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The Home Secretary

Rt. Hon. Priti Patel MP

10 June 2021

Dear Home Secretary,

Aspen Card Replacement Crisis

I am writing to you on behalf of the Poverty & Inequality Commission for Scotland. We are a public body established by statute to monitor progress towards Scotland's child poverty reduction targets, to provide advice to Scottish Ministers and to advocate more widely for the reduction of poverty. As such we write to you on a matter of great concern and urgency.

The Commission has heard from local agencies in Glasgow, and first-hand from those directly affected, that hundreds of asylum seekers and their families have been deprived of essential support on the transfer of the Aspen card scheme from one provider (Sodexo) to another (PrePayment Financial Services). New cards have either not been received, or were received but did not work or have only worked intermittently. This has deprived those seeking asylum of the means with which to feed themselves and their families with the compounded stress of a global pandemic.

Due to the sheer scale of the misery inflicted on asylum seekers, not just in Glasgow but across the UK, calls to Migrant Help are going unanswered or are taking literally hours to be put through. Similarly, the Mears Group which provides accommodation have been overwhelmed with requests for help meaning that emergency cash payments are not reaching people quickly enough. For example, asylum seekers in the local mother and baby unit have waited for five days for emergency cash payments, seriously jeopardising the health of both mothers and children.

With no one else to turn to, local charities such as M.O.R.E. (Migrants Organising for Rights and Empowerment) and Positive Action in Housing are having to pick up the pieces and use their limited resources to cope and provide hundreds of emergency food parcels.

We are asking you to use the power of your office to intervene swiftly and directly to ensure (i) that additional staff and phone lines are provided by Migrant Help (so that asylum seekers phoning for assistance can actually speak to someone) and (ii) that emergency cash support is provided urgently to assist all asylum seekers affected and to prevent destitution.

It is now three weeks since the card transfer took place and, as of the time of drafting this letter, this issue seems to be no nearer to resolution. Obviously, people cannot survive indefinitely if their normal means of support has been taken away.

We do not think that it is acceptable that the Home Office seems to have washed its hands of responsibility for dealing with this issue. People have human rights. That people may sometimes be forced to seek asylum does not reduce their humanity nor their rights. It should if anything increase the urgency with which states seek to meet those rights. We are asking you to use your office to uphold and champion those rights and to resolve this emergency quickly.

We look forward to your response.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Scott". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bill Scott
Chair, Poverty & Inequality Commission for Scotland
On behalf of the Commission