From April 2000 asylum seekers were given vouchers to buy food, clothes and other essentials and only £10 in cash. The vouchers could only be used in some shops. Asylum seekers said that they could not use the vouchers in cheaper shops and markets. They had problems paying for essential things such as food and travel. Shops were not allowed to give change if not all the voucher was spent. Many people thought vouchers would increase discrimination and prejudice against asylum seekers.

The Refugee Council joined with Oxfam and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) to oppose the vouchers. They argued that the policy did not treat asylum seekers fairly. By working together with organisations across the country they hoped to have more influence on the Government to change the law.

The campaigners got publicity in newspapers and on television. They challenged hostility to asylum seekers in some parts of the media. Thousands of people wrote to their Members of Parliament and to supermarkets. In some areas there were protests. The campaigners used the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (TUC) conferences to gain support and put pressure on the Government.

Oxfam and The Body Shop refused to take vouchers in their shops. They encouraged other shops and supermarkets to pull out of the system.

Oxfam collected information from 50 organisations about how the vouchers affected asylum seekers.  They collected evidence they called a ‘dossier of disgrace’ to show the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary. In December 2000 they published a report of their findings called Token Gestures.   By 2001 the British Medical Association and the Local Government Association also supported demands to withdraw the vouchers.

In 2001 the Government announced a review of the system and the voucher scheme ended in 2002. Two years later vouchers were introduced for a smaller group of asylum seekers who were at the end of the asylum process.

In March 2020, although asylum seekers in the UK receive support in cash, the level of support is at £37.75 per person per week, which is £5.39 a day.