

Written evidence submitted by Asylum Matters

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

Asylum Matters, July 2020

[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 are contributing to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services, in order to give particular attention to the experiences of families seeking asylum during the current pandemic. Our evidence below speaks to a number of the Committee's key terms of reference, particularly the specific focus on the effect on disadvantaged groups and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups.

Our submission first provides some context to the statutory support available for people seeking asylum, before focusing on how the key challenges faced by families in the asylum system have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in relation to education and children.

During July and August, we are conducting further research with people seeking asylum to hear directly about their experiences of living on asylum support. We will happily supplement this initial evidence submission with further data later in August.

1. What is asylum support?

People seeking asylum are not eligible for mainstream social security benefits and are not allowed to work except in exceptional circumstances. Consequently, they are forced onto asylum support – a parallel system of financial and accommodation support set up by the Home Office.

1.1 Section 95

Asylum seekers who have an outstanding claim and are assessed as being destitute are supported by the Home Office under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This comes in the form of basic accommodation and a flat rate of £39.60 per person per week, recently increased on 15th June from £37.75. It is provided on a prepaid card which acts like a debit card where people can withdraw the cash or use the card in stores to pay.

1.2 Section 4

For those who have been refused asylum and families where the parents had children after they had been refused, an immediate return to their home countries may not be possible for many reasons, including health issues, pregnancy or awaiting travel documents. Section 4(2) of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act offers support for those in this situation in the form of basic accommodation, and was £35.39 per person each week for living costs. This rate was increased in June 2020 in line with Section 95 to £39.60. This support is provided on a non cash basis on the same prepaid card.

2. Asylum support rates

Asylum support rates are currently set at £39.60 per person per week – just over £5.50 a day – to cover all essential living needs. This is significantly lower than mainstream benefits in normal times, and even more so following the COVID-19 related uplift to Universal Credit in March 2020.

This low level of support 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.¹ Mothers with young children can access a small supplement to their asylum support allowance – an additional £3 a week for a pregnant mother, £5 a week for a baby under 1 years old, and £3 a week for a child aged 1 – 3 years old – and new mothers can apply for a one-off maternity payment of £300.²

When it was introduced in 2000, 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 people seeking asylum. In 2000, the rate was set at £36.54 for adults. However, in 2008 the Government decided to break the link to income support payments which has led to a growing disparity between asylum support and mainstream social security benefits.

After the Home Office lost a High Court case in 2016 that stated 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, they 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.

The Home Office then carried out an assessment of the level of financial support provided to families and 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 dependents was introduced in 2016, thereby reducing support rates for children under 16 by 30% or £16 per week from £52.96 to £36.95 per week. The last time the Home Office fully reviewed financial support rates was in 2017 and an increase of 80p was applied in 2018. In June 2020, asylum support rates received an interim increase of £1.85 per person per week.

Low rates of asylum force people to live below the poverty line for months, often years at a time, as they wait for a decision on their claim and any appeals. As of the end of March 2020 there were 40,018 were waiting for an initial decision on their asylum claim and 22,549 waiting more than 6 months⁴

¹ You can read the full methodology and review from 2017 here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673545/Report_on_review_of_cash_allowance_paid_to_asylum_seekers_-_2017_-_final..pdf

² Home Office Factsheet on Asylum Support: [https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get#:~:text=Cash%20support,\(ASPEN%20card\)%20each%20week](https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get#:~:text=Cash%20support,(ASPEN%20card)%20each%20week).

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

⁴ Full quarterly statistics can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2020>

The experience of fleeing persecution, navigating the asylum system, and living in poverty for long periods of time will inevitably negatively impact the health and wellbeing of people seeking asylum and has a particularly devastating impact on children. Whilst this has been widely researched and reported over the years, it is undeniable that the additional pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic will have exacerbated these challenges.

2.1 The impact on families during Covid 19

Families seeking asylum were unable to meet their essential living needs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of this has been documented widely.⁵ However, life in lockdown has hugely exacerbated these challenges. From experiencing food poverty, digital exclusion, or social isolation, low rates of asylum support have hugely impacted the ability of people seeking asylum to stay safe and protect the wellbeing of their families during the pandemic.

2.1.1 Food poverty

The main impact on these families is having to make difficult choices between what to buy. This short quote from a previous joint sector parliamentary briefing in 2018 explains the extraordinarily difficult budget decisions families seeking asylum have to make week by week:

John and his family, who have been on support for 2 years, told us he has lost 10 kilos during that time, 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.”⁶

This is commonplace in normal times but the current restrictions mean that travel to larger shops is more difficult, and food and essential items like child medicines, nappies and baby formula can be far more expensive in smaller shops. Many are also limited in the stock they offer.

Many food banks and other support services have been closed during the lockdown, leaving families without a safety net. Organisations are desperately trying to meet the shortfall with one off payments, food parcels and additional support.

The biggest challenge for the families we support is the difficulty of surviving on the current asylum support rates. To that end, we’ve been supplying food vouchers and parcels to supplement the amount they have. One parent living on asylum support told me, “it feels as if I am begging and begging and begging, all the time. For my wellbeing, I do not want to be in that situation”. - Refugee Action support worker, West Yorkshire (June 2020)

2.1.2 Education and digital exclusion

It is worth noting that the last full Home Office review of asylum support rates concluded that £4 per year would cover the educational needs of a school-age child. It stated that four writing pads and six ballpoint pens allocated per person would be reasonable for children who could write and ‘the very young may prefer the slate and chalk option.’⁷

⁵ See ‘Asylum Support: Joint Parliamentary Briefing’, from September 2018: <https://asylumatters.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/2018/09/Asylum-Support-MP-Briefing.pdf>

⁶ See footnote above;

⁷ You can read the full methodology and review from 2017 here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673545/Report_on_review_of

Pre-COVID, it is clear that families seeking asylum with school-age children would struggle to afford additional materials and resources to supplement their children's education at home.

Sara is a single mother with two children, one is 17 and the other almost 10. 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. Sara says, "It is 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."⁸

However, in the context of school closures and homeschooling, the challenge is even more stark.

Families on asylum support often struggle to buy essentials so cannot afford paints, crayons, craft materials and colouring pens which most households will have and can rely on for homeschooling projects. Therefore, they have been unfairly restricted in the home schooling they can provide to their children due to the resources available to them. Voluntary sector organisations have tried to step in and where possible have posted out supplies and provided data vouchers. However this is not universal and therefore could not be relied upon to ensure all children were catered for.

Similarly, one of the biggest impacts during lockdown on these families is the lack of access to the internet. People seeking asylum are not allowed to open bank accounts, and by the nature of receiving asylum support, will not have access to savings to purchase high cost digital equipment such as laptops or tablets. Additionally, without a bank account, it is impossible to set up phone or broadband contracts or install WIFI.

Families who have access to smartphones or digital equipment must rely on data provided on a pay as you go package, which is an expense they can ill afford. It is worth noting that the Home Office's methodology for setting support rates relies on the fact that children can access school facilities and local libraries which has been impossible in the current crisis.

Undoubtedly, people seeking asylum regularly experience poverty and digital exclusion. With classrooms moving online and alternative learning venues closed, it is clear that children in asylum seeking families will struggle to access the education they are entitled to. Even in future 'blended learning' models, people seeking asylum – like others experiencing poverty and digital exclusion – will continue to be disproportionately impacted.

"We are supporting a family of four. The daughter is in Year 8 and needs to access the internet to participate. From June 1st, the school has allowed her to access their IT facilities two mornings per week, but to do so she needs to travel on public transport. She struggles to afford the bus fare, which the bus company requests is made by contactless payment, which is impossible using an ASPEN card, or by exact change. There are so many barriers. She feels singled out from her classmates." – Refugee Support Worker, South Yorkshire (June 2020)

3. Asylum accommodation

When a family arrives into the UK they are usually housed in an initial accommodation centre, which is provided under Section 98 of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. These centres are most often full board, and those accommodated there do not receive any cash support. Centres can accommodate as many as 270 people and it is a mixture of families and single adults. Initial accommodation is designed to accommodate people for a relatively short period of time (3-4 weeks) before being moved onto more stable accommodation.

[cash allowance paid to asylum seekers - 2017 - final..pdf](#)

⁸ See footnote 5/6;

Once people are assessed as being eligible for Section 95 support (as outlined above) they will be moved to dispersal accommodation. This can be either into Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) for single adults or larger families will receive their own property, where all utility bills are paid, and they are provided with basic furniture. All asylum accommodation is run by private companies who are contracted by the Home Office under the Asylum Accommodation and Support Contract (AASC), these are 10 year contracts which began in September 2019.

As soon as the contracts began, the AASC providers began to utilise contingency (hotel-type) accommodation as alternative Initial Accommodation due to the significant increase in asylum applications in the UK. [REF NAO REPORT] A number of these hotels have continued to be used, with new hotels being brought into use during the COVID-19 pandemic..

3.1. The Impact on families during Covid 19

3.1.1 Initial accommodation

Initial Accommodation is unsuitable for long term use, and indeed it is not intended for this purpose. However, both prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during it, it is clear that people are living in Initial Accommodation for very long periods of time.⁹ This is particularly harmful for families with children living in Initial Accommodation or in hotels as children cannot be enrolled in school until they are in dispersal accommodation and there is limited private space for children to engage in educational activities.

One person living in initial accommodation told us in February 2020: *“It was especially very hard for the children. They were always asking for chocolates and sweets but we could never buy them. And also, it was not a short period. It was 3 and half months.”* Some families are being dispersed but there are still families living in these conditions.

Children that are not yet enrolled in school will not be able to access homeschooling resources from educational professionals. Some voluntary sector organisations have been sending in educational supplies, art resources and toys.

Initial accommodation centres in particular often require families to share sleeping quarters together.

There is currently no Wi-Fi in Initial Accommodation hostels in Birmingham and Wakefield and we believe many of the others. The Home Office had agreed to provide Wi-Fi in Initial Accommodation in line with Public Health England guidance in mid-April but at the end of May this was still being sourced and was said to be imminent. This provision will only be for the lockdown period so they have decided not to permanently install broadband but to provide sim cards with data. Hotels have varying levels of Wi-Fi, depending on the site.

As people in Initial Accommodation or hotels have no access to financial support, they are unable to arrange a pay as you go contract for their own limited use. Therefore, those living in Initial Accommodation centres or hotels without WIFI will continue to experience digital exclusion.

Service users in Yorkshire and Humber and the West Midlands have reported substandard conditions in some parts of the hotel estate, with problems reported including unsuitable food and lack of access to essential items, and limited laundry facilities. Again, this is an issue that pre-dates COVID-19, but further concerns have been raised in the context of the pandemic.

The Faith Centre in Bradford told us in February that they had been approached by families who were asking for milk formula, nappies, pushchairs, tins of tuna and sardines, kettles and toasters. Many families had complained that they did

⁹ See recent National Audit Office report on Asylum Accommodation and Support (July 2020): <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/asylum-accommodation-and-support/>

not have access to Halal food, or were unsure of how to ask for it, so were often going hungry. In February 2020 one person accommodated in a hotel told us about the provision in West Yorkshire:

“The food was very bad....either we could barely eat the food, or we couldn’t eat it. Sometimes it was not halal and there were no other vegetarian options.... We requested it a lot of times but we never had a result. But we had no other chance because if we would refuse to eat it that means we had to sleep hungry at night.”

In the specific context of COVID-19, food provision in the Initial Accommodation centre in Yorkshire and the West Midlands includes a strict ban on food being allowed in people’s rooms. Families, whose children are not hungry at the allotted mealtime are sometimes not allowed to eat until the next one, leaving children hungry. Without access to financial support, parents are unable to purchase snacks or supplementary meals for their children.

4. Cross-governmental measures

4.1 Online support for vulnerable children

On 19th April The Department for Education [announced](#) that disadvantaged children across England are set to receive laptops and tablets as part of a push to make remote education accessible during the coronavirus outbreak. The groups mentioned are “children in the most vital stages of their education, those who receive support from a social worker and care leavers.” This recognised that vulnerable children did need support but the accompanying guidance did not specifically include include children whose families were on asylum support or families with no recourse to public funds.¹⁰ For all the reasons outlined above this group of children were some of the most in need.

4.2 Free school meal vouchers

Free school meals in England were previously only funded for families on Section 95 support. However at the beginning of April this was extended to children from certain additional groups after legal action:

- (1) Children whose parents are Zambrano Carers;
- (2) Children in families with Leave to Remain subject to NRPF restriction;
- (3) Children whose families receive support pursuant to section 17 of the Children Act 1989 who have no recourse to public funds; and
- (4) Children in refused asylum seeker families receiving section 4 support.

This was a very welcome development and has recently been extended over the school holiday period. However both a lack of clear guidance has created barriers to families accessing it. One family seeking asylum in the North East was only able to access vouchers following the support and intervention of a local advocate:

“Our child received the Free School Meal voucher with great difficulty. After the announcement by the government, we found it really difficult to get information and guidance around claiming this benefit. Initially, both the school and council were passing the buck without a solution or willingness to assist. Without your [a local advocate's] intervention we don’t feel this issue would have been resolved.

Once we received the vouchers, we found them to be a valuable source of support. The drop-ins being closed meant that the additional support that asylum seekers had received was no longer possible, and scarcity, panic buying and rise in food costs all contributed to the difficulty we faced as a family. The FSM vouchers helped us obtain more food such as fruit for the children and gave us a small but meaningful relief, even though the vouchers were provided for a supermarket two miles away from the house. It will be great if the FSM voucher support is carried on through the

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-help-with-technology-for-remote-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

summer break, as the mental strain which is part and parcel of every asylum seekers' journey has been further exacerbated giving rise to bad mental health within the community."

The new national voucher scheme was also widely [criticised for long waits to obtain the email and download the code](#). However, to access this flawed system in the first place families need to have access to the internet which as outlined above is not possible in many cases. This has left families without this vital lifeline.

7. Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has again exposed how the asylum support system – particularly low rates of financial support and inadequate accommodation – too often leaves people seeking asylum in poverty or facing digital exclusion. Particularly in the context of education, this has an undeniable impact on children in asylum seeking families' ability to enjoy equal rights to education, even more so during COVID-19.

We believe that at a minimum, the following urgent changes should be implemented to address the poverty and digital exclusion experienced by families seeking asylum:

- **Reinstate the link between asylum support rates and mainstream benefits;**
- **Set asylum support rates at a minimum of 70% of mainstream benefits;**
- **Ensure positive changes to free school meal eligibility are maintained beyond COVID-19;**
- **Urgently install free WIFI in all initial and contingency accommodation.**

While the power to make concerted policy changes in relation to the asylum system sits squarely with the Home Office, we recommend that the Committee uses the evidence above to consider whether children in the asylum system have had equal access to education and support during COVID-19. We recommend further investigation by the Committee into access to education for people seeking asylum, particularly school-age children.

July 2020