



UK Visas
& Immigration

UK Visas and Immigration

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COVID-19 – Asylum Interviewing

Dear All,

I just wanted to follow up on the recent discussions and set out an update on asylum interviewing and our intentions going forwards.

Asylum substantive interviews were suspended at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in mid-March 2020 and Asylum Operations have since followed central Government COVID-19 guidelines on essential travel. Asylum Operations have been working in the background on plans to restart interviewing in line with the recently announced relaxing of Government guidelines on some travel. There are however, different guidelines in place across the four countries of the UK and this will impact the restart and scheduling of interview on a national setting.

Asylum Operations have been building on the existing digital interviewing platform and has expanded capacity and the ability to conduct more remote interviews to assist with social distancing requirements as part of COVID-19. The expansion has added to the existing remote video interviewing capacity already in place and used regularly at Redgrave Court, Bootle and Vulcan House, Sheffield along with VFS centres used by interpreters and customers.

The increased flexibility will support wider remote caseworker interviewing and use of interpreters. Asylum Operations have started the deployment of a mobile video interviewing for use by caseworkers remotely, having worked at pace to overcome several technology challenges with our current supplier. We have tested the technology and processes with caseworkers and interpreters and are happy it is robust and meets the existing standards we operate to. We have started to deploy mobile interviewing

equipment to caseworkers across the UK and have over c.500 interpreters who are able to support.

The mobile interview solution is linked to the existing digital interview and video conferencing platform, is secure and meets all General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regulations. Interview audio records will initially be held on the laptops before being transferred securely to system, this means there will be a short delay in sending out interview records, as is already the case for interviews hosted in Bootle and Sheffield.

Whilst mobile remote interviewing will assist with restarting interviews, there will be a phasing of how we conduct interviews, with a view to restarting face to face as soon as we are able. We recognise the limitations of remote interviewing and the vulnerabilities of our customers. The recommencing of interviews will be in three phases, as we look at returning to pre-COVID-19 practices:

- Initially those asked to attend an asylum interview will be limited to those within close proximity to a UKVI or VFS location to help reduce need for public transport where possible. Once customers attend a UKVI or VFS centre, staff will accompany customers straight to an interview room/booth as soon as possible to avoid waiting in public areas. Interviews will then be completed remotely over video with the caseworker and interpreter in a separate location to help with social distancing. Consideration will be given under the existing process on the suitability of those interviewed using video conferencing.
- The second phase, in slightly slower time we will be restarting of face to face interviews. There are several further considerations around the management and upgrading of interview rooms to put in place safe system of work in response to COVID-19. We have taken specialist advice on how best to conduct face to face interviews and this will see clear screens put in place and the room layout amended to ensure social distancing is maintained. Face to face interviewing will be limited compared to pre-COVID-19 levels, as some rooms are not big enough to allow for the current social distancing requirements i.e. two metre rule. It will be optional for caseworkers, and claimants, if they wish to wear personal safety equipment in the form of a mask to cover their face during interviews or wear gloves. There will be additional breaks factored in, based on the physical interviewing environment.
- The final phase will be around how we restart interviewing of minors and the provision of childcare, we still have some work to do on the processes and with our partners and suppliers. In addition to resolving the minors interviewing process, Asylum Operations have appointed a national lead (Muriel Kelly – Head of Liverpool Casework) to take lead responsibility for overseeing operational improvements of minors (including unaccompanied) cases that have been deferred and to ensure increased operational focus on the new cases. There will continue to be cross asylum collaboration as well as wider business and stakeholder engagement going forwards with further updates to follow. The updates will be issued by the Asylum Operations Stakeholder Engagement team and enquiries should be directed to AsylumOpsStakeholder@homeoffice.gov.uk.

Given the limitations around interview room sizes and maintaining safe social distancing, there will be some limits on the number of people who can safely occupy a room. There are further considerations around legal representatives at interviews, and we will be engaging with ILPA separately to discuss and confirm how best to work around the impacts of COVID-19 related constraints.

In support of restarting interviews, we have in addition developed internal guidance to support the process of digital interviewing, worked with our Interpreters Operational Unit (IOU) around increasing the availability of remote interpreters and amended interview letters.

As we look to increase the use of digital interviewing, we are linking up our transformation plans with IOU and will be working together to understand how we can improve ways of working for staff, interpreters and customers. We intend going forward to engage with you all further on the use of digital interviewing so we can make it the best it can be and to help realise the benefits for both customers and Asylum Operations in terms of customer journey and service delivery.

Asylum Operations hopes to be able to restart interviews as soon as it is safe to do so, which is likely to be towards the end of June 2020, and the normal notice periods will be given to customers; five days. The restarting of interviews will vary by location due to safe systems of work needing to be put in place and there having been different timescales around the easing of COVID-19 Government guidance around the UK.

Yours sincerely

Dave Draper

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For any queries please email AsylumOpsStakeholder@homeoffice.gov.uk.