



Minutes

Meeting of the Expert Group on Public Health

06 December 2023

On 6 December 2023, DG SANTE hosted a meeting of the Public Health Expert Group (PHEG) to present the work of its subgroups and to discuss the priorities for the next three years. The representatives of 26 Member States, Norway and Iceland attended the meeting, together with Commission services (REFORM, AGRI, RTD, HOME, ENVI, EMPL, JUST, EAC, ECHO), the European Health and Digital Executive Agency and the European Investment Bank.

Welcome message from Director General, DG SANTE

The Director General of DG SANTE emphasised the important role of the PHEG as a key tool to address the EU's public health challenges. Reference was made to long-term trends, such as demographic change and digitalisation, that are affecting citizens and national health systems, and to the crucial role of prevention in supporting healthier lifespans, reducing health inequalities and supporting the sustainability of health systems. She referred to the concrete steps being taken by the Commission to strengthen the European Health Union with the financial support of the EU4Health programme. These include the identification and replication of best practices, and the co-creation of the 'Healthier Together' – EU non-communicable disease initiative. She welcomed the important role of the PHEG in developing more ambitious policymaking, including on healthy longevity and prevention, and on climate change.

Progress on work of subgroups under PHEG

DG SANTE provided updates on the four PHEG subgroups that address specific topics – cancer, mental health, non-communicable diseases and vaccination - and on the Network for Expertise on Long COVID.

DG SANTE informed on the preparations of a Commission Recommendation on sunbeds, which is planned to be adopted in March 2024. The **subgroup on cancer** has been consulted and a stakeholder webinar will be held in December 2023. An update was given on the progress made regarding the code of conduct for cancer survivors' access to financial services. The work started in April 2023 with the consultation of relevant stakeholders and desktop research to gather relevant information, and stakeholder perspectives. Two stakeholder roundtables have taken place and the remaining two roundtables will be held in December 2023 and January 2024. The code of conduct will be launched with an official event on 15 March 2024.

Thirteen new indicators on cancer have been included in the European Cancer Inequalities Registry data tool. A conference to mark the third anniversary of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan will take place on 31 January 2024 in Brussels.

An update on the work of the **subgroup on mental health** was provided. This group was set up to support the Commission in the development and implementation of the Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health, adopted in June 2023. The group met three times in 2023. Following the Council Conclusions on mental health, adopted on 30 November 2023, an implementation plan mapping all the flagship initiatives is being developed, and will be provided to the PHEG. A **drafting group** has been set up to develop EU guidance on stigma and discrimination, which is one of the flagship initiatives. The drafting group co-chaired by Finland and DG SANTE held its first meeting on 29 November 2023.

The PHEG was informed that the **subgroup on non-communicable diseases** (NCDs) discussed future priorities on NCDs. The experts expressed their support for the continuation of the work of the subgroup with a revised and extended mandate (until end 2025) to focus more on holistic prevention of NCDs and less on individual diseases. The PHEG members agreed with the adjusted mandate for a subgroup on “a comprehensive approach to prevention of NCDs across the lifespan”. The first task of this subgroup will focus on mapping national prevention policies and programmes, with the support of a contractor, which will be followed by advice from the subgroup on the concrete actions, such as best practices and ambitious policies.

DG SANTE then updated on the work of the **subgroup on vaccination**, including the preparation of an upcoming proposal for a Council Recommendation on Vaccine Preventable Cancers, which is included in Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan. A call for evidence was open from 9 January to 6 February 2023 and targeted consultations of key stakeholder groups, including Member States in the subgroups on vaccination and cancer, were carried out from February to April 2023. The subgroup on vaccination has also discussed the priority setting exercise which included vaccine-preventable cancers and addressing vaccine hesitancy.

The **Network of Expertise on Long COVID** (NELC), which brings together national centres of expertise to discuss the management and treatment of long COVID patients, launched a survey among Member States to understand the actions taken to tackle long COVID challenges and to gather their opinions on network priorities. All nine institutions from eight participating Member States have either implemented or planned multidisciplinary care pathways for long COVID patients, rehabilitation programs, and national guidelines for diagnosis and treatment. However, none of the countries had established screening and early detection programs for long COVID. Priority topics identified included the identification of research needs and gaps and the sharing of guidelines and intelligence on diagnosis and treatment. Three specific areas have been chosen for in-depth exploration: (i) a mapping study to provide an overview of long COVID definitions, (ii) mapping of guidelines and intelligence on diagnosis and treatment across EU Member States and beyond, and (iii) outlining surveillance systems monitoring long COVID patients.

Priority setting exercise

PHEG members were informed of the outcome of the priority-setting exercise carried out to identify priorities for the PHEG’s work for the years 2024-2026. The **priorities identified** were ranked by the level of importance given by Member States, and include (1) Health promotion & socio-economic determinants, (2) Mental health and well-being, (3) Cancer, (4) Prevention of NCDs, (5) Healthcare Workforce, (6) Vaccine-preventable diseases (cancers, life-course perspective), (7) Active and Healthy Ageing, (8) Environmental and climate determinants of health, (9) Improving access to healthcare,

quality of treatment, and care for vulnerable groups, (10) Public health best practices to address Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) , (11) Infectious diseases under SDG target 3.3 (HIV, AIDS, TBC), and (12) Long COVID.

DG SANTE presented the **2024 priorities for PHEG's work** suggesting to focus on health promotion and prevention of NCDs, including mental health, and health, socio-economic, commercial, urban and environmental determinants. The **priorities for 2025-2026** would include health longevity and lifelong prevention, vaccination and vaccine-preventable diseases, tackling infectious diseases and long COVID. Other health priorities, such as health systems, access and quality of care, and workforce, and AMR, will be addressed via other work streams or in other Commission expert groups, such as the Expert Group on Health Systems Performance and Assessment (HSPA) and One Health Network, respectively.

DG SANTE provided an outline of the **tools** that may be used to support a common approach to the prevention of NCDs, steering away from disease-specific initiatives. These tools may include joint actions, calls for proposals, contribution agreements and the identification and replication of best and promising practices at national level. Other tools could be explored, such as twinning, creating templates at the EU level, and forming subgroups for specific tasks, as well as designing and suggesting implementation routes for innovative ideas, possibly through the 'Healthier Together' initiative, and using other Commission funding tools, in particular the Technical Support Instrument for technical assistance.

The co-chairs of the **HSPA Expert Group** provided an overview of its activities and proposed future work. The HSPA is co-chaired by the Commission and Member States, with observers from the OECD and the Observatory on Health Systems and Policies. HSPA key topics include the health workforce, the environmental impact of healthcare, mental health, health inequalities, and health system performance assessment governance. The co-chairs of the HSPA proposed to liaise with the PHEG subgroup on mental health to coordinate the work of both groups and collaborate in this area; a joint meeting will be scheduled to ensure such collaboration.

Lastly, DG SANTE provided information on the new **EU4Health 2024 Work Programme**¹, which was adopted on 5 December 2023 with a budget of €752.4 million, of which €70.9 million is allocated to health promotion and disease prevention actions, excluding cancer. This funding will support Member States and stakeholders in implementing initiatives targeting both non-communicable and infectious diseases, with a strong focus on prevention. DG SANTE presented the actions under 2024 work programme which will support the priority areas identified by the PHEG, including joint actions, calls for proposals and contribution agreements with international organisations.

Update from Commission services and European Investment Bank

DG REFORM gave an update on support given to Member States through the TSI to undertake reforms in a broad range of health-related areas. The support is demand-driven and follows an annual cycle that closes every year at the end of October. In 2024, mental health has been proposed as a flagship technical support project. It has attracted 21 requests for support, including a multi-country project. Among these requests, 40% concern the mental health of children and young people. Other topics of interest to the

¹ https://health.ec.europa.eu/publications/2024-eu4health-work-programme_en

Member States include the digitalisation of health systems, AMR and reorganisation of primary and hospital care.

DG RTD updated on the Horizon Europe's 2024 call for proposals² (deadline to submit proposal is 11 April 2024), under destinations 3, 5 and 6 of the Cluster 1 'Health' of Horizon Europe. The preparatory work on the priorities for the work programme 2025, is ongoing, in line with the Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2025-2027. The PHEG and the members of Programme Committee of the Horizon Europe Cluster 1 'Health', will ensure synergies and complementarities in defining the next priorities for Horizon Europe possibly through a joint meeting.

The **European Investment Bank** (EIB) informed on their actions in supporting investments in the area of NCDs, including cancer. Furthermore, the EIB has invested in technical assistance and support for health infrastructure projects during the last year and is supporting the research and development of medical companies. With regard to AMR, investment projects involving different international partners could help to build specific financial instruments to support this area. A memorandum of understanding between DG SANTE and EIB is being drawn up on cooperation on global health initiatives.

Tour de table

Member States gave their views on the work of the PHEG and its subgroups and on the identified priorities for 2024 and for 2025-2026.

Belgium supported the extension of the mandate for the subgroup on NCDs to allow further collaboration on preventing NCDs, between the Commission and Member States. Belgium highlighted the importance of working on the health workforce. **Bulgaria** expressed its approval of the PHEG's work and said that health promotion and disease prevention are high priorities on the agenda of the Ministry of Health. **Cyprus** thanked the Commission for the presentations and for sharing information on the work of the subgroups. **Czech Republic** expressed willingness to collaborate in the area of long COVID as well as their appreciation for the excellent work in the priority-setting exercise and agreed on the identified priorities. **Estonia** thanked the Commission for the updates, including on the work of the HSPA. **Finland** supported further cooperation between countries to address the determinants of health, as well as collaboration of the PHEG with other expert groups. Finland asked for a mapping of EU level activities on public health and also suggested adding the word "non-communicable diseases" into the revised mandate of the new prevention subgroup. **Germany** proposed to include long COVID-19 in children and adolescents as a priority for the NELC, to obtain information on the number of cases of long COVID in children and adolescents, and to increase research in this field. **DG SANTE** explained that the Network of Expertise on Long Covid has already planned on working with the WHO to address this specific area. **Hungary** expressed interest in updates on the roll-out of the flagship initiatives of the Communication on mental health. **Italy** agreed with concentrating on specific priorities throughout the year for a more efficient approach and suggested the provision of updates from other Commission services. Italy agreed on the priorities and welcomed the provision of financial support under the EU4Health 2024 work programme. **Luxembourg** said that it expected its new government, which will include a new health minister who is also responsible for social affairs and social security, will continue to prioritise prevention. Luxembourg spoke about the importance of cooperating with other Member States but mentioned that the country had limited capacity to participate in many of the joint actions. Luxembourg emphasised

² [Health - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/health/)

the significance of maintaining synergies with Horizon Europe. **Malta** echoed Luxembourg's concerns on the difficulties encountered by small countries, and highlighted climate change as a priority area, proposing to include it among the other priorities identified for the PHEG. Finally, Malta suggested setting up a new PHEG subgroup, particularly concerning innovation. **DG SANTE** replied by affirming that climate change is a horizontal topic tackled by all subgroups and appreciated the suggestion concerning setting up new subgroups. To do so, DG SANTE mentioned that it is necessary for Member States to express clear necessities and formally request the set-up of new subgroups. **The Netherlands** agreed on ensuring collaboration among Member States to reach practical results. It reiterated the challenges and administrative burden of participating in joint actions. The public health priorities will be identified by the country's new government in formation. **Poland** suggested holding more frequent PHEG meetings to update Member States on a regular basis and to ensure no duplication of efforts, and agreed with liaising with the relevant Horizon Europe group. **Romania** focused on the topics of health determinants, vaccination, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and long COVID, expressing a high interest in being involved in joint actions in these areas. **Slovakia** mentioned that the country is experiencing a very strong anti-vaccination campaign and highlighted the need for funding and conducting studies and research on vaccination hesitancy as a priority for PHEG. **Spain** underlined how the country has already organised a wide range of initiatives in the areas identified through the priority setting exercise, such as cancer, mental health and vaccination. In addition, Spain asked for reassurance that alcohol and obesity would be included in the subgroup on prevention of NCDs. **Sweden** thanked DG SANTE for the organisation of the meeting and agreed with the comments made by Italy.

The Chair concluded that the Member States supported the proposed priorities of the PHEG and thanked them for all the valuable comments.

AOB

The upcoming **Belgian EU Presidency** presented its priorities in the area of public health, focusing on three main pillars: (1) Care: discussions on health workforce, needs-driven innovation, and healthy populations to create a 'Europe that cares', (2) Prepare: discussions on preparedness, governance, and clinical trials and on AMR, (3) Protect: discussion on the security of medicine supply.

Conclusion and next steps

DG SANTE thanked all the participants for attending the meeting and for their valuable input to the work of the group. The next meeting will likely be in-person in May 2024 in Luxembourg.