



4.0 Volunteers

Welcoming Volunteers Who Are Asylum Seekers

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Introduction

Individuals identified as asylum seekers and refugees can be excellent volunteers.

They can be highly motivated to learn new skills, or develop existing skills which assist them in future job seeking.

Volunteering is not only beneficial for the individual, involving volunteers who are asylum seekers and refugees can be extremely positive for your organisation.



Image: Volunteers greeting a new member

Definitions

Asylum seeker (person seeking asylum)

A person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded. Wherever possible, we prefer to describe someone as a person seeking asylum as we feel that the term asylum seeker is dehumanising.

The vast majority of asylum seekers in the UK are prohibited from seeking employment, but they are legally allowed to volunteer. Asylum seekers are able to access an alternative set of benefits, called Asylum Support.

Refugee

The definition of a refugee according to The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is:



“A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

In the UK, a person becomes a refugee when government agrees that an individual who has applied for asylum meets the definition in the Refugee Convention they will **'recognise'** that person as a refugee and issue them with refugee status documentation. Usually refugees in the UK are given five years' leave to remain as a refugee. They must then apply for further leave, although their status as a refugee is not limited to five years.

Some volunteers are concerned about the potential stigma surrounding their immigration status, fearing being labelled as **'the asylum seeker'** or **'the refugee'**. Others want the organisation they are volunteering for to know and understand their immigration status as they may require extra support, or slightly adapted policies.

We recommend that organisations that include a question in their recruitment forms about immigration status, keep it as an optional question.

Organisations need to be clear on why and how they are collecting this information and what they will do with this data. We also suggest that you keep an individual's immigration status confidential in the same way you would a volunteer's sexuality, for example.

Home office guidance

The Home Office has recently launched [new guidance](#) about permission to work and volunteering for asylum seeking individuals.

This states :

- 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.
- These events will not be rescheduled to accommodate volunteering. Organisations offering such opportunities will need to allow some flexibility so that volunteers can attend interviews or appointments around their volunteering.
- Volunteering must also not undermine the effective removal of those who do not need protection and do not qualify to remain in the UK on any other basis.
- Asylum seekers can volunteer whilst their claim is considered, without being granted permission to work.

It is Home Office policy to support asylum seekers volunteering for charities or public sector organisations. However, this must not amount to engagement as an **'employee'** or a **'worker'** and it is the responsibility of the individual and the organisation they are volunteering for to check that such activity does not mean they are working in breach of conditions.

The organisation should also undertake all relevant safeguarding checks required. Any personal details provided by the claimant as part of the immigration process cannot be confirmed by the Home Office for use in any other context other than immigration matters.

To summarise, the principal difference is that volunteering must not amount to unpaid work, or job substitution. In particular:

- There should be no payment, other than reasonable travel and meals
- Expenditure actually incurred (**not an allowance for the same**)
- There should be no contractual obligations on the volunteer and they should
- Not enjoy any contractual entitlement to any work or benefits
- The volunteer is helping a registered voluntary or charitable organisation, an organisation that raises funds for either of these, or a public sector organisation
- Volunteering is not a substitute for employment, that is fulfilling a role that a salaried worker would normally fulfil

Related to the guidance



Information

The guidelines are consistent with the definition of volunteering used in the [Welsh Government's Volunteer policy, \(August 2015\)](#)

Volunteering is an activity which:

- is undertaken freely, by choice
- is undertaken to be of public/ community benefit
- is not undertaken for financial gain

It is recommended that all asylum seekers who undertake any volunteering inform their Home Office Caseworker and their solicitor that they have begun volunteering. This information may prove useful to their asylum application.

Similarly, for refugees who may be accessing welfare benefits such as Job Seekers Allowance, it is important that their point of contact at the job centre is aware of any volunteering that an individual is undertaking.

Mind your Language – ‘volunteering’ and not ‘voluntary work’

It is crucial that volunteer coordinators who are supervising asylum seeking volunteers are aware of the importance that language can have. Always use the term ‘volunteering’ and not ‘voluntary work’.

For individuals who may be learning English, it may be easier to remember the term ‘voluntary work’ as opposed to ‘volunteering’. However, using this term to describe ‘volunteering’ may put an individual’s asylum application or their asylum support at risk.

Volunteer management: offering appropriate support

Asylum seekers and refugees are not a homogeneous group of individuals. In fact, one of the few unifying characteristics about this group of individuals is the fact that they will have faced persecution, and possibly torture in their homeland, forcing them to flee.

As a result of these experiences, asylum seeking individuals could be traumatised. Further issues which could add to any trauma experienced may include isolation, language barriers, family separation and being in a state of limbo until the outcome of their asylum application.

It is important that volunteer coordinators are aware of the multiple and complex issues affecting people seeking sanctuary, and identify appropriate additional support should this be required for an individual to be able to volunteer.

As an organisation, Swansea City of Sanctuary does not ask for the reason why people have had to flee their homeland. Instead, it focuses on ‘post-arrival’ in the UK and an individual’s desire to volunteer in their new community. This approach is commended to others.

Some individuals will choose to disclose information about their past experiences and the reasons they have had to flee their homeland. This may be a helpful experience for someone, and in this situation, we would suggest that as a volunteer coordinator you listen, and provide the opportunity for the volunteer to speak.

It is important for organisations to have adequate support mechanisms (internal or external) for their volunteer coordinators who may hear about traumatic and painful experiences.

Despite these often complex issues affecting people seeking sanctuary, many individuals display remarkable resilience, once removed from the threat they faced. It is a positive sign if an individual has taken the pro-active step of approaching an organisation, and wishes to volunteer.

Roles

Remember the importance of having a variety of roles that might capture volunteers' skills sets and motivations as well as being mindful of adhering to safeguarding and organisational policy.

As with any volunteering opportunity it is important that the role is meaningful and does not amount to job substitution or in effect, unpaid labour.

Recruitment processes

Volunteers can be encouraged to fill their **application forms** themselves, especially if travelling to the centre is difficult. It is important to ensure that the volunteer manager or another appropriate member of staff is able to support if needed.

This should be done in a way that never disempowers the volunteer in any way, but allows the volunteer to not feel obliged to talk about themselves more than they feel comfortable to, and not be concerned about spelling or language. It also allows the volunteer manager to perhaps gain more information and understanding.

References

References can be a useful way of checking someone's suitability, but for people who are new to the area finding someone to ask can be problematic.

Can your organisation use different ways of assessing suitability; a longer shadowing period, an assessed training programme? Ask the question "**does this role really require volunteers to provide a reference?**"

Is your induction training in an easily accessible place for someone new to the area, and who might not have money for bus that day? Is volunteer induction training provided in a way that is understandable for people who have English as a second language?

Do your staff have training and adequate understanding of the issues around asylum seekers and refugees, to ensure you provide a welcome?

Supervision

- Allow space within supervision sessions to ask after each and every one of your volunteers. This will allow you to offer additional support if necessary.
- You may wish have to have a map/list of support services to share. Any 'dispersal area' is likely to have a range of local services near, which you can signpost individuals to.

Building skills and receiving recognition

You should be clear ([this could be included in the volunteer policy](#)) for how long someone should volunteer ([months, hours](#)) to be able to receive a reference or support letter. An example of a [support letter](#) offered by Swansea City of Sanctuary is given in Appendix.



Information

An example of a support letter offered by Swansea City of Sanctuary is given in Appendix 1:
[Appendix 1: Support Letter](#)

Reimbursement of expenses

The current situation is that Section 95 support is referring to asylum seekers whose claims are ongoing, who are either destitute or about to become destitute and their dependants.

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Asylum Seekers can access support in the form of housing and/or basic living expenses while in the UK through a scheme administered by the Home Office.

This support scheme provides two support packages – support for those whose asylum claims are ongoing (Section 95) and support for refused asylum seekers (Section 4).

Section 95 support is aimed at asylum seekers whose claims are ongoing, who are destitute or about to become destitute, and their dependants.

Section 95 support can take the form of subsistence only (i.e. cash only support) or if the asylum seeker does not have somewhere to stay pending their asylum claim, accommodation and subsistence support.

The level of cash support provided is a fixed rate which is significantly lower than income support levels. It is currently £39.63 per week per person (adults and children receive the same).

An asylum seeker who is on Section 4 support will have their weekly allowance of £39.63 loaded onto a Debit card (ASPEN card). They will not be able to withdraw cash from the card.

This provides housing for asylum seekers plus £39.63 per week for each person. Both adults and children receive the same amount per person. Volunteers are encouraged to claim their travel expenses, plus a lunch allowance if they are volunteering for a full day.

It should be made as easy as possible for volunteers to access those payments and your finance team should treat those payments as a priority. Travel expenses should also be paid in advance when necessary. Expenses for outings for volunteers should also be paid by the organisation, including entrance fees and meal costs.

The accounting books and records of a registered charity should be designed to meet the reporting requirements laid down by the Charities Commission as well as any other financial legislative requirements as determined by the appropriate governing bodies.

The 'gold standard' practice should be that an organisation will not reimburse or make payment in respect of any commitment or expense unless that payment is supported by an original invoice/receipt. This provides maximum transparency and clear audit trail.

In occasional circumstances, a volunteer may be unable to submit an original receipt (e.g. an all day bus ticket) for reimbursement on the day of the volunteering event because they need keep hold of the ticket in order to travel back home.

In such circumstances, there are several options:

- a. If the volunteer is attending regular volunteering sessions (e.g. once a week), then they might be reimbursed (on a rolling basis) a week in arrears. This system will result in original receipts always being available and will lead to an optimal matching of receipt and reimbursement.

For most asylum seekers however reimbursement in arrears will put an unreasonable strain on their financial position.

- b. If the volunteer has no spare funds and the price of the expenditure (e.g. an all day bus ticket) is known, then a cash advance might be provided on the understanding that the original ticket/receipt will be forwarded to the charity at a later date.

In practice however, the onus will be on the staff member to chase up volunteers for tickets that had already been reimbursed. This could ultimately prove to be time consuming and may well result in missing invoices/receipts in the Charities' supporting financial records if the originals are not submitted as promised.

- c. Some organisations might accept photographs of the ticket as proof that the expenditure has been incurred. Whilst this provides a degree of reassurance that the monies have indeed been incurred by the volunteer, it does not however guarantee that the ticket is not also being reclaimed from another source, or being claimed in duplicate from your organisation.

To avoid duplication of expenses reimbursement, accurate recording should take place. Referring back to file with receipts of cash reimbursement of volunteer expenses can avoid duplication of organisational payment. It is suggested that you discuss the matter with your finance officer to identify a practical system which also complies with your organisations auditing requirements.

Reimbursement of volunteers' out of pocket expenses is widely recognised as good practice. However, reimbursement is vital when involving people seeking sanctuary.



Information

See Appendix 2 for a template cash transaction form from Swansea City of Sanctuary.

[Appendix 2: Cash Transaction Form](#)

What if my organisation reimburses expenses on a weekly or monthly basis

If your organisation typically reimburses expenses on a weekly or monthly basis, this may well represent an additional barrier for individuals who are asylum seekers, and others on a low-income.

We would suggest that an organisation implements a small petty cash system in order to reimburse individuals who may be on a low-income and who would struggle financially if having to wait for the end of the week, or month for reimbursement.

'We reimburse volunteers who are asylum seekers their expenses through petty cash and we provide emotional support to them if they need it. All of our staff and volunteers are very supportive of Asylum seekers. We provide a three day training course for all volunteers.'

Toula Karageorgis, Volunteer Coordinator,
British Red Cross.

What if my organisation reimburses expenses via bank transfer or cheque?

If your organisation typically reimburses expenses via bank transfer or cheque, this may well represent an additional barrier for individuals who are seeking asylum.

It is suggested that an organisation implements a small petty cash system in order to reimburse individuals who may be on a low-income and who would struggle financially if having to wait for the end of the week, or month.

DBS checks

For certain volunteering opportunities a DBS check will be necessary and cannot be avoided.

These opportunities may be more difficult for an individual who is seeking asylum to participate in.

It is likely that a DBS check for an individual who is seeking asylum will take longer to carry out.

This is important to explain to potential volunteers and is important for your organisation to be aware of.

'I support asylum seekers to volunteer by having them in our admin team this means that they do not require a DBS check. I have done a route 4 DBS check with an asylum seeker but it took about eight months for it to come back and by that time they had moved on. I would do this again if we had vacancies in independent living as long as the volunteer was happy to go to the police station and I would support them through the process as this is very traumatic.'

Toula Karageorgis, Volunteer Coordinator,
British Red Cross.

Undertaking a DBS check will require sight of various identification documents, which many asylum seekers simply will not have access to. It is possible to undertake a DBS following the 'Route 4' option, which consists of the individual volunteer having their finger prints taken, in order to satisfy the criteria.

However, for some people seeking asylum, the fingerprinting process may be traumatic. If undertaken, be ready to offer additional support, if the individual requests it, accompanying the individual if necessary.

There has been a tendency to only offer volunteering opportunities which do not require a DBS check to asylum seekers and other individuals who may lack the relevant documentation.

An alternative option would be to encourage more individuals to take up these type of volunteering opportunities, with additional support from volunteer coordinators.

Some organisations who support volunteers who are seeking sanctuary suggest that if the 'Route 4' option is used more frequently, it may become a mainstream practice that staff are more knowledgeable and confident to use and support.



Important Note

If an asylum-seeker is from one of the countries listed on the DBS website it may be possible to obtain a 'certificate of good conduct' from their home country, but the individual will have to apply for it, and there is likely to be a charge, and the document may have to be translated.

[UK Government: Criminal record checks for overseas applicants](#)

In summary

Many asylum seekers want to volunteer in order to learn more about their new community, practise their English and use their existing skills or develop new ones. Volunteering can provide an opportunity to meet new people and to fill your time meaningfully whilst you are unable to work.

'I had paid work for more than 20 years back home. But my volunteering means more to me than my paid work ever did. I get peace from volunteering as it helps me to forget my own struggles.'

Toula Karageorgis, Volunteer Coordinator,
British Red Cross.

For refugees, volunteering can also provide an up to date and UK-based reference, which may be useful when trying to secure a job in a highly competitive climate.

The suggestions in this information sheet are applicable to the management of all volunteers, regardless of their immigration status.

Further information

DBS Checks for Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Sheffield Volunteer Centre

http://www.sheffieldvolunteercentre.org.uk/uploads/files/GP_DBIS_Guidelines_for_Refugees_and_Asylum_seekers.pdf

City of Sanctuary, Swansea

City of Sanctuary

<https://swansea.cityofsanctuary.org/>

Displaced People in Action

DIPA

<https://www.dpia.org.uk/>

Ethnic Youth Support Team

EYST

<https://eyst.org.uk/>

Welsh Refugee Council

Welsh Refugee Council

<https://wrc.wales/>

Your Local Volunteer Centre

Third Sector Support Wales

<https://thirdsectorsupport.wales/contact/>



Cefnogi Trydydd
Sector **Cymru**

Third Sector
Support **Wales**

Third Sector Support Wales is a network of support organisations for the whole of the third sector in Wales.

It consists of the 19 local and regional support bodies across Wales, the County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) and the national support body, Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA).

For further information contact
<https://thirdsectorsupport.wales/contact/>

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

Appendix one

Address

Date

To whom it may concern,

We are writing to confirm that _____ volunteered with _____
from _____.

Example: As a _____ (s)he attended induction training, regular support sessions and was an asset to our project. (S)he used his/her existing skills in communication to educate people about the realities of life as someone seeking sanctuary in the UK.

(S)he has attended every training session available to him/her and has used the feedback provided to improve her training and presentation skills. (S)he is always willing to support audience members to get the most from the training (s)he provides.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information,

Many thanks,

Appendix two

Confirmation of reimbursement

I confirm that I have received (enter amount): £ _____

In cash from (enter name of staff member): on _____:

In respect of (enter volunteer activity details):

Name of volunteer reimbursed:

Address:

Signature of person reimbursed

Original ticket witnessed:

Photo of ticket attached: