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**Submission from the Helen Bamber Foundation on the 2018 review of
Asylum Support Rates**

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, religious / political persecution, human trafficking, forced labour, sexual exploitation, and gender-based, including 'honor-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, leading to sustained recovery.

This submission is provided for the Home Office's upcoming review of the level of weekly cash allowances provided to asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers and their dependents, as provided under Section 95 and Section 4 respectively. It provides information on the most pressing issues that have been identified by HBF in relation to our clients who are recipients of asylum support.

Many of our clients receive asylum support, including under Section 95 (accommodation and subsistence-only), Section 98 and Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The low asylum support rates affect these clients in myriad ways, permeating much of

their life in the UK and acting to the detriment of their emotional, material and physical wellbeing. In our collective clinical experience at the Helen Bamber Foundation, the low rates of financial support provided to our clients can cause them considerable distress and add to their sense of rejection and low self-esteem. This can significantly impede their engagement with and progress in therapy. We recommend that asylum support rates should be raised to more realistically reflect the needs of asylum seekers and at a minimum set rates at 70% of income support rates. Furthermore, the August 2015 support rate changes should be reversed so that the specific needs of children and families can be better met.

The below submission focuses on the aspects of basic needs provided for by asylum support payments, and is in reference to the report issued by the Home Office in January 2018 regarding asylum support rates.¹

Travel

Home Office report: *'We now assess that the sum of £4.30 is generally needed to pay for the cost of a return bus journey... All travel to essential appointments are covered so only £4.30 is required per week.'*

For asylum support recipients with a mental or physical disability, requiring them to take the bus for even a short distance (e.g. to their GP surgery or to a nearby shop to buy food), travel will cost £1.50 for a single bus journey in Greater London, the region in which our clients reside. Therefore, in Greater London, travelling by bus to visit your GP once a week costs £3.00 in total, leaving £1.30 for the rest of the week's travel allowance according to the Home Office; this amount is not enough for even a single additional bus journey.

Many of our clients suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as other severe mental health conditions including major depressive disorder, anxiety, and psychosis. Many have 'dissociative' symptoms – i.e. have episodes in which they go 'blank' and are transiently aware of their actions and/or their surroundings. They can become lost while travelling, catching the wrong bus or train and then not know where they are. Due to the limited amount of financial support, there appears to be little room for error – common errors for people with severe mental health conditions and a history of

¹ [Report on the Review of cash allowance paid to asylum seekers: 2017](#)

traumatic experiences – and many people end up walking to their destination, a journey which can take several hours and cause both mental and physical exhaustion.

The NHS Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS) can refund reasonable travel costs if a person has been referred to hospital or other NHS premises for specialist NHS treatment or diagnostic tests, but excludes visits to a GP, dentist or other primary care service provider. In our experience however, the HTCS is also not well known among asylum seekers who require specialist NHS treatment, and fall within the eligibility of the HTCS. Furthermore, many hospitals have no or only a partially-staffed cashier's desk, and so asylum seekers who do know about the HTCS are unlikely to have their travel money reimbursed on the same day. Prompt reimbursement is essential when the weekly rate of support is so low. If the travel costs are claimed retrospectively, the NHS usually does this in the form of a cheque. Given that asylum seekers are largely prohibited from opening a bank account, this makes it difficult to cash and receive retrospectively reimbursed travel money.

The limited rate of asylum support makes it extremely difficult for asylum seekers to engage in any other activities, due to prohibitive travel costs. These include ongoing healthcare appointments not reimbursed under the HTCS; college and other educational bodies (as asylum seekers are often not eligible for learner support funds due to their condition of 'no recourse to public funds'); social support networks, and religious and/or cultural establishments.

The inability to travel for such purposes greatly impacts upon asylum seekers; it increases isolation, impairs opportunities to learn English and integrate within their communities more generally and reduces quality of life. The inability to travel elsewhere other than the immediate vicinity of their accommodation is also exacerbated by the often poor quality of asylum support accommodation, increased feelings of hopelessness and low mood. We recommend that the allocation of money for travel be substantially increased.

Travel to Immigration Reporting Centres

Many asylum seekers in receipt of asylum support do not automatically receive travel tickets from the Home Office when they are required to attend reporting centres on a regular basis. Their reporting frequency could be anything from weekly to annually, however the cost is expensive, as, depending on their reporting time, they may need to

travel at peak time. Ensuring that a person receives the travel ticket ahead of the reporting date often requires third-party advocacy. We recommend that when a person is accommodated under asylum support, they should automatically be sent travel tickets ahead of the reporting event.

Travel to solicitors' appointments

We are aware that travel to appointments with a person's solicitor can be reimbursed via the Legal Aid Agency, according to the Legal Aid Agency 2013 Standard Civil Contract Specification. In the experience of the Helen Bamber Foundation, we find that many solicitors are unaware of this provision, and therefore do not inform clients of this nor apply for the disbursement.

In addition, many of our clients lack knowledge of this disbursement, as well as often the literacy and confidence (as well as other skills affected by their severe mental health conditions, for example adequate concentration during dissociative episodes) required to request of their solicitor to apply for funding for their travel expenses, and to continue to request this on a regular basis. Though this also pertains to the Legal Aid Agency, we recommend that the process by which the recipients of asylum support can have their travel expenses to attend legal appointments be simplified and that all firms with an immigration Legal Aid contract be informed of this.

Travel in urban areas

Home Office report: *'Asylum seekers are invariably accommodated in urban areas'*.

According to the Allocation of Accommodation Policy (version 5, 2017), clients of HBF are required to be housed within zones 1-6 of London, and therefore are ostensibly accommodated in urban areas. We are aware of the more acute difficulties facing asylum seekers accommodated in less urban areas in other parts of the UK.

However, within zones 1-6 of London, several of our clients have been placed in areas which are not in the near vicinity of affordable shops. Many of our clients have complex mental and often physical health conditions, and a client recently accommodated in a less

urban area struggled to carry her weekly shopping due to her heart condition. She cannot walk further than approximately 15 minutes without resting. She was unable to buy her weekly food shopping in one trip as she was not able to carry her shopping and does not have anyone to help her with this task, however she was unable to afford to travel for multiple journeys in one week. She was therefore often unable to eat a sufficient amount during the week, due to her inability to travel more than once.

Food

Home Office report: *'[w]e assess that around £23.75 per week is sufficient to cover the average weekly dietary needs of adult asylum seekers....is also sufficient to cover the needs of a dependent child'.*

We believe that the above amount is insufficient to cover the weekly diet needs of adult asylum seekers and any dependent children. Fresh fruit and vegetables – essential to meet a person's dietary needs (as supported by the Government's Change4Life campaign) – are unaffordable within this amount while also buying a sufficient amount of staple foods.

The Healthy Start scheme provides free vouchers for those who are pregnant or with children under the age of four. These vouchers can be used to obtain milk, fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables, infant formula milk and vitamins. However, unlike the eligibility for Free School Meals, asylum support is not listed as a qualifying benefit. This excludes asylum seeking parents and their children from nutritional support deemed vital for other families on a low income (and in receipt of public funds). We recommend that receipt of asylum support (and financial support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989) be listed as qualifying benefits for the Healthy Start scheme.

Many of our clients are likely to have been deprived of adequate nutrition in previous precarious living situations (e.g. detention, situations of trafficking, other exploitation and torture) and it is therefore particularly important that they be able to obtain adequate nutrition for them and their children.

Furthermore, while accommodated in asylum support, access to shops in which one can bulk-buy cost-effectively is not guaranteed, e.g. if one lives at walking distance from only a small supermarket or off-licence shop, one would need to travel (and therefore spend

money on further transport) to bulk-buy, and also be physically and mentally fit enough to carry these purchases home. We also find that in asylum support accommodation, there are often inadequate cooking facilities and sharing facilities, pots and pans not adequately provided, further limiting the effectiveness of bulk-buying and requiring the purchase of further essential items.

This amount allocated for food is particularly insufficient for people who are required to maintain a diet of specific foods for a health condition. Several of our clients are currently required to maintain a specific diet, yet are unable to do this – or even a healthy diet - within the limitations of asylum support.

We provide foodbank vouchers to clients in receipt of asylum support on a near weekly basis, as we recognise that asylum support rates are so limited and that our clients struggle to feed, clothe and generally provide themselves within this amount. The provision of foodbank vouchers is insufficient, as it relies on asylum seekers' engagement with and knowledge of organisations which understand their material circumstances and these organisations' ability to issue foodbank vouchers and food directly.

When referred to a foodbank, the person referred will then need to travel to the location (likely costing at least another £1.50 in bus fare in London). Foodbanks try to give the person as much non-perishable food as possible, meaning that food provision again excludes vulnerable asylum seekers from maintaining a healthy (and fresh) diet.

Furthermore, many foodbanks operate their own policies regarding how many times an individual/family can access their services. This may be that a person can only visit the foodbank three times in total, or that there is a limit on how many times a person can visit within a particular timeframe.

Household cleaning items and toiletries

In many ways, these issues apply to the limited amount of money allocated by the Home Office for household cleaning items, amounting £0.92 per week, and toiletries, amounting to £1.00 per week. This is inadequate to purchase household cleaning items. It is also not reflective of the way in which people purchase toiletries, particularly when applicants are often not provided with a sufficient amount of household cleaning items at their asylum

support accommodation. Residents of asylum support accommodation are often not provided with household cleaning tools required to clean their accommodation. Many people therefore are required to purchase items such as brooms and mops, all of which are more expensive than allowed by £0.92 per week.

In one such case, our client entered asylum support accommodation for the first time, after a period of prolonged homelessness and destitution, and needed to spend much of the full first week's amount on household cleaning items, due to the lack of cleanliness in the accommodation when he moved in, leaving no money for his other needs that week.

Many of our clients are also likely to have lived in unclean conditions in previous situations (e.g. situations of trafficking and other exploitation, torture, homelessness). It is therefore particularly important, both for their physical and mental health, that they be able to maintain their living space and personal hygiene adequately, requiring sufficient amounts of toiletries and household cleaning items.

Furthermore, due to the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and the impact of traumatic events, our clients are particularly susceptible to feelings of shame and inferiority, and particularly in a situation of not having adequate access to toiletries and household cleaning items. Due to these symptoms and the impact of traumatic events, our clients are therefore less likely to find and approach organisations which may be able to provide items for free, including toiletries, clothing and footwear.

In particular, menstrual products are expensive. Most of our clients cannot afford to use tampons and instead use sanitary towels. In our experience this is due to various factors including the psychological and physical effects of sexual violence and a lack of familiarity with tampons. Many of our clients also report gynecological conditions causing heavy periods (including fibroids, endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome). This also requires more regular changing of sanitary products. Sanitary towels often need to be changed more regularly, and therefore can incur a higher cost not reflected in the in-store market research undertaken by the Home Office for the recent review of Section 95 support rates.

Communication

Asylum seekers cannot usually access a phone contract without a bank account or credit history, following recent legislation disallowing asylum seekers from opening bank accounts, therefore pay-as-you go is often the only option. Internet is invariably not provided in asylum support accommodation, meaning that even clients who are able to use the internet and email facilities must rely on either calling their legal representative and GP surgery (costing money via pay as you go) or travelling to their offices directly (almost always costing money for travel). We recommend that the amount allocated to communication be raised.

Clothing

Home Office report: *'A basic wardrobe of three sets of clothing is sufficient... for the maintenance of health, decency and cleanliness... we consider that £2.30 per week is sufficient to cover the clothing and footwear needs of a single asylum seeker'*

This amount is insufficient to cover the costs of clothing and footwear needs of an asylum seeker. People often arrive in the UK with very little clothing, and lack the resources to locate services which may be able to provide clothing and footwear for free. Wearing the same set of clothes for years, a situation in which many of our clients find themselves, exacerbates clients' feelings of humiliation, shame and indignity, in addition to the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and the impact of traumatic events. A longstanding client of ours was unable to purchase a second set of clothing, other than those in which he had fled his country of origin and in which he had been detained on arrival to the UK, until HBF applied for a charitable grant on his behalf.

The current asylum support rate is also insufficient to purchase seasonally appropriate clothing. Suitable winter clothing is expensive to buy, particularly at short notice when most required, and particularly if asylum seekers have dependent children. This winter, HBF collected donations of winter clothing and distributed this among our clients who are seeking asylum. However, we do not consider this to be a sustainable solution. We recommend that the allocation of asylum support be increased to be sufficient for the purchase of suitable clothing all year round, including for dependent children who will outgrow their clothes continually.

Asylum support levels and their effect on children

In general, the rates of support provided to asylum seekers and their dependents are exceptionally low, and well below relative poverty thresholds. The adverse effects of poverty upon children have been widely-researched, and children living in asylum support are no exception to this. Many of our clients with dependent children struggle to fully meet their needs with the current rate of support. We recommend that the maternity grant be increased for recipients of asylum support.

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) indicate that children from poorer backgrounds lag at all stages of education, and according to Department for Education statistics, by the end of primary school, pupils receiving free school meals are estimated to be almost three terms behind their more affluent peers. Poverty is also associated with a higher risk of ill health. Children living in poverty (as children whose families are in receipt of asylum support do) are almost twice as likely to live in bad housing, both of which has significant effects on both their physical and mental health as well as educational achievement.²

The children of asylum seekers will likely be living with parents who have experienced trauma. Children in asylum-seeking families may have been directly exposed to trauma themselves. In addition to the poverty experienced by many asylum-seeking families in receipt of asylum support, the experience of trauma may have a further effect on children's ability to socialise and integrate, disadvantaging child asylum seekers from the outset. We are in agreement with the statement of Barnardo's Like Any Other Child report (2008), stating that *'to pay benefits to asylum-seeking families at below these modest levels is cruel and forces some families into severe poverty.'*³

School uniforms

Home Office report: *'On most cases if a child is entitled to free school meals... it is likely that the child will be entitled to apply for these grants'.*

² <http://cpag.org.uk/content/impact-poverty>

³ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/like-any-other-child-asylum-report08-summary.pdf>

In order to explore the above assumption of the Home Office HBF's Welfare and Housing Lead researched the availability of these grants across the 32 London Boroughs, and if they were accessible to asylum seekers in receipt of asylum support.

In 20 of 32 boroughs, it is not possible to apply for a school uniform grant from the local authority, even if in receipt of free school meals, because of various reasons: in some local authorities the school uniform grant had been abolished; it was only available to people not subject to immigration control; asylum support was not listed as a qualifying benefit; or there was no information online regarding the existence of a council-funded grant scheme, despite significant research.

In three boroughs, would-be applicants for a school uniform grants are advised that the council does not have its own grant for school uniforms, and to enquire at the school itself regarding their policy. This places the onus on the family in receipt of asylum support to find out from the children's school, rather than being an automatic acceptance, in the case of free school meals under the government's Pupil Premium scheme.

In five boroughs, children of families in receipt of asylum support could apply for a school uniform grant, if transferring to secondary school that year, and therefore for a specific and time-limited purpose. In two boroughs, it was unclear if people receiving asylum support could apply (though it was not explicitly excluded as a qualifying benefit), and therefore though possible, would require research and advocacy on the family's part, making it much less likely that a family would apply (or be aware of it as a possibility).

We recommend that school uniforms be taken into consideration within the allocated amount for clothing. Uniforms can be expensive and grants provided by the local authority or at school level may not exist or include children who are in asylum-seeking families within their eligibility criteria. We are aware that Section 96(2) is available for additional support not covered by the standard asylum support rate. However, the need for new school uniforms (and other clothes and shoes for children) is a continual and annual need, and should therefore be allocated as standard, rather than requiring families to complete the complex Section 96(2) application and risk remaining unable to purchase the school uniform (and other clothes) their children vitally need.

Writing materials for education of children

Home Office report: *'A 300 sheet A4 refill pad, and six ball point pens, can be bought for £2... It seems reasonable for all children who can write to make use of such pads and pens, with larger families able to split and share the resource. The very young may prefer the slate and chalk option available at £2.'*

Research undertaken by the Children's Society indicates that children living in the country's poorest families say they are embarrassed as a result of not being able to afford key aspects of school. Many families interviewed as part of their research showed that more than 25% of respondents said that this had led them to being bullied.⁴⁵

We note that the products suggested by the Home Office are not sufficient for the educational needs of children to properly enjoy and thrive in their education in the 21st century. Children may be required to have the following items: school bag, books, calculator, pencil case, ruler, rubber, pencil sharpener, pencils, coloured pencils, and craft materials for school projects. Even if the children's school, provides the above items, they are often not able to be taken home in order to complete homework to a satisfactory level. It is also not possible for children in different school years to split and share resources to a satisfactory level.

⁴ [https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/The-Wrong-Blazer - Time-for-action-on-school-uniform-costs - The-Children%27s-Commission-on-Poverty_The-Children%27s-Society.pdf](https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/The-Wrong-Blazer_-_Time-for-action-on-school-uniform-costs_-_The-Children%27s-Commission-on-Poverty_The-Children%27s-Society.pdf)

⁵ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/Queen%27s%20Speech%20-%20Cost%20of%20School%20for%20Children%20in%20Poverty.pdf>

Summary of recommendations:

1. Asylum support rates should be raised to more realistically reflect the needs of asylum seekers and at a minimum set at 70% of income support rates.
2. The August 2015 support rate changes should be reversed so that the specific needs of children and families can be better met.
3. Whilst communication and travel are included within the review of support rates, we recommend that they are considered as an essential need and raised accordingly.
4. When a person is accommodated under asylum support, they should automatically be sent travel tickets ahead of the reporting event.
5. The process by which the recipients of asylum support can have their travel expenses to attend legal appointments be simplified and that all firms with an immigration Legal Aid contract be informed of this.
6. Receipt of asylum support (and financial support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989) should be listed as qualifying benefits for the Healthy Start scheme.
7. The allocation of asylum support should be increased to be sufficient for the purchase of suitable clothing all year round, including for dependent children who will outgrow their clothes continually.
8. The maternity grant should be increased for recipients of asylum support.
9. School uniforms should be taken into consideration within the allocated amount for clothing and that this be increased accordingly.