
ADVOCATING PUBLIC HEALTH IN THE FACE
OF COMPLEXITY

EPHA
STRATEGIC
REVIEW

european public health alliance

December 2019

EPHA STRATEGIC REVIEW

Advocating public health in the face of complexity

EPHA's current Five-Year Strategic Plan 2016-2020 will expire soon. It represents EPHA guiding strategy, based on its mission and vision [1], and outlines the main advocacy goals and objectives. Aware of the need to engage EPHA's membership in the process of drawing up its future strategy, a **formal Strategic Review was launched in 2019** which became the occasion for EPHA's Secretary General, Board and membership to engage in a deeper dialogue about the future of public health policy in Europe in the face of health system crises, the impacts of the "digital revolution", global health threats - increasingly related to climate change -, new forms of governance and decision-making, and shrinking public funding.

In parallel, the European Parliament elections and subsequent institutional renewal process resulted in a number of new priorities that became clearer during the second half of the year with the publication of new Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's Political Guidelines and the Mission Letters for the new Commissioner-designates. The information contained therein led to a reconceptualization of EPHA's Annual Conference to enable an active dialogue between European policymakers and EPHA members to discuss these important shifts.

However, due to unforeseen external delays and internal uncertainties, it became impossible to organise EPHA's 2019 Annual Conference as planned. As a corrective measure, EPHA's Strategic Review got expanded as an internally focused process and several meetings took place between EPHA's senior management, Board, members and staff during the second half of 2019 to explore a broadening of EPHA's policy scope and the ways in which new priorities could best be integrated.

The present paper, which would otherwise have been informed by the Annual Conference proceedings, provides a summary of Strategic Review activities undertaken in 2019 and outlines the next steps to be carried out in 2020.

[1] <https://epha.org/about-us/>

EPHA's current Strategic Plan 2016-2020 represents EPHA's guiding strategy and outlines the strategic objectives and thematic policy and advocacy priorities EPHA is working on within a given five-year time frame.

The process to develop EPHA's future strategy got kicked off during a Board Away Day in late 2018 when EPHA advisor Tamsin Rose challenged the Board and senior management (Secretary General and Deputy Director) to think about the future of public health in Europe in relation to the global "VUCA" (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) challenges the world is facing today. As an interdisciplinary sector, public health needs to be particularly receptive to dealing with change given that a vast array of policies and legislation can influence population health and the way health is managed and financed.

Also beginning in late 2018 and continuing into 2019, EPHA undertook an extensive external evaluation that involved an analysis of inputs received during interviews with EPHA members and partners including EU policymakers, carried out by a consultant. Inter alia, the evaluation results pointed at the need to find common ground for the thematic priorities of EPHA's future strategy and establish the right balance between the number of themes and the policy team's capacity to safeguard a high level of quality. A number of members also expressed a wish to use the network more strategically, especially at the national level, which would involve a higher degree of coordination.

In the spring of 2019, it was decided to follow up the external evaluation with an in-depth Strategic Review process formally launched at a workshop at EPHA's Annual General Assembly (AGA) in June and also moderated by Tamsin Rose (who was hired as

a consultant to facilitate the process with EPHA's members, Secretariat team, and Board).

The workshop served to gather first inputs from EPHA's diverse membership following the European elections in May 2019, and the outcome was a potpourri of ideas for EPHA's potential future policy focus areas. Unsurprisingly, members viewed public health as being situated within broader European and global developments such as the acceleration of global warming due to pollution, rapid digitalisation (which holds great potential for many spheres of life, but also new dangers including cyber-attacks, undermining democracy and privacy, placing more responsibility on individuals, etc.) and international migration and trade.

Subsequently follow-up conversations were facilitated at two Policy Coordination Meetings, in July and October, where further inputs were sought from attending members in order to ensure the widest possible spread of views and obtain feedback on what was already known about the emerging priorities at the European level following the publication of then Commission President candidate Ursula von der Leyen's Political Guidelines^[2], comprised of six headline ambitions, and her more concrete Mission Letters addressed to the Commissioner-designates, which were released prior to the Commissioner hearings and outlined the ambitions in more concrete terms.

These documents revealed that, in addition to ongoing health priorities including access to medicines, tackling antimicrobial resistance and vaccination, areas in which EPHA had already been active for a number of years, vital new priorities were emerging related to EPHA's current work but for which room

[2] Von der Leyen, Ursula (2019), A Union that strives for more - My agenda for Europe. Political Guidelines for the next Commission 2019-2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf

would need to be made in the future, the Beating Cancer Plan being the most prominent example as a kind of “Health in All Policies” matrix:

“I want you to put forward Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan to support Member States to improve cancer prevention and care. This should propose actions to strengthen our approach at every key stage of the disease: prevention, diagnosis, treatment, life as a cancer survivor and palliative care. There should be a close link with the research mission on cancer in the future Horizon Europe programme.”

[3]

Similarly, the development and implementation of the “Farm to Fork” Strategy was underlined as a key activity of concern the new Health Commissioner should occupy herself with:

“I want you to lead on a new ‘Farm to Fork’ strategy for sustainable food. This will cover every step in the food chain from production to consumption, and feed into our circular economy objectives. It should combine regulation with communication

and awareness campaigns and have full buy-in from local, regional and sectoral actors, as well as Member States and European institutions”.

[4]

At the same time, it became evident that the headline ambitions of the Political Guidelines contained a whole range of activities likely to exert a profound influence on public health, policymaking and advocacy. For example, the European Green Deal includes the ambition to make Europe a zero-pollution continent, the achievement of which will depend on many different policies that shape public health and will mean much greater engagement in climate change and environmental health than EPHA has done in recent years.

Moreover, the topic of digitalisation would be significantly expanded as part of the ambition to create “A Europe fit for the Digital Age”, hence going way beyond the comparatively narrow scope of EPHA’s previous activities, which had primarily focused on e- and mHealth solutions prior to 2019:

“Data and AI are the ingredients for innovation that can help us to find solutions to societal challenges, from health to farming, from security to manufacturing (...) In my first 100 days in office, I will put forward legislation for a coordinated European approach on the

[3] Von der Leyen, Ursula (10 Sep 2019). Mission Letter to Stella Kyriakides, Health Commissioner-designate, p.5 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-stella-kyriakides_en.pdf

[4] Ibid. p.5

human and ethical implications of Artificial Intelligence. This should also look at how we can use big data for innovations that create wealth for our societies and our businesses. I will make sure that we prioritise investments in Artificial Intelligence (...) A new Digital Services Act will upgrade our liability and safety rules for digital platforms, services and products, and complete our Digital Single Market.”

[5]

The Strategic Review discussions became more concrete at an EPHA directors' meeting organised on 19 November 2019 at which EPHA's Secretary General presented a so-called “strawman” document to the membership. The latter contained **four options for EPHA's future** course of action, listing advantages and disadvantages of each approach:

1. Maintain the status quo (keep EPHA's thematic priorities as they are given that most are at least roughly aligned with most of the Commission's concerns)
2. Keep current priorities and refocus them around the SDGs and the climate crisis
3. Keep current priorities and refocus them around the SDGs, the climate crisis, and digitalisation

4. Refocus EPHA as an NGO working for systems change from a public health perspective (which might involve giving up a number of existing policy areas and focus more on longer-term structural and governance issues)

During the meeting, directors of EPHA member organisations discussed all four options, which led to potential priority topics that were brought to the table. Although no clear consensus was reached about specific content yet, members agreed that EPHA should maintain its mixed identity as an organisation that can both steer the policy conversation based on evidence and technical expertise (external or in-house, depending on whether or not EPHA members/partners are working on a given topic) and engage in impactful advocacy actions in collaboration with members and external partners.

Importantly, members confirmed that EPHA's future strategy and organisational structure should be flexible enough to be able to incorporate the European Commission's new policy themes, which also reflected priorities of the World Health Organization (WHO), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and many national governments.

In parallel to the discussion with members, dialogue also continued at the Board and Secretariat level. Among other types of inputs, a paper was received by a member of the policy team who proposed the development of a stronger public health narrative. By treating public health itself as a transformative approach, a stronger focus on

[5] Political Guidelines, p.13

the determinants of health could become an entry point into various discussions on the political agenda at EU and international level.

Subsequent analysis of all inputs by the Board and Secretary General / Deputy Director revealed that “doing nothing” (option 1) would clearly not be an option. Regarding the other proposals, a hybrid approach might work for incorporating the most suitable elements. Importantly, members confirmed EPHA’s core activities as being highly relevant for them and they did not propose any drastic changes such as changing the nature of the organisation or making major changes to EPHA’s operational model as a European membership organisation.

While the pure public health focus of the staff paper was deemed to be interesting and potentially valuable for framing the overall Strategic Plan, Board and members felt that a strict focus on the determinant of health did not leave much room for incorporating broader new policy developments such as the priorities contained in the Commission’s flagship Green Deal, the expansion of digital policy, and addressing the democratic deficit. Moreover, EPHA’s new strategy needed to be as synergetic as possible, with the future Beating Cancer Plan providing an example of a highly interconnected flagship policy towards which much of the political attention and funding will be directed during the new Commission’s mandate, with a host of diverse stakeholders involved.

The question of when the work on a given policy topic can be considered terminated or impactful enough to hand it over to other organisations (or temporarily “park” the issue) was also discussed to safeguard that EPHA remains dynamic, proactive (but also responsive) and up-to-date in its focus.

MOVING FORWARD: CLUSTER APPROACH

EPHA’s Board and senior management felt that a hybrid approach would be best suited as a compromise between the different perspectives of members, Board and staff. It would enable EPHA to create more flexible clusters of policy areas than the current “single issue” campaign structure out of which arose EPHA’s thematic priorities (e.g. used for the activities falling under its Operating Grant). It could enable EPHA to establish the necessary connections within and between different areas more easily, to integrate work on new priorities as they arise, and enable staff to gain expertise in several areas without having to relinquish their existing knowledge.

Crucially, it might enable EPHA to address the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that characterise the public health environment in 2020 and beyond, including the uncertainties of the “VUCA” world.

A cluster approach could hold advantages for a number of reasons:

- It does not call for a “radical break” and allows for experimentation in terms of scope, short- and long-term priorities;
- It could allow EPHA to better cater to the diversity of its members, some of whom – as came out of the external evaluation undertaken in 2019-20 among members and other EPHA stakeholders - felt that “their” topics were not sufficiently covered by EPHA;
- It could help national members to find easier entry ways into aligning their advocacy with European policies;

- Current thematic priorities would not need to be abandoned, but they could be temporarily put aside as new EU and/or international priorities are getting bigger and more nuanced (e.g. communicable diseases such as the current coronavirus outbreak);
- There would be less burden on EPHA to be the expert but to bring together experts from EPHA's wider network (members, scientific advisors, external partners); however, expert and convenor roles do not have to be in conflict as EPHA "translates" expertise into policy messages that can generate change;
- It is about making connections and seeing the "whole picture", in line with the dynamic nature of public health and the growing understanding that Health in All Policies is a joint effort that includes European and national action in parallel (often also at international level);
- Importantly, it would allow EPHA to devise its new Five-Year Strategic Plan while still continuing to work on existing thematic priorities under the Operating Grant.
- Another directors' meeting will take place in April 2020 to present the Board's proposal, firm up the clusters under EPHA's 2021-2025 Strategic Plan and receive concrete inputs into its sub-themes and strategic objectives;
- The Secretariat team will have an opportunity to co-shape the clusters under the leadership of the Secretary General / Deputy Director.

Finally, the new draft Strategic Plan will be sent electronically to all members for final comments before its adoption at the 2020 Annual General Assembly during the second half of 2020.

NEXT STEPS (2020)

Following first discussions about adopting a potential cluster approach in late 2019, the following activities will take place as part of the Strategic Review in 2020:

- A Board Away Day will be organised in early 2020 to think of the actual clusters that could be proposed to the membership;
- Progress will be discussed at the bi-monthly Policy Coordination Meetings (Feb, Apr, Jun);

EPHA STRATEGIC REVIEW

ADVOCATING PUBLIC HEALTH IN THE FACE
OF COMPLEXITY

December 2019

European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) AISBL
Rue de Trèves 49-51, 1040 Brussels (B) · +32 02 230 30 56 · www.ephah.org · ephah@ephah.org · [@EPHA_EU](https://twitter.com/EPHA_EU) ·
Transparency Register Number: 18941013532-08



Co-funded by
the Health Programme
of the European Union

The European Public Health Alliance has received funding under an operating grant from the European Union's Health Programme (2014-2020). The content of this document represents the views of the author only and is his/her sole responsibility; it cannot be considered to reflect the views of the European Commission and/or the Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency or any other body of the European Union. The European Commission and the Agency do not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.

Transparency Register Number:18941013532-08

european public health alliance
