

Written evidence submitted by the Home Office (COR0236)

Policing

1. The Home Office has worked with policing to maintain an overview of crime and demand trends so policing priorities can adapt where necessary and potential impacts on prioritisation of resources can be understood. Analysis has informed the policy response, for example to domestic abuse and fraud, and we continue to assess a wide range of data provided by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), National Crime Agency, third sector partners and other stakeholders.
2. The police continue to play a vital role in keeping the public safe and throughout operational partners have been consulted and kept updated on changes. The internal and cross-Government structures underpinning the Government's response have further evolved to support policy consideration and decision-making. Police representatives have been embedded into forums to feed in views from the sector on proposals and interventions. This has been instrumental in shaping the approach to enforcement. For example, in the move to simplify rules in England through more streamlined gathering limits ("the rule of six").
3. Ongoing collaboration has increased understanding of the police and local authority roles in enforcement and shaping how these complement one another as existing measures have been refined and new measures introduced. The police response has adapted in line with findings. For example, the four-step escalation method of engaging, explaining, encouraging and enforcing continues to apply however forces are now moving more quickly to enforcement where required, and are directing efforts to address high-risk gatherings, egregious breaches and repeat offenders. £30 million surge funding provided by the Home Office has supported increased patrols for proactive policing and responding to Covid-19 related incidents and the Government has also provided £30 million funding to local authorities for enforcement and compliance activities.
4. We continue to receive and analyse data on Fixed Penalty Notices issued under the public health regulations. We are clear that nobody should be subject to police enforcement on the basis of race alone, or any other protected characteristic. The Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are also working with the NPCC to ensure all forces are providing reassurance to any communities who feel disproportionately impacted or unfairly treated by measures put in place.
5. Force-level business continuity plans are reviewed on an ongoing basis, with forces continuing to plan and engage both locally and nationally. Staffing levels and absences are monitored by NPoCC across all forces and options for support in place, including mutual aid where necessary and through full time deployment of special constables. The police continue to access testing through DHSC sites nationally, no significant impact on overall police officer absence rates has been identified to date and this continues to be monitored. In parallel, policing partners currently supporting patient care efforts are able to be vaccinated immediately and the prioritisation of wider police has been proposed for the next phase of the roll-out programme.

Domestic Abuse and Child Abuse

6. Safeguarding vulnerable children and adults during the Covid-19 crisis was a key focus of the Prime Minister's Hidden Harms Summit in May 2020. Attended by over 70 representatives from across sectors, the Summit was an opportunity to share emerging best practice at the local and national level and identify areas to further strengthen our response. In-line with the commitments made at the Summit, we continue to champion and support collaboration across partners. Specific actions taken forward are set out below.

Domestic Abuse

7. During this unprecedented time, we have had regular and frequent discussions with domestic abuse organisations, the Domestic Abuse and Victims' Commissioners, law enforcement and other Government Departments to monitor and assess the impact of Covid-19 on victims of domestic abuse. We have been clear in our Government guidance that the that coronavirus household isolation instructions do not apply to those who are experiencing or feel at risk of domestic abuse. Through our #YouAreNotAlone (#YANA) campaign, we have reached almost 25 million UK adults, and almost 130 million followers on social media. Our #YANA campaign provides guidance and instructions for further support, including the police, online support, helplines and refuges. We are confident that our communications campaigns are working to raise awareness, with the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, online services and other specialise helplines experiencing marked increases in calls during the UK's response to this pandemic.
8. Protecting women and girls from violence and supporting victims and survivors of sexual violence also remains a key priority for this Government – particularly given the unique circumstances brought about by the pandemic. We welcome the fact that more victims of sexual offences, which are all too often hidden crimes, are coming forward and reporting these crimes to the police. We want victims to have the confidence to report these crimes, knowing they will get the support they need and that everything will be done to bring offenders to justice.
9. To ensure victim support services have the capacity to meet with this spike in demand, we have awarded £2m in new funding to domestic abuse services that have been affected by the pandemic. This is on top of the Government's unprecedented £76m support package of emergency funding to support most vulnerable in society, including support to victims of domestic and sexual abuse, vulnerable children and their families, and victims of modern slavery.
10. Despite the rise in demand for support from victim services, the number of police recorded incidents of domestic abuse remain relatively stable compared to pre-pandemic figures. Whilst the rise in the numbers of those seeking support from victim services could be a result of increased awareness, or concerns from friends and families, we want to ensure that victims are able to seek protection from the police where necessary. As such, we launched a new Ask for ANI Codeword scheme to enable victims to seek safe and discreet

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support from participating pharmacies who will be able to respond to their request as appropriate. The Ask for ANI codeword scheme is operating in all Boots pharmacies and almost 300 independent pharmacies. There have been over 65.7 million average web searches since the scheme launched on 14 January.

Child Abuse

11. For some children and young people, Covid-19 has brought additional risks and dangers, as well as reducing contact with frontline professionals and trusted adults. Since the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Home Office has worked closely with law enforcement agencies to monitor and respond to the changing threats and risks to children and young people.
12. We have looked to encourage close collaboration between safeguarding partners and wider community stakeholders, to ensure vulnerabilities are being identified and acted upon. Working with other Government departments, the Home Office coordinated dissemination of guidance for community partners coming into contact with families (such as supermarkets, postal workers etc) to over 25,000 stakeholders to help them spot the signs of abuse and report concerns to statutory services. This sat alongside briefing developed by The Children's Society for police officers attending domestic incidents, reminding them to look out for the signs of abuse in any children present.
13. To build awareness of the support services available to victims and encourage disclosure of abuse to a trusted adult, the Home Office launched the 'Something's Not Right' campaign targeted at secondary school children in England who suffered a range of harms. In the space of a month since its launch, the campaign attracted 24,000 new users, 3,000 returning users and 30,000 page views with an average dwell time of 4 minutes.
14. Recognising the pressures facing the charity sector, we provided additional funding to ensure that children and young people could get the required support. Through the joint Vulnerable Children National Charities Strategic Relief Fund, we distributed £7.6m to provide financial hardship relief for national Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations that support vulnerable children across England and Wales. The Home Office and Department for Education have also made funding available for the NSPCC to expand and promote its national helpline for adults concerned about a child. Additionally, we have ensured that existing funding programmes have pivoted to the Covid context, and that support, and advice was provided to enable adaptations including virtual support and working from home demands.
15. Together with other Government departments, we are continuing to monitor the overall impact of Covid-19 on the economic health of the sector, to understand emerging issues and pressures in delivering services for vulnerable children and young people during this time.

Online Harms

16. The Government recognised the increased risks to young people from spending more time online during lockdown, and has used a range of

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communications tools and forums to raise awareness of risks with parents and children, alongside driving forward our online safety agenda.

17. The Home Office galvanised industry to better understand and respond to the increasing risks, including through a ministerial roundtable with the Internet Watch Foundation, children's charities, the tech industry and other partners. Ministers also wrote to industry partners to ensure countering online CSEA remains a priority during the pandemic.
18. The Government has continued to invest in law enforcement and national security capabilities to target offenders operating online, including through building the National Crime Agency's (NCA) dark-web capabilities to tackle the threat of child sexual abuse, through recruitment of key staff and identification of technical solutions. To date, this has led to 120 arrests and 261 children safeguarded or protected.
19. We have also worked with the NCA to revitalise their Think You Know campaign last Spring and developed guidance for parents and carers which has been published on GOV.UK to signpost them to trusted resources and advice on keeping children safe online.
20. The increased use of the internet as a result of the pandemic has also brought into sharp focus the need to remain vigilant of terrorists seeking to exploit the situation. We are working closely with tech companies to ensure preventing terrorist use of their platforms continues to be a priority and that companies are responding quickly to any emerging threats. As well as engaging with companies, we are working with our Five Country partners to deliver a joint assessment on the impacts of Covid-19 on the online process of radicalisation, as agreed at the Virtual Five Country Ministerial meeting in June.
21. We published the Full Government Response to the Online Harms White Paper consultation, which sets out the new expectations on companies to keep their users safe online. Alongside this the Home Office published the interim codes of practice on terrorist content and activity, and CSEA online to 'bridge the gap' between Government's response to the Online Harms White Paper and the establishment of the independent regulator, enabling companies to take swift action in tackling the most serious of online harms. The Full Government Response will be followed by legislation, which we are working on at pace, and will be ready this year.

Immigration and Visas

22. The Coronavirus Immigration Helpline, established in February 2020 initially to support only Chinese nationals, was later broadened to all nationalities, to date processing over 250,000 emails, 290,000 calls and 40,000 requests for exceptional assurance.
23. We have made and reassessed various concessions to assist those with expired or soon-to-expire leave but who were unable to depart the UK due to Covid-linked flight restrictions; concessions were extended for those where exceptional circumstances existed after the first lockdown was lifted. We also offered a 'switching concession' to those customers who would normally be

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required to leave the UK to apply for an entry clearance. Concessions were made for Tier 1 (Entrepreneur) visa holders whose businesses were affected by the pandemic, and Work and Study customers awaiting a decision were able to start their course or employment. Those working for the NHS and their dependants whose visa was due to expire between 1st October 2020 and 31st March 2021, qualified for a free extension and no additional Immigration Health Surcharge.

24. Since 1st June 2020 when the phased reopening of the UK application services commenced, reuse of previously submitted biometrics has meant many customers could complete their applications without attending an appointment. The application centres remain open, comply with Covid restrictions and are exempted from lockdown.
25. Concessions were made so customers overseas could apply for a visa in another country if their normal Visa Application Centre was closed. Where no VAC option was available, over 4000 visa waiver requests considered, and 1056 issued. Customers whose 30-day visa to work, study or join family had expired during the first lockdown were offered a free 90-day replacement until the end of 2020.
26. We ensured all were able register their claim for protection. For 'in-country' asylum claimants' additional regional locations to register asylum claims were established in Glasgow, Belfast, Liverpool, Leeds, Solihull and Cardiff, all utilising PPE and allowing for social distancing and reduction of contact time as appropriate.
27. The asylum screening and registration process has been temporarily abridged to minimise in-person contact. We cannot comment in detail as the matter is subject to ongoing legal scrutiny, but have returned questions to the screening interview which are designed to spot those who may be a victim of trafficking, going further and publishing new guidance on 31st December pertaining to the minimum questions which must be asked where contingency measures, including abridging of the screening process, are invoked.
28. We have also put in place measures to ensure asylum interviews and decisions – excepting a short stop - were able to continue during the pandemic. Covid-19 spurred rapid movement to digital and remote working, and the majority of asylum interviews are currently being completed remotely, complementing the existing in-person interview process. In person interviews can be requested as required to meet individual circumstances and needs.
29. We have developed plans to work with Local Authorities and utilise HM Passport Office facilities to increase the throughput to asylum interviews and decisions, as well as providing further training for caseworkers. All Home Office case working locations implemented safe systems of working compliant with Government guidelines, whilst casework resource was refocused on cases already interviewed and reviewed cases for progression.

Institutional Accommodation

Asylum Accommodation

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30. The Covid-19 pandemic placed the asylum accommodation system under severe strain. We have a statutory obligation to support and accommodate destitute asylum seekers. We have worked tirelessly to balance this against managing the public health risk and providing value for money. The ongoing pressures have led to the sourcing of additional accommodation to create additional capacity, both in the form of hotels and other sites which include those owned by the MoD.
31. We are currently accommodating around 60,000 supported asylum seekers across the asylum accommodation estate, an increase of a third on the figures in January last year.
32. We had pre-prepared plans, however the pandemic has taught more us about managing infectious diseases in asylum accommodation and dormitory settings, including helping us to develop robust outbreak planning and improving Provider business continuity plans, particularly in making those plans tri-partite with relevant partners. We have seen the value of having outbreak plans in place, and of close collaboration between agencies in managing outbreaks, and applying any lessons learnt.
33. Also, following a policy review, where essential living needs are not already provided for in hotels or initial accommodation, we are now arranging to provide a cash allowance, backdating payments to those who have been in Initial Accommodation/hotels for a significant period.
34. Further to this, and as per Abi Tierney's recent response to the Committee, we took the decision to pause cessations of asylum support on 27th March 2020, so that asylum seekers whose cases were resolved and who would no longer normally be eligible for asylum support would be able to remain in their accommodation and follow the public health guidance in place at that time.
35. With the changing Covid landscape, we resumed "positive cessations" (where the person has been granted immigration status) on 11th August; adopting a careful, phased approach to this. The individuals have a 28-day grace period before they must leave their accommodation, and are provided with help throughout by the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE) service, administered by Migrant Help.
36. Throughout the pandemic we have worked closely with local authorities to support them in planning for the resumption of these decisions and ensure a proportionate approach. Some "negative cessations" (where the person has been refused asylum and exhausted their appeal rights) resumed from September 2020 but were paused again in November 2020 following the imposition of stronger lockdown measures. These decisions currently remain paused pending consideration of the impact of the current coronavirus restrictions.

Immigration Enforcement

37. The Government is committed to a fair and humane immigration policy that welcomes those here legally, but which tackles abuse and protects the public. The Government remains clear that immigration detention plays a limited but essential role in maintaining effective immigration controls and securing the

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UK's borders, by supporting the removal of people who have no right to remain in the UK but who refuse to leave voluntarily and, in some cases, present significant public risk. You will be aware that the UK Borders Act 2007 requires the Home Secretary to remove foreign national offenders from the UK, and the Home Office remains committed to doing so. For these and others here unlawfully, for both chartered and scheduled flights, we continue to make use of the routes currently available and are taking further opportunities as routes return.

38. One of the main Immigration Enforcement priorities throughout the pandemic has been, and continues to be, maintaining a safe removal estate.
39. We continue to work closely with NHSE, PHE, DHSC, partners in devolved administrations and custodial suppliers to work agilely in managing the threat Covid poses in a closed custodial environment.
40. Operating regimes were adapted at the start of the pandemic to provide an enhanced focus on hygiene and social distancing. Particular attention was paid to those deemed clinically extremely vulnerable and they received personal care plans and shielding opportunities. All Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) developed discrete isolation units and plans to deal with symptomatic residents. Reverse cohorting was also introduced, whereby all new arrivals were placed into quarantine for a minimum of 14 days before they entered the general population and all residents in IRCs had a single room and the use of their own toilet facilities.
41. We have kept pace with developments in the spread of the virus and the Government response. This includes the mandatory wearing of masks by staff in IRCs and weekly lateral flow testing for all residents and staff who request it.
42. We have also been very mindful of maintaining the mental health and well-being of residents at this difficult time. Where we have had to pause social visits to IRCs, we have provided all residents with an additional £10 weekly telephone credit and enhanced access to Skype and email. All IRCs have maintained some regime activity (gym, computer room, library, living unit-based quizzes etc),
43. To date there have only been 30 confirmed cases of coronavirus amongst IRC residents (with a further six cases in short term holding facilities). No residents have been hospitalised or have died.
44. Significant work has been undertaken to improve arrangements at Tug Haven. This includes temporary hardstanding, facilities with heating and air conditioning units, a mobile welfare unit - a large heated portacabin for families, unaccompanied children and vulnerable adults -enhanced medical services, additional handwashing stations and toilet facilities across the site, strict quarantine and self-isolation measures with additional support and appropriate fencing surrounding the processing area.
45. Tug Haven is not currently considered a short-term holding facility. It is an area where migrants intercepted by Border Force maritime assets are on-

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shored and triaged as they are disembarked for onward routing to Intake unit accommodation. As such, migrants are there for the shortest possible time.

Management of the Border

46. On 8 June, the UK implemented public measures at the border to minimise the risk of new cases of Coronavirus being brought in from overseas.
47. The Passenger Locator Form (PLF) requires most inbound and transiting passengers to supply contact and travel details to enable in-country public health measure activities.
48. On 10 July, International Travel Corridors (ITC) introduction meant arrivals from specified countries did not have to self-isolate but still complete a PLF. However, from 18 January 2021, travel corridors were suspended.
49. Exemptions are permitted around delivery of essential supplies, border and national security, some frontier workers and crew. Everyone who is exempt from self-isolation still needs to complete the PLF.
50. Pre- Departure Testing (PDT) was introduced on 18 January 2021, whereby international travellers, including UK nationals returning home, must provide evidence of a negative Covid-19 test result taken up to 3 days before departure.
51. The Department for Transport leads on these measures.

Travel bans

52. In December, following the identification of a new variant, all direct arrivals from South Africa were banned. This was then extended to other southern African countries, some South American countries and Portugal. Last year a travel ban was introduced for Denmark when evidence became clear about the mink variant.
53. Border Force officers use existing immigration powers to refuse entry to the UK to anyone who has travelled from a country subject to a Travel Ban (either directly or indirectly) or, where they had declared that they had been in a country subject to a travel ban in the previous ten days. British, Irish and UK residents are allowed to enter.

Enforcement and Compliance

54. Since the introduction of the Health Measures at the Border on 8 June, Border Force have checked over 3.6m passengers, issued over 2000 Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN's) and over 4000 Notices of Intention to serve an FPN.
55. Since 23rd January 2021 Border Force have commenced 100% checking of PLF and PDT of international arrivals (with the exception of Juxtaposed ports, CTA, General Maritime and General Aviation).

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56. From 1st February 2021 the primary means of compliance checking moved upstream. As with PDT, carriers are responsible for PLF compliance prior to boarding. Passenger fines for failing to produce a PLF and/ or evidence of compliance for PDT are £500 and £2000 (for each offence) for the carrier.
57. Since the introduction of PDT, the withdrawal of the ITCs and introduction of a number of country specific travel and entry bans, daily UK arrivals have dropped from an average of c.34k to an average of c.22k.
58. In country enforcement and compliance with self-isolation is managed by PHE's Information Assurance Service (IAS) and the Police. IAS will shortly be increasing their daily calls to 5000 (from 1500) samples from PLF data a day. Cases of concern are sent to the Police for in-country follow up. To date, 85% were either found to be isolating or were persuaded to be compliant. The Police have increased capacity and are currently actioning 1000 cases of concern per day.

February 2021