



The Befrienders' Guide

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In order for the experience of befriending to be as successful and rewarding as possible we ask all volunteers to read this guide. These are informal guidelines that result from personal experience – founding members of the team running HostNation have been through formal befriending training for unaccompanied minors and vulnerable adults - and we have now made over 700 matches. Our learning has been distilled into this guide.

Whilst HostNation is an introductory service, creating interactions between two different communities, we cannot recommend people on the site to one another or guarantee positive outcomes. We hope, however, that sustainable and successful relationships will emerge.

The introduction is between adults and we do not accept technically 'vulnerable' persons onto the scheme (in need of care or unable to protect themselves). Nevertheless, we do accept that asylum seekers and refugees may be at risk as a result of persecution and experiences of war, detention, exploitation, sexual abuse, dislocation and loss. We therefore hope that this guide will provide greater understanding of what it is like to have to flee your home and seek refuge elsewhere, and that better understanding will help provide the skills for better befriending.

Appendix 3 provides more technical information on the asylum-seeking process, housing and Government support.

PART 1 – BACKGROUND TO CLAIMING ASYLUM IN THE UK

Put yourself in the shoes of an asylum seeker and imagine...

- Fleeing civil war, persecution, trafficking, sexual violence, detention and even torture.
- Crossing the desert with other desperate people but insufficient food or water.
- Crossing the sea in overcrowded, unstable, leaking boats, under coaches, in refrigerated lorries or deep inside dark, airless containers.
- Dealing with people smugglers and giving up your savings to ensure some kind of passage however unsafe.
- Sleeping rough in Europe and being moved on by hostile border guards.
- Arriving in an alien and often unwelcoming culture with nothing but the clothes on your back.
- Coming to terms with separation and the loss of family.
- Acclimatising to a new language and negotiating new customs as you try to rebuild your life without family or friends to support you.
- Finding yourself living on £1 a day in temporary hotel accommodation or in substandard, shared accommodation, not being allowed to work and with no access to English classes.
- Having insufficient funds to travel into the city, no social contacts beyond your own community in exile and no resources beyond Facebook.
- Being confronted with racism and xenophobia when you venture out, leaving you feeling afraid, unwelcome, marginalised and socially isolated.

Outside their own communities, refugees mostly meet with authority figures in an official capacity – lawyers, police, immigration officers, doctors, social workers, therapists – where power relations

are imbalanced and not in their favour. Few will have met any British people informally or anyone who treats them as an equal or as a friend.

The Home Office policy of dispersal means that most asylum seekers are moved outside of London and the SE to parts of the country where accommodation is cheaper such as Tyne & Wear, Teesside, Glasgow, Rochdale and other parts of Greater Manchester. The North East and North West also have the highest proportion of resettled Syrian refugees.

Seeking asylum is a laborious, de-humanising process that can take years of representations, rejections and appeals. The Home Office has a huge backlog of asylum claims. Asylum seekers sometimes live with family members but more usually live in NASS (National Asylum Service) accommodation or hostels, have very little money (asylum seekers receive approx. £36 a week sometimes in food vouchers) and are not allowed to work. Since Covid, the Home Office has increasingly relied on hotels, these can be in city centres or out of town where asylum seekers feel marooned. If basic meals are provided, they only receive £1 a day for other expenses. Their accommodation is often temporary and they may find themselves moved at short notice. If and when refugee status is conferred, their housing becomes the responsibility of the Local Authority rather than the Home Office and this change can often result in homelessness and destitution. Where possible they study at College and attend English classes although ESOL (English for speakers of Other Languages) can be limited to people with refugee status and on Universal Credit. Asylum Seekers can volunteer but cannot do voluntary work – a technical distinction that can be hard to navigate. Refugee Organisations are lobbying for changes to the law but the 'hostile environment policy' has left the majority of asylum seekers with nothing to do, nowhere to go and very little personal agency. This is set to get worse with the Illegal Migration Bill (2023) punishing those who come 'illegally' with detention and deportation.

Despite this, many asylum seekers are resilient, resourceful and manage to remain hopeful. They can feel fortunate that they have a chance to rebuild their lives in the UK. But in the interim their lives can be quite chaotic – responding to last minute summons from the Home Office, collecting their benefit in person, attending appointments or moving at short notice. Fearful of doing anything wrong or getting into trouble with the authorities, their lives can rotate around the demands of bureaucracy and the challenges of living from hand to mouth. For some, years of insecurity waiting for their asylum to be resolved can be accompanied by depression, insomnia and lack of self-worth. For many it has been a long time since they have been able to exercise much personal agency in their lives, relax or enjoy simple pleasures.

To read individual refugee stories go to Refugee Voices on the Refugee Action website: <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/category/refugee-voices/>

Through befriending you can help to restore normality to lives badly disrupted by forced migration. Friendly local residents making them feel welcome, can be the first step towards creating a safe space that asylum seekers and refugees can call home.

PART 2 – THE BEFRIENDING RELATIONSHIP

What is refugee befriending?

Befriending is a chance to reach out as willing volunteers to give marginalised refugees and asylum seekers a more positive experience of our cities and everything they have to offer. It is a

chance for refugees to practise their English with a native (or at least fluent) English speaker, to learn more about British culture and traditions and to participate in English life. A good way to look at it is to see your befriender as your city's 'guest' and you as their local 'host'. Even people who have been in the UK a decade or more, have experienced very little of what the UK has to offer.

Many refugees scarcely know anyone outside their caseworkers, other asylum seekers and their own ethnic community. One-to-one befriending relationships with local residents not only help to reduce the social isolation that refugees experience, but can increase their self-confidence, promote their independence, broaden their social networks and help them to integrate into city or town life. A chance to have a simple walk in the park or a visit to the local market or a chat over a cup of tea with a friendly person, can bring a sense of normality to someone whose life has been turned upside down. And, it is often a highly rewarding and worthwhile experience for the befriender as well.

By providing an introduction, HostNation hopes to establish social connections between residents and refugees who may be finding it difficult to form friendships in the community. To 'befriend' means to act as a friend and 'to favour' an individual. It is a commitment in time that can always grow into a mutual and personal friendship.

Befriending relationships are not only inter-cultural, but can be inter-generational as well. Parents, whose children have flown the nest, often relate to their refugee friends as extended family and have in the past described their role as 'in loco parentis', or in some cases where their refugee friend has children, as 'in loco grand-parentis'. Refugees in turn can refer to their befrienders as 'sister', 'brother', 'mum', 'auntie' or 'uncle'. These kinds of relationships can be very beneficial for refugees who have lost or left behind their own families or for young refugees who may need parental figures to support them in the transition to adulthood. The presence of a trusted and involved older adult can help build their confidence and enable them to look towards the future. HostNation seeks to have a wide and diverse range of befrienders, both young (in their 20s) and older, and in the case of younger befrienders we generally try to match them with refugees of a similar age.

How does it work?

We have a large database of volunteer befrienders, recruited from the community at large in London, Manchester and Tyne & Wear. We aim to recruit a broad range of befrienders from a wide variety of backgrounds, all of whom have the capacity to build a trusting relationship and stay with it. We do, however, focus on long-term residents and native (or fluent) English speakers on the grounds that these connections can be the hardest to make and need some facilitation whilst refugees often have existing contact with refugee groups and their own ethnic community.

Everyone registers with us and goes through a simple but important process of screening, references and training before being fully briefed and added to our pool of befrienders who are 'ready to go'. We ask if you have a preference for being matched with someone of the same sex, faith, with or without children, from a particular region etc and take these preferences into consideration. We will then match you as an when an appropriate referral is made via our network of local refugee service providers and caseworkers who refer socially isolated service users they feel would benefit from having a befriender. In London we work with over 45 different

organisations, in Manchester and Tyne & Wear we also have active referral pathways with multiple organisations.

The process starts with the referral of the asylum seeker or refugee. HostNation seeks to find them a good match with someone who has both the time and the inclination to be supportive and welcoming. Profile information will be used to further refine the match, for example gender, interests, language skills, geography and so on. HostNation will contact both parties to suggest a possible match, if both sides are keen to progress, we organise a video or face to face introduction (brokered by one of the HostNation team). In the summer of 2020, in response to the pandemic, we introduced 'smart befriending' which involves a video introduction via Zoom or What's App. In London many introductions are still done by video.

HostNation is primarily about introductions. We do our best to ensure a successful match and arrange the first meeting; after this, regular meet-ups are arranged directly between yourselves. HostNation will check in with the befriender after one month to see how the relationship is going and then again at three months, by talking to both refugee friend and befriender.

The initial commitment is for three months, with the aim of meeting your befriender once a week for a few hours (evening / morning / afternoon) to show them the positive side of our cities. In Tyne & Wear there may also be opportunities to visit the coast and the surrounding countryside. After three months, the initial commitment is over, but ideally, shared experiences will have occurred and new social relations forged. Continued contact, support and friendship after this first stage are up to the individuals involved. If early experience is any prediction of success, some remain friends for life. In London over 80% of matches are positive and sustained beyond the initial commitment.

The geography of both Greater London and Greater Manchester, and the difficulty asylum seekers have affording the fares that allow them to travel into the city from the outer regions where they are often housed, puts the matching emphasis on where befriender and potential refugee friend live. In London for example, HostNation seek to match East Londoners with asylum seekers and refugees living East of Stratford, North Londoners with those living out towards the North Circular, West Londoners with those in Southall and out towards Uxbridge and Hayes and South Londoners with those often in Lewisham and Croydon. Sometimes people are referred living closer to the centre (especially if they are housed in central hotels) and sometimes matching is local, but with many befrienders living in Zone 2 and asylum seekers and refugees in zones 3-6, we endeavour to make sure that befrienders and refugee friends are only a couple of bus rides or stations apart, as friendships are most likely to be sustained if both parties live relatively near one another. We have discretionary 'hardship' funding to provide asylum seekers with a pre-loaded oystercard in London and travel passes in the NW and NE to enable meet ups with their befrienders.

We are always recruiting new befrienders so we have a choice when it comes to making a match and our pool of potential befrienders is always topped up. In London we like to have a pool of 150 unmatched befrienders which means that some people have to wait longer than others to be matched. This is almost always a function of the geography of Greater London.

What is expected of a befriender?

This is an altruistic, social arrangement and there is no payment or professional service provided. In many ways, it can be easier to give money to charity but to give of yourself, in order to make a real difference to one person's life, can be so much more rewarding.

Once introduced, befrienders should try and keep in regular phone/video contact with their refugee friend, and arrange, by call or by text, to spend a few hours together every week if possible. The role of the befriender is to make their refugee friend feel welcome – to act as a host and show them the real side of their city and the best of the area. Even if your refugee friend is not new to the area – some may have arrived years ago – they've rarely experienced much beyond their local area and the various drop in centres and offices they attend regularly. There is a real opportunity to introduce them to free (or cheap) activities, sports, social meet ups, local events, experiences – that only locals know about but can make all the difference to how you feel about the place. Befrienders are there to help take their friend's mind off their everyday problems by providing opportunities to have fun and to put a smile back on their face.

A refugee or asylum-seeker's experience of officialdom and loss of agency can result in passivity and a reduced sense of initiative. The befriender can play an important role in helping their refugee friend regain a sense of purpose and direction, by pointing them towards services or connecting them with community groups they can engage with. They can act as an encouraging facilitator - someone who provides them with the tools to build a happier life here, while ensuring that their friend does not become too dependent on the befriending relationship itself.

We also encourage activities and new experiences – going places and doing things together. Shared activities that are fun and distracting can help to prevent the relationship from becoming an alternative form of therapy or a dumping ground for problems that are intractable and hard to solve. Active plans that go beyond meeting up for a coffee will probably be more beneficial (especially for someone who is depressed), than giving advice or acting as a counsellor.

Volunteer befrienders need to have time, motivation and energy to give, in order to create what can be a special and unique relationship. There is likely to be less common ground than in a normal friendship and there is often a language barrier, as well as a wide cultural divide to bridge. It requires both time and effort – patience, flexibility, understanding, mutual trust and respect. HostNation is founded on the belief that both sides want to try and make the befriending relationship work.

We are a 'light-touch' organisation and once introduced we leave befrienders to make plans and arrange to speak to and see their refugee friends in their own time. We check by email after 1 month to see how it's going and then try to speak to both sides at 3 months. We ask all befrienders to commit to providing us with feedback when requested, but also to let us know if there are any problems in between these feedback stage posts. For example, if you can't get hold of your refugee friend after several attempts, or have any concerns about their welfare, please alert us by email.

What is not expected of a befriender

The emphasis for the befriender is more about having positive social experiences than providing practical support. Rather than being 'helped' and becoming dependant on help, befriending

should be about facilitating, helping refugees to learn the ropes, socialise and become more independent. They typically face many intractable problems – from the immigration process to claiming welfare rights to accessing education, employment and healthcare – and it would be overwhelming for a befriender to feel responsibility for resolving any of these complex problems. The asylum process is hard to navigate without expert knowledge and it can be counter-productive for befrienders to advise asylum seekers, however well meaning. Clear boundaries between different people working with a refugee or asylum seeker are essential in order for them to have a good understanding of who they should go to for different things. Council workers, Citizen's Advice Bureaus, refugee service providers, social workers and lawyers are out there to provide advice and specialist guidance and time spent with a befriender is often a moment for refugees to switch off from these concerns.

When HostNation makes a match, we send you a simple 3 page Guide as a reminder as well as signposting documents of specialist refugee support available in your city.

Practicalities on meeting

Make sure your number and name is stored on their mobile phone. Many refugees refuse to answer numbers they don't recognise. Arrange to meet somewhere they are familiar with or easy to access by public transport. Be aware of the practicalities for someone who doesn't know their way around as well as you. Depending on how long they have been in town and where they are living, they might not be familiar with key landmarks and it can be hard to navigate public transport.

Most asylum seekers and refugees use buses and the Overground in London as they are considerably cheaper than the Underground. Take a look to see which buses and stations are close to where they live and use journey planners to help suggest the best transport routes and a realistic time to meet. As most refugee friends live further out than their befrienders, you may need to check that they can cover the fares, still have enough credit on their oystercard, to come into town to meet. You may wish to help subsidise their fares / top up their oystercard occasionally

Initially it may be worth meeting in a public place near their home address and then walk or travel to your destination together. Make sure to text confirmation of plans and routes. Never rely on last minute email communication – few of our refugee friends have ready access to free Wi-Fi but most have smartphones and use Whats App. Asylum seekers and refugees rarely choose to let their befriender down, but like all of us they may oversleep, get the wrong bus or underestimate the length of the journey. Sometimes they may simply have run out of credit on their phone or travel card and can't contact you or afford to travel. It can be a good idea to call or send a text before you leave home to see if they're on their way or to remind them that you are on your way.

Ideas for what to do

Ask them when you first meet what they would like to do. But be prepared to take the initiative and think up a loose plan of activities and places to visit together. Show them something of their own neighbourhood or yours and tell them about its history; visit the local museum, library, art gallery, church, street market, sports centre or other places of interest, especially ones that are free. Take them for a walk in the park or to a football match or on a bike ride. Bear their financial circumstances in mind when suggesting activities. Shopping is often too expensive to be a

pastime, but showing your contact how to source donations or find bargains in charity and pound shops or via local recycle schemes can be helpful. Mobile phones are a lifeline to their community and families back home, so try to show them where they can access free Wi-Fi and internet. Some may want help with learning to use a computer or with English language coursework or to find a college course or to register with a GP or to open a bank account, as these things can be hard to do when you're on your own with limited ID. A supportive befriender can also help refugees to access community classes or to apply for vocational training or to volunteer in the community. But try to maintain a healthy balance between doing fun things together and helping to develop skills or battle officialdom.

Few refugees have seen anything of the British countryside so a day trip can be a welcome break. If going to the coast is possible for you (and you are happy to pay their fare or drive) consider an outing to the seaside as refugees from landlocked countries may never have seen the sea, except under adverse circumstances during their long journeys to the UK. Try to introduce them to local community groups and include your refugee friend in social events, especially if they are typically British - gatherings such as barbecues, festivals, street parties and summer fairs are popular. Photos of their new friends and new experiences that they can show to others or share on Facebook can also give pleasure. Capturing your friend laughing is the best possible evidence of your positive impact. (However don't post pictures of them on social media yourself or put their name on social media without their explicit consent).

Above all else, benders are there to make their friends feel welcome and valued as human beings. Having someone show a genuine interest in them and their welfare and being able to share simple pleasures together - talking, listening, walking, sharing a meal, feeling part of a family or group of friends, being invited to a British home - can be the most inclusive and meaningful experiences. Many refugees are alone and being able to talk to ordinary people who treat them as equals - something most of us take for granted - can be highly beneficial.

Possible difficulties

Firstly, bear in mind that it can be complex to make plans with an asylum seeker or refugee. Please be patient.

This is not necessarily because they are reluctant to meet, but because their time is rarely their own. Claiming asylum makes many demands on an individual and their lives are full of upheavals that are hard to foresee. They may receive notice of a court hearing or be asked to quit their accommodation at short notice. They fall ill or may simply be too anxious about their future to make nice plans for an outing. Getting hold of them can sometimes be tricky and involve multiple efforts.

It is important to realise that your friend's life can be chaotic, and sometimes their self-esteem can be low. Making new connections, however much longed-for, can be stressful and overwhelm them. Try to be sympathetic and flexible. If a plan falls through, tell them not to worry and help them to make another. Persistence and encouragement pay off in the end.

They may also be overwhelmed by information overload and have difficulty with small things that we take for granted such as rubbish collections, what goes in which bin and what goes down the drain, using a self-scanning till, understanding postcodes, or how to post a document. They will really benefit from kindness and patience and maybe the odd friendly conversation to point them in the right direction when it's needed.

Important boundaries

Whilst every case is different, it is generally inadvisable to try to house, financially support or directly employ an asylum seeker or refugee. The relationship with a befriender is primarily social and between equals, we discourage dependency or any arrangements that could lead to an imbalance in power relations. As we've said, asylum seekers and refugees are best supported in ways that empower them and foster independence and that enable them to feel the relationship is a two-way process.

So, do be aware that intervention in your friend's practical circumstances, even with the best intentions, can have unforeseen consequences. The offer of regular financial assistance or temporary accommodation can impact on legal aid, welfare benefits or statutory housing provision. Even short absences from National Asylum Support Services (NASS) housing can result in restrictions, re-prioritising and in some cases, homelessness. Depending on their immigration status it could be illegal for them to work, and in such cases this will impact on their asylum case and welfare eligibility. However, once someone has leave to remain introductions to local people or opportunities that might help them to be more independent can be very helpful. The Signposting Links on the our website lists organisations that can help refugees into work and others that mentor refugees, help them write CVs and prepare for interviews <https://www.hostnation.org.uk/links.pdf>. Please do not take on these responsibilities as a befriender but you can help them connect with organisations that will.

Paying for things

Whilst financial dependency is discouraged, if you feel able to help out with travel fares or paying for coffee or topping up their mobile, then it can enable you both to get more out of your time together. HostNation does now contribute to refugee's travel and sometimes their data but we do not have the resources to reimburse expenses incurred as a result of befriending, so this is at your discretion.

There are lots of activities that are free, but be aware that even the bus fare to meet you can be an obstacle for an asylum seeker who may be virtually destitute or, if they are on NASS support, living on £5 a day. In London, most asylum seekers are dispersed to the outer zones and the cost of travel into central London can be twice their daily allowance so they often stay in their room because they cannot afford to go out. Unlike asylum seekers, refugees can work, but they may be on zero hour contracts, so there can still be considerable financial hardship.

If you do intend to treat them to a meal or a movie, mention this when making the arrangement, so that they are not feeling anxious about expenses beforehand. If asylum seekers or refugees fear that meeting their befriender is a luxury that they cannot afford, they will start to look for excuses not to come.

There is a fine line between offering and funding hospitality and making someone feel indebted. We do not advise large cash gifts or regular financial transfers because, apart from the consequences outlined above, these are not sustainable and could cause anxiety and a sense of obligation. But small gifts or cards at appropriate times can be a nice way of showing that you care and your friend may also wish to exchange gifts with you as a sign of appreciation or cook you a meal.

Home visits

Many refugees and asylums have never been invited into a British home. Meeting your family and visiting your home will be an important marker of friendship but we advise against issuing an invitation in the first instance. Start by meeting in a public space as you are welcoming them to your home town, in the wider sense. Inviting them into your actual home is a more familiar step and better taken when you feel that a personal bond is developing between you and your friend. It is worth trying to maintain a good balance between home and activity-based befriending.

If a refugee or asylum seeker lives in accommodation that they consider to be home, they may invite you to visit them. This can be a matter of pride and a way of thanking their befriender for their hospitality. If possible, do accept such invitations even if it means travelling to an unfamiliar part of the city. If, on the other hand, an invitation is not forthcoming, don't take it personally. Many asylum seekers and refugees live in sub-standard accommodation or a room in a shared hostel. Remember, they may have been accustomed to a far better standard of living in their home country before the trauma that led them to seek asylum here, and may feel unwilling to reveal their difficult circumstances.

Communicating

We always try to ascertain an asylum seeker or refugee's level of English before making a match, so that we can brief you. However, the first time you meet them they may appear quiet and diffident. Often their English is better than it may seem, and they may simply be nervous. People seeking asylum have had their trust badly abused in the past and may have some difficulty trusting strangers once more. Try to reserve judgment on the first meeting. A frightened soul may blossom into a lively personality full of hope and aspiration. A friendly smile and a 'Hello' can go a long way to relieving any fear and help to make them feel welcome and wanted.

We ask that all asylum seekers and refugees referred, speak some English and are keen to improve. It is hard to befriend someone with very limited English. Some will have perfect English and may even have studied university courses in English, others may have enough to get by but need help with the odd word or two, whilst others might not even be literate in their own language. Most asylum seekers and refugees are very keen to improve their English skills as they know that this is key to rebuilding their lives in Britain. When refugee students at an English conversation class were recently asked to come up with ways of improving their English, the first thing they said was 'make a British friend'. An opportunity to practice their English informally is one of the great benefits of this scheme. You can also help your friend access English / ESOL classes in their area to learn English (or websites that make learning fun). ESOL classes are often only for refugees, not asylum seekers, but a number of charitable support groups try to complement this provision by offering free classes.

If their own language does not use the Roman alphabet, like Arabic or Hindi, they may have especial difficulty reading and writing English. If you are having trouble communicating it may be worth sharing the Google Translate App, which can also be the source of some amusement! We do ask befrienders if they have any language skills and occasionally we match Arabic speakers or French speakers with one another but the aim is always to help them to speak and improve their English.

Cultural sensitivities

For the introductory meeting, it's important that you do your best to put your refugee friend at ease. As mentioned earlier they may well be nervous and anxious about meeting someone new. Just beware of not saying anything or dressing in a way that could make them feel uncomfortable. Dress respectfully and speak slowly and carefully. It is worth stressing at the outset that you are a local citizen and that you want to welcome them to city, show them around and help them to participate. We also try to manage their expectations by sending them a profile of the befriender they are being matched to – including some of the reasons given for wanting to befriend and some of the nice things said by referees – as well as a short description of the nature of befriending and the level of commitment.

Once you know the country of origin and culture of your friend, it's a good idea to look up a bit about its history, religious customs etc. Being culturally aware shows your interest and can be a good topic of conversation. Refugees often like to talk about cultural differences between Britain and 'back home'. Different food traditions as well as attitudes can be the subject of much curiosity (and humour). If they are Muslim they are likely to prefer halal meat and may not drink alcohol, but don't make assumptions, always check to see what they are comfortable with. They may not be used to having pets, especially dogs, in the home, so be aware and introduce your pet gently.

Don't forget that your friend may be just as well educated as you, and may have run their own business or been politically active in their home country. At the same time, they may also come from more conservative cultures than our own, with different gender roles than we are used to and perhaps a more disciplinarian approach to raising children. It may sometimes be hard, but try to deal with different value systems sensitively and reserve judgment. Refugees have left so much behind that it is natural for them to try to uphold their own culture. But don't shy away from discussing differences in attitudes, as this can help them to understand British values and beliefs such as gender and sexual equality, religious tolerance, freedom of expression and so on.

The role of befriending may involve some form of cultural mediation and orientation. It is a good form of cultural exchange and well handled, it can help to bridge differences and lead to greater cultural understanding and appreciation of diversity on both sides. HostNation has been told about asylum seekers from non-Christian faiths who have been delighted (and surprised) to be welcomed into a Christian church and women refugees who have been fascinated to learn about the suffragettes. Befriending is a two-way process and as with all friendships, sharing experiences and showing respect for one another is key.

Don't expect to understand everything about your friend's situation, past or present. HostNation will brief you with what we know but often, due to confidentiality, referrers only provide minimal information and we mostly ask about their current circumstances and not what led them to seek asylum. Most refugees have suffered badly at the hands of others, whether from their government, the military, rebel forces, police, people smugglers or traffickers. They may feel shame as well as trauma, so avoid any questioning that may feel like interrogation to them. They will have been asked to tell their 'story' many times and it can be a relief to spend time with people where they can live in the present and talk about future aspirations rather than be defined by their past. If your friend wants to tell you what happened, they will. If they don't, go gently, be as open and understanding as possible, and always be guided by them.

Safeguarding

At HostNation our aim is to match and introduce informed adults who will take responsibility for their friendship. We do not take minors (under 18) or people with substance abuse issues as befrienders or refugee referrals, and we also advise strongly against referring the highly vulnerable or those with serious mental health problems.

As befrienders do not perform any of the regulated activities requiring a DBS-check, they do not have unsupervised access to children or those with serious mental health issues, they are not eligible for enhanced or standard DBS checks. However, we do recognise that whilst asylum seekers and refugees over 18 are not technically classified as 'vulnerable adults' they may, nevertheless, be at risk. They may have suffered abuse, grown up in a frightening environment (civil war, genocide) or witnessed the ill treatment of others. Many will have travelled here alone and been through dislocation, loss, flight and war. They may have suffered exploitation or assault on their journey here. They will have lost things we take for granted, such as their inner family world and the wider world of community, friends and an extended family network. The UK asylum-seeking process is also a dehumanising experience and throws up a whole host of new problems just when they thought they had reached safety. So, whilst many refugees are resilient and resourceful and we want to treat them as people first, not vulnerable victims, it is important that HostNation does everything possible to ensure that they are matched with kind and sympathetic befrienders.

For this reason, our befrienders are carefully screened and checked; we ask for two references, passport ID and a photo. Befrienders fill in a detailed screening and profiling questionnaire and are asked to read this guide. HostNation then telephones each applicant to discuss the role and ensure suitability. Some of our befrienders are recruited from refugee support networks, come from caring professions or have a background of community volunteering and so may already have a DBS (criminal record check) that we also record on the database.

It is less easy to provide checks on asylum seekers and refugees. For this reason, we do not seek self-referral and always ask for someone who can vouch for them. We rely on the information provided by referrers and have strict criteria for referral. We ask for as much background and health information as possible, so that we can give befrienders a profile before their first meeting, but confidentiality is critical to any disclosure of information of this nature, which is why we ask both parties to provide their consent to information being shared for the purposes of befriending. It is also important that befrienders do not share any personal information that their friends may disclose during the befriending process with any third parties without their consent.

In our experience, asylum seekers and refugees are generally very law abiding, as they do not want to do anything that may hinder their case or jeopardise their chance of being offered asylum. In many cases, they are the victims of religious extremism or authoritarian regimes themselves and simply want to be accepted as fellow humans and to be able to live their lives in peace.

Safeguarding processes

We're not asking you to police your friend's life or act as a social worker or to be constantly on the look-out for abuse. It is not your responsibility to keep your refugee friend safe. But there are some abusive practices you might become aware of during the course of your relationship, such as trafficking, discrimination, exploitation, financial or material abuse (such as internet scams, fraud, loans, theft). Your friend may also experience feelings of hopelessness and suicidal ideation.

If you have any safeguarding concerns for your refugee friend, or yourself, contact your HostNation match-maker. You can contact one of us by email or phone at anytime. You will be provided with contact details when you are matched. We can then provide advice or refer the incident up the line to our safeguarding leads (management and/or Trustee). We have reporting processes for logging incidents and we can also contact local authority safeguarding teams if necessary.

And don't forget to look after yourself! Let us know if you have any concerns regarding your own well-being or safety in connection with our befriending programme.

Emergency Protocol

If you have any URGENT concerns about the safety of your friend or of others, you should notify the emergency services immediately and then report it to your contact at HostNation. If you or your befriender are involved in an accident or attack you must call 999.

In a health emergency – if you are concerned that your refugee friend is severely depressed and may feel their life is not worth living – you must contact their GP or the medical emergency services. Their GP is the only person authorised to make a referral to their local community mental health team (CMHT) who will then assume responsibility. Health practices will have an out of hours service and contacts for an emergency.

Seeking Support and Advice on behalf of your refugee friend

Having said don't get too involved earlier in this guide, we know that it can be hard for a befriender to do nothing if their friend is trying to deal with a deportation threat or a housing eviction and has no one else to turn to; in these situations, you may be able to help your friend find ways to access expert support. Often refugees have limited or little connectivity and befrienders can help them google information and advice online. On the HostNation website, alongside this guide, you will find a long list of refugee organisations and agencies (and their websites) listed under **Refugee Signposting Links** <https://www.hostnation.org.uk/links.pdf>. If the original referral has been made by a case-worker and the situation is urgent, then we can link you to the referral organisation to be able to discuss the help required and to provide further support. But if the referrer is no longer supporting the person they referred or only provide specialist services, then we encourage you to use the **Refugee Signposting Links** on the website and help plug your befriender into a suitable advisory service or local drop-in centre.

Some useful contacts:

asylumcustomercommunicationshub@homeoffice.gov.uk is the address given to us by the Home Office for questions relating to people seeking asylum, who fall under the 'streamlined asylum process'. This is the inbox for individual (specific) case enquiries.

Housing issues/complaints:

Migrant Help is the centralised Home Office helpline for asylum seekers and accommodation. Issues must be raised via Migrant Help in the first instance so they can be categorised and send on to the correct organisation for response. <https://www.migranthelpuk.org/Pages/Category/asylum> **Free asylum helpline** (open 24/7/365): 0808 8010 503. Email addresses for various queries can be found [here](#).

Individual housing issues with Clearsprings Ready Homes, get in touch with safeguarding.referrals@ready-homes.com in the first instance. For further escalation, please get in touch with Stephen Miller: Stephenmiller@ready-homes.com.

There is also the Government Asylum Helpline <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-helplines> for more information and righttoremain.org.uk which have a useful Toolkit guide to immigration and the asylum system.

If a high level of trust is built between befriender and refugee, benders may be asked by their friend to accompany them to a Home Office meeting, a hospital appointment or a court hearing, not in any legal or clinical capacity, but rather to provide their friend with all-important moral support. If asked to provide a written character reference or to outline their relationship to support an asylum claim, then this should only be done in close consultation with their friend's legal representative. HostNation, can, if needed, provide a letter explaining your relationship to your refugee friend.

What happens after 3 months?

HostNation tries to manage expectations through the referral process and refugees are made aware that the commitment to befriend is only for the first 3 months. After three months, it is up to you and your friend to decide whether or not to continue to meet or maintain phone contact. The duration of each relationship will vary and depends on individual preference and chemistry – some will be supportive for a limited period; others may flower into a long-term friendship. Either way it will have been a worthwhile venture and there is no right or wrong outcome so long as any closure is mutual and managed sensitively.

What we tend to find is that either the commitment and contact has already become irregular and naturally fizzles out (this is a small minority), or a pattern of meet-ups and regular WhatsApp / texting has become established and is likely to continue (the majority). Either way the relationship follows its course and the 3-month duration is not seen as critical.

However, HostNation will contact the befriender and refugee friend at the end of three months to get full feedback on the experience of befriending from both perspectives, to determine the status of the relationship and to advise on ways to end it, if that is the preferred option. We will seek evaluation of the experience from all parties and will ask you whether you might be available for a new befriending relationship at a later date (sometimes this is alongside an existing relationship).

Whilst we love receiving updates and are still available should you want to seek advice, any formal responsibility for the match or safeguarding issues that may arise, end 3 months after the introduction.

What if things don't work out?

With the best will in the world, not all relationships take off. Most befriender / refugee friend experiences are very positive for both parties, but we cannot guarantee a successful outcome. A

refugee friend may be lacking in confidence or feeling low in spirits if they have had an asylum setback. Plans may be made and confirmed yet when the time comes there is a no-show, their phone is off and they don't respond. This does happen. If it happens once or twice, try to be understanding and don't give up. If it happens repeatedly and all friendly overtures receive no response, we ask you to let your 'matchmaker' at HostNation know. Their referrer may be able and willing to find out if your friend is OK and to try to understand the reasons for their lack of response. A relationship may then pick up. Sometimes, though, due to setbacks and fear of deportation, an asylum seeker may drop out of the formal asylum-seeking process and go 'underground'. This is technically illegal and it would be bad practice to collude with any such plans, but it could explain loss of contact.

If it becomes impossible to maintain contact over 3 months, do let us know as we hope that you may be prepared to try again by befriending someone else. Equally if you feel uncomfortable with your refugee friend or find their behaviour inappropriate or their expectations excessive after initial meetings, you may feel the need to pull the plug. In this case please contact HostNation and explain the situation so that we can help you to handle detachment sensitively.

PART 3 – APPENDIX

Background information

Terms used:

Asylum seeker

- flees their homeland
- arrives in another country, whichever way they can
- makes themselves known to the authorities
- submits an asylum application
- has a legal right to stay in the country while awaiting a decision.

Refugee

- has proven to the authorities that they would be at risk if returned to their home country
- has had their claim for asylum accepted by the government
- can now stay here either long-term or indefinitely.

Refused asylum seeker

- has been unable to prove that they would face persecution back home
- has been denied protection by the authorities
- must now leave the country, unless they wish to appeal the decision or there are legitimate reasons why they cannot yet return home.

Economic migrant

- has moved to this country to work
- could be legally or illegally resident, depending on how they entered the country
- may or may not have a legal work permit.

The asylum seeking process

(This is different to the resettlement pathways where refugee status is conferred at the outset).

To be granted asylum or refugee status a person must be able to show that they are unable to return to their country of origin due to 'a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' (UN Refugee Convention 1951). This includes persecution for following a particular faith, belonging to an ethnic minority or for reasons of gender or sexuality.

Initial asylum application can be made at the point of entry or at asylum screening units around the country. Screening involves fingerprinting, photographing and an interview about the reasons and circumstances of travel to the UK. They will then need a qualified and registered legal representative funded by legal aid to advise and represent them. With this lawyer the asylum seeker prepares a statement detailing their experiences that are the basis for the claim. This needs to be returned to the UK Border Agency within 20 working days. They will then be interviewed about the substance of their claim. A decision will eventually be taken by the UK Border Agency (part of the Home Office) but 70% have to wait more than six months and often years, for a decision on their claim.

Positive decision: they will be granted 30 months or five years 'Leave to Remain' and Refugee status or Humanitarian Protection both of which give them most of the rights of British citizens: to work, to study, to claim benefits. If they are granted refugee status they have the right to apply for an integration loan from UKBA as well as Convention Status Travel Documents (which allow them to travel anywhere apart from the country which they have fled and where they fear persecution). They can apply for 'Indefinite Leave to Remain' just before their original leave expires. If they are granted 'Indefinite Leave to Remain' they can apply for naturalisation as a British citizen. A minority of asylum seekers in the UK are granted Refugee status at this initial decision stage. Many face years of uncertainty in relation to their prospects of being able to remain in the UK.

Negative decision: they may have a right to appeal the decision if they have discretionary leave to remain for more than one year however if they come from a country considered 'safe' by UKBA they will not be able to appeal the decision from within the UK. If they have the right to appeal they have less than 10 working days to submit their appeal, legal advisors will only continue to support them if they believe their appeal has a chance of succeeding in court.

Asylum appeals are decided by immigration judges at the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (i.e. in court). The asylum seeker will be expected to attend along with their legal representative and will be offered interpreting services. If their appeal is successful, they should be granted refugee status or humanitarian protection, however the UKBA can challenge the court's decision in the 'Upper Tribunal'. If their appeal is unsuccessful, their legal representative can also challenge the decision in the Upper Tribunal but only on the basis that the decision is based on an 'error in law'.

During this process, they can apply to have their discretionary leave to remain extended but when this expires and they have been unsuccessful in appealing their asylum decision, it may be decided that their appeal rights are 'exhausted'. At this point they may become 'unlawfully in the UK' and told that they must leave. They will be informed of Assisted Voluntary Return (run by charities to provide some support for return to countries of origin) or they may be served with 'removal' directions and be detained whilst the UKBA makes deportation arrangements to remove them from the UK.

Alternatively, they may choose to submit a fresh claim. The asylum process is complex to navigate and anyone advising on asylum matters needs to be qualified in immigration law.

Asylum support

The level of financial and housing support an individual receives is dependent on immigration status. Asylum seekers have 'asylum support' (sometimes referred to as NASS) and the right to housing – a flat, a hostel or bed and breakfast - but they cannot choose where they live and do not normally have the right to work. (They may be granted permission to do so if their claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months through no fault of their own AND they can fill one of the jobs on the Home Office's shortage occupation list).

They are often dispersed away from London and the SE. They currently get £45 a week if they are in a hostel or shared flat where they can cook. If they are in hotel accommodation (as so many are, currently) with food included, they only get £8 a week. It is loaded onto a Debit (ASPEN) card which can be used at a cash machine. A mother with a child under 3 can claim an extra £3-5 per week. Asylum seekers get access to healthcare through the NHS and children between 5-17 will be offered a place at state school.

Only once they receive refugee status or humanitarian protection are they entitled to seek work and receive benefits such as Job Seeker's Allowance, housing benefit and local authority housing like other British residents. Housing could include supported housing; a tenancy in private rented accommodation or local authority accommodation but there is no automatic right to a council flat.

Often the joy at being offered leave to remain (refugee status) can quickly turn sour when an asylum seeker is given 28 days to move out of NASS accommodation and apply for housing benefit and Universal Credit. Support transfers from the Home Office – who provide asylum accommodation and vouchers – to the Department of Work and Pensions. They are given 28 days to be issued with a Biometric Residence Permit by the Home Office, to find new housing through the local authority and to sign on for welfare benefits. If there are delays, they will be evicted and some of those with newly granted refugee status can find themselves homeless and destitute in the period immediately following a successful asylum claim. The national asylum support system stops abruptly when an asylum seeker wins their right to remain and the transition to the rights of a UK resident with access to welfare can be very hard to navigate.

Asylum seekers who arrived as unaccompanied children (under 18) may have a different support system. When they arrived, they would have been supported by social services under The Children's Act of 1989 and may have been fostered, placed in a children's home or supported by a keyworker in semi-independent accommodation. After the age of 18 they would be entitled to on-going support under the Children (Leaving Care) Act of 2000 until they are 21, unless they are in an agreed programme of full-time education in which case they can be supported until 25 (or the programme ends). Young care leavers have the right to a Personal Advisor (usually a social worker) to support them and their educational choices and a Pathway Plan which is drawn up by social services, planned with the young person and regularly reviewed to provide guidance on the support they might need until 21. An asylum seeker with the right qualifications can, in theory, go to university; but unless they have Refugee status or Humanitarian Protection Status and have been in the UK for at least 3 yrs., it is unlikely that they will be treated as a 'home student' or will be eligible for student finance funding. If they have refugee status they have the same rights to further education as a British citizen.

Asylum seekers latest figures and policy update

For asylum seekers in the UK, arriving is just the start of another journey through the application process. The backlog in cases awaiting an initial decision is at a record high, with nearly 161,000 people waiting for an outcome at the end of 2022, over triple the number at the end of 2019. Of these, 68 percent have been waiting more than six months. The long wait for a decision means many asylum seekers are stuck for long periods in temporary accommodation such as hotels and hostels. Refugee Action says there are 105,522 people in such housing, with nearly 50,000 of them in “contingency” or short-term and the rest in “dispersal” accommodation.

It's hard to find exactly where refugees and asylum seekers are living in the UK but figures from the Migration Observatory suggest the north east and north west host the most per capita.

The current UK government has become increasingly hostile to asylum seekers and has made it clear it wants to dismiss the claims of anyone arriving outside the limited legal routes available. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has made “stopping the boats” carrying asylum seekers across the channel one of his five pledges on policy.

Channel crossings have indeed soared, after restrictions on travel because of Covid-19 reduced arrivals by other routes sharply. But most of the people arriving in these small boats are from war zones and many of them would have a valid claim under current laws. In 2022, the Home Office says 45,755 people were “detected” arriving in small boats – 60 % more than in 2021. Of these arrivals, 90 percent claimed asylum. And half of the people arriving by this means were from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan or Syria – people with an 80 percent success rate in asylum claims.

The latest proposed legislation for the UK, the Illegal Migration bill, will, in the government's own words, “change the law to make it unambiguously clear that, if you enter the UK illegally, you should not be able to remain here.” That would mean anyone arriving by boat, even with a valid claim, could be detained and removed, either to their home country or to a third country which would process their claim. Currently, there is only an agreement with Rwanda for this and legal challenges have so far prevented the government from sending anyone there.

It's already hard to reach the UK as an asylum seeker and most of those making the journey here are granted refugee status. The number of asylum applications in 2022 was the highest in two decades at 74,751. Of these, only 24 percent were refused – the lowest level since 1990. Legal routes include programmes specifically for those from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine, as well as under the direction of the United Nations.

Compared with European countries, the UK has below average asylum applications per head of population, ranking 16th in 2021 among EU27 + UK on this measure. Put another way, the UK receives about 8 percent of all applications for asylum in Europe.

Worldwide, UNHCR estimates there are over 100 million people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. Around 85 percent of refugees live in developing regions and 73 percent live in countries neighbouring their original home. According to UNHCR statistics, as of November 2022 there was a total of 231,597 refugees living in the UK.

For more information please see:

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9000/> Asylum claims in the UK: common questions (October 2020) provides a useful overview of the asylum process.

<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/top-10-facts-about-refugees-and-people-seeking-asylum/>

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/>

<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/>

<https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/hostile-accommodation/> A look at the situation in 2023

<https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/immigration/parliamentary-briefing-illegal-migration-bill-second-reading> Good overview of the government's policies