

Interferry supports EU's initiative for COVID-safe international travel

Trade association urges other countries to consider something similar

Global trade association Interferry has welcomed European Union (EU) plans for a voluntary Digital Green Certificate (DGC) to facilitate safe travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interferry, representing ferry operators worldwide, is now urging other countries to consider something similar for international travel in time for the peak summer season.

The DGC proposal was announced last month by the EU's executive arm - the European Commission (EC) - and is being fast-tracked by the European Parliament, with the target of being adopted by June 2021.

Noting that the ferry industry is highly dependent on summer passenger revenues, Interferry emphasises that operators incurred unsustainable losses during 2020 lockdown restrictions, when the initial ban on all but essential travel saw an immediate drop of 75-100 per cent in passenger traffic. Interferry believes that early adoption of the voluntary initiative is crucial to international ferry operators to avoid the prospect of losing a second consecutive peak season. It is also valuable to passengers because it provides greater assurance of streamlined travel.

Interferry CEO Mike Corrigan comments: "We support this initiative and believe similar aims should be embraced not only within the EU, but also worldwide for international ferry travel. Such an initiative does not stop people travelling if they don't have a certificate, but it will make travel procedures far easier for those who have this documentation."

The certificate – available free of charge in digital or paper format -- would prove that travellers have been vaccinated against COVID-19, or received a negative test result or recovered from the disease. EU member states would remain responsible for deciding which public health restrictions can be waived, but must apply waivers in the same way to all DGC holders.

This voluntary certificate will not be a pre-condition for free movement and will be non-discriminatory, since it can be used by people who have not been inoculated. The proposers have stated hopes that the format will influence global standards on the gradual restoration of free movement.

In anticipation of last summer's temporary easing of travel restrictions, Interferry sent members 'best practice' guidelines for the safe resumption of passenger services based on feedback from its 260-strong membership in 40 countries. The shoreside and shipboard measures range from booking, check-in and boarding procedures to hospital-standard sanitisation and limitations on passenger numbers and facilities.

The guidance was also circulated to governmental bodies around the world, including the EC, which oversees the world's largest ferry market by number of operators, and widely adopted as a blueprint for safe travel.

“Some technical requirements may be necessary to ensure efficient integration of the DGC into operators' check-in and boarding processes, but the guidelines have already demonstrated the ferry industry's leadership in creating a COVID-safe environment,” adds Corrigan.

Last year, when 'staycations' were briefly allowed on a regionalised basis, passengers were attracted to the greater anti-viral protection afforded by the space on ships and the extra measures ferry operators were taking to sanitize vessels and encourage physical distancing. Corrigan concludes: “Passenger volumes were – and remain – 50-75 per cent below normal, but initiatives like the Digital Green Certificate will help build confidence among passengers and encourage economic recovery.”

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