

Written evidence submitted by Asylum Matters

Additional Evidence Submission: Education Select Committee Inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Asylum Matters, September 2020

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[Asylum Matters](#) works in partnership locally and nationally to improve the lives of people seeking asylum and refugees in the UK. Through our five regional and national campaigns managers, we work with an extensive network of voluntary, community and faith sector partners, as well as people seeking asylum, to achieve positive change to the UK's asylum system.

We have already contributed to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services, in July. We wanted to give particular attention to the experiences of families seeking asylum during the current pandemic.

However we stated that during the summer, we were conducting further research with people seeking asylum to hear directly about their experiences of living on asylum support and wanted to submit that evidence, which you will find below.

In July and August 2020, we ran a two-week snapshot online survey to hear from people seeking asylum about their experience of living on asylum support. Our survey had 184 respondents: 108 had children with them here in the UK; 76 did not. We designed the questions to speak to key areas of the Home Office's methodology used to set asylum support rates: food, medicines, communications, travel, cleaning products, clothing, and toiletries.

Data from this survey confirms that the vast majority of families on asylum support remain unable to meet their essential living needs. This included buying enough food for themselves and affording data to enable their children's education. People seeking asylum are forced into a permanent state of financial precarity, whereby they have to constantly trade off one basic living need for another.

For many years, the Home Office has justified low rates of asylum support by stating that people seeking asylum should only be in receipt of support for short periods of time. However, recent data demonstrates that an ever higher proportion of people are forced to live on asylum support for increasingly long periods of time. As of June 2020, 72% of people waiting for an initial decision on their asylum claim had been waiting for over six months, an increase of 57% on the same time last year.

Therefore, without the right to work, people on asylum support are forced to live in poverty for long periods of time. This presents a severe risk to the long-term physical and mental wellbeing of those affected; a high proportion (53% on initial decision; and a further 45% following appeal) of whom will be granted some form of leave to remain, yet whose prospects of rebuilding their lives in the UK are fatally undermined by enforced poverty.

Methodology

An online survey was used to hear from people seeking asylum directly about what it is like living on asylum support (including during the recent lockdown). We disseminated our survey directly to people in the asylum system, and via over 30 partner organisations based across Britain which provide support to people in the asylum system.

Whilst we did not require respondents to tell us where they were living, those that answered lived in a diverse range of towns and cities across England, Wales and Scotland. Not all respondents answered every question. The percentages for each response are based on the total number of responses for each question in turn.

Results

Food Poverty

The Home Office's methodology accounts for £23.75 of the £37.75 weekly allowance to be spent on food and non-alcoholic drinks (2018).¹

Survey data

Families with children

Only 19.63% of respondents said they always had enough money to buy enough food for themselves and their families. 80.37% either said they did not have enough money to buy food or could only sometimes afford the food they need.

All respondents including families reported that they would regularly have to sacrifice other essentials to be able to buy the food they needed. A combination of factors, such as having insufficient funds, being unable to carry large purchases home from supermarkets, having limited storage and sometimes having no freezer in their asylum accommodation meant families could not make savings through buying in bulk. Some respondents also lived further away from cheaper stores, meaning they had to travel long distances by public transport, which was an extra, unaffordable expense.

"I am able to buy but it is really hard in this situation sometimes it is not enough and I can not get enough nutrients and food for my children and I worry about them"

The impact of Covid 19 lockdown

What was notable was that although the difficulties reported by people seeking asylum in accessing sufficient food pre-dated Covid-19, it was evident that lockdown measures had further exacerbated their experiences of food poverty.

Families spoke about not being able to buy in bulk, as well as being forced to shop at local, more expensive shops due to restrictions on travel. Some also talked about not being able to purchase food online and being forced to make regular trips to local shops.

"People were buying food stuff in bulk but we couldn't. Even a common bag of rice, we can't afford. The coronavirus has really made our lives difficult..."

"Not being able to be safe and buy food, groceries, cleaning products etc online [this is due to the fact that asylum seekers aren't allowed bank accounts] for it to be delivered to my house. I have had to risk my life and that of my family who have been at home this entire pandemic as I leave the house weekly in order to get food for my family."

It is incredibly concerning that such a high proportion of families seeking asylum reported that they were experiencing food poverty. A healthy, nutritious diet is critical for the health and wellbeing of all adults, and particularly growing children. Low rates of asylum support continue to force people seeking asylum into impossible decisions between buying enough food for their families, or cleaning products to keep their families safe.

¹ As the last written [Home Office review on support rates](#) was published in 2018, we refer to the pre-June 2020 rate of asylum support of £37.75 throughout this document.

Data and communications – Digital Exclusion

The Home Office's methodology accounts for £3.00 of the £37.75 weekly allowance to be spent on communications (2018). This includes writing materials for communication and the education of children, phone credit and data. It does not accurately reflect the average weekly communication needs of people seeking asylum and makes unfair assumptions about peoples' ability to access cheap phone contracts and WiFi.

Survey data

Families with children

10.42% of respondents said they had enough money to buy the data and phone credit they needed. 89.58% either said they did not have enough money to buy the data and phone credit they needed or could only sometimes afford it.

Respondents said that they often could not afford to buy the amount of data they required and would sacrifice other essentials to pay for it. Whilst some reported they would use free WiFi available in public settings, such as libraries and schools it was clear that as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions, this has not been an option. Most families and individuals talked about accessing the internet via their mobile phones but struggled to have enough money to pay for sufficient data, particularly during lockdown. Families highlighted how it had impacted on their children's ability to engage in supplementary learning opportunities.

'Unable to even call the school when my child is not feeling well. Unable to keep in contact with friends, services and people. Unable to help my child access the internet to do school work/homework on.'

Recent research from the [University of Loughborough with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) has found that the general public now believe that a decent internet connection and basic digital equipment are fundamental requirements for a minimum acceptable standard of life in the UK.

It is clear, however, that a budget of £3 a week for all data, communication and educational materials cannot meet the most basic of essential needs. The current rate of asylum support leaves families seeking asylum in digital poverty and isolation.

Impact of Covid 19 lockdown - Education and home schooling

For families seeking asylum, their children having to continue their education remotely, using digital and online resources has had significant financial implications, not least in relation to internet access, digital devices, writing and educational materials. Whilst it may be the case that some children seeking asylum may have been considered particularly vulnerable and therefore been in school throughout the pandemic, and others may have been able to access free school meals or digital support, provision has been patchy and access will not have been universal.

81 respondents to our survey had some experience of home schooling during the pandemic. Only 25.93% of respondents said they were able to home school their children during lockdown. The remaining 74.07% had significant difficulties or struggled to home school throughout.

Those that were able to home school their children referenced the support they had received from schools or the voluntary sector as key factors in aiding their children's development. The vast majority said the difficulties they had stemmed from having no access to WiFi or digital devices such as computers or tablets. Others talked about not having enough paper, pens, and other materials to help their children engage in learning opportunities. Some families talked about relying on charities and friends for help as they attempted to teach their children at home.

"I am struggling to buy data & also my children are struggling to do home schooling because of (sic) we don't have any laptop or desk top or good smartphone. My youngest child is suffering for the paper & colouring materials."

"My oldest child received assignments from school during lockdown but due to no Internet it was hard sometimes to do homework."

Currently children are back in school full time. However, dependent on the spread of the pandemic, it is possible that children may be forced back into home learning environments either full time, as a result of local lockdowns, or as part of a blended learning model. At the very least, it is likely that schools will continue to promote digital learning at home.

Notwithstanding home schooling or particular pressures created by Covid-19 and associated lockdowns, it is evident that a £3 a week budget is not sufficient to allow children seeking asylum to meet their most basic of educational needs.

Without adequate adjustment made to asylum support rates, this will continue to leave children in the asylum process at severe educational disadvantage.

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