

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria St
London
SW1H 0EU

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing,
Communities and Local Government
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local
Government
2 Marsham St
Westminster
London
SW1P 4DF

27 July 2020

Dear Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government,

We write to raise our concern about the **lack of availability of COVID-19 public health guidance in languages other than English**, which is preventing people in England who do not speak or read English well from accessing essential public health information and limiting their ability to keep themselves, their families, and their communities safe. At present the 'Stay alert: what you can and cannot do' guidance and information on NHS test and trace is not available in any languages other than English. The few translations that have been made available are in a limited range of languages and are frequently withdrawn as guidance changes and translated versions are not maintained. We call on the government to commit to producing and maintaining national COVID-19 guidance in languages that reflect England's multilingual communities.

The UK is a multilingual society; in England and Wales over four million people speak a main language other than English with 864,000 speaking little to no English. Many face barriers to learning English due to challenges in the accessibility, availability, sufficiency, and flexibility of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) offer, given the context of a real term cut of almost 60 percent in funding for ESOL since 2008.

To stop the spread of COVID-19 and end this pandemic, it is essential that everyone receives accurate information about the virus and public health measures in place. During the pandemic, Doctors of the World UK, with support from the Mayor of London, has translated UK-wide guidance into over 60 languages, which have been accessed over 59,000 times, demonstrating the need for translated guidance in a range of languages.

Public Health England's report on the impact of COVID-19 on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities highlighted the need "to enhance the depth of reach into BAME communities ensuring guidance and media is culturally appropriate and available in different languages" and recommended

funding, developing and implementing “culturally competent COVID-19 education and prevention campaigns” to “reinforce messages on early identification, testing and diagnosis; and prepare communities to take full advantage of interventions including contact tracing, antibody testing and ultimately vaccine availability.”

A Rapid Needs Assessment carried out in England at the height of the pandemic further showed that asylum seekers, refugees, people experiencing homelessness, sex workers, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and people newly released from prison were at higher risk of being exposed to COVID-19 because of difficulty accessing COVID-19 guidance and key public health messages.

During the pandemic local authorities and civil society organisations have made efforts to translate COVID-19 guidance into other languages, but as lockdown measures are eased and guidance changes regularly, it is not sustainable or practical for local authorities and civil society to meet this need. The production of accessible and translated public health information for the public during a public health emergency is a central part of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care’s statutory duty to protect the nation’s health and wellbeing, and to address health inequalities in England.

We recognise that local lockdowns may require area-specific guidance translated into locally relevant languages, which may be best coordinated and produced at local authority level, but central leadership is required to ensure the quality and consistency of locally led initiatives.

To tackle the huge challenge of COVID-19 together, it is critical that everyone is supported to stay healthy and included in overall public health measures. We urgently seek reassurance that the government will consider and include non-English speakers in its response to COVID-19 and commit to produce and maintain accessible COVID-19 guidance in languages that reflect England’s multilingual communities.

Yours sincerely,

Greater London Authority

Doctors of the World UK

Faculty of Public Health

Association of Directors of Public Health (London)

Kingston Council

Haringey Council

Liverpool City Council
Islington Council
After Exploitation
Asylum Matters
Asylum Support Appeals Project
City of Sanctuary
Freedom from Torture
Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit
Helen Bamber Foundation
Homeless Link
Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
Jewish Council for Racial Equality
Just Fair
Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network
Maternity Action
Migrant Voice
Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers
Refugee Action
Shpresa Programme
Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group
The University of Liverpool Law Clinic
UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group
Voices in Exile