

# National Public Health Emergency Team

8<sup>th</sup> May 2020

## Travel - restrictions on arriving passengers

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Action required

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

## **Purpose of the paper                      FOR DECISION**

To minimise the risk of imported cases and in line with WHO guidance, NPHE recommends that the present regime applying to passengers arriving to Ireland from overseas be strengthened as follows:

- (i) make completion of Public Health Passenger Locator Form mandatory for all passengers
- (ii) make the present regime of 14 days' self-isolation mandatory for all passengers arriving from overseas, with limited exemptions to include supply chain workers and those in transit (including to Northern Ireland), and isolation to occur:
  - option (a) self-isolation for those who can provide a credible plan and designated facilities (hotels) for those who cannot or option (b) designated facilities (hotels) for all non-exempt passengers
- (iii) option: introduce a ban on non-essential travel from non-EEA countries and Great Britain (with exemptions for Irish citizens or residents)
- (iv) continue to provide strong public health guidance against international travel both for Irish residents and for prospective visitors to Ireland.

### **Rationale**

As Ireland and other countries move to unwind restrictions, there is a clear need to manage the risk posed to public health through imported cases of COVID-19. Consideration of this risk of imported cases is closely linked to de-escalation of restrictions in other countries, which may prompt an increase in travellers arriving from abroad.

Ireland's response to COVID-19 has been informed by the advice, guidance and protocols of the WHO, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and by practice in other countries. The WHO has issued guidance identifying the risk of imported cases as one of six key criteria to be satisfied by countries transitioning to and maintaining a steady state of low-level or no transmission. Covid-19 was originally imported into Ireland via international travel and the risk of imported cases will increase as international travel increases, and become more pronounced as domestic incidence decreases.

### **Travel measures introduced in Ireland**

To date, Ireland has introduced a range of travel related measures including issuing advice against non-essential international travel (13<sup>th</sup> March) and introducing a requirement for 14 days' restricted movement on arrival (from 16<sup>th</sup> March). (NPHE has also previously considered a ban on non-essential travel from abroad.)

As of 24<sup>th</sup> April, passengers arriving into Ireland from overseas are expected to complete the Public Health Passenger Locator Form and to self-isolate for 14 days. The Department of Justice is conducting follow up phone calls with arriving passengers who complete the form

to check whether they are self-isolating. The current regime has been rolled out on an administrative basis – it remains voluntary for passengers to complete the form and to self-isolate.

Ireland has unique considerations that have informed the development of national policy in this area, including the Common Travel Area with the UK and the land border with Northern Ireland. Our common travel area with the UK means that UK nationals do not need permission to enter the State and cannot be prevented from entering, even when non-resident. An all-island, common approach with NI on the restriction measures applying to incoming passengers would remove the issue of the land border.

A majority of EU member states has imposed temporary border controls, using the Schengen Agreement as the legal basis on which to refuse entry to EU citizens (the Department is informed that our primary immigration legislation does not permit restricting non-essential travel of EU citizens).

The Tánaiste and Ministers for Health, Transport, Tourism and Sport, Justice and Equality and the Attorney met on 29 April and expressed broad agreement on the need for the present regime, including the Form, to be placed on a legal basis.

### **Operation of the Public Health Passenger Locator Form in Ireland**

- Aviation passenger numbers are as low as 1% of equivalent dates last year (2,400 passengers into Dublin airport in the week to 4 May).
- The majority of arrivals continue to be Irish citizens, residents or passengers travelling onwards to Northern Ireland.
- On the 5<sup>th</sup> May for example, 14% of passengers on intra-EU flights into Dublin airport were “visiting” (23 passengers, of whom 12 were Irish).
- The Department of Justice reports that 66% of passengers arriving complete a Public Health Passenger Locator Form. In the majority of cases where forms are not completed, it is because the airline did not distribute the form.
- The Department of Justice further reports that 64% of follow up phone calls were answered. In 99% of completed follow up calls, self-isolation was confirmed.
- Tourist passenger numbers by ferry into Dublin, Rosslare and Cork ports are down 96-97% on same dates last year (total of around 2,500 per week). Compliance with the Form varies between 55% to 80% at the ports.

### **International context and developments**

Unprecedented travel restrictions have been introduced by EU Member States in response to COVID-19. On 16<sup>th</sup> March, the European Commission recommended a temporary 30 days restriction on non-essential travel from third countries into the EU, since extended until 15<sup>th</sup> May. All EU/EEAS States except for Ireland have applied this restriction. Further, temporary

controls have been erected at 16 land border crossings in the EU+ area, affecting 17 countries. It is understood that at least 15 European Member States are denying entry to EU/EEAS nationals who are travelling for tourism. Further, a number of Member States have taken measures to prevent citizens and residents from undertaking non-essential travel abroad.

It is notable that, while no decisions have been taken, some thought at EU level is beginning to turn towards the resumption of international travel. Draft guidance documents have been presented to the Health Security Committee on the safe operation of hotels and aircraft. **Austria** expects to let German tourists enter the country in summer, assuming the situation continues to develop positively, and is looking to the Commission for joint solutions on how the careful restarting of summer tourism would work in practice **Greece** has joined a seven-state alliance to boost tourism and trade (includes Austria, Denmark, Czech Republic, New Zealand, Australia and Israel) and in best case scenario Greece could be open for tourists by 1 July. While **Croatia** is planning a “tourist corridor” with Czech Republic for the summer season, with similar plans to be initiated with Austria, Slovakia and Hungary should conditions be favourable.

### **Options**

Annex 1 has a table with international comparison of ‘quarantine’ measures.

The **main choice** is around where isolation is to be undertaken, at home or in a designated facility. Many EU member states have a policy of self-isolation at home, featuring in a mix of voluntary and mandatory regimes.

However, four countries have instituted **mandatory quarantine at government facilities** including Slovakia, Cyprus, Australia and New Zealand, while three more countries (Slovenia, Romania, Croatia) have self-isolation at government facilities for those who have travelled to high risk areas. This approach at designated facilities represents a strong deterrent to all non-essential travel and there are operational advantages in ensuring effective oversight of isolation of individuals concerned.

Five countries provide facilities for those who cannot isolate at home (Austria , Finland, Poland, Canada, South Korea).

The Department has been engaged in discussions with other government departments on putting the Public Health Passenger Locator Form on a statutory basis, where issues have been raised around proportionality (measures adopted are proportionate with the risk and are the least restrictive method of achieving the public health objectives) and consistency (compared with the treatment of confirmed cases in Ireland, where there is no obligation on the individual to isolate but rather it is a power of the State to detain a potential case).

A **second option** is to consider is refusal of entry to non-resident third country nationals (excluding Great Britain). While numbers of passengers arriving at present from non-EEA countries are very modest, CSO figures show in 2019 travellers from these countries made up 29% of total arrivals to Ireland.

### **Possible next steps**

Developing a mandatory system with the following characteristics:

- Incoming travellers must complete a Public Health Passenger Locator Form
- The Public Health Passenger Locator form will be expanded in scope to include questions on whether the traveller can effectively self-isolate in their home. This would focus passenger's attention on what is required during the self-isolation period and help to identify those who cannot self-isolate for various reasons.
- The government to provide support in the form of accommodation suitable for self-isolation for those passengers who cannot do so in their homes. Consideration will be needed on who will be entitled to such supports and whether the cost of such a facility should be borne by the user, be means tested or paid for in full by the government. (Broader accommodation support required for mandatory isolation for everyone at designated facilities.)
- Consideration to be given to what follow-up checks and enforcement measures are feasible to ensure high compliance rates.

Ends.