



Ms Jeane Freeman MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport
The Scottish Parliament
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20 November 2020

Dear Ms Freeman,

COVID-19 RENEWAL OF VISA EXTENSION FOR KEY HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

I am writing to update you on today's announcement renewing our UK-wide visa extension offer for key, frontline health professionals, and their eligible family dependants, working in the NHS and wider independent health and care sector – in response to the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is just one of the unprecedented measures we have introduced to ensure the health and care sector is supported fully and to show our gratitude to those workers making an essential contribution in our fight against the pandemic and helping to keep the UK safe.

In March and April, in response to the early stages of the pandemic, we introduced our initial visa extension offer for individuals and their family members working in eligible health occupations whose visa was due to expire between 31 March and 1 October. This offer, which provided 12-months leave to remain in the UK, has now expired. To date we have extended the visas of over 6,000 eligible individuals, across the whole of our United Kingdom.

Our initial extension offer was open to any person in the UK subject to UK immigration control, who met the defined criteria, and was free of any visa fees and charges. Sponsors were not required to pay a Certificate of Sponsorship fee or the Immigration Skills Charge, and individual applicants were exempt from the Immigration Health Surcharge.

In view of the increasing number of Coronavirus cases and the re-introduction of restrictions, and to further demonstrate our appreciation to key, frontline health workers, we are now renewing our previous 12-month, free visa extension, maintaining the same eligibility criteria outlined above. This includes ensuring this offer is open to all people in the UK who meet the criteria, as whilst health arrangements are devolved, immigration policy is reserved.

Along with doctors and nurses, this extension will again include allied health professionals, for example, physiotherapists, social workers and paramedics, where their visas expire between 1 October 2020 and 31 March 2021. Eligible family dependants (partner and children under the age of 18) whose visas are also expiring between 1 October and 31 March 2021 will also benefit.

In implementing renewal of the visa extension, we are committed to ensuring requirements on those eligible are minimal. No formal visa application will be required; however, each worker will be required to lodge their interest in the offer using a simple online form and

following this submit relevant identity documents electronically.

Much work is underway already and we anticipate it will only be a matter of weeks until the online form is published. In the meantime, my officials will begin work immediately, contacting employers for them to start collating eligible worker's details, ready to submit to UK Visas and Immigration.

As you will note, the eligibility of this renewal policy is back-dated to 1 October 2020– the date on which the criteria for the initial extension offer ended. Those individuals who would have benefitted from the renewal and who have had another application granted can receive a one-year ex gratia payment. Those individuals who have submitted applications yet to be decided, who would otherwise be eligible for the renewal extension, can choose to either withdraw their application and be refunded any fees paid or wait for it to be processed and then be paid an ex gratia payment if their application is granted.

The Home Office has worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to finalise the list of eligible occupations. The renewal offer will therefore benefit key health occupations working in the social care sector, for example, nurses, occupational therapists and social workers.

The Government is showing its support and gratitude to the social care sector in a number of different ways across Government, including through additional funding.

We are also working closely with the sector to go further to recognise the contributions of social care workers, increasing the prestige of our domestic workforce and providing opportunities for those in the sector.

We also intend to expand the list of occupations eligible for the Health and Care visa, following the launch of the new Skilled Workers route on 1 December and the expanded skills threshold (RQF 3 (A Level and equivalent) and above). This will likely mean more occupations in the social care sector can benefit from significantly reduced visa fees, fast track processing and exemption from the Immigration Health Surcharge.

In addition to making these changes the UK Government believes recent months have reinforced the value of many who work in sectors such as social care. We must ensure they are offered rewarding salary packages and career development opportunities by their employers, rather than looking to immigration policies for an alternative to doing so. This is why we will not be introducing a general route allowing employers to recruit at or near the minimum wage on a global basis under the new Points-Based Immigration System or exempting social care employers from the salary limits.

I greatly value the work international health and care staff do. I am sure you will agree we must continue to support these dedicated and hard-working professionals.

With my very best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Foster', with a large flourish at the end.

Kevin Foster MP
Minister for Future Borders and Immigration