



"Most ANSPs applied for prioritisation in the national vaccination strategies"

# VACCINATION STRATEGIES AND ATCO PREPAREDNESS FOR TRAFFIC RECOVERY IN EUROPEAN ANSPS

In recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination has become the most critical factor, including for operational ATM staff. Since different states and ANSPs have different strategies, **Stijn de Graaff** asked European ANSPs about their routes out of the crisis.

At the start of 2020, no-one would have imagined the topics of 'vaccination strategies' and 'preparing air traffic controllers for high traffic loads after a long period of decreased traffic' as two of the top priorities for air navigation service providers (ANSPs). But the health and performance of controllers have become fundamental to safe and effective operations, and vaccination remains key to emerging from the crisis. Still, this raises many questions. To get a view of the different strategies and actions among different ANSPs, two short surveys were conducted with a group of European ANSPs in March 2021.

## When do ANSPs expect air traffic controllers (ATCOs) and air traffic safety electronic personnel (ATSEPs) to be offered COVID19 vaccination?

To start with the vaccination survey, out of the 23 responding European ANSPs, two reported that the vaccination programme for their staff had already commenced. The rest of the responses varied from the beginning of spring to the end of the summer 2021. The availability of vaccines and different government strategies make it difficult to determine a fixed date. This is raising concerns in some ANSPs, as traffic levels are expected to rise in the coming

months and social distancing measures make it difficult to operate Ops rooms at full capacity.

## Do national vaccination strategies prioritise ATCOs and ATSEPs?

To enable the best possible continuation of operations, and in line with the recommendations from international organisations like the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and the World Health Organization's Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunisation (SAGE), most ANSPs applied for prioritisation in the national vaccination strategies. Being labelled as part of critical

infrastructure or an essential workers category, 12 ANSPs confirmed they will be prioritised as essential infrastructure workers. The level of priority, and starting date of vaccinations, differ per state. At the time of writing, eight ANSPs are still waiting for a response from the government to their request.

### **Are there any restrictions on ATCO and ATSEP activities immediately after the vaccination, and what are the impacts on rostering?**

Another impact of the vaccination campaign is the possible side effects of the vaccine to the person receiving it. Some of the ANSPs therefore implemented a rule to not undertake safety-related tasks after the vaccination (12 to 48 hours). There was no official recommendation to do so at the time of the survey. Recently, EASA and EUROCONTROL jointly issued operational recommendations in relation to the vaccination of ATCOs and other operational staff. One of the recommendations specifically addresses the resting period after vaccination: *"ATCOs and the ANSPs should consider a waiting period of 48 hours after each dose of COVID-19 vaccine, before the ATCO should be engaged in any operational related tasks in accordance with the privileges of their licence."* The potential impact on the roster, if a similar rule is implemented, is variable among the responding ANSPs. The current low traffic situation provides some with more flexibility in the roster, but others expect a high impact, especially if ATCOs and ATSEPs would be called for vaccination in groups.

### **Are ANSPs allowed to ask staff if they are vaccinated? Is there any requirement for ATCOs and ATSEPs to be vaccinated?**

The final question of this survey was about the possibility, according GDPR or local law, to ask staff if they are vaccinated. Overall, the answers indicated that there was no legal ground to ask this question, so it would not be posed. Where the question may be asked, the staff is not obliged to answer. This makes it difficult for

the ANSP to determine the level of vaccinated staff, which could be of interest before deciding to release COVID measures in the workplace.

### **How do ANSPs intend to address possible skill fade among operational staff?**

The reduction in traffic and, in some ANSPs furloughed ATCOs, has created a challenge in terms of controller confidence and deskilling. The second survey focused on these topics. The results of the 21 survey responses show a variety of actions taken to minimise and mitigate the operational risks and effects.

Overall, increased simulator-training with high traffic levels and complexity is the most common strategy to ensure sufficient skills for increasing traffic. In some ANSPs this is combined with additional theoretical training modules and communication campaigns to increase awareness on the risks of sudden traffic increases. In addition to these training-related items, there are some measures concerning live traffic.

Three ANSPs put in place a procedure that allows them to reduce sector capacity when the traffic levels rise above a certain percentage of the expected traffic. Increased supervision of the Ops room is put in place to support the controllers and provide extra eyes and ears for safe operations. These measures will be activated when the traffic rises. Another option employed is opening more sectors than needed with the current traffic levels. One of the ANSPs wants to provide continuous exposure to coordination procedures and agreements for its controllers.

Several impediments affect the implementation of these measures. The COVID-19 measures that have been put in place by different governments and ANSPs make it difficult to operate simulators at normal capacity. Cleaning schedules, social distancing and restrictions of non-operational staff to the ANSP premises limit simulator operations and have a direct impact on maintaining ATCO competency.

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Another challenge is the difference in individual training needs for controllers. The impact of a longer period of low traffic on an ATCO's confidence and competency differs per person. To fit in these individual training needs in a program for all ATCOs is difficult, and these needs may change or appear during the training sessions.

The final question of this survey concerned the deskilling of other operational staff like ATSEPs and flight information service officers (FISOs). As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was mainly on commercial traffic, FISOs have not been so severely affected by the traffic decrease. For ATSEPs, the impact is even less because all systems still needed to be operational, and there is no significant link between the workload and amount of traffic for this category of operational staff.

### **Conclusion**

The two surveys provided a valuable insight into the new reality of managing safe operations in ATM over the past year or so, and the months ahead. The experiences that ANSPs have gained and exchanged during this crisis will help the transition towards more resilience and flexibility in long-lasting traffic dips and times of crisis. 

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