



Lord Alton of Liverpool  
House of Lords  
London  
SW1A 0AA

Reference: MIN/0005630/20

5 May 2020

Dear David,

Thank you for your email of 1<sup>st</sup> April to the Home Secretary regarding your concerns regarding the wellbeing and protection of victims of modern slavery during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am replying as Minister for Safeguarding.

In these unprecedented times, I understand your concerns around how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect our ability to support victims of modern slavery in the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Please be assured that as part of our contingency planning, we have thought very carefully about how we can continue to deliver services to victims of modern slavery.

In your letter you reference a letter from a group of 27 NGOs who are working with victims of modern slavery. Following an initial email of acknowledgement from officials, I provided a substantive response to this letter on 9 April 2020. I hope this has reassured them, and yourself, that we are as committed as ever to ensure the safety of victims and continue to provide support during this pandemic.

It is important to stress that we will still be accepting referrals into the NRM. The Single Competent Authority will maintain its decision-making operations during this time and will be focusing resources on key decision-making processes. This allows us to continue bringing newly identified victims into the support service throughout this pandemic.

We continue to work closely with The Salvation Army, who, as the Prime contractor, is leading the operational response to COVID-19 within the Victim Care Contract. They are working very closely with their subcontractors to ensure victims can continue to access accommodation and associated support services, in line with Public Health England (PHE) advice.

I understand your concern around victims living in safe houses that may have difficulties self-isolating. The Government has published sets of guidance detailing the public health measures to be taken in a range of “atypical” home environments, such as care homes, children’s homes, refuges and supported living centres. This guidance is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-residential-care-supported-living-and-home-care-guidance/covid-19-guidance-for-supported-living-provision>. This guidance sets out advice on safety, cleaning and isolation. The Salvation Army has assured us that

the relevant PHE guidance has been disseminated to their subcontractors and health guidance has been communicated to all service users. We continue, alongside The Salvation Army, to assess the guidance available and work with PHE to address any gaps identified.

PHE has additionally considered a small number of questions that are specific to the provision of support for victims of modern slavery and provided advice and information to support safe delivery of services for all victims. In line with PHE guidance, household isolation principles will apply for Victim Care Contract accommodation where relevant, and we continue to work with The Salvation Army to ensure continued, high-quality provision for all service users.

In order to ensure that our Victim Care Contract providers can continue to provide support to victims, we have confirmed that all individuals working on the operation of the contract are able to be included in the definition of 'key workers' for the purposes of access to school places. Although this is subject to decisions from headteachers who will be working to prioritise the provision, it will allow vital staff to continue providing crucial support to victims.

To ensure victims feel supported and safe during these difficult times, on 6 April we announced that all individuals in accommodation support provided by the Victim Care Contract will not be required to move on from their government-funded accommodation for the next three months. Individuals will continue to be issued with Conclusive Grounds (CG) decisions, and Recovery Needs Assessments will still take place where relevant. However, where individuals are assessed not to reach the CG threshold for a positive decision, or not to have a recovery need for accommodation, we will continue to provide accommodation.

You raised concerns regarding victims having access to financial support. To ensure our support system remains robust, we have also adapted the method by which victims receive financial support. We have been working at pace with The Salvation Army to explore alternative card payment methods to issue financial support to victims. This new payment solution has been sourced to allow victims to receive their payments without requiring a cash transaction or a face-to-face meeting with a support worker. This will take the form of pre-paid cards for each user, which can be used online, in shops or in cash machines.

Please be reassured that the Government continues to be committed to providing essential support for victims of modern slavery and ensuring that they have access to the services they need during this time. We will continue to review current policies and practices in line with PHE guidance throughout this pandemic.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Victoria Atkins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Victoria Atkins MP**