

National Campaign Proposal

For Member Consultation March 2008



No More Vouchers!

Context

Section 4 support, or 'hard case' support is a type of financial and practical provision, which is provided to refused asylum seekers who have exhausted all rights of appeal and, as a direct result of government policy, have been forced into destitution. To be deemed eligible to receive Section 4 support after the refusal of their claim, people seeking asylum are required to meet specific and restrictive criteria. Individuals must have a health concern which prevents them leaving the country such as pregnancy; or, in absence of such practical considerations, people may receive Section 4 support under one other condition: if they agree to take 'reasonable steps to leave the UK'.

Section 4 support combines no-choice accommodation in a hostel or from a bed and breakfast provider, and £35 worth of vouchers provided weekly. These vouchers can only be used in specific shops, and only for certain types of food and drink, meaning that many people receiving Section 4 support are unable to buy culturally appropriate food, clothes, shoes or essential feminine hygiene products. The cost of travel to these specific outlets is also not provided for. This system therefore imposes extreme hardship upon people whose asylum claims have been refused, and adds further humiliation to the degradation of enforced destitution.

Issues of Concern

STAR is concerned that Section 4 support levels are so minimal that people are prevented from meeting their basic living needs. Research suggests people in receipt of Section 4 experience consistent hunger and frequent episodes of poor health, and for some the frustration of this impoverishment has lasting effect on their emotional and mental wellbeing (The Children's Society, 2008). Change cannot be provided from any vouchers that remain only partially spent in a shopping trip. Section 4 support thus often amounts to even less than the minimal £35 stated. Therefore, the use of vouchers is a process which unfailingly impoverishes, stigmatises and degrades those who are forced to use them.

STAR is also concerned that Section 4 support is being used as a way to persuade desperate and destitute people to comply with the Government's aim of returning them to their home countries. The condition of Section 4 that demands people whose asylum claims have been refused must agree to return to their home countries voluntarily is unreasonable for a number of reasons. The Government has demonstrated a lack of joined up thinking between their foreign policy and the process of returns, as is clear from the recent and much publicised returns to Iraq or Zimbabwe over the last few months.

There is significant evidence that many asylum claims are refused unfairly. The Amnesty International report, *Get it Right (2004)*, highlights how "asylum decisions are based on inaccurate and out-of-date country information, unreasoned decisions about people's credibility and a failure to properly consider complex torture cases".

The result is that people whose cases have not been properly considered, are trapped in a situation where they either accept destitution, or receive minimal benefits in order to ensure survival, but with the cruel condition that they return to a place where their life may be in danger.

STAR believes:

- That Section 4 support is too low to provide minimum basic standards of living
- That provision of Section 4 through vouchers is humiliating and stigmatising

STAR is calling for the Government to:

- End the threat and use of destitution as a tool of Government policy against refused asylum seekers.
- Stop using vouchers as a means to provide financial support
- Continue financial support and accommodation to refused asylum seekers at the same level as provided during the asylum process.
- Allow people seeking asylum the right to work throughout the asylum process.

Campaign Challenges

The general public hostility towards asylum seekers, especially to refused asylum seekers, and the negative attitude towards the notion of public money being spent on benefits, provides a significant challenge to this campaign.

Understanding of Section 4 provision requires a certain amount of technical and legal knowledge. This may therefore be quite a dry message to communicate student to student.

Strategy Ideas

STAR will be working on its future campaign within the model of partnership, which has proved so successful during the Still Human Still Here campaign. The broad approach for STAR would be to:

- *Raise awareness* among students about the flaws of Section 4 support for people whose claims for asylum have been refused;
- *Convince* students that Section 4 provision is humiliating and stigmatising
- *Motivate* students to take action.

To be most persuasive, STAR can:

- Be confident about its legitimacy: Voucher provision was abolished previously in 2002, as it was found to be inhumane and unworkable. This sets a powerful precedent, which should be a clear message to people throughout the campaign.

Potential Partners

- The Refugee Council
- The Jesuit Refugee Service
- Migrant Resource Centre