



Home Office

Victoria Atkins MP
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Dame Sara Thornton
Office of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner
5th Floor, Globe House
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30 April 2020

Dear Dame Sara,

Following our meetings in January and last month, and your letter of 6 March, I would like to update you on our work to ensure we continue to identify and support victims of modern slavery during the COVID-19 outbreak and provide you with more details on the resourcing of the Single Competent Authority (SCA).

As the very worrying situation around COVID-19 continues to evolve, our priority is ensuring we can continue to deliver essential services to victims of modern slavery through the Victim Care Contract. We remain guided by Public Health England in our approach and will continue to apply the comprehensive guidance they have already published to help enable the continued safe operation of the Victim Care Contract. We are working closely with The Salvation Army to get real-time information and insight on the delivery challenges and are working collaboratively to identify solutions. We provided further guidance to all First Responders on 31 March introducing COVID-19 screening questions, which will provide essential information to The Salvation Army to help them to place individuals who need it, in the most suitable accommodation.

The SCA will continue to take referrals of potential modern slavery victims throughout the COVID-19 crisis and will be focusing resources on priority decisions, namely Reasonable Grounds decisions, to ensure victims are able to access the support they need. In addition, the Home Office is developing an up-to-date resources pack for staff in NGOs and other services who may come across modern slavery cases during the COVID-19 outbreak, which will include information about how to refer suspected victims of modern slavery into support.

When we met in January, you raised a concern about the resourcing and staffing of the SCA. Notwithstanding the current circumstance, progress has been made here.

Following the resolution of some accommodation issues, the SCA was able to launch a recruitment exercise in December and January to bring the organisation up to full headcount. In addition, we have brought in additional resource from the standing HMG Surge and Rapid Response Team. This is a cross-Government resource, hosted by HMRC, which can deploy to operational areas requiring additional staff for limited periods of time.

Across the Home Office, we have also completed a detailed analysis of the deployment of case-working staff, which led to a further allocation of staff who will move to the SCA for an

initial period of around 3-6 months. It was intended that this surge would take place in May, but this is under review due to the current circumstances.

It was our preference that newer staff take on most Reasonable Ground decisions across the SCA, freeing up experienced staff to pick up Conclusive Grounds decisions. We are keeping this under review as we continue to monitor and understand the impact of COVID-19 on the SCA decision making operations during this time.

In total these recruitment and onboarding efforts should bring around 120 additional decision-makers into the SCA.

In response to your letter of 6 March on right to work for victims of modern slavery, I wanted to clarify that BICS is undertaking a review into our policy in respect of asylum seekers' right to work. This was commissioned by the former Home Secretary specifically in response to the recommendations made by the Lift the Ban coalition's report on this issue, published in October 2018. This review is ongoing and will be published in due course.

Finally, you also asked about the potential to develop a right to work programme specifically for victims of modern slavery. Thank you for this suggestion. We will await the findings from the aforementioned review before considering whether to bring forward any specific similar scheme for victims of modern slavery, to ensure a joined-up approach across the Home Office.

As you will appreciate, we are fully focused right now on responding to COVID-19 and ensuring essential services are available for victims, but we will do all we can to ensure all of our essential work to tackle the scourge of modern slavery stays on track and appreciate your continued support and engagement on this.

Yours sincerely,



Victoria Atkins MP
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