

Covid-19 and Modern Slavery

Q&As: Provision of support for victims and survivors (May 2020)

This Q&As list was created by the Commissioner's office in response to queries raised at a recent NGO forum to discuss the impact of Covid-19 and share good practice.

1) Is the current COVID-19 emergency likely to have an impact on the roll-out of the new VCC or is this still on track for existing timescales?

The Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC) will replace the current contract to provide needs-based support to victims of modern slavery. This contract will include the provision of accommodation, support and assistance (including subsistence). An Invitation to Tender for the MSVCC was launched on 25 September 2019. We anticipate awarding the contract in May 2020, followed by a period of implementation and transition before the contract goes live.

2) Are there any provisions for UASC who are newly arrived and can't go into existing foster placements either because they are symptomatic or because placements are limited/not wanting to accept new referrals?

On the 3rd April 2020, the Government published the following [COVID-19 guidance for Children's Social Care](#) :

Local authorities have been allocated £1.6 billion funding in response to COVID-19, which includes funding to support CSC to secure additional placements.

Local authorities should prioritise recruiting and developing their fostering capacity to help meet demand.

Ofsted is prioritising existing applications for registration and reviewing progress in provision with restrictions on places to support the sector with capacity.

When a UASC arrives in the UK and is symptomatic of COVID-19, the local authority receiving them will need to take steps to ensure they are placed in suitable accommodation in self-isolation in line with PHE Guidance. Local authorities are encouraged to engage with existing service providers to find suitable premises and staff to enable self-isolation. DfE is currently consulting with local authorities to understand what arrangements are being put in place and how best they can be supported.

3) Have there been any changes to policy for children who would not usually be eligible for leaving care support (as they have been in care for less than 13 weeks) in light of COVID-19?

[COVID-19 guidance for Children's Social Care](#) also states that:

"Local authorities should act in the best interests of care leavers. They are encouraged to use discretion to assess whether care leavers should continue to transition into suitable accommodation and/or independence, or remain in their placement during this period".

The Home Office has also established an internal team to consider any additional risks to vulnerable children as a result of COVID-19. This includes the threat of child sexual exploitation and abuse, child criminal exploitation, modern slavery and the impact of domestic abuse on children. This team is coordinating with other teams across Government departments to join up policy, programmatic and funding responses.

- 4) There are concerns that public health messages aren't necessarily reaching those who are vulnerable, therefore it is requested that all local authorities, housing associations and NASS accommodation providers ensure that this information is communicated to those in their services.**

The office has contacted the Local Government Association asking them to highlight this issue to their networks and encourage them to consider how they can ensure that these key messages are being communicated locally.

The office has also asked the British Red Cross for an update on how messages are being communicated to those in NASS accommodation – We will provide an update when a response has been received.

- 5) What resources are available to communicate public health messages regarding COVID-19 and are all the necessary languages incorporated?**

Doctors of the World have produced a useful document providing [advice](#) on COVID-19 which is available in 46 languages. There is also a video resource, currently translated into 7 languages.

The office has cross-checked the languages available with 2019 NRM Annual Report data. Accepting that NRM data will only include reported cases, almost all of the top 30 nationalities referred are already included within the translated materials, with the exception of the Philippines, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Kenya and Malaysia. This has been highlighted to the British Red Cross who have been providing translation support with this work.

The Healthy London Partnership have also produced '[my right to healthcare](#)' cards which can be used to communicate to health sector professionals that a person does not have to provide identification, details on their immigration status or have a fixed address in order to register with a GP.

- 6) Do the recent changes to NHS Charging Regulations and reassurance that information on those seeking medical assistance will not be shared with Immigration Enforcement relate specifically to COVID-19 symptoms?**

On the 23rd March 2020, the Government added COVID-19 to the list of conditions exempt from NHS Charging in recognition of the need for the whole population to access NHS services during the pandemic. Information on the NHS [website](#) is as follows:

Overseas visitors to England, including anyone living in the UK without permission, will not be charged for:

- *testing for coronavirus (even if the test shows you do not have coronavirus)*
- *treatment for coronavirus – if you start treatment and a test then shows you do not have coronavirus, you may be charged for any treatment you have after getting the test result*

No immigration checks are needed if you only have testing or treatment for [coronavirus](#).

On the 13th April 2020, Doctors of the World UK, The British Medical Association and the Royal College of Physicians [wrote](#) to the Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Health and Social Care calling for them to suspend the NHS Charging Regulations and immigration checks more widely, with

the view that the current Covid-19 charging exemption does not go far enough as patients with pre-existing conditions are still charged for the treatment and management of these pre-existing conditions.

The office has made contact with Doctors of the World to confirm if a response to this letter has been received and we will provide an update on this once we have received a response.

NHS Scotland have [confirmed](#) that anyone who requires immediate or urgent healthcare in Scotland (not only for COVID-19) will receive it regardless of their immigration status or their ability to pay at the time, if charges apply.

7) How can those who have received positive CG decisions and have being granted refugee status apply for UC if they aren't able to access to the internet?

DWP are still taking applications for Universal Credit over the phone for those who are not able to make an online application. Information will be collected over the phone and it is not necessary to book an appointment in person to make a new claim for Universal Credit.

Contact details are as follows:

Universal Credit helpline

Telephone: 0800 328 5644

Welsh language: 0800 328 1744

NGT text relay – if you cannot hear or speak on the phone: 18001 then 0800 328 5644

Textphone: 0800 328 1344

Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm

8) Is there still a requirement to demonstrate efforts to search for work in the context of COVID-19 to prevent benefit sanctions? Is it only those who are unwell with a direct link to COVID-19 who are exempt from searching for work?

A Government update on COVID-19 for those who are in receipt of benefits is available [here](#).

The office has have spoken with DWP who have confirmed that during the COVID-19 emergency, *'they do not require any customers to attend their offices, there are no mandatory interviews, there is no requirement to prove work search and this should not result in a sanction. If there are examples of this they need to be raised with DWP urgently'*. DWP have advised that any issues should be raised with local teams in the first instance, but we have been given contact details for the national modern slavery lead who is willing to be an escalation route if required. If colleagues are aware of any cases that are not being resolved locally, please let the office know so we can put you in touch.

In addition, on all Universal Credit customer accounts within the commitments section there should be a statement to say "You will not get a sanction if you cannot keep your commitments during the Coronavirus outbreak. If your commitments say you should search for work or be available for work, your work coach will not check that you are doing this." For those who can work, the 'Find a Job service' is still available.

9) How can claims be made for Child Benefit when services are closed for registering births?

An update from the Government regarding Child Benefit claims in the context of COVID-19 is available [here](#). It confirms that parents of new-borns will still be able to register for Child Benefit without having to register their child's birth.