



COVID-19 and people with disabilities

Assessing the impact of the crisis and informing disability-inclusive next steps

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Estonia

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1 Executive summary

Disability inclusivity of disaster and recovery planning

No disaster or recovery planning includes a disability aspect.

Impact of the virus on mortality among people with disabilities

There is no data available for mortality from the virus of people with disabilities.

Outline of key concerns about a disproportionately negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on people with disabilities

The most acute negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on people with disabilities were related to access to education (section 12 of this report), social services (section 10) and validity period of disability status (section 5), but they have been solved by now.

The closing of schools during the emergency situation in the spring of 2020 had the most severe impact on children with special needs and their parents – the care burden increased heavily due to distance learning. Several social services, especially rehabilitation services were halted for two months during the emergency situation, causing confusion about the future arrangement of services as well as negative health consequences. The validity period of disability status was extended by the Government during the emergency situation to avoid people with disabilities losing their right to benefits, and relatedly the payment of respective benefits was extended for the same period without the need of new assessments of the disability status.

Examples of good practice

Key good practice examples include the following:

The *government* reacted relatively fast by extending the validity period of disability status and extending the duration of previously determined degrees of disability or work incapacity if the terms of these statuses were to expire during the period when re-examination of person's situation was hindered due to the emergency situation (see section 5 of this report). Also, based on the recommendations of different organisations representing persons with disabilities, the government re-opened several social services after they were halted (section 10 of this report). Similarly, these voices were heard by the government to improve access to education for students with special needs in the fall of 2020 and following periods of the virus outbreak (section 12 of this report). Also, the government learned from its mistakes in the Spring of 2020, and in the following periods decided not to restrict visitations to care institutions and allowed inhabitants to leave the institution provided that protection measures are taken.

The *Estonian Chamber of Disabled People* has been crucial in advocating for the needs of persons with disabilities during the pandemic. They are also the only organisation that has conducted any survey about the COVID impact on persons with disabilities (results are mentioned in various sections of this report).

The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People's survey¹ about the impact of the pandemic on children and adults with special needs as well as on their families (180 people were interviewed) identified several major problems. These included losing one's job, learning difficulties among children, closure of support and day care centres as well as schools and no social benefits to family members of adults with disabilities. This resulted in unproportioned and sudden care burden increase of the carers which were not addressed fast enough and sufficiently, causing mental health problems for the carers. Among the respondents who filled out a simplified survey questionnaire (n=18), feelings of loneliness and lack of communication opportunities was the concern mentioned most often.

Most acute concerns were taken into account in the next virus waves and corresponding restriction phases. However, the survey also brought out major pre-COVID unsolved systemic problems such as high poverty of persons with disabilities, lack of social benefits supporting independent living and unproportioned high care burden.

Recommendations and opportunities for change

Key recommendations for using recovery planning as a chance to enhance disability rights and inclusion include the following:

- Improve mortality data availability and publication (incl. for research) by disability status and major chronic health conditions following international harmonisation, standardisation and comparability requirements (by different years and socio-demographic groups).
- Increase the amount and proportion of the social protection budget at the national and local level in order to avoid negative effects on individuals of the planned decentralisation of social support and services.
- Prioritise addressing the lack of qualified personnel in health and social care by supporting relevant educational institutions and employers with appropriate strategies, (financial) incentives and societal agreements.
- Change the Equal Treatment Act² to ensure the protection of persons with disabilities against discrimination on all discriminatory bases.

¹ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

² Equal Treatment Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/Riigikogu/act/503052017002/consolide>.

2 Disability-inclusive disaster and recovery planning

[Article 11 – Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies & Article 4\(3\) – involvement of persons with disabilities](#)

2.1 Commitments to disability in disaster management and recovery strategies

People with disabilities are not referenced in any core strategies or plans pertaining to general management of disaster or recovery planning or COVID-specific disaster management or recovery planning. Different³ (legislative) orders of the Government that were announced during the emergency situation of Spring 2020 as well as after that have been published online. The main legal bases for these include the Emergency Act,⁴ the Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Act,⁵ and the Health Services Organisation Act.⁶

The Emergency Act mentions that disabled people and their caregivers (including parents) are not obligated to perform emergency situation work. The Health Services Organisation Act mentions that data disseminated by the contact point for cross-border health services shall be published in electronic format and in a format accessible to disabled persons.

The exit strategy from the emergency situation adopted by the government in April 2020 was criticised⁷ by a human rights professor at Tallinn University for lacking the human rights perspective. The criticism did not explicitly refer to people with disabilities, but according to the professor, the restriction to go out from hospitals, dormitories and care institutions was a restriction on personal freedoms. No other exit strategy has been adopted since then and the existing one has not been updated, but also, no new emergency situation has been announced since then. Also, the Health Board and the Prime Minister do not regard an emergency situation necessary during the current second wave.⁸

With the second wave and further Government restrictions from 11 March until 11 April 2021, newly announced orders include clear mentions of exclusions for activities of disabled people.⁹ These include visiting public saunas, spas, swimming pools or water parks, engaging in sports, training, youth work, hobby activities, hobby education and refresher training, and visiting study buildings for learning purposes.

³ Riigi Teataja page for COVID-19 related orders <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/viitedLeht.html?id=7>.

⁴ The Emergency Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/516052020003/consolide>.

⁵ The Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/518052020002/consolide>.

⁶ The Health Services Organisation Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/518052020003/consolide>.

⁷ Mart Susi: Eesti väljumiskava jättis inimõigused unarusse, Eesti Päevaleht (23 April 2020) <https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/89646543/mart-susi-eesti-valjumiskava-jattis-inimoigused-unarusse>.

⁸ ERR news (March 12, 2021) <https://news.err.ee/1608140275/lanno-emergency-situation-would-not-add-anything-practical>.

⁹ Measures and restrictions necessary for preventing the spread of COVID-19 <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/510032021002/consolide>.

2.2 Involvement of people with disabilities in disaster management and recovery strategies

Various organisations representing persons with disabilities have been vocal during the last year. The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People has been actively giving feedback to the government regarding the government's restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic situation, having an impact on changing these regulations by including a disability aspect. These include visiting care institutions (section 7 in this report), accessing social services (section 10) and accessing education (section 12), for example. Other organisations, such as those representing blind or deaf people, have contributed to improving access to COVID-related public information.

2.3 Disability impact assessments and research to inform disaster management and recovery planning

Impact assessments or research concerning the situation of persons with disabilities to inform disaster and recovery planning have not been commissioned by governmental institutions. The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People conducted a non-representative online qualitative survey.¹⁰ People with official registered disabilities as well as people officially unidentified but reporting regular special needs were invited to respond to the survey. The total number of respondents was 180 people, including mostly persons with disabilities, but also their family members or guardians. The survey was carried out from March until end of June 2020. Results based on the survey are presented in various sections of this report. These results have been also communicated to the public, thus affecting disaster management and planning. With the second wave and further Government restrictions from March 11, 2021, newly announced orders include clear mentions of exclusions for disabled people.¹¹

2.4 Use of disaster management and recovery planning funds

There is no evidence of funds associated with disaster management and recovery planning being allocated to or used on disability-related purposes.

During the emergency situation, the Estonian Tax and Customs Board suspended the calculation of interests on their tax arrears for the period of the emergency with retroactive effect as from 1 March to 1 May 2020.¹² Additional measures have been mentioned on the Government website for the COVID-19 crisis.¹³

Temporary subsidies¹⁴ were paid in 2020 to those employees whose employers were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsidy granted an income for the employees and helped the employers to surpass temporary difficulties without

¹⁰ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

¹¹ Measures and restrictions necessary for preventing the spread of COVID-19 <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/510032021002/consolide>.

¹² The Estonian Tax and Customs Board press release (19 March 2021) <https://www.emta.ee/eng/interests-tax-arrears-suspended-emergency-situation>.

¹³ Economic crisis and support <https://www.kriis.ee/en/economy-and-business>.

¹⁴ The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund <https://www.tootukassa.ee/eng/content/subsidies-and-benefits/temporary-subsidy-program>.

having to lay off their staff or call bankruptcy. The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund has supported around 18 300 organisations for paying salary support benefits to almost 140 000 employers during the last year.¹⁵ The amount of benefits paid by the Fund totals EUR 276,3 million. Sectors that have received the most support include industry, retail and wholesale and accommodation.

The supplementary budget¹⁶ drawn up by the Government last year to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic was supposed to expire by the end of 2020. With the second virus wave in 2021, the new Government decided to extend this plan. The amount of the supplementary budget is planned to be over EUR 600 million and funded mostly from loan money.¹⁷ The funds are planned to be used for apartment building reconstructions, supporting rural areas development (incl. support loans), and providing loan measures.¹⁸

For 2021, the Ministry of Finance has planned surveys to map the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on companies and plan state support.¹⁹ Also, it is planned to conduct a survey to assess the potential cooperation effects between local municipalities in developing and organising long-term care services.

¹⁵ The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund press release (10 March 2021) <https://www.tootukassa.ee/uudised/veebuaris-registreeritud-tootute-arv-veidi-kasvas-kriisitoetusi-aastaga-makstud-ule-276>.

¹⁶ ERR news (2 April 2020) <https://news.err.ee/1072303/supplementary-budget-bill-key-points>.

¹⁷ ERR news (15 March 2021) <https://news.err.ee/1608142555/government-to-send-supplementary-budget-to-riigikogu-on-thursday>.

¹⁸ Government press release (4 March 2021) <https://www.kriis.ee/et/uudised/valitsus-votab-majanduskahjude-leevendamiseks-kasutusse-2020-lisaelarve-vahendid>.

¹⁹ Ministry of Finance (18 December 2020) <https://www.rahandusministeerium.ee/et/uuringud-ja-analuusid>.

3 Mortality connected to COVID-19 among people with disabilities

Article 10 – The right to life

3.1 Are official statistics available concerning the overall mortality rate of people with disabilities?

No, having such data would require a separate undertaking as the data on deaths and the information on disability are located in/ managed by different state institutions. In principle it would be possible to combine if disability information from the Social Insurance Board could be connected to data on deaths. Some disability-and mortality-related research has been conducted for previous years.^{20 21 22 23}

3.2 Are official statistics available concerning the mortality rate of people with disabilities who have died from complications connected to COVID-19?

No, as the number of COVID-related deaths is quite small (535 in total for Estonia as of 21 February 2021), detailed death data is not provided even by age and sex on the public COVID data page of the Health Board.²⁴ Data are provided by 5-year age groups and sex of hospitalised people²⁵ and of COVID-19-positive tests for the last 14 days per 100 000 people.²⁶

²⁰ Valverde et al. 2021

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S235282732100015X?via%3Dihub>.

²¹ Nusselder et al. 2020 <https://academic.oup.com/eurpub/advance-article/doi/10.1093/eurpub/ckaa194/5998367>.

²² Abuladze 2020 <https://www.popest.ee/file/B69.pdf>.

²³ Abuladze & Sakkeus 2019 <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110617245-023/html>.

²⁴ Health Board data on COVID-19 (21 February 2021) <https://www.terviseamet.ee/et/koroonaviirus/koroonaviiruse-andmestik>.

²⁵ Health Board open data on COVID-19 (13 March 2021) <https://www.terviseamet.ee/et/koroonaviirus/avaandmed#Covid-19%20hospitaliseeritud%20patsientide%20vanuseline%20ja%20sooline%20profiil>.

²⁶ Health Board open data on COVID-19 (13 March 2021) <https://www.terviseamet.ee/et/koroonaviirus/avaandmed#Viimase%2014%20p%C3%A4eva%20nakatunute%20arv%20100%20tuhande%20elaniku%20kohta%20Eestis>.

4 Access to health

[Article 25 – Health](#)

4.1 Emergency measures

Aside from the vaccination entitlements mentioned in section 4.6 no explicit disability or living arrangements regulations were set in relation to access to healthcare. In December 2020 it was announced²⁷ that starting from October 2021 flu vaccination will be free of charge to people aged 65 and older. In 2020, people living in special care homes (incl. adults) received the flu vaccination for free.²⁸ The COVID-19 vaccine is free for all.²⁹

Hospitals were closed to visitors during the emergency situation in the Spring of 2020, also appointments to (special) doctors were cancelled in non-emergency cases, including dentist appointments. This caused major problems for persons with disabilities.³⁰ On 21 April 2020, the Health Board lifted the restrictions imposed on the provision of general and specialised health care during the emergency situation.³¹ The Health Board also issued guidelines on organising the reception of patients, recommending remote appointments, if possible, especially in case of out-patient appointments.³² In case of in-patient appointments, isolation of patients must have been guaranteed. Updated guidelines are available online³³. Remote appointments can be organised by phone, video calls or online consultations.³⁴ The organisation and functioning of remote appointments in general were analysed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic by a think tank, and recommendations to develop it further were given.³⁵ The intent to apply more remote appointments in the health care system has existed for several years; the pandemic situation has made the application of such a system more urgent. The Estonian Health Insurance Fund decided to continue funding remote

²⁷ Ministry of Social Affairs press release (20 December 2020) <https://www.sm.ee/et/uudised/tulevast-sugisest-voimaldatakse-tasuta-gripivaktsineerimist-koigile-vanemaealistele>.

²⁸ Estonian Health Insurance Fund (21 September 2020) <https://www.haigekassa.ee/uudised/tasuta-gripivaktsiini-sihtruhma-laiendatakse>.

²⁹ Ministry of Social Affairs COVID-19 vaccination plan (19 January 2021) https://www.sm.ee/sites/default/files/news-related-files/covid-19_vaktsineerimise_plaan_19.01_0.pdf.

³⁰ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

³¹ Estonian Health Board (21 April 2020) https://www.terviseamet.ee/sites/default/files/Nakkushaigused/Juhendid/COVID-19/plaanilise_ravi_piirangute_lopetamine.pdf.

³² Estonian Health Board (1 June 2020) https://www.terviseamet.ee/sites/default/files/Nakkushaigused/Juhendid/COVID-19/miinumouded_tervishoiuteenuste_osutajatele_plaanilise_too_taastamiseks_covid-19_epideemia_jargsetes_tingimustes_27.05.2020_viimane.pdf.

³³ Health Board guidelines for health care workers <https://www.terviseamet.ee/et/COVID-19-trukised#tervishoiutootajale>.

³⁴ Estonian Health Insurance Fund <https://www.haigekassa.ee/partnerile/raviasutusele/kaugteenuste-arendamine/kaugvastuvotud>.

³⁵ Paat-Ahi, Randväli & Purge 2020 “Kaugvastuvõtu rakendamine eriolukorras” https://haigekassa.ee/sites/default/files/Eriolukorra_juhtumiana%C3%BC%C3%BCs_PRAXIS_02_12.pdf.

appointments and/ or consultations as a regular health care service after the emergency situation ended.³⁶

Distance therapies are also funded by the Health Insurance Fund and can therefore be offered as regular health care services since 9 November 2020 due to the increasing spread of COVID-19 (ibid). As a special measure during the second wave of the pandemic (23 November 2020 until 31 March 2021) it is also allowed to have first appointments and therapies from distance (ibid).

Starting from 11 March 2021, people aged 65 and older could book a vaccination slot through a digital registration system.³⁷ However, these were booked very quickly, and by the next day, there were no time slots available in the two largest Estonian towns or were almost full in most locations,³⁸ causing people to travel to different regions and counties to get the vaccination shots.

Hospitals announced new visitor restrictions again in the autumn of 2020. According to the most recent restrictions announced on 11 March 2021,³⁹ hospitals and care institutions are open to visitors. Currently, hospitals are still strict about receiving visitors, but now access to health care is provided. All required protection measures need to be used, such as wearing masks, meeting in special rooms, if possible, pre-filling a health declaration and disinfecting the premises. Hospitals and care institutions may specify their regulations individually and must communicate them accordingly. Visitors to hospital patients must in several cases prove that they have tested negative for COVID-19 or that they have already experienced the virus.⁴⁰

Also, during the emergency situation, the government ordered⁴¹ that the prescription and dispensing of medicinal products for chronic diseases would be done for up to two months at a time. In case the health situation was life threatening, exceptions to the two-month rule were allowed.

4.2 Access to hospital treatment for COVID-19

No information is available on the number of people with disabilities who, because of COVID-19 symptoms, have been hospitalised and admitted to intensive care units.

By 13 March 2021, 4 345 medical cases (4 175 patients) had been treated in hospitals due to and during the pandemic since the end of February 2020.⁴² 669 patients are hospitalised and 65 patients are in intensive care as of 13 March 2021. The mean age

³⁶ The Estonian Health Insurance Fund <https://haigekassa.ee/partnerile/raviasutusele/kaugteenuste-arendamine/covid-19-erimeetmed>.

³⁷ Estonian Health Insurance Fund news (11 March 2021) <https://www.haigekassa.ee/uudised/65-aastaseid-ja-vanemaid-inimesi-oodatakse-digiregistratuuri-kaudu-vaktsineerimisele>.

³⁸ Estonian Health Insurance Fund news (12 March 2021) <https://www.haigekassa.ee/uudised/mitmes-linnas-nadalavahetuse-vaktsineerimise-ajad-otsas>.

³⁹ Government order on Measures and restrictions necessary for preventing the spread of COVID-19 (11 March 2021) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/510032021002/consolide>.

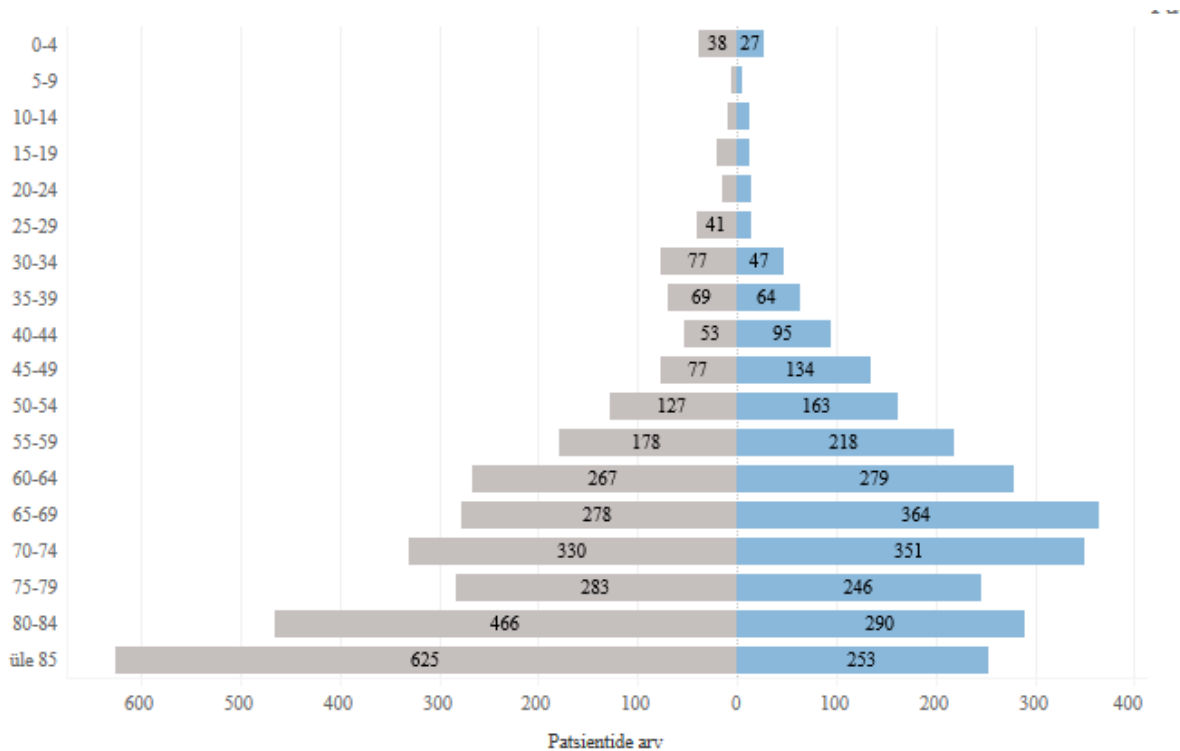
⁴⁰ For example, Ida-Tallinna Keskhaigla hospital rules (as of 21 February 2020) <https://itk.ee/en/covid-19-info>.

⁴¹ Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs' order on the Imposition of Restrictions on Prescribing and Dispensing Medicinal Products (in force between 19 March – 8 May 2021) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/520032020001/consolide>.

⁴² Health Board open data on COVID-19 (13 March 2021) <https://www.terviseamet.ee/et/koroonaviirus/koroonakaart>.

of hospitalised patients over the whole pandemic period is 67 years (men – 65, women – 69). The age-sex distribution, i.e., the number of all hospitalised patients is brought out on the Health Board website - the screenshot of the numbers is from 13 March 2021 (Figure 1). The age groups read from top to down (top – youngest), grey denotes women, and blue denotes men. The average number of days spent in a hospital is currently around 15-16 days per patient.

Figure 1. The number of hospitalised patients in Estonia during the COVID-19 pandemic by age and sex, since the beginning of the pandemic until 13 March 2021 (grey – women, blue – men)



During the first wave of the pandemic in Estonia, some regional hospitals' intensive care units were operating near full capacity, and they were offered the opportunity to move patients to other hospitals in the country.⁴³ According to the Minister of Social Affairs, this was a common practice also prior to the crisis. During the second wave by the beginning of March 2021 some hospitals, especially in the capital, have reached their full capacity in terms of bed numbers for COVID-patients.⁴⁴ Again, it is planned to use the help of other regional hospitals, although some of them are operating near full capacity already. Also, neighbouring Latvia and Finland have offered their help with providing hospital beds and treatment in their countries, but this is viewed as a statement of politeness by the Estonian Government – no international agreements for this have been planned.⁴⁵

⁴³ ERR news (14 April 2020) <https://www.err.ee/1077022/koormuse-leevendamiseks-algab-kuressaare-haiglast-haigete-umberpaigutamise>.

⁴⁴ ERR news (8 March 2021) <https://www.err.ee/1608135199/pohja-eesti-haiglad-on-joudnud-taituvuse-kriitilise-piirini>.

⁴⁵ Delfi news (12 March 2021) <https://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/eesti/eesti-naeb-naaberriikide-abipakkumist-pigem-kui-viisakusavaldust-konkreetseid-koostoplaane-praegu-ei-koostata?id=92820841>.

4.3 Treatment for COVID-19 in congregate settings

No information is available on the number of people with disabilities who were treated for COVID-19 inside care/nursing homes and other congregate settings and not admitted to hospital.

By June 2020 among those aged 60+, there were 216 persons diagnosed with COVID-19, 188 recovered and 28 people died in care institutions.⁴⁶ These numbers would correspond to 0.06 %, 0.05 % and 0.01 % of the general 60+ Estonian population, respectively. Among the institutionalised 60+ population, these would correspond to about 2.5 %, 2 % and 0.3 %, respectively.

4.4 Public health promotion and testing during the pandemic

A promotional video about the emergency situation and rules of conduct to avoid the COVID-19 was published by the government in the spring of 2020 using sign language and subtitles.⁴⁷ It included references to websites to find further information.

Sign language has been provided at government press conferences, and subtitles were added to Health Board press conferences based on recommendations made by the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People.⁴⁸

Also, an easy-to-read COVID-19 document with information and guidelines for people with special needs has been published on the government website.⁴⁹ Among other things, it includes information about where best to turn to in case of virus symptoms.

Initially, during the emergency situation there were some complaints⁵⁰ of access to COVID-19 related information. The use of masks in press conferences made the information inaccessible to people with partial hearing impairments who do not use sign language. Masks also made it more complicated for people with hearing impairment to communicate with medical professionals.

⁴⁶ Estonian Human Rights Centre “Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications” for Estonia (3 June 2020) https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/ee_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic_june_2020.pdf.

⁴⁷ Estonian Government COVID-19 news kriis.ee: rules of conduct to avoid COVID-19 during the emergency situation (9 April 2020) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ANKMfp1roo&feature=youtu.be.

⁴⁸ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People (11 January 2021) <https://www.epikoda.ee/en/news/eesti-puuetega-inimeste-koja-2020-aasta-saavutuste-ja-tegevuste-luhikokkuvote>.

⁴⁹ Estonian Government COVID-19 information material for people with special needs (12 November 2020) https://www.terviseamet.ee/sites/default/files/Nakkushaigused/Juhendid/COVID-19/info_erivajadusega_inimestele_12.11.20.pdf.

⁵⁰ Estonian Human Rights Centre “Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications” for Estonia (3 June 2020) https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/ee_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic_june_2020.pdf.

4.5 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to health services for general or pre-existing physical or mental health conditions

Over half of the respondents to the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People's survey⁵¹ on COVID-19 impact indicated problems with access to health services during the emergency situation. The main problem was that booked visits were cancelled suddenly, and in several cases the health institution did not even bother to note the person about this. One fifth of the survey respondents did not use or did not need health services during the emergency situation. The rest adjusted to the situation and/or reported positive experiences – the responses about positive experiences brought out that children's study motivation and results improved with individual and distance learning. No other surveys have been carried out.

The Chancellor of Justice received no complaints on the conditions or treatment of persons with disabilities residing in special care institutions during the emergency situation.⁵²

4.6 Vaccination programmes

Disability is not explicitly mentioned as a prioritisation category in the COVID-19 vaccine roll out programme in Estonia. However, prioritisation is based on diagnosis which includes different health conditions, such as diabetes, chronic respiratory conditions, cardiovascular diseases, kidney diseases, immune deficiencies, etc (Table 1 in the national vaccination plan document lists these diseases and corresponding ICD-10 codes).⁵³ Additionally, the vaccination plan mentions that GPs may prioritise the vaccination of people with rare diseases not mentioned in the table.

Vaccinating people living in care institutions – both in old age care homes (where many people have disabilities) as well as in special care homes (where working age people with intellectual and psychological disabilities are living) – has been prioritised in the national vaccination plan (ibid). Their vaccination is planned to be finished during the first quarter of 2021. Most of the targeted people have received or will receive the second vaccination dose in February 2021. By the end of February, over 90 % of care institutions and 86.7 % of community centres had received the first dose of vaccination.⁵⁴

In terms of numbers, the first dose has been administered to 38 520 people aged 18-69 (4.4 % of this age group), and 20 708 (2.3 %) of the same age group have received the second dose. Among those aged 70+, 23 339 (12.4 %) have received the first dose

⁵¹ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

⁵² Estonian Human Rights Centre "Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications" for Estonia (3 June 2020) https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/ee_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic_june_2020.pdf.

⁵³ Ministry of Social Affairs vaccination plan (as of 14 December 2020) https://www.sm.ee/sites/default/files/news-related-files/covid-19_vaktsineerimise_plaan_14.12.2020.pdf.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Social Affairs press release (20 February 2021) <https://www.sm.ee/et/uudised/iga-viies-ule-80-aastane-vahemalt-uhe-vaktsiinidoosiga-vaktsineeritud>.

and 5 331 (2.8 %) have received both doses.⁵⁵ Every fifth person aged 80+ had received at least one vaccine dose⁵⁶ by 20 February 2021, which would correspond to about 15500 people in this age group (and this may also include people in risk groups based on diagnosis or occupation hazard).

For persons with disabilities living at home the general vaccination plan applies: the criterion of vaccination is based on occupation hazard, age and diagnosis. Out of these, the age category (70+) was prioritised first. Generally, the GP makes the final decision whom to call for vaccination.

Any issues concerning the accessibility of vaccine programmes, including access to promotional or advisory materials, to places where vaccines are being carried out and whether vaccines are being delivered in institutional care settings or people's own homes if they are unable to travel to vaccine centres.

In terms of the accessibility of the vaccine, care homes are mentioned as one of the primary vaccination locations in the Ministry of Social Affairs' vaccination plan document (point 3, page 3). Home vaccination has not been mentioned as an option. The updated vaccination plan indicates that people belonging to risk groups can be vaccinated generally in GP organisations, but also in hospitals (if the person needing the vaccine is staying in a hospital at the time). Additionally, all who wish can be vaccinated in infection clinics, vaccination offices and specially created vaccination locations.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Health Board data and maps on COVID-19 (21 February 2021) <https://www.terviseamet.ee/et/koroonaviirus/koroonakaart>.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Social Affairs press release (20 February 2021) <https://www.sm.ee/et/uudised/iga-viies-ule-80-aastane-vahemalt-uhe-vaktsiinidoosiga-vaktsineeritud>.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Social Affairs vaccination plan (19 January 2021) https://www.sm.ee/sites/default/files/news-related-files/covid-19_vaktsineerimise_plaan_19.01_0.pdf.

5 Income and access to food and essential items

[Article 28 – Adequate standard of living and social protection](#)

5.1 Emergency measures

In March 2020, in response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic, the Government extended the validity period of disability status. The degrees of disability, which were about to expire over the period from 17 March to 31 August 2020, were automatically extended for another six months.⁵⁸ As an implication, the payment of respective benefits was extended for the same period without the need of new assessments of the disability status. This temporary *ad hoc* measure addressed the concerns of persons with disabilities who otherwise could risk losing the right to benefits in the period of virus outbreak. Disability assessments resumed in September 2020.

As an additional legislative measure, as of May 2020, the Social Benefits for Disabled Persons Act and the Work Ability Allowance Act were amended, giving the Minister of Social Affairs a mandate to instruct respectively the Social Insurance Board and the Unemployment Insurance Fund (as the competent institutions) to extend the duration of previously determined degrees of disability or work incapacity if the terms of these statuses were to expire during the period, when re-examination of a person's situation is hindered due to an emergency situation.⁵⁹ These legal amendments providing for such possibilities remain in force, however they have no more been applied in practice.

From 1 April 2020 the daily rates of work capability allowances increased by 8 %, amounting thereafter EUR 8.49 per day for a person with partial work ability and EUR 14.89 per day for a person with no work ability.⁶⁰ However, while the increase of benefit rates coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 crises, it was pre-planned in the 2020 state budget.

As with regard to access to food, since the onset of the pandemic, several retailers have significantly increased home delivery to satisfy the rapidly increased demand for contactless shopping. The largest grocery chains, which before the crises offered home deliveries only in large towns, have extended their home delivery services also to country sides, covering now the majority of the population.⁶¹ However, persons with disabilities and elderly persons do not have any priorities compared to other customers, and several such online shop websites created during the emergency situation were not made for visually impaired people.⁶²

⁵⁸ Ministry of Social Affairs (2 April 2020) <https://www.sm.ee/et/uudised/osalise-ja-puuduva-toovoime-pusiva-toovoimetuse-ning-puute-kestust-pikendatakse>.

⁵⁹ Riigi 2020. aasta lisaelarve seadusega seonduvate seaduste muutmise seadus (COVID-19 haigust põhjustava koroonaviiruse levikuga seotud meetmed), RT I, 21 April 2020, 1 <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/121042020001>.

⁶⁰ The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund <https://www.tootukassa.ee/uudised/1-aprillist-tousis-toovoimetoetuse-paevamaar-0>.

⁶¹ Selver e-shop (30 October 2020) <https://www.selver.ee/selveri-kojuveoteenus-jouab-miljoni-eesti-elanikuni>.

⁶² Estonian Human Rights Centre “Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications” for Estonia (3 June 2020) https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/ee_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic_june_2020.pdf.

5.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

2020 summary data on the number of persons with disabilities, numbers of beneficiaries, at-risk-of-poverty rates etc are not yet available.

Monthly data of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund on the number of newly granted work ability allowances and a comparison of 2020 and 2019 data suggest an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there has been some seasonal variation in the number of work ability assessment applications in the earlier year, the administrative decision to automatically extend the validity periods of work ability assessments which were to expire during the period from 17 March to 31 August 2020 is reflected in the low number of newly granted work ability allowances in the summer months of 2020, while in November and December of 2020 the numbers of granted allowances reached the historically highest level. However, these data should not be over-interpreted, and the specific mechanism of the impact remains to be explained, as it is not clear to what extent it is an administrative artefact of temporary halting and postponement of work ability re-assessments from April-August 2020 by 6 months to October 2020-February 2021, and to what extent is there an actual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number of beneficiaries.

Table 1. The number of newly granted work capability allowances for persons with reduced work ability, 2019 and 2020 (data of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund)⁶³

Month	2020	2019	Change (%)
January	4122	4381	-5,9
February	3473	3489	-0,5
March	3921	3706	5,8
April	2917	3555	-17,9
May	1218	3112	-60,9
June	1138	2868	-60,3
July	1462	3281	-55,4
August	2014	2779	-27,5
September	3085	3117	-1,0
October	4041	3813	6,0
November	5147	3751	37,2
December	5231	3363	55,5
Total	37769	41215	-8,4

⁶³ The Unemployment Insurance Fund: Work capability allowance (22 February 2021) <https://www.tootukassa.ee/content/tootukassast/toovoimetoetus>.

6 Access to transportation and the public spaces

Article 9 – Accessibility

6.1 Emergency measures

No measures relating to transportation, or the public realm have had an explicit disability or older age dimension.

During the emergency situation in the Spring of 2020, infected persons had to stay in quarantine for 14 days, except on the instructions of a health professional or a police officer, or in case of an emergency. The household members of the diagnosed person could leave in more cases (e.g., to obtain essentials), if they follow the general social distancing rules.⁶⁴ In public spaces, a 2+2 social distancing measure had to be followed - groups of more than two people were not allowed, and people were required to keep at least two meters of distance from each other (except families). Masks were obligatory, but children and adults with medical reasons or disabilities were exempt from wearing masks⁶⁵ Entertainment establishments and shopping centres were closed, public events were prohibited (public meetings were allowed for up to 10 people indoors and up to 100 people outdoors, and when following social distancing measures). Many of these restrictions were eased or lifted from 1 June 2020.⁶⁶

In Autumn and Winter 2020/2021 the Government has adopted several temporary nationwide restrictions, relating in particular to education, sports, hobby activities, entertainment, catering and public gatherings, in order to curb and mitigate the risk of spreading the virus.⁶⁷ However, until 11 March 2021 community services such as shops, banks, hairdressing, cultural activities etc remained open, albeit required to follow safety measures and observe physical distancing.⁶⁸ From 11 March 2021, several additional, more stringent restrictions have been applied.⁶⁹

The most recent movement and social distancing measures⁷⁰ in force since 11 March 2021 include again an obligation to wear masks (or cover their face) indoors, including in public transport and service centres. People with medical conditions or disabilities are exempt from this rule. The 2+2 distancing measure needs to be followed in public spaces, meaning that two people are allowed to move together with a minimum distance of two meters from other people (except families). In shops, service centres and general rooms/spaces of shopping malls up to 25 % of the space can be filled at a time (most shops and services except groceries and pharmacies are closed). People with a COVID-19 infection are not allowed to leave their home since the moment of receiving the diagnosis until announced healthy (COVID-free). People who have had

⁶⁴ Government order (9 April 2020) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/511042020004/consolide>.

⁶⁵ ERR news: Õiguskantsler: koroonapiirangud ei tohi põhineda hirmul (6 November 2020) <https://www.err.ee/1156019/oiguskantsler-koroonapiirangud-ei-tohi-pohineda-hirmul>.

⁶⁶ Government order (16 May 2020) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/VV/k/517052020019/consolide>.

⁶⁷ Government news (18 February 2020) <https://www.kriis.ee/en/news/government-agreed-necessary-measures-curb-spread-coronavirus>.

⁶⁸ Government website on COVID-19: Everyday life, basic needs <https://www.kriis.ee/en/everyday-life-basic-needs>.

⁶⁹ Government website on COVID-19: Everyday life, basic needs <https://www.kriis.ee/en/everyday-life-basic-needs>.

⁷⁰ Restrictions in Forde in Estonia <https://www.kriis.ee/en/restrictions-force-estonia>.

contact with a positive COVID-19 person must self-isolate for ten days, they can move out of their home only a limited distance (and for vital errands) and only if they do not have any symptoms.

Social services, especially rehabilitation services for people with disabilities are allowed to be continued, based on need and following all social distancing measures.⁷¹ Group services (e.g., in day care centres for adult people with intellectual disabilities or for working age people with memory problems) are also allowed, following all social distancing measures.

6.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

No information is available about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to (and the accessibility of) transportation and the public realm for people with disabilities. As part of the halt of social and rehabilitation services during the emergency situation, some people with disabilities reported⁷² also the halting of transportation services as a problem. However, some respondents to the same survey reported that the disappearance of the transport support didn't impact them in any way, and some reported that they could continue using the transport service.

⁷¹ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People news (11 March 2021)
<https://epikoda.ee/uudised/piirangud-puuetega-ja-erivajadustega-inimeste-tegevustele-martsis-2021>.

⁷² The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020)
<https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

7 Involuntary detention or treatment

[Article 14 – Liberty and security of person](#)

[Article 15 – Freedom of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment](#)

[Article 16 – Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse](#)

[Article 17 – Protecting the integrity of the person](#)

7.1 Emergency measures

On 12 March 2020, the Government of the Republic of Estonia declared an emergency situation due to the pandemic which lasted until 18 May 2020. The Emergency Act⁷³ governed the measures and guidelines for this period. The restrictions were eased as of 1 July 2020.⁷⁴

During the emergency situation in spring 2020, care institutions were closed to family and friends. Movement restrictions were imposed for people living in care institutions (mostly older people and/or people with special needs) as well as their visitors.⁷⁵ Exceptions were made for people working in or owning these institutions as well as residents in emergency health situations. The general restriction of movement in/ to public institutions did not apply to institutions which provide food aid, welfare services, services for children and adults with special needs as well as health and rehabilitation services.⁷⁶

Due to its negative impact on older adults (see section 7.2), the same decision of closure of institutions was not repeated in the following upsurge of the virus.⁷⁷ Currently, visiting care institutions is allowed by family and friends,⁷⁸ and inhabitants may also leave the institutions,⁷⁹ however, each institution may take independent decisions to restrict movement. Restrictions are agreed between the institution and the Health Board, depending on each region's epidemiological situation.

Also, people who need sporting facilities for their mental or physical health (for rehabilitation) could keep using them during the Autumn and Winter of 2020/2021 as well as during the new restriction phase starting from 11 March 2021.⁸⁰

The Chancellor of Justice received complaints about the visitation bans in specific care homes in 2020 but reiterated that it is up to the care homes to decide on the measures,

⁷³ The Emergency Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/511122019004/consolide>.

⁷⁴ Estonia, Government of the Republic (*Vabariigi valitsus*) (2020),

<https://www.kriis.ee/et/uudised/valitsus-leevendas-covid-19-seotud-piiranguid>.

⁷⁵ Order by the Prime Minister of Estonia on movement restrictions in social welfare institutions (in force between 3 April – 17 May 2020) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/511042020003/consolide>.

⁷⁶ Order by the Prime Minister on movement restrictions on public institutions (in force between 16 March – 17 May 2020) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/529042020007/consolide>.

⁷⁷ Delfi news (30 October 2020) <https://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/eesti/erisaade-terviseameti-ekspert-utleb-et-hooldekodusid-kinni-ei-panda-sest-kevadise-otsuse-moju-ei-olnud-hea?id=91522977>.

⁷⁸ Health Board guidelines (8 October 2020)

https://www.terviseamet.ee/sites/default/files/Nakkushaigused/Juhendid/COVID-19/standardnouded_hoolekandeesutuses_teenuse_osutamiseks_ja_kulastuste_korraldamiseks_08_10.2020_.pdf.

⁷⁹ Restrictions in Force in Estonia (16 March 2021) <https://www.kriis.ee/en/restrictions-force-estonia>.

⁸⁰ Restrictions in Force in Estonia (16 March 2021) <https://www.kriis.ee/en/restrictions-force-estonia>.

suggesting they use alternative means of communication for people in care institutions and their relatives.⁸¹ National guidelines recommend restricting the number of visitors to 1-2 people per resident, scheduling and registering the visitors.

All new residents admitted to the care institution must be tested for COVID prior to arriving to the institution (ibid). The negative test may be taken 72 hours prior to arrival.

Three cases were reported to the Commissioner for Equal Opportunities by September 2020 about people with chronic health conditions being restricted access to their workplace or school by their employers or students. The Commissioner reminded that in the case of non-infectious diseases people should have access to work and school, and not be isolated, calling for the employers or schools to find solutions.⁸² Otherwise, such isolation could be regarded as discrimination by disability, according to the Commissioner.

Based on respondents' answers to the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People's mini survey, it was recommended to keep day care centres and interval care services available for adults with disabilities (and fulfilling all distancing and protection measures).⁸³ The issues did not resurface anymore in the autumn.⁸⁴

7.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

No information about the number of people living in institutions in this period is available.

Also, the Health Board decided to not close care institutions in the autumn after the experience gained in spring: the mental health of people living in care institutions worsened after not seeing their family and friends over a prolonged period of time.⁸⁵ However, there is no analysis that was used for this decision.

⁸¹ Estonian Human Rights Centre "Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications" for Estonia (3 November 2020) https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/ee_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic_november_2020.pdf.

⁸² Õhtuleht newspaper (24 September 2020) <https://www.ohhtuleht.ee/1012953/liigne-nakkusehirm-pakosta-kroonilisi-haigeid-ei-tohi-pohjused-isoleerida>.

⁸³ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Estonian Human Rights Centre "Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications" for Estonia (3 November 2020) https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/ee_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic_november_2020.pdf.

⁸⁵ Delfi news (30 October 2020) <https://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/eesti/erisaade-terviseameti-ekspert-utleb-et-hooldekodusid-kinni-ei-panda-sest-kevadise-otsuse-moju-ei-olnud-hea?id=91522977>.

8 Violence, exploitation or abuse

[Article 16 – Freedom from violence, exploitation and abuse](#)

8.1 Emergency measures

No specific emergency measures on violence, exploitation or abuse (including any relating to prevention, monitoring or recovery) were adopted.

8.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

In 2020, the overall number of violent crimes dropped by 9 % compared to 2019. Physical abuse constituted 76 % of all such crimes.⁸⁶ The total number of domestic violence cases also slightly dropped by 3 % compared to 2019.⁸⁷ The Analysis Department of the Ministry of Justice has suggested that the overall decline in the number of violent crimes may be related to the COVID-19 crisis as the decline coincided with the onset of the crisis and the emergency measures reduced the number of contacts and visits. However, no specific data is available on how persons with disabilities or older citizens were influenced.

⁸⁶ Ministry of Justice: Crime in Estonia in 2020

<https://www.kriminaalpoliitika.ee/kuritegevus2020/vagivallakuriteod/>.

⁸⁷ Ministry of Justice: Domestic Violence in Estonia in 2020

<https://www.kriminaalpoliitika.ee/kuritegevus2020/perevagivald-ja-ahistamine>.

9 Independent living

[Article 19 – Living independently and being included in the community](#)

9.1 Emergency measures

In April 2020, in the framework of legislative changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, some amendments to the Social Welfare Act were adopted. According to these amendments, during the emergency situation the period of state-financed provision of social rehabilitation services as well as the provision of services at special care institutions (for persons with mental disability or chronic psychiatric illness) may be extended, if necessitated by the emergency situation. Also, the professional qualification requirements for the personnel of special care institutions could be temporarily reduced, in the absence of suitably qualified staff during the emergency situation.⁸⁸ However, as the formally declared emergency situation in Estonia lasted only from 12 March to 18 May 2020, these legal amendments were not actually applied in practice.

From the onset of the crisis in Spring 2020, the provision of e-services and phone counselling has significantly extended in many areas. For example, the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund advises clients to use, if possible, electronic channels to contact them.⁸⁹

From 11 March 2021, in the context of new restrictions applied by the Government due to the high prevalence of infections, the Social Insurance Board again closed direct counselling and in-person contacts with clients and switched to e-services and phone counselling.⁹⁰ However, the provision of services financed by the Social Insurance Board is not affected.

9.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

There has been only very limited analysis on the specific impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the daily lives of persons with disabilities. In the Summer 2020, the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People conducted a small (non-representative) qualitative study which covered 99 persons with disabilities, 58 parents of children with disabilities and 26 family members of adult persons with disabilities.⁹¹ The study, among others, inquired about access to social services and coping with the care burden during the emergency situation in Spring 2020. Nearly two-third of respondents noted some difficulties with access to social services, mostly due to the fact that the provision of some services was temporarily halted: day centres or support centres were closed for some weeks, sign language interpretation was available only as an e-service etc. The

⁸⁸ Riigi 2020. aasta lisaelarve seadusega seonduvate seaduste muutmise seadus (COVID-19 haigust põhjustava koroonaviiruse levikuga seotud meetmed), RT I, 21 April 2020, 1 <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/121042020001>.

⁸⁹ The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund <https://www.tootukassa.ee/eng>.

⁹⁰ The Estonian Social Insurance Board, news (10 March 2021) <https://sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/et/uudised/kuni-5aprillini-teenindame-mittekontaktself-e-kanalites-ja-infotelefonis-6121-360>. <https://sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/et/muudatused-meie-teenustes-koroonaviiruse-kriisi-tingimustes>.

⁹¹ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People news (14 September 2020) <https://epikoda.ee/uudised/uuring-kontaktoppe-ja-sotsiaalteenuste-katkemine-pani-puuetega-inimesed-kriisi-ajal-raskesse-olukorda>.

remaining one-third of respondents were either not affected or had adjusted to the changed situation, e.g., were satisfied with the replacement of direct provision with e-services. An overwhelming majority of parents of children with disabilities noted that their care burden significantly increased during this period as various support services were not temporarily available.⁹²

However, as the emergency situation in Spring 2020 lasted for about 2 months, the situation broadly normalised by the Summer 2020 when the prevalence of the COVID-19 virus in Estonia was very low.

In December 2020 and January 2021 local municipalities distributed free protective masks to social assistance beneficiaries, financed by the state.^{93 94} However, the target group of this measure were all persons with low income, not specifically persons with disabilities.

In December 2020, the Minister of Social Affairs confirmed to disability organisations that despite the pandemic, social services for persons with disabilities were to remain open and accessible, and the Government does not intend to take any administrative decisions to make apply any restrictions in these areas.⁹⁵

There is no specific analysis yet available on the possible impact on persons with disabilities and their families of those measures which the Government has adopted to curb the pandemic in Autumn 2020 and Winter 2021.

⁹² The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

⁹³ Delfi.ee (18 December 2020) <https://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/eesti/miljon-maski-abivajajatele-vahekindlustatud-saavad-tasuta-maskid-katte-omavalitsustest?id=92016299>.

⁹⁴ Pealinn (5 January 2021) <https://www.pealinn.ee/tallinn/vahekindlustatutele-moeldud-maskid-on-omavalitsustele-laiali-jagatud-n261796>.

⁹⁵ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People news (18 December 2020) <https://epikoda.ee/uudised/sotsiaalminister-sotsiaalteenused-jaavad-pandeemia-ajal-kattesaadavaks>.

10 Access to habilitation and rehabilitation

[Article 26 – Habilitation and rehabilitation](#)

10.1 Emergency measures

In April 2020, in the framework of legislative changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, some amendments to the Social Welfare Act were adopted. According to these amendments, during the emergency situation the period of state-financed provision of social rehabilitation services as well as the provision of services at special care institutions (for persons with mental disability or chronic psychiatric illness) could be extended, if necessitated by the emergency situation.⁹⁶ However, as the formally declared emergency situation in Estonia lasted only from 12 March to 18 May 2020, these legal amendments were not actually applied in practice.

Social services, especially rehabilitation services were halted during the emergency situation in 2020, affecting many people with disabilities negatively.⁹⁷ Also, people with reduced mobility had difficulties with receiving (rehabilitation) services to maintain their health as they need usually face-to-face or hands-on meetings/ services.

In December 2020, the Minister of Social Affairs confirmed to disability organisations that despite the pandemic, social services for persons with disabilities remain open and accessible, and the Government does not intend to take any administrative decisions to apply any restrictions in these areas.⁹⁸

10.2 Impact of COVID-19 and/or emergency measures adopted

The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People's survey⁹⁹ found that two thirds of the survey respondents experienced difficulties with accessing social services because they were temporarily halted during the emergency situation in the Spring of 2020. Halting of several social services, especially rehabilitation services, for two months during the emergency situation caused confusion about the future arrangement of services as well as negative (mental) health consequences for many people with disabilities, according to the survey.

⁹⁶ Riigi 2020. aasta lisaelarve seadusega seonduvate seaduste muutmise seadus (COVID-19 haigust põhjustava koroonaviiruse levikuga seotud meetmed), RT I, 21 April 2020, 1

<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/121042020001>.

⁹⁷ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020)

<https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

⁹⁸ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People news (18 December 2020)

<https://epikoda.ee/uudised/sotsiaalminister-sotsiaalteenused-jaavad-pandeemia-ajal-kattesaadavaks>.

⁹⁹ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020)

<https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

11 Access to justice

[Article 13 - Access to justice](#)

11.1 Emergency measures

No measures relating to access to justice have had an explicit disability or older age dimension.

The Estonian Council for Administration of Court issued recommendations for the operation of the courts during the emergency situation in Spring 2020.¹⁰⁰ Courts were functioning, but whenever possible, judicial proceedings took place in written form rather than through hearings. Where an oral hearing was necessary, the courts were encouraged to conduct proceedings via technical means (incl. video bridge and videoconference).

After the emergency situation ended on 18 May 2020, the courts started holding more hearings in the courtroom, instead of preferring video-conference solutions or written procedures. However, the judge decides the number of people in the courtroom, and it is recommended for the participants to wear masks. If a party to the proceedings becomes ill, they must report it and it will be up to the judge to decide how to proceed. All hearings continue to be public, but journalists are asked to inform the court at least one working day in advance if they wish to attend a hearing.¹⁰¹

11.2 Impact of COVID-19 crisis

No assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to justice for people with disabilities is available. There have been no court judgments concerning the legality of emergency measures.¹⁰²

The Chancellor of Justice issued opinions in response to complaints concerning various restrictions, e.g., in some local municipalities, however, upon these opinions, such restrictions were annulled. These do not explicitly mention a disability dimension.

¹⁰⁰ Estonia, Council for Administration of Court (16 March 2020) <https://www.riigikohus.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/%C3%B5igusalased%20materialid/avalikud%20esinemised/KHN%20recommendations.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ Estonian Court <https://www.kohus.ee/et/kohtumenetlus/kohtute-too-parast-eriolukorra-loppu>.

¹⁰² Estonian Human Rights Centre “Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications” for Estonia (3 November 2020) https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fi_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic_november_2020.pdf.

12 Access to education

Article 24 – Education

12.1 Emergency measures

During the emergency situation first imposed to restrict the spreading of COVID-19 in the Spring of 2020, all education facilities were ordered to be closed.¹⁰³ The same order also mentions that a separate decision was to be made regarding studies of students with special educational needs, however, such a (legal) decision was not made. The Ministry of Education and Science published recommendations for organising the study of children with special educational needs.¹⁰⁴ It was recommended for such schools to organise their work resembling the general schools as much as possible – organising studying mainly through distance learning. However, in cases where this was not possible due to the students' extended support needs, schools were suggested to appoint a support person for the student. They would meet in person with the student with special educational needs, applying all measures to prevent infection. Also, the local municipality could be contacted to appoint such a support person and organise transportation to schools if the school (and parent) was not able to do that. Guidelines¹⁰⁵ for support persons on how to organise distance learning and what to keep in mind include tips for support persons of students with special needs and a link¹⁰⁶ to study materials for students with special needs.

Although a support person was recommended to be appointed for students with special needs,¹⁰⁷ they were lacking. This is one of the systemic problems that the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People has also mentioned as one of the priority recommendations for the government to address.^{108 109} However, closing the regular schools during the emergency situation was one of the most crucial factors worsening the situation of adults as well as children with special needs.^{110 111} Based on the survey and recommendations of the Chamber of Disabled People, the restrictions of the second wave included more distinct regulations for persons with disabilities. For example, social care establishments and schools for children with special needs were left open.

¹⁰³ Government order on the application of measures of emergency situation (in force 13 March – 17 May 2020) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/508052020004/consolide>.

¹⁰⁴ Ministry of Education and Science recommendations for organising the study of children with special educational needs (27 March 2020) https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/200327_hm_eriulukorra_soovitus_hev_opilased_som.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ Rajaleidja guidelines for primary level support persons in schools <https://www.innove.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/juhised-esmatasandi-spetsialistile.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Webpage for study materials of students with special needs <http://www.hev.edu.ee/>.

¹⁰⁷ Education Estonia <https://harno.ee/et/lisatuge-vajav-laps-distantsoopes>.

¹⁰⁸ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People recommendations presented to the Minister of Education and Science (8 January 2021) <https://www.epikoda.ee/uudised/epikoja-ettepanekud-haridus-ja-teadusminister-jaak-aabile>.

¹⁰⁹ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People recommendations for the new coalition agreement (19 January 2021) <https://www.epikoda.ee/uudised/eesti-puuetega-inimeste-koja-ettepanekud-koalitsioonilepingusse>.

¹¹⁰ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People (14 September 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/en/news/uuring-kontaktoppe-ja-sotsiaalteenuste-katkemine-pani-puuetega-inimesed-kriisi-ajal-raskesse-olukorda>.

¹¹¹ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-mini-uuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

Regular schools were closed again and moved to distance learning for the period of 14 December 2020 until 25 January 2021,¹¹² (in the whole country). Students with special needs had the right to continue learning in person.¹¹³ The legal basis for these decisions was the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act.¹¹⁴ The distinction regarding students with special needs was similar to earlier written recommendations: Moving students with special needs also to distance learning would be possible only if the school finds that they can organise distance learning successfully, the student does not need external help from parents, and parents agree with such an arrangement. Distance learning would be arranged also in case of infection of the student or other close people due to whom person-to-person learning is not possible.¹¹⁵

The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People has constantly been standing behind keeping this option open for students with special needs as well as proposing further recommendations on how to develop inclusive education at all levels and across the life course.¹¹⁶ The recommendations include the following points: 1) guaranteeing contact learning for students with special educational needs, 2) hasten the passing of primary education legislation to roll out services by the support specialist that need to be covered in kindergartens, 3) outline the purpose and tasks of an assistant teacher by adding qualification requirements to the relevant minister regulation, 4) integrate education and social system evaluation criteria for children with special needs in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs, 5) consider having a student stipend also for higher education students with decreased working ability, 6) develop vocational education system for students with special needs to acquire mini degrees, 7) enlarge accessibility to vocational education for students with vision impairment. These recommendations were prompted by the COVID-19 crisis but included issues that were problematic already during the pre-COVID period. These requests have been followed up by the recently appointed Minister of Education and Science.¹¹⁷ Together with the new Minister of Social Protection, the two state institutions have already agreed to set up a working group¹¹⁸ to reform the support system of children with special needs.

The re-opening of schools since the end of January 2021 was temporary though – further restrictions were imposed from 1 March and are in force until 11 April 2021, but

¹¹² Estonian Government's order on the Measures and Restrictions Necessary for Preventing the Spread of COVID-19 (in force between 14 December 2020 – 30 January 2021) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/514122020003/consolide>.

¹¹³ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People (11 December 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/uudised/valitsus-paneb-uest-nadalast-koolid-kinni-erivajadustega-opilastel-sailib-oigus-kontaktopele>.

¹¹⁴ The Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/513012014002/consolide/current>.

¹¹⁵ The Ministry of Education and Science guidelines for organising distance learning (5 November 2020) https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/distantsope_korralduse_juhis.pdf.

¹¹⁶ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People recommendations presented to the Minister of Education and Science (8 January 2021) <https://www.epikoda.ee/uudised/epikoja-ettepanekud-haridus-ja-teadusminister-jaak-aabile>.

¹¹⁷ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled Persons news (3 March 2021) <https://epikoda.ee/uudised/liina-kersna-kaasavast-haridusest-abiopetajaid-peaks-olema-koolides-rohkem>.

¹¹⁸ Ministry of Social Affairs press release (4 March 2021) <https://www.sm.ee/et/uudised/riisalo-ja-kersna-alustavad-erivajadusega-laste-tugiteenuste-reformimist>.

again, with the exception of students with special needs^{119 120} - they can continue to attend educational facilities in person, and schools where the majority of students with special needs attend will not be closed for the period. Starting from 11 March 2021¹²¹ all students at **general schools, vocational schools and institutions of higher education** are doing distance learning. Kindergarten children should stay at home.

The national study counselling centre Rajaleidja provides guidelines¹²² and answers to parents' most frequently asked questions¹²³ for better distance learning/teaching, including issues regarding pupils with support needs.

12.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People's (ECDP) survey¹²⁴ indicated that over half of the respondents (out of 180 people) had (major) difficulties with adjusting to the emergency situation's impact on educational attainment – mainly due to the child with special (education) needs having to be at home for schooling/distance learning. A third of the respondents stated neutrally that their child (with special needs) was staying at home. Respondents reported problems with motivation to study, increasing conflicts at home, having difficulties with online education platforms and not receiving the necessary support services. Additionally, it impacted on parents of children with special needs who often had to stay at home to help the child with learning as the individual responsibility had increased too much and the child was not coping with the tasks independently. During the emergency situation (from 9 April 2020),¹²⁵ parents of children with special needs could receive a support benefit to partly compensate for the lost income. The compensation rate for this was 70 %, with the minimum support amount being EUR 540 per month, and the maximum amount being EUR 1 050 per month.¹²⁶

Another survey¹²⁷ conducted in the end of April 2020 and commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents' work and coping brought out some major problems with schools (N=605). There were no video lessons and children with special needs did not have the promised support personnel.

¹¹⁹ The Ministry of Education and Science (18 February 2021)

<https://www.hm.ee/et/uudised/huviharidusele-taiendoppele-ja-noorsootoole-rakenduvad-esmaspaevast-uued-piirangud>.

¹²⁰ Estonian Government order on restrictions and measures to stop the COVID-19 spreading (19 February 2021; in force since 22 February 2021) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/319022021008>.

¹²¹ Restrictions in Force in Estonia (16 March 2021) <https://www.kriis.ee/en/restrictions-force-estonia>.

¹²² Rajaleidja guidelines

https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/2020.12.10_distantsope_korraldamise_juhis.pdf.

¹²³ Rajaleidja answers to parents' FAQ <https://rajaleidja.innove.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Lapsevanema-KKK-distants%c3%b5ppest.pdf>.

¹²⁴ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020)

<https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

¹²⁵ Social Insurance Board press release (9 April 2020)

<https://www.sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/et/uudised/riik-hakkab-maksma-eriolukorra-ajal-toetust-erivajadusega-laste-vanematele>.

¹²⁶ Social Insurance Board <https://sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/et/puue-ja-hoolekanne/erivajadusega-lapse-vanema-erakorraline-toetus>.

¹²⁷ Turu-Uuringute AS survey commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs about COVID-19 impact on families (conducted on 24-26 April 2020), press information

https://www.sm.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Uudised_pressiinfo/koroona_lapsevanemad_aprill2020.pdf.

Although schools for students with special needs were recommended¹²⁸ to be left open, and students with special educational needs were supposed to be granted support personnel or attending schools, if necessary, in reality these recommendations were not fulfilled sufficiently. Probably the main reason was the clear order to close schools.¹²⁹ This was improved in later phases and thanks to the ECDP's survey and recommendations. However, it reflects also systemic problems in the implementation of inclusive education – something also voiced by the ECDP to the government in the beginning of 2021.^{130 131}

¹²⁸ Ministry of Education and Science recommendations for organising the study of children with special educational needs (27 March 2020)

https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/200327_hm_eriolukorra_soovitus_hev_opilased_som.pdf.

¹²⁹ Government order on the application of measures of emergency situation (in force 13 March – 17 May 2020) <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/508052020004/consolide>.

¹³⁰ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People recommendations presented to the Minister of Education and Science (8 January 2021) <https://www.epikoda.ee/uudised/epikoja-ettepanekud-haridus-ja-teadusminister-jaak-aabile>.

¹³¹ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People recommendations for the new coalition agreement (19 January 2021) <https://www.epikoda.ee/uudised/eesti-puuetega-inimeste-koja-ettepanekud-koalitsioonilepingusse>.

13 Working and employment

[Article 27 – Work and employment](#)

13.1 Emergency measures

In Spring 2020, the Government adopted several measures to support the economy and to maintain employment, in particular in sectors which were hardest hit by the crisis. The measures included a temporary subsidy programme for employers to surpass difficulties without having to lay off their staff. Salary subsidies were paid to employers who had suffered at least a 30 % decline in turnover or revenue, had cut the wages of at least 30 % of employees by at least 30 % or down to the minimum wage, and/or were not able to provide work for at least 30 % of their employees.¹³² However, there were no specific employment support measures with an explicit disability or older age dimension.

In December 2020 and January 2021, a salary grant was paid to employers in the two counties (Harju and Ida-Viru county), which have been hardest hit by the virus in the second wave and subsequently by restrictions to impede the spread of the virus.¹³³ However, these measures also have a general nature and no explicit disability or older age dimension.

Apart from the employment support financial measures, the Government has advised employers to prefer distance work (working from home) and reduce physical contacts and exposure of employees.¹³⁴

Also, during the emergency situation in March-May 2020, the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People switched to distance work and replaced in-person disability and legal counselling with phone counselling (and SMS consulting for persons with hearing impairments).¹³⁵ From May 2020, the Chamber restored their regular counselling services.

13.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Data on the overall employment rate of persons with disabilities in 2020 is not yet available. According to the monthly data of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, the general rate of registered unemployment in Estonia has increased from 5.6 % in January 2020 to 8.7 % in January 2021. While the absolute number of unemployed persons with reduced work ability has increased by about 6 % from January 2020 to January 2021, the increase in the total number of registered unemployed persons over the same time period was 54 %.¹³⁶ Whereas in January 2019 the persons with reduced work ability comprised about one third of all registered unemployed persons, by January 2021 their share had declined to about one fifth.

¹³² <https://www.tootukassa.ee/eng/content/subsidies-and-benefits/temporary-subsidy-program>.

¹³³ <https://www.tootukassa.ee/eng/content/subsidies-and-benefits/salary-grant>.

¹³⁴ <https://www.kriis.ee/en/work-work-related-travel>.

¹³⁵ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People news (16 March 2020)
<https://epikoda.ee/uudised/epikoja-tookorraaldus-seoses-eriolukorraga>.

¹³⁶ <https://www.tootukassa.ee/content/tootukassast/registreeritud-tootud>.

Table 2. Total number of registered unemployed persons and unemployed with reduced work ability (data of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund)

	Total number of registered unemployed	Unemployed with reduced work ability	Ratio of unemployed with reduced work ability to total unemployed
January 2019	33 049	10 935	33.1 %
January 2020	36 587	11 083	30.3 %
January 2021	56 575	11 755	20.8 %

This data leads to the conclusion that persons with disabilities have been less affected by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis compared to the general population. This may be explained by factors such as lower employment of persons with disabilities in sectors of the economy which have been hardest hit by the crises (tourism, catering, transport etc).

As regards distance working, according to the data of Statistics Estonia, its prevalence significantly increased in 2020 compared to 2019. In the second quarter of 2020, the share of employees who had used the possibilities of distance work amounted to about one third of the total work force, reaching 40 % in some counties (in particular in and around the two major towns, Tallinn and Tartu).¹³⁷ This development, among others, may open additional prospects for entering and staying in employment for persons with reduced mobility.

¹³⁷ Statistics Estonia: Koroonakriisi tulemus: 200 000 kaugtöö tegijat (16 December 2020) <https://www.stat.ee/et/uudised/koroonakriisi-tulemus-200-000-kaugtoo-tegijat>.

14 Good practices and recommendations

14.1 Examples of good practice

The Government reacted relatively fast by extending the validity period of disability status and extending the duration of previously determined degrees of disability or work incapacity if the terms of these statuses were to expire during the period when re-examination of person's situation was hindered due to the emergency situation (see section 5 of this report).

Also, based on the recommendations of different organisations representing persons with disabilities, the government re-opened several social services after they were halted (section 10 of this report). Similarly, these voices were heard by the government to improve access to education for students with special needs in the fall of 2020 and following periods of the virus outbreak (section 12 of this report). Also, the government learned from its mistakes in the Spring of 2020, and in the following periods decided not to restrict visitations to care institutions and allow inhabitants to leave the institution provided that protection measures are taken.

14.2 Recommendations

A range of recommendations has been made for disability-related reforms in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

In April 2020, the professor of human rights at Tallinn University criticised¹³⁸ the ban of leaving social welfare institutions during the emergency situation – according to the professor this was essentially a deprivation of liberty. The professor stressed the need to draw up a strategy for the protection of human rights, both for the duration of the emergency situation and for the process of easing the restrictions, however the exit strategy document¹³⁹ did not mention human rights at all.

In May 2020, a gerontologist from Tallinn University pointed out that the coronavirus brought older people into focus, but overall attitudes of the society were still ageist. She called for increasing awareness and activities to protect older adults' rights.

By September 2020, single cases reported to the Commissioner for Equal Opportunities concerned people with chronic health conditions being restricted in accessing their workplace or school. The Commissioner called for finding solutions for people with non-infectious diseases to have access to work/ school; otherwise, such isolation could be regarded as discrimination by disability.¹⁴⁰

In October 2020, the Tallinn University gerontologist gave specific tips on how to have meaningful phone conversations with older people, based on her personal and

¹³⁸ Mart Susi: Eesti väljumiskava jättis inimõigused unarusse, Eesti Päevaleht (23 April 2020) <https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/89646543/mart-susi-eesti-valjumiskava-jattis-inimoigused-unarusse>.

¹³⁹ Government Office news of the exit strategy (22 March 2020) <https://www.riigikantselei.ee/uudised/eriolukorra-valitsuskomisjon-avalikustas-covid-19-kriisi-valjumisstrateegia-kava>.

¹⁴⁰ Õhtuleht newspaper (24 September 2020) <https://www.oh tuleht.ee/1012953/liigne-nakkusehirm-pakosta-kroonilisi-haigeid-ei-tohi-pohjusea-isoleerida>.

professional experiences since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic.¹⁴¹ Also, the same gerontologist as well as another researcher on mental health from Tallinn University advised a multi-part journalism piece on older adults' loneliness.¹⁴²

In November-December 2020, the Chancellor of Justice was critical about the new restrictions made for the second wave. According to the Chancellor, restrictions were based on fear and were too strict, not allowing for reasoned exceptions. For example, children and adults who have medical reasons or disabilities could be exempt from wearing masks.¹⁴³ Also, people who need sporting facilities for their mental or physical health could keep using them.¹⁴⁴

In January 2021, the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People (ECDP) made recommendations to the Minister of Education and Science on how to develop inclusive education at all levels and across the life course.¹⁴⁵ These included seven recommendations (see more section 12.1 of this report).

Also, in January 2021, based on the ECDP's COVID-19 impact survey¹⁴⁶ and expertise, the Chamber proposed detailed recommendations¹⁴⁷ to the new government regarding the development of several regulations related to disabilities. These included social protection, health care, education and accessibility points. In social protection, the disability assessment methodology and its interpretation need clarification, special care availability and quality need a solution, also an integrated approach to support for children with special needs as well as reducing care burden need to be addressed. Also, social protection budgets at the national and local municipality level need to be increased as well as improving the monitoring of local municipalities' social protection activities.

As part of the ECDP's recommendations, in health care, the Mental Health Act¹⁴⁸ needs a holistic update as well as enabling underage children to have the right to visit a psychiatrist without parental acceptance. The patient insurance regulation is encouraged to move on with this, and it is recommended to free children with special needs from paying the visitation fee for specialist doctors.

As part of the ECDP's recommendations, in education, teachers' qualifications need strengthening in the context of inclusive education, but also the lack of support

¹⁴¹ Tiina Tambaum: vanaema telefoni otsas <https://leht.postimees.ee/7075154/tiina-tambaum-vanaema-telefoni-otsas>.

¹⁴² Levila: Kuidas ikkagi vananeda <https://levila.ee/raadio/voitlus-uksildusega/kuidas-ikkagi-vananeda>.

¹⁴³ ERR news: Õiguskantsler: koroonapiirangud ei tohi põhineda hirmul (6 November 2020) <https://www.err.ee/1156019/oiguskantsler-koroonapiirangud-ei-tohi-pohineda-hirmul>.

¹⁴⁴ Äripäev newspaper: Õiguskantsler: minu jõust ei piisanud (28 December 2020) <https://www.aripaev.ee/arvamused/2020/12/28/oiguskantsler-minu-joust-ei-piisanud>.

¹⁴⁵ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People recommendations presented to the Minister of Education and Science (8 January 2021) <https://www.epikoda.ee/uudised/epikoja-ettepanekud-haridus-ja-teadusminister-jaak-aabile>.

¹⁴⁶ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People Mini-Survey (September 2020) <https://www.epikoda.ee/media/pages/uleslaaditud-failid/136826268-1600012939/epikoja-miniuringu-kokkuvote-september-2020.pdf>.

¹⁴⁷ The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People recommendations for the new coalition agreement (19 January 2021) <https://www.epikoda.ee/uudised/eesti-puuetega-inimeste-koja-ettepanekud-koalitsioonilepingusse>.

¹⁴⁸ Mental Health Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/522012019010/consolide/current>.

specialists needs to be addressed. The vocational education system needs adjustments to include students with special needs.

As part of the ECDP's recommendations, in accessibility, it is recommended to implement the governmental accessibility task force's¹⁴⁹ political recommendations. This includes the creation of support measures to improve accessibility to public buildings and to implement recommendations based on the accessibility analysis¹⁵⁰ 2020 ordered by the ministries of Social Affairs and Economic Affairs and Communication.

The Chamber also recommends changing the Equal Treatment Act¹⁵¹ to ensure the protection of persons with disabilities against discrimination on all discriminatory bases. Also, additional funding is needed to regional and special organisations of persons with disabilities.

The recommendation to increase governmental spending on social protection has been voiced by different NGOs and scientists in Estonia for years, as this sphere has been consistently underfunded. The share of this spending has been one of the lowest among European countries. Even today, it remains one of the lowest in the EU, and well below the EU average – in 2019, 13.2 % of government spending was spent on social protection in Estonia (EU average was 19.3 %; Eurostat 2021¹⁵²).

14.3 Other relevant evidence

No additional information to the above.

¹⁴⁹ Accessibility Task Force <https://www.riigikantselei.ee/ligipaasetavuse-rakkeruhm>.

¹⁵⁰ Transpordi ja tehiskeskondade ligipääsetavuse analüüsis 2020
https://www.sm.ee/sites/default/files/transpordi_ja_tehiskeskonna_analyys.pdf.

¹⁵¹ Equal Treatment Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/Riigikogu/act/503052017002/consolide>.

¹⁵² Eurostat database: General government expenditure by function (COFOG) (online data code: GOV_10A_EXP)
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov_10a_exp/default/table?lang=en.

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