

A stronger voice

Report of the workshops carried out by the Anti-Poverty Group
of the Migrants Resource Centre, London, for the *Get Heard* Project



Migrants Resource Centre, June 2006



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Foreword

This report documents how migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers view and experience poverty and social exclusion in UK society today.

It presents the findings of a number of workshops organised by the Anti-Poverty Group at the Migrants Resource Centre in London. These were part of the UK-wide *Get Heard* project, feeding into the 2006 National Action Plan on Social Inclusion.

We hope that the experience and voice of all involved will be useful across government departments and initiatives around integration and cohesion.

The contributions of the members of the Anti-Poverty Group have been invaluable for the project. I would like to thank all the people who participated in the workshops for sharing with us their experiences of living in London and giving us an insight into their daily struggle to overcome poverty.

I wish to thank Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme for offering us financial support for producing this report. They also gave encouragement and support to make the voices of our client group heard as widely as possible, and their issues and concerns raised in the wider community.

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1. Executive summary

“ I am an asylum seeker, I cannot do anything. I cannot work, I cannot study, and I cannot walk in the street with confidence.”

There were almost 80 participants at the five workshops held by the Anti-Poverty Group of the Migrants Resource Centre in London. The Anti-Poverty Group is a forum for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to promote their voices in anti-poverty initiatives. On this occasion, the participants were there to contribute to *Get Heard*, a UK-wide project where, at 146 workshops, people living in poverty would feed their ideas into the Government's 2006 National Action Plan on Social Inclusion.

The Migrants Resource Centre workshops were for refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers. The atmosphere in each was one of excitement. As one participant put it: 'It gave me the opportunity to say what I wanted to say for a very long time, especially the problems we face as ethnic minorities.' There was a sense of solidarity, a belief that: 'Together we can support each other and have a stronger voice.'

Participants were very clear about the reasons why so many migrants and refugees in Britain today are poor. They listed a range of barriers that they felt prevented integration and led to exclusion, including external ones like injustice and racism, and practical ones such as lack of money, poor access to amenities and information and difficulties in finding work. They also explored barriers around loss of identity, dignity and confidence. The word 'respect' was repeated many times over. Poverty, they believed, was as much about lack of power and isolation, as it was about money.

Many of those who came had terrible tales to tell. One remembered picking biscuits out of dustbins, many had to go without food each week when their money ran out. Women were clearly upset when they told of their children having to go without the things their peers had. One young woman told how she had tried twice to commit suicide.

But despite their problems, some were able to point to some government policies that they felt were having a positive impact on the lives of migrants and refugees, and some benefits that had helped them, especially free education, health care and legal aid.

They were also clear about what needed to change. They felt that many refugees and migrants had much to offer, but that their skills and experience were not being used. One of the main changes they wanted to see was that asylum-seekers should be allowed to work. 'It is inhumane

to make asylum seekers who have been through horrific experiences, to wait for a number of years with no right to work or study. The long wait demoralises asylum seekers, causes them depression, mental health problems and loss of confidence, and makes their skills and experiences irrelevant.'

They also came up with a number of positive ways to combat the discrimination that they experienced on a daily basis. 'We like to be part of this society and live like the rest of the population in the UK, but people here are not open to us', said one person. Among other things, they suggested that policies to address discrimination and promote equality should be reviewed by ethnic minorities before being introduced or implemented 'If people feel that their voice will be heard, they will vote and get involved in the political system'. They felt that diversity should be celebrated and the contribution made by migrants and refugees in this country should be recognised, particularly in the media, which was seen as overwhelmingly negative towards refugees and asylum seekers: 'The media portray us in a bad light and the Government needs to do something about it.'

Many participants had stories to tell about trying to find work and facing discrimination: 'I have applied for a hundred jobs. I got only one reply. Is it discrimination? I strongly believe it is'. They felt that not enough was being done by the Government to counter such discrimination and that new tougher measures need to be introduced if this issue is to be addressed properly.

Many of the changes that the participants recommended would benefit all those living on a low income, whatever the colour of their skin, their cultural origins, or migration history. These included better facilities for children, free childcare, stricter policies on bullying at school, extending the Sure Start programme to all areas, increasing Income Support, Child Benefit and Child and family Tax Credit. They said there should be better support for families on low incomes, such as giving them time before having to pay back crisis loans. There were also ideas for improving social housing and transport and Job Centre Plus.

But above all, participants at the workshops wanted to be able to play a full part in life in Britain. They felt that they had much to offer and welcomed their chance to make a contribution. As one participant put it: 'No one ever asked me before how I felt or what I thought of the policies that affect my daily life. It gives me confidence to know that my views are important and will be listened to.'

“ I am so lucky to have known few good and generous people. They fed me and supported me for few months; I cannot imagine what would happen to me if I did not know anyone.”

2. Background

National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2006

Each country in Europe produces a National Action Plan (NAP) on Social Inclusion, outlining the key problems and approaches to tackling poverty and social exclusion. It covers areas such as housing, employment, health inequalities, children and older people, disability, black and minority ethnic issues and gender. So far there have been three NAPs, the latest one being in 2006.

The Migrants Resource Centre works with migrants and refugees and in partnership with other agencies, to effect social justice and change, enabling migrants and refugees to fully participate in this society. Its core activities are advice, volunteering, education and training, community development and partnership work.

As part of this work, it runs the Empowerment Project¹, which gives a voice to refugees and migrants at strategic levels. The Anti-Poverty Group, which organized the *Get Heard* workshops, is part of the Empowerment project. It has 25 members, and is a forum for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to promote their voice in anti-poverty initiatives and at policy level. It organizes regular workshops on a range of issues. After *Get Heard*, the Group held an event aimed at supporting participants in the *Get Heard* workshops to find positions as volunteers, training, education or work. The Group is currently working with the EAPN (European Anti Poverty Network), and the UKCAP (UK Coalition Against Poverty), to raise awareness of the issues facing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme (UKPP), which supported the workshops, was created in 1996 in response to the growth in poverty and inequality in the UK. The UKPP is guided by the same principles as Oxfam's work in other countries: it develops ways of working which enable people living in poverty to work out their own solutions to their problems, and to challenge the policies and practices that are responsible for creating and maintaining poverty.

Get Heard is one of the largest projects undertaken in the UK to involve people with first-hand experience of poverty in giving their views on government policies designed to combat poverty – and in doing so to attempt to shape those policies which affect their lives. It was set up by the Social Policy Task Force, comprising the European Anti-Poverty Network, England; Poverty Alliance, Scotland; Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network; Anti-Poverty Network Cymru, Wales; Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme; the UK Coalition Against Poverty; and Age Concern. It was funded by the European Commission to help raise awareness of the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion. The Department for Work and Pensions also supported the process.

One of its aims was to raise awareness of the National Action Plan (NAP) process among people living in poverty, and enable them to give their views and to inform the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2006.

The workshops

As part of the *Get Heard* process, the Anti-Poverty Group of the Migrants Resource Centre held five workshops with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in London. Participants came from the African Women's Group, Nubian Mother's Group, Ginagi Foundation, Wings of Hope, East African Society, Eritrean Muslim community, Iraqi British Centre, Iranian Refugee Organisation, the South Westminster Parents group and Migrants Resource Centre service users from a wide range of other countries.

Grassroots community members gave their views through workshops, which they organised themselves, usually with the help of their regional anti-poverty network. Each workshop held structured and informed discussions on government policy, and answered three questions:

- **What's working?**
- **What's not working?**
- **How should things be done differently?**

Nazek Ramadan, Migrant and Refugee Empowerment Worker at the Migrants Resource Centre, facilitated the workshops. She said: '*Get Heard* was a good project for us because it fitted very well with our aims. It was a good opportunity for us to promote a voice for refugees and migrants.'

A total of 79 participants took part in the *Get Heard* workshops for migrants and refugees. They came from all over the world. The majority were women. Two workshops included both men and women; three were women-only.

They were asked four main questions:

- 1. What do you see as the necessities to lead a dignified life?**
- 2. What is it like to be poor?**
- 3. How does it feel to be poor?**
- 4. What are the main reasons for migrants' and refugees' poverty?**

They then went on to identify '**What is working?**' and '**What is not working?**' and finally '**What are the changes you would like to see the Government make?**'

The Get Heard Process with the Migrants Resource Centre

Social Policy Task Force (including Oxfam's UKPP); Department of Work and Pensions



Get Heard



Migrants Resource Centre Anti-Poverty Group Workshops with 79 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers



National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2006

What participants said...

“ It gave me confidence knowing that my views are important and will be listened to. No-one ever asked me before how I felt or what I thought of the policies that affect my daily life.”

“ Together we can support each other and have a stronger voice.”

“ The whole idea of taking my views into account is good. There are many important issues that need to be addressed by the government in this multicultural society.”

“ We have learned that we have lots of rights that we did not know about or felt shy to talk about. We have learned to speak up for our rights, and always participate and be positive.”

“ It gave me the opportunity to say what I wanted for a very long time, especially the problems we face as ethnic minorities.”

“ I usually find it difficult to express my views, but I was supported and encouraged to give my views. I was made to feel that my views are important and respected.”

“ We need more meetings like this to come together and talk about the issues that affect our lives. We need to invite politicians to come and talk and listen to us.”

3. Views on poverty

When asked **‘What do you see as the necessities to lead a dignified life?’**, participants identified four main components: education, health, housing and employment but also, importantly, respect, good networks and being able to retain one’s own values:

- A good level of education
- Good health
- A secure, enjoyable, well paid job, relevant to interests and qualifications
- Secure accommodation in good size and reasonable condition
- Safety, respect and acceptance, regardless of race, colour, sex or financial status
- Equal rights and opportunities as well as full human rights
- Self confidence and good communication skills
- Adequate family and friends’ support and networks
- A set of social values
- A sense of real integration in society
- The opportunity to have own beliefs and practise own religion.

Asked **‘What is it like to be poor?’**, they spoke about money, but also about health, education and housing. Isolation, depression and lack of motivation were also seen as important. One person summed it up simply by saying: ‘You can not live like the rest of the population.’ Other comments included:

- ‘When you can not find work.’
- ‘When you can not afford to buy your children what they ask you for.’
- ‘When you find it hard to pay even for the school dinner.’
- ‘You have no money.’
- ‘Not to have enough income to cover your main needs; struggling to pay the bills.’
- ‘I cannot pay what I should pay.’

“Discrimination prevents employment. Discrimination against our names, religion, accent, appearance, etc. Change all this, and we will get a job today.”

“ You do not have control over your life, you have no right to say anything, but you have to do what the others decide for you.”

- 'You are unable to afford to go back home to visit your family.'
- 'Living in poor housing conditions.'
- 'Living with poor health.'
- 'Poor education – struggling to gain better and higher education.'
- 'Living in isolation and feeling rejected by the society.'
- 'You feel depressed and insecure.'
- 'Lacking motivation.'

Asked '**How does it feel to be poor?**' their comments were about lack of power, isolation, anger, lack of respect and dignity and feelings of depression.

- 'You feel powerless and isolated.'
- 'You lose yourself under the pressure.'
- 'You feel like a robot and have to do what others tell you to do.'
- 'Struggling.'
- 'You feel very depressed, you feel really bad it gives you a headache, and there is nothing you can do.'
- 'People who deal with you do not respect you.'
- 'People take advantage of you.'
- 'You feel neglected and badly treated by the health service and practitioners.'
- 'You feel insecure, angry and upset.'
- 'You feel angry and you have lost your dignity.'
- 'You panic.'
- 'Unable to pay bills, go out or afford a good life and education.'
- 'Unable to cope with life's stresses.'
- 'Unhappy, depressed, very sick, you wish to harm yourself or to die.'
- 'You lose confidence and motivation.'
- 'You feel hopeless and down all the time.'
- 'You do not live a normal life.'
- 'You feel ashamed of yourself.'
- 'The whole family feels unhappy.'

On the edge

N is a single female asylum seeker. She is 31 years old and lives in NASS accommodation in London in a place where she has been for eight months. She has no cooking utensils, no hot water, very poor heating, a broken bed, the roof leaks from time to time, there are mice and cockroaches, and no furniture apart from a bed. She says the staff of the housing providers are very rude to her and treat her 'with disrespect and like a criminal'.

Total weekly income: £35

Total weekly expenditure: £11 on bus pass
£3 on toiletry
£5 telephone vouchers (to call solicitors, etc)
£3 on college stationery and Internet
£13 on food.

She runs out of money by Thursday. She stays indoors for the whole weekend because she cannot afford to go out. She eats Cornflakes at the weekend. She goes without food an average of two days a week. She sold most of her clothes in Sunday markets to buy food 'I spent all the Christmas period indoors because I did not get any money for two weeks. I cannot even borrow money from anyone'.

She spends most of her time learning English and doing voluntary work to keep her busy and to reduce her stress and isolation. She experiences lots of hostility from some members of the public. Strangers insult her once they know she is an asylum seeker.

Dealing with people's attitudes, the fear of being sent back home, the waiting and uncertainty, the lack of knowledge of the system and the language, depression and financial difficulties has led her to try taking her own life twice.

When asked '**What are the main reasons for migrant's and refugees' poverty?**' participants listed a range of barriers that they saw as preventing integration, including external barriers such as injustice and racism, practical ones such as lack of information, language barriers, and difficulties in accessing employment and internal ones around loss of identity.

- Lack of opportunities
- Lack of information and knowledge of the system in the UK
- Language barrier
- Political and social injustice
- The existence of many barriers preventing integration, and the lack of real commitment and clear policy to encourage integration

- Racism, discrimination and prejudice
- Cultural differences
- Lack of work experience in the UK; difficulties in accessing employment
- Not recognising certificates and educational achievements from abroad
- Not enough professionals and influential people from ethnic minorities
- Lack of role models
- Not knowing your rights
- Loss of identity

The women's groups were asked this question specifically about migrant and refugee women. They noted issues around family, culture and education:

- Lack of family support
- Many women (Bangladeshi, over 45 years old) are uneducated
- Poor education from back home
- Looking after family and children
- Cultural restrictions on women's movement and the ability to make financial and other important decisions
- Partners do not offer support, or help around the house and looking after children
- Low paid employment
- Immigration status and rights

4. What is working?

Participants were then asked to look at **'What is working?'** They had less to say on this than on what is not working. They looked at issues that were important to them and drew from their own experiences a response to the policies that had an impact on their lives. They saw free education and free health care, and some of the benefits provided by the Government, as vital to the survival of refugees and asylum seekers – as well as others on low incomes. They noted that there are differences between what services people have access to, depending on whether they are an asylum seeker, a refugee or a migrant. Asylum seekers have no right to work, so some of the comments did not apply to them.

Health

Access to free health care was seen unanimously as vital, and was described as one of the Government's best policies. Without it, people on low or no income would suffer enormously. It provides families with peace of mind regarding their health. Access to free dental care for the under-19-year olds was also commended. The increase in health screening for both men and women meant that people enjoyed better health. Emergency services, especially ambulance crew, were highly regarded and described as non-discriminatory, treating everyone the same regardless of their ethnic origins.

Education

Access to free education for the under 19s is very important and beneficial. Some participants were happy with the standard of education in schools and colleges. The new admission system to universities was seen by some as good, as well as the student grant.

Benefits

Housing benefit enables families and people on low or no income to have a roof over their head. Council Tax benefit is also helping this group. Unemployment benefit and job seekers allowance are vital for the survival of people who are not working or unable to work, or cannot find a job. Income support is vital for the unemployed, as this is the only means to support the family.

Disability benefit provides vital support for people with disability. Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit are helping make a difference to the lives of many children and families, as this extra support enables parents to meet some of their children's

needs. Crisis loans are helpful to people in time of crisis. Financial support offered to asylum seekers who are not allowed to work and cannot support themselves is very important.

Housing

Housing homeless families is very important, so is housing benefit. Social housing is very important and the Government should always provide affordable housing for people who are unable to own their own accommodation or rent from the private sector. Many families would have been homeless if there were no social housing.

Transport

Free bus travel for children in London meant children enjoyed going out more, and their movement was no longer restricted due to their parents' financial situation or inability to pay for transport. This has made huge difference to families on low or no income, and made school journeys easier. The 24-hour bus service allows people to stay out longer and to leave home earlier for both work and leisure. Participants said the transport system had improved, and many thought it is generally working well.

The women's workshops added two more categories:

Children

Sure Start has a positive impact on families living in its catchment areas. It has brought lots of opportunities to families on low income. Activities provided by the programme for the children take some of the stress and the burden from families who are not able to afford to pay for them. Isolated parents are able to meet with parents like themselves, make friends and build support networks, and enjoy some of the support, advice and activities provided for them. Nursery places for younger children are increasing, benefiting parents and children who are able to access them. Parents are now well aware of the benefits of early activities and education for children. For many migrants and refugees who do not have friends and families around, it is important that the child/children do not suffer isolation and get the opportunity to have a break from home and play and develop in a safe, happy and supervised environment with other children. Registered child minders are providing a good support for the families who are able to use their service.

Protection

Protection and support for women experiencing domestic violence are helping some women escape violent relationship and enjoy safety and security. Legal Aid is empowering the poor to access justice.

5. Recommendations

When asked ‘**What is not working?**’ and ‘**What are the changes you would like to see the Government make?**’, participants had clear ideas and were able to actively contribute to the discussions, drawing again on their own experiences. Again, many of their ideas would not just improve the lives of migrants and refugees, but would also help all those on a low income. Participants had many suggestions to make for improving life for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. All were aimed at ensuring that they can play a full part in British society and enjoy the rights that so many people take for granted.

Summary of recommendations:

1. Allow asylum seekers to work
2. Change immigration laws
3. Integrate migrants and refugees into British society and combat discrimination and racism
4. Eradicate poverty and improve the benefits system
5. Improve the education system from birth through to adult learning
6. Improve access to employment
7. Improve health facilities for migrants and refugees
8. Improve housing for those on low incomes
9. Reduce the cost of public transport.

1. Allow asylum seekers to work

Immigration laws force people with certain immigration status into poverty, and prevent them from accessing vital services. This is particularly true of the law forbidding asylum seekers to work.

Asylum seekers are currently not allowed to work, and yet are denied support or forced to live on £35 a week. Participants felt strongly that giving asylum seekers the right to work would give them back some of their lost dignity. Allowing them to access training and education would speed up their contribution to society and their integration once they are granted refugee status. Participants said that: ‘It is inhumane to make asylum

“The longer you stay out of work, the harder it is to get back into work.”

What can we do?

'I am an asylum seeker, not allowed to work and get £30 only a week to pay for transport, food, clothing and everything. Many of my friends are not entitled to financial support. What do we do? We cannot commit crimes, and to support ourselves we are working in terrible conditions for under £2 an hour.'

seekers who have been through horrific experiences wait for a number of years with no right to work or study. Awaiting a decision from the Home Office for a long time without being able to work or study causes severe depression and other forms of mental health, and a loss of confidence in your skills and abilities'.

2. Change immigration laws

The Government needs to provide better support to refugees to help them settle down and re-build their lives. It should also provide better information about asylum seekers' and refugees' entitlement. If you are a refugee, the fees paid to the Home Office to bring your husband or wife to be with you are too high. If you are refused, you don't get the money back. Some participants made the point that this was inhumane treatment that infringed their right to a family life.

Everyone with exceptional leave to remain should be allowed to travel outside the UK to go on holiday or visit family abroad. Women who come to the UK through marriage, and then experience domestic violence, cannot access public funds if their violent partner refuses to assist with their Home Office documents. These women need to be given the same rights as their partners the day they get married, and men should not be allowed to exploit the current regulations to abuse women. Denying spouses of British citizens any right to support for the first two years, means that women and children stay in abusive situations.

Life in a refuge

D is a mother, 40 years old. She has a daughter of five. The family is a victim of domestic violence, and lived in a refuge for over three years. 'Waiting three or four years in a women's refuge has a negative impact. Women have already lost everything in their lives; their lives are shattered, they are traumatized. They suffer waiting too long for re-housing. In a refuge, women lose contact with people and become isolated. Women do not tell other people that they are living in a refuge. The quicker you get a home, the less people know that you are in a refuge. If you meet a good man, you will lose the opportunity to remarry if they see you in a refuge.'

The family was moved to a permanent accommodation a month ago. 'I was forced to accept accommodation which I am not happy with; this is causing me more depression. Kids here are out of control; the police are unable to do anything about it. If the government offers free clubs and facilities to children, children will not run out of control. Their parents cannot afford to pay for them to do activities.'

3. Integrate migrants and refugees into British society and combat discrimination and racism

Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, like many other Black and Minority Ethnic groups, experience discrimination and racism on a daily basis. This was perceived to have increased since the July bombings in 2005. They also experience very specific negative attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers as a group: 'We feel like strangers due to the majority's attitude towards us. The media stirs things up and incites people to hate foreigners'.

Participants gave specific examples of discrimination by health professionals, employers, teachers, housing officials and bus drivers. This makes it very difficult for them to feel that they belong in this country. There was a feeling that the Government needs to make a real commitment to address integration as a serious issue and develop policies to prevent segregation and exclusion. Everybody needs to feel part of British society. It was noted that integration should not necessarily mean assimilation, and diversity should be celebrated. 'Cultural and other differences should be embraced and catered for in the new British society if we are all to feel an integral part of it.'

There were a number of suggestions for ways of tackling this issue. Diversity should be celebrated, in schools and elsewhere. Young children for whom English is their second language are not getting enough support in schools, which results in lower achievements. There should be active recruitment of BME teachers and the introduction of mother tongue classes in mainstream schools for BME children.

Relevant policies to address discrimination and promote equality should be reviewed by ethnic minorities before being introduced or implemented, and their views should be taken into account. 'If people feel that their voice will be heard, they will vote and get involved in the political system'. The Government needs to recruit more people from ethnic minorities to address the issues of equality and discrimination. Racism in the workplace, housing sector and education needs to be tackled urgently, 'employers do not see people from other races as equals to their own, that's why it is hard to find a job these days.'

“ We like to be part of this society and live like the rest of the population in the UK, but people here are not open to us. ”

On the margins

- 'I have been stopped many times by the police since the July events, and this has made me very depressed, angry, rejected and targeted because of the way I look.'
- 'We need to feel protected and part of the society.'
- 'The police always stop and search people for the way they look, mainly the ethnic minorities. They are racist because they are not ready to help us in the same manner they help white British people.'

Part of this society?

Some of the comments when asked what the barriers were to inclusion:

- 'We encounter prejudice in most aspects of our daily life, i.e. from a minority of teachers, and a minority of bus drivers.'
- 'The media portray us in a bad light and the government needs to do something about it.'
- 'It takes too long to find out about citizenship, the process needs to be more efficient.'
- 'Migrants and refugees feel discriminated against them by service providers, i.e. GPs, job centre staff and other council staff.'
- 'I am an asylum seeker, I cannot do anything. I cannot work, I cannot study, and I can not walk in the street with confidence.'

There should be a recognition of the 'wealth of contributions' made by migrants and refugees in this country. The media should cover more positive stories, 'stories of communities, organisations and individuals working together successfully are rarely shown in the media'. The Government should encourage more cultural events, festivals and activities to promote a positive image and the contribution of migrants and refugees. These might include talks and debates at national and local level. White British people can be encouraged to be more involved in debates and issues concerning migrants and refugees, to stop them feeling 'invaded by foreigners'.

Most of the participants in the workshops cited discrimination as the main barrier to employment. Although they acknowledged the existence of equal opportunity policies and efforts to address discrimination, they felt strongly that not enough is being done. 'I have applied to a hundred jobs, I got only one reply. Is it discrimination? I strongly believe it is'. Existing anti-discrimination measures in the workplace and elsewhere are not strict enough and need strengthening. New tougher measures need to be introduced if this issue is to be addressed properly. Participants also felt that the equal opportunities questionnaire that they are asked to fill in with each application is being used to discriminate against them. 'People need only ask about your skills, qualifications and abilities. They do not need to know what colour you are, or where are your ethnic origins from'.

4. Eradicate poverty and improve the benefits system

Participants felt there should be a real commitment on the part of the Government to eradicate poverty. Support for poor and vulnerable people should be realistic, less complicated and 'not humiliating'. Some families feel that they have lost out under the new benefit system, and would prefer things to go back the way they were before under the old income support and child benefit system. When paying benefits, the Government needs to take into consideration the real minimal cost of living including bills and children's food, clothing and school activities. The benefits system should pay for children's school activities as well as clothing and other essentials.

Other recommendations were for increases in the amount of Income Support Child Benefit and Child and family Tax Credit. Crisis Loans are deducted immediately from the family's benefit, which leaves the family with less money to live on, and forces them back into a crisis stage. Families should be given some time before deducting money for their loans. The weekly amount deducted should be reduced. There should be no restriction on where and how to spend the Local Authority grant; people know best where they need the money.

The Government needs to reduce the period between leaving employment and claiming benefits, especially housing benefit and income support, to prevent further hardship that will be difficult to recover from.

Many people who are unable to find employment give lots of their time to voluntary work, benefiting their local community. The Government should give financial incentives to long-term volunteers who are unable to find work.

Housing Benefit does not always cover the whole rent, leaving families on benefit or low income with even less money to survive on. Housing benefit should cover the full rent, as people do not often have the option of finding cheaper accommodation.

Families who are working long hours but still struggling to pay the bills feel let down by the Government. They do not have clear information on how to get help. The Government needs to support hard working families and allow them certain benefits to improve their quality of life.

Single former asylum seekers newly granted refugee status are not entitled to any financial support while in the process of applying for a National Insurance number and looking for a job. They are forced into poverty and destitution, depriving them of dignity, causing them significant harm, delaying their settlement and hampering their integration. The Government should provide immediate help and support for this vulnerable group.

“ I dread the moment I go to the post office to collect my benefit. Some people there treat me like dirt, even those who do not know me they look at me in disgust, and I was verbally assaulted more than once.”

‘My children do not go on school trips’

School trips and activities are an integral part of a child's education and development, and children should not be deprived of them because of their parents' financial situation. ‘My children do not go on school trips with their schoolmates, I cannot afford to pay, and the school is unable to support us. My daughter stayed at home and was very upset for a week, when her classmates went on a trip abroad. My heart was broken but there was nothing I could do. I simply do not have the money’.

Too late?

A is a 54-year-old widow, living on job seeker's allowance. She has a son and a daughter who are married and do not live with her (one lives outside the UK).

Total weekly income: £52
(job seeker's allowance and widow's benefit) plus housing and council tax benefit

Total weekly spending:	£52
Water & heating	£18.50
Gas & electricity	£2.91
Telephone	£4.68
T.V licence	£2.54
Toiletry and clothing	£3.37
Food	£20.00

A has a freedom pass due to medical problems. She does not buy clothing. She cannot find a job; she has no previous work experience or education. 'If you are over 50 years old no one wants to employ you. Even for a cleaning job you need experience. It is not easy to learn a language at this age; it is too late for me to learn new skills and get qualifications.'

No way out

Family C has been in the UK for more than 20 years and still lives in poverty. The family is composed of a disabled 47-year-old father (injured in a road accident and cannot work), a 40-year-old mother, four children whose ages are (24, 16, 14, 10) and a grandmother. The eldest child works to support herself while studying at university. The mother has three jobs. She works in a school as a cleaner and kitchen assistant between 5 am and 7am and 11am and 2pm; then from 3.30pm until 5.30pm cleaning at a nursery; and from 5.35pm until 7.30pm cleaning at a Community Centre. Some of these jobs are at a school; 'you do not get paid during school holidays, and you do not get paid if you are ill... If the government gave me a break, an opportunity to study or learn new skills, this might help me get a better paid job.'

Total weekly income: £200.75
(including child tax credit and working tax credit £111)
(Income goes down during school holidays)

Total weekly spending:	£263.75
Rent	£84.55
Council Tax	£13.75
Gas & electricity	£18.33
Telephone	£8.33
Water	£6.25
TV licence	£2.54
Food, toiletry and clothing	£130.00

The children are not entitled to school meals and do not receive help with uniform. The average expenditure available for food, toiletry, travel and clothing for each person is £18.57 a week. The family has not been able to visit the rest of the family abroad for 8 years. Holidays and outings to the cinema or a restaurant are out of the question. They cannot afford to buy new furniture or a computer.

5. Improve the education system from birth through to adult learning

Education is regarded as very important by migrants and refugees as a way out of poverty, but they face specific problems as well as those faced by all those on low incomes. These are barriers to getting a good education and being able to contribute to British society.

Childcare

There are not enough nursery places for children under five, and not enough early morning and after school clubs to enable parents to work. The Government needs to subsidize nurseries to allow more people into work. Sometimes the cost of a nursery place for one child is equal or more than the whole salary of its mother. The high cost of childcare is preventing mothers from working or going into education to improve their language and skills that are needed to prepare them to return to work. There are not enough free childcare facilities with adult education (under graduate, post graduate and vocational and other training courses). The Government needs to subsidize or provide free childcare facilities to make it much easier for mothers to improve their career prospects and return to work.

Bullying is still a big problem in schools. This problem is talked about a lot but not enough action is taken to solve it. More should be done to make schools a safe environment for our children. They need to be happier and more interesting places for children, 'If a child is happy, he/she does not miss school'. Teachers need to attend better training, but not at the expense of children. There should be more teachers, enough to cover for teachers on training, to keep children in school instead of sending them home for a day or two every now and then, causing their working parents great inconvenience. For parents on low pay, it means loss of crucial income. School absentees need to be addressed more seriously. Anti social behaviour, bullying, disruption and crime in schools need to be addressed and abolished.

Free activities for children of parents on low or no income are very limited. Children of poor families are spending too long indoors and missing out on many opportunities available to other children. The Government needs to subsidize and introduce more free activities for children to give every child equal opportunities to enjoy their life and to develop to their full potential regardless of the parent's economic status.

Sure Start

The Sure Start programme does not cover all deprived areas 'my children cried every time their friends went on trips and activities without them, my children can not enjoy these activities because our street is not covered by Sure Start and we can not afford these activities'. Sure Start is beneficial to families and should be extended to cover all areas, offering families who need its service the opportunity for their children to enjoy activities and care that the parents cannot afford to pay for. Every child should have the right to enjoy a good quality of life and a good start in life, regardless of their parents' income. Offering children more support at an early stage in their life would improve their future prospects and they would be able to contribute better to society.

Young people

'Kids are out of control, police are unable to do anything about it, and they can only talk to their parents. We cannot enjoy peace in our own homes because of the children's anti-social behaviour'. The government should provide free clubs and facilities for children, extend child curfew to the worst affected areas on council estates, give more power to the police to deal with anti-social behaviour and youth crime and force parents with low parenting skills to attend parenting classes.

School uniform should be introduced in all schools. Children in poor homes suffer at school because they cannot compete with their richer schoolmates who are able to afford expensive designer clothing.

School meals are too expensive. The cost of school meals should be reduced or made free for every child. The Government should invest more in school meals. A healthier diet leads to a healthier life.

Universities

Top universities are still 'white' universities, where it is very hard for a BME student to get in. The Government should reform the admission system to encourage more students from state schools and BME groups into universities. Top up fees are no help to working class students. The university fee is causing great hardship to many students from working class or poor families, and discourages others from going into higher education. Many migrants and refugees are struggling to get into or stay in higher education, while others are unable to achieve their full potential and get out of their current situation because they simply cannot afford to pay for education.

“ I am a student, just graduated from university where I had to pay all costs and fees with no support from anyone or anywhere. I was not eligible for a grant or a loan, even though I am a British citizen! This forced me to work for 25 hours a week in addition to attending lectures and seminars, which had a negative impact on my concentration and performance. I feel that I could have achieved a much better result if given support.”

6. Improve access to employment

As a result of the lack of support and initiatives to exploit and maximise the use of their skills, many migrants and refugees see themselves as wasted resources. More schemes like the one for refugee doctors and refugee nurses need to be developed and expanded to cover more professions. It saves money, time and effort if the Government invests in developing specific training programmes for professional and qualified migrants and refugees, offering a number of short and other conversion courses combined with financial support during the study period. This would inevitably lead to the production of ready made professionals in short period of time that will fill in a gap in some of the desperately needed skills in this country.

Many migrants and refugees have qualifications from abroad that are not recognized in the UK, which causes great difficulties, leading to low paid, low skilled employment, or indeed unemployment and poverty. The Government needs to encourage and facilitate the recognition of qualifications and certificates from abroad, and to provide special training to make it easier for qualified migrants and refugees to work.

The downward spiral

'I am a pilot with full licence and with 1800 flying hours but I am working as a mini cab driver, because I cannot afford to pay for the conversion course that allows me to practice my profession. I am unable to get a loan to pay for the course as I am on low income and do not own my own property. Even if I managed to get a loan, I am unable to support myself financially while studying for the course, as I will not be entitled for any benefit. There are no government or any support schemes for professionals like myself.'

'I am a civil engineer working as a carpenter. No one would recognise my qualification or my work experience abroad.'

'I am a fully qualified solicitor, but I am working as a cashier at a supermarket.'

“ For a refugee, there is a good reason why he or she is not in employment and cannot find a job. When you are an asylum seeker, you are not allowed to work. Once you are given refugee status, there are many hurdles and barriers in front of you.”

The New Deal

The New Deal for single parents does not take childcare fully into consideration. While the program helps parents with childcare cost during interviews, etc, once they find a job, childcare costs become a major problem. The training and the work experience the New Deal put you on is not enough and career choices are very limited. But one woman said that the New Deal had helped her: 'Affordable childcare would help me into employment. The New Deal is helping me. People there are doing their best to help me find a job. I benefited from the discounted transport and the free child care facility offered to me when attending interviews.'

Women and work

Government need to provide more training courses that lead to employment for women. Job centres need to be more innovative in their approach to encouraging employment. Instead of pushing people to go into jobs that do not suit their interests, skills or needs, they should encourage people to look for alternatives, like setting up their own business and self employment. Many women would like to start their own business because it would help them work flexible hours while looking after children and family. Lack of fluency in the English language would not be a problem then, nor would the way they look or dress. Good business ideas should be encouraged and financially supported. Job centres should help women find flexible work. Employment laws and benefits should apply to all jobs, full time and part time.

Graduates

Migrant and refugee university graduates face two major problems. The first is the one shared with their white British counterparts, that it is very difficult to find a job. Employers need a number of years of experience that the graduate is unable to produce. Most students do odd jobs in cafes and restaurants while studying to support themselves, and may not have done a job related to their studies. There are not enough 'graduate schemes'. It could take a graduate a year or a number of years to find the right job, and this has a huge impact on their mental health and well-being. The Government should encourage employers to take on university graduates and train them on the job, instead of asking them for the impossible: 'minimum three years of experience', which is becoming the norm. Many graduates do not mind starting with low salaries until they get the required experience.

If given support, many migrants and refugees would set up their own business to overcome these barriers. Job centres and other employment agencies should take a leading role in assisting people who want to start their own business but are trapped in a vicious circle. 'If you do not work, you do not have money and you can not get a loan to start a small business; you are simply trapped'.

Job Centre Plus

Most participants did not see Job Centre Plus in a good light. One or two felt that it had been helpful in assisting people to find jobs and training and mentioned the one-to-one sessions and referrals to computer and CV training in particular.

In general, however, the majority of people said that Job Centre forces people to work in unsuitable jobs that are not related to their skills and qualifications. 'Your benefit will be stopped for six months if you turn down a vacancy; you are expected to work long hours while you have children'.

In addition, staff were seen as unhelpful and do not treat people with respect.

'Job Centre Plus' staff are racist, discriminatory, they do not offer real support or good explanations; they give wrong advice to refugees and they deny them their rights. They do not do anything practical to help you find a job.'

The training that Job Centre Plus sends people on is very basic, and does not take into consideration people's interests, skills or previous experience and qualifications. In brief, it was simply described as 'no good'.

7. Improve health facilities for migrants and refugees

GPs and other health staff are impatient when dealing with people with poor English. People on income support are getting humiliating treatment from health care staff. Health staff need to be patient with patients with language difficulties, and treat them with more sensitivity. Health professionals would benefit from relevant training in dealing with BME patients and their specific health needs and issues. The health services need to develop a better interpreting service to enable migrants and refugees to benefit from health provision.

People are still waiting too long for hospital appointments and treatments, and to see their GP for what is regarded as a 'non emergency'. Children are sometimes made to wait for two weeks or more to see their GP. 'Nothing is considered an emergency at the moment; you need to wait one week for an appointment with your GP.' Health awareness is still not provided properly. Health awareness sessions, information and seminars should be organised and run adequately through local and other community groups and organisations.

“Our home is very small, we suffer when the children are at home and there is no space for them to play.”

Other issues included:

- Diabetic people are not treated as a priority for healthcare despite the many difficulties arising from their condition.
- Transport to hospitals is not always affordable, and can cause lots of problems for families on low income.
- There is not enough support from GPs for people with mobility problems.
- Substance misuse is still a problem that the Government needs to find ways of addressing.

8. Improve housing for those on low incomes

The housing situation is very different for asylum seekers and migrants and refugees. Asylum seekers are not allowed to access social housing. Those who took part in these workshops were housed by NASS (National Asylum Support Service). Those migrants and refugees who had social housing said it did not offer people enough choice. They felt the bidding system (choice-based letting) is not very helpful. ‘You can bid for so many times and waste lots of time, energy and resources without any success’. There should be a separate housing list for people living with a disability or a medical condition. Other families should not be competing against this priority group, but should have their own list and own right to access social housing. Good condition accommodation is very difficult to find. The size of accommodation offered to families is not always suitable for the number of family members.

The waiting list

The waiting list for social housing is too long, especially for single people and families. People are kept for too long in temporary accommodation. ‘People on low income are constantly placed in temporary accommodation, moving from property to property, uprooting children from school to school, and changing from GP to GP, which can have an adverse effect as the new GP awaits for medical records, often stopping medication’. Women who have experienced domestic violence are placed in a refuge where they can wait between three and four years for re-housing.

Quality issues

There is not enough investment in social housing and there is no regulation of the private sector. The private sector needs to be forced to provide a reasonable percentage of affordable accommodation in new developments. Local authorities should stop selling social housing stock and support and encourage people who are able to buy their property to move on to the private sector and preserve this type of housing for people on low incomes. The quality and condition of social housing needs to be improved, so do housing services and maintenance and health and safety measures. Social housing maintenance is very poor. Local authorities should employ people who can deliver a good maintenance service, and monitor their work closely. Experiencing homelessness is very hard for both families with children and single people. Affordable housing should be available for all, as the private sector is too expensive for the average earner.

Costs

Council Tax is very high and is taking a good portion of families' income. 'Council tax needs to be reasonable; it should be possible for people on low income to pay it with ease'. Utility bills are too high, and the Government does not seem to be making any effort to control the rise in the cost for customers or to put a cap on the profit made by companies and providers. While a small number of already rich people are making huge profits, a very large number of people are working very hard and struggling to pay high bills. People on low or no income are even more affected.

9. Reduce the cost of public transport

The cost of public transport is restricting the movement of people on very low income, increasing their isolation and creating an additional barrier to getting out of their current situation. The cost of public transport should go down if more people are to be encouraged to go out, improve their skills and find a job. There is a need for more local leisure centres and sports facilities to reduce travelling time and cost, and to encourage everyone in the community to exercise.

Buses are still not running on time and there are not enough buses. Some bus drivers are racist. Bus drivers are unhelpful to mothers with prams. 'Bus drivers are rude and sometime do not even stop at the bus stop'. Trains have many problems and the service needs lots of improvement. The Congestion Charge is too expensive and the whole scheme should be abolished. 'The Congestion Charge is unfair and prevents families on low income from using an economical car as an alternative to the very expensive public transport'. Free transport for children but cost still high for families.

“Public transport is too expensive, which limits the freedom of movement to look for work.”



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