



ECDC Management Board

Fifty-first Meeting

Stockholm, 24 March 2021

ECDC Chief Scientist's Annual Report on the work of the Advisory Forum in 2020

Document number: MB51/08	Date: 8 February 2021
Summary:	<p>The Advisory Forum provided an important role for both ECDC and for EU/EEA Member States in the response to SARS-CoV-2 during 2020, through its provision of expert and informed advice and opinion on a wide range of SARS-CoV-2 related topics, and also through its information exchange function. Despite the many pressures on Advisory Forum members, they continued to provide good support to ECDC, through their participation in both scheduled and ad hoc meetings, and their rapid responses to documents sent out for comment. A number of members commented on the value of the Advisory Forum meetings as a mechanism for exchange of information and discussion of topics of mutual interest. 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.</p> <p>During the course of 2020 the very great majority of the Advisory Forum's time was given to the topic of SARS-CoV-2, with members regularly providing their opinions on draft risk assessments, surveillance proposals, case definitions, and testing and response issues. In addition, the Advisory Forum reviewed one large and complex scientific advice document (an Expert Opinion on non-pharmaceutical countermeasures against pandemic influenza), and provided opinions and comment on: ECDC Activities on vCJD; on actions taken following the evaluation of the Fellowship Programme; on surveillance of influenza during COVID-19; on ECDC's long-term surveillance framework 2021-2027; and also provided their views on the implementation of proposed changes to the ECDC mandate.</p> <p>There were a few topics on which there was not a clear consensus view within the Advisory Forum, such as on the topic of travel measures as part of the response to SARS-CoV-2, and on the future level of activities appropriate for vCJD.</p>

	<p>There were also topics on which either the majority view, or a strongly expressed minority view, of the Advisory Forum membership challenged the advice proposed by ECDC. Two examples include, the geographical criteria used for defining a case and/or for indicating the need to test travellers in the early days of the pandemic, and ECDC's advice on the use of face masks.</p> <p>As noted, an important function of the Advisory Forum is to serve as a forum for the exchange of information between its members on infectious disease threats and other concerns. During 2020 the Forum proved to be an extremely useful mechanism for exchange of information on SARS-CoV-2 issues. In retrospect, it would seem that despite their other commitments, Advisory Forum members would have welcomed more frequent meetings during 2020.</p> <p>The Chief Scientist's Annual Report for 2020 was presented to the Advisory Forum during their 64th meeting on 18 February 2021. No amendments were requested by the AF members.</p>
Action:	For information
Background:	<p>This is the fourth 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, including instances when there was not a consensus among members, either through discussion in the three scheduled face-to-face and one scheduled audio-conference meetings, or through written procedure or <i>ad hoc</i> audio-conference discussion, during the calendar year of 2020.</p> <p>The main part of the report this year focuses on the Advisory Forum's advice and comment on ECDC's SARS-CoV-2 related activities and outputs, and the remaining part follows the previous structure according to the functions that are set out in Article 18 of the ECDC Founding Regulation, which states that the Advisory Forum's role is (i) to <i>support the director in ensuring the scientific excellence and independence of activities and opinions of the Centre</i>, and (ii) to <i>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</i>.</p> <p>During the course of 2020 there was one scheduled face to face meeting in Stockholm, three scheduled audio-conference meetings, and six <i>ad hoc</i> extraordinary audio-conference meetings.</p>

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Annex I: Annual Report on the Work of the ECDC Advisory Forum, 2020

Annual Report on the Work of the ECDC Advisory Forum, 2020

Background

1. This is the fourth 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 three scheduled face-to-face and one scheduled audio-conference meetings, or through written procedure or ad hoc audio-conference discussion, during the calendar year of 2020. Taking into account the proposal in the draft Management Board response to the third External Evaluation of ECDC that "the annual report on the work of the AF provided by the Chief Scientist could perhaps be more precise about the debates and possible divergent views of the AF on different discussion points", the report notes in particular whether differences of opinion were expressed by Advisory Forum members. The report also documents the impact of the advice on ECDC's activities, highlights key issues for MB consideration and awareness, and includes a short digest of items presented to the Advisory Forum for information.
2. The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 at the end of 2019, and the ensuing pandemic that was declared in early 2020, had an impact on the topics of discussion, the ways of working, and the frequency of meetings of the Advisory Forum. At an early stage in the pandemic, members of the Advisory Forum expressed the view that the ECDC Advisory Forum was the body that should be advising on scientific policy issues, and that any technical decisions having a major impact on public health needed to be discussed at the AF first. Reflecting this, the focus of the Advisory Forum business in 2020, and hence also of this report, was SARS-CoV-2, including matters of case ascertainment, testing strategies, surveillance, prevention and control, and mathematical modelling-based projections of trends.
3. The report differs from previous reports in that the major part of it is structured according to the SARS-CoV-2 topics on which the Advisory Forum gave advice or shared information, since it was to SARS-CoV-2 that the great majority of the Advisory Forum's time was this was given during the year. The final section of the report briefly follows the structure of previous reports, in assessing how the work of Advisory Forum overall supported the functions that are set out in Article 18 of the ECDC Founding Regulation, 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.

SARS-CoV-2 Topics on which the Advisory Forum was consulted in 2020

COVID-19 documents discussed during AF meetings

Meeting	Documents
AF60 (18-19 February 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19, fourth update 2. ECDC Internal Strategic Paper outlining scenarios, critical events, response activities and risk assessment questions 3. Case definitions for surveillance (revision 14/02/20) 4. ECDC Internal Paper on areas with presumed ongoing community transmission of COVID-19, based on epidemiological data and information collected from epidemic intelligence as of 15 February 2020
First Extraordinary AF meeting on COVID-19 (24 February 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Threat Assessment Brief: Outbreak of novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): situation in Italy, 23 February 2020 2. Strategy for COVID-19 surveillance (PPT) 3. Case definition and European surveillance for COVID-19 4. Areas with presumed community transmission 5. ECDC Strategic Report: PHE outbreak of acute respiratory syndrome associated with a novel coronavirus, Wuhan, China, 18 February 2020
Second Extraordinary AF meeting on COVID-19 (4 March 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19, fifth update 2. Case definition and European surveillance for COVID-19, as of 2 March 2020
Third Extraordinary AF meeting on COVID-19 (17 March 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19, sixth update 2. WHO situation report, 15 March 2020 3. Risk communication for promoting social distancing in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, 12 March 2020 4. Novel coronavirus (SARS-Cov-2) – Surveillance Strategy
Fourth Extraordinary AF meeting on COVID-19 (6 April 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19, eighth update (PPT) 2. Novel coronavirus (SARS-Cov-2) – Surveillance Strategy
Fifth Extraordinary AF meeting on COVID-19 (21 April 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19, ninth update (PPT)
61st AF meeting (11 May 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategic analysis report (planning) (PPT)
Sixth Extraordinary AF meeting on COVID-19 (9 June 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19, tenth update (PPT) 2. Draft framework to monitor COVID-19 in the EU/EEA and the UK – ECDC Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
62nd AF meeting (24 September 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Influenza surveillance during COVID-19 2. ECDC COVID-19 work plan 2021-2022 (PPT)
63rd AF meeting (15 December 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Risk-assessment-COVID-19-transmission-related-the-end-of-year-festive-season 2. Strategic and performance review of the ECDC response to the COVID-19 pandemic 3. Technical Report: Key aspects regarding the introduction and prioritisation of COVID-19 vaccination in the EU/EEA and the UK

List of documents sent to AF regarding COVID-19

Document shared with the AF for review/information prior to publication	Date of communication
Prior to publication: Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19: sixth update	11/03/2020
FYI prior to publication – ECDC Rapid Risk Assessment Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic: increased transmission in the EU/EEA and the UK – seventh update	25/03/2020
Technical Report: Using face masks in the community, 8 April 2020	08/04/2020
Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19, 8th update	08/04/2020
Preliminary forecasts of COVID-19 in EU/EEA and the UK, version 11 May 2020	12/05/2020
ECDC assessment on risk of COVID-19 for the EU/EEA and UK population, 10th update	11/06/2020
ECDC assessment on risk of COVID-19 for the EU/EEA and UK population, 11th update	05/08/2020
Technical Report: Projected baselines of COVID-19 in the EU/EEA and UK, 31 August 2020	04/09/2020
Threat Assessment Brief: Reinfection with SARS-Cov-2: considerations for public health response, 16 September 2020	16/09/2020
Revised EASA/ECDC guidelines and summary of ECDC replies to main concerns expressed by MS	16/12/2020
COVID-19 vaccination prioritisation strategies	17/12/2020
Technical Report: COVID-19 in children and transmission in schools	21/12/2020
Rapid Risk Assessment on Risk related to spread of new SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern	28/12/2020

Surveillance and Country Classification

COVID-19 Case Definition and Criteria for Testing

The topics of the case definition for COVID-19 and the criteria for testing for SARS-CoV-2 infection were discussed by the Advisory Forum several times through the year. ECDC modified an early version of the case definition in response to advice from the Advisory Forum, such that healthcare workers wearing appropriate PPE would not be considered close contacts at high risk of COVID-19 infection, and only those without recommended personal protective equipment (PPE) or with a possible breach of PPE should be considered as close contacts. Other ECDC outputs on case definitions and testing that addressed questions raised by members of the Advisory Forum included the publication of a new case definition that encompassed the possibility to include antigen-test-positive cases in reporting to ECDC, and guidance on population-wide ('mass') testing.

A topic of some controversy within the Advisory Forum at the beginning of the year was ECDC's proposals on testing travellers arriving from countries or regions other than the epicentre of cases at that time in Hubei. Several members of the Advisory Forum raised concerns about the capacity to test so many people and the likely (low) yield of such testing. A particular matter of debate was with respect to the ECDC definition of a 'suspected case' including patients with acute respiratory tract infection with a history of travel or residence in a country/area reporting community transmission during the 14 days prior to symptom onset, which it was considered would challenge testing capacity because the WHO classification defined areas geographically at country level, not at sub-national level. It was agreed that there was a need to separate the case definition from the testing strategy; problems were arising because these two were coupled in many countries. It was also agreed that ECDC would differentiate between countries with 'widespread community transmission' and 'localised or low level community transmission' in its definition, and would provide subnational information on areas of increased transmission within the Member States, with the caveat that ECDC would need to receive a satisfactory level of data from Member States to do this in a timely manner.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC revised its case definition for SARS-CoV-2 infection in the light of feedback from the Advisory Forum, such as with regards to risk groups (excluding healthcare workers if they had used appropriate PPE). In the light of strong expressions of concern regarding the resource implications, and low yields, of testing travellers returning from all countries categorised by WHO as having community transmission, ECDC moderated the advice on testing to indicate that returning from areas with presumed localised or low-level community transmission should include case-by-case clinical judgement and be based on national recommendations. ECDC also revised and produced guidance on mass testing in line with Advisory Forum requests.

Classification of Epidemic Status of Countries and Regions

At the beginning of the year (AF60 – 18/2/20), there was considerable debate with the Advisory Forum regarding how countries and regions should be classified in terms of the level of SARS-CoV-2 transmission occurring. Concerns were expressed by some members that the definitions were very dependent on a country's capacity to detect cases, and that therefore low income countries would be unlikely to be classified as countries of ongoing community transmission as they would not be testing and detecting adequately. To address this concern, ECDC subsequently included information on testing rates and test positivity rates in its surveillance outputs, as such data became available for analysis. It was agreed (Extraordinary AF – 24/2/20) to include on the list of areas within the EU with community transmission only villages/regions under lockdown, not nearby big cities or entire countries, in the same way as China was not included as a whole country at that time but assessed at the province level. Although ECDC noted at that time that it was likely that classifying community transmission status at a sub-national level might only be relevant for a few more weeks, as after that transmission may be widespread in most countries.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

As noted above, ECDC revised its case definition for SARS-CoV-2 infection in the light of feedback from the Advisory Forum, moderating the advice on testing to indicate that returning from areas with presumed localised or low-level community transmission should include case-by-case clinical judgement and be based on national recommendations. ECDC also revised and produced guidance on mass testing in line with Advisory Forum requests.

Surveillance

The Advisory Forum (Extraordinary AF – 24/2/20) provided early endorsement for ECDC’s proposals that testing ILI/ARI and SARI patients for COVID-19 through flu sentinel surveillance should start sooner rather than later. Subsequently, the Advisory Forum also expressed broad support (Extraordinary AF – 06/04/20) for the comprehensive surveillance strategy for COVID-19 proposed by ECDC. Several AF members raised concerns (Extraordinary AF – 09/06/20) regarding the high number of indicators and the feasibility of collecting the necessary data proposed by ECDC in its draft ‘framework to monitor COVID-19 in the EU/EEA and the UK’. As a consequence, ECDC revised and provided additional guidance on the prioritisation and justification of the indicators.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC implemented its surveillance for SARS-CoV-2 in line with the endorsement of the Advisory Forum. It also revised its ‘framework to monitor COVID-19 in the EU/EEA and the UK’ in the light of the Advisory Forum’s comments.

Risk Assessment and Epidemiological Projections

Over the course of 2020 the Advisory Forum was provided with eight updates of the ECDC Rapid Risk Assessment on COVID-19 for comment or discussion, six of which were provided for discussion during scheduled or extraordinary ad hoc meetings of the Advisory Forum, and two only as circulated documents for information and rapid comment. In addition, a risk assessment focussing on COVID-19 transmission related to the end-of-year festive season was provided for discussion in the 63rd Advisory Forum meeting in December, and an assessment on risks related to the spread of new SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern, was circulated for information and rapid comment in late December.

Shorter Threat Assessment Briefs were also shared with the Advisory Forum for discussion or comment on the topics of “Outbreak of novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): situation in Italy” and “Reinfection with SARS-Cov-2: considerations for public health response”.

In general, the Advisory Forum welcomed and endorsed the contents of these documents, providing important validation for these key ECDC outputs. In the light of advice from the Advisory Forum on topics that should be addressed in its COVID-19 risk assessments, ECDC ensured that further updates included information on evidence regarding infection from asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic patients, and further analysis of the risk of infection among vulnerable groups. In addition to support for the core elements of ECDC’s risk assessments, the Advisory Forum noted the value of the addition of new elements, including: the summary of options for response by scenario introduced in the fifth update of the RRA on COVID-19; a section on considerations regarding de-escalation (RRA Update 8); and the addition of short-term modelling-based projections on epidemic progression and health system capacity saturation (RRA Update 10). In the light of opinions expressed by the Advisory Forum regarding the need to address how to communicate about the change from containment to delay/mitigation, ECDC developed and published a document on risk communication for promoting social distancing in relation to the COVID 19 pandemic (Second update published 23/03/20).

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC made revisions to several of its risk assessments as result of feedback provided by the Advisory Forum, and also developed additional technical reports in the light of the Advisory Forum’s comments. Overall, the Advisory Forum provided an invaluable source of advice and ‘sense-checking’ in the discussions around the risk assessment documents during the meetings held through the course of 2020.

Response Measures

During the course of 2020, the Advisory Forum provided views on a wide range of ECDC outputs related to SARS-CoV-2 response measures, both in the context of options for response set out in Rapid Risk Assessments and in specific Technical Reports. The following paragraphs refer to the topics on which there was the greatest discussion or clearest advice to ECDC to address the topic or update/amend its advice.

Face Masks

The topic of advice on the use of face masks in the community was discussed during the Extraordinary Advisory Forum meeting of 06/04/20, in the context of the community measures that ECDC proposed to address in the 8th update of its RRA on COVID-19. ECDC noted that as the issue had been raised, and recommendations had been made in some countries, it was a topic that could not be ignored in the RRA. Several members voiced their concerns about this measure, given the global shortage of masks, especially among the healthcare workers. ECDC was strongly advised to add a clear statement on the need to give absolute priority to ensuring availability for healthcare staff, as well as to emphasise the limited nature of the evidence for this measure. This advice was followed.

In response to specific questions raised by an Advisory Forum member regarding the rationale for advising the use of face masks in the community, ECDC explained that it had reviewed a wide range of evidence available in the literature, including observational studies, ecological analyses, and experimental studies (such as the fact that the US CDC had updated and strengthened its advice on the use of masks on the basis of a similar review of the overall body of evidence, particularly from observational studies). ECDC concluded that while the quality of evidence was low or very low, with some particular challenges in extrapolating the findings of studies undertaken on influenza and SARS, and in extrapolating the results of studies in healthcare workers to the community, to the current COVID-19 situation, these different types of study have largely been consistent in suggesting that respirators, medical face masks, and certain types of non-medical face mask provide a degree of protection (both to the wearer and to those around the wearer). ECDC recognised that the results of some interventional studies on face mask use for the prevention of influenza in community settings have been inconsistent but often such studies had serious methodological flaws, and so concluded that while the quality of evidence was low, the situation was not one of there being 'no evidence'. ECDC did note in its guidance that "There is conflicting evidence on the protective effect for the wearer of medical face masks for influenza-like illness (ILI) and laboratory-confirmed influenza in household settings" and that "all relevant evidence comes from studies on influenza and other coronaviruses".

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC included clearer statements regarding the level of evidence on face masks in response to comments made by Advisory Forum members, but remained clear in its position that the balance of evidence was that there was likely to be a benefit in the use of face masks in specified community settings.

Travel Measures

There was a considerable divergence of views within the Advisory Forum regarding the role of travel measures to prevent importation of SARS-CoV-2 in discussions. Some members expressed the view that they were not concerned about importation but more about the establishment of continuous transmission and how to measure once it was established, whereas others were concerned about the risk of importation and how to deal with secondary clusters. There was also some variety of view as to from where cases might be most likely to be imported. Later in the year (AF62 – 24/9/20) some Advisory

Forum members expressed the view that they did not believe that travel restrictions were a solution for controlling infection, and that introducing travel restrictions affecting a whole city/region/country would not make any difference. It was also noted that it was also difficult logistically to enforce restrictions. However, other members noted that entry restrictions on travellers from areas of known high incidence when they had achieved or maintained low incidence in their own country appeared to have been effective earlier in the year had been associated with successful limitation of incidence. ECDC noted that the latest version of ECDC's rapid risk assessment (12th update, 24/9/20) had also touched on this subject, pointing out that the situation changed once very low levels of infection were achieved.

Further discussion of travel measures took place during AF63 (15/12/20), following the publication of the joint EASA-ECDC document "Guidelines for COVID-19 testing and quarantine of air travellers - Addendum to the Aviation Health Safety Protocol". During the discussion, ECDC was thanked for the joint guidance, and it was confirmed by members from countries where entry screening had taken place at airports that the average positivity rate among travellers was around 1%, in line with the assumptions expressed in the joint document, although it had been considerably higher on a few specific flights.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

The topic of travel measures was one on which the range of opinions within the Advisory Forum varied most. This reflected, to some extent, differences in the geographical and epidemiological situation across the EU/EEA, and ECDC attempted to balance the opinions expressed in its documents referring to travel measures.

Schools/Educational Settings

The role of children in driving the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (i.e. whether or not they had a significant role) was raised during several Advisory Forum discussions. In response to the fact that the Advisory Forum had highlighted the uncertainty that existed on this matter, along with questions and concerns raised elsewhere, ECDC published a Technical Report on "COVID-19 in children and the role of school settings in transmission" on 6/8/20, and an update to this report on 23/12/20. In response to a request from the Advisory Forum that ECDC should encourage countries to implement measures in a randomised fashion in order to gain more understanding of the effects of opening and closing the schools for instance, ECDC noted that in its next RRA (9th Update, 23/4/20) it would suggest that interventions addressing children under 10 years of age are lifted initially as firstly, evidence shows that there is limited contribution of these groups in the transmission in the general population and secondly, when infected, these age groups rarely develop severe illness.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

The expert opinion of the Advisory Forum provided important validation of these outputs.

Vaccination

The Advisory Forum's views were sought on ECDC's "Strategy and framework for COVID-19 vaccination in the EU/EEA with a focus on ECDC activities" during AF63 (15/11/20). There was broad support expressed for the document, although a number of questions were raised. These included questions about whether ECDC would be offering any practical advice or support for vaccine effectiveness studies, to which ECDC responded that ECDC would be developing protocols on effectiveness studies in collaboration with the Member States and WHO that could be used in the countries. There would also be a specific study using EU data on hospital and healthcare workers as soon as the vaccine was on the market, along with a feasibility study relating to long-term healthcare facilities. It was also noted that ECDC had funds available to support countries, although it was not certain that they could cover

all the countries. In response to a concern that ECDC had stated that the first effectiveness study results would only be available sometime between June and September 2021, ECDC noted that this amount of time was necessary to enable enough countries to implement a common study protocol to allow a pooled brand specific analysis of effectiveness that would provide genuine added value above that provided by smaller single-country studies.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

The expert opinion of the Advisory Forum provided important validation of the proposed strategy.

Other/General COVID-related topics

The Advisory Forum's opinions were sought (AF63 – 15/12/20) on the recommendations arising from the strategic review of the ECDC response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as undertaken by McKinsey. With regard to the recommendation on ECDC developing a better understanding of national health systems, it was pointed out by some Advisory Forum members that this would be very difficult as they were all so different and complicated. Approaches proposed by members included: establishing more regular communication with countries in smaller groups; spending more time on country visits; and that ECDC should focus on learning about countries' systems in the specific areas of healthcare capacity and infection control, but not the complete systems. Comments were also made regarding the recommendation regarding ECDC's relationship with WHO, with members noting that while close coordination is in general to be preferred, the issues within the EU region could be quite different from those in the wider WHO European Region, and therefore ECDC should be able to be more proactive and move more quickly on some issues when the situation or capacities differed substantially between the EU countries and the rest of the WHO European Region. It was also commented that EU-added value was not mentioned in the report and that this should probably be included.

During the course of discussions there were calls from members of the Advisory Forum for ECDC to address the following topics related to SARS-CoV-2:

- Producing guidance on the use of smartphone applications to do automated contact tracing
- The importance of doing some systematic research after the pandemic

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC will explore the feedback on proposed mechanisms for improving its understanding of national health systems as part of the programme of the third Joint Strategy Meeting in 2021. Guidance on the use of mobile applications in support of contact tracing for COVID-19 was published by ECDC on 10/06/20. ECDC will be exploring opportunities and priorities for systematic research after the pandemic as part of its Strategy 2021-2027 activities on strengthening its research engagement.

ECDC COVID-19 work plan 2020-2021

During AF62 (24/9/20) the Advisory Forum was presented with ECDC's planned activities and outputs for COVID-19 for the remainder of 2020 and 2021, and asked to comment on these and indicate their support for the proposals using the Mentimeter polling system. The results indicated an overall high level of support, with the highest support for ensuring the scientific quality and coherence of communication on COVID-19, supporting vaccine strategies, and strengthening surveillance, and the lowest for work on contact tracing and Apps for such activity, and for undertaking specific studies and

applied research. The full polling results were as follows (all scores are against a maximum value of 5, with 0 indicating no agreement and 5 indicating full agreement that the topic is a priority):

Do you agree that the following are priorities for ECDC's work plan?

- Strengthen SARI surveillance – 4.5
- Support laboratory activities – 4.1
- Specific studies and applied research – 4
- Ensure the scientific quality and coherence of communication on COVID-19 – 4.6.
- Strengthen Member States' preparedness and response – 4.4
- Contact tracing and apps – 3.5
- Infection prevention and control activities 4.2
- Support to the European Commission and Member States' COVID-19 vaccine strategy – 4.5.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

The expert opinion of the Advisory Forum provided important validation of these proposals.

Information Exchange on COVID-19 Topics

The Advisory Forum functioned as an important mechanism for information exchange during 2020, again this was primarily for the exchange of information related to the impact of, and response to, SARS-CoV-2. There were regular exchanges of information on the epidemiological situation in the EU Member States, and also on the response measures being taken. Examples of the topics of information exchanges include:

- During AF60 (18-19/02/20) the major topic of information exchange was whether cases of SARS-CoV-2 had been detected in Member States (at that stage many countries had not detected any cases), what case definition was being used, SARS-CoV-2 testing capacity and strategy,
- Sharing of views on whether the COVID-19 response has had a significant impact on other public health activities, such as vaccination programmes, or the ability to respond to other infectious disease threats was the main topic of information exchange during the Extraordinary AF meeting held on 21/04/20, when the consensus was that there was already evidence of an impact on vaccination and screening.
- During AF61 (11/5/20) members shared information on the approach being taken to de-escalation of measures following the 'lockdowns' that had been applied in many countries in the preceding weeks. The feedback from members indicated that many countries were planning a deliberate gap between each phase of de-escalation. The most obvious variation between Member States was with regard to the re-opening of schools, with a number of different approaches being tested.
- During AF61 (11/5/20) Advisory Forum members were also asked to exchange information regarding plans within their countries for the winter season vaccination programmes for influenza and pneumococcal infection, in the light of SARS-CoV-2.
- During AF62 (24/09/20) the topic of information exchange was the epidemiological situation in Member States following the summer period, and exchange of information on approaches being taken to restrictions on international travel.
- The focus of information exchange during AF63 (15/12/20) was on the evidence for emergence of new variants of concern in Member States, and what testing strategies were being adopted to detect such cases.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

The information exchange that occurs during Advisory Forum meetings provides important insight into the needs and priorities in Member States, and is used to guide decisions on the focus and contents of risk assessments and other technical reports.

Topics other than SARS-CoV-2 on which the Advisory Forum was consulted in 2020

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 (other than COVID-19 related)

Expert Opinion on non-pharmaceutical counter measures against pandemic influenza

A revised version of ECDC's Expert Opinion on non-pharmaceutical counter measures against pandemic influenza, which had taken into account comments received by the AF at its meeting in September 2019, was presented to the Advisory Forum in AF60 (18-19/02/20). Overall, it was noted that the document was useful as evidence-based information for use at national level, not just for the current emergency but also for revising national pandemic plans, however the Advisory Forum considered that it would need further work before being released to the general public, mainly due to the evidence being offered to the public with the possibility that they will be misinterpreted.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC took into account the feedback provided by the Advisory Forum, and has used this in formulating its guidance on non-pharmaceutical measures against SARS-CoV-2.

Evaluation of Scientific Activities

Review of ECDC Activities on vCJD

The Advisory Forum was presented with a review of ECDC's activities on vCJD, in AF62 (24/09/20), and its opinion sought on the level of activity that ECDC should undertake on this disease in the light of the fall in cases to very low numbers in the most recent years (including no cases in the two most recent years). Following a discussion of the review, a poll of Advisory Forum members indicated a very small majority in favour of discontinuation of outsourced activities and very small majority in favour of maintaining the network of vCJD national focal points. The main point of concern for the Advisory

Forum was the uncertainty over the likelihood of re-emergence of vCJD, either related to relaxation of precautions undertaken to prevent specified risk materials entering the food chain, or due to late onset disease developing in individuals who are heterozygous for the genetic marker (at codon 129) the homozygous form of which has been associated with cases to date.

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

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC undertook to consider and reflect on the balance of the Advisory Forum's opinions and concerns in further internal discussions and in discussions with the European Commission, and would revert to the Advisory Forum at a future date.

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

There were no items of discussion that related to the coherence scientific work with Member States priorities and studies other than those related to SARS-CoV-2, which are described in the earlier section of this report.

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

Update on actions taken following the evaluation of the Fellowship Programme

During AF62 (24/09/20), the Advisory Forum's opinion was sought in the light of the fact that ECDC was seeking to balance conflicting views, and needed more expert advice in the area. As a result of consultations over the preceding months, it had been agreed that the two-part format (i.e. focused on epidemiology and on public health microbiology respectively) would be retained in the training, but that changes would be made to streamline the administrative processes. The Advisory Forum's views were being sought prior to the rewriting of the concept note that would set out the vision for the Fellowship Programme following the most recent external evaluation. There was general support for the proposals on the administrative changes, although concerns were expressed about the short timeline proposed. While it was noted that in at least one country the epidemiology and public health microbiology training programmes had been merged, the proposal to maintain the two-path model for the Fellowship Programme was accepted in the light of the information provided in the briefing given by ECDC.

Surveillance of influenza during COVID-19

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC undertook to present the new draft concept note and have a new round of discussions to see how to take the issue further. ECDC's Director noted that she hoped that some elements could already be incorporated for the new cohort in 2022.

During AF62 (24/09/20), ECDC presented its proposals for surveillance of influenza during the 2020/2021 winter season in the context of the ongoing SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. There was unanimous support from the Advisory Forum for the key proposals that (a) sentinel and hospital-derived specimens should be tested for both influenza and SARS-CoV-2 simultaneously, and (b) that priority be given to COVID-19 surveillance in other non-sentinel primary care and that simultaneous testing for influenza only be undertaken for risk groups and the elderly. It was noted by the Advisory Forum that due to the

major changes made to the influenza surveillance as a result of COVID-19, it would be very challenging to apply the same thresholds to the current data. ECDC responded that it had been working with WHO colleagues and a decision had been taken not to ask for Pandemic Influenza Severity Assessments (PISA) this year as the indicator was not feasible.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC and WHO published (October 2020) a joint document "Operational considerations for influenza surveillance in the WHO European Region during COVID-19: interim guidance" that reflected the proposals that had been endorsed by the Advisory Forum

Long-term surveillance framework 2021-2027

ECDC sought the Advisory Forum's opinions on its draft Long-term surveillance framework 2021-2027, during AF63 (15/12/20). It was noted that the proposals in the framework were similar to those for the changes that had been proposed for ECDC's mandate, and that although there were still a number of issues to be discussed, there were some aspects that it might already be possible to agree on. There was little specific comment provided on the proposed framework, although it was noted that they were ambitious and that some Member States could struggle to meet all the requirements, particularly in respect of the digitalisation envisioned as part of the framework. It was also noted that it would be important to find the correct balance between EU analysis and Member State analysis, and that ECDC should facilitate digitalisation of surveillance systems in a harmonised manner. ECDC responded that there should be no extra burden placed on Member States to report and that the new framework should be for the benefit of the whole of Europe. With regard to electronic health records, ECDC was aware that this could be challenging, and so ECDC was looking at proof of concept studies in the first instance. ECDC noted that it was also exploring the opportunities provided by different EU funding mechanisms for supporting digitalisation of surveillance systems in Member States.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC has made changes to the framework in the light of the feedback received from the Advisory Forum, and is bringing the revised version back to the Advisory Forum for further review in 2021.

Advisory Forum views on the implementation of proposed changes to the ECDC mandate

ECDC's Director provided AF63 (15/12/20) with an overview of the European Commission's proposal to amend ECDC's mandate, pointing out that, in addition to changes to ECDC's mandate, there were also proposals to change the serious cross border health threat mandate, and that of the European Medicines Agency. The proposals attempted to address major issues that have been observed both in the past and during the current pandemic. It was noted that the proposal for revisions to ECDC's mandate did not extend beyond the realm of infectious diseases. A question was raised by the Advisory Forum regarding proposals for a future European Reference Laboratory, to which ECDC responded that there was a catalogue of tasks for the European reference laboratories in the proposal. The laboratories, which would be appointed by the Commission, would carry out all the types of standardisation tasks that would have been so useful over the past few months for COVID-19. Other topics that Advisory Forum members commented upon included: that an expanded mandate on preparedness should include engagement with a wider range of institutions (than just public health institutions) in Member States; support for strengthening of the mandate on international work; a suggestion that a responsibility for undertaking rapid systematic reviews of knowledge should be included in the new

mandate; expressions of uncertainty and some concern regarding a strengthened role in risk management; and concern that it would place an additional burden on Member States.

Impact on ECDC Outputs/Activities

ECDC has noted the feedback provided by the Advisory Forum and will reflect on these in ongoing discussions that it is having internally and with the European Commission regarding the interpretation and implementation of the proposed changes, as and if they are approved.

Identification of emerging health threats (Art 18.4.d)

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 SARS-CoV-2 pandemic at each meeting of the Advisory Forum during 2020.

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 third annual report to the ECDC Management Board on the work of the Advisory Forum
- ECDC provided an update on the planning process for the Third Joint Strategy Meeting.

Conclusions

The Advisory Forum provided an important role for both ECDC and for EU/EEA Member States in the response to SARS-CoV-2 during 2020, through its provision of expert and informed advice and opinion on a wide range of SARS-CoV-2 related topics, and also through its information exchange function. Despite the many pressures on Advisory Forum members, they continued to provide support to ECDC, through their participation in both scheduled and ad hoc meetings, and their rapid responses to documents sent out for comment. A number of members commented on the value of the Advisory Forum meetings as a mechanism for exchange of information and discussion of topics of mutual interest. In retrospect, it would seem that despite their other commitments, Advisory Forum members would have welcomed more frequent meetings during 2020. 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.

During the course of 2020 the very great majority of the Advisory Forum's time was given to the topic of SARS-CoV-2, with members regularly providing their opinions on draft risk assessments, surveillance proposals, case definitions, and testing and response issues. In addition, the Advisory Forum reviewed one large and complex scientific advice document (an Expert Opinion on non-pharmaceutical countermeasures against pandemic influenza), and provided opinions and comment on: ECDC Activities

on vCJD; on actions taken following the evaluation of the Fellowship Programme; on surveillance of influenza during COVID-19; on ECDC's long-term surveillance framework 2021-2027; and also provided their views on the implementation of proposed changes to the ECDC mandate.

There were a few topics on which there was not a clear consensus view within the Advisory Forum, such as on the topic of travel measures as part of the response to SARS-CoV-2, and on the future level of activities appropriate for vCJD. In those situations, ECDC has either attempted to balance the views within the context of its analysis of the available evidence, or has undertaken to bring the issue back to the Advisory Forum after further internal reflection, respectively. There were also topics on which either the majority view, or a strongly expressed minority view, of the Advisory Forum membership challenged the advice proposed by ECDC. Two examples include, the geographical criteria used for defining a case and/or for indicating the need to test travellers in the early days of the pandemic, and ECDC's advice on the use of face masks. In the former case, ECDC amended the geographical criteria associated with the case definition to reflect the prevailing views of the Advisory Forum, whereas in the latter case ECDC did not amend its central message, but did highlight further the uncertainties related to the evidence on which it based its advice.

As noted above, an important function of the Advisory Forum is to serve as a forum for the exchange of information between its members on infectious disease threats and other concerns. During 2020 the Forum proved to be an extremely useful mechanism for exchange of information on SARS-CoV-2 issues.

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 2020 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.