

The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2007

Brenda Wilson (NlightN Research Limited) and Olga Evans (UK Border Agency)

Context

Aims

This research was to contribute to a wider assessment of the effects of the new 'tailored' approach to the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP), as introduced during the VARRP 2007 programme year. The aims were: to assess the effectiveness of the VARRP application process for tailored VARRP from the VARRP applicant's perspective; to understand how the process differed from previous approaches; and to assess differences in support requirements between key return countries.

The VARRP Programme and Process

Co-funded by the European Refugee Fund (ERF) and the UK Border Agency (UKBA), and administered on their behalf by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), VARRP assists asylum seekers in the UK who wish to permanently return to their countries of origin.

Assistance available includes travel arrangements and documentation to enable return; assistance to meet basic needs immediately after return; and help with longer-term reintegration through support for small business development, employment or vocational training, and education for children. Assistance in return countries is administered by IOM's overseas missions where these exist.

Method

For the 2007 evaluation year, 30 face-to-face interviews with VARRP applicants still in the UK were attempted but only ten interviews (seven men and three women from Iraq, Afghanistan, China and Pakistan) were achieved; five face-to-face and five by telephone. Additionally a group interview was conducted with three IOM caseworkers in the UK. The findings in this note therefore report views held by a small number of respondents who may not be representative of the wider VARRP applicant population

and it would be best to read these findings alongside those from other VARRP programme evaluations published by the UK Border Agency.

Results

How applicants find out about VARRP

The most common sources of VARRP information were advertisements in the foreign language media, Home Office sources, and 'word of mouth' (including previous VARRP returnees).

Motivations to return

The most frequent motivation was difficulty in supporting themselves in the UK. Seven of the ten respondents said they would be planning to return home, irrespective of VARRP assistance.

Contact with IOM

Contact with a case worker at IOM following application was often face-to-face and tended to be initiated by IOM. The frequency of contact was highly variable between applicants, and was not clearly associated with an applicant's stage in the process from application to return.

Return assistance expected from IOM/VARRP

The most commonly mentioned types of assistance sought were help with a return flight and the relocation cash grant of £500. Additional baggage allowance and help with temporary accommodation on return were also popular with this group of respondents.

Applications for reintegration assistance

Eight of the ten respondents applied for specific reintegration assistance. Five of these were seeking business start-up assistance. No applicant was seeking a job placement. IOM caseworkers did not consider reintegration needs to vary much between particular countries.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).

The Research, Development and Statistics Directorate exists to improve policy making, decision taking and practice in support of the Home Office purpose and aims, to provide the public and Parliament with information necessary for informed debate and to publish information for future use.

Development of Individual Return Plans (IRPs)

- Of the eight applicants already applying for reintegration assistance, five said they had an IRP. There was no clear association between time since application, or time to expected departure, and apparent stage in planning return activities.
- IOM caseworkers try to respond to individual needs and ability to cope. At the point of departing the UK, applicants' IRPs may range from initial thoughts through to well-developed plans. Plans usually change once applicants have returned and assessed the situation in the return country.
- No feasibility assessment of plans is undertaken in the UK; all development and delivery of plans is through IOM missions overseas.
- The applicants interviewed here had made little use of potential planning resources available through IOM; a few had used information from friends in the UK or overseas (including a previous VARRP returnee).

Effectiveness of reintegration assistance

- The flat rate assistance for business set-up was considered by some applicants not to be sufficient in their countries.
- IOM caseworkers thought tailoring increased sustainability of return, but that the presence of an IOM mission was critical to successful delivery of tailored reintegration assistance. A lack of basic literacy skills may hamper returnees' prospects.
- Six of the ten applicants we spoke to expected to still be in their country of origin in five years' time; two thought they would be in the UK (possibly never having left); and the plans of two depended on the situation they found themselves in.

Applicants' suggestions for improvements to the advice provided by IOM and the process for IRP development

The ten applicants we spoke to were very happy with the support they received from IOM. The improvements suggested by this small sample of applicants included: a larger cash grant; higher value business start-up assistance; educational assistance; longer-term monitoring of returnees; more IOM UK offices; more information on security situations in return countries.

Acknowledgements

NlightN Research would like to thank Yvonne McGivern of Working Knowledge, and Neil Amas of the Information Centre for Asylum Seekers and Refugees at City University. We are particularly grateful to IOM London for their support and cooperation with this study.