

Secretary of State for the Home Department
The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Chancellor of the Exchequer
The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

Friday, 3 April 2020

Joint letter re: Increasing asylum support rates in line with Universal credit

Dear Home Secretary, dear Chancellor of the Exchequer,

We are writing to draw your attention to the impact of Covid-19 and measures to tackle it on some of the most vulnerable people in this country, and to request an immediate intervention to ensure that refugees and people seeking asylum can look after themselves and their families during this difficult time, and ensure that the public health response is truly effective.

We were pleased to hear the Prime Minister's commitment last week to support the most marginalised in society, including asylum seekers, those who have been refused asylum and others without recourse to public funds, "*to get the Home Office funding they need and deserve.*" We also welcome the Chancellor's announcement on 20 March to increase the amount of financial support that people receive through Universal Credit by £20 per week, to "strengthen the safety net" during the Covid-19 pandemic. This increase reflects an acknowledgement of the additional living costs that people are incurring during this crisis.

As part of the public health response, we urge you to immediately increase the support available to those in the asylum system, who are in desperate need of the same financial uplift in order to meet the essential living needs of themselves and their families.

At present, people in the asylum system receive £37.75 if they are supported under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, or £35.39 if they are supported under section 4 of the 1999 Act. This amounts to a little over £5 a day per person. Unlike people on section 95 support, those on section 4 support cannot currently receive payments in cash. Under section 98 of the 1999 Act people are supported in either full-board 'initial accommodation' with no cash support provided or in self-catered housing with a cash allowance.

Even before the Coronavirus outbreak, people on asylum support struggled to meet their essential living needs on an amount of support far lower than mainstream benefits, leading to extremely difficult decisions on what to prioritise amongst essential expenditure. Asylum seekers, including torture survivors and other highly vulnerable people, tell us that, in the current context, they are finding it even harder to buy the items that they need to keep themselves and their families healthy and safe.

The response to Covid-19 has meant that many of those already under financial pressure cannot now travel long distances and are relying heavily on local shops where food options are often more limited and more expensive. People receiving asylum support are paid weekly, which makes it difficult to buy sufficient volumes of food and other essentials items that would enable them to comply with guidance on social distancing. Those in receipt of section 4 (cashless) support experience even greater limitations as to how and where they spend their weekly allowance. Additionally, shared dispersal accommodation provides limited kitchen and freezer space for each occupant, making storing essentials difficult.

Asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their support application (those on section 98 support) are likely to be in initial accommodation now for far longer periods than intended, so it is vital that they receive additional financial support to meet their living needs.

Many of those in receipt of asylum support would ordinarily use cafes to access free Wi-Fi as they cannot ordinarily afford mobile data or credit. Given that many support and advice agencies have had to revert to an entirely remote service either by telephone or online, coupled with the fact that the most up to date information from the government is distributed online, the need for additional funds to ensure communication with this isolated population is greater than ever.

We are asking for an immediate increase of £20 per week to section 98, section 95 and section 4 support for the next 12 months in the first instance, in line with the increase in Universal Credit. We are also asking that Section 4 support be paid in cash.

The virus does not discriminate and neither must we.

We also urge that the need for additional financial support be kept under review during the pandemic. It is especially vital that everyone is able to safely and securely sustain themselves and their family at this time. We must ensure that no one is left behind during our collective efforts to overcome this virus.

Yours sincerely,

Sonya Sceats, CEO, ***Freedom from Torture***

Maurice Wren, CEO, ***Refugee Council***

Sabir Zazai, Chief Executive, ***Scottish Refugee Council***

Andrea Cleaver, Interim Chief Executive, ***Welsh Refugee Council***

Kerry Smith, CEO, ***Helen Bamber Foundation***

Alice Webb, Director, ***Asylum Support Appeals Project***

Bella Sankey, Director, ***Detention Action***

Nazek Ramadan, Director, ***Migrant Voice***

Sarah Teather, Director, ***Jesuit Refugee Service UK***

Natasha Walter, Director, ***Women for Refugee Women***

Ros Bragg, Director, ***Maternity Action***

Lucy Jones, Director of Programmes, ***Doctors of the World UK***

Hazel Williams, Director, ***NACCOM***

Rick Henderson, CEO, ***Homeless Link***

Sonia Lenegan, Legal Director, ***Immigration Law Practitioners' Association***

Leila Zadeh, Executive Director, ***UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group***

Steve Valdez-Symonds, Refugee & Migrant rights programme Director, ***Amnesty International UK***

Ake Achi, Founder & Director, ***Migrants At Work***

Jon Beech, Director, **Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network**
Alison Moore, CEO, **Refugee Women Connect**
Sally Daghlian, CEO, **Praxis**
Lisa Matthews, Coordinator, **Right to Remain**
Daf Viney, Director of services, **Hackney Migrant Centre**
Cristal Amiss, Project Coordinator, **Black Women's Rape Action Project**
Emily Crowley, Chief Executive, **Student Action for Refugees**
Mel Steel, Director, **Voices in Exile**
Sue Bent, CEO, **Central England Law Centre**,
Abi Brunswick, Director, **Project 17**
Tanya Long, Director, **Samphire Ex-Detainee Project**
Katie Commons, Director, **Action for Refugees in Lewisham**
Rabbi Alexandra Wright, Senior Rabbi, **The Liberal Jewish Synagogue**
Sarah Taal, Director & Advocate, **Baobab Women's Project**
Janet Fuller, Project Manager, **Derby Refugee Advice Centre**
Rosario Guimba-Stewart, Chief Executive Officer, **Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network**
Maya Esslemont, Director, **After Exploitation**
Anna Pincus, Director, **Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group**
Karolina Maroszek, Manager, **Haringey Migrant Support Centre**
Will Sutcliffe, Chair, **Bradford City of Sanctuary**
Traci Kirkland, Head of Charity, **Govan community project**
Joanne MacInnes, Director, **West London Welcome Centre for Refugees and Migrants**
Karen Pearse, Director, **PAFRAS**
Amanda Church-McFarlane, Destitution Project Coordinator, **Abigail Housing**
Dr Edie Friedman, Executive Director, **The Jewish Council for Racial Equality (JCORE)**
Lorraine Masiya Mponela, Chairperson, **Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group**
Beth Wilson, Director, **Bristol Refugee Rights**
Sian Evans, Refugees from Rape & Destitution Co-ordinator, **Women Against Rape**
Celia Sands, Director, **South London Refugee Association**
Matt Atkins, Director, **Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum**
Jane Henson, Chair, **HOST Nottingham**
Pete Hobson, Chair, **Leicester City of Sanctuary**
Nick Watts, Director, **Together with Migrant Children**
Felix Kupay, Chairperson, **ENTRAIDE (Mutual Aid)**
Peter D.Hall, Co-ordinator, **Croydon Refugee Day Centre**
Helen Syrop, Hope Housing Manager, **Hope Housing**
Lucille, **All African Women's Group**
Debbie Moss, Advice Services Supervisor, **Coventry Refugee & Migrant Centre**
Jan Foster, Trustee, **Doncaster Conversation Club**
Maggie Pearse, Coordinator, **Bradford Immigration & Asylum support & Advice Network**
Antonia Young & Neil Young, **Balkans Peace Park Committee UK**
Fran Woodcock, **Bradford Friendship Choir**
Richard Hargreaves, **Grassington and District Peace Group**
Judy Rogers, **Skipton Refugee Support Group**