

ECA Comments: Project RNO: Return to Normal Operations

1 Current status and outlook

The COVID19 outbreak impacted the whole world. The aviation sector, and in particular the airline operations have been significantly disrupted, with current traffic levels in Europe stabilising at around 10% when compared with the 2019 volumes. Other regions of the world face similar, wide scale disruptions.

EASA worked intensely with the European Member States, the aviation industry and the international partners to put in place a set of measures needed during the most acute phase of the crisis. Those measures were aimed at reducing the risks to crews and passengers when operating to/from/within high risks areas and at providing the flexibility and specific guidance to ensure the continuity of aviation service. A full list of measures taken by the Agency is available in Annex 1.

Aviation is one of the first sectors to be affected by this crisis and its recovery will be perhaps slower and also affected by the evolution of the global economy, which will also be impacted by the COVID crisis. While airlines and their personnel bear the brunt of the impact, the entire sector will be affected, ranging from the manufacturing industry, ground and navigation infrastructure, training industry and general aviation. Conversely, the recovery of the airline industry will lead the recovery of the entire sector. A full recovery of the aviation sector to the pre-COVID levels will probably take between 2 and 3 years, depending on the specific impact on the respective domains.

ECA Comment: given the many aspects that affect personnel, especially air crew, and the relevance of WS1 and WS2 for them, we consider it important to specifically mention them here.

The current forecasts foresee the start to return of operations at the earliest in May. The RNO is likely to be slow and diverse across Europe and internationally. Member States will recover at different speeds and most likely with different health restrictions imposed at national level, making operations for aviation even more difficult.

2 EASA assistance to Return to Normal Operations for European Industry

The impact on industry depends to a large extent on the coordinated and harmonized approach taken in Europe. EASA intends to work with the Member States and aviation industry to get the European aviation industry back in business in a safe and harmonised way and as fast as possible.

ECA Comment: while it may seem obvious that EASA will try to ensure safe operations both during the height of the crisis and the RNO process, it is important to make this *explicit* in such a document, which will serve as a general framework for NCAs and industry stakeholders alike.

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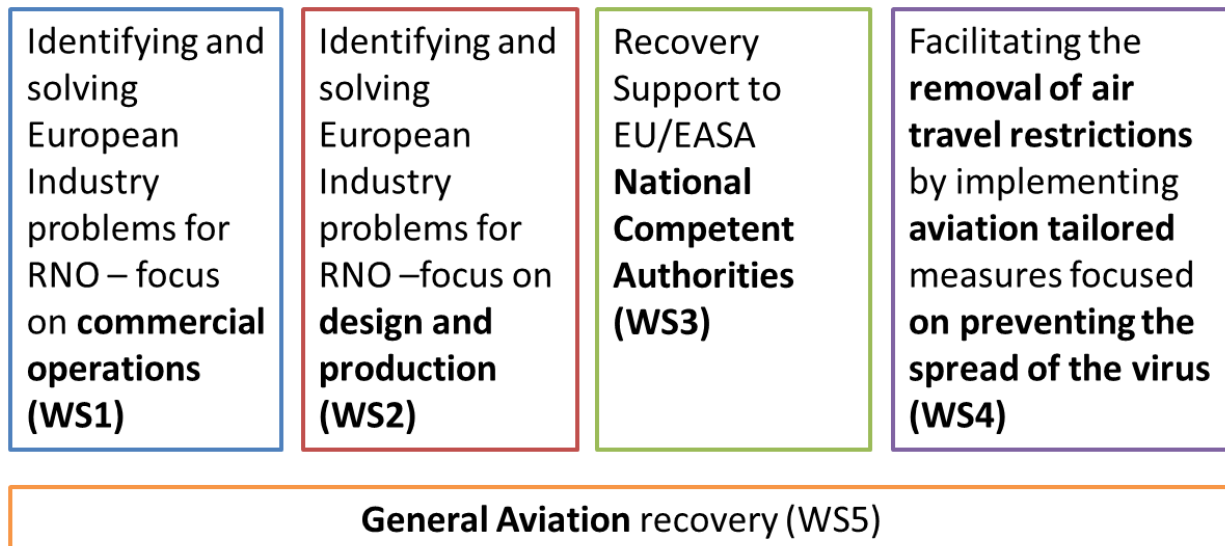
For this purpose EASA has established the project Return to Normal Operations (RNO) that will focus on helping the aviation industry to adjust and recover. To ensure an expeditious coordination across the complex ecosystem of EASA stakeholders, the Agency will establish a Task Force composed of representatives of the Member States and of the most relevant industry associations that will steer the work of the RNO project.

ECA Comment: given the many aspects that directly (and indirectly) concern air crew, and in particular pilots, ECA considers its participation in this Task Force essential, to provide its technical front-line expertise on the overall process and especially on WS1 and WS4.

3 Activities/work-streams of the RNO Project

Several work streams (WS) are foreseen, all with a wide scope of work, calling for the involvement of several stakeholders. On the other hand, each work stream must be shaped to ensure swift progress and heightened agility in order to adapt to a fast evolving operational environment.

Five work-streams have been established within the RNO project:



3.1 Identifying and solving European Industry problems for RNO – focus on commercial operations (WS1)

Identify the showstoppers for airlines’ RNO, plan and deal with the issues in the appropriate time line. The main focus will be to ensure swift and orderly absorption of recovery from the training backlog resulting from

the measures imposed during the acute phase of the crisis, while needing to observe health imposed restrictions (e.g. social distancing, donning of protective equipment, etc.).

In support of this focus area, engage with the operators, professional pilot community and the pilot training industry to consider how best to facilitate increasing the access to recurrent training as a priority, as well as at a later stage – initial training. Furthermore, it was identified that support should be provided to ensure continuity for ~~both~~ training organisations to allow for a speedy return to normal recency and recurrent training cycles for those pilots still employed and flying, and thereafter for those pilots that have become unemployed and risk losing their licenses and hence their employability and student pilots within initial training. Many training organisations have either closed until further notice, or limited their activities to distance learning. Possible high demand for ECQB theoretical knowledge examination once travel restrictions are lifted. There is also a need to engage with the cabin crew training industry as well as the cabin crew community for similar reasons.

ECA Comment: While it is important that students that have already started their initial training will at least be able to finish it at some stage, this is not a high priority for commercial air transport and its RNO, in particular as there will be a significant (over)supply of non-flying/unemployed pilots, probably during the entire RNO process, and possibly thereafter. Available training facilities must be used as a priority and to maximum extent to address the backlog and return to normal recency and recurrent training cycles as quickly as possible for those pilots still employed and flying, and afterwards for those pilots that have become unemployed and who risk losing their licenses without access to SIM facilities (i.e. to ensure their future employability once the traffic picks up more strongly again). Focussing resources on initial training might be in the commercial interest of individual training organisations, but it is neither in the wider RNO interest, nor in the interest of the individual pilot students who are likely to face significant challenges to find a pilot job for several years to come.

Furthermore, an even higher demand of training for that group should be envisioned to actually compensate for the loss of competence during long absences from flight duty.

For RNO of international operations, close collaboration with ICAO and major aviation regulators is crucial to ensure that European solutions/exemptions enjoy a wide acceptance at international level. EASA will also contribute to the new initiatives devised by ICAO, in particular in the ICAO Council Aviation Recovery Task Force (CART) and in the newly established Task Force reviewing Annex 9 in order to provide for better tools to address any future health-related outbreaks. EASA will continue to engage with its international partners for acquiring good practices of RNO from other parts of the world, which are ahead of Europe in exiting the COVID crisis.

3.1.1 Main focus areas:

1 Ensure competence and medical fitness of aviation personnel

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Erosion of competence and lack of recent experience is seen as the biggest challenge, especially when the means to restore that competence will be limited at this stage. Focus will be on ensuring that access to training and licensing systems correlates well with the operational demand, is focussed as a priority towards enabling a speedy return to normal recency and recurrent training cycles for those still employed and flying, and thereafter for pilots that have become unemployed but need to be kept employable to underpin the RNO. Use of temporary flexibility provisions might be necessary to cope with the gradual lifting of restrictions (e.g. simulators not available due to their location).

ECA Comment: To ensure competent and adequately experienced flight crews on the flight deck at all times proper risk assessments need to be conducted by the operators and be followed up upon and checked by the NCAs taking into account accumulated lack of recent experience of flight crews, increasing traffic as well as accumulated effects of multiple exemptions.

ECA Comment: For training priority – see comments above. To adequately address training needs a gap analysis of competence erosion might be required (training needs analysis), most likely leading to different and individualized training requirements before return to duty.

As regards medical fitness, a significant number of aero-medical examiners (AMEs) were forced to limit or totally discontinue medical examinations due to different reasons. In addition, some of AMEs are/will be not able to revalidate their certificates. It is necessary to assist member states in their return to normal functioning of the aero-medical examination systems.

2 Ensure fully airworthy aircraft

Airworthiness Review Certificates and maintenance schedules will have expired. Similarly, to training, the ability of the entire system (including supply chain difficulties) will be tested. Absorbing the effects of the accumulated backlog and ensuring fully airworthy aircraft will be the main focus. The status of the airworthiness should be transparent (incl. to the pilots operating their aircraft), especially with respect to possible temporary extensions and exceptions.

3 Ensure readiness at all levels (e.g. ground and air navigation infrastructure) when restarting operations

The ground and air navigation infrastructure had to scale down operations, both as a direct impact of the outbreak and as a result of the reduction in traffic. The restart of airline operations will need to be met by an infrastructure that is ready to receive the traffic and to ramp up operations to match the increase in traffic, while perhaps needing to observe certain health imposed restrictions (e.g. social distancing, donning of protective equipment).

4 Ensure coordination at international level

Aviation is intrinsically an international activity, hence in great need of harmonisation. While operations will restart at different speeds on the domestic, regional and international markets a coordinated response based on mutual acceptance of the measures taken by the State of Operator are seen as a catalyst for a speedy recovery.

3.2 Identifying and solving European Industry problems - Design and production (WS2)

In Europe, European manufacturers are affected by the crisis, either due to the direct effects of the measures taken by public health authorities and mainly due to a significant slowdown in demand. In addition, new operational needs during the crisis may trigger certification involvement, e.g. carriage of cargo in the passenger compartment.

3.2.1 Main focus areas:

1 Support to industry for changes to aircraft configurations

- conversion of passenger cabins to allow carriage of cargo in the cabin the enable the transportation of medical goods
- transportation of infected passengers
- other COVID-19 related aircraft configuration changes

EASA has already communicated that COVID-19 related projects are prioritised and are currently processed free of charge, within the scope of the applicable legal framework.

2 Adjust oversight policies of DOAs and POAs under EASA oversight during the post-crisis phase

Establish mitigation means applying a performance and risk based approach for organisational oversight to ensure a proportionate amount of oversight that allows the organisations to recover and ramp up their operations and guarantees an appropriate level of safety. Coordinated policies will be established addressing also other organisations certified by EASA (WS1) and by NCAs (WS3).

3.3 Recovery Support to EU/EASA National Competent Authorities (WS3)

NCAs play a key role in the industry's recovery process. They need to:

- Support critical operations during the acute phase of the crisis, by providing guidance to their industry and adopting flexibility provisions and/or alternative means of compliance when needed;
- Perform remote oversight in order to keep control of the situation and ensure continued safe operations;
- Support the gradual industry return to normal operations, as soon as the current restrictions to the free movement of persons will start to be lifted.

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ECA Comment: Keeping control of what is happening is certainly essential, but it must be made explicit in such a document that this is about ensuring an acceptable level of flight safety. Given that many NCA currently struggle to understand – let alone control – what is happening in the real operations, it is crucial to explicitly remind NCA about the purpose of taking / keeping control.

The impact of the crisis is not the same on all NCAs. Besides the differences in governmental restrictions, those NCAs that were already experiencing significant difficulties (e.g. staffing, resources) before the crisis are the ones most distressed now. Furthermore, return to normal operations will probably take place at different speeds across Europe. EASA support to NCAs needs to take all these factors into account.

EASA has already taken a number of actions to assist NCAs in supporting the industry during the initial phase of the crisis by developing templates for NCAs to issue the necessary exemptions in a safe and harmonised manner, publishing guidance documents to support identified technical and operational needs, implementing a simplified process to manage AltMoCs during the crisis, providing a policy on NCAs' oversight activities during the crisis, providing technical advice to the European Commission as regards the postponement of the applicability dates of upcoming regulatory mandates, and coordinating the European position in response to ICAO State Letters addressing COVID related flexibility measures.

Furthermore all Standardisation (STD) inspections planned for the near future have been postponed, and EASA experts have been redeployed into a support role, offering their technical expertise to help NCAs.

3.3.1 Main focus areas:

Three sub-streams are proposed:

1. Support NCAs in managing flexibility provisions for the industry

Exemptions: so far, NCAs have used the provided templates in different ways. While certain specificities may be justified, a harmonised approach is necessary to support the EU aviation industry's recovery, as operators employ staff holding different national licences, etc.

AltMoCs: during the recovery phase, NCAs will need to approve alternative means to comply with the applicable requirements. Here again, a harmonised approach is necessary.

Actions:

- Establishment of an online repository to share with all stakeholders all available EASA guidance to NCAs;
- Establishment of an online repository to share with all stakeholders all Exemptions granted by NCAs
- Active monitoring of exemptions and AltMoCs issued by NCAs, incl. through an online repository open to all stakeholders;
- Development of further guidance & regular updating of existing guidance, to address in a safe manner identified industry needs;

- Proactive support to NCAs in need, to address and resolve non-harmonised measures.

ECA Comment: Full understanding by and transparency towards all aviation stakeholders – about Exemptions, AltMOCs and non-harmonised measures, is necessary and will help both EASA and the NCAs to monitor and harmonise their various measures. Online repositories should be available and be made accessible to all stakeholders. - As to EASA Guidance, existing ones need to be updated regularly, and their purpose must not be addressing industry needs as such, but addressing them in a safe manner. It is important to make this clear and mention it explicitly. – Finally, as regards AltMOCs, it is not entirely clear why AltMOCs are envisioned here. If not very tightly controlled by EASA, AltMOCs risk carrying exemptions well beyond their temporary purpose, making them quasi-permanent. The risk is that safety-problematic practices – which were acceptable on a temporary emergency basis – become the ‘new normal’ in future.

2. Support NCAs in adjusting oversight programmes to the industry’s needs

Adapted oversight: NCAs have been forced to suspend their established oversight programmes. We have advised NCAs to perform a risk assessment, in order to establish to what extent all non-critical oversight activities can be reduced, postponed or cancelled. However, we do not know to what extent NCAs have been able to adapt their programmes to the current industry situation.

Remote oversight: EASA advised NCAs to explore all possibilities to perform remote oversight in order to support their industry to safely manage their operations at a time where on-site visits are no longer possible, e.g. tele/video interviews, desktop reviews, data analyses, targeted stakeholder consultation (e.g. front-line personnel associations) etc. However, also in this case we do not know to what extent NCAs have been able to perform remote oversight.

ECA Comment: The current wording gives the impression that the purpose of (remote) oversight is to support industry. This can be interpreted in many different (and potentially unwelcome) manners and therefore needs to be clarified: supporting the industry in their safety performance (not in their commercial aims). – Targeted stakeholder consultation: to compensate for the lack of on-site visits, NCAs should gather data on what happens ‘out there’ in real operations. Aviation personnel associations often have the direct front-line staff insight and can provide the NCA with useful data & information on actual operations, operators’ risk assessments, mitigating measures taken, problems encountered & learning points. This will help the NCAs to identify attention areas, to focus their (scarce) resources on those areas, and to carry out a risk & performance-based oversight (for which such information & data is essential). Hence, NCA should be encouraged to reach out (remotely) to aviation personnel associations’ technical departments to seek such information, as well as being open to be contacted by such associations.

Actions:

- Active monitoring of revised oversight programmes;
- Development of further guidance to address identified needs / sharing of best practices;
- Proactive support to NCAs in need, to establish oversight programmes fit for the purpose.

3. Support NCAs in developing plans to facilitate industry's recovery

Recovery plans: Once the acute phase of the crisis will be over, CAs will face a number of internal challenges, in terms of staff, resources, loss of revenue, etc. At the same time, industry require NCAs to react swiftly to their needs, and to fully support the recovery of normal operations. While the most resilient CAs may be already developing recovery plans to be ready to support their industry, those NCAs that were already struggling to discharge their duties before the crisis will most probably face significant difficulties.

Actions:

- Map the NCAs' status with regard to staffing, resources, and other major issues;
- Support NCAs in the development of recovery plans matching the needs of their industry;
- Identify structural issues, and escalate them in order to facilitate their resolution.

3.4 Facilitating the removal of air travel restrictions by implementing aviation tailored measures, focused on preventing the spread of the virus (WS4)

Airline traffic will restart only if robust public health measures will be in place that will protect the passengers and front-line personnel ([e.g. security personnel, gate personnel and aircrews](#)) and that will prevent re-importing and spreading the virus. EASA's combined aviation and medical competences can provide sound technical input to MS on what the aviation sector itself can do to confine the spread of the coronavirus, e.g. seating in flight, cabin crew behaviour, gate/boarding crowd management etc. Further, EASA, together with the NCAs, can facilitate a harmonised approach among Member States regarding acceptance of effective mitigation measures in aviation against further virus spread. [Such harmonised approach will also ensure a level playing field within the European aviation market, with all operators being subject to comparable requirements.](#)

3.4.1 Main focus areas:

1. **Develop mitigation measures and guidance to facilitate the return to operation and build up public confidence in aviation transport.** [\[ECA: this WS item is highly relevant and of added value for air crew\]](#)

Aviation will not start again before sufficient health protection measures are in place during the recovery phase to convince national health authorities and the general public that aviation will not contribute to spread the virus. National public health measures are applicable within the national territory, but as soon as the operators perform an international flight, they will most likely be faced with a different set of national

measures. In order to facilitate a harmonised approach for European operators, EASA should, in collaboration with MS and industry, put in place mitigating measures that address, in a coordinated manner, all relevant stakeholders (e.g. operators, aerodromes, aviation personnel, etc.). This work-stream has already started with the direct involvement of DG SANTE sanitary experts (European Commission) and European Centre for Disease Prevention (ECDC) to elaborate the sanitary content of the set of measures and ensure general European alignment on those public health matters. In that context EASA has been invited at the last Health Security committee (22 April 2020) to present a possible approach for the issuance of guidelines. Having in mind the content, the committee recommended to issue joint EASA/ ECDC guidelines. This work-stream will look as first priority at the intra-European harmonisation and then at the international harmonisation between Europe and third countries.

Aviation personnel – especially those with high exposure, such as aircrew – should get priority access to reliable testing and vaccines/treatments (as they become available).

2. International coordination: promotion of globally recognised solutions

Close liaising with ICAO and WHO to facilitate the implementation of global solutions (e.g. quarantine, protective equipment, physical distancing, mitigating measures, regulatory flexibility, etc.)

3. Develop and share intelligence on the sanitary conditions in EU and worldwide

Collect information and disseminate information on sanitary conditions in EU and worldwide to Advisory Bodies to accompany the return to operation and identify showstoppers due to health authorities' recommendations regarding sanitary conditions in the EU and worldwide.

4. Develop communication campaign

Develop and implement, in close partnership with Member States, ~~and~~ industry and aviation personnel associations a communication campaign targeting the traveling public focusing on re-building passenger confidence in the aviation system.

3.5 GA recovery

General Aviation will also be impacted by the crisis, however to a far lesser extent when compared with the airline sector. The main challenges would be erosion of flying skills and maintaining the airworthiness of aircraft. The existing coordination structures established as part of the GA Roadmap 2.0 (namely GA.TEB and GA.COM) are sufficient to collect and aggregate information from this sector and to determine what actions are needed.

As opposed to the other, more vertical, work streams WS/5 will have a horizontal function, interfacing between the GA community and the other work-streams.

4 Coordination at European level

All aviation stakeholders are impacted by this crisis and the recovery requires involvement and coordination across the entire sector. The EASA Advisory Bodies (ABs) will play a crucial role in collecting input, prioritising actions and coordinating across domains and finding a common ground.

The MAB and SAB, as the strategic ABs, will be defining the high level policies and objectives. For the specific technical domains, consultation and coordination will be mainly channelled through the respective technical advisory bodies (TeB, TEC, COM). In addition, EASA plans to cooperate closely with similar recovery initiatives at industry level (e.g. IATA, ACI, EUROCONTROL) and at the European level (ECAC). For specific areas of interest, additional ad-hoc groups may be established.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the RNO project will be steered by a Task Force set-up by EASA, composed of representatives of NCAs and industry. The actions (currently considered) and the associated timelines for the various work-streams in the RNO project are presented in Annex 2.

ECA Comment: [As to the Task Force composition, see comment further above.](#)

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Annex 1 – EASA Actions already taken in response to the COVID outbreak

Status: 22.04.2020

Date	Action
27/01/2020	Safety Information Bulletin with recommendations in response to Coronavirus '2019-nCoV' outbreak The SIB 2020-02 was subsequently updated three times.
04/02/2020	Additional promotional material for airlines and their crews regarding the Coronavirus '2019-nCoV' outbreak.
13/03/2020	Safety Directives to combat spread of COVID-19 via airline travel The list of airports in high risk areas is updated regularly to reflect the epidemiologic situation
20/03/2020	Guidance on Aircraft Cleaning and Disinfection in relation to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemics
20/03/2020	Guidelines to NCAs on the use of exemptions to ensure the immediate continuity of essential aviation activity in extending the validity periods for licences, ratings, endorsements, certificates <i>Note: similar templates were issues addressing various other regulatory aspects</i>
26/03/2020	Guidance on Management of Crew Members in relation to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic
02/04/2020	Guidance facilitating the transport of cargo in passenger cabin of Large Aeroplanes
06/04/2020	Guidance addressing airworthiness aspects for installation of patient isolation devices and cockpit separations
06/04/2020	EASA issues Guidance for helicopter operations in the light of the COVID-19 outbreak
08/04/2020	Guidelines to NCAs on issuing exemptions on flight crew recent experience - crew composition
21/04/2020	EASA publishes Draft Recommendation to Member States on the notification to ICAO of differences to Certification and Licensing ICAO Standards that may arise from mitigation measures due to the spread of COVID-19.

Note: The information presented in this Annex is subject to change.

Updated overview available at: <https://www.easa.europa.eu/the-agency/coronavirus-covid-19>

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Annex 2 – Project RNO: Actions and timelines

Status: 22.04.2020

Note: The list of actions is based on the information available at the time it was issued. It will be subject of refinement and update as the project will progress and more information becomes available.

ECA Comment: Missing in the below table are dedicated actions on addressing the backlog on recency, training and flying experience, which should be focussed as a priority towards enabling a speedy return to normal recency and recurrent training cycles of pilots still employed. (see comments above + partly below)

No.	WS	Action	Start	Finish
1.	All	Establish RNO Task-Force <u>Composition of group: – see ECA comment further up</u>	27/04	04/05
2.	All	Special MAB dedicated to RNO	15/05	
3.	All	Special SAB dedicated to RNO	13/05	
4.	WS1	Monitor application of existing exemption templates, ensure highest harmonisation among MS <u>Ensure safe operation despite exemptions by introducing additional mitigating measures, as traffic increases during the ramp up</u> <u>Provide an online list/repository (accessible to all stakeholders) of existing exemptions and differences/acceptance</u> <u>Ensure temporary nature of flexibility provisions and proper risk assessment while (gradual) return to existing requirements (Aircrew and Ops) as Training possibilities become available</u>	Permanent	

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5.	WS1	Draft recommendation to MS on the notification to ICAO of special measures in response to the COVID crisis (ICAO SL/50)	14.04	21.04
6.	WS1	Reduce regulatory effort by adjusting EPAS actions (rulemaking, research) <u>Develop guidance on additional training requirements to compensate for the lack of competence due to long absence from duty</u>	01.05	30.06
7.	WS1	Collect input from MS and industry on potential obstacles (by domain: CAW, OPS, ACW, ATM/ANS, ADR) and develop detailed action plans	20.04	30.04
8.	WS1	Draft guidance (SIB) for operational readiness of aerodromes (ADR)	15.04	24.04
9.	WS1/4	Participate in the ICAO efforts to provide coordinated guidance in response to the crisis	Permanent	
10.	WS2	Process applications for COVID related changes	Permanent	As necessary based on epidemiological status
11.	WS2	Develop guidelines how to use technology for remote test witnessing and auditing <u>[ECA: What is meant here? Remote testing?]</u>	08/04	
12.	WS2	Develop and implement organisation oversight policy for the post-acute phase	30/04	Until return to normal ops
13.	WS3	Support NCAs with regard to exemptions and AltMoCs; address non-harmonised measures	On-going	Until return to normal ops
14.	WS3	Develop further guidance on flexibility provisions <u>and update existing ones</u> to <u>safely</u> address identified needs	20.04	Until return to normal ops

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		<u>Develop guidance on additional training requirements to compensate for the lack of competence due to long absence from duty</u>		
15.	WS3	Establish an online repository (<u>accessible to all stakeholders</u>) to share all available EASA templates and guidance to NCAs	27.04	30.04
16.	WS3	Monitor the establishment of revised oversight programmes, and support NCAs in need	04.05	Until return to normal ops
17.	WS3	Develop further guidance on remote oversight / RBO / PBO to address identified needs and share best practices <u>Ensure harmonized and coordinated oversight across MS</u> <u>[ECA: it has already been identified and addressed during numerous AB meetings that NCAs need to get up to speed with PBO...which has not been satisfactory before the crisis. Considering the issues mentioned above we don't see how this could now work during the crisis.]</u>	04.05	31.05
18.	WS3	Map the NCAs' status with regard to staffing, resources, and other major pain points	27.04	15.05
19.	WS3	Identify structural issues affecting NCAs and facilitate their resolution	15.05	Until return to normal ops
20.	WS3	Support NCAs in the development of recovery plans matching the needs of their industry	Mid-May	Until return to normal ops
21.	WS4	Monitor application of SD 2020-01/02, update Annex 1 and adjust the imposed measures to reflect the epidemiological status	Permanent (weekly basis)	As necessary based on the epidemiological status

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22.	WS4	Develop and implement measures to protect passengers <u>and staff</u> on ground (in the airport) and on board aircraft <u>Ensure priority access to testing and vaccines/treatment (as it becomes available) for aircrew</u>	27/04	15/05
23.		Review and update, where necessary, the existing SDs, SIB and Guidelines.	01/05	Until return to normal ops
24.	WS4	Launch communication campaign targeting traveling public	15/05	Until return to normal ops
25.	WS4	Develop, in coordination with ECDC, set of measures/concepts aimed at preventing infected passengers from boarding the aircraft (e.g. health screenings, testing prior to boarding, immunity passports, use of mobile apps)	01/05	31/05
26.	WS4	Build repository of sanitary measures at MS level to facilitate decision making at industry level	01/05	As necessary based on the epidemiological status