

NOTE | DATA TRANSFER BETWEEN NI AND IRELAND

Why is a Data Transfer Required?

1. Passengers arriving in Ireland before travelling to NI should complete an Ireland Passenger Locator Form (PLF) and a UK one. Passengers sometimes do not complete the UK PLF, either mistakenly or to avoid potential enforcement actions. NI officials want to access information on the Ireland PLF, as otherwise they have no method of contacting this group of people, including those who arrive in Dublin from a country with a high prevalence of a new strain and then transit to NI.
2. Despite small numbers of passengers, NI health officials have genuine concerns about the lack of ability to track new Covid-19 strains in NI, and NI politicians have repeatedly stated their frustration with Ireland's reluctance to make changes on this issue, despite guarantees as to the use of data. Most recently, Robin Swann sent a letter on Saturday 6 February to CDL.

Data Protection Issues

3. Until 4 February, when Stephen Donnelly (Ireland's transport minister) announced that passengers who arrive from any destination in Ireland must quarantine for 14 days, data was not collected with the purpose of enforcing self-isolation. Irish officials assessed that they could not share data that would be used for this purpose.
4. NI officials and ministers have guaranteed that data will not be used for enforcement, and that they intend to use data to text passengers to inform them of the requirement to complete the UK PLF if they intend to transit to NI. However, there was an impasse as Ireland asked for NI officials to map possible uses of the data, NI officials did not feel they had the resource to complete this task.
5. Progress has been made through extensive engagement with an agreement drafted by DoH (NI), although there is frustration at its slow movement. NIO, FCDO and Department of Health (NI) are in touch on how Stephen Donnelly's announcement might affect the agreement in draft between NI and IE. Agreement is anticipated within 10 days.

Interim Solution

6. A temporary solution has been agreed between Northern Ireland and Ireland, this means any arrivals in Ireland who transit to Northern Ireland will receive a text message -from Ireland- advising them of the need to fill in the UK Passenger Locator Form (PLF). NI's First Minister and Robin Swann have repeatedly stated there is still a need for a data sharing agreement between Northern Ireland and Ireland.
7. Criticism of the slow response from Irish Government has been firm from across the DUP and UUP in Northern Ireland but also from Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Potential for UK-Ireland Data Sharing

8. UKG are considering how Ireland could share data with GB on arrivals transiting from Dublin to GB. This was raised at NIAC and at an operational level, Ireland have been flagging increasing arrivals in Dublin from the UAE, transiting to GB. On 6-7 February there was significant coverage in Ireland of 'the Dublin dodge' being used by people returning to the UK from UAE. However, Simon Coveney recognised that those coming in from UAE were doing so because there were no direct flights to the UK. Simon Coveney stated on 8 February that he was open to sharing data on people travelling into Britain from Dublin with the British Government but that "there needed to be a consistent approach" to how any new measures on international travel were introduced.