

Asylum seekers forced to travel miles to sign on with Home Office during lockdown

Exclusive: Lawyers prepare to challenge ‘reckless’ decision to continue in-person immigration reporting

Charities said it was ‘neither legitimate nor proportionate’ for the Home Office to require immigrants to report in person to officials during lockdown

Asylum seekers and trafficking victims are being forced to travel miles on public transport despite lockdown restrictions because the Home Office has said they must continue to report to officials in person.

People who are awaiting a decision on their application to remain in the UK – including modern slavery victims and torture survivors – are required to regularly sign on at a Home Office reporting location.

This requirement was temporarily suspended in March because of the pandemic, but in August and September the Home Office sent texts to people stating that they must start reporting in person again “due to the easing of Covid lockdown measures”.

Since 5 November, when the government announced a second lockdown – telling people to “stay at home” where possible – migrants with reporting conditions have been informed that they must continue to sign on with the Home Office in person.

Charities said this was “neither legitimate nor proportionate” and that it indicated the Home Office was prioritising its “hostile environment” agenda over the health and safety of communities.

Lawyers from Duncan Lewis Solicitors are in the process of challenging the policy, arguing that in-person reporting should not be resumed in anyone’s case without an individualised review as to whether it is necessary in the circumstances of the pandemic.

Asylum seekers told *The Independent* they were shocked that they were still being required to travel to sign on, and fearful that it could lead to them contracting the virus.

Bernadette Ajyei, 61, had to take a journey of more than an hour from Leighton to the Home Office reporting centre in London Bridge last week in order to comply with her reporting conditions.

The Cameroonian national, who has been in the UK for 23 years and was previously on a spouse visa through her late husband, and is now fighting an asylum claim, said: “I thought they’d do what they did last time. If they’re asking for social distancing, isn’t that what they should do?”

"My daughter asks me why am I going out when I’ll be in contact with people. It’s ridiculous. They did it for five months before. Why can’t they do it now? It’s not reasonable to be asking people to go when you have these restrictions. It just doesn’t make sense.”

Ms Ajyei, who suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure, said she was fearful when she had to take the journey to report – which involves a bus and a train ride – adding: “There’s a lot of hostility against migrants, and this shows that. It’s not fair.”

In another case, a Nigerian trafficking survivor in her forties, who requested anonymity, said she was “shocked” when she received a text from the Home Office stating that she must continue to report during lockdown.

“It takes me about an hour to get there, on two buses. I’m thinking, that’s not really safe. When you get to the centre you need to take off your coat and put it through machine. They don’t sterilise those machines,” she said.

“You don’t know who has it and who doesn’t. I don’t think it’s safe, but we can’t do anything about it.”

Another individual, who also didn’t want to be named, said of the reporting centre during lockdown: “There were lots of people. When you enter they check your papers, then you have to go upstairs. This was all inside. There were three lines of a queue outside – many people.

“It was very scary for me, we are many people in the same place. Some have been on the tube. I have asthma so I can’t breathe properly in a mask. I also have a heart problem and have been told that I am vulnerable to coronavirus and should not to leave the house.”

Victoria Marks, director and solicitor at the Anti Trafficking and Labour Exploitation Unit (ATLEU), said: “During the first lockdown, in person immigration reporting was suspended without adverse consequences.

“Yet we are seeing vulnerable survivors of trafficking and slavery, with fragile health, being forced to take unnecessary personal risks during a second lockdown.

“Such a policy is neither legitimate nor proportionate and exposes the Home Office’s callous attitude towards the victims it should be trying to protect.”

Brian Dikoff, legal organiser at charity Migrants Organise, said he was “alarmed” by the Home Office’s “reckless” decision to maintain reporting conditions during the second lockdown, and that it was “completely contradictory” to the government’s strategy of containing the virus.

Home Office to carry out review of hostile environment following Windrush says Priti Patel

“We strongly take issue with the Home Office’s prioritisation of its ‘hostile environment’ agenda over the health and safety of communities,” he added.

A Home Office spokesperson said: “We are satisfied that it is appropriate to continue with face to face reporting for the priority individuals we have identified.

“We have significantly changed how we interact and all centres are now Covid secure. Safety is of the utmost importance and we continue to monitor the impact of the pandemic on physical reporting.”