

## Special report 01/2023: Tools facilitating travel within the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic – Relevant initiatives with impact ranging from success to limited use

Performance audit

Published: 10.1.2023



**FULL REPORT (OFFICIAL EU LANGUAGES)**



### What we assessed and why

In March 2020, shortly after detecting the first COVID-19 cases in Europe, EU countries started imposing border controls and travel restrictions for citizens. Despite its limited competence in public health, the European Commission launched various initiatives to limit the impact of these measures on free movement.

To facilitate travel and to help trace COVID-19 cases, the Commission swiftly mobilised €71 million to develop four tools:

- the European Federation Gateway Service;
- the EU Digital Passenger Locator Form;
- the EU Digital COVID Certificate; and
- the Passenger Locator Form exchange platform.

We assessed whether the Commission had developed effective tools to facilitate travel within the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic, paying particular attention to:

- whether the choice of funding sources and service providers had enabled the Commission to develop the tools expeditiously;
- whether the tools followed best practice concerning the protection of personal data and IT security; and
- the consultation process carried out to assess the tools' alignment with the member states' priorities.

In addition, we ascertained which of the Commission's tools were effective in facilitating travel and helped to improve the coordination of travel restrictions, and which did not have the intended impact.

This audit covers the period from October 2020 to June 2022 and complements special report 13/2022, assessing whether the Commission effectively protected people's right to free movement during the COVID-19 pandemic.





## What we found

We found that the European Commission quickly mobilised EU funding from different sources, such as the Emergency Support Instrument and the Digital Europe Programme, and took a pragmatic approach to developing the tools under time constraints. The EU allocated €71 million to developing the tools, using existing framework contracts instead of public tender procedures.

We found that, considering the legal and technical requirements of the tools, the Commission developed the contact-tracing gateway and the EU Digital COVID Certificate system in good time.

The contact-tracing gateway became available just seven months after the pandemic began, while the EU Digital COVID Certificate was completed before the EU countries had finished their vaccination plans.

In contrast, the Passenger Locator Form and the exchange platform took too long to develop and some national solutions were available earlier, resulting in limited use of these two tools throughout the EU.

We also noted that, although the Commission addressed data protection requirements and applied good IT security practices, it did not manage to overcome certain national reservations about the EU tools. This was due to concerns over legal issues such as data protection combined with the fact that some countries already had their own national tools.

We found that the EU Digital COVID Certificate was effective in facilitating travel. Within one month of the relevant regulation entering into force, member states had harmonised their travel restrictions considerably. The tool improved information sharing and coordination in relation to travel restrictions, as the regulation requires member states to report and justify the introduction of travel restrictions.

We also flagged up the lack of specific procedures for the use of these tools in the longer term, or for re-activating them quickly if needed.

## What we concluded

Overall, we concluded that the Commission moved fast to propose suitable technological solutions to facilitate travel within the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, member states' use of these tools varied significantly, so their impact on facilitating travel was uneven.

The EU Digital COVID Certificate helped coordinate travel restrictions between EU countries and was effective in facilitating travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the other EU tools, however, was modest.

We therefore recommended that the Commission should:

- analyse and address the reasons for the low uptake of the EU Digital Passenger Locator Form and the exchange platform and promote increased uptake of these tools by the member states during the future phases of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- streamline communication on incidents linked to the EU Digital COVID Certificate, and specifically facilitate direct communication between official contact persons for each country participating in the EU Digital COVID Certificate scheme; and
- analyse, together with member states, the need for any additional tools to address potential future crises and, if necessary, prepare the relevant EU tools.