

European Medicines Agency Moves to Amsterdam

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This was decided on 20 November, in a setting reminiscent of the Eurovision Song contest supplemented by a lottery. Amsterdam (not The Hague, which is the seat of Government) is the capital of the Netherlands, famous for wooden shoes, tulips and extensive use of bicycles, and will build a new home for the European Medicines Agency (EMA) in the business area called the Zuidas (South Axis). The Zuidas is already the home of the largest law firms and some of the most important international banks and multinational companies in the Netherlands. This area has excellent connections with Amsterdam Schiphol airport, which in turn provides direct flights to a host of EU and non-EU capitals and industrial hotspots. EMA relocation must be complete by the end of March 2019.

After the UK's decision to leave the EU (Brexit) was announced, there was a lot of interest in the remaining EU member states to host the EMA.

Nineteen cities in as many EU member states offered to be the new EMA seat in hopes to host 900 highly educated and well-paid staff members and 30,000 visiting Agency experts. Moreover, the presence of EMA could also attract headquarters and affiliates of pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies. On 30 September 2017, the European Commission submitted an assessment of the 19 proposals to the Council (e.g., the member states). Important parameters in this assessment were: premises (suitability), accessibility (direct flights to other member states and other continents), educational facilities, labor market, social security and medical care (for staff member and their families), and business continuity (willingness of staff to move). An additional consideration was geographic distribution (location of EU institutions across all the member states). The EMA tried to determine internally who among the staff members would choose to stay in the Agency depending on which of the 19 cities was selected.

Rumour has it that Amsterdam was the preferred option. This makes sense, because Amsterdam is probably the closest to London and would bring on the least change in a number of different ways. On the other hand, one of the principles when setting up new agencies is the desire to spread the EU hotspots more or less evenly over the EU territory. Currently, most of EU activity is established in the northwest part of the EU, to which the Netherlands definitely belongs.

At the end of the day, the selection of the new EMA home was decided in a meeting on 20 November. The procedure consisted of three rounds of voting. In the first round, each of the 27 member states could allocate three points to their favorite city, two points to the next city on their list, and one point to their third choice. The outcome of the first round left three candidates: Milan (25), Copenhagen (20) and Amsterdam (20). In the second vote, Copenhagen lost and left only Amsterdam and Milan in competition. The third and last round ended in a tie when both cities received thirteen votes. As the number of remaining member states is 27, one country evidently abstained (social media claim that Slovakia was the abstaining country) due to the (lack of) geographic spread. No city from the newer members of the EU, in the middle and eastern part of the region, made it to the second or third rounds. Up until the selection procedure, Bratislava was considered to have a good chance, especially if the other Central and Eastern countries would unite to support Bratislava. Spanish candidate Barcelona was said to be the victim of political unrest in Catalunya. In the lottery that was held to resolve the tie between Amsterdam and Milan, the choice of Amsterdam was just a matter of simple luck.

What Can EMA Expect from Amsterdam and the Netherlands?

The Dutch propose to build the Vivaldi building based on EMA specifications for an estimated sum of 250 -300 million Euro, to be rented at a reasonable rate.

Furthermore, the Dutch government has proposed to team up early and to meticulously prepare for the actual move, enabling the continuity that EMA needs and “unburdening” the EMA and its staff. To fill possible gaps in expertise, the Dutch competent authority Medicines Evaluation Board gets additional budget (2 million Euro) to train and prepare additional regulatory experts. These experts could replace the UK citizens who will leave the agency because of Brexit.

First Reactions

The Dutch government was very pleased with securing the first “loot” of Brexit. As could be expected, many of the other candidate cities were disappointed for different reasons. For Milan the grapes are very sour, because the choice between Milan and Amsterdam was just a roll of the dice and had nothing to do with the respective quality of life or work in Italy and the Netherlands. In hindsight, Milan would have placed the two main product agencies, EMA and EFSA (European Food Safety Authority in Parma), in one region (north Italy).

EMA’s reaction was very positive. Implicitly, a sigh of relief could be heard about the choice of Amsterdam, because this will lead to the highest possible retention of staff and therefore the best possible guarantees for EMA business continuity.

Additional Resources

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[EMA Business Continuity Planning](#)

[Medicines for Europe Welcomes Relocation Decision](#)

Positive reaction was also voiced by the former executive director of the EMA, Thomas Lönngren. In his commentary in MedNous, he make it quite clear that even if Amsterdam is the best choice, moving the organisation and maintaining business running smoothly remains a challenge. The trade organisation for generic medicines (Medicines for Europe) is positive, as is the trade organisation for innovative medicines (EFPIA).

The life sciences industry in the Netherlands is enthusiastic too. Life sciences lawyers have voiced their excitement in national journals, with the expectation of lawyers moving from London to Amsterdam and improvement of direct contact with EMA staff.

Negative reactions have been in the local news: The Dutch are afraid that the market for housing in Amsterdam will become even more difficult if EMA staff members come to Amsterdam. On the other hand, the Netherlands is very compact and there are many nice places to live within reasonable travelling distance from Amsterdam.

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