

ILPA BRIEFING
House of Commons – Report, July 2009**Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill – Bill 115****Financial support for asylum seekers – New Clause 4**

Mr Neil
Gerrard

NC4

To move the following Clause:—

- ‘(1) The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (c. 33) is amended as follows.
- (2) In section 4(11)(b) omit “not”.’.

Purpose:

The Amendment would remove the bar on providing cash support to those refused asylum-seekers who are entitled to support under section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

Briefing:

Currently, those who are supported under section 4 are provided with vouchers. The UK Border Agency has committed itself to finding alternatives to vouchers because it accepts the position, long articulated by many, including ILPA, that vouchers are not a suitable or satisfactory means to provide support. The Agency’s acceptance of this position was made clear at the National Asylum Stakeholders’ Forum (NASF) meeting of 19 March 2009:

3.9 Matthew Coats explained in relation to payment cards that the UK Border Agency was trying to design a system that operates as smoothly as possible and that the Agency agreed with stakeholders in relation to the use of vouchers¹

In October 2008, the Refugee Council produced its *More Token Gestures*² report providing an up to date evaluation of the use of vouchers, which report was formally presented to the NASF, which is the UK Border Agency’s lead stakeholders’ forum on asylum and of which Matthew Coats, Head of Immigration at the UK Border Agency, is the co-chair. The report concluded:

...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

¹ From the minutes of the NASF meeting of 19 March 2009, available at:
<http://www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/aboutus/workingwithus/stakeholders/209086/nasfminutes/>

² The report is available at:
<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy/position/2008/section4vouchers.htm>

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and subsistence is causing unnecessary hardship and having a detrimental effect on many asylum seekers' physical and mental well-being...³

At the March 2009 meeting, the UK Border Agency introduced its plans to pilot an alternative to vouchers over the summer. It intends to replace vouchers with a pre-payment card. Since the meeting, the pilot has been delayed because the proposed card has not been considered acceptable to the major retailers. An alternative card is being considered, and it is intended that the pilot will still go ahead.

At the meeting, the UK Border Agency was asked why it was not also piloting the use of cash. This would enhance the value of the pilot because it would be possible to consider and compare cash and a pre-payment card in the same pilot, thereby giving an opportunity for the most reliable evaluation of these alternatives. Phil Woolas MP, the Minister for Borders and Immigration, was present at the meeting, and made the following observations:

3.17 Phil Woolas said that if there was evidence that cash was better he would keep an open mind but there were arguments in favour of prepayment cards over cash...⁴

Emily Miles, Director of the Case Resolution Directorate, UK Border Agency, added:

3.17... Emily Miles explained that the statutory legislation would have to be changed if cash was to be implemented. Emily Miles explained that a payment card would be administered centrally, be much more flexible and meant you could pay the exact money for every transaction. The plan is that local supermarkets would also accept the card. She planned to consult with stakeholders on more of the detail in due course⁵

It is, of course, correct that legislation requires changing in order to allow for the provision of cash. This is precisely what the amendment would do. It is timely, in that the pilot of a pre-payment card alternative to vouchers has had to be delayed but remains firmly intended. By this simple, and uncontroversial change in the legislation, the pilot could be expanded to include a trial of cash. All of which would be in keeping with the Minister's open mind on the subject, since the amendment would allow for cash to be trailed but would not require cash to be provided and thereby provide the evidence the Minister seeks.

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ILPA supports the Still Human Still Here campaign to end the destitution of refused asylum-seekers:

<http://stillhumanstillhere.wordpress.com/>

APPENDIX

Extracts from Hansard HC, 22 October 2001

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): I shall make a full statement to the House on nationality and asylum in the next fortnight⁶.

³ see report *op cit*, page 26

⁴ from the minutes *op cit*

⁵ from the minutes *op cit*

⁶ see http://www.publications.parliament.uk/cgi-bin/newhtml_hl?DB=semukparl&STEMMER=en&WORDS=blunkett%20david%20voucher&ALL=vouchers&ANY=&PHRASE=&CATEGORIES=&SIMPLE=&SPEAKER=Blunkett%20David

As part of that, I shall spell out the Government's approach to asylum in the years ahead, and shall publish the review of both **vouchers** and dispersal.

Mrs. Campbell: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on conducting that review. However, does he understand that asylum seekers find the process of making purchases

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with **vouchers** humiliating? In addition, they are unable to get full value for money because of shops' inability to give change on the **vouchers**. Will my right hon. Friend therefore make sure that any future system addresses both those problems and will he try to ensure a speedy conclusion to the review?

Mr. Blunkett: I am aware of the strong feelings—how could I not be?—about the operation of the system generally and the perception of **vouchers** in particular. That is precisely why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary initiated the **voucher** review, why we have taken our time to take the suggested changes on board and why I want to make any change part of a much broader package of measures.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Is the Home Secretary aware that many of us were impressed by his integrity when, shortly after taking office, he volunteered the information that the number of asylum seeker cases in the pipeline was not about 20,000, as had been stated before, but more than 40,000? However, it would help the House a great deal more if he gave us some explanation of how that massive statistical error occurred and who was responsible.

Mr. Blunkett: I am happy to do so. In 1996, the then Government put in place a computer system that soon collapsed; with it went the statistical base on which sensible calculation was made. It was not until we initiated a manual count that we discovered the complete mess-up following the collapse of the Siemens contract, entered into by Conservative Members. In those circumstances, of course we believed that transparency was the best way of proceeding, and that is how the Home Office team will proceed from now.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): In reviewing the **voucher** scheme, my right hon. Friend will, I am sure, take on board the humiliation and stigma which have been mentioned already. However, will he also look at the critical question of the value of **vouchers** or whatever system replaces them? Many people will not accept the

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replacement of the **voucher** system with another system that still leaves people living on significantly less than income support.

Mr. Blunkett: The full range of issues raised, not just in the review itself but in representations by Members of Parliament, voluntary organisations and those working with refugees, will be taken on board, including the importance of providing

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necessary support. That will all be done in the context of getting a system that has the trust of the British people and the confidence of those who have to operate it, and sends a clear signal to the rest of the world.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Does the Home Secretary agree that the asylum **voucher** system question involves the question of value for money for the taxpayer? To illustrate those administrative costs, can the Home Secretary give the administrative cost of each £1 of **vouchers** provided to asylum seekers?

Mr. Blunkett: No, I cannot, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman with those details. I am aware of the calculations done about three years ago when the **voucher** system was first mooted. The calculation by the Department of Social Security and those administering the **vouchers**—the £700:£425 ratio per 1,000 claimants—did not take into account the full cost of administering the social security system. It would therefore be better if I gave the hon. Gentleman an up-to-date reply.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Is my right hon. Friend aware that many of my constituents sincerely hope that the conclusions of the second review will result in the abolition of the **voucher** system? If it does not, and an alternative system is introduced, will he ensure that it is acceptable not only in high street shops but in high street markets?

Mr. Blunkett: I am aware of the problems that people have had in accessing retail outlets that accept **vouchers**. On my hon. Friend's first point, the key issue is to see the survival or abolition of the **voucher** system not in isolation but as part of a review of the working of the structure and system. We need a system which allows those operating it to do the job efficiently and effectively, and which is sensible, rational and humane for those who experience it day in, day out...