Please cite as: EUAA, '5.6 Reception of applicants with special needs' in *EASO Asylum Report 2021*, Gennaio 2022.

5.6 Reception of applicants with special needs

Tragic events in 2020 – such as the fires at the Moria refugee camp – catalysed increased solidarity among EU+ countries and triggered a dedicated relocation programme and other urgent actions to ensure dignified reception and care for the most vulnerable asylum applicants. Several initiatives took place at the European level to better support applicants with special needs. The European Commission signed a grant agreement with the Greek authorities for the construction of three new reception centres on the Greek islands of Samos, Kos and Leros, which will include designated spaces for unaccompanied children, teenagers and other applicants with special reception needs.[1329]

Additionally, a Memorandum of Understanding between the European Commission and Greece foresees the establishment of a new Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centre in Lesvos with specific reception infrastructures and conditions for vulnerable groups, such as victims of trafficking, people with disabilities, unaccompanied minors, families with children and single women. More effective procedures for vulnerability assessments and educational facilities for children would be set up.[1330]

The Netherlands and Greece also signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish 48 reception facilities on mainland Greece, which would help at least 500 unaccompanied minors to receive health care and psychosocial support, education, legal assistance and other necessary services to ensure their well-being and development. The organisations that will be working in the reception facilities have yet to be selected.[1331]

The Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors (SSPUM) was established in Greece in March 2020 to facilitate access to age-appropriate accommodation for unaccompanied minors and introduce initiatives to prevent them from being detained or living in precarious conditions. METAdrasi reported that the secretariat was working to increase the number of places in long-term accommodation structures, but despite the efforts, the reception capacities for unaccompanied children still remained insufficient.[1332]

Most EU+ countries implemented temporary measures in reception facilities to ensure decongestion, social distancing and adherence to other health and safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes had direct impacts on vulnerable applicants.

Austria, for example, introduced temporary measures to reduce the number of people in initial

reception centres by giving unaccompanied minors the possibility to be transferred to a first reception centre to file their application or to a regional directorate or branch office of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum. Finland, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia also established special housing arrangements for applicants with special needs due to the pandemic. In Slovakia, all unaccompanied minors who are accommodated in a child centre were tested upon arrival.

In Cyprus, the Ministry of the Interior planned to create a safe zone for minors during expansion works and to replace tents with prefabricated houses in the Pournara camp. However, UNHCR reported that this restructuring had not been concluded and unaccompanied minors were not in safe zones in the Pournara camp when the COVID-19 measures instructing the closure of the camp were implemented. UNHCR interviewed children on location who testified about the critical situation and inappropriate behaviour of adults towards them, in particular sexual harassment *(see Section 4.7)*.[1333]

The informal camps set up by undocumented migrants around Calais in France remained a concern in 2020, exacerbated by the fact that many unaccompanied children lived there in order to try to cross the English Channel to join family members already living in the UK. The Public Defender of Rights visited an informal camp in Calais, where an estimated 1,200-1,500 people live, and noted sub-standard living conditions, lack of adequate support services and the long distance to schools which will likely result in children dropping out.[1334] Shortcomings in the current reception conditions of both accompanied and unaccompanied minors were pointed out.

Therefore, the French National Plan for the Reception of Asylum Applicants and the integration of refugees for 2021-2023 set as a milestone the “early detection and reinforcing support of vulnerabilities”.[1335] The plan foresees the creation of additional places in reception facilities, among which are 300 places for women at risk and 200 places for LGBTI applicants. It also planned more training on the early detection of vulnerabilities for all stakeholders in the asylum procedure, including social welfare workers. In addition, the national plan announced a concrete action plan for the care of the most vulnerable asylum applicants, which was set to be published in January 2021 had not yet been made available.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted service provision from associations in Calais, namely the distribution of food and beverages to undocumented migrants and prospective applicants for international protection. Associations were no longer allowed to carry out their activities and this restriction became subject of a court case. The Administrative Tribunal of Lille in France rejected the request for interim measures to continue food and beverage distribution in the centre of Calais as the court considered that migrants had access to food and water from other parts of the city.

Several developments concerned reception conditions for vulnerable applicants in Spain, which experienced a high number of arrivals in 2020. While travel restrictions hindered the possibility of transfers between reception facilities,[1336] the Spanish Ombudsman called on the ministry on two occasions to transfer children, single women, families with children and other applicants with vulnerabilities (for example with health conditions and therefore at a heightened risk of COVID-19) to the mainland. The Ombudsman underlined that children and single women were especially at risk of sexual or other forms of violence in facilities like in Melilla, where the occupation rate was high.[1337], [1338]

As of July 2020, a group of 50 applicants with special needs from the public temporary reception centre in Melilla (CETI) had been transferred to more adequate facilities.[1339] In addition, the Public Prosecutor General's Office *(Fiscalía General del Estado)* called on the autonomous regions to agree on receiving unaccompanied minors from Ceuta, Melilla and some other cities in Andalusia in order to cope with the high influxes of sea arrivals.[1340]

Medicos del Mundo (Doctors of the World) and several other NGOs called on the Spanish Ombudsman to investigate the situation in Melilla during the state of emergency, where reception facilities were overcrowded and far beyond actual capacity, without being able to guarantee social distance measures.[1341] The NGOs underlined structural deficiencies, a lack of resources and reduced services provided to children and applicants with special needs even after some reception facilities had been adapted.

While the high influx of sea arrivals on the Canary Islands continued, reception facilities were not sufficiently equipped to host such a high number of unaccompanied children and applicants with special needs. Local authorities had to take action to allocate them to hotels used as emergency accommodation. Two additional reception facilities on the Canary Islands opened in 2020 which were specialised for unaccompanied minors until their age was assessed.[1342] The Public Prosecutor General's Office[1343] *(Fiscalía General del Estado)* announced that, in accordance with agreements made with the authorities on the Canary Islands, special measures would be adopted to create spaces and special reception centres for children to stay with their families. Civil society organisations warned though that the reception capacity on the Canary Islands was still not sufficient, and Save the Children called on the government to develop a coordinated reception plan for children which would require more funding and more distribution of applicants across the autonomous communities.[1344]

When relocation from Ceuta and Melilla to mainland Spain was not possible during the state of emergency, the Spanish NGO CEAR reported that LGBTI applicants had suffered threats in the reception facilities, mostly from individuals from their own country of origin (e.g. Morocco).[1345] In 2020, Spanish civil society organisations Kifkif, Asociación de Migrantes y Refugiados LGTBI and Red Acoge opened the first reception facility in Spain which is solely for LGBTI applicants to provide safe housing.[1346]

The Swiss National Commission for the Prevention of Torture (NCPT) published its summary report on federal reception facilities and made recommendations specifically addressing children and applicants with special needs who were housed in the facilities. It also addressed a lack of training of staff who are involved with applicants that could potentially be victims of trafficking, torture or violence, and encouraged to use other reception facilities for young applicants, for example foster families or structures for unaccompanied minors. In a previous report, the NCPT had recommended specific procedures for applicants with special needs, and in response, the SEM developed guidelines which would be available in at the end of 2021.[1347]

5.6.1 New facilities and projects focusing on children and applicants with special needs

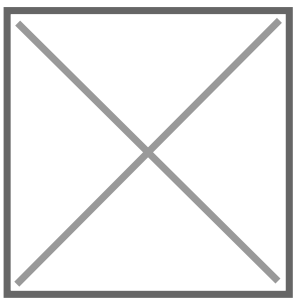
Several new facilities opened in 2020 to guarantee vulnerable applicants a safe place where their special needs can be addressed.

In November 2020, Portugal inaugurated its first service centre for victims of domestic violence and/or harmful traditional practices within the National Centre for Supporting the Integration of Migrants (CNAIM) in Lisbon. The new service provides targeted assistance, support, information and personalised referrals to all migrants and their children, including applicants and beneficiaries. The number of migrant women turning to the services of the National Support Network for Victims of Domestic Violence (RNAVVD) during the first months of the COVID-19 period (April to June 2020) significantly increased.[1348]

Iceland launched a new pilot project which focuses on victims of violence, and an emergency centre for women and children was opened in the area of Bjarmahlíð. The centre is conducting a study on the housing conditions of asylum seekers who are victims of violence. Residents of the shelter can also receive counselling and special services.[1349]

Ireland plans to open new accommodation centres dedicated to female victims of trafficking in mid-2021. A pilot project for a formal Vulnerability Assessment of International Protection applicants at the time of an application was put in place by the IPAS as of late December 2020.

A mental health project launched in 2019 by the Ministry of Health and managed by two NGOS (Ligue Luxembourgeoise d'Hygiène Mentale and Liewen Dobaussen) now offers specialised services and multidisciplinary support to help refugees and asylum seekers manage mental health disorders. The project disposes of 12 spaces for temporary therapeutic accommodation in order to support people who suffer from serious mental or psychological disorders and require stabilisation after a crisis intervention.



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