

Rt Hon Priti Patel MP  
Secretary of State for the Home Office  
Home Office  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria St  
London  
SW1H 0EU

13 April 2020

Dear Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

As organisations representing healthcare professionals and refugees and migrants living in the UK, we call on you to suspend the National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Regulations 2015 and 2017 and all associated immigration checks and data sharing, which risk undermining our national efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19.

To tackle the huge challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic together, it is critical that everyone currently within the UK is supported to stay healthy and included in nationwide public health measures. No one must be excluded, regardless of their immigration status. Recognising this fundamental public health principle, the [World Health Organization](#) has stressed the importance of ensuring all migrants and refugees have equal access to health services, are effectively included in national COVID-19 responses and are not prevented from seeking care due to fear of immigration enforcement.

Any measure known to obstruct the delivery of healthcare or prevent patients coming forward to NHS services is inappropriate and dangerous during a pandemic. A wealth of [evidence](#) shows that the regulations prevent people with insecure immigration status, including those seeking [asylum](#), from seeking the medical care they need, often because they cannot afford to pay and fear it will impact on an immigration application. Medical [organisations](#) have long warned the regulations risk undertreating and underdiagnosing infectious diseases in these populations, [undermining](#) management of communicable disease, calling for them to be suspended. The current pandemic is an urgent reminder of why this is needed.

We recognise that the Government moved quickly to add COVID-19 to the list of conditions exempt from charges under the regulations in recognition of the need for the whole population to access NHS services during the pandemic. However, this exemption does not ensure that those with pre-existing conditions can seek the care they need without fear of charging or exposure to immigration enforcement. Under the current exemption, these patients would be charged for the treatment and management of their pre-existing conditions whilst in hospital, or may even have treatment withheld if they cannot pay.

Doctors of the World UK currently supports patients who are being denied NHS services due to their immigration status. These patients are all seriously unwell with poorly managed conditions, most fall into the COVID-19 high risk groups. They are at increased risk of requiring in-patient care if they contract COVID-19 and, if hospitalised, would not be entitled to free NHS treatment for their pre-existing condition.

The present exemption also fails to protect NHS staff time and resources, which must now be focused on providing patient care above all else. In accordance with the regulations, which increase [workloads](#) and take time away from patient care, for the purposes of billing doctors are required to not only make decisions about the urgency of any overseas patient's care, but now must also determine whether treatment is being provided in relation to COVID-19. This is a wholly inappropriate use of NHS time amid the current crisis.

During this public health emergency, it is critical that we do everything possible to keep the whole population safe and healthy to stop the spread of the disease. We have seen the Government introduce a number of measures to ensure the public are protected and cared for, and we call on you to do so again to ensure that the most vulnerable in society can safely and confidently access vital medical care during this extraordinary period.

We believe suspending charging regulations, and associated immigration checks and data sharing, at the very least for the duration of the crisis is a sensible and necessary step in the fight against COVID-19. To make this change effective we also urge you to launch an information campaign to assure the public - including all migrants and NHS staff - that NHS care will be free for everyone in the UK.

Yours sincerely

Dr Chaand Nagpaul CBE, BMA, Chair of Council  
**British Medical Association**

Professor Maggie Rae, UK Faculty of Public Health  
**UK Faculty of Public Health**

Dr Pippa Medcalf FRCP MBE, Lead Fellow for Health Inequalities RCP  
**Royal College of Physicians**

Andrew Fryer, International Manager  
**The Royal College of Emergency Medicine**

Russell Viner, President  
**Royal College of Child and Paediatric Health**

Eddie Morris, President  
**Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology**

Gill Walton, Chief Executive Officer  
**Royal College of Midwives**

Dr Miriam Orcutt, Executive Director, Lancet Migration  
**Lancet Migration**

Lucy Jones, Director of Programmes  
**Doctors of the World UK**

Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor, UNHCR Representative in the UK  
**UNHCR**

Naomi Phillips, Director of Policy and Advocacy  
**British Red Cross**

Maurice Wren, Chief Executive Officer  
**Refugee Council**

Stephen Hale OBE, Chief Executive Officer  
**Refugee Action**

Aloysius Ssali, Director  
**Say it Loud Club**

Lorna Gledhill, Deputy Director  
**Asylum Matters**

Steve Crawshaw, Director of Policy and Advocacy  
**Freedom From Torture**

Vickie Hawkins, Executive Director  
**MSF UK**

Kerry Smith, CEO  
**Helen Bamber Foundation**

Steve Valdez-Symonds, Programme Director - Refugee and Migrant Rights  
**Amnesty International UK**

Rebecca Mbewe, Director  
**4M Mentor Mothers Network CIC**

Lucille, Team co-ordinator  
**AAWG**

Amanda Church-McFarlane, Destitution Project Coordinator  
**Abigail Housing**

Julian Prior, CEO  
**Action Foundation**

Aderonke Apata, Founder: African Rainbow Family  
**African Rainbow Family**

Debbie Chippington Derrick, Chair of Trustees  
**AIMS (Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services)**

Dave Stamp, Senior Immigration Caseworker  
**ASIRT**

Peter Gowland, Acting chairperson  
**Asylum Seekers and Refugees Group**

Almas Farzi, Front line services manager

**Asylum Welcome**

Ali McGinley, Director

**AVID (Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees)**

Celia Clarke, Director

**Bail for Immigration Detainees**

Sarah Taal, Director

**Baobab Women's Project CIC**

Sarah Jemison, BEACON Chair Of Trustees

**BEACON (Bradford Ecumenical Asylum Concern)**

Gina Rowlands, Managing Director

**Bevan Healthcare CIC**

Dr. Jill Lewis, Co-facilitator

**Beyond Borders Totnes & District**

wendy stayte, Co-facilitator of BBTand D

**Beyond Borders Totnes and District**

Jeni Hlrst, Director of Service Development

**BHA for Equality**

Andy Jolly, Trustee

**Birch Network**

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**Bradford Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Survivors service**

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Cllr Asher Craig, Deputy Mayor (Communities, Equalities & Public Health)

**Bristol City Council**

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**Bristol Patients not Passports**

Margaret Woodward, Midwife

**Bristol Patients not Passports**

Beth Wilson, Director

**Bristol Refugee Rights**

Alice Cutler, Welcome Team Manager

**Bristol Refugee Rights**

Lorraine Masiya Mponela, Chairperson

**CARAG (Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group)**

Gloria Saffrey, Director

**CARIS Haringey**

Ben Mussanzi wa Mussangu, Director

**Centre Resolution Conflicts (CRC)**

Tina Ball, Co-chair

**City of Sanctuary Sheffield**

Thomas Martin, Director

**City of Sanctuary Sheffield**

Sian Summers-Rees, Chief Officer

**City of Sanctuary UK**

Connected Voice Advocacy, Advocacy Director

**Connected Voice Advocacy**

Anita Hurrell, Head of the Migrant Children's Project

**Coram Children's Legal Centre**

Jackie Capitani, Core Services Manager

**Coventry Refugee & Migrant Centre**

Fran Wood, Chair

**Darlington Assistance for Refugees**

Janet Fuller, Project Manager

**Derby Refugee Forum**

Bella Sankey, Director

**Detention Action**

Docs Not Cops, Grassroots campaign

**Docs Not Cops**

Gordon Bruce, ST2 Paediatric trainee doctor

**Docs Not Cops Glasgow**

Janice Foster, Trustee

**Doncaster Conversation Club**

Felix Kupay, CEO

**Entraide (Mutual Aid)**

Felix Kupay, Chairperson

**Entraide (Mutual Aid)**

Kush Chottera, Executive Director

**Europa**

Julia Patterson, EveryDoctor Lead

**EveryDoctor**

Dr Nigel Hewett OBE, Secretary

**Faculty for Homeless and Inclusion Health**

Professor Dominic Patterson, Chair

**Fairhealth**

Lynne Carr, Development worker

**First Step**

Philip Jones, Facilitator

**First Wednesday LGBT Asylum Support**

Kakero Kakero, Member

**First Wednesday Manchester**

SANDRA WATT, MANAGER

**FODI - FRIENDS OF THE DROP IN FOR ASYLUM SEEKER AND REFUGEES**

Denise McDowell, Chief Executive

**Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit**

Daf Viney, Director of Services

**Hackney Migrant Centre**

Vicki Harris, Haref coordinator

**Haref - connected voice**

Karolina Maroszek, Manager

**Haringey Migrant Support Centre**

Lucy Nabijou, Coordinator

**Haringey Welcome**

Josh Hallam, Community Campaigns and Networks Manager

**Help Refugees / Choose Love**

Katherine Hogg, Administrator

**Herbalists Without Borders Bristol**

Rick Henderson, CEO

**Homeless Link**

Phil Davis, Coordinator

**Hope Projects**

Aliya Khan, Legal Officer

**Hope Projects Ltd**

Jide Macaulay, Programme Director

**House Of Rainbow CIC**

Joan and Peter Forrest, Hub Drop-in Organisers

**Hub Drop-in for asylum seekers and refugees**

Sonia Lenegan, Legal Director

**Immigration Law Practitioners' Association**

International Community Organisation of Sunderland, Development and Services Manager

**International Community Organisation of Sunderland**

Bini Araia, Regional projects manager

**Investing in People and Culture**

Sarah Teather, Director

**Jesuit Refugee Service UK**



Dr Edie Friedman, Jewish Council for Racial Equality  
**Jewish Council for Racial Equality**

Chai Patel, Legal Policy Director  
**Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants**

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Barbara Hungin, Chair of Trustees  
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Andy Sirel, Head of Scottish Refugee & Migrant Centre  
**JustRight Scotland**

Jon Beech, Director  
**Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support network**

Ali Mahgoub, Director  
**Leeds Refugee Forum**

Shali Bullough, Coordinator/Operations Manager  
**Leicester City of Sanctuary**

Karen Smith - but don't need a name, we are a collective, Volunteer  
**Lesbian Immigration Support Group**

MR Muhammad Awais, Member  
**Lgbt**

bilawal malik, Unemployed  
**Lgbt first Wednesday group**

TARENCE MAZENGURA, MENTAL HEALTHY SUPPORT WORKER  
**LGBT FIRST WEDNESDAY MANCHESTER**

Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary, External liaison officer  
**Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary**

Martha Spurrier, Director  
**Liberty**

Ileya Laksari, C.E.O

**Living Under One Sun**

Nikki Wilson, CEO

**Make Birth Better**

Aderonke Apata, Founder & Chair, Manchester Migrant Solidarity

**Manchester Migrant Solidarity**

Rosalind Bragg, Director

**Maternity Action**

Sophie Neuburg, Executive Director

**Medact**

Clea Kahn, Chair

**Medecins Sans Frontieres UK Take Action Group**

Sebastian Rocca, Founder and CEO

**Micro Rainbow**

Fidelis Chebe, Project Director

**Migrant Action**

Lisa Payne, Senior Policy & Advocacy Officer

**Migrant and Refugee Children's Legal Unit (MiCLU)**

Nazek Ramadan, Director

**Migrant Voice**

Zrinka Bralo, CEO

**Migrants Organise**

Fizza Qureshi, CEO

**Migrants' Rights Network**

Bridget Anderson, Professor

**Migration Mobilities Bristol**

Hazel Williams, Director

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**NAT (National AIDS Trust)**

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Dr Guy Pilkington, GP  
**Newcastle Healthy Futures**

Annie Campbell Viswanathan, Executive Director  
**North Kensington Law Centre**

Dr Mohamed Nasreldin, Director  
**North of England Refugee Service**

Euphrasia Makaure, Community Development Worker  
**One Community link**

Karen Pearse, Director  
**Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers**

Sally Daghlian OBE, CEO  
**Praxis**

Abi Brunswick, Director  
**Project 17**

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**Reach drop in**

Dr Heather Thomas, Head of health and Wellbeing  
**Refugee and Migrant Centre Black Country and Birmingham.**

Alison Moore, CEO  
**Refugee Women Connect**

Jeremy Thompson, Restore Manager  
**Restore (a project of Birmingham Churches Together)**

Roger Nyantou, CEO  
**RETAS- Refugee Education Training & Advice Service**

reunite families Uk, Campaign and membership manager  
**Reunite families Uk p**

Lisa Matthews,  
**Right to Remain**

Nicola David, chair, Ripon City of Sanctuary, Chair  
**Ripon City of Sanctuary**

Ramona constantin, Director  
**Roma voices of Manchester**

Professor Wendy Burn, President  
**Royal College of Psychiatrists**

Margaret Gregg, Secretary  
**S T A R C H (South Tyneside Asylum Seekers**

Dr Alice Welbourn FRCOG (Hon), Founding Director  
**Salamander Trust**

Judy Rogers, Vice Chair  
**Skipton Refugee Support Group**

Lindsey Stewart, Co-organiser (volunteer)  
**South Brent refugee support network**

John Grayson,  
**South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group SYMAAG**

SYMAAG, co-chair  
**South yourkshire migration and asylum action group**

Sally Causer, Director  
**Southwark Law Centre**

Jude Hawes, Specialist Services and Equalities Teams Manager  
**Staffordshire North and Stoke on Trent Citizens Advice Bureau.**

Emily Crowley, Chief Executive  
**Student Action for Refugees**

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**Sunderland Black and Minority Ethnic Network**

Ms R M Lewis, Deputy Director  
**The Angelou Centre**

SHAMSHAD IQBAL, Advocate worker  
**The Angelou CENTRE**

Rami Ghali, CEO  
**The Brigstowe Project**

John McKernaghan, Chief Officer  
**The Brunswick Centre**

Katie Hamilton, Project worker, Migrant Advice project  
**The Children's Society**

Dr Duncan Still, GP  
**The Haven**

Joan Forrest Drop-In Organiser, Drop-In Organiser  
**The Hub Drop-In for Asylum Seekers and Refugees**

Elaine Ortiz, Founder and Director  
**The Hummingbird Refugee Project**

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**The Mary Thompson Fund**

Milli Hill, Founder  
**The Positive Birth Movement**

Dzenana Masic, ESOL tutor  
**The Refugee and Migrant Centre**

Caz Hattam, Coordinator

**The Unity Project**

Marissa Begonia, Coordinator

**The Voice of Domestic Workers**

Leila Zadeh, Executive Director

**UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group**

Richard O'Keeffe, Trade Union Representative

**United Voices of the World**

Andrew Jackson, Chief Executive

**Upbeat Communities**

Mel Steel, Director

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David McKenzie, Chairman

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Wesley Gryk Solicitors LLP, Partner

**Wesley Gryk Solicitors LLP**

Joanne MacInnes, Director

**West London Welcome Centre for Refugees and Migrants**

Andrew Rathbone, Chair of Trustees

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White Ribbon Alliance UK,

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Brigid McConville, UK Director

**White Ribbon Alliance UK**

Kay King, National Coordinator

**White ribbon alliance uk**

Natasha Walter, Director

**Women for Refugee Women**

Sara Callaway, organiser

**Women of Colour Global Women's Strike**