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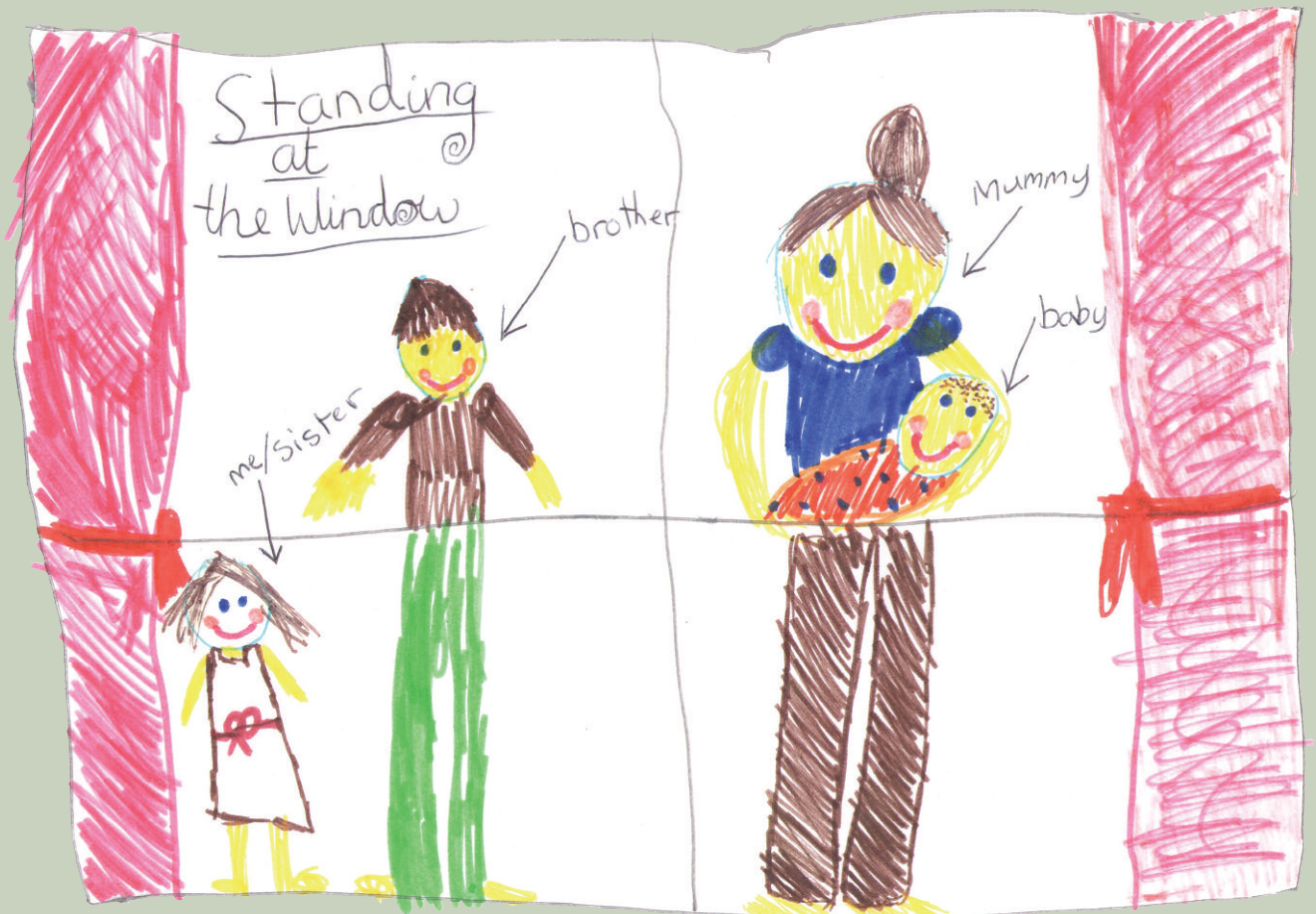
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Asylum support
for children and young people
living in Kirklees
Stories of mothers

Dr. Kate Smith and Dr. Kelly Lockwood
WomenCentre, May 2015

Cover image: Many thanks to the eight year old girl living in Kirklees who kindly drew this picture of her family for the report.

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Asylum support
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Research Report

Dr. Kate Smith and Dr. Kelly Lockwood

WomenCentre, September 2015

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We would like to thank the children who provided the pictures in the report. Also John Grayson for his photographs of asylum accommodation in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

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Project team

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Dr Kelly Lockwood

Kelly Lockwood is the Evolve and Athena Manager at WomenCentre, which supports women who have offended or who are at risk of offending. Kelly is also a Researcher in the School of Nursing, Midwifery, Social Work and Social Sciences at the University of Salford. Her PhD, funded by the Economic Social Research Council, explores narratives of motherhood and imprisonment in the UK. Kelly has been involved in several research projects and has published and presented on the subject of women, motherhood and imprisonment.

WomenCentre

Founded by local women in 1984, WomenCentre is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. The organisation has grown and evolved over the last 30 years. WomenCentre specialise in providing a wide range of woman-centred services that improve the safety, well-being and quality of life for some of the most disadvantaged women across the Calderdale and Kirklees areas of West Yorkshire. The organisation has experience of promoting rights and freedoms that enable social progress and better standards of life for all women.

WomenCentre holds a belief in fundamental inalienable human rights and in the inherent dignity and worth of women. The organisation has developed specialist services for women and their children seeking asylum in Kirklees. These women and their children are often viewed as if they are at the margins of the nations they live in and their perspectives and voices are frequently ignored and overlooked. This research turns this concept around and the authors have placed the views of mothers at the centre of the study.

Executive summary



The report is based on a one-year pilot study by academic practitioners at WomenCentre, Kirklees, funded by the Nationwide Children's Research Centre.

This study has taken a localised approach to the Parliamentary Inquiry (2013) into asylum support for children and young people. We have placed the views of mothers of children who live or have lived in receipt of asylum support in Kirklees at the heart of the study. All of the mothers interviewed said that asylum support (accommodation and/or financial subsistence) was or had been their only means of survival and many of them have spent several years in receipt of asylum support with their children.

Using the themes that arose in the 'Parliamentary Inquiry into asylum support for children and young people (2013)', we have examined the mothers' accounts of asylum support in relation to children and young people living in Kirklees. Consistent with the Parliamentary Inquiry and central to the analysis, a number of areas of concern were raised by the mothers: 'essential living needs', 'home-life', 'education' and 'societal attitudes'. A further theme emerged around 'children's resilience'.

As part of this report we have presented the recommendations put forward by the mothers:

- Families seeking asylum should be given the right to work.
- Section 4 support should be abolished and a cash-based support system introduced for all children, young people and their families.
- Families should have a choice about where they live.
- The best interests of the child should be central to decisions affecting children.

Part One

The Parliamentary Inquiry into asylum support for children and young people

In 2013, a panel of experts including MPs released their findings from the UK 'Parliamentary Inquiry into asylum support for children and young people¹'. The Inquiry was based on parliamentary hearings, including oral and written evidence. Individuals and organisations, including local authorities, safeguarding boards and academics contributed to the Inquiry.

The panel heard from people and organisations in health, poverty, housing, well-being and asylum support services, as well as directly from families with experience of living in the asylum system. The Inquiry focused on those families and children in receipt of asylum support (accommodation and financial subsistence). A number of themes were identified: 'destitution' and 'homelessness', 'essential living needs', 'health and well-being', 'education', 'worklessness', 'home-life', 'societal and institution attitudes', and 'hostile environments'.

The Chair of the Inquiry, Sarah Teather MP stated in the foreword to the report:

“There are moments in politics when what you hear makes you ashamed. There were many such moments for me and for the rest of the cross party panel during the course of this inquiry. Our inquiry set out to look at the support provided to children and families seeking protection from war and persecution. What was clear from the evidence we received was that systemic failures from successive governments are leaving many destitute – some who have no access to any support at all and many others where the level of support is inadequate to meet basic living needs” (2013, p.iii).

The panel highlighted their shock about instances of children being left destitute and homeless. Without statutory support many families rely on charitable food donations. Evidence suggests that children in the asylum process were between 13%-20% of the local destitute population. Furthermore, some people in the asylum system live on £5 per day, making it impossible to buy warm winter clothes and forcing parents to skip meals to enable their children to eat.



The findings suggest that asylum support provided to families is too low to meet the essential living needs of children and young people and does not enable parents to provide for their children in ways that enable them to learn, grow and develop, particularly where children have a disability.

Related to families' home life was evidence of the challenges of living in poor quality accommodation and unsafe neighbourhoods. Also difficult was being separated from family members through dispersal, financial pressures and the anxiety caused by the asylum process.

Evidence suggests that families were allocated unsafe, dirty and damp accommodation. Placed in dangerous areas, children and young people experience on-going harassment, including physical attacks and little privacy in the housing provided by the Home Office with accommodation staff frequently entering

homes unannounced. Perhaps one of the most alarming findings indicates that the inadequacy of the current support system may be related to greater infant mortality and maternal deaths during pregnancy. Frequent moves and dispersals (including during the later stages of pregnancy), poor accommodation, malnutrition and difficulties accessing health services such as antenatal appointments are most likely to cause harm.

The Inquiry concluded that the current asylum support system is in urgent need of reform. The safety and well-being of children, as well as obligations to promote children's best interests are severely challenged within the current asylum system. Substantial changes are urgently required so that all children can have their best interests met, enjoy a good, healthy and happy childhood and receive the best possible start to life.

Scope

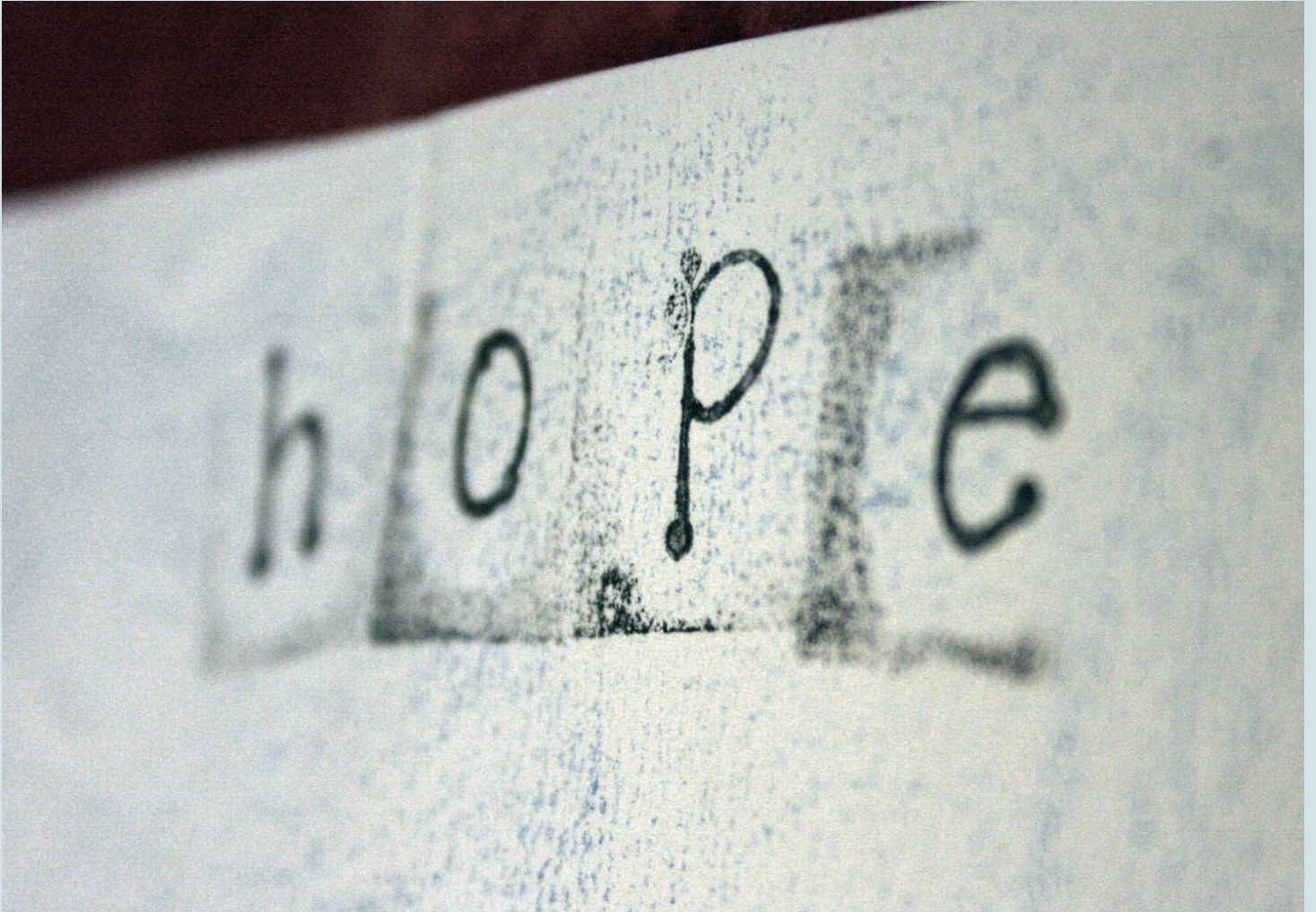
A particular concern of this research is the serious and specific problems negatively affecting children and young people living on asylum support. Therefore, this research started with the themes emerging from the Inquiry. A localised approach to the themes in the Parliamentary Inquiry was adopted, placing the views of mothers of children and young people who had sought asylum in the UK and lived in Kirklees at the centre of the research.

Mothers were interviewed about asylum support provided by the Home Office in relation to the needs of children and young people living in Kirklees. Also, the ways in which children and young people's lives could be improved within the asylum system.

Research aims

The aims of this study are threefold:

1. Take a localised approach in Kirklees to the Parliamentary Inquiry (2013) into asylum support for children and young people.
2. Place the views of mothers of children and/or young people who live or have lived in receipt of asylum support in Kirklees at the heart of the study.
3. Develop localised recommendations about asylum support for children and young people.



Background

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)²

“In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”
(CRC, 1989, Article 3 (1)).

Broad recognition of the importance of the best interests of children is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989). As a signatory, the UK is obliged by Article 3(1) stipulating that the best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them.

Since the UK Government ratified the CRC in 1991 it has been the ‘international benchmark of children’s rights’ (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2004, p. 61³). Closely related and enshrined in domestic law the Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 2004⁴ have played a central role in developing UK child protection policy frameworks. Specific to the asylum system, the introduction of Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 places a duty on the Secretary of State regarding the welfare of children. This legislative measure outlines that arrangements must be made “to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are in the United Kingdom”, including “any services provided by another person pursuant to arrangements which are made by the Secretary of State”. Section 55 is intrinsically linked to the rights of children subject to immigration controls and safeguarding their welfare, as outlined in the CRC.

The 1951 UN Convention⁵ ensures protection for people who have a “wellfounded fear of persecution” because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular group. The Home Office is responsible for deciding whether an asylum applicant should be recognised as a refugee under the terms of the Convention.

Children have always been part of populations seeking asylum (Sirriyeh, 2010⁶) but they have often been conceptualised as dependents to their parents or guardians and overlooked or marginalised within policy and literature about asylum (Crawley, 2006⁷). Despite a general commitment to the well-being of



children in the UK, Giner (2006⁸) has suggested that UK governments have consistently taken a different approach with regard to children and their families who are seeking asylum. Such approaches often overlook safeguards that might interfere with asylum and immigration agendas.

UK governments have increasingly sought to legitimise a reductive approach to asylum support. Tough and punitive immigration policies have been introduced which include the use of the welfare state as a tool for controlling immigration and the associated politicisation of asylum and immigration policy. Therefore, there is a tension between policy agendas, with children often caught between the two conflicting concepts of being 'a child' and being an 'asylum seeker' in the UK (Crawley 2007⁹, Giner, 2007¹⁰).

Crawley (2011¹¹) argues that children in the asylum system are treated first as asylum seekers and often left without state protection and second as children with particular rights and needs. As children, and as dependants on adult asylum claims, this group stands at the intersection of two policy fields in which state policy differs considerably: immigration and asylum policy on the one hand, and the best interests of the child on the other.

The concept that asylum and immigration policy takes precedence over children's welfare and humanitarian considerations is not new. From the ratification of the CRC until 2008, the UK Government held a reservation to the Convention in relation to children and young people subject to immigration control. This reservation restricted the application of the principles of the CRC and was only lifted in November 2008. This should mean that all children in the UK are entitled to the protections afforded by the Convention regardless of their immigration status (Parliament, 2009¹²). However the UK government faces the challenge of how to comply with their international, national and humanitarian obligations that address the best interests of children within asylum support.

There is an unresolved tension between commitments to protect children and children's rights contained within the CRC and the "systemic failures from successive governments in relation to asylum support" (Parliamentary Inquiry, 2013, p.iii).



Asylum support

For the purposes of this report, asylum support refers to initial and dispersal accommodation, and/or financial subsistence payments for those seeking asylum in the UK.

Financial support

Successive legislation in the UK has limited access to public funds and social housing for those seeking asylum. Until 1999, all people seeking asylum in the UK had access to a reduced rate of welfare benefits in the form of cash. With the introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 people seeking asylum are not eligible for mainstream welfare benefits and as a general rule are not allowed to work¹³.

Under Section 95 of the 1999 Act, destitute (Section 95(3) of the 1999 Act defines destitution) individuals who meet the

‘destitution test’¹⁴ can apply for accommodation and/or financial support whilst their asylum application is being decided. Applications are made to the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI, a Home Office directorate – formally the United Kingdom Border Agency).

Under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (Section 55, 1b), people seeking asylum are not entitled to support whilst their asylum application is under consideration if they did not apply for asylum “as soon as reasonably practicable”.

Types of financial support¹⁵

Families receiving financial support from UKVI receive one of two types: ‘Section 95’ or ‘Section 4’ support. Families with children are entitled to this support from the time they arrive in the UK until they are granted refugee status.

Table 1 (below) outlines the different types of asylum support.

Table 1: Definitions of asylum support

Section 95 – support for asylum seeking families

Financial support is provided in cash, collected from Post Offices using the ‘Application Registration Card’ (ARC card) which is issued to asylum seekers early in the asylum process as confirmation of their identity and immigration conditions. The Asylum Support Regulations 2000 (as amended) provide for the amounts of cash to be paid to destitute asylum seekers and their dependants. Asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute can obtain support under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

Section 4 – for some refused asylum seeking families

Asylum seekers who have been refused asylum and exhausted the appeals process cease to be eligible for asylum support under Section 95 of the 1999 Act. Asylum support is terminated 21 days after the claim has been finally determined¹⁶. In limited circumstances destitute refused asylum seekers can apply for a different type of support from UKVI (known as ‘Section 4’ support), under the provisions set out in Section 4 of the 1999 Act¹⁷.

Section 4 support is not given in cash. Instead, accommodation and an ‘Azure’ payment card are provided. The card ... can be used in specified retail outlets to buy food and essential toiletries [the main retailers that accept the card are ASDA, Boots, The Co-operative Food, Sainsbury’s, Tesco, Early Learning Centre, Morrisons, Mothercare and Peacocks]. In some cases, full-board accommodation and essential toiletries may be provided instead of an Azure card.

(Definitions of asylum support taken from the House of Commons Library, March, 2015¹⁸).



Asylum support rates of financial assistance have not increased since April 2011. In a judicial review (2014) brought by the charity Refugee Action the High Court took evidence. In a landmark ruling, the Hon. Mr Justice Popplewell stated that the Home Secretary had failed to take into account the extent of the decrease in asylum support rates since 2007 and the freezing of rates in absolute terms since 2011. He added that the UK Government had also “failed to take reasonable steps to gather sufficient information to enable her [Theresa May, Home Secretary] to make a rational judgment in setting the asylum support rates for 2013/14” and found that the decision to ‘freeze’ asylum support rates for 2013/14 was “irrational” and “flawed”¹⁹.

In light of the judicial review the Government reviewed the asylum support rates but concluded that the support rates should remain unchanged. However, in July 2015, the Immigration Minister James Brokenshire MP announced that the Home Office would be introducing a flat rate of asylum support for all people seeking asylum. The proposed rate was £36.95 per week and this came into effect on 10 August, 2015. The new flat-rate amounts to a cut in support to children of £16 per week and people in receipt of asylum support live on barely 50% of income support. For example, a couple with a child living on asylum support is expected to live on just under £111 per week which is 60% below the poverty line.

Regional Asylum Activism suggest that: “43 Members of Parliament, 9 City Councils and more than 320 civil society organisations are asking the government to ensure that people seeking refugee protection are afforded sufficient financial support set at 70% of income support so that they can truly meet their essential living needs. Barely a week after these regulations were announced, parliamentarians have tabled two Early Day Motions calling for the regulations to be withdrawn, and both the Scottish National Party and the Green Party have submitted written questions to the Home Office querying their decision to cut asylum support for children” (Online, RAA Campaigns Update July 2015 ²⁰).

Accommodation

Accommodation is offered on a no-choice basis and generally in areas outside of London and the south-east of England. Since the introduction of the 1999 Act, the dispersal process has been a central aspect of policy and the approach to housing those seeking asylum. Table 2 provides a summary of the dispersal process taken from the National Audit Office report (2014).

Kirklees has been one of the localities for dispersal since December 1999, with the Council being awarded a contract as part of a regional consortium. The contract to provide initial and dispersal accommodation (under Section 95 and Section 4) had previously been renewed with Kirklees Council. Despite the Council putting in a consortia bid to retain the contract, at the start of 2012 the UK Border Agency awarded the contract under the Home Office COMPASS program ²¹, worth an estimated £600 million, to G4S, Reliance and Serco. These contract providers represented a significant change in contractors from primarily Council housing to an entirely privatised housing sector, managed by three of the largest private security companies in the UK (Grayson, 2012a ²²).

In Yorkshire, the Humber and the North East, G4S were the contracted company and the Kirklees COMPASS provision officially started in June 2012. Academics in the Yorkshire region expressed concerns over awarding a housing contract for people seeking asylum (including families) to a private company (Institute of Race Relations, 2012 ²³). As providers of detention and removal services, G4S have a reputation for neglecting to adhere to human rights (Grayson, 2012b ²⁴; The Guardian, 2014 ²⁵; UNICEF, 2013 ²⁶) and failing in their duty of care and causing harm to those in receipt of their services (Taylor, 2012 ²⁷; Hatterstone and Allison, 2014 ²⁸). Grayson has made numerous press statements ²⁹ and made formal representations at the Parliamentary

Inquiry³⁰ and Home Affairs Select Committee (2012) suggesting that the current asylum contractors do not meet the best interests of the child (Grayson, 2014³¹).

Local concerns included the impact of the new form of asylum support and whether G4S would meet the needs of those seeking asylum and living in Kirklees. These anxieties and concerns were not appeased when, at the start of the contract, G4S experienced a number of operational issues (Grayson, 2012³²) with Kirklees Council suggesting “G4S failed to deliver on their contractual obligations” (Twinch, 2012a³³). According to Twinch (2012b³⁴): “The company [G4S]... has struggled to find private sector accommodation in which to house the asylum seekers, particularly in areas with higher rents. It has moved some individuals away from the communities in which they were living”.

Table 2: Summary of the dispersal process

The Department first places eligible asylum seekers in hostel-style accommodation (known as ‘initial accommodation’) on a short-term basis while they make an application for financial assistance to the Department. Most asylum seekers make their initial claim at the asylum screening unit in Croydon, although the Department’s policy is not to provide accommodation in London unless there are exceptional circumstances, such as, ongoing medical needs. Instead, the Department allocates asylum seekers to one of the six COMPASS regions, and the relevant accommodation provider transports asylum seekers to initial accommodation within this region.

The provider arranges to move asylum seekers to more permanent dispersal accommodation once the Department has assessed and confirmed their eligibility for support. Dispersal accommodation is typically a flat or shared house in which the asylum seeker is provided with bedding and basic kitchen equipment as well as basic furniture and access to cooking and washing facilities. The type of property asylum seekers are allocated depends on a number of factors, such as whether they have children living with them.

(National Audit Office report, 2014).



Families and asylum support

Asylum statistics are published by the Home Office. In the UK the Home Office releases data on a quarterly basis regarding the numbers of people seeking asylum in receipt of Section 95 and Section 4 support. These are publicly available and a summary of numbers of people seeking asylum in 2013 and 2014 and in receipt of asylum support can be seen at Table 3.

Exact numbers of children on asylum support in the UK are not made publicly available. The Inquiry estimated that there are 10,000 children living on asylum support, including 779 dependent children under 18 years of age in receipt of Section 4 support in April 2012 (Parliamentary Inquiry, 2013, p.8).

Table 3: Summary of numbers of people seeking asylum in receipt of asylum support

In 2013, 2,566 families applied for asylum support. By the end of 2013, 5,305 families were in receipt of Section 95 and there were 4,709 main asylum applicants and their dependents in receipt of Section 4. In 2014, 2,786 families applied for asylum support. By the end of 2014, 6,152 families were in receipt of Section 95 and there were 4,994 main asylum applicants and their dependents in receipt of Section 4. In Kirklees, by the end of 2013, 224 individuals were supported under Section 95 and by the end of 2014, 350 individuals were supported under Section 95. (The Home Office ‘tables for immigration statistics’ ³⁵).
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Methodology

WomenCentre is committed to a women centred approach³⁶. The well-being of women was at the core of planning and carrying out the research. The researchers are experienced in working with sensitive topics and with women and children in vulnerable situations and drew upon their expertise in women-centred research approaches (Woodiwiss, Smith and Lockwood, forthcoming³⁷) to address issues of equality, inclusivity and diversity.

The ethical integrity of this research was paramount and was conducted following the British Sociological Association and the Economic Social Research Council ethical guidelines.

Safeguards were important throughout the research process, particularly given the potential sensitivity of the research and the likelihood of vulnerable situations faced by mothers and their children within the asylum system. An ethics protocol was prepared and regular debriefings were carried out during the fieldwork to ensure that these standards were maintained and regularly reviewed throughout the research process.

Criteria for participation

The project started with a focus group of seven mothers seeking asylum who lived in Kirklees. The focus group lasted an hour and a half and the discussion was used to inform the study design. This included the recommendation for one-to-one in-depth interviews, given the sensitive nature of the area of enquiry. Mothers at any stage of the asylum process were included in the study, including where asylum applications had been refused.

Criteria for participation in the interviews were threefold:

- **mothers 18 years of age and over who have claimed asylum in the UK; and**
- **who live with child/ren under the age of 18 years in the UK; and**
- **who are in receipt of or have been in receipt of asylum accommodation and/or financial subsistence from the Home Office.**

We take the definition of 'child' adopted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a starting point, which states that a child is 'every human being below the age of 18 years' (Article 1). This definition adopts biological age as the main criterion for the identification of a human being as a child. However, in the case of children living in the asylum system on asylum support, this definition may be complicated. As Cunningham (2014, p.3³⁸) asserts: "childhood cannot be studied in isolation from society as a whole" as it is situated in the broader social and economic context in which people grow up. This is especially significant to children in asylum situations as different constructions of childhood, youth and adulthood may be brought together with conflicting and difficult policy and practice implications for those children (Boyden, 2009³⁹; Boyden and Hart 2007⁴⁰; Sirriyeh, 2010⁴¹).

We understand the term ‘mother’ to be socially constructed, incorporating women’s own understanding of their roles and identities outside of biological definitions of motherhood. However, for the purpose of this study we have adopted a definition of mothering in relation to conditions of asylum support. We define ‘mother’ as women who were in the late stages of pregnancy or who had dependent children under the age of 18 years living with them in the UK.

Recruitment

The limited knowledge of this population and their situation in Kirklees created challenges for the fieldwork. A significant amount of consultation with organisations and gatekeepers was required, as well as time and commitment to build trust with participants. Permissions were sought and approved with two local organisations who gave the researchers direct access to potential participants. The researchers were able to make initial contact with mothers and provide them with information about the study.

The researchers ran two mini presentations with service users, volunteers and workers at local voluntary sector organisations that support women seeking asylum in Kirklees. This created an opportunity to directly engage with mothers and provide information about the study. Introductory one-to-one meetings with mothers were also offered to discuss the project, giving them time to consider their participation and to ask questions. Leaflets about the study were left in community spaces and distributed to a small number of local voluntary sector organisations who directly work with women seeking asylum living in Kirklees. All potential participants were given a written and oral explanation of the research. A commitment to anonymity within the research was given before seeking their consent for the interview. All participants were interviewed after informed written and verbal consent was given. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw at any time.

Participants

Five mothers volunteered to participate in the research. They were aged between late-twenties and late fifties. The mothers came from five different countries of origin and had been living in the UK for different periods of time ranging between a few months to more than a decade at the point of interview. In total the women had thirteen children between them, with a total of eleven who were or who had lived in Kirklees in receipt of asylum support.

Interviews

The mothers were each given a copy of the Inquiry themes to enable them to make decisions about their involvement and the issues they wanted to discuss. Each mother was interviewed on a one-to-one basis between the participant and one of the researchers on the team. Interviews were conducted at locations identified as being suitable by the participant and researchers. Every attempt was made at reducing barriers to access, including: having a choice of accessible locations; selecting women-only, child-friendly, breastfeeding friendly places; and women researchers. Arrangements were made that should participants want or require an interpreter, they would be given a choice of professional woman interpreter, or an informal interpreter if applicable. A protocol sheet was developed to guide the choice of interpreter. None of the mothers were interviewed with an interpreter in the final sample.

No form of remuneration was offered or provided to any mother participating. An ‘in kind’ gift of a £15 gift-card was given to each participant; this was not identified at the start of the research process to avoid any form of incentive that could be seen as an inducement. The gift-in-kind was intended as a gesture of appreciation and acknowledgment of their time. Interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. Time was given at the end of each of the interviews to offer signposting for support.

Research data was recorded in digital form and kept in a password protected file. Access to the data was highly restricted. Data was transcribed by the researchers. To protect the anonymity of the participants and their children some details and quotes in this report have been altered to conceal place names, locations, nationality, ethnicity or other identifiers. The identity of participants has been protected by the mothers choosing alternative pseudonyms. These pseudonyms have been used in the report and will be used in all subsequent publications and presentations. Pseudonyms have also been given to any other people named (i.e. partner or child). We will endeavour to anticipate threats to the confidentiality and anonymity of research data on an ongoing basis, including in the ongoing dissemination of findings (BSA, 2002).

Analysis

Data was analysed using template analysis (King, 2012⁴²), starting with a priori codes from the central themes that emerged from the Inquiry:

- Destitution
- Essential living needs
- Health and well-being
- Education
- Worklessness
- Home-life
- Societal and institution attitudes
- Hostile environment.

The template served as the basis for the analysis of the data set. Where the data corresponded to a priori themes, they were coded as such. New themes were also identified in the data and these have been included in the template for analysis and writing up the findings in this report.



Part Two

Mothers' stories

The mothers in this report are not necessarily representative; whilst the sample does not allow for generalisations, it provides rich qualitative data that can inform a better understanding of this under-researched group. The mothers who participated in this research suggested that living within the asylum support system negatively affected them. Many of them suggested they had already lost a great deal before they arrived in the UK including children whom they live apart from and loved ones whom they believed were at risk. As mothers, they also all spoke of the challenges of having to respond to the practical and emotional demands of motherhood whilst living on asylum support.

Consistent with the Parliamentary Inquiry (2013), a number of areas of concern were raised by the mothers: 'essential living needs'; 'health and well-being', 'home-life', 'education' and 'societal attitudes'. Further themes emerged around 'children's resilience'.



Essential living needs

The mothers suggested they were unable to meet the essential living needs of their children or themselves. As the Inquiry states: “Families on asylum support are unable to afford nutritious food on a regular basis, particularly fresh fruit, meat and vegetables as these items are too expensive” (2013, p.15). One mother told us:

... we have to substitute our diet... we don't even have like three meals a day, cos everything is expensive so we have to budget (Yai).

The mothers told us that they often had to decide between whether to provide food for their children or pay for other essential living needs. One mother told us:

... with that money you have to buy the soap, the cleaning materials, bus pass money, everything comes from that money so we have to sometimes cut on the food (Yai).

The choices that some of the mothers said they had to make between paying for essential items or food is a great concern. As Dr. Elaine Chase from the University of Oxford states: “There is increasing evidence of the impact on children’s physical health, their mental health, their emotional well-being and their longer term outcomes, from not having enough food to eat” (Inquiry, p.16).

There were particular challenges for the mothers living on Section 4 support. The financial support received restricted shopping to certain designated retail outlets. This was problematic in many ways, including the distance of participating outlets from the mothers’ accommodation. With no access to cash, the mothers were unable to pay for public transport and therefore often had to walk long distances with their children and their shopping. This was particularly problematic for women with health problems or disabilities. For example, Shanaz told of the constant pain in her left arm from a previous accident; having to carry her shopping the long distance to her home aggravated the pain.

The mothers identified that the designated retail outlets frequently did not sell a range of culturally

specific food and were more expensive than local markets. Carnet et al. (2014, p.31 ⁴³) suggest: “... the limited shops [designated for use with the Azure card] make it difficult to buy culturally appropriate food or get value for money.” One mother told us:

Want her [daughter] to know her culture but can't buy her the food. I'll be able to buy things where they are cheap. Tesco is expensive, so you are not able to buy things (Jane).

Balancing the priorities of how to spend money and budget was an ongoing concern for the mothers. They told us they were unable to pay for essential clothes for their children. Some of the mothers said that they accessed free second-hand clothes from various voluntary sector organisations. One mother told us:

Clothes I get from charity. Not charity to buy. Can't go to the shop to buy the dress... I just have to survive with the second-hand clothes (Jane).

Whilst shoes and other clothing items could be acquired by most of the mothers from various voluntary sector organisations, underwear proved to be a sensitive issue. One mother who had a teenage daughter told us:

I go to Primark for knickers, but the bras? I don't buy bras. I cannot afford bras. I cannot afford them 'cos the cheapest bra you get is £5. I would rather get a second hand bra and give it to her (Yai).

A culturally significant element of mothering daughters is the facilitation of the transition from girl to woman. For Yai, the inability to adequately provide for her daughter’s transition to womanhood generated immense stress and anxiety.

Closely related to the sensitive issue of how to meet their children’s essential clothing needs were the mothers’ concerns about broader aspects of their children’s appearance. Several of their children had Afro hair which needed particular care and treatments.

One of the mothers felt her daughter's appearance, closely linked to her hair, was important for her education:

....she [daughter] needs her hair done. So if she keeps her hair for three months, just to save money because it's very expensive the braiding, she needs to do her hair to go to college... the minimum I pay for that is £20. You know those are things that I have to provide for her, because she is a teenager she is growing up... I cannot just let her go like that; it will affect her education (Yai).

Despite hair treatments being of particular importance to some of the mothers, those in receipt of Section 4 support were unable to pay for these. One mother told us:

... her hair 'cos its so thick [Afro hair], I couldn't manage to do her hair. I can't take her. I don't have money to do it. How she look like? ... You can't able to hide your problem (Jane).

In some African cultures, women's hair is symbolic of success and is a source of self-esteem and self-worth (Reynolds, 2010⁴⁴). With limited or no access to cash for their children's hair to be styled, the mothers in this study told of a great sense of shame.

The Inquiry argues "for children to grow, develop and learn effectively, additional resources are required beyond merely food, shelter and clothing" (2013, p.11). The importance of cash support cannot be underestimated. As Carnet et al. (2014, p.9) suggest: "The Azure card and Section 4 support does not allow asylum seekers to meet their basic needs and live with dignity; it creates unnecessary suffering for people who are already in desperate situations".



Risk of exploitation

In order to access money, two of the mothers told us that they attempted to exchange their vouchers or Azure payment for cash payments. This involved approaching friends, but also strangers. Mothers told us vouchers were sometimes exchanged for cash in order to purchase specific things, such as bus fares and cultural foods that were not available in the designated supermarket. This was highlighted by Wahid, who told us:

When you go to [supermarket] many people with their child is sitting in front of [supermarket]... to change their paper [voucher], it's painful... they have to sit down to beg... to exchange the vouchers (Wahid).

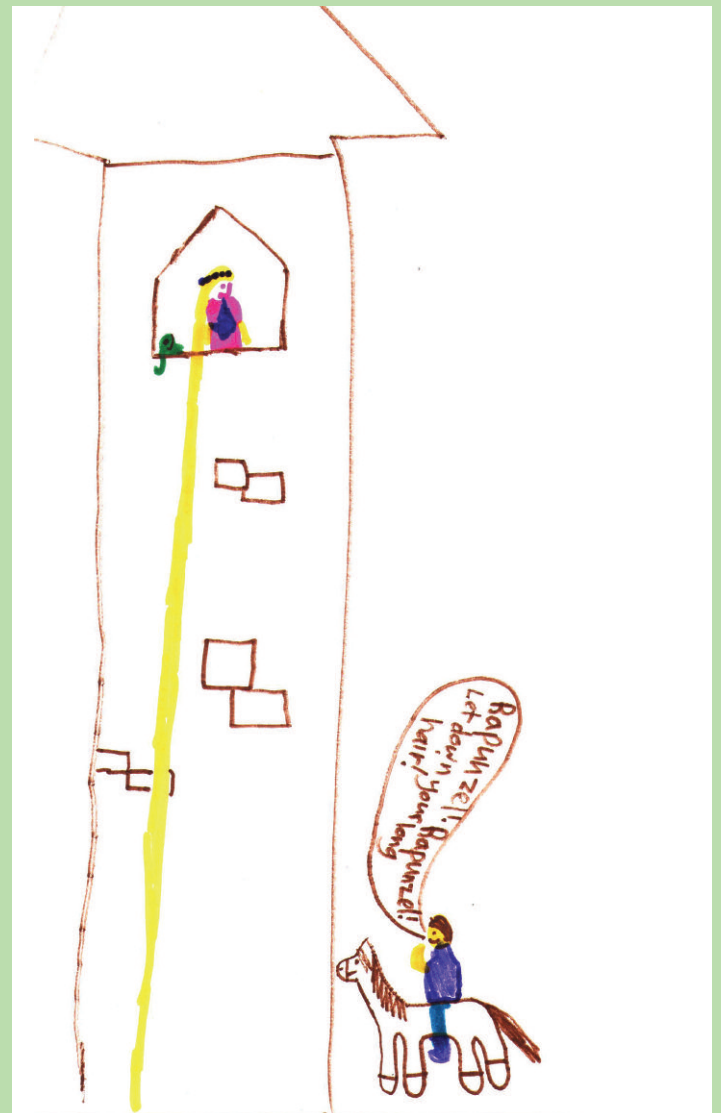
Trying to exchange their vouchers or Azure payments for cash left some of the mothers open to exploitation. For example, whilst most of the mothers identified that it was possible to exchange their vouchers, they also said that they received less than the value of the voucher:

... sometimes they [mothers] don't get the same money [as the voucher]. Depends if they [the person who exchanges the voucher for cash] are kind (Wahid).

Exchanging vouchers often placed the mothers in risky situations, vulnerable to attack and verbal abuse. As noted by Reynolds (2010), the payment card and vouchers system identifies users as asylum seekers which often expose them to racist behaviour. One mother told us how a security guard at a designated supermarket abused her for approaching members of the public to exchange her vouchers:

He said 'go away you are a bad woman', in front of the customers... It was so shame. I was banned... where am I going now to buy this and even the yoghurt, even the nappies, the wipes, all gone. 'Leave them, go now, bad woman, you are banned forever'. It affect me so much (Jane).

The Inquiry also highlighted that “families who receive no or little support are vulnerable to exploitation and may resort to dangerous strategies in order to survive” (2013, p.13). Such strategies often placed the mothers and their children in Kirklees at risk, raising safeguarding concerns.



Access to health care

The mothers in this study also spoke about their difficulty in accessing health care resources owing to financial limitations. One mother told of the difficulties faced when pregnant:

The problem was that I was reporting⁴⁵, I was pregnant that time, but it was really hard, you know with morning sickness, then you get the bus, I was always really bad, wondering why they can't let me go to the local police, instead of sending me on the long way, every morning was morning sickness (Jane).

The Inquiry noted that “pregnant asylum seeking women are seven times more likely to develop complications and three times more likely to die during childbirth than the general population” (2013, p.17). Refugee Council and Maternity Action (2013⁴⁶) have also linked increased infant mortality rates and deaths in pregnancy with dispersal. The Parliamentary Inquiry highlights similar issues in relation to the inadequate provision of non-cash support and gaps in the asylum support system.

Concerns about health resources were also raised by the mothers. Jane spoke of difficulties including being unable to access health vouchers for her baby owing to her immigration status as an asylum seeker:

I can't even get the health start vouchers⁴⁷. I can't get the vouchers, even for baby, his dad has a passport, is a British citizen, he is a baby, he is a child, why are they not giving something for the baby, vitamins are so important, they are not bothered if the mum has status (Jane).

Jane told of the how her restricted finances impeded her ability to access essential medicines and health care for both herself and her children:

The child get sick, how many time have I called an ambulance when is baby, instead of because I don't have money, I don't have money to buy even paracetamol... I remember there was time when I fall on the stairs. I was going to physiotherapy every week. Where am I going to get the money? It is a struggle for me (Jane).

Such restrictions cause avoidable hardship, impacting the physical and mental well-being of asylum seekers. Reynolds (2010) noted that 19 per cent of the people seeking asylum who participated in her study were unable to buy over the counter medicines and 53 per cent were unable to pay for travel to essential medical appointments. As the Inquiry suggests: “the issue of access to adequate cash support needs addressing urgently to prevent further harm” for both mothers and their children (Executive summary, 2013, p.2).



Home life

For mothers and children living on asylum support in Kirklees, 'home life' represented specific challenges, including 'accommodation', in particular difficulties with 'shared accommodation'; and the impact of the asylum system on 'relationships with family and friends'.

Accommodation

The mothers told of low standards of accommodation, often lacking what they considered to be basic facilities needed for families. Two of the mothers told us that they had only been provided with a single person fridge to accommodate food for themselves and their children:

... they buy for me the small one, like a one person fridge... (Jane).

... it is difficult, little fridge, little freezer... [So I'm] keeping food in the bedroom (Shanaz).

Similarly, the mothers spoke about the difficulties with heating and hot water systems in the accommodation:

I remember we stayed for one week, in a house that was freezing, no heater, just stayed inside the blanket (Jane).

...two months, no hot water in my house... (Shanaz).

Problems with heating systems were highlighted by another mother who suggested that the difficulties and lower standards of accommodation had arisen owing to a change in housing provider:

Before they had a free heater. I mean, they can use 24hrs.... now it is not like that at all because the renting house is, I don't know, the people who are the owner of the house control the heater (Wahid).

Another mother told us that the heating in her accommodation is controlled by the landlord who frequently turned it off, even in cold weather.

As discussed previously in this report (p.16), housing contracts changed across the UK in 2012 and G4S now provide accommodation and subsistence

payments to those seeking asylum in Kirklees. Two of the mothers interviewed had knowledge of asylum accommodation prior to the new contract. Concerns were raised highlighting the identified stark differences between the old housing provider (Kirklees Council) and the new housing provider (G4S). One mother told us:

Kirklees Council housing was good, but now with Cascade and G4S I can see that they are different from the Council... I am living with private with G4S it is very big difference (Jane).

Problems with the new properties included the gardens not being maintained and no tools provided for maintenance. One mother told us:

When they moved us from the council house to the private house, the grass was up to here (Jane).

The mothers also noted how repairs were not addressed quickly and the general maintenance of the property was poor:

... if they [G4S] are some repair they don't do it (Jane).

...I complained to G4S, they don't do anything... they should need to do something about my house situation... (Shanaz).

Some mothers identified further differences that they felt directly impacted on the safety of their children. One mother told us:

I wanted the gates for the baby, baby gates, I was keeping on telling them when the baby was six months there, to bring the gates, nobody was listening. It was one month, it is seven months now, another month, eight months, another month nine months (Jane).

Of great concern was the issue of infestations of rats which one of the mothers identified:

Some of the rats in my house... Rat poison... it is a old, old house. We are living with the rats... we are living with rats, dead, dying, smelling, dying in the house (Jane).

Whilst the problem with the rats was eventually addressed by the landlord, this mother was particularly upset and concerned about the impact on her and the children of rats being poisoned in their home. A Public Accounts Committee (2013-14 p.3⁴⁸) report on accommodation standards for asylum seekers suggested the housing provided by the Home Office through Compass contract was “unacceptably poor”.

Shared accommodation

Similar to the Inquiry, a number of the mothers said they lived in shared accommodation with other women and mothers who were strangers to them and their children. Two mothers told us:

The housing is, they give us sharing... (Wahid).

I am unlucky. I got sharing house... it is a really harmful house for because of the sharing (Shanaz).

Sharing communal areas, such as kitchens and bathrooms were considered to be particularly problematic, as identified by one mother:

I have a cupboard, but it is terrible, with sharing lady..., she took all my plates and bowls and put them in her cupboard. That lady never cleaned house, in two months never cleaned the toilet..., every night I clean toilet, every morning dirty..., toilet, bath tub, floor, I cleaned every day and they didn't bother, every day making mess, it's not good (Shanaz).

Of particular concern were the conditions within which the mothers had to care for their children. The constraints of space, along with the criticism of other women in the house were problematic:

.... the baby doesn't have any space to feel it is my home because... people will complain, 'can't you control the baby?' Can't control baby not cry, you can control baby not to dance, that is impossible. Otherwise they will shout at them [mother and baby] (Wahid).

They complain about my boy many times..., lady came knocking on the door telling [son] not to

watch tele..., [son] is a little boy, he wants to play after school. They [other residents] are taking whole sofa, like this, they are blocking sofa (Shanaz).

The mothers told us about feeling unsafe in shared accommodation as other tenants often had male guests to stay in the house:

... people always coming, four people, eight people, ten people, like this, they are taking men, I am getting main door open all the time, mans can come at night time..., can you imagine my situation, I cannot sleep... robber can come, highjacker can come. I don't know the man; he is a murderer or a killer? The door has no locker..., no locker (Shanaz).

Living in fear, this mother was concerned about the detrimental impact on her son of living in shared accommodation:

... my son is not able to sleep, they are making noise..., they are dancing, singing every night..., my son is crying, again and again, until 4am, 5am..., 'Mama I cannot sleep' (Shanaz).

The Inquiry suggests “the decency standards applied in the past local council provision no longer apply and ‘Statement of Requirements’ places little obligations on providers to ensure high quality and appropriate accommodation” (2013, p.19). As this research has identified, mothers in Kirklees felt that they were living in low standards of accommodation that were not appropriate to meet the needs of their children, raising serious safeguarding concerns.



Relationships, family and friends

All of the mothers who participated in this research told of the way in which the asylum support system negatively impacted their family life and familial relationships. Similar to the Inquiry, we heard that some mothers were separated from members of their family in the UK, including children. One mother told us that her son's claim, which was separate from her own, was refused:

... he [son] was destitute. He was not even allowed to live with us. He was destitute for two years and he was supported by one of the organisations in [Kirklees] who hosted him for two years, without any money... it is very, very difficult, very, very difficult, very difficult (Yai).

Her inability to provide for her destitute son, owing to the conditions of her asylum support was particularly painful for Yai and created additional stress and anxiety. Many of the mothers who participated in this research spoke of the extreme stresses they faced on a daily basis and how this affected their parenting. Poverty and mental health are inextricably linked. The link between social factors and mental distress is well established. Chantler (2010 ⁴⁹) identifies poverty, dispersal, isolation, unsettled immigration status and detention as factors contributing to the mental health of asylum seekers.

When poverty creates stress in the family it can also have an effect on the child (Arnold, 2012 ⁵⁰) and mothers in this study expressed an awareness of how their own mental well-being impacted their children. One mother told about the impact on her current well-being of her previous time in detention and the asylum process on her parenting:

Me, I am always distressed..., as mum is always distressed, even the communication, talking, shouting ..., is affected in the relationships, me, everyday, because of this Home Office, because me I have applied eight times and, and they keep on refusing me..., and ... to fight about all of these things. What can you do?..., I'm not myself, somewhere I was affected, I am not myself (Jane).

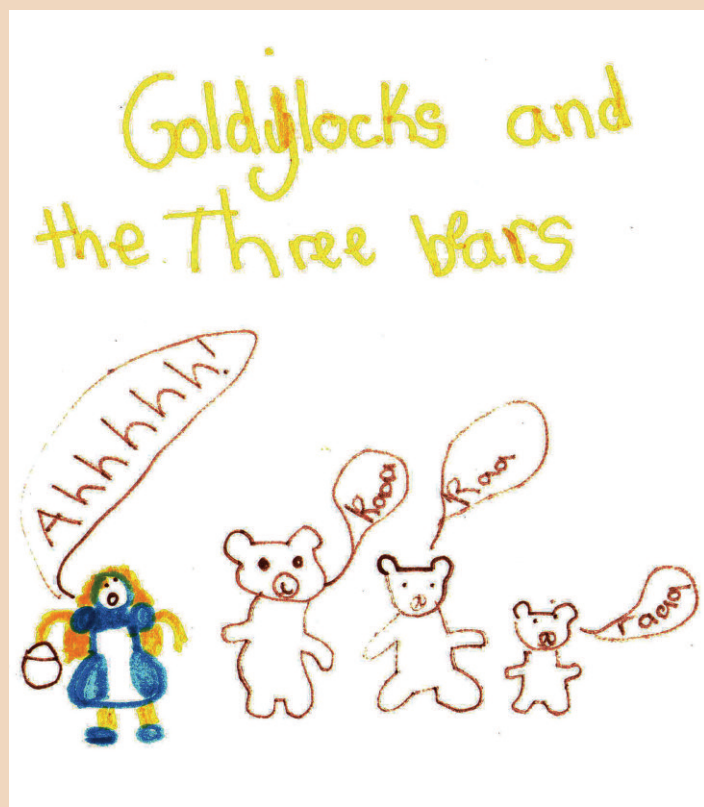
Another mother echoed these sentiments suggesting:

... the bully we face as asylum seekers it is just too much, we are bullied all around the corner..., from the Home Office, the total is too much, the torture is too much..., the nasty things they tell you in your letters..., it makes you feel defenceless, helpless, sometimes I shout at my children for no reason, because I have all this frustration in my head, I wouldn't want them to know about it, it gets to me, so if anyone says to me, I shout at them for no reason (Yai).

Shanaz also told of the way in which her own well-being impacted her son:

If my mood bad, if my emotion bad, it is effecting my son as well. I have to be smile, you know at school waving for my son, cooking kitchen nicely, if I am crying all day who is looking after my son..., My son sees, on a night time, I am crying, I am feeling so lonely (Shanaz).

Poor maternal mental health has been found to have long-term effects on children and their future outcomes (Bohon et al., 2007 ⁵¹). Indicating an awareness of this impact, mothers expressed an acute sense of guilt. Guilt is problematic for many mothers (Barnes et al., 1997 ⁵²). However, guilt for mothers who feel their capacity to mother is challenged owing to their mental health, is particularly burdensome, 'as feelings of failure can compound their already delicate mental state' (Vallido et al., 2010, p.1441 ⁵³). Chantler (2012) argues for a greater understanding of the intersection of gender and asylum to facilitate more effective interventions.



Education

The Inquiry suggests “the current asylum support system affects children’s educational outcomes, preventing them from building resilience and skills and from reaching their own potential” (2013, p.19). Repeated dispersals and the associated disruptions were all factors identified by the women in this study as affecting their children’s educational outcomes.

One mother said that because she was re-dispersed within Kirklees, but was unable to secure a school place for her daughter within that area, she continued to take her to her old school. Without cash for transportation she would tell the bus driver her daughter was only 4 ½ years old so as not to have to pay the bus fare (her daughter was just under 7 years old at the time):

Didn’t have money for bus fare. So I need money every week for the ticket, all sometimes if there [isn’t a] ticket we just walk, but in morning it’s so important not to be late. It’s like forty minutes going fast and you know it’s uphill and I have the baby. So this morning I lie, it’s [daughter] four years and a half, because I don’t have anything... (Jane).

As noted in the Inquiry “the current asylum support system affects children’s educational outcomes” (2013, p.19). Under the dispersal policy, those seeking asylum are dispersed on a no choice basis and may be moved multiple times during their asylum application. The mothers said that dispersals and often multiple dispersals were stressful and disruptive to children’s education.

After receiving a positive decision on her claim for asylum, Jane told of how she had a limited time to find new accommodation for her and her children. She went on to express her fears for her daughter’s education owing to the pending associated school move:

... [daughter] doesn’t like to be moved from school, she is used to her friends..., and I don’t know if it will be affected because she is doing well (Jane).

Other mothers expressed similar concerns. Yai emphasised how she felt the child’s age was significant to the disruption caused by dispersal and

repeated school changes. In relation to her six year old son, Yai said: “he went to school, he was happy, he was only six, he was excited”. However, she went on to tell of the disruption to her 14 year old daughter’s education:

... she has not been to school for three week, she refused to go to school... knowing that she is not going back to her school and she has missed all her friends, we came to a new place where we don’t know anyone... it is very, very difficult... she had friends who knew and loved her how she was, and she felt very uncomfortable going into a new society ... she was going to go into year ten. She was just planning for her GCSEs, which has affected her a lot... she could not chose those subjects. From then she has to drop [her chosen subjects] and the things that she was most good at. So that has affected her for the rest of her life. She has never had the opportunity to excel... (Yai).

Yai told of feeling powerless, not knowing where to go or who to turn to in order to support her daughter’s education, and having to navigate an area and a system that she was unfamiliar with. Yai went on to identify the significance of the support her daughter received in encouraging her to access education:

... the nurse contacted the school or somebody or the child support or somebody and then that lady came, she booked an appointment, came to the house, she tried to talk to her, she talked to her, talked to her, and eventually she started going to school, ...very, very tough, very, very, very tough (Yai).

The significance of receiving support in maintaining the education of children in the asylum process was also expressed by other mothers. Wahid told of the voluntary support her son received from the local university to assist her son to attend school:

...to help him to go to school three days with him. And it helps him, really helps him (Wahid).

Similarly, Shanaz told of the advice and support she received in organising her son’s education:

She is a very nice lady, she came and she speak with me, very long time (Shanaz).

Access to education is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Arnold, 2012). School environments can also play an essential role in promoting the well-being of asylum and refugee children, helping them to rebuild their self-esteem and friendships, whilst also achieving their educational goals (NALDIC, 2011).

School resources

The Inquiry identified how low levels of financial support meant parents struggled to provide basic educational resources for their children, such as books and stationery. One mother told us of how school trips placed an additional financial burden on her family finances:

... sometimes if there is a school trips, I go to them [the school] and tell them that this is our situation..., they are not very helpful, I get ill any time there is a school trip, how do I afford, they are not very helpful..., if I say something to the school, they don’t want to know, they say ‘oh can you pay this’ (Yai).

Yai also expressed how the schools limited understanding of her situation led to an increased sense of humiliation and discrimination:

... the humiliation is too much... I said to them [school], this is the situation... the lady said ok we will look into it... she wants me to tell her everything... my son was sitting there and she said ‘oh, I know it is very difficult..., but will you be able to pay £1 every week towards it’..., I felt humiliated..., I said to my son ‘no matter what, I am not going to beg anyone’. I’m not going to talk to anyone; I am a human being (Yai).

A different mother also told of how the money she received for her son was inadequate to buy essential school items, such as his uniform:

My son is getting nice money..., I think the money is for food though, not for clothes. Food is ok, but not his jumper, not his shoes..., so its clothes is difficult, it is difficult all ways, but I have to manage it (Shanaz).



Another mother also told of the inequality in the education system:

If they are asylum childrens, they will not be able to join the university because they are not a refugee, entitled to get the money, or the university permission. Or they can pay as international students, by themselves; they can't imagine a mother carrying her baby or kids from strange country, empty without even, she doesn't have shoes. How can she pay for the university, thousands and thousands of pounds? (Wahid).

Restricted finances and consequent limited participation in school trips, social activities and extracurricular activities often leads to exclude children in the asylum process from full engagement with educational experience and positions them on the periphery of society (Arnold, 2012).

Societal attitudes

The Inquiry highlights difficulties faced by families on asylum support and their ability to have regular meaningful engagement in cultural, religious or social activities. As identified by Wahid and Shanaz, many mothers who came to Kirklees did not have social networks to provide support:

When they [my children] came first in this country it was hard for them because the culture and the friendship and the language itself and the atmosphere, it was hell (Wahid).

That was a really bad moment for me and my son, because we didn't know anybody here..., we come here, London first, travel time maybe about 7 hours, I know... in London, but not here..., no relative, no husband, no friends, nothing (Shanaz).

Despite such restrictions, consistent with the Inquiry, this research has highlighted mothers' desire to provide normative activities for their children consistent with their peers. However, with low levels of financial support this often proved difficult for many mothers as expressed by Yai:

... they are all growing up, they need a life, they need to go to places that other children go, they need to go to like little holidays, they need to go to cinema and stuff which we cannot afford... it affects them a lot, a lot, a lot, cos if my daughter wants to go out with her friends, all I can give her is a £2, £3, but she does understand me, she doesn't go shopping when her friends, when they go shopping..., at this age can you imagine, she should be going shopping at that age of 17, she should be going shopping for those things, but we don't have the money, we can't afford it... (Yai).

Similarly, Wahid told of the difficulties faced by mothers in being able to facilitate play opportunities with other children owing to a lack of ability to pay for transport:

... the children they don't have any access to play, to take them to other children, because they need money (Wahid).

Further evidence suggests that Section 4 support did not enable mothers to provide for any broader needs which they felt were important for healthy happy children. Wahid spoke about such difficulties and the impact upon children's well-being:

Outside when they, the children are walking with their mother, their mother will treat them, ice cream, sweets and other things..., the asylum son, he can't, she doesn't have money..., the child must cry and she has to pull him, hardly, while he is crying as if she didn't listen to him, inside anger, the child doesn't understand why his mum isn't buying him, his mum is really angry inside (Wahid).

Consistent with the findings of this research Arnold (2005) has also highlighted concerns relating to the limited access to structured educational and recreational activities for children in the asylum process.

Discrimination and stigma

A sense of discrimination and shame facilitated an increase sense of social exclusion for the women and their children in this research. Jane expressed her daughter's sense of difference to her peers and how this impacts her ability to engage with other children;

That child [daughter's friend] that came to visit, she already know that daughter is poor, she downgrade her, we are poor, we don't have money, when I go to her house they have everything..., she feel like I'm not meeting her basic needs..., so she doesn't want her [friend] to come, "don't open the door"..., she feel like she's downgraded, things like that can affect the children (Jane).

In line with Inquiry, the mothers also told of the impact of dominant public discourses centring on the myths of 'bogus asylum seekers' coming to the UK to 'milk the system' (2013, p.23). Shanaz spoke of her sense of discrimination:

I am also a human being, it doesn't make any sense I don't have any right because I am an asylum seeker, why? I am a human being, if you need one plate of rice; I need one plate of rice (Shanaz).

Consistent with the Inquiry that suggests that it has been easier for policy makers to simply ignore these misconceptions rather than try to correct them, one mother within this research highlighted the need to educate and raise awareness:

For centuries England has been hosting asylum seekers... the mass media is not working on that part, the natives need to be conscious, they have to be a separate mass media about the historical and immigration side of it, in the other side, you know, the process of teaching the living standards of the United Kingdom, centuries and centuries, most people, they don't know, you can't blame them, the system doesn't allow them to know what is going on. It should be open (Wahid).

Mothers told us about the impact of negative discourses on their children's well-being, as highlighted by Yai:

They are making them grow up to hate people in authority, to think that they have been hated, they have not been loved, not been wanted, nobody wants that, we as an adult, it is very difficult to deal with hatred, if you know somebody doesn't like



you, people quit their jobs, if they know they are not wanted, so children are growing up in a society, you cannot run, you cannot do anything, if you know you are growing up in hatred what do they expect those children to do, to go out commit suicide, you know, it is not helping this society, the children will be ill and this is not going to help if anybody is get ill, if their education is getting interrupted that is not going to help anyone (Yai).

Recognising the impact of such discrimination, Elle also told us:

No matter how bad or horrible they think asylum seekers are, let them think of the children (Elle).

Being aware of such negative discourses, and the real or perceived impact of disclosing their asylum status, the mothers told us of their attempts to hide their status from the outside world and also from their children. This was expressed by Yai, who suggested:

... their friends don't know they are asylum seekers, because my daughter, she is not like me, she is very intelligent, but she doesn't say a lot, I don't think her friends know she is asylum, they might suspect but they wouldn't know (Yai).

Yai went on to tell of her non-disclosure to her son around the family's asylum status:

He doesn't know anything about the asylum process and I don't want him to because he is so young, he wouldn't understand, sothe little one, even last week, I don't want to tell [him] the asylum situation, but all the time he say, 'but why are we here', I said to him 'we are looking for a new house, they are making a new house' but one day he said 'but mum I never seen it take so long to make a new house' (Yai).

Reid and Walker (2003, p.85⁵⁴) define such non-disclosure as 'a selective denial of uncomfortable truths'. Living with a continuous fear of disclosure can contribute to psychological trauma and other conditions, including depression, guilt and anxiety for parents.

Children's resilience

Despite the overall adversity experienced by mothers and their children because of the asylum support system, the mothers also identified resilience factors relating to the ways children had positively adapted. Norman (2000, p.3⁵⁵) outlines the elements of resiliency which include: "...the interaction of two conditions: risk factors – stressful life events or adverse environmental conditions that increase the vulnerability of individuals [asylum support] – and the presence of personal, familial and community protective factors that buffer, moderate and protect against vulnerabilities. Individuals differ in their exposure to adversity (vulnerability) and the degree of protection afforded by their own capacities and by their environment (protective factors)". This concept of resilience has been useful to this study and was used to explore how the mothers and children make sense of some of the challenges and hardships of living in receipt of asylum support in Kirklees. For example, one of the mothers highlighted the education capacity of her daughter as a protective factor:

... she's clever. She does well in the education. She is able to count since year two. Got a lot of good certificates, 16 we count. She is proud for the school for the school, she is doing very well (Jane).

Another mother also identified the ability of her children to work hard and complete their studies. She suggested that despite the challenges faced in the asylum support system, her children had been successful in their adult lives:

...they [my children] challenge their own life. Now they became, really, stand up by themselves... My son is qualified in ... first degree, and she [daughter] had finished her first degree... I am happy because they pushed themselves to be educated and they are good state now for the future. One of my sons had finished his first degree as well and he is working [in] his profession... so he is doing well. They work hard, you can't imagine how it is. A student who is learning by his mother language ... to read and to research on it, too difficult, but they managed to do it. Whatever comes to them, they concentrate on

their education, because the answer is to show they can do it, it pushed them inside (Wahid).

Moving away from the predominant focus of the Inquiry which documented adverse outcomes in relation to the asylum support, this study includes the issue of children's resilience, as identified by the mothers. Understanding how children can cope with and achieve despite the adversities of the asylum support by investigating resilience at the individual and relational level may be an important approach to successful interventions in relation to asylum support.





The mothers' recommendations

The Inquiry made a number of recommendations (listed in Appendix One). Whilst many of these original recommendations were repeated by the mothers in this study, they also made some specific recommendations.

The mothers suggest that families seeking asylum in Kirklees, specifically mothers, should be given the right to work:

My point, I would like to request my government to give a work permit, like five hours or 10 hours, so we can earn some money so we can survive ourselves, I am doing volunteering work, but it is no money, not a single penny (Jane).

The mothers should be... allowed to work (Shanaz).

The benefits of working were highlighted by some of the mothers. One mother emphasised the money it would provide for her children:

Well if they [mothers seeking asylum] are working it would be great, because, they will give money, to spend with for their children (Wahid).

Another mother suggested that it was positive for their children's future if mothers were allowed to work:

The children will follow them [their mothers] tomorrow when they grow up. Working is a life, working is contribution, working is to be yourself (Wahid).

Closely related to working for their children's future was the feeling that the mothers were capable of contributing to society:

... will feel that 'I am important, I am looking after myself, I am happy to do so' (Jane).

If we could be working, I could have done something... with the other mothers... We can help each other, stay with the kid, I go to work, and just rotate like that, and we make our life better... (Elle).

I definitely would love to work, to support the children... I am doing the voluntary work 'cos I've got no choice... I don't want to sit at home doing nothing. I would rather do something (Yai).



... give people the chance to work. If people have the chance to work, then the money they [Home Office] are giving on support they could spend on something else. Everybody wants to work. Work gets money, do your own things, pay your bills, be responsible, anybody making the decisions (Yai).

One of the mothers told us that the right to work would mitigate some of the negative attitudes held by the wider public about those subject to immigration controls.

Abolishing Section 4 support was a further recommendation made by the mothers. This recommendation was related to the mothers' suggestion that a cash-based support system be introduced for all children and their families:

If they are mothers they shouldn't give them vouchers, poison covered money. They think they are helping the family, but the poison is inside... Mothers need cash – I can't go to the local shop, means have to go [walk] much further (Shanaz).

... this money you are putting on a card £70, why you don't give us £60 and £10 cash in case the child get sick... £10 in a week this one can help you with the [bus] ticket (Jane).

Choice about where families live was a further recommendation. The mothers suggest that having choice about where they live would begin to address some of adversity of the asylum support system that their children face and enhance their future:

At least the children can concentrate on their lives, can grow up like normal children and make better citizens in the future... look at the interests of the child... (Yai).

The mothers suggest that the welfare of the child is not given sufficient priority in the asylum support system in Kirklees. Considering the child's best interests, all of the mothers recommended that the asylum support system did not meet the welfare needs of children in Kirklees. The mothers specifically spoke about the best interests of children based on 'innocent' and 'normal' childhoods:

I want him to enjoy a normal childhood... look at the interests of the child (Yai).

... the children are innocent, they know nothing (Elle).

It was also important that children should not be hated. Feelings of abandonment and isolation were difficult for some of the mothers:

... they've [children] been hated, they have not been loved, not been wanted, nobody wants that... it is very difficult to deal with hatred (Yai).

The mothers suggest there is a need to raise the awareness of and 'sensitise' media to the challenging circumstances that families seeking asylum face. Also the impact that stereotypical and negative portrayals can have on their well-being and stigmatisation of their children. A careful balance is needed between highlighting the needs of children living on asylum support and preventing further stigmatisation.



Final summary

This study has taken a localised approach to the Parliamentary Inquiry (2013) into asylum support for children and young people. We have placed the views of mothers of children who live or have lived on asylum support in Kirklees at the heart of the study. All of the mothers interviewed said that asylum support (accommodation and/or financial subsistence) was or had been a means of survival for them and their children.

Using the themes that arose in the Inquiry, we have examined the mothers' accounts of asylum support in relation to children and young people living in Kirklees. Consistent with the Inquiry, a number of areas of concern were raised by the mothers: 'essential living needs', 'home-life', 'education' and 'societal attitudes'. A further theme emerged around 'children's resilience'. Understanding how children can cope with and achieve despite the adversities of the asylum support by investigating resilience is an important approach to successful interventions in relation to asylum support.

As part of this report we have also identified the recommendations put forward by the mothers:

- **Families seeking asylum should be given the right to work.**
- **Section 4 support should be abolished and a cash-based support system introduced for all children, young people and their families.**
- **Families should have a choice about where they live.**
- **The best interests of the child should be central to decisions affecting children.**

A proportion of mothers and children are granted asylum and may continue to live in Kirklees whilst others, who are not granted asylum may be returned to dangerous countries with precarious social and political conditions. Whatever the future may hold for the mothers and children living in Kirklees on asylum support, the 'best interests of the child' is paramount. It should be a source of shame to this country that mothers seeking asylum and their children are unable to buy enough food and go hungry; that mothers have to beg for cash in exchange for asylum vouchers; that mothers and children are placed in accommodation where they feel unsafe; and that some mothers feel that they and their children are hated by the general public. Experiences of isolation, persecution, poverty and poor housing are not, of course, confined to mothers seeking asylum in the UK, but those people seeking asylum may be made more vulnerable by the asylum support system and less able to challenge unfair treatment than some other groups in the UK.

Consistent with the findings from the Parliamentary Inquiry (2013) this report shows that the current asylum support system is in urgent need of reform. To support all children to have a good healthy childhood with the best possible start to life, providing support that places importance on the safety and well-being of children, the Home Office and UK Government need to meet its international and domestic obligations to promote children's best interests. We appeal for a rights-based approach fundamental to the best interest of the child in relation to children and young people living in the asylum system.

We suggest that all agencies in contact with mothers seeking asylum should listen to the views of those mothers and that the asylum support system should be radically changed to provide specifically for the needs of mothers seeking asylum, as well as their children.

We also draw attention to the Committee on the Rights of the Child ⁵⁶ that has identified the right of the child to be heard and have their views taken into account as one of the guiding principles of the CRC. Article 12 provides that children capable of forming their own views should be able to express their views. Therefore, we advocate that children should have their views taken into account, particularly in matters that affect them such as asylum support.



Appendix One:

Key recommendations from the Parliamentary Inquiry (2013⁵⁷)

1. The government should abolish Section 4 support and urgently implement a single cash-based support system for all children and their families who need asylum support while they are in the UK. This should include children who were born after an asylum refusal, to ensure that no child is left destitute.
2. Asylum support for families also provided with accommodation should be aligned with mainstream benefit rates paid for living expenses. Where accommodation includes utilities (such as heating, lighting and water rates) which would normally be expected to be paid from living expenses, it is appropriate to make some deduction. However, these must be reasonable and comparable to those made from housing benefit where gas, electricity and water bills are covered within rent payments. The rates of support should never fall below 70% of income support.
3. Support should be increased annually and at the very least in line with income support.
4. Permission to work should be granted to asylum seeking parents and young adults if their claim for asylum has not been concluded within six months. Refused asylum seekers who cannot be returned to their country of origin should also be allowed to work.
5. Newly dispersed families should be provided with comprehensive, written information in a language which they understand about their rights and entitlements, as well as practical information about services in their areas and where to get support.
6. The government should ensure that asylum seekers' needs for privacy are respected by housing providers, who should not enter properties unannounced.
7. Ministers and the UKBA should work to promote positive relations between refugee and British communities, and a constructive public debate by celebrating and supporting this country's proud tradition of giving sanctuary to those in need of protection.

(Parliamentary Inquiry, 2013, p.5).

Appendix 2: References

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Full written evidence submissions and transcripts from the evidence sessions can be found online at: <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/parliamentary-inquiry-asylum-support-children> [Accessed 12 December, 2014].
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