

# Catholic Union of Great Britain

## Needs of the Vulnerable during the Covid 19 Crisis

### Homelessness

UK charity Shelter has estimated that as of December 2019 there were 320,000 people homeless in the UK.

According to **Homeless Link** the national membership charity for organisations working directly with people who become homeless in England there is a need to:

Remove legal barriers to accessing self-contained accommodation for people facing homelessness. Legal conditions on assistance are preventing the implementation of public health advice. Government should suspend all legal barriers in place, including, as a priority, a suspension of no recourse to public funds conditions and fund local authorities accordingly.

In addition, in the absence of community testing, homelessness workers should be prioritised alongside NHS workers and others working to support the most vulnerable.

### Rough Sleepers

Estimates of the number of people sleeping rough vary from between 4,200 to almost as many as 25,000.

On 27 March 2020, in response to Covid 19, the UK Government gave English councils 48 hours to help everybody off the streets.

£3.2 million government funding has been made available to councils to ensure that rough sleepers are protected from the corona virus pandemic.

### [Government's letter to local authorities](#)

Councils have been working hard to identify rough sleepers and get them off the streets and into suitable accommodation to help protect them from the corona virus

For example Westminster Council at Unity Kitchen staff and volunteers are providing 900 meals a day for rough sleepers in their area.

By the 2<sup>nd</sup> April [Cheshire Council](#) had housed all rough sleepers in their borough. They worked with local partners to identify self-contained accommodation and care and support for rough sleepers.

Canterbury City Council have secured a deal with Travelodge to provide up to 57 rooms to protect homeless people and rough sleepers during the corona virus pandemic.

[Northampton Borough Council](#) has partnered with local churches and charities to find appropriate accommodation for all the homeless in the borough of Northampton.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> April LGA Housing said not everyone is off the streets yet. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, there was already a shortage of suitable accommodation available to councils. This hasn't been helped with the recent closures of empty hotels and caravan parks, and some insurance policies limiting hotel owners taking part in housing rough sleepers. Secondly, council officers aren't enforcers. People sleep rough for a number of complex reasons, and some are reluctant to accept help from authorities.

LGA Housing are calling on Government to increase support to councils who are struggling to source accommodation and hire additional staff. With the right support councils can help to get everybody off the streets and make sure everyone is safe during these uncertain times.

- On the 31<sup>st</sup> March St Mungo's said that more than 700 people who were rough sleeping or in emergency hubs across their services have been supported to self-isolate safely.
- In London, more than 500 people are now in empty hotel rooms with more hotels coming on board. They are being supported with healthcare by nurses and doctors from UCLH and our teams are providing food and social care support.
- In Bournemouth, 55 people have been given spaces, with more following. Everyone in isolation is being supported with phone calls and food deliveries.
- In Bristol 150 people who were on the streets are now safely in accommodation and 50 people who were staying in St Mungo's services in communal sleeping spaces have also been given alternative accommodation to self-isolate safely. They are also helping, with partners, in Oxford, Reading and Brighton.
- Staff in St Mungo's accommodation services are following guidance from the Government and Public Health England to keep clients and staff safe, and together with sector partners, pushing for more from Government for keyworkers and clients over coming months.

St Mungo's have specifically asked for more Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as a charity providing essential social care for vulnerable people.

**West London Mission** and **The Passage** are urgently looking for volunteers to help provide food for homeless people now in hotels in Central and West London. The food is prepared in The Passage's kitchens and the meals are then delivered to the hotels. Currently, they are providing food for 78 homeless people in two hotels, although this number is expected to rise, to potentially 400 homeless people. **Volunteers are needed immediately for the following tasks: food preparation, washing up, sorting food, making up food parcels and drivers**, Shifts are from 3.30 pm - 7.30 pm daily. The email contact is [Lorraine Richardson](#).

## Refugees

As of end 2018 there were 127,000 refugees in the UK (UNHCR data). According to Home Office data, asylum applications in 2019 reached a 16 year high with 35,566 applications (44,494 individuals). In 2019, 20,703 people were granted protection in the UK through the asylum system or resettlement programmes, the highest number in a single year since 2003. Of these 12,565 were grants of asylum, up 64% with notable increases in grants to Iranian (up 143% to 2,723), Sudanese (up 168% to 1,625) and Eritrean (up 113% to 1,785) nationals. More asylum seekers are waiting longer for decisions. There were 40,018 asylum applications waiting for a decision at the end of 2019 (a 47% increase).

The Refugee Council have been asking the government to protect refugees and asylum seekers who are vulnerable due to the Corona virus pandemic, and are concerned for those who are cannot access accommodation or support, as well as those in shared accommodation who may not be able to self-isolate.

Once granted refugee status in the UK they are entitled to free NHS care for their health needs. They have the right to work and can claim some state welfare benefits and are subject to the same restrictions as UK nationals.

Asylum seekers are entitled to free NHS treatment. However, very few are allowed to work and most rely on state support – £37.75 weekly for essentials, with basic accommodation provided. Once an asylum seeker receives refugee status, they are given 28 days to 'move-on' from their property and

find work or apply for welfare benefits in the mainstream system. The 28 day 'move-on' period is widely regarded as insufficient for many newly recognized refugees to find a job, or to navigate the system and transfer to regular welfare. Most refused asylum seekers do not receive welfare support and are not formally covered by the NHS.

UNHCR has recommended that steps be taken to ensure that refugees do not fall into homelessness and destitution at the end of the 'move-on' period. It was also recommended that health services be provided free of charge regardless of a person's immigration status. **The Government has since clarified that no-one in the UK, including anyone living in the UK without regular immigration status, will be charged for treatment and testing for COVID-19 if required.**

Most groups assisting refugees and asylum seekers remain open, but support activity is moving online where possible, or into raising funds for emergency packs.

There have been changes to asylum procedures on a practical level. The Home Office is enabling asylum claims to be registered with limited contact. Some screening interviews and all substantive in-person interviews have been cancelled; the Home Office is looking to expand using digital technology to conduct interviews remotely. For most, immigration reporting requirements have been suspended for three months. The requirement for so-called further submissions — new evidence requirements where asylum claims have been refused or withdrawn — have shifted to the post or online. The Home Office has said that it cannot currently support assisted returns for people who require a level of assistance upon return home from the UK.

The Home Office is currently unable to process any statelessness applications or make any decisions on Stateless Leave applications due to capacity issues. Statelessness interviews have also been suspended. Online applications can still be made and the Home Office will seek to resume this work as soon as they are able to.

**UNHCR is also working on a set of recommendations aimed at supporting refugee status determination procedures under the current, challenging, circumstances.**

Various initiatives are underway involving charities, local authorities and private groups to ensure that those who are homeless and destitute can find shelter. A key coordinating charity is [NACOMM](#).

UNHCR has advocated that the Home Office:

Suspend asylum support terminations, including evictions from Home Office accommodation in line with Government policy on private and social landlord eviction. All asylum support applications from people who have applied for asylum or received a negative asylum decision should be granted, and support provided as quickly as possible;

Rapidly increase suitable contingency accommodation so that people seeking asylum have somewhere safe to be and, if needed, to self-isolate; and

Remove barriers to accessing Local Authority support that people face due to their immigration status.

The Government is looking at increasing its capacity to safely accommodate people regardless of their status in the UK and will continue to monitor the situation.

UNHCR partners with the UK Government and the IOM in refugee resettlement, for which the UK has one of the largest programmes globally.

Support networks for young refugees and asylum seekers are under massive strain, said Jo Cobley, director of Young Roots. The non-governmental organization (NGO) works with 650 young refugees and asylum seekers via activities and casework in London's Croydon and Brent districts.

‘A lot of young people have fallen through the net, like those waiting for appeals. There are big concerns about mental health for an already isolated group’ Jo Cobley, Director of Young Roots

National NGOs are advocating for the inclusion of refugees **and** asylum seekers in national health care and other benefits, to ensure that accommodation and isolation facilities are available and to guard against marginalisation or stigmatisation.

They recently sent a joint letter on the issue to Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

The British Refugee Council has launched a fund to ensure that its therapists remain available for remote counselling and so they can support people with newly-granted refugee status, who only have 28 days to find accommodation.

The government is also reviewing the basis for ongoing immigration detention. NGOs have written to the Home Secretary, calling for the release of those in immigration detention amid fears about the ability to contain the virus within the facilities. Legal action is also being pursued to secure the release of detainees vulnerable to infection and the suspension of new detentions.

The Government has also announced its intention to seek an arrangement with the EU to preserve the right to family reunion for unaccompanied children seeking international protection in the EU or the UK, and has signalled it will continue with Dublin III transfers of asylum seekers from Europe as well as processing in-country applications, where possible, despite COVID-19.

Across the country, asylum seekers appear especially vulnerable, lacking the support that those with refugee status have. Those with an active claim receive £37.75 weekly for essentials, with rudimentary accommodation provided. However, those refused receive no support.

For groups supporting refugees and asylum seekers, activity is moving online where possible, or into raising funds for emergency packs.

The Asylum Support Appeals Group has posted the latest advice online about benefits or asylum support, though that advice can change quickly. Doctors of the World has translated the health service’s advice on Covid-19 into 26 languages to be disseminated by those working with migrants and refugees.

The **Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS UK)** have set up a new Emergency Response Team to distribute food parcels and hygiene packs to the most vulnerable refugees. The food shortage brought about by the corona virus outbreak is dire for some refugees, and the suspension of most day centres supporting destitute migrants has left many with no source of support. **JRS UK are looking for volunteer deliverers who can collect food parcels and hygiene packs from the JRS UK office in Wapping and deliver them to vulnerable refugees in London.** It is essential that those applying for this role have a full clean driving licence and access to a car, and are willing to drive in London. If you are interested in volunteering with JRS UK, please e-mail [uk@jrs.net](mailto:uk@jrs.net) to request an application form.

### **Food Banks**

Food banks provide a minimum of three days’ emergency food and support to people in crisis. They are therefore designed for short-term, emergency support with food. Their aim is to relieve the immediate pressure of the crisis by providing food.

Between April 2018 and March 2019, food banks in their network provided a record 1.6 million food supplies to people in crisis, a 19% increase on the previous year.

The [latest government guidance](#) explains that food banks can legally continue operating and buildings that host food banks can continue to open for those sessions provided they follow social distancing rules because this work qualifies staff and volunteers as key workers 'caring for the vulnerable.' However, this means making big changes to the way food bank centres work in order to keep everybody involved safe.

The Trussell Trust have provided all food banks in their network with a letter for workers, to explain their role so it is clear why they're leaving the house. Social distancing and self-isolation rules mean that volunteers who are classed as at-risk because of their age or due to a health condition must stay at home. It also means making sure there are hand-washing facilities in all food bank centres and that everyone is washing their hands regularly. Other changes to how food bank centres work might include:

- Instead of being invited into a centre, people referred are immediately given a pre-packed food bank parcel in a practical, dignified and compassionate manner
- Ensuring that wherever people are waiting, there is a large enough space for people to wait at least two metres apart
- A reduced number of food bank sessions per week
- Coordination with local agencies to give them pre-packed food bank parcels, or to deliver to people those agencies work with

Details of Foodbanks across the country can be found [here](#), specifically in London [here](#) and for details of Trussell Trust foodbanks [here](#).

### **Domestic Abuse**

Household isolation instruction as a result of corona virus does not apply if you need to leave your home to escape domestic abuse.

#### [Government response to Covid 19 for those suffering domestic abuse](#)

1.6 million women experienced domestic abuse last year, and self-isolation has the potential to aggravate pre-existing abusive behaviours by perpetrators. One in three women across England and Wales between 16-59 experience domestic abuse at some point in their lives.

While in lockdown or self-isolation, women and children are likely to be spending concentrated periods of time with perpetrators, potentially escalating the threat of domestic abuse and further restricting their freedom. Domestic abuse isn't always physical – it's a pattern of controlling, threatening and coercive behaviour, which can also be emotional, economic, psychological or sexual. Abuse is a choice a perpetrator makes, and isolation is already used by many perpetrators as a tool of control. In the current climate, it is certainly more challenging for women suffering abuse. Lines of communication could be severely limited if women are unable to leave the home.

The National Domestic Abuse charity Refuge has seen online traffic to its National Domestic Abuse Helpline website rise by 700%. Traffic to this website, designed by survivors for survivors and which contains valuable information for women on how they can access life-saving support rose by 700% on Monday 6th April compared with the previous day. The website visits on 6<sup>th</sup> April were greater than the combined number for the previous five days.

## Disability

Disability Rights UK has [issued a statement](#) including the following suggested principles to guide treatment for patients with disabilities:

- Our individual chance of benefiting from treatment should we have Covid19 must not be influenced by how our lives are valued by society.
- Where we have existing health conditions or impairments that are unrelated to our chance of benefiting from treatment, they must not play any part in decision-making regarding our equal right to access such treatment.
- The fact that we might have significant levels of social care and support needs, or that we may do so in future as a result of the pandemic, should not make health staff think that we will not benefit from treatment.
- We have the right to be fully involved in decisions about our own lives, including life and death decisions. Decisions should never be made without our involvement, or consideration of our best interests. There is no justification for policies based on age or learning disability that do not treat each of us with respect and as individuals.
- We all, and our advocates, have the right to know about decisions that may be made about us that will affect us.
- Guidelines on the assessment, provision, and evaluation of treatment and care provided to individuals during the Covid-19 pandemic must be developed in collaboration with disabled people's organisations and representatives from human rights bodies.

## Volunteering

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations with 4,000 member organisations (a third of the voluntary sector workforce in England) advises:

1. Only volunteer if you feel well enough and are not shielding, self-isolating or in a high-risk group.
2. Keep washing your hands often for 20 seconds.
3. Stay at least two metres - about three steps - away from people you're helping.
4. If you're trying to help someone with very serious issues – don't be afraid to flag with appropriate statutory services.
5. Support family, friends and neighbours by phone or video call.
6. Offer to run errands for people but stay outside of people's homes.
7. Let family and friends know what you're doing.
8. Don't take on too much - it's often better not to offer at all than to let someone down.

## [Government guidance on Covid-19 and the charity sector](#)

Concerning organising a community volunteer group and safeguarding issues including Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks government guidance states that 'many of the roles that volunteers will carry out in their local communities do not raise safeguarding issues and do not need a DBS check'.

If activities do normally require a DBS check of volunteers: 'under normal circumstances we would advise that having volunteers DBS checked is a prudent safeguarding step. There is, however, **no legal requirement for you to have a DBS check**. Regardless of whether you choose to have

volunteers DBS checked, you should ensure your group follow simple, practical precautions such as **working safely in pairs**, keeping records of money spent and providing shopping receipts to safeguard all involved’.

If they are not from the same household, **volunteers must stay two metres apart at all times.**

## **Mental Health**

The World Health Organisation has provided [information](#) on the impact Covid 19 is having on everyone’s mental health, and suggestions and ways to implement preventative measures to help alleviate anxiety and stress and to enable mental well-being.

The Government has given [advice](#) as to what can be done to help our mental well-being and health during the Covid 19 pandemic and lockdown.

The Charity Mind has also provided [suggestions](#) on how to protect one’s mental health and well-being.

Social distancing is creating increased anxiety and depression amongst the public and this is affecting those in low paid or insecure work positions the most, as well as the elderly and those with mental health issues. A [recent study](#) done by Swansea and Manchester University shows that isolation and social distancing is having a serious impact on the emotional wellbeing and mental health of the public.

A [survey](#) has been done to show the impact Covid 19 and the restrictions on movement is having on the well-being of the public.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has recently warned that mental health units are likely to experience the same crisis as faced by care homes due to the lack of Covid 19 testing kits and PPE. A national survey shows that only half of the UK’s psychiatrists and their patients are in a position to be tested and this figure falls to 30% for family tests. 25% of psychiatrists are jeopardising their patients and their health by being unable to access the correct PPE. Unless there is a dramatic improvement with an increase of support given with access to testing kits and correct PPE the Covid 19 crisis which care homes are now facing will be faced by mental health units in the same way. Thousands of psychiatrists and frontline staff are still treating those suffering from mental illness in person as inpatients or outpatients in the community risking their patients and their medical staff contracting Covid 19. The President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists is calling on the Government to urgently address these needs to protect their patients and staff from contracting Covid 19 and having the same consequences as care homes are now experiencing.

The full RCPsych Covid 19 statement and guidance is available [here](#).

22 April 2020