

Covid-19 contingency provisions for immigration and refugee law in Northern Ireland

Asylum

Contact to the Asylum Team at Drumkeen House should **only** be sent via email to:

- belfastasylumdutyofficer@homeoffice.gov.uk or
- belfastasylumefax@homeoffice.gov.uk.

Screening interviews:

- Screening interviews in Northern Ireland are continuing (suspended in GB).

Substantive interviews:

- Substantive asylum interviews have been suspended.

Reporting:

- All reporting requirements have been suspended for asylum seekers.

Further submissions:

The requirement to lodge further submissions in person has been suspended. Instead, further submissions should be emailed to: csuec@homeoffice.gov.uk or posted to:

FSU
The Capital Building
Old Hall Street
Liverpool
L3 9PP

Asylum support and accommodation:

The AASC/AIRE Stakeholder Engagement Forum has confirmed the following arrangements:

- For service users with symptoms living on their own the self-isolation period is 7 days. For those living with others, isolation is 14 days for all occupants.
- New service users who present with symptoms are being supported to self isolate. Mears have identified one HMO (singles) and two family sized properties that will be kept for this purpose.
- Mears are monitoring those in isolation through twice weekly phone calls. They are also working with the Home Office to identify the best model to ensure that service users in isolation have adequate and appropriate food supplies.
- Migrant Help have provided six mobile phones for the use of service users in self-isolation so that casework can be progressed.
- Mears have limited home visits to those identified as vulnerable (e.g. single mothers) and for emergency repairs. Other communications will be done via phone.
- One month's electricity and gas is being put on meters in houses.
- Coronavirus (COVID-19) has significantly impacted statutory services. This in turn has severely impacted the ability of service users to move on from asylum accommodation within the 28 day timeframe. For service users with discontinuations, it is advised that an S4 extension or application is made and these will be dealt with on a case by case basis. The Home Office is setting up an inbox where these cases can be raised.

Detention

There is no current published guidance on contingency provisions for detention.

Enforcement

NHS Treatment:

As of 07 March, new regulations mean that novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has been added to the list of diseases for which no charge is to be made for NHS treatment in Northern Ireland, regardless of the patient's immigration status.

Removals:

There is no current published guidance on contingency provisions for enforced removals.

Voluntary removals

The Voluntary Returns Service provided the following update regarding its service on 20 March 2020:

"...we are currently experiencing difficulties that mean that we cannot currently support assisted returns for people who require a level of assistance upon return from the United Kingdom. We are experiencing infrastructure and other issues that make it difficult to impossible to offer that level of support at this time.

We have therefore made a very difficult decision to cease offering assisted returns at this time.

We will continue to register an interest from people who wish to return, and to offer other levels of support to help as many people as we possibly can. Where we can

arrange flights, get travel documents etc. we will continue to do this, and we are very happy to talk to people to see what help we can offer on an individual basis.”

Visa holders and short-term residents

The Home Office has published updated [guidance](#) on visa holders and short-term residents in the UK affected by Coronavirus (COVID-19). This guidance provides important information for people whose visas have expired or are about to expire and what steps they need to take to secure an extension of leave. It also sets out provisions for short-term residents to apply from within the UK to switch to a long-term visa.

Most importantly, the guidance confirms that:

“Individuals will not be regarded as an overstayer or be subject to enforcement action if they are unable to attend a biometric appointment due to Covid-19 or if there are delays in processing your application.”

There is a dedicated helpline that affected people can contact for assistance on 0800 678 1767 or by email to CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk. We would also encourage you to [check the UKVI website for any updates](#).

If you require any advice or assistance with extending your leave in-line with Home Office guidance, please do not hesitate to contact our immigration advice line.

No recourse to public funds

Individuals whose visa contains a condition of ‘no recourse to public funds’ are unable to access benefits. We are aware that such persons may find themselves without work due to Covid-19. In its guidance, the Home Office states:

“We understand that this is a difficult time and for this reason we are continually reviewing the situation to consider what more can be done for those in the UK whose immigration status has been affected by coronavirus.”

Law Centre NI is currently monitoring this situation and will publish any updates.

UK Visa Application Centres

Applications in the UK:

Sopra Steria, which manages all UK Visa and Citizenship Application Centres within the UK, has published the following contingency measure on its [website](#):

“CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) UPDATE 1 *If you have Coronavirus symptoms and should be self-isolating, or if you have Coronavirus, you must not attend your appointment. Please email admin.ukvas@soprasteria.com with ‘COVID-19’ and your UAN in the subject to say that you cannot attend. We will refund your fee and will tell the Home Office.”*

Applications outside the UK:

The Home Office has published [guidance](#) on applications outside the UK.

UK visa application centres overseas are managed by VFS Global and TLSContact. VFS Global has published the following on its website:

“UK has stopped accepting visa applications in Wuhan (China), Gurugram and North Mumbai (India), Kingston (Jamaica), Kuwait City (Kuwait), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia), Lima (Peru), the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Miami, San Francisco and Seattle (USA), Caracas (Venezuela), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Sao Paulo (Brazil), Bogota (Colombia) , Miami (USA) , Gurgaon (India) , Beijing , Changsha, Chengdu, Chongqing, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Jinan, Kunming, Nanjing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Shenzhen, Xi'an (China), Bangalore - Whitefield & Electronic City, Noida and Thiruvananthapuram (India), Nassau (Bahamas), Bridgetown (Barbados), Hamilton (Bermuda), Georgetown (Cayman Islands), Santa Domingo (Dominican Republic), Quito and Guayaquil (Ecuador), Georgetown (Guyana), Goa, Lucknow, Mysuru and Jaipur (India), Tehran (Iran), Castries (St

Lucia), Guatemala City (Guatemala), Sharjah (UAE), and Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, Seattle & Washington DC (USA).”

TLS Contact has published updates for each visa application centre separately, and applicants will therefore need to choose the particular centre for the relevant update: <https://uk.tlscontact.com/>

Appeal hearings:

On 25 March 2020, Sir Ernest Ryder, Senior President of Tribunals [issued a presidential practice direction on the Covid-19 pandemic](#).

First-tier Tribunal:

On 24 March 2020, a [notice](#) was issued by Resident Judge Phillips with details of changes to appeals in the First-tier Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

As stated by Judge Phillips, "all appeals will proceed by way of a Case Management Hearing (CMR) via telephone or Skype which will take place on a date to be notified in a time slot to be allocated. All current scheduled hearings are vacated."

Upper Tribunal:

On 23 March 2020, a [presidential guidance note](#) was issued by Mr Justice Lane, President of the Upper Tribunal. On 19 and 20 March 2020, the Upper Tribunal informed parties of the postponement of hearings of cases that had been the subject of hearing notices, beginning on 23 March. The Presidential Guidance explains what will happen with regard to those cases and to the other cases which are before the UTIAC or which may come before it during the pandemic.

Judicial review

The Lord Chief Justice's Office has provided the [guidance on court proceedings](#).

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