

Poverty and Asylum in the UK

Oxfam and the Refugee Council



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commissioned by Oxfam and the Refugee Council**

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Contents

Summary and Key Recommendations	4
Introduction	6
Part 1 – Levels of support to asylum-seekers: the facts	8
Part 2 – Are asylum-seekers entitlements adequate to meet their basic needs?	10
Part 3 – Do asylum-seekers actually receive their basic entitlements?	16
Part 4 – False assumptions: Government policy and the impoverishment of asylum-seekers	19
Conclusions and Recommendations	23
Appendix 1 The questionnaire	26
Appendix 2 Organisations responding to the study	31

Summary and Key Recommendations

“The Government do not understand – most of us came here expecting that we would just have to find work and look after ourselves. We don’t want to live off the Government. We want to work and support ourselves. We want to make choices about our lives”

Comment of asylum-seeker at Oxfam consultation on the White Paper, (2002), Oxford

The abolition of vouchers has been widely welcomed by many organisations, including our own, for reducing the stigma and discrimination faced by asylum-seekers in the UK. But organisations working with asylum-seekers remain deeply concerned that, even with cash payments, the level of support to asylum-seekers is set so low, and the system set up to administer their payments is so badly designed and poorly run, that they are forced to live at unacceptable levels of poverty.

This study has collected evidence from forty organisations working with asylum-seekers in England and Scotland to demonstrate the impact of the level of support provided to asylum-seekers upon their lives. The results are deeply disturbing, and lead us to the conclusion that asylum-seekers are forced to live at a level of poverty that is unacceptable in a civilised society. For example:

- **85% of organisations reported that their clients experience hunger**
- **95% of organisations reported that their clients cannot afford to buy clothes or shoes**
- **80% of organisations reported that their clients are not able to maintain good health**

Asylum-seekers have barely enough money to buy food of a quantity and quality to maintain an adequate diet, and often experience poor health and hunger. They cannot buy enough clothes or shoes to keep warm or buy school uniforms. Many struggle to afford bus fares to attend important appointments, to stay in touch with friends and relatives, to send their children to school. Often, it is the most vulnerable who suffer from lack of additional support: parents worry for the health and well-being of their children. Mothers who are unable to breastfeed because they are HIV+ or have other forms of ill-health cannot afford to buy formula milk. Disabled asylum-seekers struggle to receive the extra help they need, or receive no additional help at all.

The support that asylum-seekers receive, in cash or in kind, does not equate to that received by UK residents claiming Income Support, which is generally recognised as the minimum level of income required to maintain an acceptable standard of living. The Income Support system is not simply a flat-rate payment, but is the gateway to a complex system of premium payments, passported benefits and emergency payments, all of which are designed to help poor people to meet additional essential costs. Premiums are payable for families with children, people with disability and the elderly. Social fund payments help to meet the cost of funerals, winter fuel or other emergencies. The Welfare Foods scheme provides milk tokens and vitamins in recognition of the needs of pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children. Asylum-seekers are not entitled to claim any of these additional benefits.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that many asylum-seekers do not even receive the support to which they are entitled, or receive it late. Weekly allowances and occasional clothing allowances from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) fail to arrive, and when they contact NASS to find out why, can get no satisfactory response. Tight regulations and delays in payments mean that mothers often do not receive maternity payments until well after the birth of their baby. Inadequate regulation and inspection of property by NASS means that some accommodation providers do not fulfil their contracts to pay for utilities and provide adequate furniture and household equipment.

Based on the evidence provided in this study, we believe that asylum-seekers must be provided with a level of support that is equal to Income Support – even though we view Income Support in itself as insufficient to sustain a basic livelihood. We urge the Government to implement the following changes to the system of support for asylum-seekers as soon as possible. Here we set out our key recommendations (more detailed recommendations are identified on pages 24-25):

Key Recommendations

- **The remit of the Social Security Advisory Committee should be expanded to include scrutiny of the standard of support to asylum-seekers. The Committee should be charged with the task of ensuring that the level of support to asylum-seekers, in cash or in kind, actually equates to the total of benefits available to recipients of Income Support.** This will involve a realistic calculation of the value of in kind benefits such as the provision of utilities, as well as the provision of payments for additional, exceptional and emergency needs.
- **The option for asylum-seekers to live with friends and relatives with support from NASS should be retained. The weekly allowance to these people should be up-rated to include a contribution towards the cost of utilities and Council Tax.**
- **Given the low level of support to which asylum seekers are entitled, those with particular needs (including pregnant women, families with young children, people with disabilities, victims of torture and the elderly) should have access to special needs provision and passported benefits (e.g. milk tokens, vitamins, maternity grants, pensioner premiums, and funeral grants) on the same terms as UK citizens.**

‘Some asylum seekers commented that the amount that they received was insufficient for their needs particularly in winter when they require extra clothing and bedding. Affording medications is difficult whether for over the counter medications or paying prescription charges. Few asylum seekers were aware that they should receive free prescriptions and that the HC2 form issued to them by NASS entitles them to free prescriptions etc. A particular difficulty reported was paying for nutritional supplements during pregnancy, e.g. folic acid, and for baby requirements...’.

Eagle, A., Duff, L., Tah, C., Smith, N. (2002) Asylum seekers' experiences of the voucher scheme in the UK, Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate

Introduction

Most asylum-seekers coming to this country arrive with few or no possessions, and often nothing more than the clothes they stand up in. They may have been forced to leave everything behind in their flight from persecution or conflict, or they may have had to hand over their life savings to traffickers in payment for their journey. When they arrive, they are forbidden by law to work for the first six months of their stay in this country. Many therefore have no choice but to apply for support from the UK Government in order to survive.

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 removed the right of new asylum-seekers entering the UK to claim either state benefits, or support from Local Authorities under the 1948 National Assistance Act or the 1989 Children Act. Instead, it created a parallel but separate system of support for destitute asylum-seekers, administered by one national body, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). The package of support originally provided by NASS included a weekly allowance, paid mainly in vouchers exchangeable at participating retailers. Only £10 per week was paid in cash. The level of the weekly allowance is currently set at 70% of Income Support rates for adults, and 100% for children.

The voucher system proved to be a disaster. It was expensive to run, and administratively cumbersome, resulting in asylum-seekers left without any support for days, sometimes weeks at a time. They found they were unable to buy essential items, had to walk miles to the nearest participating shop, and were unable to buy cheap goods at local shops or market stalls. The ban on giving change for vouchers meant that the value of the weekly allowance was reduced even further. Asylum-seekers felt embarrassed and humiliated having to use the vouchers, and experienced hostility and discrimination from shop assistants and other shoppers. In late 2000, the Government responded to growing criticism, by announcing that it would review the voucher system.

Oxfam, the Refugee Council and the Transport and General Workers Union contributed to this review with their report *Token Gestures*¹. This report, based on evidence provided by 50 organisations round the country working with asylum-seekers, catalogued the many inefficiencies and injustices of the voucher system, including a number of shocking case studies of the poverty, distress and hardship that had been caused. In October 2001, the Home Secretary announced his intention to abolish the voucher system.

We have wholeheartedly applauded this move by the Government, which has had the wisdom and honesty to recognise the failure of the voucher system. We remain deeply concerned, however, that the rate of the weekly allowance is still only set at 70% of Income Support rates for adults, and that asylum-seekers are not entitled to the “passport benefits” or premiums which a person on Income Support would normally be able to claim. We believe that, even with cash, and with the “in-kind” benefits provided by NASS, asylum-seekers will be forced to live at a level that in real terms is below that of Income Support, generally accepted as the minimum income level in the UK. Proposed new legislation currently going through

¹ For further details see the report on www.asylumsupport.info/publications/oxfam/token.htm

Parliament will introduce a new system of Accommodation Centres for asylum-seekers, where they will receive full board and accommodation. However, only three Accommodation Centres have so far been confirmed for the pilot stage accommodating a maximum of 750 people each. The majority of asylum-seekers will continue to be supported through the current NASS system of support for several years to come.

Oxfam and the Refugee Council have therefore prepared this new report, based on a further study of 40 organisations, in order to allow them the chance again to communicate their experiences of levels of poverty amongst asylum-seekers. It is intended to stimulate debate around the current Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill before Parliament. The Bill introduces further changes to the system of support for asylum-seekers (eg. the complete removal of the ‘support only’ option for those accommodated by friends or relatives), however it could provide the opportunity for future levels of support to asylum-seekers to be set at a more adequate and humane level.

The report sets out to explore:

- **How rates of support to asylum-seekers compare with rates of support payable to Income Support claimants.** This is examined in Part 1
- **Whether asylum-seekers’ entitlements are sufficient to meet their essential needs.** This is explored in Part 2 using data from the study
- **Whether asylum-seekers are actually receiving their basic entitlements, in cash or in kind.** This is explored in Part 3 using data from the study

Methodology

A questionnaire was sent to a range of organisations working with asylum-seekers round the country. A copy of the questionnaire, with collated numerical outcomes, can be found in Appendix 1. Details of organisations responding can be found in Appendix 2.

Forty organisations submitted completed questionnaires by the deadline. Of these, 21 were London-based, and 15 were from other parts of the country, three said their work was UK-wide (1 did not define an area). Fifteen said they work in dispersal areas.

We also asked organisations how many asylum-seekers used their services per week:

1 – 10 per week	15
10 – 20 per week	5
20 – 50 per week	4
50 – 100 per week	2
100 – 200 per week	10
200 – 500 per week	3
Over 500 per week	1

These organisations therefore work with several thousand asylum-seekers all round the country.

Part 1 Levels of Support to asylum-seekers: the facts

This section outlines the support available to asylum-seekers under the NASS system, in comparison with rates payable to those receiving Income Support.

Accommodation

Asylum-seekers accepted for NASS support may currently receive it at two levels:

- They may receive a package of support including accommodation. Accommodation is offered on a ‘no-choice’ basis in a dispersal area, and should include all utility bills, furniture and household equipment. Some are housed in hostel accommodation, with some/all meals provided and a correspondingly lower level of weekly allowance
- Alternatively, asylum-seekers who prefer not to be dispersed may make their own accommodation arrangements, usually staying with friends or relatives. In this case, they receive the weekly subsistence allowance but do not receive any in-kind contributions towards rent, utility bills or household costs.

The Bill currently before Parliament proposes that the Government should be able to take the power to abolish this second option of ‘subsistence only’ support.

Weekly allowances

The weekly allowance paid to asylum-seekers is set at 70% of basic Income Support rates for adults and 100% for children under 18. No premiums are payable. Therefore, to compare what a family of four – two adults and two children under the age of 16 – receive on NASS support to what would be paid if they were entitled to Income Support:

	Income Support	NASS
Couple	84.65	59.26
Child 1	33.50	33.50
Child 2	33.50	33.50
Family Premium	14.75	
 Total	 166.40	 126.26

The asylum-seeker family would receive £ 40.14 per week (24%) less than an equivalent family on Income Support

Special payments

A supplementary grant of £50 per person can be claimed after 6 months (and every six months after that). This is designed to meet additional needs such as clothing. The grant is not supplied automatically and must be applied for in writing, in English.

Asylum-seekers can also claim a maternity grant of £300. It must be applied for in writing between 4 weeks prior to the due date and two weeks after the birth. It is payable from 2

weeks before the due date (Women asylum-seekers who are still supported by Local Authority Social Services Departments may receive as little as £50, or no maternity grant at all²).

Asylum-seekers may not receive support from the Social Fund, either the regulated fund (funeral expenses, cold weather payments, winter fuel payments, Sure Start maternity grant) or discretionary grants or loans.

Passported Benefits

Asylum-seekers are entitled to free prescriptions and other health benefits as long as they have applied for a Health Benefits Division HC2 certificate. Asylum-seeker children are entitled to free school meals.

Asylum-seekers are not entitled to milk tokens or vitamins under the Welfare Foods scheme.

Pensioner Premiums

Asylum-seekers over the age of 60 are not entitled to Pensioner Premiums, and receive support at the same rate as other asylum-seekers.

Disability

Disabled asylum-seekers, and their carers, are not eligible to claim any disability benefits, including the premiums which supplement Income Support rates. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 allows NASS to make exceptional payments for special needs, but these are discretionary and appear to be very seldom made (see Study results).

In 2001, a court case, *Westminster City Council v NASS*, ruled that responsibility for meeting the special needs of an asylum-seeker with disability should rest with the Local Authority. Disabled asylum-seekers should therefore now be able to receive a community care assessment from their local Social Services Department, to determine what additional services and supports they need.

² Asylum-seekers who arrived in the UK before the implementation of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 are still supported by local authority Social Services Departments under Interim Arrangements.

Part 2 Are asylum-seeker entitlements adequate to meet their basic needs?

‘Goods and services reported as inaccessible because they were too expensive, unavailable or restricted by retailers included: international telephone cards; phone bill; baby milk and nappies and other items for baby care; nutritional supplements for pregnancy; medications; dentist; school uniform and school ceremonies etc.; chocolate for children; clothes and shoes, especially for children; items in the Post Office; hair cuts; fresh fruit and vegetables (not easily); stationery and calculators. travel tickets and fares.’

Eagle, A., Duff, L., Tah, C., Smith, N. (2002) Asylum seekers’ experiences of the voucher scheme in the UK, Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate

This section reports what organisations responding to the study said about the adequacy of support provided to asylum-seekers. It focuses first on universal basic needs, then on the needs of particular, vulnerable groups.

Basic Needs

- **34 organisations (85%) said their clients sometimes or frequently reported experiencing hunger.**

Comments

‘Families with children are short of money for food’

‘Often go short if they have to purchase travel or clothing etc’

‘Not healthy food, fruit/vegetables etc’

- **38 organisations (95%) said asylum-seekers are not able to buy clothes or shoes**

We asked organisations for information about the extra £50 per person that asylum-seekers can claim for essential needs such as clothes every 6 months. 33 organisations (82%) said that it was not sufficient to meet essential clothing needs: many asylum-seekers arrive from warmer climates, often with only the clothes they stand up in, and need to be able to buy adequate clothing and shoes for the British climate.

Comments

‘Especially not if they live in full-board accommodation’

‘Too expensive unless second-hand’

‘Buy second-hand shoes causing damage to feet’

‘£50 is very little especially when people have arrived with insufficient and inappropriate clothing. We depend on charities to provide clothing’

‘[The grant is] available 6 months after [NASS payments] started, so people can have been in emergency accommodation or with friends for up to 6 months before this – so first £50 can be after one year’

‘Asylum seekers stated that affording food and clothing for children and babies was difficult. Supplementing children’s meals when they refuse to eat unfamiliar foods at school put an additional strain on the budget, as did paying for public transport for children’s travel to school.’

Eagle, A., Duff, L., Tah, C., Smith, N. (2002) Asylum seekers’ experiences of the voucher scheme in the UK, Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate

- **40 organisations (100%) said asylum-seekers cannot afford to buy food for special dietary needs (e.g. diabetes)**

Comments

‘This is particularly hard for those who have physical disabilities’

- **32 organisations (80%) said asylum-seekers are not able to maintain good health**

Comments

‘While the change to cash is a great improvement, asylum-seekers remain in an impoverished situation, which exacerbates stress’

‘Only if they have no additional expenses’

‘Yes, if they only buy food’

‘Poor food, poor health’

An Afghani man who sought assistance from a CAB in Central Manchester was suffering from ulcers and wanted to know whether he could obtain additional support to cover his associated dietary needs. An advisor phoned NASS, only to be told that NASS cannot meet such additional needs.

Dunstan, R. (2002), Process Error: CAB clients experience of the National Asylum Support Service, NACAB

- **20 organisations (50%) said asylum-seekers are unable to stay in touch with their lawyer**

A further 6 organisations said asylum-seekers are able to stay in touch with the lawyer handling their asylum case if he/she is local, but not if they are some distance away (as is frequently the case).

- **35 organisations (87%) said asylum-seekers are unable to travel to important interviews and appointments**

This figure mirrors the finding of recent Home Office research into the experiences of asylum seekers³, during which a large number (83%) stated that they had been unable to attend an appointment because of insufficient cash available for fares. This was particularly the case for

³ Eagle, A., Duff, L., Tah, C., Smith, N. (2002) *Asylum seekers’ experiences of the voucher scheme in the UK*, Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate

older people, women with small children, those at college and the sick. According to the same research: *'Asylum seekers also brought up travel as a restriction on their ability to seek medical help when required. In addition, poor weather put a strain on the budget and the available cash resources when children needed to take public transport to school rather than walking.'*

Comments

'Choice is not there. Either travel to keep appointment and starve, or eat and go nowhere'

- **34 organisations (85%) said asylum-seekers are unable to stay in touch with family and friends**

36 organisations (90%) said clients 'sometimes' or 'frequently' report feelings of isolation due to their inability to visit friends or family

Comments

'The dispersal policy makes it hard'

- **15 organisations (37%) said asylum-seekers are unable to engage in adult education, and 32 (80%) said they are unable to engage in recreational activities at least once a week**

A number of organisations that answered Yes to these question pointed out that some education and leisure activities are provided free by local education establishments, Local Authorities or voluntary organisations. Some pointed out that even these free services were difficult for asylum-seekers as they could not afford the bus-fares to get there.

- **29 organisations (72%) said they have to provide help to asylum-seekers to obtain essential items**

Such assistance includes: food parcels and second-hand clothing; essential travel costs; cost of nappies; grants for maternity clothing; toys for Christmas; hot meals; use of organisation's telephone and newspapers; cost of toiletries, milk formula and special dietary requirements. One organisation remarked that workers sometimes pay for such items out of their own pockets.

Exceptional Needs and Vulnerable Groups

Pregnant Women and Babies

- **26 organisations (65%) said the grant is not enough to meet maternity costs**

Problems with the Maternity Grant appear to be caused not only by the inadequacy of the amount, but by the limited time for which it is available:

‘Maternity grants are needed before the birth as much as afterwards. Maternity clothing is essential, as is a pack to take to the hospital for the birth. We have a separate, independent hardship fund, and give £50 grants to pregnant women for maternity clothes. If they send form MAT B1 they usually get [the money] just before the birth. If they apply with a birth certificate within 2 weeks [after the birth] it takes longer. We had one case...of a woman who was ill in hospital prior to the birth and did not send the birth certificate until only just after the 2 week deadline. She was refused the £300 grant...’

Other comment

‘In the majority of cases, clients find that £300 is simply not enough to provide all of the items required’

‘We get lots of requests for [donated] large items like prams/pushchairs’

‘It won’t be enough for a new baby’s needs in a destitute situation’

- **28 organisations (70%) said that clients had reported concerns from mothers who were not able to breastfeed and unable to buy formula milk for their babies**

The fact that pregnant women and mothers who are HIV+ are not able to claim Welfare Foods milk tokens is currently subject to judicial review in a case brought by the Child Poverty Action Group on a client’s behalf. An Early Day Motion (No. 741) has been signed by 112 MPs to date, from most of the political parties.

She has been living in a squalid emergency accommodation hotel for five months. She is HIV+ and has therefore been told not to breastfeed her baby to reduce the risk of transmission. As an asylum-seeker, she is not entitled to milk tokens to buy formula milk, but the hotel did not provide any. “Sometimes there is a problem when they don’t give me milk for two or three days, and she is vomiting because I have to give her the milk we buy for adults. I had to fight to get the formula milk”. One day her baby had nothing to drink for 6 hours because the hotel kept her waiting. “I only want my baby to be OK, I don’t want her to suffer because she doesn’t have milk”

McLeish, J. (2002) Mothers in Exile, The Maternity Alliance

Children

- **35 organisations (87%) said clients sometimes or frequently express concern over the health and well-being of their children**
- **35 organisations (87%) said their clients sometimes or frequently reported that they were unable to buy school uniforms** (Local Education Authorities may provide grants for school uniforms at their discretion)
- **36 organisations (90%) said their clients sometimes or frequently reported that they were unable to pay for children’s bus fares to school**

A CAB in Central Manchester reports being approached by a Kenyan woman wanting help with purchasing compulsory school uniform for her two children. The local authority had refused her application for school uniform grant and NASS makes no specific provision for meeting such additional needs. Previous research by NACAB has found that the cost of compulsory school uniforms can exceed £250, and that many schools will exclude pupils who do not wear the correct uniform.

Dunstan R. (2002) Process Error: CAB clients experience of the National Asylum Support Service, NACAB

People with Ill-health and Disability

- **No organisations in our study reported any clients who had been granted additional payments from NASS for exceptional needs. Twelve organisations (30%) said they had clients who had applied for payments and been turned down.**

One organisation that returned the study after the deadline (so not included in the sample of 40) reported one client with diabetes who had received additional payment

Comments

'Person with mental health needs refused. Appeal difficult. Procedures did not appear to be in place'

'NASS would not make exceptional needs payment to client with life-threatening illness'

'Applied on behalf of someone who has leukaemia and was having treatment regularly at hospital. NASS would give no extra money for either travel or special food'

'We have tried for a number of clients eg diabetic, mobility needs etc, with no success'

- **32 organisations (80%) had contact with asylum-seekers with a disability. Of these, 28 organisations said these people had been referred to the Social Services Department for a community care assessment. Only 14 of these clients (50%) had received an assessment, and 11 (39%) were receiving additional support and services as a result.**

Comments

'Freedom bus pass...took a year to get'

'We had to refer client to a lawyer as SSD denied responsibility'

'It's very hard to get SSD to take responsibility for these cases'

'It has been extremely difficult to get a response from SSD'

'People get specially adapted accommodation, but it takes months and they must wait in hotel accommodation in the meantime'

'SSD refused because of shortage in their budgets'

Further information on the availability of Social Services community care assessments for asylum-seekers with disability is available in a report from the Social Policy Research Unit⁴.

⁴ Roberts K. and Harris J., *Disabled Refugees in Britain*, University of York, April 2002

My husband has problems with his spine and with his disc. He only lies down; I have to help him go to the toilet. He can't even hold one kilogram in weight in his hands so he can't carry the child. They were supposed to give us a room in the hotel on the ground floor but we are living on the second floor and my husband has to use his hands and knees to go upstairs – he crawls.

McLeish J. (2002) Mothers in Exile, Maternity Alliance

Asylum-seekers receiving 'cash-only' support

- **35 organisations (87%) said they had contact with asylum-seekers living on NASS 'cash-only' support, and staying with friends, relatives, or in community accommodation such as a mosque or church**

Asylum-seekers who opt to stay with relatives, friends or other contacts in order to avoid being dispersed do not receive any help with rent or the cost of utilities.

Comments

'This tends to be done to ensure client remains in area and is not moved away by dispersal, but situation is not really adequate'

'Accommodation is often overcrowded and people have to move around a lot. There's also problems caused by Council Tax as person whose house it is loses 25% discount for living alone'

'When people in this position apply to NASS, they can wait months for a response – there is no support available to them in this period. This puts tremendous pressure on friends/family relationships, and can result in them breaking down'

'Clients within the local community experience extreme pressure from sponsors to pay for their accommodation'

'People have to accept 'cash-only' because they need the support of their family and friends and could not cope emotionally if accommodated in other areas'

'Most think that the Home Office will take a short time to decide their case. Once their case goes over 6 months, the relatives or friends will run out of patience and quite a lot of clients will desperately try to find other arrangements until they get tired and ask NASS to disperse'

-

Part 3 Do asylum-seekers actually receive their entitlements?

This section reports what organisations said about whether asylum-seekers actually receive the support, in cash or in kind, to which they are entitled, and whether the support arrives promptly, at the time at which it is needed.

NASS administration of payments

Three organisations commented that there has been some improvement in NASS administration recently. However:

- **33 organisations (82%) said that clients sometimes or frequently reported problems over the delay/non-arrival of NASS payments**
- **31 organisations (77%) said that clients sometimes or frequently reported problems with adjustments to payments (eg. for the arrival of a new child) not arriving**

Comment

'It often takes NASS months to add the child as a dependent so the £300 [Maternity Grant] has to last a long time'

- **37 organisations (92%) said that clients sometimes or frequently have problems contacting NASS when problems occur with their payments**
- **18 organisations (45%) said their clients did not know they were entitled to claim the £50 supplement after six months, and 10 organisations (25%) said their clients did not know about the Maternity Grant**

Comments

'It has not been explained to them'

'None of our clients had any information about this option'

- **21 organisations (52%) said their clients did not find it easy to claim the £50 supplementary grant, and 22 organisations (55%) said their clients did not find it easy to claim the Maternity Grant**

Comments

'They need help to claim, then it's easy'

'Extremely difficult to claim – most give up'

'They need to enclose a lot of documentation [to claim the Maternity Grant] which takes time. Very difficult with such a strict/short deadline'

- **27 organisations (67%) said that, when claimed, the £50 grant does not arrive promptly**

There appeared to be very wide variation in how long the grant takes to arrive

Comments

'This area has improved over the last few months as NASS publishes dates when work can be expected to be completed'

'Arrives 10+ days'

'Up to 21 days to arrive'

'Takes 4-6 weeks'

'Takes months'

'Currently wait 2-3 months'

- **23 organisations (57%) said that the Maternity Grant does not arrive promptly**

Comments

'Have to chase up payment. Letters written and phone calls. Has arrived after birth, not before'

'Often maternity claims go missing – sometimes we re-send (by recorded delivery/fax) 3 or 4 times, so money is delayed. It is needed as soon as the baby is born, not months later'

'Minimum 4 weeks – sometimes 2-3 months'

In-kind benefits from accommodation providers

- **15 organisations (37%) said their clients sometimes or frequently reported problems with accommodation providers not paying utility bills**
- **When asked “Does their accommodation provider supply all necessary furniture and household equipment?”, 13 organisations (32%) replied No, and 12 (30%) replied not always/insufficient/poor quality. Thirty seven organisations (92%) reported that their clients sometimes or frequently reported that their accommodation provider did not provide adequate furniture or household equipment.**

There is some inconsistency between these replies, which might be accounted for by some organisations answering the first question based on contractual agreements with accommodation providers in their area (ie. what is supposed to happen), and answering the second question based on clients' actual experience.

Comments

'Furniture, beds, mattress, sheets only'

'On most occasions yes, - sometimes however, some items are not provided'

'Allegedly, but private providers are not very reliable, and usually not enough bedding'

'Often if items are missing we have to chase providers'

'We have many complaints about these being insufficient, old, dirty'

'We often have complaints, necessary equipment has not been provided or replenished'

'Yes, although with local limitations, depending on the provider'

'It varies, Local Authority good, but private providers less so'

A CAB in Birmingham reports assisting an epileptic man who had been living in NASS-provided, supposedly self-contained and fully furnished accommodation for the past 11 months. In fact, the accommodation was only partly furnished and had no cooking facilities. The client had bought a second hand cooker and microwave several months previously, but now neither work and he cannot afford to replace them.

Dunstan R. (2002) Process Error: CAB clients experience of the National Asylum Support Service, NACAB

Part 4 False assumptions: Government policies and the impoverishment of asylum-seekers

We strongly contest a number of the arguments made by the Government to justify the low levels of support provided to asylum-seekers, and the rationale for the creation of the separate NASS system.

Equivalency

Government justification for the lower levels of support paid to asylum-seekers appears to have changed over the last three years. In June 1999, the then Home Secretary, Jack Straw MP stated in the House of Commons:

“The proposed provision is set at 70% of the equivalent income support because the asylum support system is intended to be on a short-term basis, a safety-net arrangement, and it should be possible to live on these amounts for short periods only”.⁵

Since that time, the Government has failed to fulfil its originally stated intention to bring down the time it takes to resolve asylum cases to six months, and large numbers of asylum-seekers are living on NASS support for much longer periods. In May 2002, Angela Eagle MP, Home Office Minister, responded to a question on the 70% rate in a written answer:

“The levels of asylum support for adults are set at 70% of income support levels because, unlike those in receipt of income support, NASS-supported asylum-seekers receive free, furnished accommodation, equipped with all necessary utensils, bedding, towels, etc., and with all their utility bills paid by NASS on top of their cash subsistence payments. In addition, after six months in receipt of NASS support, asylum-seekers are eligible for an additional single payment of £50. Taken as a package, the value of NASS support is broadly equal to the support that was provided to asylum-seekers under the previous, cash-based system”^{6 7}

It is not possible to do an exact comparison between the levels of support between those eligible to income support benefits and that given to asylum-seekers, as the in-kind support that asylum-seekers receive cannot be valued definitively, although we are surprised at the assertion that the average family of four spends £40 a week on utilities and household goods (see page 9). It is clear, however, that asylum-seekers not only receive a lower basic cash payment, but they also lose out on a range of additional supplements and premiums that are designed to enable income support recipients to deal with extra essential costs, hardships and special needs. It is incontrovertible that:

⁵ Hansard, Vol 333, Col 475, 15 June 1999

⁶ Hansard, Written Answer, Col 598W, 10th May 2002

⁷ The ‘cash-based system’ referred to here, presumably, is the system of benefits payable to ‘port-of-entry’ asylum applicants up until the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This was itself not equivalent to standard income support rates payable to UK residents, as asylum-seekers were paid at the 90% ‘urgent cases’ rate, and were excluded from claiming benefits such as disability living allowance.

- Asylum-seekers who choose to avoid dispersal in order to remain with friends and relatives receive no in-kind supports at all
- While the children of asylum-seekers receive 100% of the income support rate, the loss of Family Premium reduces the overall family income back down to 70 - 80% of income support rates
- Vulnerable groups such as the elderly and those with a disability receive no premiums to help them meet additional costs such as extra cold-weather clothing, special diets, lack of mobility etc. Payments for exceptional needs are discretionary and our entire study only revealed one individual to whom it had been paid
- Asylum-seekers cannot access social fund grants or loans to help with unexpected costs or emergencies
- Newly-arrived asylum-seekers, who often arrive with nothing, from a much warmer climate, have to wait six months before they can apply for a £50 supplement to buy additional items like clothing
- The maternity grant payable to asylum-seekers is £200 less than that paid by the Sure Start Maternity Grant of £500 payable to UK residents. It can only be claimed during a six-week period, and is only payable 2 weeks before the due date. Expectant mothers may not be able to buy maternity clothes at an advanced stage of their pregnancy. If the baby arrives early, or if the payment is late, the mother may go in to labour without having been able to buy nappies, baby clothes or any basic equipment.
- Mothers who are unable to breastfeed (because they are HIV+, suffering from stress or depression, for example) are unable to claim Welfare Foods milk tokens in order to get free formula milk for their babies.

The income support system was not designed as a single flat-rate payment, but as a system of supports and safety nets that could be tailored to an individual's or family's particular circumstances and essential needs, in order to prevent their living standards from dropping below an acceptable minimum. Furthermore, NASS incompetence and the failure of accommodation providers to supply adequate facilities mean that asylum-seekers have to wait an unacceptably long time for money or goods, or do not receive them at all. It is clear that asylum-seekers are having to survive, sometimes for prolonged periods of time, without any such safety net. Evidence from our study suggests that, all too often, asylum-seekers are slipping into severe poverty and hardship.

Deterrence

The Government justifies its current asylum policy and the establishment of a separate system of support on the grounds that many 'bogus' asylum-seekers come to this country simply in order to live off the State, and that providing a lower level of support will help to deter invalid claims for asylum. In fact, there is little evidence to support such an argument. Since the UK Government started to implement policies to restrict asylum-seekers' access to benefits, beginning in 1996, the number of asylum claims in the UK has risen from 29,640 (1996) to 72,430 (2001). The number of applications did fall in 2001, compared with the previous year, but figures for the first quarter of 2002 indicate that they are rising again. The Home Secretary himself has noted that:

“The overwhelming factor affecting asylum claims, which also affects the overall proportion of abusive and unfounded claims, as well as well-founded claims, is what goes on in terms of political stability in other countries in the world”⁸

Additionally, the UNHCR points out that:

“Asylum-seekers, when deciding where to lodge their application, are more swayed by the presence of their own community than by the reception standards and benefits”⁹

Race Relations

The Government also claims that the large numbers of asylum-seekers entering the UK and claiming State support provokes public hostility, damages race relations and encourages support for the extreme right-wing. It certainly cannot be denied that the near hysterical coverage of asylum and immigration issues by some of the press is highly antagonistic, although whether this reflects or moulds public opinion is a moot point. There is evidence that the public hold some highly misinformed views on asylum issues. A recent MORI study showed that the public overestimate by ten times the number of refugees and asylum-seekers hosted by the UK¹⁰. Another MORI poll in November 2000, showed that those questioned believed that asylum-seekers received much higher levels of support than was actually the case (the average level stated was £113 per week, compared to the £36.54 per week received at that time by a single adult)¹¹. The Government might do well to counter some of the myths about asylum-seekers, and work actively to promote a positive and well-informed view amongst the general public, rather than portraying asylum-seekers as problematic, requiring frequent and ever more punitive changes in legislation. As the European Committee against Racism and Intolerance has noted:

“ECRI is concerned at the general negative climate concerning asylum-seekers in the UK....The printed media particularly contribute to creating such a climate. However, ECRI considers the frequent changes in immigration and asylum policies designed to increasingly deter these categories of persons coming to the UK have played a fundamental role in this respect”¹²

Despite press hostility, and distressing instances of racism, discrimination and even violence against asylum-seekers, there is evidence to suggest that public opinion can be sympathetic towards them: take, for example the number of small local voluntary organisations and community initiatives for the support of asylum seekers, that have grown up in dispersal areas. The recent MORI poll mentioned above found that almost four times more respondents would display a positive rather than a negative attitude to asylum-seekers in their community. The draconian nature of asylum legislation has drawn criticism from a wide range of authoritative

⁸ *Special Standing Committee Hansard*, Col 470, 22nd March 1999

⁹ *Europe: Uneven distribution trends*, UNHCR Refugees Daily, 5th October 2000

¹⁰ MORI report *Attitudes towards Refugees and Asylum Seekers: A Survey of Public Opinion* June 2002

¹¹ MORI Survey, Reader's Digest, November 2000

¹² *ECRI, 2001*

voices, including trade unions, churches, MPs and peers, and Labour's own National Executive Committee.

Consistency with other Government policies

The establishment of a parallel and separate system of support for asylum-seekers does little to break down barriers between asylum-seekers and the public, or to promote understanding. Above all such a policy seems to run in direct contradiction to other Government policies:

- The Social Exclusion Unit was set up to combat the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups in society, yet asylum-seekers are isolated and marginalized by a parallel system that forces them to live in poverty through the insufficiency of the basic system of entitlements, the inadequacy of the bureaucratic structures put in place to administer the system, and the use of accommodation providers who do not fulfil their contracts
- The Government promotes the integration of ethnic minorities in a multi-cultural society, yet asylum-seekers are consigned to a parallel system of support which excludes and stigmatises them, both by its separateness and by the poverty in which they are forced to live
- The Government has made a commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2019, yet asylum-seeker families are unable to claim a range of benefits to meet their basic needs.
- This Government has enshrined within our domestic law the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms which states that: "The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured *without discrimination on any ground* such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status. (Article 14, italics added). Similar clauses exist in the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (Article 2) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 2) to which the UK is also a signatory. Yet the rights of asylum-seekers are undermined by a system that consistently undermines their basic health and welfare.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Government first argued that it is justifiable for asylum-seekers to live on a lower level of support because they will only have to do so for a short time, while their claim for asylum is assessed. Yet the Government has failed to meet its pledge to bring down adjudication times to six months, and many asylum-seekers are left surviving on an inadequate level of income for long periods while they wait for a final decision on their case.

The Government has argued more recently that the support to asylum-seekers are roughly equivalent to those available previously on welfare benefits, when in kind benefits are taken into account. The report demonstrates that, when premiums and other passported benefits are taken into account, the support available to asylum-seekers falls well short of that available to Income Support claimants. Often those who lose out are the most vulnerable: pregnant women, mothers with babies, children, the elderly and people with disability or chronic ill-health.

The removal of benefits from asylum-seekers, a process first started back in 1996, has not proved to be effective either in reducing the number of asylum-seekers coming to this country, or in improving race relations. The separate system of support for asylum-seekers creates levels of poverty amongst these people that undermine other Governmental policies on social exclusion, integration, child poverty and human rights.

We urge the Government to undertake urgent reforms to the system of support to asylum seekers, as outlined in the Recommendations below, in order to alleviate the worst injustices of the current system.

Key Recommendations

- **The remit of the Social Security Advisory Committee should be expanded to include scrutiny of the standard of support to asylum-seekers. The Committee should be charged with the task of ensuring that the level of support to asylum-seekers, in cash or in kind, actually equates to the total of benefits available to recipients of Income Support.** This will involve a realistic calculation of the value of in kind benefits such as the provision of utilities, as well as the provision of payments for additional, exceptional and emergency needs.
- **The option for asylum-seekers to live with friends and relatives with support from NASS should be retained. The weekly allowance to these people should be up-rated to include a contribution towards the cost of utilities and Council Tax.**
- **Given the low level of support to which asylum seekers are entitled, those with particular needs (including pregnant women, families with young children, people with disabilities, victims of torture and the elderly) should have access to special needs provision and passported benefits (e.g. milk tokens, vitamins, maternity grants, pensioner premiums, and funeral grants) on the same terms as UK citizens.**

Specific Recommendations

Up-rating of Support

- All payments to asylum-seekers should be automatically up-rated annually in line with the cost of living.

Access to Passported Benefits

- The additional grant of £50 payable after six months should also be paid when asylum-seekers first claim support, in order to allow them to buy clothing or other essential items immediately. All these grants should be paid automatically each time, without having to be applied for.
- All asylum-seeker mothers should be able to claim milk tokens and vitamins under the Welfare Foods Scheme, on the same basis as Income Support claimants. This should be implemented *immediately* in order to prevent further risk to the health of new-born and young children.
- The Maternity Grant should be increased to £500, in line with the Sure Start Maternity Grant and should be available to asylum-seekers on the same basis as the Sure Start grant (i.e. from the 29th week of pregnancy up until the baby is 3 months old). This grant should be available to all supported asylum-seeker mothers, regardless of who is providing their support (NASS or Local Authority).
- Additional support for extra costs associated with disability and chronic ill-health should be payable by NASS, and proper procedures should be established for applying for such payments, both at the stage of the initial application for support, and later.
- Cash allowances to asylum-seekers over the age of 65 should be up-rated to include the equivalent of the Pensioner Premium.
- A grant for funeral expenses should be available.

Operation of NASS

- NASS administrative systems should be expanded and improved in order to avoid the numerous delays and failures in payments that currently occur.
- NASS services should be regionalised and made easily accessible at a local level so that asylum-seekers can immediately make contact to report problems with payments.

- **NASS must establish a regular and thorough method of inspecting accommodation, both emergency and long-term, to ensure that accommodation providers are fulfilling contractual agreements in the provision of furniture, household equipment, and the meeting of environmental health standard. Asylum-seekers with disability should be allocated to suitable accommodation.**
- **All NASS staff dealing with applications for support should receive disability awareness training.**

The right to work

- **Asylum-seekers should be granted permission to work immediately after their claim for asylum, in order to give the opportunity to support themselves and not remain dependent on state support.**

Joined-up anti-poverty strategy

- **The Social Exclusion Unit should also be required to look at the impact of the NASS system on cross-departmental policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion.**

Leading public opinion

- **The Government should do more to educate the public so they have a full and accurate understanding of the reasons why people claim asylum, the numbers of asylum-seekers in this country, and the actual level of state support to which they are entitled.** In this way, discrimination and hostility towards asylum-seekers can be reduced, and the public support for providing adequate levels of assistance to asylum-seekers can be enhanced.

Appendix 1 - Oxfam /Refugee Council Questionnaire on Asylum Seeker Incomes

1.Name of your organisation (if you wish to give it).....

2.Area of country you work in.....

London-based – 21

UK-wide – 3

Other areas – 15

N/A - 1

2.a) Is this a dispersal area?

(Please circle your answer)

Yes – 15

No – 21

N/A - 4

Please briefly describe your organisation (e.g., local voluntary organisation, refugee community organisation etc)

3. How many asylum-seekers living on NASS/Interim support does your organisation see:

1 – 10 per week	15
10 – 20 per week	5
20 – 50 per week	4
Other (please specify)	16 (50-100 pw – 2, 100+ pw – 14)

4. In general, would you say these people have enough money to be:

	YES	NO	Please comment (If necessary continue on a separate sheet)
Able to buy enough food?	20	20	
Able to buy clothes?	2	38	
Able to buy shoes?	1	39	
Able to buy food for special dietary needs e.g. diabetes?	0	40	
Able to maintain good health?	5	32	No answer – 3
Able to keep in touch with their lawyer?	14	20	Depends on where lawyer is – 6
Able to travel to important interviews/appointments?	4	35	Depends where appt is – 1
Able to keep in touch with family/friends?	3	34	No answer – 3
Able to engage in adult educational activities?	23	15	No answer – 2
Able to engage in recreational activities at least once a week?	7	32	No answer – 1

5. Who is the main accommodation provider(s) in your area:

	Please tick
NASS -Private landlord(s)	26
NASS -Local Authority Consortium	13
Local Authority Interim - Private Landlord	10
Local Authority Interim - Other	7
Other (please specify)	5

More than one provider in some areas

6. For those people who receive accommodation, does their accommodation provider in general:

	YES	NO	Please comment (if necessary please continue on a separate sheet)
Pay all utility bills (gas/electric/water/Council Tax)?	25	3	
Supply utilities(gas, electric, water), but at a charge to the asylum seeker	11	5	
Supply utilities but with limitations placed on their use e.g. no heating after 7.00pm	2	5	
Supply all necessary furniture and household equipment, including bedlinen, towels, cooking utensils, crockery and cutlery, baby cots etc?	8	13	Not always/inadequately provided – 12 Not answered – 7

More than one method of providing utilities ticked by some organisations. First 3 sections of question badly designed so results not used

7.a) Do you see any asylum-seekers who are living on NASS 'cash-only' support i.e. providing their own accommodation? Yes – 35 No – 5

7.b) If yes, which of the following best describes the accommodation arrangements:

Mostly staying with friends Yes - 24
Mostly staying with family Yes - 15
Mostly staying in community accommodation (mosque/church) Yes - 2
A mixture of the above Yes - 10

(If yes to any of the above please give more detail below)

A number of organisations answered 'yes' to more than one description

Any Comment?

7.c) Do these people receive any supplementary support towards the cost of their utility bills from any other source? No - 33 N/A - 7

<i>Any comment?</i>

8.a) Do your clients know they are entitled to claim an extra £50 if their asylum case is still outstanding after 6 months (and every 6 months after that)?

Yes – 22
No – 18

8.b) Do your clients find it easy to make this claim?

Yes – 18
No – 21
N/A – 1

8.c) When claimed, does the £50 supplement, arrive promptly?

Yes - 3
No – 27
Sometimes - 2
N/A - 8

8.d) Is this payment adequate to meet essential clothing needs?

Yes - 2
No – 33
N/A - 5

8.e) If no, please comment below

Any comment? (E.g. how long do payments take to arrive?)

9. Do your clients know they can claim a £300 maternity payment on the birth of a child?

Yes - 30
No – 10

9.a) Do your clients find it easy to make this claim?

Yes - 16
No - 22
N/A - 2

9.b) When people claim the maternity payment, does it arrive promptly?

Yes – 9
No – 23
N/A - 7

9.c) Is the Maternity Payment adequate to meet maternity costs?

Yes - 7
No- 26
N/A – 7

Any comment?

10. Do you have any clients who receive/have received additional payments from NASS because of “Exceptional Needs”?

No – 38
N/A - 2

If yes, please give details

10.a) Do you have any clients who were unsuccessful in getting additional payments NASS because of "Exceptional needs"?

Yes – 12

No - 26

N/A - 2

If yes, please give details

11. Do you have any clients with a disability?

Yes - 32

No – 8

11.a) If yes have they been referred to Social Services?

Yes - 28

No - 4

11.b) If yes have they received a written Social Services Community Care Assessment?

Yes - 14

No – 11

N/K - 3

11.c) If yes are they receiving additional support /services as a result of the assessment?

Yes – 11

No - 2

N/K - 1

If yes please describe

12. Does your organisation ever give emergency/subsistence money to asylum-seekers to enable them to buy essential items?

Yes – 29

No – 11

(4 organisations answering 'no' specified they did not have the money to do so)

Any comments? (e.g. frequency, amount, what to buy etc)

13. Has your organisation seen any clients who have expressed the following concerns:

	Never	Sometimes	Frequently
Delay/non-arrival of cash/vouchers	2	4	29
Distance to nearest Post Office	9	20	8
Experiencing hunger	5	23	11
Working illegally to earn money for food/other essentials	9	18	9
Inability to buy school uniforms	4	13	22
Inability to buy warm winter clothing/shoes etc	0	14	25
Inability to afford bus fares to school	4	16	20
Mothers not able to breastfeed and unable to buy infant formula	7	16	12
Isolation due to inability to visit friends/family etc	2	11	25
Adjustments to payments (e.g. for new child) not arriving on time	6	12	19
Inability to contact NASS when problems occur	1	8	29
Accommodation provider not paying utility bills	14	13	2
Accommodation provider not providing adequate furniture/household equipment	2	18	19
Health and well being of children	3	21	14
Other (please comment below)			

Where answers do not add up to 40, question has not been answered by some respondents

Any comment?

Appendix 2 – Organisations responding to the questionnaire

Some organisations elected not to be named. Organisations responding to the study included:

North of England Refugee Service -	Newcastle
Refugee Action	South Central
Refugee Housing Association	South Yorkshire
Iranian Community Centre	London
Hillingdon Refugee Support Group	London
The Hanlon Centre	Haringay, London
Refugee Arrivals Project	South East England
Refugee Council	Ipswich East
Unity Organisation Multicultural Centre	North East England
Scottish Refugee Council	Scotland
Refugee Council	Yorkshire & Humberside
Refugee Council	Leeds
North of England Refugee Services	Tees Valley
Refugee Action	South West England
The Renewal Programme	Newham
Haringay Somali Centre	Haringay, London
Women's Ivory Coast Tower Assoc	Southwark, London
Congolese Youth Association	London
Refugee Health Access Project	Barnet, London
Mama Africa Women's Assoc	London
Sangayi Assoc	London
Medical Foundation	London
Afghan Association of London	UK
Refugee Network	Southwark, London
Somali Community Information Centre	London
Great lakes Initiative & Support Project	UK
Refugee Council	London
Refugee Council	London
Congolese Voluntary Organisation	Croydon, London