Open letter to
An Taoiseach Micheál Martin

An Taoiseach Micheál Martin
Department of the Taoiseach
Government Buildings
Upper Merrion Street
Dublin 2
D02 R583

29th September 2020

Dear Taoiseach,

I am writing on behalf of the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation - and its undersigned member businesses and associations that represent the tourism, travel and hospitality sectors in Ireland - to state that we are fully supportive of the European Commission's proposed EU coordination framework for travel restrictions due to be agreed at EU's General Affairs Council meeting on October 13th.

ITIC calls for the urgent and full implementation of the European Commission's free movement proposal in order to revive the Irish economy and to enable in particular the tourism, travel and hospitality industry to plot a roadmap out of the existential crisis that has been brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

We urge the Irish Government to take a lead on this at European level to reflect the importance of international access to an island nation such as ours.

Public health must remain the primary priority during these difficult times but saving livelihoods cannot be seen as mutually exclusive from saving lives. As a country, a society and an economy it is acknowledged widely at this point that we have to learn to live alongside Covid-19.

The current situation pertaining to international travel is akin to a closed sign above Ireland for inbound tourism and, if maintained, will lead to up to 200,000 job losses as estimated by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation in its sector report on the impact of Covid of 22nd August. Indeed, that same report identified that for every direct tourism job there are 1.5 indirect or induced jobs thereby meaning that job losses could top 300,000. Such is the scale of the existential crisis facing this industry.

ITIC contends that it need not be like this. With 75% of the tourism economy in Ireland made up of inbound visitation it is vital that we recommence international travel in a safe and sensible manner. The only way to do this is by adopting the EU Commission proposal on international travel in full.

On 4th September, the European Commission's (EC) proposed a co-ordinated approach to travel within the European Union and the European Economic Area that would greatly enhance the coordination and harmonisation among EU countries for intra EU/EEA travel. A traffic light system, based on Covid infection rates, would allow for the free movement of people traveling from both green and orange coded areas with a testing regime to be considered for those countries coded red. The European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) has also confirmed their support of such a proposal in their statement of September 15th.

Irish Tourism Industry Confederation

1

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Extreme travel restrictions – in particular quarantines – are anything but risk-based and are not an effective way to fight the epidemic, and the ECDC has formally advised European States against such restrictions.

The EC framework is a much-needed step in the right direction, providing common criteria for fully aligned risk assessments and the related mapping of EU/EEA countries and the UK. We urgently need this framework to be endorsed and fully implemented by all European States. In line with the EC proposal, passenger arriving from Green and Orange coded areas should not be subject to any restrictions or testing requirements.

ITIC supports the introduction of an appropriate travel testing regime for passengers coming from high risk or red zone areas as classified by the EC proposal. This should form part of a multi-layered approach to risk management which is vital to assuage public health and provide public confidence. Such a testing regime (whether it involves pre-departure or arrival testing) needs to be rapid, scalable, accurate and ideally be publicly financed or made available at an affordable cost for passengers.

ITIC notes recent media reports that show Dublin, Cork and Ireland West Airport Knock are all in talks with potential service providers in terms of Covid-19 testing.

If Ireland is deemed high risk by other states, departing passengers from Ireland would require a similar pre-departure test or a test on arrival at destination.

ITIC fully support the position of ACI Europe (which represents more than 150 European airports, including Dublin, Cork and Shannon) and more than 20 other international travel and tourism groups that while the European Commission's plan for a co-ordinated approach to travel is welcome, it must be accompanied by an EU-wide move to replace quarantine restrictions with a new EU Testing Protocol for Travel.

Getting international airways open again in a safe manner must be the number one economic priority for the Government. A sensible and practical approach to honouring the Common Travel Area between the UK and Ireland must also be secured.

International access – by both air and sea - is the lifeline that connects Ireland to the global economy and its restoration is critical to the economic wellbeing of the country. The ability of regional Ireland in particular to rebuild in the aftermath of this pandemic is reliant on having strong airports and the connectivity provided into the UK, Europe and US is vitally important to support business and tourism recovery especially in the West of Ireland and right along the western seaboard.
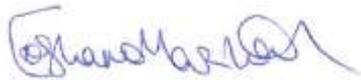
The aviation sector needs certainty in respect of the implementation of the EC proposal in order to effectively plan its operations for Winter 2020/21 as well as Summer 2021. The current uncertainty presents a significant risk to Ireland's air connectivity that will severely undermine the efforts to support recovery in the tourism economy.

Government's own Aviation Recovery Taskforce and the Tourism Recovery Taskforce have made similar recommendations urging the adoption of a pan-European approach to international travel and the Irish Government should move in this direction urgently. Failure to fully implement the European Commission's proposal would likely kill any chances of a potential recovery. The travel and tourism sector accounts for more than 10% of European GDP and 27 million jobs and is at the heart of European economies.

The current situation pertaining to international travel requires your immediate personal involvement, as Taoiseach. We are thus urging you make this issue a top priority and calling on you to address this issue directly with the Heads of State and Government across the European Union and restore an essential function of the Single Market, that of free movement.

We stand ready to immediately assist and work with the Irish Government and the European Commission to discuss the way forward and plot a safe roadmap out of this crisis.

Yours sincerely,

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Eoghan O'Mara Walsh
CEO
on behalf of ITIC Members including:

Full list of ITIC Members available on www.itic.ie

Cc. Catherine Martin TD, Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport & the Gaeltacht

Cc. Leo Varadkar TD, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade & Employment

Cc. Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for Climate Action, Communication Networks & Transport