



# Austria operational plan 2022-2024

## Ex post evaluation report

Prepared by the EUAA's Quality Management and Evaluation Sector

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## Acronyms and definitions

Term	Definition
<b>AST</b>	Asylum support team
<b>BBU</b>	<i>Bundesagentur für Betreuungs- und Unterstützungsleistungen</i> (Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services)
<b>BMI</b>	<i>Bundesministerium für Inneres</i> (Federal Ministry of the Interior)
<b>CEAS</b>	Common European Asylum System
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUAA</b>	European Union Agency for Asylum
<b>OP</b>	Operational plan
<b>THB</b>	Trafficking in human beings



## Executive summary

In 2022, Austria experienced a high influx of asylum applications, making it the fourth largest recipient in the European Union (EU). In response, Austria and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) signed an operational plan (OP) in December 2022 which ended in June 2024, following two amendments. The main objective and scope of this evaluation was to assess the Agency's support to Austria. It was conducted internally by the EUAA and assessed the OP's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, and EU added value.

The original OP focused on enhancing the capacity of the Austrian authorities with emergency reception activities such as information provision, vulnerability support and reception-related training. With the amended OP, the Agency supported the authorities to provide reception conditions in line with the Common European Asylum System. Beyond frontline reception activities, the Agency delivered structural support, such as reception management workflows and reception-related training. A decrease in arrivals throughout 2023 and a prioritisation of the Agency's resources warranted a second amendment in 2024 reducing the OP's duration by six months.

The EUAA effectively provided the support foreseen in the areas of training, information provision, vulnerability tools and workflows, and study visits. It supported between three and six reception facilities simultaneously. 10 985 individuals benefitted from information provision, 2 344 from vulnerability and social work-related activities, and 5 694 children from child protection-related activities. The Agency developed workflows and guidance notes for reception facilities and provided training to 117 individuals. Despite some initial challenges, the EUAA was able to adapt its activities to the changing national context. Efficiency was challenged by delays in the deployment of personnel and administrative hurdles, among others. The OP benefitted from the active participation of relevant Agency actors, though some duplication in efforts was identified. The shift to structural support, capacity building, and transfer of know-how allowed for increased EU added value of the operation despite the early closure of the OP.

Given the focus of the OP on capacity building and in order to foster sustainability of the support provided, this evaluation recommends to:

1. Promote the use of selected deliverables beyond the OP's duration. This could be done by engaging with the Austrian authorities to measure continuity in the usage of the tools;
2. Further expand and support the national pool of trainers by closely following up with the authorities to optimise the national roll-out of the training modules.



## 1. Introduction: purpose and scope

In 2022, Austria received 112 245 asylum applications, making it the fourth largest recipient in the European Union (EU) after Germany, France, and Spain<sup>1</sup>. This was a significant increase from recent years, with Austria receiving an annual average of 29 931 asylum applications between 2012 and 2021. In response to the unprecedented pressure on the country's reception system, Austria and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) signed an operational plan (OP) in December 2022. The OP ran for an initial ten-month period and – following two amendments – implementation was concluded on 30 June 2024.

The primary purpose of this evaluation was to assess the results of the Agency's operational support in Austria. The evaluation took place between April and July 2024 and was carried out by the Quality Management and Evaluation Sector in the Business Support and Security Unit of the Agency's Institutional and Horizontal Affairs Centre.

The evaluation exercise aimed to facilitate internal learning, knowledge management, transparency, and accountability within the Agency. It assessed the five standard evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and EU added value) in a balanced manner. The scope of the evaluation was limited to the performance of the Agency as defined in the OP.

## 2. Intended results of the action

This chapter describes the intended results under the OP and the situation before the intervention as a point of comparison.

### 2.1. Description of the action and its intended results

The **OP initially** included one operational measure on **reception**. At outcome level, the Agency planned to enhance the capacity of the Austrian authorities to respond to emergency reception needs. The OP had one result output:

#### 1.1 Support for the enhancement of capacity and quality of emergency reception response.

At activity level, the measure foresaw the EUAA's support to:

- The management and operation of reception facilities through the deployment of reception personnel;
- Communication and information provision to residents of reception facilities;
- Vulnerability identification, screening and referrals;
- Provision of reception-related training;
- Provision of interpretation services;
- Study visits to other Member States focusing on reception system management, reception workflows and procedures.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00191/default/table?lang=en>.



In early September 2023, the Austrian authorities requested an extension of the support, which led to an amended OP running until December 2024. The **amendment** also had one main result outcome: enhanced capacity of the Austrian authorities to provide reception conditions in line with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The amendment included two result outputs with respective activities:

### 1.1 Structural support to enhance reception conditions

At activity level, this output included:

- Reception management workflows and guidance, in particular with regard to vulnerability;
- Enhancing self-monitoring and reporting system on reception conditions;
- Training and learning activities with a focus on creating a national pool of trainers;
- Support to access funding mechanisms.

### 1.2 Frontline reception support

At activity level, this output included:

- The mapping of the existing framework for the management of vulnerable persons to inform 1.1;
- Support with the planning and implementation of activities related to vulnerability;
- Piloting and roll-out of the workflows and guidance produced under 1.1;
- Interpretation/cultural mediation services for frontline reception activities.

In February 2024, a **second amendment** of the OP was signed which foresaw its early termination in June 2024. This came in response to reduced needs in reception, as well as resource constraints on the side of the EUAA and the need to reprioritise support. The second amendment did not foresee any major change in the expected results<sup>2</sup>.

The intervention logic of the OP is presented in Annex 3 to this report.

## 2.2. Points of comparison

Since mid-2021, Austria experienced an increase in asylum applications<sup>3</sup>, culminating in almost 15 000 applications in August 2022. In parallel, the overall number of persons within the Austrian reception system and federal reception facilities tripled in 2021-2022, which led the authorities to request support from the Agency on 31 August 2022.

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<sup>2</sup> At activity level, the second amendment excluded the following: enhancing *self-monitoring and reporting system on reception conditions, using the EUAA's assessment of reception conditions tool as a guidance*.

<sup>3</sup> From an average of around 1 700 monthly applications in the first half of 2021 to around 5 000 in the second half and 5 200 in the first half of 2022. Source:

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr\\_asyappctzm\\_custom\\_12007415/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyappctzm_custom_12007415/default/table?lang=en).



The Agency conducted a rapid needs assessment in the first week of October 2022 to identify where operational intervention in the area of reception would be needed. In October 2022, there were 27 operating reception facilities, including 13 reactivated facilities which were temporarily closed. With a total capacity of 8 492 places, the occupancy rate at the end of September 2022 was 90 % (7 642)<sup>4</sup>.

The needs assessment underlined the importance of prioritising support in the areas of information provision, interpretation/cultural mediation, identification and referral of vulnerable applicants, child protection and capacity building. It recommended that support from the Agency be provided until September 2023 under an OP.

During the week preceding the signature of the OP, the Austrian basic care system registered around 93 000 persons, exceeding the all-time high of 88 000 in 2015, including 56 000 Ukrainian nationals. Overall, a record 112 245 asylum applications were lodged in Austria in 2022. In addition, some 91 000 displaced persons from Ukraine were registered<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. Implementation of the action: current state of play

This chapter describes how the situation in Austria evolved over the duration of the OP and gives an overview of the main results achieved.

The Austria OP was signed in December 2022, three months after the request for support and two months after the needs assessment took place. In the first months of 2023, the Agency undertook preparatory activities, including deployment of three EUAA personnel in Austria, field visits and preparation of material for group information sessions. These activities also included the identification of needs for training, translation of European asylum curriculum modules, expert deployment planning and launch of the selection procedure, as well as discussion on potential study visits. The OP's results framework included seven indicators at output level, with planned targets as of the second quarter of 2023. Deployments of the EUAA's experts and interpreters began in mid-April 2023. The coordination of the OP was ensured by two to three statutory staff and a coordinating officer.

The first quarter of 2023 saw a sharp decrease in the number of applications lodged, from 36 700 in the last quarter of 2022 to 9 600 applications<sup>6</sup>. Although numbers began rising again in late March and throughout the second quarter of 2023, the situation remained stable. To account for the new arrivals, a new centre in Braunau for single men was opened.

By June 2023, the pressure on the federal reception system had decreased, with almost 4 000 places becoming available (from 6 712 in January to 4 090 in March and 2 872 in June). Despite a slight increase in arrivals (of 26 %) compared to the preceding months and a net decrease of one reception

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<sup>4</sup> Information shared with the Agency by the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services (BBU) during the evaluation.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://ecre.org/2022-update-aida-country-report-austria/>.

<sup>6</sup> See: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr\\_asyappctzm\\_custom\\_11989258/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyappctzm_custom_11989258/default/table?lang=en).



centre since the beginning of the OP<sup>7</sup>, the occupancy rate reduced to 61 % and remained relatively stable in the third quarter of 2023.

By June 2023, the Agency was supporting six reception facilities (Traiskirchen, Semmering, Kindberg, Mariabrunn, Bad Kreuzen, and Schwechat) out of 27 (or 43 % of the target of 14). This involved six external experts and 17 interpreters (one on standby). The number of supported reception facilities gradually reduced to three in September 2023 (21 % of the target of 14). The Agency produced a total of 28 information products (mainly presentations) for use in reception facilities, four times the annual target of seven. In terms of timing, seven information products were delivered by June 2023, and an additional 21 between July and September 2023. These included 14 presentations that were translated into German.

In 2023, the Agency reached more than three times the targeted individuals in reception facilities with communication and information provision-related activities (10 985; target: 3 200). Until June 2023, 3 766 individuals benefitted from communication and information provision (quarterly target: 1 000), to accommodate increased arrivals in Traiskirchen. 7 219 individuals benefitted from such services between July and September 2023 (quarterly target: 2 200).

Moreover, 4 668 children benefitted from child protection services in 2023 (more than three times the annual target). In the second quarter, 921 children benefitted from child protection-related activities (almost twice the quarterly target of 500). Between July and September 2023, 3 747 children – a majority in the summer school in Traiskirchen – benefitted (almost four times the target of 1 000).

The number of individuals benefitting from vulnerability, or social work-related activities, was lower than planned, with the Agency reaching 907 individuals and achieving 53 % of its annual target of 1 700. In the second quarter, 57 % of the target of 500 individuals received such support, with 620 (52 % of the target of 1 200) doing so between July and September 2023.

In the second quarter of 2023 there was a two-day study visit of eight Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services (BBU) and one Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) officials to Germany. Three out of the four planned training deliverables (75 %) for the second quarter were implemented. These were a training on ‘Reception of vulnerable persons (A)’ module to 22 BBU participants and two onboarding sessions for EUAA experts. The fourth training (‘Trafficking in human beings (THB) level 1’) was delivered during the third quarter together with an additional four training activities. These were two sessions on ‘Reception of vulnerable persons (B)’ and two on ‘Introduction to vulnerability’ modules. The annual number of training sessions was eight, exceeding the planned target of six and receiving an average satisfaction rate of 90 %. In the third quarter, the Agency supported the organisation of a second study visit to Finland in September 2023, reaching the annual target of two study visits (100 %).

Following a new needs assessment in August 2023, the OP was amended in September 2023 and extended to 31 December 2024. This first amendment of the OP foresaw changes in the expected results, with the Agency focusing its efforts mainly on structural support and capacity building.

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<sup>7</sup> Two were opened by May and three were temporarily closed in June.





During the last quarter of 2023 support was limited to six interpreters in six reception facilities, asylum support teams (ASTs) pre-deployment induction training and the participation of five national officials in a training session on ‘Becoming an EUAA trainer and assessor’. Experts were deployed only in November and December, with one and three respectively (one at each location: BBU headquarters, Schwechat, and Traiskirchen). The volume of activities was in line with reduced pressure on the reception system<sup>8</sup>. During this time, the Agency piloted specific planning and monitoring tools to be employed during the inception phase of new, future operations.

At the end of 2023 a new round of consultations with the authorities was launched. An Agency-wide prioritisation exercise proposed to reduce the Agency’s resource allocation to the operation in Austria. The OP’s duration was officially shortened by six months through the signature of a second amendment in March 2024. The OP closed in June 2024 instead of December 2024. In agreement with its counterparts, the Agency prioritised structural support (including training) and activities on vulnerability and child protection.

During the first quarter of 2024, asylum applications averaged a little more than 2 000 per month, the lowest since mid-2021<sup>9</sup>. In parallel, the occupancy rate in reception also dropped to pre-2022 levels (1 495 or 29 %) with just 16 facilities being operational in May 2024 with a total capacity of 5 069. The Agency supported six reception facilities, namely in Schwechat, Traiskirchen, Graz (Puntigam and Andritz), Reichenau, and Steyregg. A total of 126 child protection-related activities (annual target of 200) and 389 vulnerability-related activities (annual target of 300) were implemented together with BBU personnel. The number of beneficiaries of such activities was not monitored as in 2023, however it was reported that in 2024 these reached 1 026 children and 1 437 individuals, respectively. In addition to the above, a further three reception facilities were supported with interpretation.

In the area of structural support, a Member State expert from the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees was deployed for two weeks in March 2024 to support the administration in formulating proposals for the Austrian Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund programme. During the first quarter, the Agency deployed two experts to the central team in the BBU who developed six guidance documents. These were guidelines for unaccompanied children’s facilities during Ramadan; three guidance documents on THB, gender-based violence, and an information awareness session on THB; and a toolbox for activities with children and one with adults. In addition, the child-friendly complaint and feedback mechanism and the methodology and tools on participatory risk assessment for unaccompanied children were revised. The quarterly target of one deliverable was exceeded. Between April and June 2024, seven additional workflows/guidance documents were prepared.

Training sessions gathered a total of 75 participations in 2024, 80 % of which were of national representatives, and received good satisfaction rates (average of 89 %). The Agency delivered sessions on the following training modules: ‘Becoming an EUAA trainer and assessor’, ‘Trafficking in human beings’, ‘Gender, gender identity and sexual orientation’, ‘Introduction to ethical and professional standards’, ‘Introduction to communication for asylum and reception practitioners’, ‘Introduction to vulnerability’, ‘Reception of vulnerable persons’, ‘Victims of gender-based violence’. Moreover, induction training was provided to experts prior to their deployment.

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<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.bmi.gv.at/news.aspx?id=327A4838364F50506A6A673D>.

<sup>9</sup> Information shared by the BBU during the evaluation exercise.



The original OP included operational preconditions to ensure that:

- Office space and necessary equipment were available to the EUAA;
- Regular coordination meetings were held;
- A two-way data sharing was established;
- All national permits and permissions were secured; and
- Practical and administrative arrangements for deployment were agreed.

For the most part, these preconditions were met. They were revised in the amended OP for improved operationalisation. The preconditions on permits/permissions and arrangements for deployments were replaced by four other preconditions. These referred to: EUAA experts' access to data and tools, a timely agreed training plan and regular dedicated meetings, and the ability of the Agency to identify experts with the necessary profiles and expertise and deploy a measure coordinator.

In May 2024, and in light of the closure of the OP, the Agency organised a closure exercise workshop in Austria alongside stakeholders from the BBU and BMI. The workshop served as an opportunity to discuss the cooperation and results of the OP, and identify lessons learnt and good practices. The OP and the Agency's operational support officially concluded on 30 June 2024.

## 4. Evaluation findings

Building on the above, this chapter provides an analysis of the evaluation questions. It triangulates evidence from different data sources such as desk research, interviews, information gathered during the closure exercise and focus group discussions.

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

The OP took place in a constantly changing environment. The initial pressure that led the authorities to request the Agency's support in August 2022 had already decreased by the time the first AST was deployed in February 2023. Whereas first-time asylum applications peaked in October 2022 (18 210), in the first quarter of 2023 the monthly average had stabilised to 3 207 applications<sup>10</sup>. To reflect this change, the OP shifted from operational to more strategic and structural capacity building support, as reflected in chapter 3.

The Agency **effectively** delivered most of the planned support in the areas of training, vulnerability (e.g., tools/workflows, mapping exercise), study visits, and interpretation, exceeding both quarterly and annual targets for most output indicators (see chapter 3). In spite of challenges in recruiting experts and deploying interpreters, these were not reflected in the achieved results. In line with the changing needs, the Agency supported between six and 13 reception centres with externally remunerated experts and interpreters.

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<sup>10</sup> Eurostat (extracted 01/07/2024).



The start to the OP was a phased one despite the urgency in the request for support, mainly due to a delay in the signature of the OP and the difficulties encountered in deploying experts. The request for support was sent to the EUAA in August 2022 and implementation began in 2023. Considering the national absorption capacity, the planning stage of the OP could have benefitted from a more effective consultation process, with a focus on clear expectations, priorities, and fulfilment of preconditions for both the Agency and national counterparts. For example, the authorities reported an initial limited understanding of the type of work that the Agency could do and on the level of involvement that would be required from their side. This resulted in misalignment between the initially expected (i.e., hands-on support) and the support provided (i.e., technically qualified experts). A targeted presentation on the proposed approach (e.g., specific proposal on expert profiles) could have mitigated this.

In October 2023, the Agency piloted an inception phase in Austria to test specific planning and monitoring tools. Since operations were already ongoing in Austria, there is scope to further test this approach in new OPs. A new round of consultations was launched at the end of 2023 to redefine priorities in view of the changed reception context.

The 39 training activities yielded good participation from the BBU, BMI, and the EUAA's AST with 221 participations (117 individuals), with satisfaction rates ranging between 83 % and 96 %<sup>11</sup>. Stakeholders considered the content and quality of sessions as highly beneficial. There was, however, room to strengthen communication on the training organisation. Interviewees, for example, mentioned the need for increased clarity on each module's content as well as planning sessions further in advance.

The technical support provided in the area of vulnerability and child protection contributed positively. The initial plan was optimistic and focused on the delivery of support at structural (e.g., development of guidance) and field levels. In practice, the development of workflows, guidance and tools was beneficial in the centres where experts were deployed. At the time of the evaluation, however, there were plans to further embed the available material within national workflows. The experts' proactivity in facilitating the planned mapping exercise of the reception facilities was noteworthy.

An experienced Member State expert provided support to the BMI and BBU in the area of funding for two weeks. This provided a good base for increased communication between the relevant departments and focused on the sharing of practices and knowledge from the side of the expert. While no immediate follow-up took place, the authorities shared the intention to take this forward. This may convey results in the medium to long term.

In terms of interpretation support, the Agency encountered some challenges. There were a few incidents reported with last minute cancellations of deployments, as well as cases of unprofessional behaviour. The Agency, however, was quick to react to these and addressed them swiftly taking into account the contractual limitations.

The duration of the OP was shortened following the Agency's reassignment of resources to other operations and changing needs at national level. The early closure of the OP did not allow for the full implementation of some activities which were still ongoing in June 2024, particularly in the area of training and development of tools and guidance for reception facilities. The ability to plan with a long-

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<sup>11</sup> This excludes 12 of the sessions where participation was lower than six.



term perspective is essential when providing structural support given the nature of the activities. While the Agency proactively revisited priorities and deliverables, its impact could have been more meaningful if the OP had an exit strategy.

The OP's **efficiency** was limited by various challenges, including:

- The rather slow mobilisation of ASTs, linked to the Agency's selection procedures including the deployment mechanism for remunerated external experts, and the limited availability of German-speaking experts during the first OP;
- Difficulties in maintaining stable deployment of experts in the short duration of the (amended) OP;
- Lack of clear work instructions during onboarding and offboarding of experts;
- Inefficiencies linked to the use of interpreters, including the specificities of the national legal framework (i.e., the need for a work permit), difficulties in deploying these to remote locations as well as the limitations that come with using a relay language other than English (German);
- The delivery of certain induction training sessions to experts on a one-to-one basis given that deployment timelines did not allow for groups of experts to be trained together;
- Administrative hurdles such as those encountered in the processing times for the reimbursement of training participants.

The planned budget for the OP was around 1 068 000 EUR (699 000 EUR in 2023 and 369 000 in 2024). 84 % of the 2023 budget was consumed. By June 2024, internal financial monitoring data indicated an estimated budget consumption of 94 %. Since the volume of deployments was lower than planned, the cost efficiency seemed adequate. For example, the original OP foresaw the deployment of up to 30 experts. This was reduced to 13 and eight experts in the first and second amendment, respectively. In practice, the deployment of experts averaged over four (4.5) externally remunerated experts and three statutory staff between April and September 2023 (first OP), and three experts and four statutory staff between October 2023 and February 2024 (first amendment)<sup>12</sup>. A thorough cost-efficiency analysis cannot be performed given the limited data on the relative cost (direct and indirect) of each output.

In terms of **external coherence**, the Agency collaborated closely with both the BBU and BMI. In the case of the BBU, for example, this collaboration extended to the joint delivery of training sessions. There was regular communication with international organisations; despite this there were no structured collaboration arrangements (e.g., joint activities). No overlaps were identified in terms of the support provided by the Agency. Regarding **internal coherence**, the OP benefitted from a clustered approach providing project management, administration and finance support. There was close collaboration with the relevant centres of the Agency at key milestones (e.g., needs assessment). However, as a first time OP, there was room to improve the coordination of the OP. Examples include the awareness/familiarisation of field personnel with the Agency's administrative processes. Additionally, there was a need to better streamline some of the working processes and roles and responsibilities of cross-Agency actors. For instance, there was some duplication of efforts in the review of tools and deliverables by different Agency centres. Despite some collaboration, overlaps were also identified between the closure exercise and the current evaluation, with proportionality concerns regarding the former.

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<sup>12</sup> Data for the second amendment are not yet available at the time of writing.



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

The Agency's activities in the areas of capacity building, vulnerability, child protection, and information provision brought good added value, with interpretation having a less significant effect. The shift from the original OP to the amendment emphasised structural support, capacity building, and transfer of know-how. Despite a few limitations in absorption capacity, this shift contributed to the overall added value, with several outputs proving exceptionally timely and useful.

The Agency was able to make a difference through the training provided, which was widely appreciated by national counterparts (satisfaction rates averaging 90 %). The authorities' high participation (120 participations) indicated enhancement of their capacities in areas such as THB, gender-based violence, and vulnerability. The BBU highlighted that online modules and preparation prior to face-to-face sessions were valuable despite their initially low expectations. The train-the-trainer sessions ('Becoming an EUAA trainer and assessor') were seen as highly beneficial given the potential impact on the sustainability of the support and included 18 participations. While data on the success rate or the follow-up from these sessions were not available to the Agency, two nationally delivered training sessions were already organised during the OP. These focused on 'Introduction to vulnerability' and 'Introduction to ethical and professional standards', with plans for more of these sessions in the near future. BBU officials also co-delivered a training session on THB in April 2023. Moreover, there are ongoing discussions between the authorities and the EUAA on the continuation of training activities under permanent support.

The study visits to Germany and Finland were of high value and provided a bridge between practices across the Member States despite the context-specific differences. The selection of German and Finnish counterparts and the selected topics contributed to the overall satisfaction and perceived benefit for the BBU. Moreover, the deployment of the Member State expert is seen to have contributed to increased cooperation between BBU and BMI departments, as well as the establishment of a communication channel with Germany.

National counterparts expressed their appreciation for the guidance and tools provided. The Agency was proactive in producing tools on vulnerability (e.g., psychosocial support for children and adults), bringing forward topics such as mental health. Interviewees stated that some of these tools were implemented within the reception centres. Further to this, and following the end of the OP, there are plans to revisit the tools and material produced to ensure their inclusion within national working processes and workflows. Tools and practices that can be taken over by national counterparts can be beneficial to the sustainability of the results of the OP and may contribute to their longer-term added value.

The closure exercise was considered useful by all involved stakeholders. It provided an opportunity to reflect jointly on the achievements and lessons learnt and was considered a good practice which could be replicated across all closing OPs.

The early exit had an impact on the potential EU added value of the OP. The reduced pressure on the national reception system in 2023 generated the opportunity to provide more qualitative support, building on the EUAA's technical expertise.



### 4.3. Is the action relevant?

As presented in previous sections, the peak in asylum applications in mid-2022 exerted unprecedented pressure on Austria's asylum and reception system. The evaluation found that the activities included in the OPs (original and amendments) were in line with the needs on the ground.

The reduction in pressure on the reception system in 2023 diminished the relevance of some of the initially identified activities. However, through frequent communication with the national counterparts, the Agency adapted its activities to the changing context. The kick-off meeting held in Austria in early February 2023 and the joint analysis and mapping of needs that followed were identified as good practices.

As a first-time OP, the initial months were a learning curve for the Agency and national authorities alike with a somewhat slow and fragmented identification of priorities. There was a slight misalignment between the Agency's support capabilities and the authorities' expectations for hands-on support. However, the Agency was flexible and considerate of existing structures, as well as time and capacity limitations. Whilst the first OP did not achieve the volume of support initially agreed, it served as a preparatory period and provided a basis for additional discussions and relationship building.

Overall, all delivered activities were deemed relevant, with training and vulnerability guidance/tools highlighted as particularly useful. The study visits to Finland and Germany were particularly relevant and well-received; the selection of counterparts (in terms of experience and level of exchange) was appreciated by the Austrian authorities. Moreover, the Agency's contract for interpretation prioritises verbatim interpretation, mainly useful in the asylum process. However, this approach is not always suitable for the reception context, where cultural mediation and alternative interpretation procedures may offer more effective support.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1. Conclusions

The Austrian authorities requested the support of the Agency at a time of unprecedented pressure on their asylum and reception system, characterised by an increased number of arrivals and a high occupancy rate in reception facilities. The **relevance** of the Agency's frontline support progressively reduced while structural support remained relevant and evident throughout the months of implementation. The Agency was initially challenged in clearly defining the needs for support, creating expectations for swift deployments yet experiencing shortcomings to fulfil those. Despite this misalignment in initially expected needs and support capabilities, a joint analysis and mapping of needs ensured the Agency's flexible adaptation to the changing context. Overall, all OP activities, particularly training, study visits, and vulnerability guidance/tools, were relevant and well-received.

The Agency was largely **effective** in delivering the planned support across training, information provision, vulnerability tools and workflows, and study visits, surpassing most targets. It supported



between three and six reception facilities at a time, which was lower than the target of 14. However, the Agency exceeded targets, reaching 10 985 individuals with information provision and 2 344 with vulnerability and social work-related activities. Moreover, 5 694 children benefitted from child protection-related activities. The Agency's capacity building and technical support efforts were significant, as evidenced by instrumental study visits, training sessions that exceeded annual targets and reached 117 individuals, and the development of essential guidance documents and workflows. The early closure prevented the full execution of some activities, notably in training, on-the-ground support, and tool development.

The **efficiency** of the operation was impacted by several challenges, including the slow mobilisation of experts for the AST and a shortage of German-speaking experts in the first OP. Inefficiencies were also noted in interpreter use in part due to the specificities of the national legal framework and their availability to work in remote locations. Administrative hurdles were also identified, such as those encountered in the processing times for the reimbursement of training participants.

The Agency's activities demonstrated **coherence** through close collaboration with the authorities. There was regular communication with international organisations, despite the absence of joint activities, with no overlaps being identified. Internally, the OP benefitted from active participation from relevant Agency actors in key milestones. However, some duplication in efforts highlighted areas for improvement. For instance, the closure exercise was valuable, but there was a need for better organisation to avoid duplication and ensure proportionality with ongoing evaluations.

In terms of **added value**, the shift to structural support, capacity building, and transfer of know-how allowed for increased EU added value of the operation. Training on gender-based violence and THB, study visits, and child protection-related activities were particularly valuable. Train-the-trainer sessions contributed to enhanced sustainability. Tools on vulnerability were proactively developed and implemented within national reception facilities, allowing for long-term impact. On the other hand, interpretation support had limited added value due to the type of support provided. The early exit and prioritisation of activities potentially affected the added value that some of the planned activities could have had.

Table 1 provides an overview of the evaluation team's assessment of the evaluation criteria by result, based on their analysis and the triangulation of available data sources.

Table 1. Evaluation criteria by result<sup>13</sup>

	Initial OP	Amendment 1 and 2
Relevance	Good/fair	Good
Effectiveness	Very good	Very good
Efficiency	Fair	Good
Coherence	Good	Good
EU added value	Good	Good

<sup>13</sup> The five evaluation criteria were rated using a four-point scale (insufficient, fair, good, very good). These ratings are judgements based on the triangulation of different information sources, such as interviews and internal data.



## 5.2. Good practices and lessons learnt

The following **good practices** emerged during implementation of the OP, which could be replicated in similar operations:

- Frequent communication between the Agency and national counterparts built trust and clarified expectations;
- The Agency was flexible and considerate of existing structures and time/capacity limitations, implementing high-quality activities and maintaining good collaboration;
- The closure exercise was valuable, providing a forum for formal closure and allowing stakeholders to share feedback and acknowledge mutual efforts during OP implementation;
- The sharing of tools and practices that can be taken over by national counterparts proved beneficial for the sustainability of the OP;
- The train-the-trainer sessions built an effective national pool of trainers, as evidenced by the two nationally delivered and the co-delivered sessions, which enhances the sustainability of the EUAA's support.

Moreover, several **lessons learnt** can be highlighted:

- The usual model of interpretation support was not fit-for-purpose in a reception setting which would have benefitted more from cultural mediation;
- There is room to streamline the training workflows (e.g., registration of participants and training organisation) to make these more efficient;
- The OP would have benefitted from a workshop approach employed at mid-term to ensure stronger communication with the BBU regional offices;
- The same result output was monitored in a different way (i.e., indicators monitoring number of beneficiaries versus number of activities) between initial and amended OP, which challenged comparability and analysis. A streamlined approach of monitoring of outputs would have allowed for a comprehensive assessment of progress;
- There were evident overlaps between the OP closure exercise and this ex post evaluation; the former needs to be redefined to ensure proportionality and enhance the overall added value.

In addition to context-specific conclusions and lessons learnt, the evaluation identified a number of **horizontal considerations** (and recommendations), which are beyond the scope of the Austria OP. These should be taken on board in future horizontal assessments and include the need for the following.

- In terms of *planning*:
  - The sudden closure of the OP evidenced the need for a more strategic approach to planning across OPs. This should include, among others, a strategic discussion on the preconditions for new OPs as well as an exit criterion (e.g., minimum timelines, parameters for early termination) with the aim of fostering sustainable change;
  - A results-based approach would require that key stakeholders are involved in target setting where these refer to their areas of work.
- In terms of *inception*:





- Increased efforts during the inception period to ensure authorities are adequately informed of the Agency's work and to manage expectations, particularly in terms of deployments. This could include:
  - A presentation on what the role of the EUAA is, including an explanation on the role and type of expert profiles, including an initial targeted proposal beyond the sharing of the operational catalogue;
  - Outline systematically what input is needed from the authorities (e.g., workload, preliminary national assessment on needs, or preconditions).
- A dedicated inception phase applied prior to implementation may be useful. The deliverables used during this phase could become more applicable and proportional.
- In terms of *implementation*:
  - The Agency needs to be able to swiftly mobilise large numbers of experts to better serve the purpose of short-term OPs;
  - Joint drafting of work instructions with the authorities to be considered to facilitate onboarding and offboarding of Agency personnel and increase efficiency and effectiveness;
  - There is a need to streamline practices around the closure exercise across the Agency.

This evaluation also identified the need to strengthen the Agency's preparedness for the start-up of new operations, as highlighted in previous evaluations. Among other things, the Agency could consider the creation and/or provision of information/guidance relating to the setting up of a new operation for the new teams deployed in-country.

### 5.3. Recommendations

This evaluation makes the following recommendations based on the triangulation of findings.

1. Given the focus of the OP on capacity building, and to foster sustainability of the support provided, the EUAA could:
  - a) Promote the use of selected deliverables beyond the OP's duration. This could be done by engaging with the Austrian authorities to measure continuity in the usage of the tools;
  - b) Further expand and support the national pool of trainers by closely following up with the authorities to optimise national roll-out of the training modules.



## Annex 1: Methodology and analytical models used

The aim of this exercise was to answer the following evaluation questions, covering the European Commission’s Better Regulation standard criteria.

Criteria	Questions
<b>Relevance</b>	To what extent was the action in line with stakeholders’ needs and the Agency’s objectives?
<b>Effectiveness</b>	Did the OP achieve what was planned? Were there any (unexpected) factors that influenced the results?
<b>Efficiency</b>	To what extent are the costs (including inputs and human resources) of the support justified given the results?
<b>Coherence</b>	To what extent is the operation coherent internally and externally?
<b>EU added value</b>	What is the added value resulting from the operation, compared to what could have been expected from Austria acting solely?

The evaluation took into account good practices and lessons learnt, including those identified in the evaluations of the previous OPs. Special attention was paid to the efficiency and added value of the Agency’s support.

To answer the above questions, the evaluation team used a mixed-method approach covering the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data sources. These included desk review, analysis, information gathered during the closure exercise and follow-up discussions, and individual and group interviews. 17 individuals were interviewed by the evaluation team.

The evaluation encountered some limitations linked to its remote execution. There were also limitations to the data available. Environmental and social impacts were not addressed in this report.



## Annex 2: Evaluation matrix

Sub-questions	Indicators/ descriptors	Norms/ judgement criteria	Sources of evidence
<b>Relevance:</b> How well was the action in line with stakeholders' needs and the Agency's objectives?			
Optional prompt question: What activities were most beneficial and why?	Priority areas identified by NA	Comparison needs assessment and OP priority areas with implemented areas	Needs assessment, OP, monitoring and reporting tools, interviews
<b>Effectiveness:</b> Did the OP achieve what was planned?			
Optional prompt question: Were deliverables (workflows and tools) as expected? If not, what are solutions/alternatives to achieve better results?	Results indicators	Comparison planned targets versus achieved	Results monitoring database
<b>Efficiency:</b> To what extent are the costs (including inputs and human resources) of the support justified given the results?			
	Output and input indicator values	Relationship achieved outputs versus inputs Qualitative challenges (processes and related indicators)	Qualitative and quantitative monitoring data, financial records, nature of underlying processes needed to achieve the planned results, interviews
<b>Coherence:</b> To what extent is the operation coherent internally and externally?			
	Nature of activities and coordination processes	Level of coordination and synergies with other national actors/internal Agency actors	Monitoring data; planning documents; interviews
<b>EU added value:</b> What is the added value resulting from the operation, compared to what could have been expected from Austria acting solely?			
	Existence of elements of the EUAA's added value	Number and level of added value elements related to financial, technical and material support	Monitoring data; planning documents; interviews



## Annex 3: Intervention logic

<p><b>Needs/problems</b></p> <p>Exerted pressure on the country's reception capacity</p>	<p><b>Expected objectives</b></p> <p>Enhancing the Member State's capacity to effectively implement the CEAS, focusing particularly on the area of reception</p>	
<p><b>Result impact</b></p> <p>Provision of effective operational, technical, and emergency support in line with the Agency's mandate to enable Austria to implement its obligations under the CEAS</p>		
<p><b>Initial OP (6 Dec 2022 – 29 Sep 2023)</b></p>	<p><b>Amendment 1 (30 Sep 2023 – 31 Dec 2023)</b></p>	<p><b>Amendment 2 (27 Feb 2024 – 30 June 2024)</b></p>
<p><b>Result outcomes</b></p>		
<p>1. Enhanced capacity of the Austrian authorities to respond to emergency reception needs</p>	<p>1. Enhanced capacity of the Austrian authorities to provide reception conditions in line with the CEAS</p>	
<p><b>Result outputs</b></p>		
<p>1.1 Support for the enhancement of capacity and quality of emergency reception response</p>	<p>1.1 Structural support to enhance reception conditions 1.2 Frontline reception support</p>	
<p><b>Activities</b></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support to the management and operation of reception facilities through the deployment of reception personnel</li> <li>• Support for the enhancement of communication and information provision to residents of reception facilities, including through the development of information material, where needed</li> <li>• Support for vulnerability identification, screening and referrals</li> <li>• Provision of training on topics and modules of the EUAA's curriculum relevant to reception (e.g., communication and information provision, reception of vulnerable persons, interpreting in the reception context), to personnel of</li> </ul>	<p>Under output 1.1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reception management workflows and guidance in particular with regard to vulnerability (e.g., development of the relevant standard operating procedures/protocols);</li> <li>• Enhancing self-monitoring and reporting system on reception conditions, using the EUAA's assessment of reception conditions tool as a guidance;</li> <li>• Training and learning activities, with a focus on creating a national pool of trainers;</li> <li>• Funding support to strengthen capacity of national reception authorities to identify, access, plan and manage available funding mechanisms, including EU funds.</li> </ul> <p>Under output 1.2:</p>	<p>Under output 1.1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reception management workflows and guidance in particular with regard to vulnerability (e.g., development of the relevant standard operating procedures/protocols);</li> <li>• Training and learning activities, with a focus on creating a national pool of trainers;</li> <li>• Support in reviewing potential needs and gaps of national reception authorities to identify, plan and manage available funding mechanisms, including EU funds.</li> </ul> <p>Under output 1.2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping of the existing framework for the management of vulnerable</li> </ul>



<p>national authorities and the EUAA's deployed ASTs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study visits to other Member States focusing on reception system management, reception workflows and procedures</li> <li>• Provision of interpretation services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping of the existing framework for the management of vulnerable persons including unaccompanied minors and social work at reception facilities in view of informing the structural support under 1.1.;</li> <li>• Support with the planning and implementation of activities related to vulnerability in reception facilities where the experts will be deployed including enhancing practices through peer-to-peer support;</li> <li>• Piloting and roll-out of the workflows and guidance produced under 1.1.;</li> <li>• Interpretation/cultural mediation services for frontline reception activities.</li> </ul>	<p>persons including unaccompanied minors and social work at reception facilities in view of informing the structural support under 1.1.;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support with the planning and implementation of activities related to vulnerability in reception facilities where the experts will be deployed including enhancing practices through peer-to-peer support;</li> <li>• Piloting and roll-out of the workflows and guidance produced under 1.1.;</li> <li>• Interpretation/cultural mediation services for frontline reception activities.</li> </ul>
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**Inputs**  
All inputs were conditional on the Agency's budget availability

<p>Human resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reception experts: up to 30;</li> <li>• Interpreters: up to 30;</li> <li>• Training expert/training support officer: one.</li> </ul>	<p>Deployment of ASTs:</p> <p>Under 1.1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up to two experts in vulnerability;</li> <li>• Up to one reception expert;</li> <li>• Up to one training support expert;</li> <li>• Up to one funding expert.</li> </ul> <p>Under 1.2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up to eight experts in vulnerability;</li> <li>• Interpretation/cultural interpreters/cultural mediators.</li> </ul> <p>Other resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translation of the EUAA's tools as needed and of training modules based on the training plan;</li> <li>• Up to two study visits in EU Member State(s) for</li> </ul>	<p>Deployment of ASTs:</p> <p>Under 1.1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up to two experts in vulnerability;</li> <li>• Up to one funding expert.</li> </ul> <p>Under 1.2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up to five experts in vulnerability;</li> <li>• Interpretation/cultural mediation support.</li> </ul>
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information sharing on reception models, best practices, operational mechanisms, and strategic planning, concerning thematic areas that are defined with the EUAA and related to the areas of support under 1.1.

Conditional on an agreement between the EUAA and the Austrian authorities, and subject to budget availability for the present OP, material and operational support by the Agency could include inter alia provision of equipment, works, services, communication/promotional material, required translations, costs for training/meetings/workshops, infrastructure costs, IT equipment, office supplies and others where required for the joint EUAA and national authorities' activities.

#### **External factors**

Migratory emergency context, national and international laws, policies and practices; availability of financial and human resources; actions by national counterparts, international and non-governmental organisations