

# The Pandemic Two Years On: The Impact on Travel

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## Introduction

This is the second in a series of papers that aim to give an overview of some of the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has changed Ireland. This paper examines the impact of COVID-19 on travel, both domestic and international. The paper analyses the sharp decrease in travel following the onset of the pandemic and shows how, even when demand for travel resumed in 2022, the knock-on effects of COVID-19 still impacted people’s ability to travel, especially overseas.

## Domestic Travel

COVID-19 has affected how we travel both domestically and internationally. Ireland’s initial lockdown (starting mid-March 2020) resulted in a stark decrease in the number of both car and public transport journeys. There was a decrease of over 70% in the volume of cars on the roads for the six-week period from 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020-9<sup>th</sup> May 2020 (CSO, 2020a). The number of public transport journeys also decreased substantially between March and April 2020 as Ireland implemented movement restrictions and set limits on the number of people permitted to use public transport. The average customer capacity of buses in Ireland was reduced to 25%, while trains were down to 12-16% and the Luas tram was operating at 15% capacity. Buses and trains were also operating at reduced frequencies (Connor, 2020). On the week starting 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020 (prior to the restrictions), over 5.6 million passenger journeys were recorded on public transport but by the week starting 12<sup>th</sup> April 2020, this was reduced to just over 514,000 (CSO, 2020a). This represents a ten-fold decrease.

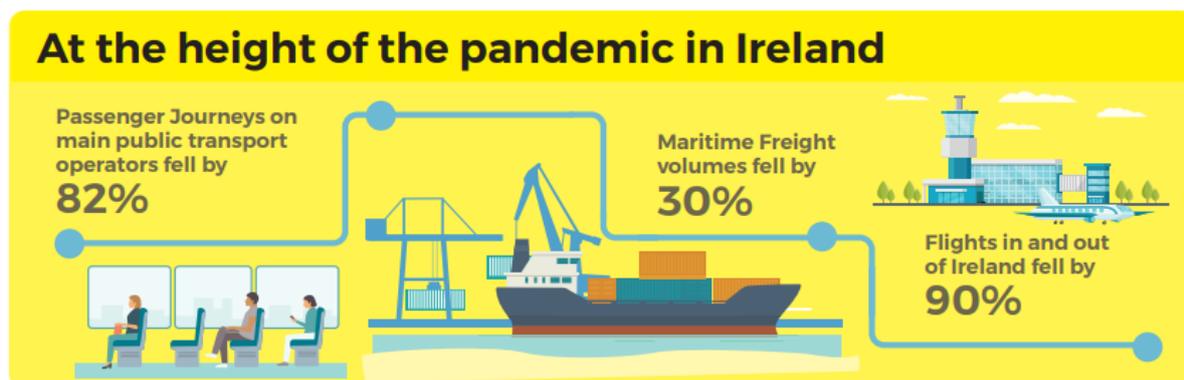


Figure 1: Transport Trends 2020. IGEES (2020, p. 1).

The Irish public’s attitudes towards car ownership and using public transport changed between 2020-2022 due to COVID-19. In a survey by Carzone (published in February 2021), it found that 65% of non-drivers said that the pandemic has spurred them to learn to drive with 55%

stating that owning, or having access to, a car became more important to them as a result of the pandemic. The same survey also showed an increased hesitancy to use public transport with 48% of respondents stating that they were less likely to use public transport compared to before March 2020. Other surveys echoed similar sentiments. For example, in a poll by AA in October 2021, 41% of people stated that they are less likely to use public transport now compared to before the pandemic, with 31% of people stating that they are more likely to drive to their destination, while 34% said that they are more likely to walk to their destination (AA Ireland, 2021)<sup>1</sup>. It is also interesting to note that ‘active travel’, i.e. cycling and walking increased in 2021, with walking journeys representing 17% of all journeys in 2021 (up from 14% in 2019), and cycling journeys accounting for just over 2% of all journeys in 2021 (up from 1.5% in 2019) (CSO, 2022c).



Figure 2: Dublin bus social distance seat signage. Photograph by Nick Bradshaw / The Irish Times. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/bus-services-in-dublin-moving-to-reduced-schedule-due-to-demand-1.4458329>

While the volume of car traffic had returned to 90% of its September 2019 level in the Dublin area by October 2021, and to 91% in regional locations, public transport levels still lagged behind (CSO, 2021b). For rail and bus journeys, the levels were just below 70% of pre-COVID-19 levels (CSO, 2021b). However, by April 2022, passenger journeys on public transport had reached their highest levels since March 2020, with the number of journeys on the last week of April 2022 at 77% of the number taken in early March 2020 (CSO, 2022d).

## Impact on Ireland’s Tourism Industry

The Irish tourism and hospitality industry have been “disproportionately hit” by COVID-19 restrictions between March 2020 and December 2021, having lost about €17 million per day according to the Irish Tourism Confederation (ITIC, 2021). The total losses in the tourism sector amounted to nearly €12.2 billion according to ITIC (ITIC, 2021). Tourism employment in Ireland was thus also severely impacted. For example, a report released in October 2020 noted that of the 260,000 tourism jobs across Ireland, “up to 180,000 of these jobs are either vulnerable or already lost” (Tourism Recovery Taskforce, 2020, p. 5). Thousands of skilled workers in Ireland’s tourism industry had to go onto the Pandemic Unemployment Payment

(PUP) and subsequently left tourism to seek work in other sectors (Paul, 2022a). As different regions in Ireland depend on tourism to various degrees (see Figure 3 below), this will have impacted regions differently.

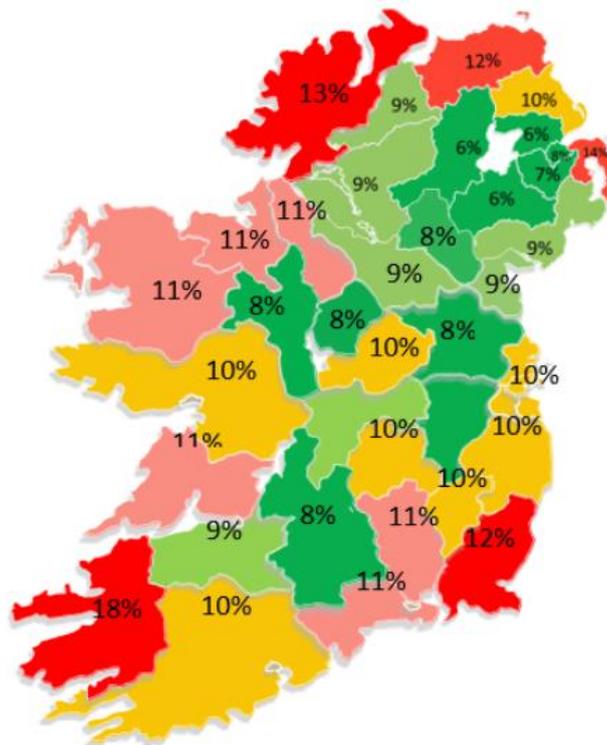


Figure 3: Proportion of jobs directly depending on the tourism sector per county/district. Based on employment estimates in Accommodation, Food, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation. Source: EY, Oxford Economics (2020). Map available at: [https://www.ey.com/en\\_ie/covid-19/potential-impact-of-covid-19-on-irish-tourism](https://www.ey.com/en_ie/covid-19/potential-impact-of-covid-19-on-irish-tourism)

### How COVID-19 has impacted Air Travel

The aviation industry was “one of the sectors of the Irish economy that was hardest hit by COVID-19” (Dublin Airport, 2021)<sup>ii</sup>. The numbers of people travelling was severely curtailed (see Figure 2) as the spread of COVID-19 in the initial wave was linked to international travel flows. This caused governments to implement restrictions on air travel in order to curb the spread of the virus. Thus, as COVID-19 began to spread in early 2020, governments across the world either explicitly closed their airspace<sup>iii</sup>, blocked certain routes (e.g. the United States banning travel from 26 European countries (BBC News, 2020a)), or advised against non-essential travel, such as in the Irish government’s unprecedented advice which they implemented on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020. In addition, to top-down advice from governments in spring 2020, airlines were cancelling specific routes. The government of Ireland required that people arriving into the Republic of Ireland from overseas quarantined for 14 days. Ireland also required passengers to fill out a passenger locator form showing where they will self-isolate. Thus, the pandemic had a significant impact on the number of passengers both entering and leaving Ireland.

*“The less travel, the more we contain the virus” – Ursula von der Leyen,  
European Commission President, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020<sup>iv</sup>.*

These travel restrictions meant that in the second quarter of 2020, 164,400 passengers travelled through the five main Irish airports, which was a decrease of 98.4% over the same period in 2019 (CSO, 2020b). Yet, despite the reduced numbers of travellers entering and leaving Ireland, by July 2020, there was still a large increase in the percentage of COVID-19 cases in Ireland that were traced to international travel (an increase from 2% of new cases to 17% of new cases) (BBC News, 2020b).

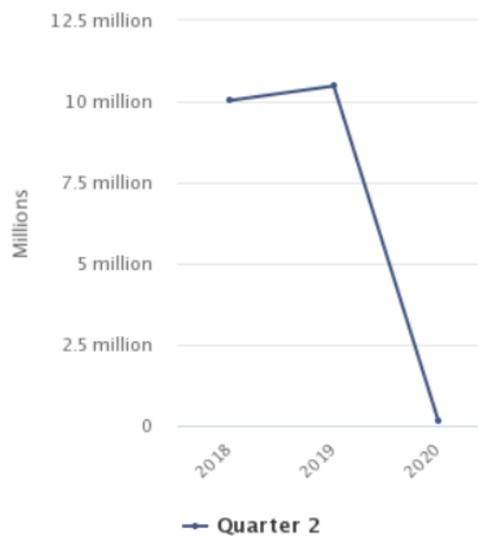


Figure 4: Passenger numbers handled by the main Irish airports in Quarter 2, 2018-2020

As a result of the restrictions that were imposed on flying, a significant number of experienced airport workers left the airline industry and aviation companies have struggled to replace these experienced staff members. Furthermore, in the summer of 2020, in an effort to avoid compulsory redundancies, the Dublin Airport Authority was advised that it needed to reduce staff numbers as a cost-cutting measure so introduced a Voluntary Severance Scheme<sup>v</sup>.

The travel requirements changed throughout 2020 and 2021 as testing and vaccinations became available, with incoming travellers required to have proof of vaccination, recovery, or a recent negative test in order to be able to enter Ireland. In 2020 and 2021, as new strains of COVID-19 emerged, the Irish government amended its international travel advice in response. For example, in December 2020, the Irish government banned all arriving passenger flights from Britain for an eleven-day period in response to a new strain of COVID-19 identified in England (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020). Another example is in December 2021 when the new Omicron variant emerged, the government then required that all overseas passengers arriving in Ireland must show proof of a negative COVID-19 test result, even if they are fully vaccinated (Department of Health, 2021). The requirement to complete a Passenger Locator Form remained until 6 March 2022.

As a result of both fears of contracting the virus, and restrictions placed on travel, COVID-19 affected people’s travel plans and travel intentions. An Intention to Travel Survey, conducted

by the Central Statistics Office in April-May 2021 found that 64.6% of Irish residents aged over 18 had cancelled an overnight trip due to COVID-19 since March 2020 (CSO, 2021a). 54.5% had to cancel an overnight overseas trip due to COVID-19, while 39.6% had to cancel a domestic trip (CSO, 2021a). In Ireland, we took 1.7 million fewer foreign holidays in the third quarter of 2021 compared with the same period in 2019 (CSO, 2022b). A more recent study conducted by the European Travel Commission found that travellers viewed the COVID-19 related entry requirements (such as extra documentation, proof of vaccination, and/or antigen testing/PCR testing) a challenge when travelling between 2020 and 2022 (European Travel Commission, 2022).

In 2019, 20 million passengers entered Ireland but by 2020 this decreased to 4.5 million passengers (CSO, 2021c). By 2021, this number increased to 5 million passengers entering Ireland (CSO, 2022b). However, the number of overseas arrivals for 2022 is set to be significantly higher as pandemic-restrictions have lifted (see Figure 3). Between January-May 2022 alone, the number of arrivals into Ireland had increased to over 5.5 million (Tourism Ireland, 2022; CSO, 2022e). The number of overseas arrivals into Ireland in May 2022 alone was over 1,592,400 passengers which is a nineteen-fold increase on May 2021 levels (85,400 arrivals), but it is important to note that this is still 12% fewer arrivals than before the pandemic (CSO, 2022e)<sup>vi</sup>.

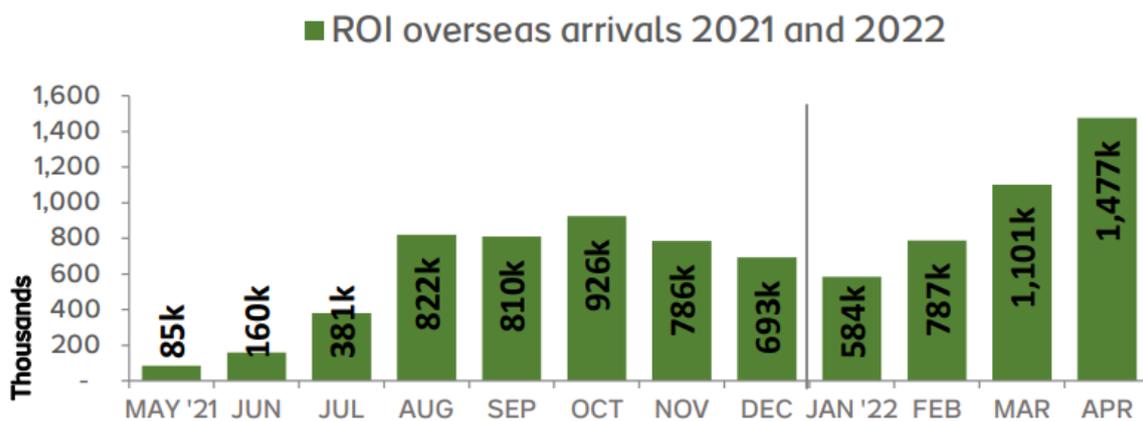


Figure 5: Republic of Ireland Overseas Arrivals May 2021-April 2022. Source: Tourism Ireland (2022). Note that overseas arrivals are all passengers travelling through the Republic of Ireland’s air and seaports, including residents of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This graph does not include the data for May 2022, see CSO (2022e) for this data.

Similarly, the levels of people seeking to depart Ireland to travel overseas has increased as the Irish public are keen to holiday abroad after two years of various pandemic-related restrictions. In the first quarter of 2022, passenger numbers increased in the five main Irish airports<sup>vii</sup>, with more than 11 times the number of passengers compared to the same period in 2021, with “almost 4.3 million more passengers using the airports in the first quarter of 2022 compared to the same period in 2021” (CSO, 2022a). However, this is still a 21% decrease when compared to the first quarter of 2020. The number of flights to and from Irish airports in this period increased by over 32,000 compared to the first quarter of 2021. Passenger numbers at Dublin Airport are rebounding as, by April 2022, they were at 85% of April 2019 levels (CSO, 2022d).

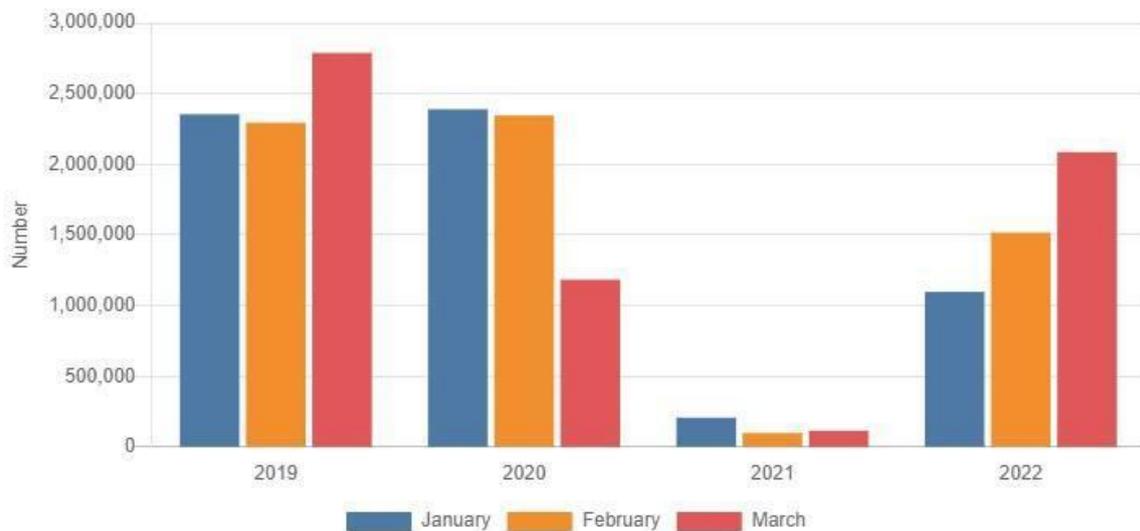


Figure 6: Passengers travelling through Irish airports Jan-March 2019-2022. Source: CSO (2022a)

In Ireland, as the 2022 summer months approached, AIB card transactions show that the purchasing of airline tickets increased a significant amount in May 2022, compared to April 2022 (Quinn, 2022). A survey by Deloitte’s State of the Consumer Tracker (published in June 2022), found that 70% of respondents intend to spend on leisure travel between June-July 2022 and 53% intend to take an international flight over the summer months<sup>viii</sup>.

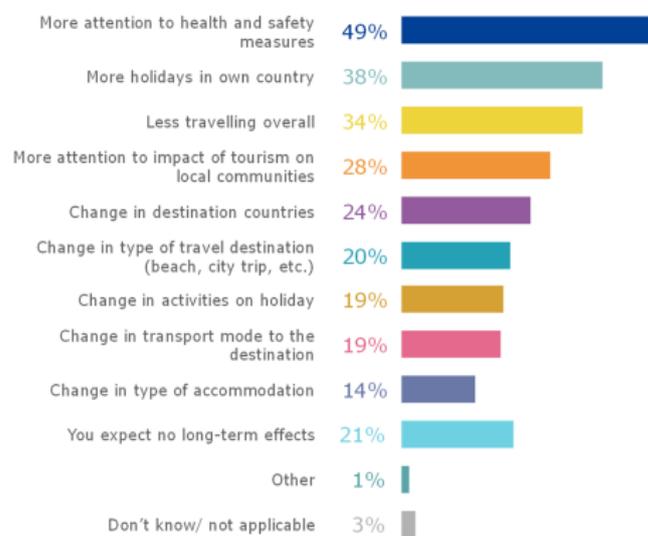
Nevertheless, the movement restrictions and travel bans that were implemented between 2020-2021 continue to have widespread effects at airports, which are struggling to recover from issues posed by losing experienced staff members when the aviation industry was impacted by restrictions on flying. For Dublin airport in particular, the issue of labour shortages and their impact, drew international attention in May 2022 (see e.g. Specia, 2022), as stories of long security queues hit the headlines. The head of the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA), said that they were trying to hire an additional 300 security officers (Specia, 2022). The issue of recruitment has been compounded by new laws enacted in January 2022 which required additional security background checks for newly recruited aviation workers (O’Halloran, 2022). As a result of the lengthy queues at check-in desks, baggage drop-off, and to pass through security, the government put the Defence Forces on standby at the end of June 2022. This was to assist with security operations at Dublin Airport (if required) in an effort to prevent Ireland’s aviation sector from receiving “reputational damage” (McQuinn, 2022).

Alongside staffing issues that have built up due to airports being unable to recover their pre-pandemic staffing levels, spikes in COVID-19 amongst airline employees, have contributed to staff shortages which have led to delays and widespread flight cancellations (McNally, 2022)<sup>ix</sup>. To add to these complexities, customers now fear that their airline will lose their checked-in luggage as there has been an increase in lost baggage in July 2022 as airlines and ground handlers across Europe struggle to manage the ‘post-pandemic’ increase in airline traffic. In Dublin airport alone, there was a reported 4,200 missing bags being dealt with by 26<sup>th</sup> July 2022 (O’Halloran, 2022).

## What could the future hold?

It appears that the impact of COVID-19 will be felt by the travel industry, and for those seeking to travel, for some time. On the one hand, it is positive that the number of people using public transport in Ireland is rebounding. But on the other hand, people may still be cautious about making travel plans for further afield. For example, a study on the attitudes of EU citizens towards tourism found that 76% of respondents expect that COVID-19 will likely have some type of long-term impacts on their travelling behaviour (Ipsos European Public Affairs, 2021). 34% of respondents reported that they reckon the pandemic will lead them to travel less overall, with 38% reporting that it will lead them to have more holidays within their own country (Ipsos European Public Affairs, 2021).

What long-term effects, if any, do you expect the COVID-19 pandemic will have on your travelling behaviour? (Multiple answers possible, % EU27)



Base: all respondents (n=25 714)

Figure 7: The long-term effects of COVID-19 on travelling behaviour. Source: Ipsos European Public Affairs, 2021

The European Travel Commission has found that the pandemic has mainly made travellers more cautious and has affected their consumer behaviour by changing how early they make travel plans, with respondents saying that they will no longer book holidays too far in advance of the departure date (European Travel Commission, 2022). Passengers' airport experiences of delays, flight cancellations, long queues, and lost baggage in May-July 2022 may have further made them more cautious of booking future air travel too early. In order to counteract these concerns, and regain passengers' trust in travelling, the aviation industry will need to resolve its staffing issues.

It is positive for Ireland's tourism industry that the levels of overseas arrivals are rebounding but in addition to the issues at the airports, there are other factors that are impacting Ireland's reputation as a viable holiday destination, namely the availability of accommodation and rental cars (Paul, 2022b). In particular, a Lonely Planet article from June 2022, warned tourists off

from visiting Ireland, and Dublin in particular, due to ongoing issues with the airports, car rental, and accommodation (Brady, 2022).

As winter months approach, and there is the possibility that COVID-19 levels may increase again (following on from the trends of 2020-2021), there is also the possibility that COVID-19 restrictions may again impact travel within, and to/from, Ireland. This may take the form of restrictions on particular routes, the return of testing, and/or the return of mask-wearing in travel settings.

Interestingly, it is possible that a return to mask-wearing in certain travel settings *may* be welcomed by some in Ireland according to a Red C Poll released in July 2022 (carried out on behalf of The Journal)<sup>x</sup>. The poll showed that 64% of respondents said that they were in favour of mask-wearing being mandatory on public transport, 57% stated they would support mandatory mask-wearing on aeroplanes, and 51% said that would like mandatory mask-wearing in airports (The Journal, 2022). Yet for the 21% of people who reported that they do not want to see masks made mandatory in any setting, a return to mask-wearing even for the explicit purpose of travel, may be seen as a step backwards (The Journal, 2022).

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<sup>i</sup> The AA polled 8,241 AA customers.

<sup>ii</sup> This is a quote from Dublin Airport Managing Director, Vincent Harrison, in February 2021 (see Dublin Airport, 2021).

<sup>iii</sup> For example, the European Commission announced a temporary restriction on all non-essential travel to the EU.

<sup>iv</sup> Speech available here: <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1239568170152857607>

<sup>v</sup> See comments made by the Minister for State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, on 14 June 2022 at the Dáil Éireann Debate on the Dublin Airport Authority.  
<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-06-14/71/>

<sup>vi</sup> For comparison, in May 2020, there were just 28,300 overseas arrivals into Ireland, while in May 2019, 1,818,900 overseas passengers arrived in Ireland (CSO, 2022e).

<sup>vii</sup> The five main Irish airports are Cork, Dublin, Kerry, Knock, and Shannon.

<sup>viii</sup> See: <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/insights/industry/retail-distribution/consumer-behavior-trends-state-of-the-consumer-tracker.html>

<sup>ix</sup> Although it is important to note that strikes by air traffic controllers in France have also contributed to the cancellations.

<sup>x</sup> This was a nationally representative survey of all adults aged 18+. 1,018 adults were polled and the fieldwork took place from 7th-12th July 2022.