

ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION & SUPPORT
FACTSHEET FOR STRATEGIC MIGRATION PARTNERSHIPS

Background

The impact of Covid-19 across our asylum functions has been significant and we are working at pace to respond to the crisis by developing new processes which safeguard our service users and staff, whilst maintaining business continuity as far as possible.

This work is continually evolving in response to the impact of the pandemic but as we continue this work we thought it would be helpful to update you on some key changes that have been made to assist those seeking asylum in accessing the services they need during this time.

1. Asylum Policy and Process
2. Asylum Accommodation
3. Accommodation Procurement
4. Support for Service Users
5. Asylum Support

1. Asylum Policy and Process

- We continue to register asylum claims through processes that are aligned and compliant with the Government's guidance on social distancing and only essential travel. The UK has a long and proud history of providing protection to those who need it and we will continue to uphold our obligations under the Refugee Convention during this time.
- The Home Office's priority is adhering to Public Health England's (PHE) advice in relation to the Covid-19 outbreak, while ensuring that people can continue to access essential systems.
- We have suspended all in-person substantive asylum interviews in order to reduce non-essential travel and contact between people in line with PHE advice and are exploring alternative methods of interview as a matter of urgency.
- Screening Units are operating a reduced service however we have temporarily introduced additional locations to register asylum claims to reduce travel requirements. These are temporary arrangements which will be reviewed in line with Her Majesty's Government measures in response to coronavirus (COVID-19). A separate factsheet has been shared detailing this.
- Social distancing measures have been put in place at screening locations to reduce in-person contact at the screening event and keep staff and customers safe during this time.
- Asylum Operations are looking to maintain services wherever possible but decision capacity has been reduced. Face to face interviewing has been paused, and appeal hearings at Immigration Appeal Courts are suspended. This will result in fewer negative decisions becoming appeal rights exhausted in the short term.
- The Home Office will update published guidance to reflect changes in operational practice where necessary and we will advise you when this happens.

2. Asylum Accommodation

- The Government has acted quickly to review process and adjust policy in response to COVID 19 guidance, working with Public Health England (PHE) to ensure we continue to support and protect asylum seekers and their families.
- We continue to support asylum seekers who would otherwise be unable to support themselves by providing free, furnished accommodation. We also cover utility costs and provide a cash allowance to meet their other essential living needs
- Asylum seekers in initial accommodation centres and hotels are accommodated on a full board basis and are provided with food and toiletries. Those in houses and flats receive free utilities and a cash allowance of £37.75 per week for each person in the household.
- We are reviewing the level of the cash allowance, as we do every year as part of normal business, and we are taking coronavirus factors into consideration.
- In addition we have committed to continue to support and accommodate asylum seekers who would normally no longer be eligible for accommodation because their claim has been resolved. They will continue to receive support until the end of June and this will be kept under review.
- Even if an asylum claim has failed, we will continue to provide accommodation and support for those who would otherwise be destitute and who are temporarily unable to leave the UK because of a practical or legal obstacle, including as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.
- The Home Office is working closely with Public Health England (PHE) who have embedded a Director within the Home Office to ensure that the right guidance is provided. PHE have reviewed all Home Office proposals regarding accommodation, and the Home Office has ensured that PHE recommendations and guidance provided have been followed.
- We remain in regular dialogue with senior local and national health officials to ensure that a national approach is adopted, whilst listening to local concerns.
- Accommodation providers have been supporting social distancing through a number of measures including:
 - Limiting access to communal areas
 - Sequencing meal times to avoid groups gathering
 - Serving food to rooms
 - Floor markings to delineate the 2m social distancing recommendations
 - Posters and translated guidance around the IA and hotel properties to inform service users of guidelines
 - Ensuring handwashing and hygiene facilities are available to service users.

- Newly arrived asylum seekers with symptoms will be housed and supported in hotels to complete their 7 days self-isolation (14 days for families/groups) and then dispersed into mainstream asylum accommodation.
- Asylum accommodation providers are applying Public Health England guidance and will instruct any symptomatic service user to self-isolate within appropriate accommodation or contingency accommodation and will provide support to enable them to do so.
- Guidance has been communicated to all individuals accommodated in Initial Accommodation (IA) that if they have any symptoms, they must notify a member of staff and then remain in their room. Where appropriate, and in line with PHE guidance, symptomatic service users are removed from the accommodation, for their own safety and that of other service users. Transport is arranged to take them, along with any family as appropriate, to alternative accommodation where they can self-isolate. If they are sharing a room, both individuals are asked to self-isolate.
- In respect of multi-person IA facilities, PHE Guidance recommends that separate rooms should be provided for symptomatic people, or they should be moved to hotels. Those with underlying health conditions and people over 70 years of age should also be moved to the appropriate hotel accommodation following PHE guidance, unless individuals do not wish to be moved. We are reviewing each case on an individual basis and continue to work with our providers to ensure the guidance is followed.
- All asylum seekers accommodated in IA have received translated Government guidance to make them aware of the Government's advice on COVID-19. This includes making them aware of the symptoms of the virus, the escalation process should they believe they have the early signs of the virus and basic hygiene requirements, including regularly washing their hands.
- There are a number of challenges in enforcing compliance with self-distancing and isolation in homes of multiple occupancy. Local Health colleagues and Police have powers under the Covid-19 legislation to enforce self isolation. We have worked closely with Public Health England to ensure that all practical measures are in place to support their guidance. If asylum seekers do not follow the rules, they will be reported to the Home Office and the Police if deemed necessary.
- The provision of WIFI in Initial Accommodation is currently being assessed and timelines investigated.
- Transportation: Provider staff are adhering to PHE guidance and advice when transporting service users.

3. Accommodation Procurement

- As no service users are being asked to leave accommodation at this time, we continue to procure accommodation to ensure that we are able to comply with our statutory duty to house all destitute asylum seekers. An additional 4000 single rooms in hotels are being procured throughout the country.
- On 27th March the Minister Chris Philp wrote to Local Authorities to advise that procurement would be required across the regions to ensure that we continue to have properties in which to house destitute asylum seekers and that the usual procedure of not permitting accommodation Providers to procure without local authority agreement was being paused, allowing Providers to identify any suitable properties as appropriate. The Home Office remains committed to working with Local Authorities and NGOs where sites have been identified.

4. Support for Service Users

- Migrant Help provide support to supported asylum seekers through the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE) service. The service is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week and this level of support has been maintained during the current crisis.
- Service users can contact Migrant Help 24 hours a day on a freephone number if they need assistance or guidance.
- AIRE are working closely with the Home Office's accommodation providers and the Asylum Safeguarding Hub to ensure service users receive the advice and support they need at this time.
- Our Providers have identified vulnerable Service Users and are providing them with additional support, including supplying food parcels where needed, and working towards supplying mobile telephones to those Service Users who do not have them.

5. Asylum Support

- We have put in place a number of temporary arrangements to support to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers through the pandemic.
- **Failed Asylum Seekers** - Anyone on S95 support who would ordinarily no longer be eligible to receive it because their asylum claim and any appeal is finally rejected, will be transferred on to S4 support. We will be issuing them with an appropriate letter informing them of this.
- **Refugees** - To reduce short term pressures on Local Authority accommodation asylum seekers who have been granted refugee status will remain in asylum accommodation until June 2020 – this date remains under review.
- Some supported persons received a “notice to quit” their asylum accommodation shortly before we announced the change of policy allowing them to stay. Where requested, we have been reinstating their support.
- Those on S95 or S4 who have received, or will in future receive, a positive immigration decision, will not now receive a letter asking them to leave their accommodation. A letter will be sent that advises that they can still apply for DWP benefits and of the assistance available to make the application. DWP has confirmed that applications can still be made and that they will be processed without the need for an interview and that advance payments are available. Asylum support payments will continue until DWP benefits are received.
- **Discontinuations of S95/98/S4 support.** The decision to allow asylum seekers who have been granted refugee status to remain in asylum accommodation until June 2020 means that the only likely discontinuations of S4 or 95 support in this period are where the person is found to be no longer destitute or possibly in some other cases where there has been a serious breach of the relevant regulations. However, we expect any such cases to be very few. Any such decisions will be reviewed by our senior casework team before they are made.
- **Refusals of applications for S95 support on grounds of non-destitution.** If the person is in Initial Accommodation at the time of the decision, they will be able to remain there pending any appeal. We are liaising with HMCTS about the handling of appeals, which have also been impacted by COVID-19 contingency arrangements. Any potential refusals are being referred to managers and are being kept under review.
- **Temporary casework measures.** Some asylum seekers live with family and friends, but if circumstances change, approach the Home Office for accommodation and financial support. In light of the NHS England guidance, we are not requiring providers to move these people into new accommodation, unless the person is street homeless, there are other vulnerability factors or there is a court order requiring us to provide alternative accommodation. To help

manage this position, asylum seekers who have applied for S95 support in the form of accommodation and subsistence may in some circumstances be offered temporary subsistence payments to cover their essential living needs in the accommodation they are occupying.

- **Temporary measures relating to the consideration of applications for support.** We will not generally expect Migrant Help to have had sight of original supporting documents provided with an application. Migrant Help will be able to complete information to indicate they have seen copy documents. As new birth certificates are not currently being issued, we will not expect applicants for maternity payments to produce them. A full birth certificate may be required at a later date once we return to normal arrangements.
- We will be communicating wherever possible by email and will not routinely be sending communications by post.
- **Aspen payment cards.** At the onset we immediately explored lifting internet restrictions on ASPEN cards. We discovered that to use the cards with major suppliers would require a 3D security upgrade. The timescale for this is 2-3 months, so we are continuing to work with contractors to investigate more viable options. Discussions are currently being undertaken with the ASPEN card provider to move to payments being made on to a two-weekly cycle.
- **Temporary measures for Emergency Payments.** Emergency payments are being issued for 10 rather than 5 days to ensure sufficient time to set up and process ASPEN Support, or if there are errors with current ASPEN cards.