

Asylum support cuts

The government prohibits most people seeking asylum from working. It takes approximately six months for the UK Border Agency (UKBA) to issue a final decision on an asylum claim. During this time, despite a great desire to support themselves, those with no family in the UK often have no choice but to apply for UKBA asylum support.

For well over a decade, destitute asylum seekers have received less than UK nationals on income support. Since 1999, asylum support has crept below the poverty line, at 70 per cent of income support. Ten years later, soon after food prices reached a record high,¹ the UKBA announced that from October 2009, they would cut asylum support even further. The majority of people seeking asylum are now required to live on £5 a day.

Just before the cuts were brought in, Refugee Action carried out a series of interviews, to establish what asylum seekers were able to buy with their UKBA support. The results are outlined below. Sadly, we found that the vast majority struggled to feed themselves and their children, and could not afford clothes, shoes, medicine or school books.

We are calling for an urgent review of asylum support levels, and for UKBA to commit as a minimum to a set rate of 70 per cent of income support, no less than £45 per week, without which it is clear that people cannot afford the most basic essentials of life.

1. Background

The link to income support

Before 1996, asylum seekers received 90 per cent of income support – the equivalent of the 'urgent cases' income support rate. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 created a new system – from the year 2000, UKBA managed asylum support payments, offered at a reduced rate of 70 per cent of income support. UKBA came to the figure of 70 per cent on the basis that it was 20 per cent below the emergency income support level, as fuel payments were covered in UKBA's accommodation.²

¹ 'The cost of fresh food was 10.4 per cent higher in February than the same month last year... the cost of ambient goods, such as tinned food or ready meals was also pushed higher as the cost of imported food rose because of the weak pound'. Grainne Gilmore 'Food prices surge 9% despite inflation fall' *The Times*, 4.3.09

<<http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/economics/article5844672.ece>> Accessed 12.2.10.

² Mike O'Brien in the Special Standing Committee debate on the immigration and asylum bill 1999 (11.5.99) stated, 'We are providing asylum seekers with funding that is 20 per cent less



It is interesting to note that 'fuel poverty' is defined as an expenditure of over 10 per cent of income on fuel.³ This suggests that the 20 per cent reduction is if anything, slightly high.

Reduced support for those aged under 25

Within income support, 18 to 24-year-olds are offered a lesser amount than those aged 25 and over. The logic being that under 24-year-olds are more likely to be living with their families, which leads to lower living costs.⁴ UKBA followed this differentiation for asylum support, offering a reduced amount to single applicants under 25 years old.

However, the logic does not follow for asylum seekers. The vast majority of young single asylum seekers are in the UK with no family.⁵ They are therefore unable to benefit from the reduced cost of a communal lifestyle – buying food in bulk, sharing transport costs, toiletries and other items. On this basis we believe that all single asylum seekers aged 18 or over should receive 70 per cent of income support at the level set for those expected to live independently – those aged 25 years and over.

Asylum support cuts

On 6 July 2009, UKBA announced that they were changing Section 95 (S.95) asylum support rates. UKBA have previously increased asylum support levels in line with the consumer price index (CPI) each year. However, this year UKBA did not implement the increase for lone parents and single adults aged 25 and over.

This represented a loss of £2.19 per week. In addition, from 5 October 2009, UKBA reduced the rate for those aged 25 and over by more than £7 – alongside the lack of CPI increase, this adds up to a total loss of £9.22 per week from the rate they would normally have expected to receive. Single asylum seekers aged over 25 now receive a dismal 55 per cent of income support, and lone parents 66 per cent.

2. Survival on asylum support rates

UKBA's intention, in the recently published asylum support consultation, is to ensure comprehensive support for those asylum seekers currently awaiting a decision on their claim. It is not only an intention, but a duty under the EU Reception Directive.

than they would get if they were on income support... Unlike other income support provisions, it includes all heating and lighting costs.'

³ The Poverty Site states, 'Households are considered by the government to be in "fuel poverty" if they would have to spend more than 10% of their household income on fuel to keep their home in a "satisfactory" condition.' The Poverty Site (undated) 'Poverty indicators: Fuel poverty.' <<http://www.poverty.org.uk/80/index.shtml>> Accessed 12.2.10.

⁴ The Poverty Site states, 'Clearly, a lone adult does not require the same income as a family of four in order to have the same standard of living. However, importantly but less obviously, economies of scale mean that the family of four does not require four times the level of income: many costs can be shared.' The Poverty Site (undated) 'Poverty indicators: Choices of low-income threshold' <<http://www.poverty.org.uk/summary/income%20intro.shtml>> Accessed 12.2.10.

⁵ Recent Home Office statistics showed that 80 per cent of asylum applications were from individuals with no dependents. Home Office *Control of Immigration: Quarterly statistical summary. United Kingdom. July-September*, Home Office, London, 2009 <<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/immiq309.pdf>> Accessed 12.2.10.



Unfortunately, it appears that the asylum support levels, even before they were cut, were far from meeting this duty.

We are extremely concerned that an already vulnerable section of the population is being asked to survive on an income set far below the poverty line. In September 2009, with the asylum support cuts fast approaching, we carried out a small survey of individuals living on asylum support levels, to find out what money was spent on, how they survived, and whether it did, as it is intended to do, meet their essential living needs.

3. The evidence

The sample group

We took a random sample of individuals currently receiving S.95 asylum support, who visited one of our One Stop Service offices between 14 and 25 September 2009.⁶ The interviewees were chosen on the basis that they were happy to spend 15 minutes answering a questionnaire – we did not identify in advance whether participants found asylum support levels to meet their needs. We sought a cross section of family status and age, resulting in a sample group which included single adults under 25 years old, single adults over 25, lone parents and couples with children.

The questions were designed to test whether the support levels prior to the October cuts met people's essential living needs, as is UKBA's intention and statutory duty.

Children

Despite UKBA's recent commendable commitment to 'safeguard and promote the welfare of children', the S.95 support levels have continued to cause hardship to asylum seeking children in the UK. Some of the difficulties reported by lone parents include:

- **Food** – 50 per cent could not afford enough food for their children. One parent was unable to pay for the necessary food supplements and special diet for their child who suffered from a long-term illness.
- **Clothes** – 100 per cent were unable to buy their children the clothes they needed.
- **Baby items** – A wide range of items could not be purchased, from replacement sterilisers (where one was broken) to pushchairs, toys and thermometers.
- **School** – Parents reported difficulties paying for school books, school activities for children, school uniforms and stationery. One parent explained that as children become older, the cost increases, but support reduces. They were struggling to provide for their child with learning difficulties who had been placed in a special educational needs school.

Food

Respondents reported that:

- Almost 50 per cent had been unable to afford enough food to feed themselves and their dependants in the past week.



- Nearly 70 per cent had been unable to buy fresh fruit and vegetables in the past week.
- Just under 90 per cent were unable to buy the food they would like or need to eat (ie for religious, cultural or dietary reasons).
- 50 per cent had experienced hunger as a result of the low levels of support.

Essential items

- **Toiletries** – Approximately 70 per cent were unable to buy the toiletries or sanitary products they needed.
- **Medical goods** – More than 60 per cent needed, but could not afford, non-prescription medical goods – painkillers were one example. This category is perhaps particularly concerning in a time of a possible flu outbreak.
- **Clothes** – A staggering 94 per cent were unable to buy clothing. One family reported that they were still wearing the clothes and shoes in which they fled their country. Many asylum seekers arrive from countries with much warmer climates. This leaves them at risk in the UK particularly as we approach winter, if they cannot buy adequate coats, jumpers and shoes.
- **Study** – Over 60 per cent of the sample group had hoped to buy study books but were unable to do so due to the cost. Many had hoped to learn English, or at least buy a dictionary. Given that letters sent by UKBA are in English only, and ESOL funding is not available for asylum seekers who have been awaiting a decision for less than six months, a dictionary would seem a basic necessity in many cases.
- **Cooking/ household utensils** – 81 per cent reported an inability to buy utensils needed in their (often UKBA-provided) accommodation.

Travel

As a direct result of the low levels of support:

- **Travel to shops** – 75 per cent struggled to travel to do their shopping.
- **Medical** – 50 per cent had faced difficulty travelling to visit the doctor.
- **Solicitors** – 65 per cent could not travel to an appointment with their legal representative, and a further 44 per cent had difficulty paying even to contact their solicitor. UKBA has accepted that access to legal advice is an important element of an accurate asylum decision – S.95 support levels actively conflict with this aim.
- **Social activities** – Over 80 per cent struggled to travel to social engagements, leaving 69 per cent feeling isolated due to a lack of money for social activities, while some reported suffering from depression.
- **Family** – Many examples related to travel to see family members: a young person under 25 years old wanting to visit their mother in London; a father housed 70 miles from his son and partner, spending £30 of his £42.16 weekly allowance on travel to see his son, and attempting to live on the remaining £12.
- **Advice** – Even visiting Refugee Action proved difficult for one, who reported a long bus journey with two young children that was becoming unaffordable.



Alternative means of support

One unique difficulty faced by asylum seekers as compared to UK residents in receipt of income support, is that there are often no alternative avenues of support. Because asylum seekers have usually arrived recently, have fled atrocities in their country so may be distrustful of their own community, and often have no family in the UK, without asylum support they have literally nothing.

Of the 16 people interviewed, over 80 per cent had absolutely no source of alternative support, either financial or in-kind. Of the three people that did, it was extremely limited. One adult treated as single received an odd £10 once in a while if struggling to buy a phone card needed to call their child, who lived with their separated partner. A mother was helped by members of her church to pay the additional fees charged by her child's school as a result of the child's long-term illness.

The astonishing kindness of those most in need is evident even in our small sample group. One lone parent with two children explained that things have been more difficult than usual recently because she had lent a small amount to a friend with no money who had just had a baby.

Because asylum support is literally the last resort for so many people, it must be set at a level which does meet their basic essential living needs.

4. How much is enough?

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's research on the minimum level of income required to meet essential living needs, a mixed sample of the general public has established that £162.56 per week constitutes a minimum adequate income for a UK national to cover basic goods and services.⁷

Given that those living in UKBA accommodation have council tax, water and fuel costs covered, and cutting out any items that are not absolutely vital, we point to Still Human Still Here's recommendation of an absolute minimum of 70 per cent of income support which equates to £45 per week. Anything under this level will, as the above evidence demonstrates, lead to an increasingly unwell population of asylum seekers, unable to buy even the essential food they need, let alone toiletries, travel and medicine.

It is clear that asylum seeking children are experiencing the effects of far greater financial hardship than British children in the benefits system. In line with the UK's commitment that every child matters, and UKBA's new duties under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we recommend that children's rates, and those of parents, must remain equivalent to those allocated to a UK family.

Refugee Action, 12 February 2010

⁷ Donald Hirsch, Abigail Davis and Noel Smith *A minimum income standard for Britain in 2009*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, 2009 <<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/minimum-income-standard-2009-full.pdf>>. Accessed 12.2.10.



Refugee Action

Refugee Action is an independent, national charity working to enable refugees to build new lives in the UK. We provide practical support for newly-arrived asylum seekers as well as a long-term commitment to their settlement. Through our One Stop Service (OSS), Gateway Protection Programme and Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES), the UK Borders Agency (UKBA) funds us to give independent, confidential frontline advice and information to people seeking asylum and refugees on a wide range of topics. These range from UKBA asylum support and in-depth work on integration and employment following a successful decision, to complex issues such as domestic violence, racial harassment and trafficking. We also offer support to refugee community organisations through our Basis project, and confidential advice for those considering return to their country of origin through our Choices project.

Last year refugees and people seeking asylum contacted our One Stop Service over 56,000 times across our seven offices in the South West, South Central, North West and East Midlands. The vast majority of these contacts related to access to UKBA asylum support.

