

# POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR THE TRAINING AND SUPPORT OF RETURN COUNSELLORS IN THEIR ROLE TO PROVIDE MIGRANTS WITH TIMELY, UNBIASED AND RELIABLE INFORMATION ON RETURN

EMN INFORM

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Counselling is widely recognised as a key component of the return process and a crucial service to assist third-country nationals and other migrants to obtain correct information about their opportunities to return and reintegrate in their country of origin, as well as their legal possibilities to remain in Europe.

Complementing outreach and general information provision, counselling on return and reintegration opportunities entails building a dialogue to plan the safe and dignified return of an individual, and as such is fully integrated in Assisted Voluntary Return (and Reintegration) Programmes and, in some Member States also in the process for forced removals.

To ensure that they can provide migrants with timely, unbiased and reliable information, return counsellors require appropriate training and support. This inform analyses and reports on Member States', non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) and international organisations' (IOs) policies and practices for the training and support of return counsellors.

This is the second inform in a series of three produced by the European Migration Network (EMN) on return counselling, which are the result of a proposal by IOM to the EMN to engage in research focusing on identifying best practices related to

outreach, counselling and information provision in (assisted voluntary) return and reintegration processes. The first inform centered on the policies and practices on return counselling for migrants in place in the EU Member States. The third inform will focus on the policies and practices on outreach and information provision for the (voluntary) return of migrants in EU Member States.

This inform was based on the findings from two Ad Hoc Queries (AHQ); one in 2018 Return Counselling Practices and Return Counsellors, and another on the policies and practices for the support of return counsellors in their role to provide migrants with timely, unbiased and reliable information on return from 2019. Twelve Member States plus Switzerland and Norway, plus the International Organisation on Migration (IOM) and Frontex responded to the first AHQ.<sup>1</sup> For the second AHQ, there were 22 respondents in total,<sup>2</sup> comprising of Member States' authorities and service providers or implementing partners, such as the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) or IOM. Several Member States have contracted IOM to provide return counselling on their behalf and therefore deferred responses to the substance of the query to IOM. The situation in these Member States is attributed to IOM throughout this Inform.<sup>3</sup>



## 2. KEY POINTS TO NOTE

- **Absence of a policy framework** to ensure a standardised approach for minimum qualifications and training requirements of return counsellors. However, minimum standards were upheld relying on well-established practices or in some cases on common guidance and expertise provided by IOM.
- **Different types of training for return counsellors in place** across the participating Member States, NGOs and International Organisations; most focused on knowledge or skills and could be made available at beginner/basic level or at a more advanced level according to the needs of the return counsellor.
- **Professional support provided to return counsellors in different ways**; from trainings to develop or reinforce existing skills and knowledge, to receiving relevant country of return information from reliable sources. In some cases, monitoring practices were in place to ensure uniformity and efficiency in the available support.
- **Limited personal support** to help counsellors to deal with difficult and emotionally draining work. Existing practices to monitor the well-being of counsellors mostly relied on introducing a 'duty of care' in the manager-counsellor relation and in encouraging peer support among colleagues. Helplines and access to support set out in human resource procedures, were some of the support tools made available to counsellors.

1 BE, BG, DE, FI, FR, IT, LV, MT, NL, SE, SK plus CH and NO. IOM and FRONTEX also participated. Switzerland also responded to this AHQ in quality of member of the EMN Return Expert Group; however, it is not included in this EMN Inform as Switzerland is not formally part of the EMN.

2 AT, BE, CY, DE, EE, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LU, LT, LV, MT, NL, SE, SK, UK plus NO, DRC and IOM. This publication was part of the 2019 EMN Work Programme and therefore includes contributions from the United Kingdom as an EU Member State up to 31 January 2020. Please note that Denmark is not part of the EMN, albeit DK authorities and the DRC participated to the meetings of the EMN Expert Group on Return. Therefore, DK did not participate to this EMN Inform.

3 CY, IE, HR, LT, LV, MT.



## 3. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR SUPPORT AND TRAINING OF RETURN COUNSELLORS

Across Member States and Norway, there were no national legal or policy frameworks in place to foster a standardised approach for minimum qualifications and training requirements for return counsellors.<sup>4</sup> However, minimum standards were upheld in different ways:

- The national institution and/or service provider recruited according to minimum education and experience requirements established at their discretion, with internal trainings set up as needed;<sup>5</sup>
- In two cases, specific guidelines were published at the national level and were followed throughout the State;<sup>6</sup>
- Two Member States reported that funding or grant agreements for return counselling services included recruitment conditions specified and set out in the terms of reference, thus ensuring minimum standards;<sup>7</sup>

IOM has implemented an institutional policy for recruitment of all staff and a competency framework which set out the values,

core competencies and managerial competencies for each staff, depending on the grade of the position, which also applied to the function of the counsellors. In practice, the skills, experience and education of each candidate return counsellor are reviewed against this policy before recruitment decisions were made.

Several Member States reported that they engaged IOM to provide return counselling through Assisted Voluntary Return programmes, thus relying on its approaches and expertise.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.1. Multiplication of tasks

All respondents found that their return counsellors were involved in other tasks beside counselling,<sup>9</sup> mainly related to activities around supporting the preparation of the return individual, providing needs assessments for vulnerabilities<sup>10</sup> and/or providing referrals to appropriate support (housing, medical care, social services, etc.).<sup>11</sup>



## 4. TRAINING PROVIDED TO RETURN COUNSELLORS

One way to provide support to return counsellors was to make sure they received the training they needed, both to learn new or refine existing skills, either as induction / introductory or ongoing training.

### 4.1. Types of training provided

The majority of Member States plus Norway reported that training for return counsellors was provided. Only one Member State did not provide any type of training to return counsellors.<sup>12</sup>

For those countries providing it, training for return counsellors could take several forms. Some Member States and Norway provided introductory trainings only,<sup>13</sup> while in others introductory and /or ongoing training were provided, depending on the needs of the return counsellors.<sup>14</sup> Induction training focused mainly on informing counsellors about their roles and how to perform them successfully, whereas ongoing training focused on developing more advanced methodologies and skills to increase the success of the delivery of return counselling.

Training for return counsellors was usually provided by national institutions or service providers contracted by national authorities and harmonised at national level.<sup>15</sup>

However, in three countries, different solutions were adopted. In France, training was provided in collaboration with other Member States, for instance it could be combined with training delivered by the Federal Asylum Agency (Fedasil) in Belgium. In Germany, training was not harmonised nationally but was rather delivered through a network established between local or regional agencies and the Federal State. In Italy, training is provided by the entities in charge of implementing AVRR projects

The trainings focused on a wide variety of topics, depending on the national needs, and included:

- Discussing the content of return counselling (e.g. the return process or reintegration support);
- The legal framework (asylum procedures, for instance);
- The methodology to provide counselling (e.g. interviewing techniques, discussing return or approaching culturally sensitive topics).<sup>16</sup>

Trainings were usually delivered in person face-to-face,<sup>17</sup> but in some cases could also be delivered online.<sup>18</sup> In terms of duration, the trainings were found to last from a half-day to 12 days (two days a week over a six week period) in the case of one of

4 AT, BE, CY, DE, EE, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LU, LT, LV, NL, SE, SK, UK and NO.

5 AT, BE, EE, FI, FR, IT, NL and SE

6 DE and NO

7 ES and LV

8 CY, EE, IE, HR, LT, LV, MT, SK.

9 AT, CY, DE, ES, FI, FR, NL, SK plus NO and DRC and IOM

10 AT, ES, NL SK, IOM

11 BE, ES, IT, LU, NL, SE, SK, DRC, IOM

12 HU. In contrast, the Netherlands provides over 18 different types of trainings

13 DE, EE, SE and NO

14 BE, DE, FR, NL and DRC

15 AT, BE, DE, EE, FI, FR, HU, IT, LU, SE, SK, plus Norway. This is usually undertaken by the national migration agencies (such as Fedasil for Belgium or OFII- Office Français pour l'Immigration et l'Intégration- in France. In the case of Spain, return counselling is subcontracted to service providers; Spain published a national call for return projects grants which included standards for recruitment and training which would have to be fulfilled by the service provider.

16 BE, DE, FR, NL, SE and NO, as well as DRC and IOM

17 DE, EE, FR, NL (all but one, i.e. a online platform, GoodHabit, was created and offered numerous courses such as a GDPR course or an integrity course), SE and NO, as well as DRC

18 BE and FR

the trainings provided by the Netherlands. None of the trainings delivered provided any form of certification.

IOM was in charge of delivering training to return counsellors across different Member States, especially in those States where IOM acted as the implementing partner in providing return counselling through the AVRR programmes.<sup>19</sup> Much like the training provided by the Member States, IOM delivered training on an introductory and continuous basis, mostly face-to-face or online, as required, and the content of the training was adapted to the different needs of the Member State or in response to the regional and global needs.

## 4.2. Refresher courses

Refresher courses were offered by four Member States plus Norway, as well as DRC and IOM.<sup>20</sup> Belgium and Norway delivered these courses on a yearly basis, while France delivered them as and when necessary. All courses were provided face-to-face, with the notable exception of IOM, which makes online training available where necessary and appropriate.

In contrast, six Member States did not routinely provide refresher courses,<sup>21</sup> although in both Finland and Luxembourg, refresher courses may be offered at the request of the return counsellor.

## 4.3. Challenges and good practices in providing training

A number of challenges were identified in relation to the provision of training to return counsellors. These included:

- Addressing the different needs of the counsellors attending training<sup>22</sup> also in the context of the changing landscape, especially regarding AVRR programmes;<sup>23</sup>

- Adapting the training to the different levels of education and experience of the return counsellors<sup>24</sup> and to make them interested and interacting with the training;<sup>25</sup>
- Human resource challenges, such as high rate of staff turnover or lack of candidates for certain positions<sup>26</sup> and the gaps of knowledge resulting from a lack of follow up between trainings and refresher courses.<sup>27</sup>
- Availability of resources and / or time to conduct the trainings;<sup>28</sup>

Different solutions were adopted to address the many challenges experienced:

- To counter the difficulties resulting from a high rate of staff turnover, subsequent continuous employment within IOM (contract duration) was a pre-condition for participation in some trainings, while France and Sweden had set up online platforms where relevant information was accessible at all times for the new recruits;
- To face the challenge of gaps in knowledge due to insufficient or infrequent trainings, IOM implemented a 'team-up/tandem' dynamic between newcomers and more senior staff to ensure on-the-job training;
- Belgium recommended that the content of the training should be regularly updated and that there should be constant interaction with the reality of work 'in the field' to ensure that the content remained relevant, as did IOM;
- To face its most pressing challenge, which was the lack of harmonised basic qualifications amongst return counsellors, Germany is beginning a pilot project permitting counsellors to participate in online training.



# 5. PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED TO THE RETURN COUNSELLORS

Return counsellors may need ongoing support while they exercise their duties, including on how to provide counselling for vulnerable individuals or to access timely and relevant information on the countries of return, for instance. Such support would complement any initial training provided to counsellors.

## 5.1. Support provided to return counsellors when working with vulnerable groups

In several cases, training was provided on how to properly interact and present information to vulnerable individuals, such as unaccompanied minors, families with children, women who

are alone, minorities suffering from mental or physical health problems, etc.<sup>29</sup>

Several Member States reported that when providing counselling to vulnerable groups,<sup>30</sup> return counsellors were helped to reach out to other branches of government, including social services or health services for instance, and other levels of government (local authorities), in order to refer a case or for guidance on how to handle a specific situation. Return counsellors also could refer cases to appropriate services where vulnerable individuals were found to have specific needs (housing, healthcare, social services, etc.).

The Netherlands and IOM published information for counsellors on how to work with vulnerable individuals on an online platform available to counsellors and published internal guidance notes,

19 CY, EE, , HR, LT, LV and SK

20 BE, EE, FR, NL plus NO and DRC and IOM

21 AT, FI, HU, LU, NL, SE

22 BE, DE, IT, NL and IOM

23 BE and IOM

24 BE, DE, IT, NL and NO

25 IT, NL and IOM

26 CY, EE, FR, IT, NL, SE and IOM

27 LT and DRC

28 NL, NO and IOM

29 BE, DE, EE, FR, SE plus NO (via its IOM office) and DRC and IOM

30 DE, FI, IT, LU and IOM

respectively.<sup>31</sup> IOM further published a handbook on how to work with medical needs, which was made public. France has also implemented a training dedicated to vulnerable persons in the framework of the OFII- IOM agreement for the Care + project.

## 5.2. Country of return: understanding the situation and accessing information

Understanding the situation in the country of return was considered essential when providing return counselling. Thus, in many countries, return counsellors received specific support to obtain current, relevant and accurate information on the country of return.

First, the return counsellor must gain a thorough understanding of the country of return. To do so, one preferred method was training. This was the most commonly used method to support return counsellors in understanding the situation and knowing the assistance available in the country of return.<sup>32</sup> Conversely, Austria and Norway, with the help of IOM, preferred to organise regular information sessions and seminars to make sure the counsellors remained informed.

Four Member States, IOM and the Danish Refugee Council published and regularly updated guidelines or country-specific factsheets,<sup>33</sup> which were in some cases made available on online platforms to improve accessibility of country of return information.

Another method was for the return counsellors or the AVRR programme providers to stay regularly in touch with the country of return (either through their own offices or via local partners) to stay up to date.<sup>34</sup> The Netherlands and Norway also relied on support from partners providing return counselling, such as NGOs or the IOM country office.

Once the return counsellors have been briefed about the situation in the country of return, it was imperative that they remained up to date on the situation. The most commonly used method for keeping up to date with the situation was for the institution or organisation providing return counselling to publish information factsheets or to use internal communication methods (email, online platforms, workshops), to notify return counsellors of the changing landscape.<sup>35</sup> Notably, IOM reported that their Headquarters published information on recent development in countries of return on internal platforms and sent this out to all IOM country offices concerned by the developments.

Several respondents also relied on cooperation with other government institutions (ministries of foreign affairs or defence, embassies) or NGOs and IOM, to collect information on the situation of the country of origin and then communicate this to counsellors.<sup>36</sup> For example, this was done via online messaging systems using platforms in the case of the Netherlands, or via the Embassy Liaison Section of the National Border Police in Sweden.

In Italy and within the Danish Refugee Council and IOM, counsellors were able to rely on the support of dedicated internal offices which were in direct and regular contact with the country of return in order to remain informed about possible developments and, if changes occurred, to communicate these back to return counsellors.

Trainings were used in Austria and by IOM, as a means of keeping return counsellors informed.

## 5.3. Achieving a minimum level of consistency

The main way consistency of the information given to the third-country nationals using counselling was ensured via internal communication channels, in the form of guidelines, interview and procedural checklists, handbooks and information packages.<sup>37</sup> For instance, France has created a handbook for return agents and has published dedicated documents for applicants informing them on the different steps of the process.

Another way to ensure that return counsellors delivered services consistently was through ongoing training, which was practiced by Luxembourg, IOM and DRC; the latter insisted upon this during its Induction training.

Additionally, Austria, Belgium, the Slovak Republic and DRC relied on meetings with service providers to maintain consistency between the different actors involved in return counselling.

Italy and Spain relied respectively on the counsellors themselves and on each implementing organisations to ensure consistency in the type of information and approach used to deliver counselling.

## 5.4. Challenges and good practices to support return counsellors

Several challenges and one good practice in supporting counsellors in delivering accurate and consistent information to migrants were identified. This included:

- Access to updated and reliable information,<sup>38</sup> with solutions ranging from setting up online information platforms, internal communication lines as well as spaces for discussion between return counsellors, to updating training regularly.<sup>39</sup>
- Cooperating with other public services (especially health services),<sup>40</sup> with a solution being strengthening communication and coordination with these services, or even hiring medical professionals to be a part of the return counselling team (in the case of IOM).<sup>41</sup>
- Italy and IOM found that dealing with the different cultural backgrounds of the migrants was a challenge; IOM found that close coordination with countries of origin was essential, as was hiring staff with the same cultural background in some cases;

31 Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/returning-health-condition-toolkit-counselling-migrants-health-concerns>, last accessed on 30 September 2019.

32 BE, DE, FI

33 BE, DE, FR, NL, SE, IOM and DRC

34 BE, FI, FR (in countries where the OFII has local agencies), IT, LU and IOM

35 BE, FR, NL, SE plus NO, and DRC and IOM

36 DE, FI, NL, SE plus NO

37 BE, EE, FI, FR, LU, NL, SE and NO as well as IOM

38 BE, DE, NL and IOM

39 FI, BE, SE, DE and IOM.

40 EE, IT, IOM

41 IOM

- Norway explained that challenges pertaining to staff turnover, lack of resources and lack of consistency between counsellors' backgrounds and experiences were the main challenges; it encouraged longer contracts, prioritisation of resources and individual follow-ups to remedy this.
- DRC devised a case system to harmonise responses and improve consistency among its return counsellors.

## 5.5. Monitoring the quality of the support provided to return counsellors

In four Member States and implementing organisations, the quality of support provided to return counsellors was not officially monitored, being considered as too time-consuming or too difficult to measure.<sup>42</sup>

Informal monitoring was however undertaken through the organisation of meetings and discussions between the return counsellors and governments, for challenges and difficulties to be identified and discussed.<sup>43</sup> Belgium and The Netherlands additionally monitored the types of trainings each return counsellor had attended and followed-up to determine if this was working or if a better strategy could be applied. Sweden used an online management system where each counsellor could register information about the counselling provided. The information entered in the system was then used to monitor and assess the work of each counsellor.

IOM has implemented a system of evaluation - the Staff Evaluation System - applying to all IOM staff members and identifying three objectives for each working year which were then assessed through a mid-term and final year review, thus offering to determine high quality counselling as objective to

be assessed. A similar internal evaluation process was also implemented by DRC; it conducted internal qualitative research to ensure the quality of the counselling, about every one-two years.

### Box1: Buddy system in the Netherlands:

A 'buddy group' or 'buddy system' is a collegial safety net, in which colleagues can offer each other relief and aftercare after an incident. This form of care exists in addition to the possibility of professional assistance. Support from colleagues after the incident contributes positively to the proper processing of the event. This makes the team more resilient and leads to better cooperation. In addition, it makes employees jointly responsible for their personal safety and at the locations.

An additional tool used by IOM to indirectly assess the quality of the support to return counsellors, was to submit a satisfaction survey to migrants who had participated in AVRR programmes. The surveys reviewed the quality of the support and counselling they received from IOM staff.

ERRIN developed a 'reintegration application tool' (RIAT) for counsellors in Europe and service providers in countries of return. Via this tool, it was possible to receive instant information from returnees and local service providers about the quality of the counselling provided prior to departure, and to report to these counsellors about the reintegration of the cases they referred to a service provider.



## 6. PERSONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED TO RETURN COUNSELLORS

On top of receiving ongoing professional support, return counsellors may need to receive personal support, especially since the type of work they undertake may be draining emotionally, given the sensitivity of the topic. As such, different monitoring and support systems have been developed across Member States and Norway, and the implementing partners or service providers.

In most cases, the monitoring of the personal well-being of the return counsellors took place at their place of work.

This was done by introducing a 'duty of care' between a supervisor and their employee, as, for instance, in Estonia and in France where line managers were expected to conduct regular interviews with their direct reports and to ascertain how the return counsellor was doing and whether they needed help.<sup>44</sup>

Another approach was to encourage team bonding and networking amongst staff, to create a supportive working environment able to act as a safety-net for counsellors and to indicate any situations of distress where support might be needed.<sup>45</sup>

IOM and the Netherlands relied on employee surveys to ascertain any specific personal issues with their return counselling staff, they also provided access to mental health professionals where necessary.

Concerning the monitoring of the well-being support itself, several respondents reported not having any systems in place.<sup>46</sup> The few States and organisations that did have such systems reported using similar methods as they used to monitor the well-being of their return counsellors, such as implementing 'duty of care' practices or asking employees to respond to internal surveys.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> BE, DE, EE, FI

<sup>43</sup> AT, IT and NL. In Italy the meetings involved only the AVRR programs implementing authorities in which the counsellors operate.

<sup>44</sup> DE, FR, IT, NL, SE, SK, plus NO and DRC

<sup>45</sup> DE, IT, SK

<sup>46</sup> BE, FI, SE and DRC- concerning SE and DRC, they specified that they had not specific monitoring systems aside from relying on support provided by colleagues.

<sup>47</sup> AT, IT and IOM and DRC

## 6.1. Support tools

Support tools included helplines, Human Resources procedures, or procedures to gain access to medical or psychological support.<sup>48</sup>

DRC has implemented an emergency crisis system where medical or psychological care is available at short notice.

Internal communication tools were used by several Member States and Norway to provide information on how to obtain personal support if necessary.<sup>49</sup> These typically took the shape of leaflets, internal guidelines, posters or information websites. Other internal processes were mentorship or “buddy groups”, which were implemented by Belgium, The Netherlands and IOM.

## 6.2. challenges and solutions

Overall several challenges to provide well-being support to return counsellors were highlighted. The main one was the lack of resources to provide adequate support to all return counsellors.<sup>50</sup> Solutions identified included collective support sessions, to save time and resources;<sup>51</sup> adequate budgeting and updating procedures to improve efficiency.<sup>52</sup>

Another challenge was the emotionally difficult working conditions for counsellors which required support throughout.<sup>53</sup> Solutions put forward included introducing regular meetings with peers and/or supervisors for a closer monitoring of counsellors’ well-being,<sup>54</sup> and facilitating access to physical and psychological healthcare.<sup>55</sup>

European Migration Network (2020). Policies and practices for the support of return counsellors in their role to provide migrants with timely, unbiased and reliable information on return - EMN Inform. Brussels: European Migration Network.

48 FI, IT, SE and IOM

49 AT, DE, EE, FI, FR, NL plus NO

50 BE, DE, FI and IOM

51 BE

52 IOM

53 IT, NL, SE plus NO and IOM

54 EE, IT, NL plus NO and IOM

55 NL, SE and DRC and IOM





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France [www.immigration.interieur.gouv.fr/Europe-et-International/Le-reseau-europeen-des-migrations-REM2](http://www.immigration.interieur.gouv.fr/Europe-et-International/Le-reseau-europeen-des-migrations-REM2)

Germany [www.emn-germany.de](http://www.emn-germany.de)

Greece [www.emn.immigration.gov.gr/el/](http://www.emn.immigration.gov.gr/el/)

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Malta <https://homeaffairs.gov.mt/en/mhas-information/emn/pages/european-migration-network.aspx>

Netherlands [www.emnnetherlands.nl](http://www.emnnetherlands.nl)

Poland [www.emn.gov.pl](http://www.emn.gov.pl)

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