



A Westminster Hall debate on the ‘Support for pupils’ education during school closures’ – Refugee Council’s note.

12 January 2021

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.

We work with individuals and families going through the asylum system and receiving support from the Home Office (through the provision of asylum support). Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have increased our presence in asylum accommodation across England, with a specific focus on the Yorkshire and Humberside region, where we provide emergency support and individual advocacy. We also provide advice through a national telephone Infoline service, offering information and signposting that is relevant to the needs of people we support during the Covid-19 pandemic, including families with children.

We also work with refugees who were resettled to the UK as well as in-country refugees who were offered protection following an in-country asylum claim. Most of our refugee clients, unlike people seeking asylum, have access to the mainstream welfare and social housing support, and many are in employment. Yet, refugees face significant barriers to integration, and especially in-country refugees and their families are confronted with uncertainty arising because of the short transition grace period from asylum support into mainstream welfare support.¹

Through our advocacy and service delivery work, we argue that people seeking protection from harm, persecution, violence and discrimination should be met with a system which is fair and compassionate

¹ Please see our relevant research reports: [A Journey Towards Safety. A report on the experiences of Eritrean refugees](#), 2018; [Refugees without refuge](#), 2017; [Refugees Welcome? The Experience of New Refugees in the UK](#), 2017.

and one which allows them to feel safe and respected from the moment they claim asylum or are settled to the UK.

Access to education for children

Families we work with are often traumatised by their experiences, don't speak the English language well or at all and are not familiar with the UK systems and processes, including in relation to education. As such we often support them with the process of enrolling their children into school, organising school uniforms, books and other school essentials. The experience of preparing a child to attend school varies between refugee and asylum-seeking families. Those differences arise from access to public support and services, including financial support which historically has been limited for families on asylum support, especially those on section 4 asylum support (e.g. access to free school meals,² which only recently became available following a successful legal challenge³).

In our experience, refugee families struggle with access to information about the UK educational system, especially when they are newly arrived, but they usually have some access to funds to purchase essentials for their children, or with our help, can apply for donations and grants since there are no restrictions arising their immigration status. Resettled refugees are provided with tailored advice support at least through the first year of their resettlement to the UK and we are able to support families with specific issues. In-country refugees and their families don't get such support, meaning the UK has a two-tier system where resettled and in-country refugees are facing similar problems but are assisted differently. This has a knock-on effect on refugee children, their ability to integrate and thrive in British schools.

In contrast, families on asylum support receive a limited amount of financial support from the Home Office and the majority are not allowed to work. Those families are completely reliant on the Home Office support, which even before the pandemic was inadequate.⁴ The situation of families on asylum support has further deteriorated during the Covid-19 pandemic and we know, through our services, that many children are missing out on education or are unable to access remote schooling because of the restrictive nature of asylum support provisions.

In particular, families on asylum support face the following issues with access to education for their children during the Covid-19 pandemic:

- **Unsuitable accommodation** – 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. Such arrangements are challenging, children don't have the designated space to learn, are easily distracted because the whole of family's life is confined to one room. Families in IAs complain of noise and disruptions from other

² Tab 6 on the Refugee Council's website: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/changes-to-home-office-asylum-resettlement-policy-and-practice-in-response-to-covid-19/>

³ <http://www.matthewgold.co.uk/following-threat-of-judicial-review-the-government-has-agreed-to-continue-the-extension-of-free-school-meals-for-families-with-no-recourse-to-public-funds-while-it-considers-a-permanent-change-to-the/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/09/its-a-shambles-data-shows-most-asylum-seekers-put-in-poorest-parts-of-britain>

people and especially now, because of the pandemic, they are limited in how often they can leave their rooms and use other places, like libraries to study. Typically parents have to supervise two and more children who are studying in the same room, a task which despite their best efforts is near impossible. Contingency accommodation has been designed to support families for the shortest possible time, yet we see it is families who stay there the longest because of the delays in procuring suitable accommodation to meet their needs (especially for bigger families).

- **Delays** – asylum contingency accommodation (Initial Accommodation and hotels) should be used to house families only for a limited period of time, yet they stay there for weeks and months. This leads not only to their mental health drastically deteriorating but they face significant barriers when it comes to accessing the most basic services, like GP surgeries or access to local schools. Based on our own experience of working in IAs and contingency accommodation, many schools are reluctant to enrol children living in temporary accommodation. They often advise families should wait until they are dispersed, in the meantime children are not in school for weeks and months.
- **Minuscule levels of asylum support** – subsistence levels of asylum support are set up to meet people’s basic needs, like food and toiletries, meaning they don’t take into consideration the needs of children, their development needs and don’t factor any support for fun, exercise and learning activities. The rates of support, in our opinion, are not set at a level which allows parents to provide children with the level of support an average child living in the UK has. Free school meals and access to nurseries for families on asylum support should be made accessible not just during the Covid-19 pandemic but permanently. Children should never be excluded from opportunities to grow and learn solely because of their parents’ immigration status.
- **Digital exclusion** – families living on asylum support have very limited access to the internet. Some IAs and contingency accommodations provide free Wi-Fi but the strength of the signal is poor, meaning children struggle with accessing on-line classes and completing assignments. Although we welcome the fact that the Department for Education set up provisions for mobile data access for children, families on asylum support get no support from the Home Office or their contractors to access those. It is important to note that 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 accessing those provisions; even those at school may not have the understanding to advocate for their child to be included and teachers, having worked with a family for a short time, might not be able to correctly identify children’s needs. In our opinion, 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. It is unreasonable to expect that families on asylum support can navigate the process in the same way as other families living in the UK.
- **Access to technology** – similar to the above, families on asylum support don’t have the means to purchase laptops or mobile phones so that children can connect to remote learning. Although we welcome the fact that the Department for Education arranged for schools to request laptops for pupils, families on asylum support get no specific support from the Home Office or their contractors to access those. We would like to see closer cooperation between the two Departments to ensure children are not missing out on education and families get support with accessing laptop and other provisions.

- **Language barrier** – people who seek protection in the UK usually don't speak English as their first language, as such they find it more difficult to access information which is now mostly on-line and find it challenging to follow and understand various processes, including around their children accessing schools and remote learning. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Refugee Council and other NGOs would support families with the school enrolment process, including completing uniforms and other school essentials. Because of the pandemic, many NGOs had to temporarily close their offices meaning families are now left only with very basic support through the Migrant Help's AIRE contract which does not include the advocacy work. Even if their children are enrolled, many parents struggle to help with home-schooling because all information is in the English language and specific individual subjects may not be familiar to people from other countries. Families are facing a significant amount of stress and frustration and urgently need tailored help from the Home Office and their providers on a range of issues affecting children's access to education.

Recommendations

Our overarching comment is for the Home Office to work together with the Department for Education to ensure all children who are on asylum support can use remote-learning and have all the necessary tools to do so. It is not reasonable to expect families who are impoverished, traumatised and face a multitude of barriers to navigate this process on their own. When it comes to children and their ability to learn and grow, the Government's priority has to be equal access to education and not immigration control.

The majority of our recommendations, even when directed specifically at the Home Office or the Department for Education, require cross-departmental working. It might, therefore, be helpful for a task group to be set up between the two ministries to help with this process.

For the Home Office:

1. To ensure families are moved safely and swiftly to dispersal accommodation and ensure there is an effective procurement process in place so that the time they spent in the initial and contingency accommodation is as short as possible. Furthermore, to ensure a decent standard of accommodation is provided with attention to the needs of the children in terms of education and learning.
2. To provide families with children with necessary support and information in a language they understand on the process of enrolling their children to school – this support should be organised by the Home Office and could be delivered through the AIRE contract as well as with the support of the welfare officers.
3. To proactively identify families who need support with home-schooling and to pass this information to relevant schools in the area as soon as a new family arrives into a dispersal or initial accommodation.
4. Increase levels of asylum support so that families have the necessary support to look after their children, help them to advance in life, gain skills and learn.

For the Department for Education:

1. To recognise the complex barriers faced by children and work closely with the Home Office on identifying and supporting children who are on asylum support and need support with accessing remote education by providing them with the internet data, laptops and other, relevant educational tools.
2. To ensure children are included in any support provided to 'vulnerable children' as many will not be known to local authority children's services and take steps to ensure that children do not fall through gaps in provision as a result of their immigration status or insecure housing situation.
3. To commit to free school meals and early education and childcare for all children, regardless of their parent's immigration status.