

**Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP**  
Member of Parliament for Camberwell and Peckham  
Mother of the House of Commons

## Coronavirus Crisis Report 1



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**2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020**

## **Introduction**

As MPs we find ourselves needing to rethink how we work to best effect for our constituents and for the country in these unprecedented times. Literally everything we do and how we do it has needed to be reconsidered.

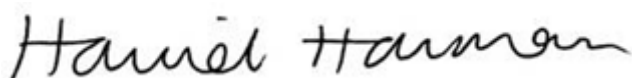
As the pandemic unfolds I want to:

- Share with you how I'm seeking to go about my work as MP during this coronavirus crisis,
- Hear from you if agree with how I'm approaching things and
- What further issues you think I should be addressing.

My approach has been to help constituents with particular problems. To raise issues with the agencies or with the Government if they do not appear to have them on their agenda. Where they are aware of problems but appear to be taking too long to solve them I am joining with those pressuring government to act more speedily.

I am supporting the public health guidance which the Government is issuing and not challenging it in any respect. So, for example, I did not raise with the Government or the school a parent's complaint that his children were not able to be in school. He was an essential worker but his wife was not and was therefore able to be at home to care for them. I haven't visited King's College Hospital yet during the crisis as I want the NHS team there not to be distracted from their work.

I'm working on a completely non-partisan basis. I am thanking the Government when they take the right action and though I raise complaints on behalf of my constituents, when their problems are not being addressed, I do so avoiding any party political overtones. The responsibility lies with the Government of the day and I want them to do their very best at this terrible time.



## **Constituency problems**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many new problems. Far from there being a diminution of complaints about the usual range of issues which my constituents approach me about and which are handled by my dedicated constituency casework team there has been an increase in constituents contacting me and asking for my help. My casework team took action on behalf of 503 constituents in March. Those who are in overcrowded or unsuitable homes feel it even more keenly when they are confined to those homes and their problems become more pressing. Those who already had financial problems find that the COVID-19 crisis only makes them worse. My casework

team continue to deal with pre-existing problems as well as the new COVID-19 problems.

1,130 constituents emailed me in March, the majority about issues relating to COVID-19 including:

- Government support for self-employed, freelancers, PAYE contracts and sole traders
- Remove barriers to abortion care during COVID-19
- Grocery shopping and social distancing
- Emergency Coronavirus Bill powers
- Coronavirus Bill: Protecting disability rights
- Religious burials
- British citizens stranded abroad - repatriation flights

### **Helping constituents stranded overseas**

Camberwell and Peckham is a constituency with many young people who travel widely and with many who've come to live in the UK from overseas who regularly travel back to their country of origin. So when the global lockdown was suddenly imposed many of my constituents found themselves stranded overseas. Constituents contacted me stranded in 16 countries, their flights to return home cancelled. They found it hard to get through to the British consular officials and when they did were simply told to contact their airline. They found that either there were no flights or they were offered tickets at exorbitant prices, for example 2 constituents stranded in New Zealand were offered tickets costing over £5,000.

A man with Multiple Sclerosis was anxious to get home as he was running out of medication. A lesbian couple didn't want to go home via Singapore as they feared their laws against homosexuality. Those stranded face uncertainty about running out of money and how they'll access healthcare. I contacted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in respect of each of my constituents asking them to help them return home. The MPs "hotline" rang for 45 minutes until my assistant gave up and got back to the rest of her work. The FCO responded to my emails only (with the exception of Vietnam) with generic advice that did not relate to the situation of the individual about whom I'd contacted them. Clearly the Consular offices are dealing with a huge number of stranded UK citizens and many of the staff are unable to be at work because they are ill or self-isolating. And clearly the FCO are working hard to arrange scheduled flights home. But it is important for a stranded individual to know that their Consulate knows they are there and knows what they are doing on their behalf. Following the unsatisfactory replies to my emails from the FCO [I wrote to the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab](#), setting out the problems for each of my constituents who'd contacted me and asking for his help. The exceptions to this were our consular office in Vietnam who kept in touch with a 22-year-old unable to return after his holiday and contacted his mother who was anxious to have him home. And Qantas offered a free flight home to one of my

constituents who is a GP and wanted to be back to work for COVID-19 patients.



**Harriet Harman** ✓ @HarrietHarman · 31 Mar

Thanks @PennyMordaunt for conf call of MPs & for taking forward concerns about FCO communicating with indiv stranded abroad to keep up their morale/confidence while they await @foreignoffice & @transportgovuk solution #COVID19

## Helping the Self-Employed

It was an enormous relief to employed people when the Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced that the Government would pay their employers 80% of their pay up to a limit of £2,500 per month. And then that he was establishing a similar scheme to help the self-employed. There are over 15,000 self-employed people in Camberwell and Peckham. They work in many different occupations, many in the creative industries. But many of them are unable to benefit from either the employed or the self-employed schemes as they have until recently been employed and do not have the tax history to qualify for the self-employed scheme, or they are part employed and part-self employed. [I, along with many other MPs, have contacted the Chancellor](#), thanking him his 2 schemes but urging him to make provision for all the people who need help but fall into neither scheme. [I'm backing the proposals that have been made by Equity](#), the actors union.

**Harriet Harman** ✓ @HarrietHarman · 23 Mar  
Govt must at least match for self-employed what they've done for employed. What could possibly be moral/political justification for treating them less favourably in this #coronavirus crisis?

**FSB** ✓ @fsb\_policy · 23 Mar  
We have over 4.9 million self-employed in the UK, contributing over £275bn to our economy. They need our support now more than ever to help them through Coronavirus.

If you want the Government to #ThinkSelfEmployed we need you to spread the word and back our campaign! 🇬🇧

*We know it's easy to say, but...*

**Self-employed:  
Please hang on in there.**

fsb.org.uk/coronavirus **fsb**<sup>98</sup>

# King's College Hospital

King's has been in the front line of caring for patients with Coronavirus and I asked the Chief Executive Dr Clive Kay about their preparedness for it when we met on 11<sup>th</sup> February. Everyone is hugely grateful to them for their dedication and commitment and concerned that, as they strive to give the best possible care, they are themselves able to stay safe. King's was among the first hospitals to report they were caring for patients with COVID-19 and amongst the first to have to report deaths including the youngest COVID-19 patient Ismail Mohamed Abdulwahab aged only 13.

I was very dismayed to hear reports that a young nurse had taken her own life at King's College Hospital. I contacted the Chief Nurse, Nicola Ranger, expressing my commitment and support for all the nurses as they work hard in these challenging circumstances and face the loss of a colleague, and I expressed my sympathy to the family of the young nurse who died.

## Calling for prescriptions to be made free during COVID-19



**Sharon Hodgson MP** @SharonHodgsonMP · 27 Mar

Today over 100 @UKLabour MPs and I have written to @MattHancock calling for prescriptions to be made free for everyone in England during #Covid19.

The system is already extremely complex & with more people now entering the system, pharmacists & patients need this certainty.

  
HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria Street  
London  
SW3H 0EU

27 March 2020

Dear Matt,

We write to plead with you to make all prescriptions in England free for everyone during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Despite Government action, some people have lost their jobs, been furloughed or had their hours and consequently their pay reduced because of the measures the country needs to take to tackle this pandemic.

During the Covid-19 Statement on Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> March you said: "Only around a fifth of people pay prescription charges, so those who are the least able to pay already get free prescriptions." However, for a large proportion of that fifth, of which you speak, their financial circumstances will have substantially changed in recent days and may continue to change before we reach the end of this crisis.

I am also aware that some people have already had to cancel their direct debits for their Prescription Prepayment Certificates, due to losing their jobs or not being paid as expected when they signed up for their PPC.

Having previously been ineligible for free prescriptions, some people will find that this is the first time they have ever needed that financial relief. After all, they will still need their prescriptions during this time and there is a lot of misunderstanding at large, especially amongst people who are now claiming SSP, that this automatically entitles them to free prescriptions, which of course it does not, and could lead to lots of people then falling foul inadvertently of the penalty charge fine for wrongly thinking they are entitled to free prescriptions.

This will be a particularly alarming time for patients with respiratory conditions, such as asthma and this very point was raised with you on Tuesday by the Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Jonathan Ashworth MP. It has been widely reported that due to prescription

would be nonsensical for some of that money to be then spent on prescription charges, when they could be made free for all during this time.

This change would benefit everyone, but particularly those who now find themselves in a difficult financial situation as a result of the Coronavirus.

We therefore urge you to make the humane and compassionate decision to ensure people can effectively manage their ongoing health conditions or illnesses by making prescriptions free for all in England during this pandemic.

Yours sincerely,  
*Sharon Hodgson*

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson MP**  
Member of Parliament for Washington & Sunderland West Constituency  
Shadow Minister for Public Health

**Co-signed by:**

Abera Opong-Asare MP Afroditi Stathi MP Jack Dromey MP James Murray MP Janet Daby MP Jeff Smith MP Jess Phillips MP John Cryer MP Jon Cruddas MP Jonathan Ashworth MP Julie Elliott MP Justin Madders MP Karen Buck MP Karl Turner MP Kate Hollern MP Kate Osamor MP Kate Osborne MP Kerry McCarthy MP Khalid Mahmood MP Kim Johnson MP Lilian Greenwood MP Liz Twist MP Lloyd Russell-Moyle MP	Bambos Charalambous MP Baroness Williams MP Rosie Duffield MP Rupa Huq MP Rushanara Ali MP Ruth Cadbury MP Sam Tarry MP Sarah Jones MP Sarah Owen MP Seema Malhotra MP Stella Creasey MP Stephen Morgan MP Steve McCabe MP Tajwa Owatemi MP Tracy Bradby MP Tulip Siddiq MP Valerie Vaz MP Vicky Foxcroft MP Wayne David MP Yasmin Qureshi MP Yvette Cooper MP Zarah Sultana MP
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Labour Whips and 4 others

## **Southwark Council**

Southwark Council's employees continue to provide much-needed services in very difficult circumstances. Many are ill or self-isolating and sadly we have learnt that already 2 council employees, a refuge worker and social worker, have died with the virus. Through the Council Leader, Peter John, I've expressed my gratitude to all the council employees for their continuing work.

Southwark has wonderful parks and they are important for exercise during this lockdown. The public health advice is strongly that people should keep no less than 2 metres distance and the paths in the parks are becoming so crowded that that is sometimes not happening. While people with gardens can enjoy fresh air without going to a park, the parks are essential for people in lockdown in flats, particularly those with young families who are overcrowded. I've suggested to the Council Leader, Peter John, that he consider a rota system allocating different days for the exclusive use of parks to particular estates or grids of streets to ensure that everyone gets safe access to our precious green spaces.

## **Bereavement**

One of the features of the COVID-19 crisis is that for public health reasons relatives cannot visit hospitals even when their relative is dying and they are not able to see them after they have died. Bereavement services are important at the best of times but are even more-so now as people struggle to come to terms with not even being at their relatives bedside as they die. I am liaising with the Council Leader Peter John about supporting our vital bereavement services.

## **Charities**

Charities, including those providing vital local services, are finding that there is more demand for their services at the same time as a collapse in their income. Local charity shops are closed and big money raising events such as the London Marathon have been cancelled. I've co-signed along with many other MPs a letter led by Stephen Doughty MP to the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, and Secretary of State for Digital, Culture Media and Sport, Oliver Dowden, [calling for a financial support scheme for our charities](#). The economy is being so badly hit by the COVID-19 crisis that charities' assessment is that there will be dramatic drop in the level of charitable giving for a considerable period of time after the pandemic is over.

## **Supermarkets**

The supermarkets have been hit by panic buying particularly for eggs, toilet rolls, and pasta. Their staffing levels have been reduced by illness and self-isolation. [I wrote to the supermarkets with stores in Camberwell and Peckham urging them prioritise vulnerable and elderly people for online deliveries](#) and to ask what steps they are taking to ensure shelves remain stocked with food and



essential supplies throughout the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic, which many of them are doing with varying success. All credit goes to those working hard in the stores, the shelves and on the tills who are now rightly recognised as providing an essential service.



**Harriet Harman** @HarrietHarman · 20 Mar

Good sense @IcelandFoods. Thanks for the determination. And I share your frustration with those whose actions threaten others. #Covid\_19



## Care Homes

There are 8 care homes in Camberwell and Peckham providing for some of our most vulnerable residents. They too are being hit by staff shortages. And the inadequate supplies of Personal Protective Equipment are particularly worrying for those whose work requires them to have close contact with those they care for. I have contacted all the care homes in Camberwell and Peckham and will be taking up their concerns with the relevant authorities.

## The Police

It is evident that the police have a very difficult but important job policing the new laws and regulations about public behaviour. They too are affected by officers and staff being absent on self-isolation or because of sickness. They too have [not had adequate supplies of Personal Protective Equipment](#). Through the Commander for MPS Lambeth and Southwark, Chief Supt Colin Wingrove, I asked for my thanks to be conveyed to all the police officers in Camberwell and Peckham for the essential work they are providing.

[I was particularly concerned about those women and children who are vulnerable because they are in lockdown with an abusive partner](#). Chief Supt Wingrove assured me that the multi-agency risk assessment discussions including the council, the health services, and other services are continuing to take place daily to review each case of a family they know are at risk but they are conducting the reviews online instead of in person.

## Thanks to our dedicated postal workers!



**Harriet Harman** ✓ @HarrietHarman · 3h

Postal workers are on frontline & working harder than ever through #Coronavirus crisis. Govt must give them PPE to do their jobs safely & suspend junk mail. Thank you for all you do @CWUnews @PostOffice @RoyalMail. Pics from Xmas 2019



## Protecting Human Rights

I'm chair of the Joint Committee on Human rights which is a select committee of MPs and peers responsible for the scrutiny of human rights in the UK. The Coronavirus Act contains sweeping new powers for government, police and other agencies with the intention of protecting the NHS and saving lives.

When the Government published the Bill it contained provision for the powers to run for 2 years before they need to be renewed. The JCHR objected to 2 years and [tabled an amendment that the powers should run for no more than 6 months before they were up for renewal](#). The Government accepted the objective of the amendment and the Act will now run for 6 months and will not continue unless it is renewed by Parliament.

At this point the JCHR is monitoring how the police, government and other agencies are using their new powers. It is important that they do everything they can to save lives. The most basic and important human right is the right to life and the Government have a duty to protect that. But the new powers must be exercised in a way that is proportionate. We have put out a public call for evidence on how these new powers are being used - [Read more here](#).

It's important that the police help in the national effort to ensure that there is proper social isolation. Most people are abiding by the guidance but a few are flouting it and thereby risking spreading the virus. The police have a role in challenging those who are flouting the guidance even if they are not committing a criminal offence. But it's important that they do so in a way which is not oppressive, excessive or discriminatory and we have to be vigilant about that. We don't want the police to emerge from this COVID crisis having



undermined their relationship with the public which is key to their being able to do their job effectively on our behalf.

It is a basic human right not to be discriminated against on grounds of disability which is why in the Equality Act we put a duty on local authorities and health services to promote the rights of disabled people as well strengthening the right not to be discriminated against. Obviously in the dire circumstances that we face we have to be vigilant that those who are vulnerable to discrimination are not in jeopardy because of the measures taken to tackle the virus. I'm asking the chair of the Women and Equalities Select Committee what plans they have to scrutinise all public authorities' response to coronavirus as it impacts disabled people as they have the lead on this. And I'm raising the issue with Cllr Jasmine Ali who has the lead on this in Southwark Council's cabinet.

Under the new powers, the Ministry of Justice, has released pregnant women from prison unless they pose a real risk to the public. This is very welcome. Pregnant women and women with young children should not be in prison unless they pose a risk to the public. And I will press for this to continue to be the position after the COVID crisis is over. [Read our Children Whose Mothers are in Prison report here.](#)

### **Working differently!**

From Monday 16th March my staff of 4 have been working from home. I'm enormously grateful to Clare Gosbee, Rachel Smethers, Chloe Wright and Papa Okyere-Asiedu, who are diligently continuing to help my constituents, supporting my work as an MP and as chair of the Human Rights Committee. I am also grateful to Bea Forrester who has temporarily rejoined the team to work remotely as a caseworker. They have overcome any and all technology issues and made their bedrooms into their offices to continue their work.



## **Coronavirus Help and Support**

### **Southwark Council:**

- [General information on Coronavirus](#)
- [Covid-19: What can you do to help](#)
- [Financial support for residents](#)

- [Food access](#)
- [Coronavirus housing advice](#)
- [Covid-19: Support and information for businesses and employers](#)
- [Southwark COVID-19 community grants](#)
- [Voluntary sector help and advice on Coronavirus](#)
- [Impact on council services](#)
- [Advice on potential coronavirus related scams](#)

**Citizens Advice – Benefit advice:**

- <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/coronavirus-check-what-benefits-you-can-get/>

**Government business advice:**

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19>
- Government's Business Support Helpline on 0300 456 3565, Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm.

**HMRC:**

- [helpline for businesses and self-employed people who are concerned about their tax](#) due to COVID-19.
- 08000 241222, Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm.

**Domestic violence help and support:**

- Solace Advice Line - 0808 802 5565
- Monday - Friday 10am - 4pm. Additional 6pm - 8pm on Tuesdays.
- Email: [advice@solacewomensaid.org](mailto:advice@solacewomensaid.org)
- Website: <https://www.together-uk.org/southwark-wellbeing-hub/the-directory/9453/solace-advocacy-and-support-services-sass/>

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