

Wales Council for Voluntary Action

Supporting charities, volunteers and communities

4. Volunteers

4.28 Welcoming volunteers who are asylum seekers or refugees



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.

This [short film](#) gives a positive example of having a mixed team of volunteers from Oxfam Books & Music shop, Swansea

In January 2017, [Swansea City of Sanctuary](#) assembled local organisations that involve volunteers, including those who are asylum seekers and refugees, to discuss the benefits and concerns and to learn lessons from each other. This guidance is based on the experience of these organisations, working alongside SCVS.

Who is who? Definitions

An **asylum seeker** is a person who is in the country legally, having requested asylum, and who is waiting for the Home Office to decide the outcome of their application. 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.

A **refugee** is someone whose asylum application has been granted by the Home Office. They are allowed to stay in the country because they have proved they would face persecution back home. Refugees are legally entitled to work and can access welfare benefits, as well as being legally permitted to volunteer.

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 include a question in their recruitment forms about immigration status, but it should remain an optional question. 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

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 homogenous 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

Volunteer **application forms** are better filled out by staff with the potential volunteer present. This allows the volunteer to talk about themselves and not be concerned about spelling or language. It allows the co-ordinator to perhaps gain more information and understanding.

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 e.g. 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.

Reimbursement of expenses:

As of May 2017, asylum seekers in the UK are surviving on a **maximum** cash allowance of **£36.95** per person per week, which is equivalent to **£5.28** a day. Swansea City of Sanctuary has committed to reimbursing travel and food expenses **on the day**, for volunteers. The cost of transport may be high when compared to the daily cash allowance that asylum seekers receive, and if an individual cannot receive on the day reimbursement of these expenses, a volunteering opportunity may be effectively inaccessible for them.

The accounting books and records of a registered charity should be designed so as 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. – see below.

(b) If the volunteer has no spare funds and the price of the expenditure (eg 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.

See [Appendix 2](#) for a template cash transaction form from Swansea City of Sanctuary.

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

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.

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.

'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.

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.

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. Fingerprinting will take place at a police station.

'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 British Red Cross
Volunteer Co-ordinator

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.

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.

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. 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.

'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.'

Testimony from one of Swansea City of Sanctuary's Sanctuary Speaker Volunteers

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

For further information:

[City of Sanctuary, Swansea](#)

[DPIA \(Displaced People in Action\) /](#)

[EYST \(Ethnic Youth Support Team\)](#)

[Welsh Refugee Council](#)

[Your local Volunteer Centre](#)

Sheffield Volunteer Centre has produced [DBS guidelines on DBS for Refugees and Asylum Seekers](#)

Appendix 1

Address
Date

To whom it may concern,

We are writing to confirm that [*insert name*] volunteered with [*name of organisation*] from [*insert dates*]. Example: As a [*name of volunteer role*] (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,
[*Staff member*]

Appendix 2

TEMPLATE CASH FORM

Confirmation of reimbursement

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

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

In respect of (enter volunteer activity details): _____

Name of volunteer reimbursed: _____

Address: _____

Signature of person reimbursed _____

Original ticket witnessed:

Photo of ticket attached:

For further information contact

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