PRESSURE INTENSIFIES TO DROP QUARANTINES IN FAVOUR OF EU-WIDE PASSENGER TESTING PROTOCOL

News / Airlines

With less than 90 days to go before the year-end holiday season, European aviation bodies have intensified their call to replace quarantine measures with passenger testing. This will provide far greater assurance and ability for cross-border travellers to plan family reunions or vacations during this important holiday period. It will also serve as a lifeline to the millions of workers in the travel and tourism sectors whose jobs remain at risk.

Following their direct call to action together with the wider travel and tourism sectors in a letter to European Commission President von der Leyen on 17 September, aviation bodies ACI EUROPE, Airlines for Europe (A4E) and IATA have submitted a framework for how an EU-wide Testing Protocol for Travel (EU-TPT) could work.

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In follow up letters sent to the Commission President and Heads of State, as well as Health Ministers across Europe last night, the industry associations set out their proposal for harmonised pre-departure testing from high-risk areas, describing the current situation of patchwork quarantine restrictions as "unsustainable".

Aviation industry data confirms the worsening situation. IATA figures show air traffic to, from and within Europe is down by 66.3% year to date. Latest figures from ACI EUROPE reveal that as of 27 September, passenger traffic in the EU had further plunged to -78%.

New research released by the Air Transport Action Group (ATAG) on the impact of COVID-19 restrictions suggests the collapse of air traffic could result in a 52% drop in employment supported by aviation in Europe, equating to the loss of around 7 million jobs. Nearly €450 billion in economic activity will be lost. Urgent action is therefore required to prevent an even greater economic and employment catastrophe.

"We need to learn to live – and travel – with the virus", says the letter. "Re-establishing the free movement of people and air connectivity across our continent in a safe way must be a priority".

With many Europeans wondering whether they will be able to come together with their families and loved ones for the holiday season, the proposed testing protocol would allow for this to happen in a safe and harmonised way. The associations reiterate their calls for the Commission and Member States to prioritise the development and implementation of the European Testing Protocol for Travel system.

The letter highlights the continually worsening outlook for passenger demand along with cripplingly low forward bookings for the winter season – down -80% from 2019. The planning certainty and risk-based safety of a common testing protocol would give European countries an effective way to reduce transmission both in communities and during air travel whilst stimulating the economy.

The framework proposed is based on two overarching principles:

- Quarantines must be replaced by testing prior to departure, based on an EU Testing Protocol for travel which is consistently applicable for passengers travelling across borders from high risk areas in the EU/Schengen space and from third countries. Public opinion research has established that 65% of travellers surveyed agree that quarantine should not be required for passengers who test negative for COVID-19.
- Travel restrictions must be coordinated and based on common risk assessment. This supports the risk assessment criteria and the common colour coding system / mapping of designated areas already proposed by the European Commission, but which is yet to be endorsed and fully implemented by EU States.

In concluding their recommendations, ACI EUROPE, A4E and IATA state unequivocally their position that adoption by European States of a common testing protocol would further reduce transmission risks, restore confidence among the travelling public, and protect livelihoods by allowing the travel and tourism sectors to begin their recovery.

As a result, they urge immediate action from the European Commission and States to urgently address this issue at EU level and accelerate this process.

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