

Involving Asylum Seekers & Refugees as volunteers

INFORMATION SHEET

Background

In March 2023, there were 3030 people receiving asylum support in Northern Ireland (Law Centre NI, 2023). Those living in Northern Ireland come from 60 countries, with the 10 largest proportions being:

- 1) Eritrean (525); 2) Syrian (524); 3) Somali (408); 4) Sudanese (257); 5) Iranian (199); 6) Iraqi (195); 7) Nigerian (115); 8) Yemeni (108); 9) Kuwaiti (91); 10) Palestinian (90)

Generally, they do settle in Belfast, but numbers are increasing in other areas, including Lisburn, Newtownabbey, Bangor, Carrickfergus, Derry, Portstewart, Craigavon & Newcastle.

What are the main reasons people have come to Northern Ireland?

There are a range of reasons that people flee in the first place, including but not limited to:

- Persecution (due to religion, LGBTQ+ status, or political opinion)
- Outbreak of war
- Armed conflict or gang violence
- Extreme poverty
- Natural disaster

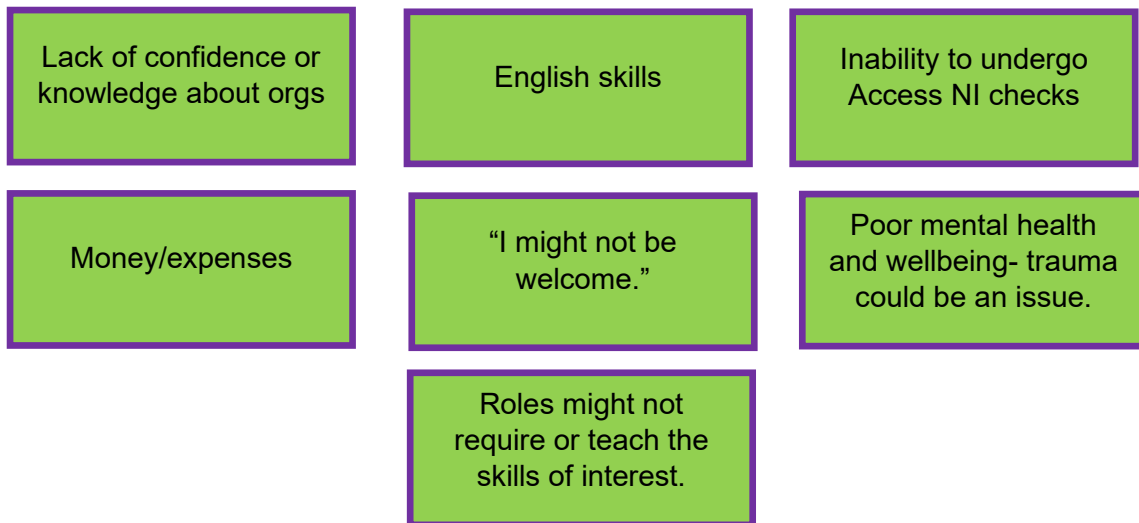
Those who seek asylum will receive a cash allowance of £45 per week to live on unless they are housed in hotel accommodation. In this case, they receive **£9.10** per week.

Why would an organisation involve asylum seekers and refugees?

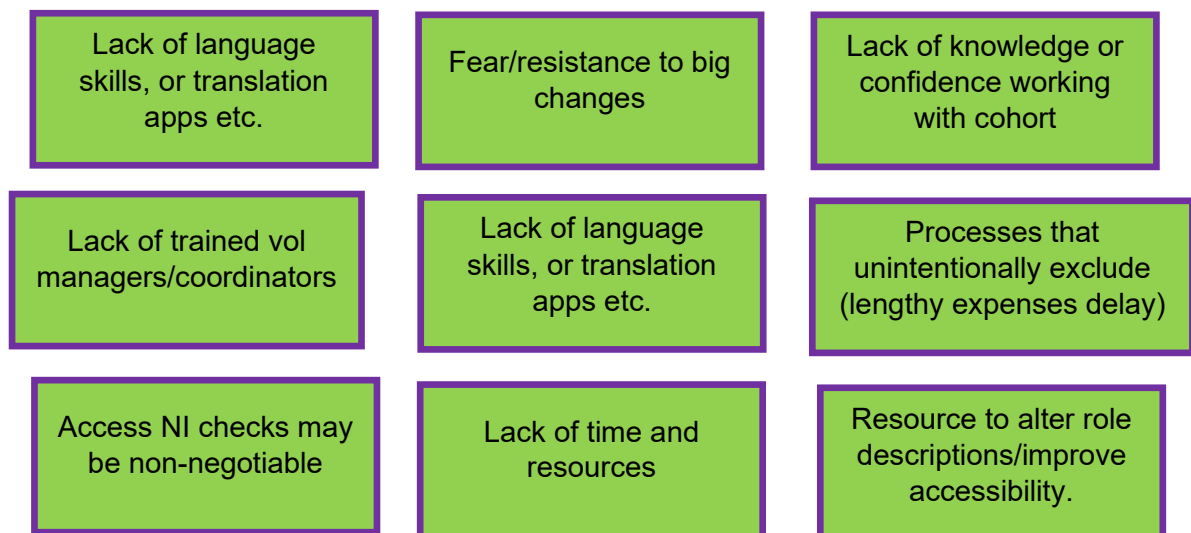
- ❖ Asylum seekers cannot work, so they are free during the day and at times other people are not.
- ❖ They are highly motivated to fill time, reduce isolation and boredom.
- ❖ They wish to remain here and work, so they need to build CV skills and develop character/work references.
- ❖ Often, they are skilled people who could put these skills to use for the benefit of your organisation.
- ❖ They want and need to build relationships, networks and connections in their new home.
- ❖ Volunteering offers English conversation practice. Therefore, they are motivated to be consistently involved.
- ❖ They are often passionate about certain causes.
- ❖ Foreign nationals bring diversity to your team and organisation, creating new ideas and widening the reach of your organisation.

Challenges facing asylum seekers/refugees and organisations:

Asylum Seekers & Refugees



Organisations



However, there are opportunities hidden within these challenges:

- You can review and improve old policies to be more fit for purpose in the 'New Environment'.
- A chance to review and re-write volunteer roles- place emphasis on work skills/CV benefits, etc.
- Explore new ways to safeguard, assess and manage risk, beyond Access NI.
- A chance to be creative and think outside the box.
- By improving accessibility, you can widen your potential volunteer pool, becoming more accessible to multiple groups/backgrounds.
- A chance to access new sources of funding/practical support.
- You can provide staff and volunteers with training opportunities.

Practical Ideas to Consider

- Get your basic info translated into one of the top 6 languages.
*Please note, there are sometimes funding pots for such activities.
Good relations/Equality departments in councils, the Law Centre and the NICVA grant tracker can be useful contacts as they may be able to provide information on types of funding available at that time.*
- Change your travel and expenses policy.
- Make your welcome very clear, explicitly mentioning asylum seekers & refugees.
- Get to know people personally and find out about their skills and interests.
Invite them for a coffee as a first step.
- Re-write policy documents in simple/plain English.
- Provide staff and volunteers with training, so everyone is prepared and knows how to welcome appropriately.
- Make council funding applications for translations/interpreters, etc.
- Re-write volunteer role descriptions to emphasise the job skills earned. Offer references if requested.
- Create a new volunteer role, committed to supporting asylum seekers and refugees into your organisations.

As is the common theme for any volunteer, flexibility must be considered. In fact, flexibility is the main factor which would encourage non-volunteers to begin volunteering ([NCVO, Time Well Spent, 2023](#)). For asylum seekers and refugees, it is worth considering having a spectrum of volunteer roles, allowing for a range of different levels of commitment, at different times of the day/week. This offers a 'step' into volunteering and will ensure people aren't ruled out or put off due to their own personal circumstances. These considerations will benefit volunteers from all backgrounds, not simply asylum seekers and refugees, so flexibility should remain at the heart of any volunteer programme.

Disclaimer

Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure information in this publication is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith without accepting liability. If relevant, we therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking any action on the matters covered herein.

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