



## **RIVM response to the scientific audit report on the Public Health Foresight Study (Volksgezondheid Toekomst Verkenning)**

### **Introduction**

Staff and management of RIVM would like to express their sincere gratitude to the audit committee for their work, recommendations and insights. We recognize the need to further strengthen the process, scientific quality and also the impact of the VTV. The recommendations from the audit committee neatly align with our intention to produce, amongst others, a scientific strategy for upcoming foresight studies in public health.

The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport commissions the Public Health Foresight Study (VTV) as part of legal tasks of RIVM. The VTV aims to provide unambiguous figures and scientific explorations into the most important future trends and societal challenges for public health and health care in the Netherlands. The VTV intends to present the facts, future projections and policy options from an independent position. The VTV is based on a robust set of independent data and is produced with the input of many experts, within and outside of RIVM. It covers broad and relevant aspects of future public health with a strong quantitative basis with state-of-the-art methodologies and authoritative data and information sources. The VTV is seen as an authoritative resource by policy makers, scientists and other users in the Netherlands.

The audit committee concluded that the quantitative work within the VTV project has an excellent academic reputation and is scientifically sound. However, the audit committee also mentioned that while the VTV remains unique in the field of public health foresight, both nationally and internationally, RIVM's VTV has lost some of its unique position as a frontrunner from a methodological perspective. Here it mainly concerns the qualitative knowledge base of the VTV, structural collaboration with national and international academic and foresight institutes, transparency and findability of methods, and organizing criticism within the process of a VTV. Finally, an assessment on how the VTV should continue to develop scientifically in the next ten years, perpetuating its unique (legal) position to serve societal needs is recommended.

As recommended by the audit committee, RIVM will - in developing its scientific public health foresight strategy - focus on 1) qualitative methods, including involvement of stakeholders and citizens; 2) collaborations with national and international academic foresight institutes, 3) external open review process and 4) transparency and findability of processes and methods. In addition, the strategy will include the improvement of the national and regional usability of the VTV. The development of this strategy will be done in consultation with our commissioner, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports. As the next VTV is already being prepared, some action can be taken immediately to profit from the audit committee's recommendations.

To follow-up on all recommendations and to perform actions, it is necessary to have attention for the conditions such as financial and organizational aspects, governance, agreements with commissioner and personnel plans. Many activities can be carried out within the available budget limits, but some activities are beyond the budget currently available. At the end of this response, we have summarized the activities 1) that will be taken up in the VTV-2024, 2) that will be taken up within a broader scope and horizon and 3) that need additional funding, within RIVM (such as SPR) or outside RIVM. In the strategic plan that will be developed, more detailed and concrete funding possibilities will be described.

A detailed response to the recommendations follows below, grouped according to the recommendations described in the audit report. Obviously, the development of a new VTV strategy is a cornerstone throughout all responses.

## Detailed reaction to the recommendations

### 1. Develop a future scientific strategy regarding foresight studies in public health.

*Any structural change in the VTV organization should be guided by a strong scientific strategy, considering the societal impact of the VTV. The committee recommends assessing strategically how the VTV should develop scientifically in the next ten years and what societal needs it will serve. This may then drive decisions regarding the organization, governance, and funding of the project and communication with stakeholders. The committee noticed that RIVM is more governable and less agenda-setting compared to the policy agencies (further called 'planbureaus'). Although this is a logical result of the different roles of the planbureaus, we suggest inspecting the strategies of the planbureaus for inspiration. The VTV team may consider publishing unsolicited interim explorations of specific topics inspired by developments in science and society. It may also be advisable to allocate seed money to further develop the quantitative models and to seriously invest in qualitative research, but allocation of additional budget should be driven by a strategic vision.*

**Response:** This recommendation aligns with our intention to develop a strategy addressing future scientific standards and societal demands. We will develop a strategic plan for public health foresight studies (further called VTV) which has a broader scope than the VTV project only, but also includes the connection with other projects, such as [regiobeeld.nl](https://regiobeeld.nl), "[Kosten van ziekten](#)" and [VZinfo.nl](https://VZinfo.nl), the necessary knowledge base and expertise. It should also involve other foresight studies, such as the ongoing foresight study on safe and healthy work and the planned foresight activities on population screening. This strategy will make full use of the recommendations and insights gained from the audit report, and will be aligned with the overall RIVM strategy 2020-2025. As the VTV project needs broad commitment and cooperation throughout all RIVM's domains, we will ensure engagement of these domains in drafting the strategic plan. We will consult the planbureaus for their foresight strategies, whilst taking into account differences between the roles and position of RIVM and the planbureaus. We will consider our position regarding the role of the VTV with respect to agenda setting.

Follow-up activities:

- Drafting a VTV strategic plan (Q2 2023).
- Consultation of foresight strategies of the planbureaus (Q1 2023); insights will be used for the VTV strategic plan.

## **2. Become more active in the broader field of foresight studies.**

*The VTV has made a substantial contribution to the scientific field of public health during the evaluation period. Its contribution to the scientific field of foresight studies from a generic point of view (outside the specific field of health) is less prominent. Over the years, foresight studies have matured as a discipline, taking place in domains such as public health, climate, environmental sciences, and economic sciences. We encourage the VTV core team to interact with scientists in these other domains of foresight studies and to obtain a position in this field as well. This may be achieved for instance by visiting foresight conferences and engaging with the Association of Professional Futurists (<https://www.apf.org>) or other professional foresight organizations. It will be inspiring to learn which techniques are used in other disciplines of foresight studies and the overall VTV process can benefit from rigorous methodological discussions with peers.*

**Response:** Currently, RIVM is active in the field of foresight at different levels. Within RIVM we organize masterclasses on foresight to strengthen foresight capacity within our centre. We had a lively foresight community which became partly inactive due to the pandemic and personnel shortage but which we will bring to life again. Nationally, we interact at a more ad hoc basis with organizations such as the planbureaus to exchange experiences in foresight activities. Internationally, RIVM holds, for example, the presidency of the European Public Health Association (EUPHA) Foresight section and has been leading various foresight work packages in European projects. We do agree that this could be further strengthened and that we may give more attention to this in our online communication.

Follow-up activities:

- RIVM-level: We will revitalize the RIVM foresight community by organizing a community meeting in Q2 of 2023 and continue to strengthen foresight capacity by organizing frequent interactive masterclasses. Here we will also strengthen our collaboration with the other RIVM domains.
- National level: We aim to set up a national knowledge platform for foresight activities (including existing networks) where parties involved could share their work, inspire others and actually collaborate. We will investigate the feasibility and added value for other institutes in Q1 of 2023.
- International level: We will continue to actively engage with other National Public Health Institutes (possibly within the context of the International Association of National Public Health Institutes (IANPHI)) and Scientific Associations such as the EUPHA. Furthermore, to strengthen international collaboration, we aim to acquire a [cost action](#) (networking budget) on Public Health Foresight. In addition, we will engage with the Association of Professional Futurists (<https://www.apf.org>) and other professional foresight organizations.

### **3. Invest in transparency and findability of the VTV methodology and process details.**

*The process of developing a VTV involves integrating up-to-date scientific knowledge (both quantitative and qualitative) about public health and healthcare. We recommend investing in the transparency of the methodology and the overall VTV process, for instance by publishing more journal articles (peer reviewed, open access manuscripts). If this would prove difficult to realize, another option may be to publish (e.g., on the RIVM website) the methodology used in VTV in the format of an easily accessible conventional 'materials and methods' section as if it would concern a section of a traditional scientific manuscript. Publishing a VTV periodic with an associated peer review system may be another option. In addition to improving the findability of research methods, international peer review may also act as a quality control step, especially if the results of these peer reviews are made publicly available. Improving the transparency of the overall VTV process (including the stakeholder consultation) will benefit the scientific quality, independence, societal impact, and viability of the VTV.*

**Response:** The methods applied in the VTV process, as well as the over-all process itself, are published on the [VTV website](#). We recognize that the methodology documents may be difficult to find as they are part of a large number of products published (e.g. synthesis and background reports, infographics, factsheets, brochures, (e-) magazines, videos). We will put extra effort in documenting processes and methods and publishing them in an easy-to-access way for others to benefit and safeguarding RIVM's transparency. We will carefully reconsider the level of detail to which this transparency is relevant and feasible. We will ensure availability of peer reviews upon request.

Follow-up activities:

- In the context of VTV-2024 we will publish methodological manuscripts (with explicit descriptions of the underlying scientific processes, steps and choices) in Q2-Q3 2024. We will organize external peer-review on these manuscripts. Whether this external review will be performed by the WAR-VTV or additional other external researchers will be assessed in the coming months. WAR-VTV = scientific advisory board-VTV, chaired by prof.dr. Karien Stronks.
- In line with RIVM's open science strategy we will apply RIVM's guidelines on open science.

### **4. Engage in sustainable long-term collaborations with academic research groups.**

*We recommend engaging in sustainable long-term collaborations with academic research groups because this will promote research quality and independence of the VTV and strengthen the viability of the project. Intensifying the collaboration with academic research groups may provide a solution to the challenge of finding manpower and resources to further develop the models and incorporate novel techniques such as artificial intelligence. In addition, social scientists at academic institutes may assist in improving the methodology of the qualitative research embedded in the VTV process (including stakeholder and citizen consultation). Collaborations may also help to recruit MSc students and PhD candidates to the VTV project, bringing fresh ideas and new connections. A first potential operationalization is recruiting (a group of) students to study the development of the views on prevention from the first VTV until now.*

**Response:** All VTV's were made in collaboration with several academic partners. We agree that making this collaboration more structural will benefit

future VTV's. The academic partnerships must be chosen carefully based on complementary knowledge and added value for both RIVM and the academic group. Topical fields of collaboration could be: qualitative methods including stakeholder involvement and citizen consultation, probably also novel foresight techniques such as artificial intelligence (AI), as well as quantitative epidemiologic modelling.

Follow-up activities:

- Investigation of research fields and promising academic partners, based on complementary expertise and mutual added value.
- Setting up a structural collaboration with academic partner(s) related to qualitative and quantitative foresight methods. This might include the exchange of MSc and PhD students and the installation of a professorship by special appointment. See also our response on recommendation 5.

#### **5. Expand and improve the methodological rigour of qualitative research within the VTV, including the stakeholder engagement process.**

*The committee encourages the VTV team to seriously invest in methodologically sound qualitative research, preferably by building in-house expertise. An alternative may be to establish collaborations with academic research groups in the field of social sciences to strengthen the qualitative research within the VTV project. For instance, we suggest adopting more structured methods for stakeholder and citizen engagement to guarantee a balanced representation of different viewpoints. It may also be useful to consult a handbook on co-creation for policy that was published by the European Commission:*

*<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128771> and this*

*paper on assessing the quality of qualitative research:*

*<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/tct.13242>. In addition,*

*participants of stakeholder meetings may be asked to sign a statement to declare conflicts of interest. Note that we recommend considering the Ministry of Health explicitly and openly as a stakeholder in addition to its role as the commissioner of the VTV.*

**Response:** We recognize the importance of the improvement of qualitative research within foresight studies. While a large range of different qualitative methods are applied (semi-structured interviews, stakeholder workshops, Delphi-panels and focus groups), making use of [RIVM-guidelines](#), we agree that the steps and decisions have to be made more explicit. Alongside signing a declaration about these interests we are going to invest in a better documentation of the processes of stakeholder engagement. As mentioned, we do provide insight in the applied methodologies and approaches (see e.g. <https://www.vtv2018.nl/methoden>), but acknowledge that we need to make this information more easily accessible. In addition, we will invest in expanding and improving the methodological rigour of our qualitative work.

As the audit commission observes, citizen engagement in the VTV requires specific attention and deserves to be better documented. The VTV-2024 has set out to engage citizens in a new way as a 'citizen council and panel'. The citizen engagement process will be evaluated and, based on that evaluation, further developed within the framework of the 'knowledge base project'.

Follow-up activities:

- Methodology of foresight studies, including qualitative methods, will be an explicit subject in the continuous 'knowledge base project'.

- We will perform comparative and in depth studies on development of foresight methods to enable the necessary progress and innovation.
- We will make an inventory of qualitative methods, in the context of foresight, including cocreating policy methods. Specifically, we will seek structural collaboration with one or two academic partners who are at the forefront of qualitative research methods.
- We will evaluate the citizen engagement in the upcoming VTV as part of the regular VTV evaluation.
- Stakeholders involved in the current and upcoming VTV's will be published on the VTV website with name and affiliation.
- Stakeholders involved in the current and upcoming VTV's will be asked to sign a conflict of interest form.

#### **6. Rethink the communication about the VTV messages.**

*The committee considers the current form of the VTV website suboptimal to facilitate in depth information provision to scientists and public health professionals other than policymakers at the Ministry of Health. It is difficult to localize information about specific topics and to trace the exact methodology that underlies the various components of the VTV on this website. We recommend rethinking how to efficiently communicate with various target groups. The VTV team may also consider increasing its impact on policymakers by seeking more interaction with directorates of the Ministry of Health other than Public Health, as well as other ministries. In addition, the VTV team may consider approaching the 'Vaste Tweede Kamer Commissie Volksgezondheid' or scientific agencies of the political parties.*

**Response:** Dissemination and communication are key for the impact of VTV. We recognize that the current form of the website is suboptimal. We agree with the audit committee that information about specific topics, the exact methodology that underlies the various components of the VTV need to be better findable. Additionally, we will upscale dissemination activities in relation to the policy making process at national, regional and local level.

Follow-up activities:

- VTV-2024 will be disseminated by means of a simple, structured and accessible website hosting several products such as management summaries, extensive reports and scientific methodological reports, addressing the main target groups with tailor-made information and communication.
- The VTV-2024 team already has regular joint meetings with representatives of all relevant directorates of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (the "VWS Policy Advisory Team"). In addition, the "Interdepartmental Steering Group Impact on Health" includes the VTV-2024 on its meeting agenda, corresponding to specific stages of the VTV process.
- We will organize an interactive 'roadshow' to present and discuss the VTV-2024 results at regional and local health infrastructures such as municipality and municipal health service networks. Here, we will explore the link with [regiobeeld.nl](https://regiobeeld.nl).
- We will disseminate the VTV-2024 report to the 'Vaste Tweede Kamer Commissie Volksgezondheid' by inviting them for a presentation and Q&A session at the RIVM, and to (all) scientific agencies of political parties.
- The foresight team will investigate the needs and wishes of a number of municipalities, municipal health services and the Dutch Federation of

Academic medical centers (NFU, specifically 'plan healthy region') regarding information, projections and developments in light of possible future VTVs at the regional level. Other existing products will be discussed and evaluated as well, such as [regiobeeld.nl](https://regiobeeld.nl).

### **7. Include more critical opinions in the various advisory boards and in the VTV process in a structured, transparent, and traceable way.**

*The committee noticed that many members of the VTV community are strongly connected to the VTV, e.g., through formal positions in previous years. The scientific quality of future VTVs may benefit from rigorous critique, also from outsiders. We recommend inviting these forms of critique into the VTV process, to ensure a more rigorous scientific quality assurance. This can be organized by inviting ad hoc, outside reviewers originating from the Netherlands or abroad. Making the results of this review process openly available will foster the scientific character of the VTV.*

**Response:** We highly support that the VTV may benefit from rigorous critique, also from outsiders. Our current governance structure safeguards the scientific, policy and societal value of the VTV, but might fail in mobilizing critique in a more structural manner with feedback from "outsiders". We do recognize the urge to include "fresh outsiders" within the governance structure of the VTV. The Citizen Council we are currently running on an experimental basis might also provide outsider views.

Follow-up activities:

- We will continue to invite the WAR-VTV explicitly to provide us with rigorous critique.
- We will reconsider the composition of the WAR-VTV-2028.
- The possibilities and use of a broad (public) consultation round, besides current review activities, will be investigated.

### **8. Increase the regional impact of the VTV.**

*In addition to its legal role to inform the National Health Policy Memorandum ("Landelijke Nota Gezondheidsbeleid"), the VTV should inform local health memoranda of municipalities through the national Memorandum. Comparing public health data between regions will allow municipalities to obtain benchmarking information. The committee sees room to increase the impact of the VTV on the local health memoranda, for instance by providing local projections and foresights. It would be good to provide resources for RIVM as well as the regions to engage in regional VTVs. A selection of results of the regional VTVs could then be channeled back into the national VTV to provide a balanced picture of the national as well as the regional foresights.*

**Response:** VTV is commissioned by the Ministry of Health and targeted at national public health. VTV-2024 emphasizes: "The VTV is about the future of public health in the Netherlands as a whole. The VTV-2024 does not offer regional VTVs for specific municipalities or municipal health services." We acknowledge, however, that the regional and local dimension of public health is relevant and that local governments and parties play an essential role at this level. We address the regional and local level in projects and programmes such as [Regiobeeld.nl](https://regiobeeld.nl) and [Loketgezondleven.nl](https://loketgezondleven.nl). The afore-mentioned stakeholder and citizen participation can help us to increase the regional impact of VTV.

Follow-up activities:

- We refer to the activities in response to recommendation 6.
- Simultaneously, we will assess the possibilities and support of a regional VTV in relation to existing regional products such as 1) regiobeeld.nl, in which regional projections for the future of several diseases and determinants are included, and 2) loketgezondleven.nl, in which interventions and policy measures (the so called "handelingsperspectieven") at local and regional level are included. If supported, we will assess who is willing and able to execute and finance the regional VTVs.

### Summary

A strategic plan Foresight in public health will be drafted in which the scientific methods will comprise a significant part and for which foresight strategies of the planbureaus will be consulted. The plan will involve activities that will already be taken up within the present VTV-2024, activities that will be taken up within a broader scope, e.g. within our present 'knowledge base project' and activities for which additional funding needs to be found.

The following activities will be taken up in the VTV-2024:

- We will invite the scientific advisory board WAR-VTV-2024 to play explicitly the role of critical counterpart.
- Stakeholders involved will be published on the VTV website with name and affiliation.
- Stakeholders will be asked to sign a conflict of interest form.
- We will evaluate the citizen engagement in the VTV-2024.
- The possibilities and use of a broad (public) consultation round, besides current review activities, will be investigated.
- We will publish methodological manuscripts (with explicit descriptions of the underlying scientific processes, steps and choices) and organize external peer-review on these manuscripts.
- In line with RIVM's open science strategy we will make data and models freely accessible as far as legally and practically possible in the VTV-2024.
- VTV-2024 will be disseminated by means of a simple, structured and accessible website hosting several products.
- The VTV-2024 team already has regular joint meetings with representatives of all relevant directorates of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, and the Interdepartmental Steering Group Impact on Health and will continue to do so.
- We will organize an interactive 'roadshow' to present and discuss the VTV-2024 results and the link with [regiobeeld.nl](https://regiobeeld.nl) at regional and local health infrastructures.
- We will disseminate the VTV-2024 report to the 'Vaste Tweede Kamer Commissie Volksgezondheid' and to (all) scientific agencies of political parties.

The following activities will be taken up within a broader scope: (VTV-2028, other foresight projects or the knowledge base project):

- We will revitalize the RIVM foresight community and continue to strengthen foresight capacity and collaboration with the other RIVM domains.
- We will reconsider the composition of the WAR-VTV-2028.
- We will make an inventory of qualitative methods, in the context of foresight.

- Methodology of foresight studies, including qualitative methods, will be an explicit subject in the continuous 'knowledge base project'.
- We will develop guidelines regarding accessibility of data and models.
- We will investigate research fields and promising academic partners, based on complementary expertise and mutual added value.
- RIVM will investigate the wishes and needs of a couple municipalities, municipal health services, and the Dutch Federation of Academic medical centers (NFU, specifically 'plan healthy region') in light of possible future VTVs at the regional level. Here we will discuss and evaluate the role of other products, such as [regiobeeld.nl](http://regiobeeld.nl).
- We will continue to actively engage internationally in Public Health Foresight activities (e.g. EUPHA).

The following activities need additional funding to be conducted. Part of this necessary additional funding may be acquired from the Strategic Program RIVM, depending on how well we are able to comply with the SPR procedures and criteria. Additionally we will aim at negotiating additional budget from our main commissioner, the ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, and acquire funding from relevant national and European (competitive) funding programs (ZonMw, NWA, COST action, Horizon EU etcetera):

- We will perform comparative and in depth studies on development of foresight methods to enable the necessary progress and innovation
- We will strengthen our international collaboration, by means of a [cost action](#) on Public Health Foresight and adding new networks to existing ones.
- We aim to set up a national knowledge platform for foresight activities (including existing networks) where parties involved could share their work, inspire others and actually collaborate.
- We will set up a structural collaboration with academic partner(s), based on the prioritization of topics and partners. This might include the exchange of MSc and PhD students and the installation of a professorship by special appointment.
- If regional VTV's are supported, we will assess who is willing and able to execute and finance these regional VTVs.

Finally, within one year from now, we will report to the RIVM Scientific Advisory Board on the progress of implementing the recommendations and acquiring additional funding.