

Briefing from UK Women's Budget Group - 25 March 2020

Coronavirus Bill: Gaps and Problems

Tomorrow (26 March 2020) the Government will sign into law unprecedented measures to help stop the spread of Covid-19. The [Bill](#) will enshrine in law many of the announcements made in recent days. The [Bill](#) makes clear that these measures are strong but temporary and will only be enforced if the pandemic worsens as it is expected to.

What's in the Bill?

The Bill is divided into four categories: enhancing capacity and the flexible deployment of staff; easing of legislative and regulatory requirements; containing and slowing the virus; supporting people; and managing the deceased. The first four are most relevant to this briefing. Measures include:

1. Enhancing capacity and the flexible deployment of staff:

- Putting 7500 retired NHS staff, social care workers and final year medical students back to work as well as drawing on existing legislation that allows extensions on responsibilities in times of crisis and delaying non-urgent treatment.
- Enable workers to take Emergency Volunteer Leave in the event volunteers are needed to support health and social care efforts.
- Make it easier for doctors to discharge patients.

2. Easing of legislative and regulatory requirements:

- Amending the Mental Health Act 1983 to extend or remove time limits relating to detention and transfer of patients and allow one doctor (as opposed to currently two) to make judgements.
- Amending the Care Act 2014 and devolved equivalents to temporarily 'relax' standards of social care for the elderly and disabled and social services for young children/adults, in local authorities particularly squeezed.
- Relaxing standards in education institutions or at childcare providers who stay open during the crisis in case of staff shortages e.g. teacher/child ratios.
- Give the Home Secretary powers to close the borders if Border Force staff shortages result in a real and significant threat to the UK's border security.
- Expand availability of video and audio link in court proceedings and allow the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to appoint temporary judicial commissioners, allowing warrants to be issued under the Investigatory Powers Act.
- Relax Treasury rules to ensure financial decisions can be made in the event of staff shortages.

3. Delaying the slowing the virus:

- Give police and immigration officers the ability to detain potentially infected people and place them in isolation if they refuse to do so willingly.
- Close schools with exception for the children of key workers, non-essential shops, restaurants, bars, gyms etc. to avoid the congregation of groups of people.
- Enable Ministers to give powers to disperse gatherings of people in all public spaces.
- Postpone the local, mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner elections.
- Remove restrictions on vaccine administration in Scotland.

4. Supporting people:

- Allowing people to claim Statutory Sick Pay from Day 1 of illness and increasing rates of UC.
- Enable employers with fewer than 250 to reclaim SSP from HMRC.
- Require industry to provide information about food supplies.

What's not in the Bill?

The Bill enshrines in law many, but not all, of the announcements the Government has made in recent days. Some have been covered in other instruments. However there remain gaps in the Government's response.

There are no provisions:

- To increase the level of Statutory Sick Pay: currently still just £94.25 a week.
- For the self-employed who are out of work or whose earnings have fallen substantially.
- For migrants with 'no recourse to public funds,' unstable status or who are detained.
- For victims/survivors of domestic abuse who will be isolated with their abuser.
- For renters who are facing rent arrears and eviction notices.
- To increase support for those now taking care of children full time through Child Benefit or paid parental leave.
- To increase Carer's Allowance, currently £66.15 a week.
- To help prisons and detention centres plan for the outbreak.

What are the key problems?

- There is widespread concern that the lessening of care standards for particularly the elderly and disabled will not help the crisis in social care caused by decades of cuts. The care sector is already in crisis following decades of underfunding. Further corner-cutting could have serious consequences, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak.
- In the small print of the Bill contains detail of what the Government meant when they said they would 'halt evictions.' Even after amendment on Monday, the Bill simply says tenants are to be given 3 months' notice of evictions with no longer term protection. Shelter [has expressed](#) concerns.
- There is [concern](#) from human rights organisations including [Amnesty International](#) and [Liberty](#) that the powers given to police, immigration and public health officials - or even the military eventually - to detain or forcibly isolate people could be particularly dangerous for victims/survivors of domestic abuse and undocumented migrants.

Equalities Impact Assessment

The Government has [said](#) an equalities impact assessment has been done but it is not publicly available. The Covid-19 crisis is clearly a gendered crisis as [our briefing](#) sets out in detail.

Though significantly more men than women appear to be fatalities of the virus in the UK, there are specific concerns for women especially. Women are overrepresented in care roles, both paid and unpaid and in the health sector. Women are more likely to be in insecure and low paid employment and less likely to be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay. Women are more likely to be victims/survivors of abuse. Particular groups of women including disabled women, migrant women and Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority women will face specific and often more severe impacts.

- Women are more likely than men to be working in sectors now closed including retail, hospitality and teaching. They are therefore at increased risk of debt – including rent arrears - and poverty.

Women, particularly BAME, disabled women and single mothers are already disproportionately at risk of [poverty](#).

- Women are also more likely to be working in professions exposed to the virus like health (77%), social care (80%), teaching (63% at primary level) and in supermarkets. BAME women are over-represented as health workers. Yet, there are [anecdotal](#) reports that PPE designed for men is not keeping women safe. This also means they may be more likely to contract the virus and rely on SSP, although clearly it needs to be increased for everybody's benefit.
- The majority of paid carers and those in need of care are women as women. This means that reduced standards of care are of particular concern to women.
- Women are at significantly higher risk of domestic abuse. The lack of provisions (such as accommodation for homeless people) for survivors/victims as well as the threat of forcible isolation must be considered. This is heightened for migrant women without recourse.
- 23% of women are disabled compared with 20% of men and the disability gender pay gap between disabled women and non-disabled men is [22.1%](#) leaving disabled people at increased risk of poverty. 1 in 2 disabled women compared with 1 in 4 non-disabled women will experience domestic abuse in their lives so there is a clear intersection of risk here.
- The majority of women in prison are serving short sentences ([77%](#) for 12 months or less) and for non-violent crimes ([82%](#).) The Government has been quiet on plans for prisons and detention centres.
- Despite many families now working remotely and flexibly, women continue to take on the majority of childcare responsibilities and budgeting for the family home. Increases to Carer's Allowance or Child Benefit would provide significant assistance to women.
- Women make up the [majority](#) of the low paid (69%), zero-hours contracts (54%) and part time self-employed (59%) therefore the Government's failure to provide for precarious workers is disproportionately distributed.
- Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures yet, for BAME families and migrant women with unstable status increased police and immigration powers could be of concern in the longer term. Undocumented women may fear seeking treatment from the NHS.

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