International Travel

In the context particularly of the potential for increased travel into and out of Ireland over the Christmas and winter period, this paper provides an update on the epidemiological situation internationally and considers the risks associated with increased international travel. It will be recalled that the NPHET advice throughout the pandemic is that people in Ireland should be encouraged to continue to follow public health advice against non-essential travel outside of Ireland and that all measures be utilised to discourage non-essential travel from overseas to Ireland. As Ireland manages to bring the incidence of COVID-19 under control, the risk of importation that could re-seed the virus in this country must be mitigated to the maximum extent.

International situation

The epidemiological situation internationally continues to deteriorate. The WHO Director General, in a press conference on 20 November, noted that coronavirus cases reported in the last 4 weeks exceeded the overall figures reported in the first six months when the pandemic hit. The ECDC, in a presentation to the EU’s Integrated Political Crisis Response meeting, has advised that based on its modelling the EU average incidence rate is expected to increase again in the week beginning 23/11. Furthermore, the ECDC technical report Updated projections of COVID-19 in the EU/EEA and the UK dated 23 November, anticipates that if measures introduced by EU countries are lifted on December 21 there will be a subsequent increase in hospitalisations by early January. If measures are lifted on 7 December, the increase may start before 24 December.

The evidence base associated with international travel continues to evolve. UK modelling estimates that a single pre-travel PCR test will detect <10% of cases. A recent study by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health into occupational risk and COVID-19 found that the most vulnerable occupations from period of mid-July to mid-October were employees in the hospitality industry, such as bartenders and waiters, as well as flight attendants and boat stewards.

EU traffic light system

(i) Council Recommendation on the coordination of EU travel measures

The EU Council Recommendation (EU) 2020/1475 on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (commonly referred to as the EU traffic light system) was agreed on 13 October 2020.

The recommendation provides that the ECDC will publish weekly a colour-coded map of Europe (by NUTS region) based on epidemiological criteria, as follows:

- Green (notification rate lower than 25 and test positivity rate below 4%)
- Orange (notification rate lower than 50 and test positivity rate 4% or higher or notification rate is between 25 – 150 and test positive rate below 4%)
- Red (notification rate is 50 or higher and test positivity rate is 4% or higher or notification rate is higher than 50.
- Grey (insufficient information provided).
Member States retain discretion and flexibility when deciding upon national public health travel measures, including testing, quarantine and passenger locator forms, to apply to passengers arriving from areas classified as Red, Orange or Grey. There are to be no restrictions applying to travellers arriving from areas mapped as Green. Information on measures implemented in each Member State should be shared via EU sources and platforms.

Travellers with an essential function or need, as listed in the agreement, will not be required to undergo quarantine. They are not required to restrict movements/quarantine while undertaking the essential function or purpose. Essential functions include healthcare and transport workers, diplomats, imperative family or business reasons, cross-border studies, patients seeking treatment, and journalists.

Within the EU/EEA countries are still in process of adapting their travel-related restrictions. Information collated by the EU Council Presidency and presented to a meeting of the IPCR on 19 November reveals that twelve EU countries are operating 10-day quarantine periods in relation to travel - Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Switzerland. Of these, Finland requires a two-test regimen to shorten the quarantine period. The period of isolation may be shortened by taking a test post arrival, this can be on arrival (Austria) or no earlier than day five Germany/Iceland or day eight in Romanian. Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia and Switzerland do not allow the 10-day period to be shortened through testing.

The disease trajectory achieved in Ireland has seen it currently classified as “Orange” by the ECDC under the traffic-light system for EU travel. Finland, Iceland, Greenland, parts of Norway and the Canaries are the only other regions that are not classified as “Red”.

The UK has recorded a threefold increase in imported cases in the last week, with the majority of these related to travel from the Canaries. Ireland continues to have a number of flights each week to and from airports in the Canary Islands.

**Government Policy**
Recent Government decisions on international travel confirm that the default position for travellers from abroad is to restrict movements for 14 days. However, Government policy is to provide specific exemptions from this advice, and travellers from EU/EEA Orange regions may avail of (a) pre-departure PCR testing or (b) testing five or more days after arrival to shorten the recommended period of restricted movement. Travellers from Red regions are also advised that they may disapply the “14 days” advice in the event of obtaining a “not detected” PCR result taken five or more days after arrival.

The Government decision also provides exemptions additional to those recommended by the EU. Exemptions from the self-restriction advice for those travelling for imperative business or family reasons are in practice a matter of personal responsibility for those involved. Inquiries

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1 In implementing the EU traffic-light model, the option to take pre-departure test is only available to travellers from orange regions. Given that most of Europe is categorised as red, this may be less of an issue in the immediate term.
received by the Department of Health to date suggest that there may be considerable subjective interpretation by the individual travelling as to whether they are covered by this policy advice.

Passengers who travel to Ireland for an essential purpose will be expected to restrict movements when not engaged in that essential purpose, while those who travel from Ireland to another country for essential purposes will not be subject to public health advice on self-restriction on their return. Finally, the exemption for travellers with essential functions within the EU has been extended to travellers arriving from all countries, meaning that even if arriving from countries of very high incidence, such persons will not be expected to follow public health measures on arrival while performing the essential function.

**Christmas/New Year travel**

Most EU countries have yet to announce how public health measures, including travel measures will apply over the Christmas period. Across Europe countries face difficult decisions around the management of COVID through the Christmas period. For example, Germany has closed its Christmas markets, while the Polish PM has urged Poles not to travel (domestically) and to spend Christmas with immediate family.

Christmas travel represents a particular risk, since at its core is likely to be the objective for most people of visiting family and/or close friends, associated sharing of accommodation, socialising indoors and intergenerational mixing, with potential for a higher number of close contacts should there be cases of infection.

Christmas travellers to Ireland may be expected to arrive from across the EU, the UK as well as from third countries with significant Irish expat populations – USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa. In the case of Australia and New Zealand, strict quarantines applying to returning travellers may deter travel for family reasons this Christmas. Canada also applies a mandatory 14-day quarantine to arrivals from Ireland. Christmas travel from the USA to Ireland is a particular concern given the elevated incidence rates there, as is return to Ireland following Christmas/New Year travel to countries of high incidence such as Italy, Poland, Austria and Brazil.

While information on potential travel volumes for 2020 is not available at this point, an Irish Times report on 20 December **2019** reported the DAA stating that 1.2m people were expected to travel through Dublin airport during the holiday period. December 20th was expected to be the busiest day before Christmas, with over 90,000 passengers due to arrive and depart, while last year December 27th was expected to be the busiest day after Christmas, with departures to leisure destinations.

**Conclusion**

A significant risk continues to present in relation to international travel, particularly in the context of anticipated volume over the Christmas period. The progress made in suppressing domestic transmission and reducing case numbers under level 5 restrictions could be rapidly eroded through a reseeding of cases. The level of risk is reflected in the travel policies adopted across the EU, which generally continue to be more stringent than those applying in Ireland. The countries globally that have had the most success in controlling transmission, Australia,
New Zealand and countries in South Asia, have maintained close control in relation to the management of risks associated with importation through travel.

**Proposed recommendations**
The NPHET advice throughout the pandemic is that people in Ireland should be encouraged to avoid non-essential travel outside of Ireland and that all measures be utilised to discourage travel from overseas to Ireland.

Given the continuing risks associated with travel and the desire to enable the country safely to exit the current Level 5 restrictions, it is recommended that Government continue to advise against non-essential travel during the forthcoming holiday season.

It is recommended that passengers travelling into Ireland are asked to strictly adhere to the advice to restrict their movements for 14 days if they do not avail of testing. In addition, the advice should also be clear that the period of restricted movements should only end once they have received a not-detected result, and not from the point the test is taken. Furthermore, for people who arrive having had a “not detected” test result taken in the 72 hours pre-departure, it is important that they should exercise caution and not assume that such a test result means that they are not incubating the virus.

Given the profile of the disease in Europe, there is also a significant risk to travellers leaving the country to visit areas of high incidence and subsequently returning to Ireland. These travellers should also be made aware of the advice to restrict movements for 14 days on return, or to avail of testing. Given that implementation of the traffic-light approach provides an exemption from advice to restrict movements if there is an imperative family or business reason, it is recommended that Government communicate that this should be confined to limited situations, such as travel for a funeral or other essential reasons. This would mean that travel to visit family or friends is not considered an imperative reason.

It is also recommended that public health messaging for the coming weeks should include communications targeted at people who may come to Ireland over the Christmas/New Year period and advising them of the need to follow public health advice generally and in particular to limit their interactions with family members and friends, especially where persons are at particular risk should they contract COVID-19.