

## GENERAL SECRETARY UPDATE JUNE 2020

I hope everyone is keeping safe and well through the uncertain and difficult times we find ourselves in. With so much conflicting advice surrounding COVID-19, the NPC believes that staying 'alert' is not the same as staying safe. So, for now, our guidance is still to follow the science and Public Health England advice for over 70's with underlying health conditions to stay at home. Those without health conditions, we urge you to use your best judgement if you are venturing outside either to shop, walk or undertake other activities in order to keep yourself safe.

Another confusing area is the mandatory wearing of masks on public transport and in places where it is difficult to social distance. The World Health Organisation has said those over the age of 60 should wear a medical mask. Given that there is still not the level of protective equipment for front line staff in hospitals and care homes, how do we get these masks and who pays the cost. Medical masks are not inexpensive. The communication from government sources leaves a lot to be desired, especially at a time when lockdown rules are being relaxed very quickly.

Those on email and hopefully those on post too will have received another set of press releases, letters and the Campaign News.

With this update, we are sending the briefing asked for on the legal situation with the free TV licence for over 75's. The NPC policy is still to target the government and we are this week following up letters to the Prime Minister on the subject of his promise to 'sort it out'. We are also following up this week the letter sent to Matt Hancock asking him to answer our request for a meeting. It is perfectly possible for us to have a face to face conversation without being in the same room!

There have been many discussions at various EC meetings regarding the non-payment of the TV licence fee by those over 75 years of age. As an organisation, the NPC has repeatedly said it will not encourage its members to break the law. This is still the current situation.

The guidance asked for has been produced and you will see that not paying your licence fee is not a criminal act – not paying the fine is. There are other consequences before the ultimate prison sentence which individuals need to take into account. For example, the court ordering the amount of the fine and cost of the TV licence to be taken from wages or benefits, and a visit from the bailiff.

Tony Hall (the current Director of the BBC) has openly said that older people will be prosecuted for not paying a fine attached to non-payment of the TV licence fee. It remains to be seen whether the new Director will hold the same views.

The office remains closed and we are watching very carefully the impact of workers getting back to their offices and the potential spread of the virus. We have a duty of care to our staff, officers and the wider membership which we take very seriously as a result of this pandemic. Staff continue to work from home and I want to thank them for all their hard work in keeping everyone informed.

The pandemic has changed how the world works and it will change how the NPC does its work whilst we are unable to meet in groups up and down the country. We are currently researching the myriad of programmes available for 'virtual meetings' to identify one that is the most suitable and effective for the organisation. We know, and understand, that a high number of our members (particularly in the smaller groups) do not wish to, or cannot for whatever reason be online. We will make sure that these members are not excluded or isolated from the work of the NPC.

We will also be looking at how we can effectively campaign whilst not being able to turn up at parliament and hold round tables, lobbies etc. It needs innovative and creative thought and the staff team are considering alternatives whilst we are all still at home.

One area of concern for the NPC and other organisations working to defend the NHS is the contract for the contact tracing service. This contract was given to a company called Serco (who a lot of us know in relation to contracts for NHS and local community services). It was given without going out to tender – part of the relaxation of legislation voted through by parliament.

The Guardian revealed that Serco's CEO says he wants the contract to "***cement the position of the private sector***" in our NHS. There are other issues that make Serco the last company that should run contact tracing:

- The head of Serco has said that the contact tracing system won't be operational until September and is likely to be "imperfect and clunky"
- Serco has only tracked 1749 people so far, with many staff sitting idle.
- Staff say they have no idea what they should be doing, are paid near minimum wage and have had minimum training.
- Serco were convicted of fraud for the electronic tagging scandal, and fined £23 million.
- Their breast cancer hotline only trained staff for 1 hour before putting them on the phones to talk to distressed patients.
- They falsified NHS data 252 times when they ran a GP out of hours' service.

Contact tracing is part of Public Health and Local Authority responsibilities. They are well trained and undertake such activity as a natural part of their role in communities. Why then, does the contract go to a private company with such a bad record?

We Own It, one of our partners in defending public services has a petition calling for the contract with Serco to be scrapped and given to those with the knowledge, track record and understanding of how the system must work for us all to come out of lockdown safely. Please sign and share widely. <https://weownit.org.uk/save-lives-scrap-serco-now>

The Royal College of Psychiatrists are researching mental health among the older age group. It is something older people do not talk about as a generation brought up to understand it was (and to a certain extent, still is) a stigma. The NPC will be circulating a survey with the June edition of the Campaign News and asks that as many members as possible have the opportunity to take part in the survey. It is important as it is the views and experiences of older people that the Royal College are looking for and will help with their research and learning the best way to approach dealing with the impact on older people.

The latest anomaly to come our way is the extra £100 per week charge being placed on those who already pay for their care in homes up and down the country. The government has said they are giving £3.2 billion to local councils on top of the £600 million to care homes to help mitigate losses. But, we must remember that £6 billion has been taken from social care through funding cuts to local councils, charities and other organisations working in care services. Losses due to the pandemic should not be borne by those already paying individually for their care. We will be making our views known to the Secretary of State for Health and the Minister for Care.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who are sending in information on a wide range of subjects and for the continued support of all our affiliates.

Please stay safe and well until we meet again.

**Jan Shortt**  
**June 2020**