

The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2006: a process and impact assessment

Transparency Research, Olga Evans (UK Border Agency)

Introduction

Aims

Research was conducted to contribute to fulfilling the reporting requirements of the European Refugee Fund (ERF) II.

Context

Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration (VARRP) is intended as a cost-effective¹ and dignified alternative to enforced removal/deportation for people whose asylum applications have failed. VARRP provides support for return to and reintegration in the country of origin. VARRP 2006 (1 August 2006 to 31 July 2007) was co-funded by the UK Border Agency and the ERF, and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). During the VARRP 2005 programme year the maximum value of reintegration assistance available to returnees had risen from £1,000 to £3,000. The VARRP 2006 programme year saw the maximum reintegration package value fluctuating, with the maximum value at different times ranging from £1,500 to £4,000.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse VARRP 2006 stakeholders. Extracts from analysis of IOM

management data are included to provide broader VARRP 2006 context. There was a focus on Nigeria as a return country.²

Limitations to the representativeness of research informants should be borne in mind when considering the implications of the findings for VARRP programme development.³

- 2 For each VARRP programme year between 2004 and 2006, priority case study countries have been identified by the UK Border Agency on the basis of having high uptake of VARRP and/or being of particular interest in terms of VARRP policy developments. Target countries for the research have then been chosen from the UK Border Agency priority list after consideration of the feasibility of conducting research there (e.g. safety, freedom of movement, IOM support, dispersal of returnees, infrastructure). Iran and Nigeria were chosen for the VARRP 2006 research. Ultimately the research team was unable to gain access to Iran.
- 3 The VARRP users and potential users whose views are reflected in this report may not be representative of the wider pools from which they were drawn. Returnees were exclusively Nigerian; and only VARRP returnees who took up reintegration assistance could be contacted. The interviews with non-VARRP returnees provide an interesting contrast, but how representative of all non-VARRP returnees these people were is again unknown. Interviews took place between four and 15 months after return, so long-term sustainability of reintegration remains unknown. The VARRP providers interviewed were, inevitably, interested parties, so dispassionate appraisal of the VARRP 2006 programme may have been difficult. Some of their suggestions are reflected in programme changes introduced during the VARRP 2007 year, which they would have been anticipating (i.e. stabilising the VARRP package, and introduction of individual return plans and reintegration assistance more tailored to individual and country specific circumstances).

1 National Audit Office (2005) Removing failed asylum applicants. National Audit Office: London. http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0506/returning_failed_asylum_applic.aspx

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Keywords

Assisted voluntary return
 Asylum
 Asylum seekers
 Immigration
 Return
 Voluntary return
 Reintegration

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Findings

VARRP process and partnerships

- VARRP continued to operate successfully with good partnership working and delivery of a dignified and cost-effective alternative to enforced removal.
- Improvements or increases were suggested in respect of the following: independent assessment of VARRP and communication of findings to stakeholders; communication of relevant policy changes by the UK Border Agency and within the UK Border Agency about VARRP;⁴ and flexibility of reintegration assistance.

Marketing and outreach

- With caveats, work with diaspora communities was favoured by VARRP providers as a way of increasing VARRP referrals and returns.
- Enhanced value packages available under VARRP 2006 may have increased referrals and applications but fluctuating package value was perceived to have negative impacts.⁵
- Increased use of video-conferencing between actual and potential returnees was suggested.
- Mistrust around VARRP could be reduced by minimising visible links with the Home Office.

Sources of information about VARRP

- Most, though not all, of those eligible for VARRP were aware the programme existed.
- VARRP users suggested VARRP was best advertised in the community (shops, cafés, churches, community centres). The initial source of information may impact on response.

Experience of help from VARRP advisers

- Most VARRP returnees were satisfied and contact with IOM personnel increased confidence in the programme.

- People withdrawing from VARRP,⁶ while also positive about the input of advisers, focused on the access to support while they were in the UK that this contact brought them. Those eligible for VARRP in the UK wanted greater reassurance about the programme.
- VARRP providers advocated greater use of free phone lines and publicity about availability of translation.

Decision to return

- VARRP returnees tended to be closer than non-VARRP returnees to the point of having appeal rights exhausted when they decided to return to Nigeria.
- VARRP returnees appeared 'pushed' by a lack of alternatives other than deportation. Non-VARRP returnees to a greater extent appeared 'pulled' by expectations of a better life on return.
- Half of the VARRP returnees (five out of 11 people) said they would not have returned if there had been no VARRP programme.

Applications and returns

- There were 6,243 VARRP 2006 applications and 3,692 people were assisted to depart the UK. This was a decrease of 26 per cent on the 5,002 people returned under VARRP 2005, but still 42 per cent higher than the 2,599 people returned under VARRP 2004. Returns under VARRP 2005 were boosted by the possibility of returning a large number of Iraqi people.
- Nigeria was the 11th most frequent return destination during VARRP 2006, with 99 applications made and 60 people returned.
- Applicants' views on the situation in the country of return, rumours of an asylum amnesty, and publicity around enforced removals were all thought to have influenced VARRP 2006 applications and returns.

Withdrawal from VARRP

- The rate of withdrawal from VARRP 2006 was 31 per cent overall but only 12 per cent for Nigerian applicants.
- Fears about conditions in the return country were most frequently seen as the key factor.

4 In 2009 the UK Border Agency AVR team commenced recruitment of regional AVR liaison officers to act as central contact points and assist in dissemination of information about AVR across the UK Border Agency.

5 From 19 October 2007 the 'tailored reintegration assistance' approach was introduced and the monetary value of the assistance available under the standard VARRP package was no longer made explicit to potential applicants and has been held constant.

6 The term 'withdrawal' as used in this report refers to those people who cancelled their VARRP applications, lost contact with IOM or made their own arrangements to return.

- Suggestions for ways of reducing withdrawal could be categorised as: tightening up on regulations and enforcement around failed asylum applicants; more liberal assessment of protection needs; and increased emphasis on the benefits of VARRP and of return in VARRP marketing.

Experience of return

- Non-VARRP returnees were more likely than VARRP returnees to feel that conditions in Nigeria had improved since they had claimed asylum in the UK.
- Hopes and fears about return most frequently concerned family reunion and starting again. VARRP returnees also looked forward to starting a business, whereas non-VARRP returnees looked forward to getting a job.
- Initial difficulties due to lack of money and interpersonal problems were generally overcome; accommodation was less of a problem for VARRP than for non-VARRP returnees.

VARRP support for return and reintegration: impact and effectiveness

- Generally returnees were enthusiastic about VARRP support for return.
- The cash relocation allowance (paid on departure) was rated highly by VARRP returnees. It was used to meet a variety of needs (predominantly housing, food, and transport); and some was saved and invested.
- Uptake of reintegration assistance was lower among Nigerian VARRP 2006 returnees than among VARRP 2006 returnees in general (54% compared with at least⁷ 71% of all VARRP 2006 returnees).
- Small-business start-up support was the most popular reintegration assistance option among the Nigerian VARRP 2006 returnees, as among VARRP 2006 returnees in general. Most VARRP returnees interviewed had contacted IOM within one week of return.

- Almost half of the non-VARRP returnees to Nigeria said they had not known that reintegration assistance was available as part of VARRP.
- Uptake of reintegration assistance may be influenced by the following: trust in bureaucracies and authorities in return countries; IOM capacity in return countries; tailoring of assistance to take into account inflation and cost of living; confidence building prior to departure; and accessibility of IOM and support on return.
- Re-migration within five years was anticipated by more VARRP than non-VARRP returnees. Most returnees reported reasonable (by local standards) housing conditions; but VARRP returnees were less likely than non-VARRP returnees to have a permanent place to live.
- The main source of income for VARRP returnees was their business; for non-VARRP returnees paid employment was also important.
- VARRP providers rated the relatively large value of the reintegration package and the cash relocation grant as the best elements of the VARRP 2006 package.
- Their suggestions for improvements included: improving monitoring and feedback for providers; providing potential returnees with better information on the return country and opportunities; introducing new rules to control the way reintegration assistance for dependants is used; and increasing flexibility around use of reintegration funds (e.g. for purchase of cars or children's education).⁸
- Some Nigerian VARRP 2006 returnees suggested that higher-value reintegration assistance would improve the programme, but most felt the programme as it stood was good: "*they should just do it the normal way they do it*", and they rated reintegration assistance highly.

⁷ The VARRP 2006 programme year ran from 1 August 2006 to 31 July 2007. VARRP returnees who wish to take up reintegration assistance are generally required to do so within three months of return. As at 31 October 2007, 71 per cent of all those people returned under VARRP 2006 had taken up reintegration assistance. It is possible that a few VARRP 2006 returnees might have been permitted to take up reintegration assistance after October 2007.

⁸ The introduction of the 'tailored reintegration assistance' approach in October 2007 also saw changes to the rules around use of assistance – for example, assistance for minors must be used for their education and can no longer be pooled with that of parents to contribute to a family business. From 2010 there will be increased flexibility to enable providers of reintegration assistance to respond to country-specific conditions when determining the use of reintegration assistance.

The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2006: a process and impact assessment

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I. Introduction

Aims

This report presents the findings of a process and impact assessment of the UK Border Agency Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) for the 2006 programme year (1 August 2006–31 July 2007). It contributes to fulfilling European Union funding requirements.

Context

VARRP exists to provide asylum seekers in the UK with the means to return to their country of origin (or habitual residence) in a dignified and sustainable⁹ manner. VARRP 2006 was funded by the UK Border Agency and the European Refugee Fund Part II (ERF II) and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), with its principal office in London, and offices in Bristol, Glasgow and Liverpool.¹⁰ In 2006, IOM worked with four partner agencies to provide referrals. These were: Refugee Action (RA), North of England Refugee Service (NERS), Safe Haven Yorkshire (SHY) and Wolverhampton Asylum Refugee Service (WARS). Further outreach work was done through more than 200 other agencies in order to promote the programme.

Support available under VARRP includes travel costs, arranging travel, help with documentation (passports or other travel documents), and support at departure and arrival. Since 2002 the package has also included

optional reintegration assistance¹¹ which aims to provide financial support towards vocational training, job placements, or small business start-up for adults and education for children. (Eligibility criteria for VARRP are set out in Appendix 3. A VARRP process diagram is provided in Appendix 4.)

During the VARRP 2005 programme year the maximum value of reintegration assistance available to returnees had risen from £1,000 to £3,000. The total value of the support package in the 2006 year varied, but a basic package consisted of logistical help with return and £1,000 of in-kind reintegration assistance. There were various 'enhanced' packages available at different points during the year which included in-kind reintegration assistance up to £3,000 per returnee. Most VARRP 2006 returnees also received a cash relocation grant of £500, on departure, to help deal with immediate costs on return. Eligibility for the enhanced packages was determined by date of asylum application, date of VARRP application, and date of return. Those ineligible for an enhanced package were put forward for the basic package. Under the rules of VARRP 2006, each returnee was entitled to assistance; thus a family of four returning would get four times the assistance. (A table of VARRP packages offered through the VARRP 2006 year is provided in Appendix 5.)

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes directly contribute to fulfilling the UK Border Agency strategic objective 4: "We will fast track asylum decisions, remove those whose claims fail and integrate those who need our protection", and Public Service Agreement 3 and, in particular, to Indicator 3 ("Increase the number of removals year on year") (UK Border Agency, 2008).

9 The UK Border Agency takes absence of re-migration to the UK as the key measure of sustainability of return.

10 IOM has since opened further regional offices in Leeds, Birmingham, and Manchester.

11 The UK has operated an assisted voluntary return scheme for asylum applicants since 1999. Prior to the addition of optional reintegration assistance, the package was known as the Voluntary Assisted Return Programme (VARP).

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Cost-benefit analyses of unit cost comparisons between VARRP returns and enforced removals indicate that VARRP is a cost-effective approach to removing failed asylum applicants (Home Office, 2002 and 2005; National Audit Office, 2005).

2. Method

The VARRP 2006 qualitative research comprised semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders in the VARRP 2006 programme, with a focus on Nigeria as a return destination.¹² Interviews took place in the UK from May to August 2008 and in Nigeria in April 2008. Details of the research participants are given below and summarised in Tables A1 and A2. Further detail on methodology, practical issues, constraints, caveats, response rates and implications is given in Appendix 1.

Quantitative contextual information, derived from analysis of IOM administrative data for the VARRP 2005 and VARRP 2006 programme years,¹³ is also included in the report.

Stakeholders in VARRP provision (VARRP providers)

In the UK, 23 interviews were conducted with those involved in promoting or delivering VARRP 2006. These comprised individuals working in IOM, in IOM partner organisations, in the UK Border Agency policy and operations teams, and members of the UK Border Agency Voluntary Returns Steering Group (VRSG). One of two IOM staff members involved in delivering VARRP in Nigeria was also interviewed.

12 For each VARRP programme year between 2004 and 2006, priority case study countries have been identified by the UK Border Agency on the basis of having high uptake of VARRP and/or being of particular interest in terms of VARRP policy developments. Target countries for the research have then been chosen from the UK Border Agency priority list after consideration of the feasibility of conducting research there (e.g. safety, freedom of movement, IOM support, dispersal of returnees, infrastructure). Iran and Nigeria were chosen for the VARRP 2006 research. Ultimately the research team was unable to gain access to Iran.

13 The IOM management data are not drawn from a cohort of people followed through the VARRP process. Not all VARRP 2006 applicants will return during the VARRP 2006 year, and some VARRP 2006 returnees will have applied during the VARRP 2005 programme year. This means that conversion rates (i.e. returns as a proportion of applications as a proportion of enquiries) are approximated rather than being exact.

Information was collected through an online survey which the respondent completed in their own time; a telephone interview was then conducted to follow up or clarify responses.

Returnees and potential returnees

Interviews were conducted in Nigeria with returnees and in the UK with potential returnees. Interviews were by telephone with four VARRP returnees but otherwise conducted face to face. (Basic demographic characteristics of these groups are given in Table A1; details of the recruitment procedure and response are provided in Appendix 1). These included the subgroups outlined below.

- 11 VARRP returnees: people returning to Nigeria through the VARRP programme and taking up reintegration assistance.
- 30 non-VARRP returnees: returnees to Nigeria who had previously claimed asylum in the UK and then returned independently.
- Six VARRP 'withdrawals':¹⁴ these were individuals who had applied and been accepted on VARRP, then subsequently withdrew and remained in the UK. These were Iranian, Somali and Syrian men.
- Six potential VARRP applicants: these were individuals who had not applied for VARRP assistance, but who were eligible for it. These were Iranian and Somali men.

Community representatives

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight Nigerian community representatives in the UK; these included professionals, community group leaders, businessmen and women, and academics. A report on this work is included in Appendix 2.

Limitations to the representativeness of the findings

The limitations to the research conducted around VARRP 2006, in terms of the representativeness of the informants for the qualitative research, should be noted when considering the implications of the findings presented here.

14 The term 'withdrawal' as used in this report refers to those people who cancelled their VARRP applications, lost contact with IOM or made their own arrangements to return.

The VARRP users and potential users whose views are reflected in this report may not be representative of the wider pools from which they were drawn. Returnees were exclusively Nigerian; and only VARRP returnees who took up reintegration assistance could be contacted. The interviews with non-VARRP returnees provide an interesting contrast, but how representative of all non-VARRP returnees these people were is again unknown. Interviews took place between four and 15 months after return, so long-term sustainability of reintegration remains unknown. The VARRP providers interviewed were, inevitably, interested parties, so dispassionate appraisal of the VARRP 2006 programme may have been difficult. Some of their suggestions are reflected in programme changes introduced during the VARRP 2007 year, which they would have been anticipating (i.e. stabilising the VARRP package, and introduction of individual return plans and reintegration assistance more tailored to individual and country-specific circumstances).

3. Findings

VARRP partnerships and process

Organisation and process

VARRP operates through a complex structure of organisations and individuals, sometimes with conflicting priorities and aims. The UK Border Agency has operational staff who deal with failed asylum seekers, and a central team which liaises with IOM, the main delivery agent, over assisted voluntary return. IOM provides the VARRP service including logistical arrangements and provides reintegration assistance in the country of return. Potential returnees in the UK may 'discover' VARRP through a variety of means, including IOM, IOM's partner agencies, or via third parties, such as lawyers, police, media etc. Ultimately, returnees make contact with an IOM case officer who arranges the return. In the country of return, IOM also typically commissions small business training and provides practical advice. IOM delivers reintegration assistance via a number of means including paying suppliers (capital goods for business start-up) directly or funding other support the returnee needs. A period of monitoring is undertaken by IOM after delivering reintegration assistance.

Appendix 4 provides a process diagram for VARRP, from a VARRP applicant's perspective. VARRP applicants are required to leave the UK within three months of their

application being accepted. They are required to contact IOM within three months of arrival in the return country, if they wish to take up reintegration assistance. Support with reintegration is delivered for up to 12 months.

Effectiveness of process: VARRP providers' views

Most VARRP providers thought that the VARRP process was quite or very effective (seven and 12 out of 24 respondents respectively). Ratings of high effectiveness were associated with perceptions that VARRP was effective in generating returns, was more cost effective than enforcement and provided positive assistance for returnees. The three respondents who felt that it was not effective at all gave reasons of: a lack of trust of VARRP among potential returnees; lack of communication between case owners and applicants (presumably after referral); and a lack of success in generating referrals.

Only five (out of 24) respondents had suggestions for improving VARRP processes. These were: increasing the relocation grant element, improving the information available on countries of return, improving communication and marketing and making the reintegration package more flexible.

Partnership working: VARRP providers' views

Partnership relationships between the VARRP providers were nearly unanimously rated as effective by the providers themselves (nine very effective, 14 quite effective, out of 24). Effectiveness was attributed to good communication and information flow in the context of day-to-day work, supported by good relationships, regular meetings, reviews and established links.

Information sources and knowledge gaps: VARRP providers' views

IOM was the primary source of information for VARRP providers (mentioned by 20 out of 24 respondents) with the UK Border Agency of secondary prominence (mentioned by 11 out of 24 respondents). Other sources were: VARRP partner NGOs; the media; other voluntary sector and refugee community groups; and VARRP applicants themselves.

VARRP providers would like to have more quantitative and qualitative information about: reintegration of returnees, applications, returnees' reasons for taking up or not taking up reintegration assistance, and why people withdrew. They would like to see more independent follow-up of returnees, to know more about experiences following return, and have access to relevant case studies to understand both the process for and benefits of VARRP.

There were also suggestions that communication about policy changes between the UK Border Agency and other partners could be improved; and that within the UK Border Agency improvements in communication about the benefits of assisted voluntary return between different policy and operational units would help those encouraging VARRP uptake.¹⁵

In conclusion:

- Effective partnership working, based on good communication, ensured that the diversity and multiplicity of stakeholders involved in promotion and delivery of VARRP, was not a bar to effective working and delivery of VARRP goals.
- Notwithstanding the generally positive appraisal of VARRP processes, a few responses suggested that there was a need to increase potential returnees' trust in VARRP, to improve communication, marketing, and information on countries of return for potential returnees, and advocated increasing the relocation grant and the flexibility of the reintegration package.
- There were also suggestions for improving communication between delivery partners. These included improving communication about VARRP within the UK Border Agency, as well as communication of policy changes from the UK Border Agency to other VARRP partners, and greater production and sharing of research into VARRP.

VARRP marketing and outreach

IOM marketing and outreach activities during VARRP 2006: VARRP providers' views

IOM and its partner agencies undertake many and diverse marketing and outreach activities. IOM informational activities during VARRP 2006 included: outreach meetings; arranging live video conferences with returnees; providing leaflets in 30 different languages and new posters; circulating newsletters to community groups; and producing a DVD of stories of return. In May 2007 IOM conducted a 'mapping exercise' to further its understanding of the Nigerian diaspora in the UK.

¹⁵ In 2009 the UK Border Agency AVR team commenced recruitment of regional AVR liaison officers to act as central contact points and assist in dissemination of information about AVR across the UK Border Agency.

However, as one VARRP provider said:

"The number of referrals can be increased by providing information to people... [An] increase in the number of returnees is a different issue. The two are affected by totally different factors. e.g. if a client doesn't feel safe to return, they will not return no matter what the incentives are. I have seen clients who took their lives because they found themselves with no option but to return. As for other people ... they can be persuaded to take up the voluntary return options if the incentive is good for them."

Effectiveness of VARRP 2006 marketing and outreach activities: VARRP providers' views

Work with diaspora communities (meetings and presentations, including video conferencing with returnees) was the strategy most frequently identified by VARRP providers as most effective in producing referrals and returns (by eight out of 24 respondents).¹⁶ Other respondents singled out advertising in newspapers or on television, work with frontline staff, and printed media, including leaflets and the publication "Stories of Return" as most effective.

Regarding specific marketing activities undertaken in the 2006 VARRP year, there was consensus that the, intermittently available, enhanced package (see Appendix 5) had increased referrals and returns. However, this was with provisos. There were perceived negative impacts when the enhanced package changed. It damaged trust, caused confusion among VARRP providers and applicants, and was believed to have made potential applicants who had missed the enhanced package prefer to wait to see if it would be reintroduced.

"The enhanced package did increase the number of people who actually returned. But it created a negative impact, as when it finished the number of applications dropped dramatically and clients were waiting for the next package hoping it will be better... Most of the enquiries we received were about the reintegration assistance and how much money IOM will give... I think the way the Home Office advertised that package really damaged the good nature of the VR [voluntary return] principles. Some parts of the media labelled it 'a bribe'."

¹⁶ To gauge possible impact of these returnees and potential returnees were asked how they found out about VARRP and what effect if any the information had on their thinking about return. This is reported on in the next section, on sources of information about VARRP. Returnees and potential returnees would not necessarily know about the range of marketing tools that had been used or be able to reflect on these.

Suggestions for improvements to marketing and outreach: VARRP providers' views

VARRP providers made many varied, and sometimes conflicting, suggestions for improving marketing and outreach work. These included: increased use of video-conferencing meetings; not using a direct aggressive marketing approach (as the 2006 year was felt to have used); reducing visible associations between the Home Office and the VARRP programme; direct targeting of information on VARRP to individual asylum seekers by letter from IOM; increasing awareness of information and referral routes other than IOM; and finding ways of increasing trust in the programme (for the full list of suggestions see Table A3).

Half of VARRP providers had consulted with community organisations. Two of the comments emerging from this were:

"The refugee community groups always have strong views about the Voluntary Return. They think if the number of returnees goes up for a specific country that will lead to the Home Office changing their view regarding that country and consider it safe. That will lead – in their opinion – higher number of refusals in the initial decision."

"Meeting community groups and advertising VARRP in clients' own language have positive impact and tend to increase uptake. They increase understanding of IOM role, benefits of VARRP, distinction between IOM and Home Office."

In conclusion:

- Of the many and diverse marketing, informational and outreach activities undertaken by IOM during the VARRP 2006 programme year, work with diaspora communities and communications through diaspora media were most frequently considered to have been the most effective in promoting VARRP uptake.
- The intermittently available enhancements to the reintegration package available during VARRP 2006 were viewed as having increased uptake but negative impacts on perception of VARRP were noted.¹⁷
- Suggestions for improving marketing and outreach focused on efforts to build trust and increase confidence in VARRP.

¹⁷ From 19 October 2007 the 'tailored reintegration assistance' approach was introduced and the monetary value of the assistance available under the standard VARRP package was no longer made explicit to potential applicants and has been held constant.

Sources of information about VARRP

Sources and impact of VARRP information: views of people eligible for VARRP

Although the majority of both non-VARRP returnees to Nigeria (21 out of 30 people) and potential VARRP returnees (four out of six people) said they were aware of VARRP, this suggests that there are still sections of the target community that information is not reaching.

VARRP and non-VARRP returnees to Nigeria were most likely to have first heard of VARRP through community media channels (four out of 11 VARRP returnees, and 11 out of 21 non-VARRP returnees). For non-VARRP returnees, more often than for VARRP returnees, the first source of information had been a Home Office letter or a detention centre (four and three out of 21 non-VARRP, and one and one out of 11 VARRP returnees respectively). Other sources for individual returnees had been: a Citizens' Advice Bureau; other adviser; a solicitor; National Asylum Support Service; and word of mouth (hearing from a relative, friend or acquaintance).

Non-returnees, (VARRP 'withdrawals' and potential VARRP applicants who had heard of VARRP) were most likely to have first heard of VARRP through an advertisement in a police station, word of mouth, and Refugee Action.

VARRP returnees tended to feel encouraged to return by the information they received (seven out of 11 people). Perhaps not surprisingly, 'withdrawals' said the information they received had no effect on their decision to return.

Suggestions for improving information available to potential applicants: views of people eligible for VARRP

Amongst those who had been involved with VARRP, there was general consensus that VARRP was best advertised in the community. Places mentioned included community cafés, shops, churches and community centres. One VARRP returnee offered his services to IOM as a representative.

Suggestions for improving information available to potential applicants: VARRP providers' views

VARRP provider suggestions for improving the information for potential applicants included: greater use of (ethnic) TV channels, (ethnic) shops, churches, mosques and community centres; taking note of translation needs; and greater use of individual testimonies of returnees. VARRP returnees could provide an information source that could be more credible than both IOM and the UK Border Agency. One cost-free suggestion was to

include a standard paragraph on VARRP on all Home Office documents issued to (asylum) applicants. (This might conflict with other steers that minimising overt associations between the UK Border Agency and VARRP would improve credibility and acceptability).

In conclusion:

- More still needs to be done to raise awareness of VARRP among potential VARRP users.
- The attractiveness of VARRP may be influenced by the source of initial information about the programme.
- Increased use of diaspora community channels and venues for marketing activities was recommended; meeting translation needs and more use of VARRP returnees' testimonies were also suggested.

Experience of help from VARRP advisers

Perceptions of help from VARRP advisers: views of VARRP users

Most VARRP returnees rated the advice given by IOM advisers as good (seven out of 11 interviewees); and none reported any problems with the advice given. Satisfaction reflected both characteristics of the adviser, and the type of information given (e.g. good information on how to get a travel certificate, information on reintegration assistance). Contact with IOM advisers reassured applicants that the VARRP programme was real, and it indicated that the steps to be taken were straightforward.

VARRP 'withdrawals' were also generally positive about the advice they received (four out of six respondents). They appreciated the interpretation assistance and perceived the advisers as kind people. Comments suggested that it was the access to support while they were still in the UK that was most valued. References were made to accommodation and food (probably referring to Section 4 support), and also to the availability of interpretation. However, in some cases the short-lived nature of the support they were able to access led to bitterness and disappointment when support stopped: *"I was asked to leave the accommodation after a short time. It made me very angry. I realised that no one cares about asylum seekers in the UK."*

Suggestions for improving VARRP advice: views of all interviewees

There was a consensus, across all categories of interviewee, that the advice currently given was of a high

standard. VARRP providers had a few suggestions, including making more use of free phone lines, and ensuring it was known that translation was available.

VARRP returnees, who had already used the system, said (for example): *"They are doing great already"*; another added: *"Any reasonable human being will be able to understand it."* A third returnee suggested continuing advice after return.

People eligible for VARRP in the UK wanted greater reassurance about the programme and felt there were some gaps, stating: *"They need to pay people everything they promised to give them."*

In conclusion:

- Both the information given by and the manner of IOM advisers were positively viewed by people who had applied for VARRP and contact increased confidence in the VARRP programme.
- Suggestions for improvement were few but included raising awareness of translation availability and use of free telephone lines, and actions to increase confidence that VARRP promises were delivered.

Decision to return: Nigerian returnees' views

Nearly all VARRP returnees (eight out of 11 people)¹⁸ were at various stages of appeal or refusal of their asylum applications when they decided to apply for VARRP. Non-VARRP returnees were less likely to have reached the appeal stage (ten out of 30 people) by the time they decided to return. Refusal of asylum and there being no other option but to return were the factors mentioned most frequently by VARRP returnees as influences on their decision to return (four out of 11 respondents). These were also important for non-VARRP returnees (11 out of 30 respondents) (see Table A4).

For non-VARRP returnees, however, expectations of a better quality of life in Nigeria were an equally important factor (mentioned by 12 out of 30 respondents). VARRP returnees were less likely to have this expectation (only two out of 11 respondents). Similarly, a number of non-VARRP returnees (four out of 30 respondents), but no VARRP returnees, also cited business opportunities in Nigeria as a reason for return) (see Table A4).

¹⁸ Two further VARRP returnees did not say what stage of the asylum process they had reached when they applied for VARRP.

While application for VARRP assistance to return was most frequently prompted by fear of deportation (four out of 11 respondents), the possibility of returning in a dignified manner, and the financial aspects of the VARRP package (each reported by three out of 11 respondents) were also influential (see Table A5). Almost half of the VARRP returnees said they would not have returned if there had not been VARRP (five of 11 respondents), but almost as many felt they would have gone anyway (four out of 11 respondents).

In conclusion:

- The balance of push (lack of options in the UK) and pull factors (opportunities and prospects in the return country) appeared to vary between VARRP and spontaneous returnees to Nigeria, with push factors dominating for VARRP returnees.
- The existence of VARRP, and the positive alternative to deportation it presented, prompted the departure of some Nigerian returnees. More could be done to emphasise the positives of return and VARRP.

Applications and returns

Number of applications and returns¹⁹

During VARRP 2006 6,243 VARRP applications were made and 3,692 people were assisted to depart the UK. This was a decrease of 26 per cent on the 5,002 people returned under VARRP 2005, but still 42 per cent higher than the 2,599 people returned under VARRP 2004. Returns under VARRP 2005 were boosted by the return of a backlog of Iraqi would-be returnees as charter flights to Iraq became available.

Nigeria was the 11th most frequent return destination during VARRP 2006 with 99 applications made and 60 people returned.

Factors (external to the VARRP programme) affecting applications: VARRP providers' views

The external factors perceived by VARRP providers as influencing uptake of VARRP 2006 fitted into five broad categories. The most frequently mentioned factor was the situation in the country of return in terms of safety (nine out of 24 respondents). Rumours of an amnesty on asylum cases were also perceived to have had an effect on decisions to return (seven out of 24 respondents), and the

threat of enforced removals (as some had been highlighted in the media during the VARRP 2006 year) was thought to have encouraged applications (six out of 24 respondents). Others mentioned that a person's experience in the UK (e.g. being unable to work and in hiding) could also encourage them to return (five out of 24 respondents), as could their own personal circumstances (three out of 24 respondents).

In conclusion:

- While fears about safety in the return country were perceived as a key barrier to uptake of VARRP, a barrier more specific to VARRP 2006 was the rumour that an amnesty for failed asylum applicants would be announced.
- The hardships of life in the UK, and, more specifically for VARRP 2006, visible evidence of enforcement activity were perceived to motivate VARRP application.

Withdrawal from VARRP

Number withdrawing

Under VARRP 2006, 31 per cent of all applications were cancelled or the applicant lost contact with IOM. Withdrawal rates vary considerably between countries. Of the 99 Nigerian applicants under VARRP 2006, only 12 (12%) had cancelled their application.

Reasons for withdrawal: VARRP providers' views

Among VARRP providers, the most frequently suggested reason for VARRP applicants withdrawing from the programme was that returnees were responding to unrest in their country of return or were afraid of returning (mentioned by 13 out of 24 respondents). Having made an application principally to access asylum (Section 4) support was also frequently mentioned (nine out of 24 respondents). Other reasons suggested by more than two respondents were: fear of detention and use of VARRP as a delaying tactic; and rumours of an amnesty for asylum seekers.

Reflecting on the fact that applicants who applied when their asylum appeal had already been dismissed were most likely to withdraw, one interviewee suggested the following explanation:

“Also I think there might be an element of heightened stress at this point in the process for the applicant – the Home Office is threatening removal and will cut off NASS support and the application might be made without proper

¹⁹ IOM records demographic details of the principal applicant associated with each VARRP application. However, several people (usually other family members) may be included on one application.

consideration. Then, after the application, the applicant has time to reflect, the pressure from the Home Office – in terms of letters sent to applicant, threats of removal and termination of NASS, stop – and the applicant has time to consider other options – such as staying in the UK illegally.”

Reasons for withdrawal: views of those eligible for VARRP

Nearly half of all those eligible for VARRP (24 out of 53 respondents), and especially non-VARRP returnees to Nigeria (21 out of 30 respondents), could not say what prompted withdrawal. Among the 29 people who gave suggestions, the most frequent was fear of return (mentioned by nine people). One VARRP ‘withdrawal’ stated: “Being told to go home is very difficult thing to deal with, when you can’t go home”.

Eight responses concerned perceptions that VARRP had a bad reputation; had strings attached; or was fraudulent. There were fears of arrest or murder upon return. Seven people, almost exclusively non-VARRP returnees, suggested that withdrawal was due to potential returnees having poor information. Other ideas (mentioned by fewer people) included concerns about being able to travel again, or that conditions were better in the UK than in the return country regardless of the difficulties.

Ways of reducing withdrawal: views of VARRP providers

Differences in the broad agenda of the diverse VARRP providers were highlighted in responses to the question of how withdrawal could be reduced. Tightening up on regulations (on enforcement, Section 4 support, and time limits) underpinned the majority (eight out of 24 respondents) of suggestions. However, other responses emphasised the ‘voluntariness’ of applicants’ decisions (and hence the inevitability that some would withdraw), suggested that more could be done by the UK Border Agency to ‘sell’ VARRP as a positive choice rather than a desperate measure, or argued that improvements in assessing individual protection needs by the Home Office would mean that the VARRP applicant pool would include fewer people fearful of return.

The challenge of overcoming VARRP applicants’ fears of return was summed up thus by one VARRP provider:

“It is very difficult, as how do you relate and convince a person whose true circumstance you may never be aware of. You can only attempt to convince them in relation to the reality they are in at the moment. Even that is difficult as many people have networks of friends in the UK who are telling them otherwise and this network also gives them a reason to stay that you are not aware of.”

Ways of reducing withdrawal: views of those eligible for VARRP

Most VARRP returnees felt that better information (advertising, reassurance of support) would reduce withdrawal rates (nine out of 11 respondents). Of the few non-VARRP returnees (six out of 30 interviewees) who made any suggestion, most (five out of six) concurred.

Only six out of 12 non-returnees made suggestions, and these were more about the value of the reintegration package or increasing trust in VARRP. Those who did provide suggestions often commented on the impossibility of return until conditions in the return country improved.

In conclusion:

- Withdrawal from VARRP was considerably lower among Nigerian applicants than among VARRP 2006 applicants in general.
- Fear about safety in the return country was seen as a key factor in withdrawal from VARRP by those eligible for and those providing VARRP.
- Suggestions for reducing withdrawal mirrored perceived reasons for withdrawal. All respondent groups endorsed providing more information about VARRP, focus on the positives and building confidence and trust in the programme.
- VARRP providers also supported increased enforcement and tightening up on regulations (e.g. around VARRP applications and access to Section 4 support).

Experience of return to Nigeria

Perceived conditions in country of return: Nigerian returnees’ views

At the time of the interviews, VARRP and non-VARRP returnees had been back in Nigeria for similar periods of time (ranging from four to 15 months, with an average of about one year), and had been in the UK for similar periods of time prior to returning to Nigeria (ranging from three to 142 months, with an average of about five years).

VARRP returnees were less likely than non-VARRP returnees to think that conditions in Nigeria had improved since they had claimed asylum (four out of 11 VARRP returnees compared with 20 out of 30 non-VARRP returnees). Perceived improvements in economic and social conditions were most frequently mentioned. A

few returnees felt that political conditions had improved, or mentioned technological development. No VARRP returnees, but one-third (ten out of 30) of the non-VARRP returnees commented on improvements in the security situation and crime reduction in Nigeria.

Specific issues that troubled both VARRP and non-VARRP Nigerian returnees included the erratic electricity supply and the fuel shortage.

Hopes and fears about return: Nigerian returnees' views

All returnees were asked about their concerns and fears prior to return. VARRP returnees were most likely to have been worried about family problems (six out of 11). These included fear of assault by estranged family members in the return country and access to healthcare for children. Among non-VARRP returnees the commonest concern was around the prospect of starting again (12 of 30 respondents). Other worries included not having work, returning home empty handed, having housing and financial problems, the conflict in parts of the Delta region and perceptions that the VARRP programme was a fraud.

Hopes about returning were mainly regarding family reunion, starting a new life, or being home. Some VARRP returnees had hopes about setting up a business; non-VARRP returnees were more likely to hope to find a job.

VARRP returnees were less likely than non-VARRP returnees to report that, on return, their fears had been justified (five out of 11 VARRP returnees compared with 20 out of 30 non-VARRP returnees). However, they were also less likely to report that their hopes had been fulfilled (six out of 11 VARRP returnees compared with 24 out of 30 non-VARRP returnees).

Experience of difficulties on return: Nigerian returnees' views

In the early days after return, lack of money was a particular problem for VARRP returnees (mentioned by five out of 11 VARRP and six out of 30 non-VARRP returnees). Problems with friends, family and social networks (mentioned by two VARRP returnees and 14 non-VARRP returnees) and with accommodation (mentioned by two of 11 VARRP and eight of 30 non-VARRP returnees) were more prevalent among non-VARRP returnees (Table A6). For a small number of returnees the same problems persisted at the time of the interviews, but most indicated that they had overcome initial problems.

Experience of discrimination and harassment on return: Nigerian returnees' views

A third of VARRP returnees (four out of 11 respondents) reported they had experienced discrimination or harassment, and two reported experiencing violence. Some had problems with family members and others had been involved in disputes and had been threatened. No non-VARRP returnees reported any such problems.

In conclusion:

- Non-VARRP returnees were more positive than VARRP returnees about conditions in Nigeria.
- Both hopes and fears around return focused on family relationships and starting again, for both groups of returnees. Early difficulties around money, family and social relationships and accommodation were generally overcome.
- VARRP returnees appeared advantaged in terms of accommodation on return but more likely to experience threats to personal security.

VARRP support for return and reintegration: impact and effectiveness

How VARRP helped: Nigerian VARRP returnees' views

VARRP returnees were asked how the programme had helped them return. Generally they appeared enthusiastic about the programme's ability to return them and the support they had received:

"At the airport I got £500 and the ticket. When I first heard about the programme I wanted to leave the next day. Here, I've got £3,000 of help. It comes in batches – such as equipment for fashion and design. I was excited. It was a relief at the time. Helped children to be in school. ... Subsequently had to sell a piece of machinery to pay for school fees. So that is why business is partial."

(Female, 37)

"It really helped me a lot. If the programme is not abused it is a very good programme. It gave me money, and it helped me start, I am making profit now. It helped me a lot. The money is not enough but I started from grass roots."

(Male, 45)

"If it wasn't for the IOM, I don't know. I didn't have anything at all. There was no way I could provide for my children."

(Female, 47)

"They made it easy him to return by returning him and they even provided a doctor to come along."

(Response from the son of an elderly disabled man)

Relocation allowances

All the VARRP returnees interviewed confirmed they had received the cash grant relocation allowance on departure from the UK. The amount received was £500 per person, but for families indications were that this was handed to the head of the household. Most of it was initially used for accommodation costs, food, and transportation. Some saved it, and invested in a business. The majority of returnees (seven of 11 respondents) said that the cash allowance was enough for immediate needs.

VARRP returnees were asked to speculate what would have happened if they had not received the cash allowance. All made dire predictions. A typical view was: *"It would have been very tough. Impossible"*.

Reintegration assistance

Uptake

It is now possible for returnees to most countries²⁰ to be provided with in-kind reintegration support on return, either through local IOM offices or through IOM London. In order to take up reintegration assistance, returnees need to contact IOM within three months of return. IOM then aims to have delivered all assistance within 12 months of return.

Of the 3,196 principal applicants who departed the UK under VARRP 2006, 71 per cent (2,269)²¹ had taken up reintegration assistance in their return country by the end of October 2007. There were 37 Nigerian principal applicants under VARRP 2006 who also returned during the VARRP 2006 year. All of them had returned to Nigeria at least seven months prior to interview. Of these, 20 contacted IOM on their return in order to take up reintegration assistance. This gives a reintegration take-up rate of 54 per cent; this is low compared to the overall VARRP 2006 figure.

20 During the VARRP 2006 period, reintegration assistance was usually in the form of cash payments in non-Kurdistan Regional Government areas of Iraq and in Somalia, Algeria, China, Turkey and some other countries where IOM does not have a mission.

21 This figure was calculated by the UK Border Agency Analysis, Research and Knowledge Management team through matching cases on the IOM VARRP 2006 departure list with cases on the IOM list of cases given reintegration assistance between 1 August 2006 and 31 October 2007 (i.e. VARRP 2006 year plus three months). The reasoning for this is that returnees are normally expected to have contacted IOM within three months of return. So, some of the people who returned towards the end of the VARRP 2006 year will have been assisted during the first months of the VARRP 2007 year.

The most popular form of in-kind reintegration assistance under VARRP 2006 (as in previous VARRP years) was small business start-up support, taken up by 86 per cent of all those who received in-kind reintegration assistance. Similarly, nearly all of the VARRP 2006 Nigerian returnees received business set-up assistance (nine of 11 respondents). Many also received some training (six of 11 respondents). Most of the returnees interviewed had made contact with IOM within a week of returning to Nigeria; the remainder within three months.

The majority of those people eligible for VARRP, and interviewed in the UK, had also heard of reintegration assistance (ten out of 12 respondents). In contrast, almost half (13 out of 30 respondents) of the non-VARRP returnees said they had not been aware that reintegration assistance was available for voluntary returnees.

Variations in take-up of reintegration assistance: VARRP providers' views²²

Factors suggested by VARRP providers to underlie the differences between countries in the rates of uptake of reintegration assistance were differences in the following: perceptions of authority figures and people in the country of return (including IOM staff) as corrupt and/or bureaucratic; opportunities available; the capacity of IOM to deliver on the ground; business start-up costs; the cost of living; inflation; official bureaucracy; and levels of acceptance of returnees.

Suggestions of how to reconcile these differences between countries included: varying the amount of reintegration assistance by country to take account of inflation and cost-of-living differences (i.e. tailoring the reintegration package); simplifying and speeding up delivery of reintegration assistance in countries where there is no IOM office by sending money in single instalments; having better arrangements with return countries; helping returnees with phone cards and a free phone number for IOM offices in return countries; or placing the onus on IOM to contact the returnee.

There were also broader related suggestions on dealing with returnees' perception of IOM in the country of return, including more information about the process and pre-departure counselling about the facts of the programme. IOM Nigeria noted that the equivalent VARRP programme run by the Swiss government allowed returnees to speak to the IOM Nigeria office prior to departure, which gave the returnee considerable reassurance.

22 VARRP providers may have very limited knowledge of conditions in countries of return; hence answers here are by their nature partly speculative.

Impact of reintegration assistance – sustainability of return to Nigeria

Only one VARRP returnee reported having any form of assistance upon return to Nigeria, other than that provided by the programme. In contrast half of non-VARRP returnees (14 out of 30 respondents) had help from either family or friends, receiving financial assistance or help in kind. Unsurprisingly, VARRP returnees were almost unanimous that VARRP assistance had been their biggest help (nine out of 11 responses).

Black et al. (2004) discussed how potentially multi-dimensional and complex definitions of sustainability could be but also suggested ways of operationalising assessment of sustainability at the individual level. Re-emigration or desire to re-emigrate was seen as a useful proxy. Employment and income levels and feelings of security, relative to those of compatriots, were also seen as useful indicators. In this research, sustainability of reintegration was measured through the following indicators: re-migration plans, housing, employment and income. (Safety and security were addressed in the section on experience of discrimination and harassment, under 'Experience of return' earlier in this report.) Interviewees had been back in Nigeria for between four and 15 months at the time of interview. Arguably this is an early point at which to assess sustainability.

Re-migration plans

When asked about their plans for the future, non-VARRP returnees appeared more settled. The majority (27 out of 30 respondents) said that, in five years' time, they would still be in Nigeria. In contrast, only half of VARRP returnees (six out of 11 respondents) thought they would remain in Nigeria. Two VARRP returnees (but none of the non-VARRP returnees) thought they would be in the UK; others did not know where they would be.

Housing

Non-VARRP returnees also appeared more settled in their housing situation. Three-quarters of VARRP returnees (eight out of 11 respondents) reported having a permanent²³ place to live, compared to nearly all of the non-VARRP returnees (28 of 30 respondents). Most returnees (nine out of 11 VARRP returnees and 26 out of 30 non-VARRP returnees) thought their housing was of a similar standard or better than that of other people around them. As most interviewees were in Lagos, accommodation tended to be urban in character, and largely rented or co-owned with family members.

²³ As defined by the respondent.

Employment

Nearly all VARRP returnees were running their own businesses (10 out of 11 respondents). One of these was doing so on a part-time basis while also seeking a job. Most businesses were in service or retail sectors. Examples included an electrical appliance shop, a grocery, a business supplying ice, a dress-maker, a hairdresser, and a digital satellite TV installer. Given this, it is unsurprising that the main source of income for most VARRP returnees was their business (seven out of 11 VARRP respondents). The one returnee not running a business was ill and VARRP assistance was used to pay medical bills.

While non-VARRP returnees had more diverse employment, and some (five out of 30) had no work at the time of interview, it appears that running a business was a popular choice with all Nigerian returnees. Those non-VARRP returnees in work were running their own business (eight out of 30 respondents); had bought into an existing business (five out of 30 respondents); were in the process of setting up a business (three out of 30 respondents); or were employed by others (eight out of 30 respondents). Correspondingly, the main source of income for many non-VARRP returnees was also their business (13 out of 30 non-VARRP respondents). Income from employment was, however, also common among non-VARRP returnees (eight out of 30 respondents). A few non-VARRP returnees (four out of 30) appeared reliant on savings, friends or family as sources of income.

Non-VARRP returnees were more likely than VARRP returnees to rate their incomes as higher than those of people around them. However, neither group was pessimistic about their future income. The majority of returnees expected their income to go up in the next five years (eight out of 11 VARRP returnees and 19 out of 30 non-VARRP returnees). The VARRP returnees expected their businesses to expand; the non-VARRP returnees insisted that hard work would pay off.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness of reintegration assistance: VARRP providers' views

Ten of the 24 VARRP providers interviewed felt they had enough information to be able to answer questions about the uptake and effectiveness of reintegration assistance, and all but one of these thought the assistance was effective. Other VARRP providers commented on the lack of independent data and feedback. One said: "Not enough information is provided on an ongoing basis to establish this. We are reliant on stories of return chosen by IOM which are often viewed with mistrust."; and another agreed, noting: "...we lack sufficient independent data and information."

The IOM staff member involved in the implementation of the programme in Nigeria felt that the programme was mostly effective and was improving with time. However, there were local difficulties, such that in Nigeria it was normal practice for rented accommodation for both residential and business purposes be paid two years in advance; this had important implications for establishing a successful business.²⁴

Best and worst elements of reintegration assistance: VARRP providers' views

The amount of money on offer in terms of reintegration assistance (mentioned by 11 out of 24 respondents), and the introduction of the cash grant at the airport (mentioned by eight out of 24 respondents) were the elements of the VARRP reintegration package most frequently viewed as the best. Typical explanations were as follows:

*"The amount of £3,000 is a lot of money anyway, particularly in some countries. ... Also, a combination of cash and in-kind support gives more guarantee of longer-term impact since money is channelled into business. [Otherwise there was a chance that] cash could be stolen, lost or misspent."*²⁵

"The enhancement to VARRP in 2006 offered the prospect of improving the likelihood that return would be sustainable and that voluntary return would be a reasonable option for a greater number of asylum seekers than would otherwise have been."

Most VARRP providers felt that the least favourable element of VARRP 2006 was the frequent changing of the package and that the enhanced package ceased to be available (16 out of 24 people).

A minority of VARRP providers felt that there were still restrictions on the VARRP package that made it less useful than it could be (five out of 24 responses). These included concerns around the following: time restrictions on making contact with IOM on return; the burden of evidence the returnee has to produce to IOM (including business plans, receipts etc.); and not being able to use assistance to purchase a vehicle as the backbone of their business.

24 Information on why such a restrictive practice is common in Nigeria is not precisely clear; however, we suggest it is excessive demand for housing in certain urban areas of Nigeria, plus the fear of non-payment by tenants that allows landlords to ask for, and get, such long advances. VARRP returnees were advised by IOM Nigeria to negotiate or deal with landlords to accept six or three months in advance, so the generalisation doesn't apply to *all* landlords.

25 However, Nigerian representatives in the UK felt this was a low amount (see Appendix 2).

"The easiest way that a person can start a small business in many countries of return is to set up a taxi/minibus or a transport business utilising a small truck. However, due to some returnees taking advantage i.e. buying private cars [then] selling them for cash, [this] has resulted in the reintegration assistance for taxis etc. being very difficult to receive, since the requirements from IOM were quite detailed and strict."

The final restriction reported was the universal nature of the VARRP package itself. In this instance, the respondent noted:

"It acted as a fixed amount instead of assessing the specific needs of returnees. It did not tackle emergency needs such as housing, childcare, further business training ..."

Suggestions for improving reintegration packages and support: VARRP providers' views

VARRP providers' suggestions for improving the reintegration package (without increasing its cost) included the following: improvements in monitoring and evaluation to inform programme improvement; and improvements in information provided to potential VARRP returnees prior to departure to improve planning for reintegration activities (e.g. about the IOM process in-country, potential business opportunities, and the range of options for assistance).

There were advocates for greater flexibility in the package, as well as comments supporting the need for restrictions on its use.²⁶ While some VARRP providers saw as advantageous the fact that families were able to pool the assistance allocated to each family member, others were concerned that children's best interests were not always served by this process. There was general agreement that it was important to meet an individual's or a family's specific needs, and to take account of conditions in the country of return: *"the one size fits all approach was not practical."*

Another suggestion was that payment of reintegration assistance should be done in instalments, withholding a portion for delivery later on. It was suggested that this would *"keep businesses going. It helps overcome unforeseen problems."*

26 The introduction of the 'tailored reintegration assistance' approach in October 2007 also saw changes to the rules for the use of assistance such that assistance for minors must be used for their education and can no longer be pooled with that of parents to contribute to a family business. From 2010 there will be increased flexibility to enable providers of reintegration assistance to respond to country-specific conditions when determining the use of reintegration assistance.

Suggestions for improving reintegration assistance: VARRP returnees' views

Most VARRP returnees (nine of 11 respondents) stated that the assistance received was "very good" or "acceptable". None rated it as poor.²⁷ Views about how reintegration assistance could be improved were varied but increased package value was a common theme. Two returnees were more thoughtful about the programme stating: "*The structure is good for any reasonable human being. If you are sincere with yourself, you will want to take it and settle down*", and, "... they should just do it [the VARRP programme] the normal way they do it." Additional views included assessing the needs of returnees properly: "... there must be one pressing need which cash might not solve. If they faced with life like this then coming back is just like going back to square one." Another suggestion included getting the information to a wider audience, perhaps on the BBC or radio.

In conclusion:

- Those who took up reintegration assistance were positive about the assistance provided by VARRP; the cash relocation grant paid on departure was especially helpful. Most additionally opted for business start-up assistance and often for some training as well. Unlike many non-VARRP returnees they did not turn to friends and family for help.
- In terms of sustainability of return, while VARRP returnees were more likely than non-VARRP returnees to expect to leave Nigeria within five years, the majority of both groups had permanent accommodation at the time of interview and were positive about the sustainability of their income.
- VARRP providers considered the enhanced value of the reintegration assistance available under VARRP 2006, along with the cash relocation grant, to be the best aspects of the VARRP 2006 package but considered the package value fluctuations that had occurred as unhelpful.
- Almost half of the non-VARRP returnees were not aware that reintegration assistance was available under VARRP, and uptake of reintegration assistance by Nigerian VARRP 2006 returnees was relatively

²⁷ It should be noted that a programme that provides free capital investment of any description to unproven start-up businesses is unheard of in Nigeria, and is, in fact, very rare anywhere else in the world. Start-up grants are simply very hard to come by. The fieldworkers conducting the interviews in Nigeria felt that many returnees seemed amazed that what they were told had actually come forth, and that the investment was forthcoming.

low. More could be done to increase awareness of and confidence that VARRP reintegration assistance would be delivered, and package attractiveness could be increased by tailoring to address country-specific circumstances and facilitating access.

Appendix I: Notes on methodology

Fieldwork specification and outcomes

Originally, the research was intended to be carried out in three countries: the UK, Nigeria and Iran. Iran was particularly of interest given that it had one of the higher rates of voluntary return, and had not been previously studied in similar evaluations. Nigeria had a relatively lower number of returns, but was of interest as Africa had not been studied as intensively as other regions and Nigeria itself had not previously been studied. Unfortunately, the work in Iran had to be cancelled as the researchers were unable to acquire a business visa within the timescale for completing the research.

Interviews were planned with Iranian and Nigerian asylum seekers in the UK. Iranian contacts proved reasonably easy to source, but Nigerians more difficult. The researchers found Nigerian asylum seekers very elusive and reluctant to come forward, and again the research plan changed to include discussions with representatives of the Nigerian community in the UK to discuss issues about return and reintegration with regards to Nigerian asylum seekers. These proved very fruitful, and provided good evidence.

Research methods with respondents, rationale and response rates

VARRP providers

VARRP providers for interview were purposively identified by the UK Border Agency and IOM on the basis that they had worked on the programme during the VARRP 2006 year and so that they could reflect on a range of roles in relation to delivery of VARRP. UK Border Agency asylum case owners in London and Glasgow were invited to participate by their managers and contact details of those agreeing were passed to the research team.

Table A1 Overview of sampling and response

Interviewee type	Eligible population size	Interviewees identified/contacted	Number of interviews completed
UK-based IOM, IOM partners, UK Border Agency AVR policy and operations, and other member of the UK Border Agency-chaired Voluntary Returns Steering Group	unknown	23	18
UK Border Agency asylum case owners	unknown	7	5
UK VARRP 'withdrawals'	unknown	6	6
UK VARRP non-applicants	unknown	6	6
IOM overseas – Nigeria	1	1	1
VARRP returnees – Nigeria	20	11	11
Non-VARRP returnees – Nigeria	unknown	30	30
Nigerian community leaders – UK	unknown	8	8
TOTAL			85

VARRP providers were initially asked to complete an online survey which was then followed up with a telephone interview. The reason for this was that VARRP providers would be working on the current implementation of VARRP and may need to check data, confer with colleagues or verify their responses to ensure they were referring to the correct sources in the correct year. Questions for the survey and interview were taken from a master schedule drawn up by the research team in consultation with the UK Border Agency. Each respondent was asked questions according to their role in VARRP.

As such VARRP providers are an invaluable source of information on process and gather formal and informal feedback from applicants and returnees. However, some of this group of respondents also have vested interests in appearing successful. The sample is not representative of all practitioners and there was a degree of self-selection involved. Equally, a number of this group also have different primary interests to that of the UK Border Agency policy (in particular, refugee advocacy organisations will primarily emphasise the rights of asylum seekers, whereas the UK Border Agency will primarily emphasise removals), and thus there may be some distrust of research commissioned by the UK Border Agency. In addition to this are the problems of retrospective recall, which the methodological approach noted above partly attempted to deal with.

Of the numbers originally specified, response rates were generally good and seven failed to respond to information requests.

Returnees and potential returnees

Interviews were conducted in Nigeria with returnees and in the UK with potential returnees. These included the subgroups outlined below.

- **VARRP returnees:** people returning to Nigeria through the VARRP programme. IOM attempted to make initial contact with all 20 principal applicants who had applied and returned to Nigeria under VARRP 2006 and who had taken up reintegration assistance,²⁸ in order to gauge willingness to participate and check contact details. They were unable to contact ten of these. In total 11 interviews took place (including one with the wife of a principal returnee); six with women and five with men. Six interviewees had returned to Nigeria alone, and five with other family members. VARRP returnees were generally interviewed face to face in their business premises or at home in Lagos (seven); a minority outside Lagos were interviewed over the phone (four). They had been back in Nigeria for between seven and 14 months (11 months on average) at the time of interview. They had been living in the UK for between three months and 12 years (around five years on average) prior to return.
- **Non-VARRP returnees:** returnees to Nigeria who had previously claimed asylum in the UK and then returned independently. These people were identified through word of mouth and existing contacts known to the researchers. In total 30 of these interviews took place; 13 were with women and 17 with men. Twenty-six of these had returned alone, and four

²⁸ IOM in return countries have contact only with those returnees who contact IOM to take up reintegration assistance.

with other family members. These people were interviewed face to face at various locations (cafés, hotels) in Lagos. They had been back in Nigeria for between four and 15 months (nine months on average) at the time of interview. They had been living in the UK for between one and a half and eight years (around five years on average) prior to return.

- VARRP ‘withdrawals’: these were individuals who had applied and been accepted on VARRP, then subsequently withdrew and remained in the UK. ‘Withdrawals’ were identified through working with local refugee and community organisations in the UK. In total six of these interviews took place face to face. (Interviewees were Somali, Iranian, and Syrian; all were men.)
- Potential VARRP applicants: these were individuals who had not applied for VARRP assistance, but who were eligible for it. These were identified with the assistance of local refugee and community organisations in the UK. In total six interviews took place face to face. (Interviewees were Somali and Iranian; five were men.)

Very little research is done into returnees so there is little existing work to draw upon, although VARRP returnees are monitored by IOM some months after return. It is important that policy makers get some understanding of the impact and effect of policy after return. Some work has been done on failed asylum seekers in the UK, but they are also by their nature a very difficult group to conduct research work with on account of homelessness, suspicion of authorities, reluctance to come forward and not least language difficulties.

As with VARRP providers, returnees and potential returnees have vested interests. Returnees may be seeking additional funding; others may be more interested in the compensation for their time. There are of course problems of retrospective recall and suspicion of work commissioned by the UK Border Agency. In addition, it should be noted that the sample sizes are very small and the representativeness of the samples cannot be established. Any findings from this research should be treated as indicative rather than definitive.

Response rates for VARRP returnees were not to the original specification which requested 20 respondents.

Of 37 principal returnees, only 20 had made contact with IOM after arriving in Nigeria. By default they did not have a contact address or telephone number by which IOM could contact them, and thus disappeared from VARRP, the IOM and all follow-up research. This in itself provided a surprising finding: that a returnee would leave from an airport in the UK, having had their tickets paid for by IOM and where necessary their travel documents arranged, would then receive (in most instances

in the year in question) £500 per person cash relocation allowance, and with the offer of an additional £3,000 of assistance in the country of return, and then simply disappear, making no effort to contact IOM or to claim the assistance. In one sense this opens up a large knowledge gap (what happens to these people?), but has equally been suggested to be evidence of high levels of suspicion of VARRP and anyone in a position of authority.

Table A2 Sex and average age of returnees and potential returnees interviewed

	Number				Total
	Nigeria		UK		
	VARRP returnees	Non-VARRP returnees	VARRP ‘withdrawals’ ^a	Potential VARRP applicants ^b	
Men	5	17	6	5	33
Women	6	13	0	1	20
Total	11	30	6	6	53
Average Age	41	31	38	31	34

a VARRP ‘withdrawals’ were Somali, Iranian and Syrian.

b Potential VARRP applicants were Somali and Iranian.

Interviewees in Nigeria were interviewed face to face in most circumstances and a minority over the phone. Initial contact with VARRP returnees was provided by IOM. Non-VARRP returnees were sourced via existing community contacts in the research team. Interviewees in Nigeria were compensated with US\$20 for their time and expenses; interviewees in the UK were compensated with GB£20 for their time and expenses. Each interviewee was asked questions drawn from the master schedule mentioned above.

Furthermore, electricity supply in Nigeria was difficult, and telephone networks often unreliable. This meant that making contact was difficult in that people's phones would often be charging up, off, or simply uncontactable. Theft of phones is commonplace, and often a theft victim in Nigeria would not replace the number known; they would instead buy a new phone with a new number, and thus become harder to trace. Often, they would not make this new number available to IOM.

Of the total 50 returnees to Nigeria in the 2006-07 year, interviews with returnees suggested that many of those accompanying the principal applicant were children and thus not suitable for interview. One was heavily pregnant at the time of the fieldwork, and another had suffered a stroke and his interview was completed with the assistance of his son. In total, out of 50 known VARRP returnees, only 11 were available, contactable and willing to take part in the research.

Non-VARRP returnees were easier to contact, and were gathered via existing contacts and word of mouth. The US\$20 to cover expenses helped to encourage them, and it would appear that many felt freer talking in Nigeria than they would have done in the UK as an asylum seeker. There is the issue that they may have been simply lying to the research team in order to get the expenses, but they seemed well informed about the UK, all confirmed they had applied for asylum, and also were largely aware of VARRP (if sceptical about it).

In the UK, it was virtually impossible to persuade Nigerian asylum seekers to take part in the research. Initial contacts with community leaders, representatives and business people indicated that the issue was so sensitive that people did not often tell anyone about their status including friends and family. Pride was an important issue, and to be seen to be doing well was important. As such, it appears that none wanted to admit that they had claimed asylum to their fellows. They also appeared highly suspicious that someone would inform the authorities if their status became known. Suspicion extended to authorities in Nigeria, and even though VARRP was advertised in the Nigerian Embassy and on Nigerian satellite TV, there were people who regarded VARRP as a scam. Most individuals contacted with respect to the fieldwork claimed that they were born in the UK and that they knew nothing about the UK asylum system and VARRP. The research managers suggested contracting the agencies interviewed to conduct interviews on their behalf: this was turned down flatly, as they felt they would not find anyone willing to be interviewed.

However, these individuals in the Nigerian community had valuable information about attitudes and aspirations, and fears and hopes of the community under study, and were included in the research to provide insight into these factors. Eight community representatives were interviewed, using a topic guide drawn up by the research team and UK Border Agency staff.

Data analysis

Information was stored in a custom-built online MySQL database with PHP interface and front end, which gave access for respondents, specific UK Border Agency research staff, and the external research team. The database was password protected and only open to respondents for entering data, and only named individuals had access to the data in its entirety. Analysis was performed by querying the database and formatting data in OpenOffice spreadsheets.

The questions used can be obtained on request from: the Analysis, Research and Knowledge Management unit of the UK Border Agency.

Appendix 2: Country case study – Nigeria

Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with a population of about 140 million. There are three major regions: the North, largely Muslim and Hausa-speaking; the West largely dominated by Yoruba, Christian and including the commercial capital Lagos; and the East, homeland of the Igbo, also largely Christian. In addition there are over 250 ethnic groups country-wide, and in the North alone over 200 other linguistic groups (Meredith, 2006). Nigeria has been beset by ethnic tensions, and this extends even to the rule of law where English common law prevails in the south and Islamic Sharia is practised in 12 Northern States (CIA, 2007). Politically, Nigeria's history has been mainly of military government until 1998. A new constitution was adopted in 1999, and despite major ethnic tensions and inter-

community violence, in 2007 Nigeria passed from military government to civilian government for the first time.

Nigeria's economy is based on petroleum and mineral resources, and has been beset by problems of corruption and mismanagement. Nigeria is the world's eighth largest exporter of oil; however, the wealth this creates has not been distributed evenly in the country; most Nigerians are very poor: only 40 per cent have access to electricity, life expectancy is 47 years (Library of Congress, 2008), and Nigeria ranks 147 out of 179 countries in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2007) and 108 out of 178 countries in the World Bank's 2008 Ease of Doing Business Index (Doing Business, 2008).

Nonetheless, there have been sustained reforms promoting economic growth. Strategies from 2003-07 sought to raise the standard of living and address basic deficiencies such as water supply, electricity supply, corruption, and infrastructure; and in 2007 inflation was estimated at 6.5 per cent – much lower than rates in 2005. The current policy aims to turn Nigeria into one of the world's top 20 economies by 2020 (Library of Congress, 2008). However, substantial challenges remain, not least continuing corruption and instability.

Asylum seekers from Nigeria

Despite being one of the largest African communities in the UK, and the most populous country in Africa, and having severe ethnic tensions at home, Nigerians do not make a large number of asylum applications in the UK, making up less than four per cent of all asylum applications each year from 1998 to 2006. In 2006 there were only 790 recorded applications, and about 50²⁹ Nigerians were granted some form of leave to remain at initial decision (Home Office, 2007). During the VARRP 2006 programme year, there were 99 Nigerian returnees. The UK Border Agency records a total of 690 asylum seekers from Nigeria being "removed" (including voluntary departures, enforced removals, and assisted returns) from the UK in 2006 (Home Office, 2007).

Country of Origin Information (COI) reports are published by the UK Border Agency for internal use; these in turn inform Operational Guidance Notes which provide guidance on case law for officials deciding asylum cases.

²⁹ Exact figures are not available; Home Office statistics indicate that 50 Nigerians were granted some form of leave to remain other than refugee status in 2006, and that the number granted refugee status was one or two (Home Office, 2007).

COI reports summarise recent political information on Nigeria, and also provide background on the main types of asylum claims that tend to be made from that country. These would indicate that asylum claims from Nigeria are made on various grounds but mainly:

- individuals from the Delta region which has high levels of tension and violence;
- membership of MASSOB (a secessionist organisation);
- fear of Bakassi Boys and other vigilante groups;
- religious persecution;
- fear of Female Genital Mutilation;
- victims of trafficking;
- fear of secret cults, juju or student confraternities;
- gay men; and
- prison conditions.

Return and reintegration in Nigeria

The research has raised a number of issues regarding return and reintegration in Nigeria for failed asylum seekers. Firstly, there is a fear of leaving the UK:

"Life is much better here. No matter what people do here, even if they have studied abroad, they would rather come to the UK to earn money. ... they can still save up enough money to build a house in Nigeria."

(Nigerian community representative)

"You get used to the life style here [UK] such as water, transport, electricity and most of all security. People do not know what to expect when they return to Nigeria, therefore the fear of the unknown stops them"

(Nigerian community representative)

Issues of peer pressure and family expectations in the country of return are very important. VARRP providers and returnees and community contacts in the UK confirm this. One Nigerian association leader said:

"The expectation to bring money back to Nigeria from the UK is high. This is common in the developing world. If the individual does not feel as though they have achieved this it can be difficult to face friends and family – going home can be bleak."

This pressure was such that one non-VARRP returnee said that *"I have been hiding from my mates because I came back empty handed at a time when my father was dying."* Another community leader elaborated further:

"If you return to Nigeria of your own accord people will not initially believe that your return is permanent – they usually think that you are there on a long holiday. However, after a while they start asking questions e.g. Is he going to set up a business? Is he going to take a post in the government? Has he got the qualifications and relevant skills to gain an important job in the country? If the answer is yes to any of the above, you will attract a lot of attention from people who would want to be seen with you, hoping that an important individual from abroad has returned home and will benefit them directly or indirectly. This will also look good for your family, relatives and friends who will be proud of your achievements. On the other hand, if nothing happens when you go back, after a while people will ask questions and say 'he has come back from abroad and nothing is happening, he has no qualifications, he has no money'. At this point people will distance themselves from you, in the belief that you will become a burden on them. You will also become a major embarrassment to your family and friends, they will feel that 'you wasted all those years you were away and came back with nothing' ... On the other hand if you were deported, you would conceal it Deportation carries a major stigma in the Nigerian community and becomes a limiting factor for the individual concerned."

There are specific local issues in Nigeria which make return difficult for some. Those returnees from the Delta region remained in fear of violence in that area, and indeed had migrated internally as suggested by OGN notes for Nigeria: they were all interviewed in Lagos. The convention that people pay two years rent in advance for both businesses and for families can make matters difficult for those who are attempting to start a new business. For those that receive reintegration assistance it can mean that potentially all the money could be spent on premises, and indeed IOM Nigeria advised VARRP returnees to shop around intensively and find a landlord who would be prepared to take six or 12 months rent instead. It seems evident that these premises would be less desirable than those where a landlord could demand and expect to get two years of rent in advance.

Furthermore, there were various bureaucratic problems which were specific to Nigeria. This included it not being generally the norm in some transactions to produce invoices and receipts. This could pose an issue for those who have to provide documentation to IOM. Restrictions on the purchase of vehicles have also been noted.

Suspicion of authorities remains very high, and this extended from established fears such as police, airport authorities, and to some extent the government to include IOM staff and officers at the British Embassy.

One community leader thought that IOM staff seeking bribes was a possibility. There were general levels of fear related to corruption or crime because the returnee was perceived to have returned with money.

There was also a sense amongst returnees and community representatives in the UK that the amount of money on offer via VARRP, and the manner in which it was delivered, was inadequate. Nigeria was noted as expensive and £10,000 was quoted as being reasonable to start up a business. The enhanced level of £3,500 was felt to be too low.

Suspicion of VARRP was also an issue, and community representatives felt that VARRP was regarded as a fraudulent programme. This suspicion, it was felt, could be overcome by paying the whole sum up front at the airport in cash.

Appendix 3: VARRP eligibility criteria

VARRP is open to any asylum seeker who:

- is waiting for a Home Office decision on his/her asylum application; or
- has had his/her asylum application refused by the Home Office; or
- is appealing against a refusal; or
- has exceptional leave to remain; or
- has been granted humanitarian protection.³⁰

VARRP is not available to any asylum seeker who:

- has been granted indefinite leave to remain and/or refugee status; or
- is a convicted prisoner subject to a deportation order; or
- is a short-term immigration detainee for whom removal directions have been set; or
- has been convicted of a serious immigration offence; or
- prior to IOM receiving the application, has received one or more custodial sentences in the UK, totalling in excess of 12 months.

³⁰ People granted humanitarian protection are no longer eligible for VARRP, although they were during the 2006 programme.

Appendix 4: VARRP process diagram

The thought of returning

The idea of returning to the country of origin may occur for many reasons. It may be expressed to several different people – a family member or a friend, a partner agency case worker or perhaps a solicitor, which may lead to an enquiry to VARRP.

Enquiry and application

This involves a conversation with an agency that is able to process a VARRP application. The agency explains how the process works, providing translation if required. If the conversation leads to an application, an application form is completed. At this stage, the options for reintegration assistance are explained and some basic details about the applicant are recorded. IOM receives and processes all applications. Applicants may apply directly to IOM, or have applications referred to IOM by other agencies.

Application approval

The application is reviewed by the Home Office and the applicant's eligibility is checked. If the applicant meets the eligibility criteria, the application is approved.

Travel arrangements

The applicant's travel documentation is checked and, if he/she does not hold a valid passport, arrangements are made to secure the appropriate travel documentation. IOM liaises with the applicant to agree travel dates and arrange the details of departure.

Return journey

All applicants are met at the airport in the UK by an IOM caseworker. Those entitled to a cash relocation grant under one of the enhanced reintegration packages receive this on departure from the UK. Vulnerable returnees, for example those with medical needs, may be accompanied on their flight from the UK.

Reintegration assistance and file closure

Once the applicants have returned, they contact IOM's in-country staff to access reintegration assistance, thereby maintaining a relationship with IOM. IOM attempts to stay in contact with the returnees who are in receipt of reintegration assistance for up to 12 months. For those who return but do not contact IOM within three months of their return, the file is closed by IOM, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Appendix 5: VARRP 2006: summary of reintegration assistance available to returnees (including dependants)

Date of VARRP application	Reintegration assistance packages
1 August 2006–31 October 2006	Extension of enhanced reintegration assistance package pilot (continuing from VARRP 2005): up to £3,000 (£3,780) worth of assistance which could be taken as ‘in-kind’ assistance or in cash payable over a six-month period. Only available to those who had applied for asylum on or before 31 December 2005 and who returned within three months of applying to VARRP.
1 November 2006–31 January 2007	Standard package: up to £1,000 (£1,260) of ‘in-kind’ assistance. All those who returned during December 2006 received an additional £500 (£630) cash relocation allowance on departure.
1 February 2007–30 April 2007	Abated reintegration assistance package (phase 1): up to £3,500 (4,410) worth of reintegration assistance, comprised of £500 (£630) cash on departure plus up to £3,000 (£3,780) worth of ‘in-kind’ assistance. Only available to those who had applied for asylum on or before 31 January 2007, and who returned within three months of applying to VARRP.
1 May 2007–31 May 2007	Amendment to the Abated reintegration assistance package (phase 1). Those applying to VARRP or returning during May received an additional £500 (£630) cash on departure. In total: £1,000 (£1,260) cash on departure and £3,000 (£3,780) ‘in-kind’ reintegration assistance per returnee. Only available to those who had applied for asylum on or before 31 January 2007, and who returned within three months of applying to VARRP.
1 June 2007–30 June 2007	Abated reintegration assistance package (phase 2): up to £2,500 (3,150) worth of reintegration assistance, comprised of £500 (£630) cash on departure plus up to £2,000 (£2,520) worth of ‘in-kind’ assistance. Only available to those who had applied for asylum on or before 31 January 2007, and who returned within three months of applying to VARRP.
1 July 2007–31 July 2007	Standard package: up to £1,000 (£1,260) worth of ‘in-kind’ assistance, plus an additional £500 (£630) cash on departure. All returnees applying in this period were eligible.

Appendix 6: Tables

Table A3 “Can you suggest any other outreach or marketing activities that might be effective?”

Responses of VARRP providers (23 out of 24 interviewees)

IOM building better links and relationships with the Embassies of countries of return.

Video links with returnees and IOM in countries of return in several workshops organised by IOM in the UK.

VR is a complicated and sensitive issue. Clients always have their doubts about the Home Office and IOM. Some still believe VR is “removal through the back door” for this reason intensive marketing, in my opinion, is not a good approach. A low profile campaign of providing the information will be more useful without showing the Government to be desperate for people to take up the VR option.

Yes, by utilising the contacts made with local authority and private asylum housing providers under the NASS s95 and s4 contract I would like to see IOM organise AVR workshops in different cities. We arrange the event, advertise it via the LA and private AS housing structure of housing managers/officers and gather a varied IOM and partner group to present an interesting and useful workshop on AVR and reintegration. I have detailed this as a strategy for IOM Leeds but as yet have not presented the idea. Also more information seminars to be arranged for colleagues that deal directly with our end users.

Making other units within the Home Office and Immigration aware that AVR saves a lot of money and is generally the preferred choice of the applicant and for the Government. Teams working with us and co-operating will increase removals, rather than units squabbling for an end-of-year statistic.

Home visits by IOM staff to failed asylum seekers.

Send out letters to asylum seekers in their own language to inform them about VARRP project.

I think that passing on applicants details to IOM would be useful as they could target and invite for appointments as opposed to the Home Office, that way it remains completely independent and if an applicant chose to concede and visit IOM they will feel this is an independent decision that would have no effect on their perceived level of sincerity, in regards to their claim.

Leaflets to send to clients in their own language for VARRP.

I think you can refer this question to the information department as they are in a better position to answer.

If the community and diaspora groups were allowed to arrange contacts with returnees themselves this would engender trust and would allow them to gauge how safe it was to return for themselves.

I think the new package that IOM offers is a fantastic idea (the education/small business/help with accommodation and finding a job) – and makes really good sense for returnees. I think it looks to the applicant, especially if they came to the UK to work, that they will be able to have the best of both worlds, help getting their feet on the ground in their own country as well as being able to live back home.

As noted above, attention should be given to confidence-building measures and activities. Accurate, well-informed and well-intentioned analysis of conditions for return would be beneficial; there is a limit on how far outreach, marketing or other interventions in the UK can facilitate return under VARRP in the absence of required political and economic conditions in the country of return.

Possibly more up-to-date and current case studies of applicants returning and from a broader range of countries.

It is more effective if the Home Office isn't seen to be 'pushing' or promoting VARRP – in as much as people are suspicious or afraid sometimes of government, but perhaps if this kind of publicity was a direct effort from IOM, as a more impartial body (stress impartiality), perhaps people might consider it more? IOM could do the mail-outs not the Home Office. This might be much more effective. This communication could definitely put emphasis on partner agencies and the 'one-stop shops' for getting advice.

We are a 'one-stop shop' but not given financial support to run our organisation by the UK Border Agency, therefore we are not on the list on the internet for one-stop shops under their official category if searching for Voluntary return info on the IND website. We are, however, delivering this work in our area of the UK, and our details should be communicated via internet and correspondence re. Voluntary returns, as we are closer for people in this area of the UK than some other options on the BA website.

Promote the availability of the partner agencies and regionalise the information, so people have the option to approach an impartial organisation, such as ours, to help with making a decision. People might feel more comfortable in approaching a service like ours for advice, as people need their minds made up if they approach IOM directly.

It will always help for IOM to stress that they are not the UK government.

Asylum seekers come from countries where there is fear and suspicion of government authorities for valid reasons, and these impressions can be transferred to authorities in the UK also.

The workshop with the teleconference facilities – organised by IOM – was well received. Difficult to think of any new marketing activities which have not so far been tried.

IOM have started using video conferences for communities to speak to actual returnees and these have proved successful and will be built upon.

IOM's conference calls to countries of origin should be enhanced and expanded.

Automatic referrals when asylum applicants are at the stage of having appeal rights exhausted.

Table A4 “Why did you decide to return?”

Coded response	Number of times mentioned by VARRP returnees	Number of times mentioned by non-VARRP returnees
Refused application for asylum and no other option	4	11
Other difficulties in the UK (please specify)	1	0
Family commitments in the return country	2	3
Better quality of life in country of return	2	12
Business opportunity in country of return	0	4
Medical reason(s)	1	1
Quality of VARRP package	1	0
Other (please specify)	2	1
Total number of responses	13	32
Total number of respondents	11	30

Respondents may have mentioned more than one reason in their response, so the total number of responses exceeds the total number of respondents.

Table A5 “Why did you decide to apply for VARRP assistance to return?”

Coded response	Number times mentioned by VARRP returnees
Possibility to return in a dignified way	3
Better than deportation/fear of deportation	4
Qualitative aspects of the VARRP package (e.g. positive experience with VARRP advisers; help with travel documents; training opportunities in the return country)	2
Financial aspects of the VARRP package	3
Recommendations by a friend, family member or community	1
Information about country of return	0
Other	2
Total number of responses	15
Total number of respondents	11

Respondents may have mentioned more than one reason in their response, so the total number of responses exceeds the total number of respondents.

Table A6 “During the early days after you returned to Nigeria, what difficulties did you encounter?”

Coded response	Number of times mentioned by VARRP returnees	Number of times mentioned by non-VARRP returnees
Hiding/family problems	2	2
Accommodation	2	8
No difficulties	3	--
Money	5	6
Friends/social problems	--	12
War/security	--	2
Health	--	2
Business problems	1	3
Accommodation	--	--
Number of responses	13	35
Number of respondents	11	30

Respondents may have mentioned more than one reason in their response, so the total number of responses exceeds the total number of respondents.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the staff of IOM London and IOM Nigeria for their facilitation of the research. We would also like to thank all those VARRP stakeholders who participated in interviews in the UK, Pakistan and Zimbabwe: staff of IOM, IOM partner organisations, and of the UK Border Agency; Nigerian community leaders; and people eligible for or having used VARRP. The authors would also like to thank the following for their useful comments: our two external academic reviewers of this report, staff of the UK Border Agency Analysis, Research and Knowledge Management team; staff of the UK Border Agency Assisted Voluntary Return team; and again IOM London.

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