

# Free bus travel for asylum seekers in London

January 2024

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. Our work alongside survivors shows us that, with early and appropriate care and support, they build the strength to move on with their lives. 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.

All of our clients live in London and many 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. Many of our clients report that they struggle to attend important meetings such as hospital appointments because of the cost of public transport.

This proposal looks at the challenges facing survivors of torture and trafficking living in London who are reliant on Home Office asylum support, and calls for the provision of free bus travel within London zones 1-6 to those seeking asylum. This would ensure that people seeking asylum are able to travel to necessary appointments and meetings and live with more freedom and dignity.

## Home Office support for people seeking asylum

People seeking asylum in the UK can apply for financial support and accommodation under section 95 or section 4(2) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 if they meet the destitution criteria. Section 95 support, for those with an initial asylum claim or appeal, consists of a weekly payment of £49.18 per person loaded onto a pre-paid Aspen card and, if needed, accommodation which can be catered or non-catered. For those living in catered accommodation such as hotels or hostels, the weekly payment is reduced to £8.86.<sup>1</sup> People whose initial asylum claims have been refused, and who have made further submissions to be considered as a fresh claim for asylum, are supported under section 4(2) of the Act. While the rates are the same, the support provided is cashless, meaning that individuals cannot withdraw money from their card. Extra payments are available for families with children or pregnant people, although these are not automatically provided and must be applied for.

The rates of asylum support are decided by the Home Office and are reviewed each year. The Home Office decides these rates by:

*“a) identifying all essential living needs that are not covered in some other way (for example through the provision of in-kind support); and*

*b) assessing the amount of money the average asylum seeker needs to meet each need.”<sup>2</sup>*

Asylum support rates have fallen significantly over the past three decades. Prior to 1999, asylum seekers accessed mainstream benefits and were paid 90% of the standard rate.<sup>3</sup> In 1999, a separate system of asylum support was established, with support set at 70% of income support for those with a current claim and a separate, lower rate for those whose claims had been refused. In 2008, the rate of asylum support was de-linked from mainstream benefits, with the Home Office determining the rate on an annual basis. In 2014, following an unsuccessful judicial review of asylum support rates, the Home Office shifted to a flat rate of individual payments, resulting in a drop in payments for some groups. Payments for children were cut by 30%.<sup>4</sup>

The Home Office now sets the rate of asylum support according to its own assessment of what it deems is necessary to cover ‘essential living needs’, based on Office of National Statistics (ONS) data and market research (crucially, travel is not considered an ‘essential need’).<sup>5</sup> As a result, asylum support payments are substantially lower than mainstream benefit payments – for a single person aged over 25, asylum support is only 58% of the

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<sup>1</sup> [Asylum support: What you'll get](#)

<sup>2</sup> Home Office, [Report on review of weekly allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers: 2021](#), April 2022

<sup>3</sup> Home Affairs Committee, [Seventh Report - Asylum](#), 2013.

<sup>4</sup> [Explanatory Memorandum to the Asylum Support \(Amendment No. 3\) Regulations 2015 No. 1501](#)

<sup>5</sup> Home Office, [Report on review of weekly allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers: 2021](#), updated April 2022

amount of Universal Credit they would receive.<sup>6</sup> While asylum support rates may be increased in line the Consumer Price Index each year,<sup>7</sup> because the starting point was far too low they still do not allow for people seeking asylum to lead independent, dignified lives. Many of our clients do not have enough money to cover their basic needs and must choose between buying food and attending appointments. Our clients often have to borrow money from friends, or even strangers, in order to cover their basic costs; one client recently had to ask a passer-by for £3 so he could pay his train fare to get to an appointment.

### Travel as an essential need

In its assessment of the amount of financial support to provide to people seeking asylum, the Home Office has repeatedly asserted that travel is not an 'essential need' but that it "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".<sup>8</sup>

In our extensive experience working with people seeking asylum, travel is essential to ensuring they can fulfil their other key essential needs, including access to adequate food, healthcare and education.

As of January 2024, the Home Office has allocated £5.84 a week to travel as part of the financial support people receive (see Appendix I for a breakdown of asylum support rates). In Greater London the cost of a travelling by bus for up to an hour is £1.75.<sup>9</sup> Those with a mental or physical disability are likely to need to take a bus 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 £3.50 in total, leaving £2.34 for the rest of the week's travel allowance. This amount only just covers a single additional bus journey.

For those living in hotels and hostels (at least 62% of those in London),<sup>10</sup> the amount of support is even lower – just £8.86 a week to cover travel, clothing and non-prescription medicines, which is even less than the amount allocated to those needs in the full asylum support rate (£10.02 – see Appendix I).

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<sup>6</sup> [Universal Credit: What you'll get - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit). The rate for an adult over 25 is £368.74 a month, which works out annually to be £85.09 a week.

<sup>7</sup> Even this is not done with the necessary regularity. Asylum support was increased to £45 in January 2023 followed a ruling in [R \(CB\) v The Secretary of State for the Home Department](#) [2022] EWHC 3329 (Admin) (21 December 2022) that the rates be increased by CPI 10.1%, after the Home Office had failed to address the fact that asylum support rates had not been changed to reflect the cost of living crisis. See Free Movement, [High Court orders Home Secretary to immediately increase asylum support rates](#), 9<sup>th</sup> January 2023

<sup>8</sup> Home Office, [Report on review of weekly allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers: 2021](#), April 2022

<sup>9</sup> [Bus and tram fares - Transport for London \(tfl.gov.uk\)](https://tfl.gov.uk/road-and-rail/bus-and-tram-fares)

<sup>10</sup> Immigration system statistics, year ending September 2023 – [Asylum seekers in receipt of support](#)

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, 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.

*“Ultimately, if you cannot afford to travel, what do you spend your time doing? Locked in your room, recounting the trauma you have been through to get here and with no outlet available for you to have an activity or something to look forward to. Your mental health deteriorates really really quickly. It is just a natural human instinct not to be alone. So being able to travel at a cost that is not prohibitive should not be a thing people need to think about, it should just be available.”*

HBF Client

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 and need to attend our offices for Trauma Focused Therapy. Trauma Focused Therapy requires clients to discuss the multiple traumatic events that they have experienced in the past in detail, and, in our experience, people can often experience a temporary resurgence in some symptoms of their PTSD in the days after sessions. Many have ‘dissociative’ symptoms, have episodes in which they go ‘blank’ and are transiently unaware 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 limited 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 end up walking to their destination, a journey which can take several hours and cause both mental and physical exhaustion. Many also do not have friends or family who can support them in making these journeys.

*“I am forgoing medical treatment because all I can think about is how much it is going to cost me. I need to see my GP, get a blood test and to pick up my blood pressure monitor but these will all be separate trips. I can't afford to do them all. If I am thinking about getting treatment, I have to think about the long term. It costs me so much to go to one appointment at the hospital. I have to think long and hard about whether it's worth setting me back so much to go to one appointment.*

*If I choose to go to an extra appointment, the whole week, I will not eat anything. I'll go to Sainsburys at 6pm to look at the reduced section for 99p. There are undoubtedly long-term health effects of being consistently malnourished.”*

HBF Client

The rates of support are intended for the 'able-bodied destitute' not those with 'complicated disability or health problems' as the Home Office argues that those with complex needs should be supported by local authorities.<sup>11</sup> In reality, however, it is exceptionally difficult for people seeking asylum in the UK to obtain local authority support as they are unable to prove their needs fall under the Care Act 2014. The prohibitively high eligibility threshold within the Care Act excludes many people, with severe or chronic disabilities or health conditions, from accessing support within the UK and this, added to the fact that many new arrived people seeking asylum do not yet have the supporting medical evidence they need, means it is almost impossible for people seeking asylum to access local authority support.

Travel is also essential for people seeking asylum to access and progress in education. Even if an individual is enrolled at a college within walking distance, other courses required for their educational pathways may not be offered locally and they may have to travel to other campuses. Additionally, courses are often offered on different days. In general, full time students will be attending courses four days a week, and if part time, it will be two to three days a week, exceeding their weekly allowance. Costs for travel to and from educational services are also impacted when people are forced to move locations without consideration their current enrolment at local colleges.

An HBF client recently reported that he walks 40 minutes there and back to his local adult education college to study English; he walks because the full-board asylum support rate is not enough to enable him to afford the travel there. His classes are from 9am-5pm, three days per week, meaning that he misses breakfast and lunch provided at the hotel for each of these three days. Whilst this person attempts to integrate better into the UK and advance their understanding of English, they are significantly prohibited from doing so, and they arrive and leave college each day very hungry.

## Existing policies to support travel for people seeking asylum

### *Support for travel to Home Office and legal appointments*

The Home Office asserts that travel to legal appointments is met through legal aid and travel costs to reporting events, asylum interviews and appeal hearings are paid separately.<sup>12</sup> However, 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.

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<sup>11</sup> [Refugee Action v. Secretary of State for the Home Department](#), [2014] EWHC 1033 (Admin)

<sup>12</sup> Home Office, [Report on the allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers: 2020](#)

For example, we have a client who has to report to the Home Office every week who has to spend about a third of his subsistence allowance every week just on travelling to Eaton House in Hounslow. Ensuring that a person receives a travel ticket or the balance uploaded to their ASPEN card in the event of the reporting date often requires third-party advocacy.

While travel to appointments with a person's solicitor can be reimbursed via the Legal Aid Agency,<sup>13</sup> many solicitors are unaware of this 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 their solicitor to reimburse their travel expenses, and to continue to request this on a regular basis.

### *NHS funding*

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, including antenatal care.

One HBF client was referred to free physiotherapy by her GP but it was a floating service based in the building of a private clinic, so she was unable to ask for reimbursement via the HTCS as it wasn't in a hospital or NHS building. She struggled to afford the travel to the appointments, which were weekly for six weeks.

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 people seeking asylum 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, we understand that 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 / impossible to cash and receive retrospectively reimbursed travel money.

### *Travel bursaries from colleges*

Accessing travel bursaries from colleges is challenging. Colleges often tell people seeking asylum that they are not eligible for travel bursaries because either a) they are an asylum seeker, or b) they don't have a bank account. While colleges in London should be able to

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<sup>13</sup> According to the Legal Aid Agency's 2013 Standard Civil Contract Specification

issue asylum seekers with travel passes or cash payments according to Greater London Authority funding guidance, based on our experience they never seem to do this. Many colleges have a policy to not cover travel costs unless a student lives more than 2km away from college, and 2km is still a long way to walk, especially if the individual is dealing with additional physical and mental health issues. If a college does offer a travel bursary, there are often delays (up to four to six weeks) before the person receives this funding and they are often unable to self-fund the first four to six weeks of travel, impacting their attendance and their ability to fully participate in the course, and in some cases risking being removed from the course due to strict attendance criteria.

### *Freedom passes*

Disabled Person's Freedom Passes, provided by local authorities, are available for those with certain statutory disabilities.<sup>14</sup> However, to prove eligibility for a Freedom Pass, people are required to gather a significant amount of medical evidence, which can differ between London boroughs (this in itself can be a barrier to being able to apply). The vast majority of our clients should be considered disabled under the meaning of the Equality Act 2010, as their mental (and often physical) health concerns are an 'impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [their] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'.<sup>15</sup> However, even if they fall under the Equality Act definition, many of our clients fall short of the stringent criteria for a Disabled Person's Freedom Pass, which doesn't use the same definition as the Equality Act. For example, many clients whose long-term mental health conditions, such as PTSD and depression, impact their ability to carry out "normal day to day activities", do not have a learning disability, issues with mobility, nor meet any of the other eligibility criteria (see appendix II) and so would not be deemed eligible for a pass.

In our experience, it can also be difficult for people seeking asylum to apply for other concessionary travel cards where eligibility criteria are more easily met, including the Older Person's Freedom Pass and the 60+ London Oyster photocard. For several clients, over the age of 60 or State Pension Age and living in a London borough (and therefore automatically eligible for those concessions), we have had to provide extensive third-party advocacy over several months to confirm their eligibility to Transport for London or the local authority, due to the requirements to provide photographic ID and specific types of proof of address, which many people seeking asylum do not have, as well as the £20 fee applicable for the photocard application.

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<sup>14</sup> London Councils, [Disabled persons Freedom Pass eligibility](#)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2>

## Proposal: Bus travel for people seeking protection in London

*“Being isolated when you are vulnerable and not being able to go anywhere is not right. To quote Sadiq Khan “we want to welcome all refugees when they arrive in the city”. Integrating means meeting people and learning about the culture. If people are forced to be isolated, they won’t integrate with the community and then people will blame them for it later.”*

HBF Client

At present, it is clear that many people seeking asylum with additional needs are falling through the gaps. Despite years of advocacy from those working with refugees and people seeking asylum, the Home Office has refused to increase asylum support rates to the extent that those dependent on that form of support can actually cover their living needs. As of September 2023 there were around 24,383 people seeking asylum in London, over 15,000 of whom are living in hotels.<sup>16</sup> **Free bus travel within London zones 1-6, provided as standard at the point where asylum support is granted would go a long way to ensuring that those seeking protection are able to access the support and services they need.**

The Mayor of London has committed to supporting people seeking asylum, and recognised in his social integration strategy that “there are specific barriers faced by migrant and refugee communities to participating in and contributing to life in London”.<sup>17</sup> The Mayor’s commitment to social integration and access to education for people seeking asylum is also emphasised in the Greater London Authority (GLA) ‘Skills Roadmap’.<sup>18</sup> **Providing free bus travel would help support the GLA’s efforts to address existing barriers to social integration and access to education.**

**Free bus travel is being offered in other parts of the UK.** Transport Scotland has recently announced its commitment to provide free bus travel to asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland.<sup>19</sup> A pilot scheme offering free travel to people seeking asylum in Wales in 2022 was considered a success, and resulted in an increase in people taking part in education; volunteering; integration activities; and being able to attend appointments. It increased people’s wellbeing and enabled them to socialise and take up opportunities. One recipient said “having bus travel made them have a life worth living.”<sup>20</sup>

Based on the experience of the Wales pilot, and our experience of supporting clients to access other forms of support, we would advocate a system which involved as little

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<sup>16</sup> Immigration system statistics, year ending September 2023, [Asylum seekers in receipt of support](#)

<sup>17</sup> [All of Us: The Mayor’s Strategy for Social Integration](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Skills Roadmap for London: Helping Londoners to access good jobs and to lead happier, healthier lives](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Free bus travel for people seeking asylum | Transport Scotland](#)

<sup>20</sup> Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group on Migration, [Meeting Minutes](#), 4<sup>th</sup> October 2022



administrative burden as possible. On presentation of a valid Application Registration Card, bus passes could be supplied to people seeking asylum for a 12 month period – based on currently waiting times for asylum decisions this would cover the period in which most people were seeking asylum without the need to repeated onerous applications. Some individuals will already be eligible for existing concessions, based on age or disability.

By providing people seeking asylum with free bus travel, they would be able to more easily meet their needs including “those related to maintaining interpersonal relationships and a minimum level of participation in social, culture and religious life” as well as attending important appointments with their solicitor or healthcare provider. **This would mean that people’s general wellbeing would be improved, reducing pressure on statutory health services in London.** In addition it would allow people seeking asylum to retain a level of independence and dignity which is too often removed from them.

For more information, contact  
Kamena Dorling, Director of Policy at [kamena.dorling@helenbamber.org](mailto:kamena.dorling@helenbamber.org) or  
Eleanor Winn, Housing and Welfare Casework Coordinator at [eleanor.winn@helenbamber.org](mailto:eleanor.winn@helenbamber.org)

## Appendix I - Asylum support calculations

In its “Report on review of weekly allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers” carried out on 2020 (published in 2021),<sup>21</sup> the Home Office sets out how it calculated the amount of financial support deemed necessary to cover the costs of different needs. Since 2021 the Home Office has repeated this process – instead the total rate has been increased by a different percentage each time. For example, the 2022 figure allowed for the CPI inflation rate of 3.1% while the January 2023 figure includes the 10.1% inflation rate, following the High Court ruling in *R(CB) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2022] EWHC 329 (Admin).

In January 2024, the rate of support was increased to £49.18 for those in receipt of financial support only or housed in non-catered accommodation, and £8.86 for those in catered accommodation. The Home Office has not provided an up to date breakdown, so the figures below which show the allocation for each ‘need’ assuming, they are all increased equally:

	2021	September 2021	January 2023	July 2023	January 2024
Food and non-alcoholic drinks	£26.89	£27.72	£30.52	£32.14	£33.36
Toiletries	£0.69	£0.71	£0.78	£0.82	£0.85
Non-prescription medicines	£0.35	£0.36	£0.40	£0.42	£0.44
Laundry/toilet paper	£0.43	£0.44	£0.49	£0.51	£0.53
Clothing and footwear	£3.01	£3.10	£3.42	£3.60	£3.74
Travel	£4.70	£4.85	£5.34	£5.62	£5.84
Communications	£3.56	£3.67	£4.04	£4.26	£4.42
<b>Total</b>	<b>£39.63</b>	<b>£40.85</b>	<b>£45.00</b>	<b>£47.37</b>	<b>£49.18</b>

NB: discrepancies in pence due to rounded figures.

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<sup>21</sup> Home Office, [Report on the allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers: 2020](#)

## Appendix II – Eligibility and process for applying for a Disability Freedom Pass

Those who fulfil the eligibility criteria below and are entitled to a Disabled Persons Freedom Pass must contact their borough for an application form and provide evidence of their eligibility and a colour passport sized photograph. Each borough's application form contains guidance on what documents need to be provided. Once the borough has assessed and confirmed their eligibility their Freedom Pass will be produced and posted to them.<sup>22</sup>

The statutory disabilities which make someone eligible for a disabled persons Freedom Pass are: <sup>23</sup>

- 1) Being blind or partially sighted
- 2) Being profoundly or severely deaf
- 3) Being without speech
- 4) Having a disability, or having suffered an injury, which has left the individual with a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to walk
- 5) Not having arms or having a long-term loss of the use of both arms
- 6) Having a learning disability that is defined as 'a state of arrested or incomplete development of mind which includes significant impairment of intelligence and social functioning'
- 7) Being in a position where, if they applied for the grant of a licence to drive a motor vehicle under Part III of the Road Traffic Act 1988, they would have their application refused pursuant to section 92 of the Act (physical fitness) otherwise than on the ground of persistent misuse of drugs or alcohol.

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<sup>22</sup> [Apply for a Disabled Persons Freedom Pass | London Councils](#)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/services/freedom-pass/disabled-persons-freedom-pass/eligibility>