

## **Refugee Council's submission for the Shadow ESCR Report**

September 2022

Our submission focuses on key issues that affect refugees and people seeking asylum in the context of economic, social and cultural rights.

Our overarching comment is that the UK Government has to set up a comprehensive integration and support strategy to address the needs and barriers that refugees and people seeking asylum face in the UK. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic laid bare deep inequalities faced by refugees and people seeking asylum, yet very little work was done to address this issue. It is particularly concerning there are no plans in place to support this group in the context of the rising costs of living.

### **Asylum support**

In the UK, people seeking asylum who are destitute, cannot work, and meet strict legal criteria can receive housing and subsistence support (asylum support) from the Home Office. As our recent research clearly shows ([available here](#)), the level of support is set at a bare minimum, leaving thousands of people, including children, living in abject poverty. The current flat rate of asylum support is set at £40.85 per person per week. Through our research and direct work with people, we know that they struggle to meet their essential needs with the money they get. They often cannot pay for travel to urgent appointments, e.g. in a hospital or afford mobile and Internet data. In consequence, they are digitally excluded from access to health services and children faced significant educational barriers, which were particularly visible during the pandemic when all services moved on-line. The systems which the government put in place to mitigate those barriers are simply insufficient. Additionally, the asylum support crisis sees thousands of people stuck in asylum hotels for months with a staggering 26,380 people living in temporary hotel accommodation by the end of 2021. There is no exit strategy from the use of hotels as such, people continue to live in wholly unsuitable accommodation.

### **Calls on the government:**

- Urgently review and uplift rates of asylum support so that people seeking asylum can live in dignity and able to meet their basic needs.
- Provide housing in the community and ensure that all asylum accommodation meets national housing standards.
- Allow people seeking asylum, who have been waiting for longer than 6 months for a decision on their asylum claim due to no fault of their own, right to work.

### **Move on**

One of the key issues the Refugee Council has been calling for is the extension of the move-on period beyond 28 days. As our research shows ([available here](#)), newly recognised refugees are facing homeless and destitution at the point they should start settling in the UK. Although the waiting time

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for the welfare payments is 5 weeks (from applying for the Universal Credit until the first payment reaches the beneficiary), refugees are only given 28 days before asylum supports stops. They are expected to find housing, employment, open bank account and secure benefits payments during this time.

#### Calls on the government:

- Extend move-on period beyond 28 days.
- Set up comprehensive, national refugee integration and support strategy to give refugees the best possible start as they seek to rebuild their lives in the UK.

#### **Afghan evacuees**

Out of over 15,000 people who were evacuated from Afghanistan to the UK, around 9,500 still remain in temporary hotels facing significant difficulties with their integration. Hotels proved to not be an appropriate place to house people for such a long time. Prolonged stay in hotels has a negative impact on children's development and well-being and creates barriers to learning the English language, gaining skills and employment, e.g. for Afghan women who find it challenging to start rebuilding their lives (our evidence [here](#)). The government offered no comprehensive strategy and there is no plan for when people will move from hotels into permanent housing. Many Afghans are offered with housing in a Private Rented Sector, however, they struggle to navigate the renting system and don't have the necessary funds to be able to rent and afford homes (especially since Afghan families are usually quite big). Additionally, because Afghans have not been formally recognised as refugees, new and expecting mothers don't have access to the Sure Start Maternity Grant (a benefit which is usually only available for the first child, however, refugee exemption allows refugee parents with children in their household to receive SSMG).

#### Calls on the government:

- Develop a strategy for moving all Afghans from hotels and ensure that they have access to an accommodation which is decent, safe and one which they can sustain.
- Improving information and support offered to people in bridging hotels so that they can access vital services, language classes, develop skills, and find employment.
- Ensure families can access Sure Start Maternity Grant payments.

#### **Ukrainians fleeing war**

The government wanted to avoid using hotels to accommodate Ukrainians fleeing war by encouraging the public to house them. However, this approach brought new problems, especially around safeguarding when hosts are matched with refugees; this led to abuse and exploitation in some instances. Additionally, there are significant variations in the operation of the hosting projects, which led to chaos and differential treatment, e.g. only under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme hosts as well as refugees receive payments. As many hosting arrangements will be coming to an end, we are expecting to see an increase in homelessness applications from Ukrainian refugees. Due to the shortage of social housing across the country, we foresee that many refugees will find it extremely difficult to secure housing and their prospects of successful integration will be significantly hindered.

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Like people evacuated from Afghanistan, Ukrainians fleeing war were not formally recognised as refugees by the UK government. It means they don't have access to, e.g. Refugee Integration Loans which although set very low, are important financial support which is helping refugees to settle in the UK, start rebuilding their lives and thrive.

#### Calls on the government:

- Ensure parity of funding & support across all Ukrainian visa schemes to ensure an adequate level of support is provided to all people from Ukraine who are fleeing war.
- Remove key systemic barriers to integration: set out a national strategy, review housing and welfare provisions, improve safeguarding and support all refugees to integrate and rebuild their lives in the UK.

#### **Access to health**

People seeking safety in the UK are often deeply traumatized and are faced with complex psychosocial challenges. Even before the pandemic, refugees and people seeking asylum have been experiencing significant barriers when accessing and seeking health support. Although access to the primary care should not be restricted based on a person's immigration status, many refugees are incorrectly refused GP registration or not provided with interpreting when attending medical appointments. They are finding it extremely difficult to navigate health provisions on their own and are often too scared to access critical services, like A&E, because they fear they might be deported. It is also important to mention the impact of the hostile environment and how it has further eroded trust in health services. Refugees are worried that their data will be shared with the Home Office for enforcement purposes or that they will be expected to pay if they need urgent and necessary medical assistance. Although refugees and people on asylum support are exempt from medical care charges, many of them don't know it and incorrectly think they cannot seek help.

#### Calls on the government:

- Investigate and address barriers and inequalities which refugees and people seeking asylum face when they try to access health services.
- Immediately suspend NHS charging regulations, especially in the context of maternity care due to the harm this system causes to women and their babies who are experiencing inequalities in maternity care.