

Dear Minister, dear colleagues,

Thank you Minister Temido for convening this meeting. The Netherlands appreciates the work of the Portuguese Presidency to ensure open communication in these challenging times. On behalf of my minister, please allow me to convey his apologies for not being able to participate this morning. Unfortunately, governmental obligations hinder him.

The Coronavirus has continued to mutate, thereby presenting us with an ever-evolving threat to public health and continuity of care. Our National Institute for Public Health estimates that a majority of the new infections in the Netherlands are caused by the version of the virus first identified in Great Britain. As this variation of the virus is quickly gaining ground, its increased transmission rate requires that we continue to hold in place effective measures to counter the virus's spread.

At the same time, our people crave for a return to normality. Our government takes this very seriously. The Netherlands is currently conducting several large-scale experiments to evaluate how events, including sports events and theater performances, can be organized safely and responsibly. These experiments require that testing capacity continues to remain widely available within our society, whilst evaluating the role additional testing can play to aid in the opening of our societies. Innovating our testing methods to also include self-testing is of importance. Cognizant of the potential to deploy them at a large scale, we should speedily ensure market approval for self-tests, or consider special dispensation to allow their sale within the EU. In light of enhancing our testing strategies, the Netherlands welcomes the continued efforts to establish a common list of validated Rapid Antigen Tests in the framework of the relevant Council Recommendation.

Whilst our efforts to increase testing will certainly aid in the opening of our societies, nothing will contribute to the health, wellbeing and reopening of our societies as much as vaccines. I am positive about the limited vaccine hesitancy that we see in our populations. Yet this requires that we provide our people the opportunity to get a vaccine as soon as possible, starting with the most vulnerable and the people that take care of them. The Netherlands is increasing the speed of vaccination by rapidly deploying the inventory of vaccines, and only retaining the minimum required inventory. This leads to risks, but we have determined that these risks are not only acceptable, but necessary to ensure the health of our society.

To conclude, I would like to bring to the attention that speeding up our vaccination strategy is only possible when we have sufficient vaccines at hand. We welcome the efforts of the Commission to coordinate and strengthen – together with the member states – the full chain of development, advance procurement, market authorization and production of a new generation of vaccines to anticipate variations of the Coronavirus. It is imperative that we do everything in our power to ensure security of supply of safe and effective vaccines.

Thank you.