

The future of Assisted Voluntary Return

Refugee Action's Choices service is coming to an end and Assisted Voluntary Returns (AVR) are changing. This briefing explains what is changing, what the implications are and how you can feed back your views on the changes.

What is AVR?

AVR programmes enable specific groups of people in the UK to voluntarily return to their countries with assistance to help them to reintegrate. There are three separate programmes – one for irregular migrants, another for people who have sought asylum and a third for families.

Since 2011, Refugee Action has received funding from the Home Office and European Commission to deliver AVR programmes through its Choices service. People can contact Choices and receive free impartial, independent and confidential advice about their options.

No information is shared with the Home Office unless the client explicitly consents and the advice provided is completely non-directive – seeking to empower people to meaningfully make decisions about their lives rather than persuade them to take one option rather than another.

Choices promotes this service via standard accessible marketing techniques tailored to different nationalities such as adverts in community media, a translated website and a dedicated team of outreach workers who engage with communities, including with those who may be hidden from mainstream services.

If somebody decides to return via an AVR programme, they receive help with obtaining travel documents and flights. The cost of transport to their destination is paid. They receive help planning how they will reintegrate. Eligible groups such as asylum seekers, families and vulnerable people receive financial support and reintegration assistance from NGOs in 18 of the most commonly returned to countries. Reintegration support can help for example with accessing accommodation, training, setting up a business or receiving healthcare.

The principles that underpin the Choices service are that it is independent from government, confidential, that it values the trust of its clients, that it is client centred – impartially helping people to make choices and that it seeks to help people achieve meaningfully sustainable outcomes.

Refugee Action believes everyone seeking sanctuary in the UK should be able to live, not just survive.
So we make sure people can find the basic support they need and have the chance to rebuild their lives.

What is changing?

The current funding for the Choices service is due to cease on the 31st December 2015. The Home Office has announced that rather than extending the funding or tendering for a new AVR service, from the 1 January 2016, the Home Office is instead planning to directly deliver a service by itself. The details of the new service are currently unclear but the Home Office has said that:

- The service will be delivered directly by the Home Office rather than an independent organisation. Refugee Action's involvement in delivering AVR through the Choices service will end. We will provide clearer details of the timeframe for different elements of service closure later on in the year.
- The service will not include any funded impartial, pre-decision advice to help people choose between their options. It will aim to return only people who have already made the decision to return rather than those who are unsure.
- In the current programme non-vulnerable irregular migrants are eligible for AVR. They are not eligible for financial assistance with reintegrating but they do receive help and support with making their decision, advice on planning their reintegration and the cost of transport from where they are in the UK to their destination within the country of return. Whereas families and people who have sought (but not been granted) asylum will be eligible for the new scheme, irregular migrants who do not meet a Home Office definition of vulnerability will not be eligible for the scheme.
- At least initially, it is unlikely people will receive post-return support apart from cash payments. The Home Office has said it intends to include a mix of cash and 'in kind' support over time with referral to in-country assistance in some countries but this is unlikely to be available at least earlier on.

What are the implications of this on people considering voluntary return?

- People who are uncertain whether to return or not will no longer have a source of funded, impartial advice to help them with their decision making. Possible consequences of the lack of such advice are that people may:
 - Remain in the UK – quite possibly facing very difficult circumstances such as destitution and being at risk of exploitation
 - Return to their country without having fully thought through the decision. This could include having not explored how they might build a sustainable future or manage risks they might face upon return.
- Irregular migrants who cannot evidence that they are vulnerable will no longer be able to return through an AVR programme.
- People who return with cash support but without broader reintegration support are more likely to use their reintegration assistance to cover immediate needs

(such as giving it away to family members) rather than considering longer-term more sustainable uses of the money. Additionally, the lack of support from organisations in-country and the provision of cash can also lead to increased vulnerability, increasing the risks of exploitation or theft. People will be less able to achieve sustainable returns. They are more likely to become internally displaced or remigrate, they are more likely to face security threats or persecution and they are less likely to be able to generate an income, access suitable housing, subsistence, healthcare or education.

What are the implications for Local Authorities?

As there will be no funded service seeking to engage with and provide impartial advice about voluntary return, many people will not hear about it. It is likely that fewer people without recourse to public funds will depart the UK.

Local Authorities are likely to see the impact of a rise in the number of destitute people in their areas. They may see a rise in the number of families they are required to support under section 17 of the Children's Act 1989.

In the current service, Refugee Action commissions in-country assessments to establish if return is in the best interests of children. Local Authorities may become obliged to commission in-country assessments directly in cases containing children.

What are the implications for the taxpayer?

According to our calculations, the Home Office plans are likely to cost the taxpayer millions of pounds. [Read our letter to the Immigration Minister for more details.](#)

What are the implications for charities?

Charities who encounter people who are undecided about whether to return will no longer have a confidential, impartial service to which to refer them for advice and support with exploring their options.

The plans will lead to an increase in destitute people in the UK. Charities and other organisations which support destitute people are already at breaking point. The plans are likely to lead them to be stretched even further.

What are the implications for Refugee Action?

Refugee Action will cease delivering all elements of AVR and the Choices service will close. Refugee Action will reduce in size and we will be sad to say goodbye to many talented, experienced, values-driven and compassionate members of our team.

Refugee Action will continue to help people who have survived some of the world's worst regimes to secure the protection and support that they need to live with dignity and build a new life in the UK.

We remain committed to empowering refugees and asylum seekers to achieve justice and escape poverty through our ambitious campaigns and innovative programme of services across four regions of the UK (North West, London, West Midlands and Bristol).

Find out more about how to get involved and support Refugee Action at www.refugee-action.org.uk/support_us

What can I do if I want to feed back my views on these changes?

- James Brokenshire is the Minister for Immigration. You could email him with your views using: ministerforimmigration@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk
- You could write to your MP and ask them to represent your views. Refugee Action has written [an example letter](#), available on our website. You could use the following website: www.writetothem.com
- The Choices service is always interested in hearing feedback. If you would like to tell us what you think of our service you could email: ChoicesFeedback@refugee-action.org.uk