

# COVID-19 vaccination and the restoration of air travel

## Overview of our position

The fight against COVID-19 is a key priority requiring strong health measures. However, A4E airlines believe that with a clear and harmonised EU testing protocol, air travel can remain safe. This requires true European coordination between Member States and harmonised measures in order to create clarity and predictability for passengers. We continue to advocate against the blanket use of quarantines, as these are both impossible to enforce and disproportionate. We detail below how vaccination certificates could provide an additional tool in supporting the restart of air travel.

## Introduction

One year into the COVID-19 global pandemic and faced with new variants, we understand that strong measures need to be taken in order to fight this unprecedented health challenge. However, we ask Member States to agree on a common approach to restore air travel as soon as it is safely possible to do so in 2021, solidifying the prospects provided by the vaccination programmes that have been launched.

Unfortunately, airlines continue to be faced with a myriad of diverging national COVID-19 requirements, often introduced at very short notice. A4E again calls for a coordinated approach among European Member States which is essential to increase harmonisation, transparency and predictability for citizens and businesses<sup>1</sup>.

The on-going roll-out of vaccination programmes and increasing levels of protection among the population should – and are expected to – be reflected in a progressive removal of national travel restrictions. However, European airlines and the wider travel sector cannot wait until the whole population is vaccinated before making plans to restart operations. In order for airlines and travellers to have the necessary confidence to plan and book travel during the upcoming high season periods (Easter and summer holidays), they need to understand the rules that will be in place.

**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 via an

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<sup>1</sup> In line with the objectives of EU Council Recommendation 2020/1475 of 13 October 2020 on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

aviation and tourism taskforce between EU institutions, and presented to European travellers as a clear pathway to travel. This roadmap should provide a positive signal and make the best use of the opportunities provided by the ongoing vaccination campaigns, as well as including better coordinated rules on travel restrictions, testing and quarantines as well as vaccination. Our current views on these elements are outlined below.

## Vaccinations

As COVID-19 vaccines become available to the wider public in the coming months, vaccinated air travellers should be exempted from testing, quarantine and other travel restrictions in line with scientific evidence. However, vaccination must not be a prerequisite to travel, but rather be used as an additional tool to restart travel as well as restore connectivity and freedom of movement within the EU.

Based on the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control's (ECDC) compelling scientific evidence, the effective rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine is key to assisting States in managing the pandemic, restarting economies and restoring public confidence (rather than measures such as national lockdowns which the WHO confirmed are disproportionate). However, any compulsory link between the vaccine and air travel would be disproportionate and unacceptable, particularly since no such provision could be applied at EU land borders.

A compulsory link between COVID-19 vaccinations and air travel would serve only to divert the vaccine away from those who need it most and who are, generally, less likely to be travelling. It would also have a discriminatory impact on nationals from countries that have not yet been able to roll out the vaccine. Once the most vulnerable have been vaccinated, EU policy must be to ensure that Member States do not impose unnecessary quarantine and/or testing requirements so that the aviation industry can restart – a much needed economic and employment stimulus – while widespread community vaccination continues.

Consequently, there should be room to significantly reduce existing travel restrictions as soon as the most vulnerable citizens are protected<sup>2</sup>.

What needs to be done to support the recovery of safe air travel:

- **Vaccinated travellers should be allowed to travel without restrictions** (i.e. no testing and/or quarantine), once it is established that vaccinated persons do not transmit the virus or in a reduced manner.

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<sup>2</sup> In line with the objectives of EU Council Recommendation 2020/1475 of 13 October 2020 on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Vaccination certificates/vaccine passports must not be a prerequisite for travel.
- A4E welcomes the adoption of guidelines<sup>3</sup> towards an EU-wide vaccination certificate, which could in time also be adapted for and support travelling purposes.
- **Any digital EU verification system for test and vaccination** should be aligned with international standards: e.g. WHO, WEF (Common Pass) and IATA (Travel Pass) are already working on this. A common set of international standards will help governments assessing that a particular person has an approved test or vaccine and meets the entry requirement from a particular country. Whilst these solutions are still being developed, existing tools (such as national official coronavirus apps or the existing WHO yellow card) should be used as a verification method in the meantime.
- Vaccination programmes at national level should give **appropriate priority to essential aviation workers** as providers of an essential service<sup>4</sup>. Naturally, vaccines should first be administered to vulnerable groups and frontline medical staff.

## Coordination of travel restrictions

- **An improved and effective European coordination of travel restrictions and requirements is urgently needed**, to assist with the recovery of the aviation industry during this time of unprecedented crisis.
- The rollout of vaccination programs to the most vulnerable across Europe in the coming months must create a situation where Member States remove unnecessary quarantine and/or testing requirements as soon as possible, so that we can start to recover the aviation industry while widespread community vaccination continues. The necessary preparations must start now, in order to provide a better framework ahead of the 2021 summer season.
- Despite coordination efforts at Commission and Council level, the patchwork of different national rules remains a reality. It has even become more intricate since December 2020, with differing pre-travel testing requirements that were introduced by many Member States, to which passengers have to add differing rules on quarantines and tests after arrival.
- Coordination efforts should create **more options for travel when the situation allows**. This should also aim to create **more stability and predictability**, as one of the key elements affecting consumer confidence in

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<sup>3</sup> 28.01.2021 - [https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/ehealth/docs/vaccination-proof\\_interoperability\\_guidelines\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/ehealth/docs/vaccination-proof_interoperability_guidelines_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> We have detailed this further in our joint A4E-IATA letter to the Commission and EASA, 19.01.2021 <https://a4e.eu/wp-content/uploads/joint-a4e-iata-letter-on-vaccination-of-essential-aviation-workers.pdf>

travelling is the high variability of rules over the last few months and the introduction of new restrictions at short notice.

- **Blanket travel bans or blanket negative travel advisory must be avoided.** Travel restrictions and advisory from the origin country/region should 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). The weekly ECDC map set up further to the Council Recommendation of 13 October 2020 is not sufficiently detailed. European airlines also call on ECDC, with national authorities, to revise the underlying criteria, in order to be adapted to the evolving situation as vaccinations programmes are rolled out throughout the EU.
- **Member States should actively seek to set up safe travel corridors with third countries.** Where needed, specific conditions can be attached such as under the agreement between Germany and Turkey (this includes a specific health & safety concept and testing before return to Germany).
- **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 5 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) as much as possible.

## Testing

- ECDC and EASA have confirmed<sup>5</sup> that testing and/or quarantines are neither effective nor recommended public health measures for air travellers when the virus is already widespread in the community. The effective tools to success 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, online and standardised passenger locator forms, and effective contact tracing are the keys.
- Notwithstanding, tests that are both affordable, reliable, and rapid should be widely used to ease current travel restrictions.
- **There should be a harmonised EU framework for travel-related testing.** This framework should encompass the following:
  - mutual recognition of tests between Member States
  - general use of antigen or other rapid tests (see below)

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<sup>5</sup> 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>

- verification of test results by national authorities
- indication as to when the tests need to be performed (preferably before departure though there could be an option to do it immediately upon arrival in case of insufficient local capacity)
- exemptions for young children and passengers with disabilities
- **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. Their reliability 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% and specificity >99%). These rapid tests can also be conducted just before departure (potentially at a location nearby airports) and deliver quasi-immediate results as opposed to PCR tests, which need to be processed in a lab and are usually taken up to three days in advance creating the risk of travellers becoming infected after the sample was taken.
- In their Council Conclusions of 11 December 2020<sup>6</sup>, EU leaders have tasked the European Commission to propose a Recommendation on the use of antigen testing and mutual recognition of test results. We call on both institutions to urgently progress on this important topic and **expand on the use of antigen tests in the context of travel**, which was not included in the Council Recommendation of 20 January<sup>7</sup>.

## Quarantines

- **Member States' quarantine requirements are greatly hindering recovery**, as travellers consider this a major deterrent to travel.
- In addition, quarantine requirements are very **difficult to enforce** and studies<sup>8</sup> demonstrate that they are **not an effective means** to limit the spread of the virus.
- **Travellers could be tested** (as per above) either before departure or upon arrival.
- European airlines consider that it is **not proportionate to subject air travellers that have already tested negative to additional quarantine requirements**.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/47296/1011-12-20-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Council Recommendation on a common framework for the use and validation of rapid antigen tests and the mutual recognition of COVID-19 test results in the EU – 20.01.2021

<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5451-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>8</sup> For instance Oxera study, November 2020

<https://www.oxera.com/publications/review-of-case-studies-of-effectiveness-of-testing-schemes/>