

# **'Token Gestures - the effects of the voucher scheme on asylum seekers and organisations in the UK' - December 2000**

*'[The voucher system] brings you into sharp contrast with others. You stand in a supermarket queue and while others have money, you have a voucher. It's grotesque. Worse, the government will subsidise Tesco and Sainsbury's. That's not the redistribution I voted for.'*

**Bill Morris, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union**

*'Asylum seekers have encountered problems when using these vouchers in shops, for example being told to put "luxury items" back on shelves and receiving discriminatory treatment by shops. Furthermore, shops participating in the new system are not allowed to give change in cash.'*

**UNHCR, (2000), Reception Standards For Asylum Seekers In the European Union**

*'The Local Government Association is very concerned about the use of vouchers, which evidence from local authorities with current problems shows can be costly, bureaucratic and stigmatising. There is evidence that the vouchers are falling into the wrong hands. Those receiving vouchers because of their desperate need for cash will sell vouchers at below the face value to cover items of essential expenditure.'*

**Evidence to House of Commons Standing Committee**

*"a degrading system"*

**Rt Hon Michael Portillo MP, shadow chancellor, BBC Question Time, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2000**

*'If the Government is truly committed to reducing inequalities in health, it cannot stand back and watch refugees being marginalised and impoverished. Evidence is beginning to emerge that this is exactly what is happening. The voucher system should be abolished at once, and replaced with cash entitlements for all asylum seekers. The dispersal system should be more in tune with the ability of communities to support new arrivals. And the NHS should be given more resources to improve refugees health and give them a better chance of leading an ordinary life if they are given leave to remain in Britain.'*

**Rabbi Julia Neuberger, Chief Executive, King's Fund**

*"Travel expenses are a lot. I can't afford clothes. Our school is far away and expensive to get to. The amount we receive is not enough"*

**Kosovan family. From comments of asylum seekers recorded by Barnet Refugee Health Access Project**

*"We think that the voucher system denies refugees some of their basic economic and social rights, and would be demeaning to our own staff if we had agreed to participate in this scheme."*

**John Morrison, Human Rights Manager, The Body Shop International Plc.**

*"The amount I get is hardly sufficient to meet our needs. I am diabetic and cannot afford to buy the special food I need. I suffer from arthritis. I need more heating and more warm clothing. I need thermal underwear, but cannot afford it."*

**Sri Lankan man in his 60s. From comments of asylum seekers recorded by Barnet Refugee Health Access Project**

*"This voucher system should be scrapped! The issue of refugees babies with no powdered baby milk is a disgrace in a country which has opened its doors supposedly to be humane."*

## **Regional law centre, response to T&G/Oxfam/Refugee Council survey**

*It is our clear view that vouchers are demeaning and stigmatise a vulnerable group in society. Furthermore, they are costly to administer and the economic arguments in favour do not add up. The 'no-change' policy is simply offensive and should be dropped immediately."*

**Simon Hughes MP, Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesman**

*"We are strongly in favour of abolishing the voucher scheme, or at least making all vouchers exchangeable for cash, so that asylum seekers could buy food in the markets where they are most likely to get the types of food they need at prices they can afford."*

**Organisation working with detainees, response to T&G/Oxfam/Refugee Council survey**

*"The voucher system has been introduced to humiliate asylum seekers. It is a system which deprives them of basic human needs".*

**London refugee community organisation, response to T&G/Oxfam/Refugee Council survey**

*'It is unacceptable that asylum seekers, who are among the most vulnerable people in our society, should be forced to shop at specified outlets and then have to calculate their purchases to the last penny to fit the value of vouchers for which no change can be given. This is humiliating. Being denied cash implies that you cannot be trusted with it. This exposes asylum seekers to prejudice and encourages negative views on asylum seekers. The voucher scheme should be done away with and asylum seekers allowed cash. Just like the rest of us.'*

**Judith Woodward, co-chair of the Asylum Rights Campaign**

*"I have yet to meet anyone receiving vouchers, or anyone from an organisation working with asylum seekers, who does not believe that vouchers humiliate and stigmatise those who are forced to depend on them."*

**Neil Gerrard MP, Chair of the All Party Group on Refugees**

# Contents

	Page
Foreword	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Summary of Recommendations	7
3. Summary of findings	9
4. The Home Office review	10
5. The origins of the voucher scheme	11
6. The case against vouchers	13
7. The survey: the impact of the voucher scheme on asylum seekers	19
8. Towards a fairer asylum service	22
<i>Appendix: case studies provided by contributing organisations</i>	24

# Foreword

**By Bill Morris, General Secretary, Transport and General Workers' Union**

The T&G has been proud to be part of this unique exercise, which has seen over 50 organisations, with particular support from Oxfam GB and the Refugee Council, come together to lend their voice to the campaign for the voucher scheme to be abolished.

Our intervention in this issue comes not as a challenge to the government's right and responsibility to set immigration policy, but out of our commitment to fairness and justice.

This government has made it clear that it wants to build a more inclusive Britain, one that values freedom, justice, fairness and equality. But if we want these rights for ourselves, then surely we should not be denying them to others who come to our shores. Regrettably, the voucher scheme does exactly that: it causes hardship to thousands of adults and children; it has attracted international condemnation for promoting discrimination; it is expensive and bureaucratic to operate; it is an ineffective control mechanism; and it has seriously undermined the government's genuine attempts to create a fairer asylum service and build a more just Britain.

The Labour Party's *Democracy and Citizenship* report offers a set of conditions for assessing asylum policy and that is the extent to which it has contributed to

- the provision of an adequate standard of living and security of income
- the integration of asylum seekers into the communities in which they live in Britain, building the confidence and maintaining the dignity of individual asylum seekers
- the development of support systems for individuals, following their experiences of persecution and oppression
- the elimination of child poverty

It is our view that the voucher policy has failed on every point. The ridicule and criticism that this policy has attracted weighs heavily on Britain's shoulders and does untold damage to the government's attempts to build a more fair and just nation. The clamour for change from the union movement, children's charities, human rights groups, community and church leaders, together with thousands of ordinary people up and down the country, cannot go ignored.

Respect, dignity and compassion are the corner stones of a decent society. We must challenge that which undermines these values. And it is on these grounds that we are satisfied that the voucher scheme must be ended.

**By David Bryer, Director of Oxfam GB**

In recent years growing levels of violence and persecution globally have increasingly caused people to flee their countries of origin - often at enormous personal risk - to find

safety elsewhere. Through its work in over 70 countries (including the UK since 1995) Oxfam is well aware of the often appalling circumstances which most UK asylum seekers have left behind.

Oxfam is therefore deeply concerned that the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act condemns these desperate people - many of whom have a genuine fear of persecution - to live in extreme poverty in Britain. Vouchers are worth 70% of Income Support, amounting to just £36.54 per week for a single person over 25 (£10 of which is in cash). They must be spent at designated shops, however any change for the portion of vouchers that are unused can be pocketed by the retailer. Moreover, the £10 cash is wholly insufficient to cover basics such as medicines, transport, particular dietary needs, and telephone calls.

As this report graphically demonstrates, vouchers are inherently discriminatory, marginalising those that use them, and making them targets for abuse and harassment in the community. The Government is rightly committed to tackling racism, social exclusion and child poverty in Britain, yet its deliberately harsh treatment of asylum seekers undermines these laudable aims.

We therefore urge the Government to allow retailers to give change now to meet the immediate needs of asylum seekers. But the case for abolishing vouchers is overwhelming, and we believe they should be replaced by cash benefits as soon as practically possible.

***By Nick Hardwick, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council***

In the last speech of his remarkable life, Rabbi Hugo Gryn, himself a survivor of the Holocaust, talked of how our attitude to asylum is an index of our spiritual and moral civilisation. *'I believe that the line our society will take in this matter on how you are to people to whom you owe nothing is a signal. It is the critical signal that we give to our young, and I hope and pray that is a test we shall not fail.'*

This report clearly tells us that when we give vouchers to asylum seekers we are failing that test.

Vouchers say nothing of the oppression from which refugees flee. They are mute also when it comes to reminding us that, in helping the persecuted, the UK is making its contribution in the fight for human rights. Vouchers isolate and mark out the most vulnerable in society as uninvited and unwanted. In doing so, they strike at the heart of the concept of sanctuary.

For the signal the voucher system sends about the humanity of the persecuted, and for what it says about us all, I hope the Government finally acknowledges that it has no place in any country which wants to protect, not penalise, victims of human rights abuse.

# *1: Introduction*

This report is a summary of a more extensive report intended to feed into the current Government review of vouchers and to inform public debate on this issue.

It is the first attempt to assess in any detail the impact of the scheme, and is based on the views of over 50 organisations working with asylum seekers across the UK.

It is supported by the Transport and General Workers' Union, Oxfam GB and the Refugee Council, with further endorsement from the Body Shop, and the Asylum Rights Campaign [a network of over 80 organisations working on refugee issues in the UK].

The main objectives of this summary and the wider report are:

- To respond to the theoretical arguments in relation to vouchers
- To provide evidence of the difficulties faced by asylum-seekers as a result of the introduction of the NASS voucher scheme

They set out the case against vouchers, encompassing its cost, the impact on race relations, and its questionable legality. It includes a survey of the experiences of 50 organisations working with asylum seekers, including case studies.

Many organisations suggested that the administration of the system should be improved and that change should be given. But overwhelmingly the organisations participating in the survey did not want to see the perpetuation of a reformed voucher system. They wanted to see it replaced with a fairer system that promotes the welfare of their clients.

Based on the evidence set out in the report, the organisations above therefore make a number of recommendations to improve the system of support for asylum seekers. Chief among these is that change should immediately be given to asylum seekers for unspent portions of vouchers and that the abolition of vouchers and the restoration of a cash-based system should follow as soon as practically possible.

Finally, we propose a framework of principles for providing support for asylum seekers.

## *2: Summary of recommendations*

On the basis of the evidence gathered for this report, the T&G, Oxfam and the Refugee Council make a number of recommendations for government about the nature of support for asylum seekers in the future:

### · **Introduce a cash-based system of support**

Asylum seeker support should be delivered through a cash-based system. This will not require any new primary legislation because under section 96 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 the Secretary of State can, by order, replace vouchers with cash support.

Experience since April 2000 confirms the view that asylum seekers do not come to the UK to claim cash benefits and that voucher systems themselves undermine public support for refugees. The voucher system has also proved to be an unsuitable mechanism to meet the basic living needs of asylum seekers.

A cash-based system would

- be simple and efficient at delivering support where it is needed
- reduce delays to asylum seekers
- allow the nominal value of support to match the actual value of goods required
- allow asylum seekers to take part in normal economic activity
- ease the pressure on currently overstretched refugee voluntary organisations
- end the burgeoning black market in vouchers which feeds off the inadequacy of vouchers to meet basic needs
- allow resources to be concentrated on what ministers acknowledge is the best deterrent to unfounded cases – a fast and efficient decision-making system.

### · **Ensure that change should be provided immediately**

The Government should take immediate action to ensure that asylum seekers do not continue to suffer one of the worst excesses of the system: being deprived of the change from their shopping.

### · **Provide access to related benefit support**

Given the overall low level of support, as a matter of urgency the entitlement to asylum support should also confer on destitute asylum seekers the range of 'passport' benefits linked to Income Support. There is no sensible reason why families should be denied milk tokens, vitamins or the other safety-net provisions available.

### · **Allow asylum seekers to qualify for special needs provision**

Asylum seekers who are elderly, people with disabilities or sickness, and victims of torture do not qualify for the additional assistance made available to UK citizens. The only exception is that female asylum seekers who are pregnant or have just given birth can qualify for a special one-off Maternity Grant of £300. This should be provided to them on the same basis as it is available to anyone else in the UK, in cash and not in vouchers.

- **Improve Parliamentary and governmental scrutiny of the system**

There has been insufficient scrutiny of this policy – which involves significant, although undefined, levels of public expenditure - by Parliament. The remit of the Social Security Advisory Committee should be widened to include periodic scrutiny of the support for asylum seekers.

The Social Exclusion Unit should also be required to look at the impact of the voucher scheme on cross-departmental policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion.

**Provide a realistic level of support**

This report bears out the view of children’s charities and anti-poverty groups that essential living needs cannot be met by support worth significantly less than the basic level of Income Support. Asylum seekers are finding it difficult to buy basic items such as shoes, underwear, women’s hygiene products, food suitable for diabetics or other dietary conditions, baby milk, nappies, and toys.

There is no justifiable reason why a group of people lawfully present in the UK, and to whom the UK owes a number of legal and moral obligations, should be denied access to a level of support regarded as society’s safety net. If the basic intention of Income Support is to act as benefit of last resort to prevent destitution then it must be the case that anything below this level of support is insufficient to meet basic living needs. The level of support needs to be increased to provide for destitute asylum seekers on the same basis as support is provided for other groups of destitute people in the UK.

- **Improve public understanding of basic facts about asylum seekers**

The recent MORI poll commissioned by Reader’s Digest demonstrated that the public is ignorant of basic facts about asylum seekers. Across the UK, the sight of a group of people, regarded as ‘bogus’ by many in the media and in politics, using vouchers has contributed to this.

The Government needs to take an active role in educating the public about not only how little asylum seekers have to live on but also why we have the right to asylum at all. The UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recommended in their recent conclusions on the UK Government report:

*“that the State party take the lead by sending out positive messages about asylum seekers and protecting them from racial harassment.”*

A failure to do this will mean that public resentment will build up and will lead to the kind of tough-sounding but flawed thinking which produced the voucher system.



### *3: Summary of findings*

This survey is unique in that it provides the first detailed picture of the damaging impact of the scheme on asylum seekers and the organisations working with them.

The response to the voucher system from the organisations surveyed is overwhelmingly negative.

The key results are as follows:

- **All 50 organisations agree that since the introduction of the voucher scheme they have seen an increase in the number of asylum seekers experiencing problems.**
- **35 organisations (70%) say that they have seen cases of asylum seekers experiencing hunger.**
- **41 organisations (82%) say asylum seekers are not able to buy enough food.**
- **48 organisations (96%) say asylum seekers are not able to buy other essential items.**
- **49 out of the 50 organisations (2%) feel that asylum seekers cannot maintain good health under the voucher scheme.**
- **35 organisations (70%) have experience of dealing with asylum seekers on vouchers suffering from anxiety or mental health problems.**
- **35 organisations (70%) say that asylum seekers have complained to them of poor treatment from shops accepting vouchers.**
- **32 organisations (64%) have seen asylum seekers suffering because of delay or non-arrival of vouchers.**
- **31 organisations (62%) have seen asylum seekers who complain about hostility from other shoppers.**
- **27 organisations (54%) have seen asylum seekers who complain that shops are inventing additional restrictions on the use of vouchers.**
- **49 of the 50 organisations (98%) state that the voucher scheme is creating serious difficulties.**
- **46 organisations (92%) say that asylum seekers are not coping well with the voucher scheme.**
- **46 organisations (92%) state that asylum seekers are unable to keep in touch with their lawyer.**
- **49 say that their organisation had found it harder to help people to resolve their problems.**
- **39 organisations (78%) say that they had not been able to liase effectively with the new administrative structures on behalf of clients.**
- **38 organisations (76%) state that they now have less time to work with refugees who have been granted refugee status or exceptional leave to remain.**
- **41 organisations (82%) state that they have incurred additional expenses as a result of the introduction of the voucher scheme.**
- **47 organisations (94%) say they had received complaints from asylum seekers about being unable to travel.**
- **42 organisations (84%) say that they have seen cases of asylum seekers who have lost some of the value of their vouchers through not receiving change, or who had made unnecessary purchases in order to avoid losing change.**

## *4: About the Home Office review*

The Home Office has requested representations from interested parties for its review of the operation of the voucher scheme.

The Home Office states that the review will include consideration of how change and lower denomination vouchers can be issued.

The Home Office has requested that responses address the following questions:

*1/What is the nature of your organisation and what is your connection with the voucher scheme?*

*2/In general, how do you think the voucher scheme is operating?*

*3/Does your organisation receive many comments about the voucher scheme?*

*4/What impact has the voucher scheme had on your organisation and/or your clients/customers?*

*5/ Please describe any difficulties you or your organisation has encountered with the operation of the voucher scheme.*

*6/ If you are a retailer who accepts Buy-pass vouchers, have you made any surplus profits as a result of vouchers not being exchanged for their full face value (i.e. as a result of the policy that prevents you from giving change)?*

*7/ Are there any improvements to the voucher scheme you want to suggest?*

*8/ Do you have any other comments on the voucher scheme?*

### **Concerns with the scope of the Home Office review**

Oxfam, Refugee Council and Transport and General Workers' Union have a number of concerns about the scope of the review:

1. Most of the small organisations working with asylum seekers across the UK, and some of the larger ones, have not been invited to submit their opinions to the review. We have sought to redress this by seeking their input into this report.
2. The review aims to consider the issue of whether change for vouchers can be provided, but has not asked organisations for their views on some of the wider concerns about the voucher system. This report provides answers to the questions asked by the Home Office but also goes further, gathering evidence on a range of issues so that the full impact of the voucher scheme can be appreciated.
3. The short timescale given for consultation limits the ability of agencies to contribute. The intention to conduct the review was announced on 28<sup>th</sup> October, with the detail announced in the second week in November. Submissions are required by 22<sup>nd</sup> December. Responses from organisations in addition to the 50 collated here are still being received by the authors and will be publicised at a later date.



## *5: Origins of the voucher scheme*

Prior to the 1996 Immigration and Asylum Act, asylum seekers were entitled to the same welfare benefits as UK citizens, but at 90% of the normal rate. This was a weekly cash payment made by the Benefit Agency, a central government department. Asylum seekers could also claim housing benefit to cover their rent.

The 1996 Act, introduced by the previous Conservative Government, removed all rights to housing and financial support from asylum seekers who failed to claim asylum at a UK port of entry or who received a negative decision on their asylum claim or appeal. As a result, thousands of asylum seekers were pushed into extreme poverty and survived largely by using services such as soup kitchens provided by charities.

Meanwhile, local authorities were compelled to provide accommodation and food for destitute asylum seekers under the National Assistance Act 1948, and for children under the Children Act 1989. Local authorities discharged their duties in diverse ways; some provided cash assistance while others opted for cash-less packages such as meals on wheels or food vouchers (valid only in designated shops). But overall provision was chaotic and patchy, as local authorities were generally ill-prepared and ill-equipped to cope with the demands that were placed on them. In addition, many ended up operating 'in kind' systems which turned out to be significantly more expensive than simply giving asylum seekers cash.

### **The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act and vouchers**

When the Labour Government came to power, it published a White Paper on immigration and asylum in 1998, which set out its intention to "remove access to social security benefits, minimise cash payments and reduce the burden on local authorities"<sup>1</sup>. The stated objectives behind this policy were:

- To provide for asylum seekers separately from the main benefits system
- To minimise the incentive to economic migration, particularly by minimising cash payments to asylum seekers
- To ensure that genuine asylum seekers are not left destitute, containing costs through incentives to asylum seekers to look first to their own means or those of their communities for support

The 1999 Act returned financial responsibility for asylum seekers to central government, but did not reinstate cash payments – instead it introduced the voucher scheme. The administration of the new system was given over to the new National Asylum Support Service (NASS), which is part of the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Department. NASS assesses who is eligible for support, arranges accommodation through regional consortia, (involving voluntary organisations, local authorities, health providers, and refugee groups).

### **Operation of the NASS scheme**

The new scheme was implemented on 3 April 2000, and since then asylum seekers have gradually been transferred onto vouchers (port applicants have been issued with vouchers since April 2000, and 'in county' applicants since July 2000).

The production of the vouchers has been contracted to a French multinational, Sodexo Pass International, which operates a similar scheme in Germany. Sodexo is also responsible for recruiting retailers to the scheme and ensuring that asylum seekers are informed about it. There

---

<sup>1</sup> Fairer, faster, firmer- A modern approach to Immigration and Asylum HMSO July 1998

are around 21,500 shops participating nationally including most of the major supermarket chains, however market stalls are virtually absent.

Under the scheme a single person aged over 25 is entitled to voucher support of £36.54 per week (£10 of which is redeemable in cash), amounting to 70% of basic income support. The vouchers are valid only in designated shops and retailers are not permitted to give change. If meals are provided by a landlord then the amount received by the asylum seeker is reduced. If a person's asylum claim takes longer than six months to process, they can claim a £50 one off payment for essential items. However there will be periods in which no support is provided; for example, if an asylum seeker is seeking judicial review through the courts.

Currently, asylum seekers may still apply for a work permit 6 months after claiming asylum, however until then they remain in a totally dependent position. Moreover, they face a number of barriers if they wish to engage in voluntary work; for example, they cannot receive expenses for lunch.

### **Vouchers and dispersal**

Crucially, the voucher scheme is set within the Government's broader support package which involves dispersal of asylum seekers away from London and the South-East to accommodation in other parts of the country on a 'no choice' basis. While it was intended to develop 'clusters' of refugee groups in particular locations to assist the development of support infrastructure, in practice dispersal has been led almost exclusively by the availability of accommodation. Considerable evidence also exists of lack of access to appropriate services - legal advice, education, health, interpreting - under the dispersal programme (Ref: Audit Commission), and asylum seekers have been subject to greater risk of harassment and degrading treatment.

Asylum seekers who can stay with family or friends can opt to receive 'support only' from NASS (ie. no accommodation), and almost two thirds of cases choose to do so. Although it is assumed that such accommodation will be 'all inclusive', in reality many of these people are making some contribution to the host household. Some will be staying with hosts who themselves are living on the poverty line and will lose out financially by taking in an extra person.

## 6: The case against vouchers

The T&G, Oxfam and the Refugee Council believe that the case against vouchers is compelling. In particular, we believe that:

- Vouchers do not deter economic migration
- Vouchers do not reduce costs
- There are huge obstacles for asylum seekers in voicing complaints
- Public support for vouchers is overestimated
- Vouchers undermine the fight against social exclusion and child poverty
- Vouchers have a negative impact on race relations
- Vouchers may be illegal
- A separate service for the poor becomes a poor service

There is also a powerful moral case that it is unacceptable to punish a very vulnerable group by using public policy in this way. Oxfam, the Refugee Council and the T&G believe it is unacceptable to impoverish asylum-seeking victims of human rights abuse in the misguided hope that this may deter economic migration.

This is especially the case for a rich country such as the UK, which hosts less than 1% of the world's refugees. In fact, it is the poorer countries of the southern hemisphere which bear the brunt of massive refugee movements.

### **Vouchers do not deter economic migration**

The Government argues that the introduction of limited voucher-based support is justifiable, as it will act as a disincentive to economic migration.

As the Home Secretary has stated:

*“There is no doubt that the availability of cash benefits in the social security system is a major pull factor that encourages fraudulent claims at port. It is one of the factors that encourages many people whose claims are wholly without foundation to come in clandestinely, particularly to Dover and other south-eastern ports, from eastern Europe and other countries where they are not under any threat of persecution. They come in principally to claim cash benefits.”<sup>2</sup>*

But the available evidence suggests that there is no causal relationship between removing cash payments and reductions in asylum applications. Rather than any fall in applications, since the introduction of the NASS scheme applications for asylum in the UK have risen steadily from 5,890 in April 2000 to 6,970 in October (Ref: Home Office, Asylum Statistics, October 2000) and the main countries of origin remain the same (Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia and Turkey). In other words, no deterrent effect is discernible.

Similarly, in the years following the 1996 Immigration and Asylum Act, when very restricted local authority ‘in kind’/voucher support arrangements were in place, applications also rose steadily - from 2900 per month in January 1998 to 4700 a year later, and reaching 6100 in January 2000.

---

<sup>2</sup> Home Secretary, Hansard, 14 June 1999

Furthermore, under the 1996 legislation, asylum seekers were able to access benefits if they applied at the port of entry, but depended on cashless support under the National Assistance Act if they applied in country.

Yet there was little change over time in the ratio of 'port' to 'in country' applicants which remained roughly 50/50. Nor was there any increase in asylum applications in Scotland, even though cash payments were available for both categories.

A new UNHCR analysis of asylum applications made in Europe in the first six months of 2000 also provides compelling evidence that the main reason for lodging asylum applications in particular countries is the presence of established communities not benefit rates. For example, for January-June 2000:

96 % of all asylum applications made in Europe by people from Mali were in France  
60% of all applications from Albania were lodged in Belgium  
48% of Nigerians in Ireland  
45% of Sri Lankans in the UK  
33% of Bangladeshis in Hungary  
and 28% of Indians in Austria.

*'Asylum-seekers, when deciding where to lodge their application, are more swayed by the presence of their own community than by the reception standards and benefits.'*

*UNHCR Refugees Daily (5 October 2000) Europe: Uneven distribution trends*

In reality, the level of available state support in a particular country is a low priority for those fleeing violence and persecution. As one asylum seeker from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where arbitrary arrest, extra-judicial killing, rape, torture, disappearances and other abuses are commonplace, put it to an Oxfam interviewer:

*"Did you think I compared the pound with the Deutschmark or the franc, or the lira? Did you think I considered 'the pound is heavier, so I will come here'?" Most asylum seekers know nothing about Italy, France or the UK. I came here to seek safety...I found an island I cannot get away from".*

### **Vouchers do not reduce costs**

In the White Paper preceding the Act (*Fairer, Faster and Firmer*; July 1998), the Government admitted that administering vouchers would be more costly than supporting asylum seekers through any cash-based alternative. Indeed, the Government's own figures show that the unit cost for supporting a single adult asylum seeker on DSS benefits was £425 a month between 1999/2000. Under the new support arrangements the figure stands at the far higher level of £700. Even taking into account the fact that the latter figure includes the cost of travel from dispersal accommodation to Immigration interviews, the overall cost of a voucher scheme are clearly far greater.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence from existing schemes confirms this. For example, Kent Social Services, in evidence to the Special Standing Committee examining the Bill, said that the extra cost of the voucher system was *'the difference between 4p and 14p in the pound'*. This means that the voucher system is three and a half times more expensive than benefits.

### **Huge obstacles for asylum seekers in voicing complaints**

<sup>3</sup> RDS: Asylum Seeker Support-estimates of public expenditure

Given the enormous obstacles asylum seekers face in voicing any opinions about their treatment, it is not in the least surprising if few complaints have been received.

Asylum seekers usually arrive in the UK from countries where they have been persecuted, often repeatedly and brutally, by state authorities.

It is therefore understandable that they should have little faith in the UK authorities, and many asylum seekers avoid contact with the authorities as far as they can. This is also because they fear that any complaint could jeopardise the decision on their asylum claim.

In addition, there are considerable practical difficulties in complaining. The main goal for asylum seekers is surviving day-to-day on a very low income in an unknown, and often hostile, environment. In most cases, they do not have the energy, resources, or language proficiency to make their views known to officialdom.

The Government has recognised the case for increased public accountability and participation in policy-making of people living in poverty, in line with the key international commitments it agreed at the Copenhagen Summit for Social Development in 1995. However the denial of basic rights intrinsic to vouchers and 'no choice' dispersal make attempts to 'consult' asylum seekers little more than a cosmetic exercise.

In these circumstances, the evidence of organisations outside government has a crucial part to play in informing public policy. This shows that in practice vouchers are humiliating, they force some people into the hands of loan sharks and racketeers, send out the wrong messages about asylum seekers and invite harassment and abuse.

*'Asylum seekers have been cut off from taking part in the debates; participation is a luxury, because without entitlement to benefits the issues are about survival.'*

Voices for change consultation, London, cited in the report of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, December 7, 2000

### **Public support for vouchers overestimated**

Recent MORI survey evidence indicated that the public overestimate hugely the financial aid asylum seekers receive, believing on average that an asylum seeker gets £113 per week to live on – instead of the real figure for a single adult of £36.54<sup>4</sup>. The enormous public ignorance about the actual levels of support provided in the UK suggest that the public must be largely unaware of the very low level of support which asylum seekers survive on. There is therefore a strong argument that greater public sympathy would be aroused if the facts were more widely known. Similarly, it is reasonable to assume that many members of the public fail to realise the damaging impact of the voucher system on asylum seekers, and would be far more critical if they knew more about the reality.

Even despite this widespread misunderstanding, large sections of UK society – including the Trades Union Congress, many churches and a wide range of non-governmental organisations – have been outspoken in their opposition to vouchers. Significant numbers of support groups for asylum seekers have sprung up across the country since the advent of dispersal.

In addition, several shops and supermarket chains have criticised the scheme, either by not participating directly (eg. Safeway), or by saying that they will be donating any excess profits to refugee organisations (eg. the Co-op), or in private discussions with Oxfam. Most recently, the Body Shop launched a campaign against vouchers in its shops in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> MORI survey in Reader's Digest, November 2000



**Vouchers undermine the fight against social exclusion and child poverty**

Under the Government's NASS system, asylum seekers and their families - already one of the most vulnerable groups in society - will be forced to live on 70% of the amount UK citizens receive.

When the cost of household utilities (eg. gas, water, electricity) are added to this figure, at most it will amount to 80% of the basic income support level. The impact is especially severe on asylum-seekers with particular needs, including children, pregnant women, the disabled and the elderly.

For example, since April 2000 a UK family with two children receives £149.40 a week on Income Support. But a similar asylum seeking family will only receive £110.57 a week overall – a significant difference of £38.83 every week.

	<b>UK Family (2 children)</b>	<b>Asylum-seeking Family (2 children)</b>
Couple over 18	81.95	57.37
Child A	26.60	26.60
Child B	26.60	26.60
Family premium	14.25	Not eligible
<b>Total</b>	<b>£149.50</b>	<b>£110.57</b>

Asylum seeking children are also denied access to a range of other safety-net benefits, such as milk tokens and vitamins.

*'It is difficult to see how social exclusion can be defeated and child poverty abolished if these plans to pauperise the most vulnerable and the poorest children in the country go ahead'.*

Extract from letter to the Guardian newspaper, signed by the Refugee Council, Save the Children, UK Unicef, National Children's Bureau, Child Poverty Action Group, Children's Society, NSPCC, National Association of Citizen's Advice Bureaux, Oxfam GB, 15 January 2000.

Until recently, the extra costs facing pregnant women with children were completely unrecognised. However from November 13<sup>th</sup> a one-off maternity payment of £300 may be provided by NASS, but this will be payable entirely in vouchers; it will not therefore be possible to buy, for example, a second hand pushchair or buggy, as many UK parents would. The eligibility conditions are also stringent; for example, an application must be lodged in writing by the father or mother, and be received between one month of before the estimated date of delivery and two weeks after the birth. It remains to be seen whether asylum seekers will receive sufficient information about the system and the criteria (in a language which they can understand) in order to apply.

*'We will continue to see limbless asylum seekers reliant on vouchers redeemable at shops they are unable to get to, and deaf asylum seekers dispersed to areas where no one understands their sign language'.*

Kishor Patel, Race Equality Advisor, National Institute for the Blind, quoted in Guardian article, 8 November 2000

Even though the Government accepts there are significant costs associated with most disabilities, disabled asylum seekers are not eligible for disability benefits. According to NASS, provided disabled asylum seekers meet local authority community care eligibility criteria, it is local authorities that should provide any necessary support. However in practice, authorities are struggling to cope with accommodating asylum seekers, and in most cases follow up work to identify and meet the needs of disabled people is not happening. For disabled asylum seekers, vouchers themselves also present significant difficulties (eg. lack of appropriate food for diabetics in designated shops; payment with vouchers cannot be accepted for home delivery of goods).

Older asylum seekers also receive considerably less support than their UK counterparts. UK pensioners, through the Minimum Income Guarantee are entitled to a minimum income of £78.45 a week. Elderly asylum seeking will therefore be entitled to less than half of what UK pensioners are expected to be able to live on, and will not be entitled to any funeral payment for which a UK citizen would be eligible.

*'NPC demands for improvements to the state pension do not rely on funds being diverted from other sections of society but from the increasing surpluses in the Treasury. This country is well able to meet its international obligations without disadvantage to anyone else.... NPC policy seeks to improve the living standards and quality of life for all older people living within these shores. That includes recent arrivals, with a number of older people traumatised by their circumstances. We deplore the Government decision to require asylum seekers to live on less than the income support level and in degrading circumstances'*

National Pensioners Convention briefing, May 2000, No. 19

#### **Vouchers have a negative impact on race relations**

Since coming to power, the Government has repeatedly emphasised the importance of good race relations in the UK and has taken some significant policy steps to promote this goal. In addition to introducing higher maximum penalties for racially motivated crimes and establishing the Race Relations Forum, the Action Plan following the findings of the Macpherson inquiry makes a range of innovative recommendations. More specifically, the extension of the application of the Race Relations Act 1975 to the police and public authorities is particularly welcome.

In relation to asylum issues, the Government argues that its approach is in line with the same positive framework. For instance, its recent consultation paper on refugee settlement argues that:

*'It is in all our interests that persons to whom the United Kingdom offers international protection are able to rebuild their lives and develop their own and their families full potential. This is most likely to minimise social exclusion and disadvantage, promote good race relations and generate valuable contributions to the cultural and economic life of the country'*

Yet the evidence presented in this report suggests that the practice of dispersal - against a backdrop of repeated criticism by the press and politicians of 'bogus' asylum seekers - is increasing racial harassment. The effect of the voucher scheme in this situation is to increase the vulnerability of victims. As the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination indicated in their recent conclusions on the UK Government report:

*“The Committee notes with concern that, as acknowledged by the State party, there is increasing racial tension between asylum seekers and the host communities, which has led to an increase in racial harassment in those areas and also threatens the well-being of established ethnic minority communities. The Committee also recommends that the State party take the lead by sending out positive messages about asylum seekers and protecting them from racial harassment.”*

### **Vouchers may be illegal**

The European Convention on Human Rights, which recently became UK law via the 1998 Human Rights Act, has considerable implications for asylum and refugee cases.

The voucher scheme could be considered a violation of Article 8 (*the right to respect for private and family life*), since the concept of ‘private...life’ includes protection from public forms of humiliation. As conditions continue to deteriorate vouchers may also be considered degrading treatment under Article 3 (*No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment*).

There are also questions over the legality of the ‘no change’ policy. Regulation 10(2) of the NASS regulations requires NASS to provide ‘as a general rule, asylum support in respect of essential living needs of that person in the form of vouchers redeemable for goods, services and cash whose *total redemption value* [our italics] for any week equals the amount shown...[in the accompanying table]’.

If the vouchers provide a *nominal* redemption value of the amount in the table, but in reality the conditions attached as a general rule to those vouchers by NASS (or their agent, Sodexho) in practice reduce the true value, it is at least arguable that NASS is not acting in accordance with 10(2) and that the total amount of non-cash vouchers should be increased to reflect the slippage caused by lack of change.

### **A service for the poor becomes a poor service**

Despite the case for ‘joined up’ thinking in relation to asylum policy, by removing the entitlement of asylum seekers to benefits and support services enjoyed by the rest of the population the Government has set up a totally separate service for asylum seekers.

The warning of Professor Titmuss many years ago, that there is a significant danger that a service for the poor becomes a poor service, is particularly apt in light of current experience with NASS. The Government should have learnt from the failings which have dogged the Child Support Agency - setting up a new bureaucracy from scratch within a tight timescale, with new staff and new procedures inevitably leads to poor administration and a poor service to clients.

The new NASS system is very bureaucratic and inefficient, as was the experience with the CSA. Far from delivering vouchers to asylum seekers swiftly, delays are endemic and destitute asylum seekers are going unsupported for weeks at a time due to failures in NASS processes. In the survey conducted for this study, it was widely reported that NASS is currently taking up to **six weeks** post dispersal to deliver vouchers to clients. Moreover, it is also taking up to five weeks to process voucher only claims, essentially leaving clients who are staying with friends and relatives totally reliant on their host for financial support. Even ‘emergency procedures’ intended to avoid these problems are also subject to significant delays.

The CSA/NASS parallel is a useful one, however a key difference between these cases is that public dissatisfaction with the early inadequacies of the CSA became quickly evident, with very vocal support groups using all available political channels to put their case forward. Given the circumstances they face day-to-day, there are very limited means for vulnerable and

impoverished asylum seekers to challenge effectively the many examples of maladministration which are occurring, yet NASS policy places the onus on asylum seekers to do so. With little or no pressure to change from their highly dependent client group, it can be anticipated that NASS systems will be very slow to respond and improve – unlike the example of the CSA.

## ***7: The survey results: the impact of the voucher scheme on asylum seekers***

This survey was conducted on behalf of Oxfam, Refugee Council and Transport and General Workers' Union. It is a response to the Home Office request for representations from interested parties for its review of the operation of the voucher scheme. 50 organisations took part in the survey; further responses are being collected.

Responses were received from all parts of the UK including London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, Bradford, Glasgow, Dover, Southampton and Portsmouth. Participating organisations include local authorities, health projects, law centres, refugee agencies (including those acting as assistants under NASS procedures), children's organisations, church groups, refugee community organisations, and small local voluntary projects. A selection of the many organisations that replied includes:

Regional offices of Refugee Action (eg Manchester, Leicester), Sunderland Refugee and Asylum Seekers Support Network, law centres in Liverpool, Hammersmith and Fulham Community, South Manchester, Lambeth Youth Service – Young Refugees Development Project, Save the Children Fund – regional officers, North East Refugee Service, Kurdish Cultural Centre, Iranian Association, Uganda Youth Support Group, Somali community centre, Migrant Helpline, Scottish Refugee Council, Refugee Health Access Project, Barnet, Newham Refugee Services, Refugee Lifeline – Sheffield, Immigration advisory service – regional officers, Volunteer drop in centre, Nelson ,Lancs., Dept of Housing, Bradford District Council, Refugee Council Unaccompanied Children's Panel, Shepherds Bush families Project, Family Welfare Association.

These organisations see anything from a few asylum seekers to several hundred a week. Between them they will have seen thousands of asylum seekers since the introduction of the voucher scheme.

### **A/. How well is the voucher scheme operating?**

- **49 of the 50 organisations (98%) state that the voucher scheme is creating serious difficulties.**

### **B/. How is the voucher scheme affecting asylum seekers?**

- **46 organisations (92%) say that asylum seekers are not coping well with the voucher scheme.**

- **41 organisations say asylum seekers are not able to buy enough food.**

Even those organisations that said asylum seekers are able to buy enough food made a number of qualifying remarks:

*"Asylum seekers have enough food only when they spend all their vouchers on food"*

*"Our clients are able to buy enough food but what they are able to buy is unhealthy and unbalanced"*

*"(Asylum seekers) are complaining of stomach upsets because of the poor standard of food they are having to buy"*

The lack of shops selling culturally appropriate food and participating in the voucher scheme was commented upon by many organisations.

- **48 organisations (96%) say asylum seekers are not able to buy other essential items.**

Basic items which organisations state that asylum seekers are unable to buy are: shoes, glasses, socks, underwear, winter coats, washing powder/use of launderette, pots and pans, pens and paper, women's hygiene products, over-the-counter medicines, food suitable for diabetics or other dietary conditions, phonecards, bus tickets, TV licenses. And for children: baby milk, nappies, school books, school dinners, toys.

· **Only 1 of the 50 organisations (2%) feels that asylum seekers can maintain good health under the voucher scheme.**

· **46 organisations (92%) state that asylum seekers are unable to keep in touch with their lawyer.**

**C/ How has the voucher scheme affected organisations working with asylum seekers?**

· **All of the 50 organisations agree that since the introduction of the voucher scheme they have seen an increase in the number of asylum seekers experiencing problems.**

· **49 say that their organisation had found it harder to help people to resolve their problems.**

Specific examples are given by the organisations:

*"The voucher system has created chaos among asylum seekers, which has led to an increase in the number of enquiries to our organisation"*

*"More and more asylum seekers are approaching our organisation for financial assistance."*

*"We have seen an increase in the number of destitute people."*

*"We feel helpless."*

· **39 organisations (78%) say that they had not been able to liaise effectively with the new administrative structures on behalf of clients.**

Many comments were made about the ineffectiveness of the NASS system and the difficulties facing organisations liaising with NASS:

*"Trying to communicate with NASS is a nightmare – they take no ownership of cases."*

*"We can't get through to NASS on the telephone."*

*"It takes an hour to deal with simple voucher queries."*

*"There is a lack of written policies."*

*"NASS are not consistent."*

*"There is a general lack of awareness of the problems and of the specific needs of asylum seekers."*

· **38 organisations (76%) state that they now have less time to work with refugees who have been granted refugee status or exceptional leave to remain.**

· **41 organisations (82%) state that they have incurred additional expenses as a result of the introduction of the voucher scheme.**

A number of organisations gave examples:

*"We are carrying out work that we are not funded for"*

*"We are filling shortfalls in the system"*

*"We run a voluntary drop in asylum seekers without any sort of funding. We are incurring expenses for example we have on occasion paid the fare for people to travel from Lancashire to immigration interviews in Gatwick, Dover or Croydon because they have not received travel vouchers"*

**D/ What are the specific concerns which asylum seekers have raised with these organisations?**

• **47 organisations (94%) say they had received complaints from asylum seekers about being unable to travel.**

This includes paying for transport to collect vouchers, to buy food, to visit hospital, lawyers or other asylum seekers:

*"Everyone that we see has travel difficulties"*

*"This causes great problems"*

*"It is regularly the case that travel vouchers do not arrive in time for immigration interviews."*

*Refugee Action in Liverpool*

*"It is especially difficult for the sick."*

- **42 organisations (84%) say that they have seen cases of asylum seekers who have lost some of the value of their vouchers through not receiving change, or who had made unnecessary purchases in order to avoid losing change.**

Again, not only is this problem recognised by a high proportion of the organisations, but also they state that it is very common among their clients. For example, they say:

*"This has been a problem for almost every one of the asylum seekers we see."*

*"This is true for most of my clients."*

*"This is always an issue."*

- **35 organisations (70%) say that they have seen cases of asylum seekers experiencing hunger.**

Organisations which had seen asylum seekers going hungry say:

*"We have seen dozens of cases like this."*

*"We are always seeing this as well as malnutrition and digestive ailments."*

*"Because people are going hungry we are collecting and distributing food donations."*

*"We know that people are begging because they are hungry."*

- **35 organisations (70%) have experience of dealing with asylum seekers on vouchers suffering from anxiety or mental health problems.**

*"Many people that we see are developing depression."*

*"Both of these problems are common in this city. Anxiety is also connected to the fact that the city does not have any immigration lawyers."*

*"We are seeing a very high incidence of mental health problems among those on vouchers."*

*"This is a huge issue which is not well dealt with. We have seen cases suffering post traumatic stress, depression and panic attacks."*

*"We see people with no sense of self esteem and with no solution to their problems."*

- **35 organisations (70%) say that asylum seekers have complained to them of poor treatment from shops accepting vouchers.**

*"This regularly happens."*

*"Several clients complained of this."*

*"Asylum seekers are being treated with low respect in shops which accept vouchers."*

*"Shop assistants have been rude and dismissive."*

*"Poor treatment from cashiers is common."*

*"Asylum seekers are made to wait longer to be served."*

- **32 organisations (64%) have seen asylum seekers suffering because of delay or non-arrival of vouchers.**

*"We have seen hundreds of cases with this problem."*

*"For the week ending 1.12.2000, we had 50 cases of this."*

*"Almost all of our clients experience delays."*

*"Our organisation sees this everyday."*

- **31 organisations (62%) have seen asylum seekers who complain about hostility from other shoppers.**

*"Asylum seekers are sneered at."*

*"Asylum seekers complain to us that other shoppers sigh audibly and get impatient."*

*"Shoppers complain about queues."*

*"Asylum seekers are now easy to spot for racist people."*

- **27 organisations (54%) have seen asylum seekers who complain that shops are inventing additional restrictions on the use of vouchers.**

*"This regularly happens."*

*“Shops are following their own procedures that differ from NASS.”*

*“Shops will restrict which foods and products they can buy.”*

*“It is not only the shops. The Post Office is also inventing its own restrictions – for example the cash voucher can only be exchanged at certain times.”*

## ***8: Towards a fairer asylum support service***

Many organisations responding to this survey suggested that the administration of the system should be improved and that change should be given.

But overwhelmingly the organisations participating in the survey did not want to see the perpetuation of a reformed voucher system. They wanted to see it replaced with a fairer system that promotes the welfare of their clients.

### **Principles for fairer asylum support provision**

The serious failings of the National Asylum Support Services’ (NASS) voucher system (and also the problems with local authority schemes) help reveal the principles on which support to asylum seekers should be based:

- **Simplicity**

Given the added complexities introduced by the Government’s dispersal policy, it is essential that support is provided in an easy to understand and simple way. The scope for things going wrong in accessing and using support must be kept at a minimum. This is why it is essential that support is not delivered in an overly bureaucratic way.

- **Value for money**

The Home Office has a responsibility to establish a support system that provides value for money to the taxpayer. The effect of the system should be that assistance is efficiently provided to those in need and administration costs are kept to a minimum.

- **Security**

A secure system is necessary to minimise fraud extant all welfare support systems. However, no system must have the effect that it forces people to make use of the services of loan sharks and black marketeers.

- **Special needs**

The special difficulties and traumas that refugees face call for appropriate and special assistance. Any support system for asylum seekers must therefore be suitable for asylum seekers and their needs. It must not ignore cultural, religious, mental and physical health or other basic needs.

- **Accepted medium of exchange**

Support must be provided through a genuinely accepted medium of exchange so that asylum seekers have both the dignity and the necessity of choice when shopping. The medium of exchange function must not be so poor that asylum seekers resort to the black market.

- **Flexibility**

It is essential that the support system should be grounded in reality. It must acknowledge that an accepted coping strategy for low income is the ability to shop strategically. Consequently, there should be no in-built costs for shopping at a number of retailers. To this end, the support provided should also be easily divisible and transferable. This will also assist with day-to-day budgeting.



- **Avoid stigmatisation of recipients**

Support should be provided in a way free of stigma. Asylum seekers should not be readily identifiable when purchasing essential living needs in shops. This exposes them to prejudice and sends negative messages to the public. In line with recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the possible impact on race relations of any support system must be carefully assessed.

As the Macpherson Inquiry held: *“It is incumbent on every institution to examine their policies and the outcome of their policies to guard against disadvantaging any section of our communities.”*

- **Dignity**

As a minimum, recourse to support should not deprive asylum seekers of their dignity. Any system that denies asylum seekers dignity carries a high social cost.

- **Credibility**

It is essential that the public regard the asylum support system as credible. Support should be delivered in manner that does not undermine faith in the fundamental right to asylum. It should not lead members of the public to make unfair assumptions about the motives of asylum seekers coming to the UK.

- **Integration**

The impact of the support system on the ability to integrate of people recognised as refugees must be very carefully considered. The system should not cut across other Government initiatives on integration, social exclusion, race relations and child poverty. It should not be acceptable, as a matter of public policy, to deliberately exclude refugees from society for the first two months of their stay in the UK and then spend considerable effort and resources trying to repair that damage.

- **Full involvement of the voluntary sector**

The experience and understanding the voluntary sector has of the needs of asylum seekers must not be ignored. This is why the support system should enjoy the confidence and support of organisations assisting and working with asylum seekers. Support must also not operate in a way that greatly burdens such organisations.

## *Appendix 1: Case studies provided by the organisations participating in the survey.*

Some of the cases used may be included in other responses to the Home Office review of the voucher scheme, submitted by the individual organisations concerned. Some of these case studies were submitted by organisations additional to the 50 organisations whose completed forms were used as the basis of the survey results. Some agencies made the point that they had too many cases and too little time to list them:

*"We have cases too numerous to list of emergency vouchers not turning up – people surviving on no income. Families with children experiencing voucher problems, resulting in no food."* Scottish Refugee Council

*"We have received many complaints especially from women, elderly people and mothers with small children re: the voucher system"* Refugee Community Organisation

Below are cases supplied by participating organisations:

1. "An Algerian 17 year old took vouchers to the supermarket and was told they do not accept them. I rang the supermarket – they do accept them. He went back and was charged £40 for items worth £21.50p. I rang the supermarket. They said that they had explained to him that he should put one item back but he insisted that he needed all of the items. I pointed out that he speaks and reads no English, so their explanation was useless. This sort of story is repeated over and over again." (Youth worker)

2. "I work with a 17 year old supported under the Children Act living in rented accommodation and receiving vouchers which can only be used in major supermarkets. He cannot buy books or other items essential for his studies." (Youth worker)

3. "On one occasion, clients aged between 15 and 18 years old were placed in a supported lodging accommodation and issued with a weekly voucher of £25.00. The closest Sainsburys was about 10 miles away. These refugee children are forced to walk up to Sainsburys do their shopping and walk back to the project with the shopping. An appalling manner to treat children." (Children's charity)

4. "Our service looks after unaccompanied minors. They often tell me how much they struggle to afford basic essentials on the small amount they receive (£10 cash and £20 vouchers). They are supposed to buy everything with that – even clothes and stationery, books for college. Many tell me that they cannot afford a winter coat. It is an extremely powerless and pathetic situation for them. They cannot experience life as a normal adolescent person as they cannot afford to do any recreation or attend entertainment venues and the struggle to survive from week to week has simply robbed them of their youth and confidence in themselves and their futures." (Children's charity)

5. "We have seen a pregnant woman who waited 3 and a half months for her vouchers to arrive." (Refugee agency)

6. "A Congolese woman aged 25 was dispersed to Liverpool in May 2000. When she arrived she was 5 months pregnant. She was placed in a single room where she had to share a double bed with another woman. She stayed there until her baby was born after which time a local refugee organisation found other accommodation. She left hospital when her baby was 4 days old but it took 4 weeks for vouchers to arrive at her new address. During that time she had no money to buy nappies and had to use newspapers to clean her newborn baby." (Refugee Action)

7. "A single mother from the Lebanon was dispersed with her 4 children to accommodation contracted by the Home Office. The family faced weeks of verbal abuse and intimidation including racist graffiti painted on their door and eggs thrown at the house. Finally a brick was thrown through the window knocking unconscious her 3 year old son." (Refugee Action)

8. "A young man from Georgia had to request emergency payments from a reception assistant three times because his vouchers had not arrived from NASS. He spent a month in hospital for operations to his stomach and for a week after leaving hospital had no money or vouchers at all to buy food." (Refugee Action)

9. "As an asylum seeker myself I can give very sad evidence of seeing an asylum seeker using the new vouchers at Safeway. I was waiting in the queue to pay for my shopping and in front of me there was a lady with a toddler wanting to pay for her shopping by these vouchers."

"First of all as soon as the cashier saw her voucher she became less helpful and did not even smile (her smile disappeared) and then the lady's shopping total exceeded £10 (only 10p more. She had only £10 voucher in her hand she did not speak any English and could not understand what was going on. The cashier explained several times that her shopping was more than £10 and could she pay the rest in cash. The lady was worrying about other people in the queue because everyone made a facial gesture. I felt so bad. Since I knew her language I started translation and her eyes filled with tears. She was so upset and felt insulted by this new law. She told me she used to be a school teacher in Iran but now she feels she is not even a human being anymore. The law in this country, and not being able to speak the language made her believe she is useless and unimportant in this country." (Member of Refugee Community Organisation)

10. "A client who is HIV positive not feeling well, living in a B and B. She needs pots and pans for cooking, warm clothes. She cannot buy these goods from the shops in the voucher system. She also needs a maize meal – maganjo – available only in specialist local shops and the market. So, as an organisation, we have had to use our money to get her these items." (Refugee Community Organisation)

11. "A woman with 4 children was accepted for support and received a letter from NASS. She attended the post office indicated in the letter on the 27 November to find no vouchers were waiting for her. A project worker contacted NASS. It transpired that the NASS caseworker had failed to put in an order in to Sodexo for the receipt book and welcome letter. The caseworker stated that emergency vouchers would be sent out. By 30<sup>th</sup> November the emergency vouchers had not arrived. NASS were contacted again and the project worker was informed that the vouchers were sent out on the 29<sup>th</sup> November. The emergency vouchers had still not arrived by the 5<sup>th</sup> December. NASS was contacted again and on this occasion the project worker was informed that emergency vouchers had not, in fact, been sent out on 29<sup>th</sup> November. NASS stated that emergency vouchers would be sent out on the same day. Mrs E received emergency vouchers on the 6<sup>th</sup> December. This meant that Mrs E and her 4 children were without any vouchers for 9 days." (Migrant Helpline)

12. "A Roma family, couple with 2 teenage sons from Poland claimed asylum Jan 98. Were receiving income support and housing benefit. Eldest son, returned to Poland, killed by skinheads. Family withdrew asylum claim to return home for funeral then returned to UK and claimed asylum again. Put in detention, on release applied for NASS support in Aug 2000. No support received. Project found out that NASS had sent support information to the wrong address. The family is now facing imminent eviction because of rent arrears. NASS are not paying their rent and are refusing to do so." (Kings Cross Homelessness Project)

13. "A male client arrived from Poland with his 2 small children. He claimed asylum and was given temporary admission by the Home Office on condition that he signs on at an Immigration Office in London each month. He stays with an aunt in London. He went to NASS for support and was eventually, after several weeks, allocated accommodation and support in the North-East of England. We lodged an appeal stating that he could not reasonably comply by taking two small children on the round trip each month, that he had 28 members of his family living in London to help the children in the absence of their mother and that one of the children was being treated by a Polish speaking GP in London for asthma and epilepsy. The client was offered alternative arrangements, but again in the North East of England. We resubmitted the appeal. Four weeks later we have received no response. He and his children have been living on the generosity of the aunt who is herself in very poor circumstances." (Kings Cross Homelessness Project)

14. "A young couple from Syria with a 2 month old child, receiving £55 a week in vouchers. Although NASS were informed of the baby's birth in early August, at the time of applying for a grant from FWA (October) their voucher assistance still hadn't been adjusted. The health visitor who referred the case to FWA said – they have been supplied with a washing machine that does not work; therefore the mother is washing by hand and has to dry the washing over radiators. The family is short of baby equipment and toys. The parents are very short of clothes and essentials such as toiletries. They have no telephone, no chairs, table, cupboard, pots and pans." (Family Welfare Association)

15. 20 year old single woman from Burundi. Her mother was killed in Burundi. Receives £35 a week in vouchers. In ill health, has no cold weather clothes. (Family Welfare Association)

16. Single woman aged 26 from the Congo. Victim of torture. Receives £35 vouchers a week. In ill health, no cold weather clothes. (Family Welfare Association)

17. Single mother with 5 year old son. Asylum seeker from the Congo, living on vouchers. Son has started school and mother cannot afford to buy uniforms, warm clothing, bedding for the winter and household items. (Family Welfare Association)