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The Food
Foundation

Immigration Policy and Food Insecurity in the UK

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About this Policy Briefing

This policy briefing draws on research commissioned by The Food Foundation, and funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which focusses in-depth on the experiences of those living in food insecurity in the UK. Through this research, The Food Foundation aims to re-shape the public narrative on food insecurity and to catalyse purposeful action from policy makers and businesses.

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The key findings in this policy briefing are drawn from research carried out with families, individuals and support organisations by The University of Hertfordshire. The report can be accessed here: Hamilton, L., Thompson, C., & Wills, W. (2022). *Hostile Environments: Immigration and Food Poverty in the UK*. University of Hertfordshire. <https://doi.org/10.18745/pb.25713>

The quotes in this briefing are non-verbatim and the names of participants have been changed.

All secondary literature has been referenced. All recommendations for policy makers and local government are made solely by The Food Foundation.



What it means to have No Recourse to Public Funds

This policy briefing focuses on families living in the UK who, due to their immigration status, have no access to specific forms of state support known as ‘public funds’. These prohibited public funds include Universal Credit, Carer’s Allowance, Child Tax Credit and Personal Independence Payment, homelessness assistance and local authority allocation of social housing.¹ With limited exceptions², those impacted by this policy include asylum-seekers with a pending claim or who have been fully refused asylum; ‘irregular’ migrants with no valid leave to remain; and migrants who have a ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) condition attached to their visa.

Nearly 1.4 million people, including 175,000 children, had NRPF as a condition of their valid visa, issued by the Home Office, at the end of 2019.³ Many people with NRPF will not be in a position where they need support,

and most are working, although research from Citizens Advice has found that families on low incomes are disproportionately affected by NRPF policies.⁴

Asylum seekers, individuals and families looking for safety in the UK, are also not able to access public funds, and are not normally allowed to work. There were over 143,000 asylum seekers waiting for an initial decision on their claim at the end of September 2022.⁵ The number of ‘irregular migrants’ in the UK is unknown.

There are no comprehensive data released by the UK Government on the extent of food insecurity among these groups. However, independent research has exposed how living without the safety net of public funds can cause and significantly exacerbate food insecurity.⁶

“No recourse to public funds is a stigma, and it should be taken off people [...] It makes you look as if you’re a failure [...] which you are not, because you are trying your best to do everything possible, to make sure that your life is good.” AGNES; WHO HAS HAD NRPF STATUS FOR 3 YEARS.

Executive Summary

Researchers at the University of Hertfordshire’s **Centre for Research in Public Health and Community Care (CRIPACC)** sought to investigate how no recourse to public funds (NRPF) conditions impact access to a healthy diet for those affected.

Their research revealed that not only were families with NRPF struggling to access healthy food, but they were also unable to access a sufficient amount of any food, a circumstance which was having “devastating effects on quality of life.”⁶

Drawing on the experiences of families and individuals with NRPF, and the organisations that support them, this briefing summarises how NRPF impacts access to sufficient and appropriate food, **because food becomes a secondary priority in the face of more urgent threats**, namely:

1. A complex and lengthy immigration system, which requires substantial effort, time and engagement and negatively impacts individuals’ mental health.
2. Financial instability and poverty, from low wages or not having the legal right to work, which means families and individuals lack the time or cannot afford to buy enough of the food they want or need.
3. Living in insecure and poor quality housing, often with unsuitable or no kitchen facilities, which limits families’ and individuals’ ability to store, prepare and cook meals.

Based on this research, The Food Foundation suggests the government take the following actions:

1. Make the Healthy Start food voucher scheme permanent, and actively promote access to increase the number of families with NRPF benefiting from this support.
2. Provide local authorities with the resources they need to support families with NRPF.
3. Ensure that all families with NRPF have adequate housing and kitchen facilities that meet their needs.
4. Provide a robust measure of the prevalence of food insecurity amongst families with NRPF.



Introduction

Between January and June 2022 researchers at the University of Hertfordshire carried out interviews and focus groups with 13 families (10 with children) living with NRPF. The majority of the participants in this research are Nigerian, and are living in London. They had NRPF status at the time of the interview with researchers, or had recently had NRPF. Researchers also interviewed and carried out focus groups with staff at 17 support services and third-sector organisations from across the UK, including foodbanks, community centres and advice and casework services.

Participants described the challenges of living with NRPF: the pressures of navigating a complex and lengthy immigration system; living in inadequate, shared housing; and not having a legal right to work or working for low wages.

This briefing focuses on how these challenges place families with NRPF in food insecurity,ⁱⁱ with repercussions for their physical health, mental health and social well-being (see Box 1 below). The experiences of families with NRPF tell us how a complex immigration system leads to protracted chronic food insecurity; how eating a healthy diet becomes deprioritised compared to more immediate challenges, such as hunger and poor mental health; how inadequate and temporary shared housing conditions compromise families' ability to store and cook enough food; and how food (especially fresh, culturally appropriate food) is unaffordable, with many families relying on foodbanks and charitable support.

By sharing the experiences of families, and insights from third sector organisations, this briefing illustrates how the challenges created by having NRPF both cause and compound food insecurity and deprives individuals and families of the ability to choose what they eat. It provides a brief overview of the current limited support available to these families and ends with a series of recommendations from The Food Foundation for policymakers.

“ [The doctor] said [...] watch what you eat. How can I watch what I eat when I can't even buy better food from the shop to eat? [...] So I have to eat the junk food, the tinned food. Sometimes I eat it and it's sugary. [...] It's making my blood pressure high, it's making and costing me a lot of things.”

JOY, A MOTHER OF 4, HAS HAD NRPF FOR 5 YEARS, AND HAS DIABETES.



BOX 1:

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY ON CHILDREN?

Food insecurity can have long-term repercussions on children's health:

- Children experiencing food insecurity are more likely to experience behavioural and mental health problems,
- including hyperactivity and inattention, suicidal thoughts, mood disorders and anxiety disorders.⁷
- Food insecure children have poorer scores on happiness and life satisfaction, and poorer social skills.⁸
- Children who are unable to access a healthy diet also have an increased risk of obesity.⁹

ⁱ See further:

• Woolley, A., (June 2019) *Access Denied: The cost of the 'no recourse to public funds' policy*, London UK: The Unity Project, p.6: A survey conducted between 2018-19 found that of 66 people living with Limited Leave to Remain subject to an NRPF condition in the UK, 74% experienced at least one day when they could not afford to eat a hot and nutritious meal. 90% of these were women with children

• The Children's Society (May 2020), *A Lifeline for All: Children and Families with No Recourse to Public Funds*, London, UK, p.31: of 11 families with NRPF in the UK interviewed by The Children's Society in 2019, 9 were dependent on foodbanks

• *Asylum Matters*, (2020), *Locked into Poverty: Life on Asylum Support*, Leeds, UK, *Asylum Matters*, p.2: 84% of participants in a survey of asylum seekers receiving asylum support in July and August 2020 said they can't always afford to buy food.

• Jolly A., Thompson A.L., (Jan 2022), *Risk of food insecurity in undocumented migrant households in Birmingham, UK*, *Journal of Public Health*, UK, fdab408, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdab408>, p.1: 95.9% of 74 households surveyed in Birmingham with irregular immigration status were food insecure.

ⁱⁱ The Food Foundation defines food insecurity as the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.

Living with NRPF and Food Insecurity

KEY FINDING

- 1 A complex and lengthy immigration system requires substantial effort, time and engagement, negatively impacting individuals' mental health, and making food a secondary concern.



“ Intense mental health problems, I think intense anxiety [...] if you are so stressed that you can't even think about where your next meal is coming, how on earth are you going to keep up with your immigration appointments, look for jobs, etcetera.”

JULIETTE, CAMPAIGNS COORDINATOR, REFUGEE SUPPORT CHARITY IN ENGLAND

Obtaining Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) or citizenship can take years. Participants interviewed as part of this research had been living in the UK with NRPF status for between 6 months and 17 years. During this prolonged period of waiting, participants experienced uncertainty, hostility and felt the pressure of a complex application process on their mental health. For many, this pressure came in addition to existing mental health issues and the trauma of experiences that took place before moving to the UK. Living with this overwhelming pressure, diet and healthy eating become a secondary concern.

“ It's a fight. It's like a mental fight, and you have to be mentally strong [...] The Home Office are there to help, but they don't care about us.”

AGNES, LIVING WITH HER PARTNER AND 4 CHILDREN IN ONE PRIVATE BEDROOM IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION, HAS HAD NRPF FOR 3 YEARS.

“ It's traumatising, because most of the time you can't get what you want. [...] If you have no recourse to public funds, obviously, it looks like you are discriminated against, because it's just like, "oh, you're not wanted here", [...] It's the same thing as you not having your stay, [...] it breaks down your confidence.”

VICTORIA, A SINGLE PARENT WHO HAS HAD NRPF 2 YEARS.

“ A lot of people that are coming to us have come from situations where they’ve been incredibly traumatised, or they’ve been trafficked [...] It’s impossible for them to do the everyday of everyday life when you have been through a war, or been trafficked, or been raped. It’s not just as simple as, ‘They can have this money, so they could go the shop and buy their own food’.” BETH, COMPASSION PASTOR, SOCIAL SUPERMARKET IN WALES.

“ I don’t know, I don’t have a word for it. I think the best word for it is, I wouldn’t even let my enemy go through that, and that’s it.”

ROSE, WHO HAS HAD NRPF FOR 6 MONTHS, DESCRIBING HER EXPERIENCE WITH THE HOME OFFICE.

“ I know we’re undocumented, I know the system fails asylum seekers [...] It’s just as if we are not even existing [...]”

JOY, A SINGLE PARENT WITH 4 CHILDREN, WHO HAS HAD NRPF FOR 5 YEARS

“ ...and I was always on anti-depressants, because I was always screaming. I didn’t have time for myself, no privacy, I became obese, too.”

MARTHA, A SINGLE PARENT WITH 4 CHILDREN, WHO LIVES IN TEMPORARY SHARED HOUSING AND HAS NRPF

KEY FINDING

2 Financial instability and poverty, from low wages or not having the legal right to work, means families and individuals lack the time to cook and cannot afford to buy enough of the food they want or need.



All the participants involved in this research were experiencing poverty, with some undergoing months and even years of destitution and homelessness. Depending on their immigration status, families with NRPF may also not have a legal right to work. Most asylum seekers for example, are not allowed to legally work and must instead rely on £40.85 a week for essential items including travel costs, food, toiletries, medication, internet, phone data and clothing.¹⁰

“ I couldn’t access anything, because I have no recourse to public funds. So I live on a foodbank...I had to sleep, in the church, where they have space in the church that’s where I was [...] with my children.”

GRACE, SINGLE PARENT WITH 4 CHILDREN

The staff at support organisations interviewed for this research raised concerns that individuals with NRPF were being forced into precarious and exploitative work, particularly in the agricultural sector in rural areas. In these situations, food is secondary to more pressing concerns over personal safety, and in some cases, food is controlled by so-called ‘gang masters’.

Almost all participants were relying on foodbanks; families explained how this meant having less choice over the food they ate. Whilst they appreciated the foodbanks, they felt that they had to take what they were given, even if this was not culturally appropriate. Moreover, whilst most foodbanks are intended to provide emergency support to families through a crisis, NRPF can last for years, forcing some families to rely on charities for their long-term needs.

“ No support, no nothing. It’s really hard. I feel so sad for them. I don’t know how to explain it. I really feel sad for them, and thank God that they are not those kind of kids that complain a lot. Sometimes they ask me, ‘Mummy, I want to watch TV. Why don’t we have a TV?’ ”

PATIENCE, SINGLE MOTHER OF 2, HAS HAD NRPF STATUS FOR 6 YEARS.

“What’s happening, and I don’t want to demonise farmers in anyway... but we’ve had quite a large diversification of farming, so people who would traditionally farm but have now gone into mushroom houses or chicken houses... but suddenly overnight they’ve become an employer with 50, 60 and I suppose in some respects they’re completely out of their depth... all of a sudden they have lots of people who are very vulnerable. [...] Where they’re not getting the minimum wage or they’re living in shared accommodation. Or they’re not guaranteed a wage... how all that can have a knock-on effect to end up with poverty, in particular food poverty.”

BRIAN, PROJECT MANAGER, COMMUNITY YOUTH CHARITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND.

“Sometimes I go hungry, but I just have to make sure my daughter is okay, so she eats first.”

VICTORIA, WHOSE DAUGHTER IS 4 YEARS OLD, HAS HAS NRPf STATUS FOR 2 YEARS.

“I found myself going to foodbanks most of the time [...] And it devalued your dignity [...] it affects you a lot. [...] Even if you’re tired, you still have to go out to work [...] because you know they’re not going to pay you; the government is not going to pay you for being sick.”

MARTHA, A SINGLE PARENT WITH 4 CHILDREN, HAD NRPf STATUS FOR 4 YEARS.

“It’s terrible, it’s frustrating, it’s hard, because [...] you can’t work, you can’t buy the food you want. You can’t eat what you want to eat..”

EVELYN, SINGLE MOTHER WITH 2 CHILDREN.





KEY FINDING

3 Living in insecure and poor quality housing, often with unsuitable or no kitchen facilities, limits families' and individuals' ability to store, prepare and cook meals.



NRPF status means individuals cannot apply for Housing Benefit or housing assistance from the local authority. In some limited circumstances local authorities can provide support to families with NRPF where there is a child in need (see below: Existing Support for Families with NRPF). Asylum seekers are provided accommodation by the Home Office; this can mean being housed in hotels, or shared accommodation managed by private companies.

Families with NRPF status are at increased risk of experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing conditions: Citizens Advice found 48% of people with NRPF surveyed reported living in overcrowded accommodation and 60% were currently behind on rent.¹¹

Most of the families interviewed for this research were living in temporary, shared housing. Three reported experiencing periods of homelessness, of which one was living with a 'host family' found via a charity. Others described being served poor quality food from canteens in temporary housing for asylum seekers, of broken furniture and cooking equipment, of overcrowded kitchens and of being frequently moved between temporary houses.

“Because I've lived on the street for many years, and I lost [...] teeth, yeah. It's really hard for me to eat some food. My hosts, they are very nice and they cook meat [...] which is very soft for me to eat.**”**

ADAM, WHO WAS STREET-HOMELESS AND IS NOW LIVING WITH A HOST FAMILY FOUND VIA A HOSTING CHARITY.

“It's a nightmare. I had a guy who had some kind of like Crohn's disease or something and honestly, the poor guy was really suffering. He couldn't eat the kind of food that could keep him well. So often that's a real problem for people, especially if they're staying in that temporary accommodation, how do they access and cook?**”**

PAULA, PROGRAMME MANAGER, COMMUNITY FAITH ORGANISATION IN SCOTLAND

“ ...the cabinets in the kitchen are bad, but we’re just trying to manage it, because you can’t put things inside, because we are afraid that it’s going to fall off [...] but we just manage it.”

PATIENCE, MOTHER OF 2, WHO LIVED IN TEMPORARY SHARED HOUSING WITH 1 PRIVATE BATHROOM.

“ We’re still getting people being put in asylum houses with no cooking implements, so they’re wandering around the charity shops with £39 trying to buy some saucepans and, you know, plates and cutlery. So, they’re [the housing provider] not meeting their contractual obligations and they should do. It’s very, very hard to hold them to account.”

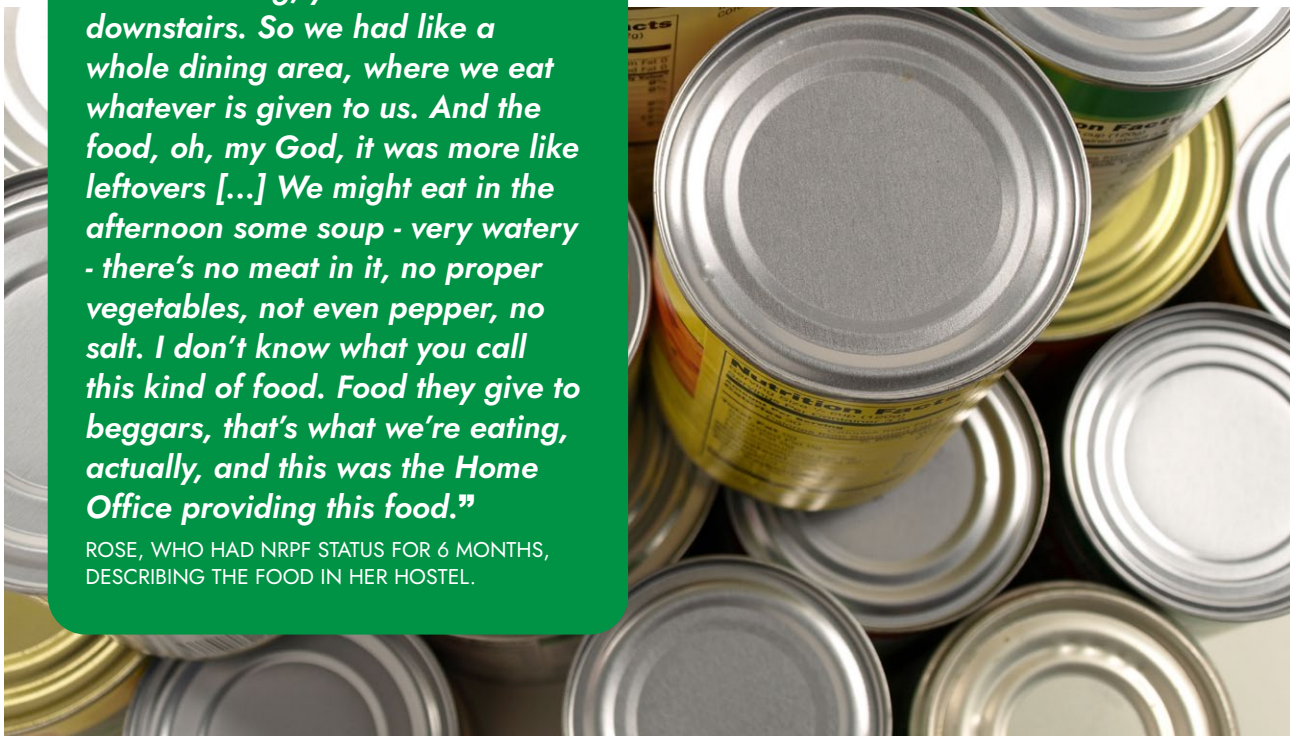
ANDY, MANAGER, REFUGEE SUPPORT CHARITY IN WALES.

“ Normally in the hostel we had the government, the Home Office provided, like, I don’t know what you call them, it’s like a cafeteria where they cook you a meal for morning, afternoon and night. So whenever it’s breakfast in the morning, you have to come downstairs. So we had like a whole dining area, where we eat whatever is given to us. And the food, oh, my God, it was more like leftovers [...] We might eat in the afternoon some soup - very watery - there’s no meat in it, no proper vegetables, not even pepper, no salt. I don’t know what you call this kind of food. Food they give to beggars, that’s what we’re eating, actually, and this was the Home Office providing this food.”

ROSE, WHO HAD NRPf STATUS FOR 6 MONTHS, DESCRIBING THE FOOD IN HER HOSTEL.

“ I’ve been moving from hostels to a flat; the Home Office were just moving me here and there, and I’ve moved places more than eight times [...] I shared an accommodation where the Home Office placed me with six girls. The kitchen was tight, it was very small.”

ROSE, WHO HAD NRPf STATUS FOR 6 MONTHS.



“ It was difficult. I was living with four children in just two rooms, in one sitting room and bedroom. We shared toilets, we shared bathrooms, we shared the kitchen, [...] and sometimes when you cook, because you share the same fridge, when you come back your milk has gone, and sometimes you come back and your food is gone. They [the other residents in the shared house] will just take it, they were hungry ... And you can’t complain.”

MARTHA, WHO LIVED WITH HER 4 CHILDREN IN TEMPORARY SHARED HOUSING WITH 2 BEDROOMS.

Existing Support for Families with NRPF

“It very much falls on charities, and falls on organisations outside of mainstream statutory support. That’s entirely designed and intentional from government, and from the Home Office. In creating the ‘no recourse’ condition, it’s basically the expectation if people are here with limited leave, then they shouldn’t be a burden, or a cost on society, but in practice, we know that the system is, kind of, a bit broken.”

PAUL, CASE WORKER, REFUGEE AND MIGRANT SUPPORT CHARITY

Local Authorities:

Local authorities are permitted to provide support to families with NRPF who apply to them under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and Section 22 Children (Scotland) Act 1995.¹² But the proportion of families able to access this support is small, and subsistence payments are below the poverty line,^{13,14}. Between April 2020 and March 2022, data from 68 councils in England and Scotland showed that 3,200 households with NRPF were provided with accommodation and financial support, at a cost of £57million.¹⁵

Asylum Support

Asylum seekers receive accommodation and asylum support – currently a flat rate of £40.85 – from the Home Office. However, asylum seekers waiting for a decision on their claim are not normally allowed to work,¹⁶ therefore asylum support must cover all essential living costs including food, clothing, toiletries and travel.¹⁷

“I mean, people want to work, but there’s no chance to work, and that’s really made life really difficult. And if we all could work and pay the tax, that would make everything better.”

ADAM, WHO WANTS THE RIGHT TO WORK AND TO GET A JOB WITH A CHARITY SO HE CAN HELP OTHER PEOPLE.

Free School Meals

In April 2022 the government permanently extended Free School Meals to NRPF families, subject to income thresholds. However, a recent consultation with families, schools and local authorities carried out by Praxis, together with eight charities and schools, raised concerns about the low awareness of the policy change, and a fear of immigration enforcement presenting a barrier to families applying.¹⁸

Healthy Start Vouchers

In 2021 the government temporarily extended eligibility to Healthy Start vouchers to families with NRPF in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, if they have a British child under four and are on a low income (less than £408 per month after tax). Best Start was also extended for families with NRPF in Scotland, with small differences in the eligibility criteria.¹⁹ We continue to wait for publication of a consultation promised by the government on making this change permanent.

Despite this extension, The Food Foundation are concerned that many families with NRPF are still not accessing the Healthy Start voucher scheme. We have heard verbally from the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) that as of November 2022, only 32 families are on the scheme, affecting 33 children. The eligibility criteria is limited to families with NRPF with a child with British citizenship. There is also a different and more onerous application process, requiring families to apply through a separate dedicated email address to the DHSC to request an application form.

“The going without food for families [with NRPF] is a very regular thing. I think the thing that helped us at the moment during Covid was the free school meals, but that’s limited to people who have got leave to remain with no recourse. It doesn’t look into the undocumented families.”

KALEEM, POLICY ADVISOR, CHILDREN’S CHARITY



Foodbanks and Charities

Many families are forced to depend on charities over the long term for their essential needs. Evidence from foodbanks and food aid organisations collected in September 2020, 6 months after the COVID-19 lockdown, found people with NRPF to be among the most frequent users.²⁰ Data specifically from referrals to the Trussell Trust found that 11% of people referred after March 2020 were likely to have NRPF status, an increase from 2%-4% before the pandemic.²¹

Some of the third-sector organisations interviewed as part of this research were delivering innovative new projects to help individuals and families with NRPF out of long-term food insecurity, including providing grants to families so they could choose the food they buy.²² But the type and availability of third sector support varies across the UK, and organisations face the challenge of securing long-term funding.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bramley G., Treanor M., Sosenko F., Littlewood M., (May 2021), *State of Hunger: Building the Evidence on poverty, destitution and food insecurity in the UK, Year 2 Main Report*, I-SPHERE, Herriot-Watt University, The Trussell Trust, p.63

11%
of people referred to a foodbank after March 2020 were likely to have NRPF status, **AN INCREASE FROM 2%-4%** before the pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ

“It’s very difficult to get funding in this area of work. It has always been quite difficult, but I would say it has got a little bit more difficult in time. We used to receive some money from primary care trusts, so we could tap into a lot of organisations previously and gain some funding. But it seems to have dried up.”

KALEEM, POLICY ADVISOR,
CHILDREN’S CHARITY IN ENGLAND

Policy Recommendations

Public funds provide a safety net when individuals are facing financial hardship: making this safety net accessible to all who need it is an important first step in giving families access to a healthy diet. The Food Foundation supports the recommendation made by the Independent Food Aid Network, Feeding Britain, Sustain and the University of York, **that all public funds should be accessible to all asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in the UK who need them.**²³ This should be combined with lifting all legal restrictions on the right to work for asylum seekers, to help reduce the number of people forced into exploitative and precarious working conditions.

Whilst NRPf status continues to be applied, The Food Foundation recommends the following interim actions to help alleviate food insecurity for families:

1 Make the Healthy Start food voucher scheme permanent for families with NRPf:

- **Extend and make permanent eligibility to Healthy Start** for all families with NRPf who meet the maximum income threshold and have a child under the age of 4 years, regardless of that child's immigration status.
- **Simplify the application process** for families with NRPf e.g. by publicising guidance and application forms online and in print, and making these available in other languages.
- **Raise awareness of Healthy Start and Free School Meal** eligibility for families with NRPf by investing in a communications campaign at nurseries, GP surgeries, local authorities, foodbanks, schools and community groups.

2 Provide local authorities with the resources to support families with NRPf:

- **Provide funding** to local authorities targeted at supporting families with NRPf, and allow local authorities to use this funding flexibly.
- **Increase funding, delivered via local authorities for third-sector organisations** supporting families with NRPf status, to ensure this is available over the long-term. This funding should prioritise support that delivers cooking equipment and training to utilise families' existing food skills, and tailored long-term support that actively involves families and enables them to make choices over their diet.

3 Ensure that families with NRPf have adequate housing, kitchen and cooking facilities:

- **Carry out a comprehensive survey of the quality of housing** provided to families with NRPf accessing local authority support, and accommodation provided to asylum seekers by the Home Office.
- **Where kitchens are overcrowded or lack essential equipment,** hold accommodation providers to account and ensure they are providing safe and adequate kitchen space and storage facilities.

4 Provide a robust measure of the prevalence of food insecurity amongst families with NRPf:

- **Collect data on food insecurity** among families with NRPf receiving support from local authorities, and among asylum seekers in receipt of asylum support.
- **Ensure and make public the existence of a data-sharing firewall** between the organisations collecting data on the prevalence of food insecurity and the Home Office.

Conclusion

A healthy diet remains out of reach for many and is much harder for the poorest in society to afford. People on low incomes have lower quality diets, higher rates of diet-related disease and higher levels of food insecurity.²⁴

The research informing this briefing has shown that families with NRPF must navigate difficult and lengthy immigration processes, often whilst living in insecure housing, forcing them into a state of prolonged uncertainty, challenges which make it more difficult to buy, prepare and cook food. For many families, being denied access to public funds means being denied choice and agency over the food they eat, including the right to choose culturally appropriate food. For many families with NRPF, a healthy diet is unaffordable and inaccessible, and indeed, they struggle to access a sufficient amount of any food.

Immediate policy interventions must be taken to increase the support available to families with NRPF and mitigate food insecurity, alongside the broader changes to immigration policy and housing needed to address the long-term destitution and insecurity these families face.



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