This is a guide intended to help organisations involve refugees and asylum seekers & support them into volunteering roles within their organisation. The inspiration behind this guide came from the experience of the ‘New Beginnings’ project that was started in 2004 in **Sheffield Volunteer Centre (SVC)** - [New Beginnings Project - Volunteer Centre Sheffield (sheffieldvolunteercentre.org.uk)](https://www.sheffieldvolunteercentre.org.uk/new-beginnings-project)

Voluntary Action Sheffield (VAS) set up the project to help refugees and asylum seekers volunteer in Sheffield. Over time, they have encountered many barriers their clients face when trying to volunteer as well as the genuine difficulties organisations face when involving people from all backgrounds.

**The key aims of Sheffield Volunteer Centre’s ‘New Beginnings’ project:**

* Give in-depth support to refugees and asylum seekers that want to volunteer and help them find a volunteer placement.
* Help local organisations to involve asylum seekers and refugees as volunteers in suitable opportunities.
* Promote good practice in volunteering with refugees and asylum seekers.

**Background**

Many refugees and asylum seekers are keen to volunteer and highly motivated to get involved in a good volunteering opportunity. Some want to gain experience of working in the UK, others want to improve their English, and many want to do something useful with their time by using the skills they have to help people.

In general, the people wanting to volunteer have had a high skill level and work experience in their home country. However, there are a number of barriers that prevent such skilled clients from volunteering and so they are keen to use their skills to volunteer and get experience in the UK. Many people speak more than one language and might be able to provide help interpreting.

**Legal Position: Asylum Seekers and Refugees *can* volunteer**

According to the recent Home Office update regarding Permission to work and Volunteering for asylum seekers – (Page 14; 18 of 19 Published for Home Office staff on 04 May 2021)

***‘****Volunteers are those who give their time for free to charitable or public sector organisations without any contractual obligation or entitlement. They are not* ***employees*** *or* ***workers*** *as defined by various statutory provisions. Volunteering can be undertaken at any stage of the asylum process; but such activities must not interfere with scheduled events such as a substantive asylum interview, regular reporting event or re-documentation interview.’*

A refugee who is on normal state benefits is under the same restrictions as a British citizen.

**The key statement from the Home Office**

‘*We are keen to see asylum seekers and recognised refugees take an active interest in the welfare of their own communities and the local community be undertaking voluntary activity while they are in the UK but it must be borne in mind that, in the case of asylum seekers, they may not be given the right to remain here. They should therefore not be led to believe that voluntary activity is regarded as a step towards refugee status being granted*.’

**The following guidance may be of help when organisations consider offers of voluntary activity from asylum seekers.**

* Care should be taken to ensure that the activity being undertaken by an asylum seeker is genuinely voluntary and amounts neither to employment nor to job substitution.
* We would not expect asylum seekers to be out of pocket as a result of volunteering. Reimbursement should be made for meal or travel costs actually incurred, not as a flat-rate allowance.

# **Asylum seeker / Refugee - What’s the difference?**

The terms asylum seekers and refugee are often used interchangeably in the media; but they are very different.

Under International Law, the word refugee has a very precise meaning. It describes someone who is forced to flee their home and country, escapes to another country and is recognised as a refugee under international law by the government of the new country.

A **refugee** is someone who has fled or is unable to return home owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

An **asylum seeker** is someone who has fled from his or her home country and is seeking to be recognised as a refugee under the asylum laws in the new country.

**Confidentiality about volunteer’s immigration status**

Some volunteers have expressed that they do not like to be labelled as an ‘asylum seeker’ or a ‘refugee’. People often feel that there is a negative stigma attached to these terms and do not want to be known as ‘the asylum seeker’ or ‘the refugee’. When making volunteer referrals however, Sheffield Volunteer Centre will reveal the immigration status of their clients to the organisations, but they would request to keep people’s immigration status confidential in the same way as you might know of volunteers’ sexuality, religious beliefs, health history etc. and not make it public.

To some, it is important for the organisations to know their status as they might need extra support (*support letters and reference*) from the organisation.

**Be sensitive about why people have come to the UK**

People will have fled persecution and gone through traumatic experiences. Some will have witnessed war or killings, others will have experienced state or police violence because of their political, religious, or sexual standpoint.

Some people chose to disclose information about their past experiences whereas for others the memories are still too painful and personal to share. At the New Beginnings project, VCS do not ask people why they came to the UK because this is a private issue and not relevant to a person’s ability to volunteer. We would ask that other organisations did not ask questions about people’s previous experiences unless the volunteer starts a conversation about them.

**Additional support during recruitment and induction period.**

Extra support/training may be required for some refugees and asylum seekers (particularly those who have limited English) to ensure that they are confident to get involved in a volunteer task. Refugees and asylum seekers are very aware of the negative media portrayal they receive so really need to know that they are wanted & valued. Organisations should therefore be able to offer people support and training as well as encouragement in their volunteer roles for empowerment and confidence building.

**To help welcome people here are some things that can help:**

**During Recruitment:**

* Offer to pay travel expenses (in cash) when you invite people for an interview / informal chat.
* Offer to go through & complete the application forms with the volunteer when you meet them.
* Interviews need to be paced so that information is understood and both sides can ask questions.
* There is no need to request their immigration status, unless for Access NI checks or to meet funding requirements.
* Always get back to people as soon as possible and let people know what the timescale or recruitment & onboarding will be.
* If volunteers call you, offer to call them back as they usually call from pay as you go mobiles which are very expensive to make calls from.
* Where the volunteer cannot provide references, see if it is possible to offer people a trial period where you can assess a volunteer’s character before allowing them to do other opportunities. This could involve group or supervised work.

**At Induction:**

* Offer to pay expenses. Be proactive rather than waiting to be asked for them and please pay in cash where possible as bank processing can take too long.
* Go through the induction at a suitable pace to ensure that the volunteer fully understands all the key issues. Ask questions about the information if you are unsure if they understand - most people will just say yes to avoid feeling stupid.
* Let volunteers shadow you before asking them to do things so that they can see how you do things. This can be particularly important with making or taking telephone calls or dealing with the public. Telephone calls are the hardest test of people’s language skills and are often intimidating even for people with very good English.

**Access NI Checks:**

Some asylum seekers and refugees may not have been here long enough or have sufficient ID documents to make enhanced Access NI checks possible – but many are able to undergo checks and Access NI will consider these applications on a case-by-case basis. IT is worth considering if an access NI check is necessary for a role and if requiring one might limit the accessibility to the role. Access NI can advise on any issues specific to your organisation & roles [AccessNI criminal record checks | nidirect](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/accessni-criminal-record-checks)

**Flexibility:**

Asylum seekers may have to go for Home Office interviews or go to appointments with their solicitors. In some cases, support workers may need to see asylum seekers at short notice. In these cases, they may not be able to attend their volunteering sessions so some flexibility may be asked for. This is not normally a problem with organisations, but it is good if the level of flexibility that you are able to accommodate is clearly explained to the volunteers i.e., how much notice is required.

## **Talking to people who speak English as a second language:**

Speak more slowly and clearly rather than louder to get a message across - it is still common for people to simply raise their voices and this will not help. It is also helpful to avoid using jargon or local expressions and idiom as these are hard for people to understand.

People often understand more than they can speak. This can be related to a lack of confidence speaking to people when they are aware their English is not perfect. Creating a supportive volunteering environment will help build their confidence in speaking.

**Telephone vs. face to face:**

Many people who speak English as a second language find telephone conversations a lot harder than meeting people face to face. It is therefore best to keep phone calls shorter and arrange to see people if you need to talk to them about something. They can also be unsure about giving too much information over the phone so try to avoid taking personal details over the phone.

**Arranging Appointments:**

Use text messages to leave messages and arrange appointments rather than voicemail as people often don’t have credit to pick up messages. Text your address and contact details with the day and date of the appointment. They can then use the text to ask a friend to translate or other people for directions.

In a situation where it is difficult to work out what people can or cannot do, it is important to listen to the suggestions that they make for appointments and to ask them what is best for them.

**Punctuality:**

In some cultures, appointment time is seen as less specific as in the UK. This can lead to people turning up at unexpected times or missing appointments. It is also a good idea for organisations to emphasise the need for punctuality when making appointments.

**Barriers to volunteering for Asylum seekers and refugees.**

For some volunteers, there will be no barriers and they will be very confident and able to volunteer with no additional support needed. There are key barriers however that many people have faced which hinder or prevent them from volunteering.

**Personal circumstances:**

* Fear of racism, prejudice
* Isolation
* Lack of confidence
* Depression
* Concern that English skills are not good enough.
* Worry skills and qualifications will not be valid.
* Anxiety over the future due to undecided asylum application
* Different cultural perceptions to volunteering

**Example of these in practice:**

1. Often organisations do not get in touch with volunteers that we refer, or it takes a long time for them to do so. Many volunteers have felt like this shows that the organisation is not interested in taking them as a volunteer and these people can feel like it is because they have a foreign name, accent or it is because they are a refugee.

2. One person with excellent English and lots of previous work experience said ‘When you come to the UK, you know it is a highly developed country, so you feel like your skills are not relevant here. You therefore restrain yourself’.

**There are also practical barriers that they will face such as:**

* Lack of knowledge about volunteering opportunities
* Unfamiliar with local area – finding the organisation can be hard.
* Busy doing community work.
* College or language class commitments

.

**Finally, external barriers that organisations put up can include:**

* Complicated application forms that confuse them.
* Previous experience is needed.
* References in English are needed.
* Police & criminal record history checks required.
* Lack of support for people with basic English.
* Volunteering environment may not be welcoming to refugees.

## **Asylum Seeker & Refugee Volunteer Expenses**

## **The Law:**

Asylum seekers and refugees are allowed to claim expenses as long as they a direct result of volunteering. This means that organisations should take copies of bus tickets, rood receipts or childcare costs. If the expenses are necessary for someone to carry out their volunteer role and paid against a receipt there are no restrictions. Expenses can be paid for travel, childcare, food, clothing, equipment, training etc. Expenses can also be paid in advance if volunteers are unable to afford the initial cost e.g., you can give someone money for next week’s bus fare and then copy the ticket after they have bought them.

**The Practicalities:**

Some asylum seekers and refugees have said that they have not been paid their expenses. This is the most common problem Sheffield Volunteer Centre has experienced with asylum seeker volunteers and it is one that can be easily avoided.

All volunteers should get their out-of-pocket expenses reimbursed but it is particularly important for asylum seekers as they get ~30% less benefit than people on Universal Credit. A day-ticket bus fare can be 30% or more of their weekly income. It is therefore really important for organisations to pay expenses regularly (preferably on the day & in cash). Volunteers with English as a second language may not fully understand your written expenses policies & processes (even if they have been given a copy) and they may be uncertain or ashamed about asking so you should be proactive & ask them about their expenses and tell them that these can/will be paid back to them and ALL volunteers if they keep receipts.

###### **One volunteer, who had been volunteering for 5 weeks but had not received any money for her expenses explained why she had not asked for her expenses:**

*“I don’t want to ask for my expenses because everyone will look at me bad. People think refugees just come here for money, so I don’t want to ask for anything. I work hard and they should give me expenses, but I don’t want to ask. I don’t understand, they have time to give me orders, tell me what to do – why don’t they have time to give me expenses.”*

# As a Volunteer Manager, it is our responsibility to check with volunteers that they have claimed their expenses. It may well take months for a volunteer to build up the confidence to ask for their expenses so please be proactive in offering to pay expenses. This will ensure that all volunteers feel comfortable about claiming expenses and do not feel like they are causing trouble for you. Volunteers may not ask for expenses for fear that people will think that they are scroungers or just after money, in the way the media portrays them.