

# Refugee Council

## research report



## More Token Gestures

### A report into the use of vouchers for asylum seekers claiming Section 4 support

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**Oxfam**

British Refugee Council, (commonly called the Refugee Council) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales, [No 2727514] and a registered charity, [No 1014576].  
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## About the Refugee Council

As a human rights charity, independent of government, the Refugee Council works to ensure that refugees are given the protection they need, that they are treated with respect and understanding, and that they have the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as other members of our society.

We achieve this mission by:

- supporting refugees and working with them as they build a new life
- speaking up for refugees and ensuring that refugees themselves have a strong voice in all areas of UK life
- building links with people from across our society to increase mutual understanding of refugees
- making the case for a fair and just asylum system
- taking a leading role in helping to build up a vibrant, sustainable and successful refugee sector in the UK and internationally

## Acknowledgements

The Refugee Council would like to thank the organisations who completed the questionnaires that form the basis of this report, and the individuals who were interviewed for the case studies. We would also like to thank Yeukai Taruvinga, who conducted the individual interviews for this report.

## Oxfam

Oxfam strongly endorses this report, which highlights the appalling conditions experienced by asylum seekers claiming section 4 vouchers. The Refugee Council has succinctly exposed the extent to which this policy perpetuates poverty and vulnerability. Oxfam urges the Government to heed the findings of this report and provide a humane level of support to refused asylum seekers who are unable to leave the UK.

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## Executive summary

This report presents the findings of research into the experiences of asylum seekers who receive Section 4 support in the form of vouchers. The research also highlights the impact of this form of support on organisations who work with asylum seekers living on vouchers.

In 2000, the Refugee Council, together with partner organisations, published *Token Gestures*, a report on the devastating human impact of the voucher scheme that was used at the time to support all asylum seekers. In 2002, the Government reversed its policy of supporting asylum seekers with vouchers and re-introduced cash benefits, in recognition of the multiple failures of the voucher system. However, vouchers have continued to be used as a means of support for asylum seekers at the end of the process who are unable to return to their countries of origin.

*More Token Gestures* presents the findings of the Refugee Council's research into the current operation of the Section 4 voucher support system for refused asylum seekers, and asks similar questions to those asked in the original research. We have conducted a survey of organisations that work with clients living on vouchers and have interviewed some individuals receiving Section 4 support whose stories are told in the case studies at the end of the report. The research results confirm the Refugee Council's own experience of working with asylum seekers on Section 4 voucher support, including that these people face real difficulties in maintaining good physical and mental health; in buying enough food and essential non-food items; in travelling to attend health appointments or to shops that accept vouchers; in maintaining contact with their legal representatives; and in contacting people and organisations in the countries to which the Government expects them to return.

The main findings of the research are that:

- 70 per cent of respondents felt the vouchers scheme was ineffective
- 68 per cent of respondents reported that clients were unable to buy sufficient food
- 73 per cent of respondents reported clients experiencing hunger
- 70 per cent of respondents reported that clients were unable to buy other essential items such as nappies and toiletries
- 95 per cent of respondents reported clients experiencing travel difficulties
- 75 per cent of respondents reported that clients were not able to keep in touch with their legal representatives
- 82 per cent of respondents reported that clients were unable to be in touch with people in the country to which they are expected to return
- 81 per cent of respondents reported that clients were unable to maintain good health
- 81 per cent of respondents reported that clients experienced anxiety/mental health issues as a result of being on vouchers
- 52 per cent of respondents reported poor treatment of asylum seekers in the shops accepting vouchers
- 44 per cent of respondents reported asylum seekers experiencing hostility from other shoppers
- 73 per cent of responding organisations reported having incurred additional costs to support clients on vouchers
- 63 per cent of respondents reported clients experiencing delays in receiving, or not receiving, the vouchers to which they are entitled.

In the light of these findings, the Refugee Council believes that the current voucher system is inhumane, ineffective, and results in unnecessary suffering. Our recommendations are:

1. The Government and UKBA should support asylum seekers appropriately for the duration of their time in the UK and allow them to support themselves by granting

permission to work.

2. The evidence presented in this report constitutes a compelling argument against continuing to provide vouchers for people on Section 4 support. Many of the problems highlighted can be overcome by providing support in the form of cash.
3. This research has indicated that the level of support provided for people receiving Section 4 vouchers is not adequate to cover all their essential needs. We believe that there needs to be an increase in the level of support provided to enable people to live with some dignity and to meet their basic needs.
4. There is clear evidence that forcing asylum seekers to move to accommodation in a new area, away from their support networks, causes unnecessary hardship, isolation and suffering. Asylum seekers who are supported at the end of the asylum process should be entitled to remain in the same accommodation that they lived in during the asylum process.
5. The Government's strategy for children is "for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being."<sup>1</sup> These outcomes cannot be achieved for children who are on Section 4 voucher support. All families with children should be entitled to cash support.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk) (accessed 30/07/08)

# 1. Introduction

In 2000, the Government decided that people seeking refugee status in the UK should be supported with vouchers, as opposed to cash. A new asylum support system was put in place and asylum seekers were provided with vouchers that were only redeemable in certain stores, and for which change could not be given. The scheme caused immeasurable suffering and discrimination to a very vulnerable group in society.

In response to the introduction of vouchers and the human suffering they caused, the Refugee Council, together with Oxfam, the Transport and General Workers' Union (now Unite) and other partners, launched a vigorous campaign against the voucher scheme. Within six months, the Government had offered a review of the scheme. Within 18 months, the Home Secretary had announced its abolition and the reintroduction of cash benefits for asylum seekers.

However, some asylum seekers at the end of the process whose claims have been refused but who are unable to return home to their country of origin have continued to be supported with vouchers. This very limited form of accommodation and financial support is known as 'Section 4' support or 'hard case' support. It is reserved for refused asylum seekers who are destitute and taking steps to leave the UK, but who cannot leave the UK for logistical or health reasons, because they have an outstanding judicial review or in some cases where they have a fresh asylum claim.<sup>2</sup>

The Refugee Council very quickly became aware of the continuing problems encountered by asylum seekers trying to exist on vouchers. Much of the hardship witnessed when all asylum seekers were supported by vouchers continues to be experienced by those refused asylum who are forced to exist on Section 4 voucher support. In order to gather evidence of this hardship and suffering, we have repeated the research that we conducted with our partners in 2000, this time focusing on asylum seekers receiving 'Section 4' support. Some eight years on, we pose the same questions and seek to identify the consequences of forcing such a vulnerable group within society to live with vouchers as their only form of support.

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<sup>2</sup> See below for a more detailed explanation of Section 4 support.

## 2. Policy background

In 1998, the Government argued that there was a need to change the nature of asylum support, to “remove access to mainstream social security benefits, minimise cash payments and reduce the burden on local authorities”.<sup>3</sup> The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act was used to remove cash support from asylum seekers, to introduce a voucher scheme, and to give the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) a mandate to administer vouchers to all eligible asylum seekers.<sup>4</sup>

In December 2000, the Transport & General workers Union, Oxfam, the Refugee Council and the Asylum Rights Campaign published *Token Gestures*, a report on the impact of the asylum voucher scheme. Evidence had been gathered by conducting a survey with organisations that worked with asylum seekers across the UK. The survey found that asylum seekers were experiencing significant problems since the introduction of vouchers such as the inability to buy sufficient food and other essential items, difficulties being able to travel and anxiety. The report called for the reintroduction of a cash based system of support.

On 29<sup>th</sup> October 2001, and following the publication of a report by the Refugee Council and its partners,<sup>5</sup> David Blunkett MP, the then Home Secretary, announced a review of the voucher policy, stating that the voucher system was “too slow, vulnerable to fraud and felt to be unfair by asylum seekers and local communities.”<sup>6</sup> In March 2002, a research report on asylum seekers’ experiences of the vouchers scheme was published by the Home Office.<sup>7</sup> The report outlined problems with the way in which vouchers were administered and concurred with many of the Refugee Council’s findings.

In 2002, in recognition of the many problems that had been identified with using vouchers to support asylum seekers, the Government abolished the system and replaced it with a return to cash benefits for asylum seekers. However, provision remained for some asylum seekers at the end of the process to be supported with vouchers.

Refused asylum seekers who have exhausted their appeal rights and do not have dependent children lose their right to accommodation and asylum support 21 days after losing their asylum appeal.<sup>8</sup> They are expected to leave the UK voluntarily or face removal. Thousands of asylum seekers are destitute at the point when their asylum support is terminated. ‘Section 4’ support, in the form of accommodation and vouchers, may be provided in very limited circumstances to individuals who are destitute and temporarily unable to leave the U.K. It is intended by the Government to be a short-term measure to support people until they are able to return. At the end of March 2008, 9,365 applicants (including dependents), were receiving Section 4 support.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Stationary Office (1998) *Fairer, faster, firmer - A modern approach to Immigration and Asylum*  
<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm40/4018/4018.htm>

<sup>4</sup> The vouchers, which could be used in supermarkets and some other smaller shops, were administered weekly and asylum seekers were able to receive some of the allowance in cash - asylum seekers over the age of 25, for example, were entitled to £36.54 per week and could redeem £10 of this in cash.

<sup>5</sup> *Token Gestures - the effects of the voucher scheme on asylum seekers and organisations in the UK*  
[http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict\\_disasters/downloads/asylum\\_vouchers.rtf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/downloads/asylum_vouchers.rtf)

<sup>6</sup> Hansard, HC Deb 29 October 2001 c627 <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200102/cmhansrd/vo011029/debtext/11029-04.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Eagle, A., Duff, L., Tah, C. and Smith, N. (2002) *Asylum seekers’ experiences of the voucher scheme in the UK – fieldwork report*, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate  
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/asylumexp.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Asylum seekers who have dependent children continue to be entitled to support under Section 95 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 until they leave the UK.

<sup>9</sup> Home Office (2008) *Asylum Statistics: 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2008*, United Kingdom  
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/asylumq108.pdf>

Asylum seekers are only eligible for support under Section 4 if they are destitute<sup>10</sup> and meet one of the following conditions:<sup>11</sup>

- The person is taking all reasonable steps to leave the UK.
- The person is unable to leave the UK because of a physical impediment to travel or for some other medical reason, including late pregnancy
- The person is unable to leave the UK because the Secretary of State believes there is currently no viable route of return available<sup>12</sup>
- The person is involved in a judicial review of a decision in relation to their asylum claim.
- The provision of accommodation is required to avoid a breach of a person's Convention rights, within the meaning of the Human Rights Act 1998.

People on Section 4 support are entitled to receive accommodation and £35 a week in vouchers,<sup>13</sup> provided by accommodation providers<sup>14</sup> that have their own local arrangements for sourcing the vouchers. This means that vouchers come in a variety of forms, including Luncheon Vouchers, card gift vouchers (where credit is loaded onto a plastic card and deducted as it is spent), and paper vouchers. Card gift and paper vouchers both restrict the recipient to shopping in specific shops, whereas Luncheon Vouchers are accepted in more than one shop. Unlike the previous voucher scheme, people on Section 4 support are not able to receive any of their support allowance in cash.

Asylum seekers with dependent children are not ordinarily supported under Section 4 as they continue to be entitled to mainstream asylum support until the youngest dependent child reaches 18 years of age, or the family leaves the UK. However, families whose children are born after their asylum claim has been refused will be supported under Section 4.

There has been widespread criticism of the current use of vouchers. In March 2007, the Joint Committee on Human Rights stated:

*"We consider the section 4 voucher scheme to be inhumane and inefficient. It stigmatises refused asylum seekers and does not adequately provide for basic living needs. There is no evidence that the voucher system encourages refused asylum seekers to leave the UK."* (2007: 38)<sup>15</sup>

This research explores the experiences of refused asylum seekers living on voucher support and provides evidence that supports the Joint Committee on Human Rights' conclusions.

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<sup>10</sup> Section 95 (3) of the 1999 Asylum and Immigration Act sets out that:

*"... a person is destitute if:*

*a. he does not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not his other essential living needs are met); or*

*b. he has adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it, but cannot meet his other essential living needs"*

<sup>11</sup> The terms of Section 4 support are set out in Section 4 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 (as amended by Section 49 of the Nationality and Asylum Act 2002 and Section 10 of the 2004 Asylum and Immigration Act).

<sup>12</sup> At the time of publication, there was no country where this was the case.

<sup>13</sup> Accommodation providers are allowed to supply meals, as opposed to vouchers, as part of the Section 4 support.

<sup>14</sup> The provision of accommodation to asylum seekers is contracted out by the Home Office to various providers, including private companies and Local Authorities. The contracts cover the provision of specified additional services, one of which is the provision of meals or of vouchers.

<sup>15</sup> Joint Committee on Human Rights (2007) *The treatment of asylum seekers*, Vol. 1, Report and formal minutes <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.com/pa/jt200607/jtselect/jtrights/81/81i.pdf>

### 3. Method

During February 2008, the Refugee Council distributed a questionnaire to organisations working with people receiving Section 4 support.<sup>16</sup> The questionnaire was designed to assess the impact of the voucher system of support on asylum seekers and the organisations that work with them. In addition to the survey, the Refugee Council conducted a series of interviews with people living on vouchers. The information gathered during these interviews forms the basis of the case studies included in Appendix 1.

#### 3.1 Profile of respondents

73 organisations responded to the survey, representing a broad range of organisations. All Refugee Council offices that deliver support and advice services to asylum seekers participated in the survey. The range of organisations is illustrated in the table below.<sup>17</sup>

<b>Type of organisation</b>	<b>No.</b>
Refugee Community Organisation	7
Local refugee/asylum support organisation	26
National refugee/asylum support organisation	9
Community organisation	13
Faith organisation	10
Advice organisation	10
Law Centre	4
Other	18

The 'other' category included five National Health Service providers, four HIV support service providers, three housing providers and six other health and human rights organisations. The housing providers provide accommodation to asylum seekers on Section 4 support and thus administer the vouchers that this survey is concerned with.

The organisations that responded to the survey were based in all regions across England, as outlined below.

<b>Region</b>	<b>No.</b>
East Midlands	3
East of England	5
London	21
North East	13
North West	10
South East	2
West Midlands	3
Yorkshire and Humberside	10
Other	5

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<sup>16</sup> Questionnaire attached at Appendix 2

<sup>17</sup> Please note that respondents could select more than one category.

The 'other' category included organisations that had a national reach.<sup>18</sup> Although the highest number of respondents was based in London, this region does not dominate the overall numbers, so responses reflect experiences across all dispersal areas.

The types of organisations that responded vary greatly in terms of the services they offer and the number of clients they see. Respondents were asked approximately how many people living on Section 4 support they saw each month.

<b>No. of Section 4 clients seen per month</b>	<b>No. of organisations</b>
Less than 10	21
11 – 20	15
21 – 30	5
31 – 40	5
41 – 50	4
51- 60	4
61 – 70	2
71 – 80	3
81 – 90	1
91 - 100	5
Over 100	6

The fact that responding organisations have such a varied profile, location, reach and number of clients means that the results presented in this report reflect many of the different circumstances experienced by those living on Section 4 support.

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<sup>18</sup> Other organisations had a national reach but regional offices responded about their local circumstances rather than generalising across all locations.

## 4. Research findings

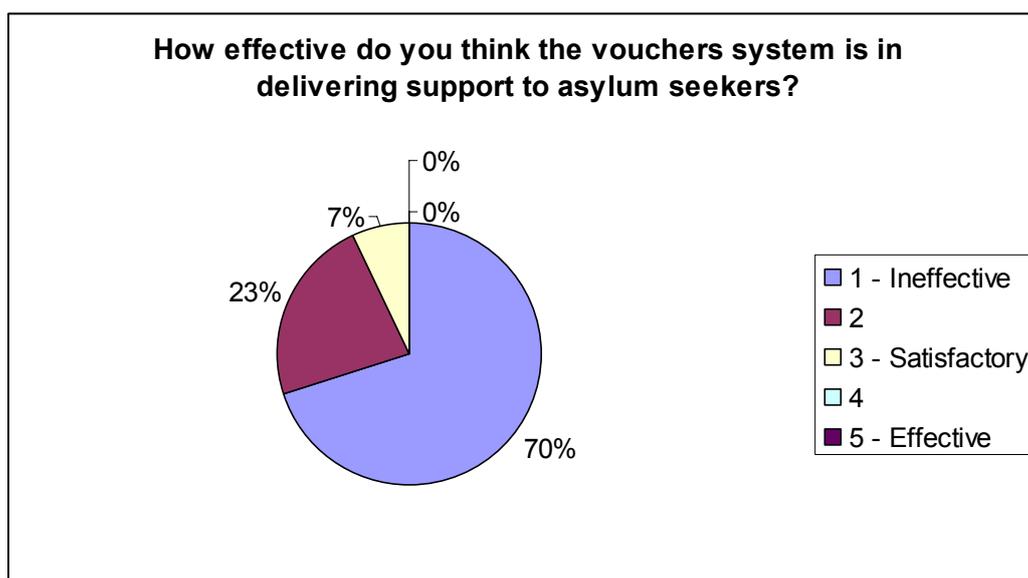
*Some clients have lived for years on vouchers. It is impossible for them to access appropriate clothing, afford travel or pay phone costs. A great deal of staff time is taken up with applications to charities for basic supplies and clothing...The effect on already fragile mental health can be devastating as [the lack of cash support] increases clients' sense of isolation and exclusion and removes any opportunity to fill time with activities. It is difficult for these clients to meet their most basic need for communication and company or to participate in society in any way.<sup>19</sup>*

The following sections will present and analyse responses to the survey.<sup>20</sup> Many questions gave respondents an opportunity to provide additional information about their response. The findings presented below contain overall numeric responses, as well as respondents' views, expressed in their own words.

### 4.1 How effective is the system?

#### **70% deemed the Section 4 vouchers system 'ineffective'**

Respondents were asked to rate how effective they think the vouchers system is in delivering support to asylum seekers.



Overall, respondents felt that the vouchers system was not effective. No organisation ranked it as either four or five in terms of effectiveness. Responding organisations regularly work with asylum seekers living on vouchers, and witness the impact the system has on them. The fact that so many of them classed the system as 'ineffective' is a grave cause for concern. The underlying reasons will be explored further in subsequent presentation of the research findings.

<sup>19</sup> Extracted from a response to the survey.

<sup>20</sup> Appendix 3 gives the quantitative responses to all of the questions. Please note that not all respondents answered all of the questions, therefore responses in Appendix 2 do not add up to the total of 73.

## 4.2 Are people able to buy enough food?

**68% reported clients were unable to buy enough food**  
**73% reported clients experiencing hunger**

Asylum seekers on Section 4 support are provided with vouchers in order to pay for food and essential toiletries. Other expenses are sometimes covered by accommodation providers or through additional vouchers which are intended to provide cover additional costs relating to maternity and children's needs.<sup>21</sup> This research did not ask questions about additional vouchers, so detailed information about them is not contained in this report.

Less than a third (32 per cent) of responding organisations felt that people on Section 4 support were able to buy enough food. Some respondents commented that the level of support was not sufficient to clients' needs as they could not afford to buy all they required.

*"No one can survive on £35 per week and have a healthy, varied diet containing all the essential vitamins and minerals etc., especially when toiletries and household cleaning materials also have to be purchased. The cost of food and other consumables are on the increase, making life totally intolerable. The use of supermarket vouchers inevitably results in having less than £35 per week due to not being allowed any change."*

*"Let us do a simple calculation: 1 voucher = £35.00... £35.00 divided by 7 days = £5.00 per day, isn't it? Would you be able to get breakfast, lunch, dinner and basic items (soap, bus tickets, etc.) with £5.00? Section 4 clients barely eat enough and quality food."*

*"£35 is too little for a reasonable diet especially when it has to include toiletries and cleaning stuff, etc. so there is often the choice between keeping clean and eating."*

*"Vouchers are not enough [to cover] the high price of food."*

Evidence from this research indicates that £35 is an insufficient level of support to cover the cost of all an individual's basic needs. The amount is less than that received by asylum seekers while their claim is being determined, when a single person aged 25 or over receives £42.16 a week.<sup>22</sup> It is less than 60 per cent of the value of support received by individuals over 25 on Income Support, which illustrates why asylum seekers claiming Section 4 support experience such difficulties in meeting their basic needs. Recent and future increases in the price of foodstuffs will only exacerbate the difficulties asylum seekers face.

Nearly three quarters of organisations (73 per cent) reported having seen Section 4 clients experiencing hunger in the last six months. One organisation, which provides free food parcels to clients reported that,

*"We have seen people get their food parcels and eat straight out of the tins."*

Many people living on vouchers are forced to shop in supermarkets and therefore cannot buy cheaper produce that is sold elsewhere, for example in local markets. Respondents noted that the

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<sup>21</sup> More information on this very limited additional support can be found in The Immigration and Asylum (Provision of Services or Facilities) Regulations 2007, available at [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2007/pdf/uksi\\_20073627\\_en.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2007/pdf/uksi_20073627_en.pdf) as well as in information on the UKBA website – [www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk)

<sup>22</sup> Income support levels for single people over the age of 25 are £59.15 so general asylum support represents just over 12 per cent of this figure and those on Section 4 vouchers receive just under 60 per cent.

provision of vouchers restricts the type and amount of food that those on Section 4 support can buy.

*"Diet tends to be calorific rather than healthy."*

*"Forces people to always seek the cheapest option."*

*"Many clients survive on bread and butter/cereal/rice. They cannot afford fresh fruit and vegetables and struggle to maintain a healthy nutritional balance. Any special dietary needs are difficult to cater for on vouchers."*

*"Many of the women are also concerned about providing adequately for their growing children on Section 4."*

Concerns about children's development are entirely reasonable, particularly given government advice to parents that healthy eating is very important for a child's health and development.

#### **4.3 Are people able to buy the right types of food?**

***86 per cent reported clients were unable to buy the right types of food (e.g. Halal)***

In addition to concerns about asylum seekers being unable to obtain enough food, the research also revealed that people were having difficulties buying religious and/or culturally specific foods.

*"Often supermarkets do not have Halal food and even if they do, the people don't trust that it is in fact Halal. Supermarkets very rarely sell traditional foods such as those enjoyed by Africans e.g. dried fish, and when clients are stressed or unwell there is nothing more comforting than being able to have a taste of home."*

*"Most of my patients complain about the fact that they cannot buy culturally sensitive food as most supermarkets do not supply the fruit/vegetables and starches that they like to eat."*

*"People on vouchers complain that they are not able to get 'food from my country' i.e. from small ethnic shops."*

*"Supermarkets are not meeting cultural diet needs."*

This inability to access appropriate food types is not a result of food being unavailable in the areas in which those on Section 4 support live. Rather, people receiving supermarket vouchers are unable to buy appropriate foodstuffs because their supermarkets often do not stock them.

#### **4.4 Are people able to buy other essential items?**

***70 per cent reported clients were unable to buy other essential items such as nappies and toiletries***

As the level of support people receive places restrictions on the types and amount of

food they can buy, this can lead to people having to make difficult choices about what to spend their allowance on. People need, for example, to buy toiletries in order to keep themselves clean and healthy. The quotations below illustrate how some of these items can be difficult to afford, and also highlight that some shops have refused to allow the purchase of non-food goods with vouchers.

*"Some of the time we have had clients tell us that they have been refused tampons and other toiletries at the tills."*

*"I cannot believe that in 2008 women are being refused tampons and nappies, that some men cannot afford soap and people do not have any money to buy basic toiletries or contact their legal reps."*

*"[Toiletries] are expensive, particularly nappies, and people are faced with the decision to eat or buy these other essential items and not eat."*

*"Nappies and sanitary products are very expensive and can eat into the money available very quickly."*

*"They are restricted from buying certain things with the vouchers like clothes for children, baby milk, nappies, toiletries."*

*"[Clients cannot buy] other items related to health (e.g. insoles for shoes, tubigrip bandages)."*

*"Toiletries are expensive as are cleaning materials for the houses which are often in a poor state of repair and cleanliness."*

*"Those on Luncheon Vouchers have major problems purchasing anything other than food and soft drinks. I've been told by a housing provider that if you buy some food, you can also buy cleaning materials and toiletries, but this is not the case in my experience, unless it has changed recently."*

The products that clients find it difficult to buy cannot be considered luxury items. Some 45 per cent of respondents reported shops imposing their own restrictions on what people are allowed to purchase with their vouchers. Where people have no choice about which shops they can use, these additional restrictions mean that people are not able to access some essential goods at all. Difficulties faced in buying nappies, baby milk and children's clothes will clearly have a detrimental impact on babies and children.

Another major problem experienced by those living on vouchers is that they simply cannot use vouchers to pay for some of the things they need:

*"How is someone who only has vouchers able to pay for a laundrette? Not all Section 4 houses have washing machines!"*

*"They cannot go to the hairdressers or barbers..."*

It should be noted that one of the groups of asylum seekers receiving Section 4 support is people with health problems. Many individuals within this group are likely to face significant difficulties in hand-washing their clothes.

#### 4.5 Are people able to travel?

***95 per cent reported clients experiencing travel difficulties***

***78 per cent reported clients experiencing difficulties getting to a shop that accepts vouchers due to distance***

The lack of cash support severely restricts asylum seekers' ability to travel as they cannot pay for bus or train fares. For some, this means they cannot easily get to the supermarket where they are required to spend their vouchers. Some accommodation providers have contracts with particular supermarkets, but, unfortunately, the shops are not always near where people live. The survey found that 95 per cent of respondents stated that asylum seekers on Section 4 support experienced travel difficulties, and 78 per cent reported that clients found it difficult to reach shops that accepted vouchers.

*"Many service users live very far from shops that accept them and some are old or too ill to carry food a long way."*

*"Often the shops are over two miles away. I have one client who has a 15 month old and twin three month old children. How is she expected to walk two miles to get her food with her three children and then back again with three children and all her shopping? She has no money for a taxi or a bus!! This is made even more difficult for her as she passes lots of shops that she could use for everyday basics on the way."*

*"[We have known a] single parent with children getting to the only supermarket that [accepts] vouchers, which was a three mile walk, when just given birth."*

*"I believe most shops are within three miles, but some are close to the edge. But some supermarkets within the three mile range are only the local franchised shops, and the food... is more expensive than the larger ones that may be well outside the three miles. Three miles is okay for relatively fit and healthy people (obviously not those on Section 4 vouchers for two years and more!), but for those with young children in tow, other childcare issues, when it is pouring with rain for days on end, when pregnant, ill or recovering from an operation or physically or mentally disabled, or having asthma, diabetes, etc., etc., then more than a mile can be difficult...A six mile round trip could tax anyone on the wrong day!"*

These responses demonstrate that for many asylum seekers, including those in good health, it is a challenge to get to the supermarket.

Asylum seekers on Section 4 vouchers use a range of advice, support and health services. This is reflected in the range of organisations that responded to this survey, all of whom work with client on Section 4 support. The fact that health, advice and support services are not always local limits the ability of those in Section 4 accommodation to access appropriate support. Respondents noted that some asylum seekers were unable to visit churches, and can depend upon people within refugee communities to support them by, for example, providing cash to help them travel. It is thus sometimes the case that the people who asylum seekers rely upon for cash support are themselves living in poverty, thus constituting an extra strain on their limited resources.

*"They have no money for phone calls or travel cost[s], they have to walk miles to see an advice service like us, and it is very difficult for them to live like this. They do not have money for bus fare[s] or change for [the] phone in case of emergency."*

*"Vouchers do not allow our patients the flexibility to attend [medical] appointments when they need them. This leads to high [missed appointment] rates because of the inability to gain access to transport.<sup>23</sup>*

*"Those with citizenship have to pay for others and this leads to dependency issues."*

*"[Asylum seekers are] unable [to use vouchers] on telephone calls or buses, [also] unable to go to churches."*

In most cases, asylum seekers have to move to new accommodation when they begin to receive Section 4 support. This often entails being re-dispersed to a different area of the country from that where they lived while their asylum claim was being determined. As a result, people on Section 4 support are often living far away from friends and networks which they previously relied upon for social, emotional and practical support. Having no access to cash can result in people being unable to keep in touch with these friends and relatives, which in turn can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation.

*"[Isolation is] a big problem, especially if relocated far away and therefore do not know anyone in the new area who they can leave children with. They are then restricted in mobility if there is no childcare."*

*"Travel difficulties and lack of communication facilities (telephone, internet) [are a problem]."*

*"Unable to contact family members and desperate anxiety about their well being and safety."*

#### **4.6 Are people able to keep in touch with their legal representatives?**

##### ***75 per cent reported that clients were not able to keep in touch with their legal representatives***

Most of the organisations responding to this survey highlighted that not having access to cash can prevent people from being able to maintain contact with their legal representatives. 75 per cent reported that they knew of clients where this was the case.

*"The vouchers cannot purchase travel passes or credit top ups for mobile phones. Many clients have lost touch with their legal representatives because of this."*

*"Hardly, almost impossible [to keep in touch with legal representative]. It depends where the client lives and where his/her solicitor is based. Solicitors hardly reimburse for people with further representations/fresh claims. There is a shortage of solicitors in Yorkshire and Humberside region dealing with such cases anyway so clients approach solicitors often in London who are willing to take their cases, but will not pay the travel. It is a huge problem in our region and Section 4 should [...] reimburse such cost."*

*"If the legal rep is based locally it is fine but with severe cuts in legal aid (including disbursements for travel costs), many solicitors firms have or are closing their immigration*

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<sup>23</sup> Although people on Section 4 support can apply for assistance towards travel to receive healthcare treatment, this response reflects the difficulties that people experience in receiving this.

*departments, so more and more people have to rely on reps many miles away, and there is no possibility of paying for a ticket unless there is access to a local hardship fund (far and few between), or vouchers are swapped for cash."*

*"There are only two immigration outlets in Stoke so people very often have to commute to London, Birmingham and Manchester to see their reps."*

An inability to maintain contact with legal representatives will clearly impact on a person's ability to make further representations about their asylum claim or to submit a fresh claim for asylum. Asylum seekers are entitled to have their travel costs reimbursed when they see their legal representative.<sup>24</sup> However, responses to the survey demonstrate that although there is a system in place for this, it does not always work effectively. Many asylum seekers have particular difficulties making initial visits when they have no cash in the first place. The problem is exacerbated for asylum seekers in areas where the availability of immigration specialists is limited, meaning that they are required to travel long distances. Further, with no access to cash, asylum seekers are unable to contact their legal representatives by telephone.

#### **4.7 Are people able to get in touch with people in the country they are expected to return to?**

***82 per cent reported were unable to be in touch with people in the country they are expected to return to***

The Government is clear that people on Section 4 support are at the end of the asylum process, are expected to return to their country of origin, and should be making preparations for their return. However, if return is to be a realistic prospect, asylum seekers are likely to need to be in touch with people or services in their countries of origin. The lack of access to cash impedes this. 82 per cent of respondents said that their clients were unable to be in touch with people in the country they are expected to return to.

*"The cost of international phone calls can make this difficult due to the fact they only receive vouchers."*

*"International phone calls are out of reach unless there is actual cash with which to buy them; many rely on the charity of friends or borrow money."*

*"They cannot buy international telephone card[s]."*

Cards to reduce the cost of making international phone calls can be bought quite cheaply, but supermarket chains do not generally sell them. This means that they are largely unavailable to asylum seekers supported under Section 4. Access to the internet and e-mail would also aid communication, but vouchers cannot be used in internet cafes, and asylum seekers on such limited support are not in a position to have private access at home.

#### **4.8 Are people able to maintain good health?**

***81 per cent reported that clients were unable to maintain good health***

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<sup>24</sup> This is administered by the legal representatives who claim the money back from the Legal Services Commission.

The difficulties asylum seekers face in buying sufficient and appropriate food were discussed in sections 4.2 and 4.3. This inability to buy enough food and sustain a varied diet may have a negative impact on people's health. The survey revealed that 81 per cent of respondents did not believe that clients were able to maintain good health.

One of the eligibility criteria for Section 4 support is that of ill health. For these people with pre-existing health problems in particular, there is a real risk that enforced poor nutrition may have more serious consequences. Additionally, some medical conditions require the consumption of particular types of food, as illustrated in some of the responses below:

*"Loss of weight which can be catastrophic for my patients [who have HIV]."*

*"HIV positive clients often need special more expensive diets"*

*"For patients of mine on Therapy they need to be able to eat at least 3 square meals per day."*

People living with HIV have particular dietary requirements in order to remain healthy. These responses indicate that the provision of vouchers does not allow for some people to obtain the food necessary to meet specific nutritional needs.

Respondents also highlighted that living on vouchers has negative implications for health above and beyond the impact on pre-existing health conditions. The lack of cash support restricts access to leisure facilities, and impedes asylum seekers' ability to maintain their physical and mental health:

*"Being able to exercise (other than walking) is real problem, and there is no entitlement to using council leisure centre. Diet is problematic for many. Many have difficulty in keeping occupied as no TV (cannot pay for TV licence), books etc."*

*"Both physical and mental health deteriorates as there is no money for social activities/TV license, travel etc; there is much distress at the loss of dignity and there have been attempted suicides."*

*"Able to maintain good health? No. Skin diseases, stomach complaints, headaches, lethargy, and depression are common."*

*"Anxiety, frustration and uncertainty damages mental health and we have had patients attempt suicide or [go] on hunger strike in the hope that someone will listen. Physical health also deteriorates but less obviously in otherwise fit young people. Vulnerable people like the elderly or people with chronic health problems and children are suffering from poor nutrition, the cold and exacerbation of existing medical conditions."*

#### **4.9 Does living on vouchers have an impact on self-esteem?**

***81 per cent reported clients felt embarrassed using vouchers***

***81 per cent reported clients experienced anxiety/mental health issues as a result of being on vouchers***

***52 per cent reported poor treatment in shops accepting vouchers***

## **44 per cent reported asylum seekers experiencing hostility from other shoppers**

Several organisations expressed the view that the lack of access to cash and complete dependency on accommodation providers can strip asylum seekers of their independence.

*"[Clients have a] sense of dependence and lack of self-respect. Sense of being treated as second class. Resentment that Housing Provider can control a client's life."*

*"Low self esteem especially when constantly having to borrow money from friends."*

The survey revealed that 81 per cent of respondents reported that they knew of clients who experienced feelings of embarrassment about living on vouchers. One organisation observed that *"desperation usually overcomes embarrassment over time."*

Some respondents described that the overall result of living on vouchers in uncertain circumstances and for an unknown length of time can have a serious detrimental effect on people's self-esteem.

*"Feeling of hopelessness due to the poverty patients experience when they are on vouchers. As they are incredibly in-flexible."*

*"People describe it as the most degrading aspect of being an asylum seeker."*

*"Repeated expression of feeling "less than human"."*

*"People have commented they feel...ashamed and feel like criminals."*

The feelings described above can be exacerbated by responses from other shoppers who see an asylum seeker using vouchers. Many respondents reported poor treatment from shops accepting vouchers as well as hostility from other shoppers (52 per cent and 44 per cent respectively).

*"People have been humiliated in front of other customers."*

*"The cards are often faulty and will not swipe without the assistance of a supervisor [which leads to] delays and angry queues."*

*"Numerous incidents of humiliation at checkouts, name calling, jeering and refusal to sell produce."*

*"Tutting and obvious impatience from staff when counting out vouchers, and when checkout staff have to scan loads of £1 and 50p Luncheon Vouchers. Not all staff are properly trained to accept vouchers and have to ask a supervisor which takes time and causes impatience from other customers. I've been told that some checkout staff deliberately shout out loud to the supervisor for "help with these vouchers", and it is believed it is done to embarrass the person with the vouchers."*

*"The additional time taken to count out and scan vouchers; to go to buy more food to make up the value closer to the voucher value (when the checkout staff allow!), is highly embarrassing and many would rather lose a few pounds than stand up for themselves due to potential and often real hostility."*

*"There is a stigma attached to having the vouchers and they are looked down on and treated with an attitude from the public which often deeply affects them, sometimes to the point they are afraid to go to the shop again."*

Using vouchers can mark out those on Section 4 support as asylum seekers, and expose them to abuse and hostility from other shoppers and staff in shops and supermarkets. This means that some asylum seekers feel unable to carry out shopping with any dignity, which in turn can create a fear of going to the shops.

#### **4.10 Length of time on vouchers**

The Government asserts that vouchers are a method of support for asylum seekers who will be returning to their country of origin shortly. The system of Section 4 support is thus not designed nor intended to support asylum seekers for prolonged periods of time. However, the survey and interviews conducted for this research reveal that people are often dependent on Section 4 voucher support for many months and years.<sup>25</sup>

*Many of the people who have just been transitioned over to us have been on Section 4 for over two years.*

*Many, many reports of people being on Section 4 vouchers for years.*

It is important to note that the problems and limitations of the voucher system, as uncovered by this research, are magnified and likely to place immense strain on asylum seekers who are forced to live on such restricted support for many months and years.

#### **4.11 Swapping vouchers**

While the previous sections have highlighted the problems that people can face when they live on vouchers and have no access to cash. The following sections outline the measures employed by asylum seekers in an attempt to meet their most basic needs.

***79 per cent reported people swapping vouchers for cash to buy necessary items***

***68 per cent reported people receiving less than the face value for exchanged vouchers***

Having access to cash enables people living on Section 4 vouchers to acquire essential goods and services that are not available in supermarkets, including culturally appropriate food, travel fares and phone and internet credit. In order to get cash, some people swap their vouchers for cash. The survey found that 79 per cent of respondents knew of such informal exchanges taking place.

*"Some of my patients do this in order to buy a travel pass or buy culturally acceptable food."*

*"A lot do swap with people buying goods from Asda to go to [the] market [to] purchase clothing or Halal food."*

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<sup>25</sup> This supports the findings of the Citizens Advice report *Shaming Destitution* which found that the average length of time spent on Section 4 support is 9 months. The Asylum Support Appeals Project has represented individuals who have been in receipt of Section 4 support for more than two years. See Asylum Support Appeals Project (2008) *Unreasonably Destitute: How UKBA is failing to support refused asylum seekers unable to leave the UK through no fault of their own.* **20**

*"[Swapping vouchers is] often the only option."*

*"It is impossible to live without any cash and as vouchers don't cover certain essential items they have to resort to extreme measure[s] e.g. travel fares, change for phone, medication, clothes for children, what can they do once their clothes have torn."*

Some voluntary sector organisations run schemes that allow people to exchange vouchers pound for pound in cash, but such schemes are few and far between. More commonly, asylum seekers are forced to accept less cash than the face value of their vouchers. 68 per cent of respondents reported knowing clients who had swapped vouchers with people for less cash than the vouchers are worth.

*"People are often getting £25 cash for £35 in vouchers."*

*"People who exchange vouchers for cash exploit these clients as they know they are desperate for money, so they will give them a lot less than the vouchers are worth."*

*"I have heard rumours of this - people hanging about social services offices offering less than face value. How mean!"*

The figure of £25 being given for a £35 voucher was that most commonly cited among respondents and reflects a loss of nearly 30 per cent of the value of Section 4 support. It is clear that very poor people are being driven even further into poverty. The fact that some asylum seekers are prepared to sacrifice such a large proportion of their support reflects the desperation they feel and the extent of their need for cash.

#### **4.12 Finding other sources of income**

##### ***71 per cent of respondents were aware of clients being forced into the informal economy to enable them to buy food/other essential items***

In 2002, the Government ended its policy of allowing asylum seekers to apply for permission to work after six months of waiting for an asylum decision. Since that time, asylum seekers have been prevented from obtaining employment.<sup>26</sup> The Refugee Council's research has revealed that some asylum seekers on Section 4 support have worked informally in order to obtain cash to meet their basic needs, potentially exposing themselves to exploitation. The survey found 71 per cent of respondents were aware of clients being forced into the informal economy in order to obtain cash with which to buy food and other essential items.

*"When people are left in such desperate positions they have little choice."*

*"An obvious and understandable consequence of keeping people in abject poverty. There must be a temptation to prostitute oneself to make ends meet."*

*"This is the reason asylum seekers are forced to work [in the informal economy is] because they are hungry and desperate."*

*"Some work as catering assistants or washers up. They're paid £2 an hour."*

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<sup>26</sup> The UK has implemented the European Directive 2003/9/EC (the reception directive) which allows for asylum seekers to apply for permission to work if they have not received an initial decision from the Home Office after twelve months. However, this applies only to the main asylum applicant and there is no right of appeal if an application for work permission is refused or not dealt with in reasonable time.

*"This situation pushes an asylum seeker to find a job with low income [and puts] employers in a great position to give an asylum seeker a low wage without paying tax and National Insurance."*

The Refugee Council is campaigning with the TUC for the right of asylum seekers to work in the UK.<sup>27</sup> We believe that all asylum seekers, including refused asylum seekers on Section 4 support, should be granted permission to work. This would be consistent with the Government's "work first" approach to tackling poverty and moving people off benefits to become self supporting. It would also reduce the chances of exploitation, social exclusion, poor health and destitution. These are key issues facing local authorities, particularly in their duty to promote community cohesion. It would also allow asylum seekers to maintain vocational skills key to their future in the UK or elsewhere<sup>28</sup>. Allowing refused asylum seekers to join the labour market would bring money into the public purse through National Insurance contributions and Income Tax, along with reducing the costs of asylum support itself.

#### **4.13 Support from the voluntary/community sector**

***73 per cent of organisations reported having incurred additional costs to support clients on vouchers***

***55 per cent of organisations had collected donations from the local community to support clients on vouchers***

Some voluntary and community sector organisations use their own resources to try to provide clients with the essentials they need. Of the organisations that responded to the survey, 73 per cent reported having incurred additional expenses to support their clients on vouchers. In addition to using their own resources, 55 per cent of respondents had also collected donations from the local community. The quotes below illustrate some of the assistance offered by voluntary and community sector organisations.

*"We often provide clients with food parcels as they struggle to buy enough food with their vouchers."*

*"Occasionally we have to give food parcels or crisis payments in addition to their vouchers especially if they have children."*

*"We constantly arrange supply of sanitary products/nappies from charitable sources."*

*"We try to provide nappies and sanitary products from our personal destitution fund but cannot do it for everyone indefinitely."*

*"Voluntary sector organisations and charities are invaluable in filling the gaps."*

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<sup>27</sup> For more information about the campaign see <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/gettinginvolved/campaign/righttowork/>

<sup>28</sup> In general, asylum seekers in the UK have higher levels of qualifications and employment experience. For example, study by NIACE found that over 80 percent of asylum seekers were economically active or in full time education before coming to the UK and that 54 percent were qualified up to and above NVQ 3 (A' level or equivalent) (Waddington, S. (2005) *Valuing skills and supporting integration*, NIACE) <http://www.niace.org.uk/projects/ASSET-UK/ASSETUK-Policy-Report.pdf>

*"Sometimes they may struggle to fund travel or phone calls. We allow people to make phone calls from our office to alleviate this problem."*

*"We have provided support for people to travel to see existing legal representatives, if they find new lawyers they often have to travel to see them and will not be able to pay for this."*

*"We have often had to donate money to the most desperate out of our own small charitable cases pot."*

*"Local communities around here routinely help former asylum seekers (some getting ...Section 4 and others with no support): they provide food and clothing and other support almost as a matter of course. These communities (mainly Somali, Arab and West African) have very limited resources themselves and it seems unfair that they should be helping to fill the gaps in asylum support and compensating for the shortcomings of Section 4."*

These responses suggest that voluntary and community sector organisations are finding themselves responsible for providing people living on Section 4 with basic essentials including food, nappies, sanitary products, access to the phone and internet and the means for keeping in touch with legal representatives. These organisations are often poorly resourced themselves and receive no statutory funding for providing these services: they do so in response to their clients' essential needs. The last quotation also illustrates that poor communities are contributing their scarce resources to support others who are worse off.

#### **4.14 Delays and non-receipt of vouchers**

##### ***63 per cent reported clients experiencing delays/non-receipt of vouchers***

Vouchers are the only means of support that a person on Section 4 can receive. The fact that the level of support is only £35 a week makes it unlikely that there will be any surplus left over at the end of the week, and means that it is essential that people receive their vouchers promptly. Unfortunately, the findings from this survey indicate that delays in receiving vouchers are commonplace.

When asked if organisations had seen clients experience delays/non-receipt of vouchers in the preceding six months, 63 per cent stated that this had been the case. The open-ended responses that accompanied this question highlight that some asylum seekers experience prolonged delays.

*"This is the normal thing that the agencies who distribute these vouchers delay them many times. At times they delay them for some days."*

*"Sometimes it has taken up to six weeks for people to get their first vouchers."*

*"Non-receipt for up to four weeks over Christmas period."*

*"Frequently for long periods. One mother and four year old son had to make £4 last for three whole weeks between them (baked beans and white bread eked out over three weeks)."*

*"Massive delays and disruptions. Sometimes many weeks passed with little or no contact between the NAM and Section 4 provider."*

Delays such as these are unacceptable. Some respondents suggested that delays occur when people are transferred from their original housing to their Section 4 accommodation and that this is a result of poor communication between accommodation providers and the Home Office.

*"We had several cases [of asylum seekers] who had been grossly neglected due to the Section 4 transfer from accommodation providers, including women and children. Delays as long as seven weeks!"*

*"The worst case we had recently was the withholding of vouchers to families as a result of the Section 4 transfer issue. We had a case of four women, all single, with young children who went weeks without vouchers. The issue was raised time and time again with the Accommodation Provider and BIA, eventually it was resolved, but not until it was raised at a higher level."<sup>29</sup>*

*"We have needed...on occasions to go to Croydon and sort everything out - taking a day out to do this is more productive than weeks of misery for the person."*

#### **4.15 Problems with the administration of vouchers**

##### ***73 per cent reported clients had experienced difficulties with accommodation providers' administration of the system***

In addition to problems with vouchers being delayed, respondents reported that accommodation providers can be very inflexible in terms of when and where clients can collect their allowances. Some 73 per cent of respondents said that clients had experienced difficulties with accommodation providers' administration of the system.

*"People are having to miss essential appointments (hospitals, exams, legal appointments, Home Office appointments) as vouchers are only delivered on one day and at an unspecified time."*

*"1- the delivery service of the vouchers is very unreliable. We have clients who have been told to wait at home Thursday afternoon, and no one attended. 2- the language barrier and lack of communications. 3- no flexibility if the client asked to change the time or the day the voucher arrives. The answer is always no. This happened when we had clients wanted to access activity groups (which were running only on certain days and times which was clashing with the voucher time) but they have not agreed to change the delivery time or to deliver it to support group or the activity group."*

*"Reliant on the accommodation provider bringing vouchers to property. Little or no contingency for unexpected absence of local accommodation manager."*

*"They have to travel a long way and then go back if [the vouchers] are not ready."*

The inflexible and unreliable nature of the system creates unnecessary problems and frustration for those who are dependent on vouchers. One of the accommodation providers that responded to the survey described the problems that it faces in distributing vouchers to clients.

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<sup>29</sup> The department responsible for vouchers was Borders and Immigration Agency at the time of the survey. It is now the UK Border Agency (UKBA). **24**

*"We're not a cash office. Administration of nearly £1000 of vouchers per week is logistically difficult with insurance and security issues."*

It is clear that the current administration of the voucher system is not consistent. The UKBA should monitor accommodation providers to ensure that they adhere to their contractual obligations. UKBA should additionally review current arrangements to ensure that asylum seekers are able to receive their asylum support in a timely manner. Consideration should be given to introducing new, flexible, methods of delivering asylum support, including the possible use of Post Offices where they are accessible to asylum seekers. UKBA should work with stakeholders to develop new mechanisms for delivering cash asylum support, including through financial institutions.

#### **4.16 Difficulties understanding the vouchers system**

***53 per cent reported that clients had experienced difficulties understanding the vouchers system***

***52 per cent of organisations reported difficulties finding enough information about vouchers***

***29 per cent of organisations reported difficulties liaising with the Border and Immigration Agency about vouchers***

53 per cent of the organisations that responded to the survey reported that clients had experienced difficulty understanding the Section 4 vouchers system. Responses revealed that this was particularly true for those with low levels of English language proficiency.

*"They don't understand what they can and cannot buy, and how they are supposed to go so far every week walking to collect and redeem them."*

*"I've not seen any clear and comprehensive advice about the use of vouchers apart from being told they are not to be swapped for cash."*

*"We spend a lot of time advising on the issues."*

Some 52 per cent of organisations who advise clients on the use of vouchers often have difficulties with finding enough information themselves, and 29 per cent stated that they had experienced difficulties liaising with the Border and Immigration Agency [now UKBA] about vouchers. Respondents also reported difficulties contacting accommodation providers on behalf of clients.

*"It is very frustrating trying to communicate with the Section 4 office about clients receiving vouchers; it's not possible to communicate with a named individual there and one depends on sending faxes to the organisation and receiving a sometimes much delayed reply."*

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

*"It is impossible to live without any cash"*

The findings of this research demonstrate that many of the problems currently faced by people living on Section 4 vouchers are the same as those reported eight years ago in *Token Gestures*. In 2001, the Home Secretary stated that vouchers were not an appropriate form of support and they were consequently abolished for asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim. We contend that vouchers continue to be an inappropriate form of support and call for their immediate abolition.

This report has outlined the problems that asylum seekers who receive Section 4 vouchers can face in their everyday lives. The research has shown that people are unable to shop around for cheaper and more appropriate food or other essential goods, are unable to buy sufficient food and toiletries to meet their needs, cannot keep in contact with friends, families and legal representatives, and are unable to pay for travel to essential appointments. It is clear that using vouchers as a means of support and subsistence is causing unnecessary hardship and having a detrimental effect on many asylum seekers' physical and mental well-being. And despite the Government's assertions that Section 4 support is a temporary form of support for individuals who it is recognised cannot leave the UK, some asylum seekers are being forced to survive on vouchers for many years. The voluntary and community sector, as well as other public services, are trying to pick up the pieces of this inhumane Government policy and to plug the gaps to ensure that individuals do not go hungry and can look after their health. The voucher system is undermining the Government's wider community cohesion objectives, and desperate individuals are placing themselves at risk of exploitation through having to resort to swapping vouchers and working in the informal economy in order to get access to money to buy essential goods.

### 5.1 Recommendations

1. The Refugee Council believes that the current Section 4 support system is inhumane, ineffective, and results in unnecessary suffering. The Government and UKBA should support asylum seekers appropriately for the duration of their time in the UK and allow them to support themselves by granting permission to work.
2. We believe that the evidence presented in this report constitutes a compelling argument against continuing to provide vouchers for people on Section 4 support. Many of the problems highlighted can be overcome by providing support in the form of cash.
3. This research has indicated that the level of support provided for people receiving Section 4 vouchers is not adequate to cover all their essential needs. The figure of £35 a week for individuals over the age of 25 years represents 60 per cent of current Income Support levels. We believe that there needs to be an increase in the level of support provided to enable people to live with some dignity and to meet their basic needs.
4. There is clear evidence that forcing asylum seekers to move to accommodation in a new area, away from their support networks, causes unnecessary hardship, isolation and suffering. Asylum seekers who are supported at the end of the asylum process should be entitled to remain in the same accommodation that they lived in during the asylum process.
5. The Government's strategy for children is "for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-

being.”<sup>30</sup> These outcomes cannot be achieved for children who are on Section 4 voucher support. All families with children should be entitled to cash support.

The current system of voucher support is clearly not effective in meeting the basic needs of refused asylum seekers. This research has collected evidence that the system can in fact exacerbate the hardships faced by this very vulnerable group in society. The provision of cash, as opposed to vouchers, would help to alleviate the extreme difficulties asylum seekers on Section 4 support face in their day-to-day lives. It would also ameliorate the confusion, embarrassment and suffering inflicted upon asylum seekers by the punitive and restrictive voucher support regime, as well as by the asylum system that has ordered them to leave the country when, through no fault of their own, they are unable to do so.

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<sup>30</sup> [www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk) (accessed 30/07/08)

## Appendix 1

### Case study 1

John is a 30 year old man from Zimbabwe. He has been in the UK for six years and is unable to return to his home country as he fears persecution because he had been politically active in Zimbabwe supporting the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). He had previously been tortured whilst protesting against the ZANU PF regime.

John receives £35 a week in vouchers and reported receiving no information about how the vouchers worked when he was first given them. He collects his vouchers from an agency that was appointed by NASS and has to walk over three miles to collect them.

John is not able to plan where he will be shopping as he is given a range of vouchers: *"I buy from TESCO, ASDA, Sainsbury's, or Somerfield. It depends on what kind of vouchers they give us that day"*. When using card vouchers, credit is debited from the card and unused funds remain on them, so he does not have to spend up to the limit. However, when using paper vouchers he is *"forced to spend all the vouchers that I have or lose out"*.

John spoke of the limits of vouchers as *"there are some selected foods that we are not allowed to buy using vouchers"*. Coupled with the restrictions imposed when shopping, he also experiences bad reactions from others when he uses them *"Whenever I go into the shops I always encounter negative attitude, especially when I am paying with vouchers I am looked down upon by other customers and the till operators from the shops."*

In order to get hold of cash John has tried to exchange his vouchers, although he does not receive their full face value in return: *"If I exchange a £35 vouchers, I get £25. And if I am lucky that day, I will get £30."* In order to access more money, John has taken on informal paid work *"I have worked illegally, because I can not sustain my life on vouchers and to look after my family back home. -When I was working illegally I could afford certain items."*

John feels that changes need to be made to improve people's lives: *"To make the support system work better, they should get rid of vouchers and allow those who they cannot return back to their countries at least work during their time in the UK."*

### Case study 2

Peter is a Congolese man living with his wife and son. He receives £90 a week in vouchers to support the whole family, and they have been living on this type of support for two and half years.

When Peter started to receive vouchers, he was not given a clear explanation of the way that the support worked; *"We did not receive clear information about them from NASS. All we got was a leaflet telling us about the area we are living [a map]"*. If he needs help, Peter explained that this was not always easy to come by: *"It is very difficult to get through to speak to someone in the office."*

Peter described himself a *"lucky"* that he does not have to travel very far to the office from where he collects his vouchers. Unfortunately this is not always the case in terms of the supermarkets where he is required to shop: *"Our nearest supermarket is Sainsbury's, but at times we are given Asda or Tesco vouchers which make it difficult for us to shop because these supermarkets are very far. They are aware of it but they tell us that there isn't much they can do. It makes life hard for us."*

Peter feels that the limits of living on vouchers is having a detrimental effect on his family. *"We are now only eating the same type of food everyday from the same shops. We are worried that our daughter is not eating well. We would prefer to buy from the African shops and market."*

*We are not used to this diet and it has become very difficult." The experience of shopping is often difficult too as he feels that people judge him for using vouchers for his shopping. "We get funny looks every time we are paying for the food in the shop. It is embarrassing to use vouchers all the time when everyone else is using cash."*

Peter explained how the vouchers he receives do not provide him with the resources his family needs; *"We are unable to buy everything our child wants, for example essential baby needs like the push chair, proper bedding and warm clothes. When my wife was in hospital due to give birth to our son, it was expensive to buy a baby car seat which the nurses required for them to be discharged. It was difficult for the nurses to understand why we couldn't prepare. Little things like this have big impacts."* This situation is made even more frustrating when some of the money is not being used: *"We lose out some of our money by not getting any change from the vouchers."*

Peter does not receive support from voluntary sector organisations and said *"it's only friends who do help us sometimes but it is not enough."* As he experienced difficulties making ends meet, he pursued other sources of income; *"I have worked illegally for about a year until I was caught by the immigration and was detained. My anger is that I was punished for working for my family. I am a father and I feel that I am being undermined for not being given a chance to work. When my children grow up seeing their parents not working, what example am I setting to them? We should be allowed to work whilst they are dealing with our asylum claims."*

The experience of living on vouchers has made Peter feel despondent and disappointed with the way he and his family have been treated; *"we feel let down by the British system. What have we done to deserve this? We left our country because everything has been taken away from me and I come here and be treated the same way. We feel hopeless."*

### **Case Study 3**

Anna has been living in the UK for four years and has a one year old daughter. Anna is living with disabilities that affect her mobility, and receives £70 a week in vouchers to support the two of them. She has been living on vouchers for two years.

Anna is given the choice of ASDA or Sainsbury's vouchers. She collects the vouchers from her accommodation provider's office and explains; *because of my disability It takes me about 10 to 20 min walk, although to some able bodied people it can be near but for me it's quite a journey. I have tried to ask on numerous times to NASS to give me support by delivering the vouchers but it's to no avail. They never seem to listen, it's pointless. I got no response and it evaporated into thin air. At some point they do accept me to send people on my behalf, but they would rather have me to go and collect and sign for the vouchers. Otherwise it's really difficult for me to live on vouchers. I have to walk with my baby, whether it's hot or cold, I just have to endure it."*

Anna has difficulties travelling to the supermarket. She sometimes uses buses if she can access some money to do so but if she cannot do that, she reports that *"carrying groceries from the supermarket to home is a nightmare."* She is frustrated by the choice of food on offer at the supermarkets; *"I am an African lady and I miss my own African food. I cannot find it in ASDA or Sainsbury's. The food I like I can find it at the market but in most cases I do not have cash."* She has also experienced hostility from others when shopping, and feels awkward when vouchers for groceries; *"I have encountered negative attitudes from shop workers and customers. It's so embarrassing when you are standing in the queue and there you are handling vouchers"*.

In order to access cash for things such as bus fares, Anna has exchanged her vouchers, but not for their true value; *"I try to exchange vouchers of £35 to a friend I will get £20 in cash. Just so I can have a little cash, just a little bit."* Lacking cash limits the things that Anna can do with her time, which is exacerbated due to her disability; *"I cannot afford to take my daughter out, it's a luxury. To be honest I have to wait for people to visit me, I am stuck indoors most of the time. If I don't see my flat mates then that's it."*

Anna thinks that vouchers are not an appropriate form of support; *"Some of us are disabled. If need to buy a bus ticket which is about £3, where do I get that money from? I used to get transport money from Home Office, but it just stopped."* Anna believes that if she was allowed to work, this could help her support herself and her daughter; *"I just wish again to be given the opportunity to work and fend for myself. Just a couple of hours wouldn't kill the country. It wouldn't pinch the country because I'm only working for myself and for my daughter. I don't want to be begging people for their money, yet I can do couple of hours work. Just something light and I get paid for it. That will mean a lot to me. It will also give me a sense of belonging within the society. At the moment I feel isolated as an asylum seeker. I have no life at all apart from looking after my own daughter. I wish the law can be changed in favour of asylum seekers."*

#### **Case study 4**

Mary is a 37 year old woman who is living with HIV. She has two dependents and has been living in the UK for nine years, having fled persecution because she was a trade union activist and a journalist.

When Mary was first issued with vouchers, she received very little information; *"there was no clear useful information given to me. It has been difficult for me to get hold of NASS office."* She receives £70 a week in supermarket vouchers which she collects from the office of her accommodation provider. Mary describes some difficulties with voucher collection; *"at times when I go and collect them, I am told that there aren't any vouchers this week. They don't alert us before we go then I would I have wasted my journey and bus fare which is not easy to get."*

Mary has been refused some products in supermarket many times; *"when I take my shopping to the till I end up not buying everything I need because the shop assistant tells me that 'this is not allowed when using these vouchers. At times I am not allowed to take some things that my kids want. So I have to explain to them that the shop assistant has refused."* Her HIV status means that she needs to maintain a healthy diet, which she finds difficult when only receiving vouchers; *"I am HIV positive and have to eat well. So being confined to one shop restricts my diet. It worries me as I cannot eat my traditional food which can be found in African shops and the market."*

Mary finds it difficult to provide the things she wants for her children; *"using vouchers in a shop is costly. I have to buy clothes and uniform for my kids which are not available in supermarkets... My worry is of my children. They cannot make friends. At times they ask me to take them out to the cinema and on school trips. I can't afford it. My son once told me that some children at school laugh at him because he does not have good lunch at school why he does not go for school outings. At times he asks me why I don't have a lot to give him."*

Mary reports that living on vouchers has a particular impact due to her HIV status; *"I have no means of buying travel pass to go to hospital to see my consultant and have blood tests etc. I Because of my HIV status I do like to attend support groups which help me a lot, but I cant to travel to go there. I am grounded in the house."*

She has worked in order to obtain money; *"I have done cleaning jobs only for a short time but I had to stop because they where asking for my passport and NI. I needed to work for my children so they can have decent meals and better life. This is the longest time I have stayed without working and it's frustrating me. I need to keep myself busy, I am lonely at times. I wish life will be only fair... I would like to appeal to the government to compassionate to our situation. I wish they could understand us. The way we are living is appalling. I wish we could be allowed to work so we can feel part of the society and our kids may be happier."*

The names of all the case study participants have been changed to protect their identity.

## Appendix 2

# The Impact of Section 4 Vouchers



### Details of organisation

Name of organisation \_\_\_\_\_

Type of organisation (Please tick all that apply):

Refugee Community Organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Faith organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local refugee/asylum support org.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Advice organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>
National refugee/asylum support org.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Law Centre	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>

Region:

Which region are you in?

East Midlands	<input type="checkbox"/>	South East	<input type="checkbox"/>
East of England	<input type="checkbox"/>	South West	<input type="checkbox"/>
London	<input type="checkbox"/>	West Midlands	<input type="checkbox"/>
North East	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yorkshire and the Humber	<input type="checkbox"/>
North West	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>

Approximately how many clients do you see each month who are living on vouchers?

Less than 10	<input type="checkbox"/>	61 – 70	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 – 20	<input type="checkbox"/>	71 – 80	<input type="checkbox"/>
21 – 30	<input type="checkbox"/>	81 – 90	<input type="checkbox"/>
31 – 40	<input type="checkbox"/>	91 - 100	<input type="checkbox"/>
41 – 50	<input type="checkbox"/>	Over 100	<input type="checkbox"/>
51- 60	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>

How effective do you think the vouchers system is in delivering support to asylum seekers? (Please circle appropriate number)

*Ineffective*

1

2

*Satisfactory*

3

4

*Effective*

5

### Experiences of people on vouchers

In general, would you say that the people you see who are on vouchers are:

	Y	N	Please comment
Able to buy enough food?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Able to buy the right types of food (e.g. Halal)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Able to buy other essential items (e.g. nappies, sanitary products, toiletries, laundry)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Able to maintain good health?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Able to keep in touch with their legal representatives?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Able to keep in touch with other asylum seekers and refugees?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Able to get in touch with people in the country they are being returned to?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Able to engage in recreational activities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

In the last six months, has your organisation seen people who receive vouchers who have experienced the following:

	Y	N	Please comment
Delay/non-receipt of vouchers?			
Difficulty getting to a shop which accepts vouchers due to distance?			
Poor treatment from shops accepting vouchers?			
Shops imposing additional restrictions?			
Hostility from other shoppers?			
Having to exchange vouchers for cash to buy necessary items?			
Receiving less than face value for exchanged vouchers?			
Hunger?			
Working illegally for money to buy food/other essential items?			
Difficulties in understanding the voucher system?			
Difficulties with accommodation provider's administration of the system?			
Isolation due to inability to visit friends etc.?			
Feelings of embarrassment related to vouchers?			
Anxiety/mental health issues as a result of being on vouchers?			
Travel difficulties (e.g. to visit supermarket, legal representative, health workers)?			
Problems relating to family unity and family tracing?			

### ***Impact on your organisation***

Has your organisation:

	Y	N	N/A
Been able to find enough information to be able to advise clients about the vouchers?			
Been able to liaise effectively with accommodation providers about vouchers?			
Been able to liaise effectively with BIA about vouchers?			
Incurred additional expenses to support clients on vouchers?			
Collected donations from the local community to help support clients on vouchers?			
Had to lobby for access to goods/services not covered by vouchers?			
Received feedback from the community on impact of vouchers?			

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the effects of vouchers (please attach case studies if you wish)? We would particularly welcome information about what people are doing in order to obtain cash and the lengths of time people are living on vouchers.

## Appendix 3

### Experiences of people on vouchers

In general, would you say that the people you see who are on vouchers are:

<b>Q6</b>	<b>Able to buy enough food?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	23
	<i>No</i>	50
<b>Q7</b>	<b>Able to buy the right types of food (e.g. Halal)?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	8
	<i>No</i>	63
<b>Q8</b>	<b>Able to buy other essential items (e.g. nappies, sanitary products, toiletries, laundry)?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	21
	<i>No</i>	51
<b>Q9</b>	<b>Able to maintain good health?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	11
	<i>No</i>	59
<b>Q10</b>	<b>Able to keep in touch with their legal representatives?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	13
	<i>No</i>	55
<b>Q11</b>	<b>Able to keep in touch with other asylum seekers and refugees?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	21
	<i>No</i>	49
<b>Q12</b>	<b>Able to get in touch with people in the country they are being returned to?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	5
	<i>No</i>	60
<b>Q13</b>	<b>Able to engage in recreational activities?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	13
	<i>No</i>	59
<b>In the last six months, has your organisation seen people who receive vouchers who have experienced the following:</b>		
<b>Q14</b>	<b>Delay/non-receipt of vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	46
	<i>No</i>	22
<b>Q15</b>	<b>Difficulty getting to a shop which accepts vouchers due to distance?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	57
	<i>No</i>	12
<b>Q16</b>	<b>Poor treatment from shops accepting vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	38
	<i>No</i>	26
<b>Q17</b>	<b>Shops imposing additional restrictions?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	33
	<i>No</i>	26
<b>Q18</b>	<b>Hostility from other shoppers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	32
	<i>No</i>	28
<b>Q19</b>	<b>Having to exchange vouchers for cash to buy necessary items?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	58
	<i>No</i>	8
<b>Q20</b>	<b>Receiving less than face value for exchanged vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	50
	<i>No</i>	15
<b>Q21</b>	<b>Hunger?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	53
	<i>No</i>	13

<b>Q22</b>	<b>Working illegally for money to buy food/other essential items?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	52
	<i>No</i>	13
<b>Q23</b>	<b>Difficulties in understanding the voucher system?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	39
	<i>No</i>	29
<b>Q24</b>	<b>Difficulties with accommodation provider's administration of the system?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	53
	<i>No</i>	12
<b>Q25</b>	<b>Isolation due to inability to visit friends etc.?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	67
	<i>No</i>	3
<b>Q26</b>	<b>Feelings of embarrassment related to vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	59
	<i>No</i>	8
<b>Q27</b>	<b>Anxiety/mental health issues as a result of being on vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	59
	<i>No</i>	6
<b>Q28</b>	<b>Travel difficulties (e.g. to visit supermarket, legal representative, health workers)?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	69
	<i>No</i>	2
<b>Q29</b>	<b>Problems relating to family unity and family tracing?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	45
	<i>No</i>	17

## **Impact of vouchers on your organisation**

**Has your organisation:**

<b>Q30</b>	<b>Been able to find enough information to be able to advise clients about the vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	38
	<i>No</i>	28
	<i>Not applicable</i>	4
<b>Q31</b>	<b>Been able to liaise effectively with accommodation providers about vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	20
	<i>No</i>	39
	<i>Not applicable</i>	12
<b>Q32</b>	<b>Been able to liaise effectively with BIA about vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	21
	<i>No</i>	39
	<i>Not applicable</i>	11
<b>Q33</b>	<b>Incurred additional expenses to support clients on vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	53
	<i>No</i>	15
	<i>Not applicable</i>	2
<b>Q34</b>	<b>Collected donations from the local community to help support clients on vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	40
	<i>No</i>	23
	<i>Not applicable</i>	8
<b>Q35</b>	<b>Had to lobby for access to goods/services not covered by vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	41
	<i>No</i>	19
	<i>Not applicable</i>	9
<b>Q36</b>	<b>Received feedback from the community on impact of vouchers?</b>	
	<i>Yes</i>	32
	<i>No</i>	29
	<i>Not applicable</i>	9