Preparing for summer 2021
- An EU roadmap to restore air travel -

Introduction

One year into the COVID-19 pandemic and faced with new variants and a third wave in most of Europe, we continue to be faced with diverging national requirements, often introduced at very short notice. As European associations representing the aviation sector,[1] we call for a truly coordinated approach among European Member States, providing transparency and predictability for citizens and businesses[2].

European airlines and the wider aviation sector, as well as travellers need to understand the rules that will be in place to have the necessary confidence to plan and book their summer holidays. Recent polling[3] showed that 54% of Europeans aim to take a trip before the end of July 2021, revealing the strong pent-up demand for mobility. Among this group, 41% wish to travel to another European country, underlining the benefit of a common EU approach.

The ongoing rollout of vaccination and increasing levels of protection among the population should be reflected in a common approach and progressive removal of national travel restrictions. Similarly, the proposed Digital Green Certificate will contribute to restore freedom of movement.

We therefore call upon Member States to urgently agree on a concrete roadmap to restart air travel. Such a roadmap should be developed with industry and traveller representatives, via a Commission-led taskforce on the restoration of the freedom of movement. Once established, this roadmap should be clearly communicated. This roadmap should provide a positive signal and include better co-ordinated rules on travel restrictions, testing and quarantines as well as cover the use of Digital Green Certificates. Our current views on these elements are outlined below.

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[1] Airlines for Europe (A4E), ACI EUROPE (Airports Council International), ASD (Aerospace and Defence Industries Association of Europe), CANSO and European Regions Airline Association (ERA).
[2] In line with the objectives of EU Council Recommendation 2020/1475 of 13 October 2020.
[3] ETC, Feb. 2021 - https://etc-corporate.org/reports/monitoring-sentiment-for-domestic-and-intra-european-travel-wave-5/

Vaccinations and Digital Green Certificates

We warmly welcome the European Commission's proposal for a **Digital Green Certificate** system[4] and the subsequent decision from the European Parliament and Council to consider this dossier under the urgent procedure. This would require Member States to issue common, interoperable and mutually-recognised certificates for COVID-19 vaccination, testing and recovery status. We are urging EU governments to ensure that Digital Green Certificates are operational in their digital format in time for the peak summer travel months, whilst coordinating further on the removal of travel restrictions.

Once the most vulnerable have been vaccinated, we are calling - alongside the WHO and ICAO[5] - for aircrew and aviation workers to be classified as key workers and therefore prioritised in national vaccination programmes. Freight traffic in particular has demonstrated that aviation provides an essential service to people and businesses alike.

Vaccination must not be a pre-requisite to travel, but rather be used as an additional tool to restore connectivity and freedom of movement within the EU.

Testing

We call on **a harmonised EU framework for an affordable, reliable and rapid travel-related testing**. This should encompass the following:
- mutual recognition of tests between Member States;
- general use of antigen or other rapid tests (see below);
- verification of test results by national authorities;
- indication as to when the tests need to be performed (preferably before departure with an option to test immediately upon arrival in case of insufficient local capacity); and
- exemptions for young children (under 2).

Reliable antigen or other rapid tests should be used as part of an effective response to COVID-19 due to their low cost and very quick turnaround[6]. Most recent studies indicate that a single antigen test on departure is as effective as a ten-day quarantine regime, when taking account the very limited level of compliance with quarantine requirements.

The reliability of antigen testing has dramatically improved over the last ten months: some antigen tests on the market now come very close to PCR tests in terms of reliability (sensitivity >96 per cent and specificity >99 per cent). These rapid tests can also be conducted just before departure (potentially at a location nearby airports) and deliver quasi-immediate results.

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[4] 17.03.2021 - https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/en_green_certif_just_reg130_final.pdf
[5] 25.03.2021 – WHO and ICAO Joint Statement on prioritization of COVID-19 vaccination for seafarers and aircrew
[6] Oxera study, 30.03.2021: "International Travel Could Safely Reopen Through Adoption Of High Performing Rapid Antigen Tests" - https://www.oxera.com/effectiveness-of-rapid-testing-for-sars-cov-2/

Coordination of travel restrictions and the end of blanket quarantines

The diverging rules combined with the introduction of new restrictions at short notice by individual Member States damage consumer confidence in travelling.

Scientific evidence and information[7] indicate that in the current epidemiological situation, where SARS-CoV-2 is established in all EU/EEA countries and the UK, imported cases account for a very small proportion of all detected cases and are unlikely to significantly increase the rate of transmission. The prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 in travellers is estimated to be lower than the prevalence in the general population or among contacts of confirmed cases.

Travel restrictions from the origin country/region should therefore be tailored to the actual situation in the destination region. Ideally, all Member States would follow the same approach and make the same assessment on a detailed regional basis (including on a per-island basis in the case of touristic archipelagos such as the Greek islands, Balearics or Canary Islands), based on the weekly-updated ECDC map.

European aviation associations consider that **blanket travel bans or blanket negative travel advisory such as quarantines must be avoided.** Travellers can be tested either before departure or upon arrival. In addition, quarantine requirements are difficult to enforce and several scientific studies[8] demonstrate that they are not an effective means to limit the spread of the virus.

When Member States decide to impose additional travel restrictions or alter the current rules, it should notify the European Commission and other Member States prior (at least five days in advance) to imposing these new or adapted restrictions and procedures. This is important for other Member States to anticipate and safeguard travel flows (both passengers and goods).

ECDC and EASA have confirmed the best tools in the global fight against COVID-19 are a combination of the implementation of the EASA/ECDC COVID-19 Aviation Health Safety Protocol; effective communication with passengers; standardised, online passenger locator forms; and effective contact tracing.

The industry and travellers alike urgently need improved and effective European coordination of travel restrictions, and requirements based on independent and robust scientific data, so that travel and tourism can restart – a much-needed economic and employment stimulus.

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7 Guidelines for COVID-19 testing and quarantine of air travellers, 2 December 2020 - https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/guidelines-covid-19-testing-and-quarantine-air-travellers
8 For instance, Oxera study, November 2020 - https://www.oxera.com/insights/reports/review-of-case-studies-of-effectiveness-of-testing-schemes/