

PRESS RELEASE

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Report to the Flemish Parliament

Contact tracing in Flanders during the COVID-19 pandemic - Management and follow-up by the Flemish Agency for Care and Health

Although the Flemish Agency for Care and Health (FACH) was unprepared to organize large-scale contact tracing, it quickly set up such a system to contain the corona pandemic. To this end, it concluded an agreement with a partnership of six call centres and the five national unions of the health insurance companies. An investigation by the Court of Audit showed that all contractual commitments of an operational nature have generally been fulfilled, with the exception of a few reports. To follow up on the implementation, the FACH focused on the results of the contact tracing. However, the operational efficiency of the partnership was insufficiently monitored by the FACH: a uniform control and reporting system was lacking for this purpose and the organization of the data flow needed for better monitoring took a lot of time. Financial supervision by the FACH was limited and only improved in the last implementation months. The Court sees insufficient staff (deployment), the lack of a risk analysis and conflicts of priorities as the main causes of the shortcomings.

Introduction

In April 2020, Flemish government launched a public contract procedure to set up a system of large-scale contact tracing. The contract was awarded to a joint venture consisting of Intermut (the five national unions of the mutual insurance companies) and a consortium of six call centres, with the consultant KPMG Advisory and the intermutualist emergency centre Mutas as subcontractors. As irregularities in the billing of services by one of the call centres were suspected in November 2021, Flemish Parliament instructed the Court of Audit to investigate contact tracing. The Court of Audit focused on the role of the Flemish government in setting up and monitoring COVID-19 contact tracing.

Pre-crisis preparedness of the FACH

At the time the corona crisis broke out, the national generic plan for the general approach to a health crisis, with a contact tracing module, had not yet been completed. The federal government and the federated states had not drawn up management measures to deal with identified risks, such as staff shortages and the legal basis for obtaining contact details. At the end of 2019, the FACH had drawn up internal Flemish guidelines for crisis acting, which also contained a step-by-step plan for scaling up personnel capacity. The agency has repeatedly warned Flemish Government of a personnel shortage and the lack of sufficient capacity to manage an epidemic, but personnel cuts were nevertheless implemented. The

experience FACH had with normal contact tracing operation, albeit on a limited scale, was an added value for COVID-19 contact tracing.

Collaboration with other governments and contract management

As the scope of the federal government's coordinating role during a crisis was rather unclear, the operationalization of contact tracing only late handed over to the competent federated states. Nevertheless, the FACH succeeded in setting up a large-scale contact tracing system very quickly in the first weeks of May 2020. In general, for the implementation and follow-up of the Flemish contact tracing, the FACH and the partnership often depended on various (inter)federal actors and the public IT service provider Smals for, among other things, of COVID-19 database management and the Genesys call centre telephone system.

The agreements with the partnership are spread over 14 contractual documents. This is legally possible, but requires extra vigilance in terms of editing. Many agreements were already being implemented before they were legally anchored, which, together with continuous unforeseen developments, has led to the fact that few agreements were concretely elaborated into technically and legally accurate provisions. Due to editorial shortcomings, the contract offered little guidance in the event of a dispute. Nevertheless, all operational commitments have generally been fulfilled, with the exception of some (quite vague) reporting obligations.

Managing central contact tracing by FACH

At the start of the corona pandemic, the FACH opted to outsource both contact tracing implementation and management, coordination and quality measurement to the partnership. However, the agency did not in advance have a concrete plan to outsource such tasks in a crisis situation, nor did it have a network to call upon if necessary, which meant there was a real risk that it would not find candidates for the public contract.

While the partnership was responsible for operational management, the FACH was responsible for strategic management. The FACH has thus set up a suitable framework to have contact tracing carried out and followed up at a strategic level, but it has not carried out any risk analysis, nor has it taken sufficient control measures, such as the incorporation of certain control mechanisms to ensure implementation of contact tracing itself. After all, the FACH has not outsourced this follow-up.

To monitor correct and efficient task fulfilment of registration of the time spent by the call centre personnel, a standardized measuring instrument and reporting was missing. The FACH therefore had insufficient insight into the way in which the partnership itself carried out such checks. Implementation of these checks by the call centres was also difficult for a long time due to the lack of a rapid flow of detailed data coming from the Genesys telephone system. Many other priorities (also from the other federated states) prevented adjustments to Genesys, despite a early request from the FACH for a more detailed information flow. To monitor contact tracing quality, the FACH did receive a monthly quality report. However, this report was not discussed at a separate, monthly quality meeting until 2022, after being recommended by a working group.

Key indicators have been defined for the strategic management of contact tracing, as well as indicators related to workload, such as capacity utilisation. Flemish government has monitored these indicators with sufficient frequency. Decisions to increase or decrease the

available capacity were usually timely, but in some cases implementation of the decision by the partnership was delayed.

Management measures for services registration and invoicing

During the first year and a half, the FACH carried out only limited checks on registration and invoicing of services by the call centres. It was not until 2022 that the agency was itself able to consult more data and to carry out additional checks. It did little to document its controls throughout the assignment and it never conducted a formal risk assessment. The FACH pointed to the lack of available personnel as the cause: no additional personnel were deployed for the financial control of contact tracing.

Response of the Flemish minister

The Flemish minister of Health agreed with most of the comments and judged the recommendations to be useful. Some recommendations had already surfaced in an internal FACH evaluation and are in the process of being systematically implemented, others are rather new and are being investigated for application possibilities. The minister indicated that a crisis preparedness cell was set up within the FACH in June 2022, which will, among other things, provide crisis plans and a quickly deployable and scalable reserve corps, and can prepare more comprehensive contract management. In addition, regular personnel capacity will increase by sixteen people. An evaluation of information management and the establishment of an audit trail will follow shortly. Finally, the minister commented on the remarks about insufficient risk awareness of the FACH and the limited focus on process efficiency.

Response of the Federal minister

The Federal minister of Health stated that Smals implemented IT adjustments on a priority basis, as decided in the working groups in which the various federated entities were represented. Smals was only able to implement Genesys reporting adjustments after the competent working group had given the order to do so.

Information for the press

The Court of Audit exerts an external control on the financial operations of the Federal State, the Communities, the Regions and the provinces. It contributes to improving public governance by transmitting to the parliamentary assemblies, to the managers and to the audited services any useful and reliable information resulting from a contradictory examination. As a collateral body of the Parliament, the Court performs its missions independently of the authorities it controls.

The audit report of the Court of Audit on the *Contact tracing in Flanders during the COVID-19 pandemic* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full versions and this press release can be found on the Court's website: www.courtofaudit.be.