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Call for leaders not to leave migrants behind as lockdown lifts

A leading human rights law charity has written to the First Minister and the Home Secretary calling on them to protect the rights of migrant communities across Scotland as they lift lockdown measures in coming weeks and months.

In the letter to Nicola Sturgeon and Priti Patel, JustRight Scotland (JRS) claims migrant communities have suffered disproportionately in the turmoil caused by Covid-19.

The call comes just days after the tragic, sudden death of a Syrian asylum seeker, found alone in the Glasgow hotel room he had been moved to from his flat as part of Home Office approved Covid-19 planning.

JustRight Scotland says the global pandemic has “exacerbated the deeply entrenched inequalities and difficulties migrants already face as a consequence of poor policy making and political choices”.

The letter calls on both leaders to ensure that “policy changes being implemented to save lives must not be dependent on an individual’s immigration status”.

Work carried out by JustRight Scotland’s migrant and citizens’ rights project – Just Citizens – has found a wide range of concerns affecting asylum seekers, EU citizens and other migrants living, working or studying in Scotland. People whose immigration status stopped them from accessing public funds are particularly affected.

Examples include:

A 16-year-old girl, fleeing domestic abuse in the family, who was not provided with ‘looked after’ care by her local authority for several weeks, supposedly due to covid-19 restrictions. She was placed in inappropriate homeless accommodation with no fixed financial support, and was forced to rely on food parcels from a local charity and hand-outs from a social worker to top-up her phone. She was isolated and put in an unacceptably vulnerable position.

Scotland’s Legal Centre for Justice and Human Rights

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Asylum seekers, moved out of flats into hotels by housing provider Mears Group, where they are forced to use communal eating spaces. They have had all financial support stopped and are reporting high levels of emotional distress. Last Tuesday, a 30-year-old Syrian man was found dead in his room. His friends said he was distressed and reported having flashbacks.

Just Citizens also highlighted immigration “catch-22s” facing the most vulnerable EU citizens. Those without smart phones are now struggling to apply for settled status, as the primary route to applying to the Home Office is through an app. Without this status, it is harder to pass the habitual residency test, and in some cases means they are unable to access benefits, leaving them destitute.

Fears were raised too around isolation and impact on mental wellbeing for migrant families with very limited access to outdoor space and no digital access to support.

The letter reads: “We already know that COVID-19 is hurting the Black and Minority Ethnic community at a higher rate, as such, we cannot afford to ignore the voices and experiences of migrants”.

It continues: “As you develop next steps in the easing of lockdown measures alongside the UK Government,...we ask that the Scottish Government fully evaluates the impact for migrants and take steps across all policy areas to protect and include migrant communities (in particular, those under no recourse to public funds (NRPF) which has already been deemed unlawful by the High Court) and pushes the UK Government to do the same.”

“Any policy changes being implemented to save lives must not be dependent on an individual’s immigration status.”

Jen Ang, JRS partner and director of the Just Citizens project added: *“At JustRight Scotland we see every day the inequality faced by migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. With COVID-19, the cases we are dealing with and the stories we are hearing from migrants are even more harrowing. Now must be the time for leaders at Holyrood and Westminster to take long overdue action to tackle the discriminatory treatment of migrants across Scotland, and the rest of the UK.”*

For a full copy of the letter, interviews and further information, contact Jen Ang – jen@justrightscotland.org.uk or 079 6005 2141.

Notes to editors:

JustRight Scotland: JustRight Scotland use the law to extend and defend people’s rights. We work with individuals and organisations to increase access to justice in Scotland by providing direct legal advice and

representation, public legal education, training and outreach, and engaging in research, policy and influencing work.

Just Citizens: This project aims to rethink what it means to be a Scottish citizen – for migrants, EU nationals, refugees and native Scots. It aims to rethink citizenship in a bigger, bolder way that ensures equal rights for people that are not determined by immigration status.