REPORT OF THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO ASYLUM SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Executive summary

Key findings

The inquiry into asylum support for children and young people received written submissions and heard oral evidence from over 200 individuals and organisations, including local authorities, safeguarding boards and academics. The panel considered perspectives from health, poverty, housing, well-being and asylum support experts, and heard directly from families with experience of living on asylum support. The evidence shows that the current asylum support system is in urgent need of reform if it is to have regard to the safety and well-being of children and meet its obligations to promote children’s best interests. Change is required so that all children can have a good childhood and the best possible start to life.

Destitution

Although the inquiry’s focus was on those in receipt of asylum support, the panel was shocked to hear of instances where children were left destitute and homeless, entirely without institutional support and forced to rely on food parcels or charitable donations. Evidence received by the inquiry cited counts where children made up between 13-20% of the local destitute population.

Some children become destitute when families gain refugee status and move from Home Office support to mainstream support. Other children are born into destitution because their parents are cut off from asylum support but are unable to leave the UK. Other periods of destitution are caused by administrative gaps and delays, which cause some families to go without income or a place to stay for weeks and months. This has severe implications for children’s safety, physical and mental health, and leaves some families vulnerable to exploitation and serious harm as a result. In one serious case review submitted to the inquiry, a child died of starvation. Their family had been made destitute when Home Office support ended.1 Although this case was complex and involved a number of different factors, it is a stark example of the serious gaps in the current support structure.

Essential living needs

Based on the evidence provided by child poverty, health and well-being experts, social workers, local authorities and families themselves, the inquiry has concluded that the current levels of support provided to families are too low to meet children’s essential living needs. Furthermore, these rates do not enable parents to provide for their children’s wider needs to learn, grow and develop, especially if they have a disability. We heard powerful evidence of the reality of living on as little as £5 per day,11 as parents are forced to skip meals to feed their children and are unable to buy them warm clothing in the winter.
Health and well-being
We heard evidence that the inadequacy of the current support system may be leading to greater infant mortality and maternal deaths during pregnancy. Problems in the support system that are most likely to cause harm are: frequent moves (including during the later stages of pregnancy), poor accommodation, malnutrition and difficulties accessing health services such as antenatal appointments.

We also received numerous accounts of serious problems experienced by families with disabilities or particular health needs such as amputees or those who were HIV-positive. One case involved a family where the baby, due to complications at birth, needed supplementary oxygen. Without access to cash support and unable to use public transportation, the family had to make regular trips to the hospital on foot carrying the baby and a heavy oxygen tank. We believe the issue of access to adequate cash support needs addressing urgently to prevent any further harm to children and families.

Education
Inadequate financial support coupled with frequent moves within asylum accommodation mean that children’s education is disrupted. Parents struggle to pay for school uniforms, school trips, or for any extra-curricular activities. Families who do not have access to cash support are unable to use public transportation and have to walk miles every day to get their children to school or nursery.

Worklessness
Welfare reform focuses on getting parents into work. However, asylum seeking parents are prevented from working, leaving families dependent on state support. This means that parents are left powerless and lose their skills while children are left without positive role models. The government’s own research has highlighted that this can lead to high levels of unemployment and under-employment once a family gains refugee status.

Home life
Some of the most worrying evidence the inquiry heard related to home life. A number of factors were seen to impact on a family’s home life including poor quality accommodation, unsafe neighbourhoods, separation from family members through dispersal, financial pressures and the anxiety caused by the asylum process. We heard how in many cases families were allocated unsafe, dirty and damp accommodation. There appears to be little obligation on housing providers to meet decency standards or safeguarding duties towards children. We also heard how families were placed in dangerous areas where they experienced ongoing harassment including physical attacks.

One of the most unacceptable things we heard was that families have little privacy in the housing provided by the Home Office. A number of families reported that staff frequently enter their homes unannounced, frightening their children. One single mother living in a hostel told the panel how male staff members spy on her while she is in the bathroom. This leaves parents feeling particularly vulnerable and unable to protect their children. This kind of
behaviour is entirely unacceptable and the government should urgently review the current guidance given to housing providers to ensure that they respect the privacy and dignity of families.

**Societal and institutional attitudes**
Many members of the public continue to believe myths about asylum seekers, in particular that the UK accepts more than its fair share of refugees and that they receive all manner of luxuries. Yet the reality is that many families desperately needing support are left unable to meet even their most basic living needs.

Misconceptions such as these cause tension between deprived communities and contribute to the severe hostility experienced by refugee children and families, often living in close proximity to other vulnerable families. The panel received extremely distressing evidence of families being racially abused, children being hounded at school and babies having stones thrown at them. Families also reported that when they were harassed or victimised, they often felt unable to complain for fear of the repercussions on their protection case.

We strongly believe that there is an urgent need to address the public discourse around asylum and refugee issues, and correct the misperceptions which persist in our society.

**Creating a hostile environment**
As well as controlling our borders, the Home Office has a responsibility to provide international protection and promote children’s welfare. Clear examples from the past show no correlation between levels of support and numbers of asylum seekers in the UK. For example, in 1999 when support payments were reduced and vouchers were introduced, asylum applications increased. When cash was reintroduced, the numbers went down steadily for years afterwards. We believe that the premise, that making things difficult for families will somehow lead more people to leave the UK, is dangerously flawed and has serious repercussions for children’s well-being and safety.

We welcome the government’s current review of the asylum support system and the work underway by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) to investigate and improve their systems for providing information to, and gaining feedback from asylum applicants.

We believe that successive governments have failed children by delivering an asylum support system that keeps children in poverty, leads to dependency on the state and denies asylum seeking families the resources they need to meet their needs. Not only must the levels of support be increased to make sure no child is condemned to poverty, but many other aspects of the asylum support system which prevent children and families from having a dignified existence need to be addressed. We hope that the government will consider our report and recommendations.
Key recommendations

1. The government should abolish Section 4 support and urgently implement a single cash-based support system for all children and their families who need asylum support while they are in the UK. This should include children who were born after an asylum refusal, to ensure that no child is left destitute.

2. Asylum support for families also provided with accommodation should be aligned with mainstream benefit rates paid for living expenses. Where accommodation includes utilities (such as heating, lighting and water rates) which would normally be expected to be paid from living expenses, it is appropriate to make some deduction. However, these must be reasonable and comparable to those made from housing benefit where gas, electricity and water bills are covered within rent payments. The rates of support should never fall below 70% of income support.

3. Support should be increased annually and at the very least in line with income support.

4. Permission to work should be granted to asylum seeking parents and young adults if their claim for asylum has not been concluded within six months. Refused asylum seekers who cannot be returned to their country of origin should also be allowed to work.

5. Newly dispersed families should be provided with comprehensive, written information in a language which they understand about their rights and entitlements, as well as practical information about services in their areas and where to get support.

6. The government should ensure that asylum seekers’ needs for privacy are respected by housing providers, who should not enter properties unannounced.

7. Ministers and the UKBA should work to promote positive relations between refugee and British communities, and a constructive public debate by celebrating and supporting this country’s proud tradition of giving sanctuary to those in need of protection.

For more information about the inquiry or to read the full report:

- Visit The Children’s Society website at www.childrenssociety.org.uk/parliamentary-inquiry-asylum-support-children
- Contact Nadine Ibbetson: nadine.ibbetson@childrenssociety.org.uk

1. Serious Case Review of Child EG from Westminster City Council (April 2012); http://www.westminster.gov.uk/services/healthandsocialcare/familycare/safeguardingchildren/serious-case-reviews
2. Support for refused asylum seekers under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 is generally provided to families where children are born after an asylum claim has been refused or where they have not been supported by the Home Office previously, but cannot leave the UK. The rates of support for children are the same as for adults at £35.39 with some additional payments for young children. There is no cash and the support is provided in the form of a payment card. Families are generally housed in hostels.
3. Dr. Jenny Phillimore, University of Birmingham, Evidence Session 1, 20 November 2012
6. Mike Kaye, Still Human Still Here, Evidence Session 1, 20 November 2012