



RIVM response to the scientific audit report on the Strategic Programme RIVM (SPR)

RIVM

A. van Leeuwenhoeklaan 9
3721 MA Bilthoven
P.O. Box 1
3720 BA Bilthoven
www.rivm.nl

T 088 689 89 89

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On behalf of the RIVM and its Strategic Programme (SPR), the Director-General, the RIVM Executive Board and the Chief Science Officers would like to express their sincere gratitude to the SPR Audit Committee for the time and effort they have put into the audit, and for sharing their insights, reflections and recommendations. Here we reflect on these findings and indicate how we will address the recommendations provided in the audit report.

General response

RIVM has taken note of the committee's findings with great appreciation. The observations highlight the quality of the research conducted in SPR projects as well as the importance of the programme for RIVM's ability to develop state-of-the-art tools and methods, to maintain our scientific credibility and to be prepared for future societal challenges and related questions from our key commissioners. We appreciate that the Audit Committee has underlined SPR's strong institutional position and its importance to RIVM's societal mission. We are proud that the Audit Committee concluded that RIVM's strategic research has both the potential and the responsibility to play a leading role in scientific debates, thanks to its unique mix of academic depth and practical relevance. We embrace the committee's recommendation to adopt a more ambitious attitude, and we recognise that there is unused potential in communicating results to ministries and in consulting external stakeholders during agenda-setting and improve external visibility in general. We recognise the need to further improve operational quality and to clarify the different roles in the programme.

The committee's recommendations focus on aspects of the quality of the research, operational quality, relevance to society, viability and futureproofing as well as openness and integrity. The recommendations encourage further critical thinking how SPR can best be designed and developed in upcoming years to strengthen the scientific knowledge base of RIVM needed to address current and emerging societal issues.

Below, we discuss the recommendations of the Audit Committee in more detail and indicate what follow-up actions will be taken. These follow-up actions will be incorporated into the SPR Yearly Plans and will be monitored through progress reports which will be discussed with the RIVM Executive Board and the Scientific Supervisory Board.

Follow-up actions

The Audit Committee recommends to complement quantitative indicators with narrative evaluation of policy uptake, capacity building and methodological innovation.

The SPR team has taken a first step in this direction by including narratives in the SPR Annual Report 2024, which was published in June 2024, shortly after

the site visit of the committee. These narratives have been published separately on the RIVM intranet to inform colleagues about the results achieved in these projects and will also be used to showcase SPR on the RIVM website.

The SPR team will take further steps by regularly requiring project teams to provide a narrative on the impact of their project in terms of policy uptake, methodological and scientific innovation and including these narratives in evaluation documents such as Annual Reports.

The Audit Committee recommends to compress the grant trajectory to 6 to 8 months; and to consider replacing the pre-proposal stage with co-creation sessions and cap full proposals at 10 to 15 pages.

The grant awarding process is a core process in SPR. It is important that this process is efficient and transparent. To promote efficiency, we will explore how to further compress the grant trajectory and post the timeline for each call for proposals well in advance so that everyone is aware of the timing of the different stages in the process (e.g. more in line with procedures for Horizon Europe calls for proposals). We will limit the maximum number of pages of proposals, depending on the nature of the call and budget: proposals for seed money projects can be shorter whereas large projects may require more space.

The Audit Committee recommends to publish timelines for grant application on the intranet and share scoring rubrics, anonymized reviewer comments and decision rationales with all applicants to strengthen procedural trust.

To promote transparency of the grant awarding process, we will publish timelines and evaluation and quality criteria for each call in an assessment framework. We will make clear in advance how and by whom proposals will be reviewed and what role the reviewers have in the final decision whether or not to fund a proposal. We will share anonymised reviewers' reports and decision rationales with the applicants.

The Audit Committee recommends, when possible, to reserve explicit SPR hours in staff planning and designate a single accountable owner for each project milestone to raise on-time delivery above 40%.

After a proposal has been awarded, the head of the centre to which a project is assigned is accountable for the quality and the on-time delivery of products. The project leader is explicitly assigned time to fulfil his or her responsibility in managing the overall project, including timely delivery of products and meeting milestone deadlines. We will further work towards clear criteria which will also assist the SPR commissioning client (the Director-General) to act when the progress or performance is not according the assignment. In addition, researchers working on each deliverable are assigned time for their work, including time for PhD supervision.

The Audit Committee recommends to allow budget carry-over for EU bids and publication fees. Recalculate the overhead rate to reflect actual programme support needs.

SPR currently has funds reserved for Open Access publication fees. These funds are available to all SPR projects, also after the project has formally been completed. We will continue the Open Access Fund in the next SPR programme.

RIVM has a separate fund outside of SPR for the preparation of EU bids that can be used to financially support RIVM staff in the proposal phase as well a fund that guarantees co-funding needed to match the difference between the RIVM and client-excepted overhead. However, part of this fund is no longer available after 2029. In 2026, RIVM will determine the framework for SPR 2027-2030, and in the preparation towards this we will consider including provisions for EU as well as national call for proposals.

With respect to the overhead, RIVM works with the established financial system for government agencies in which administrative overhead is a percentage of the hourly tariff of researchers working on projects. The budget of SPR projects is based on these tariffs, and thus also include the overhead percentage that is indeed used for overhead expenses. In some cases, when extra or specific support services are needed for an SPR project, such expenses are required to be explicitly budgeted in such projects, and in that case they are funded by SPR, and as such, not regarded as overhead.

The Audit Committee recommends to broaden agenda-setting by engaging bodies such as PBL, SCP, RVS, WHO and FAO, and maintain SPR's distinct, forward-looking scope alongside commissioned work. Strengthen interdisciplinarity in future SPR projects.

The preparation of SPR 2027-2030 will start after the summer and initial steps are already taken to define who will be consulted. The organisations mentioned by the committee are important stakeholders and will be involved in the consultation process. In addition, we will consider involving stakeholders as part of an SPR Advisory Board.

We strongly believe that interdisciplinary collaboration is an important aspect of scientific innovation. Interdisciplinary projects were first encouraged in SPR 2019-2022. In SPR 2023-2026, collaboration between the natural and the social sciences was a requirement in most calls. We will continue to request and encourage interdisciplinarity projects.

The Audit Committee recommends to make data stewards responsible for all matters related to open access publishing, data management plans, and open data storage.

We embrace and acknowledge that working towards optimal open science is important. RIVM has endorsed the principles of Open Science, and SPR has

resulted in a high rate of Open Access publications. Open Data is very much encouraged, and data management plans are mandatory for all RIVM projects.

We will:

- o Emphasize that compliance with Open Science requirements, including open access publishing, data management plans, and open data storage, is a mandatory requirement for SPR projects in calls for proposals
- o Offer support on complying with Open Science requirements for (future) project leaders
- o Require that every SPR project has a data steward assigned to the project and has funds reserved to comply with Open Data requirements
- o Monitor compliance with Open Science requirements during progress meetings with SPR projects and report on compliance in the Yearly Reports.

In addition, SPR stimulates and enables publishing in peer reviewed open access journals with a dedicated Open Access fund which finances article processing charges.

The Audit Committee recommends to explore and address social safety concerns. Track how often confidential advisors are consulted, even informally, and discuss these cases annually to determine whether action is needed by domain directors.

We agree with the importance of monitoring social safety concerns. RIVM has an extensive safety net to support and advise colleagues on social safety issues, including confidential advisors and in-house welfare officers. The director-general RIVM regularly has formal and informal meetings with the colleagues who are part of this network. During these meetings both formal complaints and informal signals are discussed, within the bounds of the confidentiality of these consultations, and action is taken when required.

The Audit Committee has indicated that trust in SPR procedures can be strengthened by increased transparency on evaluation criteria and decision rationales (see above). In addition, we will develop and implement a complaints-and-escalation procedure for applicants that disagree with decisions taken by the chief science officers and SPR management. This will ensure that disagreements that cannot be solved at the level of SPR management, can be discussed with the director-general.

The Audit Committee recommends to halt further budget erosion, position SPR as a seed fund for Horizon Europe consortia and strengthen its profile through targeted leadership communication.

We recognise that a strong international network and cooperation are crucial to fulfil RIVM's tasks as an organization. RIVM has a dedicated fund in place to facilitate acquisition of European Committee funded projects, outside of SPR. This fund also acts as a 'guarantee fund' to cover the difference that arises from the RIVM overhead and that overhead percentage that are accepted by the European Committee in case our primary clients have not committed themselves to cover for this difference. However, part of this fund is no longer available after 2029. In 2026, RIVM will determine the framework for SPR 2027-2030, and in the preparation towards this we will consider including provisions for EU as well as national call for proposals.

The audit committee appreciates the high *quality* of the publications produced. The publications receive a high number of citations, and RIVM is in this respect on par with major European sister organizations. Yet the *number* of publications is disappointing, certainly compared to the number of publications aimed for in the research proposals. That said, publication procedures are notoriously slow and it became clear during the site visit that there are still publications coming in for the project period 2019 – 2022.

We agree with the committee that the number of publications resulting from SPR projects could and should be higher. In the most recent SPR programme, a stronger focus on PhD trajectories as well as publications in scientific journals has been established, as also advised by the Scientific Supervisory Board of RIVM. Furthermore, the RIVM executive board has recently decided to provide extra funding for SPR projects to finance extra hours of staff to speed up finalization of manuscripts to be submitted in 2025. Furthermore, the relative low number of publications is also partly a registration issue. Registration is being improved by the fact that well-defined products including scientific publications are to be specified in proposals and will be monitored accordingly. Furthermore, RIVM executive board has decided to adopt and implement a Research Information System which will substantially facilitate the registration of publications that originate from SPR projects. In addition, RIVM has an Open Access incentive budget for publications which is at present based on SPR budget.

For future audits, the Audit Committee recommends that the assessment of SPR projects should not only focus on quantitative indicators such as the number of publications and citations.

As indicated above, we have taken first steps in this direction by including narratives in the SPR Yearly Report 2024, which was published in June 2025, shortly after the site visit of the committee. These narratives have also been published on the RIVM intranet to inform colleagues about the results achieved in these projects.

The SPR team will take further steps by regularly asking project coordinators to provide a narrative on the impact of their project in terms of policy uptake, capacity building of methodological innovation, and including these narratives in all evaluation documents including Yearly Reports and publishing these narratives on the RIVM website.

Whilst maintaining academic ambition, it is essential to communicate research findings beyond the academic domain. In addition to peer-reviewed publications, the results of SPR projects should therefore be disseminated through other channels: the RIVM website, policy briefs, fact sheets, stakeholder presentations etc. These formats enhance the accessibility and impact of the research, especially for ministries and other users of RIVM knowledge.

We concur with the Audit Committee that the visibility, accessibility and impact of the research in SPR projects can be further enhanced. This will be one of our main priorities over the coming months. We will invest in extra communication capacity to not only develop a communication strategy which specifies what actions will be taken to successfully reach the different target groups (RIVM community, stakeholders at ministries, broader scientific community) and to be able to execute it effectively.