

HOME OFFICE REVIEW OF ASYLUM SUPPORT RATES

Helen Bamber Foundation submission

August 2021

The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) is a specialist clinical and human rights charity that works with survivors of trafficking, torture and other forms of extreme human cruelty and believes that all survivors should have safety, freedom and power. Our work alongside survivors shows us that, with early and appropriate care and support, they build the strength to move on with their lives (or strength to fly). Our multidisciplinary and clinical team provides a bespoke Model of Integrated Care for survivors which includes medico-legal documentation of physical and psychological injuries; specialist programmes of therapeutic care; a medical advisory service; a counter-trafficking programme; housing and welfare advice; legal protection advice; and community integration activities and services.

This submission looks at the basic needs provided for by asylum support payments, with reference to the Home Office's 'Report on the allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers: 2020', and most pressing issues that have been identified by HBF in relation to our clients. Many of our clients receive asylum support, including under Section 95, Section 98 and Section 4(2) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The low asylum support rates affect them 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 HBF, the low rates of financial support provided to our clients can cause them considerable distress and add to their low self-esteem and mental health problems. 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 set out our recommendations below.

Q1. Do you consider the existing assessment methodology should be retained, adjusted or replaced with some alternative and if so in what ways?

HBF believes that the Home Office's existing assessment methodology for assessing the levels at which to set section 95 and section 4 support needs changing for a number of reasons:

- 1) The assessment is based on the needs of able-bodied individuals and appears to make no allowances for those in the asylum system with additional mental or physical health needs. The lack of consideration for those who have additionally vulnerabilities (but who do not reach the threshold required to make them eligible for additional support such as that from a local authority support under the Care Act 2014) is causing considerable difficulties for many of our clients.
- 2) The assessment methodology includes assumptions about the availability of additional funding and support that is simply not available in practice. While this additional support may not always be the responsibility of the Home Office we believe further steps should be taken to ensure that funding is practically available before it is relied on as part of this assessment.
- 3) The assessment methodology includes assumptions that asylum seekers are housed 'in urban areas' and proximate to essential services – this is not always the case.
- 4) The amount of financial support deemed necessary to cover the costs of meeting food needs is taken from Office of National Statistics (ONS) information about the amount of money spent on the items by individuals in the lowest 10% of income group in the UK. However, ONS data does not take account of the additional needs of asylum seekers, such as the fact that they often arrive with no possessions and do not have a support network on which they can rely. There is a significant backlog of asylum cases (with, as at the end of March 2021, more than 50,084 people waiting more than six months for an initial decision on their claim) and many individuals will be forced to live on crippling low levels of support for years, with an inevitable negative impact on their mental and physical health. We do not believe the lowest 10% in the ONS data is an adequate benchmark for the essential living needs of those in the asylum system.

In the questions below we will look at different living needs in turn but our key recommendations would be that:

- An alternative approach to assessing appropriate levels of support should be taken, with the starting point that it is essential to assess what rate would be necessary for an *acceptable standard of living*, not just what must be covered as a bare minimum. We recommend the Home Office considers the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's work

on the Minimum Income Standard (MIS).¹ This presents a vision of the living standards that we as a society consider everyone in the UK should be able to achieve, whether they are in work or reliant on state support.

In the interim, the rate of asylum support should be raised to at least 70% of mainstream benefits (70% of the standard level of universal credit would be £52.05).

The Home Office has rejected aligning asylum support allowances with DWP benefits because DWP benefits are not set according to the “essential living needs” test and are generally required to cover a broader range of costs, including paying for utilities and travel. However, the argument set out in the Home Office’s 2020 report appears to misunderstand the recommendation repeatedly made by organisations supporting asylum seekers for asylum support to be raised to 70% of mainstream benefits (not 100%). 70% is used because the recommendation acknowledges that asylum support covers a reduced range of costs - the 30% difference accounts for utilities etc. If we set aside the percentage and instead consider that, as the 2020 review outlines, “where a person on universal credit is receiving free utilities as part of their rental agreement, DWP deducts £24.53 from their payments (this being the amount assessed as the value of the provision)” – this deduction brings the DWP assessed level of financial support (excluding utilities costs and additional travel needs) needed by a single adult to £49.82. If £49.82 is the rate required by those *outside* of the asylum system who have their utilities and other costs covered already, why are asylum seekers deemed to need over £10 less than that in asylum support a week?

- Travel and communication should be classified as essential needs – having access to these services is crucial to people’s well-being, to their ability to stay in contact with their support networks, doctors and legal representatives, to progressing their asylum claims, and to them or their children continuing their education. Due to the high costs of renting in some areas, dispersal accommodation is often situated in places which are far away from main hubs and city centres. People often do not have enough money or cannot access it (those on section 4 support) to pay for travel by public transport to attend appointments, do their essential shopping or see a doctor. Inability to travel due to insufficient funds coupled with lack of money to pay for telephone calls hinders their ability to access crucial services and worsens social isolation and mental health problems.
- The assessment used for the rates review should look at what support is required to enable people to maintain interpersonal relationships and a minimum level of participation in social, cultural and religious life.²

¹ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/minimum-income-standard-uk-2021>

² See *Refugee Action v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2014] EWHC 1033 (Admin), para 116: “However what is involved in practice in affording asylum seekers an opportunity for a minimum level of participation in

Q2. Do you consider the existing methodology captures all “essential living needs” of individuals in the support system? If not, what needs are not captured adequately?

Travel as an essential need

In the 2020 Home Office report, it states that *“we continue to consider that travel and communication are not essential needs in themselves, but accept that they may be necessary in limited circumstances to enable other needs to be met, including those related to maintaining interpersonal relationships and a minimum level of participation in social, cultural and religious life.”*

For most HBF clients, travel is essential to ensuring they can fulfil their other essential needs, including access to adequate food and healthcare (see below). Furthermore, 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 accessing college and other educational bodies (our clients are very rarely considered eligible for Discretionary Learner Support Funds); social support networks, and religious and/or cultural establishments.

The inability to travel for such purposes increases social isolation, prevents people from learning English and integrating within their communities more generally and causes a deterioration in mental health. The inability to travel elsewhere other than the immediate vicinity of their accommodation, combined with the often-poor quality of asylum support accommodation, increases feelings of hopelessness and negatively impacts mental health.

As mentioned above, the notion that travel costs are not essential in part relies on the assumption that, as stated in the 2020 report, that ‘asylum seekers are invariably accommodated in urban areas’ which infers they will be close to all the services they need. In line with the Allocation of Accommodation Policy³ clients of HBF are required to be housed within zones 1-6 of London, and therefore *are* ostensibly accommodated in urban areas. However:

- We are aware of the more acute difficulties facing asylum seekers accommodated in less urban areas in other parts of the UK.
- Even 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

social, cultural, and religious life, is a different question. So too is the question what, if any, financial support it requires. What is meant by “minimum”? What activities are covered by “participation”? What costs, if any, are necessary to enable such minimum participation? (...) They are judgments for the Secretary of State. They are ones which she has not yet made, because on her behalf it is contended, in my view erroneously, that this is a category of need which does not require consideration. In this respect the decision making process was flawed

³ Home Office, Allocation of accommodation policy, Version 6.0, 2021

complex mental and often physical health conditions, impacting their ability to travel.

One example of this is a client accommodated in a less urban part of South East London, who struggled to carry her weekly shopping due to her heart condition. She cannot walk for longer than 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. This left her without a sufficient amount to eat during the week.

In Greater London, the region in which our clients reside, the cost of a single bus journey is £1.55 (recently increased from £1.50). Those with a mental or physical disability are likely to need to take a bus even to travel just a short distance (e.g., to their GP surgery or to a larger shop to buy food) - to do this just once a week costs £3.10 in total, leaving £1.60 for the rest of the week's travel allowance according to the Home Office; this amount is not enough for more than 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. With such a limited amount of financial support, there is little room for these types of errors, which are common for people with severe mental health conditions and a history of traumatic experiences. 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. However, this excludes visits to a GP, dentist or other primary care service provider. Furthermore, in our experience the HTCS is not well known among asylum seekers who require specialist NHS treatment, and fall within the eligibility of the HTCS, nor is it actually accessible. 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.

Recommendation: Travel should be recognised as an essential need for the purposes of assessing levels of asylum support

Recommendation: We recommend that the allocation of money for travel be increased to a level that would cover at least three return bus journeys a week wherever the recipient is accommodated.

The 2020 Home Office report states that *"the costs of travel for purposes unique to asylum seekers are covered through separate arrangements. Travel to legal appointments is met through legal aid and travel costs to reporting events, asylum interviews and appeal hearings are paid separately"*.

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, and, depending on their reporting time, may require travelling at peak time, which is more expensive. Ensuring that a person receives the travel ticket in event of the reporting date often requires third-party advocacy.

Recommendation: The Home Office should take steps to ensure that when a person is provided with asylum support of any kind, they should automatically be sent travel tickets ahead of the reporting event.

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's 2013 Standard Civil Contract Specification. In HBF's experience, though, many solicitors are unaware of this provision, and therefore do not inform clients of this nor apply for this 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 amidst dissociative episodes) required to request of their solicitor to reimburse their travel expenses, and to continue to request this on a regular basis.

Recommendation: Though this pertains to the Legal Aid Agency, we recommend that the process by which 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.

Food

We believe that the assessed amount of £26.89 is insufficient to cover the weekly diet needs of adult asylum seekers and any dependent children.

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. However, 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.

Furthermore, the Home Office market research used to calculate the costs of meeting certain essential needs assumes that it will be straightforward for those seeking asylum to 'shop around' to identify the cheaper outlets and take advantage of cost savings. As outlined above, while living in asylum accommodation access to shops in which one can bulk-buy cost-effectively is not guaranteed. For example, if you live within walking distance of only a small supermarket or off-licence shop, you 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. This is not always possible. The asylum support rates review assumes able-bodiedness and does not adequately consider those who have physical or mental health difficulties.

Clients will also face challenges with storing items such as not having a freezer or having limited space given that they live in shared facilities. We also find that often in asylum support accommodation the cooking facilities are inadequate and there is a lack of pots and pans, further limiting the effectiveness of bulk-buying and requiring the purchase of further essential items.

The 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 within the limitations of asylum support.

If asylum support payments were adequate for covering all 'essential' living needs then people within the asylum system would not report that they were going hungry and would not need to rely on charities to help them meet their basic needs in relation to food or other expenses. Such a reliance would, as defined by research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, constitute living in destitution.⁴ Yet, HBF has to provide foodbank vouchers to clients in receipt of asylum support on a near weekly basis, as our clients struggle to feed, clothe and generally provide for themselves within this amount.

Even if this reliance on foodbanks was deemed in any way acceptable, it is not an adequate solution to inadequate asylum support provision. The provision of foodbank vouchers 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. Once a person is referred to a foodbank, they will then need to travel to the location (see above for why this is problematic) and foodbanks try to give out 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

⁴ Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, G., Sosenko, F., Blenkinsopp, J., Johnsen, S., Littlewood, M., Netto, G. and Watts, B. (2016) Destitution in the UK. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

operate their own policies regarding how many times an individual/family can access their services. It 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

The 2020 Home Office report outlined that house “*household cleaning items are now provided by the accommodation providers in Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs)*” and so the support rates only covers (£0.69), non-prescription medications (£0.39) and laundry/toilet paper (£0.43), amounting to £1.47 per week.

In our experience, 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 too expensive to be covered by £1.47 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 likely to have lived in unclean conditions in previous situations (including situations of trafficking and other exploitation, torture, homelessness). Due to the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and the impact of traumatic events, they can be particularly susceptible to feelings of shame and inferiority. 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 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 often expensive. We do not consider that the number of menstrual products stated by the Home Office within the most recent in-store market research reflects the actual number of the specific product needed within the average period, particularly given that the lowest cost items are those most likely need to be replaced more frequently and a significant minority of people experience heavy menstrual bleeding, requiring much more frequent changing.⁵

⁵ See Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, National Heavy Menstrual Bleeding Audit at <https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/guidelines-research-services/audit-quality-improvement/completed-projects/national-hmb-audit/>

Many of our clients use sanitary towels instead of tampons. 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, as well as the relative costs of both types of product.⁶ Many of our clients also report gynaecological conditions causing heavy periods (including fibroids, endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome). This also requires more regular changing of menstrual products, therefore incurring a higher cost not reflected in the in-store market research undertaken by the Home Office for the last review of Section 95 support rates.

Recommendation: Given the reported failure of asylum accommodation providers to ensure that adequate household cleaning products are available, the Home Office should include this cost in its assessment of asylum support rates. It should also increase the toiletries allowance to better cover women's needs.

Communication

As with travel, the Home Office does not consider communication to be an essential need. Yet the pandemic has demonstrated just how essential access to data and online forms of communication are. Post lockdown, many essential services such as GPs are now operating online, to book appointments and carry out consultations. Learning online, including home schooling, will now be a tool schools will continue to use post lockdown so families with children will need to have access to larger amounts of data than is accounted for in the Home Office market research.

Asylum seekers cannot usually access a phone contract without a bank account or credit history, following legislation disallowing asylum seekers from opening bank accounts, therefore pay-as-you go is often the only option. Access to the internet is invariably not provided in asylum support accommodation – the review still states that people should be relying on libraries for internet use but most have been closed during the pandemic and are overcrowded with so many people needing computer access. This means 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). This also particularly impacts households with school-age children, who usually require access to the internet in order to do their homework, which is of critical importance given the severe disruption to education caused in particular by the Covid-19 public health crisis and lockdown.

Recommendation: Communication should be recognised as an essential need for the purposes of assessing levels of asylum support, and digital inclusion should also be considered as part of that assessment.

⁶ <https://www.bloodygoodperiod.com/period-poverty>

Clothing

The 2020 Home Office report states that *“£3.01 per week is sufficient to purchase and/or maintain a reasonable wardrobe of essential clothes”*. The clothing and footwear needs of an asylum seeker are considered by the Home Office to be 3 pairs of underpants, 3 pairs of socks/tights, 2 vests/bras, 2 tops or shirts, 2 pairs of trousers or skirts, 2 cardigans/jumpers, 1 coat, and 2 pairs of shoes, nightwear, and a hat, gloves and scarf. We do not believe that the current allowance is sufficient. 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. They would need to save for approximately 26 weeks in order to afford a second set of clothing without sacrificing other weekly essential living needs.

Wearing the same set of clothes for prolonged periods, 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. Usually over the winter, HBF collect donations of winter clothing to distribute this among our clients who are seeking asylum, however this, along with many other projects, was significantly impacted last year due to the Covid-19 public health crisis and lockdown measures. However in any case, we do not consider this to be a sustainable solution.

Recommendation: 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 continually outgrow their clothes.

Asylum support levels and their effect on children

The 2020 Home Office review claims that *“any extra costs in some households of meeting particular needs (e.g. clothes for teenagers) are comfortably offset by the availability of economies of scale that mean other costs per person in the household fall. [...] Applying a flat rate of £39.63 per person in a household therefore means that all families, regardless of their size and composition, will have sufficient to cover their full essential living needs.”*

HBF believes that the current rates do not sufficiently reflect the needs of families with children – it is not always possible for people who are on asylum support to use economies of scale. Families arriving to the UK to seek protection often arrive with nothing but the clothes on their backs and have to, for example, purchase sets of clothing for each member

of their household at once in order to ensure they are dressed appropriately to the weather conditions in the UK. They are exposed to high costs and are unable to shop around for cheaper alternatives. Families often don't have enough money to pay for books and other educational resources for children; due to limited funds they have to prioritise feeding their children over supporting their intellectual and social development.

As outlined already, 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. HBF clients with children often struggle to buy the items that they need, including adequate nutritious food, clothing and educational items. Below we outline further examples of where additional funding is either not available in policy or in practice.

School uniforms

Home Office report (2020) estimates that the school uniform to be purchased within current asylum support rates for a child aged 3-12 consists of 2 trousers/skirts, 2 polo shirts/blouses/shirts, 1 school jumper, 1 pair of shoes, 1 school bag, and for a child aged 13+, the previous items and an additional 1 sport stop, 1 set of tracksuit bottoms and 1 pair of shorts/skirt.

Anyone with school-aged children will know that this is not a realistic amount of uniform for children – it would require almost daily washing (and indeed many schools during the pandemic called for a fresh uniform to be worn each day), which would simply be impossible given the extremely low funding granted for laundry (see above), and ignores the fact that often children will need additional shoes for school.

Furthermore, it is well known that school uniforms can be prohibitively expensive due to the number of (often branded) items required, and these are not always available from the three shops surveyed as part of the assessment. The Children's Society's 2020 report, *The Wrong Blazer*, highlights this, and is acknowledged by the recent passing of the Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill, which is to introduce statutory guidance for schools when developing uniform policies.⁷

The 2018 Home Office report claimed that *"in most cases if a child is entitled to free school meals... it is likely that the child will be entitled to apply for [school uniform] grants"*. HBF researched the availability of these grants across the 32 London Boroughs, and found that they were generally inaccessible (we outlined our findings in our 2018 response to the

⁷ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/the-wrong-blazer>

asylum support rates review⁸) – we note that the Home Office does not refer to school uniform grants in its 2020 review.

We are aware that under section 96(2) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, if the circumstances of a particular case are exceptional, further support may be provided to a person seeking asylum and any dependants “in such other ways as considered necessary”.⁹ 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. Furthermore, last summer HBF submitted two section 96(2) applications for this additional support, for the explicit purpose of purchasing school uniform - no response or decision to these applications was ever received.

Recommendation: A more realistic allocation for school uniforms must be included in the asylum support rate. Children need more clothing that is currently considered and the current review does not recognise the additional cost of branded uniforms.

Educational materials for children

Research undertaken by the Children’s Society has highlighted 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.¹⁰

The products suggested by the Home Office are not sufficient for children to properly enjoy and thrive in their education in the 21st century. The Home Office rates review includes the costs ‘a 300 sheet A4 refill pad, and up to 20 ball point pens’ at £2.00 a year (4 pence a week), ignoring the fact that children will usually also need books, a calculator, pencil case, ruler, a rubber, a pencil sharpener, pencils, coloured pencils, and craft materials for school projects. Even if the children’s school provides the above items at school, 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.

⁸ Available at <https://www.helenbamber.org/resources/reportsbriefings/submission-home-office-2018-review-asylum-support-rates>

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/598944/Applications-for-additional-support-v1_0.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/ending-child-poverty>

Q3. The methodology assesses the amount of money required to meet each of the needs accepted as essential by using ONS data (particularly on food expenditure by low income groups) and market research. Do you consider there are better ways of assessing the appropriate amounts?

Yes – please see our answer to question 1.

Q4. Please set out any views on the additional payments provided to those who are pregnant or who have recently given birth and those with young children.

We believe that the following changes should be made:

- Maternity payments to those on Section 4 should be the same as those on Section 95, so all parents of newborn children receive £300
- All additional payments to parents with young children should be increased as these have not risen in line with asylum support and we believe the lists of adequate baby supplies and clothes do not cover essential living needs for parents with babies and small children.
- Weekly payments should be activated automatically when a baby is added to the support package and not have to be applied for separately

Additional funding – Health Start scheme

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).

Recommendation: The Home Office should review the additional payments to pregnant women, infants and young children to ensure that these are uprated in line with Healthy Start benefits, since the extra payments also aim to support the health and wellbeing of vulnerable women and children.

For more information, please contact:

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