

2026 HOME OFFICE REVIEW OF ASYLUM SUPPORT RATES

Helen Bamber Foundation submission

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 cruelty and believes that all survivors should have safety, freedom and power. 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.

Many of our clients receive asylum support under sections 95, 98 and 4(2) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The low asylum support rates negatively affect all aspects of their life in the UK. In our collective clinical experience at HBF, the low rates of financial support provided to our clients can cause them considerable distress and add to their low self-esteem and mental health problems. This can significantly impede their engagement with, and progress in, therapy.

HBF strongly believes that those seeking protection in the UK should receive the same levels of state support as any other individuals in needs, and that support should be sufficient to allow them to live in dignity and uphold their human rights. Asylum support rates must be raised urgently to more realistically reflect the needs of asylum seekers. This submission analyses the Home Office assessment of support rates and provides evidence of HBF clients' needs, as well as setting out our recommendations for change.

The current methodology that is used to assess the cost of essential needs

In the 2024 asylum support rates review, the Home Office confirmed that in order to determine the level of financial support people in the asylum system require to meet their essential living needs, they “*have taken the same approach as the 2023 review*”.¹ HBF and other organisations have submitted responses to previous Home Office reviews of asylum support rates, advising that this approach is flawed. The 2020 baseline rate of asylum support was inadequate, so any subsequent calculations that involve increases to that baseline do not capture the real cost of people’s essential needs. HBF believes that the Home Office’s approach to assessing the levels at which to set asylum support needs to change for a number of reasons:

- The current methodology a) does not cover *all* essential needs (we elaborate on this further below) and b) does not accurately reflect the cost of the essential needs that are currently included. The ‘pick n mix’ approach to calculating the costs of different needs, as set out in the Home Office’s 2024 review, also makes it hard to understand the reasoning behind the final amounts.
- In the 2024 review, the Home Office continue to maintain that “*The asylum support rates are calculated for the average able bodied adult asylum seeker*” and that individuals can apply for additional funds to meet their essential needs if they “*can show they have exceptional needs*” (emphasis added). The Home Office does not state which additional funds it is referring to, but HBF has repeatedly provided evidence to the department of the barriers facing individuals in accessing *any* additional funding. Not only is the assessment of ‘essential needs’ inadequate, that assessment also makes no allowances for those in the asylum system with additional mental or physical health needs who do not reach the threshold required to make them eligible for additional support, such as that from a local authority under the Care Act 2014. Nor does it allow for the fact that those with additional needs, who would in fact meet this threshold, may struggle to prove these needs without extensive support which is not always available. The lack of consideration for those who have additional vulnerabilities is causing considerable difficulties for many of our clients.
- The assessment methodology also includes assumptions about additional funding and support that is simply not available. While certain types of additional support may not always be the responsibility of the Home Office, if the department is not sure that additional funding is available *in practice* (and/or not taking steps to check that it is), then that support should not be included in calculations. Further steps should be taken to ensure that funding is practically available before it is relied on as part of this assessment – we have made specific recommendations about this under each ‘essential need’ below.

¹ Home Office [2024 Asylum Support Rate Review](#), Summer 2025

- There is no meaningful consideration of what people who actually live on asylum support experience. A small number of charities, including HBF, can provide very good information about their clients but the actual experiences of men, women and children with direct experience of asylum support, including those who have no access to charity support, is absent from the Home Office's consideration. By comparison, the Department of Work and Pensions relies on data from the Family Resources Survey which is a survey with people living on low income. They also commission research to consider things like material deprivation among households on low income.

Our key recommendations are as follows:

- **An alternative approach to assessing appropriate levels of support should be taken**, with the starting point that it is essential to assess what rate would be necessary for an *acceptable standard of living*. This would include a more realistic assessment of what people seeking asylum actually need to live in safety and with dignity. We recommend the Home Office considers the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's work on the 'Essential minimum amount of support to afford the essentials'.²
- **In the interim, the rate of asylum support should be the equivalent of mainstream benefits *minus* a proportion of that figure (up to 30%) to allow for utilities, rent and other costs covered separately by the Home Office.** The Home Office has previously rejected aligning asylum support allowances with mainstream social security benefits (as was done prior to 1999) because the latter "*are not set according to the 'essential living needs' test and are generally required to cover a broader range of costs, including paying for utilities*".³ In the 2024 review of asylum support rates, the Home Office maintains this position, arguing that "*the purpose of the asylum support is to ensure that individuals are not left destitute whilst their asylum claims, and any appeals, are under consideration.*" No clear explanation has been given as to why those on asylum support have different "*living needs*" to those on mainstream benefits (indeed, arguably they have greater needs because of arriving with no possessions; extremely long delays in asylum decision making; and their additional vulnerabilities). Currently, a total of 15% can be deducted from Universal Credit payments for certain costs (including utilities, Council Tax, rent and service charges).⁴

² Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [Guarantee our Essentials: reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times | Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#), January 2026

³ Report on review of weekly allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers: 2021 April 2022

⁴ See [Universal Credit deductions: Find out about money taken off your Universal Credit Payment](#); [Universal Credit: What you'll get - GOV.UK](#) and [Paying debts through universal credit - Shelter England](#)

The makeup of the essential needs categories

We understand that the Home Office deems the following to be essential needs: food and non-alcoholic drinks; clothing and footwear; communications; toiletries; non-prescription medicines; laundry/toilet paper; and (limited) travel. HBF considers all the above to be essential needs and would not remove any of these categories. However, it is HBF's belief that the Home Office's understanding of what each of these categories actually means in practice is limited and does not reflect the lived experience of people in the asylum system. Below we have detailed categories to be added and how the existing categories should be better understood, drawing on the direct experiences of our clients.

Items to add to the essential needs categories

Travel

The Home Office continues to view travel as necessary in *"limited circumstances to enable other needs to be met"*. In the 2024 asylum support rates review, the Home Office specified these needs as *"maintaining interpersonal relationships and a minimum level of participation in social, cultural and religious life"*. It goes on to say:

"We do not consider that the provision of funds for at least one return bus journey per week needs to be increased in order for those needs to be met. However, the figure calculated by the disaggregated CPI methodology does not take into account the increase in the bus fare cap from £2 to £3⁵ for single bus fares which came into effect on 1 January 2025. Therefore, we deem it necessary for the allowance to be set at £6 for individuals to be able to afford one return bus journey per week."

It remains unclear why the Home Office deems one return bus journey a week enough to maintain even the *"minimum"* level of participation in everyday life.

We fundamentally disagree with the Home Office's assertion that travel is only essential in *"limited circumstances"*. We have repeatedly outlined the reasons why people seeking asylum need to be able to travel freely and continue to call for access to free bus travel in London, where we have extensive experience of the barriers people face when it comes to using public transport.⁶ Barriers to travel resulting from low levels of asylum support have also been raised during campaigns calling for free travel in Scotland, Wales and Oxford. Yet, it should not be for local government to have to cover the gaps in support left by central government.

⁵ Department for Transport, [National bus fare cap](#), October 2024

⁶ See Helen Bamber Foundation, [When you can't afford to visit the doctor: the need for free bus travel in London for people seeking asylum](#), December 2025

One HBF client was moved while her son was in the middle of an assessment for autism and ADHD at his school. The new journey from their accommodation to the school required two buses each way. This meant for her to take her son to school and back, she was required to take eight buses. Even with the bus fare cap of £5.25 a day, this was unaffordable. Just one trip to school would leave her with only 75p left of the £6 allocated for travel, for the rest of the week.

On 28th January 2026, the Home Office confirmed that the provision of funded transport to 'essential' appointments for those in initial and contingency accommodation would be stopped in order to "reduce unnecessary costs to the public".⁷ The Home Office policy states that for journeys under three miles, individuals will be expected to "make and fund their own travel arrangements" while at the same time maintaining that people on asylum support need to complete only one return journey. In one breath the Home Office states that £6 per week for travel is enough while cutting one of their own methods of supporting those to access their essential needs.

Many of our clients suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as other severe mental health conditions including major depressive disorder, anxiety, and psychosis. Many have 'dissociative' symptoms – i.e., have episodes in which they go 'blank' and are transiently aware of their actions and/or their surroundings. They can become lost while travelling, catching the wrong bus or train and then not know where they are. With such a limited amount of financial support available and cuts to alternative means of funded travel, there is little room for these types of errors, which are common for people with severe mental health conditions and a history of traumatic experiences. Many people end up walking to their destination, a journey which can take several hours and cause both mental and physical exhaustion. Many also do not have friends or family who can support them in making these journeys.

The NHS Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS) can refund reasonable travel costs if a person has been referred to hospital or other NHS premises for specialist NHS treatment or diagnostic tests.⁸ However, this excludes visits to a GP, dentist or other primary care service provider, including antenatal care.

Furthermore, in our experience the HTCS is not well known among people seeking asylum who require specialist NHS treatment, and fall within the eligibility of the HTCS, nor is it actually accessible. Many hospitals have no or only a partially staffed cashier's desk, and so asylum seekers who do know about the HTCS are very unlikely to have their travel money reimbursed on the same day. Prompt reimbursement is essential when the weekly rate of support is so low. If the travel costs are claimed retrospectively, the NHS usually does this

⁷ Home Office letter from Deputy Director of Asylum Services to sector stakeholders, 28th January 2026

⁸ See NHS, [Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme](#) (HTCS)

via a bank transfer. Given that asylum seekers are largely prohibited from opening a bank account, this makes it difficult / impossible to receive retrospectively reimbursed travel money.

The limited rate of asylum support makes it extremely difficult for people seeking asylum to engage in activities that many of us take for granted and play an important role in living a full, self-actualised life, due to prohibitive travel costs. These include accessing college and other educational bodies (our clients are very rarely considered eligible for Discretionary Learner Support Funds and colleges sometimes do not have travel bursaries), social support networks, and religious and/or cultural establishments.⁹

The inability to travel for such purposes increases social isolation, prevents people from learning English and integrating within their communities more generally and causes a deterioration in mental health. The inability to travel elsewhere other than the immediate vicinity of their accommodation, combined with the often-poor quality of asylum support accommodation, increases feelings of hopelessness and negatively impacts mental health. This inability to integrate also plays a role in perpetuating the rhetoric that people seeking asylum are ‘the other’, something to be afraid of or ostracised. Through integration into the community these fears are allayed, and people are able to create meaningful relationships within their communities which has undeniable benefits for society as a whole.

Finally, the notion that only limited travel costs are essential in part relies on the assumption that *“asylum seekers are invariably accommodated in urban areas”* which infers they will be close to all the services they need. In line with the Allocation of Asylum Accommodation Policy clients of HBF are required to be housed within London travel zones and therefore are ostensibly accommodated in urban areas. However:

- We are aware of the more acute difficulties facing asylum seekers accommodated in less urban areas in other parts of the UK, such as rural parts of Scotland.
- Even within zones 1-6 of London, several of our clients have been placed in areas which are not in the near vicinity of affordable shops or vital services. Many of our clients have complex mental and often physical health conditions, impacting their ability to travel.

Recommendations:

- The assessment used to determine rates for travel should include examination of what is really required to enable people to buy the food they need; access vital services; and maintain interpersonal relationships and maintain a minimum level of participation in social, cultural and religious life.¹⁰

⁹ Helen Bamber Foundation, [When you can't afford to visit the doctor: the need for free bus travel in London for people seeking asylum](#), December 2025

¹⁰ See *Refugee Action v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2014] EWHC 1033 (Admin), para 116: “However what is involved in practice in affording asylum seekers an opportunity for a minimum level of participation in social, cultural, and religious life, is a different question. So too is the question what, if any, financial support it

- The allocation of money for travel should be increased to a level that would cover at least three return bus journeys a week, wherever the recipient is accommodated.

In its 2020 report, the Home Office report stated that *"the costs of travel for purposes unique to asylum seekers are covered through separate arrangements. Travel to legal appointments is met through legal aid and travel costs to reporting events, asylum interviews and appeal hearings are paid separately"*.

Many asylum seekers 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 anything from weekly to annually, 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. He spoke 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 arose repeatedly in his therapy also and were a factor in his stabilisation work ending prematurely.

Recommendations:

- The Home Office should make telephone reporting more widespread.¹¹
- When a person is provided with asylum support of any kind and made to report in person, they should automatically have funds amounting to a day's bus ticket added to their Aspen card ahead of a reporting event. The same should apply to asylum interviews and appeal hearings.

We are aware that travel to appointments with a person's solicitor can be reimbursed via the Legal Aid Agency, according to the Legal Aid Agency's 2013 Standard Civil Contract Specification. In HBF's experience, though, many solicitors are unaware of this provision and therefore do not inform clients of this nor apply for this disbursement.

In addition, many of our clients lack knowledge of this disbursement, as well as often the literacy and confidence (as well as other skills affected by their severe mental health conditions, for example adequate concentration amidst dissociative episodes) required to

requires. What is meant by "minimum"? What activities are covered by "participation"? What costs, if any, are necessary to enable such minimum participation? (...) They are judgments for the Secretary of State. They are ones which she has not yet made, because on her behalf it is contended, in my view erroneously, that this is a category of need which does not require consideration. In this respect the decision making process was flawed."

¹¹ Helen Bamber Foundation, [Evidence to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration inspection of contact management](#).

request their solicitor to reimburse their travel expenses, and to continue to request this on a regular basis.

Recommendation:

- The Home Office should work with the Legal Aid Agency to simplify the process by which recipients of asylum support can have their travel expenses to attend legal appointments reimbursed and ensure that all firms with an immigration Legal Aid contract be informed of this.

Healthcare

As outlined above, the NHS Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS) is inadequate for several reasons. In addition, we frequently support clients who are trying to navigate receiving appropriate care and treatment from the NHS and struggle with additional costs, separate to travel; in part this is due to the very low rate of asylum support leaving no room for misunderstanding, error, or delay. The Home Office calculation of asylum support rates currently includes a tiny amount for non-prescription medicines - just £0.49. This is presumably on the basis that all prescriptions are covered.

In order to receive free prescriptions, dental treatment, sight tests, glasses and contact lenses, travel costs and wigs/fabric supports, you must have a valid HC2 certificate via the NHS' Low Income Scheme. Whereas other mainstream benefits automatically qualify a person for full help with health costs, asylum support is not listed as such, and thus people seeking asylum must apply for a HC2 certificate in order to prove their low income. Only on receipt of the HC2 are they then able to provide that they are entitled to help with health costs and only once the HC2 is received can a person receive this healthcare for free.

However, the system for providing HC2 certificates for people seeking asylum is chaotic; the online form does not allow a person who confirms that they receive financial support from the Home Office to continue with the form and advises that they contact the Home Office instead. However, in our experience, contacting Migrant Help to request a HC2 certificate rarely yields a prompt response.

As a result, people often go for many months without this certificate. In that time, they cannot receive help with prescription costs; if they declare that they are entitled to help with health costs and do not have a valid HC2, they are likely to receive a penalty charge notice from the NHS Business Services Authority. Without support, many of our clients would not be able to resolve these charges and suffer the consequences of not being able to pay. If they use their very limited asylum support to purchase a prescription, they are likely to then be out of pocket for a significant amount of time, if they are not aware or able to request a refund.

We often experience clients 'opting' to go without their prescribed medication until such time as a HC2 arrives. It is unsafe for people to be in this position. Even once the HC2

arrives, it lasts for six months only (and must be applied for again if someone is moved to alternative accommodation). Many people in the asylum system are waiting for their claims to be decided for much longer than this and so have to go through the application process multiple times.

Additionally, and of particular concern for people receiving the full-board rate only, many medications are advised by GPs but not officially prescribed, meaning that they cannot be provided for free, even if accompanied by a HC2 certificate. Since changes implemented in 2018 “a GP, nurse or pharmacist will generally not give you a prescription for certain medicines that are available to buy in a pharmacy or supermarket, even if you qualify for free prescriptions”.¹² The list of conditions is extensive, and were someone to need these on a regular basis (e.g. a sore throat over several weeks, or coughs/colds throughout several months of the winter) it would amount to a significant proportion of the person’s weekly allowance. The amount allocated for non-prescription medication does not take into account these changes. There is also no obligation for a pharmacy to offer a generic formulation of an over-the-counter medication, leaving patients seeking asylum with very limited income at risk of buying a more expensive equivalent of the medication they need. One client’s NHS records stated that living in a full board hotel ‘may increase risk to mental health as can’t afford [over the counter] medication’.

Recommendations:

- The asylum support allowance should be increased to sufficiently cover health costs, include the wide range of ailments for which medication is not prescribed and therefore must be paid for.
- In line with other eligibility criteria for, for example Free School Meals, the receipt of support under Part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 should be an automatic passporting benefit for eligibility for full help with health costs. This would remove the need to continually apply for HC2 certificates, which often leaves long gaps where someone cannot prove their low income for the purposes of help with health costs. Should this not be possible, urgent reform is required to the processing and issuing of HC2 certificates to people seeking asylum, and this process should be automatic.

Changes to existing categories

Food and non-alcoholic drinks

The 2024 rates review confirms that “*expenditure for FYE 2023 for the bottom 20% of households by disposable equivalised income is the most appropriate way to determine costs required to meet essential food costs*”. Notwithstanding the fact that in 2022/2023, 21% of people were living in poverty, it is unclear why the Home Office believe it appropriate to

¹² NHS, [Medicines Information](#)

base a basic essential need such as food on the poorest in our society.¹³ This resulted in a reduction in the food allowance from the September 2023 price of £34.86 to £31.69. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has argued that for 2026/2027 weekly food per single adult per week would need to be £42 meaning that going into this period, people seeking asylum have just over £10 less food allowance than would, in reality, meet a person's essential needs.¹⁴

The Home Office has used a weekly meal plan to support their calculation of food rates, based on one created by the British Heart Foundation.¹⁵ The example shopping list they have created calculates a weekly portion cost on average to be £27.53. It is not possible to buy just a portion cost, and the basket costs are calculated to be £41.12, almost £10 more than the weekly food allowance in the self-catered or subs-only rate of asylum support. Many people in asylum support accommodation also face challenges with storing items such as not having a freezer or having limited space given that they live in shared facilities. We also find that often in asylum support accommodation the cooking facilities are inadequate and there is a lack of pots and pans. This then limits the effectiveness of bulk-buying and requiring the purchase of essential items, at basket cost, each week.

In addition, many of our clients are likely to have been deprived of adequate nutrition in previous, often precarious living situations (e.g. detention, situations of trafficking, other exploitation and torture) and it is therefore particularly important that they be able to obtain adequate nutrition. However, fresh fruit and vegetables – essential to meet a person's dietary needs – are unaffordable within this amount while also buying a sufficient number of staple foods.

Furthermore, the Home Office continue to argue that there is flexibility in the budget as *"it is expected that some items can be found cheaper than our market research by shopping around"*. As outlined above, while living in asylum accommodation access to shops in which one can bulk buy cost-effectively is not guaranteed. For example, if you live within walking distance of only a small supermarket or shop, you would need to travel (and therefore spend money on further transport) to bulk-buy and also be physically and mentally fit enough to carry these purchases home. This is not always possible. The Home Office assumes able-bodiedness and does not adequately consider those who have physical or mental health difficulties. Many clients with chronic physical health issues affecting their mobility experience are limited in their ability to get enough food and nutrition. Additionally, potentially cheaper outlets such as markets may require people to pay in cash meaning that those receiving support under section 4 cannot shop at these outlets as they are unable to withdraw cash.

¹³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation [UK Poverty 2025](#)

¹⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [Guarantee our Essentials: reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times](#), January 2026

¹⁵ Home Office [2024 Asylum Support Rate Review](#), Summer 2025

The amount allocated for food is particularly insufficient for people who are required to maintain a diet of specific foods for a health condition. Several of our clients are currently required to maintain a specific diet yet are unable to do this within the limitations of asylum support.

Many of our clients, particularly those with children, report not having enough money to buy enough food for their family, and in our experience, parents regularly skip meals themselves in order to ensure their children are more adequately fed. If asylum support payments were adequate for covering all 'essential' living needs, then people within the asylum system would not report that they were going hungry and would not need to rely on charities to help them meet their basic needs in relation to food or other expenses. Yet, HBF has to provide foodbank vouchers to clients in receipt of asylum support on a weekly basis, as our clients struggle to feed, clothe and generally provide for themselves within this amount. Foodbanks are not an adequate solution to inadequate asylum support provision. Aside from the fact that accessing a foodbank can cause shame and impinge on a person's dignity, the practicalities of accessing a foodbank (needing a referral from an organisation, the number of times the foodbank can be accessed, what food is actually available to name a few) mean that they cannot and should not be relied upon to meet a person's essential needs.

Recommendation:

- The allocation for food in the asylum support rates should be increased to match the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'Essential Guarantee' level of £42 per week. This is all the more vital if the travel rate does not increase given the link between being able to travel and being able to access appropriate food.

Clothing

In the 2024 rates review, the Home Office state that they *"don't consider that what is required to meet that essential need has changed over the past year and therefore no further changes are required"*. They maintain that the clothing costs of £3.46 per person per week is adequate. We do not believe that this rate of support is sufficient.

The annual clothing and footwear needs of a person seeking asylum are considered by the Home Office to be three pairs of underpants, three pairs of socks/tights, two vests/bras, two tops or shirts, two pairs of trousers or skirts, two cardigans/jumpers, one coat, and two pairs of shoes, one set of nightwear, and a hat, gloves and scarf. People often arrive in the UK with very little adequate or suitable clothing, and it is unclear why the Home Office believes that less than a week's worth of underwear is enough to last a person a whole year – even if there were adequate washing facilities in asylum support accommodation.

Wearing the same set of clothes for prolonged periods, a situation in which many of our clients find themselves, exacerbates clients' feelings of humiliation, shame and indignity, in addition to the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the impact of

traumatic events. Many of our clients ask for help with this, as they arrive with very few clothes and are unable to afford purchasing more.

The current asylum support rate is also insufficient to purchase seasonally appropriate clothing. Suitable winter clothing is expensive to buy, particularly at short notice when most required, and particularly if asylum seekers have dependent children who are often still growing at fast rates. Usually over the winter, HBF collect donations of winter clothing to distribute among our clients who are seeking asylum, but this is not a sustainable solution – state support should be sufficient to ensure people can clothe themselves.

Recommendation

- The allocation of asylum support should be increased to be sufficient for the purchase of suitable clothing all year round, including for dependent children who will continually outgrow their clothes. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recommends £7 per week per single adult to cover clothing essentials.

Communications

In its 2024 review, the Home Office continues to maintain that *"communications isn't an essential living need within itself, but it is accepted that it may be necessary in limited circumstances in order to meet other needs"*. They have set the rate at £4.21 per week for those living in self-catered accommodation – nothing is allocated for those in catered accommodation.

We fundamentally disagree with the Home Office's assertion. As we are living in an increasingly digitised world, more and more essential services, such as booking GP appointments and carrying out consultations, or applying for schools and Free School Meals, require being online. Many educational courses also require being able to access email and the internet. We have had clients turned away after presenting in person to council homelessness teams who argue that they have to make a homelessness application online before they can be offered any support.

In addition, communicating with family members from whom individuals may have been separated is an ongoing fundamental need and right for those seeking asylum. It is unclear why the Home Office view this basic need, one which every person has, as something not essential for people seeking asylum. They cannot usually access a phone contract without a bank account or credit history, following legislation disallowing 'disqualified persons' from opening bank accounts, therefore pay-as-you go is often the only option.¹⁶

Restricted access to the internet negatively affects children's progress at school. It also has a considerable effect on adults and contributes to depression and feeling of isolation as

¹⁶ Positive Action in Housing, [Refugees and asylum seekers: how to get a bank account](#), January 2026

they are unable to communicate with relatives left behind, some of whom are living in precarious situations and moving from place to place or living in refuge.

Recommendations:

- The assessment used for the rates review should look at what support is required to enable people to maintain interpersonal relationships and a minimum level of participation in social, cultural and religious life – for example, ensuring they have sufficient money to communicate via phone and email. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has assessed the amount needed for a single adult for communications (including phones, internet and postage) is £8 a week.
- Communication should be recognised as an essential need and included in the catered rate.
- Accommodation providers should be contractually obliged to provide WiFi in all catered and self-catered accommodation.

Toiletries, laundry and non-prescription medication

The Home Office has outlined that household cleaning items are now provided by the accommodation providers in Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) and so the support rates only cover toiletries (£0.92) and laundry/toilet paper (£0.55), amounting to £1.47 per week. Those in full board hotels are not allocated any money for these essential needs.

In our experience, residents of asylum support accommodation are often not provided with household cleaning tools required to clean their accommodation. Many people therefore are required to purchase items such as brooms and mops, all of which are too expensive to be covered by £1.47 per week.

In several cases, our clients have entered asylum support accommodation for the first time, after a period of prolonged homelessness and destitution, and needed to spend much of the full first week's payment on household cleaning items, due to the lack of cleanliness in the accommodation when they moved in, leaving no money for other needs that week.

Many of our clients are likely to have lived in unclean conditions in previous situations (including situations of trafficking and other exploitation, torture, homelessness). Due to the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and the impact of traumatic events, they can be particularly susceptible to feelings of shame and inferiority, and lack of hygiene can be particularly triggering for them, leading to a deterioration in mental health. It is therefore particularly important, both for their physical and mental health, that they be able to maintain their living space and personal hygiene adequately, requiring sufficient amounts of toiletries and household cleaning items.

Furthermore, due to these symptoms and the impact of traumatic events, our clients are less likely to find and approach organisations which may be able to provide items for free, including toiletries, clothing and footwear, where they do exist.

In particular, menstrual products are often expensive. Many of our clients use sanitary towels instead of tampons. In our experience this is due to various factors including the psychological and physical effects of sexual violence and a lack of familiarity with tampons, as well as the relative costs of both types of products. Many of our clients also report gynaecological conditions causing heavy periods (including fibroids, endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome).¹⁷ This also requires more regular changing of menstrual products, therefore incurring a higher cost not reflected in the in-store market research undertaken by the Home Office.

The weekly rate for toiletries is £0.92. However, this is simply not how people must buy these products (as well as many of the other 'essential needs' assessed by the Home Office); the extremely low rate of support, paid weekly, means that such calculations simply do not work in the context of a person's life. A person does not need to buy sanitary pads each and every week. However, at the times when they are menstruating and require these products, they will need to spend significantly more than £0.92 per week, money which they will not have, as other essential needs must still be met. Period poverty is widespread amongst people seeking asylum.

Recommendation:

- Given the reported failure of asylum accommodation providers to ensure that adequate household cleaning products are available, the Home Office should include the cost of essential cleaning products in its assessment of asylum support rates.
- The rates should also increase the allowance for laundry/toilet paper and toiletries to better cover the people's actual day to day needs.

Other considerations

Asylum support in full-board accommodation

We understand that the Home Office has committed to stop using hotels as asylum support accommodation. This is welcome but at present there are still almost 190 hotels in use.¹⁸ While hotels are still in operation, it is important to consider the impact of the low rate of asylum support in full board accommodation. The £9.95 currently provided to those housed in full-board accommodation is completely inadequate to meet essential living needs. We understand that these payments were agreed in order to meet needs related to clothes, non-prescription medication and travel. See above regarding the current inadequacy of the Home Office's methodology and the amount provided to meet these needs for people who are in dispersal and full-board initial accommodation in terms of clothing, travel and medication.

¹⁷ See Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, [National Heavy Menstrual Bleeding Audit](#)

¹⁸ Home Office, [Asylum hotels close as government scales up use of large sites](#), April 2026

In addition, food is a well-evidenced, problem in hotels. The majority of our clients housed in hotels report finding the food very problematic.¹⁹ People housed in a full-board hotel cannot cook in the facilities that exist, and so are wholly dependent on the food provided there. Many people describe the food as low quality, unhealthy, inadequate in portion size, repetitive and frequently inedible. In some instances, it is too spicy, which is particularly difficult for those suffering from serious illness and children, in others the food has been provided still frozen or not cooked properly.

The food is provided in plastic or Styrofoam containers, usually served in a communal canteen or to be eaten in a person's room, depending on the hotel. There is very little choice, and reportedly little variation between the meals themselves, and due to the very limited subsistence support provided, people have no autonomy to buy any other food for themselves. Clients have reported using their very low subsistence allowance to buy basic staples, such as bread and eggs, in order to not have to eat as much of the food provided at the hotel. Families with children in particular often spend much of their very meagre allowance on food from outside of the hotel, so that their children will actually eat anything at all if/when they will not eat the hotel food. This means they will have less/no money to spend on other essentials, such as toiletries.

The food appears to be rarely freshly cooked and is warmed up by hotel staff in a microwave. Clients have reported to us that they have received cooked meals from their friends but have not been permitted to heat this food in the hotel microwave.

In one case, sympathetic church members cooked meals for an HBF client, as they were aware that she was struggling to eat the food at the hotel and already at a very low weight. She too was not permitted to heat up this food. She continued to lose a significant amount of weight and was subsequently tested for anaemia. She and her GP attribute this to the poor food provided at the hotel, and she cannot supplement her nutritional intake with the meagre asylum support she receives.

There is a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables in the food provided in hotels, and often the meals provided are unhealthy and lack nutrition. HBF frequently sees letters provided by GPs on behalf of their patients, requesting improvements or modifications to the food given to them in the hotel.

HBF has seen reports from local GPs concerned about children losing weight or not growing as expected and recommending healthier diets, and letters from specialist doctors concerned about weight loss and the effect that unhealthy eating is having on their patients suffering from different diseases.

¹⁹ See Helen Bamber Foundation, [Suffering and Squalor: The Impact on Mental Health of Living in Hotel Asylum Accommodation](#), June 2024

One client, who has a diagnosis of coeliac disease, submitted evidence from her hospital confirming that *“she will need to adhere to a lifelong gluten-free diet, even if asymptomatic”* and that *“she also reported some difficulty with consistently obtaining gluten-free meals at her hotel residence and told me they were not always offering gluten-free options despite dietary management for coeliac disease being the only validated treatment for this medical condition”*. This evidence was not accepted, despite it coming from her hospital, and she was told to first speak to the accommodation provider (which she had already done) and to provide a hotel report confirming that this diet was not available. Despite complying with the Home Office’s policy, she was not provided with food she was able to eat and had to supplement her nutrition using her meagre asylum support.

Other clients have reported fasting on specific days of the week (for religious reasons) and have asked the hotel staff to save them a meal (which is often issued in plastic containers and should therefore be easy enough to set aside), for when they break their fast. Hotel staff have declined to do this, telling them they must wait until the evening meal time at 6-7pm, leaving people choosing whether to practise their faith, which is essential to their life (and often a protective factor in terms of their mental health) and going without meals. One client could often not make his appointments with HBF or community activities because they clashed with mealtimes and the hotel staff refused to give him food any earlier or later. He had to choose between accessing support services and eating.

A 2024 report on the food provided to people seeking asylum housed in hotel or hostel accommodation in London emphasises the themes our clients raise on a regular basis.²⁰ The research found that people found it very difficult or impossible to meet their and their children’s nutritional needs, that inadequate food access had a negative impact on physical health, and that experiences of food in such accommodation were broadly experienced as degrading and dehumanising. People reported universally low-quality food with no consideration for dietary needs, that the structure and timings of meals at hotels were constrictive with no consideration for religious fasting, and that there was no effective or transparent complaints mechanism, with no accountability for the standards of food provided.

At the end of 2025, 22,275 people (35%) had been waiting over a year for a decision in their asylum claim.²¹ We are working with clients who have remained in full-board accommodation for over two years. Regardless, more than six months still represents a significant amount of time for people and their children to be housed in a hotel, many of whom are recently arrived in the UK, and whilst in hotels remain reliant wholly on the food provided and £9.95 per person per week to meet all other basic needs.

²⁰ Sustain, [Food experiences of people seeking asylum in London: areas for local action](#), March 2024

²¹ Home Office, [How many people are in the UK asylum system?](#)

Recommendations:

- The rate of asylum support paid to people living in full-board hotels should be significantly increased, taking into account the impact (material, psychological, etc.) of living in this type of institutional accommodation for protracted periods of time.
- Catered food standards should be increased to meet the standards for school meals, and at least adequate standards of hygiene and nutrition, particularly for people during infancy, childhood, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and people with medical dietary requirements.
- No families should be housed in full-board hotels for more than 6 weeks (this is also the timeframe in which - for most homeless families, depending on when they arrived in the UK - people can be lawfully housed in B&Bs as temporary accommodation provided by local authorities)
- Financial support should be provided to people whilst accommodated under Section 98. At minimum, support under Section 95 – once granted – should be backdated to the date a person was housed under Section 98.

Families and children

The 2020 Home Office review claims that *“any extra costs in some households of meeting particular needs (e.g. clothes for teenagers) are comfortably offset by the availability of economies of scale that mean other costs per person in the household fall. [...] Applying a flat rate... per person in a household therefore means that all families, regardless of their size and composition, will have sufficient to cover their full essential living needs.”* This was reiterated in the 2022 report, which also highlighted that children of people seeking asylum would have access to free school meals and free travel to/from school. The 2024 support rates review, published in 2025, is entirely silent on free school meals.

While free school meals are now accessible to those in receipt of both section 95 and section 4, there are frequent issues with applying for these meals from the local authority (which requires literacy in English and digital skills or access to third-party advocacy, and the local authority accepting proof of the person's asylum support reference number and grant of asylum support). In terms of free travel to/from school, this does not reflect the fact that due to the age of the child(ren) and/or distance from the asylum support accommodation to the school, parents need to take their children to school, thus spending more of the available weekly allowance on essential travel, resulting in less money available for food and other essentials.

Many of our clients with dependent children struggle to fully meet their needs with the current rate of support. HBF clients with children often struggle to buy the items that they need, including adequate nutritious food, clothing and educational items.

School uniforms

The 2024 Home Office review does not engage with the need for children to have school uniform. The amount of asylum support allocated for clothing and footwear in the 2024 review is £3.46 per person per week.

In 2018 the Home Office claimed that *"in most cases if a child is entitled to free school meals... it is likely that the child will be entitled to apply for [school uniform] grants"*.²² HBF has repeatedly submitted evidence that these grants are generally inaccessible in London boroughs. Research from 2025 showed that only 22 local education authorities in England provide any assistance, however limited, with the costs of school uniforms.²³ One local authority in London that still offers such a grant provides only £15 per child, and only twice over the time a child will spend in primary school education.

One HBF client was asked to buy school uniform in order for his child to be able to begin school the following week. The list he was given included a blazer (£30.50), a school jumper (£20), a tie (£7.50), PE shorts (£7.40), PE polo shirt (£12.50) and PE socks (£7). These items, branded for the particular school, totalled £84.90 *before* general items like trousers, shirts and shoes were included. For someone in self-catered accommodation, this would have required almost two weeks of financial support to be used purely on these branded items. For someone in full board accommodation, they would have to save their full weekly financial support for almost nine weeks just to buy their child's school uniform. The local authority for the borough within which this client lives states clearly on their website that they do not provide school uniform grants.

We are aware that under Section 96(2) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, if the circumstances of a particular case are exceptional, further support may be provided to a person seeking asylum and any dependants *"in such other ways as considered necessary"*. However, the need for new school uniforms (and other clothes and shoes for children) is a continual and annual need, and should therefore be allocated as standard, rather than requiring families to complete the complex section 96(2) application and risk remaining unable to purchase the school uniform (and other vital clothing) for their children. HBF has previously submitted several section 96(2) applications for this additional support, for the explicit purpose of purchasing school uniform and with evidence of exhausting other options, but no response or decision to these applications was ever received. In 2024, only 15% of section 96(2) requests were successful (see below)

Educational materials for children

The products suggested by the Home Office are not sufficient for children to properly enjoy and thrive in their education in the 21st century. The 2024 Home Office rates review once again includes the costs of *'notepad and pens x 4'*, ignoring the fact that children will usually

²² Home Office, [Report on review of cash allowance paid to asylum seekers: 2017](#), 2018

²³ Money Wellness, [Only 1 in 4 councils offer school uniform help](#), August 2025

also need books, a calculator, pencil case, ruler, a rubber, a pencil sharpener, pencils, coloured pencils, and craft materials for school projects. Even if the children's school provides the above items at school, they are often not able to be taken home in order to complete homework to a satisfactory level. It is also not possible for children in different school years to split and share resources to a satisfactory level.

HBF believes that the current rate of £49.18 does not sufficiently reflect the needs of families with children – and, as previously outlined, it is not always possible for people who are on asylum support to use economies of scale. Families arriving to the UK to seek protection often arrive with nothing but the clothes on their backs and, for example, have to purchase full sets of clothing for each member of their household at once in order to ensure they are dressed appropriately for the weather conditions in the UK. They are exposed to high costs and are unable to shop around for cheaper alternatives. Families often do not have enough money to pay for books and other educational resources for children; due to limited funds they have to prioritise feeding their children over supporting their intellectual and social development.

Recommendation:

- **An additional payment should be provided each year per school aged child in order to buy school uniforms and educational materials. This should be prioritised for people who are living in full-board accommodation.**

Exceptional needs

The Home Office's current categories do not allow any room for emergency or one-off costs and as such people seeking asylum have very limited resources for any unforeseen but necessary costs. In addition, we have had to support clients on numerous occasions where there have been payment issues resulting in them not being able to access their financial support and leaving them without essential items such as food.

In the 2024 review the Home Office stated that *"The asylum support rates are calculated for the average able bodied adult asylum seeker. Where individuals can show they have exceptional needs in order to be able to meet their essential needs, they can apply for additional funds."*

The Home Office has consistently argued that exceptional needs can be catered for by applying for addition support under Section 96(2) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. In 2024, there were 384 requests under section 96(2); 59 (15.4%) of these were successful.²⁴

It is our position that this is inadequate when a need is urgent. To access support under section 96(2), people need to complete a further application form, requesting details and evidence of how all other sources that could meet this need have been explored and exhausted, and then await a response for issues which are often very time sensitive. The

²⁴ Freedom of Information request response from the Home Office, FOI2025/08244, 5 August 2025

processing times for applications under section 96(2) are not known, nor is the evidential threshold. This option for additional support is therefore an unreliable, if not also inaccessible, option for many people seeking asylum.

In addition, when the Home Office deems that another funding mechanism, such as the HCTS for medical appointments, is available, requests under section 96(2) are refused. We have detailed above some of the key issues with requesting funding under such schemes such as accessibility and information not being widely known. The small number of applications submitted, and the woeful grant rate underlines the difficulty of requesting support under section 96(2) and it is our position that the Home Office should not rely on this form of additional support to meet people's essential needs.

Recommendation:

- A review should be undertaken specifically with regards to applications for support under Section 96(2). Within this, we would recommend that the Home Office:
 - provide more detailed guidance on what is required for a successful application, including case studies
 - reduce the evidential burden
 - instate a right of appeal with regards to a refusal of such applications
 - Automatically grant support under 96(2) on request for specific purposes, such as a person with dependent children who are of school age and therefore have an annual need to buy school uniform.

Emergency costs

Whilst asylum support is meant to address destitution, the low rate means that people are constantly on the brink of not being able to feed themselves or their children, and meet their other basic needs, particularly when unexpected events happen which cannot be anticipated in advance. For example, clients with £20 uploaded to their Oyster cards, or who have recently purchased a week's bus pass, have then misplaced or had the card/ticket stolen, and then have gone hungry that week; both without the means to travel, and with no money in such a tight budget to afford anything extra. Another example is in periods of extreme weather needing to urgently buy a fan or heater/additional blankets/warm clothes. Affording such items in receipt of the non-catered standard allowance would be difficult enough, but impossible for people receiving only the full-board rate.

Inconsistency in payment amounts

We have also noticed that sometimes people seeking asylum simply receive the wrong amounts of financial support. When querying this situation with Migrant Help, and where it has been ascertained that the lower payment is not due to a deduction made to recover an 'overpayment', we have been informed via Migrant Help that '*sometimes the wrong amounts just get paid.*'

Recommendation:

- The Home Office should only be able to issue a set number of standard amounts based on a person's circumstances that are published and for which the calculations are transparent and clear.

Overpayments

The rate of asylum support provided at all stages is inadequate to meet people's basic needs and the overpayment regime worsens this further, deducting even more money (from an already very low sum) designed (as above) to meet a person's absolutely essential living needs.

In our experience, the majority of overpayments recovered by the Home Office are due to official errors, of the Home Office issuing an incorrect payment (e.g. people who required and received an emergency payment due to a lack of functioning Aspen card, and who were then considered to have been 'overpaid' when support was issued to the Aspen card to cover the same period. Recovery of overpayments reduces the already minimal amount for many months, even years.

Recommendation:

- The Home Office should urgently review the recovery of overpayments of people receiving asylum support. The mechanism for recovery/'clawback' of 'overpayments' from asylum support should be abolished, save for exceptional cases of fraud.

For more information, contact Eleanor Winn, Housing & Welfare Casework and Policy Coordinator, at eleanor.winn@helenbamber.org
--