

Volunteering opportunities

Photo showing two volunteers working in a plant shop in Dalston

Key information

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Introduction

Volunteering opportunities can be highly effective in helping people seeking asylum to lay roots in their new communities and to build skills that will be valuable to their future lives. These can comprise a variety of activities, from volunteering in food or clothes banks to assisting with interpretation for outreach workers. When made accessible, there are multifaceted benefits for a person's social integration:

- **Social connection.** Volunteering opportunities can encourage social mixing with other residents, can help promote language skills, and can help isolated asylum-seeking residents nurture new social connections.
- **Agency.** Research [Reference:1](#) highlights that asylum seeking residents are often keen to engage in meaningful activities and to contribute to society. The constraints on their lives led to boredom and a perceived lack of agency. Volunteering can provide a route for people to 'feel useful' and get involved in an activity where they have responsibility and agency to shape a project.
- **Vocational skills.** Tailored opportunities that combine volunteering with skills development or forms of training accreditation can help people seeking asylum to strengthen their CV and increase their employability and confidence in finding work in the future.

This section explores how local authorities can facilitate and widen opportunities available to people seeking asylum to harness these potential outcomes.

Key lessons in this section

1. Consult people seeking asylum and gather feedback to understand volunteer activities that appeal and to identify barriers to accessing opportunities.
2. Start by working with local third sector partners experienced in volunteering to help offer inclusive, accessible pathways to opportunities.

3. Build trust and confidence by spreading awareness in-person and through people seeking asylum.
4. Tailor opportunities to offer vocational skills, social connections and opportunities to practice English language skills.

1. Volunteering versus voluntary work

People seeking asylum are allowed to volunteer at any stage of their application process. However, government guidance prohibits people seeking asylum conducting voluntary work. This is an important distinction for local authorities and partner organisations to be aware of and is important to protect people seeking asylum from exploitation.

Home Office guidance explains:

- "With Voluntary Work there is an obligation on the individual to perform the work, and in return an obligation on the organisation to provide it; and [...] the individual is rewarded for that work, through money or benefits in kind."

Further information and guidance can be found on [Volunteer Centre Sheffield's website](#). As they note, voluntary work might include "a 12-month unpaid internship as there is an obligation to complete the full internship so a person seeking asylum would not be able to do that, but can volunteer in any role advertised by the volunteer centre."

2. The role of a local authority in promoting volunteering

The role of a local authority in developing inclusive volunteering pathways can take a number of forms.

Consult residents

- Boroughs should consult asylum seeking residents, to understand the volunteering opportunities that are appealing to them and to better understand potential barriers to engagement such as difficulties with travel, English language needs and recruitment paperwork. Information about coproduction and consultation methods can be found on our [corresponding page](#).

Establishing and co-ordinating partnerships

- Local authorities can benefit from establishing partnerships with volunteer centres and VCS organisations that have experience recruiting and working with volunteers of different backgrounds, to explore routes to creating opportunities. Partnerships can be used to commission inclusive volunteer opportunities and pathways.
- Local authorities can use existing team knowledge or engage their communities or cohesion department to identify organisations working within walking distance of contingency hotels and dispersal accommodation, to help design and promote opportunities with easy access and travel.

- Multi-agency forums, in particular VCS steering groups, can also be a useful way for mapping the array of different volunteer opportunities available to people seeking asylum, to ensure volunteering opportunities caters to a variety of interests, and to people with different levels of English language proficiency or without qualifications. Asking VCS organisations to present their volunteer offers within a steering group can facilitate networking, help spot gaps and identify new potential partnerships.

Offering training

- Waltham Forest has piloted a pathway for volunteering through funding free training for people seeking asylum. This included an ESOL training programme for participants to become Conversation Club facilitators, and then to volunteer in this role (see case study below). Staff involved in the scheme noted the importance of training to build the confidence of people seeking asylum to get involved in volunteering.

Leading directly

- Local authorities can also be directly involved in setting up volunteer programmes for people seeking asylum. For example, some had recruited volunteers to take part in formal consultation forums (see [Coproductio](#) and consultation), providing training to help participants experiencing the asylum system to input and shape council strategy. Others had also involved asylum seeking volunteers in providing support at their Early Help hubs.
- Such approaches can be more capacity intensive: since staff time is needed to gradually build relationships, recruit and retain volunteers. However, time invested can pay dividends through strengthening service delivery, e.g. recruiting volunteers who can support and translate Early Help support into different languages.

3. Tailoring opportunities

Local authorities can play an important role in helping ensure that volunteer opportunities are tailored to help meet the needs, interests and skills of people seeking asylum. The factors below can help maximise the integration benefits of volunteer opportunities offered.

However, it is worth noting that the tailoring of opportunities should ideally not come at the expense of siloing volunteer programmes to people seeking asylum. Where possible, seek to utilise volunteer initiatives as an opportunity to bridge asylum, refugee and migrant groups, and indeed to promote social mixing with other residents of different backgrounds in a borough. Bringing volunteers of different backgrounds together around shared community goals can help promote intergroup contact and in turn increase the levels of trust, empathy and reciprocity that characterise socially integrated communities.

Reduce barriers to access

- Locate opportunities as close as possible to sites of contingency and dispersal accommodation to minimise time and costs of volunteers travelling.
- Where travelling is required, offer to cover expenses. Not all people seeking asylum will have a bank account, so have petty cash.

- Some asylum-seeking residents will have access to an ID card, for example if they are enrolled at college, but many will not. Offer a mix of opportunities, including those which do not require background checks such as DBS checks, for example community gardening initiatives.
- Aim to offer a variety of opportunities which include activities that do not require prior experience or qualifications. Similarly, offer opportunities that require different levels of English language ability and confidence.
- Aim to provide opportunities that can cater to people with different time availability. This can include a mix of weekend and evening opportunities. It may also involve [micro-volunteering opportunities](#) – bitesize activities such as running a cake stall for a morning or setting up a monthly social get-together – which require less time and can widen the accessibility of a volunteer programme.

Trauma-informed practice

- Staff and partners working with asylum seeking volunteers should strongly consider receiving training or guidance on trauma informed practice, to understand how best to support volunteers. [ThriveLDN provides useful online training and support.](#)

Identify vocational skills and training opportunities

- People seeking asylum have limited access to the labour market; however volunteering can provide a helpful route to preparing residents for employment.
- Offering opportunities where a volunteer lead can act as a future employment reference can help make opportunities appealing.
- Seek to identify and leverage partnerships where volunteer opportunities offer transferrable skills: for example leadership, translation, community organising and digital skills. Where possible provide routes to accredited training.
- Volunteer opportunities can be integrated into ESOL programmes, to directly provide English language learning, or to help ESOL students build confidence holding conversations (see Waltham Forest case study below).

Offer social opportunities

- Volunteering can also be an important opportunity for people seeking asylum to meet and connect with other residents, helping orient themselves in their new home and reducing isolation.
- Where possible facilitate opportunities which involve teamwork, or social activities outside of volunteer tasks among volunteers, such as a monthly coffee catch-up.

Cater to different interests

- It is important to directly engage and consult residents on the volunteering opportunities that would most appeal to them.
- Consult local VCS partners and volunteer centres on the array of different local opportunities that may engage asylum seeking residents of different ages, cultures, abilities and genders.

Waltham Forest - Volunteering pathways

Waltham Forest has developed a number of bespoke pathways to help people seeking asylum access volunteering opportunities, with a view to improving residents' voice and agency, vocational skills, English language confidence and social connections.

Results:

- The borough has now established a pathway for people seeking asylum to receive Level 2/Level 3 English language training and then to volunteer as Conversation Club facilitators.
- A new volunteering coordinator has been appointed to signpost residents toward opportunities as part of the borough's Early Help 'drop-ins'. This has seen increased demand and attendance at the drop-ins from asylum-seeking residents keen to get involved in their community.
- Via partnership with Citizens UK, the borough is training people seeking asylum in community organising, particularly to become orientation leads for new arrivals. Some of those trained are now a running language exchange programme, and social coffee mornings for hotel residents.
- Citizens UK are also holding tailored sessions in contingency hotels around 'listening', 'developing leaders' and 'storytelling' to build confidence for residents, encourage leadership and equipping people to make their voices heard. As a result, several participants are now actively volunteering in Waltham Forest's Borough of Sanctuary strategy development.

Key reflections and learnings:

- Building in outreach time (e.g. through door knocking and hotel drop-ins) with asylum seeking residents was crucial to developing trust and nurturing engagement with the volunteer pathways.
- While some volunteers began setting up and steering their own activities, it was important to fund a paid staff member to support new volunteers, oversee recruitment and co-ordinate the programme. The local authority has a small budget to pay for one staff member at Waltham Forest Citizens, one day a week, to oversee the pathways.

4. Advertising, recruiting, retaining

A key ingredient to the success of volunteer programmes is ensuring that they can reach and engage a wide variety of people seeking asylum – beyond the minority with the highest confidence and/or prior experience of volunteering and community work. Crucial to this, local authority teams should liaise closely with partners to devise bespoke strategies for recruiting and retaining asylum seeking volunteers.

Engage online and offline

- Sharing easy-to-read information online can be useful, particularly where a local authority has limited data and reach to dispersal accommodation. Similarly, staff can look to work with volunteers to share information through WhatsApp groups. However, many people seeking asylum may struggle to access online devices and data, or may struggle with digital skills and have English language needs. Aim to spread awareness offline too.

In-person engagement works best

- In-person outreach is most effective for developing trust, awareness and confidence among residents to get involved in volunteering initiatives.
- At first, work with outreach staff and partners to door-knock and to share information on opportunities in places trust and frequented by people seeking asylum, for example community or early help hubs.
- As a volunteer initiative gathers momentum, staff can then encourage volunteers themselves to spread the word through the community to encourage a snowball effect.

Minimise sign-up admin

- Formal volunteering can often involve processes with registration paperwork and lengthy introductory training and orientation, which can seem daunting to those looking to ease their way into a new initiative.
- Aim to minimise the required pre-sign-up admin and paperwork to make it easier for people seeking asylum to ‘come along and try’. Alternatively, combine orientation and registration exercises with some coffee and cake sessions to attract interest.

Confidence building takes time

- Factor in time for relationship and confidence building – this is a vital step in building momentum for a new programme.
- Ensure the local authority or partner organisation delivering an initiative has capacity to offer guidance to new volunteers to help respond to queries and concerns.

Check who you are recruiting

- Aim to track data, with consent, on the profile and demographics of volunteers.
- Regularly review this, particularly in the early stages of a volunteer initiative, to spot those who are not being recruited. Is an initiative only reaching people with volunteer experience, English language confidence or professional qualifications? Or are activities largely appealing to volunteers of a particular age or background? Look to spot gaps and consider routes to broadening a volunteer pathway over time.

Expect high turnover

- High turnover of volunteers is often to be expected with programmes for people seeking asylum. Participants may receive a result on their status, be moved between boroughs, or find work or a place in college.
- Look to maintain regular, if not continuous recruitment, to broaden the pool of volunteers and avoid activities being disrupted by participants who have to drop out.
- In addition, aim to retain contact (e.g. update emails or invites to social gatherings) with those who do leave a volunteer programme, or whose participation ebbs and flows, as this can encourage longer term retention. Oftentimes, particularly as a volunteer forms social connections, they will look to return to an initiative in future once time availability allows.

Platform volunteer contributions in local media

- Work with communications and community teams to share positive stories of people seeking asylum volunteering with local media, and on social media.
- This can help volunteers feel their role is valued and can boost their CV.

- Media stories can establish ‘role models’ that attract more interest from other people seeking asylum.
- Positive stories of volunteers mixing and contributing to their community can also help build stronger feelings of trust and empathy among local residents – breaking down polarising narratives about people seeking asylum and facilitating integration.

5. Further resources

- Belong, the Cohesion and Integration Network have a [useful toolkit](#) exploring how stakeholders can maximise the social connection and cohesion benefits of volunteering.

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References

- [Reference:1](#) Jo Pettitt and Natasha Tsangarides (2022) Needs, Experiences & Capacities of People Seeking Asylum in London, London: GLA.