

## Voluntary Returns: Home Office Working with Faith Organisations and Charities July 2018

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The Home Office runs a Voluntary Returns programme that, in certain circumstances, enables individuals to apply for financial support and practical assistance to return to their country of origin. Historically this programme was delivered by an independent third sector provider, however the Home Office decided to return to delivering the service in-house in late 2015. **Part of the Home Office's approach to delivering the scheme is to run advice surgeries in the community and to seek to work in partnership with community and faith leaders in order to reach out to particular groups of migrants.**

We recognise the importance of migrants being able to access information about the Voluntary Returns process. However, we have several concerns about how this programme is being delivered which are important for organisations to consider when deciding whether to host Home Office Voluntary Returns Surgeries.

- **We are concerned that this approach will lead to vulnerable migrants no longer feeling safe or welcome in community spaces and places of worship and becoming increasingly socially isolated as a result.** Due to their own experiences engaging with the Home Office, many migrants may not trust a government-run service and could feel threatened by its presence in community spaces. As a result, they may be deterred from accessing those spaces, as well as the vital services and support on offer there.
- The current Voluntary Returns service does not include advice which is OISC regulated for those who have not yet made up their minds to return. Therefore, these **individuals will not at any point in this process be accessing regulated immigration advice or independent advocacy.** While the Home Office aims to persuade people with no leave to remain to voluntarily leave the UK, where this option is declined, they will take steps to enforce removal. Depending on how they leave the UK, migrants may also be subject to a re-entry ban. **Engaging with Voluntary Returns surgeries, and in particular sharing personal information with the Home Office, could lead to migrants being targeted for enforced removal.** It is important that people who engage with these surgeries understand these risks, particularly when they have not yet made up their minds about returning voluntarily. Furthermore, [the Home Office only recently agreed to scrap their targets for enforced removals](#) – a practice which called into question the ability of enforcement officers to offer impartial advice when they were working to meet targets to send people home.
- Returning home is often one of the toughest decisions a person will make so it is vital they have access to confidential, transparent, impartial and non-directive advice from an appropriately qualified Level 2 OISC-registered adviser that explores all the available options, including opportunities to regularise their status in the UK. This is particularly important as **not all people without leave to remain will have had access to justice and the chance to regularise their status in the UK.** For example, some refused asylum seekers can have their protection needs overlooked during the asylum process, as a result of limited access to legal advice, difficulty disclosing past traumas to officials, or a lack of documentary evidence to support their claims. Moreover, Home Office decision making can be unreliable. In 2017, 50% of appeals to the immigration tribunal (mostly challenges to Home Office refusals to allow people to stay in the UK) succeeded. **This means that people still in the UK might be able to regularise their status here but will need advice to explore and understand all of their options.** Refused asylum seekers often have their Home Office support and accommodation withdrawn and may become entirely destitute. **It is questionable how a decision to return home can be taken on an entirely voluntary basis when vulnerable people are forced into destitution, denied permission to work, cut off from society and from basic services like healthcare, housing and education by [hostile environment](#) policies.**

- **There is a real lack of information about the practical and logistical support for Voluntary Returns offered by the Home Office.** Since the Home Office took the decision to stop any independent service delivering advice on Voluntary Returns, there have been no details published as to how the Home Office engage with applicants, what are their standard procedures for assisting applicants logistically and in practical terms whilst in the UK, or details of assistance on to their journey and on arrival, particularly in relation to their integration packages. There are no published figures or reports on the outcomes of these returns, as there were when these services were delivered by NGO providers. **It is therefore very difficult for people considering their options to feel supported, reassured and in full understanding of the decision they are making and the different steps this involves.**

**It is crucial that faith institutions, charities and community centres working with people seeking asylum and other migrants have an awareness of these issues. We urge you to continue to provide safe spaces for all migrants and advocate for transparent, confidential, impartial and non-directive advice on Voluntary Returns.**

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**This resource has been produced by Asylum Matters and Right to Remain. Further resources are available:**

- ❖ The [Right to Remain Toolkit](#) provides a comprehensive overview of the asylum process, including what options are available to asylum seekers who are appeal rights exhausted.
- ❖ Refugee Action have produced a [Best Practice Model](#) for Assisted Returns.
- ❖ More information about Voluntary Returns is available from the [Home Office](#).