



Asylum Support: Parliamentary Briefing

Key Messages

- There are currently more than 40,000 people seeking safety from war and persecution living on asylum support in the UK.
- Support levels are alarmingly low at £37.75 per person per week or just over £5 a day to cover all essential living needs. This represents 52% of income support levels for a single adult.
- Asylum seekers are not allowed to work except in exceptional circumstances, which means they are forced onto asylum support while they wait for a decision on their claim. This is at odds with Government policy aimed at moving people away from welfare dependency and into work.
- Asylum support levels force people to live below the poverty line for months, or even years at a time, as they wait for a decision on their claim and any appeals. This negatively impacts on their health, wellbeing and ability to integrate, and has a particularly devastating impact on children.
- **We recommend that the rate of asylum support is raised to at least 70% of mainstream income support.**

What is asylum support and who is eligible?

- When an individual applies for asylum in the UK they are prohibited from working to support themselves whilst their claim is being processed by the Home Office.¹ Consequently, people who are seeking asylum are forced to depend on support from the Home Office provided under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.
- An asylum-seeker and their dependants can apply for this support if they can prove they are destitute, which means they have no other means of supporting themselves whilst their claim is being processed.
- When granted, asylum support can consist of a weekly cash payment and accommodation in 'dispersal' areas across the UK. The cash support is currently at a flat rate of £37.75 per person per week and is provided on a pre-paid visa card (called an ASPEN card) which can be used as a debit card.

How are support levels set?

- **This low level of support, just over £5 a day, is meant to cover essential living needs** including all food and drink, clothing, toiletries, household cleaning items, and everyday medication. It also provides a small amount for travel and communication, though these are not considered by the Home Secretary as essential needs.
- **When it was introduced, the level of support provided under section 95 was set at 70% of income support levels for adults and 100% for children**, to reflect the fact that utilities are included as part of the accommodation arrangements for asylum-seekers. However, in 2008 the Government decided to break the link to income support payments which led to a growing disparity between asylum and income support levels.
- **In 2014, Refugee Action brought the issue to the High Court which ruled that the Home Secretary had acted 'irrationally'** in failing to take into account the extent of the decrease in asylum support rates in real terms since 2007 and the freezing of rates in absolute terms since 2011.²

¹ Asylum-seekers can apply to UKVI for permission to work if they have been waiting for a decision for over 12 months and only for jobs on the Government's restricted Shortage Occupation List.

² [Refugee Action, R \(On the Application Of\) v The Secretary of State for the Home Department \[2014\] EWHC 1033 \(Admin\) \(09 April 2014\)](#)

- **The Home Office was required to recalculate support rates so developed a ‘pick-and-mix’ methodology** based on data collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) about expenditure by the lowest 10% income group among the UK population and the Home Office’s own market research.
- A specific review was then carried out to assess the level of support provided to families which concluded that families received *“significantly more cash than is necessary to meet their essential living needs.”*³ **As a result, a flat rate for all asylum seekers and their dependants was introduced, thereby reducing support rates for children under 16 by 30% or £16 per week** from £52.96 to £36.95 per week.
- **In 2018, using their established methodology the Home Office increased asylum support levels by 80p weekly from £36.95 to £37.75.**⁴ This is currently 52% of income support levels for a single adult.

Why is the current methodology for setting support rates inadequate?

- The current Home Office methodology used to calculate essential living needs fails to take into account the particular circumstances of asylum-seekers, who are forced to live in poverty, for often lengthy periods of time.
- **The weekly calculation for clothing and footwear does not take into consideration the potential immediate needs of newly arrived asylum-seekers.** Someone who has arrived with nothing more than the clothes on their back would need to save for approximately 26 weeks in order to afford a second set of clothing without sacrificing other weekly essential living needs.⁵

Miriam is a single female asylum seeker in her 60s suffering with PTSD. She bought a winter jacket and a pair of winter boots last year after saving money over two months starting in the Autumn. Now her summer clothes are worn out and she is collecting money to buy a reasonable pair of shoes for summer. Everything is interconnected: she can’t afford to take the bus which means she has to walk long distances, wearing out her shoes more quickly.

- **The cost-saving exercise conducted by Home Office staff members** that involves surveying multiple outlets to identify the best deal **is not comparable to the experiences of newly arrived asylum-seekers** who will take time to navigate their new environments, identify the cheapest outlets and take advantage of cost savings.
- **The Home Office claims that “asylum seekers are invariably accommodated in urban centres,”** so participating in activities associated with social, cultural, and religious life does not always incur a cost. **This overlooks the fact that asylum accommodation is often located far from town centres,** where housing stock is at its cheapest, and therefore many need to travel long distances to access such services.
- By the Home Office’s calculation, asylum-seekers are allocated the average amount for one travel fare per week which can enable them to travel to areas with more outlets and larger supermarkets. However, **many are unable to bulk-buy given they have inadequate cash, can’t carry many items home, and face challenges to storing items** such as not having a freezer or having limited space given that they live in shared facilities. As a result, they will often use smaller shops in their vicinity which tend to be more expensive.

The Helen Bamber Foundation noted: “Many of our clients have complex mental, and often physical, health conditions, and a client recently accommodated in a less urban area struggled to carry her weekly shopping due to her heart condition. She cannot walk for longer than approximately 15 minutes without resting. She was unable to buy her weekly food shopping in one trip as she was not able to carry her shopping and does not have anyone to help her with this task. She was unable to afford to travel for multiple journeys in one week.”

- **A number of schemes referred to in the methodology that would allow asylum-seekers to receive items free of charge are often not available in many locations or are very difficult to access.** For example, the NHS minor ailments scheme is no longer available from many Clinical Commissioning Groups around the country,⁶ and where it does exist certain restrictions will be in place. It is often not possible to receive a school uniform grant from local authorities and many families have reported difficulties in getting local authorities to cover school travel for their children.

³ [Explanatory Memorandum to the Asylum Support Amendment No 3 Regulations \(2015\)](#)

⁴ Home Office, [Report on Review of Cash Allowance Paid to Asylum Seekers: 2017](#), January 2018

⁵ Based on HO calculation of £134.94 for two sets of clothing (or £67.47 for one) with a £2.60 weekly allocation for clothing and footwear.

⁶ The NHS minor ailment schemes allows pharmacies to provide medicines for free on the NHS, to anyone who doesn’t normally pay for prescriptions from their GP, and give advice and support about how to care for minor conditions.

- **Communication costs are largely based on the availability of cheap phone contracts but asylum seekers often don't have the necessary credit history and/ or bank accounts to be able to secure these deals.** This can mean they are unable to communicate with their families or their legal representatives.

Why does this need to change?

- **Forcing people to live below the poverty line as they seek safety from persecution is inhumane.** People seeking asylum have been forced to flee their home countries – places like Syria, Iran and Sudan - due to conflict and persecution. Many arrive in the UK after having been threatened, detained, beaten or tortured and may suffer with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other serious mental health problems.

Current levels of asylum support mean that a single asylum seeker will be living 74% below the relative poverty line (in relation to the relative poverty threshold for a single adult after housing costs (AHC) which would be £147.90pw). **An asylum-seeking family including a couple and one child under 14 would be living 63% below the relative poverty line** (in relation to the relative poverty threshold for a similar family receiving £306pw AHC).⁷

- **People can be on asylum support for months or even years.** One of the justifications for lowering asylum support rates was that people would be supported only temporarily. However, at the end of 2017, there were 40,736 asylum-seekers on section 95 support, with nearly 15,000 asylum cases awaiting an initial decision for longer than 6 months. Where a negative decision on an asylum case is reached, asylum-seekers will often appeal and in 2017, 35% of negative decisions were overturned.⁸ People can often wait more than a year for their asylum appeal to be heard meaning that asylum-seekers can be on support for years.

Tristan and his family arrived in the UK in 2013 and claimed asylum. They waited almost five years for a decision on their case. He told us that while his family have waited on their case they have struggled to buy anything other than food: "[Imagine how it feels] when your daughter tells you 'why are we walking all the time? Dad, why are we walking all the time and why can't we take the bus when we're going far away?' Five years is a long time, and it's not only about eating."

- **Living on low support rates for extended periods of time negatively impacts on the health, wellbeing and ability to integrate of asylum-seekers.** While receiving asylum support, many asylum-seekers feel isolated from their surrounding community given they are excluded from the labour market and face financial barriers to accessing social, cultural or religious events. This isolation and inactivity has a negative impact on their psychological well-being and is often compounded by the anxiety of providing for themselves and their families. Some asylum-seekers also experience a deterioration in their physical health while they are on asylum support suffering from weight loss and developing vitamin deficiencies, high blood pressure or other illnesses.

John and his family have been on support for 2 years told us he has lost 10 kilos in the last two years, both him and his wife are suffering with depression and she is taking sleeping pills. He stated he was mentally worn down, "never before in my life have I struggled for food and to feed my family, every week you have to calculate everything, I can't work, I'm always in fear of detention, my life is a trap."

- **Low support rates impact negatively on children and families.** Reducing the rate of support for children by £16 in 2015 has had a devastating effect on families, impacting on their health, wellbeing, education and general development. Families report that they often struggle to feed and clothe their children and ensure they have access to a stimulating environment that can support their social and educational development.

Sara is a single mother with two children, one is 17 and the other almost 10. She noted that school holidays were a particularly difficult time when she would struggle to provide for her children. She said "When she came to the country, my daughter was plump, but now she has lost a lot of weight." She has managed to buy papers and pens for her children's homework but they do not have internet access which is a challenge for her oldest child who needs this for homework. In addition, the children cannot go on school trips and there have been occasions where they have stayed home from school because they felt bad about not being able to join other pupils. Sara says, "It is

⁷ Based on the [latest HBAI figures from 2016/17](#), the median AHC income is £425pw for an adult couple, with the relative poverty line at 60% of this or £255pw.

⁸ Home Office, [Immigration statistics: October to December 2017](#), Asylum data tables volume 4, 21 March 2018

not easy for me and my children. We are managing on little money and denying the children. Our life is based completely on resources. Everything is governed by this. We live day to day."

- **Children often have needs additional to those of adults or needs that are more expensive to meet as they grow and develop.** In addition to their higher nutrient requirements and the need to change clothing and shoes more regularly, there are also other costs like school uniforms, transport to accompany children to school, stationary and other writing materials, accessing the internet, and taking part in school trips or other youth activities. These can often be inaccessible for many asylum-seeking families.

One family reported to us that they had to buy the school's specified uniform and could not buy generic items in high street shops as all the items must show the school emblem. The cost for their two children was £180 last September and they had saved for nearly a year to be able to afford this.

A mother in the North West with a 5-year-old son told us, "We need to get the bus to my son's school - we buy one adult pass and me and my husband share it to take my son to school." They spend £18 per week on an adult bus pass for this purpose – just under half of one person's weekly allocation.

- **Many mothers struggle to buy nappies and formula milk for their babies,** even though there is an extra £5 per week for babies under the age of 1 and £3 for those aged 1-3 years.

MRANG a charity based in Liverpool, spoke with one woman who said, "I used to spend £11 per every two weeks on formula and that was the cheapest I could find, but eventually I had to stop because I couldn't afford it. I now give him [her baby] cheap £1 milk from the supermarket." Other women reported that they bought the cheapest own-brand nappies they could find and if they were struggling to pay for those, they would attend a charity-run drop-in across Merseyside in the hope that they would have some to donate. One woman stated that this is often a gamble because the travel cost of £4.30 to attend drop-ins that are not within walking distance do not always result in a donation of nappies due to charities having the wrong size or lack of supply.

- **Raising support rates will not increase asylum applications to the UK.** The Home Office's own research into why people claim asylum in the UK showed that people seeking asylum have limited control over their final destination and know little about UK asylum procedures and entitlements to support.⁹ As noted in a report on the topic, *"the choices that asylum seekers make are rarely the outcome of a rational decision-making process in which individuals have full knowledge of all the alternatives and weigh them in some conscious process designed to maximise returns."*¹⁰

In 1996 and 1999, the UK introduced a raft of restrictive policies in relation to support provisions, but asylum applications rose despite these measures. Countries such as the Netherlands receive far fewer asylum applications than the UK, despite having a more generous asylum support system and allowing applicants to work six months earlier than in the UK.

- **Raising support rates will help people seeking asylum fully engage with the legal process.** A lack of funds can limit the ability of asylum-seekers to pay for photocopying, faxing and making calls to help document a claim and communicate with relevant stakeholders. In addition, anxiety about meeting one's own basic needs or those of their family can prevent them from having the emotional and physical resources to engage with the legal process.
- **The cost of increasing asylum support levels to 70% of mainstream income support would be small - £14.5 million (or 0.01%) on an overall annual benefit bill of £146 billion¹¹.** If combined with giving the right to work to people seeking asylum who have waited for a decision for over six months there would be no net cost to this measure.

This briefing is a joint initiative between: Asylum Matters, City of Sanctuary, DASH (Destitute Asylum Seekers Huddersfield), Freedom from Torture, GMIAU (Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit), Helen Bamber Foundation, MRANG (Merseyside Refugee & Asylum Seekers Pre & Postnatal Support Group), Refugee Action, Refugee Council, Staffordshire North and Stoke-on-Trent Citizen's Advice & Scottish Refugee Council.

⁹ Vaughan Robinson and Jeremy Segrott (2002) '[Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers](#)', Home Office Research Study 243 (London)

¹⁰ Heaven Crawley (2010) '[Chance or choice? Understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK](#)', British Refugee Council (London)

¹¹ [James & Mayblin, Restricting the Economic Rights of Asylum Seekers: Cost Implications, University of Warwick \(2016\)](#)