asking somebody to wear a face covering. Returning to the original point, Mr. O’Leary is correct that the term “relevant persons” includes employees of the transport company, which would be NBRU members, and NTA personnel. Did the NTA send out personnel to monitor compliance with this instruction? Did it set up a group or cohort of NTA inspectors to monitor it on public transport?

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** I will not speak on behalf of the NTA. I would criticise it but I will not speak on its behalf. I do not know the answer to the Chairman’s question.

**Chairman:** Is Mr. O’Leary aware from speaking to NBRU members of any NTA patrols?

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** Not unless it adopted the model of the mystery shopper and kept it a secret from our members. I do not know is the honest answer.

**Chairman:** Returning to the taxi drivers, the plight of the taxi industry seems to be very much shared by hackney drivers. I appreciate there is often rivalry between the two groups. In the west, the Western Chauffeur Drive Association has reported an 80% reduction in income for March and April. Does Mr. Waldron accept that a similar difficulty is being faced across the PSV sector? In other words, operators of public service vehicles in general face serious difficulties with regard to their income and maintaining their vehicles while they wait to get an income source back.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** As I mentioned in my opening statement, the groups we represent are

from cities, towns and villages throughout the country. We are all faced with the same problem. We need to make a living and we cannot do so in the taxi industry at the moment. Taxi drivers and hackney drivers - the SPSV industry - want equal recognition with the other parts of the public transport service. I welcome the suggestion by my colleague of a transport forum to allow people in the industry to engage with those who make the decisions because people who are not in the industry, for example, representatives of the hotel industry, are having a say in what we do or do not do. That is laughable.

**Chairman:** I agree that a forum is a good idea. Before other speakers contribute again, I will ask one more question. Mr. Waldron said that he received 500 boxes of face masks from the Chinese embassy. I do not expect him to be able to answer this question, but does he have any idea where they were made? I ask that question because in the People's Republic of China there is a phenomenon called a labour transfer programme. The Chinese Government describes it as a programme whereby local residents rise above poverty through employment and lead fulfilling lives. However, it has been reported in *The New York Times*, a relatively reputable newspaper, that penalties faced by those who refuse to co-operate often mean that their participation is in effect involuntary and that this could amount under international law to forced labour. There has been a certain focus on the Xinjiang province in the north west of China, an area that I visited in a very different capacity almost 20 years ago. There is a minority there called Uighurs, which is largely a Muslim ethnic minority. Under this labour transfer programme, Uighurs are often sent into factory and service jobs. According to the National Medical Products Administration of China, only four companies in Xinjiang produced medical grade protective equipment before the pandemic but, as of 20 June, that number had increased to 51. From a review of state media reports and public records, *The New York Times* found that at least 17 of those companies participate in the labour transfer programme. While those companies produce equipment primarily for domestic use, *The New York Times* also identified other companies outside Xinjiang which were using Uighur labour and were exporting globally, including to the United States. There has been a huge jump in the number of face masks being worn, which is to be welcomed generally, but would it be of concern to the witnesses if some of those face masks were being produced using forced labour?

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** I am not aware of where they came from. I might add that the NTA was not banging down doors to give us face masks otherwise we would not have required them.

**Chairman:** I take that point. Furthermore, neither the NTA nor anybody else in Ireland is checking the source of where this PPE comes from, which is sad. There was a time when Irish foreign policy was otherwise. In terms of China's internment of Uighurs and other Muslims in the north western Xinjiang province, there are almost 2 million people estimated to be incarcerated. These people are a Muslim minority. As I said, almost 2 million of them are incarcerated.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** We have a Chinese community within Ireland. Many of them make a living through the taxi industry. I would suggest that it is through their friendship that these masks may have been offered to us.

**Chairman:** I ask Mr. Waldron to repeat that.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** It is through their friendship that the masks may have been offered to us. The Chinese people working in the taxi industry may have requested them and viewed it as an avenue to get them out to people as quickly as possible.

**Chairman:** Any generosity is to be welcomed, particularly if it meets a shortfall from a

State authority. Dealing with the latter is, I suppose, the primary purpose of this committee. I was just wondering if anybody knew where the masks were made, in what conditions they are being made or if there is any State authority here is looking at that, particularly in view of Ireland's enhanced role on the world stage as a member of the UN Security Council, etc.

Deputy Boyd Barrett wants to come in on issues that are more directly related.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I would like to comment on the Chairman's remarks. China is a brutal, totalitarian state that has a terrible history of oppression, including against the Uighur Muslims mentioned by the Chairman and dating back to Tiananmen Square. It is not a telling indictment of our State and the NTA that taxi drivers who need PPE cannot get it from the Government or the NTA such that they have to get it from China? The Chairman's question should be directed to the NTA, not taxi drivers.

**Chairman:** And, perhaps, the Department of Foreign Affairs as well.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Yes.

**Chairman:** The Deputy might wish us to make that recommendation.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I do. I thank Mr. Macken and Mr. Waldron for attending. I thank all of the taxi representative groups-----

**Chairman:** Solidarity-People Before Profit pressed for this session. Would Deputy Boyd Barrett like to speak last or to proceed now? I am alerting the Deputy to the fact that there are two other speakers yet to come.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I will proceed now. My first question is to Mr. Macken and Mr. Waldron. Would it be a fair summary that the key things they are asking for are a step-down income subsidy to make it viable for taxi drivers to survive, grants to cover fixed costs because the loss of income means that members cannot cover them, the extension of the ten-year rule to 15 years, a moratorium on new licences and, critically, that the NTA, the Government and Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport treat taxi drivers with respect and give them fair representation on a committee that is supposed to be representing them? Perhaps Mr. Macken and Mr. Waldron will comment on whether that is a fair summary or if there is anything else they would like to add. They might also give their views on why the NTA seems to be treating taxi drivers with such contempt, ignoring them and seeking to reduce their representation on committees rather than increase it.

**Mr. Gerard Macken:** Dublin Airport should be added to that list. We need negotiations with the DAA and across the country. Those involved should not be taking advantage of Covid-19 to dismiss the organisations representing the taxi industry and other people in transport. The NTA seems to be a law unto itself. It only comes and looks to solve problems, and, in fairness, we did solve an awful lot of problems regarding wheelchairs and the driver check app. All of this was brought in by representative groups at the time. The person in charge of the NTA at the time, Mr. Hugh Creegan, listened to and met massive numbers of taxi drivers. I brought 30 people into meet Mr. Creegan. I know that is not feasible now. However, it has gone from there to where we are now, that is, being totally ignored. It beggars belief.

The new Minister with responsibility for transport needs to talk to taxi drivers, form a new committee and bring people in. We were recommended for bus services within the city when capacity had been reached. We all need to talk to one another within the transport community

and not be ignored. If we are not being ignored, we are being dictated to. We are not being given information on screens, masks or anything else regarding Covid-19. We are totally being ignored.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** While it is a good summary of our submission, the big thing is we need recognition and want to be equal partners. We want to be sitting around the table with the likes of our colleagues here and other people in order that we can discuss things. We are not looking for an equal chop of the cake. We are not looking for €5 million because they got €5 million. We want to sit down and work out how the transport system works. We all complement each other, and I said it in my opening statement. We all need one another to survive and to succeed.

One last thing I ask is whether anyone can remember when the use of taxis was last promoted, because I cannot. Promoting the use of small public service vehicles is something that needs to be done immediately by the National Transport Authority. As I said, the priority will be to stop the issuing of new licences at present. Letting guys come into an industry that is down on its knees is just wrong.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Waldron. Deputies Cronin and Ó Murchú both have additional questions to ask.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** Mr. O’Leary should be given a chance to respond to the question I asked about school transport. While some people might say one should never let a good crisis go to waste, let us look at it from another point of view. Let us not let this crisis go to waste and try to improve the school transport system. Many parents are already being asked to pay for this service and we are still waiting to find out whether the schools are going back.

**Mr. Dermot O’Leary:** My colleague, Mr. O’Connor, covered that earlier in his response. He may want to do that again.

**Mr. Thomas O’Connor:** The schools’ contract is run on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills by Bus Éireann. In the main, almost 90% of the trips are covered by indigenous coach and bus operators but the contract has been in place since 1975. Massive investment is required in schools that will aid us in social distancing and the fight against climate change. There needs to be a place on a dedicated school bus for every child who requires it and that will require funding. People must come up with a plan and with the investment for the sake of our schoolchildren and for society.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** This question is for Mr. Waldron and Mr. Macken who, in fairness, gave what one could only call an indictment of the NTA. I also accept their comments about the necessity of stimulus and grant aid and possibly even to facilitate some people leaving the industry. Insurance was, however, a big issue long before we started this. I have two quick questions. I could be using the wrong terminology but a taxi driver who lives close to me in Dundalk had a limousine-type policy. His insurance premium jumped from approximately €1,400 to more than €3,200. He expected a slight jump, but this seems astronomical. He wondered whether this was happening across the industry, particularly, regarding those types of policies and whether that is an attempt by insurance companies to basically get rid of that type of policy.

Another taxi driver came to me who had difficulty with regard to changing his policy. He was not allowed to change his policy for the period but was only allowed to defer the payment, which he did for three months. His policy is up for renewal in August and he was told that un-

less he pays the three months straight up, the company would not quote him. This is a company he has been with for ten years. He was willing to offer a deal of paying that three-month figure over ten months which I think is fair enough. This industry is being put upon and, once again, the insurance companies are failing miserably. I want to know what the witnesses expect regarding the NTA and others, including the Government. What needs to be done about that? It is an issue I will be bringing directly to the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming.

**Chairman:** I will allow the witnesses a couple of minutes to respond.

**Mr. Jim Waldron:** Obviously, insurance is the biggest cost most taxi drivers have. If they have a tip, they can expect their policy to double or sometimes treble. It is a concern but the NTA has shown no leadership here. It tells us it has been in touch with the insurance companies but only yesterday a driver contacted me whose car has been suspended by agreement with the NTA. He has seven days now to reinstate his licence. He said he does not want to go back to work at the moment and would rather stay off for another couple of months for health reasons. He has been told he cannot extend his suspension. What does that mean practically? It means he now must install or replace full taxi insurance which could probably cost him €200 per month, or more, on what he is already paying now because the NTA will not allow him to continue his suspension. The NTA has not negotiated prices on behalf of taxi drivers and has not negotiated at all with insurance companies to allow drivers to step down. The simplest thing for it to do is to say to all drivers that if they want to step their insurance down to a social and domestic policy for three months, we could all save money. However, it would not allow us because the regulation states if one has a taxi one must have full taxi insurance at all times. Why did the NTA not say that because of Covid-19, at this particular time it will allow a person to drop his or her insurance down to social and domestic, stick the roof sign in the boot and use it when he or she needs go to the hospitals or anywhere else?

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Waldron and all the witnesses in the committee room for all the questions they have answered. I now propose to suspend until 2.30 p.m. when we will meet representatives of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. I will make the point that several colleagues who wished to speak at this session could not do so because there was a possibility of votes being called in the Convention Centre. That may also affect the next session but there is nothing we can do about it.

*Sitting suspended at 2.05 p.m. and resumed at 2.35 p.m.*

### **Covid-19: Impact on Public Transport (Resumed)**

**Chairman:** We are joined by representatives from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to further discuss the impact of Covid-19 on public transport provision. I welcome Mr. Kenneth Spratt, acting Secretary General of the Department; Ms Deirdre O’Keeffe, assistant secretary; Ms Deirdre Hanlon, assistant secretary; Mr. Fintan Towey, assistant secretary; and Ms Maria Melia, principal officer.

I advise witnesses that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is



to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I ask Mr. Spratt to introduce his delegation and outline the Department's submission to the committee, which has been circulated in advance. I apologise that very few members of the committee have been able to make it today, as votes are anticipated in the Dáil. In normal circumstances, committees would sit in the room where the witnesses are and the Dáil would sit in this Chamber, and if and when a vote was called, the committee would rise temporarily to enable people to make their way to the Dáil Chamber. That is obviously not possible when the Dáil is sitting in a different location, and everybody is down at the Convention Centre as I believe votes are anticipated.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** We were advised by the clerk to the committee that there was no need for opening remarks to be submitted. I am joined by my colleague, Ms Deirdre O'Keeffe, who heads up the maritime side of the Department; Ms Deirdre Hanlon, who heads up public transport; Mr. Fintan Towey, who heads up the aviation side; and Ms Maria Melia, who will be covering tourism matters today.

I thank the Chairman for the invitation. We are looking forward to engaging with the committee on this important matter.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy O'Rourke. He has ten minutes but may take as long as he wishes as there are few members present, through no fault of their own.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I am keeping an eye on the clock. I have a number of questions arising out of issues that have presented over time but I also wish to address some matters that arose during this morning's deliberations. I thank the witnesses for their attendance.

There is deep concern that our ports and airports are gateways for further import of Covid-19 and that they will increase the risk of the spread of the virus in the community. We heard from some representatives this morning, including the Irish Air Line Pilots' Association, that the gold standard was testing and tracing. I ask the witnesses to outline what models have been assessed for our ports and airports in that regard. All the measures, checks and controls laid out in A Protocol for the Management of Air Passengers in light of COVID-19 and COVID-19 agreed protocol for International Ro-Ro Passenger Transport Services, Ports & Terminal Service Operators, the documents published for the air and marine sectors earlier this week, are self-declaratory in nature. I ask the witnesses to address that point. The fact that there are no diagnostic or third-party checks or controls at our ports and airports causes great concern for people generally. That is an important point, particularly since many people are asymptomatic but carry and transmit Covid-19 during that period. We do not have temperature screening, antibody tests or DNA tests, which are often part of the response in other countries. I would like the witnesses to address that, if possible.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** We are guided by public health advice and guidance from NPHET and colleagues at the Department of Health. It is important to remember that travel into the country is significantly reduced. The numbers speak for themselves. We are down significantly in aviation travel and maritime travel. As regards what we have in place, we have the passenger locator form, which will move to an electronic form very soon, and follow-up questioning from colleagues in the border management unit. We acknowledge that has not been as effective as we would like it to be, which is why we are setting up a call centre that will follow up on all the

passenger locator forms completed by people who come into the country. We are moving to an electronic version of the form, which the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer is developing as we speak. Although travel into the country is significantly reduced by normal standards, that should enable us to follow up with people in a much more rigorous and robust way.

Regarding the self-declaratory nature of the protocols, when we started to reopen society and the economy, we introduced the roadmap for reopening. Like many of the approaches we have taken to dealing with Covid, that has been based on engaging with people, explaining things to them and encouraging them to abide by the public health guidance, advice, regulations and instructions that have been put in place by the Government. That has worked very well across a number of areas and we believe the self-declaratory approach is working quite well when it comes to air and marine travel. As we understand it, the incidence of contagion is zero on the marine side. We have no evidence of any case having been contracted during travel into the country. Similarly, we have not been alerted to the protocols not working when it comes to air travel.

As regards there not being checks, controls or diagnostics by third parties, we try to engage, explain and encourage people, and we seek to steer clear from enforcement, as best we can, unless it absolutely needs to be done. Mr. Towey may want to add something on temperature screening and DNA testing. We believe more could be done. We are giving consideration to introducing departure point testing, but some testing is in place in Dublin Airport for people who present with symptoms. We are considering what additional measures we could, and perhaps should, introduce.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** The protocols on the management of passengers during aviation journeys include a series of measures to be taken by airlines, airports and passengers. There is a very heavy burden on passengers to observe all the good practices for preventing the spread of the virus, with which we are all familiar. As in society generally, we are very largely dependent on individuals taking responsibility in that respect. We have looked at the question of whether additional tests or controls at airports might be helpful in controlling the spread of the virus. Obviously, we have to be guided by the expert public health advice in that regard. Our colleagues have looked at these possibilities, not only terminal screening, that is, temperature controls, but also other tests for the virus that might be conducted at either the point of departure or the point of arrival. While it is entirely understandable that people believe that if it were possible to have a conclusive test on arrival, that would be a measure we could take to improve safety, in fact the public health advice is that the type of testing available does not provide that level of assurance. The view of public health experts is that the case for introducing measures of that kind is quite marginal. One of the difficulties is that tests can produce false negative results, and they then create a false sense of security and increase the risk of virus transmission. These things are evolving all the time. We are watching them very carefully and collaborating carefully with our colleagues, our public health experts.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I thank Mr. Towey for that response. I will make a point about the low passenger numbers at this point in time. My sense is that the challenge at the moment is not what it might be in the future. This morning we heard a strong case for a relaxation of restrictions, and we do not know where we are in the development of a vaccine. We may be some months living with Covid-19. We will have to consider our approach in terms of our checks and controls at our airports in particular but also at our ports. Is it the case that the protocol is being actively reviewed in the context of the incoming numbers? Could the witnesses give

me a little more detail on the immediate plans in response to the green list as they relate to the passenger locator form and the call centre that was mentioned earlier? The figures that were reported during the week for those filling out the passenger locator form, the follow-up calls and the number of people who answered do not inspire confidence. It is really important that people have confidence in the systems we have in place. Whether the small numbers coming from the United States, the small numbers coming from Germany or someone coming from a green list country, it is important that people are assessed for their risk and followed up on.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** What are we doing with the passenger locator form and the follow-up, and can we do it better? The answer to the second questions is “Yes”. We are moving to put the passenger locator form onto an electronic footing and, as I mentioned earlier, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer is developing that as we speak. Once we have that done, we will be far better able to identify and authenticate the people filling out the passenger locator forms. That will be really important for us in terms of the follow-up and a much more effective and robust way to follow up. We will do that by way of increasing the capacity we have working on this at the moment. It is the case that we do not have enough capacity on that, and that is well recognised and accepted. For that reason we are working with a third party with a view to standing up a call centre at least by 10 August, but we hope before then. Those are the things we are doing at the moment and which we need to do better.

As for other things we could do, my colleague, Mr. Towey, mentioned earlier that we were giving consideration to departure point testing. We are exploring that and will make a decision on it fairly soon. In addition, we would like to increase the soft pressure at the point of departure, whereby airlines at time of booking and at time of departure would ensure that people coming in from countries not on the green list would be made aware of the need for them to restrict their movements when they arrive. Potentially, we could also do some entry screening at Dublin Airport and step up the testing we are doing there at the moment. We do have processes in place whereby somebody who is symptomatic can be and is being tested. We have random testing under way, and the level to which we would step that up is being considered as well. The things we are doing we need to do better. We also need to do more things to try to make sure we prevent the virus from being imported. I do not know whether there is anything to add to that.

**Deputy Darren O’Rourke:** I wish to move on to another issue. We had representatives from the-----

**Chairman:** The Deputy has spoken for 13 minutes. He can speak for as long as he likes within the time allocated to his party, but his colleague, Deputy Ó Murchú, wishes to come in. I do not know how the Deputies wish between the two of them to use their time.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** If Deputy O’Rourke eats into my time, that is fine.

**Deputy Darren O’Rourke:** I have two more questions and they will be brief. Then I am-----

**Chairman:** I am not stopping Deputy O’Rourke from continuing to speak. I am just alerting him to the time.

**Deputy Darren O’Rourke:** That is no problem. I am watching the clock myself.

Representatives from the taxi sector appeared before the committee this morning. They outlined a deep sense of frustration in their industry and how it has been affected by Covid-19 and with the supports from Government. One issue they raised was engagement with the NTA

and, to a lesser extent, I think, the Department and the Minister. Issues with the taxi advisory committee were raised. Will the Department engage with the taxi sector? More generally, how does the Department propose to address and engage with the concerns that have been raised? I am sure the witnesses will have access to the submissions that were made earlier. There is deep concern within the sector. Many of those in the sector are highly vulnerable workers who have been forced, through the way in which the system was set up, to work through the Covid period despite being quite vulnerable.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** The Minister did meet the Advisory Committee on Small Public Service Vehicles recently to hear proposals on how to support the industry as the economy reopens. A report detailing those proposals has been received and is under consideration.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** What form did the Minister's meeting take? Was it with the taxi advisory committee or was it more general?

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** It was with the Advisory Committee on Small Public Service Vehicles. In a couple of minutes I will hand over to my colleague, Ms Deirdre Hanlon, who looks after the public transport side of the house. I am relatively new in this role of acting Secretary General. For however long my tenure lasts, one thing I am keen to do on behalf of the Department and the Minister is to ensure that any stakeholder who has need to engage with officials or the Minister will secure a meeting. We do that regularly and would be happy to do it again. I am also keen to encourage the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and our Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, to engage and to meet. That is something we can take away and follow up on. I will ask my colleague, Ms Hanlon, to elaborate on the recent meeting if she can.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** There has been engagement by the NTA, the Department and the Minister primarily through the taxi advisory committee. Its official name is, as my colleague said, the Advisory Committee on Small Public Service Vehicles but it is known more commonly as the taxi advisory committee. It is set up under statute. It has a number of members, including six from the taxi industry. There are also members appointed with a public interest perspective and members appointed with a business perspective. The chairman is a retired head of traffic in the Garda. The committee has put together a number of recommendations. At the Minister's meeting with the committee, it was in the process of looking at the situation across the industry. The Minister encouraged the committee to produce its report and send it in. That has arrived within the past few days, during the course of last week, and I can assure the Deputy that there will be further engagement. There is a meeting scheduled for next week that both the Department and the NTA will be attending and giving an initial reaction to the recommendations that the industry group has to come up with.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I thank Ms Hanlon. I welcome the fact that there has been engagement, but in addition to the assessment, it is fair to say that a question arose in our earlier session in terms of the representativeness of the taxi advisory committee. I ask that the witnesses engage in a full and comprehensive way with the groups we met earlier. I do not know the exact detail in terms of the make-up, but the principle of comprehensive engagement is an important one and I ask that they make that effort.

My final question is on a separate issue related to Ms Hanlon's Department. An issue has arisen around full driving licences and people being caught since the start of this month with driving licences expiring and being unable to get an extension or an appointment for a renewal. They have been left in a legal limbo in terms of insurance and being able to drive. Will someone outline to me the immediate action that will be taken to address that anomaly, which I and

a number of colleagues raised in the Dáil this week?

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I thank the Deputy. It is definitely a challenge, one of many that we have at the moment. I understand that licences were given additional periods, in other words, they did not expire at the time they were due to expire, but we can have a good look at that. I am afraid I am not joined by my colleague who has responsibility for the road safety side, so it is something I can look into and revert to the Deputy directly on, if that is okay with him.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Yes. I thank Mr. Spratt. I will conclude and I thank the witnesses for their contributions.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Ó Murchú.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I congratulate the Chairman on his new role. I want to follow up on some of the points made by my colleague. Serious dissatisfaction was expressed earlier between representatives of taxi drivers and the NTA. They specifically spoke about the issue around insurance and the difficulty whereby insurance companies blamed the NTA, saying that it did not change its rules for the period of the pandemic and that it did not negotiate with taxi companies from the point of view of people being able to reduce their premium from a taxi driver policy to a regular policy to allow them continue their regular work of bringing people to doctors, shopping or whatever the day-to-day activities all of us needed to engage in, during a period when they could not work. When the witnesses have a conversation with the NTA, I would request that this issue is put to its representatives first and foremost.

We know the issue of insurance crosses many Departments. I would like to think that the witnesses would be part of the conversation on finding solutions. They may wish to comment on that.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I thank the Deputy. Before I came into this role I had responsibility for tourism and sport, and insurance was a big issue in both sectors. It was one which led our previous Ministers to seek meetings with the insurance industry and to engage directly with them with a view to ensuring that the industry fully understood all of the challenges that were presenting to hoteliers and others in the tourism and hospitality sector, and in the sports sector. It is something on which we can continue to apply appropriate pressure as best we can across Government and on which we have been doing as best we can up to now. I do not know if there is anything in particular Ms Hanlon would like to add to that.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** The Deputy asked about the role of the NTA. As he knows, the NTA is statutorily independent and it is the regulator for the taxi industry, but we are aware of some of the measures it has taken to support the industry with regard to regulatory affairs over the period since the commencement of the pandemic. He mentioned that there had not been a change in rules. They have taken steps to facilitate taxi drivers, especially in the early days of the pandemic where they wished to suspend their licences. The NTA also engaged with the insurance industry to try to come to an arrangement where insurers would recognise a suspension of a licence while a taxi driver was not trading. They were significant factors. The issue now is trying to facilitate people in returning to business as business picks up, but those were the specific points the Deputy mentioned around the engagement on that.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Obviously, we would like to see increased engagement. The taxi driver representatives had a serious difficulty in that they did not believe that the NTA, and the insurance companies, had done all that was necessary. We need to ensure that happens, and



I would like it put on the agenda.

Another major concern they have is that there should be a stimulus programme specifically related to them. They even spoke about some sort of grant aid for people who may want to leave the industry. Have the officials spoken to their Government colleagues about that because we do not see that it relates to the current stimulus programme but to future programmes that will be decided during the budgetary process? That would need to be determined as soon as possible.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** There are a number of what we call horizontal supports available across a range of businesses. Development of those is led primarily by our colleagues in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. Several of those are applicable to the taxi industry, as they are to many other business areas. For instance, in the business area there is restart grant, which is linked to the waiver of commercial rates. An enterprise support grant is also available. There is-----

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Taxi drivers do not pay rates.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Not individual taxi drivers but some operators within the sector-----

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I accept that.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** -----for instance, were doing dispatch operating and they might have a connection to that. The enterprise support grant applies to eligible self-employed people, and many taxi drivers are in that category. It is a once-off grant of up to €1,000.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I accept that but the taxi drivers themselves stated that most of those did not apply to them. It is something that would need to be looked into. It happens to many groups, when necessary blunt instruments are brought in, that they can fall between stools. We need to look at that. I just want to know if it is on the Department's agenda. The stimulus programme announced this week is only part of a number of programmes that are to be operated. We need to ensure taxi drivers are put into the consideration in that regard.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Certainly, and that is a point we have raised with our colleagues in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation where we have looked to make sure that where schemes are introduced, eligibility would also comprehend sectors such as ours. A significant initiative that was brought in that many operators in the sector have been eligible for and able to avail of is the pandemic unemployment payment for the period they are not operating and then, as they come back into the system, they can-----

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** They spoke about that as a necessity to survive but their costs were still running in many cases, and we have dealt with some of those. They also spoke about the fact that it is incredibly difficult to get protocols on safety and security. As a result of rules relating to insurance and such, they cannot put in screens in cars or whatever. That is another issue they believe needs to be addressed.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** There are a few features of that. The Deputy is correct. That is the type of area that is addressing the core of the issue, which is the public health issue. The economic supports come after that but the core issue is to address the public health aspect. From the very early days of the pandemic, the NTA made available on its website protocols and information for the sector about cleaning arrangements based on public health advices we were getting from colleagues in the public health area. That is significant. There is advice around

the wearing of face coverings, which is highly recommended and moving to mandatory. We are engaging with our colleagues in the Department of Health about the legal arrangements for that. It is expected that it will be expressed very shortly.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** That is all vital and I accept it. The sooner it happens the better.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** In the meantime, it is open to taxi drivers under the existing regulations to make a reasonable request of a customer. In the current circumstances, a reasonable request would include a taxi driver telling an intending passenger that he would like them to use a face mask if they are using his vehicle. They have the ability to refuse the fare if the intending passenger does not comply.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I agree. The unfortunate thing is that not everyone is always reasonable. I will finish up on the green list, which came up this week. I accept some of the commentary from the officials on the fact that they would be looking at putting the passenger locator online, which would allow for a greater level of authentication. I assume they are talking about stronger protocols in respect of follow-up. There is the whole question that was brought into play by the Tánaiste about what previously people called quarantine and isolation, which is now referred to as restricted movement. People will need greater detail on what that actually means. Mr. Spratt spoke about the possibilities of certain testing procedures that would be carried out in airports for people incoming and outgoing. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, spoke the other day about possibly random testing of passengers coming from certain places that do not fall under the green list. How far progressed are all those possible procedures and protocols? The biggest question of all is whether we have the capacity to put them into play as quickly as possible? Even last week we saw the difficulty in certain nursing homes where although a couple of weeks ago they were able to get testing turnaround times of four or five hours, suddenly it went out to 48 hours. The important thing at this point is that we test, trace and isolate.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** It is still the case that we are in a fight for our lives. We are doing well and that is good. However, we have lost 1,763 of our citizens, including two parents of very good friends of mine. Some 25,826 people have been infected. We had seven new cases yesterday. While we are getting a grip on this virus, it is still out there. While we had seven new cases yesterday, the UK had 769. Its total now stands at 297,146. It has lost 45,554 of its citizens. Globally it is important to remember that there is still a major battle on. The virus is still accelerating. While we are doing well, we must continue to be vigilant and to fight on two fronts. We must suppress the virus and save lives but we must also reboot the economy and save livelihoods.

When it comes to travel, we know that 21% of recent new cases are travel-related and we cannot ignore that. While it is the case that some travel is essential and required, the Government has been quite clear in stating that its preference is that there would be no non-essential overseas travel.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I agree there should be nothing other than essential travel. Unfortunately, there are people travelling and there are people travelling to Ireland from places in the US where there is an absolute disaster as regards Covid-19 outbreaks. It is about ensuring that we can mitigate against the worst excesses.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** That is really important. We can touch again on the measures that are

in place and the ones that we have planned. There was a lot of social media commentary last week about Dallas in the USA. We had four flights in from Dallas last week. There was an average of 24 people on each flight. I do not have the exact figures but I think it is safe enough to suggest that probably half of them were probably Irish people returning home. While there was quite a lot of hysteria and social media commentary we had a total of 96 people coming in from Dallas last week. We are acutely aware of the need to ensure that we do as much as we possibly can in order to stave off importation of the virus, allowing for the fact that some people do have to travel for essential work reasons, essential caring reasons, or because they are Irish citizens wanting to return home or Irish people wanting to come home to Ireland for important family events. Mr. Towey and I touched on the measures earlier on. Suffice it to say that as a result of the Government decision earlier in the week around the green list, we have been given our riding instructions in terms of additional measures that could be introduced around departure testing, entry testing, entry screening, random testing and the other things we have mentioned already. I do not know if there is anything Mr. Towey wants to add.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** Just to confirm that is the position. This is something that is constantly moving as we continue to battle against the virus. We will constantly be looking at what additional measures might be necessary and introducing them if it is the appropriate course of action. The Deputy mentioned restricted movement and the question of whether it aligns with quarantine. My understanding is that the restricted movement advice for all incoming passengers is intended to align with the advice that is given to close contacts of a confirmed case of somebody having Covid. The intention is to put in place measures that are proportionate. Restricted movement as I understand it would allow an individual to undertake some limited exercise and travel to shops for essential supplies. The view of experts is that this is the appropriate, measured approach right now.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I thank the witnesses for what they have done today. I accept the difficulty in the situation we are all dealing with. The big thing is that we give people as much clarity as possible and ensure that we put the best procedures possible in place. As we open up more, even in respect of all elements of this economy and society, we need to ensure that we have the capacity and ability to move fast to test, trace and isolate. I assume the officials will be in communication with other Members of Government and the Department of Health ensuring that we have everything in place.

**Chairman:** I would like to ask a couple of questions around airport testing. I note the officials' position on airport testing and their concern that there would be false negatives. How do they square that with other European countries which have seen transmission rates fall substantially and that have been allowing people in? In the case of Vienna airport, they have been allowing people in since March. Testing is organised and they have seen rates fall.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** I can answer that. Across Europe there has not been a consistent approach to introducing airport testing. There are some instances where it happens. The question of its effectiveness is not clearly proven. In the case of Austria, their performance in terms of the control of the virus overall is not in fact as good as it is in this country.

**Chairman:** What does Mr. Towey mean by "not as good"? Have they not lost a lot fewer people *per capita*?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** In terms of the parameters that are applied in developing the green list, I do not think they have the performance that would allow them to be on the list.

**Chairman:** Will Mr. Spratt explain the parameters for developing the green list?

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** The primary parameter is the number of infections recorded over the previous two weeks per 100,000 of population. This has been announced by the Government as the best assumption in relation to decisions on the green list.

**Chairman:** That is the number of diagnoses per 100,000?

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** Yes.

**Chairman:** Not the percentage of people who test positive. Obviously, I would have thought Russia has a very low number per 100,000 of population diagnosed because it does not carry out much testing. Why is Russia not on the list? What if a country does no testing? I ask this because Donald Trump has suggested that testing be reduced in the United States of America because too many positives were being found. Various countries have very different attitudes to testing and the numbers being tested.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** In addition to the 14 day incidence as referred to by Mr. Towey, we also take into account other factors, including the trend of new cases compared to the previous 14 days and whether or not that trend is increasing or decreasing. We also look at the overall response, including testing, surveillance, contact tracing, containment, reliability of data and so on. Assessments of the overall response will comprise the international health regulations score, which is across 196 countries, and where possible it will be complemented by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade reporting from the capital of the country in question. There are four elements: the 14 day incidence; the trend of new cases; the overall response with regard to trust in and how happy we are with the regime in the country; and the reporting from that country's capital by the Irish Embassy there. That is all fed into the system and, based on the analysis of this by colleagues in the Department of Health, the advice comes up to Government. Based on that the green list is issued, which contains countries that are at or better than Ireland based on all of these criteria. It is quite detailed. I have looked at the appendix that went to Government for its decision this week and the reporting is quite substantial. Even though a report from the countries' capital cities is part of the work, there are also the three other science-based components.

**Chairman:** Will Mr. Spratt explain further? I am a little confused about territories such as Gibraltar, for example. Is Monaco on the list? If I am not mistaken, the only way to get to Monaco is through France or through Italy. Gibraltar, however, is pretty hard to get to from Ireland unless one goes through Spain. Yet, it appears there is no concern if a person goes through Spain. Obviously, it is impossible to go through an airport without interacting with people and people will typically either get public transport from an airport in Spain to Gibraltar, or hire a car and be in a queue, and eat or do what humans do. I just find it difficult to understand how it is considered safe to travel through France to Monaco or through Spain to Gibraltar and there is no need for a person to undergo any isolation upon return, when if a person was to travel only to Spain it is considered dangerous. I find this difficult to understand conceptually.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** The approach we take is based on the international health regulations. Each of the states and countries mentioned on our green list is considered to be its own jurisdiction for the purposes of international health regulations, IHR. The vast majority of people who go to or return from Gibraltar or Monaco would come from another country. It is that other country we consider when we decide whether or not the person is coming into Ireland from a country that is or is not on the green list. If, for example, a person travels from Gibraltar and has

to transit through Spain, we look at Spain and therefore the person is considered to be coming from a country that is not on the green list. Similarly with Monaco, if the person comes through France, we consider France to be the country from which the person had departed and therefore not on the green list. The person would be required to restrict his or her movements on return to Ireland. These would not be considered normal precautions. For this reason, travel insurance would not apply to the person while he or she is in that country.

**Chairman:** Having Gibraltar and Monaco on the list is largely illusory unless someone rows there in a boat or-----

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I agree.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Spratt for clarifying that. With regard to the list, freedom of movement is a right under EU law but, as with all rights, it is subject to the common good and public health considerations. I would have thought that any restriction must be proportionate and pursuant to law. Is it fair to suggest, as some earlier witnesses did, that what Ireland has determined to be proportionate is out of kilter with the rest of the European Union and that we have adopted a more cautious approach?

While no law has been put in place with regard to these restrictions, it has been made very difficult for people to travel to countries that are not on the green list. Private sector workers are being asked by their employers where they are going on holiday and with whom. That is unusual and has never happened before. Public sector employees, even those who have been asked to work from home for the past four months and may continue to do so, are being told they cannot work from home and must take leave if they holiday abroad. That is a barrier to going on holidays but it is not necessarily a barrier pursuant to law. I ask Mr. Spratt to comment on both those issues.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I will make some comments before I invite colleagues-----

**Chairman:** If Mr. Spratt does not wish to comment on the basis that this is a matter of Government policy, I ask him to say so.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I think it is safe enough to make some comments. The Chairman asked if we are taking a very cautious approach. The Government believes it is taking an appropriate approach that tries to steer a middle course between saving lives on the one hand and doing as much as we possibly can to save livelihoods. The approach we have taken with the green list is the start. The green list will be reviewed every two weeks. We have the first green list and we will have our second iteration of it in a couple of weeks. We needed to start somewhere and now, thankfully, we have a start. It is our first attempt to reopen international travel, albeit in a very limited and restricted way in this first iteration of the green list.

The Chairman asked if it is a proportionate approach. We think it is. Does it have public support? That is hard to judge but it seems to us that the reaction to it has been okay. People understand the need for us to do everything we can to keep the virus suppressed and to continue as best we can to save as many lives as we can. We will learn, as we have been learning, about the other impacts of Covid-19, and we will respond as best we can.

On the restriction of movement and whether something needs to be put into law, this is a matter for Government to consider. As I stated, the whole approach where we explain, engage and encourage, while trying to steer clear of enforcement, has worked well and we hope it will work well when it comes to restriction of movement.



**Chairman:** Has the Department sought or received legal advice on whether it should be made pursuant to a law? I am not asking Mr. Spratt to outline what the legal advice is but whether the Department has sought or received legal advice on that question.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** Is the Chairman referring to the question of whether employers should require employees to take leave on return from-----

**Chairman:** I am referring in particular to the many practical barriers that are being put in place for people travelling. I am not second-guessing the Department's determination, which is proportionate. I asked whether it is out of kilter with the rest of the European Union, which it would appear to be. It is implicit in what Mr. Spratt said that we have adopted a more cautious approach. The question is whether these restrictions should be pursuant to a law rather than through administrative circulars that require, in particular, public servants to take additional holidays. It is almost as if there is an intentional policy of penalising them for going abroad because they are not allowed to work from home when they come back, even though they may be working from home now and have been asked to work from home up to now.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** I thank the Chairman for his question. On the question of the approach in Ireland versus other countries in Europe, across Europe the approach is not uniform. It is correct to say that in comparison with many countries in Europe, the approach taken in Ireland is more cautious in seeking to control the virus. The Government has set out very clearly the rationale for that approach.

On the restrictions or the various elements of guidance that are in place that have the effect of restricting international travel, these are based on the principle of setting out good guidance for members of society, and appealing to their human goodwill and good citizenship to support the efforts to suppress the virus. These are not generally based on any legal restrictions. That is true even in the case of individuals who have been diagnosed with the virus or of close contacts of these people. To a large extent it is not a legal framework and our Department has not sought legal advice on the restrictions to which the Chairman is referring.

**Chairman:** To be clear, if an employee of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport decides that he or she is going to a country that is on the green list and returns from that country with their family on a Sunday, is it correct that that person can go to work on the Monday morning?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** That is correct, in that a person arriving into the country from a country that is on the green list is not subject to advice to restrict movement.

**Chairman:** If one arrives in from Portugal or Spain, for example, on a Sunday, is it correct that that person cannot go to work on a Monday morning?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** In that case the advice is that they should restrict movement.

**Chairman:** I understand the advice but what I am getting at is the difference between advice and law. If the person is advised not go to work on the Monday morning, and this may be a selfish thing for the person to do, but the person may say that he or she wants to go to work on the Monday morning as the family has to be fed. They have just been on an expensive holiday for which the family has saved up for some time. The family cannot afford to go on a holiday every year and bought one this year. The Department the person works for allows airlines to fly in and out and the person cannot get a refund and has tried to do so. The person is going on holidays and wants to work on Monday morning. Can that person show up for work on Mon-

day morning or not?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** The guidance that is given to public service employers is that persons in those circumstances should take leave for the two-week period of recommended restricted movement, which I understand is intended to support employers' duty of care and the welfare of workers generally.

**Chairman:** What happens if the employee does not take leave?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** That is the-----

**Chairman:** What if the employee says that he or she would love to take leave but cannot afford to as the person needs to go to work to support his or her family and does not have any leave left for that year. What happens then?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** I do not know what happens in that case.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** We have not-----

**Chairman:** What happens in Mr. Towey's Department? I appreciate that he cannot answer for the entire public service but what happens if the person is an employee of the Minister of Transport, Tourism and Sport?

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** This is a hypothetical situation which has not happened but we will deal with it if it presents itself.

**Chairman:** Is there a lawful basis to-----

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** The terms and conditions in the Civil Service are dealt with by a Civil Service circular issued by the Minister for Finance, which has a legal underpinning. There is a certain legal basis for terms and conditions of employment in the Civil Service and to that extent it has a legal basis.

**Chairman:** That is rather vague, but I will take Mr. Spratt's word on it.

Returning to another point, Mr. Spratt does not appear to have any confidence in testing on arrival. We are slightly out of kilter with some other EU countries in that regard. Mr. Spratt nonetheless says that he is looking at departure-point testing. How would he differentiate between the accuracy of departure-point testing and arrival-point testing?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** Can I interject here, please? To be clear, I did intimate earlier that we do not have any confidence in testing, as referred to by the Chairman. I may not have been clear. On the question of confidence in testing processes, I am not personally an expert nor is the Department an expert but we are guided by the advice of public health experts on this matter. Our understanding of the public health expert advice is that the case for testing is very marginal with regard to its efficacy in contributing to the process of virus control. I know that other countries do it. Apart from the strict public health efficacy, other factors may be at play such as public confidence or the potential disincentive effect to travel that such a testing regime might entail. If nothing else, there is a significant cost involved in a testing process.

**Chairman:** Is Mr. Towey saying he would be concerned that introducing testing in Ireland would be a disincentive to people travelling to Ireland? Is it not the purpose of red lists, green lists and all of this to have a disincentive to travel? We have all of this confused messaging

about a requirement to quarantine, no requirement to quarantine, it might be possible to quarantine, and we actually cannot quarantine. Is the purpose of all of that not to disincentivise travel to Ireland?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** The purpose of those measures is to try to give the best guidance to citizens based on the public health advice. As part of that process, the public health expert advice has been engaged on the question of whether additional testing protocols would be beneficial. The advice has been that at the stage we are at, and given the status of testing, the case for that is marginal but it is not excluded. It is something we will continue to keep under review. We will assess what is happening in other countries and will continue to engage with our public health colleagues on this.

**Chairman:** I notice that Deputy Shanahan is joining the meeting, which may be a welcome relief. I have a few more questions to ask before I bring him in. The first of them relates to the doubts about the accuracy of testing on arrival. Mr. Spratt has spoken about looking into departure-point testing. Is it the case that testing is more accurate in other countries? If we do not trust the accuracy of testing here, why would we trust its accuracy in other countries?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** The point here is that if there is some benefit in testing and if a test delivers a positive result, it is better to have that positive result arrived at before a person comes to Ireland rather than afterwards.

**Chairman:** Okay. The Department is going to make the passenger locator form electronic. Does that mean one will have to fill it in before one boards a plane?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** Yes, within 48 hours of departure.

**Chairman:** Will that also apply to ports and ferries?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** Yes, that is the intention.

**Chairman:** Will it apply to buses and trains crossing the Border?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** No.

**Chairman:** I would like to ask about what happens if one flies into Northern Ireland from one of the 44 countries that UK citizens can fly to and from. I am not suggesting that one can fly to 44 countries from Belfast as I have no idea where one can fly to from there, but I know there is an airport there. If one flies into Belfast having been in any country in the world, or if one drives or gets a bus or train to Belfast having been in any country in the world, the Department will have no record whatsoever of one's movements. Any such passenger may be a non-resident in Ireland coming to Ireland on a holiday via Belfast, or an Irish person who does not fancy being unable to go to work on a Monday morning and instead decides to go on holidays via Belfast. I am referring to people who are deliberately choosing to do that, which I presume Mr. Towey would discourage. That being said, I am sure there are people in the Border area who fly via Belfast. People from Belfast regularly fly from Dublin so I presume the opposite is equally the case.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** The Chairman is correct, that is possible. I also think it is clear to people generally and think most people understand that the advice has been given for the purpose of preventing transmission of the virus and as such it should apply equally whether an international journey is taken via Dublin or Belfast airports.

**Chairman:** There is, however, the question of the passenger locator form. Do you know how many residents of the Republic of Ireland would fly out of Belfast or other UK airports for holidays in a typical year?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** I do not have those figures.

**Chairman:** Would your Department have those figures?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** I am not sure if they can be obtained. I am not sure if those data exist but we can certainly look into that and see what we can provide to the committee. We will follow this up in writing if that is acceptable to the Chairman.

**Chairman:** It is. Would Mr. Towey accept that typically 30,000 people cross the Border every day?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** I cannot confirm that figure.

**Chairman:** Okay.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** I accept it. I do not dispute it by any means.

**Chairman:** I do not have the figures. If you had a more accurate figure I would welcome it. Would you accept that there is no record whatsoever? I accept the majority of these people are travelling from somewhere a couple of miles from one side of the Border to somewhere a couple of miles on the other side of it for work, family reasons and so on. There is also, however, a large cohort of people who decide to come to Ireland from the United Kingdom or from many parts of the world via Northern Ireland. Would you accept that?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** Yes, I think that is correct.

**Chairman:** My question is whether the very restrictive measures being put in place in the Republic of Ireland are proportionate given the amount of travel via Northern Ireland and the complete lack of any record of people travelling via Northern Ireland? These could be people travelling from Larne to Stranraer or via other routes. Are there two airports in Belfast? I do not know whether there are two airports which have international flights. Perhaps one closed. There is certainly an airport in Belfast. We are clear about that.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** There are two. The Chairman is correct that there are people who can travel via those airports to and from the Republic of Ireland. With it being a different jurisdiction, the requirements for the passenger locator form and the follow-up measures will not apply to those travellers. If I understand correctly, the Chairman's question was: having regard to the fact that that possibility exists, should the requirements that apply here, namely the passenger locator form and guidance on restricted movement, be applied? Without having the precise numbers, it is clear that it is still the case that the majority of travel to and from Ireland will take place through Dublin Airport so where virus control is concerned the argument there is evident.

**Chairman:** Okay. I thank Mr. Towey for all those clarifications. I have one last question and I see Deputy Shanahan is indicating.

Why has the number of centres in which public service vehicles can be tested been reduced? There was a time when one could test in almost every DOE testing centre, as they were called. Now, for example, one can only do part of the test in Ennis and must go to Limerick or Galway for the rest of it. Is there a particular reason for that?

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I apologise but as we were limited to five my colleague from the road safety side of the Department is not here. I will have to come back to the Chairman on that in writing, if that is okay. I apologise that I cannot address it here.

**Chairman:** That is understandable. I would appreciate it if Mr. Spratt responded to me in writing.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I thank those from the Department who are here today.

I wish to return to the issue of testing in airports. Last week in the media I requested that we do Polymerase chain reaction, PCR, Covid testing at Dublin and the other airports. I believe this is eminently feasible and have made the point that if we do not do it at the airports, we will end up doing it in the community a little bit later in the year. I note the comments made by a previous speaker who I think said that the medical advice was that the testing regime was not robust enough or did not capture enough and therefore it was almost not worth doing. PCR Covid testing is what we do in the hospitals at present and is about 80% to 85% effective. I am not sure there is any test anywhere more effective than that. Essentially, we decide when we test that we are going to miss people who are asymptomatic at the time or are very early on in the infection because it does not show up then. A subsequent test, if they have symptoms, is we how establish that they are Covid-positive. Then we go through the rigmarole of contact tracing and all the rest of it. I heard what Mr. Spratt said about testing at airports and foreign centres. Has anyone looked at the cost of doing what we are proposing to do abroad which we could probably do now quite easily here? We certainly know the costs of doing it here. I am not sure that we know what we are going to pay for doing it abroad. We will still have the same number of cases slipping through regardless of where we do it. Perhaps someone will take that question.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I might make some remarks and then see if Mr. Towey has anything he wishes to add.

The benefit of departure testing is that the person would be required to take the test himself or herself 24 to 72 hours before actually departing. That result would be presented to the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service, INIS, on arrival at Dublin Airport. The person would not travel if he or she had received a positive test result. The benefit of that would be that that person would not have actually travelled and potentially come into close contact with all of the other travellers. Therefore, we would avoid a situation where if we had entry testing and someone tested positive, we would have to do all of the required follow-up with the other travellers, so there is that benefit. There is also the benefit of the cost being borne by the traveller. There is also the issue of capacity. The capacity for testing on arrival does not arise if one has departure testing. That is why we are looking at that as closely as we are. There is the potential to do not only a high-street test where a person purchases his or her own test but we could improve the standardisation of that through colleagues in the Department of Health, NPHET and the HPSC. As such we would set the bar relatively high and apply that to departure points. Again, that would reduce issues of capacity, credibility and cost. That is why we are looking at that as closely as we are.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I apologise for cutting across Mr. Spratt but my time is limited. I accept the logic of what he is proposing but if this is the route we are going down then the next question is are those tests available at the points of departure or prior to people departing? Furthermore, when does Mr. Spratt see something like this being put in place?



**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** It is still being considered. As I said, it is possible to purchase reputable Covid-19 tests and to take them oneself in most countries around the world, so they are available. On moving to the Irish-applied standard, that is something that is being considered in consultation with colleagues at the Department of Health but that will take some time.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** There is obviously potential there for people to defraud that test if they are presenting their laminar flow or whatever it is that they are required to bring in to show the result they got. It would be like bringing a pregnancy test kit to show somebody the stripes on it. Effectively, that is what is being addressed by the diagnostic test kits to which reference has been made. That is essentially how they work. Unless, of course, the Department has another one I do not know about, which it may have. I am not an expert but I know a little bit about it. Having said that, the most important thing the Department needs to flag is whether this is what is being proposed, and, if so, that it is proposed and gets done because we need to take action in respect of foreign travel, particularly from the US, South America and other places that are not on the green list.

We heard from the aviation sector this morning. It has more or less been established that it is assumed people getting on flights do not have Covid but for those who are asymptomatic, the transmission rate appears to be very low because of the negative air pressure in the cabin, recirculation and the high efficiency particulate air, HEPA, filters. We can assume that we are saying it is safe for people to be beside each other for six hours wearing masks.

The question then is why we are not doing this for the taxi sector. Why are we not making masks mandatory? I heard a previous contributor state that taxi drivers can ask people to put on masks. I remind the committee that a couple of weeks ago a bus driver was kicked to death in France by two people full of alcohol because he asked them to wear masks getting on a bus. It is not operationally possible for many people going back out to drive taxis, particularly those earning very little money, to start asking customers to wear masks. The first thing a customer might say is that he or she does not have one. In such circumstances, taxi drivers will have to supply masks at their own expense. Even then, customers may not wear them. It would be far better if the Department took a leadership role on this matter. The witnesses will say that the medical advisers, NPHET and everybody else have not come to them and stated that it is a good idea. We need to look at what is going on in other countries. Those responsible for providing leadership within the Department are in a position to make a strong recommendation to the effect that the wearing of masks in taxis should be mandatory. Is this a reasonable assertion?

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** Before we go on to wearing masks in taxis, it is important to note that we are learning as we go. We are at the start when it comes to a lot of measures, particularly in the context of international travel. The engage-explain-encourage approach we have taken up to now has worked quite well across the board. If somebody were to test positive at departure point and then decide to hell with this, travel anyway and put people in danger, it would be a pretty serious decision for that person to take. It would be contrary to what we have seen with regard to almost universal compliance with requests for people to be in this together. We expect to continue to see good compliance along the lines we have seen until now. I will ask Ms Hanlon to comment on the issue of the use of face coverings in taxis.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** The Deputy is right that face coverings are important. We are moving to introduce mandatory face coverings in taxis. The first priority was to arrange it for mass transit, namely, buses, trains and trams, on which large numbers of people travel together. This has been introduced. We understand the compliance levels are very high. The NTA has been in constant touch with the operators of the services and we hear that compliance rates are typi-

cally in the mid 90s and in some cases 100%. There is particularly strong compliance when the vehicles are more full at peak hours on buses and trams.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I do not mean to be rude but I have very limited time. I am glad to hear that but what I would say is please-----

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Sorry. I will move on. For taxis-----

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** We need urgency. I know the Department is considering and analysing it but for public confidence, it needs to demonstrate urgency. This is what people want. The witnesses have told the committee that the Department is looking at it and wants to get it done on public transit. However, there is no reason it cannot be done across the board. The officials should ask the Government, if necessary, to put in place emergency legislation to make it mandatory. With respect, that is what needs to be done.

Another issue that arose during this morning's session was that of the use of screens in taxis. The NTA does not have a preferred screen in the context of protecting taxi drivers and their customers. At the same time, however, a person who installs a screen is essentially breaking the law and will probably have an insurance issue as a result. Can we not find common ground in order that we might make recommendations? This is not rocket science. I am responsible for two initiatives taken up by NPHET. I am not an expert but I look at these things and speak to the people concerned, and logic tells us what we need to do and they can be done. I am frustrated today as I ask why these things cannot be done and as I listen to what we are hearing. I accept that the Department has a remit and must look at this in the round, but it is not rocket science. These are simple measures that would give confidence to the public and employers, would show the country we are trying to mitigate the disease and would not make simple solutions difficult to implement. The witnesses can come back to me in writing on the screens for the taxis.

I have received correspondence from a person with a limo business who works at weddings. The gentleman says his vehicles must pass an NCT every six months and the cars are then booked in for a suitability test, which is an inspection to grant the licence. He pays every six months for the service and licence. This gentleman paid over the phone for a suitability test, which was then cancelled due to the lockdown. He was refunded for the booking but during the lockdown he had also paid for the NCT for a number of cars, which have been idle for a number of months. When he tried to book again he was informed that he has seven days in which to complete the booking and, if not, the NCT for the cars will have to be done again. He has received no reimbursement for the NCTs and is now expected to carry out 13 NCTs in the next seven days or face a €500 fine per car.

Can we please address this type of nonsense and lack of joined-up thinking? People in business are at their wits' end. Various Departments dealing with Government regulation do not speak to each other and small business people are being hammered time and again. They cannot get into business and when they are in business all they have is one regulation to meet after another. I implore the Department.

There is also an issue with driving tests. I know of a young lady who has graduated college. She has been offered a fantastic job, one of only three in the country, and needs a full driver's licence to get the job but she cannot get a test. She has been told by this multinational company that if she does not have a full driver's licence by September, it cannot offer her the job because it is a contract of employment. I am running around trying to see how we can get her a driving

test. We are told there is no safe way for a driving test to be completed. Dual-driving cars could have a screen placed in them and we could certainly get emergency driving tests done. Is this an unfeasible ask?

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I thank the Deputy for bringing these issues to our attention. It is very important to remember that Covid-19 is throwing up an awful lot of challenges to the private sector, the public sector, the Civil Service, State companies and State agencies. It is very important to remember we are doing really well when it comes to the suppression of the virus. If we look at the statistics, we will see that we are in the leading pack when it comes to suppressing the virus. This is down to how the Irish public has responded under the leadership of Departments, including our Department. It is not the case that we have solved every problem and there are still plenty of problems to be solved, including the problems mentioned by the Deputy, but we will redouble our efforts and do everything we can to try to identify these issues and solve them where we can. The Deputy has brought some issues to our attention and we will look at them to see what we can do to try to resolve them as quickly as we can.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I do not wish to argue the epidemiological outcome of Covid and how we are doing, but to set out what might be of benefit. Deputies and other representatives in Leinster House would be very happy to meet the Department to discuss these issues. The committee is not the place to do it. Some of the issues are quite small and a quick decision could get them answered. That is what all of us want to hear. We want to see movement. I accept it is difficult and there are new learnings. We are all on a learning curve here. It would be better if we learned together, and we can do this by having engagement. I seek engagement with the Department and any other member of the committee who wants to come with me, to discuss these issues to see whether we can come up with some resolutions for people.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I am happy to do that.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** A Dáil vote is taking place in the Convention Centre. We are in here, but we are meant to be voting as representatives of our constituencies in the Dáil. A bad mistake is being made here. In future, we cannot miss our Dáil activities because they are clashing with the activities of the committee. I respect this is a very important committee but we should be allowed to vote.

**Chairman:** The only thing I can say is that everything we do is run by the Business Committee of the Dáil so we do not know what will happen as we make plans, going forward. Until now, we have never clashed with a Dáil sitting. This is a Dáil committee. We do our best, but it is up to the Business Committee to alert us to these clashes.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Maybe we should write to the Business Committee in the future to see that we are not losing our right to vote. We are elected by our constituencies to do that and to be here. I know this is a difficult time but we cannot be in two places at the same time.

I thank our guests for being here today. As I said earlier, taxi drivers are suffering extreme stress. Taxi drivers and private bus operators are going through a difficult and anxious time during the Covid-19 crisis as their incomes have dropped and some taxi drivers have been wiped out. Nonetheless, they must keep their cars taxed, insured and licensed. They are fearful of cancelling their insurance because they may find it difficult or impossible to get insurance in the future and a renewal of their policies could see inflated premiums.

Many drivers are over 66 years of age, working full time and paying income tax but, be-

cause of age discrimination, are unable to avail of the Covid-19 payment. Significant numbers of drivers have been in the business for 40 years and, having paid exorbitant fees for their taxi plates under the old system, are still bearing this financial burden. They face repeated costs, such as the cost of a taxi licence, which amounts to €250 for five years, and €125 per year for a vehicle licence. Can existing licence holders who are over 66 years of age be given some incentive? Perhaps licences should be made free to drivers over the age of 66.

Regardless of the condition of a taxi, it must be taken off the road once it is ten years old. Drivers have to upgrade their cars to keep a licence active and, in the current business climate in these difficult times, their cars are predominantly parked up. In these exceptional circumstances, could that ten-year limit be increased to 15 years to ease the financial stress on drivers?

Does the National Transport Authority, NTA, have surplus moneys that have been collected from taxi drivers over the years? If so, could those funds be made available to support drivers with car upgrades? These grants are already available for wheelchair taxis. Taxi drivers need support now.

Was there anything for taxi operators or private, independent bus operators announced in the stimulus package? I asked that question in our first session this morning and the union representatives said that they did not see anything in the stimulus package. Many operators are going out of business and I am worried that there was nothing in the stimulus package for them. Our guests might be able to answer those questions.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I will take those questions. To answer the question the Deputy asked about initiatives for the private sector, he may be aware that, on 25 June, the Government made a decision to introduce a new system of temporary funding supports for the commercial bus sector. These are operators that typically provide scheduled bus services but are not a part of the public service obligation, PSO, regime because, in normal circumstances, they make a profit from their business. However, at the moment, because passenger numbers have been hit so hard by the Covid-19 emergency, those operators are not in a position to make profits. The Deputy has described the situation correctly. Those operators have high costs but need to keep services running. In this case, we are talking about services where there is a strong public interest for the services to keep running because they are providing a facility that the travelling public needs, particularly people who are either essential workers or others making necessary journeys. To that end, the Government made a decision that, on an exceptional basis for a period of six months, it would introduce a new temporary funding support arrangement. That is being done within the provisions of EU and Irish law and being administered by the NTA. It is putting contract arrangements in place with relevant private sector and other commercial operators where it judges that the services that those operators provide have a public service justification for their continuation. That is significant.

The Deputy also asked about the stimulus package. I understand that an initiative has been announced as part of the stimulus package specifically for coach tourism. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport is progressing that initiative.

The Deputy also asked about the age of vehicles used as taxis and licence fees for taxi drivers. He might be aware that those matters come within the ambit of the NTA. Under legislation passed by the Houses in 2013, the NTA is the regulator for the taxi sector. It has statutory independence from the Department and we do not have a role in areas in respect of which it makes decisions. The two issues about which the Deputy asked come within the remit of the NTA.

The Deputy might be aware, from the comments we made earlier, that within the past week or so the taxi advisory committee has made a report to the Minister and the Department. The previous Minister met representatives of the advisory committee a number of weeks ago and encouraged them to come up with a report after looking at what needs to be done across the sector. The advisory committee has come up with a list of measures that it thinks are relevant. Some of those measures are relevant to the Department, some to the NTA and others to a few other Departments. There will be an engagement next week between the Department, the NTA and the taxi advisory committee to give preliminary feedback on the proposals that have been put forward. Some of the proposals will be possible to be implement and others will not. A few, indeed, are already in train.

The Deputy asked about grants specifically for the taxi industry. There are no initiatives under way in that regard but, within the stimulus package and more generally in the horizontal business supports that have been introduced by the Government in recent weeks and months, a number of initiatives are relevant. The pandemic unemployment payment is relevant to those who are not currently working and have temporarily ceased working in the sector because of the emergency. As was announced yesterday, that payment will continue for a considerable period.

Specifically considering a business focus and helping people with their business costs, re-start and enterprise support grants are available. There are also credit guarantee schemes available for businesses that need to undertake loans. Advisory supports are also available. They do not get as much coverage as other supports but can be very helpful to small businesses such as taxi companies and others. Those supports offer advice on matters such as financial planning, business continuity and how to get going and cope with business challenges.

There is no way we are underestimating the business challenges because they are real. They affect the taxi sector as they do practically all other sectors of business. The motivation to be of assistance and help business as best possible is what is underlying Government policy on things such as the stimulus package and the range of horizontal supports that have been announced. I hope I have captured the main points that the Deputy raised.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Ms Hanlon absolutely has. The impact of Covid-19 on the finances of coach tour operators has been disastrous. Such operators traditionally plan their finances on the basis that they need to cover their operating costs throughout the winter period until the tourist season commences the following March. The timing of the outbreak of Covid-19 has meant that many of those operators have no reserves left to enable them to survive the crisis until the revenue, we hope, starts to flow again in the 2021 tourist season. What financial support mechanism should be put in place, considering that the turnover for the coach tourism and private hire industry is €250 million per year and that fixed costs amount to 17% of this amount? The latter highlights a need for a yearly subsidy requirement of €42.5 million. What other measures can be put in place to keep this vital part of our economy in operation?

**Ms Maria Melia:** I will come in there. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport announced earlier that a €10 million fund will be provided for coach tourism business continuity. This fund will be administered by Fáilte Ireland and will assist the coach tourism sector. The Deputy mentioned the impact on that sector. It has been severe. The Minister established a tourism recovery task force earlier this year to which I provide the secretariat. Although I was not there, I know that coach transport, car hire and chauffeur service representatives this morning presented the task force with their concerns, thoughts and ideas about survival, stabilisation and the long-term sustainability of the sector. Their thoughts and ideas would have been heard by that group this morning and we would hope to incorporate any of their recommendations in



the final report to the Minister.

**Chairman:** I have a couple of final questions. I thank the witnesses for answering all of our questions. I appreciate the questioning has possibly been more in-depth than usual given the limited number of Deputies present, for the reason Deputy Michael Collins outlined. Deputy Catherine Murphy specifically sent her apologies. Other Deputies to whom I spoke also regretted the fact that the Dáil is sitting in the Convention Centre while we are in the Seanad Chamber. None of us has the gift of bilocation.

I have a couple of questions on departure-point testing. Is it being looked at as an alternative to isolation on arrival in Ireland or in addition to isolation in Ireland? Is it envisaged that it would apply only to incoming passengers, that is, non-Irish residents, looking to come to Ireland or would it equally apply to Irish residents who have gone abroad and are seeking to return to Ireland? If it does, will it even extend as far as people who have gone abroad temporarily for a holiday who are looking to return? They are my three questions on departure-point testing. Perhaps it is not at a sufficiently advanced level.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** That is the answer, Chairman. This is something the Government addressed in its meeting this week, which signed off on the green list. Arising from the green list, and the Government meeting and decision, we have been asked to look into the efficacy and potential for use of departure testing. We are at a very early stage and it will be another couple of weeks before we come back with any recommendations.

**Chairman:** The green list contains some very large European states that have a very regionalised approach and it does not contain other large European states with an equally regionalised approach. I am thinking of Germany, France and Spain, which are not on the list and Italy, which is. There is significant variation within all four of those states in terms of the incidence of Covid-19 in their various regions. Are the witnesses looking at a more nuanced or regionalised approach going forward?

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** No, is the short answer to that. The Government has decided that it will take a country-specific approach. The difficulty that would be involved in taking a regionalised approach would make it a little bit unwieldy, so the smallest unit, geographically, that we are using now will continue to be the country approach.

**Chairman:** So even though Corsica and Sardinia are right beside other and they are relatively similar islands to all intents and purposes, one is on the green list and the other is off. The Department is taking a country-specific approach rather than looking at an approach to Europe based on regions.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** Yes.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I will come in briefly if I may, Chairman. I thank Mr. Spratt for agreeing to arrange a meeting with him and some of his senior colleagues. I will try to organise some Members so we can get it done quickly. That would be very helpful.

I wish to point out an issue concerning the luxury coach sector. I believe there is an anomaly *vis-à-vis* the coach service in Northern Ireland, which does tours around Ireland. We are very grateful for that, but there is a substantial difference in VAT between Irish coach tourism and private bus operators compared to those in the North of Ireland. Perhaps that is something the Department could look at in terms of competition given the significant advantage to operators based in the North.

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There are no open windows on buses any more so they require air to be recirculated through the air conditioning system. Some newer buses may have the ability to easily put on HEPA filters but it is a more involved job for older buses, as it requires a modification of the existing air circulation system. Perhaps that is something the Department needs to examine in terms of passenger safety. The cost of adding a HEPA filter is not too expensive, between €700 and €900, but it is probably a lot more to put the filters into older buses. Such an initiative should be considered. We must try to get our fleet up to standard and get a reasonable level of infection prevention in the private bus sector.

**Mr. Kenneth Spratt:** I am happy to meet the Deputy. We might try to arrange a meeting for next week if he wishes. We are keen to understand the challenges and to do our best to try to resolve as many of those issues as quickly as we possibly can. We will be in touch with Deputy Shanahan's office to set up a meeting.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I thank Mr. Spratt very much.

**Chairman:** On behalf of my colleagues who are present and those who could not be here because they are in the Convention Centre, anticipating a vote, I thank Mr. Spratt and all of his colleagues for coming here this afternoon, for the information that they have given to us and, most of all, for explaining the reason behind many of the decisions that are made. It is very much appreciated.

The committee adjourned at 4.10 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Tuesday, 28 July 2020.