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Human-centred Design in UK Asylum Social Protection

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Abstract

This paper considers United Kingdom welfare provision for asylum seekers in the context of social protection scholarship and policy discourse more commonly associated with international development. Social protection definitions are contested, ranging from those focused on state provision to wider interpretations reflecting debates on holistic wellbeing, human rights and self-actualisation. Most recently, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has called for social protection policies for all citizens to reduce inequality among and within countries. Though there is exigency to reduce the extreme inequality existing between countries, literature is lacking on how social protection can be used to critique inequality within more economically affluent nations. Commentaries on social protection also tend to focus on economic poverty, with less attention given to vulnerabilities such as marginalisation. Literature suggests that UK asylum welfare provision is based on deterrence, control and marginalisation. In response, and to encourage equity in how all countries' public policy is assessed, this paper utilises an international social protection framework to critique UK asylum welfare provision. It concludes by advocating for transdisciplinary, human-centred and comprehensive social protection policy design, encouraging participation by a wider range of stakeholders and a holistic understanding of wellbeing to meet asylum seekers' needs effectively and efficiently.

Keywords: Asylum seeker, refugee, social protection, wellbeing.

1. Introduction

Homelessness, hunger and fear are not confined to warring and unstable regions in the 'Third World' but are increasingly faced by asylum seekers arriving to deterrent asylum policies in the West (Kissoon 2010, 5).

Since the late 1980s, a growing body of literature has analysed and critiqued the United Kingdom (UK) government's public policy response to the 'so-called'¹ European refugee crisis. The overriding objective of which has been deterrence, control and marginalisation (Kissoon 2010; Qureshi, Morris, and Mort 2020; Canning 2017; Bloch and Schuster 2002; Scheel and Squire 2014), a political manifesto based on the empirically refuted theory that asylum seekers are economic migrants in disguise, 'pulled' to the UK by the prospect of superior economic gain (Mayblin and James 2016; Mayblin 2019). It has been argued that in order to stem the flow of these 'unwanted invaders' (Samuel Parker 2015), successive right and left-wing governments have introduced increasingly militaristic border controls and punitive immigration and welfare policies that some have contended "penalize asylum seekers for their own displacement" (Mayblin 2019, 1, see also, Aas, Katya F. and Bosworth, Mary, 2013, and Aliverti, Ana, 2012). Most recently, the Nationality and Borders Bill (2021c) was quickly and quietly passed in the House of Commons on the 8th December 2021 and is, at the time of writing, being discussed in the House of Lords.

The Bill proposes a two-tier asylum application system based on how claimants arrive in the UK², a system that is "incompatible with international law through the UN Refugee Convention" (Hutt and Antoniwi 2021). Many have come out against the new bill including politicians (Hutt and Antoniwi 2021), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR 2021) and human rights charities (Amnesty International UK 2012). Yet, the UK government, perhaps aided by the diversion of the Covid pandemic and its' normalisation of a fast-track legislative process, have continued to push forward with the Bill despite significant opposition and evidence that policies that include detention, dispersal and employment restrictions, evoke fear of deportation, and provide inadequate financial support, lead to pervasive destitution and exclusion, a form of structural violence that is both avoidable and has easily anticipated outcomes of "significant social and emotional harms" (Canning 2017, 2).

The UK has pursued the opposite of welfare state policies: asylum seekers are denied chances

¹Canning (2017, p.9, Note 1) contests the term crisis as "a crisis is unforeseeable and unpredictable" and the events that have caused an influx of irregular migrants at European borders are "wholly predictable: conflict, country occupation and economic dismantlement". Canning suggests that the refugee crisis is more "aligned to militarised neoliberal border mismanagement than an unforeseeable crisis".

² The Bill penalises asylum seekers who arrive in the UK through 'irregular means' or who put in late claims, restricting their access to asylum welfare support and potentially resulting in inferior immigration rights being granted if applicants are given permission to stay.

for social inclusion in order to ensure that the migration process is reversible (Jurado, Brochmann, and Dolvik 2013, 8).

To formulate an acceptable public policy response to irregular migratory flows and justify the policy's perpetuation despite damning critiques, Mayblin (2019) contends that politicians and civil servants construct and encourage civil society acceptance of a hegemonic construal of what is driving the phenomenon – in this case the 'economic pull factor' story. This construal has facilitated a growing welfare chauvinism toward asylum seekers among some UK politicians, media commentators and citizens, defined by Guentner et al (2016, 3) as,

[...] the ideological construction of a specified out-group as both threatening and morally inferior so that action to punish, exclude or incapacitate its members is necessary on both moral and existential grounds.

Practices of 'belief confirmation' within the civil service – the acceptance of confirmatory, usually sanitised³ and quantitative, data, and the dismissal of contradictory, usually qualitative, data – have, Canning (2017) argues, allowed politicians to reinforce the economic pull construal, remaining distanced from the human face of the resulting restrictive welfare policies. Apprised of only confirmatory data, politicians are also able to deny that any negative impacts of these policies could have been deliberate or foreseen (Canning 2017, 134 & 139) and silence the everyday suffering of those within the asylum system.

On the opposite end of the policy formation spectrum, there has been growing interest in a more "human-centred model of public governance" emerging from the private sector design tradition (Bason and Austin 2021). This approach supports citizen collaboration and innovation in the dynamic and strategic development, delivery and management of public bodies, as a reaction to the often slow and opaque bureaucratic reinforcement and "reproduction of societal norms and institutions" (ibid, 2). Weber's seminal bureaucratic principles proposed the need for efficiency, reliability, equality and fairness (Du Gay 2000; Weber 1947) to curb the power of rulers and elites (Fukuyama 2014), protecting individuals from the "whims of a despot whose only law was his own wish" (Wren and Bedeian 1994, 229). However, strong evidence exists that these guiding principles are lacking in the formation and administration of the UK asylum welfare system (Mayblin 2019). As such, there is an urgent need for research to support a new approach to the construction and management of these policies.

A significant body of literature already exists describing and critiquing the creation and evolution of the UK welfare state and its' impact on population groups (Fraser 2000). This paper does not seek to replicate this work but instead, to consider welfare provision for asylum seekers in the UK in the context

³ Statistics without personal information or stories.

of social protection scholarship, that has more commonly been associated with international development research and critiques of poverty alleviation policies in less economically developed countries. As the next section will attest, the definition of social protection is contested and evolving as its prominence in policy documents grow. Definitions range from those closely aligned with UK current welfare state provision to wider interpretation that reflect debates on holistic wellbeing and self-actualisation. Most recently, it has received considerable attention in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development where Target 1.3 calls for the implementation of “nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors⁴, and by 2030 [the achievement of] substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable” (United Nations 2015). This social protection target is required to fulfil many of the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda including: ending poverty in all forms everywhere (Goal 1); healthy lives and the promotion of wellbeing throughout the life course (Goal 3); empowerment and equality for women/girls (Goal 5); sustainable and inclusive economic growth and decent work for everyone (Goal 8); and the reduction of inequality among and within countries (Goal 10).

Though there is undoubtedly an urgent need to reduce the extreme inequality that exists *among* countries globally, as promoted in Goal 10 of the SDGs, there is a lack of literature focused on how social protection guidelines can be used to critique inequality *within* more economically affluent nations. Commentaries on social protection also tend to focus on economic poverty and give less attention to other vulnerabilities, such as disability and marginalisation. As such, this paper will turn the lens inwards to use current international social protection definitions to critique UK welfare policy for a specific marginalised group: asylum seekers, to ascertain whether the government is fulfilling its commitment to end poverty everywhere, promote wellbeing, health, empowerment and equality and decent work for everyone as set out in the SDGs to which they are a signatory. The article will commence with a brief description of dominant social protection definitions and their ideological foundations. A human-centred, right’s based definition of social protection (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004) will then be used to critique current UK welfare provision for asylum seekers before describing what other avenues of social protection they regularly interact with. Finally, a case will be made for a radical transdisciplinary reconceptualization and reorganisation of government asylum social protection based on Devereux’s (2019) comprehensive social protection categorisation and human-centred design principles.

⁴ “Social protection floors are nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees that should ensure, as a minimum that, over the life cycle, all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level.” (ILO *n.d.*)

2. Defining Social Protection

Over the last two decades, the use of the term social protection, and the magnitude of government funds dedicated to its operationalisation, have grown steadily, yet there remains a tension among scholars, policymakers and development agencies concerning its purpose, tools, and implementation actors. Most definitions consider social protection as fundamentally a state responsibility, aligning with historic descriptions of the ‘welfare state’ by being primarily concerned with assisting the chronic poor and managing a population’s risks and vulnerability. For example, the UK Department of International Development (DFID 2006) definition comprises:

- *Social insurance - [...] the pooling of contributions by individuals in state or private organisations so that, if they suffer a shock or change in circumstances, they receive financial support;*
- *Social assistance – non-contributory transfers that are given to those deemed vulnerable by society on the basis of their vulnerability or poverty;*
- *The setting and enforcing of minimum standards to protect citizens within the workplace.*

Other organisations take a wider view of the purpose of social protection, what interventions are included therewithin and which actors can deliver them, such as the following definition by the Institute for Development Studies:

Social Protection includes formal and informal initiatives that provide income or in-kind transfers in combination with other forms of support to poor and vulnerable households to: i) act as a safety net for extremely poor people, ii) protect people against risks and consequences of livelihood shocks, iii) promote people out of poverty, and iv) support social justice for equitable outcomes for all (Roelen and Devereux 2013, p.1).

The tension surrounding the meaning and purpose of social protection relates to the ideological foundations of social care provision (Devereux and McGregor 2014; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004) and whether social protection is primarily understood as instrumental, employed as a “means to achieve economic development targets” (Devereux and Solórzano 2016, p63), or rights-based in nature, utilised in the pursuit of social justice.

The former conception of social protection is most closely linked to the social safety nets discourse that dominated literature and UK public policy through the Conservative Margaret Thatcher government and into the late 1990s and involved “targeting efforts to only those classified as ‘deserving’ or the ‘needy’” (Kabeer, p 338-354 in Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004, p. 297). This approach to social

welfare saw the contraction of state welfare provision and the spread of neo-liberal ideology in the health and education sector, leading to the Conservatives being dubbed the ‘nasty party’ by political leaders of the day for their lack of “sympathy for those at the bottom of society, for the less privileged, for the minorities” (Espiet-Kilty 2016, 10). Following 13 years of increased public spending by Labour between 1997-2010 (Lupton et al. 2013), David Cameron secured a Conservative-Liberal coalition by distancing the party from this negative image, promoting the idea of a ‘Big Society’ where an active and efficient third sector, comprised of caring citizens and charities, fulfilled their obligations to care for society. Unfortunately, a lack of funding and support for the proposed expansion of the third sector resulted in the policies ultimate demise, with some suggesting it was just another way for the Conservatives to cut public spending. A right’s based definition of social protection emerged in the 21st century as a critique to the “residualist and paternalistic” (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004, p.1) nature of safety nets and has been the basis for more complex programmes targeting multidimensional aspects of poverty in the wider population.

Which version of social protection governments and development agencies align with stems from their beliefs concerning the roots of poverty and vulnerability. Specifically, whether they are the result of personal circumstances and characteristics requiring individual or household-level interventions to manage ‘individualised risk’ (World Bank, 2001 in Devereux and McGregor 2014), or produced and reproduced by exogenous powers, such as social and cultural structures, politics or institutions that require widespread systemic change. Despite considerable scholarly endeavour to move the social protection discussion on from basic social safety nets towards a rights-based, broader understanding of multidimensional poverty alleviation, the residual approach, coupled with individualised intervention strategies, still dominates political and development discourse today for a number of reasons (Devereux and McGregor 2014, p. 303). Firstly, social protection is still mainly understood as a public response delivered through state-sponsored, formal agencies. Other less formal mechanisms of protection, such as family, peer-based or community interventions are often overlooked. Yet, literature indicates there is a complex web of semi- and informal social protection supporting those living in poverty to improve their wellbeing and manage daily risks (For examples see Clark 1999; Papadopoulos and Roumpakis 2017; Awortwi and Walter-Drop 2017; Mayblin and James 2019; Anonymous Author 1 2021).

Secondly, many governments and development agencies still define social protection within the narrow focus of individual economic and livelihood security, focusing on basic needs and physical deprivation and neglecting wider aspects of wellbeing such as self-actualisation, esteem and relationships (see hierarchy of needs by Maslow 1943). Social protection, understood in this role, is concerned with income smoothing and the accumulation of assets to tackle poverty and minimise risk and is, therefore, limited

to “formal income or consumption transfers to poor households” (Attah 2017, p.15). To focus solely on the economic causes and outcomes of poverty, vulnerability and migration fails to address the complex social and political context that creates or perpetuates these risks in the first place. Indeed, some argue that by “associating the causes of poverty with poor people themselves” poverty professionals can avoid the “more difficult challenges that are identified when poverty is understood as being embedded in structures, institutions and relationships” (Devereux and McGregor 2014 , p.301), allowing discriminatory social, cultural, and institutional power structures to remain unchallenged and economic inequality to increase. Unfortunately, by failing to recognise the wider structural context of poverty, social protection interventions are often one-dimensional, attempting to alleviate poverty or improve wellbeing in one area of an individual’s life without understanding the knock-on negative impacts this could have on other dimensions of wellbeing. For example, by taking away asylum seekers’ right to paid employment in the UK and replacing this with financial social protection through a system of benefits, literature suggests that the government is perpetuating the negative representation of asylum seekers as lazy and a drain on national finances (Samuel Parker 2015; Philo 2013; Huysmans and Buonfino 2008). The mental and social wellbeing of asylum seekers may be negatively impacting through this enforced idleness as may their ability to integrate into society (Smith 2015).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Human-centredness

The concept of human-centredness can be found in a number of disciplines, including economics and development studies (see human-scale development Max-Neef 1991; Cruz, Stahel, and Max-Neef 2009), interdisciplinary human rights research (Chatterjee 2021), law (UN 1948; UKGOV 1998), business (Howard 2015) and design (Giacomin 2014). The main tenet of human-centredness found in all these disciplines is that people are all of equal worth, and the fulfilment of their needs is central to successful decision-making. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”. As such, it sets out a list of fundamental human rights that should be prioritised and protected by signatory countries such as equality, freedom from torture and the right to claim asylum. Max-Neef (1991), a Chilean economist, proposed that a countries’ economic order should be organised to serve its people, rather than its people organised to serve the economy and suggested that development should be centred around fulfilling nine fundamental human needs – subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity and freedom. The concept of human-centredness has also recently grown in popularity in design literature where authors such as Giacomin (2014) state that human need and utility should be at the centre of any design process and that users should be involved in all stages of product

design and evaluation to maximise efficiency, effectiveness and positive impact.

Contemporary migration scholarship suggests that UK asylum social protection policy lacks human-centred design. Instead, it is characterised by welfare chauvinism, an outcome of neo-liberal ideology, constructed and legitimised by the economic pull-factor construal (Guentner et al. 2016; Mayblin 2019). Many of the restrictive and exclusionary policies that flow from this ideology have, in recent years, been privatised including border securitisation, dispersal housing and detention centres, an economic incentive for those involved in planning and running these controversial interventions (Andersson 2014). “From a corporate perspective, the expansion of border controls is a neo-liberal dream come true” (Canning 2017, 142), but has also been labelled ‘state-corporate harm’ as “states develop harmful structures to contain and control migrant bodies, but corporations increasingly enact the policing, control and confinement of these bodies” for financial gain (Canning 2020, 262; López-Sala and Godenau 2020). “[T]he illegality industry of border control – and the number of people crossing – are not reduced the more money that is spent, but instead expand” (Canning 2017, 144, see also Andersson, 2014), and a recent literature review by Mayblin and James (2016) has demonstrated a clear lack of correlation between asylum welfare provision restrictions and reduced asylum applications. Thus, current policies are not fulfilling the government’s objectives to reduce irregular immigration, only inflicting further trauma on individuals already fleeing persecution and violence.

A human-centred asylum policy design, would reorientate the UK’s prevailing neo-liberal, chauvinistic policy to a rights-based one that would also fulfil the government’s legal obligations to refugees, set out in the 1951 Convention and subsequent 1967 Protocol (UN 2012) to which they are a signatory. These documents commit the UK government to implement policies and procedures that treat those seeking asylum with respect and dignity, “to facilitate, encourage and sustain [...] suitable welfare services” (UNHCR 2010, 11), ensure legal processes for refugees invest the same equal rights to them as to other citizens, and uphold non-refoulement – a legal commitment not to return refugee applicants to a country where their safety is not guaranteed. The UK’s Human Rights Act (1998) also outlines universal human rights that asylum seekers are entitled to including: freedom from “torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” (Article 3); freedom from unlawful detention (Article 5); the right to a fair trial (Article 6); respect for private and family life (Article 8); freedom of religion (Article 9); freedom “from slavery and forced labour”; freedom from discrimination (Article 13).

To satisfy these objectives a comprehensive social protection framework is needed to support asylum seekers’ wellbeing while awaiting their asylum application decision; one that incorporates formal and informal mechanisms to protect those unable to support themselves financially, prevents deprivation through mitigation strategies, promotes people out of poverty by enhancing incomes and capabilities, and transforms societal attitudes and actions to improve social equity.

3.2 Social Protection

The conceptual definition of social protection proposed by Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004, 9) underpins a human-centred approach to wellbeing:

Social Protection describes all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler state that social protection interventions can be protective, providing targeted social assistance through resource transfers to the chronically poor or those unable to work for their own livelihood e.g., disability benefit, single-parent benefits, state-funded pensions, or as *social services* to special needs groups through mechanisms such as orphanages, feeding or refugee camps. They can also be preventative, seeking to avert deprivation through *social insurance* e.g., tripartite-funded pensions, health insurance, unemployment benefits, or via informal mechanisms such as community savings clubs. Beyond these ‘safety net’ style interventions, promotive measures seek to enhance incomes and capabilities through livelihood-enhancing initiatives such as school nutrition programmes or micro-finance to stabilise and improve incomes in the longer term. Finally, transformative measures tackle social inequality and exclusion by targeting discriminatory or abusive regulatory frameworks to protect marginalised or vulnerable groups, such as UK asylum seekers, and by sensitising and seeking to change public attitudes and actions to reduce stigmatisation and improve *social equity*. This definition has primarily been used by international development scholars to investigate and critique social protection policies in less economically developed countries. Yet this definition can also be used to critique UK domestic welfare policy. Whilst promoting theoretical equity, such a critique also helps to legitimate on-going critiques of social protection in developing nations.

4. How Human-centred is UK Asylum Social Protection Policy?

[The Home Office] can't take you out, so they push you so hard that you leave yourself. They put you under such pressure that they make you think that you prefer to be dead in your own country than alive here. Research participant (female, originally from Bolivia, has been living in the UK for 11 years) (Qureshi, Morris, and Mort 2020).

Between 1993 and 1999, the John Major (Conservative) and Tony Blair (Labour) governments set in motion a constriction of welfare for asylum seekers to respond to growing concerns over the economic pull-factor construal. Prior to 1993, asylum seekers received cash benefits, council housing and were, in some cases, allowed to undertake employment. The Asylum and Immigration Act (1993) removed

asylum seekers' right to permanent council housing and reduced financial welfare to 90% of the standard British citizen rate, being cut again to only 70% by the Immigration and Asylum Act (1996).

In 1998, New Labour set about reorganising the administration of asylum to, “create new support arrangements to ensure that asylum seekers are not left destitute, minimize the incentive to economic migration, remove access to Social Security benefits, minimize cash payments and reduce the burden on local authorities” (Home Office 1998). In this White Paper, Jack Straw, the current Home Secretary, made it clear there was “no doubt that large numbers of economic migrants [were] abusing the system by claiming asylum”. He stated that the “current arrangements for supporting asylum seekers [were] a shambles” and that new policy must “minimise the attractions of the UK to economic migrants” (Preface, Home Office 1998). Though the White Paper stated that the application process would be streamlined and that “it [was] plainly absurd for those who [had] fled persecution from abroad to have to wait months, or even years, to hear if they [were] allowed to stay”, the paper had a clear mandate to tighten and toughen up the immigration system to reduce the numbers arriving in the UK claiming asylum. The changes proposed in the paper led to the creation of a totally separate welfare administrative system, the ‘National Asylum Support Service’ (NASS) in 1999 with a focus on deterrence and control of asylum seekers through decreasing financial support, reducing avenues for legal aid and limiting application appeals. Though the new system was intended to speed up application times and “ensure that genuine asylum seekers [could not] be left destitute” (ibid, section 8.17), the exclusion of asylum seekers from mainstream benefits, meant that the government was, and continues to be, able to decrease their financial support with little awareness or concern by the British citizenry. Indeed, some argue that “enforced destitution has been a planned outcome of public policy to disincentivize asylum seekers from coming to the UK whilst also incentivizing refused asylum seekers to leave the UK” (Sam Parker 2017).

Since March 2013, UK asylum administration has been controlled directly by the Home Office through the Immigration Enforcement and Visas and Immigration directorates. In 2002, asylum applications reached a peak of 84,130, fuelled by conflicts in Iraq (17%), Afghanistan (9%) and Somalia (8%), and a dictatorial regime in Zimbabwe (9%) (UKGOV 2004), before falling to a twenty-year low of 17,916 in 2010 (Sturge 2019). Since then, application figures have risen slowly again to 31,115 in 2021 (Home Office 2021). UK asylum applications can be made under the 1951 Convention, Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave (Consonant n.d.), or the European Convention of Human Rights 1953 or Human Rights Act 1998 (Owers 2003). Asylum applications must be made as soon as reasonably possible following arrival in the United Kingdom and can be done either at border control or at an Asylum Intake Unit. Asylum seekers and their dependants will then be screened by an immigration officer who will decide if their case can be considered in the UK or if they should be sent to another safe country to claim asylum, e.g., a country already passed through enroute to the UK. Once

approved, asylum seekers are appointed a caseworker and will have interviews on a regular basis. If entry into the UK is deemed unlawful then the claimant could be placed in a detention centre until a decision is made on their application. The government aims to provide an application decision within six months. However, in the year ending March 2021, 76% of current asylum seekers had been waiting more than six months; between 2010 and 2020, the numbers waiting more than a year had increased tenfold, from 3,588 to 33,016, and 250 people had been waiting over five years for an initial decision (Hewett 2021).

Assuming a claimant is not detained on arrival in the UK, the majority will rely on some form of social protection for survival. In the United Kingdom, social protection is traditionally seen as a state mandate and responsibility, organised and delivered by government ministries, departments and their agents. However, there are a host of other semi-formal providers, such as faith-based groups and large and small non-profit organisations, and informal providers, including peers, friends and family, that may also be involved in supporting an individual. The following sections will consider the extent to which five areas of UK asylum social protection policy – financial disbursements, housing, healthcare, education and employment – align or depart from the right’s-based, human-centred definition proposed earlier.

4.1 Financial Disbursements: “I Am Destitute”⁵

There is increasing evidence of the impact on children’s physical health, their mental health ... not having enough food to eat ... not having a warm coat to wear in the winter ... ha[s] a long term effect on children and young people’s wellbeing (Chase quoted in Ghelani 2014).

As it is illegal for most asylum seekers to work in the UK, weekly government financial disbursements are relied upon to survive. Current government welfare provision for asylum seekers awaiting an application (Section 95 support) includes a weekly allowance of £39.63 (2021 figure) loaded on to an ASPEN payment card with a cash withdrawal function. This is approximately 53% of the amount that would be paid to a 25+ year old British citizen claiming universal credit. If an asylum claim is refused, but the claimant is either making all possible attempts to return home, cannot safely return to their home country or have been granted leave to appeal (Section 4 support), they continue to receive the same level of financial benefit. However, it is loaded on to a payment card that can only be used to purchase essential items such as food and toiletries and cannot be withdrawn as cash. In addition to these amounts, pregnant women, and those with children under three years, receive between £3-5 extra per week and a

⁵ Section 26 of the 32-page Asylum Support Application Form requires applicants to tick a box stating they are destitute in order to receive welfare benefits.

maternity grant of £250 (refused asylum seeker) and £300 (awaiting application). Some applicants fail to qualify for government support all together as the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002) excludes asylum seekers from support if they do not make their application ‘as soon as reasonably practical’ after arrival. Despite government assurances that this proviso would be implemented with sensitivity, 9,000 claims for support were refused in 2003 alone under this condition (Allsopp, Sigona, and Phillimore 2014).

Financial disbursement levels are determined by considering the weekly spend of the poorest 10 percent of British people on essential items only (Mayblin 2017). However, though any financial support could be argued to fulfil the definition of protective social protection, as the income of the poorest 10 percent “is below 60 per cent of the median income (the poverty line)” (Mayblin 2017) of the UK population, it appears the Home Office are intentionally inflicting poverty on this group, while providing a higher level of support to UK citizens. This can also be seen in the level of maternity grant paid to asylum seekers - £250-300 dependent on application status compared to £500 for UK claimants - and suggests a “[h]ierarchical conceptions of human worth” rooted in colonial history whereby some individuals deserve or require more money to live on in the UK than others (Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi 2020, 108; see also Guentner et al. 2016). This categorisation of peoples’ financial needs and worth, and the inherent discrimination therewithin, is clearly seen when refused asylum seekers, deemed unable to return home through no fault of their own by UK officials, are still punished by degrading financial restrictions. Though still given the same level of weekly financial support loaded on to an ASPEN Visa card, their autonomy is removed as they are unable to withdraw the money to spend how they wish, including saving money, and cannot use the card to make any online payment. This means they must travel to each shop they wish to purchase from and cannot make use of online prices which are often lower than those in store. In addition, during the recent Covid pandemic, UK citizens receiving Universal Credit or Working Tax Credit saw their weekly benefits payment increase by £20 for 12 months, a preventative, risk-mitigating policy signalling the government’s awareness of the additional costs the health crisis placed on poorer households. However, no increase in financial benefits was given to asylum seekers pointing to the government’s continued welfare chauvinistic attitude.

There are many accounts of asylum-seeker destitution, or what has been termed the ‘slow violence’ of everyday living under the poverty line (Nixon 2011). These describe the marginalisation “so often experienced and felt at the banal level – eating, washing, travelling and socialising” (Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi 2020, 109), with some asylum seekers talking of a ‘feeling of social death’ when they think of their current destitute existence compared to their former, more affluent lives⁶ (Mayblin, Wake, and

⁶ Though there is insufficient data on the educational and professional background of UK asylum seekers, in 2014 it was estimated that one in five EU refugees aged 15-64 had tertiary education (Ganassin and Young 2020), and

Kazemi 2020, 114). Many skip meals and learn to live with hunger from a lack of funds, reporting anxiety, shame and a loss of self-confidence, self-worth and identity through an inability to purchase personal items such as clothing and toiletries.

Half of asylum-seekers surveyed couldn't buy enough food to feed themselves or their families. [Our] research also found that 43% of asylum seekers miss a meal because they can't afford to eat while a shocking 88% don't have enough money to buy clothes (Bowcott 2014).

Lack of resources to pay for transportation can result in physical and psychological distress through constant exertion and worry and, given regular attendance at interviews are a requirement of the asylum application process, some go without food just to make the journey.

Yes. I always walk. I walk for short and long distances. For the long ones, I feel I am torturing myself by walking [but] if I buy a bus ticket, then I won't have food for that day (Ahmed, Kuwaiti) (Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi 2020, 117).

Both the poverty-level financial benefits and the control exerted on individual's buying preferences is counter to the ideals of respect and dignity and 'suitable welfare services' set out in the 1951 Convention (UN 2012) and the freedom from discrimination (Article 13) and freedom from degrading treatment or punishment (Article 3) articles in the Human Rights Act (1998). They also do not align with the definitional objectives of human-centred social protection by "reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalised groups" (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004, 9). In addition, the discrimination is gendered as payments are made to one main applicant only, which is usually a man, leaving female dependants financially reliant on their partner (Home Office n.d.), a policy that is particularly problematic where domestic violence or power imbalances exist.

4.2 Dispersal Housing: Asylum Apartheid

People are housed where no one else wants to be housed in British society, in areas which are very deprived, which have a high prevalence of people with British Nationalist Party views, and they are subject to harassment and abuse on a daily basis (GP interview, Canning 2014a in Canning 2017).

In 2020, approximately 46,000 asylum seekers were in receipt of Section 95 support in the UK, with 92% living in no-choice dispersal housing (Walsh 2021), a practice that has been coined 'asylum apartheid' (Precey 2015) due to the deprived neighbourhoods and poor housing stock intentionally allocated to a specific societal group. Though any housing is, arguably, better than homelessness, and

in the case of Syria it is estimated that at least 2,000 university professionals and 100,000 university graduates are among the EU refugee population (King, J., 2016 in Ganassin and Young 2020).

a form of protective social protection provided for those unable to pay for private accommodation, reports have found residents living alongside rat and cockroach infestations (Chaplin 2019), same-sex asylum seekers forced to share rooms, and even beds with strangers (Batty 2020) and heavily pregnant women with children housed in top-floor flats with no lifts (Canning 2017, 73)⁷.

The practice of dispersal was introduced in 1999 due to housing shortages for asylum seekers in London and Southeast England (Zetter 2000). NASS created regional associations involving local authorities and non-governmental organisations to which they could sub-contract the work of housing claimants (Sales 2002). In 2012, housing policy was reviewed again, and contracts given to three private contractors – Clearal, Serco and G4S - thus removing asylum housing responsibilities from local authorities. However, rather than dispersing claimants among local authorities equally, placements have been concentrated in only a small number of, mostly deprived parts of North England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with Northeast England housing around 17 times more asylum seekers per 1,000 population than the Southeast of the country. Dispersal policy has been widely criticised for sending vulnerable asylum seekers to areas of social exclusion and deprivation, with poor quality housing stock, and where there is a lack of local expertise or refugee community organisations (Sam Parker 2017; Zetter 2000; Phillips 2006; Phillimore and Goodson 2008). The methods of dispersal employed by the new housing contractors have also come under fire for encouraging racist abuse, such as “the use of wristbands in Cardiff and the painting red of asylum seekers’ [front] doors in Middlesbrough” (Sam Parker 2017, see also Bates, 2017). These policies are a far cry from the transformative social protection required to change attitudes and improve social status and equity proposed by Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004). They also do not align with the rhetoric of integration promoted by the current UK government (Home Office 2005).

Adequate accommodation is central to physical and mental health, playing an important “role in safety, security, belonging, and predictability” with “... anxiety, low mood and re-traumatisation” a “consequence of the uncertain and fragile housing conditions” that many asylum seekers live in (Chaplin 2019). Though poor housing is not unique to the asylum population, the high percentage of trauma in this group, and the constant fear of deportation that is inherent to the asylum process increases their chances of suffering from “‘hypervigilance’, meaning an intense and exaggerated sense of danger, and a heightened response to external stimuli such as noise and movements” (Chaplin 2019). Couple this with enforced isolation through both the asylum journey and dispersal upon arrival, the potential for stigmatisation and racist abuse, a lack of funds to engage in social connections, and enforced inactivity due to the illegality of work (Anonymous Author 1 2021), and access to a safe, clean and

⁷ Year ending June 2021: 31,115 initial asylum applications were made in the UK. Of these 81% were male and 19% were female; 9% were under 18 years old, 52% were aged 18-29, 35% were aged 30-49 and 4% were aged 50-69 years (Home Office 2021) .

private space becomes critical for the protection of emotional, social and physical wellbeing. Dispersal in itself is also particularly jarring for individuals dealing with the effects of trauma who are made to move away from formal or informal support networks that they have established in their initial location (Canning 2017, 40, see also Dumper 2002, and Human Rights Watch, 2010).

The complexities of asylum administration and holes in provision lead to a high rate of homelessness (Sanders 2021). This is usually due to the withdrawal of Section 4 support from a refused asylum applicant⁸, an asylum seeker breaking the conditions of their application⁹, or when a 28-day notice to leave housing is given at the point that an asylum application is approved (often less than 28 days, as the letter takes time to arrive). As a new Universal Credit claim often takes six weeks to be paid, and employment income, even if found straight away, is paid in arrears, little time is left for the newly approved refugee to find somewhere else to stay. As such, many end up destitute and homeless (Lewis 2007), staying with friends, family, or other claimants, potentially risking their own claim for asylum. Though it may be reasonable for government support to be removed where there is a clear case of serious criminal endeavour or refusal to return to their country of origin following a rigorous and fair investigation of their asylum cases, 52% of refusals were overturned in 2019 (Bulman 2019) demonstrating inadequate initial screening processes. Losing one's housing by either letting another homeless person sleep on your floor or due to known time gaps in provision between gaining refugee status and receiving Universal Credit indicates the opposite of preventative social protection, intentionally causing deprivation rather than mitigating the easily predictable risks of it.

Detention centres are another key form of accommodation used by the UK government to house asylum seekers, and the contraction of welfare benefits, employment restrictions and the illegality of virtually all legal entry routes into the UK to claim asylum have “meant more laws that facilitate detention or removal if broken” (Canning 2017, 70, see also Bhatia, 2014). Therefore, more and more asylum seekers are finding themselves branded as criminals, a label that has been well used to reduce sympathy for those seeking asylum, “even if the crimes they commit are more reflective of crimes of the powerless than those of violent criminals” (Canning 2017, 55). A (2014) Channel 4 documentary found medical negligence, racist, sexist and sexual abuse and suicide attempts in UK detention centres, adding to significant evidence of the structurally violent nature of detention, negatively impacting physical,

⁸ Accommodation should still be provided for refused applicants who have children, disability, approval to make an appeal or can prove they are attempting to return to their home country but are not able to through no fault of their own.

⁹ Often by allowing another destitute person to stay in their NASS accommodation with them or by temporarily vacating their assigned property.

mental and emotional wellbeing (Bosworth 2014; Prison Reform Trust 2009). Although guidelines¹⁰ state that detention should not be used for men or women with a history of trauma, its use as a cornerstone of asylum policy despite the high incidence of trauma among this group (Girma et al. 2014) begs the question, who is protected by this form of social protection?

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, cessations of S4 support were halted in March 2020 and councils were required to house all destitute asylum seekers based on the risk to public health of the pandemic. Two attempts to restart cessations by the government were successfully challenged through litigation. However, cessations restarted on 19th July 2021. In addition, a legal challenge by Detention Action in March 2020, who raised serious concerns about the safety of vulnerable detainees held in close quarters due to Covid-19, saw the Home Office release 350 people held under immigration powers, with the numbers continuing to drop “from 1,225 on 1 January [2021] to 368” (Refugee Council 2021a).

These actions fall under the preventative social protection category as they could be said to mitigate risks associated with the coronavirus. However, aside from the reports of families being crowded into small hotel rooms for the duration of the pandemic (Batty 2020), it appears that it has taken outside intervention to force the government to act, and they have since attempted to withdraw these temporary preventative initiatives. Additionally, it could be argued that the preventative measures were only required because the current protective social protection provision was not fit for purpose, allowing people to fall through the net into homelessness or inflicting structural harm on individuals by detaining them for minor infringements of laws that are set up to illegalise the very process of seeking asylum in the first place.

4.3 Healthcare: “Where is my Tooth?”¹¹

When I went to my dentist, they ask me give £100. They charge me, and that was really a shock, even besides having this, you know, HC2 form. To be honest, very scary when they ask so much money. That was a really bad experience (Bina) (Kang, Farrington, and Tomkow 2019, 540).

Initial Accommodation Centres and Immigration Removal Centres often have ‘wrap-around’ services – resident or locum doctors, nurses, midwives, counsellors and health visitors, provided by the NHS, sometimes in response to local swamped GP surgeries coping with rising numbers of registrations

¹⁰ UNHCR detention guidelines for asylum seekers state that “victims of torture and other serious physical, psychological or sexual violence [...] need special attention and should generally not be detained” (UNHCR 2012)

¹¹ A dentist extracted the wrong tooth as the asylum seeker could not speak English to explain where the pain was (Kang, Farrington, and Tomkow 2019, 539).

(MacPherson 2014). These offer a wide range of short-term services that can be a positive first step in reducing the vulnerability of new asylum seekers presenting with a high incidence of trauma/traumata. These services can be categorised as protective and preventative as, in addition to the immediate benefits of treatment, early interventions may mitigate against more serious longer-term impacts such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Unfortunately, stays in these well-resourced centres are usually short, with asylum seekers dispersed out into the community, where they often find access to medical care more challenging.

All categories of asylum seekers are entitled to free primary health care. However, since 2012 the government has attempted to make the UK a 'really hostile environment' (Griffiths and Yeo 2021) for irregular migrants including the introduction of charges for non-emergency NHS treatment for refused applicants. And, despite all GP consultations remaining free, evidence suggests that 13% of vulnerable migrants who attempted to register with a GP were wrongly refused due to their immigration status (Kang, Farrington, and Tomkow 2019). Recent research also suggests that asylum seekers find it hard to access medical services for a number of other reasons including significant language barriers and a lack of interpretation services that have caused wide-ranging mental, social and mental harm such as incorrect invasive treatment, missed appointments, embarrassment and, in some cases, death (Canning 2017, 75, see also, Kang, Farrington, and Tomkow, 2019). Asylum seekers also lack awareness of NHS structures and how to access different services such as ambulances, dental and maternity care, and, even though prescriptions, dental treatment and eye tests should be free, claimants struggle to complete lengthy HC2 forms to allow them to claim their entitlement. This, and a six-month HC2 application turnaround, results in free services and prescriptions being denied, while others are incorrectly charged causing unnecessary stress. Finally, travel costs to reach medical appointments cause anxiety for asylum seekers who barely receive enough to buy food each week, and purchasing personal medical items sometimes requires going without meals.

During the recent Covid pandemic, asylum seekers have been included in another preventative social protection scheme alongside citizens, the NHS Covid Registration database for the extremely vulnerable (Refugee Council 2021a). Individuals with certain serious health conditions that made them more vulnerable to Covid-19 were, until April 2021, provided with free deliveries of essential supplies, including food. Asylum seekers are also entitled to Covid vaccinations, though the vaccine centres are sometimes outside main towns resulting in costly transport. It is unclear whether asylum seekers can access other on-going ancillary services advertised to those on this register, such as mental health helplines.

4.4 Education: “Learning is better than silver and gold”¹²

I'm very stressed, I'm always crying as well, I don't get sleep. But when I start college, I become bigger, better, better. Now, thanks to God, everything's well and I love my school (Unnamed) (Wenning 2018, 115).

The Human Rights Act 1998 includes the right to education, and in compliance with this state education is free for asylum seekers' children between the ages of 5 – 16 years. However, in 2016, the Immigration Act attempted to bar certain categories of refused asylum seekers from education causing “consternation as children and young people seemed to be included in those who could face a study ban, as could adults pursuing ESOL classes and other adult education” (Right to Remain 2018). As with other restrictive policies already discussed, it took a judicial challenge for the government to backtrack allowing all but immigration offenders and adult ‘appeal rights exhausted’ individuals with deportation orders to access some form of education. This is definitely an improvement; however, given the increased illegalisation of asylum and the high rates of appeals overturned demonstrating incompetence in the asylum decision-making process, estimates suggest there could be at least 500,000 irregular immigrants living without government financial support or access to education in the UK today (Mayblin and James 2019, 384).

Though education is free for asylum-seeking children, destitution may impact attendance as children of refused applicants “are not entitled to free school meals or other benefits and yet may have no cash to pay for” them. They may also struggle to buy essential school items such as a uniform (ECRE 2021) or items that inadvertently help enable social inclusion or avoid teasing, bullying and marginalisation, such as a pencil case or sports equipment. Following a legal challenge, the Home Office has temporarily extended free school meals to refused asylum seekers and other excluded immigrant groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as other temporary covid-related welfare benefits have been withdrawn in 2021/22 it is likely there will also be a cessation of free school meals for this group (UKGOV 2021b).

Following the aforementioned judicial challenge, Home Office rules state that post-16 asylum claimants and those refused but still in receipt of government benefits should be treated as home students, providing free access to further education until age 19. However, due to the rule complexity and changing policy provision, some have been denied education “because learning providers are confused about their entitlements and often do not have adequate processes in place to support them” (Refugee Council 2013). As with the children of refused asylum seekers, those accessing free further education also face financial barriers to attendance such as transportation costs, equipment and subsistence. Some colleges provide bursary schemes that may help with these costs, but they are limited in capacity due to

¹² (Wenning 2018, 113)

continual funding cuts by government (Belfield, Sibieta, and Farquharon 2018).

A significant body of research, including two Home Office reports (2005, 2009) shows “the overwhelming importance of language to speeding up progress towards self-sufficiency and to successful integration in domains such as health, education and employment” (Morrice et al. 2021, 683). As such, it is unsurprising that one of the most desired courses by asylum seekers is English as a Second Language (ESOL). This is backed up by the government’s Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper that states that “everyone living in England should be able to speak and understand English so they can integrate into life in this country” (Refugee Action 2019, 2). The provision of these classes, free to most asylum seekers is both preventative and promotive, seeking to mitigate against deprivation and marginalisation that may occur if applicants cannot communicate within their community or access future employment due to language barriers. However, despite government acknowledgement of the importance of language for integration, funding for ESOL classes in England was cut by almost 60% between 2008 – 2018, and there has been a corresponding 40% drop in ESOL participation, despite continued demand. Classes are also only available after a six-month wait for eligibility, a long time when you may have no English skills on arrival (ECRE 2021), and access is gendered as many women report challenges to attending due to a lack of childcare (Refugee Action 2019, 2).

Finally, there are significant financial barriers to asylum seekers attending UK Higher Education. Though attendance for most asylum categories is allowed under UK law, unless a university has a specific fee-reduction policy or works with charities such as the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA), claimants are classed as overseas students, attracting a much higher tuition fee than home students. Even if they can negotiate the standard home rate this still constitutes around £9,000 per annum and, given they have no access to the government student loans scheme and are banned from paid employment, most will be unable to fund their tuition, let alone the subsistence costs related to study.

The financial obstacles experienced by asylum seekers wishing to undertake education of all types is counter to the objectives of “reducing economic and social vulnerability” and enhancing “the social status and rights of the marginalised” proposed by Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004). Though, in theory, the government is providing access to primary, secondary, further and higher education for most groups of asylum seekers, the restrictive social protection policies that control their ability to earn and where they live, coupled with decreasing funding for ESOL classes act as barriers to entry and limit the promotion that education could have in enhancing incomes and capabilities for this group. A lack of English skills also limits integration, exacerbating their position as ‘other’ in British society, the opposite to what transformative measures should be, tackling social inequality and exclusion.

4.5 Employment: “British people, they don’t like lazy”¹³

Our culture is to work...not to sit back and let someone else to feed you. It has destroyed my life, waiting for others to feed me. I have always worked, since I was a young man, I have worked (Cuthill, Abdalla, and Bashir 2013).

Employment can provide access to preventative social protection through social insurance interventions that mitigate against livelihood shocks. However, most asylum seekers are prohibited from working under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002), with permission only given if an individual has been waiting for an initial asylum decision for more than 12 months and can take up an employment position on the UK shortage occupation list. These graduate-level specialist jobs, such as scientists and engineers, exclude a large proportion of asylum seekers and could be particularly discriminatory to women who tend to juggle childcare responsibilities with lower-skilled, part-time employment. Refused asylum seekers are not permitted to work, even if there are legitimate obstacles to returning to their country of origin. In contrast, EU law allows asylum seekers to work after a nine-month application wait (European Parliament 2013), but many grant access to their labour markets earlier than this. Australia and Canada allow immediate access to work and USA policy is to open employment to asylum seekers after six months (UKGOV 2021a).

The restriction on employment closes off asylum seekers’ access to private social protection vehicles such as pensions, sick pay or childcare. This further limits their ability to support themselves, a ‘manufactured precarity’ (Van Kooy and Bowman 2019) that encourages dependence on the State, exacerbating fear and, therefore, compliance, during the asylum application process. It also acts as a form of ‘autonomy harm’ (Canning 2017, 76) resulting from role deprivation and enforced incapacitation that can lead to a loss of self-worth, physical and mental decline (Refugee Woman’s Strategy Group 2014). Many asylum seekers indicate that they had no idea they would not be able to work to support themselves while claiming asylum in the UK (Anonymous Author 1 2021) and this restriction, coupled with long application wait times has led some to feel they are “suspended in a kind of temporal limbo for years at a time” (Canning 2017, 75). Though not technically a form of social protection, illegalisation of employment acts to inhibit individual’s from protecting themselves and preventing deprivation by making them reliant on meagre government financial disbursements and poor-quality housing. By enforcing this dependence, the policy undermines individual’s attempts to enhance their income or capabilities and promote themselves out of poverty. The societal exclusion it encourages also limits interaction with UK civil society, compounding the othering of migrants and justifying the prevailing chauvinistic welfare approach in the UK today.

¹³ (Yap, Byrne, and Davidson 2010, (Francine, 627-35), 163)

5. Towards a Comprehensive, Human-centred Social Protection Policy

...arrival at the country of destination marks the end of one journey but signals the beginning of another one, a journey that in its own way might be every bit as demanding and uncertain as that of the escape from danger to apparent physical safety (Kirkwood 2016, p. 1-2).

The continued steady flow of irregular immigrants into the United Kingdom despite increasingly restrictive structural limitations to their social and economic integration suggests that a punitive regulatory system (Webber 2012) as well as militaristic border controls do not “prevent the efforts of people mobilising whose alternative is poverty, conflict and persecution” (Canning 2017, 15). The manipulation of public opinion through state enforced dependency, dispersal housing, enforced exclusion and the political and media promotion of the unevidenced ‘economic pull factor’ construal has encouraged xeno-racism (Fekete 2001) and a process of othering, stigmatizing and discrimination leading to widespread support of the UK government’s deterrence and repulsion based asylum welfare system. Whilst there is evidence of some protective policies, such as financial disbursements and housing, improved somewhat during the covid pandemic, these are very limited in nature, forcing asylum applicants to live in poverty, often for years, while their claim is assessed.

Beyond basic protection, we have argued that UK asylum policy fails to support a human-centred, right’s-based approach to social protection that treats those seeking asylum with respect and dignity. Though undefined in the 1951 Convention and subsequent 1967 Protocol, we have shown how current provision does not constitute ‘suitable welfare services’, apportion equal rights to asylum seekers alongside other UK citizens, nor upholds non-refoulement, given so many refusals are overturned at appeal. Current policy also intentionally inflicts destitution on asylum claimants through inadequate financial disbursements and employment restrictions, policy decisions that conflict with the Human Rights Act 1998’s commitment to freedom from ‘inhuman or degrading treatment’. Finally, ‘freedom from discrimination’ is missing, both in respect of the different approach to asylum versus citizen welfare and due to the gendered nature of harm that sees women further disadvantaged through their role as asylum dependent and main childcare provider.

However, as a growing body of research is illuminating, government-led social protection is not the only source of economic and social support that UK asylum seekers interact with. Indeed, despite a nearly £2bn fall in government funding for the voluntary sector overall (Finnegan 2016, 6, see also Price, 2016, and Mayblin and James, 2019), a growing number of community-based, volunteer and donation-supported social protection providers are attempting to fill the gap left by inadequate formal welfare (Fell and Fell 2013; Dwyer and Brown 2005; Phillimore and Goodson 2010). Their services include “housing management and provision, legal and welfare advice, financial and other types of

subsistence support such as clothes and food banks, and rights-based advocacy” and are estimated to be worth at least £33.4 million per year in poverty alleviation (Mayblin and James 2019, 379 & 391).

If these organisations weren't there, I may have died because the government doesn't give you any support and we are not allowed to work in this country and we don't have a place to stay. [Gibrel] (Cuthill, Abdalla, and Bashir 2013, p.12).

Informal social protection derived through relationships with peers, friends and family is also hugely important (Anonymous Author 1 2021). Though the scale and diversity of informal support is difficult to quantify, it can range from international financial remittances between extended family to meals, floors to sleep on, and peer advice on accessing semi-formal and formal welfare assistance.

...my friends tell me where everything is, how things work...With my friends I feel strong. (Juliette, Female 29) (Murray 2015, p. 165).

Given that the UK government's asylum social protection system appears to be failing spectacularly, we call for a radical transdisciplinary reconceptualization and reorganisation of government asylum social protection that both builds upon Devereux's (2019) comprehensive social protection categorisation and also incorporates human-centred design and management. Devereux “recognises that individuals derive protection against livelihood shocks and life-cycle risks by drawing on a panoply of providers” - formal, private, semi-formal and informal - and that the role of each should be acknowledged, scrutinised and analysed (Devereux 2019, 1). Using human-centred design principles, our new construct requires the inclusion of a multitude of actors to challenge existing construals and the “reinforcement, or reproduction of social norms and institutions” that are linked to top-down bureaucratic decision-making processes (Bason and Austin 2021, 2). Specifically, design thinking uses multidisciplinary perspectives and skills to: facilitate the explicit understanding of the user, their context and needs; evaluate and refine designs from the user's perspective; and consider the holistic user experience, all through an iterative process (Giacomin 2014).

Design can bring the foundational skills of visualization, problem solving and creativity to a collective level and seed the emergence of transdisciplinary approaches to addressing the complex issues critical to society today (Sanders, 2014, p.133 in Bason and Austin 2021, 3).

Given the wide range of actors already involved in the protection, risk prevention, promotion and transformation of the lives of UK asylum seekers, including all categories of claimants themselves, it is imperative that the research, design, testing and evaluation of a holistic approach to social protection involves a fair representation of these people and that politicians, civil servants and service providers make evidence-based decisions on asylum policies, incorporating findings from a full range of quantitative and qualitative data.

Based on existing evidence, asylum seekers are not simply drawn to the UK primarily for economic gain. They are pushed by persecution and violence, arriving traumatised, but determined to regain control of their lives through employment and integration in a country they believe is fair and just (Mayblin and James 2016). It has been suggested that the newly proposed Immigration and Borders Bill (2021) aims “to abdicate [the Home Office’s] commitments to international law, and slowly erode the UK’s responsibilities to ensure they provide a safe place for people who are forced to flee conflict and persecution” (Qureshi and Mort 2021). As part of this proposed legislation, the criminalisation of individuals arriving irregularly into the UK¹⁴ and their detainment in privatised detention centres would cost an estimated £412m a year (Refugee Council 2021b). Given that deterrence policies have not been shown to reduce asylum numbers (Mayblin and James 2016), this funding could instead support sustained improvements in both the lives of claimants themselves, and the harmony of civil society through a human-centred, comprehensive – formal, semi-formal, private and informal - response to the holistic needs of asylum seekers, including their integration into communities. £412m is more than ten times the figure that community-based providers of social protection provide each year¹⁵, and their services have been shown to positively improve the physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of service users (Anonymous Author 1 2021), providing protective, risk preventative, promotive and transformational social protection interventions.

Asylum seekers constitute only 6% of UK immigration (Sturge 2019, 3), yet their purportedly negative impact on employment opportunities for UK citizens has been hugely over exaggerated by both the mass and social media. To further reduce the cost of asylum to taxpayers, applicants could be allowed to undertake temporary or contract work while their claim is being administered, with the savings used to improve the efficiency and speed of the application process. Politicians could also work with stakeholders, including community groups, asylum seekers and media representatives to explore the challenges of life in the UK asylum process, as well as reporting and portraying positive stories and images of asylum seekers; utilising these data to design, test, evaluate and publicise cost-efficient, human-centred and just responses to the needs of claimants. These actions would fulfil the promotive and transformative mandates of human-rights based social protection policies by enhancing the incomes and capabilities of applicants, tackling social inequality and exclusion by improving discriminatory and abusive regulatory frameworks, sensitising and seeking to change public attitudes and actions to reduce stigmatisation, encouraging social role valorisation, and improving social equity.

¹⁴ An irregular means someone arriving without previous permission, e.g., not through the Refugee Resettlement Scheme.

¹⁵ Estimated £33.4m per year - (Mayblin and James 2019)

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