



## Ombudsman calls on ECDC to be more open about its work as vaccine rollout begins

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Following a six-month inquiry into the performance of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) during the COVID-19 crisis, the European Ombudsman has made a series of proposals to enable greater public scrutiny and understanding of its work as the crisis continues and the focus of that work moves to the monitoring of vaccine distribution.

The Ombudsman has also suggested that EU legislators reflect on whether new powers for the agency are needed to improve its capacity to deal with similar future public health crises.

The [inquiry \[Link\]](#), part of a wider monitoring by the Ombudsman of how EU institutions responded to the pandemic, examined how the ECDC gathers information, the transparency of that information and how it communicates with the public.

At critical points in early 2020, the ECDC gave positive assessments of the capacity of Member States to cope with the crisis. These assessments quickly became outdated as the EU moved from 'containment' to a 'mitigation' phase.

*“The ECDC’s mandate prohibits it from independent data collection, thereby significantly limiting its capacity to assess, advise and communicate when speed of response was crucial.”*



*“Too often, national authorities struggled to report complete data to the ECDC or did not even answer its appeals for important data. It also had no comprehensive set of data on hospital and other critical medical resources across the Member States,” said Emily O’Reilly.*

The Ombudsman’s inquiry also found gaps in the ECDC’s transparency practices. Not all surveys it conducted in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic were made public. It is also difficult to see whether assessments on aspects of the pandemic have been updated. In addition, exchanges with international partners, for example the Chinese CDC, are not made public.

*“ Transparency and accountability should be the bedrock of an institution that has a role in protecting public health. Much more should have been done to communicate with the general public to explain how and on what scientific evidence the ECDC made its assessments. Crises not only require extraordinary responses from public administrations but also extraordinary efforts to maintain public trust. As Member States embark on vital vaccination programmes, this public trust is essential and the ECDC will continue to play a central role gathering and publicising information on the vaccine rollout. Our proposals to the ECDC today should prove useful in this context.”*

*“This is an unprecedented crisis, and I recognise the hard work and dedication of the ECDC throughout this highly challenging period. But without specific new powers to ensure the completeness and quality of the data it receives from national authorities, it cannot fully fulfil the mandate it has to help control the next pandemic. This is now a matter for EU legislators.”*

### **Proposals for improvement**

Based on the inquiry, the Ombudsman has made six proposals for improvement to the ECDC.

They include:

- Greater transparency on the evolution of its risk assessments.
- Greater transparency on the completeness of the data underlying its risk assessments.
- Greater transparency around its interactions with international partners, such as the WHO and the Chinese CDC.
- Revised communication strategy more directly aimed at the general public.
- Updated language policy to include as many official EU languages as possible.
- Systematic publication of survey results.

The European Commission has also recognised the ECDC’s effectiveness gaps and has made proposals for improvement. However, based on her inquiry, the Ombudsman believes that, unless it has the means to improve the data it receives from national authorities, the ECDC will continue to play a limited role in this and possible future public health emergencies. It is for the EU legislators to decide on the most appropriate steps to correct this gap.

### **Background**



The ECDC was created in 2004 in the aftermath of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak. The ECDC's mandate - consistent with the EU's role to complement national health policies - is to support and coordinate the work of epidemiological centres in the Member States. The ECDC is a small agency with 286 employees and an annual budget of EUR 60.5 million in 2020. The ECDC collates data through the European Surveillance System (TESSy), the Early Warning and Response Mechanism (EWRS), through surveys on specific issues, and daily epidemic intelligence screenings.

In addition to this inquiry, the Ombudsman is [looking into how \[Link\]](#) the Commission, the European Investment Bank, the European Medicines Agency and the Council have responded to the pandemic. In each instance, the Ombudsman has put particular emphasis on the transparency of the response.