

Briefing for MSPs

Members' Debate on the Discontinuation of Home Office's Go Home Campaign

"The signs were everywhere in the [Glasgow] Reporting Centre – on the back of chairs, on the walls, on the steps. I had my three year old with me and he kept asking me what all the signs said, where the footprints on the floor led. There were huge pictures of homeless people. I didn't know what to say to him." *Scottish Refugee Council client awaiting asylum decision and member of the Refugee Women's Strategy Group*

Go Home – Summary of Scottish Refugee Council's Concerns

1. Scottish Refugee Council was appalled by the Home Office's "Go Home" Campaign, which comprised mobile billboards and other activity in London and the poster campaigns in the Glasgow & Hounslow Reporting Centre pilots. We regard it as the worst of Home Office communications. We were dismayed by its crude approach, insensitive tone, and the real distress and trauma it caused. This should have been foreseeable given the context. Whilst social solidarity largely held in Scotland, clearly the campaign had the potential to damage community relations including the possibility of incitement to hatred against visible minority communities. We think the Glasgow Reporting Centre pilot failed, because:

- **Its blanket approach needlessly caused distress to people who were exercising their legitimate right to claim asylum and safety in the UK and who should not have been targeted with this communication. No-one would argue that people awaiting a decision on their claim for protection should even consider 'going home' at this stage;**
- **It almost certainly deterred more from accessing voluntary return than it encouraged;**
- **Potentially, it irresponsibly damaged public attitudes to immigration, refugees and visible ethnic minorities;**
- **It led to widespread criticism of and reputational damage to the UK and the Home Office; and**
- **It damaged trust and confidence between the Home Office and public, third sector bodies, communities and refugees themselves.**

2. Scottish Refugee Council welcomes the cross-party consensus in The Scottish Parliament against the Go Home campaign. This is demonstrated by four motions being lodged since the campaign started, attracting a cumulative total of 129 signatories, and being laid and supported from across the Chamber: starting with Neil Findlay MSP on 30th July, onto James Dornan MSP on 30th August, through to Jackie Baillie MSP on 4th September followed by the Motion on 14th November that led to today's debate.

3.. The cross-party opposition to Go Home is the latest example of the Scottish Parliament's political and civic leadership and condemnation of hostile and inhumane policy on asylum and immigration, a heritage dating from its unity against child detention and dawn raids.

Overview of the 'Go Home' Campaign

4. There were two parts to the 'Go Home' Campaign: Operation VAKEN which included the highly-controversial mobile 'Go Home' billboards and the Reporting Centre Pilots in Hounslow and in Glasgow. The campaign itself stemmed from a desire in the Home Office to raise the visibility of its immigration enforcement¹ and voluntary return activities. Communications in the new immigration enforcement team were tasked to develop projects to meet this objective resulting in VAKEN and the Glasgow and Hounslow pilots. The Home Office acknowledged on 8th August, after legal challenge on the Public Sector Equality Duty, that no external consultation had been undertaken prior to the start of Go Home.

Background to mobile 'Go Home' billboards in London

5. The VAKEN project was a communications pilot. It ran from 22nd July to 22nd August 2013. It comprised a range of proactive communication techniques including postcards in shop windows, adverts in newspapers and leaflets. The most controversial technique was the mobile billboards driven, in the week 22nd to 29th July, in six boroughs in London. The mobile billboards included statements: "in the UK illegally?" and "Go Home or Face Arrest"; supplemented by a statistic stating that the number of local immigration-related arrests in the last seven days was 106.

6. The Home Secretary announced on 10th October that the mobile billboards in Operation VAKEN would not be repeated. The evaluation report of VAKEN was published on 31st October. Its covering material at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operation-vaken-evaluation-report> reiterated that the advertising vans would not be repeated. The evaluation report went on to state that 60 people had left voluntarily "as a result of" or their departure was "directly attributable to" Operation Vaken¹. The evaluation states that the billboards cost £9,740.

7. No robust evidence was provided in the evaluation of a "directly attributable" connection between the stated number of people who took up voluntary return as a result of the pilot. Nor was this unpacked or explained. The evaluation criteria were focused on quantitative measures of contacts made by potential voluntary returnees. It did not extend to criteria enabling any real measurement of success or failure, such as measures on those deterred from returns; levels of distress arising from the campaign amongst the target groups; impacts on community relations and tensions and costs; and reputational costs for the Home Office and the UK.

8. The billboards triggered a storm of protest across the UK, particularly in London. ¹ There was widespread condemnation in the media and across organisations and sectors against VAKEN. However, two of these stand out. Firstly, a successful legal challenge through the Refugee and Migrant Forum of East London (RAMFEL) that the Home Office acted unlawfully by failing to have "due regard" to its Public Sector Equality Duty¹, resulting in an assurance from the UK Government, published on 12th August, that if considering similar activity in the future they would consult with migrants, community groups, and councils likely to be affected by such campaigns. Secondly, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) partially upheld a wide-ranging complaint, led by the Peer David Lipsey, and found that the figures for arrests cited could not be substantiated and should be withdrawn. The ASA concluded that the Home Office must not run VAKEN in its current form again¹.

Background to the Glasgow Home Office Reporting Centre Pilot

9. Scottish Refugee Council was deeply concerned that, after such early criticism of VAKEN, that similar Go Home posters and messages were placed from 29th July to 4th October 2013 in the Home Office's Reporting Centre in Brand Street, Glasgow.

10. The stated aim of the reporting centre pilots was to encourage more use of the Home Office's voluntary departure scheme. The Home Office stated that the intended targets of the pilot were refused asylum seekers and those with irregular immigration status. The objective was to develop materials to *"assure people that we can provide sensitive advice and assistance to help them return home easily and with dignity"*.

11. Wall-sized posters and stickers on seats and flooring used these messages:

- *We can help you return home.*
- *Is life in the UK what you expected? You can choose to go home.*
- *Is life here hard? Going home is simple.*
- *This plane can take you home. We can book your tickets.*
- *Ask about going home.*
- *Going home is as easy as 1.2.3: step 1 - speak to a member of staff, step 2 - we can book your ticket, and step 3 - you can return to your family and friends.*

12. The Home Office undertook an evaluation of the reporting centre pilots in October 2013. According to media reports on 1st November this is to discontinue the pilot, a decision welcomed by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Alastair Carmichael MP, who said he *"was pleased we can now put this pilot behind us"*¹.

Criticisms of the Glasgow Reporting Centre pilot

13. There has been a chorus of condemnation for the Glasgow pilot from politicians, stakeholders and the media¹ Responses from those affected directly by the pilot include:

"[The pilot] is against everything that the Refugee Convention stood for as people were in Scotland because their own country is not safe and they would go home if they could."

Young person, refused asylum, supported by the Scottish Guardianship Service¹

"Nobody wants to stay away from their family but if they do so then there is always a very serious reason behind it, due to which people make these decisions. And on the top of that when people see these kinds of comments or posters, asking them to go back home or go back to your family, that make situations worse for them, because it reminds them the sufferings of their family, when they last saw them."

Scottish Refugee Council service user awaiting asylum decision

14. Scottish Refugee Council was unsurprised by these responses. We know from decades of experience that the right to asylum is not used lightly. Many refugees will never see their families again. Many people seeking protection in Scotland have fled here for their lives, leaving friends, families, jobs and homes painfully behind. Many would love to go home but their countries remain unsafe, or their lives - and the lives of their families - remain at risk there. Going Home is absolutely not *"as easy as 1,2,3"*, or often possible as one may return to stigma, ill-treatment, torture, rape, or even death.

15. Scottish Refugee Council supports the view of the Home Office that voluntary return is a more cost-effective form of return and more dignified way of leaving the UK. However it should only be

promoted and used when and where appropriate. In relation to asylum, we, and many others, have long expressed concerns whether some people seeking asylum receive a full and fair hearing of their claims. Decision making in relation to some nationalities and claims from women remain particularly poor. For example, for nationalities like Eritrea and Somalia up to one in two cases have their refusals overturned on appeal. Targeting messages to those who have just claimed asylum to "Go Home" reinforces this concern that people seeking asylum may not have a fair decision made against their claim to be protected.

16. Many of those refused asylum (and forced into destitution) would have qualified for some form of subsidiary protection and immigration status had they applied for asylum in another country or had they applied in the UK in the past. Those refused include: people who would have to return to areas of armed conflict or endemic violence and people at serious risk of systemic or generalised violence of their human rights but who have not been able to establish that they, individually, are at risk. Since 2005 less than one in ten people who seek asylum in the UK have been granted protection outside of the 1951 Refugee Convention whereas in 2003 this was one in four. Improved decision-making and a greater net of protection in the UK is much needed.

17. We accept that there are people who do not have protection needs and should return to their country of origin. Decisions on return are however best reached through confidential dialogue between those refused asylum, their advisors, and the Home Office decision maker. We do not oppose communications on returns but we do regard generic and hostile communications, of the nature used in the "Go Home" reporting centre pilot in Glasgow, as ineffective, counterproductive and inhumane.

18. We surmise that it is likely to have driven people away rather than towards exploring voluntary departure. The approach may also have increased the perception amongst those seeking or appealing asylum that they may not receive the fair, unbiased decision on their claim or appeal for protection. The pilot also undermined existing Home Office funded work to increase the uptake of voluntary return. The Home Office currently contracts Refugee Action to undertake the Assisted Voluntary Return scheme. Refugee Action stated that *"we were not consulted, or even informed about the pilot"* and it had *"damaged Refugee Action's reputation, diminished levels of trust in our service, and reduced take up of AVR"*¹.

19. Scottish Refugee Council - and many others including Positive Action in Housing share the deep concerns expressed by many of the language used in the campaign. The most worrying term was, of course, "Go Home" with its toxic history in UK immigration and race relations of racist connotations reflecting its common use by the National Front in the 1970s, in relation to non-white communities and newly-arrived visible minority immigrants, particularly. Whilst in this campaign it sat within a larger message, "Go Home or Face Arrest", we believe the connotations to be self-evident even if on an optimistic reading these may have been unintended.

20. Scottish Refugee Council remains concerned that evaluation has not yet been made public. We recommend that the Home Office rectify this omission as a matter of urgency and publish in full its evaluation of the Reporting Centre pilots.

Continuing issues of concern

21. Fundamentally, the Home Office's Go Home Campaign as a whole is part of a political attempt to support a hardening of public attitudes to immigration. It is a policy based on no external consultation or evidence, with the aim of supporting a context in which hostile policies are easily accepted as necessary.

22. One aspect of The Immigration Bill currently making its way through the UK Parliament, for example, proposes to make it far more difficult for some migrants to access private tenancies and

housing association stock as well as enable greater NHS charging, including potentially for emergency treatment, for all migrants. It relies on sections of civil society; private landlords, who will be subject to significant financial penalties; and doctors to act as de facto immigration officers, checking documents before allowing migrants to access housing or services. In order for the restrictions to be upheld and unchallenged by those facing human beings in need, it is useful for public attitudes to be informed by anti-immigration messaging. However, the problem with basing immigration policy on or as a response to populist rhetoric rather than evidence is that it creates short-sighted and ill-thought out policy and legislation which does not work in practice and shows up the gulf between political rhetoric and reality. The Glasgow Reporting Centre pilot is a case in point.

23. It also then feeds into public concern that immigration is 'out of control' and makes space difficult for policies which are evidence based, humane and the 'right thing to do'. For example, we believe the current UK Government's target of reducing immigration to tens of thousands, which is neither a "useful or effective measurement."¹ is the key reason the UK Government refuses to play a role in resettling even a handful of refugees who have fled civil war in the Syria where over 2 million people have fled, 1 million of those children.

24. The UNHCR has called on western nations to provide 30,000 resettlement places for Syrian refugees. Sixteen countries, including USA, France and Germany, have so far responded, providing 10,250 places (plus an unspecified number in the USA).

25. Limited evidence is available¹, but attitudes to immigration and asylum in Scotland and London are understood to be slightly more positive than attitudes in other parts of the country. However, what is, and has been, distinctive is the value of cross-party political leadership in the Scottish Parliament, setting the tone for a more humane and evidence based debate on asylum and migration in Scotland.

26. We call on the members from across the chamber to support the motion and condemn the Go Home campaign.

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Our response to the second stage reading of the Immigration Bill (2013):

http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0000/7201/Immigration_Bill_Second_reading_-_SRC_briefing_2nd_reading.pdf

Our call to the UK Government to resettle Syrian refugees:

http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/what_you_can_do/campaign/syrian_refugees_-_the_right_thing_to_do

Our news story on Scotland's new strategy for refugee integration:

http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/news_and_events/latest_news/2222_integration_strategy_to_help_refugees_rebuild_lives_is_launched

Our response to the Scottish Government's White Paper on Scottish Independence:

http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/news_and_events/latest_news/2217_scottish_refugee_council_welcomes_white_paper_proposals_on_asylum

About Scottish Refugee Council

Scottish Refugee Council is Scotland's leading refugee charity, which since 1985 has provided help and advice to those that have fled human rights abuses or other persecution in their homeland and seek refuge in Scotland. Our vision is that all refugees seeking protection in Scotland are welcomed, treated with dignity and respect, and are able to achieve their full potential. We provide advice and information to those seeking asylum and refugees, campaign for their fairer treatment and for better awareness, policy, and law on matters affecting them.

References

¹ Motion Number: S4M-08323. Title: Discontinuation of Home Office's Go Home Campaign: Lodged by Jackie Baillie on 14th November 2013: "That the Parliament welcomes the Home Office decision to discontinue what it considers its insensitive, callous and ill-thought-out Go Home poster campaign at its reporting centre at Brand Street in Glasgow; considers that, as the Scottish Refugee Council has stated, it caused distress to men, women and children in Scotland, some of whom are past victims of atrocity, torture and ill-treatment; notes what it believes is the shared will in Scotland and across the UK against such a hostile policy toward those who have claimed asylum in the UK; considers that the Go Home campaign messages echoed the language of the National Front in the 1970s, which was targeted particularly at non-white communities and recently arrived visible minority immigrants, and believes that what it sees as such an intemperate and appalling approach to refugees should be rejected."

¹ The Home Secretary gave an oral statement to the House of Commons on 26th March 2013 on the future of the UK Border Agency, within which she announced that it was to be split into two organisations: Immigration and Visa Service and Immigration Law Enforcement. You can read the statement at <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/news/ho-os.pdf>.

¹ You can read the evaluation report at

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254411/Operation_Vaken_Evaluation_Report.pdf, with pp.10-12 particularly important on criteria used to evaluate (pp.10-11) and the main results of the evaluation (p.12).

¹ For instance, see report in "The Guardian" on "Twitter Storm" relating to the Go Home Campaign:

<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/aug/02/twitter-storm-home-office-illegal-immigration> or

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/jul/31/campaign-illegal-immigrants-advertising-watchdog>

¹ On July 30th, two clients of RAMFEL challenged the lawfulness of the Home Office's Go Home Campaign, by way of a letter of claim issued through their legal representatives, Deighton Pierce Glynn, on 25th July, followed by a reminder on 1st August. This led to the UK Government responding on 8th August 2013, where they provided an assurance that if they were to carry out any further campaigns of this nature they would have due regard in terms of the Public Sector Equality Duty at s.149(1) Equality Act 2010 to the effect this would have on migrants living in those communities and in so doing would carry out a consultation. You can read the Home Office response of 8th August here: (http://www.deightonpierceglynnc.co.uk/news/news_docs/2013%2008%2013%20PAP%20Letter.pdf).

¹ The Advertising Standards Authority issued its decision on the VAKEN part of the Go Home Campaign on 9th October 2013. You can read the full decisions at http://www.asa.org.uk/Rulings/Adjudications/2013/10/Home-Office/SHP_ADJ_237331.aspx. In summary, there were five heads of claim, drawn from the 224 complaints received on the VAKEN campaign, and these concerned, respectively, whether: (a) "the poster, and in particular the phrase 'GO HOME', was offensive and distressing, because it was reminiscent of slogans used by racist groups to attack immigrants in the past"; (b) "the poster was irresponsible and harmful, because it could incite or exacerbate racial hatred and tensions in multicultural communities"; (c) "several complainants challenged whether the claim '106 ARRESTS LAST WEEK IN YOUR AREA' was misleading and could be substantiated"; (d) "a few complainants challenged whether the qualification in the small print was presented clearly, because it was not legible on a moving vehicle"; and (e) "a few complainants challenged whether the poster was misleading, because it implied that arrest was the automatic consequence of remaining in the UK without permission".

¹ <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/migrant-centre-poster-scrapped.22575676>.

¹ <http://www.heraldscotland.com/comment/herald-view/campaign-that-is-not-wanted-here.22007294>, and appendix one.

¹ The Scottish Guardianship Service works with unaccompanied children and young people with non-EEA status providing them a guardian who provides independent advice and advocacy. The SGS is funded as a service by The Scottish Government. It is a partnership between Scottish Refugee Council and Aberlour Child Care Trust.

¹ p.7, Refugee Action Feedback to Evaluation by the Home Office of its Immigration Enforcement Communications Pilots October 2013. You can read this at http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/assets/0000/7843/Home_Office_Vol_Dep_Comms_pilot_-_RA_comments_-_10-10-13.pdf.

¹ http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/1113/Salt_Dobson_291013.pdf

¹ http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0000/5495/4087_SRC_Referendum_Report_V3.pdf