**Reference guide for clinicians how to assist & support vulnerable patients during the COVID-19 pandemic**

**Introduction**

When you encounter a vulnerable patient who has any difficulty accessing food or medication, or is isolated without any support network, some of the resources listed may be useful.

As the situation is fast changing so is available support. Although official council/local authority helplines should be stable, the support available from volunteer organisations/groups may change quickly.

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**Basic principles of referral**

Before linking patients up with any external organisation, particularly volunteer groups:

1. Discuss the referral with the patient, gain verbal consent to pass on their details and document this in their patient record
2. It may not be necessary to disclose medical conditions to voluntary groups; if it is seek patient consent and where it is not delete any information which could compromise patient confidentiality (e.g. footer about HIV medicine).
3. You should be transparent that you are a health professional, that you are making a referral at the patient’s request, and they have granted their consent
4. Save any emails or content of phone calls to overview in CELLMA
5. Request feedback from the organisation or from the patient

**Language shop for phone interpretation**

Language barriers are an important issue for more vulnerable patients; telephone interpreting services, like language shop, are helpful **if your clinic is registered**:

* **Language shop number: 020 3373 1700**

Note: the full guide is in the COVID folder with further instructions and languages available

1. Call the language shop
2. They ask for the access code
3. They ask for your name
4. They ask which language is required
5. They will transfer you to someone else who will check the details and whether the patient is with you or needs to be called
6. Document the interpreter’s name and language provided within BBV assessment.
7. If there is no interpreter available immediately, they will call you back
8. If the patient gets called too, double check that you have the right person on the line and introduce yourself
9. Use short simple sentences & ask the patient to repeat any crucial information

**Information on COVID-19 for non-UK nationals in London:**

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/eu-londoners-hub/information-covid-19-non-uk-nationals>

There is information available in Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Mandarin, French, Gujarati, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Urdu and Welsh.

**Doctors of the World COVID-19 information**

DOW has translated a general COVID information sheet into 43 languages so far: <https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/coronavirus-information/>

This can be sent to patients or those who are looking for simple instructions in specific communities.

**Refugees, asylum seekers & people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)**

This is a complex area made more convoluted by different policies introduced in recent years. Since law firms are barely accessible currently, the following may help:

**Electronic immigration network**

<https://www.ein.org.uk/news/brief-guide-covid-19-coronavirus-immigration-and-asylum-resources>

**The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants helplines**

Irregular Migrants helpline: 020 7553 7470

Foreign National Prisoners helpline: 020 7553 7468 every Wednesday 10:00-11:00

<https://www.jcwi.org.uk/our-helplines>

**How to register as an extremely vulnerable person**

This is an online process, which the individual can do or ask someone else to register for them. **Please note an NHS number is required**.

<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable>

Patients need a letter to prove that they fall into the category that entitles them to access assistance or get delivery slots for online shopping/delivery etc.

Some patients will ask you to provide a letter; many who have a condition listed on the gov.uk website will already have received a letter from their GP or another specialist service: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

For HIV patients who are considered extremely vulnerable by BHIVA but not listed in the guidance above, please use the **BHIVA letter template**:

“To Whom It May Concern

Re: <insert patient details>

The above-named individual has been advised to follow Government shielding advice based on significant impairment of their immune system secondary to HIV. Most people living with HIV do not need to take precautions beyond those recommended for the general population. However, people with a very low CD4 count (a measure of the immune system, very low considered less than 50; ‘normal’ is above 500) or a recent opportunistic illness (and AIDS-defining condition within the last 6 months) are considered ‘extremely vulnerable’ by the British HIV Association (BHIVA)[[1]](#footnote-1).

HIV is not a condition included in Public Health England’s ‘extremely vulnerable’ guidance[[2]](#footnote-2) but, based on BHIVA guidance, the above-named individual has been advised to follow shielding advice as such should be entitled to the same support package as anyone else in this category.

Yours sincerely

<insert name/sign off>”

For further advice with regards to HIV patients and vulnerability please check the BHIVA website:

<https://www.bhiva.org/joint-EACS-BHIVA-statement-on-risk-of-coronavirus-for-PLWH>

<https://www.bhiva.org/BHIVA-and-THT-statement-on-COVID-19-and-advice-for-the-extremely-vulnerable>

1. People with CD4 >200 and undetectable on ART are considered at no greater risk than the general population; follow general advice.

2. People with CD4 <200, detectable viral load or not on ART may be at higher risk of severe illness; follow general advice stringently.

3. People with a CD4 count <50 or opportunistic illness in last 6 months; follow shielding advice for extremely vulnerable.

**Support from councils**

Councils have introduced whole packages of support for their residents; please check the appropriate council website or advise the patient to do so, if they have internet access (some do not have internet or have a learning difficulty or other barriers to access it).

Most boroughs have a telephone number to call and have distributed leaflets to households with information.

People can apply for emergency funding (up to £5,000):

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/volunteering/coronavirus-covid-19-civil-society-support?utm_content>=

You can find a single access support point on the GLA website:

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/volunteering/coronavirus-covid-19-civil-society-support/londons-civil-society-digital-support-access-form>

Updates from the Greater London Authority: <https://www.london.gov.uk/coronavirus>

There is a borough search tool: <https://www.london.gov.uk/in-my-area>

That takes you to the local council website which then guides you to the up to date COVID response and support pages.

**For example, in Camden:**

* <https://news.camden.gov.uk/camden-council-and-age-uk-camden-pilot-emergency-food-delivery-measures-for-vulnerable-residents/>
* Age UK Camden 0207 8373777
* Camden Council 020 7974 4444 (option 9)

**For example in Islington:**

* Resident Support Scheme, with relaxed criteria; <https://www.islington.gov.uk//social-care-and-health/coronavirus-covid-19/support-for-residents>
* They can also contact the ‘We are Islington’ Helpline, a joint council, voluntary sector and mutual aid groups endeavour. Support includes: getting food or medicine, online group activities, legal advice or a friendly phone conversation. Contact: 020 7527 8222 or weareislington@islington.gov.uk. Lines open every day from 09:00-17:00
* Canonbury Mutual Aid: 020 3026 4438 or canonburymutualaid@gmail.com. Phone lines open 09:00-17:00 Monday to Friday and 10:00-17:00 Saturday and Sunday.

**People who are experiencing homelessness**

The GLA is currently working to protect and support rough sleepers in London including ten hotels operating for exclusive use by around 460 rough sleepers, who have been assessed and accommodated. The GLA programme is open to those with **No Recourse to Public Funds** (NRPF) and migrants with insecure immigration status are able to access the bed spaces without fear of repercussions.

There are various health inclusion projects running across London, mainly run by the homeless GP surgeries (e.g. CHIP in Camden, Great Chapel Street in Westminster).

Please contact Streetlink: [www.streetlink.org.uk](http://www.streetlink.org.uk) or 0300 500 0914 should you want to help someone sleeping rough, this triggers an alert to their outreach team. You will get feedback on when and if they got in touch with the person you have referred.

Groundswell, one of the homeless charities and closely connected to the excellent Find and Treat team from UCLH has further information and can be also contacted for help.

* <https://groundswell.org.uk/coronavirus/>
* <https://groundswell.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Groundswell-Health-Update-2-Covid-19-people-who-are-rough-sleeping-26.3.20.pdf>

Groundswell services are also available in Polish and Romanian

Another excellent resource is the pavement magazine also available online:

* <https://www.thepavement.org.uk/>

**Mutual Aid groups**

Across the country COVID mutual aid groups have been created in many communities as a source of direct support and solidarity; you can find a list of mutual aid groups here:

<https://www.theresident.co.uk/london-culture-events/londons-coronavirus-mutual-aid-groups-a-complete-list/>

For LGBT across London: <https://lgbtiqoutside.org/>

Self-referral is the straightforward, or you can refer someone directly. The outside project is responds quickly and will update you if and when they made contact.

**Foodbanks**

Foodbanks are facing significant challenges as most of the usual supply and donations have dried up but demand has skyrocketed.

Please support your local food banks or the once listed below:

* <http://www.foodchain.org.uk/> - well established food supply link for PLWH
* <https://thefelixproject.org/contact-us-coronavirus> - another charity
* <https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/find-a-foodbank/> - if you need to find a local food bank, you find it here

**Supermarkets**

Most large supermarkets have opened delivery slots only for vulnerable people; information is on the different websites with either online registration or a telephone number.

1. <https://www.bhiva.org/BHIVA-and-THT-statement-on-COVID-19-and-advice-for-the-extremely-vulnerable> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)