

Set 2

InfoSheet 2.10

Recruitment and Selection

Involving Refugees and Asylum Seekers as Volunteers

Refugees have been arriving in the UK for more than a hundred years. Volunteering has been key to their resettlement from the outset. Across the UK, volunteering has built bridges between communities and has enabled refugees and local people to make new contacts, acquire new experiences and understanding and to move on to paid employment.

Refugees and asylum seekers bring a vast array of skills and qualifications yet are often unable to secure work and are among the more vulnerable and socially excluded in British Society. It therefore matters that they are given every opportunity to take part in volunteering with all the benefits this can bring.

Initially, asylum seekers are likely to volunteer with their own community or with refugee organisations. It is important, however, that they are also helped to volunteer in 'mainstream' organisations, beyond the refugee sector. Careful planning and management are needed for this to take place. Volunteering can be a pathway to employment for refugees and volunteering opportunities need to be created with this in mind.

The Home Office in 2002 removed the right of asylum seekers to work. They must wait until they receive a decision about whether they can remain in the UK before they are allowed to seek employment. Volunteering therefore becomes all the more important as a chance to get work experience, references and to do something meaningful.

The Legal Situation

Until April 2000, there were restrictions limiting asylum seekers' ability to volunteer and receive expenses in the UK, but the legal situation has now changed and asylum seekers are now allowed to volunteer and claim expenses.

Voluntary activities are not considered to be 'employment' under the Immigration Act 1971. The Home Office has stated that no action will be taken against any asylum seeker engaging in voluntary activities, providing that the volunteer is only paid actual out-of-pocket expenses.

People who have refugee status, humanitarian protection or exceptional, indefinite or discretionary leave to remain, and their family members, are allowed to do any type of paid work as well as volunteer.

Asylum seekers are permitted to volunteer as soon as they arrive in the country. This includes people who are in the process of appealing against a decision to refuse them asylum.

Unfortunately some organisations have thought that asylum seekers are not allowed to volunteer. To confirm the Home Office position on volunteering you can call the **Refugee Information Service (020 7820 3085)** or the **Volunteering England (0800 028 3304)**. You can also contact the **Home Office Active Communities Unit (0207 7035 5331)**

Simplify your Application Process

If you have an application form, try to keep it as simple as possible:

- Bear in mind that refugees and asylum seekers may not have English as a first language.
- You can issue translated application forms but remember that you will need the resources to get them translated once they come back.
- You can invite potential volunteers to visit and fill out the application form with them during an informal conversation.
- Be clear about what information you need and do not ask for anything unnecessary
- As a minimum, you could just record contact details and the sorts of tasks the volunteer is interested in (unless, of course, the volunteering involves work with children or vulnerable people – see below).
- Treat all information confidentially and observe the Data Protection Act
- Equal opportunities monitoring should be carried out on a separate form that states clearly why you collect this information and what it is used for.

Asylum Awareness

If you are planning to target asylum seekers and refugees for the first time you need to make sure that everyone in your organisation has the necessary awareness and understanding to be able to welcome and support them as volunteers. This includes your service users, your paid staff and any existing volunteers. Contact the **Refugee Council** for more information on its training courses or to find out if there are any training providers in your local area.

Barriers to Volunteering

- There are many factors that stop refugees and asylum seekers from volunteering:
- Lack of information about opportunities
- Concern that skills and qualifications have no value in the UK
- Different cultural perceptions of volunteering
- Prejudice about working with people from other cultures
- Poor knowledge of English
- Busy doing informal work in the community
- Feeling transient and unable to commit
- Lack of confidence and low self-esteem
- Anxiety about future
- Expectation of deportation
- Disability and/or illness or depression
- Responsibilities of caring for family members
- Poverty

- Lack of knowledge of right to expenses or embarrassment about claiming expenses
- Difficulties getting a reference
- Preferring to get a job even if underpaid
- Going to college

Look at each of the barriers above and think about how you can minimise and break down some of these when it comes to attracting volunteers who are refugees or asylum seekers. You could do this as a group, involving paid staff, service users and existing volunteers in a 'brainstorming' session.

Language

Language is an important issue for organisations where refugees and asylum seekers are involved as volunteers or clients. You will need to decide what level of written or spoken English a volunteer needs. While in some cases you may require quite fluent English, remember that some roles can be carried out by people who speak very little English. Volunteers who speak more than one language can be a great asset, although you will need to plan how they can be used and managed.

Induction Training

You will need to consider how to adopt your Induction Training Programme to meet the needs of volunteers who are refugees and asylum seekers.

Where the client group is made up of, or includes refugees and asylum seekers, the induction process should include:

- An introduction to refugee issues – legislation, definition, legal processes
- The local situation – number of refugees and the challenges and difficulties they face.
- What support is available to refugees
- Emotional and mental health issues
- Cultural differences, values and attitudes
- Communication and listening skills
- Boundaries, confidentiality and dealing with challenging situations