

**REPORT OF THE OPERATIONAL REVIEWS OF THE VOUCHER AND
DISPERSAL SCHEMES OF THE NATIONAL ASYLUM SUPPORT
SERVICE**

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 The United Kingdom has a long and proud tradition of providing refuge to those fleeing persecution. We have an international and moral obligation to protect refugees and we must discharge that duty properly and efficiently. The Government is committed to ensuring that the UK has an asylum system where the right decisions are taken with the minimum of delay.

1.1.2 Prior to 2000, asylum seekers were supported in an ad hoc and uncontrolled way. Those who declared their asylum application at their port of entry were eligible for income support, housing and council tax benefit. Other destitute asylum applicants were supported by local authority social services departments. With most asylum seekers declaring their asylum application in London or the South East an untenable burden was placed on London and Kent local authorities.

1.1.3 It was widely recognised that this uncoordinated system was unsatisfactory. In 2000, the Government set up a centrally administered national asylum support scheme to rationalise the system of providing support to destitute asylum seekers. The twin pillars of that system were:

- vouchers in place of social security benefits for asylum seekers; and
- a dispersal policy to ensure that asylum seekers' accommodation needs could be met in a way that relieved pressure on London and the South East.

1.1.4 Operation of the national asylum support scheme proved less straightforward than expected. Particular concerns arose at an early stage over the voucher scheme. In the autumn of 2000, the Government announced its intention to review the operation of the scheme. More recently, on 12 August this year, the Home Secretary announced a review of the dispersal arrangements.

1.1.5 This report provides a summary of the chief findings of the voucher and dispersal reviews. The findings need to be viewed against the background of recent immigration and asylum policy developments.

1.2 A new approach to immigration and asylum

1.2.1 The asylum situation has changed dramatically over recent years. The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act set in train a wide-ranging programme of reform. We have come a long way towards achieving more robust and transparent asylum and asylum support systems. However, a changing international situation and global patterns of mass migration have necessitated an overhaul of immigration and asylum policy.

1.2.2 Whilst considerable progress has been made in recent years to provide a credible and robust system of asylum support, the voucher and dispersal reviews have identified real problems with the current system. The Government therefore intends radically to reform the system of support for asylum seekers. Our key objective is to establish a system that is throughout tough, effective and credible, ensuring that those

who are fleeing persecution can have their claims considered fairly, and those who do not have a right to stay are removed from this country.

1.2.3 To achieve this we shall develop a system which combines tough new-style reporting centres and new accommodation centres, with increased appeals capacity and more removals centres. We shall establish tighter system management, with asylum seekers subject to stringent reporting requirements in reporting centres. In addition, we will set up 3,000 places in four new accommodation centres in the course of 2002, to trial the new approach. Decisions about the long term mix of facilities will be taken in the light of the emerging evidence about what works.

1.2.4 The new accommodation centres will provide full-board accommodation and other on-site education and health services for destitute asylum applicants while their claims are processed. This will remove the need for vouchers or benefits. Asylum seekers will receive a small personal cash allowance.

1.2.5 In addition, we will take steps to tackle abuse of the asylum system by people traffickers, through the creation of additional, legal avenues of controlled migration for both skilled and lower skilled migrants, where it is in the UK's interests; and a concerted effort to stamp out fraud and illegal working. These and other measures will be set out in detail in a forthcoming White Paper, with legislation as soon as Parliamentary time is available.

1.2.6 Subject to evidence of what works, we will aim to phase out the current system of asylum support. In the meantime, the Government will implement the recommendations arising from the voucher and dispersal reviews.

1.3 Voucher review

1.3.1 The voucher review looked at how the voucher support system was operating with a view to identifying deficiencies and proposing remedies where necessary. In carrying out the review both asylum seekers and other interested parties were consulted.

1.3.2 The review identified clear concerns about the operation of the scheme:

- availability of accurate and up-to-date information for asylum seekers in a language they (and/or anybody trying to help them) can understand;
- failure of shops to operate the voucher scheme correctly;
- location of post offices where asylum seekers have to collect vouchers and of retailers accepting vouchers; and
- administrative and operational problems resulting in a poor service by NASS to asylum seekers.

1.3.3 As a result it made a number of operational recommendations aimed at meeting these concerns. These are set out in Annex A, together with an indication of the action that has or is being taken in response to each recommendation. They include measures to:

- improve communication to asylum seekers and ensure they have the information they need to understand the voucher scheme;

- tackle concerns about retailers' performance to ensure they operate the scheme correctly;
- extend the network of shops and post offices; and
- improve the service NASS offers to asylum seekers.

1.3.4 Comments from people consulted during the review also included allegations of stigmatisation of asylum seekers caused by vouchers; concerns about the impact of the no change rule; and a number of asylum seekers said that they suffered embarrassment using vouchers. The main comments made during the consultation exercise, together with the results of the fieldwork investigating asylum seekers' views are summarised at Annex E.

1.3.5 Responses to the consultation also revealed a number of misconceptions and misunderstandings about the voucher system which this publication provides a useful opportunity to deal with. A note on these is at Annex B.

1.3.6 The tables at Annex D show that the monetary value of the package of support under the NASS arrangements is broadly comparable to that provided in other northern European countries. However, some asylum seekers and respondents to the consultation exercise perceived existing levels of support to be inadequate, particularly in view of the limitations imposed by vouchers – the lack of flexibility and the no-change rule which can make it difficult for asylum seekers to budget.

1.3.7 In the light of these concerns, the Government has decided in the short term to alter the balance of cash and vouchers received by asylum seekers, so that asylum seekers receive more cash and correspondingly fewer vouchers. As a consequence, the cash element of support will increase from £10 to £14 per person, per week.

1.3.8 The Government has also reviewed the current levels of support, which for adults have been static since April 2000 and for children have not increased since December 2000. Support levels for adults will be uprated in line with the April 2001 increase in income support. Children of asylum seekers will also have their support increased so that they revert to receiving the full income support rate, as they did when NASS was first introduced. Asylum seekers also have their utility bills paid by NASS, and the full support package includes fully furnished accommodation (these issues are addressed in Annex B). Taken together, it is intended that the proposed changes will provide additional flexibility to asylum seekers supported under the NASS arrangements, making it easier for them to shop to meet their needs and reducing any problems they experience.

1.3.9 In addition to these immediate changes, and in the context of the introduction of the new smart cards and other measures, the current voucher system will be superseded by a more robust but less socially divisive system by early autumn next year. The Home Secretary is exploring with colleagues the potential for automated credit transfer and other mechanisms to provide support for asylum seekers.

1.4 Dispersal review

1.4.1 The dispersal review has considered the history and operation of the NASS dispersal process since April 2000 and has made recommendations to improve the

efficiency and effectiveness of the dispersal programme. The review has also identified any further issues relating to the management of the dispersal of asylum-seekers.

1.4.2 During the course of the review, meetings were held with stakeholders from the public and private sectors, voluntary and charitable organisations, accommodation providers and NASS senior managers. External published research was also reviewed and responses to the Home Secretary's announcement of the review were noted.

1.4.4 Whilst not wishing to re-engineer the principle of dispersal (in view of the need to continue the successful policy of relieving pressure on London and the South East) the review has identified many concerns about the operation of dispersal and problems that have resulted. The main concerns that have been raised are:

- the impact of dispersal of large numbers of asylum seekers on local communities, including increased racial tensions and burdens on local services;
- the nature and condition of accommodation, in particular the use of private landlords and sub-contractors and the monitoring of accommodation standards; and
- the problems caused when some asylum seekers are dispersed without the local authority being consulted or notified, leading to difficulties with social integration and access to public services.

1.4.5 In addition, there were concerns about:

- the lack of consultation between private sector accommodation providers and local authorities for accommodation with a capacity of fewer than six beds;
- the failure to take into account individual needs and the reluctance of asylum seekers to be dispersed;
- the poor explanation of the dispersal process to asylum seekers;
- the lack of contact with asylum seekers after dispersal;
- the weak control of processes and case information;
- the lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities by the agencies involved; and
- the lack of co-ordination with the management of non-NASS dispersed asylum seekers.

1.4.6 As a result, a number of specific recommendations have been made, aimed at meeting the concerns listed above. The key recommendations are based on the introduction of a network of induction centres to:

- improve asylum seekers' initial involvement with NASS;
- provide taut management of the critical entry point into the NASS and asylum process; and
- ensure that asylum seekers are properly briefed, in their own language and in clear terms, about the processes affecting them.

1.4.7 The review further recommends that:

- dispersal is undertaken within a managed process, with the involvement of trained staff to determine the most appropriate dispersal location for each asylum seeker, based on personal circumstances;

- NASS reverts to clustering asylum seekers in dispersal areas on the basis of language;
- there is improved liaison with local authorities and other local agencies to ensure delivery of services;
- regional managers are empowered to provide more responsive decision-making in support of local agencies, encompassing all dispersed asylum seekers, not just those who are NASS supported; and
- NASS maintains greater contact with dispersed asylum seekers, including ensuring they have an appropriate type and quality of accommodation.

1.4.8 NASS will also be required to take a number of measures aimed at offering a better service to asylum seekers and other stakeholders. These include:

- tighter internal management of processes, contractors, the voluntary sector and accommodation providers;
- changes to procedures and regulations to enable better integration of those who are recognised as refugees or granted exceptional leave to remain and transfer from NASS into the community; and
- closer integration of NASS with other Immigration and Nationality Directorate operations and closer joint working between NASS, the voluntary sector, accommodation providers, the police and local authorities.

1.5 **Conclusions of the reviews**

1.5.1 Both reviews identified a range of operational issues that needed to be addressed and suggested a number of recommendations aimed at improving the operation of the voucher and dispersal schemes. However, it is clear from public and stakeholder responses to the reviews that there are some serious problems with the voucher and dispersal policy. These are:

- community tensions – the dispersal of significant numbers of asylum seekers to an area can considerably alter the ethnic mix of the local population and can exacerbate racial tensions, particularly if asylum seekers are perceived to be receiving preferential treatment and a drain on local services;
- fraud – the current voucher system is vulnerable to fraud, for example by double-claiming or by continuing to claim support whilst working. In addition, there are indications that vouchers are vulnerable to black market activity. Some dispersal accommodation is sub-let or left empty; and
- stigma – although two thirds of asylum seekers said they had few difficulties when spending their vouchers, there is a clear perception that vouchers are stigmatising.

1.5.2 The operational recommendations described in Annexes A and C set out what can be done and what is being done to address the issues identified by the reviews above. Measures include improving and refining NASS processes and working with the voucher supplier, Sodexho Pass UK Ltd, local authorities and other stakeholders to reduce stigma, address community concerns and rigorously investigate and prosecute fraud.

1.5.3 However, as foreshadowed in the introduction to this document, the Government has concluded that the combination of inherent difficulties with the current system and the changing global situation necessitates a radical overhaul of the asylum system.

Subject to the emerging evidence about what works in the proposed new approach, the aim is to phase out the current system and replace it with a new, more tightly-controlled regime designed to speed up the decision-making process, reduce fraud, increase the rate of removals, and ensure that those who are granted refugee status are properly integrated into society, while offering value for money.

1.5.4 The trial accommodation centres will remove the need for cash benefits or vouchers by providing full-board accommodation and other services for destitute asylum seekers while their claims are processed. The cessation of direct financial support to asylum seekers will reduce the scope for fraud, whilst the removal of the current voucher purchase scheme will end the stigma that is perceived to be associated with it. Consistent with similar systems in other EU Member States, the intention is to provide those asylum seekers in the 3,000 accommodation centre places with a small cash allowance to meet their personal needs.

1.5.5 The Government believes that the principle of dispersal – moving asylum seekers out of the South-East and dispersing them on a rational basis around the country – remains correct. The trial accommodation centres will build on this principle, but will also seek to relieve the community tensions that have become a feature of dispersal in some areas. On-site provision of services, such as health and education, will remove the problem of dispersed asylum seekers placing burdens on local provision, often in deprived areas; and will also provide more tailored support for asylum seekers, reducing the sense of isolation that many of them currently feel.

1.5.6 In the immediate future, the Government will implement the operational improvements arising from the voucher and dispersal reviews.

1.5.7 The Government intends to begin by implementing a series of induction centres. These are a major recommendation of the dispersal review. Induction centres will remove the need for asylum seekers to be accommodated initially in emergency, bed and breakfast type accommodation as happens in the current system. Instead, asylum seekers will have a structured entry point into the asylum system. During a two to ten day stay in an induction centre, applicants will be briefed about asylum processes, have an initial health check, receive information about the availability of legal advice and preparation for their move on to dispersal accommodation or, ultimately, to an accommodation centre. The aim is to provide a controlled and supportive gateway to the asylum process, which will provide a good foundation for the move to a new and enhanced system of asylum support.

2. VOUCHER REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 The review of the voucher system was set up following representations about the system and its operation. The review was based on a fieldwork study with asylum seekers, representations from stakeholders and other interested parties and examination of the National Asylum Support Service's (NASS) relevant processes and practices. It looked at how the NASS asylum voucher support scheme was operating with a view to identifying deficiencies and proposing remedies where necessary.

2.2 Asylum seekers' experiences

2.2.1 The chief findings from interviews with asylum seekers were that:

- **information** is a key area and its content and format influence the effective operation of the voucher scheme. The need for accessible and up-to-date information in a language that the asylum seeker is likely to understand is axiomatic;
- **collecting vouchers** has been a problem for a number of asylum seekers, in many instances arising from uncoordinated changes of address. Others have found the distance they have to travel to the post office too far;
- **using vouchers** – a number of asylum seekers said they had difficulties when spending their vouchers and there was evidence of retailers not operating the scheme correctly. Many asylum seekers interviewed reported feeling embarrassed using vouchers and at a practical level reported a lack of budget shops that would accept vouchers. Problems were also identified as regards the range of goods and services that could be obtained using vouchers; and
- **the value of vouchers and the lack of receipt of change** caused concerns. Asylum seekers said that they had to buy things they did not want in order to avoid wasting some of the voucher value and the no change policy was unpopular. On the other hand, few of the asylum seekers interviewed specified how much change they lost. Views on the usefulness of lower denomination vouchers being made available were mixed, with few considering that the introduction of these would be useful.

2.3 Consultation with stakeholders and others

2.3.1 Responses by stakeholders and other interested parties to the written consultation exercise contained a mixture of opinions and evidence. Chart E1 in Annex E summarises the main points that were made. The chief concerns were:

- **allegations about discrimination, racial harassment and stigmatisation** caused by the voucher scheme (though no police force that responded reported that asylum seekers had been victims of crimes as a result of the voucher scheme);
- **the no change policy** – which was perceived as unfair and restrictive;

- **the location of post offices and shops** with complaints about the distance from where asylum seekers live in relation to the post offices and shops that they have to use to collect and spend their vouchers; and
- **administrative and operational issues involving the distribution of vouchers** including failure to provide correct amounts of emergency vouchers; non-delivery of vouchers and difficulties with contacting NASS over voucher queries.

2.3.2 Respondents also reiterated concerns raised by asylum seekers about using vouchers: the lack of choice of shops; and the range of goods and services that can be purchased.

2.4 Recommendations and conclusions

2.4.1 **Operational recommendations:** In the light of the consultation process, a number of operational recommendations were made. These are set out at Annex A together with information about the Government's response to each one.

2.4.2 As indicated in the first chapter of this report, the recommendations listed here and in Annex A need to be seen as short-term improvements. They are intended to deal with the immediate difficulties associated with the voucher scheme during the transitional period while more fundamental changes to the asylum support system are introduced.

2.4.3 In broad terms, steps have and are being taken by NASS with its contractor Sodexho Pass UK Ltd to:

- improve retailers' knowledge of the scheme so that they operate it better;
- extend the network of retailers accepting NASS vouchers;
- increase the number of post offices from which asylum seekers can collect vouchers; and
- review the languages in which information about vouchers is provided by Sodexho.

2.4.4 In addition, NASS itself has taken measures aimed at offering a better service to asylum seekers. These include:

- the provision of an improved voucher enquiry service;
- a review of the languages in which information is provided to asylum seekers; and
- caseworker training and new processes to enable voucher matters to be dealt with more efficiently and effectively.

2.4.5 **Change, lower denomination vouchers and the value of support:** As reflected in the consultation results, a major and early criticism of the voucher scheme was the impact of the no-change rule. When established, the review was specifically tasked with considering the issues of change and lower denomination vouchers and whether these might make the voucher scheme more user-friendly for asylum seekers.

2.4.6 As set out in paragraph 2.2.1 above and in Annex E, the evidence obtained during the review suggests that asylum seekers are not losing out to any great extent as a result of the no-change rule. However, asylum seekers did say that they had to

buy things they may not want, to avoid wasting unspent portions of the voucher.

2.4.7 The review considered alternatives such as providing change up to the value of 99 pence, which is consistent with most retailers' own store voucher policies, or providing a lower, limited amount such as 10 pence. Neither option is ideal. Rules would have to be set about whether the change limit applied per voucher or per transaction, which would create additional complexities for asylum seekers and retailers working out how much change was due. The review fieldwork identified a lack of awareness amongst retailers about how the voucher scheme operated and indicated that asylum seekers are already experiencing difficulties at the checkout. It would not be sensible to add to these existing problems.

2.4.8 The change issue also needs to be considered in conjunction with lower denomination vouchers because the two are inter-related – the higher voucher denominations are, the less flexibility an asylum seeker may have to purchase one-off, perishable items, such as a pint of milk. However, vouchers are currently available in £5, £1 and 50p denominations and, when consulted, asylum seekers expressed no clear preference for particular denomination vouchers. Some thought lower denomination vouchers might help; others felt that having to sort through a large pile of low value vouchers would add to their difficulties at the checkout. Instead, asylum seekers indicated that they would prefer an increased proportion of cash to vouchers.

2.4.9 The Government has considered this, together with the evidence that certain goods and services – such as public transport, school trips and launderettes – cannot be purchased with vouchers. The Government believes that there is a case for altering the balance of cash and vouchers, so that asylum seekers receive more cash and correspondingly fewer vouchers. Accordingly, the cash element of support will be increased from £10 to £14 per person, per week.

2.4.10 The Government has also reviewed the current levels of support for asylum seekers. The tables at Annex D demonstrate that the package of support under the NASS arrangements is broadly comparable in monetary value to that provided in other northern European countries. However, in the light of comments from asylum seekers and others and taking into account that support levels for adult asylum seekers have been static since April 2000 and for children since December 2000, the Government has decided to increase total voucher support levels. For adults, support will go up in line with the most recent increase in income support, which took place in April 2001. Support for the children of asylum seekers will be increased to match income support rates for children, which went up on 22 October. These changes and the increase in the cash element of asylum support will be implemented as soon as the necessary administrative steps can be taken and the Regulations laid before Parliament.

2.4.11 Together, it is intended that these changes will provide additional flexibility to those supported under the NASS arrangements. It will be easier to combine vouchers and cash to make up the exact value of a shopping bill; and there will be scope for increased access to goods unavailable with vouchers. As a consequence, it will be more straightforward for asylum seekers to shop to meet their needs, thus reducing the stigma associated with vouchers during the transitional period until the current voucher scheme is phased out.

3. DISPERSAL REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 On the 12 August 2001, the Home Secretary announced an internal review of the NASS dispersal arrangements. The scope of the review was to:

- review the history and operation of the NASS dispersal process since April 2000;
- review and make recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the dispersal programme; and
- identify further issues relating to the management of the dispersal of asylum-seekers.

3.1.2 The review did not address the principle of dispersal, but the operation of that policy.

3.1.3 Programmes have been in place, primarily within NASS, since the early part of this financial year to improve the dispersal processes and their outcomes. This review builds on that work and brings together a range of options, many of which were already expected to be taken forward. The recommendations described in this report will be implemented quickly, paving the way for the introduction of tighter system management, with asylum seekers subject to a stringent reporting regime, and the development of accommodation centres to an initial capacity of 3,000. This will provide the Government with the opportunity to trial a system of asylum support now prevalent in other European countries. Many of the lessons learnt from the NASS dispersal experience will be relevant and will be taken into account in the development of the new system.

3.2 NASS dispersal

3.2.1 The key stages of the NASS dispersal process, introduced in April 2000, are:

- lodging of application for NASS support;
- allocation to emergency accommodation;
- allocation to dispersal accommodation;
- travel to dispersal accommodation; and
- departure from NASS accommodation.

These activities run in parallel with the consideration of the applicant's asylum application.

3.2.2 The original intention was to disperse asylum seekers to cluster areas outside the South East where their language (or at least one they understood) was spoken. In practice, NASS has had great difficulty in ensuring that dispersals are undertaken on this basis, even from the outset.

3.2.3 Dispersals are now arranged in large groups. Voluntary agencies, responsible for the emergency accommodation, identify groups for transfer. Accommodation providers receive these groups of applicants and decide where individual asylum seekers will be located.

3.3 Key findings

3.3.1 Dispersal has relieved the extreme pressure experienced by London and the South East of the UK. There are examples of the process working very well; dispersal arrangements in Kent and Humberside provide examples of good practice, through proactive management of the dispersal process. The presence of NASS out-reach workers at emergency accommodation has encouraged travel and ensures improved data accuracy. However, there have been a number of concerns expressed and problems identified, which require review and improvement. High level concerns that can be identified are set out below.

3.3.2 **Local communities** in dispersed locations have been significantly affected. For example:

- in one city, accommodation selected was adjacent to housing estates with intolerance of all non-locals. The number of asylum seekers dispersed has doubled the existing local ethnic minority population. Local police were not informed in advance; and
- in another city, the indigenous population perceived that the dispersed asylum seekers were better off than themselves. However, great efforts to integrate the two communities have resulted in strong ties being developed on the ground.

3.3.3 Asylum seekers who have been dispersed have not been fully informed of the process of dispersal, where they are to be dispersed to, or sufficiently informed of accommodation and services they will be provided with. There has also been a lack of information provided to local authorities and other local agencies about who and how many asylum seekers are to be dispersed to their areas to enable them to make relevant preparations.

3.3.4 Other local service providers, including schools and GPs, have been poorly informed of the needs of arriving asylum seekers and have struggled to respond speedily to the additional demands. As a result, insufficient services have been provided to the dispersed asylum seekers and additional pressures have been placed on existing services, impacting adversely on local communities.

3.3.5 The failure by NASS to adhere to the policy of dispersal with language clustering has placed additional pressures upon local communities. By failing to disperse in accordance with policy, NASS has caused asylum seekers to be dispersed to areas without established communities sharing the same language. As a result, many asylum seekers had no potential networks for seeking support and integration with local communities was consequently harder to achieve.

3.3.6 Failure to disperse on the basis of language has caused additional problems in the provision of services. For example, in a number of cluster areas the language spoken by asylum seekers did not match the services available in local schools. This has led to increase in expenses to create the appropriate services, or re-dispersal has been undertaken in an attempt to rectify the problem.

3.3.7 **Condition and nature of accommodation** used has been of significant concern. Although much good practice can be identified, there are inconsistencies in the quality of accommodation and support services that are provided by both private

and public sector accommodation providers. Although allegations have been made, there is no evidence to indicate that the public sector provision is substantially better than that of the private sector.

3.3.8 One of the reasons cited for inconsistency in provision is lack of clarity over what is expected from accommodation providers, especially in terms of support services to aid integration. There have been allegations of localised problems with accommodation standards including, for example, concerns about old and bad smelling carpets, mould on walls, damp and repairs not being completed. In a number of areas, there appear to be no effective channels for highlighting problems with accommodation, exacerbated by a lack of interpretation services and a failure to respond speedily to improve accommodation when problems are identified. These highlight the need to monitor accommodation more effectively and for NASS to take effective action when accommodation does not meet appropriate standards.

3.3.9 A further concern is that, at present, accommodation providers are under no duty to consult with local authorities about the use of dispersal accommodation with a capacity of fewer than six beds. However the use of a number of small accommodation units within a locality may have a significant impact on the demand for services in that area and on local community relations. In some instances, use of such accommodation appears to have conflicted with local regeneration objectives, exacerbated by the failure to consult.

3.3.10 **Concerns regarding the management of accommodation** have been raised. Accommodation management was a major challenge for NASS as a new organisation. Increasing pressures on emergency accommodation in London led to the need to change from individual to group dispersal but record keeping and IT systems could not fully support this. As a result, NASS has failed to accurately record who has been dispersed, where they have been dispersed to, who was in the accommodation and consequently what accommodation was available. In addition:

- some asylum seekers have been moved within and between cluster areas by accommodation providers without informing NASS. Other asylum seekers have failed to travel to dispersal accommodation but this has not been accurately recorded;
- the number of properties contracted for use but unoccupied ('voids') needs to be reduced; and
- the lack of control of accommodation and its use, together with unnecessarily high levels of 'voids', represent a potential for fraud.

3.3.11 Other concerns identified by the review include:

- **lack of control** over arrangements for emergency accommodation. Delays between the voluntary sector moving people into or out of emergency accommodation and NASS being informed led to inaccuracies in the data held on IT systems about asylum seekers' whereabouts and accommodation availability;
- **difficulties from the outset in transferring significant number of asylum seekers out of London** due to changes to asylum seekers' needs and reluctance to be dispersed. Spot booked accommodation became necessary to meet needs, but very difficult to disperse from. This led to an increase in the numbers of asylum seekers in London and the South East with consequent disruption to services;

- **incomplete briefings**, combined with a lack of information in relevant languages, meant asylum seekers were not well informed about the process of dispersal;
- **a number of NASS problems** concerned with processes, accountability and responsibility, management and case information;
- **voluntary sector** organisations, although not all, not demonstrating a clear understanding of their own role, with potential conflicts between acting as agents of NASS and providing an advisory role to the asylum seeker;
- **little NASS contact** with asylum seekers once they have been dispersed to accommodation outside London and the South East;
- **un-coordinated process for supporting asylum seekers leaving NASS accommodation** following the grant of leave or a negative decision on their application, including delays in securing National Insurance numbers;
- **arrangements for managing** asylum seekers not supported by NASS but dispersed as a result of earlier arrangements are not co-ordinated with NASS activities; and
- **lack of understanding** or consistent view of the dispersal process and roles of individuals within the process, by NASS and associated agencies.

3.4 Recommendations

3.4.1 The detailed recommendations resulting from the review can be found at Annex C. The key recommendations fall within three broad areas addressed in the following sections:

3.5 Induction centres

3.5.1 The main recommendation is that dispersal is to be undertaken within a managed process, with the involvement of skilled professionals who will determine the most appropriate dispersal location for each asylum seeker based on personal circumstances. The initial involvement with NASS is to be improved with the introduction of a small network of induction centres to provide a controlled and structured process and taut management of the critical entry into the NASS and asylum process.

3.5.2 The benefits of introducing induction centres include the potential for better integration with the asylum consideration process as well as ensuring greater control of NASS processes. In addition, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate Integrated Casework Directorate (ICD) could at an early stage, arrange an interview date for asylum seekers, resulting in a significant reduction in the time taken to process asylum applications. Those who are dispersed would all be interviewed in Liverpool or Leeds and would be made aware of their interview date before leaving the induction centre for their dispersal accommodation. This removes the need for asylum seekers to travel up and down the country for interview. It also addresses the current problem of asylum seekers missing interviews because of the present priority given to dispersal, over ICD functions.

3.5.3 The use of induction centres should also obviate the need for emergency bed & breakfast accommodation. This will lead to reduced costs and will relieve the tensions with the local communities in emergency accommodation localities.

3.5.4 Through a vigorous and consistent identification of needs in an induction centre, dispersal suitability can be achieved more effectively and efficiently, ensuring the asylum seeker is dispersed to the most appropriate cluster where the recipient accommodation provider is informed and prepared for the needs of the arriving asylum seeker.

3.5.5 Management will be pro-active. It is envisaged that induction centres would house asylum applicants for two to ten days, once they have lodged an application. Full board facilities would be provided, thus, there will be no need for the provision of cash or vouchers for the duration of stay.

3.5.6 Further work is needed to determine how many of the screening functions could eventually be carried out in induction centres. But the following functions could be introduced in the short term:

- all NASS processes, including means testing and allocation to dispersal accommodation;
- a basic medical examination for each applicant, allowing for any special needs to be identified and addressed;
- briefing, in an appropriate language, on NASS and asylum processes, backed up by multi-lingual written information and on-site staff to explain processes further if necessary;
- provision of a list of the legal representatives available in the area to which the applicant is to be dispersed;
- provision of local information about the dispersal area;
- issue of a letter inviting the applicant to their substantive asylum interview (possibly with a travel warrant); and
- consideration of any reasons put forward by the applicant about why they should not be dispersed.

3.5.7 The introduction of such induction centres would be consistent with practice in other European countries, as well as building on best practice in Kent and Yorkshire and Humberside, which has been identified by stakeholders as worthy of replication.

3.6 Relationship with local agencies

3.6.1 A further key recommendation is to develop the strength of the NASS managerial structure in the regions. The role of the regional manager will be clarified and the team strengthened, to provide a more comprehensive service. The improvements to the current arrangements will include:

- regional managers providing better information to local authorities and other local agencies, improving communication and understanding throughout their region;
- giving regional managers the authority and autonomy to tackle local problems and pro-actively manage issues within their region; and
- requiring regional managers to monitor best practice, and ensure consistency between regions.

3.6.2 The regional managers' responsibilities will include:

- ensuring local authorities are fully informed of developments in their area in regard to dispersal, as well as encouraging greater involvement by them;
- ensuring that all stakeholders are fully involved in dispersal planning and other issues to ensure the timely delivery of the full range of services needed by asylum seekers;
- holding meetings, regionally and nationally, with all parties involved in the process. This will create regular fora to aid communication and integration, to identify best practice and for further development of processes; and
- ensuring that arrangements for managing asylum seekers who are not supported by NASS, but dispersed as a result of earlier arrangements, are co-ordinated with NASS activities. This will be facilitated by greater communication with relevant local authorities and other agencies responsible for those arrangements.

3.6.3 These improvements to the NASS management structure within the regions will aid identification of the appropriate accommodation and service needs for asylum seekers dispersed to those regions and aid successful integration of asylum seekers granted refugee status.

3.7 Develop contact management

3.7.1 The third key recommendation is to provide greater contact with asylum seekers in dispersal locations by expansion of the NASS outreach teams.

3.7.2 Outreach teams in dispersal areas will:

- facilitate receipt of dispersed asylum seekers and ensure timely information flows;
- maintain contact between the asylum seeker and the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND), ensuring smoother and more informed processing of asylum applications;
- maintain contact with the asylum seeker so that IND have accurate, timely and regular information about applicants' whereabouts and status; and
- facilitate liaison between all parties, diverting queries to appropriate departments/agencies.

3.7.3 Outreach workers in dispersal locations will also monitor quality, nature and use of accommodation on the ground. As a result, outreach workers will also be responsible for:

- pro-active management of accommodation quality, reporting any apparent problems with accommodation and ensuring consistent quality and respect of contractual duties;
- monitoring occupancy of accommodation and ensuring the update and preservation of accurate IT information; and
- pro-active local management of accommodation within clusters to identify and minimise "voids" in accommodation, reducing costs and the potential for fraud.

3.7.4 Explanation of the role and services provided by outreach workers will be part of the briefing to asylum seekers during the initial phase within the planned, new, network of induction centres.

3.7.5 The introduction of outreach teams to all dispersal regions will widen established good practice currently being developed in some pilot locations where the introduction of outreach workers has been beneficial to all agencies involved. This is because asylum seekers are provided with a better service; accommodation providers and local agencies have an accessible avenue for information and advice; IND are able to process asylum applications more speedily; and the Immigration Service are better informed of the progress of specific applications.

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM THE VOUCHER REVIEW

The review identified a range of practical improvements to existing arrangements. All have been taken forward by NASS and suppliers. Many have already been implemented. The recommendations are listed below, together with a brief explanation of the action NASS is taking or has taken in response to each recommendation.

Retailers

Recommendation 1 - Improve retailers' awareness of the voucher scheme to smooth voucher transactions and minimise the stigma associated with using vouchers.

Sodexho Pass UK Ltd, the voucher supplier, has implemented an improved system of monitoring and evaluating retailer performance, with a view to minimising delays at the checkout and retailer error.

Recommendation 2 - Ensure that the new 2001 voucher design states clearly that the voucher can be exchanged for any goods.

The text on the latest voucher design has been enlarged slightly and emboldened to make it clearer to retailers that vouchers can be exchanged for any goods.

Recommendation 3 - Remind retailers of the importance of treating asylum seekers sensitively and their equal treatment obligations.

Sodexho Pass UK Ltd has written to all affiliated stores. It has also been asked to report regularly the results of its 'mystery shopper' surveys in order to indicate the quality of service being provided by retailers.

Recommendation 4 - Map the distribution of shops (by type of shop) against the NASS accommodation areas, identify and remedy any gaps in order to improve the range and number of shops available to asylum seekers.

Sodexho Pass UK Ltd has completed this analysis and is actively seeking the participation of more retailers in certain sectors, for instance market traders.

Recommendation 5 - Provide asylum seekers with up-to-date, local information about participating shops in their area.

Asylum seekers now receive details of the shops nearest to their dispersal accommodation with the "welcome letter" they receive from Sodexho Pass UK Ltd informing them how to collect their vouchers.

Recommendation 6 - Implement an industry standard (EAN 13) barcode on vouchers, to enable automatic scanning at the checkout.

The voucher design now incorporates a barcode, so retailers may reduce the transaction time at the checkout by scanning the voucher.

Post offices

Recommendation 7 - Map post offices against dispersal accommodation and consider how additional or alternative post offices might be brought on stream to improve the network.

Analysis has shown that 98% of the addresses of asylum seekers receiving vouchers are within three miles of a post office. NASS is working with its partner Sodexho Pass UK Ltd to bring additional post offices on stream in certain areas. In the past year, over 150 post offices have been added to the voucher distribution network.

Recommendation 8 – Invite Post Office Counters Ltd to become a trading partner to enable asylum seekers to purchase items, including television licences, from post offices.

Post Office Counters Ltd (POCL) have refused an invitation to become a trading partner. The Government will continue discussions with POCL as well as exploring alternative avenues for asylum seekers to purchase television licences.

Recommendation 9 - Ensure that arrangements for notifying asylum seekers that post offices are closed on public holidays take account of public holidays in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Information about public holiday closure of shops and post offices in the UK is now included in the multi-lingual information leaflet sent to all asylum seekers.

Recommendation 10 - Implement a bar-code scanning system within post offices as soon as possible to provide efficiency gains for post offices and Sodexho Pass and to enable NASS to have real time information about which voucher packs have been issued.

Post Office Counters Ltd have been approached about this, but have indicated that they could not implement such a scheme earlier than Autumn 2002.

Information provided to asylum seekers

Recommendation 11 - Make copies of all the foreign language versions of the information leaflet available for reception assistants to hand out at pre-travel briefings, not just the English version. This will help asylum seekers to understand the voucher system before they need to start using it.

Multi-lingual leaflets are now available in emergency accommodation and prior to travel.

Recommendation 12 - Review the default language system (i.e. the languages NASS and Sodexho IT systems default to if information is not available in an applicant's first language) to identify alternative default languages, more appropriate than English.

A review of the languages in which NASS information to asylum seekers is available has been undertaken. To implement the recommendation it would be necessary to anticipate users' preferred choice of alternative language, if their own first language is unavailable. In some cases this may be possible to do with some confidence. However, it seems likely to remain better in the majority of cases to provide information in English where it is not available in the asylum seeker's own language. This choice may assist users' advisers.

Recommendation 13 - Review the languages available to determine whether, by adding a few more languages, NASS could enable substantially more than the existing 50% of applicants to receive an information leaflet in their own language.
Information about the NASS system is now available in 18 languages.

Recommendation 14 - Review the format and content of the information leaflet that is provided to all NASS-supported asylum seekers.

The leaflet has been reviewed and reprinted in a revised format.

Recommendation 15 - Publicise the existence of the Sodexho helpline to asylum seekers.

Multi-lingual details of the Sodexho helpline are now sent to asylum seekers with their initial "welcome letter".

Recommendation 16 - Review the languages in which the helpline is provided to ensure they are the top ten most appropriate languages, plus English.

A review has been carried out. This suggests that Kurdish and Tamil should replace Spanish and Slovak as helpline languages. If analysis of current data confirms this, the change will be implemented with effect from the last quarter of 2001.

Recommendation 17 - Introduce a dedicated voucher enquiries line, with increased staff, to deal promptly with voucher enquiries.

An improved voucher enquiry service was introduced from January 2001. NASS now has a target of issuing emergency vouchers to eligible cases within 24 hours of receipt of their call, which it is meeting in 99% of cases.

Recommendation 18 - Ensure asylum seekers are provided with clear information about the no-change rule.

Information about the no change rule was already printed on the face of the voucher and is now included in the multi-lingual information sent to asylum seekers.

Recommendation 19 - Produce the Sodexho Pass "welcome letter" in multi-lingual format to aid asylum seekers' understanding of the voucher scheme.

The "welcome letter" now includes a multi-lingual insert with information about the multi-lingual helplines available for asylum seekers.

Recommendation 20 - Include the Home Office crest, which asylum seekers will be familiar with from the NASS letter of support handed to them at their pre-travel briefing, on the Sodexho "welcome letter".

The Home Office crest now appears on the welcome letter, with a view to helping asylum seekers understand that this is an important letter which needs to be retained.

NASS administrative issues

Recommendation 21 - Take steps to restore the integrity of the NASS address database, so that important asylum support documents are sent to the applicant's correct address. Put procedures in place to ensure that the database remains accurate and up-to-date.

NASS has dedicated substantial resources to restoring and maintaining the integrity of its databases. NASS data is now routinely compared with information held by accommodation providers and anomalies identified and reconciled.

Recommendation 22 – Minimise NASS caseworker error by ensuring that all caseworkers are appropriately trained and providing regular updates/refresher training sessions. Provide focused training targeted on frequently occurring errors.

NASS has developed and implemented a caseworking guide, which is combined with face to face training targeted at the most common mistakes.

Recommendation 23 - NASS should put an effective system of emergency support in place as soon as possible, to provide a safety net in the event that NASS's main processes fail.

NASS is consulting the local authority regional consortia with a view to contracting with them to provide emergency support based on existing out of hours and homelessness provision. The aim is to provide immediate support for short periods, for example, if vouchers do not arrive, to cover the period until emergency vouchers can be sent from NASS. Negotiations with two consortia are at an advanced stage.

Recommendation 24 - NASS should develop and implement a system of continuous improvement as soon as possible, to minimise the scope for similar process failures occurring in the future.

NASS is monitoring and reviewing its performance. It is developing and refining performance measurement systems and is committed to continuous improvement.

VOUCHER REVIEW: NASS VOUCHERS - MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

- As well as a number of legitimate concerns, which are dealt with elsewhere in this report, responses to the Home Office consultation exercise indicated that there are misconceptions about the NASS voucher scheme. This annex seeks to set the record straight by addressing some of those misunderstandings.
- NASS is not the first organisation to use vouchers to support asylum seekers. The NASS voucher scheme was developed from voucher schemes used by local authorities prior to the introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. In many cases, the voucher schemes used by local authorities were much more restrictive than the NASS scheme. Many of the misunderstandings surrounding the NASS scheme can be traced back to local authority schemes.
- The chart below lists a number of frequently held misconceptions.

Misunderstanding	The Correct Position
Asylum seekers are restricted to one supermarket.	A range of shops including smaller retailers, charity shops and specialist shops have signed up to the NASS voucher scheme. Across the country, around 25,000 retail outlets accept Buy-Pass vouchers.
NASS-supported asylum seekers receive all their weekly support in one voucher.	Asylum seekers currently receive £10 cash per person per week and the remainder of their support in a combination of voucher denominations designed to ensure they have a good spread of high and low value vouchers. The highest value of voucher is £5; the lowest 50p.
Asylum seekers' support is worth only 70% of basic income support.	70% reflects the face value of the vouchers. The NASS support package also includes fully furnished accommodation (including bedding, crockery, cutlery, kitchen utensils, etc.), with all utility bills paid by NASS.
There are restrictions on the goods that asylum seekers may purchase with vouchers.	It is up to the individuals concerned to determine how they spend their vouchers, which can be exchanged for any of the goods available at participating stores.
Asylum seekers cannot use vouchers to buy toys for their children.	Although asylum seekers cannot complain they are destitute because they are unable to buy toys for their children, they may use their vouchers to purchase toys. This is no different to the position of those people settled here who are reliant on public funds for support.

Misunderstanding	The Correct Position
Asylum seekers are required to pay for prescriptions from their vouchers.	NASS supported asylum seekers are sent a certificate (HC2) which entitles them to free NHS prescriptions, dental treatment and sight tests. With this certificate, they can also claim for vouchers towards the cost of glasses or contact lenses and refunds of necessary travel costs to and from hospital for NHS treatment.
Shopping with vouchers may only be done by the principal asylum applicant (usually the male head of the household).	Vouchers are made out in the name of the principal asylum applicant but there is nothing to prevent them being spent by other members of the family.
Asylum seekers are required to show proof of identity when using vouchers.	Retailers are instructed to accept all valid vouchers and to report any concerns they have relating to misuse of vouchers to Sodexho Pass UK Ltd.
Asylum seekers cannot make purchases with a combination of cash and vouchers.	The voucher scheme was designed with the intention that asylum seekers should combine their cash and vouchers to make up the value of their shopping.

DISPERSAL REVIEW: RECOMMENDATIONS

Induction centres

Recommendation 1 – The establishment of a small network of induction centres to deliver a controlled, structured and informed process, securing consistency of service for all asylum seekers and clarity of roles for those involved in the process.

Activities, pre-dispersal, should be undertaken in a network of locations where emergency accommodation can be provided for a few days before the managed transfer of the asylum seeker to dispersed accommodation. Consideration would also be given to the identification of an individual's needs, including identification on any special needs. This would aid identification of the most appropriate accommodation for dispersal. Information would then form the basis of better communication between accommodation pre-and-post dispersal, identifying need for appropriate preparation, organisation or allocation of services.

Recommendation 2 - NASS needs to secure control over the whole system.

This would achieve better accuracy and efficiency of the process, encouraging integration with the rest of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND).

Recommendation 3 - There is a need to revert to clustering on the basis of language wherever possible.

This can be achieved by moving to a more managed initial induction phase with the involvement of skilled professionals. These will determine the most appropriate dispersal location for each asylum seeker based on personal circumstances.

Recommendation 4 - An increased explanation of the dispersal process and the responsibilities of the asylum seeker should form an integral part of the initial briefing.

A briefing within the induction centres will provide accurate information about the dispersal, where the asylum seeker is to be dispersed to, the process of considering their asylum application, the services available to them and their duties and responsibilities during NASS support.

Recommendation 5 - Improve transport arrangements maximising use of contractual arrangements with travel providers.

Travel providers should organise appropriate transport to support individual dispersal. This will support the need for and help to achieve intelligent dispersal, by reverting to clustering on the basis of language.

Relationships with local agencies

Recommendation 6 - Better communication channels need to be established between NASS and other agencies involved in the dispersal process.

Local authorities, service providers and other relevant agencies require more information from NASS in regard to the number and needs of the asylum seekers to be dispersed. This will relieve the pressures presently experienced by the local communities of the dispersal areas and allow for better preparation in regard to the

services required, including legal and interpretation. This will also aid future integration of those asylum seekers into the communities of the dispersal locations.

Recommendation 7 - There should be an increased management presence in the regions.

Regional managers will facilitate greater integration of relevant agencies and improve communication and information channels. Regional managers' responsibility for facilitating communication and integration throughout their own regions and nationally will improve the identification of best practice and development of consistent practice both regionally and nationally.

Recommendation 8 - Responsibility needs to be taken for non-NASS dispersed asylum seekers, to ensure they are receiving appropriate accommodation and services.

NASS should develop, through strengthening of the structure and role of the regional manager, co-ordination of accommodation and service needs of asylum seekers not dispersed by NASS.

Recommendation 9 - NASS to review the feasibility of consultation with local authorities on the procurement of on six-bed properties and smaller.

NASS needs to take this consideration forward in an attempt to minimise the friction experienced with local authorities and communities, caused when large numbers of small accommodation units in a relatively small region, are procured for accommodating asylum seekers.

Develop contact management

Recommendation 10 - Additional effort needs to be put into maintaining contact with asylum seekers while their applications are being considered and during the course of any appeal. Further efforts need to be made to respond rapidly when dealing with individuals who demonstrate criminal or anti-social behaviour.

This will ensure that relevant support is provided where necessary, throughout the course of their application, in the regions where asylum seekers are dispersed.

Increased presence will also aid monitoring the quality and appropriateness, as well as any fraud, of accommodation and support services that are provided. This role will also support the tracking process, and help ensure the departure of those whose claims are not upheld, as well as dealing with individuals who demonstrate criminal or anti-social behaviour.

Other recommendations

Recommendation 11 - Changes should be made to procedures and Regulations to improve the management of applicants at the end of the process.

To enable better integration of refugees, procedures should be changed to ensure smooth transition from NASS support to Benefits Agency and Local Authority support where the asylum claim is recognised. Where the asylum application is refused, better integration of NASS processes with those of Integrated Casework Directorate and the Immigration Service need to facilitate the removal process. To enable and facilitate those procedural changes, Regulations should be amended to change the notice period to 21 days for failed asylum seekers and to 28 days for those granted leave.

Wherever possible, failed asylum seekers in accommodation centres will be transferred to removals centres.

Recommendation 12 - In appropriate cases, accelerate consideration of outstanding asylum applications relating to family groups, who have established themselves for some time in emergency accommodation.

This might be considered as an alternative to dispersal to new accommodation, with consequent upheaval of those that have been in spot accommodation for a considerable period of time.

Recommendation 13 - Increased, more efficient, accurate use and regular update of the ASYS IT system is required.

There is currently no efficient process for accommodation providers to supply speedy and accurate information to NASS. This information is critical to the IND asylum decision-making process and to the removal of failed asylum seekers, and needs to be available.

Recommendation 14 - The long-term IT requirements for the management of asylum seekers needs to be determined.

If this will not require the NASS ASYS system, then further development of that system should be limited to operationally essential iterative changes.

Recommendation 15 - NASS needs to promote accurate and appropriate information recording.

Every movement and action throughout the process should be recorded accurately on the IT system. This must involve NASS data, but also that derived from the rest of IND service providers, the voluntary sector and accommodation providers.

Recommendation 16 - The lack of integration within NASS, and with the rest of IND needs to be addressed.

NASS was established as an independent operation within IND, but for NASS to be fully effective it needs to be integrated with other parts of IND, communicate regularly and effectively with other departments and ensure their own processes are consistent with those of other departments.

Recommendation 17 - NASS should develop the concept of a process team. The process team should “own” and control all processes and procedures within NASS and their authority should be required to change processes.

Recommendation 18 - The management structure within NASS casework teams should be changed to separate management functions from providing professional casework advice.

This would reflect the successful arrangements elsewhere in IND, through the development of a clearly identifiable source of technical guidance, separate from that of a staff manager.

COMPARISON OF ASYLUM SUPPORT ACROSS THE EUROPEAN UNION

1. The tables in this annex compare UK asylum support with that provided in other EU Member States. They show that the package of support under the NASS arrangements is broadly comparable in value to that provided in other northern European countries.
2. However, it is worth noting that all other EU Member States use reception/accommodation centres for asylum seekers to some degree (except Portugal, which provides no accommodation at all). Vouchers are used, to a limited extent, in only Germany and Luxembourg.

ANNEX D

Comparison of Support for Asylum Seekers in the European Union^{1,2}

Country	Free accommodation for all destitute asylum seekers?		Value of "living needs" support per month for:- (1) single adult (2) family with 2 children		Vouchers?	Free healthcare?		Free education?		Employment?	
United Kingdom	Yes	Those choosing to stay with relatives, etc. receive "living needs" support only.	(1) £157 (2) £515		Yes For use in participating stores; no restriction on type of goods	Yes	Those eligible for NASS support get NHS primary healthcare and free NHS prescriptions; dental treatment and sight tests	Yes	As UK citizens	Limited	Can apply permission to work if not had decision within 6 months
Austria	Limited	Only for ca 30% on Federal programme	(1) £23 (2) £92	Only if under Federal programme. No food allowance (provided in kind)	No	Limited	For those on Federal programme only	Yes	Compulsory between 6 and 15.	Limited	Can apply for a work permit but rarely approved
Belgium	Yes	Generally in reception centres, but if full may obtain financial assistance from the commune.	Nil	Asylum seekers in reception centres not entitled to assistance. (Food provided in kind.) Elsewhere: (1) £311 (2) £562	No	Yes	During initial "admissibility procedure" in reception centre. Then same entitlement as Belgian nationals	Yes	Compulsory up to age 18.	Limited	Not allowed to work whilst in admissibility procedure
Denmark	Yes	In a reception or accommodation centre.	(1) £182 (2) £616	No financial assistance for those choosing private accommodation.	No	Limited	Covers only serious complaints.	Yes		No	
Finland	Yes	In reception centres. Those choosing private accommodation have to pay for it themselves.	(1) £176 (2) £521	Varies locally.	No	Limited	Urgent treatment only.	Yes		Limited	Limited access to work after 3 months
France	Limited	Those who need housing must file an application. Allocation is made on the basis of social criteria	(1) £130 (2) £274	Outside reception centres: (1) £164 (2) £328	No	Yes		Yes	Compulsory between 6 and 16	No	

Country	Free accommodation for all destitute asylum seekers?		Value of "living needs" support per month for:- (1) single adult (2) family with 2 children		Vouchers?	Free healthcare?		Free education?		Employment?	
			Additional to accommodation								
United Kingdom	Yes	Those choosing to stay with relatives, etc. receive "living needs" support only.	(1) £157 (2) £515		Yes For use in participating stores; no restriction on type of goods	Yes	Those eligible for NASS support get NHS primary healthcare and free NHS prescriptions; dental treatment and sight tests	Yes	As UK citizens	Limited	Can apply permission to work if not had decision within 6 months
Germany	Yes	Initially reception centres and then dispersed to an asylum centre.	(1) £25 (2) £86	No food allowance (provided in kind). Outside reception centres: (1) £135 (2) £453	Limited use, outside asylum centres	Limited	Serious cases only.	Yes	Varies locally	Limited	
Greece	No	Limited number of places in reception centres, most asylum seekers have to rely on NGOs.	None	Except in exceptional circumstances.	No	Yes	Urgent medical needs.	Yes	Children have access to the education system up to age 16.	Limited	Can apply for a work permit for a specific job.
Ireland	Yes		(1) £37 (2) £166	No food allowance – accommodation is full board.	No	Yes	Free healthcare, prescriptions, sight tests & glasses, hearing tests & hearing aids and dental treatment.	Yes	Compulsory for children aged 4 – 15.	Limited	If sought asylum after 26 June 1999 not entitled to work or attend vocational training. Those in country pre-June 1999 have right to work after one year.
Italy	Limited	Available, but not for all cases. Varies locally.	Nil	No financial support for those in reception centres (food provided in kind). For those in own accommodation (on application and not guaranteed): (1) £315 (2) £1260 for max 1.5 mths.	No	Yes		Yes	Compulsory	No	

Country	Free accommodation for all destitute asylum seekers?		Value of “living needs” support per month for:- (1) single adult (2) family with 2 children		Vouchers?	Free healthcare?		Free education?		Employment?	
			Additional to accommodation								
United Kingdom	Yes	Those choosing to stay with relatives, etc. receive “living needs” support only.	(1) £157 (2) £515		Yes For use in participating stores; no restriction on type of goods	Yes	Those eligible for NASS support get NHS primary healthcare and free NHS prescriptions; dental treatment and sight tests	Yes	As UK citizens	Limited	Can apply permission to work if not had decision within 6 months
Luxembourg	Yes	In a reception centre or other designated accommodation.	N/K	Contingent on residing in a reception centre.	Yes – basic allowance for food and other living expenses can be given in the form of coupons.	Yes		Yes	Between the ages of 7 and 15.	No	
The Netherlands	Yes	In reception centres initially, then moving to asylum centres	(1) £101 (2) £249	Outside asylum centres: (1) £117 (2) £234	No	Limited	Basic health costs.	Yes	Compulsory for children aged 5 - 16	Limited	Maximum of 12 weeks in a period of 39 weeks
Portugal	No	No accommodation provided by the authorities.	N/K	No state financial support during the admissibility procedure. Once admitted to the regular status determination procedure, a monthly cash allowance for a maximum of four months.	No	Yes	On the same basis as Portuguese nationals.	Limited	Access to the education system only when have a provisional residence permit. Children cannot attend school whilst in the admissibility stage of the asylum procedure.	Limited	Not whilst in the admissibility procedure. Possible once admitted to the normal status determination procedure.
United Kingdom	Yes	Those choosing to stay with relatives, etc. receive “living needs” support only.	(1) £157 (2) £515		Yes For use in participating stores; no restriction on type of goods	Yes	Those eligible for NASS support get NHS primary healthcare and free NHS prescriptions; dental treatment and sight tests	Yes	As UK citizens	Limited	Can apply permission to work if not had decision within 6 months

Country	Free accommodation for all destitute asylum seekers?		Value of “living needs” support per month for:- (1) single adult (2) family with 2 children		Vouchers?	Free healthcare?		Free education?		Employment?	
			Additional to accommodation								
Spain	Limited	Depending on the availability of reception centre places.	NK	A small amount of pocket money for those in reception centres. Outside reception centres (can be supplemented by a rental allowance in special circumstances: (1) £148 (2) £259	No	Limited	Access to healthcare is likely to change	Yes	6-16	Limited	Authorisation given on a case by case basis.
Sweden	Yes	Around 40% in reception centres; 60% choose to live with friends or in rented accommodation	(1) £153 (1) £458	Outside residence centres: (1) £189 (2) £530	No	Limited	Emergency medical & dental treatment only for adults (pay per visit). Children have same rights to free care as Swedish children.	Yes	Compulsory for children aged 7-16	Limited	Only if application is expected to take more than 4 months

1. The arrangements in each country differ quite considerably in structure; therefore it is not easy to draw simple direct comparisons. In order to provide a broad overview, the information for each country has been edited and monetary figures, where available, have been subject to currency conversion and rounding. Readers should note, therefore, that the table is not suitable as a detailed source of reference data – it should be treated as indicative only.

2. The table above shows available social assistance levels, additional to accommodation, for (1) a single adult and (2) a family with one young child and one teenage child. Where applicable, the table indicates where benefit is not intended to purchase food. Where benefits are shown as being payable “outside reception/residence centres” the amount is generally intended to cover or contribute towards housing costs.

VOUCHER REVIEW: CONSULTATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS AND OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES**1 Findings from the asylum seeker study**

Asylum seekers' experiences of the voucher scheme were investigated using a combination of in-depth interviews and questionnaires. The complete findings from the asylum seeker study will be published by the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate. The key findings are summarised below.

1.1 Information

- Information was a key area and its content and format influence the effective operation of the voucher scheme.
- The majority of asylum seekers felt sufficiently informed about the voucher scheme
 - 74% of asylum seekers¹ said they received enough information on where to collect vouchers; 61% received enough information on where to use vouchers; and 67% received enough information on how to use vouchers.
- However, asylum seekers who were interviewed commented that lists of shops were not always up to date, which caused them problems.
- The ability to read English was an important difference between those who reported receiving adequate information and those who did not. Those who reported receiving information in their own language reported it as useful.
- The NASS helpline was reported as difficult to access because it was often engaged and only available in English.

1.2 Collecting vouchers

- Few asylum seekers reported problems with the post office handling of voucher distribution.
- Key findings relating to asylum seekers' experiences when collecting vouchers at the post office were:
 - 28% said that on at least one occasion their vouchers had been unavailable for collection;
 - 48% felt unhappy because they slowed down the queue; and
 - 75% felt embarrassed because they thought people were looking at them.
- In the qualitative fieldwork, asylum seekers highlighted the problem of distance to the post office, noting that it could be a long way for them to walk.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, percentages are of the 205 asylum seekers completing the questionnaire.

1.3 Using vouchers

- Nearly two thirds (65%) of asylum seekers said they had few difficulties when spending their vouchers.
- However, there was significant evidence of retailers failing to operate the scheme correctly. 46% of asylum seekers reported that a shop had prevented them from buying an item; and 55% reported that shop staff did not recognise or know how to process vouchers.
- Asylum seekers said they felt embarrassed and were complained about in shops. 70% felt embarrassed because others were looking at them. Embarrassment was also attributed to others in the queue complaining; delaying the queue; and difficulties adding up the cost of shopping and knowing which vouchers to use.
- Asylum seekers reported a lack of budget shops – 76% said they could buy things more cheaply in shops that did not accept vouchers. Few markets accept vouchers, so fresh meat, fruit and vegetables were a particular problem.
- Some goods and services were reported as inaccessible, because they were too expensive, not available in shops that accepted vouchers or retailers restricted access (e.g. school uniform and school trips; haircuts; and public transport).
- No asylum seekers reported being followed or targeted for racial abuse following the collection or use of vouchers. One asylum seeker interpreted the response of others in the queue towards him as racist.

1.4 Value of vouchers and the receipt of change

- Assessing the adequacy of support levels was outside the scope of the fieldwork. However, some asylum seekers commented that the amount they received was insufficient for their needs, particularly in winter.
- The no change policy was unpopular - 77% of asylum seekers said they had to buy things they did not want in order to avoid wasting some of the voucher value.
- However, very few asylum seekers specified how much change they lost. Of the 23 interviewed, two talked in terms of a few pence; another two spoke of losing £1 from £15 of shopping.
- 29% of asylum seekers said they did not receive enough information about the no change policy; 14% said they did not receive any information.
- When asked about which voucher denominations they preferred, asylum seekers expressed no consistent view. 12% suggested a 10p voucher would be useful and 11% thought a 20p voucher might help. Others felt that having to sort through a large pile of different denomination vouchers would add to their difficulties at the checkout.

2. Consultation with stakeholders and other interested parties

Stakeholders and other interested parties were asked to comment on various areas of the voucher scheme. Responses to the written consultation exercise contained a mixture of opinions and evidence. Chart E1 shows the main points that were raised and the proportion of respondents that raised them.

In addition to the written consultation, Home Office Ministers visited shops and post offices to see the scheme in operation and had a series of meetings with key stakeholders. Those key stakeholders who were consulted orally made the same points as respondents to the written consultation exercise, but also raised more practical and operational concerns.

2.1 Stigmatisation

- Discrimination was a major concern for over half (52%) of respondents, with many stating that the voucher scheme stigmatises asylum seekers and others alleging that it was a racist scheme. However:
 - only 6% of respondents claimed the voucher scheme had contributed to incidents of racial assault, harassment or abuse and only three of those reported specific incidents;
 - none of the police forces that responded reported that asylum seekers had been victims of crimes as a result of the voucher scheme; and
 - when the issue of harassment and abuse was explored further during interviews with NGOs, they described incidents such as comments from other shoppers in the queue, shop staff refusing to accept vouchers and other people staring or reacting in a way that was perceived to be different.

2.2 No change and lower denomination vouchers

- The no change policy was a key issue with 40% of respondents expressing concern about it. Concerns included: stores profiting at the expense of asylum seekers; restrictions on asylum seekers' flexibility and ability to budget; and embarrassment at the checkout.
- As retailers are not required to keep records, it is impossible to identify precisely how much they retain as a result of the "no change" rule. However, some figures were available from a major clothing retailer and a major supermarket carried out a one-off survey for one week in three of its stores. The results indicated that the sums retained by retailers are generally small – around 0.5% of the value of the voucher transaction. This was borne out by the comments of retailers who were visited or who responded to the written consultation.
- A minority of respondents (14%) suggested that lower denomination vouchers would be helpful. A further 2% felt that lower denomination vouchers were not desirable because: they would increase the administration for participating retailers; and they would humiliate asylum seekers (presumably because they would have a large bundle to sort through at the checkout).

2.3 Location of retailers and post offices

- The location of retailers and post offices was raised by 42% of respondents, with the main points being:
 - asylum seekers have to travel too far - there should be more post offices and shops participating in the scheme;
 - the distance to shops and post offices impacted more harshly because asylum seekers on the voucher scheme have limited access to public transport; and
 - there should be a wider range of retail outlets in the scheme, including more markets, ethnic food stores and low cost stores to enable asylum seekers to budget and to access healthy, culturally appropriate food.
- As regards the network of shops participating in the voucher scheme, the issue was perceived to be a need for more shops of specific types (small, local shops, budget shops, markets, shops selling culturally appropriate foodstuffs, etc) rather than more shops of all types

2.4 Administrative and operational problems

- Administrative and operational problems with the voucher scheme were raised by just over a third (36%) of respondents. Examples included: vouchers failing to arrive; people dispersed with incorrect amounts of vouchers; difficulties contacting NASS, in particular because the voucher enquiry line was often engaged; and lack of a safety net for emergency short-term support, if the voucher scheme fails.

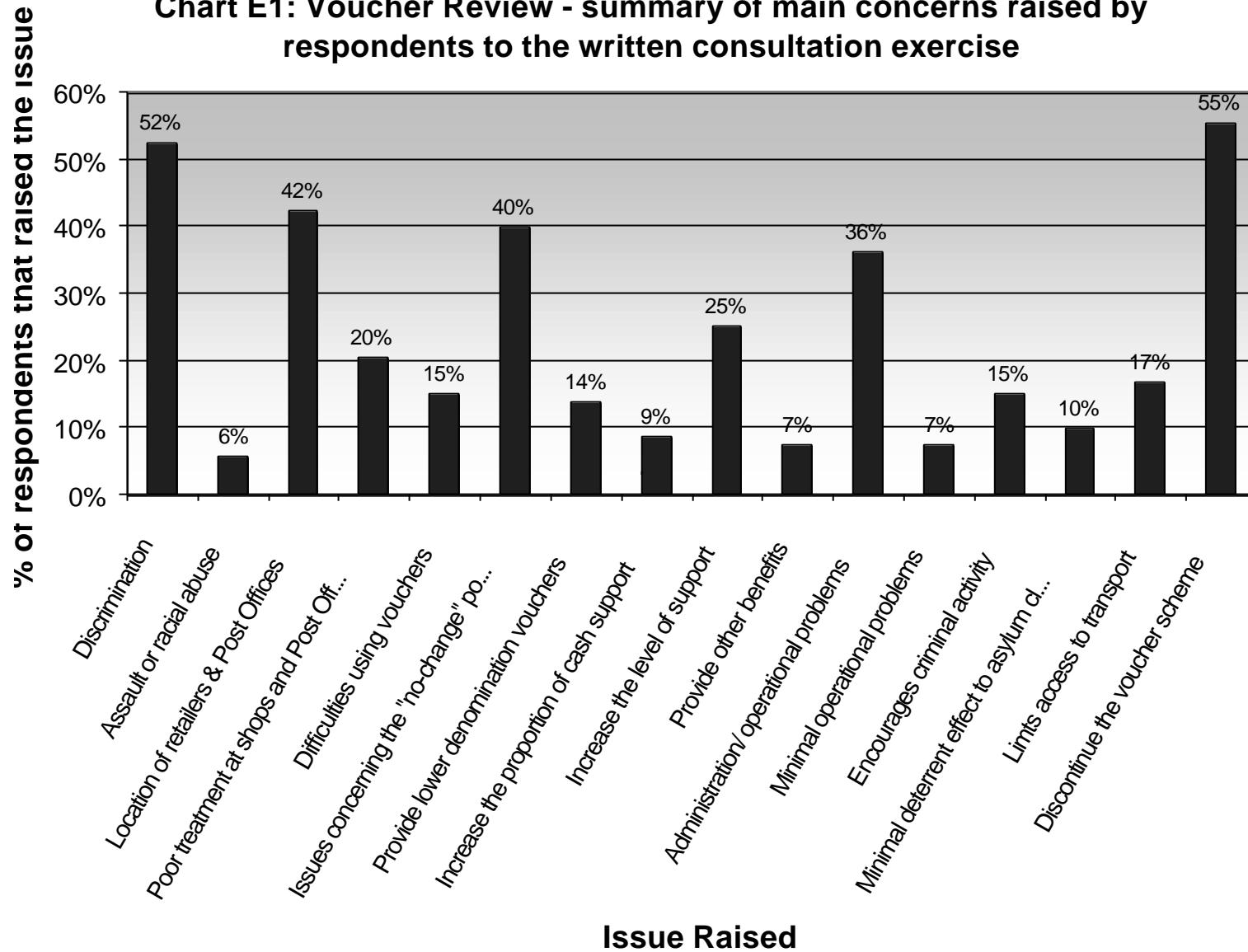
2.5 Level of support

- The level of support was raised by 25% of respondents. The most frequent comment was that support levels are inadequate because vouchers equate to only 70% of income support. (This misses the point that other benefits are provided in kind and, when taken as a package, NASS support is broadly equivalent to the cash benefits that were previously provided to asylum seekers.)

2.6 Using vouchers

- Poor treatment at shops and post offices was mentioned in 20% of responses. Issues included: shop staff not recognising vouchers; shop staff or customers being rude or reacting in a hostile manner; and shops or post offices having separate queues for asylum seekers.
- Respondents also reported other difficulties when asylum seekers are using vouchers including: shop staff querying purchases and sometimes refusing to sell certain goods; retailers (wrongly) asking for identification; delays at the checkout; and difficulties purchasing certain goods and services with vouchers (e.g. school trips, haircuts, launderettes, phonecards and stamps)

Chart E1: Voucher Review - summary of main concerns raised by respondents to the written consultation exercise



ANNEX F

DISPERSAL REVIEW: COMMENTS BY STAKEHOLDERS AND OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES

This annex sets out the main comments from stakeholders who were consulted or submitted written evidence during the dispersal review. Information was gained through:

- meetings with public and private sector stakeholders, including local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, accommodation providers, IND managers and visits to relevant accommodation;
- reaction in the press to the announcement of the review; and
- research material.

1. Main issues raised

1.1 A constructive review of dispersal has been widely welcomed. The main concerns identified include:

- the impact dispersal has on local communities;
- asylum seekers' lack of appreciation of what happens to them during the process;
- asylum seekers are not dispersed following consideration of their individual needs or their language;
- the quality and standard of accommodation is inappropriate; and
- local authorities are poorly informed of the process of dispersal and who is to be dispersed to their area.

1.2 The specific comments raised have been collated in accordance with different parts of the process of dispersal.

2. Specific issues raised

2.1 Concerns expressed relating to the introduction of NASS support and the dispersal process include:

- lack of explanation of the dispersal system to the asylum seeker;
- lack of preparation for integration of the asylum seeker; and
- lack of warning given to local authorities when they are identified as potential dispersal locations and a lack of information about whom is to be dispersed to their area.

2.2 Concerns expressed in regard to dispersal include:

- lack of adherence to dispersal on the basis of language clustering, resulting in multiple problems;
- lack of identification of skills and qualifications of the asylum seeker and encouragement not to work;
- an inability to provide appropriate accommodation for those with special needs;

- weaknesses in NASS processes leading to poor use of accommodation resources and a high proportion of accommodation being empty; and
- inaccurate records of who has not travelled and lack of action taken against those individuals.

2.3 Concerns expressed in regard to the process, post dispersal, include:

- lack of clarity of the regional manager role, their lack of autonomy within the region and their inability to make decisions;
- lack of NASS presence in the regions to which people are dispersed;
- delays in dealing with individuals who demonstrate criminal or anti-social behaviour;
- lack of monitoring public and private sector landlords in regard to quality of accommodation provided and support services they provide to asylum seekers;
- lack of access to legal advice, interpretation and other services in the regions, including a lack of opportunities for asylum seekers; and
- lack of streamlined integration and move-on phase, post positive or negative decision.

2.4 Other concerns expressed in regard to the overall dispersal process are:

- lack of NASS organisation and accountability;
- an apparent lack of awareness by NASS staff of who their customers are;
- contractual agreements are not maximised upon or reviewed regularly;
- good practice is not readily identified or shared;
- language used by some public figures and the media is “xenophobic” and affects the opinions of the public at large, while many asylum seekers live in fear of intimidation; and
- lack of investment in the regions for support services.

2.5 **Lack of explanation for asylum seeker:** Many believed the information provided to asylum seekers entering the NASS support process is poor, with a lack of explanation of what happens during that process. Many expressed concern at the lack of information provided in the asylum seekers' own language, or in a language they understood. Many believed better information is required in different languages. A number of the agencies involved made suggestions for an integrated and comprehensive induction centre, which would integrate introduction to NASS support and dispersal with assessment of the individual's specific needs and personal circumstances. Good practice in this area has already been identified and praised.

2.6 **Lack of preparation for integration:** Absence of preparation, during the NASS support and dispersal process, for asylum seekers' integration within society was of concern. The perceived improvements required for integration included permanent integration, following a positive decision to grant leave, and the integration required while an asylum seeker waits for a decision upon an outstanding asylum application. An increase in the provision for English language lessons is also felt to be of importance. It was felt that steps to achieve integration should begin as soon as the asylum seeker receives NASS support and has made an asylum application.

2.7 **Lack of warning given to local authorities:** Many believed that local authorities are not sufficiently informed or involved in the dispersal process. Many see

the role of the local authorities as very important in ensuring the best possible preparation for the arrival of dispersed asylum seekers, for informing agencies involved or affected by dispersal and preparing local communities for arriving asylum seekers. Greater involvement of local authorities needs to be encouraged.

2.8 Lack of adherence to dispersal on the basis of language clusters:

There is widespread concern that the initial proposal to cluster dispersed asylum seekers on the basis of language has not been adhered to. Widespread calls for strict adherence to the policy of clustering on the basis of language have been made, as it is felt the failure to implement this has led to dispersed asylum seekers returning to London and the South East. Concern has also been expressed at the pressure placed on a small number of regions in the dispersal process. There is feeling that the burden of dispersed asylum seekers should be shared throughout the regions, rather than a concentration within and the subsequent impact on a few centres. It is felt that this improvement will ensure appropriate services are available, including legal and interpreting services, to asylum seekers dispersed, as well as improving support and integration of asylum seekers.

2.9 Lack of appropriate accommodation for those with special needs: There is a lack of accommodation provisions for those with special needs and as a result, appropriate accommodation and services are not provided for those asylum seekers. There is a need for identification of special needs at an early stage in the process and to allocate appropriate accommodation and services where need demands it.

2.10 Better identification of skills and qualifications and preparation for the asylum seeker being granted permission to work are required: Suggested improvements included identifying the skills and qualifications of asylum seekers, skill matching for the good of the economy, increasing vocational training to develop skills, encouraging involvement of industry and employers to develop appropriate skills and developing smoother methods for an asylum seeker to gain permission to work.

Suggestions also included encouraging asylum seekers granted leave to provide advice and act as mentors for new asylum applicants.

2.11 Weaknesses in NASS processes: There is a lack of clarity and lack of understanding of the NASS processes, leading to different interpretations and inconsistencies. Demands for more clarification and a consistent approach that will ensure better communication and effective, pro-active management of NASS processes, is seen to be of high importance. It is felt that if better use is made of the services available to NASS, use of accommodation will be maximised and reduce voids that are present.

2.12 Inability to keep accurate records: Many parties outside NASS have identified a lack of accuracy and robust use of the information technology (IT) facilities available to NASS. As a result, all agencies involved within NASS dispersal are effected because no one has reliable information from which to work with. This causes problems in locating asylum seekers, providing them with the appropriate services, identifying available accommodation and accurately following the processes of dispersal and consideration of the asylum application.

2.13 Lack of clarity of the role of the regional manager: The role of the NASS regional manager needs clarification and greater strength. It is felt greater

support is needed for regional managers, locally and centrally, so that they have autonomy to make decisions and can be pro-active without being undermined by NASS. Greater communication and integration is perceived to be required.

2.14 Lack of NASS presence in the regions: A greater operational presence in the regions would be welcomed. It has been suggested that responsibility for dealing with everyday issues of asylum seekers when they arise, including not only NASS-related issues but issues resulting from the progress and consideration of an asylum application would be welcomed within this remit. This would help to relieve the pressures presently placed upon One-Stop Shops (OSSs), run by the voluntary sector. It is perceived this would facilitate better integration throughout the whole of the process and with all agencies involved.

2.15 Delay in dealing with individuals who demonstrate criminal or anti-social behaviour: Demands have been made for clear and effective guidance to be issued and effective processes to be developed, on how to deal with asylum seekers who are behaving in an inappropriate manner. At present, such behaviour causes accommodation providers many difficulties, including risks posed to staff, the local community and other asylum seekers accommodated, with little support or guidance provided by NASS.

2.16 Lack of monitoring of public and private accommodation providers: Although much good practice can be identified, there are serious inconsistencies in the quality of accommodation and support services provided by both private and public accommodation providers. One problem is that there is lack of clarity around what is expected from accommodation providers and how this is monitored, which needs improving.

2.17 Lack of access to legal advice, interpretation and appropriate services and opportunities: Many believe that clustering on the basis of language is not adhered to and local authorities are not accurately informed by NASS of who is to be dispersed to their area. As a result, there is a perception that availability of suitable and accessible services is not sufficient and needs improving, as well as increasing the awareness of the asylum seeker to available advice, services and opportunities.

2.18 Lack of streamlined integration and move-on phase: Calls for better integration and co-ordination have been made, because many asylum seekers have NASS support terminated before being able to access appropriate alternative benefits. NASS needs to appreciate, and incorporate in its processes, the availability of support for asylum seekers leaving the NASS system and the speed in which other government departments are able to process applications for these benefits or services. An increase in the bridge period between NASS support and support through benefits, following a grant of leave, will aid integration. There is a need for better co-ordination between different government departments and agencies that are involved, so that processes are consistent.

2.19 A lack of NASS organisation and accountability: Many concerns relate to the organisation of NASS and the apparent inability to follow their own processes or have consistent understanding of them. Particular concern was raised in regard to the role of the regional managers and their inability to pro-actively manage their own regions, without being contradicted by NASS centrally. Concern was also expressed in

regard to a lack of NASS accountability and how this is greatly needed for the dispersal policy to succeed.

2.20 A lack of awareness by NASS staff of who their customers are: Concern was expressed in regard to the perceived lack of awareness by NASS staff, of who their customers are. Many agencies involved on the ground do not feel that NASS demonstrate sufficient understanding or are sufficiently pro-active in regard to the needs of asylum seekers and the effect dispersal and the current process of explanation effects asylum seekers.

2.21 Lack of review and observance of contractual duties and obligations: Concern has been expressed in regard to the quality of some accommodation used for dispersed asylum seekers and the support services provided by some agencies involved in the dispersal. Many believe greater monitoring of the services provided to asylum seekers is required and that the contractual obligations of those paid to provide services need to be enforced and reviewed more regularly and more stringently.

2.22 Good practice is not readily identified or shared: Many stakeholders and agencies involved in dispersal feel better communication and integration between all involved parties is required. Better identification of best practice and its adoption nation-wide is required, so that asylum seekers are consistently provided with high quality services, wherever they are dispersed. Much good practice is evident, but to identify this and implement it nationally with structure and guidance from NASS will aid better development and success of the dispersal process.

2.23 Lack of investment in the regions for support services: Many of the areas asylum seekers are dispersed to are deprived, with socio-economic problems and over-stretched services. Dispersal of asylum seekers in these regions is felt to have aggravated the existing problems and made integration more difficult.