



Meta-evaluation of horizontal recommendations of evaluations of operational plans conducted between 2019 and 2023

Ex post evaluation report

Prepared by the Evaluation Team of the Quality Management and Evaluation Sector

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Acronyms and definitions

Term	Definition
AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
C1	Operational Support Centre
C2	Training and Professional Development Centre
C3	Asylum Knowledge Centre
C4	Institutional and Horizontal Affairs Centre
C5	Administration Centre
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EU	European Union
OP	Operating/operational plan ¹
TP	Temporary protection

¹ The term 'operating plan' applied under the EASO Regulation, whereas 'operational plan' applies under the EUAA Regulation.



Executive summary

The main objective of this first meta-evaluation was to contribute to internal learning and knowledge management. It intended to aggregate follow-up actions and findings from the three horizontal reports relating to the operating plans 2019, 2020 and 2021 and six internal evaluations of operational plans (OPs) which were conducted between May 2022 and August 2023. This meta-evaluation applied the European Commission's Better Regulation evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and added value) and paid special attention to the following priority questions:

- What horizontal report recommendations remain unresolved? Why?
- Which OP evaluation findings need to be followed-up beyond the scope of individual OPs?

Since December 2020, horizontal OP evaluations have given rise to recommendations that led to 48 follow-up actions, 28 of which were completed and contributed to Agency improvements. This meta-evaluation identified clusters of follow-up actions which require special attention.

In relation to **effectiveness**, most of the six internally evaluated OPs were overly ambitious, in particular considering their short duration and novel nature. Thus, there is room for better OP design and planning. The Agency committed to designing and applying operational quality indicators, but these have not yet been completed. In addition, there is need for a standardised results framework including common operational monitoring indicators. The Agency should further invest in better mechanisms to assess and enhance its **efficiency**. In the context of the OP evaluations, outstanding actions mainly relate to the management of operational human resources and improvements to the expert deployment mechanism.

In relation to **internal coherence**, the Agency has made sound progress in developing collaborative internal processes. There still remain challenges when different actors are involved. Therefore, for example, it needs to review and clarify its intention to optimise synergies between the Administration Centre and the Operational Support Centre. The development of guidelines that drive the Agency's activities to achieve intended results can also be further pursued. To ensure **external coherence**, the Agency should speed up the rollout of an escalation mechanism² so that incidents in operational settings are assessed and shared in a structured way with senior management and beyond. Further harmonisation of the implementation of quality management in operations with those of national authorities remains an outstanding action.

Overall, the European Union **added value** of the OPs was relatively positive and most horizontal actions were considered completed in this field. The Agency's support was in particular **relevant** in a context where external factors generated disproportionate pressure on Member States' asylum and reception systems. There are two outstanding actions regarding the embedding of training in the design of the OP right from the start to ensure that it is tailored to identified needs.

This meta-evaluation adds the following recommendations to the outstanding horizontal follow-up actions:

² As foreseen in the Agency's (draft) fundamental rights strategy.



Addressed to the Quality Management and Evaluation Sector:

1. Analyse the possibility of rationalising the number of recommendations and follow-up actions to a limited set of priority ('flagship') actions that could bring about higher change benefit to the Agency.

Addressed to the Agency:

2. Strategically consider the articulation and complementarity between emergency, long-term, and permanent support taking into account parameters such as efficiency, adequate size of the OP, time factors, and nature of support; in practice this means:
 - Defining what should be covered by permanent support and through a long-term OP;
 - Defining when and how emergency support is more adequate than permanent support;
 - Simplifying modalities for delivery of short-term emergency OP support.
3. Embed more explicitly multi-annual planning in OPs to ensure complementarity with AMIF support taking into account strengths and weaknesses. This can lead to synergies, cost-efficiency gains and avoidance of double funding.
4. Ensure the Agency's preparedness before committing to results under a new OP and include the option of measurable 'start-up' results that are proportionate to the required effort.
5. Optimise the financing of OPs through improved budget forecasting and planning, as well as introducing activity-based budgeting and costing.
6. Conceptualise strategically Agency-provided interpretation services that are now more strongly articulated in the EUAA's mandate.
7. Revisit and optimise the current model for selection and mobilisation of asylum support team experts to achieve higher efficiency and deployment success rates. This should take into account occupational health and safety needs.
8. Enhance data collection and reporting of training outputs in line with the available Agency guidance.



1. Introduction: purpose and scope

Since 2014, the Agency has conducted regular evaluations of its operational and technical assistance to Member States to determine and consequently enhance the overall relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and added value of the support it provides. This reflective approach has increasingly contributed to institutional learning, evidence-based change management, accountability and transparency.

As of 2020, the recommendations³ stemming from these evaluations were addressed in management responses and improvement action plans. In addition, evaluations of 12 operating/operational plans (OPs) were complemented by horizontal evaluation exercises in 2020, 2021 and 2022 that focused on cross-Agency analytical insights.

In the period May 2022 to August 2023, six internal evaluations were conducted that covered the Agency's OPs with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania. These evaluations identified lessons learnt and horizontal considerations that went beyond their scope but were earmarked for follow-up (in a subsequent meta-evaluation).

As of June 2022, the Agency's centralised evaluation function reported on the progress of action plans on a bi-yearly basis in line with the Agency's Founding Regulation⁴, Financial Regulation⁵, and subsequently the evaluation framework⁶.

The main objective of this first meta-evaluation was to contribute to internal learning and knowledge management. It intended to aggregate conclusions and recommendations from the three horizontal reports and six internal evaluations and their follow-up action plans⁷, as well as those elements of common interest to different Agency actors that went beyond the scope of the individual evaluations. This approach was expected to:

- Build on the experience of previous OP horizontal evaluation exercises;
- Take the evaluation culture within the Agency to a new level by exploring and testing new analytical methods;
- Focus on cross-cutting evaluation findings to guide change management, including future planning and implementation;
- Maximise existing findings by identifying commonalities, differences and trends;
- Identify good practices and areas for improvement based on how evaluations have been conducted to date.

³ Throughout the report, 'recommendations' refer to full recommendations and sub-recommendations.

⁴ Pursuant to Article 47(5)(f) of Regulation (EU) 2021/2303 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2021 on the European Union Agency for Asylum and repealing Regulation (EU) No 439/2010, (OJ L 468, 30.12.2021, p. 1).

⁵ Pursuant to Article 29(4) of Management Board Decision No 54 of 14 August 2019 on the EASO Financial Regulation, as amended by Management Board Decision No 74 of 28 July 2021.

⁶ Decision of the Executive Director No 57 of 26 May 2023 on the evaluation framework and the establishment of an Evaluation Advisory Group.

⁷ Recommendations are addressed through management responses, which propose improvement actions (or action plans) to address the recommendations made. The status of these actions is then followed up to track their implementation.



This meta-evaluation applied the European Commission's Better Regulation evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and added value) and paid special attention to the following priority questions:

- What horizontal report recommendations remain unresolved? Why?
- Which OP evaluation findings need to be followed up beyond the scope of individual OPs?

The scope of the meta-evaluation was limited to the performance of the Agency in delivering OPs, with a focus on the abovementioned evaluations. It was managed and carried out internally by the evaluation team of the Quality Management and Evaluation Sector in the Business Support and Security Unit of the Institutional and Horizontal Affairs Centre (C4). The process included a Quality Review Task Force made up of representatives of the Agency's centres.

2. Intended results of the action

2.1. Description of the action and its intended results

Recital 25 of the Founding Regulation of the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) states:

'To facilitate and improve the proper functioning of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and to assist Member States in implementing their obligations within the framework of the CEAS, the Agency should provide Member States with operational and technical assistance, in particular where their asylum and reception systems are subject to disproportionate pressure. Such assistance should be provided on the basis of an operational plan and through the deployment of asylum support teams.'

The Operational Support Centre (C1) coordinates the support activities in close collaboration with other Agency's centres. This involves the planning, budgeting, procurement and provision of human and material resources, channelled through dedicated coordinating officers appointed by the Executive Director.

Article 16(4) of the EUAA Regulation refers to evaluations of OPs. As presented in the intervention logic (see Annex 3), evaluations enhance (at impact level) the Agency's operational and technical assistance in terms of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and added value. Their main result outcomes are institutional learning, evidence-based change management, accountability and public transparency.

Evaluations produce recommendations as main result outputs which are followed up by improvement actions. Evaluations are useful if they are driven and supported by proportionate and committed human resources.



This report also considered the recommendations and follow-up of three **horizontal evaluation reports**⁸ relating to OP implementation:

- The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) external evaluation OP 2019 – Cross-country report and evaluation strategic recommendations, BearingPoint, 2020. This report complements the evaluations of the OPs 2019 for Greece, Italy, and Cyprus;
- External Evaluation of EASO Operational Interventions in 2020, Horizontal Evaluation, Ramboll Management Consulting, 2021. This report complements the evaluations of the OPs 2020 for Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Malta;
- External Evaluation of EASO’s Operational Support in 2021, Evaluation Report, Ramboll Management Consulting, 2022. This report complements the evaluations of the OPs 2021 for Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, and Spain.

This meta-evaluation did not review individually the 12 OP evaluations that related to the above three horizontal evaluations. However, it took into account the status of the follow-up of their action plans.

This meta-evaluation analysed horizontal lessons learnt stemming from **six internal evaluations** of OPs which took place between May 2022 and August 2023⁹:

- The 2021-2022 and 2022 OPs for Latvia;
- The 2021-2022 and 2022-23 OPs for Lithuania;
- The 2022 OP for Romania;
- The 2022-23 OP for Bulgaria.

2.2. Points of comparison

This section refers to the period preceding 2019. As of 2014, the Agency initiated internal and external evaluations of OPs. This mainly concerned the interventions of Greece and Italy, which were the largest operational settings. In 2019, the Agency also evaluated the special support plans of Cyprus and Bulgaria.

In 2019, the Agency’s management identified the need for horizontal evaluation reports. These were intended to capture cross-cutting findings and facilitate evaluation-based knowledge management, building on previous evaluations. Recommendations which were considered to be beyond the scope of the individual OPs (e.g., when these needed Agency-wide action) were aggregated in the respective horizontal evaluation reports.

⁸ Referred to as ‘horizontal evaluation reports’ in this report.

⁹ Referred to as ‘six internal OP evaluations’ in this report.



3. Implementation of the action: current state of play

The need for OP evaluations was formalised in December 2021 with the adoption of the EUAA Regulation, which stated that an evaluation of each OP needs to be undertaken after its completion. As of December 2020, the Agency started to report on the status of implementation of all planned actions stemming from its evaluations. Six-monthly status reporting started as of January 2022. In the period 2022-2023, the Agency piloted new evaluation practices such as structured quality checks, the use of standardised templates and the publication of evaluation reports. In May 2023, an Executive Director Decision formalised the EUAA’s evaluation framework. This contributed to a more harmonised approach for the governance, design, implementation and dissemination of evaluations.

This chapter gives an overview of the status of the follow-up actions of the horizontal OP evaluations and summarises the main findings of the six internal OP evaluations which were undertaken in the period 2022-23.

Status of follow-up of recommendations of horizontal evaluation reports

The 29 recommendations from the three horizontal reports are included in Annex 4. They mainly cover aspects relating to project management (18), human resource (6), and training (2) matters. The Agency’s senior management accepted most of the recommendations as laid out in the table below.

	OPs 2019	OPs 2020	OPs 2021
Fully accepted	4	6	8
Partially accepted	2	2	6
Not accepted	0	1	0

Table 1. Overview of acceptance of recommendations from the horizontal evaluation reports

Fourteen actions were under implementation at the time of the drafting of this report. Of those, five actions concerned staffing and resourcing, four dealt with strategic programming, planning, start-up, or exit strategy, three related to monitoring and/or evaluation actions, and two dealt with training improvements. All 14 actions concerned actors within C1. In addition, ten of these (71 %) also concerned the Training and Professional Development Centre (C2), ten concerned the Asylum Knowledge Centre (C3), six (43 %) C4, and five (36 %) the Administration Centre (C5). A third (or five) of these actions involved all the centres of the Agency.

As per the June 2023 six-monthly status report, all follow-up actions of the OP 2019 **horizontal evaluation** were concluded with the exception of the harmonisation of quality management (recommendation 4) which was still under implementation.

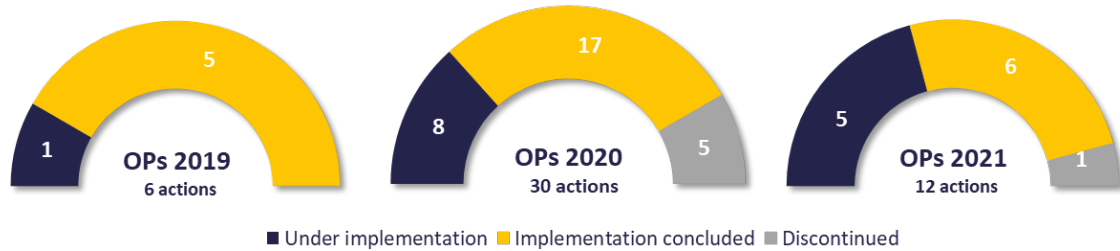


Figure 1. Status of follow-up actions from the respective horizontal evaluation reports (June 2023)

The OP 2020 horizontal evaluation report generated 30 cross-Agency follow-up actions, 17 of which were concluded by June 2023, eight were still under implementation and five were discontinued. Similarly, the recommendations of the OP 2021 horizontal evaluation were addressed by 12 improvement actions, half of which were concluded, five were under implementation and one was discontinued. In total, the recommendations of the three horizontal evaluations were addressed by 48 improvement actions. Four of these actions were commitments under the lead of C1, whilst the remaining involved more than one actor. Three of the 48 actions (efficiency-related) were led by C4 or C5¹⁰. Almost one fourth (11) of these actions were directed to all five centres of the Agency.

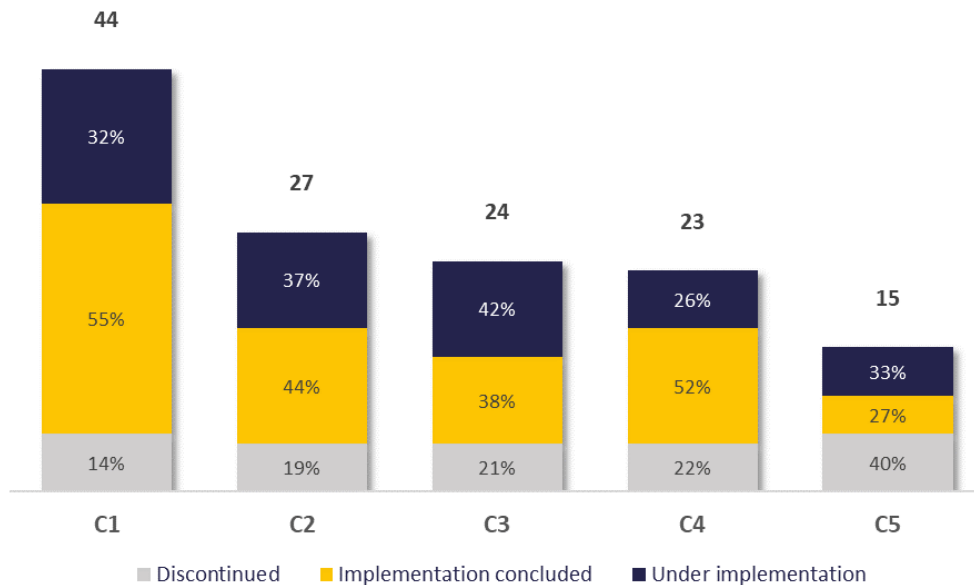


Figure 2. Actors concerned by follow-up actions from the three horizontal evaluation reports (state of play – June 2023)

¹⁰ The Administration Centre (C4) composed of the administrative units existed in the period up to 18 January 2022. During the period 19 January 2022 to 19 February 2023, the administrative units were integrated with the former Executive Office as the Corporate Management Centre (C4). The Administration Centre (C5) composed of the administrative units was reinstated as of 20 February 2023. For the purposes of this report, all references to ownership and responsibility for improvement actions by the administrative units are attributed to C5, as the entity in place at the time of writing.



Six internal evaluations of OPs

In the period May 2022 to August 2023, the Agency undertook six internal evaluations of OPs covering Bulgaria, Latvia (x 2), Lithuania (x 2), and Romania. These OPs had in common their small volume, substantial training and interpretation components, and relatively new collaborations with the respective countries. They covered operational measures relating to asylum, reception and temporary protection (TP) support. The findings of these reports were relatively positive, with the average scores for the respective evaluation criteria shown in Table 2.

Average by measure / criterion	Temporary protection	Asylum support	Reception support
Relevance	3	3.2	3
Efficiency	3.5	2.4	2.8
Effectiveness	2.75	2.9	3.2
Coherence	3.5	3.2	3.3
EU added value	3.5	2.6	3

Table 2. OP evaluation criteria – average score by measure¹¹

The OP evaluations summarised good practices and provided country-specific recommendations which were followed up by the country teams with management response action plans. Some of the recommendations could also be generalised for other OP settings:

- Ensure minimum conditions before committing to new OPs and document these minimum elements in a practical tool (Lithuania and Latvia OPs 2021-2022 and Lithuania OP 2022-2023 evaluations);
- Flexible training solutions and learning paths to be delivered in close collaboration with the national authorities (Lithuania OP 2021-2022 evaluation);
- Develop a deployment scheme by groups of experts to allow a more efficient approach to training and onboarding (Romania OP 2022 evaluation).

¹¹ Scores were quantified and averaged from four categories: unsatisfactory (=1), fair (=2), good (=3) and very good (=4). The averages on TP for relevance and effectiveness are derived from two OPs (Bulgaria and Romania) and for the remaining criteria from Romania only. Averages on asylum and reception support are based on five and six OPs respectively. Two measures from Lithuania and Romania are not included in the table due to their specific nature.



	Lithuania OP 2021- 2022	Latvia OP 2021- 2022	Latvia OP 2022	Romania OP 2022	Lithuania OP 2022- 2023	Bulgaria OP 2022- 2023
Fully accepted	14	5	1	1	4	1
Partially accepted	4	7	1	2	0	2
Not accepted	1	1	0	1	0	1
Total	19	13	2	4	4	4

Table 3. Overview of acceptance of recommendations from the six internal OP evaluation reports

Table 3 gives an overview of the status of the six internal evaluations. Two of these were included in the follow-up of June 2023, namely the evaluations of the Lithuania and the Latvia OPs 2021-2022. Almost all recommendations of the two evaluation reports were fully or partially accepted. Moreover, they were targeted by 36 improvement actions. Three-fourths of these actions (27) were completed by June 2023, one was discontinued, and eight remain under implementation.

Horizontal considerations from the six internal OP evaluations

The OP evaluation reports also included a total of 33 considerations which were beyond the scope of the country-specific OPs. These were not included in the OP-specific recommendations as they could best be addressed in an Agency-wide follow-up. These horizontal considerations included planning and data collection matters, efficiency challenges, opportunities for enhanced support in specific fields at Agency level and matters of internal and external coherence.

4. Evaluation findings

The six evaluations covering the period 2022-2023 provided a number of findings and recommendations. This chapter presents common trends and differences between the different evaluation findings. It also explores which horizontal report recommendations remain unresolved and why. It seeks to assess which OP evaluation findings need follow-up beyond the scope of individual OPs.

4.1. To what extent was the action successful and why?

Effectiveness

Seventeen OP 2019-2021 horizontal follow-up actions dealt with effectiveness-related matters. By June 2023, 14 of these were concluded. These included improvements relating to collaborative planning, monitoring, reporting and evaluation practices. Two of the outstanding actions relate to the development of **core monitoring indicators** on quality and common result areas. The third refers to the need for a **standardised results framework** for new OPs prepared by a cross-Agency task force building on internal experience and existing good practices.



These outstanding improvement actions were still valid for the six OPs (2021-2023) that had a similar design articulated around operational measures relating to asylum, reception, or TP support. While the results frameworks of the OPs referred to a wide range of possible intervention activities, their output results indicators related to counting numbers of activities such as workshops, training sessions or exchange visits. Other results frameworks refer to inputs such as interpreters or deployment of experts with little evidence on deliverables that made it difficult to assess effectiveness. Some results frameworks described as an output the delivery of workflows, procedures or related tools. In reception, a recurring outcome level indicator was the geographical presence of the Agency's operations, i.e., number of locations supported. Most of the OPs evaluated internally included a start-up phase. However, this was not reflected in the design of the OPs and therefore the various efforts could not be identified under a specific activity, measurable output or even outcome (e.g., as a start-up measure).

Table 2 shows that, despite often being overambitious, the effectiveness of EUAA's operations was overall good with support in the field of reception being the most effective. This can be explained by the nature of support in this field, which is often composed of interpretation and training, elements which are easier to mobilise in a short term. In particular, the swift and flexible organisation of training sessions was a common denominator in most of the recent evaluations boosting overall effectiveness. While this is a good practice, there is still scope to improve the number of participants and completion rates. The support on TP was mixed. In Romania, TP support was the priority outcome while in Bulgaria activities under this measure were progressively reduced.

From a horizontal perspective, the six internal OP evaluations suggested the need for better **OP design and planning**. Examples are:

- Alternative approaches to target setting to ensure that expectations are clearer with regard to the results of an OP;
- Defining a minimum duration for OP inception with associated tangible result or progress indicators in the context of a new intervention in a Member State ('start-up') or the introduction of a new measure in existing operations;
- Utilising the inception period to define baselines and articulate specific results and targets to ensure feasibility in preparation for evaluations.

In addition, the Bulgaria OP 2022-2023 evaluation included a general recommendation to establish better coherence between the OP and its results framework and ensure that it is accompanied by proportionate monitoring practices at the required frequency.

The six OP evaluations also referred to the opportunity to optimise **data collection of the results of training activities**, with the aim to better demonstrate their effectiveness. This is similar to a horizontal recommendation of the OPs 2019 that refers to enhancing the sustainability and impact of capacity building. As a response, the Agency deployed training focal points, put in place training plans, and reinforced competency-based training, integrated reporting and on-the-job training and coaching. While previous country-specific actions (e.g., from the Italy OP 2020 and Greece OP 2021 evaluations) have also contributed to better training planning, monitoring and reporting, there still remains scope for improvement in line with the internal approach developed on the matter.



Efficiency

The efficiency criterion compares the result outputs with its inputs or resources provided and looks into any underlying factors.

The horizontal evaluation reports yielded 12 efficiency-related follow-up actions. One of the follow-up actions of the OPs 2019 horizontal report related to the need to align the OP budgets with their respective results-based planning. While the action was considered as completed, the Agency still has not embarked fully on **activity-based budgeting and costing**. Article 42(3) of the EUAA Regulation for example states the need for the Agency’s annual work programme to contain a description of the actions to be financed and an indication of the financial and human resources allocated to each activity, in accordance with the principles of activity-based budgeting. Compliance with this requirement would facilitate better understanding of the efficiency of the Agency’s actions and support future evaluations.

By June 2023 five actions, mainly relating to contingency planning and remote asylum processing, were discontinued.

The **deployment of experts** in operational settings was the subject of a recommendation in all three horizontal OP reports. Two of the recommendations that were implemented dealt with alternative deployment mechanisms and the deployment roster. There remains one outstanding action relating to pre-defining the internal contingency capacity, profiles and roles, and agreements for deployment of asylum support teams. Under the six OPs, many of the planned technical assistance measures met delays because of efficiency challenges linked to the Agency’s expert deployment mechanism. The table below provides an overview of the indicative, planned, and actual deployments in Romania, Bulgaria, and Lithuania.

	Planned deployments as per OP	Actual deployments
Romania OP 2022	Up to 67	14-29 (21 %-43 %)
Bulgaria OP 2022-2023	Up to 8	0-1 (0 %-13 %)
Lithuania OP 2022-2023	Up to 24	2-5 (8 %-21 %)

Table 4. Indicative deployment rates in OPs versus actual deployments

The EUAA’s Central Risk Register for 2023 includes the deployment of experts as one of the Agency’s main critical risks, as its implementation and management may not provide the number and quality required to meet operational needs. At the time of the undertaking of this meta-evaluation, a dedicated operational deployment project team was coordinating responses to the different challenges. However, it seems that there is a need to take an additional step back and holistically reconsider the current intervention model and explore how asylum support teams, as laid down in the EUAA Regulation, can be more optimally deployed. This assessment should take into account elements such as legal constraints, efficiency, timeliness, reliability and flexibility.



The remaining outstanding horizontal report actions mainly deal with the management of **operational human resources**, such as:

- Clarifying tasks and levels of responsibility of country coordinating officers, measure coordinators, and field coordinators;
- Managing an internal roster linked with a competency framework¹²;
- Analysing whether the Agency could use remote processing of asylum applications as an alternative business model.

The six internal OP evaluations proposed a number of horizontal efficiency-related considerations on human resources, such as:

- Improving working conditions of staff deployed on long-term mission;
- Further facilitating internal staff mobility to new operations;
- Providing clear information and training on available guidelines related to the setting up of a new operation.

As presented in Table 2, for the six internal OP evaluations, efficiency was the criterion which had, with the exception of TP, a relatively lower score than the other evaluation criteria. While efficiency is difficult to measure in general, in the context of the six internal OP evaluations this could be explained by the fact that the OPs under review were all relatively new and small in size, therefore having various start-up costs and no economies of scale. Some services (e.g., online and face-to-face training, interpretation) were often delivered in an efficient way, while others (e.g., mobilisation of experts, speedy translation, office space rental) were more challenging. The OPs established preconditions relating to the need for regular communication, office space, data sharing, access to permits, and databases. In practice, these preconditions were more complex and needed additional follow-up, coordination and planning.

In addition, the six internal OP evaluation reports referred to the opportunity to strengthen the Agency's internal **efficiency of OP implementation**, in particular when committing to new OPs. This could be achieved by:

- Conducting a better assessment of internal capacity before committing to activities, ensuring prior consultation and coordination between centres, units and sectors;
- Defining minimum parameters for the handover between C1 Agency units for optimal relationship building, ownership, and continuity.

The Latvia OP 2022 evaluation also recommended adapted processes for the translation of training material to take into account constraints linked with the shorter duration of OPs.

¹² This would allow deployment of Agency staff to asylum support teams in operational settings.



Coherence

The 2019, 2020, and 2021 horizontal evaluation reports covered respectively three, four, and five OPs. The six internal OP evaluations took place during a period when the Agency increased its operational and technical support from five to 14 OPs¹³. To this effect, the Agency set up the First Operational Response Unit to coordinate the response and preparedness plans for the establishment and operationalisation of first operational response capacity. These changes influenced the Agency's internal and external coherence.

Internal coherence

Internal coherence relates to the way the different Agency actors collaborate to deliver the results of an OP. There are two horizontal improvement actions stemming from the 2019-2021 OP evaluations which are still under implementation:

- Development of a **policy** to optimise synergies **between C1 and C5** for improved procurement, recruitment and administrative processes related to operational support;
- A common mechanism for the involvement of the Agency's centres in the implementation of operational support that extends to other thematic areas the joint development of **strategies and/or guidelines** as a means **for cross-Agency planning** and efficient complementary resource mobilisation.

While these two actions are still valid, there is a need to review if these are still critical, in view of competing priorities in light of the new mandate of the Agency, the new strategy of the Executive Director and the Agency's prioritisation initiative. The policy for example could be replaced by an agreed way of working between the respective centres articulating a joint action.

Overall, the six internal OP evaluations reported an important level of internal coherence, with examples of increased collaboration between the different centres. The reorganisation of the Agency in early 2022 brought additional coordination challenges. These derived from the need to ensure the transition of responsibilities and harmonised work approaches in a complex and changing staffing environment.

External coherence

Complementarity, alignment and collaborations with the OP counterparts and other governmental, international, and non-governmental actors in-country are reflected under the external coherence criterion.

One of the remaining follow-up actions from the horizontal evaluation reports states the intention to **harmonise the implementation of quality management** in operations with those of national authorities and explore how productivity and efficiency considerations can be better embedded as quality requirements. This matter was not strongly addressed in the six internal evaluation reports, in

¹³ The Agency had OPs with Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain. A small deployment to Moldova was carried out in response to displacement from Ukraine.



view of the limited depth of the operational support. A good practice however was identified in Lithuania, where both the Agency and the authorities agreed on a way forward for a harmonised approach towards vulnerability assessments.

In this context, a horizontal follow-up action of the OPs 2021 related to the need to speed up the rollout of an **escalation mechanism** at Agency level. This would also allow the Agency to implement a clear workflow to deal with cases of non-compliance with preconditions in OPs. The absence of such a mechanism was again documented in two of the six internal OP evaluations. This occurred for example when local deployment working conditions were not adequate or because of controversial national practices towards the implementation of the CEAS.

In some countries, the Agency undertook innovative collaborations with non-governmental actors in agreement with the host Member State. This was the case in Romania, where the Agency played a pivotal role in training and information provision on the TP Directive. Another good practice identified in Bulgaria, was the joint planning between the EUAA and the administration of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) which, at times, can provide similar support. As most countries under OP support access this funding, there is scope to enhance the **complementarity between the Agency's operational and technical assistance and support through AMIF** thus reducing the risk of overlap in funding and scope of the support provided. This is in particular relevant when:

- Certain elements can be more cost-efficient under AMIF (e.g., staffing longer-term support);
- The Agency's support can have a multiplier effect (e.g., in training and support to workflows).

4.2. How did the Agency make a difference through the action?

The European Union (EU) added value criterion looks for changes that are brought about by the Agency's OPs, over and above what could be reasonably expected from national actions by Member States. The 2021 horizontal OP report concluded that the added value of the Agency's operational measures was very positive and referred to it as 'undisputable'. The reports did not generate any specific recommendations towards this criterion.

Under the six internal evaluations, this criterion was very positively assessed in the fields of TP (in particular in Romania) and reception. It scored slightly lower in asylum support. This disparity can be explained by the nature of the services. In TP and reception, added value was achieved through capacity building and information provision. Value adding in asylum was more complex in view of the need to develop collaborative workflows articulating the Agency's support with national practices and data systems. In addition, multiple planned asylum technical assistance actions were hampered because of expert deployment inefficiencies (e.g., in Bulgaria). The added value of interpretation support is mixed, in particular when the nature of the deliverables is not clearly defined (nor reported upon) and national interpretation contract frameworks are available (e.g., in Latvia and Lithuania). In the OPs under consideration, the Agency was instrumental in preparing (often newly recruited) national staff and facilitating innovative national practices through capacity building. Examples were the promotion of the vulnerability assessment tool (in Lithuania), the rollout of practical guidance on TP (in Romania), and training on reception (in Latvia).



A horizontal consideration stemming from the six internal OP evaluations, relates to the need for a more strategic approach to multi-country OP planning. With over half of the EU Member States receiving operational and technical support, the Agency accumulated reputational risks associated with, amongst others, capacity limitations. Therefore, there is need to strategically consider the **articulation and complementarity between emergency, long-term, and permanent support** to increase the added value and achieve fitness for purpose.

The horizontal OP 2019 evaluation report recommended that the Agency's added value in each area of expertise in each OP intervention logic be defined more clearly. While this recommendation is considered as concluded, at a larger scale, the six internal OP evaluations identified interpretation as a field where the Agency should consider strategically how to achieve optimal added value. The Agency has spent 21.9 and 28.1 million EUR in 2021 and 2022 respectively on operational interpretation support. The deliverables of the interpreters are however not always well defined or reported upon. Article 19(4) of the EUAA Regulation states that interpreters should have at least basic training or proven experience. Although Article 16(2)(i) of the same Regulation foresees the Agency providing interpretation services in the context of OPs, in order to achieve optimal added value, the Agency should explore if **interpretation** constitutes an area of expertise it wishes to strategically invest more in in the long run. This would involve additional adapted capacity building, planning and reporting outputs embedded in the Agency's operational practices. A qualitative textual analysis finds that interpretation is one of the most recurring themes used in the recommendations of the six internal OP evaluations.

4.3. Is the action relevant?

Relevance looks at the relationship between needs and problems at the time of introducing and during the implementation of the OPs. The management responses to horizontal recommendations stemming from the evaluations of the OPs 2019-2021 related to the relevance criterion by focusing on the needs assessment process. The Agency completed an action relating to the updating of the needs assessment user guide with additional mechanisms for active collaboration across all centres. Another completed action adapted the user guide to ensure that realistic timeframes are considered for the delivery of support measures. One outstanding action is the intention to undertake **joint needs analysis and planning**. This would include a training needs analysis in the comprehensive needs assessment methodology used in the design phase of operations. This practice has greatly improved over the years, as a result of a strong collaboration between the relevant Agency's centres but could still benefit from structured guidance.

In the field of training, other completed horizontal actions related to adjustments to the training offerings to better meet the partners' needs. There remains an action relating to **coaching methods** and the intention to encourage organisations and individuals to move from skills to autonomy and support therefore the sustainability of the Agency's intervention. This action may need to be reviewed or updated to make it more actionable or relevant.

The internal OP evaluations perceived the relevance criterion as 'good' to 'very good'. The Agency's support was particularly relevant in contexts where external factors generated disproportionate pressure on the countries' asylum and reception systems. Latvia and Lithuania, for example, were confronted with sudden arrivals through their borders with Belarus. Romania and Bulgaria needed to



respond to increased asylum applications while being major transit and receiving countries for persons fleeing Ukraine. From a wider EU policy perspective, the management of their borders also became an EU priority in view of their possible accession to the Schengen area.

The four Member States had similar needs in terms of interpretation support and capacity building. Romania requested support relating to the registration and information provision of TP seekers. In the other countries, this mainly related to the asylum and reception sectors. Some OPs included measures which ultimately were not needed. In Romania, for example, the OP foresaw the possibility of a voluntary transfer mechanism which did not materialise. The Bulgaria OP was amended to continue foreseeing support on TP, which was ultimately abandoned. Lithuania needed support for an institutional reception reform, but because of legal delays, the implementation of this measure was untimely. In Latvia, support for contingency planning was deprioritised.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

Since December 2020, horizontal OP evaluations have generated recommendations leading to 28 completed improvement actions. By deduction, one can expect that these evaluations have contributed to change management and institutional learning within the Agency. Nevertheless, this deduction is not always a full closed circle. Some actions have contributed partially to the improvement of a certain condition but were not sufficient to change a situation. In June 2023, there were 14 horizontal follow-up actions which were pending or under implementation. Some of these needed clarification (e.g., joint C1-C5 action) while others were at the heart of the need for a rebalanced strategic approach towards the optimal implementation of the Agency's updated mandate. The publication of the evaluation reports on the Agency's website since 2022 also contributed to the Agency's overall transparency and accountability.

This meta-evaluation has analysed the nature and relevance of the outstanding horizontal improvement actions in follow-up to previous evaluations covering OPs taking place between 2019 and 2021. It related these with findings from six recent internal OP evaluations undertaken during the period May 2022 to September 2023. It observed that support in the field of reception was generally more effective and coherent in new country settings compared to TP and asylum. Support in TP was mixed, depending on the uptake of the host Member State. Asylum support was considered as very relevant but more difficult to implement. Short new OPs were by design inefficient in view of multiple challenges to kick-start the required processes and mobilise resources. Many of the significant start-up efforts could not be taken into account in the evaluations in the absence of a tangible plan in the OP. Overall, the Agency made substantial progress in developing internal collaborative workflows and its support was complementary to that provided nationally and by other actors in-country. The support often took place in country-specific geopolitical contexts where the Agency sought optimal alignment with EU and CEAS-related policies.

Applying the Agency's evaluation framework criteria, this meta-evaluation identified clusters of follow-up actions which require special attention.



In relation to **effectiveness**, most of the six evaluated OPs were overly ambitious, in particular considering their short duration and novel nature. There is a need for better OP design and planning. The Agency committed to designing and applying operational quality indicators, but these have not yet been completed. In addition, there is need for a standardised results framework including common operational monitoring indicators. New OPs could include measurable start-up results. Similarly, data collection and reporting on the results of operational training activities can be further optimised.

The Agency should further invest in better mechanisms to assess and enhance its **efficiency**. In the context of the OP evaluations, outstanding actions mainly relate to the management of operational human resources, the need to improve the Agency's preparedness for the start-up of new country operations and improvements to the expert deployment mechanism.

In relation to **internal coherence**, the Agency has made sound progress in developing collaborative internal processes. There still remain challenges when different actors are involved. Therefore, for example, it needs to review and clarify its intention to develop a policy on optimising synergies between C5 and C1. The development of a thematic strategy and/or guidelines that drive the Agency's activities to achieve intended results can also be further pursued.

To ensure **external coherence**, the Agency should speed up the rollout of an escalation mechanism so that incidents in operational settings are assessed and shared in a structured way with senior management and beyond. It also needs to enhance the complementarity between the Agency's operational and technical assistance and support from AMIF. Further harmonisation of the implementation of quality management in operations with those of national authorities remains an outstanding action.

Overall, the **EU added value** of the OPs was relatively positive. The six OP evaluations identified interpretation as a field where the Agency could achieve optimal added value. From a wider perspective, the Agency needs to strategically consider the articulation and complementarity between emergency, long-term and permanent support.

The Agency's support was in particular **relevant** in a context where external factors generated disproportionate pressure on Member States' asylum and reception systems. There are two outstanding actions regarding the embedding of training in the design of the OP right from the start to ensure that it is tailored to identified needs.

5.2. Good practices and lessons learnt

This meta-evaluation takes note of a number of good practices from the three horizontal reports. 28 of the 48 follow-up actions were completed and contributed to improvements. The six internal OP evaluations flagged some good practices such as:

- The swift and flexible mobilisation of training programmes was a common denominator in most of the six evaluations boosting the effectiveness of new OPs;
- Support to Bulgaria coincided with EU-wide priority setting towards enhanced migration and border management in the Member State in view of its potential Schengen accession, adding to the relevance and perspectives for continued support;



- In Lithuania, sustainability and co-ownership were strengthened through joint training deliveries and the sharing of tools and practices that could be taken over by national authorities;
- In Romania, the operation benefitted from a swift mobilisation and installation of the country coordination leading to a rapid implementation;
- In Latvia, the physical presence of Agency staff allowed for smooth coordination, flexibility and a stronger relationship with the local authorities.

The requirement for *ex post* evaluation of OPs was formalised in December 2021 with the adoption of the EUAA Founding Regulation, which states that at the end of each OP the Executive Director has to evaluate the operational and technical measures in that OP. While this provides a legal basis for the conduct of evaluations, it reinforces the need to continue promoting an organisational evaluation culture, where evaluations are timely and serve decision making and change management purposes. A too frequent recurrence, such as through short duration OPs, could generate evaluation fatigue and could undermine ownership and follow-up of improvement actions. In this context, there is a need to ensure continued commitment from the Agency's management.

The evaluation exercises evolved over the period and embedded good practices such as:

- The standardisation of management responses and a rigorous six-monthly follow-up and reporting system;
- The progressive reduction of recommendations and follow-up actions, making the follow-up of evaluations more focused;
- Higher added value of country-specific evaluation reports by ensuring that they document horizontal considerations to be taken into account in meta-level analyses;
- The publication of evaluation reports to enhance transparency and accountability;
- The more explicit distinction between country-specific recommendations and horizontal considerations.

An important lesson learnt is the need to ensure that OP evaluation recommendations are SMART¹⁴. For example, under the 12 OP evaluations that related to the horizontal evaluations, 13 recommendations were not accepted. These were often out of scope (e.g., directed at the authorities), were not actionable, or came too late (e.g., recommended ongoing practices). Out of the recommendations that were fully and partially accepted, 15 have since been discontinued due to a change in circumstances (e.g., no longer relevant or new needs identified).

5.3. Recommendations

This meta-evaluation adds the following recommendations to the outstanding horizontal follow-up actions:

¹⁴ Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound.



Addressed to the Quality Management and Evaluation Sector:

1. Analyse the possibility of rationalising the number of recommendations and follow-up actions to a limited set of priority ('flagship') actions that could bring about higher change benefit to the Agency.

Addressed to the Agency:

2. Strategically consider the articulation and complementarity between emergency, long-term, and permanent support taking into account parameters such as efficiency, adequate size of the OP, time factors, and nature of support; in practice this means:
 - Defining what should be covered by permanent support and through a long-term OP;
 - Defining when and how emergency support is more adequate than permanent support;
 - Simplifying modalities for delivery of short-term emergency OP support.
3. Embed more explicitly multi-annual planning in OPs to ensure complementarity with AMIF support taking into account strengths and weaknesses. This can lead to synergies, cost-efficiency gains and avoidance of double funding.
4. Ensure the Agency's preparedness before committing to results under a new OP and include the option of measurable 'start-up' results that are proportionate to the required effort.
5. Optimise the financing of OPs through improved budget forecasting and planning, as well as introducing activity-based budgeting and costing.
6. Conceptualise strategically Agency-provided interpretation services that are now more strongly articulated in the EUAA's mandate.
7. Revisit and optimise the current model for selection and mobilisation of asylum support team experts to achieve higher efficiency and deployment success rates. This should take into account occupational health and safety needs.
8. Enhance data collection and reporting of training outputs in line with the available Agency guidance.



Annex 1: Methodology

The meta-evaluation applied five criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and added value) with a view to answering the following questions:

Criteria	Questions
Relevance	How do stakeholders' needs compare? To what extent are OP results in line with the Agency's objectives?
Effectiveness	Is there a common trend in outputs that are achieved more easily? Were there common (unexpected) factors that influenced the results? <i>Priority question:</i> What horizontal report recommendations remain unresolved? Why?
Efficiency	What are the enabling factors for efficient delivery of OP measures? Are these common or different between the OPs? <i>Priority question:</i> Which OP evaluation findings need follow-up beyond the scope of individual OPs?
Coherence	What are common good practices and lessons learnt for internal and external collaboration?
EU added value	Which types of Agency support are of high added value following the different evaluation reports? What are the potential areas for improvement?

The evaluation triangulated information from several sources, with, as main reference, the three horizontal evaluation reports of OPs 2019, 2020, and 2021 and their follow-up, and the six evaluation reports and supporting documentation. It did not look into detail at the outstanding actions being part of the country-specific OPs covering the period 2019-2022.

The evaluation sought to reorganise outstanding recommendations which were not fully addressed and sought ways to enhance their follow-up.

A focus group discussion on key findings took place with Evaluation Advisory Group members.

A Quality Review Task Force made up of representatives of the Agency's centres accompanied the drafting, quality review and follow-up of the meta-evaluation. The quality function of QMES also reviewed the report for editing and formatting purposes.

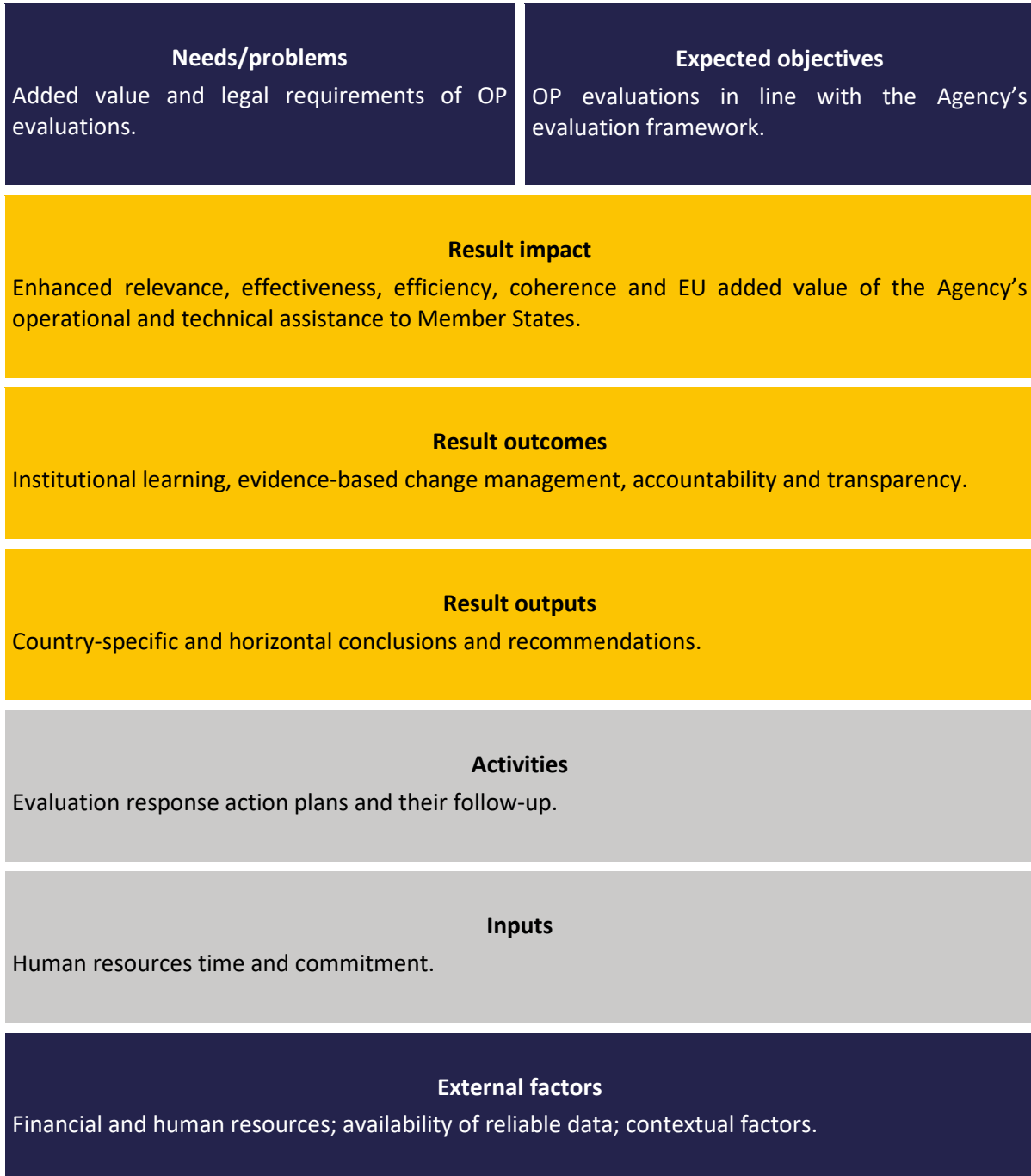


Annex 2: Evaluation matrix

Sub-questions	Indicators / descriptors	Norms / judgement criteria	Sources of evidence
Relevance			
How do stakeholders' needs compare? To what extent are OP results in line with the Agency's objectives?	Priority areas identified by NAs and OPs	Comparison findings evaluation reports with mandate Agency	Needs assessment, OP, evaluation reports, EUAA Regulation, interviews
Effectiveness			
Is there a common trend in outputs that are achieved more easily? Were there common (unexpected) factors that influenced the results? <i>Priority question:</i> What horizontal evaluation recommendations remain unresolved? Why?	Effectiveness findings in evaluation reports; CAAR reporting on progress of management response;	Comparison effectiveness along result areas	Evaluation reports, monitoring reports, interviews
Efficiency			
What are the enabling factors for efficient delivery of OP measures? Are these common or different between the OPs? <i>Priority question:</i> Which OP evaluation findings need follow-up beyond the scope of individual OPs?	Efficiency findings in evaluation reports	Efficiency considerations beyond country-scope	Evaluation reports, monitoring reports, interviews
Coherence			
What are common good practices and lessons learnt for internal and external collaboration?	Coherence findings in evaluation reports	Examples of coordination and synergies with other national actors/internal Agency actors	Evaluation reports, monitoring reports, interviews
EU added value			
Which types of support that the Agency delivers are reported to have been of high added value in the different evaluation reports? What can be the potential areas for improvement?	Number and level of added value elements related to financial, technical and material support	EU added value considerations beyond country scope	Evaluation reports, monitoring reports, interviews



Annex 3: Intervention logic





Annex 4: Overview of horizontal recommendations in the period 2019-2021

OPs 2019	OPs 2020	OPs 2021
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthen the continuity and stability of resources (including human resources) for the intervention. 2. Align and enhance the contents and structure of strategic planning documents (multi-annual roadmap, OP, etc.). 3. Advance the level of maturity of results-based planning, implementation and monitoring. 4. Harmonise the implementation of quality management in operations with those of national authorities and investigate how productivity and efficiency considerations can be better embedded as quality requirements. 5. Improve the intervention logic where it is not sufficiently clear. 6. Further enhance the sustainability and impact of capacity-building. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthen the continuity and predictability of resources in operations. 2. Avoid ambiguity by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of key EASO staff in operations from the start-up phase. 3. Consider moving to multi-annual operational programming, at least in Member States where the imminent need for support has stabilised but there is a need for capacity building. 4. Continue to prioritise and invest in training and coaching activities. 5. Explore the legal feasibility of accommodating teleworking and remote processes where relevant. 6. Consider streamlining the approach to defining certain core indicators to measure progress, when considering the same type of activity in different operational interventions. 7. Improve the usefulness and accuracy of the monitoring process by setting targets in consultation with relevant stakeholders, and, where relevant and logistically feasible, jointly monitoring their achievements. 8. Adapt the evaluation cycle to make results more useful to EASO. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Refine the scope and depth of involvement of all centres in the OP needs assessment process (two sub-recommendations). 2. Put in place an internal mechanism to mobilise staff from across the Agency to support operations under the coordination of C1 (two sub-recommendations). 3. Harmonise the level of definition and structure of the results frameworks of new OPs to facilitate monitoring and evaluation. 4. Share good practices and experiences to better align the scope of OPs with their timeline and the absorption capacity of national counterparts (two sub-recommendations). 5. Clearly define and discuss the conditions and criteria for exit in different national contexts, taking into account the need for emergency assistance and EU solidarity (four sub-recommendations). 6. Strive for efficiency gains by reconsidering the approach to the implementation (three sub-recommendations).



OPs 2019	OPs 2020	OPs 2021
	9. Consider conducting an evaluation of EASO as an Agency.	



Annex 5: Elements of interest in follow-up of 12 OP evaluation reports' recommendations (in the context of the horizontal evaluations)

During the period 2019-2022, the Agency engaged external contractors to evaluate 12 OPs. These reports generated 122 recommendations, most of which (46 % or 56) were partially agreed, while 43 % (or 53) were fully agreed and 11 % (or 13) and not agreed. These evaluations were followed up by 126 improvement actions. These included deliverables such as workplans, specific support actions, human resource deployments, dedicated capacity building, the undertaking of studies, the design of operational tools, data collection and sharing, and country-specific working and coordination arrangements.

Some of the recommendations and actions from country OP evaluations were relevant at Agency level. Examples are the migration of the IDS Platform to the new Country Operations Platform (COP; Italy OP 2019 management response, planning alignment with the single programming document (Italy OP 2020 management response) and the support to an expert roster (Malta OP 2020).

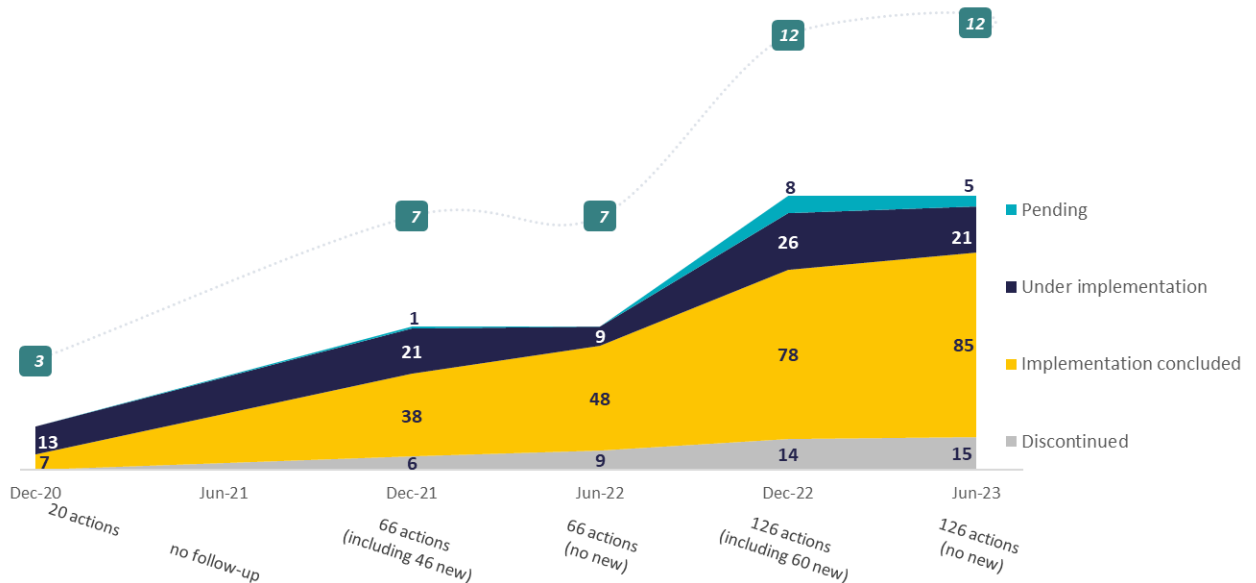


Figure 3. Cumulative status of follow-up actions from the 12 OP evaluation reports; numbers on the dotted line represent the number of evaluation reports the actions refer to

As of June 2023, the centres completed 85 of the planned 126 improvement actions (i.e., two thirds) following the evaluation of the 12 OPs. Fifteen actions were discontinued, while 21 were under implementation and 5 were pending.

The 26 actions that are outstanding (i.e., pending or under implementation) relate to capacity building (7), staffing and resourcing (2), procedures and tools (8), and strategic programming (9). In the area of *procedures and tools*, improvement actions aim to enhance standardisation, digitisation, and



operational monitoring. *Capacity building* related follow-up actions address collaboration, needs assessment, adaptability, structured communication, and specialisation of training modules. Lastly, in the field of *strategic programming*, Agency staff aim to improve collaboration, evaluation practices, adaptation, capacity building, and quality assurance while taking into account external factors.