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In Finland, the Aliens Act was amended, making free legal aid available to all applicants for international protection during an interview, not only to vulnerable groups.954In addition, people with legal training but who are not qualified as public legal counsellors can no longer be assigned as legal assistants to third-country nationals in the international protection procedure, which will improve the quality of services. In line with this, the Legal Aid Act was amended to eliminate any pay differences for legal assistants working on international protection cases, with the aim to improve the availability of professional legal aid.955All legal professionals are now remunerated on an hourly basis as of 1 August 2021, which was confirmed by the Turku Administrative Court in two cases.956

Throughout 2021 the Finnish Immigration Service continued to ensure legal assistance and interpretation to applicants when decisions were increasingly communicated by phone or video call.957 In addition, in a study on the impact of COVID-19, the Parliamentary Ombudsperson in Finland noted that all third-country nationals placed in immigration detention centres were provided with access to legal assistance in procedures before the administrative courts in 2021. 958

In Estonia, civil society organisations highlighted difficulties for legal professionals to access asylum applicants in detention centres. Coupled with a lack of interpretation services in detention, and a ban on bringing electronic devices into the premises which hindered communication between legal counsellors and applicants.959

In Iceland, a 2018 contract agreement for legal services provided to applicants between the Ministry of Justice and the Red Cross was extended until February 2022, with a possibility of a further renewal until May 2022.

In Sweden and Denmark, legal service providers, for example the Swedish Refugee Law Centre (one of the several actors providing legal counselling and representation in Sweden) and the Danish Refugee Council, acting in partnership with UNHCR, continued to offer remote counselling in 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions.960 However, due to limitations of digital and phone counselling, the Swedish Refugee Law Centre started since September 2021 to provide direct contact legal advice for applicants, in order for them to better understand their rights and the asylum procedure. 961

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