

# **APPG on Migration and APPG on Poverty Joint Inquiry on the effects of UK Immigration, Asylum and Refugee Policy on Poverty Professional Experience Evidence Session - Group 1**

Palace of Westminster - Committee Room 2  
Tuesday 5 December 2023 – 10.00-11.00

**Meeting Chairs:** Baroness Lister and Lord German

## **Panellists:**

Lucy Mort – IPPR

Dr Dora-Olivia Vicol - Work Rights Centre

Tamara Manuel - British Red Cross

Lucy Leon - Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS)

## **Welcome and Introductions (Baroness Lister)**

Baroness Lister welcomed everyone to the session and noted apologies from Baroness Mobarik and David Linden MP. She highlighted the collaborative effort in examining the submissions and appreciated the substantial work put into the evidence, emphasising the seriousness of the issue, evident in the over 220 submissions received. She handed over to Lord German to ask the first question of the session.

## **Section 1: Overview (Lord German)**

### **Q. Lord German to Lucy Mort – IPPR**

What are the policies that have the biggest impact on poverty and what do you think would be the most transformational changes the government or future governments could make?

### **A. Lucy Mort – IPPR**

Lucy highlighted the significant problems caused by the immigration policies in the UK at that time. She emphasised that those policies, aimed at deterring migrants, drove people into poverty, prostitution, and homelessness. Lucy believed that the premise of those policies—aimed at persuading and deterring people—was fundamentally flawed and didn't work. She argued that immigration policies not only affected those moving to the UK but also harmed individuals who had been living in the country for a long time, trapping them in poverty due to the complexities of the immigration system.

Lucy pointed out several specific issues within the immigration system, such as high visa fees leading to people losing their immigration status, inability to access welfare due to the hostile environment measures, NHS charging for those without immigration status, resulting in poor health outcomes and debt. She mentioned recent policy changes, like increased visa fees and minimum income requirements, expressing concern about their impact.

Her "magic wand" solution involved a compassionate, fair, and evidence-based immigration policy that supported settlement and contribution to society. She called for changes such as aligning fees with administrative costs, accessible fee waivers, reinstating legal aid for immigration matters, excluding certain benefits from the definition of public funds (particularly those relating to children, e.g. child benefit), and granting healthcare access to all residents in the UK, regardless of immigration status.

In summary, Lucy advocated for a transformation in immigration policy that considered humanitarian aspects, aligned with broader societal objectives, and ensured fairness, accessibility, and support for those affected by those policies at the time.

## **Section 2: Direct Costs (Baroness Lister)**

### **Q. Baroness Lister question to Lucy Mort – IPPR**

On the issue of the 10-year route to settlement you mentioned how previous research found that, for an adult on the 10-year route, their immigration status would cost them £13,000 over those 10 years. (See IPPR submission, Page 1, paragraph 1) As one recommendation you stated that “family and private life routes to settlement should be capped at five years maximum”. (See IPPR submission, Page 5, paragraph 2) What political barriers exist in achieving this and what could be learned by a similar policy introduced by the government in 2022, which shortened the route to settlement for children and young people with leave to remain on the 10-year route?

### **A. Lucy Mort – IPPR**

Lucy discussed key recommendations from a 10-year route report, advocating for the reduction of the settlement period from 10 to 5 years to address issues related to poverty and status concerns. She acknowledged political barriers, such as the fiscal impact on the Home Office due to reduced fees and challenges in shifting the narrative from a tough migration stance to more compassionate policies.

She highlighted the importance of reframing the narrative, emphasising the public's potential openness to fair and pragmatic rules. Lucy mentioned successful campaigns, particularly for refugees, stressing the significance of highlighting wasted potential and focusing on the welfare of children and young people in policy discussions.

The report's survey findings showed concerns about children's education, health, and future prospects among respondents, indicating the importance of considering these aspects in policy discussions. Lucy emphasised the ongoing need to campaign for access to resources, especially for those trapped due to financial constraints, underscoring the continued importance of this issue.

### **Q. Baroness Lister question to Dr Dora-Olivia Vicol - Work Rights Centre**

On the topic of visa fees, you recommended in your evidence that the Government should “consider reducing the level of fees charged on visa applications, particularly for temporary workers like seasonal workers, so that they are more in line with the Home Office’s administrative costs of processing those applications.” (Work Rights Centre Submission, page 3, paragraph 3). What are the current political barriers around achieving this? Could you expand some more on what benefits this would bring?

### **A. Dr Dora-Olivia Vicol - Work Rights Centre**

Dr Dora-Olivia Vicol emphasised the Work Rights Centre's commitment to aiding migrants and promoting human justice. She identified political barriers that hindered progressive migration policies, citing the prioritisation of immigration over other economic and social interests as a key issue. She critiqued the then-current political stance, which favoured controlling migration over broader economic benefits and societal welfare.

Dr Vicol outlined three main barriers: first, the long-term effect on migration policies that didn't align with broader economic and social care objectives; second, the essence of the sponsorship system introduced post-Brexit, which restricted migrants' mobility and tied them to specific employers,

negatively impacting both migrants and businesses; third, historical government control over natural resources and its influence on EU reforms, impacting the then-current stance on migration.

She advocated for reducing visa fees to lower migration costs, especially for seasonal workers affected by conflicts like the war in Ukraine. Dr Vicol highlighted the increased difficulties faced by migrants due to rising migration costs and emphasised the importance of creating opportunities for work that didn't necessitate extreme mobility.

Additionally, she stressed the importance of inclusion, particularly in labour markets, emphasising that migrants and their children were integral parts of communities. She underscored the need to shift the focus from controlling migrants to understanding their needs and contributions, emphasising the significance of migrants within the broader context of EU economies.

#### **Q. Baroness Lister question to Tamara Manuel - British Red Cross**

In your evidence you said that the “NHS Charges to Overseas Visitors Regulations 2015” was a policy directly causing financial hardship for your clients. (Red Cross Submission, page 7, paragraph 2) How do you think NHS charging could be reformed to protect the health of all in the UK? Do you have recommendations which you believe could help mitigate the effects of this policy but also achieve cross party and wider public support?

#### **A. Tamara Manuel - British Red Cross**

Tamara discussed two key areas that could garner support and positively impact the community supported by the British Red Cross. She highlighted the organisation's role as the largest independent provider of refugee support in the UK and noted that many individuals interacting with their services faced destitution or financial hardships. Tamara welcomed the chance to present evidence in an inquiry.

Specifically addressing NHS charging, she proposed improving information and awareness about healthcare access rights and ensuring the correct application of charging regulations. Tamara cited cases where individuals were incorrectly charged, such as a client charged £15,000 for a complicated delivery due to a caesarean section despite being eligible for exemption.

Another critical concern Tamara raised, though acknowledging its challenge for cross-party support, involved investigating the impact of data sharing between hospitals and the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes. She highlighted the complexity of charging regulations, leading to barriers in healthcare access due to poor understanding and communication, resulting in individuals avoiding necessary healthcare despite being in pain.

She emphasised the importance of a continuous awareness-raising effort, involving accommodation providers and the asylum system to inform those within the asylum system about accessing NHS services. Tamara discussed initiatives by Doctors of the World UK to support GP practices in not incorrectly turning away individuals who lack an address or ID, wrongly applied policies acting as deterrents to accessing primary care.

Regarding data sharing between the NHS and the Home Office, Tamara highlighted its implications, stating that it deters people from seeking healthcare and even engaging in public health initiatives like accessing COVID-19 vaccinations due to fears about negatively affecting their asylum applications.

Finally, she stressed the need to encourage early healthcare access for asylum seekers, considering that most eventually receive status in the UK. Tamara highlighted that promoting good health among

these populations aligns with public health initiatives, preventing emergency interventions due to worsening health conditions.

- Before moving onto the next section Lord German asked for consideration of the relationship between the Home Office and NHS Scotland, NHS Wales, and NHS Northern Ireland, noting their distinct dynamics compared to NHS England. He suggested supplementing the evidence provided with a short note addressing these specific relationships to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

### **Section 3: Indirect Costs (Lord German)**

#### **Q. Lord German question to Dr Dora-Olivia Vicol – Work Rights Centre**

In your evidence you made the following recommendations on how to ensure the visa sponsorship system did not lead migrants into poverty;

- “Extend the time that workers have to move jobs before falling into an irregular immigration status.
- Remove the need for making an updated application when changing jobs entirely.
- Update the list of registered sponsors to make the list more user friendly for workers looking to switch sponsors.” (Work Rights Centre Submission, page 3, paragraph 3)

Could you elaborate on precisely what benefits adopting these recommendations would bring regarding mitigating poverty? And what counter arguments the Home Office might put forward for not accepting these proposals?

#### **A. Dr Dora-Olivia Vicol – Work Rights Centre**

Dr Dora-Olivia Vicol expressed cautious optimism, believing that despite the optics, implementing the recommendations would significantly impact the Home Office and its immigration control ambitions. She highlighted the need to scrutinise and name the sponsorship system within the recommendations, highlighting its distinct architecture and specific challenges it poses.

Dr Vicol noted that 90% of work visas are sponsored, leading to indirect costs associated with this system. She highlighted the restrictive nature of sponsorship, where migrants can only work for the sponsoring business, which creates vulnerabilities. She highlighted cases where migrants, especially from sub-Saharan Africa and India, faced exorbitant fees - between £10,000 and £20,000 - from licensed businesses in the UK but found no work upon arrival despite having valid visas.

These individuals were effectively trapped in a cycle where they couldn't work elsewhere due to sponsorship conditions. This situation led to worklessness and poverty, with migrants being unable to report the issue out of fear of losing their sponsorship. Dr Vicol underscored that the spouses of sponsored migrant workers had unrestricted work rights, allowing them a better chance to find work and avoid destitution compared to the sponsored individuals themselves, thus trapping them in a challenging scenario.

- Lord German interjected and asked Dr Vicol if the issue of fraudulent companies sponsoring work visas is an increasing problem.

Dr Vicol highlighted the challenging situation faced by the Work Rights Centre, a small charity lacking funds for national campaigns. Despite their limitations, they became increasingly aware of scams targeting workers in recent months.

This put both the charity and the workers they represented in a precarious position. They recognised fraudulent activity but also understood their clients' desire to remain in the UK under sponsorship. This dilemma exposed a fundamental flaw in the system: if the Home Office intervened and revoked licenses of fraudulent businesses, the workers would face dire consequences. They risked losing their right to stay in the UK, disrupting their lives significantly, including commitments like enrolling children in school and accumulating substantial personal and family debts.

These workers were effectively trapped, relying on various means such as family loans or dependents' salaries to survive. Dr Vicol highlighted the core issue of sponsorship—binding people to a single sponsor—which limits their freedom and options. While theoretically, the Home Office might suggest changing sponsors, the reality was bleak. If workers left exploitative employers, they had a mere 60 days to secure another sponsor, reapply, and obtain a new visa to continue working in the UK—a challenging task within such a limited timeframe.

Her main recommendation aimed to abolish the sponsorship system, advocating for a more flexible structure meeting both migrant and business needs. Alternatively, she proposed tweaks such as extending the sponsor-changing timeframe to six months, updating the list of sponsors, and improving information on licensed sponsors stored by the Home Office.

Dr Vicol highlighted the inadequacy of the current information system and suggested simple technical modifications to streamline processes. She proposed eliminating the need for migrant workers to reapply for sponsor changes, which duplicated existing data and incurred unnecessary costs. These adjustments, they argued, could reduce costs and facilitate smoother transitions for migrant workers.

## **Section 4: Housing and Accommodation (Baroness Lister)**

### **Q. Baroness Lister question to Tamara Manuel - British Red Cross**

On the issue of housing, you mentioned the 28 day move on period, which was also brought up by many of those giving evidence today. Many of you highlighted how people granted refugee status in the UK must transition away from Home Office support within 28 days, resulting in the abrupt termination of their accommodation and subsistence payments. This frequently leads to extreme poverty and homelessness as individuals find themselves in a precarious situation between asylum and mainstream benefits systems. As a recommendation it was raised by many of you that; "The Home Office should extend the move-on period for newly recognised refugees to 56 days by amending regulation 2(2) (interpretation) in the Asylum Support Regulations 2000 (S.I. 2000/704) to substitute "56" for "28". (Red Cross Submission, page 9, paragraph 6) What are the current political barriers to achieving this? What would be the impact of granting 56 days instead of 28 days regarding reducing poverty among those affected?

### **A. Tamara Manuel - British Red Cross**

Tamara discussed the significant political barrier posed by the asylum backlog, which affected around 165,000 individuals awaiting an initial decision on their asylum claims, with another 120,000 people receiving asylum support. The pressure on asylum accommodation, particularly the use of hotels for housing nearly half of those in asylum accommodations, was deemed both expensive for taxpayers and detrimental for individuals.

Addressing the backlog was a political commitment, but shifting costs within the system wasn't a viable solution. This shift plunged refugees into destitution, hampering their ability to thrive and integrate into the UK in the long term. Regarding the proposed change to a 56-day transition period,

Tamara highlighted its impact based on various factors. Local authorities took 56 days to prevent or relieve homelessness as mandated by the Homelessness Reduction Act. However, the initial wait for universal credit payments was around 35 days, leading to what was termed the "destitution gap."

Recent policy changes further reduced this transition period to as little as seven days, resulting in an acute crisis. Tamara stressed the undeniable human impact, witnessing the toll on people affected by this housing policy. Cases included individuals being evicted without proper documentation, leading to homelessness and an inability to access public services.

Additionally, the economic impact of extending the move-on period to 56 days was discussed. A cost-benefit analysis conducted in 2020 by the London School of Economics projected financial benefits of £4-7 million yearly across various areas like relieving homelessness, improving mental and physical health, enhancing employability, and reducing rough sleeping.

Extending the move-on period was deemed economically viable and could address destitution and poverty, subsequently reducing the risk of exploitation. Tamara highlighted the link between destitution and vulnerability to exploitation, including human trafficking and modern slavery, which incurs substantial economic and social costs in the UK.

Moreover, the potential for entrenched homelessness increased if individuals remained without secure accommodation, amplifying the overall societal cost. The joy of being granted refugee status was overshadowed by individuals being plunged into homelessness instead, highlighting the urgent need for policy changes to address these issues.

## **Section 5: Financial Support (Lord German)**

### **Q. Lord German question to Tamara Manuel - British Red Cross**

On the topic of insufficient asylum support payments, you said that; "The Home Office should increase the weekly asylum support allowance to an amount that reflects the real cost of living in the annual report on review of asylum support rates and ensure this is provided consistently." (Red Cross Submission, page 15, paragraph 4) Do you have estimates of how much this would cost and is there research out there which is costed? What impact on poverty reduction do you foresee if this policy was implemented?

### **A. Tamara Manuel - British Red Cross**

Tamara discussed the absence of a cost estimate or available research concerning the cost-effectiveness of asylum support. She noted the challenges in estimating costs, especially due to the high asylum backlog and the substantial number of individuals currently receiving asylum support, which might not accurately represent those awaiting decisions in the future.

She referenced the Home Office's acknowledgment, in their 2021 published annual review of asylum support rates (released in 2022), that many respondents suggested raising asylum support to at least 70% of mainstream benefits. Additionally, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's work on minimum income standards was proposed as a potential alternative model for determining support rates. She highlighted the need to classify travel and communications as essential living needs by amending Annex D of the methodology.

Tamara highlighted that while the nominal amount of asylum support had increased to £47.39 per week (for those in dispersal accommodation without food provided), adjusting for inflation revealed a 28% decrease in payments since asylum support's inception in 2000. This decline resulted in

individuals facing difficult choices between essentials like warm clothing, transportation to medical appointments, and adequate food for themselves and their children.

She recounted a case of a recognised trafficking victim—a single mother forced into regular sexual exploitation simply to await her asylum support allowance. This highlighted the inadequacy of the support provided. There were instances where individuals worked for minimal wages, such as £10 a day, which, while evident exploitation, seemed preferable due to the support's insufficiency. Another significant recommendation was to involve asylum seekers themselves in co-producing in determining the level of asylum support. Asylum seekers have valuable insights into the workings of the system and ways for improvement, making their input crucial for understanding cost allocations.

Tamara emphasised the importance of digital access, considering it essential for communication, yet not recognised as a fundamental living need within the support system. Limited access to devices or data hindered individuals from registering with healthcare services or engaging effectively with the asylum system due to financial constraints. Despite the desire for a precise cost estimate, the complexities and inadequacies within the system made estimating the true cost of asylum support a challenging task.

## **Section 6: No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) (Baroness Lister)**

### **Q. Baroness Lister question to Lucy Leon - Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS)**

Does your research suggest that there are particular kinds of public funds that migrant communities might especially benefit from access to? Do you think that a blanket end to the NRPF condition is the best way forward or might there be incremental changes that it would be possible to get broad support for?

#### **A. Lucy Leon – COMPAS**

Lucy outlined various critical steps to address challenges related to public funds, particularly in providing access and support to vulnerable groups. This included reviewing public funds that grant access to essential services and proposing a cost-of-living allowance for emergencies. She highlighted the significance of local welfare assistance and household support funds, particularly for those affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy, which disproportionately impacted vulnerable groups like children and disabled people.

Lucy pointed out the need for changes in guidance to local authorities, citing inconsistent and patchy support provided across England and Northern Ireland. The lack of statutory guidance for local authorities assessing support provision led to an inconsistent and uneven support system nationwide.

Regarding the NRPF policy's efficacy, Lucy discussed findings that raised questions about its impact on both local governments and migrants facing poverty. The recent Migration Observatory briefing highlighted a significant increase in the Home Office's use of the NRPF condition, affecting over 2.6 million people in the UK by the end of 2022. This surge, combined with a rise in migrant destitution, especially post-Brexit, underlined the broader impact of the NRPF policy on vulnerable adults and long-term residents unable to work due to health issues.

Lucy emphasised the strain on local authorities expected to provide a parallel welfare system, stressing the need for appropriate central government resources, which are currently insufficient. Despite pockets of excellent practice, there are concerns about the capacity and infrastructure of local authorities to administer a fair and consistent welfare system.

She highlighted that NRPF support is highly conditional and limited to a specific group, leaving many in deep poverty excluded from accessing mainstream benefits. The policy inadvertently pushes people into destitution, perpetuating issues highlighted in previous research such as inconsistent support and financial pressures on local services, which are now overstretched due to the wider impact of the NRPF policy on a broader group, including British-born children.

Lucy concluded by highlighting the policy's incongruence with broader agendas like ending homelessness and poverty, emphasising the urgent need for changes in NRPF policies to address the escalating challenges faced by vulnerable groups.

#### **Q. Baroness Lister question to Lucy Leon – COMPAS**

How can local authority support, in relation to welfare assistance and household support fund be improved for those with NRPF?

#### **A. Lucy Leon – COMPAS**

Lucy highlighted several key areas where improvements could have been made in the past:

Firstly, she stressed the importance of greater statutory guidance to local authorities, especially in involving people with lived experiences in policy design. Throughout the research, it was evident that individuals felt they were treated inhumanely by local authorities during crises and destitution. Lucy suggested involving individuals in policymaking, possibly through auditing services, seeking feedback, and ensuring dignity and compassion are central principles.

Secondly, governance played a significant role. Lucy noted that the parallel welfare system was primarily administered at the frontline level, lacking substantial senior leadership involvement and strategic consideration. She advocated for more senior leadership engagement to understand the broader impact of the NRPF policy.

Thirdly, she emphasised the discrepancies in support levels across different regions, with many receiving support well below mainstream benefit or asylum support levels. Families in various areas were reported to receive minimal support or only food bank vouchers, causing considerable distress.

Lastly, Lucy highlighted the need to expand legal advice provision and capacity across local areas, addressing the issue of "legal deserts." While some areas were proactive in commissioning legal aid, there remained a significant gap across the country, with patchy support. Models like the one in Greater Manchester, which offered holistic support to access legal advice, were cited as effective examples to consider.

### **Section 7: Last Comments (Baroness Lister)**

Baroness Lister thanked everyone for their contributions and considered the discussion incredibly helpful. Unfortunately, there was no time for further comments or questions but panellists were encouraged to share any further input with the Secretariat.