Briefing for debate on asylum support for children and young people, February 2013

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About Barnardo’s

Barnardo’s is the UK’s largest children’s charity, with 800 services supporting over 200,000 children, young people and families every year. Our projects include counselling for children who have experienced sexual exploitation, fostering and adoption services, vocational training, disability inclusion groups and services for young carers. Our purpose is to help the UK’s most vulnerable children and young people transform their lives and fulfil their potential.

We believe that children in asylum-seeking families should be adequately supported regardless of their immigration status. Meeting the essential living needs of these children should be of utmost concern. This response is based on the views of our practitioners and experience of delivering services to children and young people in the asylum system.

Barnardo’s services for children and young people in the asylum system

- Barnardo’s has three trafficking services in London, Hampshire and Manchester and many of the young people involved receive support through the asylum system. In Manchester our practitioners work specifically with failed and destitute asylum seekers.

- We run a specialist fostering service in the South East that provides family placements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and supports them through the asylum process.
• We provide a range of services for families experiencing difficulties, including those in temporary accommodation, many of whom are involved in the asylum process.
• In Bristol we run a specialist service providing advocacy and support for asylum-seeking families.

Financial support

We believe that the current asylum support system does not adequately meet the essential living needs of all asylum seekers. Under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, asylum seekers are entitled to receive support. However, we are aware that the level of this support is considerably less than current Income Support rates, which are established at a minimum level to meet essential living needs.

Deduction rate for cost of utilities is higher than in mainstream system

We accept that deductions are made as services charges are provided for, unlike for those in the mainstream benefit system. However, we are concerned that this deduction is too high. Those in the mainstream system who have their utility bills covered in their rent arrangements have a standard rate deducted from their payments. The deduction rate for asylum seekers, however, is higher. Due to this disparity, asylum-seeking young people between the age of 16-18 and families with children are ultimately entitled to just over half the current rate of Income Support. This difference is too high and is the result of asylum seekers paying a higher than standard rate of deduction, leaving many with inadequate financial support.

We welcome the recommendation from the recent Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry Into Asylum Support for children and young people that 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.

Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
Support levels are even lower for those who have had an asylum claim refused. Under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, asylum seekers who have had their claim refused are entitled to support but at an even lower level than those receiving support through Section 95. Whilst families with children continue to be eligible for Section 95 support even if their claim is refused, those who have children after a refusal are only eligible for Section 4 support. Many, often single mothers, are therefore pushed into severe poverty. The extremely low level of support for families who have children after their asylum claim is refused places some into a financial situation where they cannot meet their children’s essential living needs.

Families who have children after their asylum claim is refused should be supported under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 rather than the lower rates under Section 4 to ensure that children’s essential living needs are met.

Through our direct work with asylum seekers, our practitioners are aware of the difficulties that many asylum seekers face due to a lack of adequate financial support. We are very worried that many are simply unable to meet their essential living needs through the asylum support system alone and cannot access the most basic of provisions. Families are often forced into accessing food parcels and relying on short-term support from friends. We know of instances where parents are unable to buy warm clothing for their children in the winter or to replace their clothes as they grow. Many are also unable to access leisure activities or healthy food options due to the costs involved and are often unable to buy items necessary for the development of their children such as books and toys. Overall, these effects combine to have a significant detrimental effect on children and young people’s development.

We welcome the recommendation from the recent Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry Into Asylum Support for children and young people calling on the Government to 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.

Difficulties during transition between receiving National Asylum Support System (NASS) support and moving into the mainstream system

We are concerned about the difficulties that many families go through during the period of transition between receiving National Asylum Support System (NASS) support and moving into the mainstream system. Our practitioners work with
asylum-seeking families who are granted temporary or indefinite leave to remain and are subsequently no longer eligible for NASS support. Whilst they become eligible for support through the mainstream system, we know that it typically takes 2-6 weeks to make the transition from one system to the other. They are therefore left without any support during the time and become reliant on our services. It is clear that support is needed in this transition period to avoid this gap in provision and prevent families from becoming destitute.

**A system of financial support should be put in place for asylum-seeking families making the transition from NASS support to the mainstream system to ensure that they are adequately provided for in this period.**

**Azure payment card**

Our practitioners work with young people who are given the Azure card. As the vouchers can only be used in specific shops, it can be necessary to travel to supermarkets, leading to an additional cost. These can also be more expensive than local markets or second-hand shops. We also know that some find it embarrassing and stigmatizing to buy items with the card. Shopping is often checked to ensure that only the designated items have been bought and other customers can become aware that the card-user is an asylum seeker. The card therefore confers a lack of privacy. This is particularly problematic when asylum seekers are negatively portrayed in the media and are sometimes treated with prejudice by others. For example, one young person we supported presented her Azure card at a supermarket but was treated in a rude manner by the cashier. This added to the embarrassment she already felt in using the card. Overall, it is unacceptable that subsistence for asylum seekers is provided in this manner.

**We welcome the recommendation from the recent Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry Into Asylum Support for children and young people that asylum seekers should be provided with subsistence through cash benefits rather than through the Azure card or vouchers.**

**Accommodation**

We are very concerned about the standard of accommodation provided to asylum-seeking families and the implications this has for children. Our practitioners support asylum seekers who are provided with NASS accommodation and advocate on their behalf. They report that many housing providers do not maintain their properties appropriately and that good conditions are the exception rather than the rule. The houses are often damp, small and have a range of issues from pest infestation to poor heating. These conditions are not in the best interests of children and do not
promote their welfare. Worse still, we know of examples of accommodation with broken windows, broken heating or water systems, and broken locks. We have also advocated on behalf of young women with children who have had housing providers regularly entering their accommodation without prior warning and without knocking. It is clear that some NASS accommodation does not meet minimum accepted standards of living and the examples above lead us to believe that there are safeguarding issues around children living in housing that is not secure.

Case study – inadequate NASS accommodation

One of our practitioners accompanied a young woman with children to view a NASS provided flat in Manchester. Upon arriving they noticed that the cooker had been placed in the middle of the kitchen as the allocated spot by the wall had been too small to place it into. The piping extended from the wall to the cooker, sectioning off part of the room. In both the kitchen and the children’s bedroom there were gaps in the wall. This led to extremely cold conditions in the flat and meant that outsiders could peer in. Finally, the bath had a leak and this had led to a pool of water on the floor. With the support of our practitioner she was able to complain about the flat and was eventually moved into alternative accommodation.

We are worried that the asylum seekers we work with in NASS accommodation have been required to move accommodation too readily. We know that there are cases where asylum seekers with children have been required to move out of their accommodation with little explanation or notice. Moving to a new location can be a particularly daunting experience for asylum seekers, especially if they have built up a system of support in their area. Some may not have knowledge of their new area or how to access information. Support during the moving process is therefore crucial. From our experience, however, there is often minimal support, if any, leaving many to fend for themselves. Furthermore, requiring families to move to distant locations means that children have to be moved to new schools. When this happens on a regular basis, it is likely to disrupt their education

Case study – frequently changing accommodation

A mother with three children under the age of 7 was required to move house three times in quick succession. The first two times, she re-located all of her children into new schools. Moving schools so frequently had a negative emotional impact on her children and she had the additional cost of paying for new school uniforms.

The third time they were moved, they were told it was to be a temporary placement. Consequently, she decided not to change her children’s school. As the journey to the school would have involved taking two buses, a cost she could not afford, she and her three young children walked for an hour to school and an hour from school everyday.
Asylum seekers in NASS accommodation have a right to live in adequate housing. Urgent action should be taken to ensure that this housing meets minimum standards to ensure that children are kept safe and that their welfare is promoted.

Asylum-seeking families with children should be allocated to accommodation which they can occupy for the duration of their asylum applications. If this is not possible, families should not be required to move distances which entails children changing schools.

Work

Almost all of the asylum seekers we support are denied permission to work and many have waited for long periods of time for a decision to be made on their case. Our practitioners report that parents want to be able to support themselves and contribute to society. Many have skills that would enable them to do so. Not being able to work means that they are reliant on state support, leaving them in poverty. It can also affect their feeling of self-worth as they are unable to take an active part in society. These two factors can combine to make it difficult for parents to provide happy homes for their children.

As there is a backlog of asylum applications, it is unfair to penalise asylum seekers for the delay in decisions. If they have waited more than six months for a decision through no fault of their own, we believe that they should be given the right to work. The welfare system, for those who are able to work, is based upon the principle of providing support for them to be able to do so. Keeping asylum seekers who are able to work solely reliant on the welfare system goes against this principle. It also prevents them from giving back to the society that has supported them and from contributing to the economy. If asylum seekers were given the right to work, we would expect to see improved family life and opportunities for children as their parents are given the chance to lift themselves out of poverty and regain their self-esteem as they become self-sufficient.

Some asylum seekers and their children are unable to return to their country of origin due to a number of reasons, such as the host country refusing to take them back, a lack of papers or identification, or because they are stateless. In these situations, asylum seekers should be given the right to work as they are not responsible for their continued residence in the UK. Granting this right to work would enable them to provide better support to their children.

We welcome the recommendation from the recent Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry Into Asylum Support for children and young people
that 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.