

Group of Experts on the Exit Strategy

6e Nota aan Eerste Minister en Kern ter voorbereiding van de Nationale Veiligheidsraad dd. 24/6/2020*

**Dit document bevat advies van de experten die deel uitmaken van de GEES. Het gaat daarbij onder meer om persoonlijke meningen die uit vrije wil en op vertrouwelijke basis worden verstrekt aan de federale regering.*

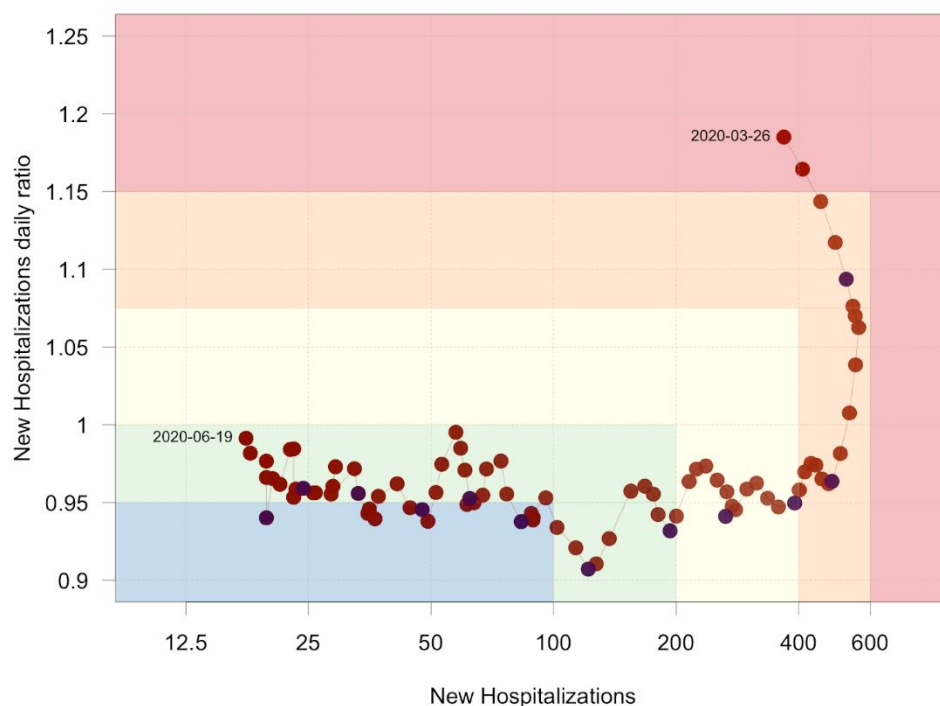
Chair: Erika Vlieghe. Members: Emmanuel André, Inge Bernaerts, Mathias Dewatripont, Marius Gilbert, Niel Hens, Celine Nieuwenhuys, Johnny Thys, Marc van Ranst, Pierre Wunsch.

1. Executive summary

- a. Epidemiology: transmission has declined but remains active at low levels and requires close attention given the risk of focal resurgence. The need for a more elaborate outbreak control system remains very important.
- b. Remaining sectors: a detailed reply on the protocols for the re-opening sectors is given in Annex 1. Suggestion to homogenize spacing requirements to 4m² for seated and 10m² for moving activities across sectors
- c. Audiences and events: concepts of distanced seating arrangements are explained. CERM is suggested as a compulsory tool for events of > 200 visitors and recommended tools for events of < 200 visitors.
- d. Private life: strengthened communication on 6 golden rules is essential + compulsory use of masks in shops and crowded settings if there is evidence of viral resurgence
- e. International travel: attention needed for organizing the logistics of quarantine for possible ill visitors into Belgium.
- f. Education: a phased approach for the restart of school year 2020-2021 has been presented and discussed
- g. Evaluation of second wave preparedness: GEES thinks it is essential to carry out in the coming weeks a thorough assessment of the country's preparedness for a second wave; to be discussed in the coming days if and how the GEES or its members can play a role in this exercise.
- h. Looking forward: the GEES wishes to discuss and clarify its further mandate and activities, within the landscape of other Task forces, administrations, institutions and decision making bodies

2. Overall status of the outbreak

The transmission is at its lowest level in absolute terms, with an average of 17.5 new hospitalizations and 6.2 deaths per day in the last 7 days. The ICU occupancy is also very low and reached the number of 50 on the 20th of June. An increasing number of municipalities have not declared a single positive case in the last 14 days.



However, we should recall that the transmission is not over yet. We still have an average of 95 positive cases per day, and indicators of growth are more worrying. The new hospitalization daily ratio was estimated at 0.99 on the 19th of June (waiting for the new data points) and the estimate of the effective reproduction number R_t now includes 1 in its prediction interval (estimate of 0.85, 95% CI 0.71 - 1.01). These may be uncertainties linked to the very low numbers that we now have, but we should remain particularly vigilant to any indication of rebound in the number of cases or new hospitalizations linked to reopening of more and more compartments of the society.

In addition, with an increase in international travel as well as an ever increasing number of COVID-19 cases worldwide, there are multiple possibilities of direct or indirect introductions through international travel that will likely continue for several months.

The GEES expresses its concern on this persisting low level transmission versus a perceived gradual decline in the discipline with which the 6 golden rules and other preventive measures are applied (crowding of people in certain public spaces, less people wearing mouth masks in public spaces and shops, images of certain horeca establishments where 1,5m social distancing between tables is clearly not respected, although other establishments scrupulously adhere to the rules). There is a need for clear and persistent communication that preventive measures remain absolutely necessary to protect oneself and avoid a resurgence of infection rates, as well as a need for monitoring that protocols are respected in all sectors and at all times.

Since the 19th of June, epidemiological reports to the public will be made with a lower frequency. Although this is understandable from a communication point of view, it is important that the public health monitoring of the epidemiological situations can be maintained on a daily basis and that a clear overview becomes available for policy makers which action has been undertaken for which problem, to avoid unnecessary losing time in discommunication or misunderstanding.

3. Remaining sectors to be deconfined

In accordance with earlier decisions of the National Security Council, it is the responsibility of each minister and administration to ensure that adequate protocols are in place for economic and non-economic activities falling within their competencies. As the GEES has emphasized also in previous reports, it is important that such protocols are in place well before the reopening of the activities concerned, in order to allow the sector to prepare itself and the public to be informed on rules and remaining risks (eg for vulnerable groups).

Whilst the GEES agrees that it must be possible to adjust protocols as the epidemic situation evolves, new scientific evidence becomes available and/or protocols turn out not be implementable in practice, it warns against relaxing physical distancing and other measures too early or too drastically, as the corona-virus still circulates in Belgium and there is no clear visibility yet on the main causes of those infections.

- As regards specific protocols prepared and specific questions and issues raised by the cabinet of minister Muylle in recent days and weeks, the answer has been formulated in a separate document (Annex 1).

In addition, the GEES advises the following:

- Event organisation
Events (including parties, festivals, sports events, conferences,...), especially when held at large scale and in circumstances where physical distance cannot be respected at all times, are well-known risks settings for transmission of virus and subsequent outbreaks, due to crowding at specific places, shouting, singing, dancing, joint eating and drinking,... For indoor events, additional concern exists regarding the adequacy of ventilation in the venues.
Therefore the GEES keeps its advice to prohibit large scale events until August 31st.

Small scale events (audience size: see below) may be organised in a safe manner, provided the 6 golden rules can be respected at all times. This implies specific measures regarding overall planning, crowd management, physical distancing, distanced seating arrangements, arrangements for serving food and drinks,... For specific at risk activities on stage (e.g. singing, music playing, dance, theatre), specific sectoral protocols should be respected at all times. For catering services, horeca protocols apply.

The Karel de Grote Hogeschool and Toerisme Vlaanderen have developed an interactive 'Covid Event Risk Model (CERM) which may help organizers and local authorities to define the viral transmission risk associated with a certain event, based on a set of criteria including crowd density and management, overall planning, location type (indoor/outdoor), activity type, duration, geographical character,... It has been further refined based on feedback from

local authorities, the GEES and the event sector itself in order to allow organisers and local authorities to select events which can be organised in a safe manner. From July 1st onwards, it will become available as a freely accessible online tool, together with an online guide 'How to organise an event in COVID-times'. This tool may be adapted according to new insights or epidemic evolutions.

A positive assessment by this tool describes only its relative safety concerning COVID-transmission, and does not lead automatically to approval as additional safety assessment rules (e.g. fire prevention) and maximum numbers for audiences should apply as well. The final decision for approval of events remains the discretion of the local authorities.

The GEES recommends that this tool is a mandatory pre-authorisation check for all events with audiences > 200 participants, and is recommended for organizers of events with < 200 participants.

- Audiences:

Absolute numbers of audiences are important for viral transmission risk, as with higher numbers, the risk of crowding at entrances, exits, food/drink stands, toilets,... increases, in particular with non-professional organised events and/or in non-adapted venues (narrow corridors, insufficient sanitary blocks,...).

In addition, for indoor events, the venue's ventilation capacity to reduce the accumulation of aerosols is of important concern, and will become even more important in fall and winter months with the number of indoor activities increasing. Therefore a distinction between allowed crowds indoor and outdoor events is reasonable; outdoor events should be given priority provided compliance with the above mentioned rules and CERM.

Minimal spacing requirements for events should be 4m² per person for seated events, and 10m² per person for moving activities. Audiences for performances should remain seated (or strictly standing with own bubble at a table), always with respect of distanced seating i.e. with 1.5 m between social bubbles. Wearing masks could help reduce the required distance to minimal 1.2 m.

Spontaneous singing, shouting and dancing have the risk to be superspreading events and should only be allowed with physical distancing or with the use of a mask. When organised in the context of a cultural activity (i.e. workshop, performance,...), sector protocols should be respected at all times.

The GEES advises to keep a maximum number of participants for audiences during the months of July and August, which may progress gradually provided the epidemiological situation allows it.

In accordance with the events' sector's suggestions, this could be:

- July 200 (indoor)/400 (outdoor)
- August 400 (indoor)/800 (outdoor)

The GEES warns that combining the restart of organising large scale events in fall and winter months together with other changes in society (e.g. re-opening of schools) can have cumulate effects on virus transmission and should be considered very cautiously.

Drive in-events: these can be allowed as people stay mostly in their car, social distancing between bubbles is per definition respected. Drink, food stalls and sanitation blocks should be organised following the same rules as for horeca.

Manifestations: mass-manifestations and other unplanned, unforeseen mass-events with large numbers of participants and where social distancing cannot be respected at all times generate a particular risk of virus transmission, in particular when participants are not wearing masks and are shouting or singing and are therefore to be avoided. The balancing of this health risk with other public interests such as the freedom of expression, canalisation of social unrest and protection of public order (including difficulty to identify people wearing masks) must be made by the competent authorities.

4. Private life

For private gatherings: the GEES advises to maintain the number of 10 as a maximum for private gatherings where physical distancing may be somewhat relaxed.

For weddings, family parties and other life moments, seated ceremonies can take place (according to rules for ceremonies: max. 200 persons from July 1st), and seated meals may take place (according to rules for horeca and rented halls: only seated, no dancing, singing, shouting, respecting physical distance with persons at other tables, organized by professional: max 50 persons). Until further notice, the GEES advises against parties with unprotected singing, shouting and dancing as these have been described to be superspreading events.

In general the GEES advises to strengthen the communication on the 6 golden rules and insists on the active promotion of wearing masks in crowded settings such as shops and unplanned crowds, as there is an increasing level of evidence on the protective capacity of masks towards transmission. In addition, wearing masks in public maintains the awareness on the still ongoing epidemic, and it could counterbalance further deconfinement measures. In case of sustained increasing viral transmission levels for an extended period of time and/or indoor activities with larger audiences, the compulsory use of masks in crowds and indoor settings is needed.

5. International travel

Travelling to and from countries within the EU+ has re-opened since June 15th. With the summer months approaching, the GEES wants to stress the fact that increased international travel brings along the risk of fuelling the epidemic in Belgium and the rest of Europe again, in particular when the six golden rules other local preventive measures are not scrupulously adhered to. We repeat therefore our request for caution in the official travel advices towards all Belgian citizens and residents.

In addition, it should be clarified for international travellers how and where to obtain a test, and where travellers with proven COVID should remain in quarantine when they become ill with COVID-19 and cannot return home.

6. Education

The Flemish ministry of Education has worked out a colour-coded phased approach. Each of the phases corresponds with an epidemic risk level and with the way how educational activities should be organized in each of the levels and sectors of the educational system.

NUL RISICO	GROEN	Er is een vaccin beschikbaar en/of er is groepsimmunitet. Alle contacten kunnen plaatsvinden. Handhygiëne (voor eten en na toiletbezoek) blijft noodzakelijk.
LAAG RISICO	GEEL	Er is een beperkte transmissie van besmettingen, waardoor verhoogde waakzaamheid is aangewezen. Contacten tussen mogelijke verspreiders worden beperkt. Functioneel noodzakelijke contacten kunnen doorgaan met inachtneming van de toepasselijke veiligheidsmaatregelen.
MATIG RISICO	ORANJE	Er is een systematische transmissie van besmettingen in de samenleving. Er zijn alleenstaande of geïsoleerde cluster-uitbraken. Contacten tussen mogelijke verspreiders worden tot het essentiële beperkt en vinden plaats binnen een context waar risicofactoren zoveel mogelijk onder controle zijn gebracht.
HOOG RISICO	ROOD	Er zijn wijdverspreide besmettingen in de samenleving en er zijn nieuwe uitbraken en clusters. Contacten tussen mogelijke verspreiders moeten maximaal vermeden worden.

The proposal has been adjusted based on suggestions of the GEES and the pediatric Task Force, and has been discussed and agreed upon with all educational ministers.

In concreto, the GEES agrees:

- to leave kindergardens and primary schools open for 5 days/week in all phases, in the working conditions as of June 8th 2020
- to allow secondary schools to organize 4 class days/week with complete classes in yellow phase, and switch to halved classes on alternating weeks in the orange and red phases
- to allow higher education institutions to restart the academic year with a mix of distance/blended learning and on campus learning for smaller groups, with priority for generation (first year) students

Details of the plan can be found in Annex 2.

6. Preparedness for a second wave

In view of the possibility of a second wave, which may occur at any point in time as long as an effective vaccine is not available, the GEES thinks it is essential to carry out in the coming weeks a thorough assessment of the country's preparedness for a second wave, drawing lessons from the first wave. This should include an assessment of the preparedness of the entire health care system (testing and tracing; availability of essential drugs, PPE and materials; policy on sourcing and administration of vaccine(s); preparedness first and second line, mental health services, elderly homes and other collectivities), but also an assessment of the existing systems of real time surveillance and early warning, overall decision making processes, crisis communication, as well as the development of possible re-confinement strategies.

The GEES proposes to discuss in the coming days if and how the GEES or its members can play a role in this exercise.

7. Further mandate

The GEES' general function as a multidisciplinary expert group to advise on the country's deconfinement strategy has almost come to an end. The overall strategy has been set, with a limited number of remaining sectors to be deconfined. In particular, sector protocols' specifications are now the responsibility of relevant ministers and administrations, as communicated by CNS on June 3 and confirmed by Ministerial Decree issued on June 5 in Moniteur Belge.

Nevertheless, the epidemic is not over yet, and the impact of recent deconfinement measures are yet to be observed closely and assessed accordingly.

The GEES therefore wishes to discuss and clarify its further mandate and activities, within the landscape of other Task forces, administrations, institutions and decision making bodies.

Annex 1: Detailed reply to cabinet of minister Muylle regarding protocols

- Saunas and wellness centres:
 - GEES agrees with general rules as suggested (i.e. 1.5 m between visitor, 10m² pp, upon appointment only)
 - Reservations may be made according to maximum of bubble of 10 persons
 - Close contact activities should follow the instructions of close contact professions
 - in accordance with a Ceval advice dd.18/06/2020 , the GEES would recommend to keep steam baths, jacuzzi's and hammams closed in these structures (smooth surfaces, lower temperature, high humidity and aerosols remaining longer present)

- Swimming pools:
 - for large swimming pools type 'tropical swimming paradise', in accordance with Ceval advice dd. 18/06/2020, the GEES recommends to start with a reduction to 30% of their visitor capacity and limited time slots to avoid crowding in the pools and at attractions
 - crowd control should be managed at all times: at the entrance (reservation system), in the changing rooms and slides (e.g. through traffic light system, distancing floor stickers,...)
 - 1.5 m distance needs to be respected between swimmers who do not belong to the same family bubble
 - additional supervision in the swimming pools for adherence to these rules will be necessary

- Casino's:
 - GEES agrees with made propositions

- Theme parks and indoor playgrounds:
 - GEES agrees with made propositions
 - Time sloth should be compulsory
 - Shows with up to 200 visitors in distanced seating as for other performances
 - Advice to keep 'ballenbad' and other toys with numerous components closed as disinfection is very difficult

- Cinema's:
 - Avoid crowding in corridors and adjacent shops before and after movie projection
 - distanced seating arrangements as described in our GEES general advice (part on 'Audiences')

- Rental of infrastructure:
 - see part on 'Private parties' in our GEES general advice

- Request of relaxing measures for shops:
 - GEES agrees to relax requirements in time spent and number of persons (family bubble)
 - Keep space requirements of 10m2pp (moving activity)

- Request of relaxing measures for markets for > 50 stalls?
 - GEES agrees to relax requirements in time spent and number of persons (family bubble)
 - Keep space requirements of 10m2pp (moving activity)
 - Number of stalls can be increased provided crowd control can be managed at all times by local authority
 - Food and drinks can be allowed and should respect horeca guidelines
 - Strict adherence to existing guidelines on masks should be respected

- Request of relaxing measures for musea:
 - Spacing requirement could be similar to shops and moving events i.e. 10m2 pp

- Request of relaxing measures for religious events
 - Spacing requirements could be adapted as described in GEES general protocol on 'Audiences'

- Request of relaxing measures for horeca:
 - the GEES recommends to maintain its original proposition of closing hour 00.00
 - GEES does not recommend opening dance venues and nightclubs at this stage

Dit document bevat advies van de experten die deel uitmaken van de GEES. Het gaat daarbij onder meer om persoonlijke meningen die uit vrije wil en op vertrouwelijke basis worden verstrekt aan de federale regering.

Annex 2: Proposal from 3 ministers of education regarding the phased approach to re-open the school and academic year 2020-2021

See separate pdf document