

Press Release - for immediate publication



EPHA Concurs with Council Diagnosis on the EU Health Union

Brussels, 21 June 2024

The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) welcomes the Council (EPSCO) Conclusions on the Future of the European Health Union

EPHA expresses its approval and support for the recently agreed Council Conclusions adopted today on the Future of the European Health Union. These Conclusions align closely with EPHA's own assessment of the need for a stronger EU Health Union to advance evidence-driven public health policies that prioritise prevention, equity, and sustainability.

“Health Ministers share our diagnosis on the future of the European Health Union” stated Milka Sokolovic, Director General of EPHA. **“Whilst the EU Health Union has been questioned by some, the lessons from the pandemic are clear - we really need the EU to support greater action on health. They have joined us not just in recognising the priority health should continue to have in EU policy making, but also in identifying some of the same health priorities requiring attention”** she added.

The Conclusions underscore the urgent need to build upon and improve the European Health Union to address the systemic challenges faced by health systems across the continent. They lay out a comprehensive framework for strengthening the health workforce, enhancing health data usage, and promoting disease prevention, including protecting children from the marketing of addictive substances, all crucial areas of EPHA's advocacy.

We are particularly pleased to see the emphasis on preventing and treating non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which are responsible for almost 90% of all deaths in the EU. This includes a clear invitation for the European Commission to adopt legislative proposals and continue working on non-legislative measures announced under Europe's Beating Cancer plan, with a special focus on initiatives related to

socioeconomic and commercial determinants of health. We welcome in particular that the Council calls for actions plans for the specific strands in the healthier together initiative such as on health determinants and chronic respiratory diseases.

The Council's proactive stance on mental health and the promotion of healthier environments aligns with our vision for a healthier Europe. The focus on combating antimicrobial resistance (AMR) through a One Health approach also mirrors our calls for integrated health strategies. EPHA also supports and aligns with the Council's vision for a future European Health Union that prioritises proactive measures to tackle climate change and health as interconnected issues, emphasising strengthened EU-level coordination and cooperation

Furthermore, the Conclusions advocate for significant investments in health innovation and infrastructure, which are vital for maintaining robust health systems. EPHA believes that the strategic investments mentioned in the document, alongside enhanced EU-level collaboration and a reinforced legal framework, will play a pivotal role in ensuring a resilient Health Union.

However, EPHA notes some critical areas where the Conclusions could have been stronger:

- **Absence of Food Systems:** The draft Council conclusions overlook direct references to the "Farm to Fork" strategy, and food systems in general. The omission misses a critical opportunity to highlight the interconnectedness of sustainable food systems with public health objectives. This integration is essential to address the broader determinants of health through sustainable food production and consumption, which significantly impact the nutritional health and environmental well-being of all.
- **Conflict of Interest Controls:** There is a need for stronger safeguards against potential conflicts of interest, particularly concerning the influence of the known NCD risk factors, pharmaceutical and medical device industries on health policies. EPHA advocates for enhanced transparency and stricter regulations to protect health policy-making from undue commercial influence.
- **Support for Civil Society:** Although the document mentions civil society only once, EPHA believes the Conclusions should explicitly support, including sustainable funding civil society organisations (CSOs) engaged in public health advocacy. A stronger emphasis on the role of CSOs would promote a more balanced and inclusive approach to the development and implementation of health policies.
- **Health Equity:** Social determinants are covered strongly throughout the text but lack substantive measures. To truly achieve health equity, the European Health Union must urgently adopt a cross-sectoral approach, integrating Health in All Policies throughout its framework. Mere mentions of the European Pillar of Social Rights as an afterthought in a footnote or on the final page are insufficient - explicit integration is needed.

EPHA stands ready to support the implementation of these Conclusions. **We will continue working closely with our members and allies to ensure that these priorities, alongside our recommended improvements, remain at the forefront during the mandate of the next European Commission.** Together, we can create a Europe that not only cares but effectively prepares and protects its citizens against current and future health challenges.

ENDS

Note for editors:

The EU Strategic Agenda will be discussed by EU leaders during their meeting this week. It was launched by President Michel in November 2023 and is due for final adoption in June 2024 marking an important milestone in this years EU institutional renewal.

About EPHA:

The European Public Health Alliance - EPHA - is a change agent – Europe’s leading NGO alliance advocating for better health: <https://epha.org/>



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