

Dear Sirs,

In response to the comments of Phil Taylor – Scottish regional director of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) - reported in 'Asylum Seeker Service not fit for Purpose' (News, Feb 1), we at Scottish Refugee Council take issue with many of his points.

Mr Taylor emphasised that he would 'love to do away' with the controversial policy of dawn raids as it was 'unpleasant' for all involved, but stressed the policy would continue until someone came up with an effective alternative.

We, in consultation with asylum seekers in this terrifying position, have offered the Home Office many effective alternatives, tried and tested with positive results in other democratic countries.

These include reporting and close case management programmes, such as those practised under the Assisted Appearance Programme in the United States and similar schemes in Australia and Sweden, which have proved very successful.

Without proper trials, the Home Office has argued that similar approaches would not work in the UK, as they open up the potential for families to abscond. But they have no evidence that families are a high absconding risk. Why would a family abscond when, not allowed to work, complying with the government is their only means of accessing the financial support they need to survive?

Mr Taylor argues that the new asylum process currently being implemented in Scotland will improve the system, hearing asylum claims more quickly and effectively. But this does nothing for the 1100 families whose cases were heard under the old regime, now living in fear of being dragged out of their houses without warning or being picked up at immigration centres when they go to routinely report.

Evidence from the United Nations High Commission for Refugee's Quality Initiative Project suggests that there have been several deficiencies in the UK asylum process under which these legacy cases were heard, including questioning the case workers skills in determining people's suitability for asylum at the very outset of their claims.

We call on the Home Office to consider alternatives in these cases, including the wider humanitarian grounds surrounding them – how long has a family been here, how they have integrated within the community etc – before making decisions on their removal.

But instead, the government has set itself high and arbitrary targets on removals, responding to a certain media constituency that wants people to be returned.

Meeting these targets seems to be taking precedence over looking at individual cases and treating them with compassion.

Another alternative to detention is promoting awareness of Voluntary Assisted Returns to increase greater confidence in them and to allay fears amongst the asylum-seeking families.

Mr Taylor says voluntary returns were piloted in Scotland, with only one person out of the 140 targeted turning up to be deported. The pilot to which he refers was tried last year and called 'self check-in'. It consisted of the Home Office sending letters, unannounced to asylum seekers or agencies working with them, advising people to turn up to a flight which would deport them back to countries, often still in conflict and where people feared potential persecution.

Fearing persecution, not knowing what might face them when they went back, anxious about how their children – many of them born here – would adapt to a strange place, the majority panicked. They didn't turn up. Their support was stopped and they experienced periods of destitution. The impact on children of seeing their parents in such distress is hard to imagine.

To assert this experiment failed is disingenuous. None of the agencies who work on a daily basis with people in the asylum process knew anything about it until it was reported as a failure. Assisted Voluntary Returns will only work if they are truly voluntary and assisted. Simply sending someone a letter out of the blue telling them to be at the airport next week is not an effective way to encourage returns.

Asylum seekers have told us if there was more and better information about what happened to people who had gone home, this might contribute to more genuinely voluntary returns, but little is being done to monitor what happens to people when they return and whether this is a safe solution for families.

Under the new asylum procedures, Mr Taylor has promised closer case management of applications, keeping people informed at every point of their claim. We welcome this improved communication, hopefully improving the speed and quality of decisions and making the process more effective for those seeking refuge. Like Mr Taylor, we would 'love to do away' with dawn raids and are happy to work with him to find effective, humane and sustainable alternatives.

Yours,

Sally Daghlian, chief executive, Scottish Refugee Council