

Surviving in poverty

A report documenting
life on asylum support

December 2023

asylum matters

Introduction

Deprived of the right to work, people seeking asylum in the UK face a continuous struggle to meet their most fundamental needs. Without the ability to earn for themselves, people are forced to rely solely on government-provided financial support for survival.

Called asylum support, people are given an alarmingly low rate. In November 2023, this was £47.39 per week or £6.77 a day. For those living in hotels, they receive just £9.58 a week, that's around £1.40 a day.









The stark reality is that this low level of support means people don't have enough money to feed themselves and their families, buy adequate clothing or afford public transport to get around. People find themselves trapped in a never-ending state of financial uncertainty. This ongoing struggle forces people to make agonising choices, where one essential need must be sacrificed for another.

People are enduring life below the poverty line for months, and in many cases, even years while they wait for a decision on their asylum claim. The consequences are far-reaching, affecting their physical and mental health, and most painfully, casting a shadow over the lives of their children.

In 2020 Asylum Matters published research which uncovered the challenges people face living on asylum support. Three years on and in the midst of an unprecedented increase in the cost of living, we wanted to get a fresh insight into people's experiences. We surveyed over 300 people currently living on asylum support. In this report, we hear the everyday struggles to even buy the basics like food and how the cost of living crisis is having a devastating impact.



Key findings

-  **91%** don't always have enough money to buy food
-  **75%** can't always afford the medicines they need
-  **85%** struggle to afford the cleaning products they need
-  **97%** can't always afford all the clothes they need
-  **65%** struggle to afford the toiletries they need
-  **95%** can't always afford to travel where they need to by public transport
-  **88%** don't always have the data and phone credit they need
-  **83%** say asylum support payments aren't enough to cover the rise in the cost of living.

What is asylum support?

People seeking asylum who have nowhere to live or no money to support themselves can apply for asylum support to help them financially while their asylum claim is being considered. This is the time when someone seeking asylum is being interviewed by the Home Office and waiting for a decision on their asylum claim.

People who come to the UK to claim asylum are unable to access mainstream welfare benefits and are effectively banned from working. This means most people can't earn their own money while they wait for a decision from the Home Office. Decisions can take many months. At the end of September 2023, there were over 90,000 cases waiting more than six months for an initial decision¹.

The current UK Government, through the Illegal Migration Act which is not yet fully enacted, is planning to dismantle the UK asylum system. However, while we wait to see the outcome of these plans, tens of thousands of people seeking asylum in the UK are living on asylum support which is provided by the Home Office under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. To receive support, people seeking asylum must prove that they don't have adequate accommodation or if they do, that they can't financially meet their other essential living needs.

There are different levels of support, depending on circumstances:

- **People living in dispersal accommodation, such as a flat or shared housing, receive £47.39 per person per week which is £6.77 a day (this can also be provided to those who have accommodation, like living with friends)**
- **People living in a hotel receive just £9.58 per person per week which is around £1.40 a day.**

For those who have been refused asylum, an immediate return to their home countries is often impossible for many reasons, including health issues, pregnancy and waiting for travel documents. Section 4 (2) of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act offers support to those in this situation with accommodation and financial support at the same rate. Of the people who answered our survey, 11% were on this type of support.

This amount needs to cover all essential living costs, like food and drink, clothing, toiletries, household cleaning items, everyday medication, travel, and phone and internet. For families, they also need to pay for school uniforms, nappies and items like baby formula.

There are additional payments of £3 per week for pregnant women and for children aged one to three. Babies under the age of one receive an extra £5 per week.

A report by the British Red Cross in October 2023 revealed that adjusting for inflation, asylum support payments have declined in real terms by 28%². This low level of support forces people into a life of poverty while they wait for their asylum claim and makes it impossible to pay for everyday living expenses. It means people must make difficult decisions on a daily basis around whether they can afford basic essentials like food, clothing and medicine.

Numbers of people receiving support

123,758 people were receiving asylum support as of September 2023.

The majority are living in Home Office accommodation, with 45% staying in hotels.

UK Government, Immigration system statistics year ending September 2023, published November 2023.



Research methodology

Asylum Matters ran an online survey of people currently seeking asylum in the UK between July and September 2023. We wanted to hear from people about their experience of living on asylum support and understand the impact of the cost of living crisis.

To design the survey, we consulted with four groups of people with lived experience of the asylum system:

- **Walking With Community Campaigns Group**
- **West End Refugee Service Community Campaigns Group**
- **Stories of Hope and Home**
- **The Voices Network**

The survey was sent out directly to people in the asylum system and through 51 partner organisations across Britain which provide support to people seeking asylum. It was conducted in four languages: English, Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish. Our survey had 317 respondents, with 30% having children with them here in the UK (the majority aged between four and nine years old). Just over 60% of all respondents were living in dispersal accommodation as opposed to hotels.

People who responded to the survey lived in a diverse range of towns and cities across England, Scotland and Wales. Not all respondents answered every question. The percentages used are based on the total number of responses for each question, except when specified otherwise.

We designed the questions to cover key areas of the Home Office's most recently used methodology to set asylum support rates. This includes food, medicines, communications, travel, clothing, cleaning products and toiletries.

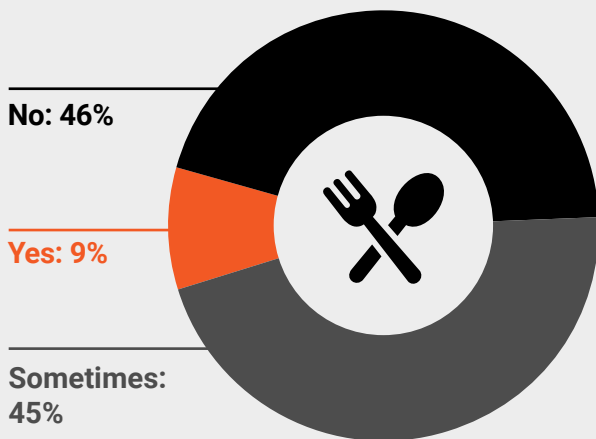
We've compared these results with a similar survey we carried out in 2020 called "[Locked into poverty](#)" to see how the situation has changed over the last three years. You can view the full comparison chart at the end of the report.



The findings

Food

We asked: Are you able to buy the food you need?



People told us that with food prices so high, they struggled to afford food for themselves and their families. They regularly relied on foodbanks, sacrificing other essentials or simply going without. The impact of rising food prices means certain foods were out of reach like fruit, vegetables and culturally specific food.

For people living in hotels, many didn't have access to a fridge or freezer, meaning they couldn't store food. They spoke of the food provided by the hotels as poor. Without access to a kitchen, they couldn't cook for themselves so would go without hot meals.

With limited storage in their accommodation and being unable to carry large purchases from supermarkets, families couldn't make savings by buying in bulk. Some people talked about living far away from the cheaper stores, making the trip by public transport an extra and unaffordable expense.

Those with children spoke of how difficult it was to buy food for the whole family and some parents spoke about sacrificing their own meals so their children could eat.

Compared to our survey from 2020, 12% more people were facing difficulties buying the food they needed (34% said 'no' in 2020).

"Most of the necessary food is relatively expensive. In most weeks the financial support runs out in the middle of the week, and we complete the week without a single pound available to the family, which is very difficult."

"The cost of groceries has increased along with some cultural foods. The distance to big grocery stores such as Aldi or Lidl has an impact as well."

"Most of the time I am not able to buy the food I need. I end up getting my food from food banks. However, it is usually processed food or low [in] nutrients, which has greatly affected my weight, activity and mood."



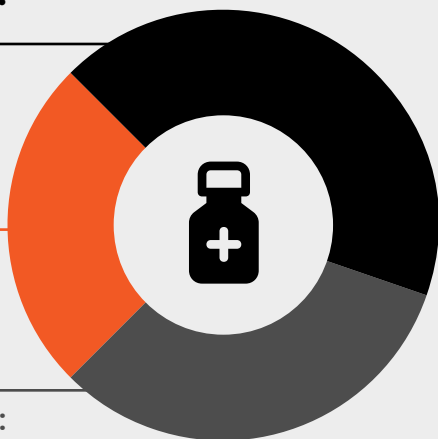
Medicines

We asked: Are you able to buy all the over-the-counter medicines you need?

No: 43%

Yes: 25%

Sometimes: 32%



With medicines expensive to buy, people told us that they need to sacrifice other items to afford them or go without.

Some said that the only medicines they were able to use were those on a prescription from a doctor. When they needed over-the-counter medicines like painkillers, allergy relief or creams, they would struggle to buy them.

Parents explained it was difficult to buy medicines when their children were sick. Medicines for illnesses like colds, coughs and toothache were extremely hard to afford, forcing them to go without other essentials.

"My baby has problems with her skin and sometimes I can't afford to buy the treatment."

"I bought allergy medicine from the pharmacy - about £7 - which is the cost of one day's food and my day's food is gone."

"I can't afford [medicines], but when [my] children are sick, I have to buy and go without other things."

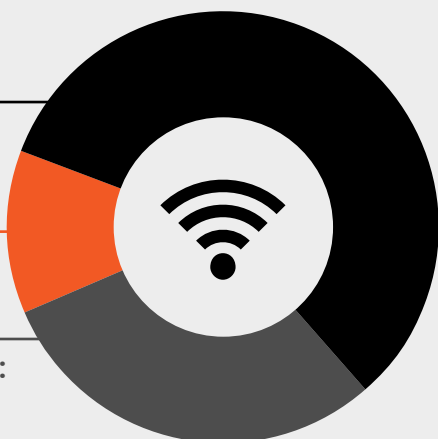
Communications

We asked: Are you able to buy all the data and credit you need?

No: 58%

Yes: 12%

Sometimes: 30%



People seeking asylum need access to a phone and the internet to keep in touch with family and engage with daily life in the UK. It's crucial for things like speaking to lawyers, online English lessons and supporting children with homework.

The majority of people who answered our survey said they couldn't afford to buy the amount of data they needed and would often run out. Most people talked about using their mobile phones for the internet but that pay as you go is expensive. Many relied on charities to provide sim cards,

others to buy them credit or sharing Wi-Fi with friends. Having to swap sim cards to get the best deals caused problems accessing regular appointments, like English lessons.

Struggling to afford data and credit meant people couldn't keep in touch with family and friends, missed vital health appointments and couldn't contact their legal representatives. Families said this impacted on their children who some said had phones for safety reasons, but also needed data for homework.

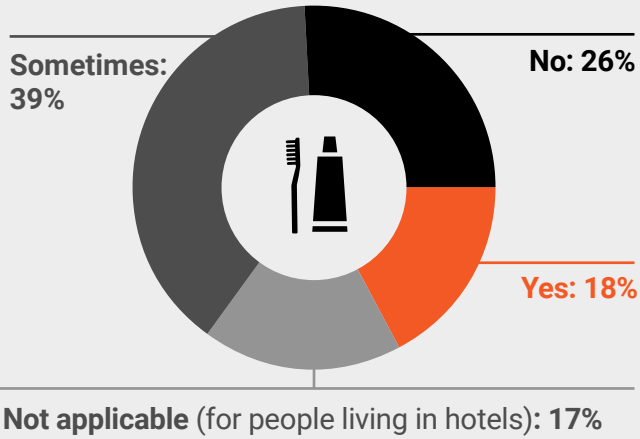
"If I buy data I will not have enough for food. There is no television or radio in shared accommodation. As a result, you can never know what is going on around you since you are disconnected from the web."

"Data is very expensive, and I often find myself missing online appointments or opportunities [because of] not being able to afford paying for internet/data plans. I have missed a few counselling appointments in the past due to this."

"We got a sim from a charity for six months. Children need [the] internet all the time to contact their friends and homework. It's really frustrating for them when they are unable to share [the] hotspot."

Toiletries

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



Everyday toiletries like soap, toothpaste and sanitary towels are essential for peoples' health and general wellbeing. Many people who answered our survey said that they struggled to afford hygiene essentials, having to choose between toiletries and paying for basics like food.

People said toiletries were expensive, with many having to rely on foodbanks and charities. When they did buy them, they could only afford the most basic and cheapest items. When they couldn't meet their needs, it affected their mental health and self-esteem.

Compared to our survey in 2020, the situation has got worse. The proportion of people who said they couldn't afford to buy the toiletries they needed has more than doubled.

"Things like shaving cream, spray deodorant and dental floss become more of a luxury than a basic need I could afford. This has greatly affected my self-esteem."

"My weekly allowance is barely enough to get me food for the week, so when it is time to buy toiletries, my food reduces."

"It makes me feel less human that I can't meet my needs."



Period products

When women were asked about buying period products, like tampons and sanitary towels, 37% said they couldn't buy all the products they needed. Many had to rely on items donated by charities and churches.

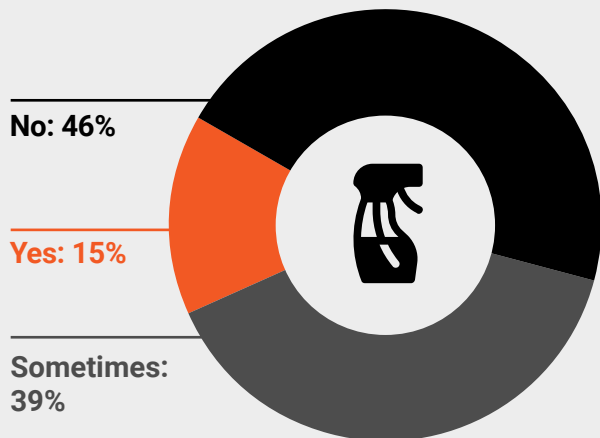
Women talked about having to buy the cheapest products, which weren't so good, and the expense of having a long or heavy cycle. One woman talked about being forced to stay indoors during her period as the cheaper sanitary products caused leaks.

The women living in hotels spoke of how the sanitary products provided by the hotel weren't suitable for their needs, such as different absorbencies.

"I have been many times in a really difficult situation because [period products] are so expensive if you have a long and heavy cycle as I do."

Cleaning products

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



Living in a clean and safe environment is essential to stay well, avoid illness and improve wellbeing. Cleaning products safely remove germs and help care for our surroundings and belongings. For the people who answered our survey, everyday cleaning products like washing up liquid, bleach and washing powder were often out of reach.

People said they found cleaning products to be too expensive, forcing them to make difficult choices about what to buy. Many spoke about how much they've recently increased in price.

Several families said they reduced their use of cleaning products or limited the items they bought. Many talked about how it's difficult to keep their accommodation and clothes clean, affecting their family's health. Some wore clothes for longer or watered down the products to make them last longer.

The percentage of people unable to afford the cleaning products they need has more than doubled since 2020 (20% said 'no' in 2020).

"Even from a food bank [we] rarely get washing powder or dishwashing liquid. We need to sacrifice so many things to buy washing or cleaning items."

"It is expensive, and I cannot keep my house thoroughly clean. That is dangerous to my family's health."

"If it wasn't for the local church's help, we wouldn't be able to buy those products."



Clothing

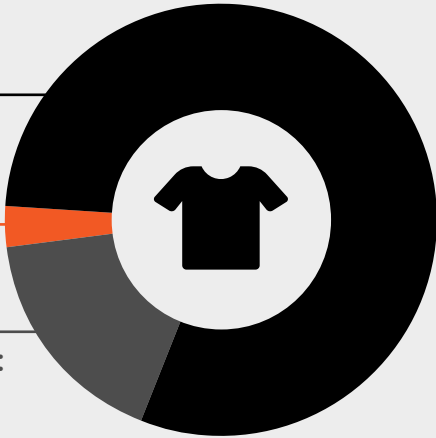
We asked: Are you able to buy all the clothes and shoes you need?

All respondents

No: 80%

Yes: 3%

Sometimes:
17%

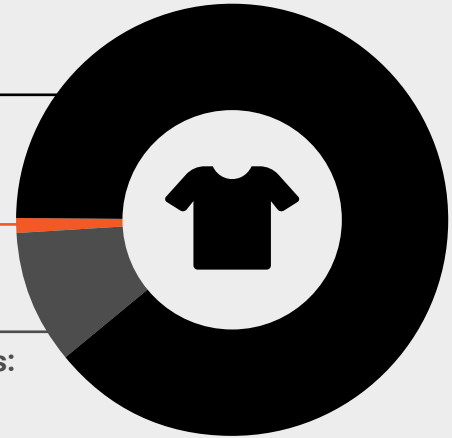


Respondents
in hotels

No: 89%

Yes: 1%

Sometimes:
10%



Having appropriate clothing that's suitable for different weather conditions is essential to everyone's lives. For the people answering our survey, clothing was something they simply couldn't afford. The majority would have just arrived in the UK with very limited clothing. Most rely on free clothes from charities and community clothing hubs or save up to buy from second hand shops.

New clothing is not an option. Even buying from second hand shops requires people to save up over a long period of time and go without other essential items.

For parents, they spoke of the difficulty in clothing children as they grow out of clothes so quickly and children feel disappointed because they want to wear the same as their friends. Some spoke of concern for their children wearing ill-fitting shoes and clothes as they can't always get the right sizes when relying on charities.

The findings show that the situation for people living in hotels, who are on a lower level of support, is even worse than for those in dispersal accommodation.

"I [have] holes in [my] shoes and wet feet."

"If I happen to buy shoes or clothes, I will not be able to eat for that week."

"The money we receive is not enough for us to buy new clothes. We rely always on second hand clothes which don't last for long."



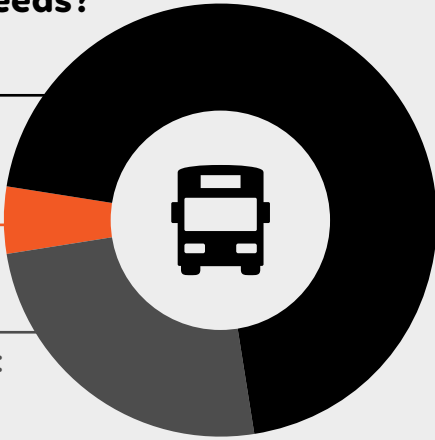
Transport

We asked: Are you able to afford to travel on public transport for all your needs?

No: 70%

Yes: 5%

Sometimes: 25%



Ability to travel means people seeking asylum can get to appointments, meet friends and family and go shopping. However, people told us that they limited their use of public transport and walked long distances to avoid having to pay travel costs. For many people, this meant missing out on services they needed or not taking part in social, cultural or religious activities.

People talked about the rising costs of tickets for buses and other transport and for those living more rurally, the sheer expense of travelling meant difficulties going anywhere. Respondents felt isolated and lonely, which had a negative impact on their mental health. For people with disabilities or health conditions, having numerous medical appointments meant they struggled the most.

Families with children talked about how they couldn't afford to take trips which meant their children missing out. Even if activities were free, they couldn't afford to get there.

"I survive eating one meal to save money to go on a trip to see the lawyer."

"Travelling is extremely expensive. I often find myself walking long distances to save travel money."

"We face a big problem even for a doctor's appointment at the hospital because our weekly [asylum support] does not even cover a bus trip. Most of the time we have long walks for several hours with our children."

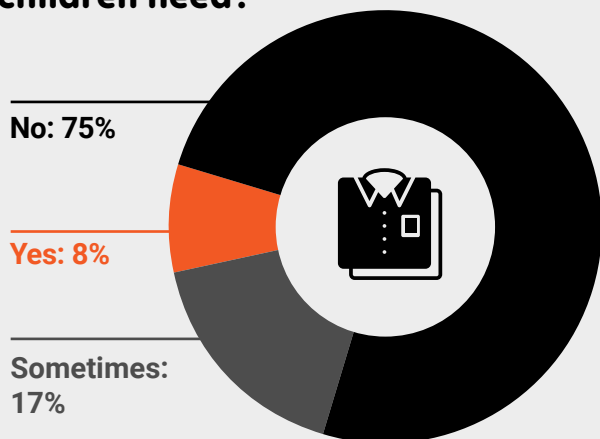


Impact on families

Families caring for children faced extra challenges, like buying school uniform and items for babies. We asked some questions to families with children to understand their struggles and challenges.

School uniform

We asked people with children with them in the UK: Are you able to buy the school uniforms your children need?



School uniforms put an extra cost and strain on families receiving asylum support. Families surveyed said they saved throughout the year, but even that was not enough.

Parents have had to talk to the school or rely on charity shops and places of worship for second hand uniform which often doesn't fit well.

There's also the pressure of providing winter coats and appropriate shoes when the weather changes. Some parents spoke of feeling like they were failing their children and don't know where to get help.

One parent mentioned being able to get a school uniform grant, which is available in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but in England it's up to each local council.

"[We] have to buy high school uniform items from [an] authorised supplier – so expensive. [We] go without other essentials."

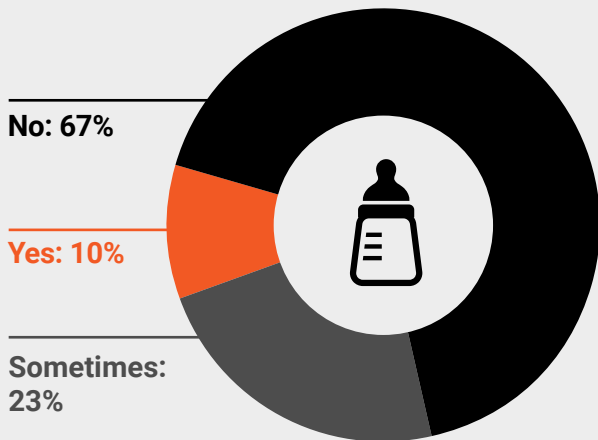
"[My child] is tall and broad, [so it's] hard to get his size from preloved clothes."

"It's difficult. I feel like I'm failing my child. At her school they have introduced used ones for free which helps."



Baby items

**For families with babies, we asked:
Can you buy all the things you need?**



Compared to our survey in 2020, parents are six times more likely to struggle to buy these items for their small children (in 2020 11% said 'no'). For parents who received the extra weekly payments of either £3 or £5, this still didn't help them afford what they needed.

"The nappies and clothes are really difficult. My baby is growing up very fast and the clothes are too small. I can't afford this every month."

"[I] can't give my child the best in life."

"We can only use powdered milk and diapers provided by the hotel. If we want to use other brands or products, we don't have the money."

Most of the parents who took part in our survey said items for babies, like nappies, clothes and baby formula, are too expensive to afford. Many seek outside help from charities and other organisations to provide essentials for their children.

Support for newborn babies

Pregnant women receive an additional payment of £3 per week. They can also apply for a one-off £300 maternity payment if their baby is due in eight weeks or less, or if they have a baby under 6 weeks old.

For those who had received the maternity grant, they highlighted it was not enough to cover all the essential items needed for a newborn. People had to rely heavily on support from friends and charities.

Maternity Action highlights that asylum-seeking pregnant women and new mothers are at high risk of poor physical and mental health and that poverty is a key factor. The charity stresses that the low levels of asylum support stop women living a healthy lifestyle during pregnancy or caring for their new baby.

Healthy eating during pregnancy is critical in protecting the health of children and the extra £3 per week that pregnant women receive is inadequate to cover the additional costs of healthy food. Pregnant women in hostels and hotels are dependent on accommodation providers to deliver a balanced diet.



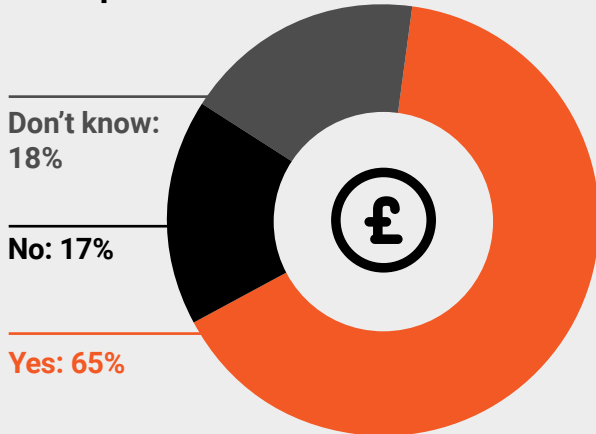
"£300 of allowance money for a baby is very little, but charity organisations have helped us a lot with baby things and without their help the situation would have been very difficult."

The impact of the cost of living crisis

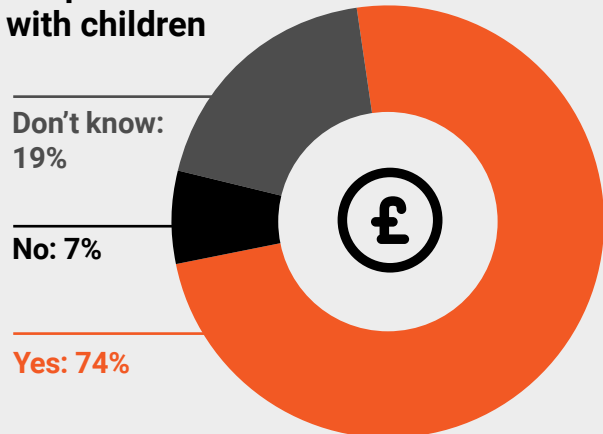
The cost of living crisis has hit many people in society and there has been a rise in poverty and destitution across the UK³. Already facing a desperate struggle to afford the basics, with prices for essentials rising dramatically and not having the option to work to increase their income, people seeking asylum have been pushed to breaking point.

We asked: In the last six months, has your cost of living increased?

All respondents



Respondents with children



Among the survey respondents, 81% said they were worried about the rising costs. For people with children, this percentage increased to 90%. Parents spoke about not being able to meet the needs of their children or having to skip meals themselves to be able to feed their children.

Others spoke about having to cut back on things like seeing friends and socialising with family. Some couldn't afford the basics and had even reduced what they were eating to try and make ends meet.

The top three things that people said they saw the biggest price increase in were food, clothes and travel costs. It's driven people to cut out more expensive food like fruit, vegetables, meat and fish, while others mentioned not being able to buy any winter clothes.

"It has become more difficult to buy necessary food. Milk and bread prices have doubled over the last 12 months."

"It has affected me mentally, [I can't] cook what my kids want to eat, can't take them out for lunch, can't provide what they need. It's so sad for me."

"I just buy potatoes and almost eat the same for long periods of time."

Price rises

We asked people to give specific examples of cost rises. These are just a few of their responses:

"I used to spend £1.95 on milk, now its £2.75."

"15 eggs were £1.09 and are now £1.99."

"Cheese used to be £2.60 and now it's £4."

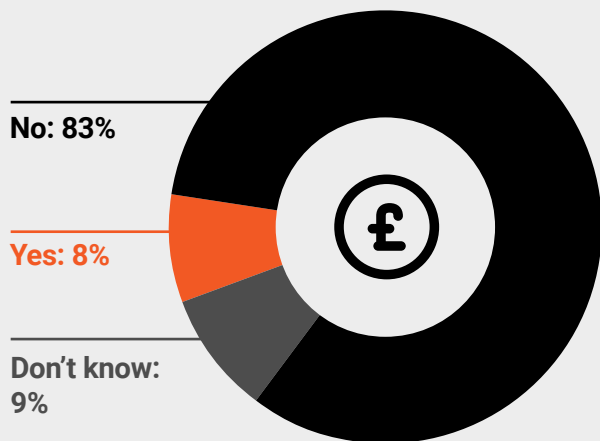
"Travel used to be £3.80 and is now £5.20."

"Whole chicken was £2.49, now it's £3.59."

"Milk formula was £11 and it's now £14."

Is it enough?

We asked: Do you think the weekly asylum support payments are enough to cover the rise in the cost of living?



The dramatic rise in the cost of daily items means even more people on asylum support can't meet their basic needs compared to our survey in 2020. Whether it's buying enough food for themselves and their children, being able to travel to appointments or buying toiletries and cleaning products, people are making tough decisions every day.

People live with persistent worry about their finances and constantly trade off different basics depending on their needs each week.

"Prices are rising every time you go to the grocery [shop] making it difficult to survive with what is given weekly."

"All prices have either doubled or so, while the asylum support has increased by only £7 a week."

"Buying food alone is expensive, I don't see how you can manage with buying food and other necessities with the weekly allowance."



The long-term impact of living on asylum support

Living in this continuous struggle to meet their basic needs has a profound effect on peoples' mental health and wellbeing. It puts a huge strain on their lives, limiting what they can do.

"Staying in a period of five years in that condition creates a huge impact on your mental and emotional health. You see yourself as a parasite and a prisoner."

"It has affected my family, as they can't participate in sports they like, they can't wear good clothes and shoes, they can't do what their mates are doing. I can't provide their needs which has affected me as I can't work to give my family the best life they deserve."

"Life is so difficult. I never have enough food for me and my children. I am often crying and distressed, as are my children."



Conclusion and recommendations

Our survey results show the devastating situation of living on asylum support, unable to work to improve your circumstances.

When asked about their ability to cover basic living expenses, like food, medication, toiletries, cleaning supplies, clothing, transport and internet data, an overwhelming majority of people revealed a distressing truth. People either couldn't afford these essentials or could only do so occasionally. For any of these basics, only a small minority of people, often barely 10%, expressed confidence in their ability to consistently meet their vital needs.

This situation and the harsh reality of trying to live on asylum support underscores an urgent need to reform asylum support and the asylum system, including the right to work, so people have the chance to rebuild their lives in the UK.



Our recommendations

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.
 - Ultimately, asylum support rates should once again be set to **at least 70% of the Universal Credit rate** for people over 25.
 - Payments to people in **full board accommodation should be reassessed and increased**.
 - All additional **payments to parents with young children should be increased** as these have not risen in line with asylum support.
- The Home Office must ensure that the methodology for setting asylum support rates is fit for purpose and should **reflect the real-life experiences** of people seeking asylum.
 - The UK Government should use the **Joseph Rowntree Foundation Minimum Income Standard**.
 - Essential living needs should include **religious, social and cultural participation**.
- 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.
- **Free bus travel** should be made available for people seeking asylum on a **UK-wide basis**, as is currently the case in Scotland.

Comparison table 2020/2023

	2020	2023
Food	No 34% Sometimes 50% Yes 16%	No 46% Sometimes 45% Yes 9%
Medicines	No 30% Sometimes 33% Yes 37%	No 43% Sometimes 32% Yes 25%
Communications	No 54% Sometimes 36% Yes 10%	No 58% Sometimes 30% Yes 12%
Toiletries	No 11% Sometimes 49% Yes 40%	No 26% Sometimes 39% Yes 18% Not applicable* 17%
Cleaning products	No 20% Sometimes 55% Yes 25%	No 46% Sometimes 39% Yes 15%
Clothing	No 76% Sometimes 20% Yes 4%	No 80% Sometimes 17% Yes 3%
Transport	No 72% Sometimes 23% Yes 5%	No 70% Sometimes 25% Yes 5%
School uniforms	No 74% Sometimes 20% Yes 6%	No 75% Sometimes 17% Yes 8%
Baby items	No 11% Sometimes 42% Yes 47%	No 67% Sometimes 23% Yes 10%

*This answer was not in the 2020 survey. There were fewer people in hotels at that point and the allowance for people in hotels was not introduced until late 2020.



Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to all those people seeking asylum who generously gave up their time to share their experiences for this survey.

We'd also like to recognise and thank the local and national partner organisations which disseminated the survey and supported people to participate in it. They include Action Foundation, Barnsley Borough of Sanctuary, BEACON Bradford, BIRCH, Brushstrokes, CARAS (Community Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers), Catalyst, Connected Voice Advocacy - Newcastle Upon Tyne, Conversation Group – Newcastle, Destitution Concern Bradford, Free2BeMe, Govan Community Centre, Greater Manchester Asylum Seekers and Refugees Together, Halesowen Welcome, JCWI, Justice and Peace Group Newcastle, LASSN, Leeds City of Sanctuary, Lingua GM, Mafwa Theatre, Manchester Women's Aid, Migrants Organise, MIN Voices, NACCOM, Nottingham Refugee Forum, Oasis Cardiff, Oasis Church, PAFRAS, Parkway Conversation Group, Praxis, RAMFEL, Refugee Action, Refugee Council, SASS (Swansea Asylum Seekers Support), Sheffield City of Sanctuary, St Augustines, St Chad's Sanctuary, St Paul's Church Group Birmingham, Stories of Hope and Home, SYMAAG, The Refugee Buddy Project, Together with Migrant Children, Upbeat Communities, Voices in Exile, Voices Network, Wakefield District of Sanctuary, Walking With Community Campaigns Group, Welsh Refugee Coalition, Welsh Refugee Council, West End Refugee Service Community Campaigns Group, Wirral Multicultural Organisation.

We'd like to say thank you to the [Walking With Community Campaigns Group](#) and Sadia Sikandar for many of the photographs in this report. We would also like to thank Maternity Action for their contribution to the report on support for newborn babies.

About Asylum Matters

Asylum Matters is a charity that works in partnership locally and nationally to improve the lives of refugees and people seeking asylum through social and political change. By mobilising and coordinating local, regional and national advocacy work, we aim to increase the impact of campaigns to secure improvements to asylum policy and practice.

References

1. UK Government, Immigration system statistics year ending September 2023, published November 2023. www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#asylum-and-resettlement
2. British Red Cross <https://public.flourish.studio/story/1958766/>
3. JRF Destitution in the UK report www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2023

“Try and put yourselves in our shoes and try to live and survive on £48 pounds a week. We are all human beings.”