

Refugee Children's Consortium

Submission to the Home Office 2017 review of level of asylum support cash allowance

April 2017

The Refugee Children's Consortium (RCC) is a group of NGOs working collaboratively to ensure that the rights and needs of refugee children are promoted, respected and met in accordance with the relevant domestic, regional and international human rights and welfare standards. Our membership includes leading children's and refugee NGOs, bringing together a significant body of expertise in safeguarding and promoting children's welfare including dealing directly with children who are refugees, migrants or seeking asylum.

We welcome the opportunity to inform the 2017 review of the level of asylum support cash allowance. Our comments relate to the Home Office report on review of cash allowance paid to asylum seekers: 2016. Comments are in two parts: overarching observations about the review and some specific comments relating to particular costs discussed in the review.

General comments

We are disappointed to learn that destitute people seeking asylum will continue to receive a cash allowance of just £36.95 per week. As explained below, we do not believe that this limited support enables people to meet their basic living needs.

As a consortium focused on promoting the welfare of children, we consider the needs of children in asylum seeking households to be as important as the needs of any other children. We believe that families seeking asylum should receive financial support that is commensurate with mainstream benefit entitlements. As such, support provided under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 should be in line with the benefit provisions from the Department of Work and Pensions and HMRC. At the very least, rates should never drop below 70% of mainstream entitlements.

Asylum support rates are predicated on the assumption that support will only be required for a short period, enabling people to survive on a temporary basis while their asylum claims are processed. However, Home Office decision-making is subject to significant delay, which means people are forced to rely on asylum support for many months, and often years. Previous Home Office targets for handling asylum claims were two months for making an initial decision and four months for dealing with any appeal. The Home Office has revised its internal targets for making an initial decision on asylum claims to six months in 'straightforward' cases and to twelve months for cases it identifies as 'non-straightforward'. Recent statistics indicate that the number of applicants waiting more than six months for an initial decision has increased by 143% in the last year to 8,825 applicants.¹ Moreover, this figure does not include the numbers of applicants awaiting the determination of their appeal.

¹ Home Office National Statistics, Asylum, October-December 2016:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-october-to-december-2016/asylum#asylum-applications-and-initial-decisions-for-main-applicants>

The poor quality of initial Home Office decision-making on asylum claims further delays the recognition of refugees, increasing the length of time people need to rely on asylum support. The First-tier Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) advised in September 2016 that immigration and asylum appeals are being heard within 12 months on average although some cases may take longer.² As such, Home Office delays and poor decision-making create circumstances in which people are required to cope for long periods of time on minimal support that is intended to be short-term.

In April 2017 the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees reported serious concerns about the high numbers of asylum decisions overturned on appeal, and recommended that the Home Office examines the reasons for the sharp increase in delays in initial decision making.³ It further noted evidence concerning the impact on mental and physical health and wellbeing of the current low rates of asylum support.⁴ The enduring effects of child poverty are severe and well documented, impacting all areas of life from educational attainment⁵ to life expectancy.⁶

Specific comments

In addition to the above comments, we are concerned that the costs of the following items have been calculated inconsistently, often in a manner that disadvantages families with children.

Food

The decision to keep the cash allowance at the previous levels does not take account the significant rises in food inflation that have occurred over the last 12 months. With the Office for Budget Responsibility predicting RPI of 3.9% ahead of the Spring Budget⁷ and the Kantar Worldpanel, which measures like for like food purchases on an ongoing basis, seeing a doubling of its rate from 0.7% to 1.4% between January and February 2017⁸ the current asylum support rates will buy less and less food for families over the course of the year. Some essential products like butter have increased by over 10%.

Healthcare

The cost of children's medicines tends to be higher than that of generic adult medicines. As children are not allocated an increased budget for medicine, households with children are likely to spend more.

² First-tier Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber), HM Courts and Tribunals Service, correspondence with the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association of 21 September 2016

³ Paragraph 212, APPG on Refugees 'Refugees Welcome? The Experience of New Refugees in the UK' April 2017

https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/0316/APPG_on_Refugees_-_Refugees_Welcome_report.pdf

⁴ Paragraph 208, APPG on Refugees 'Refugees Welcome? The Experience of New Refugees in the UK' April 2017

https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/0316/APPG_on_Refugees_-_Refugees_Welcome_report.pdf

⁵ Department for Education 'GCSE and Equivalent Attainment by Pupil Characteristic: 2014'

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/gcse-and-equivalent-attainment-by-pupil-characteristics-2014>

⁶ Office for National Statistic 'Inequality in Healthy Life Expectancy at Birth by National Deciles of Area Deprivation: England' 2015

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/datasets/inequalityinhealthylifeexpectancyatbirthbynationaldecilesfareadeprivationengland>

⁷ Office for Budget Responsibility 'Economic and Fiscal Outlook - March 2017'

<http://budgetresponsibility.org.uk/efo/economic-fiscal-outlook-march-2017/>

⁸ Kantar World Panel 'UK Grocery Market Grows as Price Rises Continues' March 2017

<https://www.kantarworldpanel.com/en/Press-Releases/UK-grocery-market-grows-as-price-rises-continue->

Clothing:

The allowance of £2.60 per week for clothing is impractical. The review has allocated £134.94 for clothing per year by budgeting for £2.60 per week. The expectation appears to be for people to save up for a full year before buying clothes. Clearly this is unworkable.

Whilst we acknowledge that additional allowances have been made for children's clothing, from the age of 36 months the Home Office expects clothes to last for a full year. The NHS estimates that the average child grows nine centimetres between three and five years old,⁹ so more frequent purchases are likely to be required as children grow.

Travel:

The review confirms that children may need to travel to attend school. It states that children under five years travel for free, and children over eight may, in limited circumstances, be able to access free transport to school. However, it does not appear to acknowledge that young children will require a parent - who is not eligible for free transport - to accompany them to school. It is therefore likely that families with young school-aged children will spend significantly more than the allocated budget on travel.

The review allocates £4 per week for travel on the basis that this is sufficient to cover a return bus fare in 'most' areas in which asylum seekers are accommodated. In fact, the survey information covered less than 50% of areas in which people receiving s.95 support live. Moreover, crucial information on which the review appears to rely is missing from Annex C, which states:

It is possible to make a short return journey for £3 or less (using either a return ticket or 2 singles, and sometimes 3 short hops) in % of the towns and cities. This is down from 78% in June 2015

Clearly, vital information is missing from the review. However, it appears from the table of analysis conducted in December 2015 that the relevant figure is just 57%. Further, in our view more than one bus trip per week is likely to be required to enable basic communication needs to be met.

For the reasons outlined above, we are concerned that the decision to maintain the current rate of asylum support will leave children and adults unable to meet their basic needs, surviving for extended periods of time on insufficient funds.

⁹ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
<https://www.evidence.nhs.uk/formulary/bnf/current/approximate-conversions-and-units/prescribing-for-children/weight-height-and-gender>