



Good Practice Guidelines

(Working with Asylum seekers / Refugees)

33 Rockingham Lane, Sheffield, S1 4FW, ☎ 0114 253 6650 p.harvey@vas.org.uk

This guide is intended to help organisations to involve refugees and asylum seeker volunteers.

There is a lot of negative information, and often misinformation about refugees and asylum seekers in the media. However, the experience of the Volunteer Centre Sheffield, New Beginnings refugee and asylum seeker project is that refugees and asylum seekers are a highly skilled, motivated group of volunteers that are keen to help. This guide is intended to help organisations to involve these volunteers, and hopefully to clear a few misunderstandings.

We have had a project worker dedicated to providing extra support to refugees and asylum seekers as well as to organisations since May 2004. If you would like any further guidance, training or assistance, please contact the volunteer centre.

The key aims of the project are to:

- 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.

Examples of volunteers so far:

So far we have had volunteers who have worked in their home countries as accountants, beauticians, engineers, doctors and psychologists. They have volunteered as treasurers for charities, advice workers, support workers, admin assistants, web designers and conservation volunteers to name a few. The refugees and asylum seekers we have seen are from a very diverse group of people (over 50 countries so far) and they can offer a rich diversity of skills and perspectives to any organisation.

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 so they can get a job, 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 these skilled people from working 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.

The Home Office clarified the fact that asylum seekers can volunteer in December 2002 and the letter is included in these guidelines.

There are no restrictions on the number of hours an asylum seeker can volunteer, whereas a refugee who is on normal state benefits is under the same restrictions as a British citizen.

There is often confusion as to whether asylum seekers can volunteer because they will receive papers informing them that:

'You must not enter paid or unpaid employment'

Volunteering is not 'unpaid employment' and therefore this restriction does not apply to asylum seeker volunteers.

The key statements from the Home Office letter are:

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 by 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.

Can Refugees on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), Income Support (IS) Volunteer?

People on benefits can volunteer and there are no restrictions on the number of hours that people volunteer. The Social Security Office produced a booklet called "WK1 October 2003 Financial help if you work or are looking for work". This leaflet says:

"Volunteers work without being paid. To make sure they are not out of pocket, we can ignore payments they get for actual expenses to do with their voluntary work."

"You can do as much voluntary work as you like. Your JSA will not usually be affected as long as:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You are still looking for work as agreed with your Personal Adviser• You can be contacted quickly if the chance of a job comes up• You are willing to start work at a weeks notice or go for an interview within 48 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You do not receive any pay other than to pay for expenses like fares or special clothing you need for the voluntary work• It is reasonable for the person or organisation you are doing the voluntary work for not to pay you."
---	--

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 seekers is a person 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 volunteers 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'.

Other volunteers feel like it is important for the organisation to know their status as they might need extra support from the organisation.

Therefore, when we refer people we will tell you the volunteers status but we ask that organisations keep a persons immigration status confidential in the same way as you might know of, but not make public a volunteers sexuality, religious beliefs, health history etc.

Be sensitive about why people have come to the UK:

People will have fled persecution, and will have gone through traumatic experiences. Some will have witnessed war or killings others will have experience 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.

The Volunteer Centre does not ask why people came to the UK because this is a private issue and not relevant to a persons 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 in the work that they are doing. Refugees and asylum seekers are all very aware of the negative media portrayal they receive so really need to know that they are valued. This means that some may lack confidence, and therefore we like to place people with organisations that are able to offer people support and training as well as encouragement in their volunteer work.

In order to help welcome people here are some things that can help:

Recruitment:

- Offer to pay expenses when you invite people for an interview / informal chat
- Offer to 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
- The Volunteer Centre can help with forms and getting to the interview
- There is no need to request immigration status, unless for a CRB check or to meet funding requirements
- Always get back to people as soon as possible and let people know what the timescale will be.
- Use text messages or email to leave messages rather than leaving voicemail that people have to pay to collect.
- 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 volunteers character before allowing them to do other opportunities. This could involve group or supervised work.

Induction:

- Offer to Pay expenses. Be proactive rather than waiting to be asked for them.
- 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. If you ask if people 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.

Criminal Record Bureau disclosures:

Asylum seekers and Refugees **can** get CRB checks. See below for more information or go to: <http://www.vas.org.uk/volunteer-centre/refugee-asylum-project>

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.

General information and guidance.

Talking to people who speak English as a second language

Speak slower and clearer rather than louder. It is also helpful to avoid using jargon or local expressions and idiom as these are really hard for people to understand.

Telephone vs. face to face.

Keep phone calls shorter and arrange to see people if you need to talk to them about something. Use text messages to leave messages rather than voicemail as people often don't have credit to pick up messages.

Arranging Appointments:

Use text messages to arrange appointments. Text people your address and contact details with the day and date of the appointment. They can then use the text to ask people for directions. Use the translated letters on the VAS website to post a confirmation letter.

Punctuality:

In some cultures, appointment times are seen as less specific as in the UK. This can lead to people turning up at unexpected times or missing appointments. The volunteer centre has produced translated guides that clearly explain the need to people to keep to appointment times. These are available to download as a pdf from our website:

<http://www.vas.org.uk/volunteer-centre/refugee-asylum-project/index>

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.

However there are a number of key barriers that many people have faced which hinder or prevent people 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 often people 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 commitments

Finally, external barriers that organisations put up can include:

Complicated application forms

Previous experience needed

References needed

CRB (Police) checks required

Lack of support for people with basic English

Volunteering environment may not be welcoming to refugees

Other Factors

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.

Criminal Records Checks

Difficulties that asylum seekers and refugees face getting CRB checks.

Asylum seekers have to hand over their identity documents to the Home Office when they apply for asylum and are given an ID card in return. This means that they do not have a passport and so they will not have any of the 'Group 1' CRB documents. They are then required to find 5 documents from Group 2. This is very hard as asylum seekers do not have many of the documents on this list.

Asylum seekers are housed in NASS (National Asylum Support Service) accommodation through housing providers so asylum seekers will not have any utility bills in their name. Asylum seekers will often not be able to open a bank account, and they rarely have NI numbers or the right to work so will not have p45/60 forms.

This effectively means that it can be difficult for asylum seekers to get enough documents to satisfy the CRB. Refugees will have the right to work, so will have benefit books and should have utility bills in their name so can often find enough documents.

Below is a list of documents that asylum seekers and refugees may have and that the CRB will accept.

Possible ID letters that asylum seekers and refugees might have.

The letters must be from 5 different organisations and they must demonstrate an entitlement or show they are involved in an official process.

An **entitlement letter** is a letter confirming they are in receipt of benefits or a service.

These could be:

- NASS letter – Dispersal letter, Benefit confirmation/ change letter
- Sodexho benefit letter (JSA or Income Support letter if you are a refugee)
- Medical Card
- Tenancy Agreement
- College photo card
- ARC Card

An **official process** letter is a letter confirming that you are in an ongoing official process e.g. Their asylum claim is still ongoing. These could be:

- Home Office Letter – Confirmation of your application for asylum, an Interview request letter, Appeal letter, Initial decision letter
- Immigration Appellate Authority – 1st Hearing letter and/or Full Hearing letter
- Solicitor letter – This must confirm that you are in the asylum process, e.g. that you have an interview coming up, have submitted a fresh claim. An appointment letter is not sufficient.

Refugees might also have:

<input type="checkbox"/> Bank Statement	<input type="checkbox"/> JSA / IS Benefit book
<input type="checkbox"/> Utility Bill – Gas, electricity, telephone bill etc	<input type="checkbox"/> TV Licence
<input type="checkbox"/> Grant of Status Letter	<input type="checkbox"/> UK Driving Licence

How to do CRB checks for asylum seekers without the above documents?

There is a way of processing CRB checks for people without sufficient documents and so asylum seekers and refugees will be able to apply for volunteering roles that have often been unavailable to them.

We have worked with the policy department at the CRB and they have approved a pro-forma letter (available to download at: <http://www.vas.org.uk/volunteer-centre/refugee-asylum-project/good-practice>) that can be used with any volunteer who does not have a passport or the required 5 class 2 documents. Unfortunately the process requires volunteers to go to the police station to get their fingerprints taken. It does mean that a CRB check is possible although it will take longer than a normal CRB check to process.

If the pro-forma letter is attached when the CRB is first submitted it will start an automated process on the CRB computers that will then send out the necessary letters to complete the process.

1. Voluntary Organisation will receive a consent letter for the volunteer to sign. This is to say that they are happy for their fingerprints to be taken to establish their identity.
2. The local Police headquarters will phone the volunteer directly to arrange a convenient time to take the fingerprints.
3. Once the fingerprints have been taken, the CRB will be able to run a check on the prints and a CRB disclosure will be posted to both the organisation and the volunteer.

If the pro-forma letter is attached when the CRB is first submitted it will start an automated process on the CRB computers that will then send out the necessary letters to complete the process. This will avoid the CRB replies saying that they are unable to process the application due to insufficient documents. Please also see the website for an approved example letter of a person that does not have full addresses for the last 5 years.

Do you need to CRB check your volunteers?

Not all organisations will need to screen volunteers. The need to screen will depend entirely on what the volunteer is doing and the client group that they are working with. Except for organisations who fall under the remit of the National Care Standards Act, the only legal obligation that organisations have to screen their volunteers is the 'duty of care' that they have towards the people they work with. Duty of care requires that you do everything 'reasonable' within your power to protect others from harm. Organisations need to look carefully at their client group and volunteer roles to decide whether screening is necessary, and a risk assessment needs to be done to decide whether clients are at risk if volunteers are not screened.

Under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, ex-offenders normally have the right not to reveal spent (old) convictions. However, where work involves contact with 'vulnerable' people, organisations can require applicants to declare spent convictions too.

For more detailed information see our full guidelines on CRB checks (www.vas.org.uk)

How to avoid the CRB becoming a barrier to volunteering.

CRB checks can take over 2 months to process and are likely to take longer if it is necessary to go through the 'finger print request' system. This time delay between applying to volunteer and actually being able to start is a significant barrier for many people and sometimes leads to organisations losing volunteers. Where volunteer roles require unsupervised work with children or vulnerable adults, there is nothing that can be done to avoid this problem. However, it is often possible to be flexible and develop ways for volunteers to start doing something before the CRB check is processed. Here are some examples from organisations we have worked with:

- Allow the volunteer to start volunteering where they will be closely supervised by a paid member of staff.
- Wait for references to be returned and then allow the volunteer to start.
- Allow the volunteer to do tasks that don't involve working with vulnerable people, for example; office tasks until the CRB check arrives.

If it is possible to do this it will remove a barrier to volunteering and enable people to start volunteering with you quickly.

For further information about the CRB contact: 0870 90 90 811 or www.crb.gov.uk

The Cabinet Office's June 2008 guidelines on CRB checks can be downloaded from our website at by going to:

<http://www.vas.org.uk/volunteer-centre/refugee-asylum-project/good-practice>

Expenses

Expenses and the Law.

Asylum seekers and refugees are allowed to claim expenses as long as they are a direct result of volunteering. This means that organisations should take copies of bus tickets, road receipts or child care costs. As long as the expenses are necessary in order for someone to carry out their volunteer role and paid against a receipt there are no restrictions.

Expenses can be paid for travel, child care, 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 it.

Why are additional notes required? What are the issues?

Asylum seekers and refugees have often contacted us saying that they have not been paid their expenses. This is the most common problem we have experience 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 Job Seekers allowance. A day-rider bus fare can be 10% or more of their weekly income. It is therefore really important for organisations to pay expenses regularly (preferably on the day).

Volunteers with English as a second language may not fully understand your written expenses policies, even if they have been given a copy.

Be proactive – ask if volunteers want expenses

Many asylum seekers are unsure about expenses, and may well be ashamed to ask to claim their expenses. One volunteer came in and told me that she had been volunteering for 5 weeks but had not received any money for her expenses. She 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 your 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.

Level of English

When working with refugee and asylum seeker volunteers the level of English is often the first question that needs to be addressed. Most people will be attending an English class and the following classifications will help you to identify what level of ability they have and help you to decide what level is necessary for your volunteer roles.

The levels are as follows:

Level	Key skills	Example opportunity, role
Pre – Entry Entry 1	Basic or very basic English, will need visual demonstrations, slow simple instructions	Serving tea and coffee, gardening, simple admin tasks
Entry 2	Ok English, will be able to communicate and understand basic face to face conversation but might not be confident to use the telephone.	Basic - Intermediate office tasks, admin, working with people, putting data onto computers.
Entry 3	Good English. Should be able to understand face to face and some telephone English. Should have a strong grasp of language.	Advanced office tasks, possibly advice work, befriending, people support. Language might not be a deciding factor.
Level 1 Level 2 Advanced courses	Very good English and will rarely have problems with communication.	Anything they have skills to do. Language should not be a deciding factor.

How to chose the level for your opportunity?

The level of English spoken varies considerably, if you are looking for willing volunteers, please think about whether you really need perfect English for the roles. If not, there may be refugees and asylum seekers who are keen to volunteer and able to bring skills to the opportunity that will benefit the project. It is important to remember that there is a range of English spoken and that many people will speak and understand English to some degree, even if they are not fluent.

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.

Volunteer roles that require good spoken and written English such as advice workers, advocates and volunteers required to write up casenotes or letters will generally need to have Entry 3 English as a minimum.

There are sometimes exceptions to the rule as people may not always be in the appropriate class. There are times where someone in an Entry 2 class will have very good English, and also people in Level 1 classes do not.

Talking to people who speak English as a second language

It is well known that it is better to speak slower and clearer rather than louder to get a message across but is still common for people to simply raise their voices. It is also helpful to avoid using jargon, local expressions and idiom as these are really hard for people to understand.

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. Therefore it is best to keep phone calls shorter and arrange to see people if you need to talk to them about something. People can also be unsure about giving too much information over the phone so try to avoid taking personal details over the phone.

Arranging Appointments:

For some cultures people feel uncomfortable saying 'No' and may agree to do things or come to meetings that they are unable to do. This can make it difficult to work out what people can or cannot do so it is really important to listen to the suggestions that they make for appointments and to ask them what is best for them.

We have pro-forma appointment letters in 9 languages on our website that can be very useful in confirming appointment times made over the phone. By sending the letter in their first language it ensures that they know exactly when to come to the appointment. They can be found on: www.vas.org.uk/volunteering

Frequently Asked Questions

Language Issues:

Many opportunities need good written and spoken English

There are many asylum seekers and refugees who have good written and spoken English. When deciding what roles you need volunteers for, please use the 'Level of English' guidance to help choose the appropriate level for the role. This will help us to refer suitable volunteers to you. If you would like help doing this, please contact us and we will be happy to work together.

Hard to find placements for people with limited English

It does take more effort to involve volunteers with limited English but we have placed people in a range of different roles. For example, people have done practical work, helped out serving tea and coffee, preparing food at lunch clubs and I have involved people in my office. When involving people with limited English in the office it is unlikely that they will be confident answering the phone. This rules out a lot of opportunities. However, we have successfully used volunteers for sending out various mailouts and entering data in our database.

Does VAS offer language support?

Not at present. Running a training course for people on telephone skills and office English etc could be a possibility in the future if we are able to secure further funding.

How long do volunteers stay? If their review / appeal is heard are they likely to just leave?

Refugees have got status so they are in the same position as any other volunteer. Asylum seekers are waiting for their appeal and this can be a stressful time for them. However, this does not mean that they will necessarily leave quicker or be more unreliable than any other volunteer that you interview. Part of the nature of volunteering is that volunteers choose to help and do this without a contract. This means that it is not possible to ensure people will stay for a long time.

Asylum seekers, like any group are made up of very different people and many of the people who volunteer choose to do this as a means of keeping their mind off situations that they have left behind. This means that even if they have an initial refusal, or they are investigating ways of putting in further evidence, they may still want to keep volunteering regularly.

I know lots of asylum seekers who have kept regularly volunteering whilst going through difficult times with their asylum application, although there have also been others who have had to leave as a result of losing their asylum case.

How can I be confident that the asylum seeker / refugee understands and there is a good level of 2 way understanding?

Often people will understand more than they are able to speak, but this can make it hard to assess the level of understanding. One way to get a broad idea of how much people are likely to understand is by finding out what level English class they attend. Comparing this to the 'Level of English' guidelines should give you a rough idea of what people will understand.

Where it is important that people really understand what you are asking them to do there are some techniques you can use. One effective way to check people understand is by asking them to repeat back to you or explain in their own words what you have asked them to do. It may seem a little unnatural, but it does give a very good indication of the understanding.

For other roles, this may only come through supervising people and learning by 'trial and error'.

Where this is too much of a risk, we do have some support with interpretation costs. (see below)

What support is there to ensure that critical issues are fully understood e.g. Health and Safety issues?

Where people have been placed in roles that require a full understanding of health and safety issues, e.g. Practical work, carpentry we can help with interpreters. We have arranged for interpreters to attend for the initial meeting so that the organisation can be sure that everything has been fully communicated in the induction.

Are interpreters available and are there reduced rates for charities?

No. There are no reduced fees for charities as far as I am aware.

Expenses

Will volunteers have bank accounts?

Some volunteers will have bank accounts but not everyone will. It is difficult for refugees, and really difficult for asylum seekers to get bank accounts so it is better to pay expenses in cash if possible

How and when should I pay expenses?

Please see our guidelines on expenses for asylum seekers for more information. As a rule of thumb, expenses should be paid in cash, on the day, and the organisation should be proactive in offering expenses to the volunteer. If you have limited expenses then you should make a decision as an organisation as to how many volunteers you can take. You should pay a minimum of the travel costs which is currently £3.50 for a day saver.

We have limited funding for expenses. Can we get support for this from anywhere else?

It is possible to get funding for expenses from various funding bodies. Your organisation would need to put in a bid for this and advice on who to apply to can be found from SYFAB www.syfab.org.uk 0114 276 5460

**Payment for people on benefits is under review? Does this affect asylum seekers?
What is the current guideline**

The DWP made a u-turn on their expenses policy and have issued a statement to say that volunteers can claim lunch expenses without it affecting their benefits.

Asylum seekers are not on DWP benefits but they too can claim expenses for lunch without any problems.

How many hours a week are people allowed to volunteer?

There are no restrictions on the number of hours that refugees or asylum seekers can volunteer. If a refugee is getting Job Seekers Allowance, they will have to be 'actively seeking work' and ready to have an interview within 48 hours and start work within a week. Asylum seekers have no restrictions on the hours they can volunteer.

What childcare provision is there for refugees and asylum seekers?

There is no special childcare provision for refugees and asylum seekers. However, as a volunteer, they are entitled to exactly the same expenses as any other volunteer. If your organisation provides childcare expenses to volunteers, you should provide childcare to refugees and asylum seekers as well.

Volunteer management issues

How can volunteers find out about the volunteering opportunities that our organisation offers?

Volunteer Centre Sheffield keeps a database of opportunities in Sheffield. When volunteers are interviewed, we match their interests to the opportunities on this database. If you are not registered, please contact us and we will help you to register your opportunity.

Do overqualified refugees get easily bored in volunteer posts and move on?

Highly qualified people do tend to be more selective when choosing an opportunity. They often want to do something that will help them on their road to employment and this means that they are selective, but often committed. We do our best to give people a good idea of what each role involves and the benefits it has so that they will commit to a role. We always say that they should give at least 6 months commitment if they want a meaningful reference for a paid job.

How do we find voluntary activity which matches interests and experience of individual refugees and asylum seekers?

The Volunteer Centre refugee project advisors will interview people and match their interests to the available opportunities on our database. This will mean that volunteers referred to your organisation will have been matched to an opportunity that they are interested in. There is a responsibility on organisations to keep the Volunteer Centre updated with the volunteer roles that are available so that we can accurately make the matches.

There are few paid jobs in our sector but there is a huge social value for volunteers who get involved with us. How do we make this clear to potential volunteers? Are people interested in this or are they more interested in their financial future?

Preparing for employment is the top reason for volunteering. However, after that, people want to volunteer is to help others and then meet new people so they do value the social aspect of volunteering. Many people just want to help other people and do something useful as they are not allowed to work. When volunteers are interviewed, they will be told of the wider benefits that volunteering bring and many want to volunteer for the social value that it brings.

How can references be checked?

Some people will be able to provide references of a similar standard to UK citizens i.e. from people who have known them for 2 years or more.

However, other refugees and asylum seekers will struggle to do this. Where people have been to college they should be able to get a reference from their teacher, or in other cases support worker. If they are unable to do this it might be because they are very isolated and may not have had contact with people or built relationships with people who will write a reference for them.

In these circumstances it is a good idea to build up your own reference for the volunteer by supervising their activities. Through this you will get a good idea of the persons character.

However, this will mean that some refugees will be unable to apply for some volunteering positions where more concrete assurances are required.

How does a CRB check work? Can they be done internationally?

The CRB check works by comparing an individual's details with the details held on the national criminal records database. This holds details of everyone who has committed a crime in the UK. Refugees can normally get a CRB check done with documents although asylum seekers will often have to use the finger print method (see our website for full details). The finger print method is more intrusive but clearly the most reliable way of checking a person's identity.

CRB checks cannot be done internationally and although there is information sharing of criminal records internationally this does not include all countries and is unlikely to include countries where asylum seekers and refugees come from. This means that the check only covers the time that they have been in the UK but this should not necessarily mean that they cannot volunteer with you. The CRB is a vital tool but should always be used in conjunction with not a replacement for good induction, training and supervision where you can build a relationship with the volunteer and develop your own opinion as to their suitability and character.

There is often a tendency to assume that asylum seekers and refugees are high risk volunteers and the media portrays them almost as criminals just for coming to the UK. Please bear in mind that asylum seekers are here because they are victims of crimes against them rather than perpetrators of crimes.

Are there any cultural / religious issues that we need to be aware of? Specifically things that might not be immediately apparent such as attitudes to gender, age, authority, the nature of volunteering? What advice or support is available.

There is translated information about volunteering available from the Volunteer Centre Sheffield website. In addition when we interview people we do spend some time talking to people about what volunteering is as very few people have volunteered before. There are too many issues to give a full answer to this question here, and some issues such as people's attitudes are so dependent on individuals that I do not feel comfortable giving a general answer.

The most important thing is to give volunteers the confidence to tell you if there is an important issue for them. Therefore during their induction tell them that you do not know much about cultural or religious issues and ask them if there are any things that you can do to make the volunteer feel welcome and be sensitive to their beliefs. This will give people the opportunity to tell you what is important to them. Even within faith's and cultures there is huge diversity so it is always best to talk to individuals about their needs.

**How can we be sensitive to an individuals specific situation?
Should we offer different support when training refugee and asylum seeker
volunteers?**

Please do not ask people about their asylum application, or why they came to the UK. This is a really sensitive issue and may bring up memories and issues that people do not feel comfortable talking about. Some people will want to talk about it, but I would not initiate the discussion.

During a focus group discussion there was mixed opinion as to whether organisations should know if people were asylum seekers or refugees. Some people felt very strongly that it was personal information and that they could face discrimination if people knew. There was agreement that the volunteer manager should know, but that it should be confidential information and not openly shared in the office.

Refugees and asylum seekers will often need extra support as they might not be as familiar with how UK organisations work and the procedures that other volunteers may be familiar with. They may also lack confidence in their own skills and so training can take a bit longer, and should involve more encouragement and confidence building. Please be proactive in asking if people have questions, or need anything explaining again etc.

How do we deal with the emotional / personal issues of asylum seekers and refugees.

Organisations are not expected to deal with emotional issues, although there may be cases where asylum seekers talk about the issues that they are facing. This has not been a common issue but when it comes up it can be difficult to handle. In these cases it may be appropriate to refer them to other support services in Sheffield. The Volunteer Centre can give details of appropriate support services in Sheffield if they are available.

How do we deal with discrimination / negative attitudes of other volunteers and people they may come into contact with?

If there are specific issues, the Volunteer Centre may be able to help although your organisation should have a robust policy on dealing with discrimination and offensive behaviour in the workplace. If there are certain people, or a group of people who do not adhere to your policies we could provide a training session on working with refugee volunteers to your staff and volunteer teams. If there is a broad problem across the organisation then it would be a good idea to try to get senior managers and staff to implement a diversity toolkit to change the way the organisation operates. There are a number of different toolkits available from the following websites:

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/managingvolunteers/diversity/> (information and 10 point plan on how to encourage diversity)

The CRE also have similar resources on their website
<http://www.cre.gov.uk/gdpract/equalopps.html#top>

Is availability limited because volunteers will need to pray at set times?

This has not caused any limitations so far and many Muslims have started volunteering in mainstream organisations. Some Muslim volunteers have wanted to keep Friday free so they can attend the Friday prayers, but aside from this it is unlikely to be a problem. Volunteers who need to pray will often be able to do this at the organisation where they volunteer. It is a good idea to ask if people will want to do this, and offer them a place where they can do this if possible. Prayers normally take only a few minutes, no longer than making a cup of tea to smoking a cigarette.