

Children in poverty: No Recourse to Public Funds

Summary of engagement

On Thursday 25 November, the Work and Pensions Committee held an informal virtual engagement event in order to hear from parents who are currently or have in the past, raised their children whilst subject to the no recourse to public funds condition. Ten parents attended the event—nine mothers and one father—as well as three support organisations. We thank Together with Migrant Children, Project 17 and the Children's Society for assisting with the facilitation of the event and supporting the participants.

What we heard

Many parents with NRPF become homeless or are forced to live in small, cramped conditions, with a parent and multiple children often sharing one room in shared accommodation.

- We heard from one parent with NRPF, who was placed in temporary accommodation with her young child after being evicted from her previous housing as she couldn't pay rent. This house had no furniture and limited facilities forcing the mother to order basic furniture using buy now pay later schemes, it is unclear how she will be able to settle this balance.
- Single mothers and their children are at risk of exploitative landlords to stay off the streets.
- We heard from multiple parents that they were forced to sleep on the floor whilst multiple children would be sharing a single bed.
- Many parents told us they had been homeless and faced eviction during the pandemic. One mother, an NHS worker, had been locked out of her home by the council as she couldn't afford the rent and didn't qualify for any support. She was forced to travel across a city with her child in the early hours in order to find a homeless shelter for herself and her child.
- Parents have been forced to live in shared accommodation in which they felt vulnerable, threatened and frightened for their and their children's safety.
- Parents with NRPF have been reliant on the kindness of members of the community including church groups and local GPs for housing assistance. One parent told us how grateful she was when, penniless, her GP handed her £100 in cash.

Parents with NRPF struggle to work and look after their children

- Many parents reported that their work wouldn't stretch to cover childcare as well as rent and living costs. Often parents were working through the night so they could care for their children in the day, leaving them sleep-deprived and affecting their mental wellbeing.
- Parents told us that, because they couldn't afford childcare, they depended on housemates/neighbours who often turned out to be unreliable—meaning that their children did not receive adequate care. In some cases, social services had become involved as a result. One Mother told us that she left her children under the care of a neighbour and her children went missing; they were found, but then social services had to investigate her. She has struggled to find affordable, safe childcare for when she works, without support.
- One parent told us that she took her child with her to work outside of school hours as childcare was too expensive. She said that she had no time to support her child emotionally as her mental health was so strained.

Some parents with NRPF have had their children removed from their care as they don't have enough money to look after them

- Numerous parents told us that they had been told their children would be taken by social services, which makes parents afraid to approach councils for help and support.
- One parent told us that early in the pandemic she lost custody of her oldest children throughout the pandemic whilst she was living in a guesthouse, having been evicted from her council property. She was reunited with her children later on in 2020 and now has access to public funds.

Parents leaving relationships in which they or their children are being abused are left without support.

- One mother told us that she had left the father of her children because he was physically abusing the children. Social services then threatened to remove her children from her because of her lack of money, leaving her feeling that she was being punished for removing her children from danger.
- One parent had experienced financial abuse which included restricting her visa conditions so that she was unable to leave because she was unable to get access to public funds and therefore wouldn't be able to support her children independently.
- Parents of disabled children are even more at risk of domestic violence and face difficulty leaving as they cannot work as their child requires full-time specialist care.

Difficulty applying for the change of conditions to access public funds

- Many parents didn't know that they were eligible for support and as a result their families had lived in deprivation for years. Many told us that they had not been given information about how to apply for a change of conditions by their local authority or had been given incorrect advice. When parents do go through the change of conditions process it is long, expensive, parents are living in poverty and cannot afford to use computers/wifi/printers to prove their deprivation to the Home Office. Many are homeless at the time of application.
- Many parents are reliant on charities for support in order to convince councils to provide support and housing under section 17 of the Children's Act. Many parents told us that without help of charities they wouldn't have been given housing or support, or been successful in their change of conditions application. Social services direct parents with NRPF to charities for help, but those charities are small and their resources are already stretched thin.
- Some parents reported having to wait a long time to find out if their change of conditions application had been successful.

British children go without because of the immigration status of their parents

- Parents reported that their children are suffering as a result of the no recourse to public funds policy. Parents told the Committee how committed they are to ensuring their child has a good life and education and this is difficult for them given the barriers they face due to their parents' immigration status.
- We heard that children are placed in temporary accommodation away from their schools. Multiple parents told us their children spend between four to six hours a day travelling to school on public transport. Some schools assisted the parents in providing money to cover travel costs but it is not a requirement for them to do so. We also heard that children of

parents with NRPF cannot take part in extracurricular activities and school trips because they cannot afford the extra costs.

- Parents told us that the impact of poverty on their own mental wellbeing affects their children's own emotional wellbeing and development. Parents were pleased that their children were now able to have free school meals, as many are reliant on foodbanks outside of school. They hoped that this would continue.
- Children in families with NRPF do not have consistent access to food, water, WiFi, gas and electric and stable housing, all of which have the potential to affect their development, health and education.
- Parents told us that they had experienced racism and discrimination when trying to get help and their children have witnessed this.

Conclusion

We are very thankful to all the participants and organisations who were able to speak with us about their experiences supporting their children without recourse to public funds. Parents spoke with us at length about how difficult it has been to raise children in these circumstances, and we will consider all of their experiences when we write our Report. What was striking from the testimonies was the resilience of children and we were pleased to hear from parents about their children's educational successes despite the difficult conditions and lack of support they have encountered.