



COVID-19 and people with disabilities

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

Cyprus

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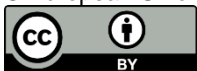
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Table of contents

1	Executive summary	5
2	Disability-inclusive disaster and recovery planning	6
	2.1 Commitments to disability in disaster management and recovery strategies	6
	2.2 Involvement of people with disabilities in disaster management and recovery strategies	7
	2.3 Disability impact assessments and research to inform disaster management and recovery planning.....	8
	2.4 Use of disaster management and recovery planning funds	8
3	Mortality connected to COVID-19 among people with disabilities	10
	3.1 Are official statistics available concerning the overall mortality rate of people with disabilities?	10
	3.2 Are official statistics available concerning the mortality rate of people with disabilities who have died from complications connected to COVID-19?	10
4	Access to health.....	12
	4.1 Emergency measures.....	12
	4.2 Access to hospital treatment for COVID-19	13
	4.3 Treatment for COVID-19 in congregate settings.....	13
	4.4 Public health promotion and testing during the pandemic	14
	4.5 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to health services for general or pre-existing physical or mental health conditions	15
	4.6 Vaccination programmes	15
5	Income and access to food and essential items.....	17
	5.1 Emergency measures.....	17
	5.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	18
6	Access to transportation and the public spaces	19
	6.1 Emergency measures.....	19
	6.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	21
7	Involuntary detention or treatment.....	23
	7.1 Emergency measures.....	23
	7.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	23
8	Violence, exploitation or abuse	24
	8.1 Emergency measures.....	24
	8.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	24
9	Independent living	25
	9.1 Emergency measures.....	25
	9.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	25
10	Access to habilitation and rehabilitation	27
	10.1 Emergency measures.....	27
	10.2 Impact of COVID-19 and/or emergency measures adopted	27
11	Access to justice	29
	11.1 Emergency measures.....	29
	11.2 Impact of COVID-19 crisis	29
12	Access to education	30
	12.1 Emergency measures.....	30
	12.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	33
13	Working and employment	37
	13.1 Emergency measures.....	37
	13.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis	37

14	Good practices and recommendations.....	39
14.1	Examples of good practice	39
14.2	Recommendations.....	39
14.3	Other relevant evidence.....	41

1 Executive summary

Disability inclusivity of disaster and recovery planning

There are no particular plans for disability inclusivity, other than some attempts for the provision of accessible information. In relation to future recovery planning, the government announced its intention to extend and diversify disability-related benefits as part of its 2021-23 budgetary planning.

Impact of the virus on mortality among people with disabilities

There are no statistical data or other official data on mortality among people with disabilities. Such data are collected, but not in a coherent manner, and therefore they have not been processed or published yet.

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

- Lack of continuous and updated accessible information. Though some efforts have been made, accessible forms of information are not widely available or easy to locate (see section 2.1 and section 6).
- Impact on the education of children with disabilities. Distance education measures did not take into consideration accessibility and inclusive education requirements. Planning in education was continuously changing, causing confusion and frustration to students and families, and relevant rhetoric and discourse, as well as practices were criticised as segregating and discriminatory (see section 12).
- Lack of psychological and other care and support to persons with disabilities in care homes and supported living residences (see section 9.2).

Examples of good practice

Several good practices, including exemptions for persons with disabilities to go out, ability to visit people in care homes, financial support for carers, accessible information, and active involvement of DPOs and the Ombudsman have been identified.

Recommendations and opportunities for change

Three recommendations/opportunities for using recovery planning are as follows:

- Include disability representatives in the decision-making bodies and committees for emergency response measures (see section 14.2, and reference to the Confederation's position in other sections of this report).
- The State's intention to extend and diversify disability-related benefits as part of its 2021-23 is an opportunity to empower access to technology, telehealth and remote services for persons with disabilities (see section 2.1).
- Include disability and inclusive education specific planning and activities in the digital education policy currently under development by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth (see section 12.1).

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

General management of disaster: The following strategies or plans pertaining to the pandemic were introduced after the Pancyprian Alliance for Disability and other disability advocacy groups,^{1 2} as well as the Commissioner of Administration (Ombudsman)³ levelled criticism against the Government's failure to include persons with disabilities in measures aimed at protecting people against the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 3rd, 2020, the Ombudsman- that acts as the Independent Mechanism for the Promotion, Protection and Monitoring of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - issued a Statement explaining the specific circumstances and needs of persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 health-related crisis. The Statement called the State authorities to collaborate closely with persons with disabilities representative organisations with a view to taking all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities, especially in relation to their right to have access to transparent and accurate COVID-19 related information.³

Information dissemination as a response to the COVID-19 crisis was, therefore, planned and enacted, taking into consideration disability accessibility; limited online information platforms were specifically designed in order to make this information accessible for people with disabilities. For instance, a Guidance titled 'COVID-19 - We are not afraid - We are protected', is available in an illustrated and easy-to-read format that is posted on the website of the Committee for the Protection of Persons with Mental Disabilities (www.cpmmental.com.cy), and on another relevant website (www.noesi.gr). This kind of accessible information is also available for people with disabilities whose first language is not Greek. Moreover, COVID-19 related Information in accessible braille format for persons with visual impairments can be obtained from the School for the Blind or the Pancyprian Organisation of the Blind or the Cyprus Confederation of Disabled Organisations (CCDO) for people with a hearing impairment, there is available material in sign language on the general information website www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus.⁴ Accessible COVID-19 related information with subtitles and in sign language- that provide daily updates on any changes in the measures adopted to mitigate the risks of the pandemic- has also been made mandatory for TV news bulletins, though not always applied. Moreover, the Ministry of Health issued a Press release with instructions on preventing COVID-19 coronavirus

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- ¹ Cyprus Confederation of Disabled Organisations (02.04.2020) Letter to the President of the Republic, available at: http://www.kysoa.org.cy/kysoa/userfiles/file/diekdikiseis/20200402_kysoa%20proedro%20corona%202020.doc.
 - ² News post: <https://m.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/kypros/kypros-ygeia/kysoa-apokleismos-politwn-me-anapiries-apo-ta-metra-gia-ton-COVID-19>.
 - ³ Ombudsman report, available at: [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/7EE18391CBE8E56CC2258542002907CB/\\$file/AYT_9_2020.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/7EE18391CBE8E56CC2258542002907CB/$file/AYT_9_2020.pdf?OpenElement).
 - ⁴ News post: <https://www.philenews.com/koinonia/eidiseis/article/909293/yp-ergsias-enimerosi-amea-ga-metra-kata-koronoioy>.

infection in individuals residing in Shelters for the Disabled and the Elderly.⁵ Nevertheless, despite the title, there are no further references to people with disabilities; in essence, the document refers to elderly people who usually reside in these shelters. The Shelters for the Disabled and the Elderly accommodate mainly people of the third age with chronic underlying diseases, which belong to high-risk groups who are more likely to develop serious illness and complications from viral infection COVID-19. (p. 1)

Future recovery planning and processes: Disability-related benefits were dramatically reduced due to austerity measures introduced after the financial crisis. The financial predicament of people with disabilities has further exacerbated during the pandemic. On 26 November 2020 the Government announced its intention to extend and diversify disability-related benefits as part of its 2021-23 budgetary planning.⁶ Even though there are some specific references to budgetary allocations for people with disabilities, the preamble of the statement does not refer to the need to support people with disabilities, who are indiscriminately included in the bandwagon of 'vulnerable groups', and are placed at the bottom of the budgetary support allocation priority list. As it is suggested:

The Priority of the Government's policies are to restore the economy to a trajectory of sustainable development, to deal with the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, to recover the labour market after the multidimensional deterioration of the situation as a consequence of the pandemic, to support workers, the unemployed and businesses affected. disproportionate as well as the protection of vulnerable groups from poverty and social exclusion. (par. 1)⁷

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

Due to the exclusion of people with disabilities and their organisations from decision making processes and support measures related to COVID-19, the Cyprus Confederation called the government to recognize the human-rights subjectivities of people with disabilities and to provide adequate forms of support and protection. The confederation expressed its dissatisfaction with:

The situation created by not including the dimension of disability in the measures announced to deal with the pandemic is aggravated by the fact that the various Ministries and competent Government Services act spasmodically and without any consultation with our Confederation, in order to introduce measures of questionable effectiveness, and circulate contradictory and conflicting messages/guidance on how to deal with a state of emergency and a humanitarian emergency experienced by the citizens of our country, which, in addition to the violations of the rights of citizens with disabilities, introduce serious

⁵ Government Press release: https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/press/11042020_2.pdf.

⁶ News post: <https://m.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/kypros/kypros-ygeia/kysoa-apokleismos-politwn-me-anapiries-apo-ta-metra-gia-ton-COVID-19>.

⁷ Note of the Minister of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance on the Budget for 2021, 2022 and 2023, available at:

<https://www.pio.gov.cy/%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%BD%CF%89%CE%B8%CE%AD%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1-%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%BF.html?id=17052#flat>.

discriminations against them and cause confusion and upset amongst people with disabilities and their families.(p. 2)⁸

Nevertheless, no targeted actions have taken place in order to officially invite and include the disability representatives to disaster and recovery planning.

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

Even though there is some disaggregated data on COVID-19 related levels of mortality and morbidity,⁹ the covariable of disability is missing, even though there is specific information on age, gender and geographical location covariables.¹⁰

2.4 Use of disaster management and recovery planning funds

The Cyprus Financial Stability program of 2020-2023,¹¹ issued by the Ministry of Finance, provides a comprehensive analysis of COVID-19-related financial recovery planning. The only explicit reference to people with disabilities relates to their entitlement to be granted a 'Special Absence Leave', along with other eligible groups of people 'for the care of children up to 15 years of age due to suspension of the operation of private and public schools, nurseries and child-care centre' (p. 5). As it is specifically pointed out:

if one parent works / receives unemployment benefit / participates in a Work Suspension Plan and the other does not, the working parent is not entitled to it, unless the non-working parent has contracted COVID-19 or is being hospitalised or is a person with a disability or is a person under compulsory restriction. The parental leave will be granted if the nature of the work does not allow for teleworking or working from home or working part-time. (p. 5)

In the rest of the document, people with disabilities are subsumed in the indiscriminate category of 'vulnerable groups'. There is a failure to explicitly refer to people with disabilities, who are more likely to experience intersectional forms of 'vulnerability'.

In a report issued by the Council of European Union commenting on Cyprus Financial Stability Planning of 2020,¹² publicized on 7 May 2020, the Council highlights the imperative to extend some of the proposed measures to mitigate the adverse financial effects of the pandemic, while making two references to people with disabilities: As it is suggested, it is imperative for Cyprus to ensure the following prerequisites:

Policies that improve capacity of hospitals, cover the working conditions of employees in its field, ensure the use of personal protective equipment, tests, medicines and medical products, is vital. Integration with the long-term care, as

⁸ CCOD Positions: <http://www.kysoa.org.cy/kysoa/page.php?pageID=25&mpath=/24>.

⁹ Daily statistics of COVID-19 in Cyprus, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/19rtmezv>.

¹⁰ Daily statistics of COVID-19 in Cyprus, available at https://www.data.gov.cy/search/field_topic/%CF%85%CE%B3%CE%B5%CE%AF%CE%B1-4.

¹¹ Ministry of Finance stability programme 2020-2023, available at: http://mof.gov.cy/assets/modules/wnp/articles/202005/653/docs/stability_programme_final_2020_2023.pdf.

¹² Council of Europe, Cyprus reforms, available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8432-2020-INIT/el/pdf>.

well as primary care and care at the local level community in the light of demographic change and need support for the most vulnerable, including people with disabilities. (p. 9)

Capacity building of public employment services with permanent staff will be crucial, particularly by ensuring the continuity of the services of employment counsellors, as their temporary employment contracts expire in the second half of 2020. This avoids putting the services under further pressure and is provided effective support for the young unemployed and other vulnerable groups, such as young people out of education, employment or training, the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities. (p. 10)

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?

There are no relevant information and data available regarding the overall mortality rate of people with disabilities.

No figures are available the mortality rate of people with disabilities during COVID-19 been proportionately higher, lower or the same as the mortality rate for the general population. Please see details in section 3.2. below with regards to data in relation to disability and COVID-19.

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

Yes, but they are not publicly available.

Important note: However, based on personal communication of the Cyprus EDE team with a member of the Epidemiology Team involved in statistical reports on the COVID-19 situation of the Ministry of Health,¹³ the following information was obtained: Data recorded by the Ministry of Health for every COVID-19 affected person and his/her progress in relation to COVID-19 (e.g. admission in hospital, Intensive Care Unit, recovery, death, etc) capture various information about each person, including disability. However, these data are not publicly available. In addition, though all information is recorded, they are not entered or coded in a consistent way that allows easy processing (e.g. disability may be recorded under different terminologies, or a type of disability may be recorded under a variety of interpretations, etc). This does not facilitate easy processing and results regarding relevant rates and statistics. According to our personal communication, such kind of processing and results would be possible given the available data, but due to time constraints and heavy bureaucratic procedures for obtaining relevant approval and guidelines, this is not possible at the moment.

This kind of data concerning how many people with disabilities have died from complications connected to COVID-19 during the period of the pandemic are potentially available in the Ministry of Health records. However, due to difficulties described above (Important note), there are no processed and/or publicly available data on the mortality rate for people with disabilities who died from complications connected to COVID-19 in Cyprus. It is noted that in Cyprus there is not yet an available disability registry, or any other specifically disability related aggregated data in general. Various statistical data related to COVID-19 are made available to public by the Ministry of Health on the National Online Portal of Open Data,¹⁴ as well as the official announcements of the Ministry on the official COVID-19 information webpage

¹³ Personal Communication with a member of the Epidemiology Team responsible for the COVID-19 statistical reports for Cyprus, 15.01.2021.

¹⁴ National Online Portal of Open Data, at <https://www.data.gov.cy/>.

hosted by the Press Information Office (PIO).¹⁵ The latest data available on mortality (in detail) make connections to underlying disease, and for now they are only covering the period of 14.07.2020 – 14.10.2020. This dataset¹⁶ reports data on cases of Intensive Care Unit admissions, discharge and deaths. None of the reported cases identify disability-related underlying diseases, though as per the personal communication mentioned earlier, such information is recorded by the Ministry of Health.

Until January 2021, there was a single reference particular to disability on the news media, in respect to COVID-19 related deaths (announced Jan 13th, 2021). This referred to a young woman of 28 years, with multiple disabilities, who lived in a Public Housing establishment for persons with severe disabilities. The announcement of the Ministry of Health¹⁷ referred to “underlying diseases” (implying, but not indicating, disability). The reference to the House’s name,¹⁸ a known place for accommodating persons with multiple severe disabilities, revealed the relevance to disability. The local online news media¹⁹ discussed the particular death by clearly referring to disability and mentioned a second person with multiple disabilities of the same House that has been hospitalized with serious COVID-19 symptoms.

Concerning the data of all people who died from complications connected to COVID-19 during the period of the pandemic, what proportion were people with disabilities, please see information above. This was the only publicly available reference to disability in relation to cases and deaths, since the outbreak of the pandemic in Cyprus. However, as mentioned earlier, such data is recorded but not processed yet by the Ministry of Health.

Concerning the data on the place of death of people with disabilities with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19, the only case that was publicly reported involving a disabled person until 15 February 2021, ended in the person passing away in a hospital.

Concerning the data on the place of residence of people with disabilities that have died with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19, the only case that was publicly reported involving disabled person until 15 February, was a resident in a Public Housing for Persons with Severe Intellectual (and multiple) disabilities.

¹⁵ Press Information Office, Cyprus official COVID-19 information portal, at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/>.

¹⁶ Document EEM4: Intensive Care Unit Admissions-Discharge-Deaths per Underlying Disease, available on the Cyprus National Portal of Open Data, at <https://bit.ly/3qo0LUg>.

¹⁷ Announcement by the Ministry of Health for the COVID-19 cases of 13 January 2021, at <https://bit.ly/3oLa4NH>.

¹⁸ House for persons with Severe Intellectual Disabilities, Nea Eleousa, available at <http://www.mlsi.gov.cy/mlsi/sws/sws.nsf/All/C6DE77FF21FF3F28C2256E6700322231?OpenDocument>.

¹⁹ Online news announcement of the death of a disabled woman due to COVID-19, available at <https://www.reporter.com.cy/local-news/article/766448/sygglonismos-ga-ton-thanato-tis-28chronis-me-polyanapiries-kai-deftero-atomo-apo-to-idryma-sto-nosokomeio>.

4 Access to health

[Article 25 – Health](#)

4.1 Emergency measures

The ordinance issued by the Ministry of Health on the 15 March 2020 included the first general emergency measures related to the operation of pharmacies, public and private hospitals. Pharmacies were to operate on regular schedule, whereas all hospitals and clinics had to postpone all scheduled surgical operations and admissions for cases that were not life threatening.²⁰ On the 16 March 2020, the Ministry of Health clarified with a press release the term “vulnerable groups” based on age and different health conditions (e.g. the population aged 60 and over, chronic cardiac and respiratory conditions, chronic neurological conditions, diabetes, immunosuppression, pregnancy, etc.). People with disabilities were not included in this listing. Disability was mentioned for the first time as a criterion for exemptions from some of the restrictions on the 20 March 2020, where people with disabilities were included in one of the three categories: *vulnerable groups, aged 60 and over, people with disabilities*,²¹ that were prioritised for accessing pharmacy services. The exemptions and regulations that were put in place from the 20 March 2020 until the first week of February 2021 are the following:

- Access to doctors’ services and pharmacies was permitted.²²
- Provision for ordering repeat prescriptions through telephone appointments with doctors for people in quarantine or shielding.
- People with disabilities were exempted from the curfew so they could access and attend specialised therapy sessions.²³ A general rule has been issued for the cases where people are not able to drive themselves to medical centres and/or hospitals, then they could be accompanied by one family member or carer.²⁴
- Visits to households where people needed support for selfcare were permitted.²⁵
- All members of staff at care homes had to go through the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing procedure.²⁶ However, this measure that was issued on the 15 April 2020, did not include members of staff and residents of supported living settings, institutions, and other types of accommodations for people with disabilities. At the beginning of the second wave (January 2021), the regulations by the Ministry of Health highlighted that the managers of care homes and other types of social care accommodation for vulnerable people and children, should comply with the guidelines for testing members of staff and users.²⁷

²⁰ Decree: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/3.pdf>.

²¹ Decree: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/9.pdf>.

²² Decree: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/10.pdf>.

²³ Decree: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/11.pdf>.

²⁴ Guidelines to Houses:

https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/3112020_revisedodigiesgiaidrymatasteges.pdf.

²⁵ Decree: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/13.pdf>.

²⁶ Decree: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/20.pdf>.

²⁷ Decree:

<https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/5434%204%201%202021%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf>.

- By the end of April 2020, the exemptions from the curfew included people with disabilities that needed access to specialised therapies, with a special mention of people with autism and their personal assistants/carers.²⁸
- According to the regulations that followed the end of the first lockdown in June 2020, visits to care homes and supported living accommodations with 24hours support were allowed only by appointment.²⁹ Since November 2020, only one visitor (particularly family member) per service user has been allowed to access the premises twice per week.

As it has been already mentioned in section 2.1, both the Cyprus Confederation of Organisations for the Disabled (CCOD) and the Commissioner of Administration and the Protection of Human Rights (Ombudsman) had to address the government's failure to liaise with the organisations of people with disabilities in the decision-making process for the development of emergency measures. The CCOD openly criticised the government for taking no action to protect people with disabilities.³⁰ The Commissioner of Administration and the Protection of Human Rights (Ombudsman) made specific recommendations to the Republic of Cyprus, so all guidelines and emergency measures are set in compliance with the protection of human rights, and particularly highlighted the importance of accessibility of disseminated information.³¹

4.2 Access to hospital treatment for COVID-19

See information in section 3.1. The publicly available records of persons hospitalised and admitted to intensive care units does not include any disability related data. However, as mentioned above, these data are recorded and held by the Ministry of Health, even though they are not processed and announced. Relevant information may be identified indirectly from other sources, such as news media or documents, which however do not include any statistical data.

4.3 Treatment for COVID-19 in congregate settings

The epidemiological data that have been published so far do not present any information related to the factor/category *disability*.

The only case that has been reported by the media refers to a private care home for the elderly in the district of Nicosia, where 9 residents had to be treated for COVID-19. The director criticised the government for pushing, due to the lack of adequate procedures, the care homes to turn into COVID-19 clinics. He admitted that the care home could not provide the medical equipment required for COVID-19 patients and asked publicly for the 9 residents to be transferred to the hospital.³² The State Health

²⁸ Decree: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/30.pdf>.

²⁹ Decree: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/43.pdf>.

³⁰ Cyprus Confederation of Disability Organisations:
<http://www.kysoa.org.cy/kysoa/page.php?pageID=25&mpath=/24>.

³¹ Ombudsman report, available at:
[http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/7EE18391CBE8E56CC2258542002907CB/\\$file/AYT_9_2020.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/7EE18391CBE8E56CC2258542002907CB/$file/AYT_9_2020.pdf?OpenElement).

³² News post: <https://www.alphanews.live/cyprus/kraygi-agonias-apo-timotheio-zita-na-metakinithoynoi-9-ilikiomenoi-me-koronoio>.

Services Organisation responded by sending two doctors to examine the residents and provide to the staff guidance for isolating the patients to avoid contamination.³³

4.4 Public health promotion and testing during the pandemic

In relation to the way that the state dealt with the pandemic of COVID-19, the CCOD reported significant delays and inefficient measures for the protection of people with disabilities. An interesting observation is that the state interprets the term “vulnerable groups” in different ways, and in the first responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, people with disabilities were not included in the list of vulnerable groups; this happened only after their representatives reacted, addressing their concerns. An example is the announcement of the creation of mobile units to serve the elderly and vulnerable groups. These mobile units, which is one of measures mentioned in the list of support package of the NRP (2020), were to support isolated elderly and vulnerable groups with the provision of food and medication.³⁴ However, it is not clear if people with disabilities are included in the vulnerable groups. The NRP (2020) also mentions the development of digital platforms and tools for citizens’ information and communication purposes. However, they were not all fully accessible and available to citizens with disabilities. Once again, there was fragmentation in the development and circulation of accessible information.³⁵

The state proceeded with two main actions to ensure accessibility of information at the beginning of the pandemic; a) a bulletin that indicated to all radio and TV stations that all announcements related to the pandemic should be accessible via the provision of subtitling and sign language interpretation, and b) the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance listed several sources and instructions where people with disabilities could access information related to COVID-19. However, these actions were not adequate, and, as it was mentioned in sections 2.1 and 4.1, the Commissioner of Administration and the Protection of Human Rights (Ombudsman) issued a statement on the 3 April 2020 with specific recommendations to the Republic of Cyprus in relation to the right of people with disabilities to accessible COVID-19 related information.

It seems that the volume of accessible sources has increased since then; the easy-to-read guide “COVID-19 - We are not afraid - We are protected” that was developed in Greece has been disseminated by the state authorities and disability organisations. The official website of the Ministry of Health includes two more documents in easy-to-read format: general information about COVID-19, and the key emergency measures that were put in place in May 2020. There are also sections that include videos in sign language, animated informative videos, and the WHO recommendations for keeping people with disabilities safe.³⁶ An easy-to-read special permit for transportation has been also available since January 2021 from the website of the Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities. However, there is no accessible information related to the national plan for the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

³³ News post: <https://www.alphanews.live/cyprus/aporriptei-kataggelies-oti-o-ios-se-girokeio-metadothike-apo-nosokomeio-o-okypy>.

³⁴ Press conference (15.03.2020), available at: <https://tinyurl.com/46cr47ck>.

³⁵ News Post: <https://www.24sports.com.cy/gr/news/nea/koinonia/kypros-pandimia-pws-na-enimerwnontai-ta-atoma-me-anapiries>.

³⁶ <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/>.

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

Permission was granted for vulnerable groups, people aged 60 and over, and people with disabilities for accessing pharmacies and doctors' services. In addition to this, there has been a provision for ordering repeat prescriptions through telephone appointments with doctors for people in quarantine or shielding. People with disabilities were also exempted from the curfew so they could access and attend specialised therapy sessions.³⁷ In September 2020, the Commissioner of Administration and the Protection of Human Rights (Ombudsman) had to proceed with inspection at the psychiatric hospital Athalassas, after official reports that the hospital was understaffed and there was no pathologist's specialisation within the medical team. The reports also mentioned that the hospital was beyond its capacity for accommodating patients and the wards were overcrowded, so the COVID-19 protocols for safety and prevention could not be applied effectively. The recommendations by the Ombudsman included the change of the medication supply system, the appointment of pharmacists to provide services within the hospital, and appointment of new members of staff to cover the posts of psychiatrists, nurses, pathologists and social workers.³⁸

4.6 Vaccination programmes

The national plan for the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines is currently ongoing.³⁹ According to the plan, priority is stated as listed below:

1. *Residents and staff of senior people's homes and institutions for chronic adult illnesses.*
2. *Healthcare professionals: Workers in hospitals with COVID19 patients, and in all ICU, Accident and Emergency Departments, Ambulance Departments (regardless of COVID hospitalization).*
3. *People >80 years old (priority in vulnerable groups).*
4. *People >75 years old (priority in vulnerable groups).*
5. *Individuals ≥ 16 years of high risk for severe disease.*
6. *People working in Primary Healthcare Centres, followed by other healthcare professionals/personnel.
Residents in other closed structures such as prisons and hosting centres for refugees and migrants.*
7. *The rest of the population according to age.*

The health conditions that define the fifth population group *Individuals ≥ 16 years of high risk for severe disease* are:

- *Chronic Pulmonary Disease*
- *Severe Chronic Renal Impairment*
- *Cardiac failure (of any aetiology)*
- *Cardiovascular disease*

³⁷ Republic of Cyprus Decree (24.03.2021), available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/11.pdf>.

³⁸ Ombudsman report (16.09.2020), available at: [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/0DE66FEF1DE96C4DC22585E600450F2F/\\$file/EMP_3_2.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/0DE66FEF1DE96C4DC22585E600450F2F/$file/EMP_3_2.pdf?OpenElement).

³⁹ National vaccination plan: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/NationalVaccinationPlan.pdf>.

- *Recent acute coronary syndrome or revascularisation surgery:*
- *Active use of biological agents*
- *Patients with Class C haemoglobinopathy (based on the Thalassemia International Federation classification)*
- *Patients with Diabetes mellitus*
- *People with severe obesity BMI ≥ 40 or ≥ 35 with metabolic syndrome*
- *Patients with a history of transplantation of solid organs or stem cells*
- *Individuals with hereditary or acquired immunodeficiency*

5 Income and access to food and essential items

Article 28 – Adequate standard of living and social protection

5.1 Emergency measures

People with disabilities were exempt from some of requirements of the decree that determined the most recent Covid-related lockdown.⁴⁰ For example, persons with disabilities and persons on the autism spectrum could go out for exercise or else escorted by their carers without sending SMS for movement exemptions. Moreover, even though the presence of any persons in a house other than the persons permanently residing in was not permitted, persons with disabilities were part of the cohort of people whose presence was permitted for the caring and custody purposes.⁴¹ Further, visits to nursing homes, centres for the chronically ill, structures and hostels for vulnerable groups etc was prohibited, excluding visits to persons with disabilities who were allowed to have two visits per week. In addition, the operation of the swimming pools was suspended, except for the use by persons with disabilities for therapeutic exercise.⁴² Finally, retail businesses that may remain open mainly include first need goods such as food supplies, pharmacies, clinical laboratories, vehicle repair and accessories, cleaning services, pet and vet services, telecommunication services, as well as retail referring more explicitly to disability, i.e. disability and orthopaedics equipment, hearing aids and opticians,⁴³ while there is priority for persons with disabilities and older adults for getting served between 08.00-9.00/10.00 daily.

According to Eurostat statistics, the percentage of children living in poverty and social exclusion in 2018 in Cyprus was 24.2 %, above the European Union average. Even though there have been initiatives to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic in exacerbating the financial hardship and poverty experienced by disenfranchised children and their families, there was not an explicit reference to children and people with disabilities and their families,⁴⁴ who are at increased risk of experiencing higher levels of poverty.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Government announced additional COVID-19 related measures aimed at supporting business and self-employed people,⁴⁵ the tourism industry, unemployed people, self-employed with a special status, individuals who have child-care responsibilities, and seriously sick COVID-19 patients who cannot work,⁴⁶ there was no explicit reference to individuals with disabilities.

⁴⁰ News post: <https://www.reporter.com.cy/local-news/article/764680/>.

⁴¹ Republic of Cyprus Decree (08.01.2021), Annex II, paragraph (ζ) <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/5436%208%201%202021%20PARARTHMA%203o%20OMEROS%20I.pdf>.

⁴² News post: <https://www.reporter.com.cy/local-news/article/764680/>.

⁴³ Republic of Cyprus Decrees (08.01.2021), Annex II, paragraphs (ψ)(i- xxii): <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/5436%208%201%202021%20PARARTHMA%203o%20OMEROS%20I.pdf> and Decree (23.03.2020) Article 2(γ)(v): <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/10.pdf>.

⁴⁴ News post: <https://www.philenews.com/f-me-apopsi/paremvaseis-ston-f/article/927069/pio-thanatifora-i-pandimia-tis-ftocheias-poy-epetai-toy-koronoioy>.

⁴⁵ News post: <https://www.philenews.com/oikonomia/kypros/article/1098621>.

⁴⁶ News post: <https://www.philenews.com/oikonomia/kypros/article/1098633/ta-8-schedia-stirixis-ergzomenon-apo-zeta>.

It is also interesting to note that a document⁴⁷ -that is available on the official website of Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance- focuses on providing information about the process of claiming Covid-related financial support- is riddled with oversights (wrong dates- e.g. information provided on December 2021- and a spelling error that is repeated on the website subject heading- *διευκρίνηση* instead of *διευκρίνιση*); these oversights can be confusing for everyone who tries to read and navigate the document, let alone people with intellectual disabilities or specific learning difficulties. The document also provides a weblink for people to submit their bank account information to claim their COVID-19 related benefits, which was not accessible at the time of writing (www.coronavirus.gov.cy), even though the document was published a week before the submission of this report. Interestingly, another COVID-19-related financial support document dated 26 January 2021 related to Plans for Dealing with the Impacts of the Coronavirus COVID-19 included an Amending Decision (No. 84) of 2021 (KDP 38/2021) concerning corrections of typographical errors that have been repeated in a subsequent publication. Arguably, these examples are indicative of the perfunctory and rudimentary ways in which the Ministry deals with the development and dissemination of information about financial support measures linked to the pandemic that further undermine the rights of persons with disabilities to have access to transparent and accurate COVID-19 related information.

5.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Even though the note of the Ministry of Finance to the Parliament during the debate on the state budget on 19 October 2020 provided evidence to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to increase social indicators for inequality and poverty, no specific reference was made to people with disabilities and the extent to which they have been disproportionately impacted. The covariable of disability is missing from the value of the coefficient that is used to measure an increase in inequality/ risk of poverty and social exclusion; disability is subsumed in other covariables/indicators namely the percentage of the population that is below the poverty line or living in households with severe material deprivation or living in households with a very low labour intensity index.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ministry of Labour Announcements: <http://www.mlsi.gov.cy/mlsi/mlsi.nsf/All/0DE65CA311A4ABFCC22586700059E0F9?OpenDocument>

⁴⁸ News post: <https://www.philenews.com/oikonomia/kypros/article/1046042/afxithike-i-anisotita-printon-COVID-19>.

6 Access to transportation and the public spaces

Article 9 – Accessibility

6.1 Emergency measures

The announcements⁴⁹ of the Ministry of Transport, Communication and Works, do not make any specific reference to disability or older age. These announcements include guidelines to rural and urban taxis and buses, guidelines and measures in public services open to the public during restrictions, and the general guidelines and measures taken in different periods for the mobility and social distancing in the public realm. In the majority, the announced measures do not include disability or older age specific references and guidelines. For example, in the measures defining the permitted percentage of occupancy in buses (up to 50 %), as well as the allocation of seats, there is no reference to the way priority seats (i.e., for persons with disabilities and older adults) are allocated. Neither are there any relevant guidelines for the occupancy of taxis and private transportation means when persons with disabilities and older adults are served. Similarly, the announcement by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth on measures in school buses, refers to the general guidelines and regulations, without an explicit reference to the transportation of students with disabilities.⁵⁰ However, the number of passengers, excluding the driver is anyway limited to either two or three, based on the full capacity of the taxi, and to 30 % for private shuttles and minibuses⁵¹ (same measures applied for both phases of the restrictions period, i.e. Spring 2020 and Winter 2021).

Despite the absence of disability explicit reference in transportation measures, some of the restrictions on the movement of citizens to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in Cyprus have an explicit disability and older age dimension. According to the lockdown measures announced in January 2021,⁵² for the period of 10-31 January 2021 movement is permitted by exception twice a day by sending a text message (SMS) to the authorities for particular reasons, defined in 8 categories. The following categories and exceptions are directly or indirectly referring to disability:^{53 54}

- Category 5 permits movement for the provision of help and support to relatives or other citizens that face difficulties in self-care or belong to groups which should be self-protected (including persons with disabilities, though not explicitly mentioned) or persons who are under self-isolation.

⁴⁹ Announcements Archive of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Works: http://www.mcw.gov.cy/mcw/mcw.nsf/mcw33_arch_gr/mcw33_arch_gr?OpenDocument&Start=1&Count=1000&Expand=1.

⁵⁰ Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth announcement "Health protection on school buses" (13 October 2020), available at, <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp11344a>.

⁵¹ Ministry of Transport, Communications and Works announcement for Transportation of passengers on public transport and regular transport with fare (17 March 2020): <http://www.mcw.gov.cy/mcw/mcw.nsf/All/A09135025AE623BBC22585750013C170?OpenDocument>.

⁵² Republic of Cyprus Decree (08.01.2021), <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/5438%2015%201%202021%20%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf>.

⁵³ Answers to frequently asked question on the COVID-19 pandemic response measures (20.01.2021), https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/20012021_Q&As_EL_revised3rd.pdf.

⁵⁴ Guidelines to citizens (08.01.2021), available at: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/odigiesgiapolitesmetakiniseisEL.pdf>.

- Category 8 lists a number of *other* reasons to justify movement (with the submission of documentation), one of which refers to “specialized therapies for persons with disabilities or chronic diseases, also covering accompanying persons”.
- Exception for movement without sending SMS is permitted for the mobility of persons with disabilities and persons with the autism spectrum disorders, with their accompanying persons.
- Persons over the age of 65 who may not be able to send an SMS, can move by using a printed version of the permission (ref. as Document B).⁵⁵
- Retail businesses that operate during the lockdown, such as pharmacies and food providers (i.e. supermarkets, minimarkets, fish-markets, fruit-markets, and butchers) until 10:00 am each day, are available only to persons with disabilities and older adults over the age of 65. In October 2020,⁵⁶ the time range changed to till 09:00 and in November 2020⁵⁷ explicit service to persons with disabilities and older adults over 65 was also added between the hours 13:00 – 14:00, which was however cancelled with the immediate effect following decrees of the same month (28.11.2020).

It is noted that in the movement restriction measures, initially announced in the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Cyprus, on 11 March 2020, exceptions and explicit references to disability of points 2 and 3 above, were not included. However, the revised measures of the same period (starting April 2020)⁵⁸ included exemptions for the movement of persons with disabilities and access to rehabilitation services, whereas the rest of the exemptions have been provided earlier in March 2020.^{59 60 61}

In addition to the above, the restriction measures on social gatherings permit social gatherings for the following three reasons, all of which include disability and older adults:

- babysitting and care of minors (children) and persons with disabilities in the absence of parents and primary carers, due to other responsibilities;
- provision of support to persons that face difficulties in self-care (including persons with disabilities though not explicitly mentioned);
- particular professionals such as electricians, plumbers, gardeners etc., and health professionals (e.g. physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, nurses etc.).

⁵⁵ Document B, for citizen movement, available at [http://www.mcw.gov.cy/mcw/mcw.nsf/All/A5E7C0FD67BB4208C225853600276794/\\$file/dilos_i_kat_exairesi_metakinisis_politon.docx](http://www.mcw.gov.cy/mcw/mcw.nsf/All/A5E7C0FD67BB4208C225853600276794/$file/dilos_i_kat_exairesi_metakinisis_politon.docx).

⁵⁶ Republic of Cyprus Decree (22.10.2020), available at: https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/22102020_DIATAGMA.pdf.

⁵⁷ Republic of Cyprus Decree (04.11.2021), https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/4112020_DiatagmaYpYgeias.pdf.

⁵⁸ Republic of Cyprus Decree (08.04.2020), available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/17.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Finance announcement (25.03.2020) available at, <http://www.mcw.gov.cy/mcw/mcw.nsf/All/A5E7C0FD67BB4208C225853600276794?OpenDocument>.

⁶⁰ Republic of Cyprus Presidents' Speech on 23.03.2020, available at https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/press/23032020_12.pdf.

⁶¹ Republic of Cyprus Decree (20.03.2020), available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/9.pdf>.

The above were not specifically mentioned in the exemptions of the Spring 2020 restriction measures.

With respect to accessibility of information (in relation to Article 9 of the UN CRPD), there have been very limited measures and actions in Cyprus. COVID-19 related information is made available to persons with disabilities in alternative formats, in very specific and limited ways, which include:

- easy-to-read information on main guidelines and restriction measures available in the official information website,⁶² as this was announced by the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance in relation to the information available to persons with disabilities on the COVID-19 response measures;⁶³
- short sign language news on the news broadcast (which has been always available), and this has been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic by Cyprus Radio-Television Authority official announcement which requests the use of captioning and sign language by all private and public television organisations.⁶⁴

However, the Ombudsman under the Authority of the Independent Mechanism for the Protection, Promotion and Monitoring of the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities identifies several gaps in the provision of accessible COVID-19 related information to persons with disabilities.⁶⁵ These include:

- Absence of sign language from all televisions stations, especially when broadcasting official reporting and announcements by policy makers and experts.
- Absence of caption in all relevant transmitted information on TV.
- Insufficient easy-to-read material of all important press releases, announcements, decrees, guidelines in relation to the pandemic, which are announced on the internet. The ones available are not updated and contain only very basic initial information.
- Braille format of the same information is not always and easily available.
- The website of the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance does not conform with accessibility requirements.
- Lack of communication opportunities through technology for older adults living in care homes, as well as persons in mental health clinics.

6.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to and accessibility of transportation and the public realm for people with disabilities is limited. The absence

⁶² Press Information <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/infoeasy>.

⁶³ Information for Persons with Disabilities on COVID-19 response measures from the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance (02.04.2020), available at, <https://tinyurl.com/1j9gfciv>.

⁶⁴ Cyprus Radio-Television Authority Announcement (12.03.2020), available at: <http://www.crtv.org.cy/images/users/1/7.2020ProsbasimotitaKoronoios.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Independent Position of the Ombudsman as the Independent Mechanism for the Protection, Promotion and Monitoring of the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (03.04.2020), available at: [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/7EE18391CBE8E56CC2258542002907CB/\\$file/AYT_9_2020.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/7EE18391CBE8E56CC2258542002907CB/$file/AYT_9_2020.pdf?OpenElement).

of such evidence is possibly not because there is no disproportionate impact, but because of the lack for disability related data analysis (as explained earlier in section 3). As a result, there have not yet been any relevant studies or published data or other information, especially for indicating the proportion of impact in various groups of people, including disability. Nevertheless, the position statements of the disability activists in Cyprus, both in the media and in official communication with competent agencies, indicates the concerns of the disability representatives and advocates. For example, issues of accessibility have been highlighted by disability representative in a newspaper relevant article on 15 May 2020.⁶⁶ Specifically, the President of the Pancyprian Organisation for the Blind and the President of the Cyprus Deaf Federation, among many other COVID-19 issues, stated that information of the “Stay Home” campaign was not made accessible for persons with disabilities, exposing deaf and blind persons, as well as other persons with disabilities, to the risks of COVID-19, as protection measures were not communicated appropriately. The Deaf Federation representative also highlighted that the Deaf community faced difficulties in understanding the SMS messaging procedures for movement. He also underlined that the state did not pay the necessary attention to the use of Sign Language, as during the Holy week of Easter 2020, the Sign language newscast of the Public Television was interrupted in order to broadcast the church mass. In addition, he also stressed the large impact of the use of masks on the communication of deaf persons, who largely depend on lipreading. The use of transparent masks is very limited, and only in cases specifically requested. Additionally, difficulties in accessibility of information for persons with disabilities are expressed as main concerns in a letter to the President of the Republic of Cyprus, the Cyprus Confederation of Organisations for the Disabled (CCOD),⁶⁷ and were also communicated repeatedly in the online press.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ In the vortex of the pandemic, people with vision, hearing and myopathy, Signalive news, available at: <https://www.sigmalive.com/news/international/628905/sti-dini-tis-pandimias-oi-anthropoi-me-provlimata-orasis-akois-kai-myopatheis> and email form the Pancyprian Organisation of the Blind by email).

⁶⁷ Letter to the President of the Republic of Cyprus, the Cyprus Confederation of Organisations for the Disabled (CCOD) (09.04.2021), available at: http://www.kysoa.org.cy/kysoa/userfiles/file/Anakoinoseis_Deltia%20Typou/20200409_kysoa_anakoinosi%20facebook%209.doc.

⁶⁸ Gaps in informing persons with disabilities for the measures, online news article, available at: https://www.philenews.com/koinonia/eidiseis/article/908200/den-merimnisan-tin-prosbasimi-enimerosi-amea-ga-ta-metra?fbclid=IwAR2KZ4J-2_rs8wjcrXAgO-h-2q_DwOVDu3hKW1yqxtADdQlwz4vzOePYZ3o#.XoM3l8pA3lQ.facebook.

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

Visits to households where people needed support for selfcare were permitted in all phases of emergency measures. From the end of April 2020, the exemptions from the curfew included people with autism and their personal assistants/carers. However, the updated emergency measures in January 2021 indicated that people with autism could be exempted from the curfew measures and SMS mobility procedure for a distance up to 500 meters from their accommodation.

The ban on visits in care homes and supported living accommodations was not included in the published ordinances of emergency measures. However, the regulations that followed the end of the first lockdown in June 2020, mentioned that visits to care homes and supported living accommodations with 24 hours support were allowed only by appointment. Since the end of October 2020, only one visitor (particularly family member) per service user can access the premises twice per week. In February 2021, visits were banned once again with the only exemption the visits to residential care for people with disabilities. Maximum number of visits is two per week and if there is a need for more, this should be approved by a social worker.⁶⁹

7.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

No evidence was found concerning any increases or decreases in institutional living as well as in rates of compulsory detention, treatment or restraints, or of restrictions in access to family or friends for people living in institutional care.

⁶⁹ Decree:

<https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/5462%2012%202%202021%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf>

8 Violence, exploitation or abuse

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

8.1 Emergency measures

No official measures or policies were set on any emergency laws, policies or other measures on violence, exploitation or abuse (including any relating to prevention, monitoring or recovery) that have an explicit disability or older age dimension.

8.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

According to the data of the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in Family, there was a significant increase of the reported cases of domestic violence during the pandemic.⁷⁰ In March 2020, the reported cases have increased by 47 %. According to the records of the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in Family, 1.1 % of service users were persons with disabilities. Five persons with disabilities are currently amongst the service users that receive support by the association.⁷¹ However, the published data of the association do not include disability as an analytic category.⁷² Another matter that should be mentioned is the lack of accessible information for reporting or seeking information related to violence and abuse.

⁷⁰ News post: <https://www.offsite.com.cy/eidiseis/topika/kypros-dramatiki-ayxisi-endooikogeneiakis-bias-en-meso-pandimias>.

⁷¹ Personal communication via e-mail with Iro Michael, supervisor of the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in Family, 10 March 2021.

⁷² Association for the Prevention of Home Violence: <https://domviolence.org.cy/statistika/>.

9 Independent living

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

9.1 Emergency measures

As it is mentioned in sections 4.1 & 7.1, people with disabilities were exempted from the curfew, so they could attend specialised therapy sessions, and they were given priority to access pharmacies and shops for their daily supplies. Shops and services related to assistive equipment and devices were also part of the businesses that could remain open. Exemptions from the curfew included people with autism and their personal assistants/carers. However, this exemption has been amended since January 2021, and people with autism are only allowed to cover 500 meters from their accommodation without the required special permit.

The development of supported living is a new provision for the Cypriot socio-cultural context. Since the first wave of the pandemic, visits to households where people needed support for selfcare were permitted. According to the regulations that followed the end of the first lockdown in June 2020, visits to care homes and supported living accommodations with 24 hours support were allowed only by appointment. In August 2020, the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance circulated updated instructions for care homes, homes for people with disabilities and institutional settings. According to the updated instructions, visits were only allowed after contacting the providers of care, and residents' outings were limited to strictly necessary ones. The Ombudsman had to address recommendations about the care and the wellbeing of elderly people who live at residential care, highlighting the importance of providing psychological support and keeping them active through various activities. The Ombudsman noted that the residents' personal needs, their prosperity and dignity should be considered, and the state in cooperation with the care providers should make all possible efforts to prevent the danger of them being socially excluded. It was also recommended that maintaining contact with family and friends and socialising via the use of technology was equally important as residents' physical health.⁷³ Since November 2020, only one visitor (particularly a family member) per service user can access the premises of social care homes twice per week.

In terms of financial support, the only emergency measure was that of special leave for childcare, which actually was a childcare allowance for parents employed in private sector. Eligibility was limited to parents who could not continue working from home, on a flexi hours schedule or online. It is interesting that this emergency measure defined persons with disabilities of any age that were under the care of their parents as "children".⁷⁴

9.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

All members of staff at care homes had to go through the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing procedure. This regulation that was issued on 15 April 2020 initially did

⁷³ Ombudsman report:

[http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/F17D43C6EE20A15DC22585C2003CA512/\\$file/SUMMARY.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/F17D43C6EE20A15DC22585C2003CA512/$file/SUMMARY.pdf?OpenElement).

⁷⁴ Special Leave measures: https://e718d27b-8be9-41b8-b3ad-57c7b7f7c4a0.filesusr.com/ugd/67201e_a299b94cb29340a8aa88b473d5e26446.pdf.

not include members of staff and residents of supported living settings, institutions, and other types of accommodations for people with disabilities. In December 2020, the Ministry of Health circulated specific guidelines for prevention and control of the spread of COVID-19 in care homes and institutional settings. These guidelines included instructions for staff and residents. The general direction was that the residents should remain in their rooms, reducing the time spent in communal areas.⁷⁵ They should also receive their meals in their rooms if possible. It was indicated that residents should be informed about COVID-19, and the hygiene measures for protection. It was also recommended the use of protective equipment by the staff and the provision of sanitisers outside each room and in the communal areas. Staff should be tested regularly every 7 days and the residents every 14. If there are more than two persons that test positive, then all residents and members of staff should be tested after 72hrs, and then again on the 7th day. If a resident has tested positive, then the regulations recommend procedures of isolation to a single bedroom and limitation of contact by avoiding unnecessary provision of care (e.g. shaving, haircut). At the beginning of the second wave (January 2021), the regulations by the Ministry of Health highlighted that the managers of care homes and other types of social care accommodation for vulnerable people and children, should comply with the guidelines for testing members of staff and residents.

⁷⁵ [7122020_PLIROFORIES_odigiesgiastegesrevised.pdf \(pio.gov.cy\)](#).

10 Access to habilitation and rehabilitation

[Article 26 – Habilitation and rehabilitation](#)

10.1 Emergency measures

The initial emergency measures for the response to COVID-19 pandemic in Cyprus in March 2020 did not provide for access to habilitation and rehabilitation support and service, public or private. All movement restriction measures introduced on 11 March and valid until 23 March did not permit persons' with disabilities physical presence in habilitation and rehabilitation services.⁷⁶ However, on 24 March 2020, the regulation was revised and the new Decree (article 2(β)(ii))⁷⁷ provided an exemption to restrictions in movement, for accessing “*specialized therapies for persons with disabilities and chronic diseases*”. The same provision is repeated in the following Decrees (starting 08.04.2020),⁷⁸ and was also included in the restriction measures of the second phase in Winter 2021.⁷⁹ Additional exemptions that support access to habilitation and rehabilitation are included in the second phase restriction measures,⁸⁰ by allowing movement of particular professionals, including and specifying health/rehabilitation professionals, such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, nurses etc. This measure allows rehabilitation services on one-to-one basis (based on the measure of gatherings for purposes of exercise and rehabilitation, only of two persons plus assistant) and on the site of the persons to be served.

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

As reported in sections 3 and 6, evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access of various services and life sectors, including habilitation and rehabilitation is limited, due to absence of further analysis of disability-related data. Nevertheless, various non-scientific publications and posts provide some indication of impact and difficulties faced by persons with disabilities in relation to access to habilitation and rehabilitation support and services. As mentioned in section 10.1, the very first COVID-19 response measures in Cyprus banned all citizens' movement and almost all services operations, including disability related support services, other than emergency health and covid-related response. As a result, persons with disabilities, and especially young children that accessed habilitation and rehabilitation in school and hospitals where not able to receive this kind of support for the first two weeks of the lockdown in Spring 2020. With the change of the regulation on 24 March, access to “specialised therapies” was permitted in private practices, as such services in the public health and education sector where not operating. In addition, social distancing and COVID-19

⁷⁶ Republic of Cyprus Decrees (11.03.2021 – 23.03.2021) available at: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/categories/diat>.

⁷⁷ Republic of Cyprus Decree (24.03.2021), available at: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/11.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Republic of Cyprus Decrees, available at: <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/categories/diat>.

⁷⁹ Answers to frequently asked question on the COVID-19 pandemic response measures (20.01.2021), available at https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/20012021_Q&As_EL_revised3rd.pdf.

⁸⁰ Republic of Cyprus Decree (08.01.2021), available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/5438%2015%201%202021%20%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf>.

related precautions seemed to cause concerns among both the professionals^{81 82} and the persons with disabilities and their families.⁸³ The latter also expressed their frustration for the failure of national health system to generally respond to the rehabilitation and habilitation needs of the persons with disabilities (see EDE report on European Semester country fiche on disability equality, Fall 2020). During the COVID-19 response measures, no official policy or practice was announced by the State on how habilitation and rehabilitation services could be alternatively accessed, other than some guidelines from individual rehabilitation departments.⁸⁴ An effort is continuously made by academics and professionals through news, social media and associations' announcements to provide information how rehabilitation and habilitation can be accessed through telehealth and how some university-based labs are currently implementing this^{85 86} and in collaboration with parents' associations.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Letter of the Cyprus Occupational Therapists Association to the Minister of Health, (08.04.2021), available at: <https://www.ergotherapeiacy.eu/images/pdf/8-4-20.pdf>.

⁸² Cyprus Association of Speech and Language Pathologists: Speech and Language Therapy in Primary Schools, during lockdown (26.01.2021), available at: <https://paideia-news.com/syndesmoisyllogoi/2021/01/26/syllogos-eggegrammenon-logopathologon-paroxi-logotherapeias-sta-dim-sxoleia-en-kairo-egkleismoy/>.

⁸³ News article, "In the air the therapies of children with disabilities" (28.07.2020), available at: <https://www.philenews.com/koinonia/eidiseis/article/986844/ston-aera-therapeies-paidion-me-anapiria>.

⁸⁴ Handbooks on techniques for responding to crisis and emergency situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic for persons in quarantine/for the general public/for school age children: the Occupational Therapy Perspective (OT Department of the Mental Health Services), available at: <https://www.ergotherapeiacy.eu/images/pdf/covid19/exiridio1.pdf> (2 and 3 also available).

⁸⁵ Tele-practice in Speech and Language Therapy: Challenge and opportunity (28.04.2020), available at: <https://paideia-news.com/eyropaiko-panepistimio/2020/04/28/tilepraktiki-sti-logotherapeia-proklisi-kai-eykairia/>.

⁸⁶ Cyprus University of Technology participation in responding to the pandemic impact in mental health, available at: <https://www.cut.ac.cy/faculties/hsc/reh/announcements/article/?contentId=432080>.

⁸⁷ European University Cyprus, Collaboration with Cyprus ADHD Association for remote Occupational Therapy sessions, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2193412984123306&set=gm.10158138029577972>.

11 Access to justice

[Article 13 - Access to justice](#)

11.1 Emergency measures

Even though there was an Announcement of the Supreme Court on the reopening of the Courts in May 2020⁸⁸ and COVID-19 related guidance was issued, there was no reference to people with disabilities.⁸⁹ The same applies to the requirements of the decree⁹⁰ that determined the most recent Covid-related lockdown.

The Council of Europe's webpage that provides country specific information on 'management of the judiciary - compilation of comments by countries during the COVID-19 pandemic - does not include any information about Cyprus,⁹¹ even though there are more than 20 country-specific commentaries. Cyprus has not provided country-specific information about online judiciary measures either.⁹²

11.2 Impact of COVID-19 crisis

The Council of Europe's webpage that provides a comparative information table on the impact of COVID-19 on judiciary procedures does not include any information about Cyprus.⁹³

⁸⁸ News Post: <https://gr.euronews.com/2020/04/30/kypros-supreme-court-anotato-dikastirio-ti-apofasise-gia-tin-leitourgia-dikastirion-covid>.

⁸⁹ Announcement for measures in Courts: https://www.pio.gov.cy/assets/pdf/newsroom/2020/04/30.4.20_Proxedio_Odigou_Dikastiria.pdf.

⁹⁰ News post: <https://www.reporter.com.cy/local-news/article/764680/>.

⁹¹ EC for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ): <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cepej/compilation-comments>.

⁹² European Justice: https://e-justice.europa.eu/content_impact_of_covid19_on_the_justice_field-37147-el.do.

12 Access to education

[Article 24 – Education](#)

12.1 Emergency measures

Measures related to education in Cyprus included mainly aspects: suspension of educational institutions' operation in physical mode, distance learning and sanitary measures. On 10 March 2020, following the decision of the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth (MECSY) announced the suspension of the operation of all private and public primary and secondary schools in the capital (Nicosia) for the period of 11-13.03.2020, including private education institutions, as well as education centres for persons with disabilities.⁹³ The same announcement called for safety measures and cancellation of all other activities in schools that remained open. At the time, distance education was then suggested by the Ministry (12.03.2020), specifically referring to the secondary education graduates,⁹⁴ and neither the initial nor the following announcements on efforts to facilitate distance education included any particular reference to the education of children with disability or accessibility and relevant issues.⁹⁵ ⁹⁶ The suspension of the operation of all schools was extended across the country (Special Schools are explicitly mentioned in the announcements)⁹⁷ until 21 May 2020 (excluding secondary education graduates that returned to schools on 8 May 2020). The measures applied for all educational settings, including educational activities of all kinds in private institutions (extra-curricular activities) and Higher Education. Higher Education Institutions' attendance in physical presence was also permitted on 8 May 2020,⁹⁸ while most of the Universities chose to continue with online teaching. However, attendance in physical presence was gradually released, according to age group, with early childhood education students and students attending special schools being the last to return. During preparation for the staged reopening of schools in physical presence, in May 2020, the Ministry announced procedures on protection measures for both educators⁹⁹ and students that may belong to vulnerable groups. The announcements of the Ministry¹⁰⁰ referred to measures for returning to school, explicitly for students with disabilities attending both mainstream and special schools. These measures suggested the establishment of a "special doctors" committee, to whom parents should submit a doctor's medical

⁹³ MoECSY announcement and list of schools initially closed (10.03.2020), available at, <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/ypp10527>.

⁹⁴ MoECSY announcement on distance education (11.03.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10549a>.

⁹⁵ MoECSY letter to school head-masters on the operation of schools during March (14.03.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10556a>.

⁹⁶ MoECSY announcement to the press (24.03.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10581a>.

⁹⁷ MoECSY announcement on COVID-19 measures (01.05.202), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10675a>.

⁹⁸ MoECSY announcement on HEI reoperation, available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10708a>.

⁹⁹ MoECSY announcement for educators' availability for schools reoperation (04.05.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10683a>.

¹⁰⁰ MoECSY announcements for school attendance of students with special needs (20-24.05.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10800a>, <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10831a>, <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10817a>.

assessment report for their children's health condition,¹⁰¹ based on which the committee will examine children's "individual characteristics in order to apply specific protection health and safety measures". The committee listed two categories of children with disabilities: (a) children that do not have any obvious vulnerability to COVID-19, and it is recommended that they can return to school, and (b) children that are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and should not return to school, who would be assessed by specialized doctors' committees. When a child with disabilities returns to school, then all classroom students and the teachers should be COVID-19 tested. The announcement caused the reaction of parents and other stakeholders, with high criticism of the impact such measures would have on the education and human rights of students with disabilities, as this was also identified by the Ombudsman for Children's Rights.¹⁰² Following a staged procedure, all schools reopened with physical presence on 9 June 2020,¹⁰³ taking into consideration all sanitary measures. A particular announcement by the Ministry of Education was published in relation to Special Schools¹⁰⁴, for which additional health and safety guidelines were prepared,¹⁰⁵ while it was highlighted that special education school assistants attended online training on 9-11 June 2020,¹⁰⁶ offered to all school staff and parents. The academic year 2019-2020 was extended for a week, ending 26 June 2020, and on 9 June 2020 the Ministry of Education announced the opening of 41 public summer schools,¹⁰⁷ which operate each year during 1-31 July 2020 in various areas of the country. Parents can apply, and priority is provided to various groups, including children with disabilities. Interestingly, though health and safety protocols have been published specifically for summer schools, no particular discussion and procedures for attendance were mentioned for children with disabilities, in contrast to the discussions for attending the compulsory education less than a month earlier.

In the new academic year 2020-2021, school started a week later than initially announced, as preparations for social distancing measures were not completed on time.¹⁰⁸ Measures announced then did not include any disability explicit references. Educational settings at all levels, including Higher Education were able to reopen with physical presence. However, a number of universities chose to continue delivering the majority of classes online or in a blended mode, limiting face-to-face meetings to labs, clinical practice and learning activities where physical presence is considered essential. Though as in other countries, the cases of children positive to COVID-19 were very limited in Cyprus, in Fall 2020 schools that have been affected had to suspend physical presence either for the whole classroom, or a number of students,

¹⁰¹ MoECSY Assessment Special Document (requested to be filled by parents).

¹⁰² Ombudsman of Children's Rights Position (21.05.2020), available at: <http://www.childcom.org.cy/ccr/ccr.nsf/All/5EBCE15FD25C1F53C22585A500271648?OpenDocument>.

¹⁰³ Republic of Cyprus Decree (06.06.2020), available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/43.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ MoECSY announcement on the reopening of Special Schools (03.06.2021), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10889a>.

¹⁰⁵ MoECSY announcement on additional health guidelines for special schools (03.06.2021), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10892a>.

¹⁰⁶ Distance Education on COVID-19 response for school assistants of children with special needs, MoECSY (11.06.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10892a>.

¹⁰⁷ MoECSY announcement on the operation of public summer schools 2020 (09.06.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10935a> & <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10939a>.

¹⁰⁸ Ministers press conference for the MoECSY planning for academic year 2020-2021, available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp11212a>.

and in limited cases for the whole school. During that period, learning was delivered in distance mode. In October 2020, the operation of two special schools was suspended for some days for sanitation, implementation of additional sanitary measures, and relevant staff training, while no distance/online education arrangements were announced in the meantime.¹⁰⁹

With the return of students to schools, sanitary measures included, among other, social distancing and the use of masks by school staff and students (over the age of 12).¹¹⁰ The use of masks resulted in debates among parents¹¹¹ as well as educators, in relation to the impact on the education of children with disabilities. With the announcement of the new measures for returning back to school in September 2020, parents of students with disabilities expressed their concerns about the use of masks by children with developmental or other disabilities, who may not be able to properly wear a mask or may face respiration difficulties.¹¹² The Ombudsman also made relevant suggestions to the MoECSY for identifying alternatives to masks.¹¹³ In relation to masks, concerns were also expressed about the availability of transparent masks for the needs of children with hearing disabilities. Responding to this, donations of transparent masks and face shields were made by private companies to the MoECSY.¹¹⁴

During November, numbers of COVID-19 positive cases in Cyprus increased and the Government announced further restriction measures and lockdown, taking effect in the Christmas period, and resulting in the suspension of face-to-face operation of all educational settings after the Christmas break, and until 10 January 2021.¹¹⁵ Early childhood education private and public schools and Special Schools reopened with physical presence on 10 January 2021 (ΙΙ(υ&φ),¹¹⁶ ¹¹⁷ while the physical presence operation of the rest of the educational settings continued only in distance education mode, initially until 31 January 2021 and then until 8 February 2021.¹¹⁸ Appealing

¹⁰⁹ MoECSY announcement on the suspension of the operation of two Special Schools (18.10.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp11357a>.

¹¹⁰ Republic of Cyprus Decree (26.08.2020, art 2.5) available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/59.pdf>.

¹¹¹ News Post 'In disadvantaged position the children with special needs due to the use of mask – they cannot attend, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4kl4tn9n>.

¹¹² News post: Parents reactions for the use of masks at school for children with disabilities (24.08.2020), available at: <https://www.sigmalive.com/news/local/656789/antidroun-oi-goneis-paidion-me-anapiria-gia-xrisi-maskas-sta-sxoleia>.

¹¹³ Ombudsman Report (24.08.2020), available at: [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/6BD7DC3850D03BA3C22585CF0030B7AB/\\$file/AYT_20_2020_.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/6BD7DC3850D03BA3C22585CF0030B7AB/$file/AYT_20_2020_.pdf?OpenElement).

¹¹⁴ MoECSY announcement: Donation of protection masks to children with hearing disabilities and their educators (30.10.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp11408a>, and <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp11408a>.

¹¹⁵ Republic of Cyprus Decree (29.12.2020), available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/5430%2029%2012%202020%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf>.

¹¹⁶ Republic of Cyprus Decree (08.1.2021), available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/5436%208%201%202021%20PARARTHMA%203o%20OMEROS%20I.pdf>.

¹¹⁷ Answers to frequently asked question on the COVID-19 pandemic response measures (20.01.2021), available at https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/20012021_Q&As_EL_revised3rd.pdf.

¹¹⁸ Republic of Cyprus Decree (28.1.2021), available at <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/5453%2028%201%202021%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf>.

against this decision, a group of parents have submitted a complaint to the Ombudsman, requesting physical presence in schools for children with disabilities who attend special units in mainstream primary schools, highlighting that distance education was not appropriate or feasible for them.¹¹⁹ The Ombudsman suggested that the MoECSY should revise the decision and allow the return of students of the Special Units and children that receive individualised support back to the schools' premises,¹²⁰ in the same way as Special Schools have operated since 10 January. The MoECSY¹²¹ responded that children with disabilities are members of their mainstream classrooms and that such practice would exclude them from the online activities and participation with their peers and would be an action of segregation. However, the Minister suggested that measures can include attendance of pre-scheduled short face to face sessions for individualized support, based on families' interest and application.¹²² Schools were then instructed to contact parents and collect requests for interest of children that wish to attend a special customized schedule of returning back to school for about a teaching period per day,¹²³ which was implemented as of 29 January 2021.¹²⁴

On 8 February 2021, only the following educational settings went back to attendance in physical presence ((II(u)(i)): public and private primary schools, graduates of the higher-level secondary schools (Lyceum and evening public and primary schools Grade C), public and private early education schools, public Special Schools and Special Units, while the rest of the secondary education and Higher Education institutions will continue in distance education. It is also noted that childcare of children with disabilities in non-school settings was also permitted as an exception to the social gathering restrictions measures.

12.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Measures and procedures for the transition of schools to distance education, as well as all measures on students returning to school, had an impact both on the education and the human rights of students with disabilities. Firstly, during school closures and implementation of distance education strategies in the public education sector, these failed to respond effectively to online learning, especially for primary and lower secondary education. There was no established learning management system which educators could collectively use, and most efforts (individual educators) did not take into consideration accessibility requirements. The e-learning webpage built by the MoECSY,¹²⁵ and announced by the Minister as one of the measures for responding to

¹¹⁹ News post (12.01.2021), available at <https://www.alphanews.live/cyprus/epanexetasi-tis-apofasis-gia-toys-mathites-eidikon-monadon-eisigeitai-i-lottidoy>.

¹²⁰ Position of the Ombudsman on distance education for children attending Special Units in Primary Schools (12.01.2021), available at [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/B7434AEFDD11330AC225865C003890F0/\\$file/54.2021_12012021.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/B7434AEFDD11330AC225865C003890F0/$file/54.2021_12012021.pdf?OpenElement).

¹²¹ Ministers' of Education response to Ombudsman (13.01.2021) https://www.reporter.com.cy/local-news/article/766463/i-apantisi-prodromoy-ga-tin-eidiki-ekpaidefsi-to-skeptiko-tis-apofasis?fbclid=IwAR0J5byoTxkw3qJC1LK40_sOpXV92xAb5PWneloeGd56DX9GZDatDUKaGj0.

¹²² MoECSY announcement for students of Special Education (27.01.2021). available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp11760a> & circular on Schools reoperation (27.01.2021).

¹²³ MoECSY circular to schools on educational programmes for children attending special education (14.01.2021).

¹²⁴ MoECSY announcement (27.01.2021) <https://tinyurl.com/y72qnc4u>.

¹²⁵ E-Learning, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth, available at <http://elearning.schools.ac.cy/index.php/el/>.

the pandemic through facilitating distance education¹²⁶ solely collates various existing resources of the public educational setting and does not make any reference to disability issues or accessibility of the learning materials and content, and neither holds a learning management system that could be applied in schools. The main tools officially available for distance education to teachers and students in public settings are the Microsoft 365 suite, where MS Teams was used for synchronous communication and file sharing, while educators had the opportunity to use other MS 365 applications as well. However, though Microsoft complies to accessibility requirements, educators did not receive any relevant training on how to develop accessible learning environments. Hence, educational material provided to learners in digital form was not accessible, and often not editable, which resulted in the need for parents to print hard copies or collect hard copies of materials from school. In addition, the relevant official training of teachers for distance education approaches and strategies did not include issues of accessibility and digital inclusive education, at least as officially announced.¹²⁷ Some relevant training was included in the regular in-service training events (held pre-recorded online) in September 2020, which addressed both mainstream and special teachers.¹²⁸ These issues and concerns were highlighted by academics,¹²⁹ educators,¹³⁰ as well as disability organisations,¹³¹ which asked for measures that would take into consideration inclusive practices and accessibility.

In May 2020, when schools gradually returned to physical presence, measures explicit to disability received high criticism for being segregating and oppressive. Both the discourse and the practice of the policy documents, as well as the Ministry's announcements, reflected the deficit model of disability, placing the decisions regarding students' education solely in the hands of "special doctors", causing insecurity and confusion to parents. Students with disabilities were excluded from students that would return to school, and they were identified as 'vulnerable groups'. The status of 'vulnerability' imputed to some groups of students is unproblematically presented as an inherent characteristic of the child, as there is no exploration of the intersection of inherent factors and inequities that render some groups of students

¹²⁶ Minister of education announcements on distance education (07.04.2020), available at <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10599a>.

¹²⁷ MoESY and Pedagogical Institute announcement: Educators Education in the use of online learning environments (May 2020), available at, <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10813a>.

¹²⁸ Two-days In-Service Training for educators in Pre-Primary, Primary and Special Education – Training Material (September 2020), available at https://www.pi.ac.cy/pi/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2908&Itemid=497&lang=en.

¹²⁹ Mavrou, K. & Tsakiri, M. (08.04.2020) Disability during pandemic, available at: <https://paideia-news.com/panepistimio-kyproy/2020/04/08/i-anapiria-stin-epoxi-tis-pandimias-toy-koronoioy/>.

¹³⁰ Speech and Language Therapists position (26.01.2021) available at: <https://paideia-news.com/syndesmoy-sylogoi/2021/01/26/sylogos-eggegrammenon-logopathologon-paroxi-logotherapeias-sta-dim-sxoleia-en-kairo-egkleismoy/>.

¹³¹ Cyprus Confederation of Disability Organisations (31.12.2020) Marginalisation of learners with disabilities, available at <https://tinyurl.com/jmr7ldnc>.

more vulnerable than other, also identified by a number of academics,¹³² ¹³³ parents,¹³⁴ organised educators¹³⁵ and disability organisations.¹³⁶ In an independent research report, the Ombudsman for Human Rights¹³⁷ noted that the Ministry's position, as well as the procedures followed for children with disabilities to return to school (see section 12.1) violate the principle of equal treatment and non-discrimination. Relevant complaints about discrimination were submitted to the Ombudsman for Children's Rights, who proceeded to carry out an investigation within both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health,¹³⁸ in relation to the segregating measures taken by the MoECSY for children with disabilities. At the same time, parents of children with disabilities reported in the local media the difficulties with home schooling and the lack of access to rehabilitation and other support services.¹³⁹ In terms of numbers, on 25 May 2020,¹⁴⁰ the Minister announced that 769 students with disabilities who attend the mainstream classrooms and are supported by an assistant would be able to return to school. On 29 May 2020, the special committee decided that based on the cases assessed, 323 students attending mainstream classrooms (with an assistant) and special units could immediately return to school.¹⁴¹ It is noted that the total number of students with disabilities across all educational settings and levels is about 10385 (as per official numbers of 2018-2019 academic year).¹⁴²

The negative impact of the disability explicit measures in education continued in the second phase of the pandemic response lock-down measures in the new academic year 2020-2021. Though there is no evidence in figures and statistical data on this impact, evidence provided through discussions among the various stakeholders indicate impact in relation to societal and attitudinal barriers. In January 2021, when all

¹³² Kourea, L., Fella, A. & Demetriou, K. (25.05.2020). The disability 'label' – the ticket for exclusion from the public school, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/1waaywai>.

¹³³ Symeonidou, S. (21.05.2020). Children with disabilities once again out of school..., available at: https://paideia-news.com/panepistimio-kyproy/2020/05/21/gia-alli-mia-fora-ta-paidia-me-anapiria-ektos-sxoleioy%E2%80%A6?fbclid=IwAR0h8MYLL_4HG_Fw8d0RbTZoUy2yf8pVgoP0wrQjmk19Qmw3nITQW2k0HcY.

¹³⁴ News post: Discrimination against students with disabilities (23.05.2020), <https://www.philenews.com/koinonia/eidiseis/article/943091/lottidi-diakrisi-se-baros-ton-mathiton-amea>.

¹³⁵ OELMEK Secondary Education Educators Association Announcement.

¹³⁶ Cyprus Confederation of Disability Organisations letter to the Parliament Education Committee (26.05.2020).

¹³⁷ Report of the Office of the Commissioner for Administration and Protection of Human Rights as (21.05.2020) available at: [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/549327802D18D7F1C2258573004149DF/\\$file/C.N%20789-2020%20-%20Children%20with%20disabilities-Reopening%20of%20schools.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/549327802D18D7F1C2258573004149DF/$file/C.N%20789-2020%20-%20Children%20with%20disabilities-Reopening%20of%20schools.pdf?OpenElement).

¹³⁸ Letter of the Ombudsman of the Protection of Children's Rights to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health (07.07.2020).

¹³⁹ News Post: Parents of children with disabilities in quarantine (08.05.2020), available at: https://www.philenews.com/koinonia/eidiseis/article/932920/gneis-amea-se-karantina-anisychies-ga-epanodo?fbclid=IwAR09Es6yIETGIcdy0M7qGqLhNG5qp2sglJegg3TsWNGuyPiUSX_aHc70xgE.

¹⁴⁰ MoECSY announcements for school attendance of students with special needs (25.05.2020), available at: <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10836a>, and <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10837a>.

¹⁴¹ MoECSY announcements for school attendance of students with special needs (25.05.2020), available at: <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp10866a>.

¹⁴² MoECSY Annual Report 2019, available at: http://www.moec.gov.cy/etisia-ekthesi/pdf/annual_report_2019_gr.pdf.

schools other than ECE and Special Schools remained closed till 8 February, and although parents and advocates had previously criticised these measures as segregating, some of the parents, as well as the Ombudsman, requested the provision of specialised face to face individual sessions for children with disabilities in the mainstream school and special units. The suggestion was based on the argument that distance education, provided to schools/classmates was not appropriate for children with disabilities, and hence they should have received education in physical presence, as this was already provided in Special Schools, despite the fact that they would be separated from their peers. Under these pressures, and though the Minister denoted his disagreement (see footnote 69 above) with such a practice, the MoECSY provided the option for parents to take their children in for individualized sessions once per day at school, for just one week before all schools opened. Even though their request was addressed, parents noted their dissatisfaction because of delays¹⁴³ and limited support time per day (about one teaching period per child per day).¹⁴⁴

Additionally, when COVID-19 positive cases were increasing in particular schools, the whole school, or some classes had to move to distance education during the required quarantine period of 15 days. In the case of Special Schools (see 12.1, footnote 60), neither the school nor the educators were prepared to appropriately implement distance education and support sessions for therapies and individual interventions provided by the school. Hence, the MoECSY requested each school principal to contact all families individually in order to make relevant arrangements for the 'absolutely necessary' support sessions.¹⁴⁵

Summing up, the emergency response measures in relation to education did not seem to follow a strategy that was planned and well prepared in order to avoid frustration and confusion by both students with disabilities and their families. The absence of disability awareness and relevantly informed practices had an obvious effect on the discourse used in the MoECSY's announcements and the actions taken. This was even more obvious during the second phase of the crisis and the restriction measures, where the state failed to reflect on the experience of the Spring school period and design a response plan for the new academic year. On the contrary, decisions in relation to the education of children with disabilities were constantly changing, depending on various groups' pressures, while at the same time no measures for accessible and inclusive distance education were taken. Even though we do not have any statistics or other figures that indicate the impact, it is evident that a great number of students were either left out of any kind of education for most of the time or received education in ways that were not appropriate and accessible for them.

¹⁴³ News post: In waiting status thousands of children of Special Education (25.01.2021), available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4fxaf258>.

¹⁴⁴ News post: Furious parents: only 40 minutes in schools the students of special education (29.01.2021) <https://tinyurl.com/2saz2ouh>.

¹⁴⁵ MoECSY announcement on the suspension of the operation of Agios Spyridonas Special School (30.01.2021), available at: <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp11775a>.

13 Working and employment

[Article 27 – Work and employment](#)

13.1 Emergency measures

In the initial COVID-19 pandemic response measures of Cyprus relevant to labour market,¹⁴⁶ disability is particularly mentioned in the Special Leave for Childcare allowance. Beneficiaries are parents of children to the age of 15 and/or parents of children with disabilities regardless of age,¹⁴⁷ who due to the nature of their work cannot work remotely or with flexible time-schedule (see paragraph 3 of Articles 6 & 12 of the N27(I)/2020 Law).¹⁴⁸ In addition, parents of children with disabilities that are not able or willing to work remotely should request a leave absence or the ‘Special Leave of Absence’ available to employees in the public sector.¹⁴⁹

13.2 Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

There were no additional measures and flexible working arrangements announced after 12 June 2020, or after August 2020, although the opening of schools was delayed. Research evidence also indicates that parents of children with disabilities largely depend on grandparents for the childcare of their young children,^{150 151} which was obviously not possible during the pandemic, as older adults are on the top of the vulnerable and protected groups list. Other than the special childcare leave, and allowance, initial measures were not specific to employees with disabilities. In March 2020, the decision for the Special Sickness Allowance provided to specific groups referred to employees with certain health issues listed by the Ministry of Health (MoH) (continuously updated based on WHO directions). In April 2020, the CCOD had addressed a complaint to the President of the Republic in relation to lack of protection to disabled employees,¹⁵² with particular evidence of a number of employees with disabilities affected and/or hospitalized in the Intensive Care Unit due to COVID-19. Interestingly, the revised decision of the state on the Special Sickness Allowance (May

¹⁴⁶ Protection and Support Measures of the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance for the COVID-19 Pandemic situation in Cyprus, Period 16/3 – 12/4, available at:

<https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/home>.

¹⁴⁷ Republic of Cyprus Decree (03.04.2021), available at:

<https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/16.pdf>.

¹⁴⁸ The on Extraordinary Measures Taken from Ministry of Labour, Welfare And Social Insurance For tackling The Covid Pandemic Pandemic 19 Law 27 (I) of 2020, (Decision for Articles 6 & 12),

[https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/gpo/gpo.nsf/All/0A6463F28E5C0A81C2258539004CCBA6/\\$file/5229%2028%203%202020%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf](https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/gpo/gpo.nsf/All/0A6463F28E5C0A81C2258539004CCBA6/$file/5229%2028%203%202020%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf).

¹⁴⁹ Republic of Cyprus Decree (05.05.2020), available at:

<https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/diat/31.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ Preece, D, Symeou, L, Stošić, J., Troshanska, J., Mavrou, K. Theodorou, E. & Frey Škrinjar, J. (2017): Accessing parental perspectives to inform the development of parent training in autism in south-eastern Europe, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 252-269.

¹⁵¹ Kokkinos, A. (2020). Unpublished PhD: Relationships of School and Families of Children with Disabilities in Cyprus: Investigating the Socio-economic background and disability axes. *European University Cyprus*.

¹⁵² Cyprus Confederation of Organisations of the Disabled letters to President of the Republic (02.04.2020), available at:

http://www.kysoa.org.cy/kysoa/userfiles/file/diekdikiseis/20200402_kysoa%20proedro%20corona%202020.doc and (09.04.2020) available at:

http://www.kysoa.org.cy/kysoa/userfiles/file/Anakoinoseis_Deltia%20Typou/20200409_kysoa_anakoinosi%20facebook%209.doc.

2020) included persons with disabilities employed under the Supported Employment Schemes in the categories of the allowance beneficiaries (see paragraph 3c(v) of the N27(I)2020 Law).¹⁵³

¹⁵³ The on Extraordinary Measures Taken From Ministry Of Labour, Welfare And Social Insurance For tackling The Covid Pandemic Pandemic 19 Law 27 (I) Of 2020, (Decision 20, May 2nd, 2020), available at: [https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/gpo/gpo.nsf/All/508B26273C4C3E33C225855C005B1AD0/\\$file/5258%202%205%202020%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf](https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/gpo/gpo.nsf/All/508B26273C4C3E33C225855C005B1AD0/$file/5258%202%205%202020%20PARARTIMA%203o%20MEROS%20I.pdf).

14 Good practices and recommendations

14.1 Examples of good practice

Cyprus has faced a number of challenges in relation to disability related measures responding to COVID-19 crisis. In general, efforts to mitigate the negative impact on people with disabilities were not well targeted and coordinated, but rather random after pressure by specific groups. Nevertheless, some decisions and actions can be considered as good examples of how measures could be more effective if they were better informed and structured. These include:

- The activation and presence of some disability representative organisations and parents of children with disabilities, individually or through the Ombudsman. However, it is noted that these efforts came by very specific groups, were not well coordinated, and did not always lead to inclusive measures, which in some cases were also criticised (see section 12.2).
- Information material in easy-to-read format (see section 2.1). Though limited and not regularly updated, this was a good start, as no previous example of easy-to-read information was available. Similarly, individual attempts for other types of accessible information (e.g., sign language and braille formats) have also been applied.
- Exemption measures for persons with disabilities and their families in moving and going out, which resulted after the requests of organized parents (mainly parents of children in the autism spectrum disorders) in a subsequent phase of the emergency response measures.
- Financial support for carers through “Special Leave of absence”, which particularly mentioned carers and parents of persons with disabilities (see section 13.1).
- Initiative of the Parallel Parliament¹⁵⁴ to organize a consultation meeting (24.02.2021) open to the public, in order to collect ideas and recommendations for digital inclusive education which would be then put forward to policy makers. The consultation was organized based on the challenges faced in the education of children with disabilities during the pandemic crisis. The Parallel Parliament is an opening of the House of Parliament to the Civil Society, by the creation of various Committees in which citizens from various sectors and disciplines (labour market, students, academics, youth, etc.) who are not politicians participate, in order to project the concerns of the society on various issues and provide suggestions through democratic and transparent dialogue.

14.2 Recommendations

Though there are not many good practices, some recommendations, reported in the sections above were made by various bodies and academics. These are summarized below, though their impact is discussed earlier in this report.

Recommendations by the Cyprus Confederation of Organisations of the Disabled to the President of the Republic:

¹⁵⁴ Parallel Parliament:

<http://www.parliament.cy/el/%CF%80%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%B1%CE%BB%CE%BB%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%B7-%CE%B2%CE%BF%CF%85%CE%BB%CE%B7>.

- Monitoring of social distancing measures in the workplace of persons with disabilities.
- More flexibility and opportunities for working from home to persons with disabilities, even if some groups are not included in the ‘vulnerable population’ identified by the WHO and/or National Authorities.
- Special paid leave to family members of persons with disabilities or chronic diseases that may face challenging health situations and require specific medication.
- Participation of the disability representative in the decision-making bodies for the COVID-19 response measures.

Recommendations by the Ombudsman for the Protection of Human Rights as the Independent Mechanism for the Promotion, Protection and Monitoring of the UN CRPD:

- The Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance and the Cyprus Radio-Television Authority should collaborate with the disability organisations in order to create and publish accessible information in relation to the pandemic.¹⁵⁵
- The Ministry of Education (MoECSY) should proceed to take the necessary measures in obtaining alternative solutions for the use of the mask, in order to avoid interference with lipreading for children with hearing impairment, cause of frustration and sensory issues for children with sensory and intellectual disabilities, and other possible barriers.¹⁵⁶
- Re-examination of the MoECSY decision on the process of children with disabilities’ return to school, through examination of their health and medical condition by a special committee.¹⁵⁷
- Children with disabilities attending mainstream schools and special units should be provided the opportunity to return to school in physical presence, even though the rest of their peers are following distance education.¹⁵⁸ (This recommendation was highly criticised by academics and other stakeholders as being discriminatory.)

Recommendations by the Ombudsman for the Protection of Children’s Rights:

¹⁵⁵ Ombudsman of Human rights report (03.04.2020), available at: [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/7EE18391CBE8E56CC2258542002907CB/\\$file/AYT_9_2020.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/7EE18391CBE8E56CC2258542002907CB/$file/AYT_9_2020.pdf?OpenElement).

¹⁵⁶ Ombudsman of Human rights report (24.08.2020), available at: [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/6BD7DC3850D03BA3C22585CF0030B7AB/\\$file/AYT_20_2020_.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/6BD7DC3850D03BA3C22585CF0030B7AB/$file/AYT_20_2020_.pdf?OpenElement).

¹⁵⁷ Ombudsman of Human rights report (21.05.2020), available at: [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/549327802D18D7F1C2258573004149DF/\\$file/C.N%20789-2020%20-%20Children%20with%20disabilities-Reopening%20of%20schools.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/549327802D18D7F1C2258573004149DF/$file/C.N%20789-2020%20-%20Children%20with%20disabilities-Reopening%20of%20schools.pdf?OpenElement).

¹⁵⁸ Ombudsman of Human rights report (12.01.2021), available at: [http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/B7434AEFDD11330AC225865C003890F0/\\$file/54.2021_12012021.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/All/B7434AEFDD11330AC225865C003890F0/$file/54.2021_12012021.pdf?OpenElement).

- The Ministry of Education should ensure the immediate return of the children with disabilities to school in May 2020, after the end of the first lockdown.¹⁵⁹

14.3 Other relevant evidence

There is no further evidence and information to report.

¹⁵⁹ Ombudsman for the protection of children's rights (21.05.2020), available at: <http://www.childcom.org.cy/ccr/ccr.nsf/All/5EBCE15FD25C1F53C22585A500271648?OpenDocument>.

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