



Council of the European Union
General Secretariat

Brussels, 05 March 2021

WK 2945/2021 INIT

LIMITE

**SAN
PHARM**

This is a paper intended for a specific community of recipients. Handling and further distribution are under the sole responsibility of community members.

WORKING DOCUMENT

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations

Subject:	Preparation of the Informal videoconference of ministers of Health on 16 March 2021: COVID-19 – the way ahead - Exchange of views
----------	--

Delegations will find a note from the Presidency attached. This note is intended as a basis for an exchange of views under the agenda item "COVID-19 - the way ahead". That exchange of views is scheduled to take place at the Informal videoconference of Ministers of Health on 16 March 2021.



COVID-19 – the way ahead

Non-pharmaceutical interventions in the EU

According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), non-pharmaceutical interventions against COVID-19 constitute public health measures that aim to prevent and/or control SARS-CoV-2 transmission in the community.

Over the last year, mostly following various guidelines set forth by the ECDC and the World Health Organization (WHO), a variety of non-pharmaceutical interventions have been adopted across Europe. The adoption of such measures has played a major role in reducing transmission rates, as well as the overall impact of COVID-19 in the EU.

In its guidelines on non-pharmaceutical interventions against COVID-19, the ECDC presents several available options for such interventions in various epidemiologic scenarios. Non-pharmaceutical interventions include a wide range of public health measures, comprising 3 main categories: i) individual measures, such as hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene and use of face masks; ii) environmental measures, such as cleaning and ventilation of indoor spaces; and iii) population-related measures, such as promoting physical distancing and limiting and/or restricting movement and large gatherings.

In addition, testing and contact tracing have been cornerstone measures of our collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the implementation of effective testing and contract tracing strategies, health authorities are able to rely on such measures to reduce the spread of the virus, by correctly identifying positive cases and isolating them, as well as being able to impose quarantine measures to all traceable contacts. Indeed, until safe and effective vaccines are widely available, non-pharmaceutical interventions will continue to be the main public health tool available to health authorities in the response to the challenge posed by SARS-CoV-2.

Therefore, optimising the implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions and policies in the EU is essential, alongside the discussion on how to gradually lift restrictions, while controlling transmission in a sustainable way.

Within personal protective measures, issues relating to community use of facemasks in combination with other measures should not be cast aside, especially considering the emergence of new variants of SARS-CoV-2.

Non-pharmaceutical interventions related to travel measures, including the measures applicable to travellers from higher-risk areas, such as testing and quarantine, have been discussed thoroughly in various fora, both at a national level and at an EU level.



As part of the Commission's ongoing efforts to ensure better coordination and communication of travel-related measures at an EU level, some important milestones are worth mentioning: on 13 October 2020 EU Member States adopted a Council Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and, on 19 January 2021 the Commission set out actions needed to step up the fight against the pandemic, resulting in the Commission proposal on 25 January to amend the Council Recommendation of 13 October 2020.

Measures applied to international travellers, usually encompassing testing and/or quarantine are permanently under discussion to ensure free movement of citizens, goods and services, while respecting health and safety measures. Quarantine or combinations of testing and quarantine could play an important role in contributing to the gradual lifting of travel restrictions. Testing approaches for COVID-19 have also been a major matter of interest within Member States, reflected in the publication of recommendations by the Commission and guidelines by the ECDC and WHO.

In addition, as Europe moves to the next stage of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the main action point necessary to overcome this challenge remains accelerating the development, manufacturing, and deployment of vaccines against COVID-19.

This has been regularly addressed, including by the members of the European Council at their videoconference on 25 February 2021 and at the Informal Meetings between Ministers of Health of the EU, on 13 January 2021 and, most recently, on 1 March 2021.

However, the vaccination roll-out plans continue to face some challenges. Accelerating the pace of the implementation of national vaccination campaigns, including reducing waste, adapting supply chains, and ramping up production capacity, are essential to inoculate a high percentage of the European population (in particular, citizens at highest risk of severe disease), as well as to limit opportunities for the virus to mutate.

Optimising communication on the available vaccines, their different administration schemes and their effectiveness are key factors to ensure that as many European citizens as possible agree to be vaccinated.

In addition, increasing the international solidarity effort is vital to ensure an equitable distribution of vaccines globally and reinforce the EU as a global health leader.

Adding to uncertainties regarding vaccines, there is the challenge of new current or emerging variants of SARS-CoV-2, with several of concern currently circulating within Member States. Test and trace approaches, including strong surveillance and sequencing, remain the cornerstones of the response to the emerging variants. We need to enhance surveillance and detection capacity in order to identify variants of concern as early as possible to control their spread, as well as to invest in potentially adaptable vaccines, as stated in the Commission Communication on the *'HERA Incubator: Anticipating together the threat of COVID-19 variants'*. In response to the



variants, many EU Member-States have also implemented travel restrictions and/or enhanced testing and quarantine for travellers. Strategies towards a coordinated EU approach to non-pharmaceutical interventions in response to the variants could be considered as these variants, having crossed borders, pose a significant concern to all countries.

Furthermore, the European Union's approach regarding the APAs and their enforcement as well as the need of maintaining a common strategy should be considered in view of future needs.

Finally, the COVID-19 crisis has put Member States' health systems under unprecedented stress. Overall, it has exacerbated existing structural challenges related to the effectiveness, accessibility and resilience of health systems. On 11 February 2021, the Council adopted a regulation establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility setting the tone for the EU's recovery plan.

The scope of application of the Facility shall refer to policy areas of European relevance structured in six pillars, one of which is "health, and economic, social and institutional resilience, with the aim of, inter alia, increasing crisis preparedness and crisis response capacity".

Indeed, one of the main goals of this initiative is to tackle and mitigate the health and socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, better preparing Member States for a resilient recovery.

It will support the EU recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, allowing countries to implement investments and reforms in several areas. This Facility is intrinsically linked to the ongoing health common response to this pandemic and it is important that it incorporates objectives and strategies to prepare the health systems for the long-term and to build resilience for any future pandemics. It is an opportunity for countries to invest in and reform their national health systems and strengthen health policies to address the challenges and disruption caused by this pandemic, contributing to social and economic cohesion at national and EU levels.

As set out in the Regulation establishing the Facility, close cooperation between the Commission and the Member States should be sought and achieved throughout the process.

In view of the above, delegations are invited to present their views on the following:

Question 1:

What strategic choices should be made regarding non-pharmaceutical interventions in the way ahead to effectively respond to COVID-19 in the EU?

**Question 2:**

What are the main conditions required for a gradual lifting of restrictions in Member States? Ramped up and accelerated provision of vaccines against COVID-19 to citizens? Others?