

Sean Palmer Director – Resettlement, Asylum Support and Integration (RASI)
Asylum and Protection
Home Office

Cc: Emma Haddad, Andrew Kelly, Susanne Bell

29th July 2021

Dear Sean,

We are writing as members of the NASF support subgroup to formally request that the Home Office does not reclaim any overpayments of asylum support that may have occurred due to the serious problems with the transition to the new ASPEN card contract.

This request has been made by many partner VCS agencies in stakeholder meetings with the Home Office since the ASPEN contract transition. NASF support members made the request in the June NASF support meeting and in the ASPEN card 'task and finish' meetings and have been told that the issue is under consideration by senior Home Office officials and Ministers.

We are making this request due to the widespread distress experienced by asylum seekers in the asylum support system during the transition period. Most NASF support members worked directly with the individuals and families affected during this process and witnessed the anxiety and hardship caused by the lack of access to essential funds. VCS services often gave out precious resources (food parcels and toiletries) to people affected by the lack of access to their weekly Home Office payments. Of course, by its very nature, people do not receive asylum support from the Home Office unless they have no other access to funds to meet their essential living needs. In this context, the unexpected lack of access to funds to so many people in the system was unacceptable.

We accept that the transition was always going to be complex and challenging to manage but the scale of the problems that became evident after the 'black out' transition weekend was a shock to everyone. Our impression was that the dismay over the scale of the problems was shared by the Home Office ASPEN team. We look forward to engaging with the Home Office in a 'lessons learned' exercise around the ASPEN transition, where we hope to gain more of an understanding about what went wrong and why and how these problems can be avoided in future. However, it seems inescapable that the scale of the problems must have been caused by flawed Home Office planning and implementation of the contract transition.

As we have previously stated in meetings with you and your colleagues, we appreciated the engagement and hard work of the ASPEN project team in trying to mitigate the problems caused by the transition. We have no doubt that the team was 100% committed to putting in place mitigation strategies as quickly as possible and worked very hard to implement escalation processes when the Migrant Help lines became overwhelmed, alongside attempts to simplify the ECP sign-off process. This work meant that people could eventually receive payments to buy food and other essential supplies.

We do not now think it is fair or reasonable for the Home Office to seek to reclaim any overpayments made during this period. This is because:

- The need for some of the UK's most economically vulnerable people to rely on ECPs during this period was entirely outside their control and was the result of a flawed contract transition process.
- The extent of the transition problems was avoidable and the Home Office must take ownership of its failures in this process. We believe this should mean that the Home Office makes a principled decision not to seek to reclaim any overpayments made as a result of its failures.
- The human cost of the transition problems was significant and widespread and should form a key part of decision-making on the Home Office position on any overpayments during this period.
- Careful budgeting strategies which are essential when living on £39.63 p/w were disrupted and meant that many people could not make the ECPs stretch as far as they would with regular weekly payments. For example, CRH gave out supermarket vouchers (not cash) to people on s95. This restricted people's ability to shop around for the best deals and sometimes meant that people had to find additional funds to travel to the relevant supermarket. Many people had experienced significant gaps in support before ECPs (initially only £20) were issued to them and were in serious need by the time the ECPs became available to them.
- We recognise that the Home Office has stated that any overpayments will be taken back slowly and at a low rate. However, it is important to note that the level of asylum support payments are set at an absolute minimum to meet essential living needs. Any fluctuation to those payments, however minimal, will have an impact on people's ability to meet their essential living needs and will disrupt the careful budgeting plans mentioned above.

We look forward to hearing the results of your internal and ministerial discussions on this issue.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Alice Webb".

Alice Webb
ASAP, NASF support co-chair