

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration inspection of contact management

Helen Bamber Foundation submission

September 2024

The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) is a specialist clinical and human rights charity that works with survivors of trafficking, torture and other forms of extreme human. Our work alongside survivors shows us that, with early and appropriate care and support, they build the strength to move on with their lives. Our multidisciplinary and clinical team provides a bespoke Model of Integrated Care for survivors which includes medico-legal documentation of physical and psychological injuries; specialist programmes of therapeutic care; a medical advisory service; a counter-trafficking programme; housing and welfare advice; legal protection advice; and community integration activities and services.

The use of reporting conditions as a form of contact management

Our key concerns regarding reporting are as follows:

- The Home Office argues that *“everyone required to report to immigration as part of a condition of their bail is assessed to ensure the most appropriate reporting type and frequency is applied”* and that *“identifying and safeguarding vulnerable individuals is very much part of this assessment.”*¹ This is often not the experience of HBF clients. Reporting conditions can be and are imposed on extremely vulnerable individuals, including those with mental and/or physical disabilities and survivors of torture and trafficking. Challenging the frequency of reporting conditions often requires

¹ Home Office [letter to Migrants Organise re: Request for the Immediate Suspension of Immigration Bail Reporting Conditions](#), 13th August 2024

significant advocacy and the evidential threshold can be set impossibly high for many (usually a detailed medical report is needed).

- As well as being extremely distressing, the cost of attending report centres is prohibitive given the extremely low rates of asylum support (£49.18 a week or just £8.86 for those in catered accommodation such as hotels). Many people seeking asylum in receipt of asylum support do not automatically receive additional payments for travel from the Home Office when they are required to attend reporting centres on a regular basis. Their reporting frequency could be as often as weekly and, depending on their reporting time, may require travelling at peak time, which is more expensive. In our experience, it can also require third party advocacy to ensure that travel tickets or expenses are provided in advance of reporting events, interviews, and appeal hearings. For one client, the very meagre financial support was a significant ongoing frustration for him. In an annual review he had spoken about how little he felt he had to live on week-to-week, and how this was also being exacerbated by having to attend Home Office reporting every two weeks and the associated travel costs. These concerns would arise in his therapy sessions and were a factor in his stabilisation work ending prematurely. Linked to the issue of cost, some people have to travel extremely long distances to report.
- People seeking asylum during reporting are often treated poorly by some security guards and immigration officers. This adds to the harm and trauma caused by the reporting experience.

Available data indicates that the rate of absconding has consistently been in the single digits, below 5%.² The current Home Office policy is also clear that telephone reporting should be the main form of reporting. Given the harm that in-person reporting causes, the default should be telephone/online reporting.

Case Study 1

Asim was held in immigration detention from June to October 2022, having been detained after one of his reporting dates. His experience in detention was particularly traumatic - with a fellow Sudanese detainee he was close to committing suicide, and witnessed a friend set fire to themselves, amongst many other difficulties. Since his release from immigration detention in October 2022, Asim has been required to return to the same reporting centre (where he was removed to immigration detention) every two weeks in person. As of January 2024, Asim has had his reporting reduced to monthly in person, following intervention from his immigration representative and a supporting statement from HBF.

Throughout HBF's time working with Asim, he has spoken of the difficulty of having to attend regular reporting. In our first meeting he described having flashbacks as soon as he entered the building, that it reminded him of being detained in the "hell hole". The anxiety

² https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/absconding_rate

and fear of reporting has meant that Asim is unable to sleep the evening prior to attending. Asim described one instance this year where he had a panic attack while reporting - he felt he was "losing his breath" and had to be let out during the reporting meeting to calm himself down. In HBF's welfare call with him in August, Asim described rude behaviour from the security staff at the building, questioning why he was now attending monthly (despite Asim having a letter from the Home Office confirming his reduced conditions) and being needlessly intimidating towards him.

Case Study 2

Bilal is a young male from Egypt. He entered the UK in 2022, was detained upon arrival and was soon served with a Notice of Intent. Since then, his asylum claim has been put on hold while the Home Office was considering whether it was admissible in the UK asylum system and Bilal has been required to report every two weeks. He was previously allowed to study and started engaging with his local college as a result. The uncertainty around his asylum claim impacts him greatly but he has tried his best to engage with the local community and improve his language skills in the meantime. One day, his reporting conditions were suddenly amended, and Bilal was prevented from studying. It took a significant toll on him as attending college was, at the time, one of the only elements giving him purpose and structuring his daily routine. The ban on studying, alongside time spent previously in detention and fortnightly reporting have made Bilal feel like 'a criminal'.

Bilal struggled significantly with attending his reporting every two weeks as this would trigger painful memories from his past experiences. He was detained and tortured by his home country's authorities on several occasions and has since then developed a fear of authorities. He felt extremely frightened around the reporting centre, seeing police cars and uniforms. It was also clear that the frequency of reporting alongside its conditions (in person) were having a significant impact on him, his wellbeing and mental health presentation.

Eventually, Bilal was allowed to study again, and, after extensive advocacy, his reporting conditions were amended from every two weeks to every six months in light of his mental health difficulties and vulnerability as a survivor of human trafficking. However, it was very hard for Bilal to appreciate this. He reported strong feelings of unfairness and injustice and was scared that his reporting conditions would suddenly be changed again.

Case study 3

Charity is a young woman from Nigeria. She is currently pregnant and has a three-year-old daughter. She is an isolated single mother with little network of support, no family and limited acquaintances in the UK. She has a pending initial asylum claim and received a conclusive grounds decision after being referred to the National Referral Mechanism. She is required to report in person every two weeks and finds the process very distressing.

Charity is currently housed in asylum accommodation in Stratford and must travel for more than an hour and a half each way with her young daughter to attend her fortnightly reporting at Lunar House. She is currently in receipt of asylum support only following a positive conclusive grounds decision (meaning support under the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract has been stopped), and therefore must take cheaper public transport to be able to afford fortnightly reporting, which impacts her journey and how long it takes her to travel as well as her finances.

Charity is a survivor of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Like many of our clients, she is fearful of travelling around London as she is afraid of being found by her traffickers.

Promptness and efficiency of Home Office correspondence

The Independent Chief Inspector will be well aware of the terrible problems seen in the summer of last year regarding discontinuation of asylum support and the move-on period which left many new refugees homeless, or at serious risk of becoming so. They, in part, stemmed from problems with when refugees receive their grant letter, their Biometric Residence Permit (BRP,) the letter containing the date when their asylum support will end, and the notice to quit their accommodation on the same day. You can read more about our concerns in [this briefing](#).

While the Home Office has done a lot of work to address some of these problems, we would urge the ICIBI to look at how that is operating in practice. For example, whilst our clients invariably are informed of an eviction date, via the subcontracted accommodation provider, they far more rarely receive a discontinuation letter from the Home Office, which is essential to understanding the reasons for discontinuation of accommodation/support.

Also, it may not come under the scope of this investigation but in the context of “promptness and efficiency” of Home Office correspondence, HBF would also like to highlight the ongoing issues with responses from Migrant Help, subcontracted by the Home Office. Staff frequently see queries regarding asylum support going unanswered for weeks if not months (six months is the longest wait so far). This means, in urgent cases, staff have

to bypass them and go straight to the Home Office escalation teams - who then usually respond relatively quickly.

Case study 4

A client was told that he would be moved to Napier Barracks despite a successful suitability challenge to him being accommodated in large accommodation sites. As the move was scheduled for the following day, HBF emailed the Migrant Help and Home Office escalations teams directly.

Migrant Help did not respond until nearly a month later when they asked if the move had gone ahead or if the client still needed help. By comparison, the Home Office escalations team responded to the email HBF sent the next day, advising that the move was cancelled. While this is a quick result, if clients were advocating for themselves, they would not have the Home Office contact details and so would remain waiting for long periods of time to resolve their problems.

Case study 5

An HBF client's asylum support payments stopped without explanation or reason. He tried to contact Migrant Help numerous times over a two-week period with no success. He was finally able to report the issue and was told that a replacement card would be sent, and he should allow ten working days for it to arrive. An Emergency Cash Payment (ECP) was also issued, and he was told it would be given to him via the accommodation provider within 24 hours.

The client received his new Aspen card, but it did not have money loaded onto it. HBF staff contacted Migrant Help and the Home Office as the client had also not received the ECP that had been issued. It was then that Migrant Help advised that the support had been stopped but was unable to say why. They also advised that an appeal to the Asylum Support Tribunal would not be necessary despite the seeming error in payments being stopped.

When HBF staff spoke to the Home Office, they were advised that payments would start again and that a letter had been sent. The client did not receive this letter. In addition, despite HBF submitting a form of authority and having previously been sent letters directly, staff were told we could not receive a letter explaining the reason it had been stopped so they were unable to explain to the client.

Approximately a month after payments were stopped, the client's support was started again. He then received the ECP the day after support started. He had had to rely on emergency relief payments from HBF and borrow money from friends. The following day, the client's asylum claim was decided positively. It remains unclear why payments were

stopped, but the timing of the grant of leave in the UK raises the question about whether it was a miscommunication within the Home Office and the client's support with discontinued too soon.

The recording of personal and contact details by the Home Office

The inadequacy of the Home Office's recording of personal and contact details was exemplified by the rollout of new Aspen cards, due to a new service provider, in May 2021. Due to various failures, this rollout meant that thousands of people, already subsisting on a very low amount of financial support, went without that support for a significant amount of time. Some people did not receive a new Aspen card, and only did so after sustained third party advocacy. Others had Aspen cards issued to their address for people who no longer lived there. We refer you to Asylum Matters ['Lessons Learned' report](#) for more context on the Aspen card rollout in 2021.

It became very clear during this time, and in subsequent years, that the Home Office's recording of personal and contact details was inaccurate and inadequate, and the stakes of having inaccurate data are very high, relating often to, for example, a person's receipt of financial support, a decision letter on their asylum claim.

There is due to be a new provider for the provision of Aspen cards in 2025, and HBF is very concerned that the same will happen again. We understand from a recent meeting with a staff member from the Home Office (who is now no longer working on the Aspen card transition in 2025) that a significant amount of work has been undertaken within the Home Office to consolidate contact information, in this case for people who are provided with asylum support under Sections 98, 95, or 4(2) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. However, we urge the ICIBI to scrutinise their efforts before the new Aspen card is rolled out next year, to mitigate the entirely avoidable destitution experienced by many people seeking asylum during the same process in 2021.

The Home Office recently sent out communications via various stakeholder forums stating: *"We strongly encourage all asylum seekers and their representatives to contact the above inbox, irrespective if they have moved or are moving to ensure their claim for asylum is not unduly delayed."* Whilst it is appreciated that efforts are being undertaken to update addresses, it should not be dependent on people seeking asylum and those supporting/representing them to need to update their address or contact details where they have already done so, and particularly where the Home Office is providing them with accommodation.

Case study 6

Amelia is a survivor of trafficking and seeking asylum; she lives in dispersal accommodation with her seven-year-old son. She noticed that her current Aspen card expired in July, and contacted HBF in mid-June for advice on this. We advised her to contact Migrant Help to request a replacement card. She did, and was informed that she would receive another card within 10 working days. When this timeframe passed and she had not received a replacement Aspen card, she contacted Migrant Help again and checked which address the new Aspen card had been issued to several weeks prior. The card had been issued to an address at which our client has not lived at for over two years, and a new card was then issued to her current address. She was not aware of how long the expiring Aspen card would work for, and if she would be left without funds in the meantime. Whilst this was resolved, this client had the foresight to ask for the address the previous card was sent to; without having done so, it seems likely she would have not had the financial support she is entitled to for a longer period, and she should have been able to reasonably assume that her address is correct across Home Office systems, particularly given how long she has lived at her current address.

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