

General Debate on COVID-19 (Monday 22 February)

About the Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is one of the leading organisations in the UK working with people seeking asylum and refugees. We provide a range of specialist services to adults and children and also work with them to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed by decision-makers.

Executive Summary

During the first wave of COVID-19 in the UK in the first quarter of 2020, a number of changes were made to asylum and refugee policy and practice as part of overall measures to protect public health. These included ending all evictions from asylum accommodation (to prevent homelessness during the pandemic) and providing regional centres to claim asylum (to prevent nationwide travel to London for asylum claims). As important as these measures were, it is unfortunately true that people in the asylum system have also not been protected from COVID-19 in ways that have applied to the rest of the population.

For example, the Government decided to increasingly use hotels and military sites as long-term housing for people seeking asylum. While the need for more accommodation during the pandemic was critical, these facilities have not been made COVID-secure. Room sharing between strangers in hotels was initially common during the first months of the pandemic, and in military barracks up to 28 people have shared one sleeping space, with shared dining facilities and shared toilets. In late January 2021, COVID-19 spread across Napier Barracks in Kent, infecting 120 people, and recent evidence suggests that people with a positive coronavirus test are still sharing rooms with others who have not tested positive.¹

In addition to public health measures, people seeking asylum have not been supported in the same way as other members of the population. While Universal Credit was increased by £20 per week to support people, calls for the same increase in asylum support were repeatedly ignored. Ultimately, the Home Office review levels of asylum support and increased them to £39.63 per week – an increase of just 26p per week.²

Equally, digital exclusion is an ongoing problem during lockdown, and support has not been adequate to ensure good internet access across the asylum accommodation estate. This has harmed online learning and access to education for children in the asylum system while schools have been closed.

Finally as policy focuses on life after the pandemic, people in the asylum system must be properly supported to access vaccines. This involves recognising the barriers that some people in the asylum system have in registering with GPs, and so ensuring they are provided with suitable and understandable information, while also ensuring that doctors' surgeries are informed and supported too.

¹ See <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1631/html/#Panel2>

² <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/refugee-council-says-26p-daily-increase-to-asylum-support-allowance-is-deeply-insulting-to-people-seeking-asylum/>

1. Safety and suitability of asylum accommodation

The ability to socially distance from other households remains very difficult for people in the asylum system, living either Initial Accommodation (typically large-scale hostels) or dispersal accommodation (typically HMOs). The increased use of hotels and military barracks as asylum accommodation has only increased this problem.

Arrangements such as bedroom sharing between unrelated adults, communal eating facilities and crowded social spaces make social distancing difficult and self-isolation almost impossible. Concerns have also been raised about the provision of sufficient hygiene and sanitation products in both Initial Accommodation Centres and hotels.

Since March 2020, some measures have been put in place to protect people including reducing and in some cases halting the sharing of rooms between unrelated adults. However, we remain concerned about the wellbeing of people accommodated in hotels for long periods, even where standards are good, as they are not homes and provide little privacy or choice for people, many of whom have additional needs. Important services such as schools, GPs and legal advisers are rarely available, as usually people would only be expected to live there for a little over a month.

In addition to our concern about the length of time people are staying in Initial Accommodation Centres and hotels, we are worried about the recent move to convert former Ministry of Defence barracks, into accommodation remote from local communities and services. In addition to the problems mentioned above, the accommodation in these sites appears to be of a very low standard and 'dormitory style' rooms as well as communal facilities, are a step backwards. Until their use can be ended, urgent attention must be paid to the health and safety of the people living there.

Recommendation: The Home Office must ensure adequate provision of safe, self-contained accommodation to enable social distancing and self-isolation. In addition, the Home Office must immediately ensure the provision of adequate supplies of cleaning products, soap/hand sanitisers for people housed in Initial Accommodation Centres and hotels.

2. Access to the asylum system

In the normal working of the asylum system, a claim is made in person at an Asylum Intake Unit (AIU). Throughout the entirety of the pandemic, it has been necessary to make an asylum claim in person, despite general advice to reduce travel and in-person interaction as much as possible. Prior to the pandemic, there was one intake unit in Croydon and people had to travel there to register their asylum claim.

In a very welcome move, the Home Office have since set up six additional regional intake units in Glasgow, Belfast, Liverpool, Leeds, Solihull and Cardiff. This regional approach should be maintained in the long-term, ensuring the process is nationwide and accessible.

In contrast to the first lockdown of March-June 2020, other appointments related to the asylum system (including reporting) are now one of the exemptions to the lockdown - the Home Office can require a person to attend an appointment regardless of the risks people may have to take to get to it, such as several trips on public transport.

Recommendation: A person should be able to register their asylum claim by phone, post or email. When biometrics need to be taken, more use should be made of mobile units to avoid the need for lots of people to travel. Where travel puts public health at risk, the government is able to delay taking biometrics to avoid unnecessary travel.

Recommendation: For reporting and other appointments related to the asylum interview, the Home Office should give people an option to reschedule if they are concerned about the risk to health (including of people they live with). Nobody should be asked to attend a reporting centre on a regular basis whilst the current national restrictions are in place.

3. Homelessness and prevention of rough sleeping

When someone receives a decision on their asylum claim – either positive (recognition of refugee status) or negative (not considered a refugee) – they have a short time before they must leave their asylum accommodation and their financial support is ended. In March 2020, the government paused all evictions from asylum accommodation as a public health measure to ensure that no one was homeless during the pandemic.

Since then, evictions from asylum accommodation have been in flux: those with a positive asylum decision started to leave accommodation in September 2020; evictions of those with a negative asylum decision resumed in October, but were subsequently paused in November. Currently those with a negative decision on their asylum claim are not being evicted, as a result of a High Court injunction.

Evictions for those with a positive decision are continuing, despite the latest lockdown starting in January 2021. However, the additional measures taken in the first national lockdown, whereby care was taken to ensure that a refugee's asylum support payments continued until the first welfare benefits payment was received, have not continued. This is despite repeated calls from the voluntary sector for the Home Office to analyse the effects of the temporary measure and make it permanent.

Recommendation: People with a positive asylum decision should continue to be housed and provided with financial support until they have an alternative in place, i.e. regular welfare benefits paid and accommodation either through the local authority or in the private rented sector.

Recommendation: People who receive a negative decision should continue to be accommodated and supported by the Home Office and should not face eviction into homelessness and destitution.

Alongside the measures needed to protect public and individual health in the asylum system, better support has been needed to ensure refugees and people seeking asylum can access services that they need. This is particularly true in the case of access to education, which has been particularly difficult for children in the asylum system:

4. Access to education for children in the asylum system

Learning environment

Asylum dispersal and contingency accommodation (Initial Accommodation - IAs and hotels) often lack privacy and are not set up in the way which facilitates conditions for children to study. It is not unusual for families to be huddled up in one small room, with nothing more than a bunk bed, one chair and a desk and a simple wardrobe.

Contingency accommodation has been designed to support families for the shortest possible time, yet it is common for families to stay in this accommodation the longest because of the delays in procuring suitable accommodation to meet their needs (especially for larger families). Children would not usually be registered in schools whilst living in Initial Accommodation Centres, and so many will still be excluded from measures designed to increase their inclusion.

Digital exclusion

Families living on asylum support have very limited access to the internet. Some IAs and contingency accommodation provide free wifi but the strength of the signal is poor, meaning children struggle with accessing online classes and completing assignments.

Department for Education provision of mobile data access for children is welcome, but families on asylum support get no support from the Home Office or their contractors to access this support. All data and technology assistance is provided through schools, meaning families with children who are not yet enrolled and those where children have only recently joined, are likely to face barriers with access.

Recommendation: The Home Office should liaise directly with the Department for Education to ensure all children on asylum support have access to a good and stable internet connection.

Access to technology

Families on asylum support don't have the means to purchase laptops or mobile phones so that children can connect to remote learning. We welcome Department for Education policy that allows for schools to request laptops for pupils, but families on asylum support get no specific support from the Home Office or their contractors to access that equipment.

Closer cooperation between the two departments is needed to ensure children are not missing out on education and families get support with accessing laptops and other equipment.

Recommendation: The Department for Education must ensure that children are included in any support provided to 'vulnerable children', as many will not be known to local authority children's services. The department must take steps to ensure that children do not fall through gaps in provision as a result of their immigration status or insecure housing situation.

Recommendation: The department should commit to free school meals and early education and childcare for all children, regardless of their parent's immigration status.

5. Coronavirus vaccinations for people in the asylum system

Although it is Government policy that coronavirus vaccinations will be available to everyone, regardless of their immigration status, the process is reliant on being registered with a GP, something that people in the asylum system can often struggle with. People living in Initial accommodation and hotels receive little practical support to help them register with a GP, leaving many of them unregistered for long periods.

Although not a requirement for registration, some GPs will ask for proof of address, which people living in asylum accommodation may not have, particularly if they have been moved at short notice between different facilities, as has become more common during the pandemic. Some people seeking asylum are only being registered by GPs for short periods of time, such as three months, meaning they may drop off the health register list before they have a chance to be vaccinated.

Recommendation: Provide specific support to all GP surgeries to register everyone, including undocumented and underdocumented migrants and those without secure accommodation, and ensure that all other routes to vaccination are accessible to everyone.

Recommendation: Ensure that information about vaccinations is being provided in an accessible and consistent way to everyone in the asylum system.

For more information, please contact:

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