

Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic Protocol Directorate guidance

Background:

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is creating a hitherto unprecedented social, economic and logistical strain on the UK and many other countries around the world. The highly contagious nature of this new disease, combined with the high rate of severe illness and mortality, means that it has been necessary to implement immediate, tough social distancing policies in order to protect the National Health Service from being overwhelmed which will ultimately save lives.

The advice to stay at and work from home has created new and unique strain and challenges for many businesses and organisations across the country, including your diplomatic missions, consular posts and international organisations. The FCO itself is having to adapt to the same restrictions, with more than 90% of staff currently working from home, so we are aware of and sympathetic to many of the practical problems they create. But we ask that all missions and international organisations work with us during this difficult time to support your communities and staff to comply with the social distancing regulations currently in place.

Stay at home

Only go outside for food, health reasons or work (but only if you cannot work from home)

If you go out, stay 2 metres (6ft) away from other people at all times

Wash your hands as soon as you get home

Do not meet others, even friends or family.

You can spread the virus even if you don't have symptoms.

<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

In order to support you through this difficult time we have set out answers to some of the frequently asked questions. Additional central Government general FAQs regarding the **implementation** of COVID restrictions can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do>

Questions and Answers

Q1. Do diplomats, consular staff and staff of international organisations have to comply with the GOV.UK guidance on staying at home and away from others?

A1. All individuals who enjoy privileges and immunities in the UK have an obligation to respect the UK's laws and regulations.

Q2. What about staff who are essential to the operation of the mission in the current circumstances?

A2. Diplomatic missions, consular Posts and international organisations should determine the minimum number of staff considered essential to their operations, and which staff fulfil such roles. By way of comparison British diplomatic missions overseas and the FCO in the UK have reduced to a bare minimum the number of staff who need to travel to work whilst the vast majority of staff work from home.

Q3. Will essential staff who travel in to work be arrested or detained?

A3. No. Her Majesty's Government upholds the principles of inviolability and freedom of movement enshrined in the Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic and Consular Relations. Essential staff who need to travel to work should present diplomatic ID cards as proof of their status if challenged by law enforcement agents. Any essential Locally Engaged (LE) staff who need to travel for their work should be issued with a letter confirming their role at the mission, consular Post or international organisation.

Q4. Can essential staff travel outside of London?

A4. Yes. Her Majesty's Government upholds the principles of inviolability and freedom of movement enshrined in the Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic and Consular Relations. Essential staff who need to travel outside of London to conduct essential business should present diplomatic ID cards as proof of their status if challenged by law enforcement agents. Any essential Locally Engaged (LE) staff who need to travel outside of London to conduct essential work should be issued with a letter confirming their role at the mission, consular Post or international organisation.

Q5. Will school places be made available for children of essential staff of diplomatic missions, consular Posts and international organisations?

A5. If children can stay safely at home, they should, to limit the chance of the virus spreading. That is why Her Majesty's Government has asked parents to keep their children at home, wherever possible, and asked schools to remain open only for those children who absolutely need to

attend. Staff should apply to schools to be regarded as staff essential to the operation of a diplomatic mission, consular Post or international organisation, in line with guidance issued by Local Authorities and schools.

Q6. Do diplomats, consular and staff of international organisations qualify for preferential or preventive testing for Coronavirus?

A6. *Superseded – please see Q12.*

Q7. How do I renew a diplomatic exempt vignette which has expired?

A7. It is not presently possible for the FCO or UKVI to receive or process passports in order to renew diplomatic exempt vignettes. Expired diplomatic exempt vignettes, which show that an individual is exempt from UK immigration control whilst they hold a role that entitles them to such status, will be renewed as soon as circumstances permit. In the meantime staff should use their diplomatic ID cards issued by the FCO to confirm their status, if required to do so.

Q8. Can we continue to use the mission premises to support our communities?

A8. Yes. However, you should endeavour to ensure that this can be done in a way that is compatible with your communities and staff complying with UK guidance and the regulations put in place under the Coronavirus Act. This means avoiding, or doing differently, any activities that would, if implemented in the normal way, require members of the public or your staff to leave their homes for reasons other than those set out in the Government guidance, gather in groups in public places or be unable to keep more than 2 metres apart from others at all times. The only permissible reasons for people leaving home are: shopping for basic necessities; one form of exercise a day; any medical need; and travelling for work purposes (but only if you cannot work from home). Full guidance, published on 29 March 2020, can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do>.

Q9. Can we use mission premises to conduct in person voting for our national/regional elections?

A9. Her Majesty's Government supports and encourages all citizens to exercise their democratic rights. However, in the present circumstances there is a clear danger that the additional security and crowd control measures necessary to facilitate in-person balloting could not be conducted effectively in a way that is compatible with social distancing. This would put the public at risk as well as put increased pressure on an

already strained Police force. To protect the public, we would expect any voting from the UK to be done through other means – for example, through the post, by in-country representatives, or, if available, through online voting mechanisms.

Q10. My consular post/international organisation is not based in London. Are there additional restrictions I need to be aware of.

A10. For consular posts or international organisations based in England there no additional measures. However, whilst the general advice is consistent in the devolved nations, implementation and specific advice may vary. For further implementation of COVID crisis restrictions and advice in the devolved nations please see these websites:

Scotland: <https://www.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19/>

Wales: <https://gov.wales/coronavirus>

Northern Ireland: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19>

Q11. How will Missions and consular posts be informed of the death of a national due to COVID-19?

A11. Article 37(a) of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (VCCR) states that “If the relevant information is available to the competent authorities of the receiving State, such authorities shall have the duty in the case of the death of a national of the sending State, to inform without delay the consular post in whose district the death occurred.” This obligation is typically fulfilled in the UK by regional police forces, liaising with NHS and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) staff and it is the mechanism whereby information on relevant COVID-19 fatalities will be passed to missions.

Q12. Can our staff gain access to the COVID 19 Antigen testing process?

A12. Yes. For the purposes of COVID-19 Antigen testing members of the diplomatic community are categorised as essential workers. All categories of mission staff will be eligible to book a test in either England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is for missions and organisations to determine which members of their staff they choose to categorise as essential workers but the DMIOU requests cooperation in adhering to the eligibility criteria for testing. This will help to ensure that those key individuals who cannot work from home and who are experiencing uncertainty due to COVID like symptoms within their household are able to return to work as quickly as possible. It will also help to avoid overburdening the testing system. Further information can be found on the self-referral portal, at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-getting-tested>

Q13. Contact details in DMIOU?

A13. Direct your queries in the first instance to your DMIOU team, using the usual e-mail addresses:

Protocol.DMIOUTeam1@fco.gov.uk

Protocol.DMIOUTeam2@fco.gov.uk

Protocol.DMIOUTeam3@fco.gov.uk

Protocol.DMIOUTeam4@fco.gov.uk

These mailboxes will continue to be monitored during working hours throughout the current Coronavirus arrangements.