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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP

House of Commons

London

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HOCS Reference: MIN/0010143/20

 17 July 2020

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 29 June on behalf of your constituents who are concerned about financial support for asylum seekers.

The package of support provided to asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute includes free accommodation (with utility bills and council tax paid) and a weekly cash allowance to meet their other essential living needs (the legal test). Free healthcare and education for their children is also provided.

The Home Office has reviewed the level of the allowance using the standard methodology that has been in place since 2014 and which has been judged by the Court of Appeal to be rational and lawful. We increased the weekly allowance on 15 June 2020, rising from £37.75 to £39.60, an uplift of around 5% and one that is substantially higher than the current rate of inflation. Office for National Statistics data for May shows general inflation in the preceding 12 months was only 0.5% and food inflation only 1.8%. Inflation on other essential items covered by the allowance, such as non-prescription medication and clothing had also fallen.

There is no current evidence that COVID-19 has left asylum seekers without the necessary funds to meet their essential living needs. However, where individuals can show that they are incurring extra travel costs because of their particular circumstances, for example the closure of local shops, they are able to apply for additional funds exceptionally under the policy already in place that allows this.

The level of the asylum support allowance is not linked to social security benefits, which are not set according to the “essential living needs” test and is generally required to cover a broader range of costs, including paying for utilities and travel and other expenses incurred in looking for work. There are currently no plans to set the allowance at 70% of the level of universal credit or other benefits.

Your constituents raised the issue of access to WIFI for those in the support system. We accept that the need to communicate may in certain circumstances constitute an essential need. The cost of doing so effectively are built into the review methodology of the cash allowance that I have described. In practical terms, this is done by working out the costs of purchasing and using a mobile phone. More details of the way the costs are assessed can be found in the reports published at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-on-review-of-cash-allowance-paid-to-asylum-seekers>.

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis a higher proportion of asylum seekers than usual are being accommodated in full-board hostels and hotels. We are looking at practical ways of providing internet access to this group and other ways to enable them to communicate effectively. Those accommodated in the larger hostel facilities, where there is no WIFI provision, have already been given access to the internet via the issue of SIM cards.

The UK has a generous record in relation to asylum seeker numbers. Last year, we made around 20,000 grants of asylum or protection (one of the higher figures in Europe) and received over 3,500 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children – the highest number of any country in Europe. In addition to this, we have directly resettled around 20,000 people from the most dangerous areas of the world (especially Syrians) in the UK over the last five years. Finally, we spend around £14 billion per year in Overseas Aid helping millions of people around the world – we spend the highest amount of any country in Europe and we are the only G7 country to meet the 0.7% of GNI Overseas Aid target.

I trust this helps in setting out the Government’s position.



**Chris Philp MP**