



25 November 2020

**Replies by the Government of Finland to the questionnaire by the
the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

The Government of Finland would like to thank the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for its work, and presents the following replies to the questionnaire sent by the OHCHR on 5 October 2020 for the preparation of the report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the enjoyment of human rights around the world including good practices and areas of concern, and to present the report to the Human Rights Council at its forty-sixth session.”

The replies to the questionnaire were received from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

The communications material published by the Government and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health on the coronavirus epidemic has been prepared in compliance with the instructions on accessibility. Information is available in several languages, including plain language and sign language. The website of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare contains instructions related to corona-virus (COVID-19) in 20 different languages. The website is updated when new material becomes available.

A letter about coronavirus has been sent to every home in Finland. The purpose of the letter is to ensure that everyone receives information about coronavirus and how to prepare for it. All material in the letter is in both Finnish and Swedish. In the letter distributed to the Saami-speaking areas, the instructions are also available in the Saami languages. In addition to Finnish and Swedish, the letter to citizens is available on the website of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare in 16 different languages, as audio recordings and as videos in the Finnish and Finnish-Swedish sign languages. The letter to citizens is also available in Braille.

To get an overall picture of the wellbeing of the Roma population, the authorities have had discussions with the Roma population by email and telephone about the effects of coronavirus on different age groups of the Roma population in Finland. A similar discussion will take place again in November.

As regards people with disabilities and people with a foreign background, Finland is about to launch a study on the realisation of their rights during the coronavirus crisis. The aim of the study is to explore the experiences of these people during the pandemic and, based on the findings, to find ways to better prepare for future emergencies.

During the pandemic, the Finnish Disability Forum (which is the umbrella organisation of disability organisations), public officials of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and political leaders have met to discuss the challenges faced by people with disabilities. It is important to maintain a close dialogue between the Ministry and disability organisations and to ensure the participation of organisations even during the coronavirus crisis.

The *Koronaviilkku* smartphone app was published to help break infection chains. The app helps people prevent the spread of the virus. Through the app, people exposed to the virus can be reached and infection chains can be stopped faster. When the app was being developed, particular attention was paid to privacy and the protection of personal data. The use of the app is voluntary and requires the consent of the user, which contributes to the consideration and realisation of human rights. Furthermore, special attention was paid to the effects on children, older people and the disabled and to the accessibility of the app.

State-funded and government-run services for victims of domestic violence (shelters and the *Nollalinja* Helpline) have remained operational throughout the pandemic, providing round-the-clock services to victims. During the pandemic, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare have provided detailed guidance to shelters and the *Nollalinja* Helpline.

As regards social benefits and social security, the Government has made temporary amendments to the Unemployment Security Act, the Act on Financing Unemployment Benefits and the Act on Unemployment Funds. The purpose of these temporary amendments, which are in force until 31 December 2020, is to speed up the processing of applications for unemployment benefits.

The five-day waiting period before a person is eligible for unemployment security was abolished, for instance, and the allowances payable for these days are funded by the State. The Government has also increased the exempt amount of unemployment security from EUR 300 to EUR 500 per month and shortened the daily commuting distance for commuting and relocation allowance. Unemployment allowances paid on the grounds of layoffs would not be taken into account in calculating the maximum period of payment that applies to the unemployment allowance. Temporary financial assistance benefit (ended on 31 August 2020) was introduced for parents who took unpaid leave to look after their younger child or child with special needs. Employers' pension insurance contributions were decreased by 2.6 percentage points for a temporary period of 1 May – 31 December 2020.

Due to the coronavirus outbreak, the Government also decided to grant a temporary compensation of EUR 75 per month to basic social assistance clients who received basic social assistance for part of the time or for the whole time that the COVID-19 restrictions were in force between 1 March and 31 July 2020. The compensation will be paid for four months (September to December 2020), and it will be granted automatically to those who are entitled to it.

Ministry of the Environment

The COVID-19 crisis has only had a slight effect on homelessness in Finland. We don't have many rough sleepers. Due to COVID-19 we have provided temporary accommodation only for about 100 persons. The Housing Finance and Development center of Finland ARA has recommended to non-

profit renters that they should make compromises when tenants have financial problems due to COVID-19. Consequently, the number of evictions in Finland have decreased during the pandemic. The most recent figures (information received in November 2020) show that this fall, there were 10% fewer evictions compared to the same time last year.

Ministry of Education and Culture

From mid-March to mid-May 2020, Finland closed its schools (with certain exceptions¹) while ensuring that teaching and learning itself continued with minimal interruption. A very **quick transition to distance or e-learning** took place, and students were asked to attend classes online, do school projects, homework and tasks independently and to hand them electronically to teachers. All Finnish schools have tutor teachers and mentors as well as other peer support mechanisms for facilitating the use of digital tools, which proved very valuable during a pandemic. Finnish National Agency for Education is currently compiling a study to find out how schools and institutions in primary and secondary education cope with being forced into distance education by the COVID-19 pandemic. A [preliminary report](#) on initial observations is already available in English.

[Temporary legislative amendments](#) were introduced to enable the safe organisation of teaching by allowing local authorities to use exceptional teaching arrangements flexibly, as and when needed. If contact teaching cannot be organised safely, exceptional teaching arrangements could be temporarily introduced in primary and lower secondary education by decision of the education provider. An assessment of the safety of contact teaching will be made in cooperation with the regional authorities responsible for communicable diseases based on a decision to be issued under the Communicable Diseases Act. Contact teaching and distance learning can be alternated, for example by placing groups in distance learning on alternate weeks. Exceptional teaching arrangements do not apply to pupils in years 1–3, pupils who have received a decision on special-needs support, or pupils in extended compulsory education or preparatory education. Students have the right to school meals, support for learning and school attendance, study guidance, and student benefits during exceptional arrangements.

The **Act on Vocational Education and Training** has been temporarily amended with regard to the demonstration of skills and competence. If, for reasons attributable to the coronavirus epidemic, a demonstration of the professional skills and competence required to pass a qualification module cannot be conducted in authentic work situations and processes, a student may demonstrate his or her professional skills and competence by performing other practical tasks that are as similar to authentic work situations and processes as possible. In addition, the demonstration of skills and competence can be supplemented with other types of competence assessment more flexibly than at present.

¹ Pupils in years 1–3, pupils who have received a decision on special-needs support, and pupils in extended compulsory education or preparatory education had the right to attend classroom teaching. (The attendance of pupils in grades 1–3, in special-needs support or extended compulsory education varied from 5 to 9 %, while the estimate in preparatory education was 11 to 16 %). Early Childhood Education stayed open to everyone, though children were recommended to stay at home whenever possible.

Temporary amendments were also made to the **Universities Act** and the **Universities of Applied Sciences Act**. A student may now register as a non-attending student during the first academic year if he or she is prevented from starting his or her studies due to an official regulation related to the epidemic or for another epidemic-related serious reason. If studies are delayed due to exceptional teaching arrangements introduced by a higher education institution because of the coronavirus epidemic, this will be taken into account when deciding on the extension of the right to study.

The temporary amendments made to the Basic Education Act will remain in force until the end of 2020. The amendments made to the Act on Vocational Education and Training, the Universities Act and the Universities of Applied Sciences Act will remain in force until 31 July 2021.

In the Autumn term, early childhood education and care and basic education resumed and students returned to educational institutions. Teaching premises were arranged more spaciouly than usual to avoid and reduce unnecessary physical contacts, and mixing or combining learning groups is avoided. General upper secondary education and vocational education and training institutions, as well as higher education institutions, may flexibly decide how to organise safe and appropriate teaching methods and arrangements. Gatherings of large groups are recommended against, with a preference on the use of remote connections. All activities shall be staggered with the aim on ensuring that there are as few people in the same space as possible. In universities, new students begun their studies in contact education, while others made broad use of distance learning methods.

The Ministry of the Interior

Reception of asylum seekers

The Finnish Immigration Service is responsible for the steering, planning and monitoring of the operation of reception centres for asylum seekers. Finnish Immigration Service has issued several operational instructions to reception centers in a non-stop manner based on the ongoing corona-situation. Various corona-related procedures have been and are in use in the reception system such as quarantine procedures when entering the system and various safety procedures for staff. Space arrangement and accommodation solutions have been designed for reception centres for potential quarantine and isolation situations. The availability of nurses working in each reception centre as well as smooth cooperation between other health care operators and authorities are particularly important during the pandemic, for example regarding testing. The centres have the possibility of temporarily acquiring, where necessary, separate additional facilities to be able to implement the necessary arrangements. As few clients as possible are transferred between the centres during the pandemic. During the spring and summer, reception services were also continued for clients who in normal situation would have been removed from reception centers and from these services. Reception centers have prepared corona specific contingency and operational plans under instruction from the Finnish Immigration Service during spring and taken necessary action accordingly. Finnish Immigration Service also monitors COVID-situation in reception system in a systematic and ongoing manner.

In order to tackle COVID-19 in the reception system as whole, it is important that also asylum seekers receive current information on the COVID-situation and on what is expected of them in reception centers and also when they are outside centers, in their own language. Reception centres

convey instructions about the coronavirus and emergency conditions to asylum seekers in several languages. Information has been offered on, for example, the prevention of the coronavirus, the prevailing emergency conditions in Finland and on the assembly restrictions and on necessary precautions (e.g use of face masks, observing safe distance, hand sanitizing, coughing and sneezing hygiene, symptom reporting) in the most common languages spoken by the applicants. In addition, the Finnish Immigration Service has drawn up several instructions about the coronavirus for asylum seekers, which have also been translated into the most common languages spoken by the applicants. They pay particular attention to the applicants' conditions at reception centres. Asylum seekers can also always obtain information from the personnel of the reception centre where they are staying.

The COVID- situation in reception system has generally been quite mild and stable. It seems that the various preventive measures described above have worked relatively well. When needed, reception centers have been able to scale up procedures and make the necessary, stricter arrangements. Also, reception centers have taken necessary and appropriate action with other health care operators and authorities, when suspected or actual positive COVID-cases have emerged.

Asylum interviews and processing of applications

In the beginning of the pandemic in Finland, from mid-March to mid-April, all asylum interviews were on hold. After this, they were resumed gradually when interview rooms were equipped with necessary protective equipment (such as protective glass between the participants). Asylum unit also explored and utilized different technological solutions for conducting interviews. This included the use of videoconference equipment which allowed conducting interviews without the need for all participants to be present in the same room. These measures allowed for the continuation of interviews rather quickly while at the same time ensuring the health and safety of applicants and staff.

Due to suspension of asylum interviews, COVID-19 has caused delays in the processing of asylum applications, when already planned interviews had to be cancelled. Because of this, the Immigration Service has explored means to streamline its processes while ensuring the applicants are afforded all the procedural rights and safeguards as required by law.

Travel restrictions

In order to limit the spread of COVID-19 -virus, Finland has established travel restrictions at its borders. However, these restrictions are mainly aimed to limit non-essential travel. Allowed essential travel includes several categories that ensure fulfillment of individual rights. These categories enable work and arrival of persons travelling for family reasons. They also enable travel of persons in need of international protection or who are travelling for other humanitarian reasons. At the same time, every person residing in Finland is allowed to return and every person, no matter of their nationality or place of residence, is allowed to leave Finland.