



Open letter to the chief executives of all local authorities in England

cc

Council leaders
London Councils
Greater London Authority
Greater Manchester Combined Authority
Local Government Association

NRPF Network
Homeless Link

20 March 2020

Dear Chief Executive,

Supporting migrant communities during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

We are writing to demand that urgent steps be taken by local authorities to protect and support vulnerable migrants, particularly those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Councils must ensure that all migrants in their area can access the care, support and shelter they need during this crisis, regardless of immigration status and without fear of the consequences. We urge you to apply to the [£500 million Hardship Fund to support economically vulnerable people and households](#), recently announced by the government, in order to help you do this.

Specifically we are asking for:

Communication and coordination

- Each local authority must set up a COVID-19 and homelessness taskforce and conduct an urgent needs analysis of the homeless and rough sleeping population in their area

- Needs analysis must pay careful attention to people who may be at additional risk due to lack of eligibility for housing assistance and welfare benefits and/or lack of English
- Needs analysis must also consider the needs of women with insecure immigration status who are at risk of sexual and domestic abuse
- Local authorities must ensure that information and guidance around COVID-19 is available in all community languages in an easy-to-understand format. Guidance must make clear that no charges apply to testing or treatment for COVID-19
- Information and guidance must be accessible to migrants who may have limited access to the internet, including: rough sleepers; people in hostels and shelters; people in temporary accommodation; refugee and migrant looked after children and care leavers; and destitute migrants supported by social services under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 or the provisions of the Care Act 2014.
- Guidance must be provided to ensure that migrants who are not registered with a GP understand how to obtain prompt medical care and advice if they are concerned about COVID-19
- Local authorities must communicate regularly and clearly with local migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs); migrant-support organisations; homelessness organisations; women's organisations including those specialising in violence against women and girls (VAWG); and mutual aid groups about the measures they are putting in place to ensure the safety, welfare and dignity of all migrants in their area. These groups must be represented on local authority COVID-19 and homelessness taskforces.

Migrants at risk of street homelessness or who are in shelter, hostel or temporary accommodation or other accommodation provided by the local authority

- Local authorities must ensure that everyone, regardless of immigration status, can access self-contained accommodation and self-isolate safely
- Local authorities must block book hotels or other suitable accommodation so that homeless or overcrowded individuals and households (including rough sleepers and those who are sofa-surfing) can self-isolate
- Empty homes, council estates facing demolition, private housing developments standing empty and university halls of residence should also be put to this use
- Accommodation must be made available with 'light-touch engagement'. Any data collected must not be shared with the Home Office or any other agency for the purpose of immigration enforcement
- Local authorities must enforce the suspension of all private-sector, housing association and council evictions
- Local authorities must ensure all shelters, hostels and council-accommodation providers in their area (and beyond, where individuals and households are accommodated out of

borough) are adequately resourced to look after the welfare of their residents in a safe, hygienic and dignified manner

- Overcrowded households in accommodation provided by local authorities must be offered suitable re-housing in more spacious, self-contained accommodation

Migrant rough sleepers

- Suitable accommodation must be secured for all rough sleepers, whether or not they have been diagnosed with, or are suspected of having, COVID-19
- Local authorities must use s189 of the Housing Act 1996 or the Care Act 2014 to ensure people diagnosed with, or suspected of having, COVID-19 are housed immediately
- All rough sleepers must be made aware of the support available and provided with clear public health information about the measures being imposed to deal with COVID-19 and what they need to do if they suspect they have the virus. This information must be given in a language that people can understand.
- People staying in winter shelters must be provided with accommodation by local authorities if shelters are forced to stop or reduce their operation as a result of COVID-19 or because their winter season has come to an end
- Social distancing, self-isolation and ‘lockdown’ guidance and policies are likely to result in more people being at risk of street homeless. Migrants with insecure immigration status will make up a disproportionate number of those affected. Contingency plans must urgently be put in place for this

Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and Care Act 2014

- The impact of COVID-19 on access to accommodation, suitability of accommodation, capacity to work, medical issues, childcare and other caring responsibilities must be considered in all assessments conducted under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 or Care Act 2014
- Where individuals or households are already supported under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 or under the provisions of the Care Act 2014, steps should be taken to assess whether additional support will need to be provided as a result of COVID-19. Where extra support is required, it must be provided without delay
- Local authorities must make arrangements for all subsistence payments to be received remotely so that people do not have to travel to collect their subsistence in person
- Where migrants in receipt of, or seeking to access, section 17 or Care Act support are in work, local authorities must provide information and advice on their rights to statutory sick pay if they are required to self-isolate or have to stop working due to COVID-19

- Local authorities must identify those they support who may be more severely affected if they contract coronavirus, including elderly individuals, people with pre-existing medical conditions and pregnant women. Local authority staff should maintain regular contact with such individuals to monitor their wellbeing
- Where migrants are unable to attend Home Office appointments, renew their leave on time, or provide outstanding evidence to the Home Office due to COVID-19, they must be supported to access urgent legal advice. Local authorities must be mindful that, as a result of COVID-19, individuals are likely to face delays in resolving their immigration status.

Refugee and migrant looked-after children and care leavers

- Local authorities must protect the health and safety of young people in their accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes but is not limited to addressing issues of overcrowding in hostels.
- COVID-19 is likely to have a negative impact on the mental health of refugee and migrant looked-after children and care leavers, especially if they are asked to self-isolate. Local authorities must take steps to protect the mental health of the young people in their care.
- Local authorities must ensure that young people in their care have consistent access to the internet so that they can participate in online education and communicate with their support networks should they need to self-isolate. Young people must not be asked to fund this themselves.

On 16th March 2020 an [open letter](#) was sent by migrants' rights organisations to central government asking for urgent measures in response to the pandemic, including:

- The suspension of NHS charging and data-sharing with the Home Office for the purposes of immigration enforcement
- The suspension of 'no recourse to public funds' conditions
- Assurances that migrants unable to attend reporting appointments, court dates, or interviews whilst self-isolating will not be penalised
- Provision to extend or modify visas to prevent people being forced to 'overstay' their visa due to self-isolation or being unable to return to a country that is not safe to travel to
- The release of everyone detained under immigration powers to reduce the risk of COVID-19 entering the detention estate and causing avoidable harm

Local authorities must actively support these demands. They should urgently advocate to central government to end all ‘hostile environment’ policies and suspend immigration-based eligibility criteria for housing assistance and welfare benefits.

We urge a speedy response to ensure that all migrants in our community are protected during this current and evolving crisis, regardless of their country of origin or immigration status.

Please respond urgently by email to benjamin.morgan@pilc.org.uk detailing the actions your local authority has or will be taking to address the concerns raised.

Yours sincerely,

Migrants’ Rights Network
Project 17
Public Interest Law Centre
Liberty
JCWI (Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants)
NACCOM (No Accommodation Network)
Jewish Council for Racial Equality (JCORE)
Youth Legal
Together with Migrant Children
Migrant Voice
Magpie Project
Latin American Women’s Rights Services
Step Up Migrant Women Campaign
Roma Support Group
Labour Homelessness Campaign
Labour Campaign for Free Movement
Haringey Migrant Support Centre
Haringey Welcome
Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network
Unity Project
The BASW IAT SIG (The British Association of Social Workers Immigration Asylum and Trafficking Special Interest Group)
Birmingham Community Hosting Network (BIRCH Network)
Just Fair
Museum of Homelessness
Women for Refugee Women

Director of the Council of Somali Organizations
Right to Remain
We Belong
Hackney Law Centre
Hackney Migrant Centre
RAMFEL
ASAP (Asylum Support Appeals Project)
After Exploitation
Bristol Refugee Rights
BMENational
ASIRT
Social Workers Without Borders
Student Action for Refugees (STAR)
the3million
Settled
Jesuit Refugee Service UK
Central England Law Centre
Wanstead and Woodford Migrant Support
RAPAR
Polish Expats Association CIC
Centrala
Voice4Change England
Runnymede Trust
Race on the Agenda (ROTA)
Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT)
Young Roots