

Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

Wednesday 14 October 2020

Dear Chancellor,

The Prime Minister said on Monday that COVID-19 is once again “spreading among the elderly and vulnerable”. As charities representing people that are clinically vulnerable to COVID-19, we are alarmed by the guidance published by the Government yesterday for our communities, which falls well short of the practical and financial support required to enable vulnerable people to stay safe as COVID-19 cases continue to rise. We are disappointed that we have not received a response to our joint letter addressed to you on 30 July 2020 and are worried that the concerns of vulnerable people are not being fully considered.

People living with suppressed immune systems, long-term or life-threatening conditions like multiple sclerosis, lung conditions, cancer and diabetes have undertaken huge changes to their lives in order to protect themselves, and need the support of the Government to do so. Without the practical and financial support in place during the first wave, vulnerable people with less savings, without family nearby, or who are not able to work from home, have no choice but to simply carry on and risk their health.

Vulnerable employees in very high risk areas are being strongly advised to work from home, but if that’s not possible, they have been told they can continue to go into work. That puts people in an unacceptable situation, with a choice between their health and their livelihoods. Even if cases rise to a level where shielding returns and vulnerable people who cannot do their job from home are told not to attend their workplace, the Government’s only response to the significant financial concerns this would raise is that they “may” be eligible for some benefits. Vulnerable people deserve to know they will be supported throughout this crisis.

The past six months have shown us that the most vulnerable need financial support, safe access to food and medicines, and clear communications. Under no circumstances should they be forced to take potentially enormous risks – like commuting and working in close proximity to the general public. The furlough scheme has been a lifeline for those previously asked to shield, and many are anxious that this support package is being wound down at the end of the month.

We recognise that the wider context around case numbers differs from when shielding was originally introduced, with additional measures having been put in place around social distancing and the wearing of masks. However, with cases continuing to rise, it is far from clear to vulnerable people that their risks will remain significantly lower than when they were shielding previously.

The Government is right to highlight the impact that shielding had on many people's mental health – we are not writing to advocate a blanket re-introduction of the shielding programme. However, there is a world of difference between giving people the *option of* not following shielding advice and *forcing* them to take unquantified risks by withdrawing vital support.

Collectively, we are calling on the Government to put in place practical and financial measures to make sure vulnerable people get the crucial support they need as COVID-19 cases rise. This must include:

1. **Financial support:** Introduce a new support scheme (or extend the furlough scheme) for people who are high risk and unable to work from home as furlough comes to an end. This is essential in areas at the highest risk. We need this support scheme to maintain the relationship with their employer and ensure individuals retain a decent income whilst the risk of COVID-19 remains high. The UK Government also needs to take steps to ensure that workplace health and safety measures are enforced, including the Government's own COVID-secure workplace guidance.
2. **Access to essential items:** Ensure safe access to deliveries of essential items, including food and medicines, particularly in high-risk areas, to prevent vulnerable people having to take unnecessary risks. Such support from government and local authorities was invaluable in the first wave and must be continued where it is needed
3. **Better communication:** Timely, clear information in plain English for all vulnerable people that offers practical advice that people can understand must be provided. The Government must ensure this information is suitable for everyone and not just those with internet access. Each vulnerable person should have a point of contact in the health and care system, to check they are coping emotionally and physically. Charities should be part of this more integrated offer of support too. The Government must also set out clearly in what instances shielding guidance will come into effect.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you or your advisers to discuss this further, to ensure that vulnerable groups are not forced into making impossible choices between their health and their livelihoods.

For your information, we will be writing to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for a response to these points, and share a copy of this letter with members of the Shadow Front Bench.

If you would like any more information or to set up a meeting, please contact Joe Brunwin, Public Affairs Manager at the MS Society on Joseph.Brunwin@mssociety.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Moberly, CEO, MS Society

Steve Ford, CEO, Parkinson's UK,

Georgina Carr, CEO, Neurological Alliance,

Chris Askew, CEO, Diabetes UK,

Sally Light, CEO, Motor Neurone Disease Association,
Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director, Age UK,
Genevieve Edwards, CEO, Bowel Cancer UK,
Catherine Woodhead, CEO, Muscular Dystrophy UK,
Dr Keith Brownlee, Director of Policy, Programmes and Support, Cystic Fibrosis Trust,
Paul Bristow, CEO, Kidney Care UK,
Chris Walden, Deputy Director of Policy, Campaigns and Engagement, Blood Cancer UK,
Sarah Sleet, CEO, Crohn's and Colitis UK,
Dr Alison Cook, Director of External Affairs, Asthma UK and The British Lung Foundation
Lynda Thomas, CEO, Macmillan Cancer Support
Charlotte Augst, CEO, National Voices