

The Helen Bamber Foundation's response to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Select Committee's inquiry into food supply amid the Covid-19 pandemic

1. The Helen Bamber Foundation ('HBF') is a UK charity that provides expert care and support for refugees and asylum seekers who have suffered human cruelty. The individuals we work with have been subjected to atrocities including state-sponsored torture, human trafficking, religious / political persecution, forced labour, sexual exploitation, and gender-based, including 'honour-based' violence. Many of our clients have been repeatedly victimised and suffered multiple traumas. We offer survivors access to an individually tailored programme of specialist psychological care and physical rehabilitation activities alongside an advisory medical clinic, expert medico-legal assessment and documentation, welfare and housing support and a creative arts and employability skills programme. Our work helps survivors to gain stability, to address and overcome their trauma and to integrate into the community, resulting in sustained recovery.
2. We have extensive experience in assisting our clients to ensure that amongst others their most basic needs are met, including access to food; a need which has overwhelmingly increased since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown measures.
3. Asylum seekers (and people recently granted leave to remain having claimed asylum, including newly recognised refugees) are particularly vulnerable to food poverty because of the extremely limited amount of financial support they receive from the Government (UK Visas and Immigration). Those in receipt of support under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 receive £37.75 per person per week (with an additional £3 if the applicant is pregnant, £5 for children under 1 and £3 for children under 3). The basic rate of support for those in receipt of support under Section 4(2) of the above Act is £35.39 per person per week, which cannot be spent in cash or at shops which do not accept VISA cards. In our experience working with clients who are predominantly in receipt of these types of support, this amount is insufficient to meet the applicant's basic needs, and this is particularly the case during this unprecedented time of high general need for food and other essentials.
4. In response to the Committee's call for evidence on Covid-19 and food supply, we have outlined our response below, focusing specifically the Committee's second question: **Are the government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient health food, and are any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?**
5. We are receiving increasing requests from clients – often in significant emotional distress – who have been unable to purchase the food they need with the amount of asylum support they receive. Survivors of trafficking and torture are saying sourcing the food they need is even more difficult than before because of rising food prices, the reduced availability of the bargain 'basic' supermarket brands they usually buy, what they need is not available and because they cannot shop in all shops (and in cash for those in receipt of Section 4 support). We are regularly issuing food bank vouchers to clients (though we understand that the food banks own store and supply of food are likely to be depleted also), as well as helping them to obtain support from their local authority's Covid-19 response team (if this exists) and local mutual aid groups, even whilst they are in receipt of statutory support from the Home Office.

6. When the ongoing need to purchase food and essentials collides with other needs, this creates additional hardship due to the extremely low rates of subsistence. For example, recently one of our clients, who was not able to receive our practical in-person support in order to reapply for a HC2 certificate for free medication prescriptions before her previous certificate expired, was faced with the choice of spending £9.15 of her weekly £35.39 in order to purchase and continue taking her prescribed antidepressant medication or attempting to purchase enough food for the week.
7. One of our clients is a mother of three; her third child is a few months old. She has post-traumatic stress disorder and experienced post-natal depression. She recently asked us for a referral to any place that could provide food, vouchers or cash (she asked for around £15-20). She explained that they are buying from their local co-op shop due to very long queues in the larger supermarkets (which they would need to take a bus to travel to), and that it is very difficult for her to buy enough food to feed her family of five. She said she is buying food for her children first to prioritise their wellbeing and nutrition above her own and has checked with food banks as to whether they are able to help her with anything.
8. Asylum seekers in receipt of financial support from the Home Office are eligible for free school meals (very recently families in receipt of Section 4(2) support became eligible). Though it is unclear how eligible families may be able to receive the supermarket vouchers offered by the Department for Education (particularly for families without access to the internet, as Wi-Fi is rarely provided in Home Office accommodation), this is a welcome development. However, several of our clients and their families who are eligible for Free School Meals have reported not having received any support so far from their children's school (across different parts of London), in terms of actual provision of food or supermarket vouchers. It is unclear why these issues have occurred; however, it appears that there is a delay in applying for and receiving the vouchers via Edenred, and other clients have not known that they are eligible and have therefore not applied for Free School Meals previously. For those who have recently applied for Free School Meals it is anticipated that the local authority may take several weeks to process the application and until such time, vouchers cannot be provided. It is our view that the publicization of and practical support for the scheme needs to be more widely undertaken to all education providers and local authorities, the initial eligibility checker made quicker for schools and local authorities, and guidance to be provided for families not yet receiving support.
9. Asylum seekers in receipt of financial support from the Home Office are not eligible for [Healthy Start vouchers](#), which are free weekly vouchers to spend on milk, plain fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables, infant formula milk and vitamins. These vouchers are available to people who are pregnant or have children under the age of four and are on certain income-based benefits (Universal Credit, Income Support, income-based Jobseekers' Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance, Pension Credit and Child Tax Credit). Given that these are the same benefits which entitle people to receive free school meals from their children's education provider, we are concerned that asylum seekers who receive extremely limited financial support from the Government, are excluded from this support.

Recommendations:

Asylum support:

- Increase asylum support levels by at least £20 per month.
- Allow Aspen cards to be used online and in cash (for those on Section 4 support, so that they can go to their closest possible retailer).
- Provide Aspen cards to those facing a significant period of time in Section 98 support whilst awaiting dispersal to accommodation provided under Section 95 or 4(2), so that they are also able to purchase their own food during this crisis.

Free School Meals:

- Publicize and provide support to education providers and local authorities in order that schools are able to efficiently provide food supplies or food vouchers to all children entitled to Free School Meals
- Provide public guidance accessible to families entitled to Free School Meals so that they (and those supporting them) are aware of how they can request and receive this support, particularly for vulnerable parents
- Ensure that eligibility for Free School Meals can be verified quickly, via the parents National Insurance number, Asylum Support reference or other supporting evidence, to prevent delays in processing applications and then issuing vouchers.

Healthy Start vouchers:

- Extend the eligibility for Healthy Start Vouchers to include families in receipt of asylum support from the Home Office and families with no recourse to public funds who have recently been granted eligibility for Free School Meals support (including children whose parents are Zambrano Carers, families with leave to remain subject to the no recourse to public funds condition, and families who receive support to Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 who have no recourse to public funds).

Other:

- In terms of collecting prescriptions, where the person is in receipt of asylum support from the Home Office (and therefore unquestionably eligible for free prescriptions) but does not have a current HC2 certificate, provision of the person's asylum support reference number (and/or other confirmation of receipt of asylum support) should be sufficient to access free prescriptions. This is to ensure that asylum seekers who have not been able to apply for or renew a HC2 certificate do not have to choose between accessing their medication or purchasing food.