



Minutes

Second meeting of the Public Health Expert Group

29 June 2023

DG SANTE hosted a meeting of the Public Health Expert Group (PHEG) to outline planned actions following the recent adoption of the Commission Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health. The meeting also provided an update on current activities in relation to the prevention package, other policies and sub-groups and preparations for the rolling work plan of the PHEG. The representatives of 20 Member States, as well as Norway, attended the meeting, together with Commission services and agencies.

Update on the Commission Communication on mental health

DG SANTE presented the Commission Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health which was adopted on 7 June.¹ Backed by €1.23 billion in funding possibilities from different EU financial instruments to support the implementation of 20 flagship initiatives and other key actions, the Communication marks a new departure for mental health, taking a holistic approach that incorporates policies and socioeconomic, environmental and commercial determinants that affect mental health.

The Communication is based on three guiding principles: (1) access to adequate and effective prevention; (2) high quality and affordable treatment and care; and (3) reintegration into society after recovery. It recognises the key issues to be addressed, such as (1) mental health across policies; (2) promotion, prevention and early detection; (3) children and young people; (4) helping those most in need; (5) risks at work; (6) reforming mental health systems and improving access; (7) breaking through stigma; and (8) fostering mental health globally. As with all EU health policy making, the focus of the Communication is on supporting vulnerable groups.

Follow-up actions are already underway or planned in the coming months, such as the launch on 12 June of a EUR 9 million call for tenders on capacity building, and a call for best practices on mental health to be launched this summer. In the implementation of the Communication and its flagships, the Commission continues to work closely with Member States and stakeholders: meetings are planned with the PHEG sub-group on mental health (27 September) and stakeholders (21 September).

Responding to the presentation on the Communication, **Finland** and **Sweden** welcomed the new approach and looked forward to its implementation. **Belgium** inquired about a possible implementation road map, along the same lines as Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. **DG SANTE** replied that it was working on the implementation schedule at the moment and details would be shared with Member States.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_5493

Update on the prevention package

DG SANTE provided an update on preparatory work on the prevention package, which includes two Council recommendations: (1) a revision of the 2009 Council recommendation on smoke-free environments; and (2) a new Council recommendation on vaccine-preventable cancers.

The goal of the first recommendation is to better protect people in the EU, particularly children and young people, from exposure to second-hand smoke and aerosols arising from tobacco and electronic cigarette use, and to contribute towards the reaching the goal of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan to establish a tobacco-free generation by 2040. The proposal on smoke-free environments is currently being prepared taking into consideration the outcomes of the consultations of Member States, stakeholders and the Expert Group on Tobacco Policy and the Joint Action on Tobacco Control (JACT-2).

The second recommendation is being prepared taking into account the results from the call for evidence and consultations of key stakeholder groups and scientific partners. The recommendation is designed to help Member States address cancer risks linked to infections with human papillomaviruses (HPV) and hepatitis B virus (HBV) by encouraging vaccination uptake and better monitoring of coverage in order to inform public health action.

Update on other policies and sub-groups

Member States were updated on the activities of the various PHEG sub-groups: Cancer, Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), Mental Health, and Vaccination, as well as the network of expertise on long-COVID (NELC). In addition, the Commission informed the participants on the recent work by the Health Systems Performance Assessment (HSPA) expert group.

Regarding the **sub-group on cancer**, recent developments include the new Council Recommendation on cancer screening, the launch of the European Cancer Imaging Initiative, the second phase of the European Cancer Inequalities Registry (ECIR) with detailed cancer profiles of EU Member States, and a new website showcasing 28 EU4Health funded cancer projects. Ongoing and upcoming projects include Joint Actions, funded under the 2023 EU4Health Work Programme, addressing various aspects of cancer screening and care, and work on developing a code of conduct concerning access of cancer survivors to financial services.

Regarding the **sub-group on NCDs**, DG SANTE referred to Joint Actions in the areas of chronic respiratory diseases, dementia and other neurological disorders financed under EU4Health 2023 work programme. The deadline to nominate competent authorities has been set for 15 September 2023. A call for proposals for stakeholders on the same topics will also be financed under the 2023 EU4Health Work Programme. The next meeting of the sub-group will take place on 18 October 2023.

The main work in the **sub-group on mental health** so far has concerned support in the development of the Communication on mental health. In addition, relevant opportunities available under the 2023 EU4Health Work Programme include a Joint Action on mental health, and support stakeholders to develop projects on supporting vulnerable groups, mental health challenges faces by cancer patients and survivors, and the development of a European Code for Mental Health. Participants were asked to share with their networks the recently launched call for tenders on a training and exchange programme on mental health professionals. The next meeting of the sub-group will take place on 27 September 2023.

The **sub-group on vaccination** held its first meeting in March 2023 focusing on the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on vaccine-preventable cancers. Its members participated in the Health Security Committee meeting on polio and measles in April 2023. The next meeting of the sub-group is scheduled for 4 October 2023.

Member States were also invited to nominate institutions for the **network of expertise on long COVID**, which held its first meeting in May 2023. A survey among NELC members is underway to determine the status of long COVID care pathways, unmet needs and existing policies across

Member States. The responses so far underline the need for improved guidelines, clinical recommendations and good clinical practice, enhanced support to patients, exchange of expertise and the possible formation of a knowledge centre on long COVID.

The update of the work by the expert group on **Health Systems Performance Assessment** focused on a brief background to its history and rationale, and its latest publication that showcases how Member States measure health promotion and disease prevention and which indicators they collect and use. The report found that indicators in cancer screening and vaccination coverage were among the most commonly used to measure prevention activities. The mandate of the HSPA has been extended to promote strategic innovative approaches to strengthening health systems, with a new workplan focusing on five priority topics: workforce, environmental impacts of healthcare, HSPA governance, health inequalities and mental health.

Rolling agenda

The results received so far from 14 Member States on the survey of setting priorities for the rolling work plan of the PHEG, were presented. It was agreed that those Member States which had not yet replied to the survey, would do so by 7 July 2023.

In a brief tour de table, several Member States which had not yet replied to the survey gave some initial feedback on the rolling agenda. **Finland** apologised for the delay in responding to the survey due to a change in government but said it was committed to providing its own priorities before the deadline. **Bulgaria** said that it was broadly in agreement with many of the priorities presented in the initial survey responses, but that it would also be keen to provide more detailed answers in written form after further discussion at national level. **Portugal** welcomed the work achieved to date and said that the priorities in the initial survey response were broadly in line with its own objectives but will provide a formal response before the deadline. **The Netherlands** will send more comprehensive answers by 7 July. They inquired how the PHEG priorities, which would be set from now until 2025, would be harmonised with the mandate of the newly elected European Parliament and Commission in 2024, how the final survey outcomes would be presented and the next steps for the PHEG.

DG SANTE informed that a summary of the responses and priorities will be shared with all Member States ahead of the next meeting of the PHEG. The draft work plan will be presented in the autumn after further consultation with Member States. Related to a new European Commission in 2024, it was possible that the work and priorities of the PHEG may be impacted to some degree. Nevertheless, it was expected that the broad goals and dynamic of the PHEG would continue to serve the needs of Member States in line with their identified priorities.

Any other business

The **Spanish EU Presidency** briefly outlined its priorities in the area of public health, focusing on mental health, improving the protection of vulnerable populations, improving responses to major health crises, building capacity of health systems and the promotion of healthy lifestyles and prevention measures.

Conclusion and next steps

The Chair thanked all participants for attending the meeting and for their valuable input to the work of the group. The next meeting of the PHEG is planned on 6 December 2023. Invitations for this meeting and for sub-groups and stakeholder meetings will be sent out soon.

Those Member States who did not fill the 'Priority Setting Survey for the 2023-2025 Work Program of the PHEG', were kindly asked to do so by 7 July 2023.