

## **Joint submission to the Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry into Children in poverty with no recourse to public funds – September 2021**

This is a submission to the Work and Pension Committee into Children in poverty with no recourse to public funds made by United Impact with the support of Project 17. This submission should be read in parallel with the joint submission made by Project 17, The Unity Project, The Children's Society and ILPA.

United Impact is a group of families with dependent children affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy. The group is convened and supported by Project 17. The group brings together people with lived experience of the NRPF policy with an aim to provide a platform for the voice of people with lived experience and to provide solidarity and peer support. United Impact currently has 35 members.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2021 the group convened to discuss the questions raised by the Work and Pensions Inquiry with a particular focus on the 4 questions. 12 members participated in the discussion. The members contributions and thoughts have been anonymised and remain the opinions and experiences of individuals within the group.

### **1. What impact has the pandemic had on children with NRPF? Has the lifting of restrictions made any difference?**

All of the families who participated in the workshop reported that the impact of the pandemic on their children had been severe and continued to affect them. Most of the families reported that having NRPF meant they could not access support and many were turned away when approaching local authorities for assistance. Many were only able to access help through the advocacy of a charity. Below are some of the accounts provided by members:

One participant explained:

*“NRPF and the lockdown affected my children – it affected them physically emotionally and psychologically. Physically, about the time when the lockdown started was the time when the local authority kicked us out of where we were staying. Since we were subject to immigration control the local authority evicted us and because of NRPF policy we were evicted and we had to move from hotel to hotel. I have six children and they would not let us all stay in one hotel room and the children could not sleep by themselves. So, I had to separate my children, some of them had to go stay with their father. So, the children had to be separated. And this was very traumatic for everyone. And it had a ripple effect. And with the NRPF policy still in place and Home Office were taking their time with their decisions and not paying attention to the effect of what they do on people affected. This continues to affect my children to this day and causing anxiety both in children and parents. Financially you see other kids wearing things that you cannot afford because of your situation. So, children are discriminated and this has a very negative effect.”*

Another said:

*“We got quite a lot of help from other organisations during the pandemic – we had fresh food coming in every two weeks. If it had been the council, I would have been very stressed but since Project 17 got involved I got support and stress was reduced. My son was stressed because he could*

*not meet his friends and could not go out. I was also stressed since I could not go to the council office and speak to people face-to-face. On the phone I was just told that not many people were working during the pandemic so things were more difficult and I ended up waiting for people to come back to me. It is a bit better now that restrictions have been lifted as I have been able to meet with my solicitor and discuss my son's passport."*

Even for those working the situation was difficult:

*"The pandemic had a very big impact on me and my son. I work in a hospital and my son is asthmatic. The local authority was accommodating us at the time but they did not give me anything. They just told me I had to try to work. So, I was going to work, I was forcing myself to go to work and putting my child to a private childminder. But I was worried since my son has health issues but [the local authority] did not want to hear since I have NRPF. In the end of the day, they kicked me out saying that I was not eligible for support. I went to work one day and when I came back then my room was locked. I went to [the local authority] to ask for help but they said they could not do anything since I have NRPF. If you don't have the information then there is nothing you can do. You just have to do what they tell you. [The local authority that was supporting me] told me to go to and get help from [another local authority]. Again, they turned me away saying I was working and paying rent, that I was not eligible. But I tried to explain that I was struggling to pay the rent. When lockdown came in and I could not work much because of my son's health as advice was to stay in [to shield]. My childminder stopped working. It is really really hard for people who have NRPF. Despite the fact that I was working it was so so difficult. .... I was distressed and did not know what to do. Reached out to Project 17 and got help. They put me in touch with a lawyer who said they have no right to do that and we could bring a challenge."*

Many experienced hostile gatekeeping by local authorities, even during the pandemic:

*"Throughout the pandemic I was having a tough time with my children and I was pregnant at the same time. Where we were living, we could not afford to pay the rent anymore. I was picking them up and sleeping everywhere. Someone told me to go to [the local authority] but when I went they were talking aggressively at me and telling me there was no help for me. They talk to you like you have no life, like you were not a human being. I did not know what to do I had to take my children and started sleeping in the church because I had NRPF. Then I heard about P17 – I went to [the local authority] and they did an assessment for me and it was very very bad. I was crying. I was pregnant and I was crying. There were 5 of them on top of only me. And they were just talking from one thing to another, and they were just abusing me. Imagine you don't have anything, you have children, you are pregnant, you have nothing and they can see the state of you and you have nowhere to sleep and nowhere to wash. They are not supposed to use this against another person. They should take a proper assessment. I could have had a heart attack or anything. They are not meant to treat people in this way. Treating us like animals. We have now been given a place to stay but it is very far away. My daughter has to travel 2 hours and 30 minutes from where we are now to school. We are still battling but I can see where I am coming from and where I am going now so there is a big difference."*

Some experienced homelessness during the pandemic:

*"During the lockdown me and my children were homeless and I was too scared to come out and say I was homeless. We were staying with the grandmother but we had to go. We got support to approach housing, to access housing. The lockdown really really affected myself and my children physically and mentally and everything. I know where I am coming from and I know where I am today. If I think from where I come from. I was pregnant and had a one-year-old boy then and I was homeless. We don't have a voice."*

Even for families left homeless and destitute experienced gatekeeping by local authorities:

*“During the pandemic we have been sleeping in the bus, sleeping in the mosque. I went to [one local authority] and they did not help. I went to [another local authority] and they did not help. We were not allowed to sleep in the mosque anymore but [the local authority] were not accepting me because of my situation [having NRPF]. We did not get help until someone at the mosque gave me the number for Project 17.”*

Many were trapped in abusive situations with nowhere to go during the pandemic:

*“This lockdown really affected my children. It will have affected a lot of children. I was in a domestic violence situation before. When there was lockdown. My children they can’t go anywhere. I can’t go anywhere. Before when they were going to school, they were not seeing things. But during lockdown they saw a lot of the things that we were going through. It has affected them a lot. Especially my daughter she was sick, she was down. I don’t want to speak about it a lot. Thank God we have come up from that. When we got to know P17 then things changed really.”*

For many children these are experiences which will stay with them forever:

*“The pandemic really impacted my children. We as adults we have a way of masking our experiences but the children still have a way of knowing. Suddenly the children could not go out. I have boys that have a lot of energy and we have horrible neighbours who complained about noise. The impact was worst on my youngest child. He is at an age where he needed to explore and express himself and suddenly, he could not. So started throwing tantrums. When the pandemic started, we started having a lot of issues, financial etc. We went to so many charities and they said sorry you are outside of our area. I was just desperate. I tried everything. That is when I found Project 17. Project 17 sent us to the local authority but they were horrible to me. It was too much. They said because we have NRPF they could not help. But the caseworker at Project 17 had to email and intervene for me. We were desperate and almost homeless. The landlord was threatening to come change the lock and I was panicking. And the children were desperate to since we had been homeless before. Especially for the oldest one who could remember. He was asking ‘mummy are we going to sleep in McDonalds again?’ and he was having panic attacks. I have always been scared of social service because of all the terrible stories I have heard. If they take my children away, they are taking my life. At the point I could not put food on the table. Project 17 gave us food vouchers and at least then I had something to put on the table. The [local authority] have to think about the children and the impact this is having on them. These experiences will stay with them forever. Children don’t forget these memories; they stay with them forever. Children are children and they should be helped so they feel like they belong and they are part of the environment they are part of the community and they are someone who is wanted.”*

## **2. Eligibility for free school meals was extended to some categories of children with NRPF on a temporary basis during the pandemic. What was the impact of this change on children with NRPF?**

The majority of families participating in the workshop were still not able to access free school meals for their children despite the fact that most reported struggling to provide enough food for them. This is due to the fact that the FSM extension only extended FSM to certain categories of beneficiary - such as those supported under section 17 of the Children’s Act 1989. However, many families and children experiencing extreme poverty, including those with an irregular immigration status are still not able to access free school meals. Even for those who were eligible, the path to securing this provision was often far from straight forward. Below are some of the accounts those who were able to access FSM through the extension shared with us:

*“My first daughter was not one FSM before the pandemic. And my son was not – they gave us a list from school of who qualified – but I was thinking he was not qualified for FSM. So, I was struggling with my life. But local authority was doing an assessment and they contacted the school and they said my son should now qualify. So at the beginning of the pandemic they opened a voucher for him. But nothing for my daughter. The £15 they were giving us every month was not really a lot, was not enough. But the social worker and P17 caseworker came along with me to argue for me and then the school opened a voucher from my daughter. So now she is getting meals. The impact now is that everything is fine. The voucher they are giving us now, it helps us a lot.”*

*“My kids school never asked us once during pandemic if maybe anyone needed help. It was not until our social worker got in contact with them regarding our family’s situation that they helped, even though the school could see we were owing school meal money yet they were not bothered. But after the social worker got in touch with the school they put them on free school meal. The FSM made a big difference to my family.”*

*“My son was not eligible for FSM. I approached the social worker and asked for help. But the social worker said: ‘you can cook for him. Just cook for him. You are a very disgusting woman’ – I just wanted to know if my son was eligible for FSM. Then I called again and spoke to another person and she said: ‘don’t worry I will send an email to the school and we will sort it out’. The change of the criteria made a bit difference. They just had to send an email to the school but it was not easy getting there.”*

*“It was quite helpful with school lunches. When I was packing lunches, it was African food and it is not nice to eat cold. Getting warm fresh food from school helps. The local authority know I am eligible but because they know I am not a lawyer they just keep saying NO. They should not put me and my children through what they have put us through where we have to fight for everything. They pretend as if they don’t know you are eligible when they know you are.”*

### **3. What role do other bodies, such as local authorities and charities, play in supporting children with NRPF? Is the support provided sufficient?**

The views of the participants are naturally influenced by the fact that they are all being supported by a charity working with them to resolve their situation. However, most agreed that despite the invaluable support they had been provided with this should not be the role of charities. Below are some of the thoughts and experiences shared by participants:

*“Support from Project 17 has made a big difference. I can do more for my kids now. I moved from the dump I was living in. and my son gets to eat at school. And we are able to get passport for my son and regularise our status. I have money coming in and I have foodbank voucher coming in. The support from P17 is not amazing but it is more than I had. Our life is much better in everything after P17 coming into it.”*

*“NRPF is horrible. They (charities) are helping. I have been complaining about the local authority only giving us support in the form of voucher. My daughter is in secondary school and I have to buy a school uniform. But I cannot buy it with the voucher. The charity helped me apply for a grant to get £80 to buy uniforms. Still the local authority has not changed it, they would not give us cash, only vouchers. “*

*"I am going thought the same thing. For the last year they have been giving me vouchers but can only spend them in Tesco or Asda which is very far from where I am living. For some people they give them [pre-paid] cards – but they can only spend this in Tesco etc which is so expensive. Cannot use in them in cheap shops. We are placed very far away and my daughter is so tired and cannot even read a book. She has to take two trains every day just to get to school."*

*"I been with local authority before with my children and they throw us out. I am shaking I cannot say anything. They say they cannot help me. We are sitting in the council and they say they cannot help us and the children are crying and asking if we are going to stay here. But then I met Project 17 and they helped. When you meet local authority I have fear because they say they can take your children"*

*"The local authority there is something they need to do. They are not approachable; they are very difficult. Assuming I went straight to the local authority for the problem I would still be in the same situation; maybe I would have been traumatised. Even with P17 support it was not easy. It is mentally draining. The way that P17 talked to me it changed everything. If local authority could put in more empathy this would help. Since many people do not have access to local charities. But local authorities are not approachable. It is like they are following a manual and they do not care if you are living or not. There was one time, about child benefit, I made the application but the letter did not come back. But because I could not produce that evidence, they suspended everything. I asked for a little more time. But they aid no. They don't even want to know if you are dying or in a vegetable state. People are going through a lot of things. Local authorities are going through process. But there are better ways. If they could review their approach then maybe children would not be going through all these things they are going through. It is not fair; it is not good. If they are able to review certain things then maybe things would improve."*

*"Information is power. When I approached this local authority, I did not know what they were supposed to do – I did not have the information about what they should do to help us. Then I got in touch with Project 17 who helped me and now I have full understanding. But what about people who don't know anything so they just suffer? The local authority is putting people in a tight spot but Project 17 help people to know their rights. Local authority just push you away somewhere like you were not even human being. And without information you cannot push back"*

*"I don't think anyone should be dependent on charity. Government has to be the one to provide for these people. Charity is ok. But what about all the people who are not supported by charity."*

#### **4. People with certain kinds of leave can apply to have the NRPF condition lifted in some circumstances ('change of condition' application). How effective has this measure been at preventing families from falling into serious hardship?**

The majority of participants were still subject to NRPF so were not able to comment on the impact of a Change of Condition application. However, some had been successful in making a Change of Condition application. Of these most agreed that this had not been enough to prevent them experiencing destitution, that having the NRPF had been very helpful to their families as they now had access to mainstream benefits and that they had seen a real change in the attitude of the local authority following the removal of the NRPF condition. Though most emphasised that the transition had not been easy, that they had been given very little support to apply for and secure benefits and that in many cases this had led to a disruption of support. Below are some of the thoughts and experiences shared by participants:

*“People are going through a lot of things and many are not talking. The NRPF is one of the factors which is causing all this trauma. They follow the rules given to them by the Home Office – but I was able to lift the NRPF condition and this really helped me. If this could be ended then children would not have to suffer a little like this. The effect of NRPF is so enormous that you are restricted from helping yourself because the system does not allow you to help yourself. We do not have the choice to find a way to help yourself. So, if you do certain things to help yourself then it becomes illegal, it comes a crime. When you ask for help and they say you are not eligible for that – then you are stuck. And if you help yourself then it is a crime. This is what makes it so difficult. When I made a Change of Condition application with a proof of destitution. You have to convince the Home Office. And if you are being supported then this may be a little bit difficult. It looks so simple but it is not. The assessment is difficult. But when it is lifted then it changes your eligibility. After three weeks HO sent me a letter changing my BRP card to remove NRPF. Everywhere you go they want to see the letter, it changes the whole approach. From that point every help available. And you meet another local authority entirely. Get access to mainstream help.”*

*“Even until now I did not even know it existed [the Change of Condition application]. Why can't local authority direct us to people who can help us? They just say: 'we cannot help you, there is no one that can help you, so go die'. But when you try to get on the bus and you don't have an oyster at least the driver tells you where you can buy a ticket. But not local authorities...”*

**United Impact (with the support of Project 17), September 2021**