



ECDC Advisory Forum

## Seventy Second Meeting

### Stockholm, 21-22 February 2023

#### ECDC Chief Scientist's Annual Report on the work of the Advisory Forum in 2022

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| <b>Document number:</b> AF72/09 | <b>Date:</b> 3 February 2023  |
| <b>Summary:</b>                 | <p>This is the sixth Chief Scientist's Annual Report on the work of the Advisory Forum. During 2022, the work of the Advisory Forum transitioned from the almost exclusive focus on COVID-19 related topics (which had dominated the business of the Forum during 2020 and 2021) to providing advice and comment, and sharing of information, on a wider range of ECDC scientific activities and disease topics. Nonetheless, a substantial number of COVID-19 related ECDC outputs and activities were reviewed by the Advisory Forum, particularly in the first quarter of the year. The discussions and written procedures on some of these COVID-19 related outputs and activities highlighted concerns among Advisory Forum members that for non-urgent matters there needed to be greater engagement in the development of the outputs, and more time and feedback given to consultations. In response to this, ECDC has implemented a formalised process for recording and reporting back on written consultations, and has initiated a dialogue with the Advisory Forum on what, and on when and how, it should strengthen engagement and consultation processes.</p> <p>There was general consensus within the Advisory Forum on many of the issues that ECDC brought to it for advice and opinion, although there were also a few topics on which diametrically opposite views were expressed by different members of the Advisory Forum e.g. on the strength of advocacy for the use of face masks in public settings.</p> |
| <b>Action:</b>                  | <p>To note and comment on the content and format of the report</p> <p>To identify any topics on which further Advisory Forum opinion is required</p>  |

**Background:**

The need for the report was identified by the Management Board Working Group that was established to address the recommendation arising from the Second External Evaluation of ECDC that there should be improved complementarity between the Management Board and the Advisory Forum. The purpose of the report is to provide the Management Board with a succinct summary of the advice provided by the Advisory Forum, either through discussion in the four scheduled meetings, or through written procedure during the calendar year of 2022. The report documents the impact of the advice on ECDC's activities, identifies any topics on which there was a significant divergence of opinion within the Advisory Forum's membership, highlights key issues for MB consideration and awareness, and includes a short digest of items presented to the Advisory Forum for information.

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**Annex I: ECDC Chief Scientist's Annual  
Report on the Work of the ECDC Advisory  
Forum, 2022**

## Annual Report on the Work of the ECDC Advisory Forum, 2022

### Background

This is the sixth Chief Scientist's Annual Report on the work of the Advisory Forum. The need for the report was identified by the Management Board Working Group that was established to address the recommendation arising from the Second External Evaluation of ECDC that there should be improved complementarity between the Management Board and the Advisory Forum. The purpose of the report is to provide the Management Board with a succinct summary of the advice provided by the Advisory Forum, either through discussion in the four scheduled meetings, or through written procedure during the calendar year of 2022. The report documents the impact of the advice on ECDC's activities, identifies any topics on which there was a significant divergence of opinion within the Advisory Forum's membership, highlights key issues for MB consideration and awareness, and includes a short digest of items presented to the Advisory Forum for information.

After two years in which the very great majority of Advisory Forum discussion was devoted to SARS-CoV-2 topics, with many *ad hoc* on-line meetings held in addition to the four scheduled meetings for each year, in 2022 the topics addressed by the Advisory Forum were no longer so exclusively focused on SARS-CoV-2. There were also no *ad hoc* meetings held in 2022, although a significant number of Advisory Forum consultations by written procedure were undertaken, several of which were on SARS-CoV-2 topics. This gradual return to a pre-SARS-CoV-2 programme of Advisory Forum business is reflected in the format of this report, which is again structured around how the work of Advisory Forum overall supported the functions that are set out in Article 18 of the ECDC Founding Regulation<sup>1</sup>, with regards to topics other than SARS-CoV-2, which are: (a) to support the director in ensuring the scientific excellence and independence of activities and opinions of the Centre, and (b) to constitute a mechanism for an exchange of information on health threats and the pooling of knowledge [and to] ensure close cooperation between the Centre and the competent bodies in the Member States.

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<sup>1</sup> This report refers to Article 18 of Regulation (EC) No 851/2004

## Scientific Excellence and Independence (Art. 18.3)

A core role of the Advisory Forum in ensuring the scientific excellence and independence of activities and opinions of the Centre is that of reviewing scientific advice outputs (including Expert Opinions, Systematic Reviews, and Guidance documents). The AF is consulted on the content, conclusions and process of development of draft outputs, including before and after public consultation if such is undertaken, and may also be consulted at earlier stages in the design and development of such outputs. As a result of the advice provided by the AF, the Centre may proceed to publication (or to public consultation) of the advice with relevant amendments or, in the case of substantial comment and/or divided opinion on the key conclusions of the scientific advice that is being reviewed, may undertake more substantial review and revision and resubmit to a later meeting of the AF.

### Scientific Advice Outputs

#### ECDC scientific advice process and impact framework

The Advisory Forum's opinions were sought on a recent revision of the process and principles followed by ECDC in developing its Scientific Advice outputs, and on a new impact assessment framework that ECDC was in the process of developing. A few minor comments were received, particularly regarding the need to ensure the completeness and appropriateness of expertise of members of expert panels established to develop scientific advice, and also on the need to ensure the feasibility of implementation. No substantial criticism or objection to the process and principles, or the impact assessment framework, was voiced (AF69).

##### Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC proceeded with the development of the impact assessment framework and the adoption of the revised process and principles. In the light of the comments regarding the importance of ensuring the feasibility of implementation of its scientific advice, ECDC initiated a review of Implementation Science literature and will present its findings and conclusions for future development of scientific outputs to the Advisory Forum in early 2023.

#### A standardised monitoring tool for PrEP in the EU/EEA

ECDC presented (AF69) a tool for monitoring HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis programmes. It was emphasised that the tool had been designed primarily for use at Member State level, and was not drafted as a framework for data that ECDC would collect. Advisory Forum comments were sought on the practicability and utility of the tool. The AF was broadly supportive of the indicators, although some members considered that in some countries they might be more difficult to implement than in others.

##### Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

In the light of the general endorsement by the Advisory Forum of the tool as something that could be used in Member States according to their capacities, and not as an EU/EEA reporting requirement, ECDC published a report on the tool to provide countries with a reference set of commonly agreed indicators for data reporting to improve comparability, while giving practical advice on different options for data collection to allow for sufficient flexibility.

### **ECDC guidance on Quarantine of COVID-19 close contacts and ECDC Guidance on isolation of COVID-19 cases**

A written consultation was undertaken on 05/01/2022. Responses were received from the Advisory Forum members from Ireland, Italy, EUPHA, EBMT, and WHO. Comments related to concerns about implementation feasibility and utility in high incidence settings, and to classification and differentiation of individuals according to vaccination history, although divergent opinions were expressed on the need to differentiate between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals.

#### **Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities**

The guidance was revised in the light of the comments received, reconciling as far as possible divergent views

### **ECDC guidance on ending isolation of people with COVID-19**

A written consultation was undertaken on 19/01/2022. Responses were received from the Advisory Forum members from Czechia, Finland, France, Hungary, Iceland, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and EUPHA. Several of those responding expressed concerns about health services response capacity and population acceptability of the proposed measures, although it was also noted by some respondents to be a 'good' and a 'useful' document.

#### **Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities**

ECDC took account of Advisory Forum members emphasising that the document did not adequately indicate that the proposed response actions should be tailored according to resources and the epidemiological context. The guidance was revised in the light of the comments received, making clearer that measures need to be tailored according to the epidemiological situation and response capacities. The Chief Scientist also responded to the Advisory Forum in the light of the comments received, instigating a mechanism for formal recording and response to Advisory Forum comments, using a standardised template, and noting that while ECDC recognised the need to give greater emphasis to the tailoring of response in the guidance in question, this had previously been clearly stipulated in related guidance on testing and isolation of cases and contacts.

### **COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness in adolescents aged 12-17 years and interim public health considerations for administration of a booster**

A written consultation was undertaken on 01/02/2022. No responses were received.

#### **Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities**

The document was published



## Considerations for the use of face masks in the community in the context of the SARS-Cov-2 Omicron variant of concern

A written consultation was undertaken on 02/02/2022. A response was received from the Advisory Forum member from Norway, with an overall comment that the document was concise and useful, but with comments on the need to make clearer the purpose of the advice.

### Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

The guidance was revised in the light of the comments received, clarifying the public health objectives of implementation of the advice provided and describing how policies for the use of masks could be adapted to the public health objective

## Considerations for the use of antibody tests for SARS-COV-2– First Update

A written consultation was undertaken on 07/02/2022. No responses were received.

### Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

The document was published

## Joint EASA/ECDC COVID-19 Aviation Health Safety Protocol – update

A written consultation was undertaken on 07/05/2022. Responses were received from the Advisory Forum members from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, ASPHER and the European Institute of Women's Health. Almost all of the comments received were about the phrasing of the advice on wearing of masks in community settings/public spaces, although there was no consensus view, with some advocating for strong advocacy (i.e. 'recommend') and others advocating for a much softer and discretionary position (e.g. 'consider', as was the formulation of advice in the version circulated for consultation).

### Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC provided responses to the Advisory Forum feedback, using the new standardised template for responses to Advisory Forum consultations. In the light of the majority opinion being in favour of 'softer' advice on use of face masks in public spaces, and to maintain consistency with previous ECDC advice on the use of face masks, ECDC kept the advice as originally formulated.

## Preliminary public health considerations for autumn/winter COVID-19 vaccination strategies

A written consultation was undertaken on 08/07/2022. Responses were received from the Advisory Forum members from Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden. There was general endorsement of the document, although with a number of comments on some specific details in the document, and also concerns expressed regarding the need for a greater level and timescale for consultation on advice that is not required very urgently. Detailed comments related particularly to the need for more information on the safety profile of vaccines, requests that greater consideration be given to the implications of hybrid immunity, the need for more information on the assumptions made in the modelling analysis, and requests for more consideration of the longer-term use of repeated boosters.

### Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC provided responses to the Advisory Forum feedback, using the new standardised template for responses to Advisory Forum consultations. All of the issues referred to above were addressed through revision of the document prior to publication, including additional sections on hybrid immunity and vaccine safety, and a new section on key assumptions and parameters used in the modelling section. With regards to the requests for consideration of longer-term strategy related to the use of boosters, ECDC noted that it was developing a paper on long-term scenarios, which would include consideration of this. With regards to the requests for greater engagement and longer consultation periods, the ECDC Chief Scientist initiated a review of implementation science literature, with particular emphasis on the evidence regarding the value of co-production, and will bring a paper summarising the conclusions of the literature review to the Advisory Forum in early 2023.

## Selection of experts scientific panel Chagas disease

The opinions of the Advisory Forum were sought on the proposed selection of an Expert Panel on Chagas disease through written procedure on 05/08/2022. No comments or objections were received

### Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

The Expert Panel was convened

## Cooperation with Competent Bodies and exchange of information (Art. 18.4)

### *Coherence of Scientific work with Member States priorities and studies (Art.18.4.a, f)*

#### **Prioritisation of COVID-19 research proposals**

The Advisory Forum was presented (AF68) with a list of 22 high-level COVID knowledge gaps, divided into three thematic areas, that had been identified during group interviews with ECDC experts. Each AF Member was asked to identify the three highest priority areas for research action in each thematic area, based on IRIS criteria, and taking into account the research action that would be most relevant in informing future public health policy given the current trajectory of the pandemic. The outcome of the polling of views was that the highest priority areas, as assessed by the Advisory Forum, were: Immunity and immune response (prioritised by 93%), Research into novel surveillance and monitoring strategies (88%), Characterising the disease burden (80%), Systematic evaluation of prevention and control measures (80%), Optimising responses to prevent and mitigate a new pandemic (69%), and Evaluation of public health and economic cost of COVID-19 (67%). A final draft of the report based on the prioritisation exercise was circulated to the Advisory Forum as a written consultation on 25/07/2022, with no further comments received in response

#### **Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities**

The Advisory Forum's opinion on the highest priority knowledge gaps in respect of COVID-19 were reflected in the final version of the report on ***ECDC expert consultation on knowledge and research gaps related to the COVID-19 public health response*** that was published on the ECDC website and submitted to the European Commission (DG SANTE and DG RTD)

#### **Tailoring ECDC scientific outputs according to variations in regional/national epidemiology and capacity**

ECDC consulted with the Advisory Forum twice during 2022 on the topic of a mechanism for further ensuring the relevance (utility and proportionality) of ECDC scientific outputs, during a plenary discussion in AF69 ("How should or could ECDC tailor its risk assessments and scientific advice according to variations in regional/national epidemiology and capacity?") and in Advisory Forum Working Group discussions in AF70 ("Future Advisory Forum consultation procedures"). Although no consensus was reached over the course of the discussions in AF69 and AF70, a number of suggestions were made regarding approaches, including relevant consultation processes, to making ECDC's scientific outputs more relevant and usable by Member State authorities. These suggestions included that risk assessments should be categorised by priority and likely impact, and that recommendations included in public health guidance, expert opinions, and surveillance reports (if they include risk management recommendations) should be categorised according to the strength of evidence underlying the recommendations. It was also suggested that the development of standards for adoption by external partners (e.g. Competent Bodies) should involve consultation with those partners with regards to feasibility and acceptability, particularly if adoption is likely to have high resource implications.

#### **Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities**

ECDC is developing proposals based on the Advisory Forum's comments and will bring these back to the Advisory Forum in 2023, along with a related document on lessons that ECDC could learn from implementation science studies.

## IRIS consultation exercise - implementation of the Joint Strategy Meeting discussion (2023–2025)

The Advisory Forum was consulted (AF70) on proposals presented by ECDC on its plans to take into account in its 2023-2025 work plans the conclusions arising from the discussions held during the 3<sup>rd</sup> ECDC Joint Strategy Meeting (JSM3), at which participants had been drawn from the ECDC Management Board, the ECDC Advisory Forum, and the Directors and Coordinators of the national Competent Coordinating Bodies in Member States. The consultation was undertaken using the IRIS framework for assessing the proposals, which were grouped according to the following thematic areas: 'Never again: the imperative need to strengthen EU and Member State surveillance'; 'Addressing the silent 'P' [for prevention] in ECDC'; 'EU standards for emergency preparedness'; 'ECDC's role in global health security'. Following brief presentations on ECDC's proposed work plans in each of these areas, the most common opinion expressed by Advisory Forum members for each of the areas was "supported with minor changes", with the exception of the global health security area, for which the majority opinion was "fully supported".

In the discussion on strengthening surveillance, concerns were noted by the Advisory Forum that there should not be any duplication of ECDC's activities by HERA. It was also noted that laboratory-based reporting had been implemented or enhanced in some Member States in response to SARS-CoV-2. A number of concerns were expressed regarding the challenges of integrating data from different sources, those concerns relating to a reluctance to share 'commercial' information and to the interpretation of GDPR. With regards to 'prevention' there were a number of comments on the need for greater use of social science studies and results, and on the need for, and challenges to, assessing social inequalities, and the challenges of responding to 'infodemics'. With regards to 'standards for emergency preparedness' there were again questions from the Advisory Forum about the possible duplication of work by HERA. There was general support for the plans related to ECDC's role in global health security.

### Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC has reviewed its workplans based on the feedback received during the Advisory Forum discussion, reflecting the general support for the proposed plans with minor changes in most cases.

## *Cooperation between the Centre and Member States (Art. 18.4. b, c, e)*

### Proposed criteria and process for prioritising diseases for EU/EEA surveillance

ECDC explained that the criteria for selection of diseases for EU/EEA surveillance were currently in the Annex to Decision 1082/2013 (Cross Border Threat to Health), and that as the European Parliament proposal was to keep the criteria in the proposed Regulation on Serious Cross-Border Health Threats, which was under review, ECDC was seeking the Advisory Forum's views on five criteria that it considered should be reviewed (AF69). Discussion within the Advisory Forum included the extent to which the criteria are relevant to all countries and different reporting systems, and whether there was a need to consider syndromic reporting for some infectious public health threats. Following the consultation with the Advisory Forum and the National Focal Points (NFPs) for Surveillance, ECDC produced a proposal for a revised list of diseases under EU/EEA surveillance, which included suggestions on whether a disease should be under indicator-based surveillance, event-based surveillance or both, based on the surveillance objectives of each notifiable disease. This document was circulated to the Advisory Forum for consultation by written procedure on 02/12/2022, with comments received from Belgium, Czechia,

## ECDC NORMAL

Denmark, Estonia, France, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Romania, and Sweden. A number of suggested changes were accepted, including proposals related to the reporting of campylobacter, yersiniosis, shigellosis, measles, meningococcal infection, and respiratory viral infections. Although a number of Advisory Forum members questioned the proposals related to some vector-borne infections, ECDC concluded that it would keep to the original proposals as had been agreed by the panel convened to develop the revised list of EU/EEA reportable diseases.

**Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities**

ECDC took the Advisory Forum feedback into account in its proposals on the prioritisation criteria for diseases for EU/EEA surveillance, and revised the final list in the light of the written consultation.

**Operational considerations for respiratory virus surveillance in Europe (joint ECDC/WHO report)**

A written consultation was undertaken on 06/07/2022. No responses were received.

**Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities**

The document was published

***Identification of emerging health threats (Art 18.4.d)*****Long-term scenarios for the COVID-19 pandemic – Considerations for transitioning beyond the acute pandemic phase**

ECDC presented a set of long-term scenarios that it had developed in respect of COVID-19 and sought the opinions of the Advisory Forum on their expectations and concerns in respect of COVID-19 during the autumn and winter of 2022/2023 (AF68) and subsequently presented a further iteration of the document on long-term scenarios that included an analysis of packages of measures that would be relevant and appropriate in each scenario (AF69). Feedback from the Advisory Forum included that the scenarios were both plausible and useful for planning purposes, and that the document should be made public, subject to some minor amendments, particularly related to proposals regarding testing strategies for each scenario.

**Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities**

In the light of the Advisory Forum's endorsement of the long-term scenarios, they were published on the ECDC website following minor amendments in response to the Advisory Forum's feedback

## Rapid Risk Assessments

The following Rapid Risk Assessments were circulated to the Advisory Forum prior to publication for information and/or comment:

- COVID-19 Rapid Risk Assessment, 19<sup>th</sup> Update: Assessment of the further emergence and potential impact of the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant of concern in the EU/EEA (21/01/2022)
- Rapid Risk Assessment: *Candida auris* outbreak in healthcare facilities in northern Italy, 2019-2021 (17/02/2022)
- Rapid Risk Assessment: Increase in extensively-drug resistant *Shigella sonnei* infections in men who have sex with men in the EU/EEA and the United Kingdom (21/02/2022)
- Rapid Risk Assessment: Increase in severe acute hepatitis cases of unknown aetiology in children (28/04/2022)
- Rapid Risk Assessment: Monkeypox multi-country outbreak (23/05/2022)
- Rapid Risk Assessment (Update): Monkeypox multi-country outbreak (07/07/2022)
- Rapid Risk Assessment: Increase of diphtheria cases among migrants in Europe due to *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* (03/10/2022)
- Rapid Outbreak Assessment (joint ECDC/EFSA assessment): Multi-country outbreak of *Salmonella* Mbandaka ST413 possibly linked to consumption of chicken meat in the EU/EEA, Israel and the UK (29/11/2022)
- Rapid Risk Assessment: Intensified circulation of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and associated hospital burden in the EU/EEA (09/12/2022)

### Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC reviewed and, where relevant, revised the Rapid Risk Assessments in the light of any feedback received from the Advisory Forum

## Epidemic Intelligence updates

At each AF meeting there is a presentation on new and ongoing cross-border infectious disease threats of particular public significance. This provides an opportunity for sharing of intelligence and of experiences in responding to those threats, and as such fulfils the AF mandate to constitute a mechanism for exchange of information on health threats and the pooling of knowledge.

### Epidemic updates were provided on the following topics:

- SARS-CoV-2 (AF68)
- Increase in acute hepatitis cases of unknown aetiology in children (AF69)
- Multi-country *Salmonella* outbreak linked to chocolate products (AF69)
- Diphtheria (AF70, AF71)
- Monkeypox (AF70)
- Respiratory syncytial virus (AF71)
- *Streptococcus* (AF71)

## Updates for information and comment

In addition to the above items on which AF advice and opinion was sought, or exchange of intelligence and pooling of knowledge was undertaken, a number of topics were presented to the AF for information (and comment if needed). These items included:

- The ECDC Chief Scientist presented a draft of his fifth annual report to the ECDC Management Board on the work of the Advisory Forum (AF68)
- ECDC provided an update on ECDC Scientific Outputs in 2021 and forward look to scientific outputs planned for 2022 (AF68)
- Update on ECDC Vaccine-Preventable Diseases and Immunisation Programme (AF71)
- Update on COVID-19 and influenza vaccine effectiveness multi-country studies (AF68)
- Update on ECDC Foresight Programme (AF71)
- Eurosurveillance - long term strategy 2021-2027 and key objectives (AF69)

## Conclusions

During 2022, the work of the Advisory Forum transitioned from the almost exclusive focus on COVID-19 related topics (which had dominated the business of the Forum during 2020 and 2021) to providing advice and comment, and sharing of information, on a wider range of ECDC scientific activities and disease topics. Nonetheless, a substantial number of COVID-19 related ECDC outputs and activities were reviewed by the Advisory Forum, particularly in the first quarter of the year. The discussions and written procedures on some of these COVID-19 related outputs and activities highlighted concerns among Advisory Forum members that for non-urgent matters there needed to be greater engagement in the development of the outputs, and more time and feedback given to consultations. In response to this, ECDC has implemented a formalised process for recording and reporting back on written consultations, and has initiated a dialogue with the Advisory Forum on what, and on when and how, it should strengthen engagement and consultation processes.

There was general consensus within the Advisory Forum on many of the issues that ECDC brought to it for advice and opinion, although there were also a few topics on which diametrically opposite views were expressed by different members of the Advisory Forum e.g. on the strength of advocacy for the use of face masks in public settings.

As in previous years, the work of the Advisory Forum has added significant value to the quality, relevance and the credibility of ECDC's scientific outputs and activities. ECDC owes a debt of gratitude to the Advisory Forum members for their continuing engagement and informed and constructive advice during a time of unprecedented pressure. The sharing of not only their expertise but also their time through the course of 2022 was of great benefit to ECDC in not only assuring the quality of its scientific outputs, but also in ensuring its awareness of the challenges and priorities for colleagues working in the EU/EEA Member States.