

locked into poverty:

life on asylum support

Asylum Matters, November 2020

Introduction

People who are seeking asylum are forced to depend on support from the Home Office while they wait for their asylum claim to be decided. They are effectively banned from working and are locked into poverty living on asylum support. Asylum support levels are alarmingly low at £39.63 per person per week or £5.66 a day, forcing people to live below the poverty line for months, or even years at a time. This negatively impacts on their health, wellbeing and, and has a particularly devastating impact on children. This summer we carried out a research survey to hear of the experiences of people living on asylum support.

Key findings

- 92% of respondents stated they did not have enough money to buy **all they need**
- 84% said they don't always have enough money to **buy food**
- 63% of people stated they could not always **afford the medicines** they needed
- Only 1 in 4 people stated they could afford **essential cleaning products**
- 95% of people stated they could not afford to **travel by public transport**
- Only 1 in 10 people could afford **data and phone credit** they needed.
- Recent opinion polling found 64% of people thought the amount people received was **too little**

What is asylum support?

"It's a struggle every day and sometimes it affects you a lot."¹

People seeking asylum are provided with accommodation and financial support under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. An asylum seeker and their dependants can apply for this support if they can prove they are destitute, which means they have no other means of supporting themselves whilst their claim is being processed. Support is currently at a flat rate of £39.63 per person per week and is provided on a pre-paid card (called an ASPEN card). This was increased in June 2020 from £37.75 to £39.60; and raised by a further 3p a week in October 2020 after months of assessment by the Home Office.

For those who have been refused asylum, an immediate return to their home countries may not be possible for many reasons, including health issues, pregnancy or awaiting

¹ Quote from survey participant, November 2020



travel documents. Section 4(2) of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act offers support for those in this situation in the form of basic accommodation and is set and provided in a similar way.

This low level of support, just £5.66 a day, is meant to cover essential living needs including all food and drink, clothing, toiletries, household cleaning items, everyday medication, travel and communications.

When asylum support was introduced, the level of support provided under section 95 was set at 70% of income support levels for adults and 100% for children, to reflect the fact that utilities are included as part of the accommodation arrangements for asylum seekers. However, in 2008 the Government decided to break the link to income support payments which has led to a growing disparity between asylum and income support levels.

In 2014, Refugee Action brought the issue to the High Court which ruled that the Home Secretary had acted 'irrationally' in failing to take into account the extent of the decrease in asylum support rates in real terms since 2007 and the freezing of rates in absolute terms since 2011.² The Home Office was required to recalculate support rates so developed a 'pick-and-mix' methodology based on data collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) about expenditure by the lowest 10% income group among the UK population and the Home Office's own market research.

A specific review was then carried out to assess the level of support provided to families which concluded that families received "*significantly more cash than is necessary to meet their essential living needs.*"³ As a result, a flat rate for all asylum seekers and their dependants was introduced, thereby reducing support rates for children under 16 by 30% or £16 per week from £52.96 to £36.95 per week. In 2018, using the established methodology the Home Office increased asylum support levels by 80p weekly from £36.95 to £37.75.

The research

In July and August 2020, we ran a two-week snapshot online survey to hear from people seeking asylum about their experience of living on asylum support (including during the recent lockdown). The data from this research was given to the Home Office and asked to be considered as part of its recent review.

We sent out our survey directly to people in the asylum system, and via over 30 partner organisations based across Britain which provide support to people in the asylum system. Our survey had 184 respondents: 108 had children with them here in the UK; 76 did not.

Those who participated lived in a diverse range of towns and cities across England, Wales and Scotland. Not all respondents answered every question. The percentages for each response are based on the total number of responses for each question in turn, except when specified otherwise. We designed the questions to speak to key areas of the Home Office's methodology used to set asylum support rates: food, medicines, communications, travel, clothing, cleaning products and toiletries.

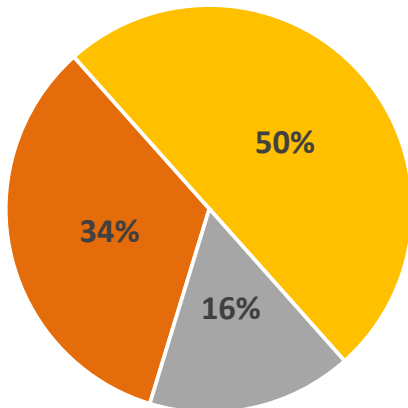
² [Refugee Action, R \(On the Application Of\) v The Secretary of State for the Home Department \[2014\] EWHC 1033 \(Admin\) \(09 April 2014\)](#)

³ [Explanatory Memorandum to the Asylum Support Amendment No 3 Regulations \(2015\)](#)

The findings

Food

We asked: *Are you able to buy enough food for yourself/your family?*



■ No ■ Only sometimes ■ Yes

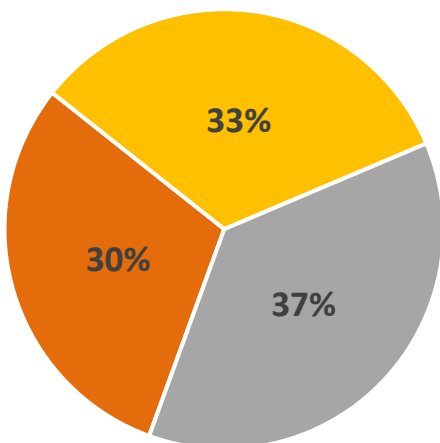
People told us they would regularly have to sacrifice other essentials to be able to buy the food they needed. A combination of factors, such as having insufficient funds, being unable to carry large purchases home from supermarkets, having limited storage and sometimes having no freezer in their asylum accommodation meant families could not make savings through buying in bulk. Some people also lived further away from cheaper stores, meaning they had to travel long distances by public transport, which was an extra, unaffordable expense.

“Sometimes it's difficult to manage a budget since the cheapest supermarkets are located far away from where I live, and you have to spend more in the local stores.”

“I would like to buy good quality food and these are expensive. I am not eating healthy because I need to save the money.”

Medicines

We asked: *Are you able to buy the medicines you need?*



■ No ■ Only sometimes ■ Yes

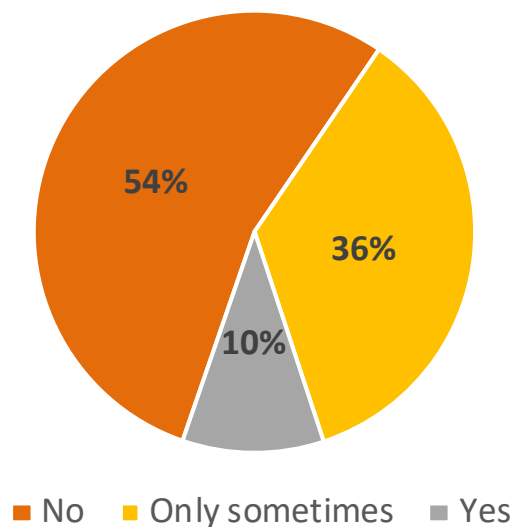
People told us that medicines were often too expensive to buy, and they would need to sacrifice other items to afford them. Some stated that the only medicines they used were those issued on prescription, but when they required specific items such as painkillers, they would struggle to buy them.

“It is very expensive - last time I went to pharmacy to get medication I couldn't afford it as I would not have been able to afford food for the week if I did”



Communications

We asked: *Can you afford to buy data and phone credit?*



People said they often could not afford to buy the amount of data they required and would sacrifice other essentials to pay for it.

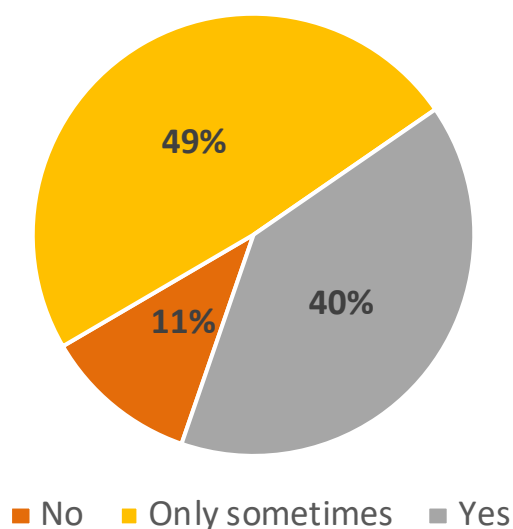
Some used free WIFI available in public settings, such as libraries, but during the Coronavirus lockdown, this was not possible. Most families and individuals talked about accessing the internet via their mobile phones but struggled to have enough money to pay for sufficient data.

The consequences of this were difficulties staying in touch with family and friends, as well as essential services, such as advice charities or even legal representatives. Some also spoke of an impact on their mental health. Families highlighted how it had impacted on their children's ability to access educational activities.

"Yes it really caused us problems because we could not access the internet. [We] really needed to ... get our kids some learning materials online, ...the data we manage to buy is limited."

Toiletries

We asked: *Are you able to buy the toiletries you need?*

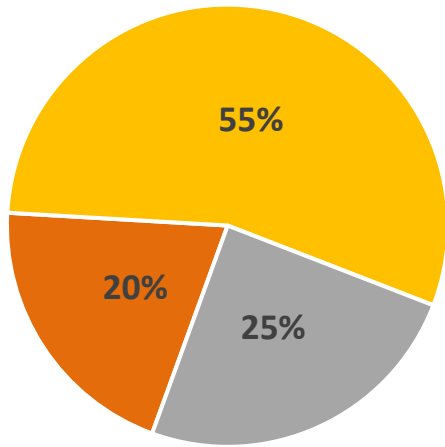


Families and single adults stated that toiletries were often too expensive to buy and if they needed them they would have to sacrifice other items. Some respondents commented they would access charities and foodbanks to obtain the items they needed. Some women commented that they found sanitary products to be expensive.

"I'm saying sometimes because they are too expensive and sometimes after buying food and using that money support we get on transport, we are not left with enough money to buy toiletries."

Cleaning Products

We asked: *Are you able to buy the cleaning products you need?*



■ No ■ Only sometimes ■ Yes

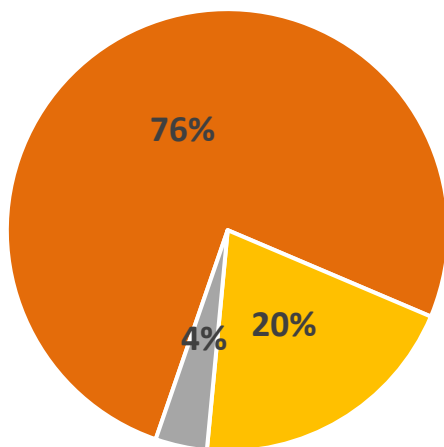
Families and single adults stated they found cleaning products to be too expensive to buy and if they needed them they would have to sacrifice other items.

A number of the families stated that they highly reduce their use of them and limit the items they bought such as only buying washing up liquid, rather than other cleaning items. During the Covid-19 pandemic this is especially concerning.

“I cannot afford these things - I can only get things for myself, not my house. It makes me feel sad living in these conditions - it is not good. If I could work, I could buy these things”

Clothing

We asked: *Are you able to buy the clothes and shoes you need?*



■ No ■ Only sometimes ■ Yes

All Respondents

For most respondents, clothing was felt to be prohibitively expensive.

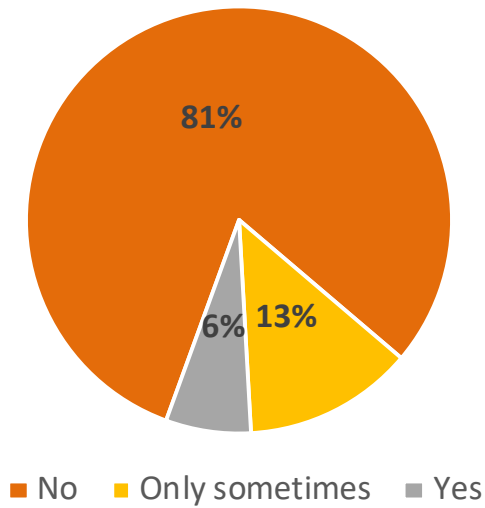
Consequently, families reported needing to save money over a long period of time, in which they were forced to go without other essential items.

Others spoke about using charity shops, buying items second hand, or accessing charities for free clothes.

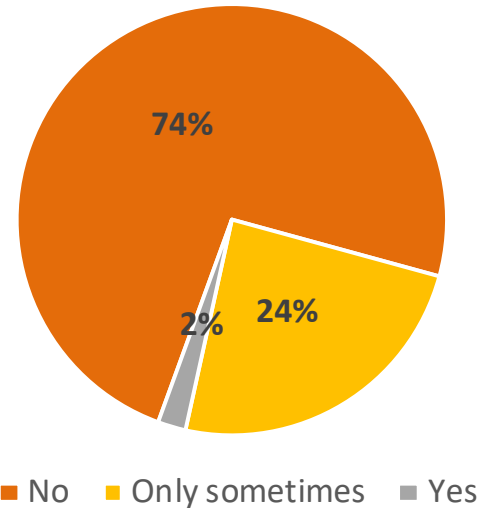
Only 2% of families said they were able to buy the clothes and shoes they needed.

“Once a year I may be able to buy some clothes. I have to take it out of my weekly budget to save.”

"I go to charity shops, this is the worst part. I worry about winter and getting cold as I can't afford clothes even charity shops are now expensive."



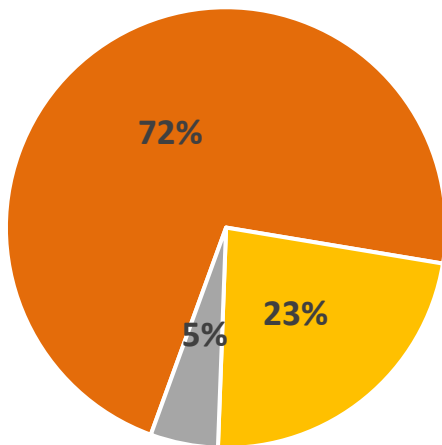
Single Adults



Families with Children

Transport

We asked: *Are you able to afford to travel on public transport?*



■ No ■ Only sometimes ■ Yes

A large number of respondents stated they found public transport prohibitively expensive.

Families and single adults would both strictly limit the use of public transport and walk long distances to avoid paying for travel. For many, this meant they were often unable to access the services they need, or participate in social, cultural or religious activities.

Some people also noted that if they were on Section 4 support, they were unable to buy bus tickets as they did not have access to cash.

"This is the most high one, I sometimes walk 10k just to go somewhere I need to and I set off so early just to go to shop or to the doctors. I cannot get any public transport, it is too much"

"They are too expensive. Only 1 person goes for shopping weekly because we can't afford to pay for 2."

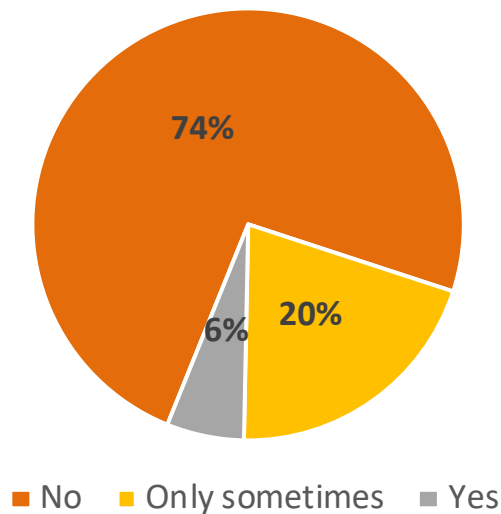


Impact on families

We also asked some specific questions to families with children, as there are specific items they often struggle to afford.

School uniforms

Of those who had children, we asked: *Are you able to buy the school uniforms your children need?*



Much like clothing in general, school uniforms were an annual purchase that was often prohibitively expensive.

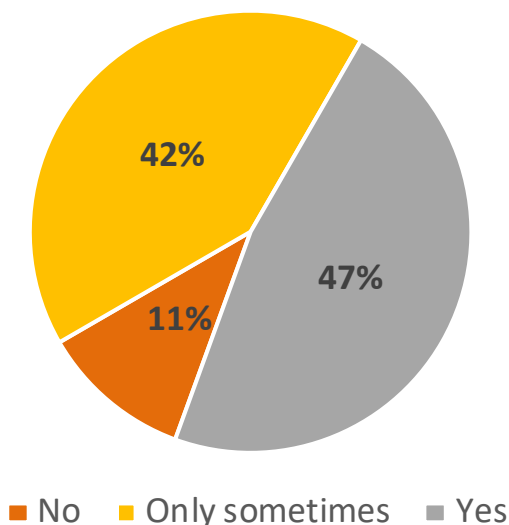
Families talked about saving throughout the year, so they are able to make the payment, but sometimes even this was not enough.

Like with so many other essentials, families were forced to choose between eating enough food and clothing their children.

“I can’t afford to support my daughter as she gets older, she starts high school soon and I can’t afford her school uniform as it is so expensive and I am very worried”

Baby items

Of those who had babies, we asked: *Can you get the things you need for your baby?*

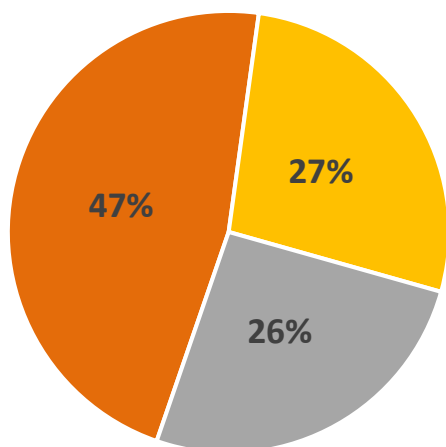


Many mothers struggled to buy baby formula and nappies, especially during the lockdown.

“Because asylum seekers are not given enough money from NASS in order to be able to access the bare minimum. I would have to substitute food money in order [to buy] anything else and babies are expensive (diapers, baby food etc) and having 3 children myself, I know.”

Home schooling during lockdown

Of those who had children, we asked: *Have they been able to do home-schooling?*



■ No ■ Only sometimes ■ Yes

Those that were able to home-school their children referenced the support they had received from schools or the voluntary sector as key factors in aiding their children's development.

The vast majority said the difficulties they had stemmed from having no access to WIFI or digital devices such as computers or tablets. Others talked about not having enough paper, pens, and other materials to help their children engage in learning opportunities.

Some families talked about relying on charities and friends for help as they attempted to teach their children at home.

"I am struggling to buy data and also my children are struggling to do home schooling because we don't have any laptop or desktop or good smartphone. My youngest child is suffering for the paper and colouring materials."

"She had no WIFI... [not seeing] her friends, it really changed her physically and emotionally. She became very difficult and I couldn't teach her as she was so down"

Impact of Covid-19 and lockdown

We asked people to tell us about the extra impact of the Coronavirus lockdown. Here are some of their responses:

"Not being able to be safe and buy food, groceries, cleaning products etc online for it to be delivered to my house [due to the fact that asylum seekers aren't allowed bank accounts]. I have had to risk my life and that of my family who have been at home this entire pandemic as I leave the house weekly in order to get food for my family."

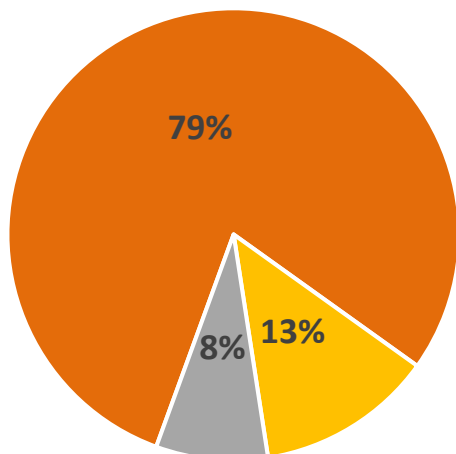
"I have never been in a difficult situation like this before. People were buying food stuff in bulk but we couldn't. Even a common bag of rice, we can't afford. The coronavirus has really made our lives difficult."

"It's difficult to stay on a budget and avoid going to the biggest and cheapest shops because local stores are much more expensive."

"I couldn't buy food during the pandemic as most shops were empty and with no money to buy food for my family – it was so painful."

Is it enough?

We asked: *Do you think the recent increase to £39.60 per week [announced in June 2020] is enough for you to be able to buy everything you need?*



■ No ■ Sometimes ■ Yes

It is clear from the response to this question, and to the questions throughout our survey, that people on asylum support remain unable to meet their essential living needs.

Whether it's buying enough food for themselves and their families, affording data to be able to stay in contact with essential services, or buy enough clothes for their children, people seeking asylum are forced into a permanent state of financial precarity, whereby they have to constantly trade off one basic living need for another.

“My daughter is growing and always needs new clothes, there isn't anything left to get books. She is always asking me ‘mummy, can I get this book?’ and I have to tell we don't have enough”

“I need clothes but food is expensive and if I run out of shampoo or toothpaste it is not enough and I get really worried”

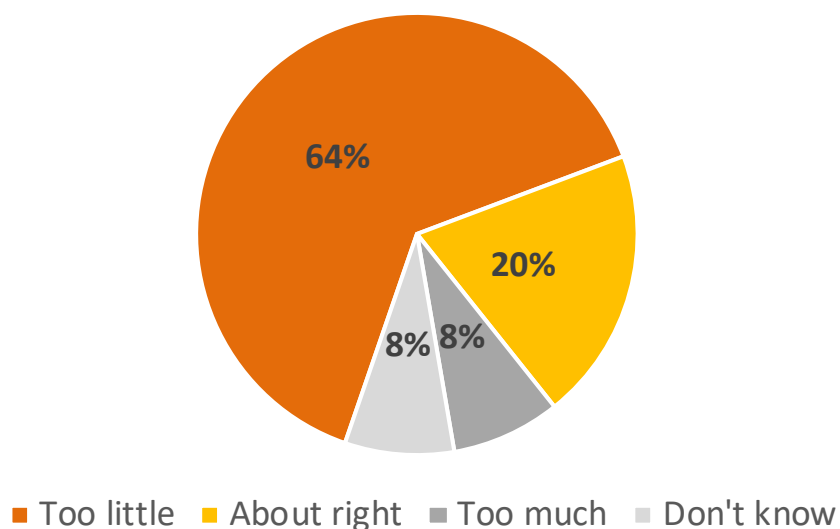


“
IT IS INSULTING
AND DEGRADING.
WE ARE TREATED
LIKE OUR LIVES
HAVE NO
IMPORTANCE.
”

Opinion polling

Recent opinion polling shows clear public support for increasing support rates, with almost two in three people (64%) in key marginal constituencies saying they thought the amount people seeking asylum receive was too little.

Asylum Matters and Refugee Action commissioned ICM to conduct a representative survey between 27 August - 9 September 2020 of 1,005 adults living in the 35 constituencies that switched from Labour to Conservative in the 2019 general election, but which have a majority of less than 10%.⁴



The polling found:

- Nearly two-thirds of people (64%) think that the £5.66 a day that asylum seekers receive as Government support is too little
- One in five think the amount is about right (20%)
- Under one in ten think it is too much (8%)
- Meanwhile, in response to a further question, three quarters of adults surveyed in these constituencies stated they don't think they could live on £5.66 a day to meet all their essential living needs (74%)
- Only one in five think that they could manage on this amount (21%).

⁴ These constituencies were: Blyth Valley, Birmingham Northfield, Bolton North East, Bridgend, Burnley, Bury North, Bury South, Clwyd South, Colne Valley, Darlington, Delyn, Derby North, Dewsbury, Don Valley, Gedling, Heywood and Middleton, High Peak, Hyndburn, Keighley, Kensington, Leigh, Lincoln, North West Durham, Peterborough, Redcar, Stockton South, Stoke-On-Trent Central, Stroud, Vale Of Clwyd, Wakefield, Warrington South, West Bromwich East, Wolverhampton South West, Wrexham, Ynys Mon.

Conclusion and Recommendations

People seeking asylum and living on asylum support are regularly unable to meet their essential living needs. Barred from working, they are entirely reliant on financial support from the Home Office to survive. However, whether it's buying enough food for themselves and their families, affording data to be able to stay in contact with essential services, or buying enough clothes for their children, people seeking asylum are forced into a constant state of financial precarity, whereby they often have to trade off one basic living need for another.

Across all questions, the majority of respondents said they either could not afford, or were only sometimes able to afford, basic living expenses such as food, medicines, toiletries, cleaning products, clothes, travel, phone data, and things to support their children's development. In many of these categories, only a small minority of respondents – often barely 10% - were confident that they could regularly afford these basic necessities.

People seeking asylum should not be locked into poverty by an unfair system.

We recommend that:

- The Home Office must further **increase rates of asylum support** to allow individuals and families to meet their essential living needs
- The Home Office must ensure that the methodology for setting asylum support rates is **fit for purpose**. This includes updating what are considered to be 'essential living needs' to fairly reflect the real-life experiences of people seeking asylum
- Ultimately, asylum support rates should once again be set at **at least 70% of mainstream welfare benefits**, to ensure that people seeking asylum are able to meet their essential living needs
- People seeking asylum should have the **right to work** after six months of waiting for a decision on their asylum claim, unconstrained by the Shortage Occupation List.

Due to the significant ongoing challenges which result from Covid-19, we also recommend that asylum support rates receive the same **£20 Covid-related uplift** as Universal Credit.

“Living in asylum support is not easy...

You don't have a life. You are disconnected from the world.

Someone that was an active person suddenly becomes

inactive. You have to justify any move you make.

It's an open prison.”

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to all those people seeking asylum who generously gave up time to share their experiences for this survey; and to the more than 30 local and national partner organisations which disseminated the survey and supported people seeking asylum to participate in it.

About Asylum Matters

Asylum Matters is an advocacy project that works in partnership locally and nationally to improve the lives of refugees and people seeking asylum through social and political change. One of our key aims is to ensure that people seeking asylum receive sufficient support to meet their essential living needs while they seek protection in the UK.

November 2020