

IOM Council – High Level Segment

Statement: Minister for Home Affairs, Hon Karen Andrews MP

Geneva 29 November 2021

Director General, distinguished delegates,

Thank you for inviting me to make some remarks on behalf of Australia. I'm sorry I couldn't be there in person to deliver them.

On the 20th March 2020 the Australian government took the unprecedented step, based on health advice, to close our international border to all non-citizens and non-residents. We did this to protect the Australian community from the widespread transmission of COVID-19.

We introduced a system of traveller exemptions to regulate the flow of non-citizens into, and Australian citizens out of, Australia. All arriving travellers were required to quarantine for 14 days.

Border movements fell dramatically. A total of 2.4m traveller movements were recorded in the 2021 financial year, compared to 47m travellers in 2018-19.

Now almost two years later the resumption of international travel in a COVID-safe way will be critical to Australia's economic recovery from the pandemic. This is why from 1 December 2021 we are welcoming fully vaccinated eligible visa holders to travel to Australia without needing to apply for a travel exemption.¹ This includes skilled workers and student cohorts, as well as refugees, humanitarians, temporary and provisional visa holders. We will also welcome all fully vaccinated South Korean and Japanese citizens with valid visas travelling direct from their home countries. This is in addition to existing arrangements with Singapore and New Zealand that allow for fully vaccinated citizens of those countries to travel to Australia too.

This is consistent with Australia's national transition plan to transition Australia's national COVID-19 response which sets out a four-phase roadmap for the reopening of the border.

After successfully opening travel for Australian citizens, permanent residents and their immediate families we are now taking further steps to safely reopen to the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to develop robust, resilient and layered border protection measures that use all reasonable avenues to mitigate human biosecurity threats without overly impacting the traveller experience or causing bottlenecks at ports.

Australia recognises the sovereign right of individual nations to determine their biosecurity settings at the border, but we also recognise that the travelling public's confidence in our collective border arrangements can be enhanced if states' decisions are guided by a set of overarching principles which reaffirm the primacy of scientific evidence. It's important that the evidence base is transparent, and we must protect personal data and respect individuals' privacy. In this regard, I thank G7 Transport and Health ministers for adopting a set of high-level principles for the safe and sustainable resumption of travel.

¹ On 29 November 2021, the Government decided, on the basis of medical advice, to postpone this step in the safe reopening of Australia from 1 December until 15 December. The temporary pause will allow further information to be gathered to better understand the Omicron variant.

We also need to invest in the necessary tools to enable us to conduct appropriate risk assessments as far ahead of the physical border as possible. This will facilitate travel decisions and post-arrival mitigation measures.

The resumption of safe and sustainable international travel at scale also requires the adoption of global standards and approaches to digital vaccination certificates to support a biosecure border system.

Australia launched its international COVID-19 vaccination certificate in October 2021 as proof of vaccination for people vaccinated in Australia. The certificate has been developed in conformity with the World Health Organization's guidelines for digital documentation of COVID certificates and takes the form of a visible digital seal as specified by the International Civil Aviation Organization.

Australia chose this path because the visible digital seal is a multilateral standard that leverages the e-passport trust infrastructure which already underpins the world's border systems.

We strongly commend the ICAO standard to other countries. We encourage efforts to make certificates issued in other formats interoperable with the visible digital seal and with each other. Interoperability will make it easier to process vaccination certificates at scale including for the purposes of effective post-arrival management and contact tracing should this need arise. This could be as simple as officially adopting certificate readers with the capability of validating certificates in multiple formats.

We also recognise the importance of the World Health Organization's efforts to digitise its international certificate of vaccination. If appropriately developed, a digital yellow book will be another critical enabler of international mobility.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance of access to travel history information in the risk assessment process. The Passenger Facilitation and Control Working Group of the World Customs Organization is currently developing a voluntary international data standard for 14-day passenger travel history. Australia is also undertaking a 14-day travel history concept study to explore potential legal, data, systems and other requirements to implement a 14-day travel history standard which will directly inform the WCO work.

Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate IOM on its 70th anniversary. As a founding member state, Australia has greatly valued its partnership with IOM for the past 70 years. We look forward to continuing our close cooperation on migration, as well as engagement in humanitarian response and development settings.

Thank you very much.